



Australian Government

A Nation Charred: Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires

October 2003

House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires

Australian Government Position

Introduction

In March 2003 the House of Representatives appointed a Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of bushfires and their impact on life, property and the environment.

In investigating these matters the Committee had specific regard to:

- a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;
- 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;
- c) the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;
- 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;
- e) any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;
- 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;
- g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;
- h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;
- i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters; and
- j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

The Select Committee's report, titled *A Nation Charred*, was tabled in October 2003. It contains 59 recommendations which identify areas for possible action by the Australian and state and territory governments, the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC), the insurance industry, Standards Australia and the Australasian Fire Authorities Council.

There is no way to completely fire proof Australia but the Australian Government strongly supports action by all Governments, businesses and individuals to reduce the incidence of damaging bushfires and the impact of bushfires when they occur.

Subsequent to the establishment of the Select Committee's inquiry, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned the National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management which reported to the Prime Minister as the Chair of the COAG on 2 April 2004. The National Inquiry's terms of reference required it to take account of and draw on previous bushfire inquiries. The Select Committee's Report was among those considered by the National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management in developing its recommendations. There is some overlap between the two inquiries and, where appropriate, the Australian Government's response to this

Report cross references recommendations in the National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management.

The recommendations of the Select Committee's Report deal with particular themes and in some instances are directed to particular bodies. These recommendations and the Government's responses have been grouped together where appropriate.

Recognising the work of the Select Committee's Report and the COAG National Inquiry, and given the high fire risk faced in the current bushfire season, on 8 September 2004 the Prime Minister announced the allocation of \$24 million over the next three years to assist local communities to better prepare for bushfires. This funding is comprised of \$15 million for the construction, maintenance and signage of fire trail networks; an additional \$3 million for the Bushfire CRC and \$6 million towards a Bushfire Awareness and Preparedness Day.

This money is in addition to the Australian Government's commitment of \$68.5 million for the Natural Disaster Mitigation Programme announced in the 2003-04 Budget.

In the 2004-05 Budget the Australian Government announced a further \$16.5 million over three years for the National Aerial Firefighting Centre (\$5.5 million per annum from 2004-05 to 2006-07) as its contribution to aerial firefighting operations.

1. Recommendations regarding the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre

The Select Committee identified the Bushfire CRC as playing a significant role in implementing a number of recommendations. The Bushfire CRC began operations in July 2003 and was officially launched on 9 December 2003 by the then Federal Minister for Science, the Hon Peter McGauran MP.

The objective of the Bushfire CRC is to increase scientific understanding of bushfires and their social and economic impacts through a coordinated, multidisciplinary research programme involving Australasian fire and land management agencies and government and university research agencies. The programme is designed to improve agency and community capability to manage bushfires in an economically and ecologically sustainable manner, to increase the number of researchers working in the field, and to foster international research collaboration relating to bushfires.

The Bushfire CRC brings together researchers and research users from universities, government research organisations such as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and the Bureau of Meteorology, research users from across the metropolitan and rural fire services, land management agencies and private businesses. The total budget for the Bushfire CRC, including cash and in-kind contributions, is approximately \$100 million for the initial seven-year research period. The Australian Government's direct contribution is approximately \$29 million; this is additional to the contribution of Australian Government agency participants. The Australian Government's initial contribution was about \$25 million. An additional \$3 million over three years (\$1 million per annum) for the Bushfire CRC was announced by the Prime Minister on 8 September 2004. A further \$350,000 per annum over three

years was approved by the former Minister for Science under the CRC Programme to support the CRC's community education activities in regional areas.

The Bushfire CRC is undertaking the 5 programs detailed below. The scope of these programs and the funding arrangements had been developed and agreed by all parties prior to the Select Committee delivering its Report. It would be difficult for the Australian Government to significantly change the Centre's current research program. However, there is the opportunity to optimise the value gained from the Centre's research and assist in the setting of future research priorities.

Programme A: Safe prevention, preparation and suppression

The objective of this programme is to develop technologies to increase understanding of bushfire behaviour and the ability to manage bushfires in order to reduce the risks to firefighters and the general public. The programme plans to assess the relative efficiency and effectiveness of a number of risk treatments involving the combinations of prevention, preparation and suppression.

Programme B: Management of fire in the landscape

The objective of this programme is to develop tools for effective, safe and ecologically sound planning and use of prescribed fire and fire regimes.

Programme C: Community self-sufficiency for fire safety

The objective of this programme is to coordinate research in Australia to increase the self-sufficiency of communities in managing the risk from bushfires. Community needs will be defined with the aim of increasing the community's capacity to manage bushfire risk through development of new knowledge and tools for building and improving 'community self-sufficiency', which is defined as the ability of the community to prepare for, withstand and recover from bushfire events.

Programme D: Protection of people and property

The objectives of this programme are to reduce the loss of buildings and the injuries to occupants, to increase the safety and wellbeing of firefighters, and to increase the availability and retention of essential volunteers. These will be achieved through implementation of research results relating to bushfire attack, human behaviours on the fire ground, assessment and control of firefighter exposure to toxic air pollutants, and the motivations and needs of volunteers in response to demographic trends.

Programme E: Education and training program

The objective of this programme is to develop the next cohort of qualified fire researchers, improve the use of Australian intellectual and research resources and keep Australia at the forefront of international bushfire research.

In the preparation of its response the Australian Government sought the views of the Bushfire CRC on relevant recommendations.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre establish, as part of its program to implement a single fuel classification system, a national database that provides information on current levels and rates of accumulation of fuel loads that takes into account vegetation type and climate across all tenures of land, including private land where data is available.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre establish, as part of its program to implement a single fuel classification system, standards which take into account local conditions including topography and vegetation type, for determining appropriate dimensions for asset protection zones.

The Australian Government supports the intent of these recommendations to develop management tools that will provide better information on current levels and rates of accumulation of fuel loads. The Bushfire CRC has advised that existing Bushfire CRC projects, particularly the fuel accumulation project, have the capacity to establish a framework for the database proposed in the Report's recommendations. Establishment and ongoing maintenance of a national database is an operational rather than a research function and is therefore outside the scope of the Bushfire CRC.

A range of tasks which are relevant in the context of this recommendation was jointly assigned to the Augmented Australian Police Minister's Council and the Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council as part of the COAG response to the National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management. These Councils could further examine financial and other operational issues associated with the establishment and ongoing maintenance of the recommended national database.

The Bushfire CRC will be asked to provide advice to the Augmented Australasian Police Minister's Council and the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council on the possibility of accelerating research into fuel loads and dynamics and the compilation of this data into accessible databases.

The Australian Government agrees that a nationally consistent framework that would allow data on fire regime mapping to be shared between jurisdictions would be a valuable outcome. The framework needs to be developed in the context of the recommendations of the COAG *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements* report and the work being undertaken by Geoscience Australia as part of the Disaster Mitigation Australia Package to develop a national risk assessment framework for natural hazards. This framework should include development and provision of models, data and decision support tools.

The Australian Government will continue to develop national consistency in datasets relevant to bushfire mitigation and management under the Australian Spatial Data Infrastructure framework. Geoscience Australia is the lead agency for Spatial Data Management and provides the Australian Spatial Data Directory. Vegetation information (National Forest Inventory and National Vegetation Information System) is another key data set relevant to bushfire mitigation and management. A recent application of the National Vegetation Information System has been to link

information about vegetation types to fuel loads. The Bureau of Rural Sciences and the Department of the Environment and Heritage are lead agencies on vegetation information.

The Bushfire CRC's research will contribute data that would assist in the establishment of standards for determining appropriate dimensions for asset protection zones and the Australian Government requests that it make such data available to those state and territory agencies which have responsibility for establishing those appropriate dimensions. A longer-term goal of the projects in the Bushfire CRC's Programme A is to understand better the role of fuel types and topography. The outcome of Project VESTA being undertaken in Western Australia has provided some early results that are being validated by the current Bushfire CRC work plan.

It is noted that the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management addresses the issue of data and information relevant to bushfire mitigation and management in Recommendations 5.1-5.4. The Australian Government supports these recommendations.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre determine a minimum national standard, taking into account topography and vegetation type, for adequate access to all public lands including wilderness areas of national parks for the purpose of effective fire prevention and suppression.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre establish a minimum national standard that is common across all tenures of land for water access and availability for bushfire fighting.

The Australian Government accepts that access is a fundamental issue which all state, territory and local authorities must address. As Programs A and B of the Bushfire CRC deal with "Safe prevention, preparation and suppression" and "Management of fire in the landscape", the outcomes of these research projects will be of significant importance in addressing these recommendations. However, the issue of access to lands, including the number, size and maintenance of fire tracks, and the issue of access to water, are not part of any current research plan of the CRC. The Australian Government considers these to be areas for policy action by local, state and territory government rather than areas for research.

The CRC research programs will provide information on the intensity and rate of spread of fires under a range of conditions, which will be important contributions to the access conditions set and implemented by local, state and territory authorities. While the CRC is not a standard setting organisation, its findings on these matters will be of relevance to the appropriate state, territory and local bodies.

Access to Australian Government owned and/or managed lands and national parks is determined by the plan of management for each relevant piece of land. Development of the management plans entails extensive public consultation and input, where

appropriate. Plans are designed to protect the full range of assets, including management of risks associated with bushfire and the spread of weeds and disease.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that, as part of its study into improving the effectiveness of prescribed burning, the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre establish a national database that includes areas targeted for fuel reduction, the area of fuel reduction achieved based on a specified standard of on ground verification and the season in which the reduction was achieved. The Committee also recommends that in developing this database the Cooperative Research Centre develop a national standard of fire mapping, which accurately maps the extent, intensity, spread and overall pattern of prescribed and wildfires in Australia.

Recommendation 15

The Committee acknowledges community concerns about smoke pollution as a result of prescribed burning and recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre pursue its proposed study into smoke modelling.

While the Bushfire CRC has advised that it recognizes the potential value of a detailed database on fuel reduction, the establishment and maintenance of a national database as proposed in Recommendation 14 is beyond the scope of the currently funded research programme of the Bushfire CRC.

Important work has been undertaken on fire regime mapping, particularly by the Western Australian Department of Land Information and the Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Savannas Management, complemented by the work of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and Geoscience Australia to develop the Sentinel system. The Sentinel Fire Mapping website is an internet-based mapping tool designed to provide timely fire location data to emergency service managers across Australia. Satellite information is accessed and processed by the Australian Centre for Remote Sensing, in Geoscience Australia, to provide the key information for the CSIRO-based Sentinel website. The mapping system allows users to identify fire locations that pose a potential risk to communities and property.

Standards for fire mapping and database development need to be developed in conjunction with work being undertaken as part of the Disaster Mitigation Australia Package to develop a national risk assessment framework for natural hazards. This framework should include development and provision of models, data and decision support tools. The Disaster Mitigation Australia Package was recommended to the COAG, along with other reform commitments and recommendations in the COAG report *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming Mitigation, Relief and Recovery Arrangements*. In the 2003-04 Budget the Australian Government announced new funding of \$68.5 million over 5 years for the Disaster Mitigation Australia Package. The Australian Government's commitment to the funding was conditional on the states and territories agreeing to the implementation of consistent risk assessment methodologies and a nationally consistent approach to data collection and analysis.

The Bushfire CRC has a number of projects relating to smoke and its effects on the community and the fire fighters. The Bushfire CRC's smoke dispersion prediction project is already well advanced.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre monitor the effect of grazing on mitigating the return of woody weeds to recently fire effected areas across various landscapes including alpine and subalpine.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre conduct further research into the long term effects and effectiveness of grazing as a fire mitigation practice.

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre conduct further research on the impact of weeds on the flammability of land and the most economically and environmentally appropriate way to remove weeds after fire events.

The Australian Government agrees in principle to these recommendations and requests that the Bushfire CRC specifically address them as part of the work it will undertake with the additional \$3 million recently allocated by the Australian Government; it also understands that grazing has impacts beyond fire mitigation and that these need to be evaluated as a whole by land management agencies in developing grazing policies.

The Australian Government notes that the effect of weeds on the progression of wildfire will be captured under the Bushfire CRC's programme looking at the understanding of fuel types.

It is also noted that Australian Governments will continue to implement actions under the National Weeds Strategy (launched June 1997) to eradicate weeds, including as appropriate, weed occurrences following a bushfire event. The Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, through the Australian Weeds Committee of the Natural Resource Management Standing Committee, is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the National Weeds Strategy (refer Recommendation 19).

Recommendation 51

The Committee recommends that (under Programs C and E) the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre considers the following items as part of a national education program.

- ◆ *Introducing bushfire skills training to schools and libraries.*
- ◆ *Training various categories of emergency services personnel on their specific role in the event of a bushfire.*

- ◆ *Ensuring that those in the fields of building, engineering, urban planning, forestry and science have a clear understanding of bushfire risk management including current related regulatory codes and legislation.*
- ◆ *Counselling prospective land developers in bushfire prone areas on the risks and necessary protective planning.*
- ◆ *Running adult education courses on protective planning (including insurance, building design and maintenance and defence techniques) in the context of bushfires.*
- ◆ *Broadcasting protective planning issues through the media, television, Internet, radio and publications.*
- ◆ *Structuring the community into groups and providing them with guidelines for launching an initial attack on a bushfire.*
- ◆ *Enclosing brochures about bushfire protection with rates notices.*
- ◆ *Having a Bushfire Awareness and Preparedness Day (similar to Clean Up Australia Day) where the community is encouraged to undertake risk reduction with local governments coordinating the disposal of hazardous material.*

The Bushfire CRC has advised that it will consider all these items in developing its community education program. The major part of the Bushfire CRC's community education work will seek to enhance and complement the broad range of educational activities presently undertaken by state and territory agencies. The Australian Government is providing the CRC with an additional \$350,000 per annum over three years under the CRC Programme to support these activities in regional areas.

In part, Recommendation 51 has been addressed by the Prime Minister's announcement on 8 September 2004 of the allocation of \$6 million over three years (\$2 million per annum) towards the establishment of a Bushfire Awareness and Preparedness Day, managed by the Attorney-General's Department.

It is noted that the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management addresses the issue of school and community-based education in Recommendation 3.1 and related Finding 3.1. The Australian Government supports this recommendation.

The Australian Government notes that the COAG has requested that the Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council and the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs consider the implementation of Recommendation 3.1 and report back within 12 months. It has also requested the Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council to collect and share information on best practice in community bushfire education across jurisdictions in order to assist jurisdictions to adopt appropriate measures, having regard to particular risk factors and local conditions.

Recommendation 53

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre's research and recommend property protection products and programs under Program D.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation and notes that the Bushfire CRC advises that it is examining these topics within the broad context of Programme C which looks at the social impact and elements of preparedness of communities at risk. The Bushfire CRC's research outcomes on the effectiveness of this and other policies will assist to inform the debate.

While the Bushfire CRC is not a testing authority, its work programs are contributing to improved understanding of the scientific basis for establishing codes and standards. The testing of products against fire and building standards is undertaken by several organisations, such as the CSIRO.

Recommendation 59

The Committee recommends that Program E of the Bushfire Cooperative Centre, which is tasked with the development of the next generation of fire researchers and dissemination of the Centre's work, be tasked further to collect and respond to feedback, particularly from the on ground volunteer levels of fire brigades, on the practicality of its outputs and their future requirements.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation and understands that the education programme (Programme E) of the Bushfire CRC will monitor the perceived effectiveness of all its outputs.

2. Recommendations regarding the Council of Australian Governments

In December 2003 the COAG agreed in principle to the reform commitments and recommendations of the High Level Group Report *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements*. The COAG also agreed that the reform commitments and recommendations be implemented by an Augmented Australasian Police Minister's Council, supported by a reconstituted Australian Emergency Management Committee.

These arrangements provide a mechanism for dealing with natural disaster issues of national significance that require agreement between governments.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth through the Council of Australian Governments ensure that states and territories have adequate controls to ensure that local governments implement required fuel management standards on private property and land under their control.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments resolve when asset protection zones will be located on private land and when on public land and gain assurances that adequate maintenance of zones will be enforced.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments implements arrangements in which greater flexibility is devolved to local brigade captains in the issuing of permits to burn for fuel reduction and other purposes in the context of local fire management plans.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seek to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments seek agreement from the states and territories on the optimisation and implementation of prescribed burning targets and programs to a degree that is recognised as adequate for the protection of life, property and the environment. The prescribed burning programs should include strategic evaluation of fuel management at the regional level and the results of annual fuel management in each state should be publicly reported and audited.

In January 2005 the COAG released its response to the *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management*.

The Australian Government notes that the COAG has asked the Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council and the Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council to work together to establish arrangements for sharing information and enhancing approaches to zoning and classification of fuel management areas. The Primary Industries Ministerial Council, the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council and the Environment Protection and Heritage Council will also need to be consulted on this work to ensure consistency with approaches for the management of environmental assets. The Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council has been asked to report back to the COAG within 12 months.

With regard to the role of brigade captains, while the proposal in Recommendation 11 is a matter for the states and territories, the Australian Government supports the recommendation and encourages relevant state and territory agencies to act on the recommendation.

The Australian Government is a significant land manager and contributor to national land management policy development and programme implementation. The Australian Government recognises the principle that reducing the amount of fuel in a landscape reduces the risks associated with bushfires by the reduction in fire intensity and spread and assisting in suppression of the bushfires.

Prescribed burning regimes need to recognise the priority importance of the protection of life and property as well as the conservation of Australia's biodiversity, especially fauna and flora listed under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. The zoning approach should be implemented on all Australian Government owned and/or managed lands including national parks and relevant Ministers will be asked to ensure this occurs.

The Australian Government agrees that the evaluation of the effectiveness of fuel reduction in reduction of risk to all assets needs be given greater emphasis and priority. The Bushfire CRC is undertaking a major long term project on fuel reduction and fire regimes to optimise risk management of all assets in the landscape.

While noting the COAG National Bushfire Inquiry finding that comparing targeted and actual annual gross area of fuel reduction within a state/region does not necessarily provide a good measure of risk reduction, nevertheless public reporting will assist communities to understand the extent of fuel reduction burning in their regions.

Inappropriate fire regimes (whether too infrequent, too frequent or too intense) can be a major threatening impact to biodiversity. In the case of lands managed by the Department of Defence, which constitute the greatest proportion of land owned by the Australian Government, inappropriate fire regimes can also result in training areas being unable to support preparedness training of the Australian Defence Force. These inappropriate regimes may also pose an unacceptable risk from wildfire to Defence facilities and infrastructure.

The Australian State of the Environment reports and the National Land and Water Resources Audit and other research support the conclusion that changed fire regimes are threatening ecosystems across Australia, especially in northern Australian and the rangeland grazing areas of Australia. Therefore, the Australian Government notes and supports the COAG National Bushfire Inquiry report's findings that prescribed burning regimes need to be based on a shared understanding of the assets and the fire regime needs of the assets within the landscape. Moreover, prescribed burning regimes need to be managed in an adaptive style taking account of increasing scientific knowledge of fire within the landscape.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments implements to a minimum national standard adequate access to all public lands including wilderness areas of national parks.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments resolve to increase water access points for bushfire fighting on public land to the minimum national standard.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments initiate consideration of the relaxation of restrictions on the movement of fire fighting equipment during declared emergencies.

The COAG National Bushfire Inquiry recommends that the COAG adopt a statement of national principles as the framework for the future direction of bushfire mitigation and management in Australia. The COAG has agreed to refer the draft national principles to the Augmented Australasian Police Minister's Council for further development. The Australian Government's Attorney-General will be asked to take these recommendations into account during the discussions on national principles.

Access to state, territory and Australian Government owned and/or managed lands and national parks is generally outlined in plans of management developed to meet statutory requirements. The Australian Government believes that all jurisdictions,

when developing plans of management for their respective national parks, wilderness and other public land ensure that appropriate definitions of access, including access to water, are included. Development of plans for national parks generally entails extensive public consultation and input, where appropriate. Plans are designed to protect the full range of assets, including management of risks associated with bushfire and the spread of weeds and disease. Whilst the management of public lands owned by state, territory or local governments is a matter for those governments, the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council *Directions for the National Reserve System – A Partnership Approach* (2005) provides for all national parks and other reserves in Australia to be managed in accordance with fire management plans which take into account the purpose of the reservation and management objectives of the reserve. The document notes that fire management plans need to consider, *inter alia*, public safety, the ecological role of fire, asset protection, landscape effects of fire and Indigenous use of fire.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments develop a mechanism that ensures that appropriate measures are taken by public and private land managers for the eradication of weeds following a bushfire event.

Australian Governments will continue to implement actions under the National Weeds Strategy (launched June 1997) to eradicate weeds, including as appropriate, weed occurrences following a bushfire event. The Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, through the Australian Weeds Committee of the Natural Resource Management Standing Committee is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the National Weeds Strategy.

The next Primary Industries Ministerial Council and Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council meetings will be on 26 and 27 October 2005 respectively. It is anticipated that any work referred to the relevant Ministerial Councils from the COAG would go forward to the October meetings. The Australian Government will seek to ensure that these matters are considered at these upcoming meetings.

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth work with the states and territories through the proposed Council of Australian Governments to review the response to bushfires to ensure that principles of fire prevention and rapid and effective initial attack are adopted and implemented by all rural fire authorities and public land managers.

Recommendation 25

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seek to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments seek the adoption by all states and territories of multi-agency protocols and agreements for fire management, similar to those in force in Tasmania.

The Australian Government supports these recommendations and acknowledges the importance of national principles for bushfire mitigation and management which underpin existing approaches and set a framework that jurisdictions should work towards.

Such principles need to emerge from a process of consultation. Draft principles have been agreed by the COAG as a starting point with further consultation and any amendments necessary to be undertaken over the next twelve months, overseen by the Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council. A report and recommendations on endorsement of a final set of principles will then be made to the COAG.

While ultimately the protocols and agreements adopted in any particular state or territory for the management of bushfires are a matter for that state or territory, the Australian Government strongly recommends the approaches outlined in Recommendations 20 and 25 with particular reference to effective initial attack on fires.

Recommendation 21

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the proposed Council of Australian Governments review of the bushfire management initiate with the states, as a priority, a review of the responsibilities and potential liabilities of fire controllers with a view to developing principles of indemnification for reasonable, responsible and informed decision making. This review should extend to defining responsibility for occupational health and safety requirements in a way which allows practicable compliance where a reasonable degree of risk taking is urgently required to prevent the loss of life, property and environmental amenity from wildfire.

Recommendation 54

Further to recommendation 21 in chapter 4, the Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seeks to ensure that the proposed Council of Australian Governments review of the bushfire management, initiate with the states and territories, as a priority, a review of the duty of care of public and private landowners and their potential liability. This should be done with a view to developing clear and consistent principles that cover (but are not limited to) the following:

- ◆ *Timely replacement/ repair of loss/damage (including to fences) resulting from fire fighting operations, suppression activities or wildfires.*
- ◆ *The liability of councils that imprudently approve the sale of land.*
- ◆ *The responsibilities and potential liabilities of fire controllers with a view to developing principles of indemnification for reasonable, responsible and informed decision making (including occupational health and safety).*

The Australian Government understands and supports the intentions behind these recommendations. While it notes that the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management found that existing state and territory legislation dealing with occupational health and safety is sound and that the effort required to achieve a nationally uniform approach is not warranted, every opportunity should be taken to ultimately achieve uniformity. The Australian Government will ensure that such a goal remains part of any future involvement of its Ministers. In other areas where

volunteer firefighters may be liable, the COAG Inquiry was satisfied that volunteers do not face greater exposure than other citizens, but called on the states and territories to maintain a process of review, to ensure that judicial interpretations are reflected in policy and procedures and that volunteers are not disadvantaged, particularly when they deploy interstate.

3. Recommendations regarding the Natural Heritage Trust¹

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth through the National Heritage Trust assist the states and territories in the construction, maintenance and signage of fire trail networks.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth through the National Heritage Trust, offer assistance to the states and the Australian Capital Territory to develop specific prescribed burning guides, at least to the quality of Western Australia, for national parks and state forests through out the mainland of south eastern Australia.

Recommendation 58

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth require state and territory governments to have in place comprehensive bush fire management plans as a pre-requisite for accessing funding from the National Heritage Trust and like programs.

Recommendation 7 has been addressed by the Prime Minister's announcement on 8 September 2004 of the establishment of a \$15 million Bushfire Mitigation Fund, over three years (\$5 million per annum), to contribute to the construction, maintenance and signage of fire trail networks. The Bushfire Mitigation Fund is being managed through the Department of Transport and Regional Services.

The objective of the Natural Heritage Trust, as outlined in the *Natural Heritage Trust Act 1997*, is to repair and replenish Australia's natural capital infrastructure. The Trust's operations and investments focus on the repair and enhancement of Australia's natural environment and the sustainable management of its natural resources.

The COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management recognises the important role of fire management in achieving sustainable landscape management objectives and commends the Natural Heritage Trust's support for a wide range of projects that are improving fire management, mitigation and recovery. Topics include: scientific knowledge of fire regimes and impacts on biodiversity; fire management planning and practices; rehabilitation of fire trails; bushfire recovery; threatened species recovery and habitat restoration; and Indigenous fire knowledge and practices.

¹ The House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires refers to the Natural Heritage Trust as the National Heritage Trust.

The Inquiry further notes the good progress being made in addressing appropriate fire management practices and bushfire risk management planning through regional natural resource management plans supported by the Natural Heritage Trust.

Australian and state and territory governments ensure that natural resource management regional plans developed under the Natural Heritage Trust are consistent with nationally agreed strategies as they relate to the objectives of the Trust. Recommendation 14.1 of the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management recommends the adoption by the COAG of a statement of national principles as the framework for the future direction of bushfire mitigation and management in Australia. Following national agreement of principles for bushfire mitigation and management, all Governments would ensure that new regional natural resource management plans are consistent with relevant elements of these principles.

Further, the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council has endorsed principles for managing protected areas in Australia, as reflected in the Directions for the National Reserve System - A Partnership Approach statement of 2005. Consistent with this statement, the states and territories have agreed to develop management plans, including fire management plans, within 3 years. In addition finding 6.12 of the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management stated that 'Natural resource management regional plans developed under the National (sic) Heritage Trust should take bushfire management into account and be consistent with the bushfire risk management process.' All governments acknowledged this finding.

A further opportunity to encourage appropriate consideration of fire management needs in natural resource management planning will arise in the development of natural resource management funding arrangements to operate after conclusion of the current arrangements in June 2008.

4. Recommendations regarding spatial information

Recommendation 31

The Committee recommends that Geoscience Australia take responsibility, in conjunction with Emergency Management Australia, for developing a national spatial data policy to coordinate the development of data systems, the collection of data and the sharing of data between all the emergency response agencies across Australia, and that both agencies participate in the development and delivery of spatial information systems as part of a national approach to emergency planning and management data. The first priority in policy development and of systems should be related to bushfire hazards.

Recommendation 32

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia be required to participate in the development and delivery of spatial information systems as part of a national approach to emergency planning and management data. The first priority in policy development and of systems should be related to bushfire hazards.

Recommendation 33

The Committee recommends that the 1:100,000 national mapping program be accelerated to achieve an average life of no greater than 10 years with priority given to those areas most susceptible to national disasters.

The Australian Government agrees that national consistency in datasets is essential for addressing an all-hazards approach to risk management, including bushfire risk.

A wide range of data needs to be captured in order to fully rationalise the entire emergency management process. This includes post-disaster data relating to the impact and recovery from present-day or historical events, as well as basic exposure and vulnerability data to assess the potential impact of future events. This work needs to be coordinated with the activities identified and discussed under Recommendations 1, 3, 5, 8 and 14. Further, this exercise needs to be coordinated across all hazards in order to minimise the duplication of effort. Some initiatives are underway that will contribute to developing useful data. Given the complexity of this issue and the wide range of beneficiaries of a national database, advances in this area will require major coordination across all levels of government.

The GeoInsight project, sponsored by AusIndustry, was initiated in 2001 “to facilitate an enduring relationship between the Spatial Information Industry and the Emergency Management Community”. Following the successful completion of GeoInsight, the Emergency Management Spatial Information Network of Australia was formed in October 2002. Emergency Management Spatial Information Network of Australia is a national body representing spatial information users in the emergency management community, with the Australian Government represented by Geoscience Australia as the voting member, and the Bureau of Meteorology and Emergency Management Australia as observers. The provision of spatial data for emergency management is mainly the responsibility of the states/territories (with Australian Government input from Geoscience Australia in a national coordination role).

The Australian Government will continue to develop national consistency in datasets relevant to bushfire mitigation and management under the Australian Spatial Data Infrastructure framework. Geoscience Australia is the lead agency for Spatial Data Management and provides the Australian Spatial Data Directory. Vegetation information (National Forest Inventory and National Vegetation Information System) is another key data set relevant to bushfire mitigation and management. A recent application of the National Vegetation Information System has been to link information about vegetation types to fuel loads. The Bureau of Rural Sciences and the Department of the Environment and Heritage are lead agencies on vegetation information.

The Australian Government notes that as part of the response to the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management, the Augmented Australasian Police Ministers’ Council will ask the Australia New Zealand Land Information Council to work on the development of proposals to enhance national consistency in data collections.

Geoscience Australia has developed a seamless national topographic spatial database, i.e. the data are not constrained by map sheet areas. Initially developed for 1:250 000

scale topographic data, the data model has been extended to cater for 1:100 000 scale data emanating from Geoscience Australia's new 1:100 000 scale Topographic Mapping Pilot for Emergency Management. In addition to undertaking new mapping in key areas using the latest mapping technologies, Geoscience Australia is working collaboratively with the state, territory and Australian Government emergency management agencies to: develop tailored emergency management specifications; further develop processes and arrangements that maximise outcomes and production efficiencies through joint data purchasing, data sharing, and integrated development of mapping programs which meet both state or territory and Australian Government requirements.

The first of these products, the 'Canberra Special' map at 1:100 000 scale, replaces a previous 1998 edition. Geoscience Australia has been working closely with the ACT Emergency Services Authority to incorporate specific features in the mapping. The Emergency Services Authority was provided with the digital data in October 2004 and has been using it extensively to undertake planning for the 2004-05 fire season.

Other areas being mapped during the pilot in collaboration with the states include: the Dungog and Camberwell region in NSW; the Benalla-Seymour-Eildon region in Victoria; the Gold Coast-Toowoomba region in Queensland and the Karijini National Park region in the Hamersley Ranges of north west Western Australia. Production has commenced for all these regions, and will be available for use by emergency management agencies in mid 2005.

The mapping priorities will be developed in close collaboration with the national database needs addressed in Recommendations 1, 3, 5, 8 and 14. The Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources will be requested to take Recommendation 33 into account when preparing forward budgeting.

5. Recommendations regarding incident action plans

Recommendation 23

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth, through the Council of Australian Governments and the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, initiate an overhaul of the incident management systems used by bush fire agencies in Australia to better incorporate local knowledge and expertise and better understanding of the needs and circumstances of local rural communities in the management of major fire events.

The Committee also recommends that this overhaul should aim to:

- ◆ *refine the system to facilitate setting up simple command and control structures, closer to the fire ground, in tune with the ever changing local fire ground conditions and needs of local communities;*
- ◆ *include training of incident management personnel on how to engage and involve local people in planning and management of fires.*
- ◆ *establish national models for community fire planning and provide for the integration of community fire plans into incident management; and*

- ◆ *include national reporting of the success of incident management of fires as a means of auditing the cost effectiveness of incident operations.*

Recommendation 24

The Committee recommends that the state and territory bushfire agencies ensure that, on a district basis, communications are addressed within the district operations plans and that the plans are capable of easy adoption to incident action plans.

Recommendation 30

The Committee recommends that in changing the incident management systems as proposed in recommendation 23 above all bush fire agencies review concerns about difficulties in communicating operational information from the fire front to air operations.

Recommendation 37

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia work through the Australasian Fire Authorities Council to ensure that:

- ◆ *A greater emphasis be placed on pre-incident and incident preparation of communication plans as a means of ensuring effective interoperability between agencies at command and tactical levels.*
- ◆ *That the speed of transfer of operational information between agencies at command level be regularly monitored to ensure that operational objectives are not being compromised.*

The Australian Government strongly supports the adoption of a nationally agreed Australian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) Incident Control System, while recognising operational issues such as the incident management systems used by bushfire authorities in Australia are matters for the states and territories.

The Australasian Fire Authorities Council is currently working with member agencies towards the development of a national system for multi-agency incident coordination, using the (AIIMS) Incident Control System as the basic building block. All fire services have agreed to the national adoption of the recently reviewed AIIMS and also all state emergency services have confirmed, through the Australian Council of State Emergency Services, that they will adopt the AIIMS on a phased state by state basis. Recommendations 23 and 30 will be addressed as part of that process.

The Australian Government understands that the Australasian Fire Authorities Council has recognised the need for standard operating procedures for aircraft operations (Recommendation 30).

The AIIMS Incident Control System potentially allows for the identification and integration of local knowledge during fire fighting operations. Increased use of local knowledge would be more related to training in the value of this information and organisational cultural changes in accepting the value of local knowledge than occurs in the currently documented process. While this is primarily a state and territory issue, the Australian Government strongly endorses this report's emphasis on the need for utilisation of local knowledge and encourages all jurisdictions to adopt this approach.

The COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management has also recognised this issue in Recommendation 8.2 relating to further development of the AIIMS system.

6. Recommendations regarding communications

Recommendation 34

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia and the Australian Communications Authority jointly with the Australasian Fire Authorities Council:

- ◆ *Initiate an urgent review on a district basis, of the suitability of the current allocated radio spectrum to ensure that as far as possible, fire fighter safety is not being compromised through inadequate communications.*
- ◆ *Commit to the development, in conjunction with representative bodies of all emergency services, to a National Strategic Radio System.*
- ◆ *That the coordination of the deliberations be assigned to Emergency Management Australia.*

Recommendation 41

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia request the Australasian Fire Authorities Council to:

- ◆ *Determine protocols and standards on a national basis for the adoption and implementation of mobile data services by all fire fighting agencies with a view to ensuring national compatibility.*
- ◆ *Consider the development of a 'closed user group', utilising satellite telephony, as an interim measure for achieving interoperability between member agencies on a national level.*

The Australian Government agrees in principle to these recommendations, in particular the objective of developing a National Strategic Radio System, and the issues raised will be directed to the National Coordinating Committee for Government Radiocommunications (NCCGR), which is tasked with developing and maintaining a national strategic plan for Government radiocommunications. The NCCGR consists of representatives of the Australian Government and all state and territory governments. The Australian Communications and Media Authority² is an adviser to the Committee.

The Australian Government, through the Australian Communications and Media Authority's participation in the NCCGR, gives effect to its acceptance in 2002 of Recommendation 6a of the 'Radiocommunications Review Report' - conducted by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts - that the Australian Communications Authority² provide technical assistance if state and territory emergency and police services seek to cooperate in establishing a national emergency services network.

² On 1 July 2005, the Australian Communications Authority merged with the Australian Broadcasting Authority to form the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

Recommendation 35

The Committee recommends that:

- ◆ *As a short term objective, the use of '40' channel UHF CB equipment be adopted for coordination and interoperability of communications at fire ground level.*
- ◆ *As a longer term objective a national communications plan be developed and incorporate the provision of low powered VHF channel allocations for the purpose of ensuring compatible fire ground communications between all agencies on a national basis.*
- ◆ *That the use of UHF CB between units on the fire ground be included in communications planning for intra-state and interstate deployments.*

With regard to the Citizen Band Radio Stations (CB) elements of this recommendation, the Australian Communications and Media Authority has advised that UHF CB radio is an open informal uncoordinated low-cost radiocommunications application that can be used by anyone in Australia. While anyone can use the Class Licensed CB radio spectrum, there are no provisions to reserve any particular channel for emergency service use. That lack of coordination and control might make CB unsuitable for emergency or safety communication purposes. There is the possibility that other users may not respond to emergency calls for assistance or not behave in a responsible manner at critical times (anti-social behaviour is known to occur among some users of CB radio equipment).

The Australian Communications and Media Authority has allocated specific channels in the UHF band (450 to 470 MHz) for exclusive use by police and emergency services. The Government is working with the NCCGR regarding access to, and use of, these channels for inter-operable communications between agencies in times of national emergencies and natural disasters.

The remaining element of this recommendation relating to VHF communications and objectives of a national communications plan will be referred to the NCCGR.

Recommendation 36

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia and the Australian Communications Authority work with state and territory bush fire authorities to ensure that that district communication plans have regard for the amount of radio traffic that may be generated under the most severe conditions.

Recommendation 38

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia and the Australian Communications Authority, in conjunction with the respective state and territory governments, ensure the survivability of essential communication installations during fire incidents by strategic fuel management around the assets.

The Australian Government acknowledges the importance of good communications plans when severe events such as bushfires occur. Therefore, state and territory emergency service organisations which have responsibility in this area must adequately manage their dedicated networks on the ground during an incident to avoid congestion.

Although the issues raised in Recommendation 36 are a state and territory responsibility they should be considered by the NCCGR. Through the Protective Security Coordination Centre as the Australian Government member of the NCCGR, Emergency Management Australia, as an observer to the National Coordinating Committee, will pursue the objectives of Recommendation 36.

While generally the issues raised in Recommendation 38 are a state and territory responsibility, the Department of Communications IT & the Arts and Emergency Management Australia will bring this matter to the attention of the National Committee for Critical Infrastructure Protection, where consideration will be given as to whether the matter needs to be passed to the Communications Sector Infrastructure Assurance Advisory Group for advice on the current plans of telecommunication providers to protect their installations during fire incidents. It should be noted that communications issues were also addressed in the COAG directed National Bushfire Inquiry.

Recommendation 39

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth investigate, and where necessary, require the urgent enhancement of the provision of emergency power and telecommunications services for the purpose of restoring essential services expeditiously in areas affected by fire or other natural disaster and where necessary to place licence requirements on telecommunication providers to do so.

The Australian Government recognises that public networks are already designed for business continuity with redundancy and a high degree of resiliency. Providers have a capacity (although this is clearly dependent on the incident and level of damage etc.) to respond to provide extra communications capacity.

The Australian Government does not support the proposal to require power and telecommunications providers (as part of licence conditions) to enhance existing backup power and telecommunications systems across their entire networks as this would place very significant cost burdens on providers and, consequently, consumers. For example, costs may be incurred due to provision of additional facilities in the case of telecommunications. However, further improvements to bushfire mitigation and management practices and procedures are being pursued by all jurisdictions, through the responses to the COAG Natural Disasters in Australia report and the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management.

Recommendation 40

The Committee recommends that, for the purpose of communications for the police, ambulance and fire brigades, any rental costs associated with the use of radio sites under the care, control or management of the Commonwealth, state, territory or local government be waived, other than for the ongoing cost associated with the use of power at the site.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority provides radiocommunications licence fee concessions and exemptions for certain emergency and safeguarding-of-life bodies where those bodies are staffed principally by volunteers and meet other

specified criteria. While the decision to waive costs for any user of a radio site is a commercial decision for the owner of that site, the Australian Government, at the earliest opportunity, will discuss this issue with relevant parties, including through the NCCGR. The Australian Government encourages site owners to favourably consider requests by emergency service clients to waive some costs during times of emergency, in recognition of the public good provided to the community by such groups.

7. Recommendations regarding volunteers

Recommendation 27

The Committee recommends that

- ◆ *the Commonwealth implement a program similar to the Army Reservist Employer Support Program for the re-imbursment of costs incurred by employers of volunteer fire fighters when attending bush fires for a period exceeding five days in any month; and*
- ◆ *the Commonwealth consult with the states and territories through Council of Australian Governments to develop a range of measures related to local government rates, state government charges and insurance costs to provide rebates for registered volunteer fire fighters.*
- ◆ *the Commonwealth consider the feasibility of taxation relief on costs incurred by registered fire fighting volunteers in the line of duty.*

Recommendation 28

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government work with Australasian Fire Authorities Council to review the insurance cover provided to volunteer fire fighters in all states and territories and ensure that cover is adequate for loss of life or injury and related loss of income and property lost in the line of duty

The Australian Government acknowledges the vital and significant contribution emergency services volunteers make to the safety and well-being of Australian society. Recognition is an important part of volunteering but the Australian Government recognises that proposals that seek to provide financial recognition for volunteers may not always be consistent with the volunteer ethos.

The Australian Government does not endorse the proposal for payment to the employers of emergency services volunteers similar to the Army Reservist Employer Support Program, due to the difficulties in implementing such a scheme and the potential inequities. The Australian Government notes that this position is consistent with the view expressed in the report of the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management.

It is worth noting that the Australian Government already provides generous tax concessions to emergency services organisations. Emergency services or search and rescue teams consisting of volunteers and voluntary organisations such as bush fire brigades, which have as their central purpose the provision of direct relief to disadvantaged people, may qualify as Public Benevolent Institutions (PBIs). This will be the case where they are not arms of government and subject to government control. As PBIs, emergency services organisations are entitled to a number of tax

concessions, such as an income tax exemption, fringe benefit tax exemption and deductible gift recipient status.

In recognition of the valuable work of government emergency service coordination bodies, the Australian Government has introduced legislation to extend deductible gift recipient support to the coordinating bodies for fire and emergency services in each state and territory. If an organisation is a deductible gift recipient, donors are able to claim a tax deduction for most gifts made to the organisation provided that certain conditions are met.

The Australian Government acknowledges the need for greater non-monetary recognition of volunteers but does not support the proposal for tax concessions for individuals.

It is noted that the Australian Government has announced funding of \$16 million over four years to establish a National Emergency Volunteer Support Fund. This fund will boost the recruitment, skills and training base of volunteer organizations at the front line of emergency management. Arrangements for the establishment of this Fund are well advanced, and the development of those arrangements has involved active consultation with states and territories and other stakeholders, including the Australasian Fire Authorities Council.

Tax Concession Proposal

While acknowledging the important work undertaken by emergency services volunteers, the Australian Government does not consider it appropriate for it to provide financial assistance in recognition of their out-of-pocket expenses. Also, as previously stated to the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management, the Australian Government does not consider that tax concessions are the appropriate mechanism for providing this assistance.

The Australian Government notes that volunteer emergency services organisations are primarily funded by state and territory governments and, depending on the management of the individual organisation, volunteers may already be compensated for their out-of-pocket expenses. The Australian Government does not support an additional Commonwealth outlays programme that would ensure direct reimbursement, as such a programme would go against the principle of volunteering; that is, the contribution to the community is the motivation and reward for participating in the activity. This was acknowledged in submissions made to the House of Representatives Select Committee by various volunteer fire brigades including Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

The Australian Government notes that tax deductions are generally considered to be inferior to outlays measures in encouraging behavioural change, as the degree of benefit an individual receives from a tax deduction is dependent on the marginal tax rate they face and therefore their income. Similarly, tax rebates can generally only benefit people who pay tax. Any volunteers who do not pay tax would generally not be able to access a benefit provided in this form. Also, an income tax concession would impose a cost on the Australian Government for what is primarily a state and territory government responsibility.

The Australian Government considers that if income tax concessions were available to emergency services volunteers only, it is likely that there would be pressure to extend them to other volunteer groups. The proposal may generate a significant cost to revenue. Further, the Australian Government notes that such a proposal may have considerable impact on the Australian Taxation Office's administration of allowable deductible expenses and add greater complexity to the tax system.

The Australian Government notes that issues concerning volunteers raised by the report *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements*, endorsed in principle by the COAG (Recommendation 58) will be taken forward by the Australian Emergency Management Committee.

In particular, in relation to Recommendation 28 of the Nairn Inquiry regarding insurance cover to volunteer fire fighters, Recommendation 58 (c) of the *Natural Disasters in Australia: reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements* report asks, *inter alia*, that state and territory governments:

- review and compare the legal protections provided in their legislation to determine whether it offers adequate cover for both volunteers and their organisations; and
- consider providing assistance with the provision of public liability insurance for emergency management volunteer organisations.

8. Recommendations regarding insurance and charges

Recommendation 42

The Committee strongly recommends that the New South Wales, Victorian and Tasmanian Governments abolish the Fire Levy tax they impose on home and business insurance premiums (wherever applicable), making it payable through household rates instead.

Any cost savings gained by the insurance industry through relief from collecting Fire Levies should be passed on to policyholders through reduced premiums. At the same time the Committee urges the Insurance Council of Australia to run ongoing education campaigns to increase public awareness on bushfire preparedness, including the need for insurance.

Recommendation 44

The Committee suggests that registered volunteer fire fighters be exempt from paying Fire Levy tax to help offset some of the expense they incur during active duty. The exemption could be for a period of 12 months following each bushfire season in which they are proven to have fought fires.

Fire Levy taxes are levied by state and territory governments. In relation to Recommendation 44, the Australian Government considers it appropriate that state and territory governments consider providing exemptions for emergency services volunteers.

In regard to Recommendation 42, the Australian Government agrees that state and territory governments should reduce or eliminate inefficient and inequitable taxes. The Australian Government Treasurer wrote to the state and territory Treasurers on

11 September 2003 in regard to the HIH Royal Commission recommendation that states and territories abolish fire services levies on insurers.

Recommendation 43

The Committee recommends that taxes on insurance premiums be calculated only on the premium in order to eliminate the current cascading cost.

While this issue is the responsibility of the state and territory governments, the Australian Government supports the recommendation and strongly encourages state and territory governments to change their current policies. The GST has provided the states and territories with increased revenues and they should not be resorting to ‘tax on tax’ methodologies to further increase revenues.

General insurance policies such as household and fire insurance are subject to GST in the same manner as other goods and services. Under the *A New Tax System (Goods and Services Tax) Act 1999*, GST does not apply to taxes that states and territories charge on insurance policies.

However, the level of state taxes and the calculation of these taxes is determined by the states and territories. It is a matter for individual states and territories to decide whether their taxes are levied on a GST inclusive or exclusive price of the premium.

Recommendation 45

The Committee recommends that the Insurance Council of Australia coordinates a public education campaign aimed at illustrating the importance of asset protection and how this can be achieved (that is, insurance products).

Recommendation 46

The Committee recommends that insurance companies ensure that potential and existing policyholders are aware of the need to regularly review their insurance policies to prevent undervaluing. This could be done through renewal notices and quarterly reminders. This should include a list of bushfire risk reduction measures that policyholders can implement to decrease the cost of their premium.

The Australian Government supports attempts to ensure that the insurance industry takes account of lessons learnt regarding the level of under-insurance and the treatment of policy holders during the recent bushfires.

The Insurance Council of Australia is currently reviewing its Code of Practice. The Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer will write to the Council drawing its attention to these recommendations.

9. Recommendations regarding building construction

Recommendation 47

The Committee recommends that Standards Australia incorporate building maintenance into AS3959–1999: Construction of buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas, perhaps renaming it as AS3959–1999: Construction and maintenance of buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas.

Recommendation 49

The Committee recommends that Standards Australia review the clarity of AS3959–1999: Construction of buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas to ensure that all relevant stakeholders can interpret and apply the Standard in the way it is intended.

Recommendation 50

The Committee recommends that Program D of the Commonwealth Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre examines the (pending) outcome of the ABCB's review of the existing Building Code of Australia bushfire provisions (including Standard AS3959–1999) to determine their adequacy and the ways in which compliance can be better managed. This should include extending its scope to cover existing buildings and those that are not in areas declared as bushfire prone, yet still on the urban/rural interface and therefore, potentially at risk.

The Australian Government supports these recommendations and considers that the Australian Building Codes Board should place priority on its current review of the Building Code of Australia provisions and Standard AS 3959.

The Building Code of Australia (BCA) currently contains provisions for construction of certain buildings to resist bushfires in order to reduce the risk to life and minimise the risk of property loss in designated bushfire-prone areas. These provisions generally include requirements for determining the bushfire exposure hazard on a site, as well as construction requirements to resist exposure to burning debris, radiant heat and flame contact. The Australian Building Codes Board considers that the bushfire hazard should be approached in a holistic manner and that construction provisions are only one part of the solution.

The Australian Building Codes Board, in conjunction with Standards Australia and with advice from the Bureau of Meteorology, is currently reviewing the existing Building Code of Australia provisions and Standard AS 3959 to ensure they are practical, effective, reflect good regulatory principles and informed by the latest scientific knowledge. The Australian Building Codes Board is a core participant of the Bushfire CRC and will direct research within the Bushfire CRC to aid the development of the provisions for construction in bushfire-prone areas.

The Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources will write to the Australian Building Codes Board, identifying the review as a priority and reinforcing both the urgency for, and benefits of, encouraging Standards Australia to complete the revision of the Australian Standard that follows the COAG *Principles and Guidelines for National Standard Setting and Regulatory Action by Ministerial Councils and Standard-Setting Bodies* and its enactment through the Building Code of Australia. In

his letter the Minister will ask the Board to resolve as soon as possible any other outstanding issues relating to the building code and natural hazards including bushfires and he will refer the Board to Recommendations 47, 49 and 50 of the report.

Recommendation 48

The Committee recommends that state and territory governments be required to regularly perform risk assessments to the land within their jurisdictions to ensure that bushfire prone areas are accurately identified and can be appropriately managed. This should include possibly prohibiting, or at least limiting, reticulated development in these areas. If building is effectively prohibited on land previously zoned for residential or commercial building, state and territory governments, in conjunction with local councils, should adequately compensate the affected landholders.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation and encourages the states and territories to continue improving bushfire risk assessment through the implementation of the reform commitments and recommendations in the COAG report *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements*. In particular, Reform Commitment 4 states that governments should:

take action to ensure more effective statutory State, Territory and Local Government land use planning, development and building control regimes that systematically identify natural hazards and include measures to reduce the risk of damage from these natural hazards.

Reform Commitment 4 and Recommendations 12, 13, 14 and 15 of the COAG *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements* report are currently being addressed through the Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council. The Australian Government is also providing training in risk based land use planning through Emergency Management Australia.

10. Recommendations regarding miscellaneous actions

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Attorney-General engage the Commonwealth, states and territories in a review of occupational health and safety legislation as it affects the proper and effective functioning of bush fire services.

The Australian Government agrees that the occupational health and safety concerns of volunteers are important issues.

As noted under Recommendation 54, the Australian Government notes that Finding 12.2 of the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management found that existing state and territory legislation dealing with occupational health and safety

is sound and that the effort required to achieve a nationally uniform approach is not warranted. Ongoing review of the issue was proposed.

Occupational health and safety issues concerning volunteers were also raised in Recommendation 58 of the COAG report *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements* and will be addressed by the reconstituted Australian Emergency Management Committee, chaired by the Attorney-General's Department.

During the 2004 election, the Australian Government announced a commitment of \$16 million over four years to establish a National Emergency Volunteer Support Fund. This fund will boost the recruitment, skills and training base of volunteer organizations at the front line of emergency management. Arrangements for the establishment of this Fund are well advanced, as noted earlier.

Matters raised in this recommendation will be included as an agenda item at the next meeting of the Australian Emergency Management Committee, with particular reference to the state and territory review processes.

Recommendation 26

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia initiate a process involving Australasian Fire Authorities Council and the Australian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigades Association to review the coordination of cross border fire fighting arrangements and interstate deployment of fire fighting resources. The review should specifically consider training on the full range of equipment and procedures likely to be encountered, standardisation of equipment and procedures, communication and the provision of information about local characteristics such as access to water.

The Australian Government supports the improvement in cross-jurisdiction arrangements and improvements in inter-operability and standardisation of equipment. It is noted that through the Australian Emergency Management Committee process there has been the development of a paper "Guidelines for the Provision of Support Between States". While issues related to standardisation remain the responsibility of the states and territories, Emergency Management Australia will work with the Australasian Fire Authorities Council through the Australian Emergency Management Committee to overcome any inconsistencies.

The Australian Government, through the Australian National Training Authority³, has played a role in identifying standards for mitigation against fire and emergencies. These standards have been nationally agreed after extensive consultation with stakeholders and are being used for training purposes. The standards allow for training in specific pieces of equipment and differing circumstances and cover management as well as operational skills. The standards also allow for local legislative and regulatory requirements as well as being able to be used for training on equipment used locally. Procedures are documented in training support material developed to support implementation of the standards. However the standards do not and cannot

³ From 1 July 2005 the responsibility and functions of the Australian National Training Authority will be transferred to the Department of Education, Science and Training.

accommodate or prescribe the use of standardised equipment where this has not been agreed nationally.

Recommendation 29

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth should commit funding for aerial fire fighting beyond the 2003–04 season on the proviso that the Australasian Fire Authorities Council and the state and territory governments make a commitment to:

- ◆ *Rapid initial attack of all wildfires during the bush fire season regardless of tenure.*
- ◆ *Deployment on long term contracts of a mix of aircraft, including fixed wing.*
- ◆ *Deployment of aircraft on a nationally coordinated risk analysis basis to be updated as each fire season unfolds.*
- ◆ *Provision of nationally coordinated full ground support.*
- ◆ *Development of training arrangements for air crews, ground support crews, incident management teams and fire fighters to a national standard.*
- ◆ *Development of systems of effective aerial control of fire bombing operations.*

The Australian Government believes that the investment in aerial firefighting must be utilised effectively. This includes the use of appropriate aircraft at the appropriate time during a fire event. The Australian Government has already announced further funding for the National Aerial Fire Fighting Centre of \$5.5 million per annum for the three years 2004-05 to 2006-07. The Department of Transport and Regional Services will require detailed acquittal of the Australian Government's contribution to aerial firefighting resources to ensure the most effective use of aircraft.

The decision to attack fires using aerial firefighting equipment is solely that of the jurisdiction with “ownership” of the fire. The National Aerial Firefighting Centre has no role in making this type of decision, although the new “national” arrangements allow for a more flexible movement of resources between jurisdictions in response to their requests.

The mix of aircraft in the national pool is determined by the needs of the states and territories taking into account their individual firefighting requirements and budgetary constraints. This process is centrally coordinated by the National Aerial Firefighting Centre to enable the best mix of aircraft using economies of scale within budget constraints.

Deployment of aircraft is decided by states and territories in conjunction with the National Aerial Firefighting Centre prior to each season, taking into account their perceived and immediate fire risk. This is reviewed annually prior to each fire season with the needs of each state and territory being taken into account by National Aerial Firefighting Centre as part of its planning process.

Ground support for each aircraft is a requirement of the current “wet” lease arrangements, i.e., a service is leased, not just the aircraft.

It is understood that training arrangements are in place as part of Australasian Fire Authorities Council Training Resource Kit for aviation. This is based on the National Public Safety Training Package as part of the national competency framework.

Systems for aerial control of fire bombing operations have been in place for some time as part of the suite of tools for firefighting. In addition the Bushfire CRC will be undertaking research evaluating effectiveness of aircraft and the results of that research will be considered by the Australasian Fire Authorities Council.

Recommendation 52

The Committee recommends that the Australasian Fire Authorities Council's suggested evacuation protocol be adopted by all of the Australian States and Territories.

The Australian Government notes the importance of clear advice for residents during a bushfire and supports this recommendation. It is important however that the message of “go early or stay and defend” is communicated carefully because in relation to other disasters it may not be appropriate to allow a resident to stay.

The Bushfire CRC is examining these issues within the broad context of Programme C of its research which looks at the social impact and elements of preparedness of communities at risk. The Bushfire CRC's research outcomes will help inform the development of policy in this area.

Recommendation 8.7 of the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management also addresses the issue of a ‘go early or stay and defend’ policy.

The COAG has asked the Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council and the Australian Emergency Management Committee to consider the implementation of a nationally consistent approach and provide guidance to jurisdictions on issues related to community information, training, warnings and evacuations for disaster situations.

Recommendation 55

The Committee recommends that the functions and administration of Emergency Management Australia be reviewed to develop an organisation that is proactive and involved in the development and implementation of national policy on emergency response.

The Department of Transport and Regional Services is the Australian Government agency with principal responsibility for natural disaster policy matters, including natural disaster relief and mitigation in the form of financial assistance to the states and territories; the Attorney-General's Department (including Emergency Management Australia) is responsible for Australian Government emergency management.

The endorsement in principle of the High Level Group Report *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements* has involved Emergency Management Australia heavily in the establishment of and support for the high level governance of emergency management in Australia. This will involve Emergency Management Australia at all levels of national policy development, where

appropriate. Further, Emergency Management Australia is a member of the National Counter Terrorism Committee and the Australian Government Counter Terrorism Policy Committee, thereby involving Emergency Management Australia in the development of national security related policy. Through these means, Emergency Management Australia is involved pro-actively in the integration of crisis and consequence management, in an all hazard context. Evidence of this was recently tested by Emergency Management Australia bringing consequence management issues to the fore during Tsunami Assist.

The current arrangements are supported in Finding 8.1 of the COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management which states that “The current all-hazards control and coordination arrangements at the national and state and territory levels are adequate for the operational management of bushfires in Australia.”

Recommendation 56

The Committee recommends in acknowledgement of the expertise that the Commonwealth can bring to the Australasian Fire Authorities Council and of funding already supplied to the Council for the development of a National Aerial Firefighting Strategy, that the current status of Emergency Management Australia on AFAC as an associate member be upgraded to full membership and that full membership also be extended to the Department of Defence.

Emergency Management Australia became a full member of the Australasian Fire Authorities Council in October 2003 and represents the Australian Government on the Council. The Department of Defence is a member of three Australasian Fire Authorities Council committees.

Recommendation 57

The Committee recommends that the Department of Transport and Regional Services review its record keeping practices to show the type of emergency for which assistance is provided through the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements.

The Department of Transport and Regional Services is currently reviewing the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements in light of recommendations related to the Arrangements made in the COAG report *Natural Disasters in Australia; Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements*, accepted by all Australian Governments in December 2003. The Committee’s recommendations will be given particular consideration as part of that review.