



# **WHEN THE BUSH BURNED**

**CANN RIVER: THE BIG FIRES, 1983**

*By Heather Quick*



*Left: Mid-morning on the 1st February 1983, as smoke billows into the Cann Valley from the North West. Taken by Mrs. Sylvia Sumberg, from Sumbergs Mill, Cann River.*

*Below: 3.30 pm on Saturday 5th March, looking north east from the Cann River Anglican Church in the centre of the main street of the township.*

*COVER PHOTO: The fires rage along the side of the Princes Highway late in the evening.*

*Bottom Right: the scene around Mallacoota Hall and oval shows the activity within the community with outside assistance during the time of such a disaster as the fire gradually heads towards the outskirts of the township. Photo by Sgt. John Bodinar.*

*Bottom Left: During the night of the 4th March, after the start of the second fire, east of Cann River, along the Princes Highway near Reedy Creek.*



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CANN RIVER: THE BIG FIRES, 1983

*By Heather Quick*

*Dedicated to the many persons involved in saving the small communities of  
Far East Gippsland from the raging Bushfires of 1983 — those involved in actual  
fire-fighting and those who fed and cared for everyone involved.*

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## — FOREWORD —

This record prepared by Heather Quick deals with many aspects of fire control and effects. It has been written by a young lady who experienced and researched many facets of what was one of the most destructive fires in the Cann River District.

Fire suppression efforts are covered in broad terms and particularly reflect the tremendous efforts of the many people involved in the fire. These people worked through some of the worst fire danger weather experienced in South Eastern Australia for many years.

This report will record for posterity the events of 40 days of fire in the Cann River District. The fires were the worst experienced in Victoria since 1939. Fire conditions were so bad that fire breaks burnt in recent years had no effect on the fires progress; such was the extreme fire weather during that period. In time nature will heal most of the scars from these fires, but the memories will remain for most people who worked and lived through this period.

This report will serve to record what can happen in East Gippsland when the forests and parks are dry and weather conditions adverse. We should all work diligently to ensure a repeat of the 1983 fires does not occur again in East Gippsland.

E.K. GIDLEY

Regional Manager

Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands.

(Mr Keith Gidley was Divisional Forest Officer at the time of the fires).

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As a 16½ year old student attending Orbost High School 1983, for assessment in Year 11 Geography, we were set an Individual Research Project on some feature of our Shire.

Having been somewhat involved with the fires in my home area in the early part of that year, and with such vivid memories of the disaster firmly in my mind, this seemed the obvious choice of topic for me to research.

Looking back, this project now holds historical evidence and facts and figures that show the problems of a wild fire in an area where the timber is so important in maintaining the local timber industry.

Thank you is extended to the following people who assisted in this script/publication:

- My family - throughout the time of its preparation and with this final publication.
- Miss Maxine King - for typing the original manuscript.
- Mr Ron Anderson - for many of the photographs included.

- To the many people who replied so willingly to my original questionnaire and again for allowing their contribution to be published.
- To 'Bazza', (Mr David McKenzie), for being such an encouraging teacher.

SOME EFFECTS OF THE JANUARY 31ST TO MARCH 20TH 1983 BUSHFIRES  
ON THE TOWNSHIP OF CANN RIVER AND SURROUNDING AREAS

Man has used fire for warmth and the preparation of food for a very long time.

Fire became the slave of many settlers as they burned areas to rejuvenate the grasses for hunting and grazing lands.

But exposed to the full force of the element and the high rate of combustion the vast areas of forest and grasslands can quickly be engulfed in a haulocaust fire - not always to man's liking.







*Above: White sand churns out of the Cann River bed, as a dense, black column of smoke and ash approximately 170 metres high, crosses the valley towards the C.R.B. camp on the eastern side.*

# SOME EFFECTS OF THE JANUARY 31ST TO MARCH 20TH 1983 BUSHFIRES ON THE TOWNSHIP OF CANN RIVER AND SURROUNDING AREAS

Monday January 31st, 1983 will be recorded in the memories of many East Gippslanders as a day on which a huge bushfire started and spread throughout this far corner of the state and for approximately forty days caused much concern to residents. This was the date when East Gippsland's largest bushfire since 1965 (and biggest outbreak since 1939) broke out near the township of Cann River. By the time it had finally been brought under total control some weeks later and many kilometres further east - around Mallacoota-Genoa area - about 253,300 hectares of native forest, pine plantation (N.S.W.) and grasslands had been ravaged and destroyed.

"The fire", which is referred to as one fire, within this assignment was actually two fires, code-named Fires 12 and 16, overall they had threatened the townships of Cann River, Genoa and Mallacoota and areas known as Wangarabell Furnell, Tamboon Inlet and Quinburra. It had burnt through State Forest, National Parks and farmlands and when controlled had a perimeter of about 300km.

Several unoccupied outhouses were burnt and quite a lot of fencing but there were only minor losses of private property and farm animals, even though there were many times the flames were licking extremely close to occupied areas.

Bushfires are probably the worst single natural disaster that can happen in a populated rural area as their unpredictable path makes it very difficult to defeat. South - East Australia is known, along with parts of California, to be among the worst areas in the world to possess the vegetation, and climatic conditions of hot dry summers following good spring rains and growth and these can be conducive to fires. Slope, also, plays a major part in the spread of fire, as steep northern slopes provide the dry fuel to allow fire to speed up. With the 4-5 years of below average rainfall (drought) in East Gippsland region, it could also have contributed to the severity of the fires. It would seem February/March 1983 was the time of exactly these right conditions.



### How did the fire start?

The fire was started by a lightning strike which smouldered for five days (from latest known thunderstorm) before detection in early morning of Monday 31st January 1983, in State Forest east of Combienbar. Before man or machinery were able to take over, this fire was soon racing through dry vegetation, over the mountain ranges in an easterly direction towards the Cann Valley.

Then just over a week after the finish of the first fire the rising smoke column of the second fire was watched in horror by Cann River residents about 3pm on Friday 4th March. It started from smouldering debris pushed up by a bulldozer from the first fire - five kilometres north east of the town.

### Area covered by both fires:

Fire 12 raged in the area east of Combienbar, across to the Cann Valley and for over a week niggled homes/farms approximately nine kilometres north of the Cann River township. Strong winds plus the dry vegetation helped it spread north either side of the Cann Valley Highway, into Buldah Valley, around Chandlers Creek settlement, west again towards Quinburra (N.S.W.) till it was eventually "blown" into and caused much concern in the Bondi pine plantation. While threatening areas south of Bombala, other fronts were burning east around Mount Drummer, from Cann Valley Highway, onto Wangarabell and over the border again - always keeping north of the Princes Highway. This fire covered a total of about 127,200 hectares (25,000 in N.S.W.).

Fire 16 quickly spread south and east and bordered the south eastern boundary of the town. Soon after its start with a known boundary front of upto 42 kilometres long and 37 kilometres east, it was blocking the Princes Highway to traffic and later the Genoa - Mallacoota road. Coastal areas from Tamboon - Point Hicks to past Wingan to close into Mallacoota, were burnt out, with the total area being burnt within the vicinity of about 126,100 hectares of thick bush.



*Fire 16, looking east along Princes Hwy out of Cann River.*



*Fire 16, approaching the coastline.*



# EYE ON FIRES



A first hand look at part of fire-ravaged Victoria was in the busy schedule of the Minister for Lands, Mr Rod Mackenzie (centre) when he toured the area. Here he discusses the organisation of the fight against the Cann River fire with Forests Commissioner, Gerry Griffin, and endorsed A.L.P. candidate for Gippsland, Mr Tony Peterson (right).

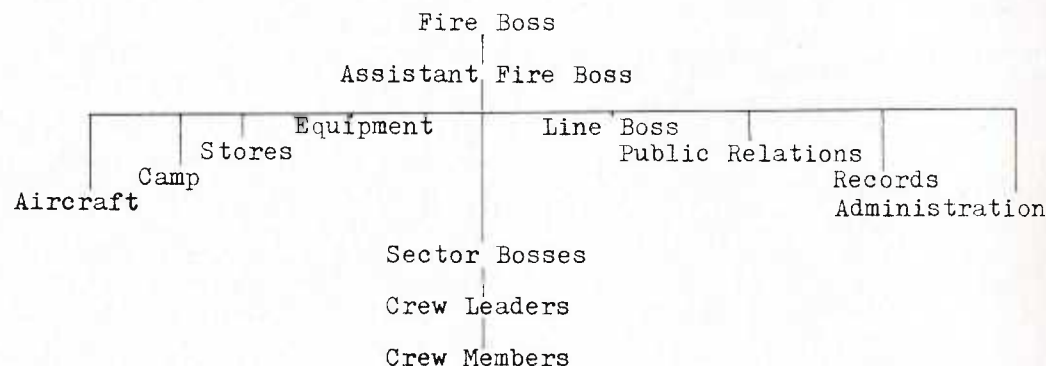
*Road closed by police at Reedy Creek.*



The people involved with controlling these fires and their means of help:

Cann River District Forester Mr Denis Reed, was in charge of controlling the fires i.e. - fire boss.

Delegation of authority was as follows:



Sector bosses with local knowledge were utilized where possible. However due to the sheer size of the fire and the suppression forces required to combat it, many sector bosses had little or no local knowledge.

All organizations involved were slotted into the overall chain of command outlined in diagram and were answerable to the fire boss.

As is common practice, the Forest Commission takes on extra employees for the known fire season and these workers are ever ready to be called out to fight fires. Along with man power, equipment, such as knapsacks, rake-hoes, tankers, bulldozers, chainsaws etc, are always at hand - backed up with the extra skilled operators. With Fire 12 this was the force that attempted to do battle with this fire, but with natural conditions at such an extreme state after approximately 4-5 years of known drought in the area, the land crews soon found this fire racing ahead.



By midnight of 31st January, the Country Fire Authority region had been put on standby and they were alerting crews from around the region - a total of some 15-17 tankers plus crews.

By mid-morning of 1st February, this fire had become a major disaster and over the next period of time man power began to be called from National Parks, other Forest Districts, (including N.S.W. later), municipal councils, Country Roads Board, Lands Department, National Safety Council of Victoria, Royal Australian Air Force, sawmill employees and State Emergency Service, Police and landowners. More than half of the regular workers in Cann River were involved and the fire-fighting operation turned into a community affair of self-help.

The maximum numbers of people involved in the fires from each organization were:-

Forest Commission of Victoria	448	(includes local
Country Fire Authority	93	contractors)
Lands Department	42	
State Emergency Service	34	
National Parks	37	
Royal Australian Air Force	100	
Other	24	
TOTAL: 755		

In addition about 300 people were involved in the coast range sector of the fire, which was controlled by Orbost Forest Commission. With such numbers of people moved quickly into Cann River area, there arises the need to provide these people with food, bedding and other personal necessities. Forest Commission crews from other areas came as units fully equipped with camping and fire-fighting equipment. Due to the magnitude of the disaster the Forest Commission called upon the State Emergency Service to assist with the Forest Commission mobile kitchens and freezers, and sufficient cooks to man this equipment. The volunteer State Emergency Service workers at Cann River helped with ordering and serving the food, providing bedding and other personal comforts and general tidiness and support at the Base Camp at the local hall and sports ground. State Emergency Service from Bairnsdale and Orbost were a necessary back-up to the local unit.

With 93 Country Fire Authority people (mostly volunteers) and 34 State Emergency Service and other volunteers this highlights the dependence of Government and communities on volunteer forces during disasters.

#### Public Notices THANK YOU

We wish to express our gratitude and appreciation to members of the Forests Commission, C.F.A. and National Parks Service who worked so hard to protect our home during the recent Tamboon fires. Many thanks for a job well done.

Kath and John Vane

#### THANK YOU

We wish to thank the officers and men of the Forests Commission, C.F.A. and National Parks, the helicopter and plane pilots, for their courage, expertise and discipline and devotion to duty in saving our lives and homes, under appalling conditions.

A special thank you to Geoff and Shirley Harvey (nursing sister) of Dandenong North, Les and Lynn Draper for their support in our horrific situation.

Signed: Bob Ornsby, Bill Gatens, Harry and Joy Smith, Neville and Pat Luhrs

## THE CASE FOR THE VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS

(To the Editor)

Dear Sir, - Please allow me space to explain the case of volunteer firefighters.

Although most equipment is supplied by the Country Fire Authority, certain items of equipment are not, and have to be purchased from brigade's funds.

All training and equipment maintenance, together with prevention and firefighting, is carried out at the volunteers' expense. This sometimes is at great

cost or inconvenience to the family or job. Employers who permit staff to attend fires without loss of wages, must be commended for their generosity and understanding.

A lesson should be learnt from the fires over the last weeks. It is apparent that not enough fire prevention and pre-planning is being done by individuals to help protect their own interests. Although no life or buildings have been lost, we must be thankful that the bri-

gades' pre-planning and training have been carried out. Next time we might not be so lucky.

On Tuesday, February 8th, every piece of equipment was committed to a fire somewhere in the shire. If another fire had occurred, nothing could have been done to help, without some delay in getting back-up from outside the area, then only if it was available.

To help firefighters gain their objective, please follow the media advertisements and clean around your own home and/or property. Also start to pre-plan for next fire season. Don't be complacent and think

it can't, or won't happen, because it has, and will again.

All brigades advertise when their meetings are held - more members and finances are required - so turn up and give your support. You will get a lot of pleasure from helping others in their times of need. You will also learn more than having a little tin shed in the area with a red truck inside. After all, fire brigades are there to help you - a little self-help would also come in handy.

Finally, Mr. Editor, what other voluntary service gives 24 hours' service, 365 days of the year, all free of charge. Thank you - Yours faithfully, Bruce FINDLEY, Group Officer for the Orbost Group of Fire Brigades.

## Reconstruction Of Fire Damaged N.P. Facilities Under Way

Reconstruction of fire damaged facilities in the Croajingolong National Park is currently underway with the help of men employed under the Government's employment initiatives programme.

Pictured here are Greg Doland, Geoff Boller and Anthony Cousins who are engaged in rebuilding the Wigan Inlet Boardwalk, a popular part of the Wigan camp area.

The boardwalk is designed to carry visitors around the lower section of the inlet as a nature

walk to the beach using numbered pegs to signify areas of interest, which are explained in a leaflet obtained from a box at the beginning of the track.

Other works going on include rebuilding of sites in the camp area, new toilets and a new water supply.

The ranger in charge at Cann River, Mr. Peter Allard said that the target date for re-opening of the Wigan camp was December 1st, when it was anticipated to have the majority of clean-up and construction work completed in

time for the Christmas holiday period.

Other work being done by the park access crew include repainting of the Cann River office, sign painting and erection, painting of service residences at Mallacoota and upgrading of the Narrows walking track.

A new bridge has been built on the centre track to the Shipwreck camp area, which will also be repaired in time for the Christmas period. If time and weather conditions permit work will go ahead on upgrading of the Genoa Peak track.



#### SPECIAL THANKS

Keith and Gwen Harrison wish to thank the members of the Cann Valley and other C.F.A. units, for their outstanding effort and organisation in helping to save our property from complete devastation from the bushfires on Tuesday, February 1st.

Special thanks to Ted and Jim Armstrong for leaving their property to come to our aid with a tractor and rotary hoe, and truck for shifting cattle. John Mulligan who travelled from Gipsy Point, Bill Young, Humphrey's Mill crew, and anyone else who helped in any way.

It was a great relief to arrive home and find so many had come to Ted and Alan's aid, for this we are indebted to you all.





N.S.C.A. helicopter with water bucket at Mallacoota

## \$40,300 BUSHFIRE DAMAGE

The Cann River bushfire which commenced in the Combenbar area on or about January 27th last will involve the shire of Orbost in expenditure of \$40,300.

The breakdown of this amount is:

Clearing of trees and debris from the West cann, Buldah and Wangarabell roads — \$5,000.  
Replacement of ten

timber culverts on the Buldah road — \$15,000.

Replacement of timber bridge in the Buldah Valley — \$17,500.

Replacement of three timber culverts on the

Wangarabell road — \$3,300.

The estimate of the damage done was presented Friday's meeting of Orbost Shire Council.

Yet to be determined is the cost of any further damage caused by the last outbreak in the Mallacoota area.

## Wind danger as bushfire rages

March 7th

A LARGE bushfire near Cann River in East Gippsland was still burning out of control last night despite the efforts of 500 firefighters to contain it.

The fire, which started about 5 km east of Cann River on Friday, has now burnt out more than 30,000 hectares of thick forest.

Fire fighters have managed to make the town safe, but strong northerly winds have opened up large fronts which have been difficult to halt.

The southern flank of the fire was last night 42

km long and the eastern flank 37 km long.

The Princes Highway east of Cann River has been closed since Friday, and traffic has been diverted up the Cann Valley Highway.

Forests Commission chief divisional officer Stan Duncan said conditions were favorable for firefighters last night and they hoped to quell the fire before today.

Temperatures in the high 30s and northerly winds have been predicted for the area today.

"The forest is so dry that the fire just races through it — it's a mammoth task to control it," Mr Duncan said.

Forests Commission firefighters from all over Gippsland have been brought into the area as well as 60 CFA volun-

teers, 50 RAAF personnel and employees of the NSW Forests Commission.

About 45 fire trucks have been brought into the area and 27 bulldozers are clearing fire breaks.

Mr Duncan said Cann River was safe because the western edge of the fire had burned up to the perimeter of last month's massive 120,000 ha fire.

The alternative (a true economic effect) is to pay volunteers which would add enormously to the cost of disaster, which the Government and ultimately the communities would have to bear.

Extra police were assigned to the area, and they were kept busy in controlling traffic, manning road blocks, and on evacuation of an area.

Total number of:-

Bulldozers	37
Floats	7
Tankers	86
Other vehicles	40 approximately
Aircraft	11

With the bulldozers in constant use there were floats always on call to transport the dozers quickly from one area to another. Many of these dozers were owned by local logging contractors, who were now employed in Fire Suppression activities having been contracted to the Forest Commission in this emergency.

Fire helicopters were constantly using the small Noorinbee airstrip, on Mr Derek Broome's farmland, as they did routine checks of fire boundaries, checked fresh outbreaks and assisted with emptying water buckets and the dropping of fire retardant, phoscheck. Two of these helicopters were fitted with infra-red heat sensing equipment which helped find the fire edge under the smoke haze. A R.A.A.F. Hercules aircraft fitted with the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (M.A.F.F.S.) on loan from the United States of America, used Sale as its base.

Six fixed-wing aircraft were used to drop fire retardants. Four were small agricultural aircraft. 395 loads of fire retardant (466,900 litres) were dropped on the fires by both the Hercules and the small agricultural aircraft. The Hercules was probably not quite as effective as several agricultural aircraft based near the fire. This was due to the relatively large turn around time of the Hercules (e.g. Sale to Cann River took 45 minutes), and its limited manoeuvrability in mountainous terrain even though the Hercules carried much more retardant.

However all retardant bombing effectively suppressed small spot fires and assisted fire suppression around assets (private property, valuable forest etc) and during back burning.



Other fixed-wing aircraft were used to fly fresh crews to Cann River and fly tired crews to their home bases in various parts of the state.

The total number of men employed at any one time on both fires would be unable to be determined exactly, but it was not uncommon for six hundred plus to be served the main meal of the day between the times of 5.30pm to 10.30pm (considering shift changes).

#### What costs were involved?

Fires 12 and 16, in the Cann River Forest District had a total cost of \$2½ million. All the Fire Suppression equipment was hired by the Forest Commission. This hire of external plant and vehicles cost approximately \$470,000. It is estimated that approximately seven thousand man days were employed i.e. approximately 90,000 man hours to bring the two fires under full control.

#### Facts on Costs:-

Wages (excluding staff)	\$1,684,000
Sawmill employees wages	1,300
Stores, materials, services, food etc	340,000
Plant/machinery hire/costs	280,000
Vehicle hire/costs	263,000
Fixed wing aircraft hire	91,300
Helicopter hire	92,200
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$2,751,800</b>

The Hercules aircraft was a cost of \$3,000 per hour, not to mention the other aircraft that were being used as well. Fuel accounts must have been astronomical considering the aircraft, dozers, tankers, the four-wheel drives, buses and cars that were constantly moving in the area. All State Emergency Service accounts for requirements at the base camp became a Forest Commission cost as well.

Additional costs of regenerating logged areas burnt by the fires, is expected to be about \$65,000, for each of the next three years.

About \$300,000 is estimated to be required to collect and sow seed on salvaged logged areas, and some burnt regrowth coupes, repairs and replacement of burnt bridges and signs, road repairs, rehabilitation of recreation facilities and construction of primary salvage logging roads.

# HUGE FORCE FIGHTS FIRE

(Continued from page 1)  
occurred west of the Coast Range Road on Wednesday night but has been checked."

Mr Gidley said if the spot overs could be held, if the back burning was completed, and if the weather was helpful, there was a 50-50 chance the fire would be controlled by to-night.

**RESOURCES**  
The 500 men who are pitting their strategies and strength against the fire are being assisted by equipment on land and in the air.

They have about 50 bulldozers, about 25 Country Fire Authority tankers, 60 Forests Commission tanker units, 10 National Parks Service units, plus other units on loan from municipal councils.

In the air they have three helicopters, a Hercules aircraft and five smaller planes, which are dropping retardants.

At least one of the helicopters has infra-red equipment, which helps find the fire edge under the smoke haze.

The manpower comes from the Forests Commission, National Parks, Lands Department, State Emergency Service, R.A.A.F., New South Wales Forestry Commission, Country Roads Board, sawmill employees, municipal councils, landowners and volunteers who have offered to "chip in and help out".

Even if the fire is brought under control by to-night, Mr Gidley says it will be patrolled for a further two weeks.

One of the biggest problems in combatting the fire, which is the largest in East Gippsland since 1965, is the dryness of the forests.

"A small spark can cause a fire within minutes," Mr Gidley said.

**LOSSES**  
It is probably the first time in 15 years that fires have caused significant losses in valuable forest regrowth which has been established following logging operations.

"It could be 5,000 hectares," Mr Gidley said. "The replacement cost will be between \$220 and \$250 per hectare — about \$1,250,000."

"Mill timber has been lost."

"A lot of jungle type gullies and unique vegetation in the Genoa River and Combiabar areas have been destroyed."

"In many years, this type of vegetation would not burn."

"It will take time to assess the losses."

Mr Gidley, who flew over the fires this week, said the Commission's policy of fuel reduction burning had undoubtedly saved many trees.

"Where fuel reduction burning has been carried out, most trees will survive, but where no burning has been carried out, the leaves and small branches have been destroyed."

"Because the undergrowth has been reduced in the fuel reduction areas, the fire has not burned with the same velocity as in other areas."

As a forester and as a person who has a great love for the forests of East Gippsland, the Cann Valley fire has been an unpleasant experience for Mr Gidley.

He is sure many other people have felt the same.

"You get a lump in your throat and in your stomach."

"You think of the many hard years of regeneration work, destroyed in such a brief period."

"You think of the forests' beauty and attractiveness, and see it desolate and horrible."

The fire will have killed wildlife, but, Mr Gidley says considerable numbers will have survived by hiding in holes, in logs, in streams and trees, and already fire-fighters are noticing the re-appearance of some of the animals.

If there is a light-hearted note to the disaster, it could be the appearance of the small air strip on a farmer's property at Noorinbee.

"At one time it looked almost as busy as Essendon airport, with three helicopters and about 12 planes on the ground," Mr Gidley said.

The strip, which is only rarely used, has become the air servicing centre for the Cann Valley fire.

**BEHIND THE SCENES**  
Inspector Maurice Walsh, of the Bairnsdale Police, is the overall co-ordinator for the fire.

He co-ordinates the combatting, welfare, communication and medical services, and yesterday said "there has been no hitches".

Each service is autonomous but relies on Inspector Walsh for up-to-date information, and together the services have formed a very effective whole.

This is the third time East Gippsland's disaster welfare organisation has been tested, and its co-ordinator, Mr Paul Newnham, said yesterday, everything was running smoothly.

"At the moment we have two welfare centres, at Genoa and Cann River."

"Both are staffed by S.E.S. welfare people."

"Red Cross Melbourne has been sending trailer loads of bedding to Genoa and Red Cross Bairnsdale is doing most of the ordering of food."

"The supplies are being transported by

S.E.S. volunteers to the two centres."

Mr Newnham said the Seventh Day Adventist Church and numerous organisations were assisting in providing welfare for the fire-fighters.

"At any one time 200 volunteers are helping out and there would have been 200 volunteers involved since the fire started."

"At Cann River S.E.S. women are cutting sandwiches and salads and are ordering their food needs either locally or from Bairnsdale."

A first-aid centre has been established by the local bush nursing centre, and arrangements are being made to open another centre at Genoa.

The disaster's medical co-ordinator at Bairnsdale, Dr G. McCallum, and several nurses are ready to be flown to the fire scene at short notice should their services be required.

Overall, the fire has brought many sectors of the East Gippsland community to the fore, and proving that the strong resilience shown by Australia's pioneers in meeting their adversities is still around to-day.



# Fires: 600 in battle for towns

By DAN McDONNELL

**MORE than 600 firefighters last night battled bushfires bearing down on the East Gippsland towns of Mallacoota and Genoa.**

A massive blaze, burning from Cann River towards the east coast since last Friday, broke through Forests Commission and CFA control lines yesterday afternoon.

Fire chiefs decided last night to concentrate exclusively on saving the two settlements and to hope that by this morning the menacing south-west winds would ease.

At times yesterday they reached 80 kmh.

One of the breakaway fires was 5 km from Genoa and the other 4 km from Mallacoota after having scooted around that town's aerodrome

## Bush ravaged by the fires

**MORE than 200,000 ha of prime Victorian bushland has been destroyed by the recent bushfires in the Cann River and Mallacoota areas.**

A Forests Commission spokesman said yesterday the fires which threatened the towns of Mallacoota and Genoa on Wednesday had already destroyed about 100,000 ha.

She said the earlier fires, in the Cann River area, had destroyed more than 110,000 ha in Victoria and a further 15,000 ha in NSW.

Some prime timber areas, state forests and water catchment areas in Victoria had been destroyed, she said.

"We have lost a lot of our source of growth of our forests."

Some national park areas have also been destroyed, she said.

She said there were pockets of temperate rain forests in these areas which were "unique" in Victoria.

Also destroyed in the fires was one of the few places in Australia—and possibly the only one in Victoria—where sand-paper fir trees grew in abundance, she said.

By MICHAEL ROBERTS

For the people of Mallacoota and Genoa, the situation has eased considerably, although the danger has not completely passed.

The Forests Commission said that although the main body of fire was "fairly well under control," the danger of spot fires was "still quite high."

Several small spot fires broke out yesterday but were contained quite quickly.

All day an eerie pall of smoke and ash—often given a reddish tinge by the still-burning fires—hung over the area.

Everyone was hoping for a repeat of Wednesday night's rainfall to help fire fighters.

Mallacoota postmistress Mrs Roma Torry said Wednesday's rain had also helped local morale. "Everyone woke up a lot happier," she said.

Some elderly people were evacuated to the Mallacoota shire hall, but most residents were told to stay in their homes and protect their property if necessary.

Some Mallacoota people had packed their most valuable possessions into their cars or headed for the town's wharf in case they had to leave by water.

Mrs Peggy Rudge, wife of the local publican, said there was a feeling of tension around Mallacoota.

## A town on edge

"Everyone's pretty uptight, but the beer's still cold," Mrs Rudge said.

"You can hardly see anything because of this smoke."

The Forests Commission's Bairnsdale divisional forester Mr Keith Gidley said the situation was changing hourly with winds still gusting up to 50 kmh.

"Our main effort now along with the CFA will be to protect life and property in the area between Mallacoota and Genoa," Mr Gidley said.

"Until the winds abate that will be our job and we'll have to regroup and have another go at it in the morning."

"We'll keep having a go until we get it out." Firefighters were confident that they had the huge blaze—now estimated to have burned more than 120,000 ha—under control yesterday morning.

But the fire broke through control lines in two places about 2 p.m.

One was near the wharf and headed towards Mallacoota.

The other was halfway between the coast and the Princes Highway and had closed the highway and the Mallacoota-Genoa road.

Two fires had "spotted" about 10 km in front of the main blaze and were troubling firefighters east of the Mallacoota lakes.

Light rain fell in some of the fire areas around Genoa and Mallacoota late last night.

Temperatures also dropped and firefighters were optimistic they would "trap" the fire edges around the two towns.

The main fire is the result of two big outbreaks. The first started on January 31 and firemen believed they had it controlled until it got away from them again last Friday.

It merged with another outbreak which Forests Commission officers believe was either an "old relict" or a new deliberately-lit blaze.

Emergency services had set up a bush-fire headquarters in the shire halls at Mallacoota and Genoa to provide meals for firefighters and to give advice to locals.

Bulldozers were cutting breaks on the outskirts of Mallacoota and Genoa and back-burns were being lit as a further precaution.

Along side this monetary figure paid out for "man and machines" there were many people who offered their services voluntarily and free—namely members of the Country Fire Authority and State Emergency Service.

The Country Fire Authority main area of protection is private property and this is where they were mostly directed. Their voluntary efforts are greatly to be admired as sometimes it can be at.... "great cost and inconvenience to their own family or job. The employers who permit their staff to attend fires without loss of wages must be commended for their generosity and understanding". Quoted letter to Snowy River Mail 23/2/83.

Both State Emergency Service and Country Fire Authority provide voluntary service when needed in any hour over 365 days of the year. The welfare centre at the Base camp was operational 24 hours a day and in both fires local volunteers provided food service from 5-6am to midnight daily.

This above total of \$2,751,800.00 would be substantially higher (possibly doubled) if staff wages and costs incurred by other Government Departments e.g. National Parks and Country Fire Authority, State Emergency Service, police R.A.A.F. etc were included.

## What losses occurred?

"The destruction of regrowth by the fires will set back maturity of the forests by up to 20 - 25 years in many areas. However, destruction of recent regeneration will delay maturity by only a few years.

The destruction of merchantable forests probably amounts to about 10% of the current total sawlog resources in Cann River Forest District. However, most of this killed timber will be salvaged over the next few years.

In addition to the destruction of trees, the fires causes accelerated defect in remaining trees. Trees become scarred by the fires and this may pre-dispose them to insect or fungal attack. The accelerated defect may not kill the trees, but will cause a reduction of log quality and ultimately a reduction of sawlog resource in the Cann River Forest District.

The amount of this reduction is very difficult to determine, but is probably 5 - 10% of total sawlog resource."



### Other losses:

- 2 houses (unoccupied)
- 2 bush camps (bus and caravan)
- 1 vehicle (burnt)
- 1 chainsaw (burnt)
- fences
- State Electricity Commission lines (several burnt poles)
- Extensive minor damage, dents and breakdowns to suppression plant and vehicles

Damage to National Parks facilities include approximately 120 signposts, 8 bridges destroyed or damaged, camp area facilities of toilet block and wooden walkways at Wingan Inlet and Shipwreck Creek were destroyed and roadside stop facilities at Governor's Bend in Alfred National Park, were also affected. Approximately 250km of National Parks roads and tracks had to be cleared and maintained.

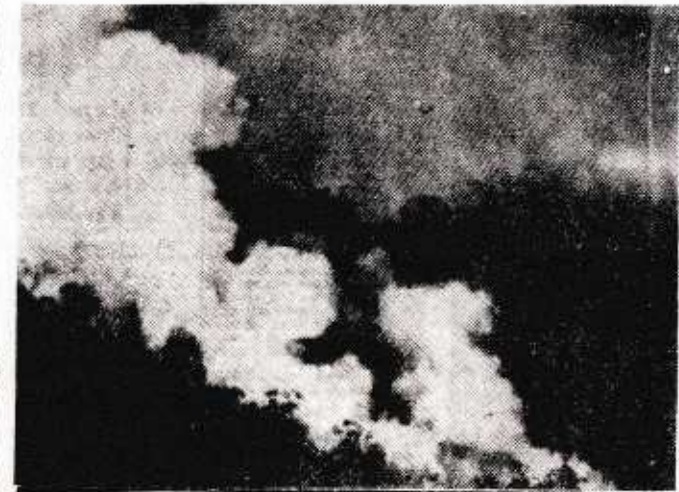
Since the fire, unemployed persons on a Government financial scheme have been employed in an effort to restore basic facilities at the beach camps which hopefully will be re-opened to the public by 1st December, 1983.

Another major loss was to the Bondi Pine Plantation with \$12 million damages. "About 5,500 hectares in the Bondi Plantation and 800 hectares in the Kapunda Development Company's pine plantation were destroyed." Quoted Age 10/2/83.

Mr Gordon Whitby, mill manager of Australian Consolidated Industries said the damage was primarily to the young pines. (The A.C.I. are the major harvestors of pine for the Bondi Plantation). They probably will not be effected by the fire for up to 5 years because the mill uses mainly mature pines.

### What effect have the fires 12 and 16 had on the local community

In order to assess the economic effects on local industry in Cann River, I wrote to people from many walks of life and following are the summaries of their thoughts and opinions.



## The Age Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> February Firefighters toil in Cann Valley on two fronts

By MATTHEW RICKETSON

Fire-fighters were battling to contain the Cann Valley fire on two fronts last night, in the Bondi pine plantation in New South Wales and in a 20-kilometre section west of Gipps in Victoria.

Although fire-fighters contained a 150-kilometre perimeter of the fire yesterday the blaze was still potentially dangerous according to a Bombala district forester, Mr Lloyd Walker.

Yesterday's cooler temperature and southerly wind may be succeeded today or tomorrow by hot weather and northerly winds, he said.

The Bondi pine plantation suffered an estimated \$12 million damage according to local forester, Mr Jim Simmonds.

About 5500 hectares in the Bondi plantation, 800 hectares in the Kapunda Development Company's pine plantation and 100,000 hectares in Victoria was burnt.

But the damage was primarily to young pine, according to Mr Gordon Whitby, the mill manager

of Australian Consolidated Industries, the major harvester of pine from the Bondi plantation.

The company probably will not be affected by the fire for up to five years because the mill uses mainly mature pine, he said.

New mills won't be built now. It's a case of an expanding industry being pruned, he said.

The 10-day fire, which is spreading across a 40-kilometre area, has so far caused no casualties and damaged very little property, according to Mr John Hoo, fire control officer at Bombala. Local townships were under threat from the fire last night, he said.

Firefighters began backing last night. Melbourne's top temperature today is expected to be 35 with high to very high fire danger. The Country Fire Authority not called a total fire ban last night, but would review situation early today. The cast for Friday is for a cooler



## 10,000 HECTARES BURNT AT CANN

Forestry and Country Fire Authority personnel are battling a huge bush fire to-day in the Cann River area which has already burnt approximately 10,000 hectares of bush and grass land.

The fire is each side of the Cann Valley highway and biggest on the western side.

No stock or buildings have been lost.

About 40 Forestry and 40 Country Fire Authority personnel worked all last night protecting the properties.

One hundred and fifty Forestry and 60 C.F.A. men are working to-day on the southern section with 15 bulldozers, back burning.

Three light aircraft are also bombing the fire with chemical re-

tardant.

Yesterday, it was reported the fire had burnt to within a short distance of 10-15 houses in the valley and one family had to be rescued from one house surrounded by fire.

A small spot fire has also broken out at the south side of Genoa Peak.

Two crews and bulldozers are working there to-day in an effort to contain the fire.

The C.V. fire is believed to have started from a lightning strike.

Because so much timber was burnt, major concern fell on the future of the local sawmilling industry.

One sawmiller, considers that the short term effects relate mainly to the loss of logging time and the finances involved. As the first three months of the year are the highest log production months, these fires prevented this production from occurring as man power was needed elsewhere. The long term effect is still rather difficult to assess - but obviously there must be some in the future. Soon after the fires, most mills were directed by the forest Commission to salvage logs from the Buldah and other damaged areas, so these trees were not completely lost to the industry.

Such employers did have several employees involved in voluntary work such as State Emergency Service and Country Fire Authority - but most fallers and truck or tractor drivers were utilized by and paid by the Forest Commission hence did not lose income.

The sawmiller believes that most of the forest will survive and regenerate as it is widely known that natural eucalypt requires fires as part of their natural cycle. Some parts may have been too severely damaged to recover and this may effect the future. Future employment in Cann River mills will probably remain much the same for some years despite the fires.

Comments from another sawmiller throws another light on the subject as he made the following point.....I quote "Our industry is attempting to process a product that has been burnt, creating problems with charcoal and advise just received (May 1983) from Harris Daishowa of Eden in forms us that 'any charcoal content in our chips will cause the cancellation of our contract of supply' (L.T. Doland) This problem is added to the now expected shortened life of raw material available as a direct result of the recent fires. Where will future supplies come from - ultimately this falls back on the Forest Commission to find suitable timber areas for allocation.

Future employment does not appear to have been effected, except perhaps for some awareness of possible shortened work life perhaps, and the emotional reaction of groups outside the industry in regard to the sawmilling industry.



Yet a third sawmiller provided me with the following information:

Showing the importance of the forest based industry as a source of employment in Cann River area. Within the Orbost Shire 25% of the population are directly dependant on forest based industry. In 1972 the total population of Cann River of 480 people, 409 were directly dependant upon the timber industry and he says "Cann River is a real timber town" (H. Sunberg 10/6/83) (Although these figures were based on 10 years ago, in discussing them with others, it was considered they would be fairly accurate even in 1983).

Thus the effects on mill and bush workers from the fires in his opinion would be:-

- 1) Short term traumatic experience, effects not too bad
- 2) Long term 60 - 70 of forested area of Cann River District was burnt. Salvaging of fire killed trees may continue for 2 years plus. But he also comments that it will be 1984 before a better assessment can be made.

A Forest Commission Officer sees the situation differently, that any losses of raw material (saw logs) will ultimately be borne by the sawmilling industry because the Forest Commission cannot "pull saw log resources out of thin air".

Ultimately, the sawmilling industry may have a number of options from which to choose its future.

- (a) accept lower quality logs and stay in existence in Cann River, for a longer period.
- (b) shift to other areas, of the state, or interstate, where longer term saw log supplies are available.
- (c) accept a reduction of allocations.
- (d) cease operation.

As the local Forest Commission is a branch of a State Government body, the financial losses overall becomes a Government burden, and as has been stated is expected to tally over \$24 million. This does not directly affect the local office, whose main concern now is in dealing with what remains after the fires.

In regard to mill allocations, the Forest Commission assess what timber/areas the mills will be allowed to remove trees from.

## SNOWY RIVER

Published Wednesdays at Orbost, Victoria

# MAIL

No. 4292

Wednesday, February 9th, 1983

93rd Year Price 15c



■ Fire rapidly approaching the West Cann road properties at Noorinbee North last week. Photograph was taken from Cann Valley Highway looking west across Ted Armstrong's property.

Photo by Ron Anderson,  
Cann River

## FIRES RAGE OUT OF CONTROL

Two main bushfires are raging out of control in the Cann River area and approximately 300 men are fighting the blaze, which broke out nine days ago and which already has destroyed an estimated 200,000 hectares of bush and farm lands.

The fire fighters have about 48 hours weather respite to gain control of the blaze before the temperature again rises as forecast.

The regional Forestry office advised the "S.R.M." this morning that the northern perimeter of the fire has burnt out the Bondi forest plantation (N.S.W.) after raging through rugged mountain country south-east of Bombala before entering New

South Wales, near Timbillica and west of the Princes Highway. Luckily the fire did not and is not expected to cross the highway between Genoa and Cann River.

However, the fire burnt through the Wangrabelle area and into N.S.W. north of Wallagarah.

A fire break is being bulldozed on the south edge to Genoa and to the coast range and it is expected to have this area of the fire under control by to-morrow night.

Work is also continuing on new lines in an endeavour to contain the north-western front from spreading to the Errinundra Plateau.

Two unoccupied houses and several outbuild

ings were reported to have been destroyed yesterday in the Cann Valley.

The Cann River bushfire is said to be the biggest outbreak in East Gippsland since 1939.

Conditions were reported as "quiet" at Cann River blaze at mid-day with very little wind and fighters were concentrating on constructing fire breaks on the northern and southern perimeters of the fire.

Weather conditions were expected to remain stable, giving personnel an opportunity to better contain the blaze.





*Mid afternoon on Saturday March 5th, 1983.*

At this stage it is fairly unlikely to be cutbacks in the allocations which seems quite a hopeful situation for those relying on this employment. However had drought conditions continued and significant areas become adversely affected - then the situation would be reviewed and re-assessed (At the time of writing this, the Cann River district has had quite a good rainfall and although re growth is not fast or great - it will probably improve).

In the middle to long term, the fire may have caused the loss of several years growth on surviving trees, and degrade of mill log material will be accelerated - i.e. some reduction in available resource. In approximately 70 years, the effects of the destroyed regrowth aged 1 - 10 years will be felt.

Overall the timber industry will remain the basis of employment for Cann River residents.

#### Economic Effects

Mr Broome is a local resident who has also spent many years as a contractor in bush work.

He makes the comment that fire has in the past been used naturally and by the natives to keep the forest clean and virilient. This same practice was also carried on by the early settlers in these such areas and although forest fires were numerous, there were none of the magnitude of the few fires that have occurred in the last half century. Although Mr Broome accedes to the fact that there are other factors that may have imput to this disaster, in his opinion it is the "narrow" conservation policy that is a major cause of this disaster occurring and causing such effects on flora and fauna in particular.

In regard to flora, this writer believes about 40% of burnt area will show more benefit than ill-effect due to conversion of dead and decaying material to nutrument available to new growth. Of the 60% that will probably have difficulty in recovering, the drought of the past 4-5 years plays quite an important part in this lack of recovery because a) root systems were so dry, they had little or no reserve of moisture to draw on, and b) the soil was so dry that the fire heat penetrated deep destroying soil structure, seeds, and roots.

He continues in regard to losses involved in timber/forest areas "...the mature forest in the fire stormed areas will eventually die after an initial showing of recovery".



Having observed what happened to a very good stand of forest in the east Wigan area killed in a 1979 fire, he continues "the greatest disaster was the loss of huge areas of regeneration up to 30 years of age, some of these areas of regeneration would be producing timber within the next 30-40 years. These areas will regenerate" - but he continues that the first crop of regeneration is better as it is usually dense enough to inhibit the scrub species.

Effects of this fire on mature will probably take a much longer time for recovery. This writer doubts if the forests and jungles (rain forests) and the territorial wild life i.e. scrub wallabies, emu wrens and other travelling fauna will recover to their original state within a hundred years. He bases this statement on a small scale but similar type of fire on cleared farmland, and its close to total recovery.

He too feels that short term affects of logging will be minimal as timber can be salvaged from fire-stormed areas. Also, regeneration on a large scale as happened after 1939 fires produces an even forest which ultimately may not be seen as such a disaster, as some of these stands may attain maturity, whereas the precemeal regeneration after logging would probably have to be used before full maturity.



As tourism plays a large part in the Cann River District one of the main features is the accessibility of good fishing areas. And with the Cann River Angling Club providing competition for many locals and visitors. Much is based on the Tamboon Inlet, although other river areas are included at various times. Fishing competitions are held monthly and the March comp was the only one that was not able to be held. Access to many popular fishing spots at Thurra, Mueller and Wigan Inlet was affected and facilities provided at these spots for day visitors (e.g. toilets, etc) caused these areas to be closed by the National Parks and thus to fishing activities. Although the fires were a problem around the jetty and northern parts of Tamboon Inlet - this area was not inaccessible to those who wanted to fish.

Overall the social effects and enthusiasm remained at a moderate level and quickly recovered as people sought relaxation from the strain of fighting fires. The burnt debris that was washed into Cann River by later rains hindered good fishing results for a period of time.

# Crisis as the gales spur fire

By KEN MERRIGAN

A STATE of emergency was declared last night for two NSW towns threatened by the giant East Gippsland bushfire.

About 15 people from the township of Wangarabell, fled to Maffacoota as the fire headed toward them.

The fire, which has been burning for at least eight days, yesterday destroyed two farmhouses at Chandlers Creek off the Cann Valley Highway north of Cann River.

The township of Genoa is on alert and firefighters are on standby at the seaside resort of Maffacoota.

Firefighters fear the blaze will be driven towards several towns by a sudden wind change accompanying the cold front crossing the state.

Until yesterday, firefighters had believed that the fires were being contained within fire breaks.

But Cann River district forestry officer Mr Denis Read, who is leading the battle, said that early yesterday the bush went "boom" and the fire broke away.

He said he believed it was the worst fire in the area since 1939.

"These are the worst conditions I have ever seen," he said.

"All we are trying to do is save people and private property."

"There is no moisture in the soil and the wind is so strong."

Mr Read said outlying settlements and houses had been warned by

phone and helicopter to evacuate if threatened.

The main fire front, too fierce for firemen to hope to combat, was burning on a 1 km stretch north of Cann River.

Spot fires were burning over a wide area.

The firefighters' strategy is at best to try to contain the fire at its fringes and douse fresh spot fires to save lives and property.

The fire, which was started by lightning, has burned about 10,000 hectares, much of its valuable timber and vegetation.

Yesterday it destroyed another 10,000 hectares of bush.

It now threatens thousands of hectares of NSW pine plantations.

Facing the blaze in temperatures up to 44C yesterday were more than 100 firefighters.

The Forests Commission has been alerted to the possibility of a major bushfire.

Fire spotting helicopters and ground staff are being used to drop retardant.

East Gippsland Forests Commission district forester Mr Keith Gidley said another 35,000 hectares was burnt yesterday.

"The area is so dry that the forest simply explodes," he said.

"It is as if man is almost powerless to stop this one."

"Rain could be the only answer."

A Forests Commission spokesman said thousands of NSW men were waiting to fight the tear-away blaze.

East Gippsland was clouded by a giant plume of smoke yesterday.

Co-ordinators working at a makeshift headquarters at Cann River, where residents have been rationed to 60 litres of water a day, said fire crews had

been on duty for weeks and will soon need a respite.

Police closed off the Cann Valley Highway and other roads between Cann River and Genoa.

Some firefighters have been on duty for weeks and will soon need a respite.

## Flare-up fear in bush blaze

FIREMEN in East Gippsland fear a major outbreak of the 11-day-old Cann River fire after it burst through the south-east front late yesterday.

A Forests Commission spokesman said more than 200 men, including RAAF servicemen from Sale, were preparing a breakline along the Princes Highway between Cann River and Genoa.

The fire, fanned by strong north-westerly winds, was bearing down on the Alfred National Park.

More than 720 men are fighting the giant blaze in Victoria and NSW, which has burned out about 130,000 hectares.

"If we can't stop it at the highway, then it could

burn on through to the coast," the Forests Commission spokesman said.

He said today's local forecast of northerly winds and high temperatures made the situation critical.

Fire fighters in NSW were busy checking the northern front of the blaze, which has been contained south of Bombarla.

But spot fires were still burning outside breaklines on both sides of the border.



## WHAT WILL HAPPEN OVER FORESTS

(To the Editor:—  
Dear Sir, Ms. Murray needs to keep wondering a lot more about the bushfire in the Cann River Forest Area and maybe she will fully understand the situation. Ms. Murray has made a judgement when obviously, I am informed and with a short sighted approach to the reason for bush fires, a common judgement error made by the Shire in the Cann River area.

The bushfire started from a lightning strike it is generally thought at this stage, this may alter with more investigation. A lightning strike can occur anywhere in the bush, untouched bush, logged bush, played bush or even as this was, a regenerating coup — an area removed of logging debris by the Forests Commission. There is a high rate of lightning strikes in East Gippsland, hence this area is considered a high fire risk area — one of three main bushfire danger areas in the world.

Lightning strikes would have been starting fires in our bush long before we were ever here. Indeed the natives of Australia, the Aborigines, realised this — historical and archeological evidence shows the Aborigines did not stay permanently in East Gippsland forests, they very quickly learnt to move onto the Monaro or the coast during the summer months when fire was a danger, to return when the grass was green and game plentiful on newly burned areas.

It is evident from examining soil strata that bushfires as bad or often worse than this fire have raged through East Gippsland throughout time. But the bush was just as beautiful again in a short time as when white man first arrived, untouched Eucalypt forests benefit from fires, it is part of their life cycle.

If Ms. Murray were to speak to some of the senior residents who have lived here all their lives she would learn from them what fires were like long before logging, which she claims provides fuel for fires, came to this area. One senior citizen I spoke to says, as a child, she can remember the whole valley being smoke covered for weeks on end, with fires on the mountains all round the valley, one time the fire raced down to the edge of the settlement and they had to beat it out to stop it getting their buildings.

In the 39 fires, before logging had entered the forests of Cann River, the bushfire raced just as savagely right up the coast of Victoria and N.S.W. a much more extensive fire than this bushfire.

We must realise Ms. Murray, we live in a high fire danger area, if you don't like the risk, leave, as the risk has always been here and will continue to be. It takes a fire like this to show man that he is a mere mortal and cannot always control nature. No man or machine could have stopped this fire — as conditions were perfect — a long period of dry, four years now, unusually strong winds for this time of the year, and finally many years of the bush not having been burnt, so there was plenty of fuel for fires.

Why hasn't the bush been burnt? The farmers blame the Forestry and "greenies" for this, the millers keep quiet, the reason — hot summer fires make trees unsuitable for logging, as Ms. Murray well knows. The millers have a strong lobby on the Forestry to protect the bush from fire, and fair enough, the logging industry is a viable industry. The "greenies" don't mind fire — they realise it is part of the environment of a natural wet sclerophytic forest. Simply, that means that the Forestry stop summer fires to prevent damage to saw logs and regenerating coupes.

The farmers will start their accusations again on the Forestry, misdirected accusations, it should be aimed at their politicians and lobbying of the policy makers, that is how the millers have attained this policy of not burning the forests. Some farmers quote stories of how the cattle men once protected settlements by burning and this is why we are endangered this year, so farmers should be allowed to burn off again. This is naive in the extreme — how do they think this will be organised — every Spring give all farmers a box of matches and say go to it — you would soon have a range war between millers and farmers. If the fires burnt out of control, who would put it out and who would be responsible for damage to property, the farmers? Would the taxpayer of Victoria be willing to see their dollars spent for stopping deliberately lit fires, or fires destroying regenerating logging coupes?

The Forestry do not have the man power to fuel reduction burn around all settlements, they don't even have the man power to carry out all their regeneration burns in logging coupes, there is only a short time in the Spring when the forest will burn safely — do people really think the Forestry can fuel reduction burn all areas in such a short period. The old cattlemen lived in a different time — the forest is now a multi purpose resource. My grandfather was a well known 'old timer' who burnt the bush, as did

many others. They burnt the bush to get feed for cattle, they only burnt a small area so the cattle would stay on the burn. They weren't burning to protect all settlements nor did it matter if they burnt the bush as there were no regenerating logging areas or sawlogs to damage. These men are mostly dead and gone, so has their knowledge, and that period of history, I'm afraid.

Ms. Murray might care to come out here and I will show her areas on the W.B. line which have been fuel reduction burnt, or around Brownies, and these areas burnt just as well and fiercely as any where I can show her areas where there has been no logging and it burnt just as fiercely. I can show her logging coupes which have been slashed and burnt to clear them of logging residue and they have burnt just as fiercely. Better still Mrs. Murray I can show you areas which have been pulped to supposedly remove all fire risk and they burnt just as fiercely. Did the fire go around the trial P.D.A. at the Reedy Creek? One would think so if Mrs. Murray's statements are correct. Go across the border and see the fire damage in the pulpwood areas of N.S.W. Yes, fire will burn just as fiercely in these areas.

In fact Mrs. Murray, what can be learnt is the vulnerability of a regenerating area to fire. The damage to our bush from this fire is going to be quite alarming, not in the untouched forest, it will regenerate just as it was, the animals will breed again as they have done over centuries, the soils will be more fertile from the ash, no problems there. But the regenerating plots, with few big trees to recover from fire, all the small trees burnt, many of them not to recover, no habitat for animals, not the depth of ash from the fire to encourage regeneration and the soil exposed to the elements, a large area of our forest land is now going to be all immature trees for many years to come. Many species will be lost and the regeneration of saw logs set back years.

This has been the worry of we Concerned Residents of East Gippsland. I in fact questioned Mr. Gidley and Mr. Reed, F.C.V. personnel, in February '81 about my fears of the damage that could be caused by fire to an immature forest. This

— Asks Cann River Resident  
question was put to Mr. Gidley by me in front of the media and V.S.A. and F.I.R.M. representatives at the Reedy Creek P.D.A. Mr. Gidley replied, fire would not be a problem as the Forestry now had the forest well broken up with roads and with their knowledge and equipment could prevent fire from entering these logging coupes.

I pointed out to him the susceptibility of the Reedy Creek P.D.A. to fire, be agreed, but pointed out to me that the Forestry could prevent fire from burning these areas. Well why didn't they stop this fire from burning these areas? They couldn't and I don't blame them for that. But it does support the fears of the opponents of pulpwood operations, what will happen to our forests if larger areas of immature forests are exposed to fire as they will be? The policy of clear felling, as the method of saw log extraction, which creates the need for pulpwood extraction, needs more research. Will areas such as the Lock-up and Buldah Gap be able to regenerate? There were problems with regeneration in the Lock-up area before this fire, how will it cope now?

I find it curious that Mrs. Murray has omitted to mention National Parks personnel in her praise of the fire fighting operations. It may be her lack of knowledge which has caused this omission, however with their limited staff they did help save homes and properties. The residents of Norrabin see North can't see that.

Finally Mrs. Murray as Shire president, I suggest you consider the proverb: "It's a all wind that blows no one any good." Whilst I agree the fire may cause hardships to the timber industry and that does concern me

Continued

The Shire of Orbost is one of the largest Shires in the State of Victoria, and Fires 12 and 16 covered a major part of the shire. The total expenditure incurred by this municipality is approximately \$40,000 and the break down of this amount included:—

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| 1) clearing of trees and debris from West Cann, Buldah, and Wangarabell roads | \$5,000  |
| 2) replacement of ten timber culverts, on Buldah road                         | \$15,000 |
| 3) replacement of timber bridge in Buldah Valley                              | \$17,500 |
| 4) replacement of three timber culverts on Wangarabell road                   | \$3,300  |

(Not including damage in Mallacoota area)

However this figure is later retrieved through Government Grants. Plant was also provided by the Shire to the Forestry to fight the fires as well as indoor and outdoor staff volunteering their services.

Immediately after the fires the employment by Shire increased for several months in a clean up and salvage attempt — but this increase was only a very short term arrangement.

Comments by a local storekeeper in the town, (relying greatly on the tourist trade) tells another aspect of the economic affects of the fires.

Because of the danger of the fires close to main thorough fares, and the extended time that the area was endangered, tourist seemed to avoid this area during the fires and for many weeks later. As camping areas in Croajingalong National Parks were closed — those being popular tourist attractions for many people coming into this area, and the fact that Mallacoota was reported by the media to be endangered by Fire 16, the tourist situation was greatly reduced.

Because of the great distance from other major towns and limited access into these areas (i.e. only the Princes Highway or Cann Valley Highway) people did not travel to "have a sticky beak". Some weeks later, as the tourist trade gradually started to move again — many were still curious about the fires.

Overall it was considered that business was slightly below normal, but many such places were called on to help with supplies for the extra workers in the town.



It can be said that a number of other local businesses must surely have had an enonomic gain throughout the time of the fires. The Butcher was the sole provider of meat to feed the "crowds" in the base camp. For the financial gain he must surely have acquired, he also must have "suffered" somewhat as he had an extra large load of work - plus long hours.

The B.P. cafe and service station also were called on for both fuel and food, far and beyond their normal trading, plus motels and hotel for accomodation. In the early part of Fire 12 with such hot unpleasant weather a certain brick building must surely have had a financial gain....

2

Affects of the bushfires on the natural flora and fauna became a major project for a dedicated few in the area and enclosed here is a summary of the report on the feeding and study of the fire-affected wildlife of Cann River area and the Croajingalong National Park as written by Leonie Cameron.

Although much of the  $\frac{3}{4}$  million acres damaged by the 1983 bushfires was roaded, most were inaccessible due to the fire damage/debris and most feeding and a study of wildlife had to be done around the settled areas and along main road systems, thus covering only about 10% of the damaged area.

Feed was made available by organizations and orchardists around Bairnsdale, Sale, Garfield etc. included lucerne, hay, apples, carrots, tomatoes, other vegetable scraps and bread all delivered to a base in Cann Valley once a week and distributed by locals each day.

Placing of these foods were at water holes, along S.E.C. line, cleared areas where these animals were most likely to be, and most of this was done during the day to prevent disturbing the animals.

From observations made, birds soon started feeding by day and their noise attracted others to the area. This program of feeding continued for approxiamately 6 weeks until high rain fall made many areas inaccessible and with the wide distribution of water and the shoots coming into the plants - animals were able to resume natural feeding.

Success of these food drops: It is understood that only a few kangeroos and wallabies would eat hay, but it did attract the birds. However, the bread, carrot, apples, and tomatoes were most popular to a wide range of animals and birds. Wallabies, possums, wombats, bandicoots, rats, mice and potarroo took many of these vegetable

## Biggest fire in 18 years

BAIRNSDALE  
ADVERTISER  
FEB 7  
'83.

The Cann River bushfire, now in its eighth day of burning, is the biggest outbreak in East Gippsland since 1965.

More than 400 men — 200 of them from outside Gippsland — are fighting the blaze in extreme conditions.

East Gippsland District forester, Mr Keith Gidley, said today the Forests Commission's resources are fully committed to the Cann River fire.

"We have to rely on members of the public — whether they be property owners or tourists — to report and put out any fires they see," Mr Gidley said.

He has emphasised the importance of extinguishing fires while they are small.

It is difficult to imagine how firefighters could cope with two the size of the Cann River fire, which has burnt more than 47,000 hectares so far, and is still burning unchecked on the western side of the Buldah settlement.

Cause of the fire is unknown.

The fire has been controlled on the eastern side of Cann Valley Highway, and will be patrolled there for at least a week.

New control lines are being burnt from Buldah west to the Coast Range Road. From there burns will be made down the Coast Range Road and Hensleigh's Creek Road to Combiobar.

By then the fire will be about 10 kms from Bondi at the New South Wales border, where there are big pine plantations.

While optimistic the control lines will be successful in containing the blaze, Mr Gidley says there are 150 kms of fire frontage and it will take only one weak spot to cause another major outbreak.

"The small settlement Buldah may have some anxious moments late today or tomorrow. We have sent tankers in case the fire comes close.

"Fifteen men area also on standby at Bruthen should further reinforcements be necessary.

According to Mr Gidley, the fire-fighting operation is turning into a community affair, particularly in the small township of Cann River.

Forests Commission Country Fire Authority National Parks Service Police and State Emergency Service personnel are uniting to fight the flames.

In addition to the Cann River fire, three other fires have been checked in the past few days.

They have been at Club Terrace; at Campbell's Creek between Gelantipy and Swift's Creek; and at Mount Menaak in the Suggan Buggan area.

### Continued

particularly the workers, who unlike the owners do not have reserves to draw upon, the fire has benefited some — small business owners — fuel suppliers, butchers, supermarket, etc., hotels, dozer and equipment operators, and owners, machinery suppliers, etc., will all have done well due to the fire. Many wage earners have had a chance to earn more, especially many summer crew employees, many of whom face unemployment after the fire season. So it has meant more revenue coming into the Cann River area and Orbost Shire for this financial year.

It is also a suggestion, if in fact many mill employees face an uncertain future, that the shire lobby the government for extra forestry revenue to allow the local Forests Commission to employ these workers to repair the fire damage; regenerate damaged areas, repair dozer and fire break damage to streams and gullies, which could create erosion, rebuild bridges and roads, replace signs, etc., a task beyond the resources and man power of Cann River forest district at present. — Yours etc., Leonie CAMERON, Noorinbee.



*Looking North, to Fire 16 at Tamboon Inlet.*

scraps quite readily. Parrots, loukeets, galahs, were some of the first birds back into the bush after the fires, plus thrushs, bower birds, wrens, tits, honey eaters, magpies, jays and crows all were observed and were the leaders of the wildlife back into the burnt area.

As no research has been done as to whether these animals and birds would have survived without food drops, assumptions can only be made on what was observed by these locals.

Many of these creatures were in danger of being killed as they sought out "safe" areas - mostly on roads along which fire equipment was being moved. By feeding them back into the bush, perhaps it prevented a few more unnecessary deaths.

As the cost of this project was minimal and voluntary it is quite possible that the tremendous saving of nature's wonderful creations has been far greater though the efforts of those who assisted even this small percentage of creatures endangered by the 1983 bush fires.

~

Lyrebirds were among the first species to recolonize burnt areas in large numbers. They appeared to enjoy scratching for insects in the bared earth at the base of trees. It was amazing the number of lyrebirds in burnt areas, many kilometres from the nearest unburnt forest, very soon after the fires.

Since the fires most of the common animal species have returned although not in the same numbers as before the fires. Forest Commission ecologists have established research plots in burnt areas to monitor the recovery of both flora and fauna in future years.

~

As well as material losses, natural flora and fauna was also greatly affected. The Ranger comments that "it is quite obvious that a large amount of wildlife would have been destroyed, but the resilience of native animal species to survive and recolonize burnt areas is well known. Sightings of wombat, Antechinus Lyrebirds have been noted over the past months since the fire.

Rainforest and jungle gully areas have been severely affected and these areas will be a long time, possibly hundreds of years, before retaining their characteristics. Some may never recover and a whole new plant regime could predominate. Some areas that were burnt recently in the 1979-1980 fires have eucalypts that will not survive and therefore will not seed, which means a whole new plant community will develop.



Therefore that means a different animal community will "adapt"/ occur with it. In some areas the fire was so hot that the heat will have sterilized the soils, and killed the seed it contained prior to the fire, so there will be interesting developments to watch there".

In the "Sun" newspaper March 11, 1983 it was reported that the National Parks "lost a lot of young regrowth potential, some National Park areas having been destroyed.

.....there were pockets of temperate rainforest in these areas which were unique in Victoria. Also destroyed in the fires was one of the few places in Australia, and possibly the only one in Victoria, where sand paper fig trees grew in abundance".

### Effects on the Farming Community

The approach of the fire into the Cann Valley on 1st February showed up a real community spirit as farmers down the valley raced to help save the homes and sheds of those farms facing the most danger. If one farmer appeared to have ample assistance on to the next to help; and these efforts by the Country Fire Authority and so many locals resulted in no real property loss. Having had such dry conditions, the remaining valuable dry cattle feed was lost on the West Cann Road farms. Fencing was also greatly affected many losing much of their boundary fences.

Very few farmers carried insurances on their fencing, preferring to lay this on machinery, cattle and buildings, however a Government grant for the cost of fencing material was available, administered through the shire offices.

The Forest Commission waived royalty on fencing material for fences destroyed in the fires, for three months after the fires.

### Emotions felt by two community members

On reflecting back on the emergency of the fires, several people I interviewed spoke of their own remarkable calmness, braveness and strong will power that evolved from within them.

A dower driver found that he lived each day as it came. He had very little sleep each 24 hour period, yet had no time to feel tired.

# CANN FARMERS WANT BUSH LITTER REDUCED

"SNOWY"  
FEB 16  
'83  
SANICE

Cann River farmers are of opinion that it has been shown without doubt that existing Forests Commission fire protection policies do not work. They now want the bush litter reduced and area around settlements kept clear of scrub and rubbish.

This opinion was expressed by a deputation on Sunday last to the Minister for Forests (Mr. R. McKenzie) who agreed to a meeting at Cann River following an inspection by him of some of the fire area.

As the size of the deputation was to be kept small, ten farmers and graziers, all born and reared in the area and all third and fourth generation East Gippslanders met the Minister and Forests Commission officers.

The deputation told the Minister that:

Local groups — Victorian Farmers' Union, Cattlemen's Association, Country Fire Authority and individuals had over the years repeatedly approached the Forests Commission and National Parks requesting that F.C. restrictions be eased to enable people to burn off and clean up and for the F.C. to carry out more burning off. All these pleas, it was claimed, had fallen on deaf ears. Submissions along these lines had also been put to the Barber Inquiry into the "Prevention of Bush and Grass Fires in Victoria" and to the Land Conservation Council together with numerous letters to papers, interviews, etc. all to no avail.

At this point, said the deputation, it is shown beyond doubt that ex-

isting F.C. fire protection policies do not work. This is proven by the bad fires in recent years, i.e., the Orbost fire, Coopracambra fire, Nadgee fire (just across border in N.S.W.) and now the Cann River fire.

Farmers now want the bush litter reduced and areas around settlement kept clear of scrub and rubbish.

Spokesmen said they have no argument with local foresters who, it is believed, are restricted by F.C. policy and that many officers are hesitant to take the initiative to burn off for fear of censure from above, should anything go wrong. Existing fuel reduction burning policies are too restricted, it was said.

Concern was expressed that as the law stands it needs to be altered to protect F.C. and also private individuals authorised to burn off, should fire escape and do damage. It is also believed that the public have been wrongly educated in the past to believe all fire is bad and should now be re-educated to understand that in East Gippsland forest fire is natural to the environment.

If more burning was done, said the deputation, the cost of control would be considerably less. If the forest were kept clean then even a

summer fire would not be over harmful to the forest.

The deputation believed that the cost to do regular burning off would be far less than the cost of fighting big fires.

The F.C. are putting the reason for this fire, claimed the deputation, down to the drought (Orbost shire is not yet a proclaimed drought area) and this was disputed as the other ingredients required for a fire are material to burn, temperature and draught or wind. Of the 10 days or so that this fire has been wandering about only about two days could have been considered as dangerous fire days having all the ingredients for a holocaust fire. The Nadgee and Coopracambra fires could not be controlled and they were springtime fires when the bush debris would be much more moist so F.C. argument falls pretty flat.

The comments were aimed equally at National Parks as well as F.C. and spokesmen believed that if F.C. altered their policies and this resulted in less timber being available for commerce then little harm would be done to selectively logging national parks for sawlogs and pulpwood.

After the discussion the deputation asked the Minister if he would hold an inquiry into the Cann River fire and the points wanted clarified were as follows:

1. Why did this fire assume such proportions?
2. What is the total cost of this fire to the community?
3. What changes do you recommend to existing F.C. policy re "Fuel Reduction Burning" and clear felling to ensure that a similar happening does not occur again?

At this point the Minister replied saying he would supply answers to the first two questions but he did not know about the third. He went on into a lengthy explanation in support of existing F.C. policies and praise for his officers and men but saying he had taken note of the points the deputation had raised and inviting members of the deputation to a symposium to take place in several weeks time on fuel reduction burning.

A debate ensued between F.C. officers and the deputation as to the amount of fuel reduction burning required to render the area reasonably safe.

The meeting closed as the Minister and party had to fly back to Melbourne but the deputation left the meeting, it was said with the feeling that bureaucratic pig-headedness will not change until the forests are completely devastated.



## Giant blaze under control

# Breather in fire fight

FIREMEN working on the giant Cann River blaze, in two states were slowly bringing it under control last night.



FIREFIGHTER Daryl Purcell, his face stained by dust and smoke, takes a break during the Cann River battle.

The 100,000-ha fire, which broke out just north of Cann River in East Gippsland nine days ago, crossed the NSW border early yesterday.

Crews of up to 100 volunteers with the NSW Forestry Commission, the Bush Brigade and shire workers, have stopped the northern march of the blaze about 20 km south of Bombala.

Early yesterday the fire had been burning on a 35 km front.

Police said the fire was burning in rough forest country with no reported building losses.

However, millions of dollars worth of pine forests have been destroyed in the Bondi and Kapunda plantations.

There have also been reports of logging machinery lost in the steep timber country.

Meanwhile, Victorian Forests Commission and CFA workers have contained the threatening edges near Genoa and Quinburra.

Firemen contained the 25 km front at Genoa on the eastern flank, which enabled the Prince's Highway to remain open.

They also had fire breaks established at Quinburra on the western flank of the blaze.

Firemen said the light south-easterly winds were a 'godsend' and allowed them to get on top of the blaze for the first time.

But the feared hot conditions at the weekend could prevent necessary backburning.

Residents in the tiny Gippsland town of Nowa Nowa were licking their wounds yesterday according to District Forester David Hocking, after a 170-ha blaze went through the "backyard" of the town.

The fire, which broke out about 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, passed the northern edge of the town, destroyed several outbuildings—but missing houses.

Mr Hocking said the fire raced through railway yards on the edge of the town before it was brought under control about midnight.

He said about 65 volunteers, using eight tankers, had worked feverishly to save houses in the town's main street.

He worked constantly and without thought of the dangers around him. There were always the possibility of the dozer rolling when working, on the side of steep terrain; of the burning trees falling or the time when about 20 dozers were "buried" in the Pine Plantation (N.S.W.) to protect machinery, from the approaching fire. In the panic to get aboard road vehicles out of this area, men became abusive, pushing and screaming, fear of the danger obviously produced these reactions.

He had no clean clothing for quite a time, but when he did get them, he put them straight on and continued with his work (there was obviously no feeling of cleanliness and the clothing didn't matter). As well as all the serious "automatic" type actions, there were times when happenings became humorous, like when a National Parks man fell head first into the river, and the realization that one of the pilots was a female.

These enlightenments was obviously a relief of tension for many people north of Cann River, and along the Cann Valley Highway, the dangers of the fire "niggled" the emotion of residents for 7-8 days. The emotional responses of one family were:-

worry and fear of the unknown (the fire being 14km away); excitement about the fire; relief as it was heading their way and were now able to prepare to fight it ; a period of absolutely no feeling, being unsure of the outcome of their property ; relief when the result was not too bad ; calmness and courage in front of the children ; scared as burning trees fell between them and safety; upset over the death of their milking goats ; children having nightmare reactions, while parents being exhausted ; hate of home and surroundings after fire, due to the stench of smoke, of the soot and grit throughout the house, and then finally shaky and upset, a shock reaction.

Several days later, relief and contentment as the family support arrived and the realisation that damage was severe but repairable.

This would be typical of several homes and pressures the fire put upon them.



## CONCLUSION

What then are the effects of the fire?

The Forest Commission are in control of the timber areas in this region and in making allocations for sawmill production, but their work became greatly effected by the break out of the fire on January 31st. Not only were they faced with organizing the suppression of these fires and all that was entailed, when extra help was brought in, but afterwards, they were responsible for continuing requirements of sawmill operations.

Sawmillers appear to have suffered to a degree, but probably far less than what might have been expected considering the area and intensity of the fire. They suffered some loss of employment, when workers were needed elsewhere in fighting the fire, and this would perhaps have been their best time for production.

However, since the fires, with all mills being directed to salvage fire damaged trees, probably this is the "down" in production figures overall, but at least they are still gaining some timber.

The future too, does not look as bleak as may be thought during mid February 1983, and the future of milling is not all directly related to the fire.

As sawmilling and timber based industry are the basis of employment in Cann River, then this area appears to have a future ahead to at least another 8 to 10 years, perhaps not an increase but to remain constant. Considering the percentage of the town that relies on this employment, Cann River will still continue as a timber town for some time yet.

Tourism was greatly effected during and after the fire and even some 8 to 10 months later, the news items still prominent in the thoughts of many visiting the area. However the fire results are less obvious now with all the plants and trees starting to shoot again. To counter balance the business loss of tourism, with the greater town population, people were purchasing more in the shops.

The effects on nature will be rather hard to access. Nature is really wonderful, in how it rejuvenates itself and we have been fortunate in receiving so much rain in light regular showers, which will certainly help the bushlands recover. The Forest Commission have a group of employees, who study the flora and fauna in bushlands and these people have been continuing since the fire.

# THE NEWS & MARKET GUIDE

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## LIGHTNING FIRE AT COMBIENBAR

**A fire started by lightning in State Forest south east of Combiensbar early Monday, has burnt more than 15,000 hectares of bush and grassland.**

About 200 Forests Commission fire-fighters and 100 Country Fire Authority volunteers are fighting the blaze which has split into two fires east and west of the Cann Valley Highway.

The fire has burnt some grass, but no property has been destroyed.

Yesterday a spokesman for the Forests Commission, Mr Moray Douglas, said control lines had been established along the southern edge of the fire, which was causing fire-fighters the most concern.

Mr Douglas said back-burnt commenced on Tuesday night and fire-fighters hoped to control the southern edge quickly before establishing control lines in the more rugged country along the north edge of the fire.

The fire is expected to be brought under control within the next few days.

Seventeen CFA tankers, 12 bulldozers and about 20 Forests Commission tankers have been used to fight the blaze.

Planes have been dropped retardants to prevent "Hot-spots" from developing.

The State Emergency Service has set up a base camp at Cann River to provide bedding and meals for the fire-fighters.

A small fire began at Genoa Peak on Tuesday night and is being fought by about 30 Forests Commission workers.

The fire has burnt about four hectares and is not expected to pose any threat.



*FIRE 12. Near Allards, Norrinbee North, 22 February 1983.*

Open Column:

## GREENIES WRONG

(To the Editor)

Dear Sir, —The disastrous fires in East Gippsland-Eden/Monaro once again prove how wrong are the conservationists in their opposition to the removal of bush, mill and second class timber from the forest floor.

This coupled with bureaucratic interference stopping controlled burning and fuel reduction off season led to the situation where assets and revenue are lost for a generation, costing instead the taxpayer thousands of dollars.

Let the locals, bushmen and forestry people control their own destiny, they above all know the area and problems best. I am, yours faithfully, David F NIXON, 12 Kristine Court, Cheltenham 3192

Most native vegetation and animal species have evolved with frequent fires. Although some individuals may be killed by the flames, the fire in fact rejuvenates the bush by assisting the regeneration of vegetation and the building of new populations of animals and other fauna which depend on the vegetation for their food supplies and habitat.

### On farming.....

It has taken many farmers about 6 months to completely repair all fencing destroyed and with good follow up rainfall consistently throughout winter and particularly spring, it is amazing now to see the tremendous years growth.

The farming community here and elsewhere were at a rather low ebb early 1983, as the dry seasons were beginning to take their toll and the fire that followed added to this. However as "Mother Nature" heals quickly - so too do the spirits of those who work close to the land.

### On the homelife.....

The fires were really a most frightening occurrence and it was evident in many housewives appearance at the base camp, voluntarily offering their service, but also giving them support and re-assurance while the smoke hung heavily around. For many children they virtually didn't see their father for days on end - as the men fighting the fire mostly worked very long hours and travel to and fro added extra time to this. Financially this period was a gain for many family incomes - especially those who had equipment hired to the Forest Commission plus their own time.

### Are these the expected results?

During the time of the fires, one heard of so many timber areas being burnt and the immediate thought for the outsider - was that this would greatly reduce employment in the timber mills - as so many logged areas would be wiped put - but it is interesting to read the collective information and realize that the fire will virtually have no short term effect on employment and long term probably won't be affected greatly either. As this covers so many of Cann River's population, it means that the township can continue its employment as usual with a future still ahead.



## Why did the fires go so far and so fast?

Under 'normal' Cann Valley Summer weather conditions it is very unlikely that a fire of such intensity would have encroached onto farm pasture lands, as green pastures do not normally burn. However the dryness caused even the few green patches to explode.

The Feb/March fires appear then to have resulted from a number of facts. In past years there have been large fires in Coopracambra and Madgee State Forests and these were very difficult to control even though they were spring time fires when much more moisture was present in foliage and soil. The 1983 fire/s however was intensified because of the extreme dryness of vegetation, soil, and river beds, plus the extremely high temperatures over many consecutive days, and the strong winds that added to make a major problem.

Of course other groups will consider that conservation ideas or restrictions in fuel-reduction burn-offs were a contributing factor to the amount of debris piled on the forest floor and allowing ready fuel to spur on the fire.

There have been many people who are very verbal as to what could have been done, how such disasters may be prevented etc. etc. This has been the case with the Fires 12 and 16, and following is a summary of these thoughts.

Bruce Findley wrote on 23rd February in Snowy River Mail "not enough fire prevention and pre-planning is being done by individuals to help protect their own interests" and as this Feb/March occurrence was such a traumatic experience for many - perhaps it can be used as a warning device in future years.

Many bush folks are in strong opposition to the conservation groups and "greenies" and David Nixon wrote to Snowy River Mail with the wording.....

"Perhaps we may have to educate people more and prevent opposition such as from greenies who oppose the removal of bush, mill and second class timber from forest floor. This coupled with bureaucratic interference stopping controlled burning and fuel reduction off season led to the situation where assets and revenue are lost for a generation, costing instead the taxpayer thousands of dollars".

## Cann River fire a capricious mistress who just won't die

The Cann River bushfire, the one that will not stop growing, is also on the way to becoming the one that will not go out. Probably the only thing that can kill it is heavy rain.

Nobody expects heavy rain this summer. In autumn? Perhaps. What seems clear is that it will rage or smoulder for many weeks yet.

One reason for this is the sheer breathtaking size of the fire's area: it has mauled 100,000 hectares, mostly in State forest, and it has a perimeter of about 300 kilometres.

Like most fires it is capricious. It jumps anywhere.

Flying over part of the area yesterday, I noticed groups of trees untouched. Their greenery looked odd amid the brown devastation that stretched to every horizon. The fire had simply incinerated them for distances of two or three kilometres.

The man in charge of beating the fire is Denis Read, who is district forester at Cann River, who has been getting two hours sleep at night until recently. Now he manages to knock off at midnight and not come to work until six in the morning.

He says that given ideal conditions, his men can contain the fire within a couple of days. Eventually it would burn itself out, he says, but before that happens winds could start new outbreaks. He thinks the whole area will need to be patrolled all summer and probably a helicopter



ter will have to be stationed at Cann River.

A second reason for the fire's prolonged life is that five years of drought have dried all vegetation. The thing just won't go out. Mr Read says.

Looking at the devastation and marvelling at the figure of 100,000 hectares, one realises with a sudden shock that it is amazing that no one has been killed or hurt.

At least some credit for this must go to Mr Read. On Tuesday apparently when the terrible heat struck, he ordered his men not to go near the flames. He had them stand on ground that was already burnt. Their job was to hold the line not risk death.

"We don't mess around with people's lives" he is said to have told his staff. Later in the day when he was warned that the breeze winds had reached Bairnsdale and were heading for his area he pulled all his men out of the bush.

One feels an enormous sympathy for them. They number

about 400, and three quarters of them are Forests Commission men who have been drafted into service from almost every part of the State.

They work 12-hour shifts in the heat and discomfort. Home is a base camp with a touch of the Klondike about it. There are no fools.

Some sleep in the local hall on mattresses on the floor. Others have tents at the dusty football ground nearby. The heat inside the tents must be terrible on days like Tuesday. The men who come home from the night shift have their dinner as the ones on the day shift are having breakfast. Then they must try to sleep in hot tents while fire trucks race by and dust descends on everything.

But at least they get good tucker. The camp has 10 cooks, two mobile kitchens and a mobile freezer and the men get such things as roasts, sliverside, steak and salads.

There seems to be an enormous number of women running things. They are from the State Emergency Service. They serve the meals and do the tidying and take the men's washing, which is often black with soot, and bring it back clean.

The night shift was on the job again last night: they were due to do some back-burning. I don't think they were very happy about today's forecast — hot, with northerlies.

—JOHN LAHEY.

PAGE 6: Firefighters toil on two fronts.

In concluding, this project has shown that in a major disaster a community such as Cann River and district can be brought together to work at all aspects in self-help.

In normal everyday activity - many of these people would not be as closely associated and even though the fires created a spate of excitement and anxiety for the people in the district, it is well known now that bushfires are an expected event in a forested area.







 CANN River  
firefighters  
In 1980; hosing with  
great courage and  
sweet aplomb.

# INFERNO!



# FIRE PREVENTION WORKS CANN RIVER DISTRICT

Forests Commission staff at Cann River have taken advantage of dry conditions during the winter to carry out fuel reduction burns in several areas.

These include settlement protection burns north west of Mallacoota, and hazard reduction in forests south of Cann River and on Poddys Creek.

Additional fireline construction has been completed around Mallacoota in preparation for further implementation of protective burns in future years. Burns proposed for this spring include the western portion of Shady Gully, the

area behind Terra Nova Drive and the golf course, and the tip surrounds.

Progress has also been made in upgrading the green firebreak around Mallacoota into a condition which will facilitate annual maintenance as an effective fire protection tool, as well as enhancing scenic values in the town.

Other burns proposed for this spring, weather and manpower permitting, include forest north of Blackwood's mill at Bemm River, and forest blocks adjacent to Cann River and Club Terrace townships.

Landowners are reminded of their obligation to reduce hazards on their properties, particularly around the home, while observing full precautions during the unpredictable spring conditions.

Further details of the Forest Commission's fire protection works proposals may be obtained from the Cann River forest office.

# Fighting fire with...



**BUSHFIRES:** Probably the worst single natural disaster that can happen in a fairly tightly-populated area.

By JOHN  
FRASER

There are two grave areas of menace in the world: California and Victoria.

Given a combination of dry timber, high winds and some lunatic with a box of matches, the despicable firebug, fire can rip through bush faster than horses can run.

The noise is a dull roar; the sight is a dull orange and black color inside a black, enormous column of smoke.

Trees explode, houses vanish in a shower of sparks as the enraged timber dissolves, while the massive super-heated fireball rolls across the countryside.

If a bushfire goes unchecked, it could destroy an area the size of Gippsland in a matter of days, with God knows what losses in people, farmland and stock.

Victoria has got the CFA and its volunteer firefighters, which means that Victoria has the finest, toughest and most dedicated firefighters in the world.

I've stood in the middle of a bushfire, trying to suck in breath, while volunteer firefighters rushed past me, dragging a hose behind and almost knocking me into a clump of rapidly crisping shrubbery.

"Sorry pal," they'd say, or, "You're a bit in the way, old son."

And the tankers, battling up impossible rises and careening down ridiculous slopes, trying to save one or two houses at the absolute risk of the lives of the driver and his mates.

Driven not by bravado, but by the single-minded determination to "get that bloody fire out."

If you have no idea what a bushfire can do, well, just look at these photographs.

You may never strike a match in the bush again.

All being well.

WHILE the victims of Ash Wednesday slowly rebuild their lives, the search is on for a way to ensure that the tragedy doesn't happen again.

• Dr EALEY

Bushfires and the destruction they leave have always been a part of Australian life.

But how to prevent them remains unanswered — and heatedly debated.

One of the best ways, according to environmental expert Dr Tim Ealey, is to literally fight fire with fire.

Dr Ealey is the director of the Graduate School of Environmental Sciences at Monash University, and has been assisting a House of Representatives committee looking into ways of reducing the risk of bushfires.

One method, according to Dr Ealey, is a program of what he calls "cool-burning," or the fuel reduction technique.

This involves burning off areas of land where there's a thick cover of gum leaves with the potential to spread fire rapidly during a bushfire.

"If you've got a cover of gum leaves two or three inches thick, they can send flames 20 or 30 feet high during a bushfire," he says.

"Before the Ash Wednesday fires, leaves were about 12 inches thick in parts of the Beaconsfield area.

"It just wasn't an accident

By LACHLAN McDONALD

firestorm. It means the flames shoot up, vaporising the oil in the gum trees, then the fire roars through the tops of the trees.

"The density of leaves also has a second impact.

"If there's a wind, it sends the leaves tumbling around, forcing air through them and making them burn faster.

"It makes the fire incredibly hot, and all the green leaves burn as well.

"The gum leaves on the ground — not the trees — are the problem."



Dr Ealey believes that bushfires were less severe before Australia was settled by Europeans. That is because fires caused by lightning strikes would burn unchecked, thus stopping a build-up of leaves.

Cool-burning, he says, involves controlled burning during cool times of the year.

Targets would be land with a tendency to get a thick cover of gum leaves.

Aboriginals living in south-east Australia to create the right soil conditions for certain plants to grow, rather than to prevent bushfires.

He says the technique is used by the CFA, but believes it could be done on a bigger scale.

Not everyone though, shares his enthusiasm for cool-burning.

A number of conservationists are apprehensive, fearing the effect on the growth of plants such as wildflowers.

They also argue that bird life would be endangered by the destruction of nests and that not enough is known about the technique.

Dr Ealey agrees with the arguments, but says it's a case of "determining your objectives."

He says: "People like the CFA and myself believe it's the sort of thing that you have to go ahead with even if you don't know everything about it."

A symposium entitled "Fighting Fire with Fire" will be held on September 17 at Monash University by Dr Ealey in conjunction with the Conservation Council of Vic-



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H.A. Sumberg (Sawmiller), Wilson Street, Cann River

Orbost Shire Secretary, Ruskin Street, Orbost

Mr & Mrs K Hancock (mixed business), Princes Highway,  
Cann River

R Humphreys (Sawmiller), Tamboon Road, Cann River

Kevin Broome (Bulldozer contractor), Wilson Street,  
Cann River

Leonie Cameron (conservationist), Cann Valley Highway,  
Noorinbee

Mr & Mrs P Allard (farmers), West Cann Road, Noorinbee Nth

Cann River Angling Club, P.O. Box 43, Cann River

Interviews with:

H. Stevens (Bulldozer Contractor), Cann Valley Highway,  
Cann River

Mrs J. Atkins, (housewife), Cann Valley Highway, Chandlers  
Creek

Brian Ward, (Forester), C/- Forest Commission Offie,  
Princes Highway, Cann River

QUESTIONS INCLUDED IN LETTERS SENT

- Who was in charge of controlling the fire?
- How was this control delegated?
- Did the sector 'bosses' know the area or only by maps?
- What other groups were brought in?
- How did their chain of command work?
- What losses were involved - timber/forest areas?
  - equipment?
- How many extra locals were employed - percentage of locals involved?
- Where else did crews come from?
- What made the fire so fierce and devastating?
- How can this be prevented in future?
- Was there much equipment brought into the area? Is this hired?
- What voluntary organizations assisted?
- How many man hours were put into both Fires 12 and 16?
- What costs are involved?
- Does government have reserve finance for such events?
- What logging areas were lost?
- What logging areas now remain?
- Is this sufficient to employ all workers immediately again?
- Will mills have to cut back?
- Will it have effect on logging in future years?
- Will the timber industry still be a basis of employment for Cann River residents in the future?
- Did the recent fires have any effect on a business person?
- What were the advantages?
- What were the disadvantages?
- Were they able to cope to their own satisfaction?



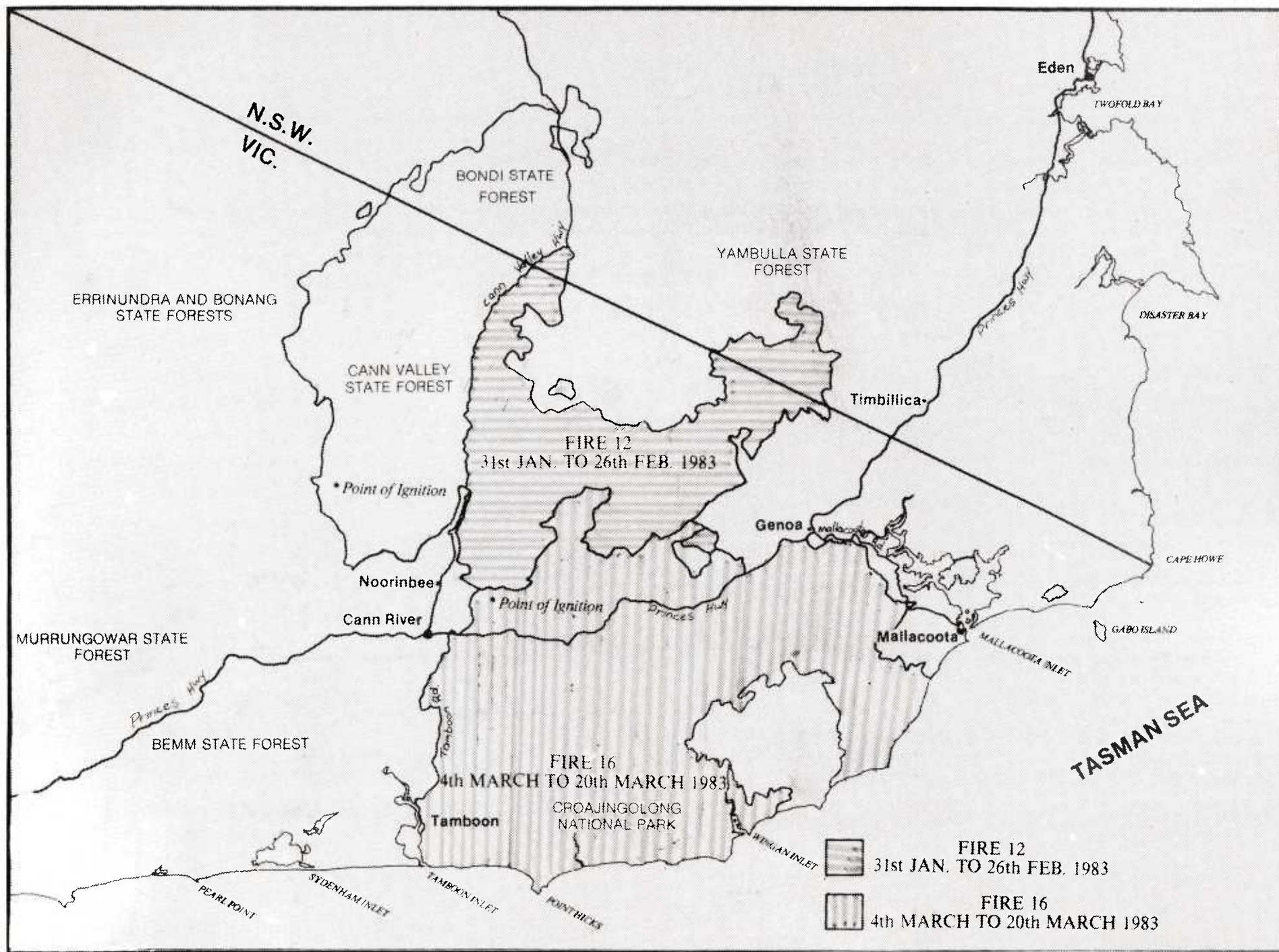
- Did the effects continue for long?
- Were tourists effected?
- Was your business with tourists affected, and to what extent?
- What were the farmers thought on the handling of the recent fires?
- Did you become affected personally?
- What losses did you entail?
- Can these be compensated - in what way - Government assistance or private insurance?
- Would you have suffered more in a normal season? - to what extent, do you think?
- Will it take you long to recover fully?
- How will you go about this?
- What did the recent fire mean to the National Parks as a conservation group?
- What natural disaster to flora and fauna has happened?
- Are any flora and fauna unique in this area, in danger of extinction?
- Was much area saved?
- How has tourism been effected?
- How long will it be effected?
- What equipment/facilities were lost?
- Will they all be replaced?
- What costs were involved, and what labour will be used?
- What will assist restoration of flora and fauna?
- How long will this take?
- How has the recent fires had any effect on the normal functioning of the Angling Club, with fishing competitions, the access to fishing areas, facilities at water areas for fisherman, damage to Club's equipment and the effect on the enthusiasm?

- What effects did the Leonie Camerons see that the fire had on flora and fauna - what evidence was there?
- What particular areas were effected most and why is this so in your opinion?
- In your opinion what effect will it have in the future?
- What people/groups have tried to improve the situation since the fires?
- How has this assistance been given and who has financed these doings?
- Is there any future program to continue, or continuing?



*These and the photographs appearing on Page 3 were taken by Mr Stephen Ledger of Bombala.*





*Areas Affected by the Fires*

## — SOURCES OF INFORMATION —

The author, Heather Quick, in compiling this record of the frightening Cann River fires, approached the task in a number of ways:

- (a) She collected and studied many newspaper reports, a selection of which have been included in this book.
- (b) She held discussions with a significant number of the people who experienced, like herself, the holocaust.
- (c) For the purposes of historical record, she wrote to a wide variety of government, sawmilling, conservationist and community representatives, seeking their recollections and comments on the consequences of the fires. The replies represented a significant input to the author's work.

Listed here are some pertinent quotations from some of the people contacted.

*...ister of people willing to help in such a crisis situation, should be  
...d by a responsible authority, National Parks possibly the most suitable*

**...ameron, Conservationist, Cann River**

*...rise of the conservation lobby with its 'No Bushfires for Victoria' has to  
...st of the blame.'*

**...ome, Bulldozer Contractor, Cann River**

*...s to the Shire involved timber culverts, bridges and toilet block.'*

**...rt, Orbest Shire Secretary**

*...ires were fierce and devastating as a result of a prolonged drought  
...with extreme weather conditions.'*

**...ung, Forester, Forests Commission, Victoria**

*...forests and jungle gully areas have been severely affected and these areas  
...a long time, possibly hundreds of years, before retaining their  
...ristics, some may never recover and a whole new plant regime could  
...nate.'*

**...rd, Farmer, Noorinbee North**

*'People are still asking questions about the fires and asking 'Where did they  
start?', 'Were they close to town?' and so on.'*

**Ken Hancock, Mixed business, Cann River**

*'Access was affected to areas for example, Mueller and Wingan Inlet.'*

**Bob Stafford, Secretary, Cann River Angling Club**

*'The effect on our workers is not apparent apart from the awareness of the  
possible shortened work-life in the industry.'*

**L. T. Doland, L. T. Doland P/L, Sawmillers, Cann River**

*'The most serious economic loss from the bushfires of 1983 is the damage to  
the forest.'*

**Hans Sumberg, Hans Sumberg P/L, Suppliers & Timber Merchants, Cann River**

*'Most of the forest will survive and regenerate.'*

**R. Humphreys, Sawmiller, Cann River**

*'It is difficult to allocate a dollar value to many species of flora and fauna, but  
collectively they contribute to the smooth functioning of a forest and hence to  
forest products.'*

**Paul Kelly, Snr. Field Management Officer, Fisheries and Wildlife Division, Gippsland**



*Right: A Convection cloud, formed from smoke, moisture from foliage, and the heat, in the eastern sky about 10 am. On the 7.30 am Gippsland News it had been reported that the fire would be stopped at the West Wingan Road area. After the cloud was formed with the heat, the fire spread 23 km eastward from the Wingan West Road by 10 am.*

*Far Right: Late afternoon on the second day of the first fire, around Mr. Arthur Leslie's farm on the Cann Valley Highway.*



*Right: Beside the Princes Highway, east of Cann River, opposite Jones Creek Road showing the wide breaks cleared by the bulldozers.*



*Far Right: Looking north from the Princes Highway, towards Reedy Creek, at the commencement of the second fire at 3.30 pm on Friday March 4th 1983.*

REEDY





*Far Left Along the back road from Cann River to Combenbar, shows the regeneration of tree ferns, approximately eight weeks after the fire. The original fire had started in the Combenbar area, after a lightning strike.*

*Left 'Chimney Fire', near Princes Highway. This style of fire in the dry hollow trees allows 'Flyers' to carry sparks several kilometres further, in a very short time.*



*Above: During the raging fires, at the Rankin's farm at Karlo Creek, east of Cann River. The fires were crossing the flats, up to 70km/hour at this time.*



*Above: One of the few buildings that were destroyed during the second fire on Myrle Johnson's farm along the Thurra River, north of the Princes Highway.*