



Inquiry into the Incidence and Impact of Bushfires

Submission No.228

SUBMISSION

To

**House of Representatives
Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires**

Prepared by:-

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Background

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc) (WAFarmers) is WA's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation.

WAFarmers represents West Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers and beekeepers. WAFarmers has recently expanded its membership base to incorporate rural small business owners.

It is estimated that collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production (ABS March 2003) that agriculture in its various forms contributes to Western Australia's economy.

Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

Introduction

WAFarmers is please to provide comment to the House of Representatives Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires.

WAFarmers has sought input from its membership base, particularly those members affected by bushfires during the summer of 2002/03 and by far the major issue raised has been the spread of bushfires emanating from vacant Crown Land and State Government owned land i.e. parks, forests and reserves.

Accordingly, to ensure that the issues raised in this inquiry are subsequently addressed at a State level, WAFarmers recommends:-

That the inquiry into the incidence and impact of bushfires be extended and undertaken at a State level.

Farming communities are under financial, physical and emotional stress with community expectations that fires in Crown and State Government owned land will be fought by volunteer farmers indefinitely.

In 1998 the following motion was unanimously supported at a major conference event and communicated to the Government of the day.

"That a concerted effort be made to change the policy and attitude by which the Government and urban communities expect the agricultural community to fight non-agricultural fires and that a code of practice be developed to manage the way in which these fires are prevented and controlled."

Five years later, nothing has changed.

Terms of Reference

The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities.

Western Australia's summer bushfires will always impact extensively on the environment, private and public assets and local communities.

To some extent, the drought conditions prevalent during the 2002/03 summer period reduced the amount of bushfire damage, however, the impact was magnified, particularly in respect of already scarce livestock fodder.

The State's beekeepers also lost a considerable number of hives during the most recent bushfires.

The causes and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property.

Many of the causes of bushfires cannot be easily controlled e.g. lightning strikes. The risk factors, however, can be better managed.

Comment was made in relation to inadequate attention to buffer burning.

Fires are not being managed and extinguished when appropriate conditions arise.

Government agencies need to be audited annually on what action they are implementing on preventing the outbreak of fires on their land.

Government agencies must do fuel reduction burns and install adequate firebreaks on their land.

Penalties for deliberately lit fires are insufficient.

The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control.

Hazard reduction and other strategies are often well planned but poorly implemented.

Fire control needs to take priority over other consideration such as flora and fauna as they are lost during fire storms.

Less hazard reduction burning and more buffer protection burning.

Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices.

Local communities need to have a greater input of local practical knowledge and advice on how parks and reserves are managed.

Fire Management Plans for all Government owned land adjoining farm land should be developed in consultation with the landholders, Shires and relevant Government agencies.

Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) continuously claims that it has no budget allocation for fire prevention, yet expends millions of dollars each year fighting fires. Isn't prevention (cheaper) and better than cure?

More buffer burning.

The appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires.

Persons wishing to live in a bush setting with increased fire risk, need to recognise that risk and take steps to minimise the risk.

The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting.

Generally considered adequate at best. Too top heavy.

Comment was made that several rural Shire bushfire organizations are grossly under-funded, poorly equipped and poorly trained, whereas bushfire brigades near large populated centres are well funded, well equipped and well trained and under utilised.

The adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions.

CALM and Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) need to come to an understanding with neighbouring farmers and bushfire brigades as to their respective responsibilities on the outbreak of a fire, especially at weekends or during holiday periods.

There is a perception of a culture within CALM and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) to keep things in house. Information dissemination and public debriefings should be the norm, not the exception.

Comment was made that FESA, the people who are charged with putting the wildfires out are the greatest concern.

We have moved from the days when volunteers went out and got the job done to a point where a bureaucracy sits on the side of the road and wonders what to do next.

Liability, insurance coverage and related matters.

Insurance is obvious post fire support, however, is a cost to the community and no substitute for fire reduction or prevention measures.

Self insurance, or managing your own risk is the most effective form of insurance.

Penalties for deliberately lit fires are insufficient.

The roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

Volunteers are generally first on the scene of a bushfire.

The general policy of farmer volunteers is to immediately report smoke sightings, then go directly to the fire with their fire unit. There are often 3 to 5 units at the fire within 10-20 minutes. This usually enables the fire to be controlled before it gets too big or hot. The rest of the district is put on alert and additional fire units and any other equipment sent as required. The general approach is to overwhelm a fire with equipment as soon as possible.

By definition, a volunteer is a person who enters into a service of his own free will. A volunteer should not carry a burden of expectation.

There must be a better balance between the expectations of the community and the workload and risk placed on volunteers who are expected to contain, control and eliminate bushfires, at the volunteers own risk and cost.

There is no consideration given to the cost incurred by the self-employed business proprietor (farmer) and his employees with the expectation that they will turn out and fight fires.

Farmers are on occasion, reluctant volunteers in bush fire brigades but all know that if one doesn't co-operate when someone else has a fire, it may be them next time. The need for farmers to protect their families, homes, buildings, machinery, crops and livestock is of paramount importance to the whole community.

Government agencies rely too heavily on local volunteers. Diminishing rural populations is also increasing the workload on those remaining.

Volunteers experience is not respected and their presence often not accepted by CALM and/or FESA personnel regardless of training levels and local area and fire knowledge.

Conclusion

WAFarmers notes that where the environment is referred to in the Terms of Reference, it precedes other considerations. Whether the emphasis is deliberate or not, WAFarmers refers Select Committee members to a respected and accepted bushfire ethos that clearly delineates fire fighting priorities:-

1. Protect human life, including your own
2. Protect property
3. Protect the environment

The public good needs and expectations of communities are rapidly becoming unattainable and undeliverable by the minority who are left to fight bushfires. Public good expectations must be paid for by the community.

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