

**2010 Senate Inquiry
Bushfires in Australia
Submission
Natural Asset Protection Agency**

(c) the extent and effectiveness of bushfire mitigation strategies and practices, including application of resources for agricultural land, national parks, state forests, other Crown land, open space areas adjacent to development and private property and the impact of hazard reduction strategies;

(d) the identification of measures that can be undertaken by government, industry and the community and the effectiveness of these measures in protecting agricultural industries, service industries, small business, tourism and water catchments;

(e) any alternative or developmental bushfire prevention and mitigation approaches which can be implemented;

(g) the adequacy and funding of fire-fighting resources both paid and voluntary and the usefulness of and impact on on-farm labour;

(h) the role of volunteers;

(i) the impact of climate change;

I, Robert Webb, represent Denhine Pty Ltd, a rural land management business based at Oberon on the Central Tablelands of NSW. I hold a Bachelor of Business (Agricultural Commerce) from the University of New England. I have 21 years experience as a volunteer bushfire fighter with the NSW Rural Fire Service in the Tarana Brigade. Within that Brigade I currently hold the position of Senior Deputy Captain, Crew Leader, Rural Fire Driver and I hold a St John Advanced Life Support First Aid Certificate, I also hold a TAFE chainsaw license. Our Tarana Brigade is a very strong brigade in terms of its membership and is actively involved in community activities. Our brigade however, lacks young volunteers, to the point that at our last AGM at which 30 members were present, I was the youngest by 10 years, and I am 38 years old.

My Business partner and brother, Hugh Webb holds an Associate Diploma in Farm Management and a Diploma in Land Management and Conservation Earthworks. Hugh has had 22 years experience as a volunteer in the NSW Rural Fire Service and has had a number of roles in his brigade over that time. Both Hugh and I have attended many bushfires over the course of our volunteering with the NSW RFS.

We are 5th generation farmers and graziers and up until approximately ten years ago we would use fire annually as a very effective tool in our land management programs and property protection strategies. Bushfire, also poses a threat to our land management programs on a yearly basis. We would use fire to burn undercarriage in autumn and stubble when conditions were correct. We would also burn the dead canes of blackberry bushes and other woody weeds in order to control weeds and vermin. Re growth vegetation that was pulled down was stacked and burned as well. It was general farm

practice to burn and good land managers were very efficient and effective at using fire as a tool.

Our business Denhine Pty Ltd, involves the management of rural properties generally owned by city investors or “absentee owners”. We employ other young land managers to help us manage these properties. We manage properties across a wide area of the Central Tablelands of NSW that traverse many NSW Rural Fire Service brigade areas. These farms are significant in that they generally represent the last “open grazing” country before entering the National Parks of the Blue Mountains, the Sydney Catchment Area and large tracts of NSW State Government owned Radiata Pine Plantations.

Absentee ownership of rural land

Across the Central Tablelands, much of the ownership of rural land is being purchased by investors from outside the area. This is due to the close proximity of the Central Tablelands to Sydney (generally 2.5 to 3.5 hrs drive from the CBD). These city investors, known as absentee owners, along with retirees are increasingly purchasing farms from asset rich but cash flow deficient long term farming families.

As these rural properties are purchased by absentee owners as an investment we have seen that they are not grazed or managed as intensively as a primary farming business. As a result, fuel levels over this absentee owned grazing country are often higher in the peak vegetation growth periods of autumn and spring. Spring growth on these properties, unmanaged, cures and can then pose a risk as bushfire fuel.

Absentee owners Volunteering for NSW Rural Fire Service.

In our experience as managers of absentee owned rural properties, the owners generally are very community minded. They support local charities and events, and whilst they cannot always attend these events, due to it not being their primary place of residence, they will offer financial assistance and donations wherever possible.

We have found one of their priorities is to join the local NSW RFS brigade. This serves two purposes, by paying membership they feel as though volunteers are likely to help them if their properties were under threat from bushfire, and secondly the social network of being involved in the local RFS brigade enables them to meet people.

Memberships of absentee owners are recorded in the NSW Rural Fire Service as being a volunteer and then become part of the much publicized 70,000 strong NSW Rural Fire Service volunteer ranks. Some of the absentee owners also undertake training of varying degrees. Whilst their intentions are to be of assistance as a volunteer, the reality is that the chances of them being at their investment farm to offer assistance at the time of a fire is unlikely. If the bushfire was to fall on the weekend then possibly that may be the one weekend of the month which they attend the farm. If the bushfire fell mid week, then the likelihood would be that they would be unable to offer assistance.

The experience of absentee owners in terms of frontline bushfire fighting is varied but generally minimal. Whilst some may receive adequate technical and theoretical training, this provides only a small degree of what is needed to be able to undertake direct attack, where appropriate, in a bushfire situation. Whilst their volunteering efforts are appreciated, and in some cases productive, this does not stop bushfires from escalating.

As more rural land is purchased by absentee owners in the 200km radius of our capital cities along the South East coast of Australia, the original style land manager based volunteer bushfire fighting ranks are being dramatically eroded. With the diminishing “farming family” ranks, also diminishing is a wealth of knowledge in terms of mitigating and controlling bushfires. Bushfire up until the late 1980’s was always a valuable tool to the land manager and also a threat that farmers dealt with on a yearly basis.

In summary, the growing ownership of rural land by absentee owners along the south eastern corner of Australia and their contribution as rural bushfire fighting volunteers in my opinion is;

- General lack of land management experience,
- Minimal understanding of intensive land management practices and vegetation control,
- Rarely in attendance,
- Ageing Demographic,
- Possible inadequate fitness to undertake active bushfire fighting,
- Still recorded as active volunteers within their respective brigades,
- Generally keep properties clean and tidy around major infrastructure and do have a bushfire plan if they are in attendance.

General Volunteering

Throughout the Eastern Central Tablelands, Rural Fire Service volunteers are generally based in the towns and villages. They have varying degrees of training and experience in bushfire control and mitigation. Fewer long term farmers are farming and of those that are, they find it difficult to find time to volunteer. This may be because of financial restraints due to years of drought and reduced commodity prices, or it may be due to work loads. Farms tend to have to operate with less labour to produce more. Lack of financial reward in farming has seen the 25 to 45 year old farmers head to the cities or mines for employment. This has seen a ‘missing generation’ of young farmers within the rural industry. It is these people that have the extensive land management experience, which includes the management of bushfires. Farming also is represented by an ageing demographic whereby the average age of farmers in Australia is now 54 years of age. (Ref Australian Natural Resources Atlas, “Median Age of Farmers and Farm Managers 1996”.)

Documented evidence of an aging and diminishing volunteer base in Rural Areas includes **“Where have all the People Gone”** *NSW Rural Fire Service Assistant*

Commissioner, Mark Crossweller, AFSM FAIM, International Wildfire Conference, Sydney, 2009. This seems to contradict the message that the NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner puts forward frequently about the 70,000 strong volunteer bushfire fighting force.

The town based volunteers come from many different forms of employment. In our local town Oberon, the timber industry employs a lot of staff as do the local correctional centres. Once a bushfire is reported and these volunteers are called to duty, many remain on full pay. Many are not land managers, and a growing percentage are unfit. Whilst a large number have the interests of the land manager for whose property they may be defending at heart, a very small percentage may not. Whilst they are still on full pay, and are not being productive on the fire ground, one wonders what the real cost of these “volunteers” in a bushfire fighting effort is. Are these people true volunteers? It is very difficult to source information as to the costs of individual bushfire events, and putting a cost on the productivity or lack of, in terms of volunteering, is very important. It would be from these figures I believe that the public may potentially see a large amount of unnecessary cost and lack of productivity.

Productivity amongst NSW RFS volunteers at bushfires.

From my experience within the NSW Rural Fires Service on the Central Tablelands of NSW, there is limited scope for volunteers to undertake critical rapid response and direct attack. The first twenty minutes straight after a bushfire has ignited is critical in controlling or containing the spread of the fire.

Throughout the 1980's and 90's many local brigades were outfitted by the NSW RFS with tanker trailers and slip on units. They were extremely useful in that they were at all times positioned on land owner's properties and were spread across the district. The machines were maintained by the property owner with some funds provided by the RFS and may have been used for other purposes outside the bushfire period. When a fire was smelt, reported or sited, the telephone “phone tree” plans were activated, UHF communications were utilized and farmers would hook on to their full tanker trailer with approximately 600 litres of water in it.

In the 20 years that the brigade provided these tanker trailers I recall attending at least 15 fires (mainly lightening strikes) where the tanker trailer and its rapid response capabilities enabled the operator/s to suppress the fire in its infancy. The brigade trucks and larger equipment were always generally 20 minutes to half an hour behind. Once they arrived they were mainly used to mop up and black out. Many of these fires were unreported and therefore unrecorded as an incident by the RFS. This was because the local farmers would put the fire out and go home to carry on with their farming activities. I recall at least three fires on days that I would estimate back then to have had an FDI well above 50. If it were not for these smaller units these fires would have most definitely turned into long, protracted, costly campaigns.

In 2002 the NSW Rural Fire Service decommissioned these smaller units in favour of the larger water carriers, (cat 7 and cat 1 appliances). There was much angst and opposition to this move. The RFS stated that they were a safety concern despite not being able to give evidence of any prior incidents. Unfortunately, at great cost and time spent, the Tarana Volunteer Bushfire Brigade bought the tanker trailers from the RFS and formed its own incorporated entity to ensure the tanker trailers stayed as our main bushfire strike weapon. It seemed to the brigade that the decision makers within the RFS did not want us putting fires out as efficiently as possible. The NSW RFS were able to debate the matter with remarkable lack of logic, and still win. This created resentment toward the executive of the NSW RFS within the Tarana brigade. Despite being one of the strongest brigades in the Lithgow Zone, this disappointment still remains today.

Unquestionably the resources now afforded our local RFS brigades in terms of new modern appliances are second to none. The concern I have is that the equipment provided is too large and cumbersome to provide effective rapid response in this area. These expensive resources sit in brigade sheds for nine to ten months of the year, completely under utilized. In addition it worries me that the skill and license required to operate this heavy machinery is lacking within our brigade and other brigades. It concerns me that there are many brigade areas where these vehicles may remain in the shed in a bushfire situation as there may be no one qualified or willing to operate the vehicle.

In my recent experience it seems that volunteers assemble on an appliance, and wait in safety for the fire to approach them on a main road or similar safe spot. Meanwhile in the paddock, a land owner attacks the fire in order to preserve his or her assets, which include pasture, fencing, livestock, machinery and buildings. Volunteers seemed, on these occasions, to be reluctant to leave the truck to man a hose even in relatively benign conditions.

The Rathdowney section 44 bushfire, of February 2006 which I attended, was a fire that burnt through a lot of grassland and destroyed many kilometers of fencing and killed many sheep. After three days the threat had eased and weather conditions had improved to render the fire safe. At that time a large number of out of area volunteers turned up from the Blue Mountains and Sydney. For the next two days they could offer no further assistance and therefore sat with their appliances until they were transported to their motel accommodation. This also seems to happen frequently at larger fires.

The skills of many volunteers are varied and highly valued in a protracted bushfire campaign. Specifically “blacking out”, patrolling, catering and communications are areas that brigades across the south east of Australia excel. There would be no bushfire fighting effort without the valued services of these volunteers. My point is there are a decreasing number of available volunteers that possess the skills and fitness to offer direct attack, where appropriate.

I believe at the very least bushfire fighters in brigades within the 3 hr radius of Sydney, must have a certified minimum level of fitness and have some land management experience. I also firmly believe that the volunteer fire services in NSW, ACT and

Victoria should utilize the expertise of a professional specialist bushfire fighting and mitigation contractor.

Denhine Pty Ltd trading as

Natural Asset Protection Agency (NAPA)

Proposal Detail

Since September of 2007, our company has been proposing to supply a specialist Bushfire Fighting and Bushfire Hazard Reduction (HR) service to the NSW or Commonwealth Government. We have been actively campaigning to have the Federal Government adopt our proposal as a pilot scheme, or to have the NSW State Government release a public tender for a service such as the one we are proposing. The proposals inception was long before the tragic events of Black Saturday in Victoria. It was bought about by our fear of bushfires of larger intensity becoming more frequent due to the many land management and volunteer issues that we have discussed

The relevance to the Senate inquiry is that we believe the model that we are proposing is extremely relevant to those communities which are inhabited by absentee owners of rural land or lifestyle rural land owners. This includes where land holdings are generally small, owners may not be in residence, bushfire fighting volunteers may not be as experienced as they need to be and volunteer numbers may be dwindling. These areas are generally close to the states' capital cities. This includes the Central Tablelands of NSW, the Hunter Region of NSW, all of the ACT and the Central, Eastern and South Eastern areas of Victoria. In addition Government natural assets such as commercial forests, national parks and capital city water Catchment areas may be tenants of large tracts of land around these areas.

Our proposal also stems from the fact that the seasonal crews employed by Government Land Management Agencies, are often short term employment prospects. Training and retraining needs to be undertaken and no "career" bushfire specialists seem to be retained for any significant period of time. Our company has been striving to address these critical issues.

We have met with other key stakeholders and are making inroads into bringing our proposal to life. We have been invited to submit to the Senate Committee inquiry into Bushfires in Australia. We have had positive discussion with other Government land management agencies including the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forests NSW.

Proposal Detail has been deleted and forwarded as a confidential (commercial in confidence), submission to the Senate Bushfire Inquiry.

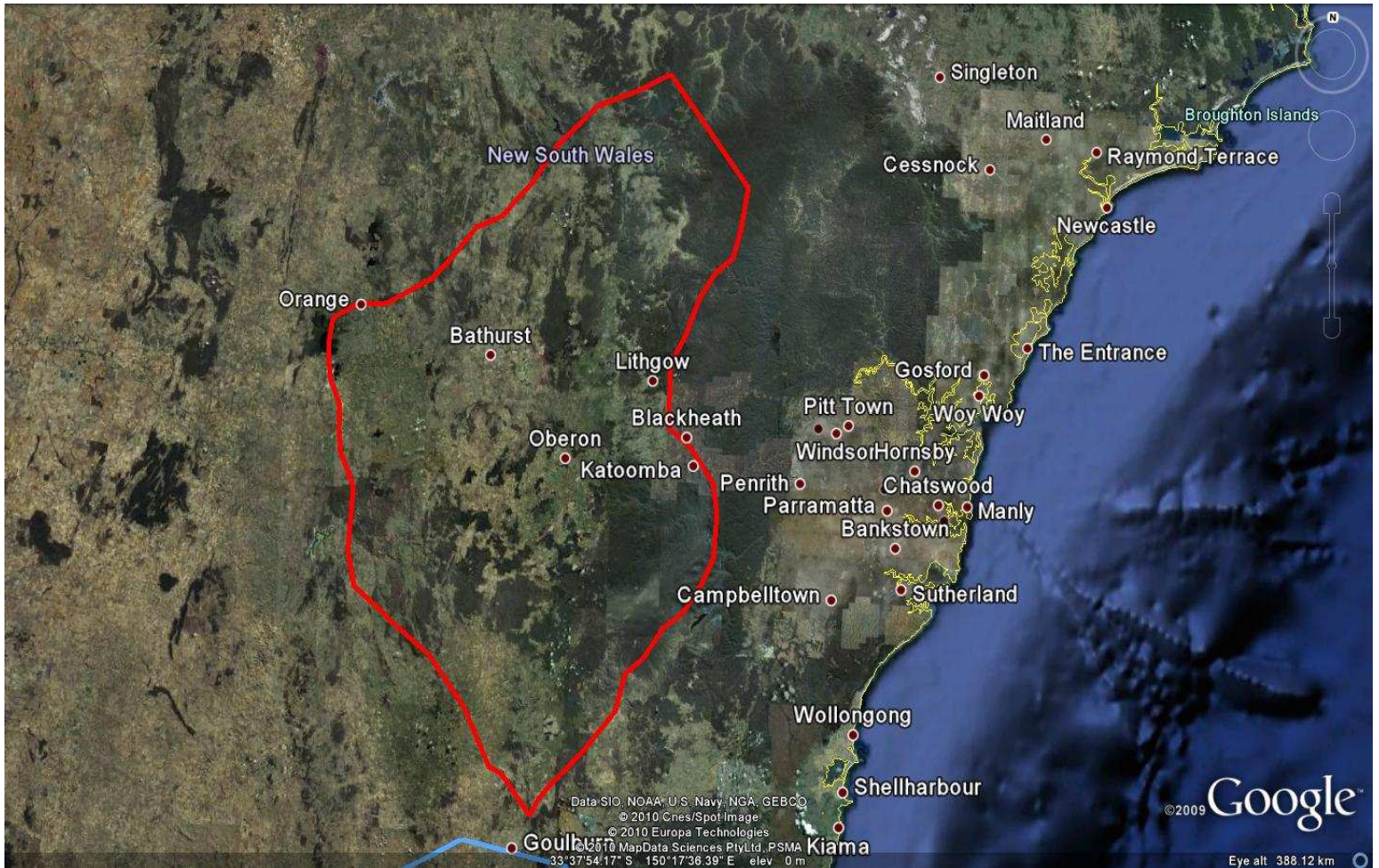
Accompanying copies of letters, emails from NSW RFS executive members and NSW State Government Ministers have also been included in the confidential submission.

Conclusion

Our proposal aims to reduce the effect of bushfires on the Australian landscape and its population. Specifically we are targeting the higher risk areas of South Eastern Australia, areas where large numbers of absentee owners reside, areas of large natural assets (National Parks, State Forests). These areas have seen a demise in the tried and tested old bushfire brigade volunteer organisation. A system that used to work. Our location on the Central Tablelands of NSW is a prime position in which to commence a pilot program. Our model could be replicated to any high risk area within NSW, ACT or Victoria. We have been trying to address the issues that the Senate Inquiry into bushfires has been grappling with over the last 8 months. We have been pursuing this for 2 years. I have followed the inquiry closely, and have highlighted some ill-conceived comments about our proposal from the chair. I hope that this submission sets the record straight about our commercial proposition, one that will offer specialist support to our volunteers whom are incorrectly equipped, ageing and blinded by the fear of litigation.

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Natural Asset Protection Agency (NAPA) Area of Operation



(Image Courtesy Google Earth)

Proposed Area of Operation Natural Asset Protection Agency (NAPA) Specialist First Response Bushfire Control Headquarters – Oberon NSW Central Tablelands.

First Response Bushfire Control Model ©

The area within the red boundary represents the NAPA proposed initial area of operation. This area is represented by a large number of absentee owned properties. Many of these landowners are not primary residents. These areas are on the prevailing fire weather side of Sydney and the Cumberland Plain, an area of significant bushfire risk.

The area is also home to a significant area of Radiata Pine plantations, a natural State Government owned asset. The area is also significant in terms of its bordering of the ungrazed Wollemi, Blue Mountains and Kanangra Boyd National Parks and Sydney Catchment Area.



(courtesy Google earth)

**Proposed Area of Operation – Model Duplication
Natural Asset Protection Agency (NAPA) Specialist First Response Bushfire Control.
First Response Bushfire Control Model ©**

The Blue outline represents high risk bushfire areas whereby NAPA’s first response bushfire model could be duplicated should a NAPA pilot proceed and be successful.

If there was low bushfire risk during our proposed contracted period within our base region, then NAPA could be deployed to any location across South East Australia, as directed by the Attorney Generals Department. Prior to the fire season proper, NAPA crew leaders would undertake familiarization tours of high risk areas of South Eastern Australia. This would enable the crew leaders to gain the imperative “local knowledge” required to successfully offer first response bushfire fighting. NAPA would liaise with Landowners both Private and Government, local bushfire brigades, (CFA, NSW RFS) in order to gain maximum understanding of land access and local knowledge.

Many other major wildfire prone countries offer support through specialist contractors to their firefighting agencies. These include the USA, Canada, Greece and Spain.

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T/as
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