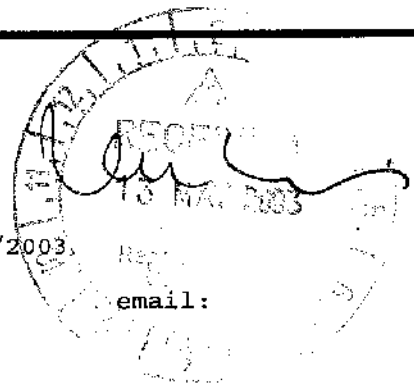


Newsome, Silvana (REPS)

From: Mac Paton
Sent: Sunday, 11 May 2003 5:00 PM
To: Committee, Bushfires (REPS)
Subject: Summer Bushfires North Eastern Victoria 2003



Mac Paton,

Date 8/5/2003

Submission No.247

ENQUIRY INTO THE RECENT
AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES.

Dear Committee,

I am a farmer in the

Mitta Valley in North Eastern Victoria. During January 2003 we were enveloped in smoke from the bushfires started by lightning strikes in early January. I am a member of the Noorongong CFA Fire Brigade. We relied on Radio Broadcasts to understand where the fires were and as they moved into more threatening positions the radio information became not specific enough to be useful for pinpointing the actual position or threat of the fires. On the 27th January the Fires had incinerated Dartmouth area and was heading North West back in the direction of our farm. I asked my near neighbour and Noorongong CFA Lieutenant Matt O'Brien for information about the fire strategy and he was unaware of any specific strategy and suggested I contact the Brigade Captain Roger Peters. I found out that Roger was asleep due to captain's duty for weeks now, on top of many shifts on the fire truck and trying to run his dairy farm as well. Matt then suggested I contact CFA Deputy Group Officer Matthew Thompson, of neighbouring Eskdale Brigade. Matthew explained he had just had 2 days away from fire duty to catch up on sleep and work on his dairy farm, but due to his own curiosity had travelled on his motorbike toward the fires nearest his property but was not allowed to go beyond a road block. Radio reports were describing the fires as getting into a position which was quite threatening to our farm. January 28 was spent again in smoke so thick visibility was about 200 meters, wind direction had moved around to the south providing cooler conditions but I could not get any satisfactory information about the fire fighting strategy and therefore how should I prepare myself. Due to immense frustration and concern early on 29

January my wife Pat, next door neighbor Campbell Paton and I drove out through the bush south east of our property along good conditioned forestry tracks towards where we thought the fire should be. We arrived at the fire front on Bullhead track to find a very benign fire slowly crawling down a ridge and being put out by the track itself. After feeling some relief at the state of the fire we started to return home via Callaghan Creek and Fairyknowe Creek Tracks. About 9am we arrived back at Campbell's house where an officer of the Department of Sustainability Peter Ellis had arrived to meet with locals to discuss a fire strategy. Peter described his plan to construct a containment line through local private property as the fire was not going to be fought until it came through to that containment line. We asked, because of our trip through the bush why couldn't the fire be attacked and in our view put out back in the hills where it was putting itself out along the Bullhead track. Steve Paton travelled the same track on 28th January and described the same opportunity to attack the fire. Peter said the fire was too dangerous and lives could not be risked, he had no understanding of local geography and explained he had just come straight from Mount Beauty control Centre that morning. The map he had was a cheap tourist map with inadequate detail on which a red text line had been entered to describe the position of the previously mentioned containment line. Most of the containment line followed bare paddocks due to the drought and one section followed the bush track we had just driven along. I asked him what form of containment line he envisaged through the bush [Stringybark and other eucalypts 10-15 metres high plus thick understory]. He replied there was no problem there because it was a sealed main road. He had no local knowledge. I asked him who was supporting him with local knowledge, surely the local CFA hierarchy would be able to help. He replied that they had CFA presence at the recently established Dartmouth Incident Control Centre and invited me to travel to the Centre to discuss my concerns with Bob Graham, Incident Controller in charge. He realised our group were not convinced that his strategy was properly thought out so he then told us that his plan was to be put in place whether we agreed with it or not. I then asked him when the machinery was likely to begin the containment line. He replied in 2 or 3 Days. The next northerly wind would be through before then so it seemed a waste of time if it could not be done before that because the northerly would blow it back

on itself. He then explained he had spent 2 days trying to get a government car to deliver his plan from Mt Beauty Incident Control Centre but every time he went to get one some other government employee beat him to the available car, hence he was delivering a plan 2 days out of date. I then travelled to Dartmouth to meet Bob Graham. Arrived approximately 11.00AM. Had a briefing on the fire situation from Bob and explained my thoughts about trying to stop the fire on Bullhead Track. Bob was being bombarded with directions from Corryong and Mt Beauty which were conflicting with what he was learning from local people and the CFA support he had was an employee of the CFA who had just arrived from Mt Beauty Control Centre and he had never been in this area before. A message then came through that the machinery had turned up back at home to start the containment lines. I asked who was directing them through the various properties. Bob asked me if I would do that and I agreed to and returned home. We were not expecting the machinery for a couple of days. Bob Graham soon got a good understanding of the local situation and the fire was stopped at the Bullhead track and we thank him for that. I believe there is a huge injustice where fire suppression decisions to stop forest fires on private land assume the sacrifice of boundary and internal fences and pasture with no support for at least replacement of fences.

My son 25yrs of age, just returned from Northern Territory, where he drove road trains and worked on the construction of both the rail and road development there, was deemed unable to assist the CFA fire effort. He was registered immediately with the CFA on 26/1/03 and registration became effective 29/5/03.

Issues.

1. Glaring need for involvement of local knowledge as integral part of response strategy. Local Brigade Captains and Deputy Group Officers are the logical persons to provide this.

2. Radio Communication among all fire fighting agencies needs to be standardised so actual strategies can be followed with listening devices by whoever is interested. All Agencies should use common frequencies, ie CFA/DNRE in these situations.

3. Freehold/Public land boundaries need major focus. Need Forest Protection Zone from freehold boundary back into Public land as far as actual vegetation requires. ie if trees are 15m high then zone is minimum 15m etc. This properly protects the boundary fence and provides an area which could be easily maintained or converted into a sensible fire containment facility.

4. Methods of using extra personnel should be fast tracked by the CFA to take advantage of capable willing people able to assist the fire effort.

I hope your enquiry roots out some positive improvements so that the next time a similar situation confronts us we are benefitted by the harsh lessons learned in this fire,
Yours Sincerely, Mac Paton.