

The Hon. I. Macdonald BA, MLC,
Minister for Forests,
Governor Macquarie Tower,
Level 33, 1 Farrer Place. Sydney 2000

30th August 2009

Dear Minister McDonald,

I wish to lodge a formal complaint over the current Gulaga Mountain fire in SE NSW. I understand that this was a Forests NSW 'control' burn which had been left unextinguished for four weeks prior to its escape on Thursday 27th August into Gulaga National Park.

This National Park has endangered remnant rainforest vegetation and many important sacred sites significant to the local Yuin traditional owners. This fire has the potential to put these irreplaceable values at serious risk. The plume of smoke covering the district must be creating serious discomfort for asthma sufferers or those with respiratory ailments. Many local people have been stressed by fear of loss of property or even life.

I wish to ask you three questions:

1. Why was a 'control' burn lit in August when current scientific fire management wisdom is that burns should not be undertaken in early spring, especially when this part of NSW is drought affected and when the long-range weather forecasts predict continuing dry and hot conditions into summer?
2. Why did Forests NSW permit this fire to burn for four weeks?
3. Why did Forests NSW permit this fire 'under their control' to escape into a sensitive National Park; putting settlements and private lands around Gulaga Mountain under threat?

Only this week (BDN 28/8/09) do we see statements from the Rural Fire Service urging landowners to avoid fire, and stating "Never leave a fire unattended ... serious fines and/or imprisonment apply for allowing a fire to escape and damage property and the environment".

Will you, as the responsible Minister, take action to discipline those officers of Forests NSW who permitted this emergency to occur? When will the State of NSW treat Government officers equally under the same rules as the ordinary citizens of this State?

Finally, given the proposal by ForestsNSW to soon intensively log critical koala habitat in Mumbulla and Murrah State Forests, adjacent to Biamanga National Park, can the Minister assure me, and the community, that their post-logging burns will not escape either into the National Park, or into the surrounding private lands?

I believe that the issues I have raised in this letter are sufficiently serious, and have such potential to affect the quality of the environment and the livelihoods of Forest neighbours and indeed the entire rural community, to warrant the Minister convening an independent public inquiry into the management practices of Forests NSW, and the extent to which they need to modify their fire strategies under a changing climate. I therefore call upon the NSW Government to institute such an enquiry before we have more 'Gulaga' fires this season.

Yours sincerely,

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c.c.

The Hon. Nathan Rees MP, Premier of NSW

Hon. Carmel Tebbutt BEc,MP, Deputy Premier and Minister for Environment