



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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Member for Brindabella
Shadow Minister for Education and Youth Affairs,
Police and Emergency Services, Industrial Relations and Multicultural Affairs

15 June 2003

A SUBMISSION TO THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT INQUIRY INTO THE BUSHFIRE DISASTER

A SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE ACT JANUARY 2003 BUSHFIRE DISASTER.

Mr. Gary Nairn MP
Chairman of the Federal Parliament Inquiry into the Bushfires
PO Box 232
Queanbeyan NSW 2620

Dear Mr Gary Nairn,

This submission to the Federal Inquiry is entirely based on the report submitted by the ACT Opposition on the 2nd May 03 to the ACT government appointed Mcleod Inquiry detailing the issues it believes were integral to the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the 18th January 2003 bushfire disaster in the ACT. We believe that the issues affecting the ACT coming out of that disaster are entirely relevant to the reviewing of national disaster management – indeed, all forms of emergency management, not just bushfire emergencies.

The report was authored by Steve Pratt, Shadow Minister for Police and Emergency Services.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th January 2003 bushfires, the Opposition has consulted widely and comprehensively within the ACT community and has received many representations from members of the community. All information received by the Opposition has been analysed to determine its worthiness and relativity for inclusion in the submission that it put to the Inquiry. That submission forms the basis of the Opposition's position on the January 2003 Disaster.

The Opposition has as part of its responsibility as representatives of the ACT community, been asking and sought answers to many of the questions it has as well as those posed to it by the ACT community such as:

- *What actually happened in the period 18 - 26 January 2003 and how well did our emergency services cope with the disaster that confronted them?*
- *What were the circumstances contributing to the disaster in the immediate weeks and days leading up to 18th January 2003?*

- ❑ *In terms of the dynamics and scope of the disaster that impacted how adequate were the bushfire emergency and disaster management plans of the ACT which had been in place in the years before this disaster occurred?*
- ❑ *Were the emergency and disaster management plans and engagement properly executed with particular regard to prevention?*
- ❑ *Could the emergency plan have been strengthened to minimise the outcome of 18 January or was the scope of the disaster so broad as to have prevented any prediction and subsequent prevention by the ACT community?*
- ❑ *What must we do – and what is within our power to do - to minimise a repeat of this disaster?*

The Opposition's submission had sought to identify where problems occurred as well as the 'lessons to be learned' arising from those issues listed. In addition, the Opposition made recommendations to the inquiry it believes would minimise the risk to the ACT from bushfire disasters such as that experienced on 18th January 2003.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The shadow minister for emergency services, Steve Pratt MLA, is the primary author of this submission on behalf of the opposition. He has consulted with members of the Opposition and coordinated input in the writing of this submission. Mr Pratt has considerable experience in the area of natural disaster and war-time emergency management, including in the disciplines of risk management, risk analysis, contingency planning and security and safety management, in hazardous environments.

OPPOSITION OF THE ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr Brendan Smyth MLA – Leader of the Opposition
 Mr Bill Stefaniak MLA – Deputy Leader of the Opposition
 Mr Steve Pratt MLA -
 Mrs Vicki Dunne MLA
 Mr Greg Cornwell MLA
 Mrs Jacqui Burke MLA

CHAPTER ONE

STRATEGIC WARNING AND FIRE INTELLIGENCE

Introduction

The Bushfire disaster of January 2003 has highlighted the lack of preparedness in the ACT Community for a major bushfire. The delay in providing appropriate and timely warnings to communities undoubtedly resulted in residents being placed at greater risk of harm – both physical and to property.

The bushfires that hit Canberra had been burning for some time at various points along the Brindabellas, and yet the people of Canberra were regularly reassured there was little chance of the fires descending directly into Canberra.

The Opposition is aware of at least one instance of a local brigade command informing a senior member of the Emergency Services Bureau (ESB) in a telephone conversation on Wednesday 15 January 2003 that the fire front would certainly hit Canberra. Of great concern to the Opposition, according to the information provided, is that the same senior member of ESB allegedly agreed with the local area command, yet subsequently made public statements contradicting what appears to be a privately held view.

At no stage, prior to 18 January 2003, was the public informed that it was highly likely a massive converging fire front would reach the suburbs of Canberra, allowing no time for residents to prepare – including preparations for 'last resort' evacuation. And yet, the Opposition would contend that all the signals were there in the months before and certainly in the ten days prior that a fire disaster impacting onto suburbia, was fairly likely.

The first indications that Canberra would be at risk were not provided until Saturday 18 January 2003. This clearly was grossly inadequate given the then known ferocity of the firestorm approaching and the prior warnings given about severe weather. The very fact a State of Emergency was not declared until about 2.45PM, moments before the first houses were burnt in the outer suburb of Duffy is clear evidence of a significant lack of coordination and intelligence gathering.

Quote: from **David Menzel**, ACT landowner – [ABC Lateline, 4 April 03] : - - In response to a question from the interviewer, describing the general feeling that local landowners and landowner fire fighters had expressed, - - [interviewer] - - *'... there was inaction on the part of the ACT services in the 10 days as the fire burnt down to the city'. 'Why??' [Menzel] " I don't know – whether they believed in good luck or something, there was just nothing done about it until midday on the 18th and I just find that incredulous"*.

Quote: from **Peter Smith**, Captain of Brindabella Bush-fire brigade - [ABC Lateline, 4 April 03]. In response to the interviewer's comment about the perceived delay in warning to residents and landowners by the authorities about the severity of the growing fire in the days prior to 18 January: - - *"I will be saying to the inquiry the initial delay is something I find difficult to understand..."*

The Crossing of the Murrumbidgee and the Declaration of the Emergency.

While the Opposition is concerned about how this emergency was managed in the period 8 to 18 January it is deeply concerned particularly about the management of this emergency from the moment the fire crossed the Murrumbidgee at midday on 18th January until the moment it impacted on Duffy, approximately 3.15PM. There are significant questions to be answered about the assessment of the situation once the fire broke the Murrumbidgee, why the gravity of the situation did not trigger a much earlier Declaration of Emergency, what advice and decision processes occurred leading to the declaration and why earlier and more substantive warnings – including advices to "pack and standby to evacuate" were not delivered, clearly and earlier, to the residents of vulnerable suburbs. The Opposition believes there was a fundamental breakdown in this critical time period.

Lack of Intelligence Sharing

Anecdotal evidence provided to the Opposition from Police and Emergency Services personnel also indicates a lack of effective coordination and a significant lack of intelligence sharing.

Police personnel were in Duffy at the time the fire hit, and were placed at significant risk by virtue of the fact they received no intelligence indicating the close proximity of the fire. It was not until they did directly witness the fire front that they were aware of the need to immediately evacuate the area.

Public Warnings

Warnings of the impending disaster came far too late or not at all according to information gathered by the Opposition. Many Canberra residents did not know from where to find information. If they were not regular listeners of either AM666 or AM1206, they would not have received important information, as no other radio or TV station was broadcasting emergency information.

The lack of information resulted in a feeling of helplessness and panic amongst many residents. A number of Chapman residents have informed the Opposition they never saw any emergency personnel in and around the most vulnerable streets prior to the fire front impacting on their suburb and their homes.

Throughout the day of Saturday 18 January 2003, the updates provided on ABC Radio continued to suggest residents 'stay with their houses'. The Opposition accepts this is often an appropriate course of action; however, it is only appropriate until you are placed in a position of high risk – at which stage immediate evacuation is necessary.

It appears the point at which evacuation should have been advised was either ignored, or information was withheld that would make obvious the need to evacuate.

The ABC provided an outstanding service, however, the public should not have to rely on the reports of news media, and journalists out in the field in order to keep them informed as to what risks they are currently facing.

There have been many reports of a lack of information provided to residents by Emergency Services [ESB]

ESB routine reporting through the two radio stations was to improve markedly after 18th January 2003, during the remainder of the crisis period.

Assessment and Warnings in the period 8th – 18th January 2003

Slow Response to Initial Outbreaks. There are numerous reports received by the Opposition indicating an apparent lack of ability – or inertia – to respond to and quickly combat the lightning strike fire outbreaks on or about the 8th January 2003. A strong impression exists of frustrated field personnel, in a variety of agencies and supporting services, not able to get support, approval and resources for their recommended action to snuff out the lightning strike fires. Personnel who felt they could see the great danger of the combination of: [1] ignition; [2] the worst fire conditions in living memory [drought, fuel]; and [3] approaching, within days, the seasonal strong, dry westerly winds.

Quote: from **experienced fire-fighter** – interview with author: [words to effect] *"We always had trouble getting authority to stay longer on the fire ground to persevere with and try and completely knock out those outbreaks. We were willing, tired maybe, but we wanted to try and nip them in the bud. But we were often told that there was insufficient funding in the budget to allow us to continue and we would have to break off and come back again. I heard that a helicopter pilot who had spotted one of the fires on 8th January 2003 sought permission to fly back and pick up a water bucket to have a crack at the fire that afternoon – only to be told that budget restrictions and a restriction on flying hours meant that he would not get approval. By the time he was allowed to [in budgetary / resource terms] some days later, it was too late – the fire was away".*

[*** **NB:** Helicopter incident *not proven* for this report, but the incident has been frequently acknowledged when the Opposition has investigated the issue]

There are innumerable accounts of the speed at which the fire approached Canberra. It is clear once the fire reached Canberra on Saturday 18th January 2003 there was little that could have been done to stop it. The concern of the Opposition is the lack of warnings provided prior to 18th January 2003, when there is evidence it was known within some quarters that the likely outcome would be a fire front hitting Canberra.

Mr McNamara, Manager of Namadgi National Park, who lost his house in Namadgi Park. "...the house was gone – after that, the fire went through and over the top of the hill, toward Birrigai – I knew then that this was on its way to town.....", ABC TV "New Dimensions", 20 March 2003.

The lack of coordination of every available agency appears to have had some material impact on the ability to fight this fire.

Quote: from **Interviewer**, ABC TV *Lateline*, 4 April 03. Against comment from experienced landowner people regarding their view of a lack of coordination and poor command and control: "... and judging from the witnesses met on the way, it seems a combination of allegations of mismanagement, delay and red tape combined to make January 18th what it was.."

Lack of Coordination Amongst Agencies

According to Mike Corcoran of the Urban Fire Brigade Union, there was a significant lack of consultation and coordination between the various agencies of the Emergency Services Bureau.

The Opposition is also aware of the lack of information provided to police personnel tasked with the responsibility of ordering evacuations.

Evidence provided to the Opposition indicates police personnel were not informed about the progress of the fire from Emergency Services, and radio contact between the services was minimal. Members of the Police Force have informed the Opposition any decisions made about evacuations were made as a result of the intelligence gathered by Police – not that provided by the Emergency Services Bureau.

Given the basic assertion that the likely progression of the fire would result in an emergency in the suburbs of Canberra, and evidence suggesting this was known as early as Wednesday 15 January 2003, it is unacceptable that no appropriate coordination of emergency services had taken place prior to the declaration of a State of Emergency in the afternoon of 18 January 2003.

Extracts of notable Comments

Superintendent **Mark Johnsen** says "They were told one point in time that they had 10 or 15 minutes and then within one minute the fire was upon them and had gone beyond them." Chief police officer **John Murray** says "It's almost impossible to prepare for an event of this size."

20/01/03, p.8, Canberra Times: Witnesses. Chapman resident **Steven Spencer** says, "It's like a war zone," while **Robert Davidson** explains "It was the speed I couldn't get over. I thought we had an hour before the fire came..."

"I took it on myself to advise everybody that this was going to happen and giving them details of what prevention work they could do and advising them there was no way in the world the special forces would be able to protect them because we'd be too overwhelmed. So the rural resident all done their housework and, as a result, in my area, our losses were very minimal" **Val Jefferys, Captain, Tharwa Bushfire Fire Brigade**

Extract from email received from Weston Resident – 5th February 2003

"We were at home, in Weston, on Saturday 18th, principally because I had decided quite early in the morning that the fire danger was sufficient that any other course was inappropriate. By approximately 1:30pm, based on observations from our back verandah of intense areas of smoke from the north west of Mount Stromlo (which is clearly visible from our house), we had determined that immediate preparations for fire were appropriate."

"I was not alone in coming to the conclusion that such actions were necessary well prior to any formal warnings being issued, as most of our neighbours instituted similar practices at around the same time."

"A significant question that has not been answered is if we as individuals could determine a sense of danger based on our own observations, why was it that it took such a long time after this for any official warnings to be issued?"

"At no stage were warnings broadcast prior to about 5:30pm, of any danger to residents of the suburb of Weston."

"By then, the fire had destroyed four or five houses on McCubbin Street (backing onto Streaton Drive) and a number of buildings at the CIT complex on Heysen Street."

Weather Warnings

There is clear evidence that the Bureau of Meteorology had been warning the ACT government of severe conditions for three days before the disaster highlighting the potential risks.

Indications are the warnings were not treated with the gravity they should have been. The management of ESB does not appear to have factored those extreme weather warnings into their 'risk analysis' advices to the community.

The weather warnings provided by the Bureau of Meteorology in the three days prior to 18 January 2003 were alarming enough to cause the authorities to specifically warn 'front-line' suburbs to take special precautions and prepare for an extreme situation.

Recommendation 1.1 - - Timely and Progressive 'Situation Reports'

That a program of regular updated *situation reports* feeding simultaneously through the emergency agencies command radio networks and public radio be implemented to better equip the emergency agencies and the residents to make timely and calmer decisions about evacuations or staying to fight.

Recommendation 1.2. - - Public Awareness Programs

That public information is formally distributed to residents on bush-fire emergency for long term planning and preparation, that this is placed in the 'white pages' telephone book and that the information is regularly updated. The information should be related to both general emergency procedures and those specific to relevant suburbs.

Recommendation 1.3 - - Interaction between the services

That all authorised emergency agencies be equipped and organised to access a radio operations net to ensure a free flow of quick information about the fire situation, rather than relying on information filtered through a central point, via independent agency radio nets.

Recommendation 1.4 - - Adherence to weather warnings

That in the event severe weather warnings are provided, ESB to take immediate action to disseminate the information to appropriate agencies and the public.

Recommendation 1.5 - - Early advice

That when ESB is concerned about the potential for an emergency, it keeps the public informed at every step – not simply when the emergency begins.

Recommendation 1.6. - - Critical and Strategic Level Decisions with Respect to Evacuations

That the system of critical decision making about when to “warn out” communities for possible evacuation, delegation of authorities to order evacuations, timeliness of decisions to order evacuations and the operational link of such decision making between ESB, fire units, the police and the senior emergency authority, be reviewed and be clarified.

Recommendation 1.7. - - Powers of Authorities and Citizens Rights with Respect to Decisions About Evacuation

That the community be informed with great clarity on their rights and responsibilities in times of crisis with respect to decisions to remain with property or to follow evacuation orders. That the community be informed, with great clarity, about the powers and the responsibilities of the authorities when they are required to make decisions about evacuations and other decisions affecting the safety and the security of the ACT and its communities.

CHAPTER TWO

LONG TERM STRATEGIC PLANNING

Background

It is considered by some experienced fire fighters, emergency services personnel, land owners and others that the January bushfire disaster has been for a number of years “an accident waiting to happen”. The apparent disregard of the McBeth Report, handed down in 1994, which amongst many recommendations, called for an overhaul in the fuel reduction strategies for national, territorial parks and rural areas, is considered by many to have been irresponsible with bureaucratic, environmental lobby and budgetary concerns over-riding common-sense and visionary risk management.

The emerging drought, identified as one of the worst in many decades, failed to ring alarm bells with respect it's contribution to highly dangerous circumstances. The 2001/2002 fires [ACT and interstate] should have rung alarm bells with respect the fragility of the ACT and surrounding national and state parks. The situation was, in reality, tinderbox dry.

The speed and dynamics of the 2001 fires through the pine forests should have been a warning with respect to Stromlo Forests, its proximity to urban areas, and the speed at which such a fire can travel.

Inability to Visualise Potential Threat over the Years

While it is generally accepted that ESB has worked well through the years in its preventative strategies to the best it probably could within political constraints, it is also apparent ESB did not hold sufficient authority to determine fuel reduction strategies, including winter 'cold' burns, in the years leading up to 2003.

Quote from Peter Smith, Captain of Brindabella Bush-fire brigade, ABC TV 'Lateline', 4 April 03: - - discussing the ferocity of the fire-storm and the fact that it was unstoppable - - "*It is quite true to say that once you get a fire-storm there is nothing you can do about it - it is like a flood, a typhoon. What you got to do is you must never let it have enough fuel to let it get to that stage - you must do hazard reduction*"

It is apparent ESB has provided professional advice on the known risk factors and seemed to have done this comprehensively.

Extreme conservationist concerns though seemed to have overridden operational recommendations.

Local landowners and experienced land-owning fire fighters have told the Opposition repeatedly of bureaucratic ineptitude driven by budgetary and political concerns (particularly from the so-called 'green lobby') which has denied long term visionary analysis and planning.

Tharwa Fire Captain and former member of the ACT Bushfire Council, Val Jeffery stated in the Canberra Times and again on the ABC's 7.30 Report that he had been warning the authorities for some years a catastrophic fire would hit the ACT.

Mr Jeffery claims he has been repeatedly ignored. He has stated his warnings, spoke of extreme fuel loads in parks not being dealt with and the dangerous combination of those fuel loads and increasingly dry summers of recent years would have a disastrous effect.

Quote: from **Mr Jefferys**, who was to say on 19 January 2003, "*I believe this fire and this disaster was conceived 15 years ago and birthed yesterday*" [ABC 7.30 Report]

Quote: from **Stephen Pyne**, Professor of Environmental History, Arizona State University, with an article in *The Australian*, 20 January 2003: - - "*...But there is a sad symbolism in the tragedy of the burning bush capital, for Canberra was not merely sited in the political middle ground between Sydney and Melbourne but in an environmental middle ground between two Australia's: that of the bush and that of the metropolis. When slammed together, the matter and anti-matter of Australia ecology are likely to explode. They are doing so more and more frequently and with great ferocity.*"

Great fires happen when wind, drought, bush and spark converge"

The McBeth Report - Handed down But Not Heeded

A Report completed eight years ago by fire specialist Howard McBeth [.....1994] for the ACT Government reiterated the importance of tackling dramatically increasing fuel loads - loads that had developed through years of neglect. This had left the city vulnerable.

Additionally, The McBeth Report emphasised the need to greatly improve road access for emergency vehicles to National Parks and reserves. The report emphasised it was only a matter of time before a catastrophe occurred. Advice from that report apparently has not been effectively considered by either the government of the day or by any successive governments.

Quote: from **Mike Seccombe**; *Sydney Morning Herald*, , 21 January 2003. - - "McBeth had warned that it was only a matter of time until an event such as Saturday's firestorm happened"

Quote: from Howard Mcbeth, January 2003. "...Indeed, from memory, the entire ACT was pretty well burnt out in 1936, and the majority of it burned again in 1952".

Forest and Rural Land Fuel Threat

Forest and rural land fuel loads are a major issue, and lie at the heart of strategic planning.

The Opposition has a great deal of concerns in this area, and has dealt with them comprehensively at Chapter Three.

Long Term Major Disaster Planning – The Vulnerable 'Western Flank'.

It appears planning in the ACT for a major disaster covering the ferocity and breadth of the fire-front that actually did emerge has been insufficient.

It is the strongly held view of experienced observers that authorities vastly under-estimated a broad front fire capable of easily over-stretching ACT fire and police units. The ACT does not have an emergency services capability to cope with simultaneous breaches of the urban fringe over a front spanning fifteen or more kilometres. Nor, for that matter, with the situation which developed in the forested and rural areas to the west and south-west, where numerous, simultaneous outbreaks had to be combated.

A simple examination of a map of the ACT shows a "long finger" of urban sprawl with a major western forested and grassland flank, vulnerable to high speed north-west, west and south-west winds. There are serious questions as to whether the geographical disposition of the ACT and its close proximity to extensive forest, park and rural areas 'up-wind' of the ACT was underestimated, in long term strategic planning.

Risk Analysis

It is apparent the dynamic and disastrous scope of this fire was grossly underestimated in long term planning. Reports indicate fire units deployed forward in the forests were unable to return to the urban fringe to fight the emerging threats. Additionally, reports indicate fire units in the days immediately prior to 18 January had been over-stretched in the various forest outbreaks and many of the units were weary by 18 January 2003. This begs the question as to whether the 'risk analysis' and subsequent planning had identified the scope of the tasks for a 'worst-case' scenario and deployment, 'warning out' and 'calling out' arrangements

It is clear than any estimations of what assets were required by Emergency Services in order to confront potential threats, and minimise disastrous outcomes, have been significantly underestimated.

Long Term Planning for External Assistance

The rural fire brigade units fought magnificently on the 18th January 2003 and indeed, by all accounts, fought beyond the call of duty in the 10 days leading up to the disaster. It is also clear though they worked resolutely to the point of total exhaustion and very nearly lost people. If the apparent shortfall of assets, human and equipment, in the ACT had been accurately identified in advance, the level of external assistance required could have been determined in any emergency management plan, thereby bringing both relief and increasing the opportunities to stop the fire earlier, or to slow it.

External assets to supplement the ACT fire fighting capability were clearly not identified in advance. The time at which federal assets – for example the Australian Defence Force - were called upon was too late. Additionally, NSW assets rushed to the ACT had no prior tasking and many of them were unaware as to where they were to be deployed, resulting in a significant loss of time.

Reports from NSW Fire Units give an impression of hurried deployments with little coordination and briefing, illustrating the overwhelming nature of their deployment. This would indicate that no long term planning involving the 'pre-planned' allocation of the external assets likely to be available was ever undertaken.

Quote: from: **Mike Seccombe** article, Sydney Morning Herald, 21 January 2003: Re-telling the story of **Peter Holding**, a NSW volunteer fire-fighter. Holding, according to Seccombe, had, "...led a convoy of five tankers full of water to Canberra on Saturday afternoon, only to be dismissed by the emergency management centre. It was not until 1 am on Sunday that they were put into action".

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 2.1 - - Authority to Implement Protection Policies

That the relevant authorities are given adequate powers – and powers of primacy - to implement protection policies, such as winter burns, controlled burns in national parks, forests, rural areas and suburban reserve areas, to reduce the fuel loads in order to reduce the risk of bushfires.

Recommendation 2.2 - - McBeth Report

That the ACT community be given an explanation as to why the Mcbeth report has not been:

- [a] Fully released;
- [b] Fully implemented.

And further, that the recommendations of the Mcbeth Report be comprehensively reviewed with a view to immediate implementation of those measures that would contribute to the lessening of risk of bushfire.

Recommendation 2.3 - - Town Planning

That the proximity of existing and future housing to such threats as bushfire prone areas, particularly along the ACT's vulnerable 'western flank' needs to be reviewed.

Recommendation 2.4. – Radical Rethink for Planning along the Western Fringe.

That as the ACT looks to refurbishing the western fringe / Murrumbidgee Corridor a radical rethink of planning be undertaken aimed at reducing the vulnerability of the western, south-western and north-western fire-weather approaches. That consideration be given to a radical re-think about the Stromlo Forest and other forests which could be converted to mosaics of mixed rural acreage / timber plantation / village developments / new suburbs, where fire is less likely to emerge and generate to catastrophic proportions.

Recommendation 2.5 - - Risk Analysis

That the risk analysis, risk management and subsequent planning for fire disaster prevention for the ACT be comprehensively reviewed.

Recommendation 2.6 - - External Assets

That the ESB develop a more effective deployment plan for external fire fighting assets which may be called upon in times of crisis.

CHAPTER THREE

FOREST AND RURAL AREA PREVENTITIVE STRATEGIES – FUEL REDUCTION / ACCESSIBILITY

Background.

Rural landowners in the ACT and the surrounding districts within NSW have been outraged for years at an apparent lack of fuel hazard reduction and bushfire prevention measures generally. The Opposition has received numerous submissions outlining concerns and frequently in discussions this topic has been a significant issue, not only by the afore-mentioned landowners, but too, by experienced fire fighters and emergency services personnel. The outrage has peaked since 18 January 2003 and is directed at both the ACT and NSW authorities.

Muddleheaded Priorities

Quite experienced comment – comment supported by the Opposition – points to a hijacking of bushfire management strategies by green lobby groups influencing governments. The laudable but over-riding concern for the protection of growth in forests and parks is seen to have totally ignored the fire risk to surrounding rural property and close proximity urban areas. The environmental protection priorities of the past two decades has led to large scale neglect in the bushfire preventative maintenance of parks, forests and adjacent rural areas.

Quote: ABC TV *Lateline*, 4 April 03: The ACT and NSW high country fires - Survey of NSW and ACT "Bush Opinion". - - "... Since the fires the NPWS has strenuously defended its hazard reduction program. But in the broad opinion of landowners and volunteer fire fighters from the land - 'The service [NPWS and ACT equivalent] must burn off more, much more and if they had the fire-storm would not have occurred'...."

NSW Neglect – Impact on the ACT

Quote: ABC 7.30 Report – 'Poor Record of Compliance' – Interview with NPWS Director, Mr Gilligan .

Assertion by TV interviewer: [words to effect] *Most of NSW national parks and reserves had no individual fire management plans. Official records show that just 10 of the state's 237 national parks and reserves have been completed, despite being promised by National Parks and Wildlife Service almost six years ago.* Mr Gilligan admits in the interview that the interviewer's assertion is correct.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service [NPWS] departmental neglect of its forest's and park's, in terms of bushfire prevention, has in the opinion of the Opposition, jeopardised the ACT and did contribute to the emergence of the McIntyre's Hut fire front. The director of NPWS Mr Gilligan as illustrated above confirms his agency had only achieved 10% of its 237 parks winter 'cold burn' and other obligatory preventative measures, as laid down in the department's parks bushfire management 'Action Plans'. This is an extraordinary admission by a senior bureaucrat, a bureaucrat seen to be closely associated with - and of - the environmental lobby. This is scandalous given that in the opinion

of many, those plans were inadequate in any event – that is, not even inadequate plans have been complied with.

The Opposition questions whether there was any will by this department – indeed the NSW government – to carry out the fundamental bush-fire preventative maintenance required in a national park system. This demonstrates a clear case of neglect, which had a direct impact on the ACT bushfire disaster. It is felt that this example of NSW environmental lobby interference in sensible and visionary bushfire management leading to departmental neglect has been emulated in the ACT.

Expert Bush Opinion Ignored.

The Opposition questions why expert bush opinion in NSW and the ACT has been ignored and in some cases, simply denigrated. There have been strong and regular comments from Peter Webb (former NSW MP for Monaro), Peter Cochrane (former NSW MP for Monaro also, Mayor of Cooma and experienced bushman and landowner), Val Jeffery and other locals who have served on both ACT and regional bushfire councils, regarding their concerns that land and forest management agencies have been captive to minority green lobby groups. In their view, lobby groups with "ideals" but no realistic practical experience. Experienced bush people believe NSW and ACT conservation departments have been, in a policy sense, corrupted.

The Opposition points out that these people represent the expertise and long experience of the land – they are of the land and love their region – people who have lived with 'bush-fire prone' Australia and have generations of experience behind them. Their innate sense of love of the land and their ingrained sense of 'duty of care' for both bush and community, is to be compared with that of environmental lobbyists and bureaucrats, who seem often to be blinded by political and bureaucratic interests.

Notable quotes from noted local and regional rural and town people and others; with respect the NSW high country and the Brindabellas:

Cooma farmer **James Litchfield** in a letter to *The Land*: - - *"These terrible events provide all the evidence necessary to prove the claim that today's conservation ideology is deeply flawed.....after the aboriginal way of life was destroyed and the [grazing] animal population much reduced, descendants of the early settlers learnt by bitter experience.....that regular controlled burning was of paramount importance to their very survival and for the sustainability of the landscape"*

Daniel Lewis in the *Sydney Morning Herald* article: *"Angry Embers Still Burn"* [18-20 April 03], states, - - *"Farmers argue that if the high country was still grazed and burned as it was by their forefathers and by aborigines, the recent fires would have been quickly brought under control before causing extensive damage"*.

Historian **Tim Flannery** in his book, *The Future Eaters* [1994] - -and who lost his house to bush fire: - - *'and is adamant that the death of the aboriginal fire regime has led to the horrific fire storms of south-east Australia', [quoted in Sydney Morning Herald, 18-20 April 03]; Flannery says, "...it is to be hoped that, after 200 years of ignorance, modern European fire management techniques are coming to resemble Aboriginal fire stick farming"*.

Noeline Franklin, landowner in the Brindabellas, ABC TV *Lateline*, 4 April 03. [Interviewer] - - *"Noeline Franklin's family has lived in the Brindabellas for generations and hazard reduction burning off was commonplace."* - - [Franklin] *".. My father lived through the '39 fires and they were as a result of the same climatic conditions as these but I believe the mountains got through in a lot better form than this".* - - [Interviewer] *"What was the difference then to now?"* - - [Franklin] *".. basically we had it preparedgrazing, small area controlled fires.."*

Paramount Quote – The Energy Developed in the Brindabellas which Impacted on Canberra:

Captain of the NSW Brindabella bushfire brigade, **Peter Smith** – discussing the lightning strike of 8 January starting the fire that burnt down through the Brindabellas and struck the suburbs 10 days later – Lewis's SMH article: - - -

" [he] pointed out the hectares of farmland between the Brindabella ranges and Canberra left almost bare by the drought and asked: how did a bushfire cross such a vast distance where there was seemingly so little for it to burn?"

His view – shared by many others – is that the lack of hazard reduction in the Brindabella National Park allowed such vast amounts of fuel to accumulate that the fire became a creature with so much energy it could fuel itself using volatile gases driven from the vegetation of the forests. "It was like napalm; it was like putting a blowtorch to something", Smith said.

ACT Experience

Experienced people in the Emergency Services Bureau and in bushfire brigade units have indicated that undertaking bushfire prevention planning has often been a prickly and frustrating business. One discussed with those in ACT Parks and various ACT environmental lobby groups, seen to be 'sticking their oar in' when it should not be their position to do so. It is felt that never ending debates involving a surfeit of 'torch bearing' lobbyists, with little bushfire fighting experience, burdens and dangerously jeopardises bushfire management planning.

Governments too have experienced the intransigent behaviour of the green lobby:

Quote: *"What there was in the ACT is a significant environmental lobby that I'd have to say, if I'd gone and cut a 30 metre wide break around Canberra, well, I would have been lynched, it's that simple."*
-former ACT Chief Minister, Kate Carnell, ABC 7:30 Report, 27 January 2003.

It is the opinion of the Opposition that experienced people and professionals charged with bushfire management responsibilities believe they have insufficient power and authority - nor do they feel confident – in being the final arbiters in determining bushfire management plans across the ACT. Political and lobbying interference has eroded their confidence in making the right – and sometimes tough – decisions, which have to be made in the best and majority interests of the ACT.

Park and Bushland Maintenance - Management Practices

It would seem inherently sensible to build onto existing, effective park maintenance management practices by upgrading or introducing the following:

- A strengthening of the authority of the ESB to allow it – while taking into account all environmental and community concerns - to arbitrarily determine emergency management plans for all park, forest, bushland, rural areas and urban / bush fringe areas, including the directing and supervision of all necessary maintenance measures;
- Dramatically expanded fuel reduction programs with more vigorous programs of 'cold burns';
- Better fire breaks;
- Greatly improved access to park areas with existing fire trails cleaned up, bridges re-opened and upgraded to take heavier fire tenders;
- New fire trails added to enable more flexibility in both fire fighting and evacuation procedures;

- Sensible live-stock grazing in park, forest, bushland reserves and other bush areas determined as vulnerable to over-growth, as a measure of fuel reduction.

ACT ESB Access to Key NSW Parks and Forests.

It is clear that the ACT has no say over how bushfire management practices are carried out in those NSW parks located on the fringes of the ACT. The NSW forests and parks of particular interest to the Opposition are those located to the west, north-west and south-west of the ACT, that is, those straddling the fire-weather approaches to the ACT. In discussions with the Opposition ESB and rural fire fighters have indicated concerns about the management of those areas.

The Opposition questions whether the ESB has sought to more formally monitor the bushfire preventative measures in those close and most vulnerable NSW parks and forests. It is argued they need to do this with a view to better understanding and preparing for weaknesses in the NSW emergency management plan that are likely to have direct bearings on the ACT. It is argued the ACT government has the right to appeal to the NSW government – in advance of trouble – when it is clear the NSW government is not exercising its 'duty of care', regarding the management of preventative measures in parks and forests in close proximity to the ACT.

The opposition believes it is necessary for the act government to develop a memorandum of understanding with the NSW government, which allows the act to monitor preparations in adjacent NSW parks

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Recommendation 3.1. A Strengthening of the Authority of the ESB

That a strengthening of the authority of the ESB be undertaken to allow it to determine emergency management plans for all park, forest, bushland, rural areas and urban / bush fringe areas, including the directing and supervision of all necessary maintenance measures;

Recommendation 3.2 Fuel Reduction

That dramatically expanded fuel reduction programs with more vigorous programs of 'cold burns' be implemented;

Recommendation 3.3 Fire breaks

That a more comprehensive system of effective firebreaks be implemented and maintained;

Recommendation 3.4. Access to Parks

That greatly improved access to park areas for emergency vehicles be implemented with existing fire trails cleaned up, bridges re-opened and upgraded to take heavier fire tenders;

Recommendation 3.5. New Fire Trails

That new fire trails be added as appropriate;

Recommendation 3.6. Grazing

That a sensible program of live-stock grazing in park, forest, bushland reserves and other bush areas determined as vulnerable to over-growth, be implemented, for the purpose of enhancing fuel reduction.

CHAPTER FOUR

TRAINING AND ORGANISATION OF ESB AND BUSHFIRE UNITS.

Background.

The volunteer ACT rural bushfire brigade organisation overwhelmingly depends on goodwill, faith and a voluntary service ethic to remain the credible and viable organisation that it is. It is the core fire-fighting organisation in the ACT and is the organisation at the heart of the ESB's response to any fire threat.

The bravery and determination of the fire fighters and their unit capabilities has been discussed earlier in this submission. Their heroism cannot be overstated and hundreds of eyewitness accounts are testimony to this. Out of this experience it is also clear that a number of rural brigade units are well trained and well organised, but this picture does not appear to be consistent across the ACT fire service. It is the view of the Opposition that the rural fire brigades are expected to deliver the impossible and, across the board, with insufficient training and organisational capability. In other words we think that we the ACT community do not fully appreciate the complexities and resource needs of a professional and ready rural fire service.

Comments from experienced fire fighters and other emergency personnel express concerns about the compatibility of operational procedures, equipments and systems amongst ACT emergency agencies and between ACT and other state emergency agencies, as well as emergency communication capabilities within the emergency network and across the ACT generally.

Quote: from Val Jefferies, Captain of Tharwa Bush-fire Brigades, ABC TV *Lateline*, 4 April 03 "...what we had here on the afternoon of the 17th April and on the 18th – I just divorced myself from the organisation – comms broke down – fortunately we foresaw this 15 years ago – we raised then \$30,000 and put our own radio system in, that is all that saved us that day – I had no contact with North Curtin – we done our own thing.."

Personnel

It is felt that rural fire units need to better assess people for suitability, after all, the job of volunteer fire fighter and the demands of team are extraneous. The Opposition feels that selection procedures need to be upgraded. Performance appraisal reporting and other integral human resource and training systems need to be formalised across the service. For example, 'key performance indicators' to both measure individual and organisational competencies needs to be introduced. It is felt that ESB needs to lay down formal benchmarks by which fire units are held accountable. The dilemma of the pay vs no pay / no allowances debate clearly is divisive and affects morale. The retention of effective and good citizen bushfire fighters, who clearly make up the vast majority of ACT personnel, is dependent on an effective and transparent personnel system.

Training

It is recognised that a training system is in place for induction and basic skills training. It is felt that the ACT needs to look to the NSW and Victorian training systems which are more specialised to rural fire fighting capability thanks to their many years of fire fighting experience and breadth of talent that comes with a larger organisation. The introduction of a competency based training package conforming against a national standard for all field and technical training and for ESB HQ staff is essential. Such a system must ensure competency compatibility with the NSW service.

The question of accreditation of trained fire fighters also needs reviewing with a more effective system of 'refresher training' and analysis of currency needed. A number of fire fighters presenting on 18 January 2003 voluntarily after short absences from fire unit activities found themselves unable to be placed with units when they felt their credentials were sufficient and an urgent need for their services existed.

Quote: from experienced **fire-fighter** with professional organisational, training and management background – interview with author. [Words to effect] *"The training is a bit of a joke although in some brigades like Jerrabomberra it is quite effective and they all take it seriously there. Tharwa and Guises are OK, but the rest of them reflect a pattern of great inconsistency."*

The suitability of some recruits leaves much to be desired – a few is too many and too many of them fit into that category. Which is a shame because most of the blokes are competent and really dedicated. But it only takes a few dickheads to turn up and really stuff up a good brigade.

New recruits really need to understand what they are getting into and what their responsibilities will be. It is no game but some people treat it that way"

The government will have little choice but to review its training budget in order to ensure that a standardised training system exists, which not only enhances capability across the service but also ensures operational capability. More importantly though, retention of the Act's valuable and very capable fire fighters depends clearly on this being done. Training is essential to the maintenance of high morale and inspiring effective teamwork – the teamwork that saves lives.

Quote: from **Mr McNamara**, Manager of Namadgi National Park, ABC TV, *New Dimensions*, 18 March 03. *"...we were fighting these fires since the 8th January – 10 days -- a couple of times in those 10 days I was in fear – we were in fear – of not only my welfare but the crew I was with - it was a miracle that none of the fire-fighters were killed..."*

Equipment, Systems and Operational Procedures

Compatibility of equipment – it is essential, in the view of experienced brigade people that equipment be interchangeable and compatible with equipment used by other brigades. Radio components need to be capable of being interchanged between different brigades and vehicle units, indeed between different emergency agencies - as do spare parts and batteries. More work is needed to supplement what has already been undertaken by the ESB.

Compatibility of frequencies and frequency availability is too, essential. Reports from some emergency agency personnel indicate that not all the agencies were briefed with the details or given the operational and emergency frequencies for communications equipment. There is a question that police, ambulance, emergency ActewAGL and urban services personnel need to be able to switch to the fire units command operating net, when it is required in emergency situations. This will allow them to be fully briefed on the situation, and allow them to communicate in life and death situations but otherwise not interfere with the communications net.

Compatibility of communications and operating procedures – It is the Opposition's view that there is a need to ensure timely 'situation reports' are passed amongst all relevant agencies [police, ambulance, AGL, emergency urban services teams, etc] operating on the fire ground and in areas potentially in danger. As noted in Chapter 1 there was clearly little known by the police stationed in the Duffy area of what the actual fire situation was approaching Duffy. Whilst, as noted above, the police and other agency personnel cannot 'join the radio net' – this would be an interference at a dangerous time - they need to be able to closely monitor developments so as to avoid personnel danger and be able to better assess their own plans.

Communications with Aircraft – it is doubted that ACT fire units and other emergency agencies carry sufficient equipment and a knowledge of frequencies – nor a system of standardised procedures – that allows them to communicate effectively with aircraft. All units should be able to communicate with confidence to surveillance, fire-bombing, medevac, troop transporters and resupply rotary wing and fixed wing aircraft. The system used needs to be consistent for all so that pilots may operate without any added confusion.

Intranet Network Consideration ought to be given to connecting any existing ESB HQ intranet network by wireless to field HQ units. This would add greater depth to communications. The transmission of satellite 'fire progress maps' would be of significant assistance to field commanders trying to keep track of field units and monitor the progress of the fire during times of poor visibility.

Situation Reports are the lifeblood of emergencies – the hour-by-hour and then minute-by-minute updates of the actual 'front-line' situation – the timely knowledge of which may save the lives of fighters and their civilian charges. It appears that the current system of communications is as follows: Communications originated by front line fire unit. Passed by fire unit up their chain of command to ESB who in turn filter 'situation reports' and then pass – sanitised or simply too slowly – these reports across to the police and other chains of command. This for passing down their chain to police and other agency units located in the vicinity of fire units who originated the initial 'situation report'. It is reported this was the case on the 18th January 2003 and if so this was ludicrous – and dangerous.

Quote: from **Policeman in charge** at a particular fire ground site. *".. we turned up and set up the road blocks at about 2.30PM and were told the fire coming up from the Murrumbidgee would not get to the edge of the suburb before 6PM – this was the info from Curtin. Had no idea where the fire was, could not see anything in the smoke – there was confusion about whether people should stay with their homes or be evacuated. Had no idea what was going on. Firemen just rushed passed us back and forth – could get no sense of how the fire front was progressing and whether it was going to peter out or just pass us. 3 hours before the appointed time of arrival the fire came through the smoke screen like an express train and I just screamed to my people to get out – we reversed our cars at 80km backwards, tyres on fire – and just over-rode the ESB directive about staying with houses – I ordered an immediate evacuation of the suburb, but it was chaos."*

Standard Operational Procedures Standard Operational Procedures for all core operational functions and support administrative functions need to be introduced. These need to be designed against national benchmarks and again should be compatible with the NSW service. They should be designed against national 'best practice' benchmarks, which should be clearly demonstrable.

Organisational Delegation.

The Tharwa experience where the local brigade Captain determined he was out of radio contact with the Curtin HQ, then took matters into his own hands to 'fight the battle' on his patch and won that battle, is a salutary lesson for the ESB, regarding the delegation of operational authority. The further the delegation can be passed down 'the chain of command', the better it must be.

The brigade captain, given his operational area of responsibility, should be empowered to fight his battle as he sees fit, within his operational boundaries, but also within essential strategic parameters, as laid down by ESB HQ – for example: instructions may be issued that a brigade stays as long as possible to fight until a certain line on one of their flanks is breached – then they must be required to withdraw along a pre-ordained route to a pre-ordained position. HQ would need to be the arbiter though and retain the authority on all decisions relevant to emergency back burning in all brigade areas of operation and all other areas.

The job of HQ is then to decide on all back burning and related high risk operations, decide strategic and operational priorities regarding where all units are to deploy to and where to redeploy to and

tasking; monitor the delegated fire battles; provide support [for example, aircraft] where possible to the deployed brigades; and to resupply brigades. Bold delegation would greatly enhance the HQ's ability to 'step back' and review strategic developments more calmly and think more broadly about other matters.

For example, collecting fire intelligence from the brigades and the community; passing information and situation updates to the community; determining subsequent action, for example, the timely delivery of warning to residents for evacuation; and then importantly, in consultation with the Emergency Control Officer, decide and coordinate evacuations of the civilian population. The ESB organisation, incorporating the networks of rural and urban fire units and other associated emergency supporting agencies, may need to review its command and control structure and operational procedures from top to bottom to see whether delegated operational control, including devolved authority, can be enhanced.

Quote: from Peter Holding, NSW volunteer fire-fighter, quoted in Mike Seccombe article, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January 2003. - - Leading a convoy of five tankers and arriving in Canberra at the height of the fire on 18th January 2003 Holding said, "...I feel the fire-fighters did what they could, the community did what they could do, but there was no command structure".

"There command structure was overwhelmed".

"Why was it every suburb didn't have a divisional commander? Why, when you went there, [sic] couldn't find anybody? Why was there no information coming back? Why didn't they do anything? These are not issues for the fire-fighter hanging on the end of a hose to figure out. These are command issues"

Quote: from Val Jefferies, Letter to Editor, *The Canberra Times*, 30 December 2001. **Note that this view about the organisation of ESB was expressed before the January 2003 disaster:**

"The bushfire organisation in the ACT is an utter mess"

Organisational Bureaucracy

The Opposition has received significant comment from fire fighters and ex-members of the ACT Bushfire Council who feel the ESB has become too bureaucratic, too process driven, too beholden to budgets and out of touch with fire units and community expectation.

Quote: from experienced fire-fighter, interview with author: [words to effect] *"The ESB has become too elitist and too tied to the government and too concerned about the government's view and the politics of various community lobbies. Indeed, it was pretty clear that the Chief Minister was too close to the ESB during the fire crisis, he was too emotional, too involved. So where was the professional gap? Were these guys giving the government blunt, honest and timely advice?"*

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Recommendation 4.1 - - Training

That national training standards for fire fighting units, ESB HQ and support elements and other emergency agencies engaging in bushfire operations and emergency planning for bushfire prevention, be adopted throughout the ESB and those emergency services likely to be engaged, for all competencies **Slow Response to Initial Outbreaks.**
relevant to bush fire fighting and preventative planning.

Recommendation 4.2 - - Personnel - Suitability

That national standard policy and procedures for checking the suitability of new recruits to rural fire units be adopted and that the policy and procedures include regular review and refresher training components, including health and fitness standards and compatibility.

Recommendation 4.4 Personnel - Accreditation

Following on from the previous recommendation, that the government review the ACT rural fire service accreditation system:

[a] Against national standard 'best practices';

[b] To ensure 're-joining' procedures for lapsed members at time of crisis are appropriate and practical.

Recommendation 4.5 - - Standardisation of Communications Equipment and Frequencies.

That all radio and other communication equipments be standardised across the brigades, urban and rural and across all emergency agency units, to enable interoperability and resource compatibility. That this system be compatible with NSW fire units.

Recommendation 4.6.- - Communications - Operational Interoperability

That communication procedures, the distribution of frequencies, call-signs, etc and the establishment of communication nets be established in such a way that enables all emergency services units and supporting agencies, when authorised, to access operational and command nets, in times of crisis.

Recommendation 4.7. - - Back-up.

That the ESB reviews its organisational structure, command and control capability and equipments to ensure that back-up capability is always ready to allow 'seamless changes' – including alternative HQ and communication bases and back-up generators and other equipments.

Recommendation 4.8 - - Operating Procedures – Situation Reports

That the operating procedures for communications and reporting information – particularly 'Situation Reports', Incident Reports and Medical Evacuation Requests, be standardised for interoperability across all fire units, ACT and NSW, urban and rural and across all emergency agencies

Recommendations 4.9 - - Delegation of Operational Control and Devolution of Authority.

That the ESB organisation, incorporating the networks of rural and urban fire units and other associated emergency supporting agencies, review its devolution of command and control and authority to ensure effectiveness.

CHAPTER FIVE

EMERGENCY SERVICES BUREAU – BUSHFIRE EMERGENCY INFORMATION AND BRIEFING PROGRAM – VULNERABLE SUBURBS

Background

It is clear a significant gap has emerged between emergency planning and preparations regarding the provision of information, education and contingency planning where it really matters – in the vulnerable urban fringe.

Indeed, the Opposition's analysis of the Christmas 2001 fires highlighted these emerging gaps.

The Opposition identified the need for comprehensive briefings for those members of the community living on the vulnerable urban fringe. The Emergency Services Bureau made clear in departmental briefings to the Opposition in November 2002 that they favoured this sort of pro-active contingency planning.

The Chapman Experience

There are many areas of Chapman, which would be identified as forming part of the vulnerable urban fringe. The damage inflicted by the January bushfires is clear evidence of this.

There exists very clear evidence the most vulnerable street communities in Chapman – in the streets that were severely impacted - did not ever receive visits from the emergency services, during the fire season. While we are not as clear about the question of residential briefings and warnings with respect to Duffy it is suspected that the Duffy experience was the same. The Shadow Emergency Services Minister spoke with a number of Chapman residents to gain this impression and indeed knows well a family who lost their house in Lincoln Close Chapman. These people are adamant they were not visited by Emergency Services Bureau personnel in the years before this disaster. Not during this, the most dangerous bushfire season for many years and certainly not on the 18th January 2003, nor during the 10 days of high and increasing danger prior to 18 January 2003.

The type of visits where professional firefighters visiting the most vulnerable streets, might have advised residents – either individually or in residential group briefings – of how to prepare for the 'worst case scenarios' of:

- Fire impacting from their bushland fringes;
- How to prepare their houses, yards, street and adjacent bushland reserve areas; and
- How to prepare and be alert to the possible need to undertake evacuations.

Nor did they receive visits to advise on and in the days immediately before 18 January 2003 to warn them of the gathering fire-storm, when it had been very clear for some days to experienced firefighters and others with emergency management experience that the fires burning down from Bendora and Macintyres were:

- developing enormous energy;
- Potentially threatened the urban fringes; and
- Very likely to be transformed into the catastrophic by a severe weather pattern forecasted three days prior.

The Chapman family referred to above, like many others in the street, did not have themselves prepared for a 'worst case scenario' evacuation, indeed their cars were trapped inside their garage and they had to flee on foot, with nothing. By all accounts they were lucky to break out of a burning house where doors and windows were blocked by uprooted, fallen and burning trees.

Some wiser, more experienced people in that street had packed and parked their cars in the street facing the way of most likely evacuation. But many did not. Some people in that street were confused by public announcements to stay in or with their houses – they had not countenanced evacuation, had not been advised / instructed on how to prepare for the 'last resort' evacuation, had not been told what the most likely evacuation routes were. Nobody had been told by experts of the possibility of uprooted and burning trees blocking vehicular evacuation. It is the Opposition's view that this picture is fairly representative of all suburban experiences, not just Chapman.

Emergency Management - Normal Practices.

It is a routine practice in the emergency management business that planners and operators do conduct *reconnaissance* in the areas they think may be subject to threat. There is little doubt the emergency services were thorough in their *reconnaissance* and *planning* in bushland, forest areas and rural areas, however the urban interphase may simply have been overlooked. *Reconnaissance, risk analysis* and then *planning* for emergency contingencies of any dimension – natural and man made - is, in the professional experience, very important and best undertaken 'on the ground'. It should be conducted in consultation with the community and organisations likely to be involved or impacted.

This concept surely applies to bushfire emergency management and must involve both thorough reconnaissance of forest / bushland / rural and urban fringes and consultation with the relevant communities. This activity and the accompanying liaison undertaken with residents is essential for preparing the best fire-fighting plans and, importantly, for safe-guarding the residents as well. These practices are also re-assuring and confidence boosting for a community alerted to the dangers and greatly enhances survivability.

The gaps in the system with respect the Chapman experience immediately highlights urgent measures that can be implemented with respect the ACT's bushfire fighting contingencies and the minimisation of the threat to the urban fringe and its residents.

Quote: from **Resident of Chapman**, interview with the author: " We never in all the years we have lived in Lincoln PI saw any emergency services people in our area, nor did they ever come to see and talk to us about any possible bush-fire threat. Nor did we see them in the days before the great disaster and nobody came to tell us to get out of the place on the day of the horror..."

Proposed Fire Prone Suburbs Program.

The Opposition would propose the development of a *Fire Prone Suburbs Program*. The concept would see Emergency Services units, directed by the Emergency Services Bureau [ESB], visiting highly vulnerable streets in vulnerable suburbs, door-knocking residents and offering community briefings. This would commence, annually, in late winter and spring and re-visits would occur during the summer.

The briefing program would involve street groupings in those most vulnerable streets as identified by the ESB. Or perhaps groupings of a number of co-located streets, gathering as communities to meet with fire unit teams and discuss contingencies. Such groupings could be based on Neighbourhood Watch Groups, or other community groupings, where they existed.

Residents would need to agree to participate in the briefings. If they did not agree then at least the authorities would be comforted by the fact that they had, at least, offered the best service possible. This is an important element of this proposal. The program would not be mandatory for residents but it would be mandatory for the ESB to carry out its duties by formally offering the program to all community groupings and residents in fire prone suburbs.

If this meant that the ESB identified residents in a particular street / community as being unwilling, then so be it. This would not mean the emergency services would abrogate their natural duties to that particular street though, either in terms of preparing preventative strategies nor in reacting to fight fires.

Components of the Fire Prone Suburbs Program

The suburban program would consist of five components.

- Firstly, an identification and categorisation of those suburbs and their most vulnerable streets considered to be fire prone. The delivery of general advice to each community of the likely bushfire threats confronting their community area, by way of leaflet, door-knocking, radio and TV. The advice to include a strong encouragement for each community to organise and agree to meet with authorities;
- Secondly, the detailed preparation of fire prone suburb '*Risk Assessments*' and consequential '*Bushfire Emergency Plans*' for each community and the delivery of these to community groups. '*Bushfire Emergency Plans*' to include descriptions of the possible directions that fire paths approaching that community might take, with respect the differing weather scenarios. An advice to the community of what the community might do with respect mitigating local bushland fuel loads, ensuring that streets and adjacent bushland reserves were open for emergency vehicle access, etc.
- Thirdly, fire units to undertake 'safety audit' inspections of individual houses in the designated fire prone streets and offer advice to homeowners on what preparations to undertake. Cleaning of roofs and yards, applying to have vulnerable trees cut back, the fitting of metal fly screens, etc.
- Fourthly – and preferably with community police in attendance – in accordance with '*Bushfire Emergency Plans*', fire units to brief community groups on 'worst case' evacuation procedures. With police advice they would identify the "routes out" plan. That is, the best vehicle and pedestrian escape routes – differing for each separate fire / weather scenario. Evacuation control measures to be planned, keeping in mind that in thick smoke and the mayhem of a fire storm calm and well rehearsed evacuation plans will save lives. Preferably, in consultation with fire units, neighbourhood groups to appoint their evacuation marshalls and guides, with their training provided by fire units.
- Fifthly, fire units to consider the provision of basic street fire kits to willing communities. Again, communities would need to voluntarily accept such kits, be prepared to store them in a secure but accessible place, it is suggested on somebody's property. This plan would need to involve training of those communities in the use of these street fire kits. The kits might include fire-hoses and stand pipes. It is stressed the provision of street fire kits would not abrogate the responsibility of fire units to attend fires in those streets. The provision of these kits would essentially be a supplementary and community empowering measure.

Dedication of Fire Units

An association of fire units, dedicated to suburban areas, would be advantageous. This would develop an operational partnership and would lead to smoother operations in the mayhem of fire fighting. 'Operational dedication' however cannot be guaranteed because you cannot lock fire units easily into operational zones – this would mean the alleviation of operational flexibility. However, in the winter and spring months approaching the bushfire season a dedicated support for fuel reduction burn offs, training and safety audit purposes, would be valuable.

The General Benefits to Community of Re-activating Neighbourhood Watch Committees [NWC's]

Vulnerable suburb committees based on NWC would initiate great benefits to their suburbs. The establishment of committees and their delegated task groups would bring communities closer together. This would also enhance local security, re-introduce police to suburban beats, stream line local community interest development planning and generally help in a range of community interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 5.1. - - Education and Information.

That an education and information program for the ACT community be implemented to prepare the community for bushfires.

Recommendation 5.2. - - '*Bushfire Prone Suburbs Program*'

That the '*Bushfire Prone Suburbs Program*', proposed in this report and detailed above, be adopted as part of the ACT emergency management plan and that it be introduced before next spring

Recommendation 5.3. - - Education - - Community Evacuations.

Singling out one aspect of the proposed '*Bushfire Prone Suburbs Program*', that the ACT community be universally educated in all aspects of individual and community evacuation during bush-fire, including prior individual and community contingency planning.

CHAPTER SIX

BUSHFIRE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Background

There is also emerging a clear gap in emergency planning and preparations regarding the provision of information, education and contingency planning where it really matters – in our schools.

Strong anecdotal evidence from the school children of families whose houses were destroyed in Chapman indicates that in all of their different schools they have never experienced any form of bushfire education. They have indicated that such education would have been most beneficial and would have better equipped them to help their parents on the 18th January 2003.

There is a need to ensure that mandatory bushfire education for all schools, both government and non-government, has been established. The 2001 fires proved the need for this program and the Opposition has been formally calling for the implementation of this program for some twelve months.

The Proposed Program

The program would be designed primarily to teach preventative skills to children, to better safe-guard our bushland and suburban fringes. It was also to be designed to teach emergency and safety procedures for children caught in a bushfire situation. The program would be synchronised with the 'vulnerable suburbs' program in those schools servicing those suburbs.

The program would see all school children annually receiving, as a minimum, about one hour's formal education delivered by fire unit personnel, assisted by a cadre of trained school teachers selected from each school. The education program would be calibrated in its impact to ensure the sensitivities of younger children were protected but as children grew older the training would include firmer messages. Training would start in very early schooling. The trained school teachers would continue with follow up education during the bushfire season, reminding students of the need to remain alert and of their responsibilities to their community.

Youth Arson

There is a certain timidity in the community regarding the need to educate our youth about the evilness of arson. It is considered that the potential devastation and death that may arise from arson illustrates that the stakes are too high for the community to ignore this ever growing phenomena. It is felt that the risk of encouraging arson is far outweighed by both the need to intervene before more devastation is visited upon the community and the distinct possibility that effective and sensitive youth arson programs, taught as part of the mainstream fire education delivery, may just appeal to and deter some youth from going down the arson path.

Consequently, it is proposed the bushfire education program should contain an element to combat youth arson. This element would be embedded within the mainstream program so that 'children at risk' were not necessarily singled out. The subject of arson needs to be breached early in school life, but subtly so. It is felt that early intervention, while controversial, is necessary so as to minimise the risk that some 'children at risk' would head to arson in later years.

Separate youth arson programs [based on existing programs] aimed to deal with convicted youth arsonists need to be further developed as a separate entity, administered by Justice authorities. This issue will not be dealt with in any detail in this submission but is the subject of current Opposition review.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 6.1. - - Mandatory Bushfire Education

That mandatory bushfire schools education programs for all schools, coordinated jointly by the Education department and the Emergency Services Bureau, are immediately introduced.

Recommendation 6.2. - - Preventative Education – Youth Arson

That a sensitive but effective education program aimed at preventing arson be embedded into the general bushfire education program, as proposed above, for early years intervention.

CALL FOR AN INDEPENDENT INQUIRY AND THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE LEGISLATURE FROM THE EXECUTIVE

What was most notable in the period immediately after and then in the post medium to term was the ACT government's reluctance to call for an independent inquiry. An inquiry to examine all of the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the circumstances of the 18 January 03. The Opposition feels that it is axiomatic for any democracy – at whatever judicial level – to immediately announce the intention to implement such an inquiry into any disaster or substantial event that has occurred. The Opposition formally called for the government announce such an inquiry on the 20th January 03, but the government rejected and was defensive about the issue – when there was no need to be defensive – when the interests of the community justified such an inquiry.

The Chief Minister's close association with the ESB and other emergency authorities was understandable – in times of crisis people are thrown together and the Opposition understands and respects this. The government had a strong duty to support and to encourage community support for ESB and the emergency units in the field. However, the Opposition feels that the government also had a professional duty to remain the correct 'arms length' from those executing the management of the emergency and this they did not do. The opposition feels that the government has lost its objectivity in

assessing and reviewing what actually happened. Hence, the emotional government calls attacking those in the community calling for the necessary independent inquiry.

SUMMARY

Effort and Bravery

The paramount observation of this submission recognises the following:

Fire units, police and other emergency services personnel worked at superhuman paces to points of exhaustion in the days leading up to and on the 18th January. The emergency units in the field and their ESB seniors demonstrated bravery and doggedness during the extremities of this period. Many fire fighters, police, other emergency personnel and residents often placed themselves in extreme danger seeking to help their colleagues and neighbours. The community, in adversity, was marvellous and the country is proud of this community.

Lack of Alertness and Responsiveness

The ACT community and its emergency services did not anticipate the acute danger faced by the community – wilderness, forest, rural and suburban, through early January 2003 as drought and weather conditions deteriorated dramatically. Integral to this the ACT emergency services did not move quickly to tackle the lightning strike fires of 8th January in their early infancy. While the fire units worked beyond the call of duty in the 10 days prior to the 18th January the authorities under-estimated the acute danger to rural and suburban Canberra.

Lack of Strategic Preparedness

Successive ACT governments and departments over some eight years must accept the fact that preparedness for a bush-fire emergency and disaster was inadequate. The Opposition believes bush-fire preventative strategies were inconsistently applied and the magnitude of forests, parks and rural bush-fire preventative preparations, in terms of fuel reduction, were significantly underestimated, particularly in the most recent years as the country grew drier and drier. The lessons of the December 2001 fires here and the 2001 fires around south-east Australia, were ignored.

The conservation lobby had a disproportionate grip on planning and must wear significant responsibility for the outcome of this disaster. Expert bush opinion was ignored and indeed denigrated. NSW government neglect of its bushfire preparations had a significant bearing on the ACT fires and the ACT needed to more closely monitor the condition of NSW forests and parks bordering the ACT.

ESB and emergency unit organisational and training issues too lie at the heart of the ACT's preparations that the Opposition believes need to be addressed. Community education and information programs, including school programs, as well as *vulnerable suburban* preparations are typical of the type of preparations, which if implemented over the years, may well have minimised the scope of the disaster.


CONCLUSION

Quote: from Val Jeffery, Captain of Tharwa Bush-fire brigade, ABC TV, *Lateline*, 4 April 03. "It is a national disgrace that we have done this amount of damage to the national capital – 500 houses – I don't think we have done this much damage to Baghdad to this point in time, as we done in Canberra...".

In the penultimate days of the crisis and at the height of the crisis all units and field agencies worked effectively and efficiently, with personnel fighting bravely and beyond the call of duty. The ACT emergency system responded reasonably well but has been found wanting in many areas. Determining and responding to the risk, long term preventative planning and some organisational issues lay at the heart of the weaknesses that the Opposition believes must be addressed. There are very significant 'lessons to be learnt' coming out of the 18th January disaster and the essential objective of this community should be to apply those lessons as soon as possible so as to minimise future risk.

The ACT Opposition appeals to the McLeod Inquiry to take note of the recommendations of this submission and it is hoped that Mr McLeod will – as the Opposition intends to – encourage the government to implement these and other worthy recommendations which are being put forward by the ACT community, in the best interests of the ACT and its people.

We also seek to influence the Federal Inquiry to influence the Federal Government to enact the same types of recommendations on a National level in terms of their impact on the ACT.



Steve Pratt MLA
Shadow Minister for Police and Emergency Services.

For the Leader of the Opposition
ACT Legislative Assembly

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1.1 - - Timely and Progressive 'Situation Reports'

That a program of regular updated *situation reports* feeding simultaneously through the emergency agencies command radio networks and public radio be implemented to better equip the emergency agencies and the residents to make timely and calmer decisions about evacuations or staying to fight.

Recommendation 1.2. - - Public Awareness Programs

That public information is formally distributed to residents on bush-fire emergency for long term planning and preparation, that this is placed in the 'white pages' telephone book and that the information is regularly updated. The information should be related to both general emergency procedures and those specific to relevant suburbs.

Recommendation 1.3 - - Interaction between the services

That all authorised emergency agencies be equipped and organised to access a radio operations net to ensure a free flow of quick information about the fire situation, rather than relying on information filtered through a central point, via independent agency radio nets.

Recommendation 1.4 - - Adherence to weather warnings

That in the event severe weather warnings are provided, ESB to take immediate action to disseminate the information to appropriate agencies and the public.

Recommendation 1.5 - - Early advice

That when ESB is concerned about the potential for an emergency, it keeps the public informed at every step – not simply when the emergency begins.

Recommendation 1.6. - - Critical and Strategic Level Decisions with Respect to Evacuations

That the system of critical decision making about when to "warn out" communities for possible evacuation, delegation of authorities to order evacuations, timeliness of decisions to order evacuations and the operational link of such decision making between ESB, fire units, the police and the senior emergency authority, be reviewed and be clarified.

Recommendation 2.1 - - Authority to Implement Protection Policies

That the relevant authorities are given adequate powers – and powers of primacy – to implement protection policies, such as winter burns, controlled burns in national parks, forests, rural areas and suburban reserve areas, to reduce the fuel loads in order to reduce the risk of bushfires.

Recommendation 2.2 - - McBeth Report

That the ACT community be given an explanation as to why the Mcbeth report has not been:

[a] Fully released;

[b] Fully implemented.

And further, that the recommendations of the Mcbeth Report be comprehensively reviewed with a view to immediate implementation of those measures that would contribute to the lessening of risk of bushfire.

Recommendation 2.3 - - Town Planning

That the proximity of existing and future housing to such threats as bushfire prone areas, particularly along the ACT's vulnerable 'western flank' needs to be reviewed.

Recommendation 2.4. – Radical Rethink for Planning along the Western Fringe.

That as the ACT looks to refurbishing the western fringe / Murrumbidgee Corridor a radical rethink of planning be undertaken aimed at reducing the vulnerability of the western, south-western and north-western fire-weather approaches. That consideration be given to a radical re-think about the Stromlo Forest and other forests which could be converted to mosaics of mixed rural acreage / timber plantation / village developments / new suburbs, where fire is less likely to emerge and generate to catastrophic proportions.

Recommendation 2.5 - - Risk Analysis

That the risk analysis, risk management and subsequent planning for fire disaster prevention for the ACT be comprehensively reviewed.

Recommendation 2.6 - - External Assets

That the ESB develop a more effective deployment plan for external fire fighting assets which may be called upon in times of crisis.

Recommendation 3.1. A Strengthening of the Authority of the ESB

That a strengthening of the authority of the ESB be undertaken to allow it to determine emergency management plans for all park, forest, bushland, rural areas and urban / bush fringe areas, including the directing and supervision of all necessary maintenance measures;

Recommendation 3.2 Fuel Reduction

That dramatically expanded fuel reduction programs with more vigorous programs of 'cold burns' be implemented;

Recommendation 3.3 Fire breaks

That a more comprehensive system of effective firebreaks be implemented and maintained;

Recommendation 3.4. Access to Parks

That greatly improved access to park areas for emergency vehicles be implemented with existing fire trails cleaned up, bridges re-opened and upgraded to take heavier fire tenders;

Recommendation 3.5. New Fire Trails

That new fire trails be added as appropriate;

Recommendation 3.6. Grazing

That a sensible program of live-stock grazing in park, forest, bushland reserves and other bush areas determined as vulnerable to over-growth, be implemented, for the purpose of enhancing fuel reduction.

Recommendation 4.1 - - Training

That national training standards for fire fighting units, ESB HQ and support elements and other emergency agencies engaging in bushfire operations and emergency planning for bushfire prevention, be adopted throughout the ESB and those emergency services likely to be engaged, for all competencies **Slow Response to Initial Outbreaks.**
relevant to bush fire fighting and preventative planning.

Recommendation 4.2 - - Personnel - Suitability

That national standard policy and procedures for checking the suitability of new recruits to rural fire units be adopted and that the policy and procedures include regular review and refresher training components, including health and fitness standards and compatibility.

Recommendation 4.4 Personnel - Accreditation

Following on from the previous recommendation, that the government review the ACT rural fire service accreditation system:

- [a] Against national standard 'best practices';
- [b] To ensure 're-joining' procedures for lapsed members at time of crisis are appropriate and practical.

Recommendation 4.5 - - Standardisation of Communications Equipment and Frequencies.

That all radio and other communication equipments be standardised across the brigades, urban and rural and across all emergency agency units, to enable interoperability and resource compatibility. That this system be compatible with NSW fire units.

Recommendation 4.6.- - Communications - Operational Interoperability

That communication procedures, the distribution of frequencies, call-signs, etc and the establishment of communication nets be established in such a way that enables all emergency services units and supporting agencies, when authorised, to access operational and command nets, in times of crisis.

Recommendation 4.7. - - Back-up.

That the ESB reviews its organisational structure, command and control capability and equipments to ensure that back-up capability is always ready to allow 'seamless changes' – including alternative HQ and communication bases and back-up generators and other equipments.

Recommendation 4.8 - - Operating Procedures – Situation Reports

That the operating procedures for communications and reporting information – particularly 'Situation Reports', Incident Reports and Medical Evacuation Requests, be standardised for interoperability across all fire units, ACT and NSW, urban and rural and across all emergency agencies

Recommendations 4.9 - - Delegation of Operational Control and Devolution of Authority.

That the ESB organisation, incorporating the networks of rural and urban fire units and other associated emergency supporting agencies, review its devolution of command and control and authority to ensure effectiveness.

Recommendation 5.1. - - Education and Information.

That an education and information program for the ACT community be implemented to prepare the community for bushfires.

Recommendation 5.2. - - '*Bushfire Prone Suburbs Program*'

That the '*Bushfire Prone Suburbs Program*', proposed in this report and detailed above, be adopted as part of the ACT emergency management plan and that it be introduced before next spring

Recommendation 5.3. - - Education - - Community Evacuations.

Singling out one aspect of the proposed '*Bushfire Prone Suburbs Program*', that the ACT community be universally educated in all aspects of individual and community evacuation during bush-fire, including prior individual and community contingency planning.

Recommendation 6.1. - - Mandatory Bushfire Education

That mandatory bushfire schools education programs for all schools, coordinated jointly by the Education department and the Emergency Services Bureau, are immediately introduced.

Recommendation 6.2. - - Preventative Education – Youth Arson

That a sensitive but effective education program aimed at preventing arson be embedded into the general bushfire education program, as proposed above, for early years intervention.