



**ANOTHER DISASTER WAITING TO  
HAPPEN**

**Submission from the  
Victorian Farmer's Federation  
to the House of Representatives  
Select Committee  
Inquiry into the recent Australian Bushfires**

June 2003

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## 1 FOREWORD

The 2002/03 bushfire period in Victoria has been devastating for the Victorian rural community. They have faced a fire season not seen on this scale since 1939. The total area burnt during this fire season is larger than that of the 39 fires. The North East Victoria and Gippsland fires had and continues to have the largest effect, for this reason this submission to the inquiry has decided to focus on these particular fires.

The North East and Gippsland fires burnt approximately 1.3 million hectares of National Parks and State Forests and 90,000 hectares of private land.

*For goodness sake lets take the best from what's available, mix it with experience and local knowledge and come up with something sensible, efficient and effective.*

*Farmer*

When reviewing these fires consideration must be given to the emotional damage, not just the damage to assets. The majority of the area affected by the fires was in its fifth year of below average rainfall. Many farmers and the communities, which, rely upon them were at the end of their tether, then they had to face over a month of 24-hour pressure while the fires raged.

Some farmers are now informing us there is a growing level of despondency amongst farmers, their families and the communities since the fires have gone out.

On attending meetings with farmers to obtain their input for this submission and reading the many reports of past Victorian bushfires it is impossible not to get the impression that history has been repeated.

The tragedy is that proper practical management of natural resources would have limited much of these foreseeable losses. Rather than proactive fire mitigation, reactive fire management has become an accepted institutional approach, predictably resulting in large recurrent bushfires and loss of those natural resources.

Our conclusion is that the State was hopelessly unprepared for the bushfire season. The institutions responsible for managing public lands have thus failed in their duty to conserve the environment and protect the aesthetic amenity of the natural resources and jeopardised agriculture and farming.

The culture of these institutions can be summed up simply as "If I do nothing, I do nothing wrong". The ideal of increased 'professionalism' of our volunteer fire service, that has served the community so well for so long, has isolated the very volunteers upon which it was built. Fire management has become the predominant approach rather than suppression of fires and as a result it is likely such large bushfires will reoccur.

The State Government has failed to acknowledge the full impact of the fires on farmer's livelihoods. Agriculture and those who have committed their livelihoods to it must no longer be placed behind environment, conservation and aesthetics when it comes to managing crown land.

This inquiry will be pointless unless its recommendations influence Government policy and those institutions responsible for its implementation. Without substantial change there is ANOTHER DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN.

Paul Weller  
**VFF President**

## 2 INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) is Australia's largest state farmer organisation. The Federation represents 22,000 farmers, representing 15,000 farm enterprises.

The VFF comprises eight commodity groups representing dairy, grains, pastoral, horticulture, chicken meat, pigs, flowers and egg industries. It has an elected Board of Directors and a member representative General Council that is responsible for setting policy. Farmers are elected by their peers to lead the organisation and direct each of the commodity groups.

*It would be good, if when wrong/bad decisions were made, they could be acknowledged. We all make mistakes & act from imperfect knowledge. Some acknowledgement will allow all people to move on!*

*Tallangatta farmer*

Each VFF member is represented locally by one of the 230 VFF branches across the state and through their commodity representatives at local, district, state and national levels. The VFF also represent farmers' views on hundreds of industry and government forums.

Preparation of this submission has involved extensive consultation with a large number of VFF members from fire-affected areas and across the state. The process commenced with community meetings in the Omeo and Tallangatta, where VFF members voiced their concerns regarding the fires, which had monopolised their lives for over two months.

These meetings called for the formation of a VFF Bushfire Taskforce, whose role was to shape the concerns from the community meetings into a draft submission, and then make the draft submission open for the whole VFF membership to comment on.

The willingness of governments to declare land national parks without providing resources for proper management of these parks has been a growing source of frustration for neighbouring farmers and rural communities. The push for increased 'professionalism' of our volunteer fire services has added to this frustration as it has isolated the Country Fire Authority from communities.

The bushfires in Gippsland and north east Victoria merely provided the impetus for people in rural communities to voice their concerns.

As a result, the VFF sought representation on the Taskforce that covered the main areas of the state that have been prone to bushfires. It was also in recognition of the fact that these areas employ different fire protection methods.

The VFF Bushfire Taskforce members were Mr Ron Hards as Chairman, from the Mallee, Mr Anthony Wait representing the Wimmera/Grampians, Mr Jim Gardiner representing Colac-Otway region, Mr Simon Paton and Mr Ed Baynes representing north east Victoria and Mr Barry Newcomen and Mr Hugh Adams representing East Gippsland.

### 3 Bushfire Preparedness

#### 3.1 Fuel reduction burning

There are only three ingredients for fire – oxygen, heat and fuel. The only ingredient that can be controlled by human intervention is the availability of fuel. Insufficient fuel reduction was identified as a major factor in the severity of the 1982/83 bushfires<sup>1</sup> and there is wide consensus that the scenario has been the same in the lead up to the 2002/03 fires.

This is confirmed in the Auditor General's report that states "there has been a consistent failure to achieve all of the DSE's hazard reduction "targets" over the past 8 years."<sup>2</sup>

State Ministers defending the government's preparedness for bushfires have claimed "Opportunities to carry out fuel reduction safely have been severely limited over recent years as Victoria has experienced severe drought conditions" (media release, 8 May 2003). Such claims do not bear up to scrutiny. Many VFF members, who are intimately familiar with the history of the management of public land will attest that large areas have not been subject to prescribed burning for a decade or more.

Another consequence of fewer fuel reduction burns is that fire fighters miss out on valuable fire fighting experience.

#### 3.2 Fire conditions

There was a failure to take heed of conditions and recognise that they were ideal for bushfires of tragic proportions. The conditions leading up to the 1982/83 fires were described as follows "rainfall over most of Victoria in the winter spring period of 1982 was abnormally low ... the winter was exceptionally dry and the spring that followed was little better .. Indicative of the severe drought conditions is the fact that during the ten months, April, 1982 to January 1983, most of Victoria suffered the driest period on record."<sup>3</sup>

It is the belief of the VFF that the seasonal conditions, which led to the fires in the North East and Gippsland were not fully recognised by the Victorian State Government and therefore they were inadequately prepared. It is sadly obvious recommendations from previous bushfire inquiries have not been implemented.

#### 3.3 Public and private land interface

There appears to be poor cooperation between managers of public land and private landowners. Private land owners view the crown as a poor neighbour. Poor weed and vermin management, failure to reduce fuel loads and unnecessary regulatory control on private landowners in relation to clearing and burning of native vegetation has fostered a climate of mistrust and antagonism between government and private landowners. Private landowners are unable to

<sup>1</sup> Victorian Bushfire Review Committee, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Auditor General Victoria, Fire prevention and preparedness, Melbourne, May 2003, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Victorian Bushfire Review Committee, 1984.

clear bush from fence lines and are threatened with fines and legal action if burning for fire breaks on their boundaries escape into public land.

### *3.4 Containment lines and tracks*

Containment lines and tracks within public land are no longer constructed or effectively maintained. Existing tracks are neglected and have become overgrown. In many instances, public land managers in their infinite wisdom have obstructed tracks with logs or trenches to stop people using them.

Roads and track access around public land can't be given high enough priority. The worth of roads and tracks was well highlighted in the Reports of the Royal Commission into the bushfires of 1939 – "The importance of roads even in small forests cannot be too strongly stressed .... The cost of construction of roads in some districts is heavy, the cost of severe fires is infinitely heavier".

Fire fighters and equipment took up to two days to reach some fires started by lightning strikes. This was due to the inability of the fire fighters to reach the fire source. The tracks, which were made during the fires are already being closed off and will not be maintained. This will substantially reduce preparedness for future fires.

### *3.5 Loss of Resources, local knowledge and water access*

Resources and local knowledge have been lost as a result of the demise of public utilities and reduction in allocations for logging. Closure of timber mills directly affects local towns and communities. Of particular concern to the issue at hand is the loss of equipment and manpower available to fight future fire outbreaks.

Changes to the roles of forestry managers have also resulted in the loss of intimate local knowledge of the terrain and vegetation within parks that is critical of fighting fires. The State Government's contribution to resources for fire prevention and fighting is not in proportion to the area of land that it is responsible for. In some regions the area of land under public management far exceeds that under private ownership. A case in point is Towong Shire where approximately 70% of land is publicly owned and managed.

Authorities responsible for management of public lands have actively decommissioned dams on public land, reducing water resources available for fighting fires.

### *3.6 Sensible management sacrificed for conservation*

Sensible and effective management practices permitted for many decades have been cast aside in pursuit of 'conservation' and a 'no touch' approach to the environment. Examples of this include the restrictions on collection of firewood and the constant pressure to outlaw alpine grazing. Local government has also placed restrictions on the movement of livestock on roads allowing fuel to build up on roadsides.

Many people fighting these recent fires can attest to the impact that grazed areas had on fire intensity in alpine regions. Furthermore, mountain cattlemen, in association with area forest managers (DSE) are well placed to undertake fuel reduction burns during the late autumn muster & other appropriate times.

### 3.7 *Restrictions on private land owners*

The threat of fines and prosecution that face private landowners who allow fuel reduction burns to escape into public land has already been highlighted. However, the injustice does not stop there. Private landowners are also restricted from making preparations for fire on their own land due to concern for remnant vegetation and threatened species.

Many farmers report the total destruction of remnant vegetation on their land following the fires that will now take at least twenty years to restore to its previous condition.

### 3.8 *Protection of native species*

The impact of fire on native species is frequently used as an excuse not to do fuel reduction burns. The intensity of fires is largely determined by the type and amount of fuel available. The intensity of the recent fires has had a devastating impact on wildlife with many areas appearing 'sterilised' (<http://wave.prohosting.com/jitlit/>). One can only wonder at the likelihood that most wildlife would have escaped unscathed from a less intense controlled burn.

The final report of the Government's Ministerial Bushfire Taskforce (April, 2003) reports eight threatened fauna species have had 90-100 per cent of their known Victorian habitat affected by the fires. Five animal species listed on the critically endangered list have had more than half their known habitat destroyed, including:

- the mountain pygmy possum;
- brush-tailed rock wallaby;
- alpine water skink;
- alpine tree frog; and
- spotted tree frog.

It will be a long time and only after many studies before Victorians become aware of the number of species that have been lost or are under greater pressure for survival as a result of these disastrous fires.

### 3.9 *Volunteer resources and private units*

The ethos and culture of the CFA has changed as a result of the increased professionalism. Following the Victorian coronors' inquiry into the December 1998 Linton, fires, the CFA finds itself unable to use a large number of long serving local volunteers because they have not completed their required minimum skills training. This is despite the fact many of these same volunteers have extensive experience and knowledge of fire fighting which now is not officially recognised.



The use of private fire fighting equipment is of utmost importance and a critical element of rural fire suppression. Private units are often the first on the scene and are able to put out fires in the early stages, resulting in huge savings for the community.

Groups of efficient private vehicles, equipped with good equipment and UHF radios, that are highly motivated to protect their own and neighbours property have formed effective fire fighting units. Increasingly, these units are driving past the CFA shed and tanker to fight fires in the brigade area when manpower is low.

Increasing regulation of equipment and onerous training requirements threatens to force these units outside the control of the CFA.

## 4 Response

### 4.1 Incident Control System

The CFA, Parks Victoria & DSE have of recent years been developing the use of the Incident Control System (ICS). This practice has seen a lessening of the relevance of the operational "chain of command" and the importance of democratically elected leaders, elected in recognition of their experience and skills.

Insufficient use of local knowledge in the Incident Control Centres (ICC) has been highlighted on many occasions. It is important that the personnel operating the ICC have the respect of the fire fighting crews affected by their decisions.

### 4.2 Reluctance to put fires out

The apparent reluctance of Parks Victoria and DSE to tackle fires quickly, when they are small and conditions are right has drawn repeated criticism from our members.

During the recent fires, too much emphasis was put on asset protection kilometres away from the fire front, instead of attacking the fire at the front. As a result, fires got out of control and escaped from public lands with such violent intensity that no amount of resources could stop them.

Effective asset protection begins with fuel reduction, preparedness and early strike capacity. Nothing is more important than reaching the fire source quickly.

### 4.3 Failure to take advantage of favourable weather conditions

Opportunities to fight and contain the fires in the evening, when conditions were more favourable were squandered. People considered that the 'working hours' mentality of DSE and Parks Victoria staff and the fact that experienced volunteers at the front were prevented from making decisions about back burning and other proactive control measures, were contributing factors.

Fire fighters from the Omeo CFA reported an occasion when the Swifts Creek ICC took two and a half hours to fax approval for back burning. ICC decisions were often delayed due to shift changes in the control centre and the absence of good intelligence about local conditions.

### 4.4 Tracks and containment lines

There are many examples of fire crew access and egress being impeded by overgrown and blocked tracks. New tracks often had to be established alongside existing tracks to get around obstacles.

Establishment of containment lines were necessary but were done at significant cost. There are reports that volunteer labour and machinery was refused because operators did not have appropriate tickets or that the equipment did not meet DSE specifications. Examples include a Myrtleford dozer driver, with 40 years experience and his own D7 and also a driver with his own D65 Komatsu whose

services were declined for use in the Tallangatta Valley, Mitta and Dartmouth, only to read later in the paper that dozers were being brought in from Gippsland.

There were also reports that bulldozers were not given sufficient protection and that navigation was hampered by poor communication. Firebreaks were often poorly located because of insufficient prior consideration of whether the firebreak was for containment or to back burn from.

#### *4.5 Experienced volunteers poorly utilised*

The 'no ticket no job' approach meant that many volunteers, who collectively have hundreds of years of experience between them, could not be used or were allocated to more menial tasks that failed to take advantage of their experience and knowledge.

#### *4.6 Inappropriate deployment of strike crews and resources*

There are many examples of poor deployment and operation of strike teams such as that which occurred in the Tallangatta Valley/Cravensville area.

Problems included:

- team leaders inexperienced in fighting fires in mountainous terrain,
- team leaders were under direction of ICC and therefore could not take orders from local fire front officers
- strike teams were not accompanied by people with local knowledge and experience
- poor coordination that resulted in strike crews being 'unavailable'
- inadequate radio communication because strike crews were not using CFA radio channel
- inability of strike teams to respond to 'obvious' emergencies because their orders came from the ICC that could not observe what was happening on the ground
- tankers left fire front when strike teams had to change over, leaving fire fronts unattended for extended periods
- strike team accommodation was too far from fire front, the greatest distance known was 90km from the fire front, it must be remembered this distance needed to be travelled there and back to change over a crew.

In rural districts tankers were often idle because fresh crews were unavailable. Strike teams could have been utilised in these instances, however they were generally allocated to protect towns in the first instance and only released to rural districts when towns were no longer under threat.

Strike teams should be able to be used when needed for operations such as emergencies, back burning and blacking out.

Fire fighting equipment and bulldozers were often used around towns waiting for protection when they would have been more useful at the fire front.

#### *4.7 Communication failures*

Communication between fire fighting crews reportedly broke down on many occasions as a consequence of incompatible radio equipment, no uniform radio frequency and the lack of a radio protocol.

Hand held radios often would not work on heavy smoke days. There were also reports that radio frequencies were frequently jammed with irrelevant radio traffic, such as the reported use of open channels to verify completeness of crews and trucks leaving depots instead of undertaking a physical inspection of the deployment.

#### *4.8 Inappropriate measures of success*

The success of fire-fighting efforts were measured in terms of the number of assets, in particular houses, saved. The failure of ICC and fire crews to commit resources to protect farm assets such as fencing, stockyards, hay, hay sheds, machinery, standing pasture and livestock, in many instances, belies the fact that the value of these assets to farmers, especially in times of drought, were not widely appreciated.

#### *4.9 Private property destroyed by back burning and containment lines*

Back burning operations on occasion were commenced on private land with complete disregard to the impact of the resultant loss to landowners. Many farmers believe this occurred because fire crew access to public land was too difficult.

One farmer, from Tallangatta reported his disgust and horror when he saw DSE leave a back burn unattended at the end of a shift and over night, putting at risk his own property and neighbouring farms.

Property owners should be kept informed about what fire-fighters are planning that will affect their particular property so that complimentary work can be undertaken by the owners.

The establishment of containment lines also often resulted in destruction of fences, pipelines and other infrastructure on private property. These losses could have been reduced with some proper thought and consideration.

#### *4.10 Use of aircraft*

An increasing dependence on aircraft by DSE and CFA is most evident, however on many occasions during the NE and Gippsland fires aircraft were either occupied elsewhere or were grounded by weather or smoke.

Many people were sceptical of the motivation for using aircraft, such as the sky crane "Elvis". People continue to question the increased use of aircraft and whether the cost can be justified in terms of their impact on the fires.

#### *4.11 Municipal Emergency Management*

Members in the Tallangatta Valley were critical of the effectiveness with which Municipal Emergency Management plans were prepared and implemented. Specifically, they were concerned that plans did not appear to have been put into effect in advance of the fire and personnel from other Emergency Services did not appear to be aware of the role or operation of the Municipal Emergency Control Centre (MECC).

## 5 Recovery Assistance

### 5.1 *Government hiding behind Fences Act*

The State Government continues to hide behind the *Fences Act* 1968 absolving itself of liability to repair or replace boundary fences. However, the same government has set precedents for fencing funding when it agreed to fully cover the costs of fencing destroyed by the Stawell fires (2001) for uninsured farmers and more recently farmers in the Mt Macedon area had internal and crown land boundary fencing fully compensated.

There should be a legislated requirement for the State Government to pay half the total cost of rebuilding boundary fences, when the fire starts on public land. The government should cover the cost of replacing fences that are destroyed as a result of back burning, from private land in full.

### 5.2 *Inadequate compensation*

The VFF believes the State Government's offer of assistance for affected farmers is woefully inadequate. A total of \$5.15 million was offered to help eligible farmers affected by the North East and Gippsland fires. This included \$3.75 million towards dog fencing adjoining public land, covering up to 50% of the material costs only of an electric fence to keep out wild dogs. In steep, mountainous terrain that is characteristic of Gippsland and the North East, material costs would often be only one quarter of the true cost of rebuilding fences which is estimated to be up to \$12,000 per kilometre.

Those who have experience of this assistance, available in the past through the Land Protection Incentive Scheme (LPIS), are strongly of the view it is not worth the effort of applying.

### 5.3 *Pollution of water supplies*

The depth of debris and ash on the forest floor, measured in feet over large areas, means that this problem will affect farm stock and domestic water, town water and rivers and streams. All these water sources are at risk of being heavily polluted for years to come as this burnt debris is washed off the landscape by rain.

It is very concerning that Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), such as the North East CMA, have warned farmers that they should not break dam walls to drain polluted water.

### 5.4 *A slap in the face*

The State Government's total assistance package for agriculture is a slap in the face in comparison to the direct assistance provided to the tourism industry plus unquantified amounts to be spent on reconstruction of tourism infrastructure.

The tourism industry, worth about \$100 million annually to regional economies ([www.info.vic.gov.au/bushfire/questions.htm](http://www.info.vic.gov.au/bushfire/questions.htm) 22/4/03) will receive \$1.98 million compared to \$5.75 million to agriculture that has an economic value to

the region in excess of \$1 billion. The Victorian Government justifies this discrepancy by saying that "fires are a foreseeable risk in the Victorian rural landscape and they are also an insurable risk". The same can be said for any business operating in a rural area. It should also be remembered that in the post-fire period business does not simply 'walk in the door' of a farm business as it does for tourism operators.

### *5.5 Families under stress*

The effect these fires have had on families will be extremely difficult to measure. The prolonged waiting period was stressful enough, however in the months since the fires, feedback has come through to the VFF that many families are not coping.

The State Government has assisted the rural communities that were affected by making counselling services available. However, isolated rural communities are not well known for opening up to strangers, and have had limited experience with the concept of counselling.

Many rural women are bearing the brunt of the of the emotional aftermath of fire, they are consoling their husbands over the loss (in some cases) of a lifetimes work, and they are trying to bring normality back into their children's lives.

The VFF believes this inquiry, with its national experience, should tackle the issue of emotional support offered to victims post bushfire, it should make an effort to asses the forms of support that were considered by the rural community to be the most beneficial. One such service that has been highly commended by many rural people is the Bush Nursing Service, which operated in the Wulgulmerang area.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 Fuel reduction burning

The State Government's guidelines and performance in meeting targets for fuel reduction burns should be reviewed. Fuel load monitoring and completion of fuel reduction burns should be a priority within the responsible departments.

Following the 1939 Royal Commission, the Government amended the Forests Act to provide that "Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in any other Act or law it shall be the duty of the Forests Commission to carry out proper and sufficient work for the prevention and suppression of fire in every state forest and national park and on all protected public land but in any national park or protected public land proper and sufficient work for the prevention of fire shall be undertaken only by agreement with the person or body having management and control thereof."

This law is still in place today and the duty imposed by it is carried by the Forestry Commission's successor, the Department of Sustainability and Environment. The department needs adequate financial and human resources to undertake prescribed burns for the protection of property, assets and the environment.

As noted earlier, the Victorian Auditor General reports 'there has been a consistent failure to achieve' fuel reduction targets<sup>4</sup>.

Underachievement of fuel reduction burn targets is institutional. The DSE's own Fire Operations Plan targets for hectares of fuel reduction burning have consistently been half the set Fire Protection Plan targets.<sup>5</sup>

When broken into Victorian regions, the average annual Departmental achievement of fuel reduction burning compared to the Fire Protection Plan targets, for the period 1994/95 to 2001/02, ranges from 8.3 per cent in south-west Victoria to 60 per cent in Victoria's north east.<sup>6</sup>

The Department should also allocate resources into educating the public and raising awareness of the benefits and need for fuel reduction burning. Community criticism has been listed as a reason for DSE managers to adopt a so-called risk averse approach to fuel reduction burning. There is potential greater risk in not effectively managing forest fuel loads.

### 6.2 Private and public land interface

The VFF Bushfire Taskforce recommends that special planning and management arrangements are required for the interface between public and private land and that cooperative management of the interface is essential.

<sup>4</sup> Auditor General Victoria, Fire prevention and preparedness, Melbourne, May 2003, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Auditor General Victoria, chart 4C, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Auditor General Victoria, chart 4D, p. 57.



The fire protection zone must be appropriate to the prevailing land types and vegetation. For example, in forested areas in NE Victoria the zone should extend a minimum of 30 metres or the minimum accepted distance to meet OH&S and WorkCover Guidelines, from boundary fences.

A cleared track inside public land adjoining private land, from which back burning can occur, would provide better access and reduce the need to do back burning off farms, thereby minimising the risk of damage to fences and pasture.

A second clear break should be made at up to 1.6 kilometres into public land to facilitate the control of back burning or fuel reduction burning that is required.

### *6.3 Containment lines and tracks*

The Taskforce recommends that public land managers should be required by legislation to provide resources for track maintenance to provide access and egress for safer fire suppression and general management.

A pattern of containment lines, appropriate to the terrain and landscape should be established in large tracts of public land to facilitate access and controlled burning.

### *6.4 Government fire fighting resources and water access*

Over recent years the DSE and Parks Victoria appears to have become more reliant upon "slip on" type fire fighting appliances. Whilst these are immensely useful there is a need for a greater number of proper tankers with better storage and pumping capacity. This equipment is essential to resource the land manager responsible for areas with the largest area and the greatest fuel loads.

Authorities responsible for monitoring the storage of water must recognise the importance of reliable water storage for fighting fires. They should be required to recommission old dams or construct new storages. Water storage capacity should be installed for fire fighting capacity on the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline, as it is being planned and constructed.

Modern use of aircraft also requires that adequate access should be available, for rotary wing aircraft as well as tankers, both large and small. There is a need for larger tankers to transport water to floating collar tanks or long distances into the forests.

### *6.5 Local knowledge and experience*

The Taskforce recommends pre-planning to ensure that the immense value of local knowledge in the suppression of fires and experience of Group and Brigade officers is recognised as an integral part of the management structure and resource pool.

The involvement of this expertise is essential for safe, practical and timely decisions at the fire front. No amount of technology can replace local knowledge, particularly in hilly or mountainous country.

### 6.6 *Deployment and operation of strike teams*

Strike teams should be made available to the CFA group headquarters in control of the fire, with the number of tankers determined after consultation with fire control officer at the fire front. CFA strike teams and tankers should only be made available to DSE through a CFA group, yet always remain under the control of the CFA group headquarters or the officer in charge of the brigade.

Strike teams should operate on the same radio channel as the local brigade and be able to take orders from the local brigade officers. Strike team leaders should be encouraged to apply common sense to make the best use of units under their control, even if this means splitting units up.

Strike team tankers should stay at the fire front with teams bussed in and out, using what are commonly called 'hot crew' changeovers. Teams should be accommodated in close proximity to the fire front and consideration given to utilising army accommodation when not in close proximity to a town for accommodation.

### 6.7 *Fire services provision and CFA funding*

The changing nature of the Victorian community for which the CFA provides the fire service is placing increasingly complex demands on the services provided by the voluntary membership.

The Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Service Board currently provides the fire service to the Melbourne Metro Fire District. The Country Fire Authority provides the fire service to the Country Area of Victoria, including those public lands subject to private lease. This involves the privately owned plantations. In these plantations the equipment and crewing is provided by the owners of the plantations under the control of the CFA. The fire service to all other public land, known as the 'fire protected area of Victoria', is provided by the Department of Sustainability and Environment. It is a fact that experience and knowledge of the public land is best gained by year round involvement.

The Taskforce recommends that it would be most inappropriate for the CFA to have any increased responsibility for providing the fire service in Public Lands.

The CFA is principally funded through a levy on property insurance, however, it is a fact that a large number of Victorians are uninsured, and therefore are not contributing to the costs of operating the CFA.

The VFF recommends that the Government abolish the existing fire services levy on insurance and replace it with a system that comprises:

- A new fire services contribution to be charged on all rateable properties across Victoria, calculated on the basis of the added asset value of the property (i.e. Capital Improved Value minus Site Value);
- The contribution to be collected by local government with rates notices;

- The same contribution rate to apply statewide, removing the current differentiation in Fire Services Levy rates between CFA and MFESB regions;
- Vehicle owners would pay a contribution to the fire services reflecting the level and cost of fire service provided to automobile accidents and incidents. Such a contribution should be collected annually from vehicle owners via a levy applied on vehicle registration.

Fire services levies on insurance have been abolished by most other States.

#### 6.8 Incident Control System

The forward control centre MUST be in the immediate vicinity of the actual fire. The role of the remote ICC should be to coordinate all the other services and supply back up equipment to the controllers at the fire front.

DSE staff should be prepared to take advice from CFA volunteers if they are leaders with local knowledge.

#### 6.9 Communications

Rural communities depend upon various forms of communication including VHF, telephone & listening sets scanning CFA & DSE frequencies. It is essential that the fire services enable this information to be monitored by pre planning the frequency and channel allocation and there should be more 'go to' channels per CFA region.

The technology involved in many receivers is such that prior knowledge of the frequency and channel needs to be determined and broadcast. This cannot cause jamming of operating channels, as the listening sets are receivers only.

The Taskforce recommends that the CFA & DSE select the channels to be utilised and broadcast these to local fire brigades for use by their members.

Fire fighting vehicles should be equipped with UHF radio to enable communication with landholders and private fire fighting vehicles for improved safety and to reduce irrelevant traffic through the ICC.

#### 6.10 Restitution

As the recovery program following the North East fires appears to have developed by exception rather than by rule, the Taskforce recommends:

*"That legislation be enacted to ensure that where private property is burnt by fire, for which the owner cannot be held responsible, then restitution is the responsibility of the relevant Authority".*

Compensation should reflect material losses and subsequent potential further losses as a result of the loss of productive assets, from which future income would be derived such as feed, livestock and fences.

Consideration should be given to providing cash grants to farms and other businesses that suffered substantial losses from bushfires. There should be no strings attached for the use of the grant allowing businesses to apply the grant according to their priorities e.g. fodder, fencing, agistment, accommodation etc.

#### *6.11 Recognition of prior learning for minimum skills*

The requirement in Victoria that CFA volunteers complete minimum skills training should include a process for recognition of prior learning so the vast experience and knowledge of many long serving CFA members can be recognised and utilised. CFA Group captains should be intimately involved in this process as they are likely to have worked alongside many volunteers in the past and are able to effectively assess skills and abilities.

#### *6.12 Use of private equipment*

Private units should be encouraged and their standard and condition monitored by the local CFA captain at the fire. Private units need to know that they are valued by the CFA, otherwise the CFA is putting at risk the volunteer base it has been built on.

#### *6.13 Use of aircraft*

There are concerns at the public money expended on aircraft. Cost effectiveness must be weighed up. Public land managers are too reliant on use of aircraft and they are often not as effective as people on the ground, particularly for early strikes.

The Taskforce recommends more preplanning be undertaken to determine ways to improve the utilisation of aircraft.

#### *6.14 Municipal Emergency Management*

The Taskforce recommends that municipalities review, understand and take action to ensure they are fulfilling their obligations under the relevant Acts. Municipal emergency management plans need to be recognised, understood, operative and effective.

## 7 References

- i. Auditor General Victoria, *Fire Prevention and Preparedness*, Melbourne, May 2003.
- ii. Media Release, "Auditor General's report on fire preparedness welcomed", Victorian Government Ministers for Emergency Services and Environment, 8 May 2003, <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/pressrel> (accessed 11 May 2003).
- iii. Victorian Bushfire Review Committee, *Report of Bushfire Review Committee on bushfire disaster preparedness and response in Victoria, Australia, following the Ash Wednesday fires 16, February 1983*. Melbourne, 1984.
- iv. Victorian Government Ministerial Bushfire Taskforce Report, Melbourne, April 2003.