

"A Current Affair"
Interviews Bushfire Expert David Packham
at a "Black Saturday" Site, February 2009.

Transcript

Transcript typed from *A Current Affair*, Channel 9. Please check for accuracy against video clip at www.nillumbikratepayers.asn.au

TG:- Tracy Grimshaw.

DP:- David Packham.

TG: Well there has been a lot of debate this week about some Council's **Green Policies**, about fuel reduction methods and measures and whether there was enough, and also the *Fight or Flee Policy*, and here to talk with me about some of those issues is David Packham who is a former CSIRO Bushfire Scientist. David you're an expert. You warned Nillumbik Council, which takes in St Andrews and Arthurs Creek, where there were deaths on Saturday, about their pro tree policy, what, six years ago, what did they say?

DP: Yes. Yes, that would be right. Well they didn't say much, it was the Nillumbik Ratepayers Association who were uncomfortable with the fire threat, and they asked me to do an assessment. When I did an assessment, I said they should get a second opinion, which was an independent opinion, and that opinion was tougher than mine. It was just a disaster. And a terrible situation, probably the worst I've seen anywhere, probably in the world, except near Los Angeles.

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TG: So did the Council question your logic or did they simply ignore what you had to say, because they didn't like what you had to say?

DP: There was a hearing, and the hearing just said "*Thank you very much*" and the Council did absolutely nothing, but continued on with their, in my view, absolutely irresponsible, shall we say, *Green Policies*.

TG: Do you believe these policies contributed to these fires?

DP: Absolutely, without the slightest doubt. Because to get a disaster fire like this, you've got to have three things; you've got to have bad weather, we had it; you've got to have ignitions, we always have them; and you have to have extensive quantities of very heavy neglected fuels; and boy we had that, especially in Nillumbik.

TG: You know how big this is, that you are saying, because people died in this area.

1.56

DP: Oh yes, I'm well aware of that....this is a repeat of what has been going on since Hobart was destroyed in 1967, this looks like so much of Hobart. We have, we are slow learners, we're taking a long time to come to the right conclusion, which is look after your fuels.

TG: Ok, so, but in terms of fuel reduction, it's not just green groups that oppose fuel reduction, a lot of residents in leafy green areas, like their bush around them.

2.25

DP: Well they do have a choice, they can have little bits of annoyance when the fuel reductions are going on, from time to time or they can have what we see here (a burnt out car & what is left of a home & burnt vegetation in the back ground). And I do not know about them, but I know which choice I would make, and have made.

TG: There will be a Royal Commission into this, it will presumably go through all of these questions, do you believe that the Royal Commission will find failures at a Local Government and a State Government level?

DP: Well in terms of fuel management they will, or it will, it must because there is no alternative, it's just absolute. In terms of what people did during the time there has been some wonderful and heroic and appropriate things, people have all preformed as well as they possibly could, but these forces of nature are just so big. You know the fires that we've had in Victoria, have been equal in energy release, to 660 Hiroshima bombs. Now, no amount of helicopters or yellow uniforms, is going to change that.

3.22

TG: I think there is no question that we've heard some remarkable stories of heroism and wonderful, wonderfully good things that were done on Saturday, but I guess the point of the Royal Commission, is to learn from the mistakes, and you think you have got a finger on the mistakes?

DP: Oh well, there is one outstanding mistake, which has been found by the House of Representatives inquiry in 2003 and by the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry, which gave only, its Report only 6 months ago, you must manage your fuels or you will have these disasters.

TG: David, what about the Fight or Flee Early Policy, I mean people, some people found their very best laid fire plans, well literally went up in smoke?

4.02

DP: It's a highly stressful situation, it's an area in which, you cannot afford to make a mistake, it's an area also in which you've had no previous experience. Now I am one of the authors of Fight or Flee and I do believe that careful, honest research has got to evaluate every death here and that policy has got to be validated or altered or if necessary rejected. I will be very surprised, if it doesn't turn out with careful, honest work, to be shown to be the most appropriate policy.

4.36

Common sense will tell you that the alternative of dumping everybody onto the roads, and having to get them out of the area in an hour or two, just can't happen and you'll have people caught on roads, much more than now and the death tolls will not be one hundred, or so, or two hundred, or what I heard tonight three hundred, but it will be measured in the thousands. We have to keep people sheltered during the passage of the flame.

TG: Alright David, you drove three hours to be with us tonight, we appreciate your time, thank you very much.

DP: That's alright, ok well thank you.

5.10