

SERIOUS BUSHFIRE DAMAGE:

Bushfires this year already have devastated huge tracts of eastern Australia. They have burned people to death, destroyed trees and pastures and crops. They have killed cattle and sheep. Scores of homes have gone up in an inferno of flame. Up till this week they had done damage officially estimated at more than five million pounds (Approx 10 million dollars)! They had destroyed State pine forests worth half a million pounds. Vast tracts of valuable young soft wood timber -- 90% of Australia's indigenous timber is hardwood -- have been destroyed. This is a bad bushfire. Three lush seasons have been followed by a prolonged dry spell. Grass and scrub is high - and timber dry.

The New South Wales Bushfire committee, the Forestry Commission, fire brigades and 30,000 organized volunteers have worked and fought magnificently against fires. Without them, ten, twenty, fifty times the damage would have been done. But with all their efforts -- self-sacrificing and strenuous, the fire damn has not been controlled. Victoria, with a tragic experience of forest fires, has set up a Country Fire Authority. Aircraft and radio have been put to work as they were by army and air force fire fighters in disastrous fires of the forest. Those directing the war know what the attacking force -- the fire -- is doing. They can rush defenders to the danger points - quickly. There is no equivalent authority in New South Wales.

In this State control of fires is the responsibility of Shires and Councils. They must rely, for the most part, on the efforts of volunteer fire-fighters who do magnificent, dangerous work without reward. Often even 500 volunteers could not stop a huge blaze racing before a 40 mile an hour gale. So they must watch fine homes reduced to ashes - and save what they can. Bushfires are man-made and carelessness is their chief cause - the cigarette end from the passing car, the unattended camp or picnic fire. All too frequently the cause can be traced to sparks from locomotives igniting dry grass beside the track. Blackened countryside - fair pastures goes - homes burned - stock dead. It's an appalling scene. Destruction by bushfires can never be eliminated. But the shocking losses of the past few months could have been reduced by better prevention and fighting methods. By complete co-ordination of the fire fighting forces. Through a single expert and authoritative control. By far more - and modern - equipment in the hands of the volunteers. By an even more strenuous campaign of public education on the bushfire danger. Severe penalties for the fool with a match.

No reasonable person will deny the work that has already been done. It is just that more work still must be done - and immediately. We city dwellers cannot view this desecration complacently merely because the inferno has not touched us. Words of sympathy won't do. Action - swift effective action - is the vital necessity. And a dual-Government grant of a few thousand pounds to relieve suffering, is not enough action.

It is a problem for the whole community as well as the authorities. It's too easy to shift the blame to some body or other and let it go at that. Bushfires are the business of every man, woman and child in the country one way or another. We'd better do something constructive about them -- and fast.