



29th April, 2003

**The Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent bushfires
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600**

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires

Please find enclosed a submission relevant to the "Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires" prepared jointly by the Chairman for our Bush Fire Management Committee and Group Captains from the Snowy River Rural Fire District.

Yours sincerely

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Philip Reid
Group Captain
Snowy River Rural Fire District
For and on behalf of the following:

David Glasson (Chairperson, BFMC)
Darvall Dixon (Group Captain, Snowy River RFS)
Ross Walters (Group Captain, Snowy River RFS)
Peter Bottom (Group Captain, Snowy River RFS)

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Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires - Terms of Reference:

- (a) **The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;**
- Catastrophic impact as ecology/vegetation will be dominated by species that thrive on fires, e.g. Tumut Ponds area has burnt twice in the past twenty years, and the most recent fire was more intense than the first fire; run off/sediment; erosion, slippage into rivers and dams; feral dogs coming out of the Park onto private property and no real pattern with dogs appearing everywhere and this will be exacerbated because of the lack of feed, pasture and lack of fences; behaviour of pest species will change also due to lack of feed.
 - Social/psychological problems have impacted heavily on members of the community.
 - Public assets that were destroyed include a vast area of the KNP, huts in the high country, loss of income for many local business houses and private individuals, loss of tourism, assets belonging to Snowy Hydro, Country Energy and Telstra.
- (b) **The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other crown land and private property;**
- Fuel build up, lack of hazard reduction on a regular basis and fire trails that had not been maintained to a condition that was acceptable for use during the recent fires.
- (c) **The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;**
- The following areas are the only places that the fires were contained: Snowy Plain area where the fire came out of National Park onto private land that was still being used for grazing, and in areas that burning regimes had been carried out by individual landholders. Interesting to note that fires on private property started by lightning at the same time as fires in the National Park were contained early due to quick response by Rural Fire Brigade members in which access and fuel loads were manageable. The Snowy Plains basin, headwaters of the Gungarlin River was the only river not affected by fires (quote by Snowy Hydro).
 - The impact of hazard reduction is obvious, areas that had previously been burnt enabled us to control the fires e.g. Stone Ruins, Byadbo, Burnt Range, Kalkite, Burkes Road, Crooks Racecourse, Gaden, Round Mountain and Denison (the area of Denison was burnt in October 2002 and on three occasions during the recent fires prevented fires impacting into the communities of Old Adaminaby, Adaminaby and Anglers Reach.

- Aboriginal/Australian heritage needs to be recognized and known well before a fire approaches, but once a fire is running the main priority is to put the fire out. Land Management Policies need to be mapped out and identified in local fire districts' Operations Plan.
- Fire trails that had been maintained and were fully constructed prior to the fire certainly assisted with fire fighting operations (brushed up to mineral earth, double width and canopy removed).
- Other strategies that would assist with bushfire prevention include strip grazing (Snowy Plains), block burning trials for hazard reduction purposes (CSIRO), and not closing trails that were constructed during the recent fires and maintaining them instead (some trails have already been closed off after the recent fires).

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

- Land management policies are non-existent, no trials have been carried out, fire trails are closed and as seen during the recent fires strategic fire trails need to be widened and maintained to a standard that provides access to all vehicles and fire control during a fire.
- The fact that two thirds of KNP was burnt out is testimony to the fact that whatever land management policies are in place are not working.
- Both Victoria and ACT are currently undertaking trail maintenance work, yet NSW is preferring to close off some of the trails that were constructed during the recent fires.

(e) Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;

- Prior to the 2002/2003 fires Mr Phil Cheney (CSIRO) had been invited to assist with "block burning" trials in our fire district. Unfortunately due to fire activity at the time this visit was postponed, but now after the fires would be an ideal time to invite him back to inspect sites that were burnt and conduct further testing and establish a fire regime for alpine, sub alpine and montane land.

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

- The Land Environment Court and Local Government both need to be more accountable for development decisions, e.g. development in the Crackenback Range area adjacent to KNP. Fortunately for most property owners in the Snowy Mountains fire district what saved a lot of their property was not the fuel free zones or fuel reduced zones constructed around their house but the weather conditions that prevailed during this fire. Certainly the general public need to be

educated about property protection prior to a fire season and not whilst a fire is running.

(g) The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;

- Response arrangements for firefighting on private property was generally very good. Firefighting in National Parks was somewhat more difficult due to having to prepare firetrails before they could be utilised for access or backburning operations.
- Frustration with NPWS due to their decision or lack of willingness to use large dozers, preferring smaller dozers and plant. (Smaller size plant is preferential for tidying up work, but not for strategic maintenance work).
- Resources were stretched at district level, but our most serious concern was the fact that our radio communications system was totally inadequate for this terrain and could well have endangered lives.

(h) The adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;

- Resource sharing between agencies worked efficiently and effectively due to a good working arrangement and good communications between senior officers of land management agencies on the local Bush Fire Management Committee.
- Communications between agencies on a Div. Comm level were non-existent. Good crews are dependant upon good Group Leaders.
- Some of the problems volunteers faced included task forces arriving late and changeover times. The window of opportunity for conducting backburns in the Snowy Mountains Region is very limited, and late crew arrivals jeopardised critical backburns on numerous occasions.
- NPWS ground personnel had no understanding of fire behaviour in their own area as they had no previous practical experience with hazard reduction burns.

(i) Liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

- In previous years funding was made available from the Coordinating Committee to maintain fire trails on private property, but in the past five years there has been no money allocated to private landholders to maintain these trails (refer Laurie Nortons letter and BFMC correspondence). The block referred to in the above correspondence was discussed at a Bush Fire Management Committee Meeting and National Parks stated that they would burn this block in April on a specified day. That day unfortunately was wet, but since then a golden opportunity has existed to burn this block and to date no burning has been carried out yet again. Once again this community is disillusioned.

- Some of these trails on private property form part of a strategic trail network and access to some areas of National Parks and State Forests is through these trails – yet landholders are expected to fund and maintain these trails for use by land management agencies.
- Insurance reimbursement for people affected by the fires is not fair and just. People who have insurance are expected to go through their own insurance company, affecting their own “no claims bonus”, yet people who have no insurance can seek government compensation.
- People whose internal fences have been damaged or destroyed by fires are not entitled to the government compensation, only those whose boundary fences are shared by NPWS.
- NPWS should be held responsible and liable for all damages as the fire escaped from KNP onto private property. If the reverse had happened and fire escaped from private property into KNP the landholder would have been accountable and this in fact has occurred in the past (refer Ron Flanagan’s case) when NP’s sought compensation from a private landholder when fire escaped from his property onto NP land.
- A “Standard” needs to be set for fire trails and this would cover issues such as aspect, terrain and vegetation and would be on a district level only. The Coordinating Committee’s new Policy on fire trails is inappropriate and outdated and certainly needs input from sub committees who are specialists in this field.

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

- The manhours contributed by volunteers has been invaluable and immeasurable, especially considering the fact that the area had been in drought and rural decline for many months and many farmers were struggling barely to exist.
- Kilometres travelled in private vehicles by Group Captains and other individuals has not been factored in reimbursement claims. Some Group Captains and brigade members travelled in excess of 5000 kms during the fire.
- Consideration should be given to developing a “special team” within National Parks that could be called upon for hazard reduction activities and fire fighting during large incidents.
- Payment for volunteers during a S.44.
- Paid and unpaid volunteers.
- One of the problems faced in most rural areas these days is the trend for young people to leave the area to seek work, resulting in an aging population.
- Disillusioned senior representatives of local brigades e.g. Group Captains, Captains, Senior Deputies who feel that they are not being listened to, yet they are expected to assist and respond to the bureaucracy and senior managers and hierarchy of the RFS who have no practical fire fighting experience at all.
- Volunteers feel that the gap between themselves and the senior managers from Rural Fire Service is widening.

- Volunteers feel passionate about their own local area and they are aggrieved about the situation where they are forced to suppress fires in the National Park, but have no say in management practices.
- Conservationist groups seem to have the monopoly on “caring for the environment and the mountains” but where were they during the fires.
- Allocation of equipment and funds is not needs based, and the present situation whereby if a Local Council has the ability to provide funds, that fire district is better off – equipment and funding should be on a “threat” basis.
- Equipment and vehicles used on a 24 hour system for the duration of the Snowy/Bombala S.44 (65 days) has resulted in an over used and exhausted tanker fleet.
- In recent times the area of management for NP’s personnel has increased (more wilderness areas, Nature Reserves and National Parks), but personnel have decreased and volunteers have been expected to fill this gap.
- Lack of decision making on behalf from NP’s personnel.