

"SUSPECTED ADJOINING LANDHOLDER"

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The title refers to those fires which regularly occur adjacent to our boundaries near the beginning and end of each fire season, and always in the mixed species forests - from Heywood to Mallacoota.

I suspect that they occur under similar conditions in other States at least, I do know that A.P.M. has suffered from them in Gippsland.

I have not bothered to tally these fires, for the sake of this discussion - you all know how constantly they occur.

Many are just inside our forest boundary. Cause mostly listed as "suspected adjoining landowner", other listings include unknown, sportsman, hiker, smoker, deliberate.

Similarly, many fires occur on private property adjoining our boundary, and burn into our forest. If cause cannot be proved, it goes as "suspected owner" or one of the other causes mentioned.

If we establish that the fire was lit by the landowner, the plea will probably be that a sudden deterioration of weather conditions was too much for the reasonable precautions that he had taken.

Whatever the circumstances in any particular case, it is very obvious that many landowners on our boundaries are definitely interested in burning the adjacent forest in spring or autumn. For every one who does so, we don't know how many others would like to, and will do so next year, or the next.

In the aggregate, those fires cost a considerable amount of money to suppress, and on occasions when bad fire weather develops unexpectedly, considerable timber losses can occur.

I think we should analyse this position. Why do honest, decent citizens break the law constantly and consistently in this manner?

You have probably all heard the story about the man who asked to define a living wage, and who replied - "Am I supposed to be getting it, or giving it?"

Similarly, ask any forester what is the greatest threat to his forest, and the most probable reply is - "the private property on my boundary".

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¹ Chief, Division of Forest Protection, Forests Commission, Victoria. Scanned from the proceedings of the "Fire Protection Conference" held at Marysville, Victoria, Australia, in August 1963 by the Division of Forest Protection, Forests Commission, Victoria.

Ask the adjoining landowner what is his greatest fire threat, and most certainly the reply will be - "that forest outside my fence".

Could we consider these two opposing opinions for a moment?

The forester can argue that the forest was there before the farm was created. The farmer knew the position when he took the farm, so he accepted the risk with his eyes open. From the forester's position - this is an unanswerable argument.

Also the law says "You shall not" in several very firm ways regarding any potential firelighting from the landowner, either inside or outside the fence.

So the forester, with the forest being there before the farm, and supported by the Forests Act, appears to be in a position above criticism. And, anyway, he has more important things to spend his money on.

But I find it very hard to believe that this "You shall not" in the Forests Act was ever meant to be the only barrier to fire crossing our boundary

I think you will all concede that we do not get paid on results, but are paid to do the job required of us. So if our forest burns from end to end, we personally, lose nothing. To be candid, we improve a little because of the fire fighting overtime cheque which comes along so very many months later.

Now come with me out of your forest, and across the boundary. What of the landowner?

He lives on the place, quite often. Earns his living on the place. Has his wife and children on the place, quite often. In many cases everything he has, except the mortgage, is contained inside these boundary fences.

If it burns, he loses the lot, including a year's income - and don't forget the risk to his wife and children. Can he really be sure that the fire protection measures on his farm will save his property if a fire roars through the adjoining hazardous forest on a really bad day?

Is it worthwhile him going to the time and expense necessary to give him a chance against such a fire, if nothing has been done, apparently, to reduce the hazard in the forest? Isn't it wiser to burn the forest in a quiet period and so reduce his main danger?

These, to me, are the opposing schools of thought in this question of who is a threat to who.

It is legitimate for us to claim that the landowner knew the risks when he took the property - this is a simple matter of fact not open to argument.

If a man builds his house next to the local hall, he cannot complain if the dance band disturbs him - there is nothing he can do about it.

There- is, however, something that our landowner can do about it, and, quite frankly, it is what I would do if I were in his shoes. He can sneak into the forest and set it alight at a reasonable time of year.

And I suppose that the distance - in time - he lights it away from the peak danger of the season is the measure of his decency, and of the battle between necessity and consciencebecause I believe that only a small percentage do this act without some worry.

If the case is as I have put it to you - where do we go from here?

Do we continue on for the next 50 years as in the past 50? Enduring these fires every spring and autumn. Blaming them on the adjoining landowner. Apprehending a very small number. Continually expending money on suppression and periodically suffering quite a degree of fire loss.

And in addition, building up quite a - to say the least - disharmony with our neighbours.

And deadening our own thinking by constantly claiming that these people are breaking the law. I can see no future in that at all - no percentage whatsoever.

Are we going to say that we cannot afford to do anything about it?

If we really look at this problem and have understanding and appreciation as to how this problem can worry our neighbour, can't we do something about it?

Since 1939, we have built 14,000 miles of forest road and track - a big "proportion to give access to" areas for the control of fire. How much of this road is on our boundary - particularly the south and east boundary?

Have we lived so long with these marginal fires that we have come to regard them as inevitable?

If we really examine this problem, and get an appreciation of the reasons actuating the landowner, can you decide to do something about it?

Or are we just going to live with it until some Government decides that we are not facing up to our responsibility for fire protection "IN", as well as "OF" State forests, and creates another organization with the power to direct us to take action it specifies to reduce hazards which it considers threats to adjoining landowners.

Because fire protection in this State must be State-wide and inter-connected. No body or sectional interest can justify the existence of an unrestricted hazard which is a threat to another.

I referred earlier to the fact that A.P.M. had recent experience of this land owner reaction in regard to one of their properties in Gippsland - I believe a combined reaction- and as a fellow sufferer, I would be very interested to know whether there has been any change in their thinking, as a result of this action being taken by adjoining landholders. (End)