

'Bushfires flame debate over national park management'

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**By Allan Hansard
Chief Executive Officer
National Association of Forest Industries**

Bushfires are a grim reality in Australia's hot dry summers. As we enter another bushfire season, and with blazes already devastating large parts of the country, it's time to once again consider what approach to forest management will best protect the economic, environmental and biodiversity values of forest areas from the devastation of intense bushfires.

The reason we hear given for the creation of conservation reserves and national parks is the environmental value of the forest is deemed to be higher than the value of any timber that might be derived from it, or the timber communities that rely on these forests. This is even though Australia's sustainably managed production forests deliver important economic and social values, as well as environmental values.

However, many environmentalists consider the value of reserved forests to be priceless. If this is the case and the value of these natural assets are so high, why do governments fail to take measures to adequately protect them from fire, pests and diseases?

Governments are failing the Australian community and not meeting their environmental obligations by not providing the resources to ensure forests in conservation reserves and national parks continue to be managed to world's best practice standards. In fact, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) ranks the number of conservation rangers per hectare in Australia lower than many developing countries.

Yet we continue to transfer sustainably managed production forests – some 11 million hectares since 1994– into conservation reserves with little or no management to ensure the environmental values they were reserved for in the first place are maintained. This 'lock up and leave' approach means a build up of fuel occurs on the forest floor, increasing the risk of intense bushfires which results in a devastating loss of flora and fauna. In many cases these forests will never recover and the value of these forest reserves to the Australian community is lost forever.

Fires are indiscriminate and do not recognise ownership boundaries. Too often we have seen a fire started in a national park cross into private property destroying all in its path, affecting the property, livelihood and often the lives of the farmers and local communities that surround national parks. Farmers will often tell you, national parks



are not good neighbours. In addition to the fire threat, farmers also have to contend with the proliferation of weeds and feral species, such as pigs, and goats that thrive in poorly managed national parks. Many of Australia's sustainably managed production forests which neighbour national parks face similar threats.

Bushfires in national parks have a wider effect on the Australian and global community. A recent Federal Government report estimated that the catastrophic bushfires of 2002-2003 in NSW, ACT and Victoria – which were caused by an excessive fuel load on the forest floor – released around 130 million tonnes of carbon; that's around a quarter of Australia's total annual carbon dioxide emissions in just a few weeks. If governments are really serious about climate change, surely this issue has to be addressed as a national priority.

Australia's sustainable production forests are among the best managed forests in the world and are actively managed to reduce the risk of fire, pests and diseases. The risk of fire is managed by reducing excess fuel loads and debris as well as maintaining access roads which is vital for fire crews in the event of a fire. The forest industry is required to protect our natural forest assets. Why aren't the same high standards for forest and risk management applied to national parks and forest reserves? By locking forests into poorly managed reserves and national parks governments are putting at risk the very thing they are trying to protect.

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