

Response to Minister Neville

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Cattle Ban sets dangerous precedent for science

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Minister Neville and the Andrews' Government have introduced legislation to ban scientific research using cattle in the National Park.

This sets a dangerous precedent and speaking as a scientist, the principle of moving Legislation to cut off options for any form of future scientific research causes me great concern.

The Minister is claiming that there exists "Extensive scientific research" and that "the science is clear". On the subject of grazing and fuel reduction, adequate scientific work just does not exist in any credible form. It is a falsehood to pretend that it does so. The Minister's comments in Parliament imply wider scientific work that has been done in the Alpine area automatically supports this Legislation. It does not.

I have grave concerns about the veracity of the small amount of completed scientific work that is available on the subject of grazing and fire threat. The methodology used to develop this work is questionable. I note that credible work is presently being undertaken in the NSW High Country by independent scientists on this exact subject. I have visited the trial site and it is showing very interesting and different results and should be taken into account.

Minister Neville, in attempting to deal with the politically difficult issue of Alpine ecology and its relationship to one grazing activity has no doubt listened to advice that is politically based, rather than taking notice of the experiential and theoretical evidence, the whole evidence and nothing but the evidence. To stampede long lasting legislation without a full knowledge of the facts is to cause lasting damage to the Alpine environment and no doubt ultimately her own political standing.

Some of the reasons for continuing the grazing trial as a very high priority and over many decades are:

1. There is no clear parameter available to describe environmental health and thus "damage" cannot be evaluated. This lack of quantitative measurement reduces the little research done so far to about the status of stamp collecting.
2. Environments have life spans of hundreds of years and short term; usually undergraduate or post graduate studies are not able to provide answers to even fundamental questions of fire ecology. The USA has taken a different approach for example the Tall Timbers Research Station in

Tallahassee, Florida has been the leading institute for at least 40 years. Yet we have nothing.

3. Consequently there is no capacity to disentangle grazing pressure from cattle, feral horses, pigs and deer and the impact of now very reduced native fauna due to most of the Alpine Parks being consumed in 2003 and 2006/7 by the largest hottest fires for at least 70 years. It may well be that grazing pressure from induced surrogate mega fauna (cattle) is necessary for the environmental health of the Alpine area. The University of Sydney "High Fire" plots indicate that. (I saw them the weekend before last).
4. Most seriously there is no dose-response curve that could lead to considered and wise decisions to secure the long-term health and safety of the Alpine country and all who reside in it.
5. I suggest the only coherent body of science on this subject is in the Australian Academy of Science published "Fire and the Australian Biota" some 32 years ago, and a couple of published papers since then.
6. The "science" available fits all the description of pathological science identified by the Noble Prize Chemist Dr Irving Langmuir¹. That is "science that is bunkum".
7. By evicting cattle, a great and harmful error may have been made, but by terminating the trial when more and better research is needed is intellectual, environmental and civilised vandalism.
8. Leaving the High Country and the Red Gum forests to become fuel clogged without grazing and burning in the absence of rigorous evidence is a disgrace.

It appears that the current apparent environmental degrading of millions of hectares of dead snow gums and subsequent overstocking of regrowth with dominant scrub layer and matted rank grasses is considered by the Minister to be satisfactory.

The Alps now are truly at the crossroads and the decisions now being made in haste on enforced ignorance will be repented at leisure.

It may be time for the Federal Government to remove management of the Alpine and Red Gum Parks from the Victorian State and develop a research and management activity that could be as successful for the environment, culture, heritage and security as it has done in Kakadu and Litchfield National Parks in the Northern Territory.

¹ *Langmuir's address at his Institute in 1952 is available on the Internet via Google and is recommended reading.*

Brief CV David Packham

David Packham OAM, MAppSci, has worked for 50 years in bushfire research in CSIRO, Monash University, The Australian Emergency Management Institute and in fire weather policy at the Bureau of Meteorology.

His extensive research (61 publications) has concentrated on the physics and chemistry of bushfires and he applied this research to practical issues including the development of aerial prescribed burning, non-evacuation of properties, modelling of fire behaviour and some forensic investigation of firefighter deaths.