FIRE MANAGEMENT

Australian Forest Growers:

- *seeks confirmation from all levels of government that active fuel reduction programs in appropriate vegetation types is a necessary means of reducing the risk of landscape scale mega-fires. Community support for fuel reduction programs should be achieved through a sustained public education program;*
- *recognises that land managers have a duty of care to actively manage for fire mitigation;*
- *recognises that active management of forests through thinning or selective harvesting is a means to regulate fuel loads;*
- *would like to ensure that access roads and fire trails across land tenures are maintained and accessible throughout the Australian bushfire season;*
- *calls for clear policy guidance, coordination and standardisation of fire management authorities at both the national level and within State and Territory jurisdictions. These authorities should then develop a process for assessing and authorising fire management plans at a local level with associated training, to minimise bureaucratic intervention and holdups in the implementation of such plans;*
- *seeks that the number of permanent, trained and properly resourced fire management personnel in Australia is increased;*
- *advocates a greater availability of resources to assist further research into fire behaviour in an Australian context; and*
- *seeks the creation of a National Fire Audit Office (NFAO) to report on preparedness for fire suppression and attainment of fuel-reduction targets.*

"If you don't manage for bushfires, then you can't manage for anything else".
Roger Underwood, Chairman, Bushfire Front Inc

Background

In the past decade or more fire management in Australia has been characterised by disputes regarding the impacts of prescribed burning on ecosystems, including whether burning equates to vegetation clearance (as it does under South Australian native vegetation laws). This dispute has resulted in an increasingly cautious approach towards active fire management, particularly on the part of the government agencies responsible for management of the public protected area estate. This has resulted in a build-up of fuel loads to levels impossible to manage in fire hazard conditions. The devastating impact on human life, infrastructure and biodiversity from recent wildfires that burnt into areas of high fuel loads has been illustrated in the ACT, Victoria and New South Wales. The devastation caused by these fires has resulted in a reappraisal of the passive versus active fire management debate in Australia.

AFG recognises that fire is an agent for regeneration, releases nutrients locked up in litter on the forest floor and is a natural part of the Australian environment.

Discussion

Fire occurs each year in Australia. Regionally, fire frequency and fire intensity differs, depending on vegetation type, weather conditions, slope and the fuel load and characteristics. The only variability within human control is fuel load and time since last burnt.

In order to reduce risk to life and infrastructure and promote ecosystem function, land managers and government agencies have an obligation to ensure that fuel loads are actively managed, access to vegetated areas is mapped and maintained and adequately trained personnel are continually available to manage these issues.

Permission for hazard reduction burning is extremely difficult to obtain in some States. Objective tools such as Drought Index calculators, Fire Spread and Intensity prediction spreadsheets and/or McArthur Forest Meters should be routinely used, understood and work shopped yearly by local groups. Local fire wardens with the authority to approve prescribed burning plans sometimes have little understanding of fire behaviour and the absolute imperative to use fire as a land management tool. Training in the climatic and vegetative conditions peculiar to local areas must be focused and updated regularly. Landowners who fulfil yearly training and active involvement in fire management planning should be granted exemptions from the prospect of litigation if a permitted, hazard reduction burn has unintended consequences. There is a precedent for this exemption to be applied in overseas forest management plans and this has resulted in a much more proactive approach to fuel/fire management. Current processes and threats of litigation impede management because they require bureaucratic intervention at every step.

To restrict the frequency of high intensity wildfires, fuel reduction using prescribed burns on private land should be encouraged and impediments to reasonable measures removed. Greater attention, through the use of publicly reported performance indicators, should be paid to actual fuel reduction and renewable energy policy could address both climate change and fire preparedness. By utilising forest thinnings in bioenergy/ biofuel production, the amount of fuel on the forest floor is reduced and a sustainable source of renewable energy is produced.

A lack of understanding of the practical realities of fire behaviour poses a risk to environmental and productive

values, as well as to human life. The level of expertise amongst land managers in fire management positions must be rebuilt with an emphasis on adequate experience of *actual* fire management.

Public funding must continue for research into fire behaviour and for resources that will transfer this knowledge into practical management technologies, practices and the effective community wide dissemination of information.

Fire suppression teams are more effective if adequately resourced with appropriate equipment. The initial response to fire often dictates the extent of the final impact. The more rapid and vigorous this initial response, the greater the chance fire will be extinguished quickly. It has been shown that rapid, combined ground and aerial intervention has been effective in reducing fire spread and damage in high value plantations.

Fires do not recognise cadastral boundaries. Hence, management and suppression would be more effective if strategies operate across vegetation types rather than to State borders or other arbitrary boundaries.

Preparedness is vital. Pre fire season coordination of preparations would reduce costs, maximise efficiencies and importantly ensure preparedness amongst agencies to work together to extinguish major fires. Cross-agency training, communications planning and the development of complementary skills and practical experience are essential to effective teamwork at a fire front. Adequate consultation with local people and landholders who have detailed knowledge of the conditions, access and fuel types can ultimately save lives and property.

Independent auditing against fire preparedness benchmarks may be beneficial to check the fire season readiness of public land agencies. Audits would assess the adequacy of pre-season fuel reduction, fire training and coordination between agencies and the preparedness of fire detection systems, firefighting equipment and communication systems. Additionally, a National Fire Audit Office (NFAO) reporting by 1 October every year to Federal Parliament could provide greater community confidence of adequate preparedness.

Preferred Outcomes

- Support by the community and all levels of government for fuel reduction burning and recognition of the important role it plays in fire preparedness.
- An increase in the number of permanent, trained and properly resourced fire management personnel in Australia.
- Firefighting equipment purchasing decisions based on careful cost-benefit analysis, including assessment of the effectiveness of associated tactics. We believe this will show that more resources should be allocated to on-ground and low-cost aerial options capable of rapid response.
- Development of a system whereby plans for active management of fire in Australia are subject to a rigorous approval and monitoring process, facilitating public scrutiny and vigorous debate, allowing for practical implementation with a minimum of bureaucratic intervention.
- A highly coordinated, independently audited national approach to fire management (such as through a National Fire Audit Office), with management plans based on contiguous fuel type. Implementation of fuel reduction strategies should be enforced through this system.