



Additional comments

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**House of Representatives
Select Committee on
The Recent Australian Bushfires**

Additional Comments

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Overview

The context in which wildfires occurred during the 2003 season needs to be fully understood in order to achieve a balanced future response by the community to what scientists are predicting will be an increased incidence of bushfires of considerable intensity in future years as a result of global warming and climate change.

The 2003 bushfire season was preceded by one of the most severe droughts on record and characterised by a prolonged period of higher than average temperatures coupled with lower than average rainfall for the nine months preceding the outbreaks in January 2003. These conditions induced high evaporation rates and drying of vegetation and forest litter, making high fuel loads in forests a potential driver of extreme wildfire in unusual climatic circumstances.

These extreme variables came together in early January 2003 when the occurrence of dry storms saw in excess of 80 lightning strikes across the eastern ranges of Australia, caused fires which put intolerable pressure on existing fire fighting resources.

Despite the overwhelming of fire fighting resources in many instances, we note the success of the fire fighting effort in containing and suppressing the majority of those outbreaks, and acknowledge the dedication and sacrifice of volunteer fire fighters, state government agency personnel, police and other emergency service personnel, landowners and members of the general community in the fire fighting effort.

The Committee heard evidence that in some instances considerable tension evolved between people involved in the fire fighting effort around issues such as the allocation of resources, backburning, the timing of responses and other strategic considerations. However we acknowledge the high degree of co-operation overall between the state government agency personnel and volunteer fire fighters in meeting the wildfire threat, and their collective effort in suppressing many fires throughout the season and preventing loss of life.

We accept that much of the evidence to this committee has been honestly given and delivered from personal experience, by people who were directly threatened and have had their livelihoods diminished, as a result of the fires. Other evidence was supplied by fire fighters with considerable experience and local knowledge and therefore should not be ignored in any assessment of features of the 2003 bushfire season, and the response of agencies.

We also note however that many experienced fire fighters and personnel in control of fire fighting assets and land managements practices were not able, for a variety of reasons, to give evidence to the Committee. Their perspectives and recollections of local events and responses would have been invaluable to the Committee in its deliberations, and would have provided some opportunity at least to test some of the evidence presented and to challenge some of the myths that often develop in the public mind when reacting to extreme events.

The Context of This Inquiry

This House of Representatives Bushfire Inquiry is one of many inquiries conducted in the wake of recent Australian bushfires.

In the ACT an “Inquiry into the Operational Responses to the January 2003 in the ACT” (the McLeod Inquiry) has completed its deliberations and reported to the ACT Government. A Coronial Inquiry is in progress.

In Victoria the Auditor General has completed and tabled his report into Fire Prevention, and a more general Inquiry into the 2002-03 Victorian Bushfires (Esplin Inquiry) has completed its deliberations and has reported to the State Government.

In New South Wales a Joint Select Committee on Bushfires into the 2001-02 Bushfires reported to the NSW Government in 2002, and a Coronial Inquiry has completed its deliberations and delivered its findings.

At the National level two Inquiries have been initiated; this one and the National Inquiry on Bushfire Management, Prevention and Mitigation (COAG) to be conducted in co-operation between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

This Committee was informed by State and Territory Governments that their priorities and that of their land management and fire fighting agencies would be directed to their own State and Territory based Inquiries, and the COAG Inquiry.

Therefore this report has of necessity been written without the benefit of all sides to this debate having articulated their points of view or having this evidence tested, as has been the case in many of the State and Territory based inquiries that are still progressing or that have already been concluded.

Regrettably many Parliamentary Inquiries are established in a highly charged political atmosphere following national disasters, where the media is seeking the sensational story, the community is demanding answers, and politicians are seeking

to apportion blame. These are hardly conducive circumstances for the rational evaluation of evidence, the setting aside of long held prejudices and the development of practical recommendations to assist the community to prepare itself to meet future bushfire threats.

Stating the facts of this matter, the circumstance of this inquiry and its political and associated context, does not detract from the honesty with which evidence was tendered, the personal integrity and expertise of individuals and organisations who have given it, and the quality of the scientific evidence that came before the Committee.

Changing Culture – Impact of the Linton Tragedy and Other Factors

It would appear that in recent times there has been a change in land management and fire fighting practices in relation to different land tenures such as National Parks, State Forests, private land and private plantations.

This has occurred in response to changing community expectations, the emergence of the environment as the key political issue, events such as the Linton fire tragedy, and the actions of Governments of all political persuasions.

With regard to the latter, trends in downsizing relative to total area under land management that has occurred under many Governments, and changes in forest policy have led to a loss of critical fire fighting expertise and a significant reduction in resources.

While these changes need to be fully appreciated, it is important for managers in all land tenures including those who administer public lands, to justify to the public their management philosophies and administrative regimes.

With regard to current fire fighting procedures and practices, the impact of the Linton tragedy should not be underestimated. Neither should the difficulty facing incident controllers in balancing the need to attack fires early, particularly if they occur and take hold in inaccessible areas, and their statutory responsibilities to guarantee wherever possible the safety of the paid and unpaid fire fighters under their control.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and opinions formed on how resources should be allocated in certain circumstances (on the ground in the heat of the battle) while valid for the person forming them, might not have the value of the larger perspective on the fire being fought, the resources available to fight it and the legal and statutory context in which critical decisions carrying the weight of liability have to be made.

Therefore it is extremely important in our view that considering the volume and variety of information that is available from local and other sources and required to be validated and processed in emergency situations, that particular resources be directed to train incident controllers in advanced decision making to ensure quality decisions are made and the best fire fighting outcome is achieved.

The Debate over Hazard Reduction Burning

We note the contentious debate, both in evidence to the Committee and in the wider community on the extent to which fuel reduction burning ought to be instituted as a fire prevention or mitigation measure.

Within the Australian community there are strongly held views that broadscale hazard reduction burning ought to be the main tool for fire prevention, and this view was reflected in evidence to the Committee. There are equally strongly held views that the practice ought to be either abandoned or severely restricted on environmental grounds, the potential to cause unwanted wildfires, and because of urban sensitivities, views which were also reflected in evidence to the Committee.

We note that in recent times community attitudes have moved to accept greater areas of our forests, bushland and wilderness areas being set aside in National Parks. These increased areas, along with the attitudes of members of the community stridently opposed to broadscale hazard reduction burning, have made it extremely difficult for land managers, firefighters and the community to strike the appropriate balance between environmental outcomes that protect biodiversity and other environmental values, as against initiating measures to reduce fuel loads on a substantial scale to protect property and life.

We also note the concept of hazard reduction burning has been supported in numerous Coronial Inquiries, Parliamentary Committee reports and Audit reports over the past decade.

The body of public and scientific evidence presently identifies two potential but conflicting outcomes.

Firstly unchecked high intensity wildfires on a massive scale have the potential in many circumstances to impact adversely on biodiversity values in our flora and fauna, cause soil erosion and other serious environmental problems. Equally, frequent prescribed burning, if not undertaken in a strategic manner and on the basis of strong science, can cause significant environmental damage by destroying the habitat of species, altering the pattern of nutrient recycling and exposing areas to weeds and noxious animal invaders.

We are of the view that if a policy of prescribed burning is adopted by agencies as a fire management tool it should be done on a strategic basis according to negotiated and agreed fire management plans, and on the basis of comprehensive research data, to enable the best possible assessment of local environmental impacts.

Well meaning calls for broadscale fuel reduction burning on a massive scale may be as counterproductive in achieving a national response to the bushfire threat, as calls by other sectors of the community to outlaw prescribed burning in all forms and circumstances.

Given the need for hazard reduction burning to be undertaken with appropriate regards for the ecological and biodiversity needs of forest areas, it is important that it be conducted by skilled personnel in appropriate and optimal circumstances.

We note that land management and fire fighting agencies from NSW, Victoria and the ACT were not in a position to directly tender evidence on their policy and practice in relation to hazard reduction burning in recent years, the scientific basis on which it was undertaken, and the skill of land management and other personnel to whom this task was entrusted.

However we also note that in evidence tendered to other State and Territory based enquiries these agencies have conducted fuel reduction burning programs against the background of limited windows of opportunity caused by prolonged dry seasons and adverse weather conditions, and community input.

The Committee received evidence from West Australian and Tasmanian agencies which suggested that public land management and fire management have become highly integrated, and sophisticated planning is being employed in implementing strategic mosaic burns to meet both fuel reduction objectives and community expectations on the environment.

We are strongly of the view that Australia's bushfire research effort must be intensified in order to provide land management decision makers with the best science available, to enable them to make decisions that achieve better balance between the needs of the environment, and the community's needs to feel secure from the threat of wild fire.

National Bushfire Strategy

We are strongly of the view that the Commonwealth Government should as a matter of some urgency, develop a comprehensive national bushfire strategy in consultation with the States and Territories.

In the wake of the devastating fires in south eastern Australia in 2001-02 which caused extensive property loss, as well as loss of life, the Federal Government announced that it intended to pursue a national bushfire strategy in co-operation with the States and Territories.

In a press release on 2 April 2002 the then Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government said, “the Government was developing a national fire fighting strategy in partnership with State and Territory Governments.”

The Government commissioned Australia’s Fire Chiefs under the auspices of the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC), to investigate Australia’s aerial fire fighting capacity as part of the pursuit of a national strategy, and to make recommendations to it in advance of the 2003 season.

AFAC reported to the Minister in August 2002 making detailed recommendations on a range of aircraft required to supplement existing State based aerial resources, to meet the extreme threat from wild fire in the 2003 season.

It canvassed two funding options for the Commonwealth, which involved a mix of aerial resources including high volume aircraft, medium helicopters, fixed wing firebombers and light helicopters for air attack supervision.

Australia’s fire chiefs warned in August 2002 that climate predictions indicated the high probability of an above average fire season in the south eastern states particularly, and emphasised the need to put a national fleet of aircraft resources in place for the 2002-03 season as a matter of urgency.

The AFAC recommendations were dismissed as a ‘wish list’ of resources by the then Federal Minister. The supplementation of overstretched State based aerial capacity occurred well into the fire season, with Erickson sky cranes considered by some fire fighters to be inefficient in certain operational circumstances and by some States as too expensive to operate.

We support the view expressed in this report that an initial attack fire fighting capacity is a desirable one for our fire fighters to possess. We note the strong views expressed in evidence that the eventual damage caused by the 2003 fires

could have been ameliorated if resources had been brought to bear earlier. We also note that some fires occurred in remote and inaccessible areas, and conscious decisions were made by fire fighting agencies not to attend to them because appropriate resources were not available to be deployed.

The dire warnings to the Federal Government on the likely severity of the 2003 bushfire season and the emphasis placed on an urgent need to put a national fleet of aircraft resources in place for the 2002-03 season by Australia's fire chiefs in the AFAC were recommendations that should have been acted upon by the then Minister as a matter of urgent priority. They were not. One can only speculate as to the impact these early suppression initial attack resources might have had at the outbreak of lightning fires in inaccessible areas in NSW and around the ACT.

Australia's experience over the past few years indicates that extreme climactic conditions and intense bushfire events are occurring with greater frequency. Given high fuel loads in our forests, changed land management practices, the complexities of the urban-bush interface and other factors, we believe that the need to develop and adequately resource a comprehensive national bushfire strategy is self-evident and urgent.

Role of Local Government in Bushfire Management

The Committee report acknowledges the important role of local government in fire prevention and suppression activities, as well as the post bushfire recovery phase in local communities. We wish to emphasise that role, and encourage local governments in bushfire prone areas to expand their bushfire mitigation efforts.

In the past detailed knowledge to assist local government in defining fire risk has not been available, and as a consequence local area planning has been undertaken without due sensitivity to the threat posed by fire to many localities.

Lack of planning sophistication has permitted housing development in inappropriate areas, with individual property owners being permitted poor choices in the design of buildings and materials used in construction.

The legal system and existing law in some states, has also made it difficult for local government to refuse to allow developments in sensitive and fire prone areas at the urban – bush interface.

Even where planning has been undertaken, adequate resources have not been made available to effectively police and ensure the implementation of appropriate planning controls.

We note however that the technical skill and capacity now exists to assist municipalities in assessing risk and developing comprehensive planning strategies for their local areas. We acknowledge the fine work already being done by some local government administrations in preparing local fire mitigation and management plans, effectively administering bushfire sensitive planning schemes, conducting extensive community education campaigns, and playing pivotal roles in the fire suppression efforts and in the recovery of local communities from bushfire.

It is a matter of some urgency that all municipalities that have fire prone areas within their boundaries, follow this excellent lead in effectively preparing their communities for bushfire events.

There is a need for greater liaison between local government planners and local fire authorities, and for formal processes of communication and consultation between the above on all aspects relating to local bushfire management. Any level of communication, consultation and co-operation will be negated if appropriate local and state planning processes are not developed for discreet land tenure types.

The areas of planning and community education offer local governments a unique opportunity to play an increased role in bushfire prevention and management.

Public Education

We wish to emphasize the need for a greater public education effort to be undertaken by all levels of Government and the agencies they control, as well as the general community, as an integral part of a national bushfire strategy.

In recent times in many areas there has been changing ownership of private land with the emergence of small holdings by people seeking a rural lifestyle but who may be unfamiliar with both the demands of living in a rural environment, and the need to adequately prepare their properties for the eventuality of a bushfire.

Many of those people live away from their properties for most of the time and are not able to undertake the required fire prevention work around their properties when the best opportunity presents itself to do so.

Clearly many landowners are not doing enough to protect their properties at the urban interface, and indeed the failure of those landholders and their local governments to fully comply with the provision of existing legislation, is putting the general community and fire fighters at greater risk from bushfire.

There is an urgent need to scale up the public education campaign at all levels of government, and to explore in greater depth the legislative and practical financial measures that can be employed to induce greater co-operation from landholders in this regard.

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Deputy Chair
27 October 2003

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