



The Secretary
 Colo Heights Rural Fire Brigade
 103 Wheelbarrow Ridge Rd
 COLO HEIGHTS 2756

8th May 2003

Select Committee on Bushfires
 Parliament House
 Canberra ACT 2600

Cause and risk factors of bushfires

A letter was received by Colo Heights Rural Fire Brigade from the Federal Member for Macquarie seeking submissions to the Select Committee on Bushfires. It was resolved at the meeting on the 24th April 2003 of the Colo Heights Rural Fire Brigade that a letter be forwarded to the Select Committee on Bushfires regarding some cause and risk factors and other problems experienced by our brigade during recent fire seasons.

Colo Heights Rural Fire Brigade covers an area of just under 1,000 square kilometres in the Hawkesbury Local Government Area on the northwestern outskirts of Sydney. A majority of the area consists of National Park with approximately 100 rural residential properties scattered throughout the area. Almost the entire area consists of eucalypt forest on deeply dissected sandstone. The entire area would be regarded as a high bushfire risk area.

Colo Heights experienced major bushfires in 1994, 1997 and 2001. All these fires were started by natural causes (lightning strikes) within the National Parks areas and then grew in intensity and threatened the lives and properties on the outskirts of the Parks. Huge numbers of volunteer personnel, equipment and resources, defence forces, National Parks personnel and air support were required to prevent loss of life and property on each occasion.

All fires are based on three elements – Heat, Oxygen and Fuel. Of these, Fuel is the only element which can be manipulated before a fire event. The fuel can be reduced to lower the intensity of the fire, generally by prescribed burning (or hazard reduction) or by removal of the fuel by the creation of firebreaks.

Over recent times, the National Parks and Wildlife Service have greatly reduced hazard reduction within the parks situated in the Colo Heights area and have actively discouraged hazard reduction by local Rural Fire Brigades. Recent problems

associated with obtaining Environmental Impact Statements prior to hazard reduction activities have also reduced the hazard reduction undertaken by Rural Fire Brigades.

It is appreciated that fire management and an appropriate fire regime is a complex issue to maintain the correct environmental diversity, and that major changes have occurred since European occupation, however prescribed burning remains the one viable option in an area such as Colo Heights to reduce the impact of fire on local communities. Combined with an improved system of permanent firebreaks at strategic locations and the maintenance of existing fire trails, as well as the establishment of further fire trails where strategically important, the local Fire Brigades stand some chance of controlling wild fire when they occur.

At an operational level, there are other problems faced by brigades over recent years.

Communications has become a vital tool in combating bushfire, and during recent fire events, two main problems have occurred. Radio coverage within some areas is virtually non-existent which can lead to unsafe situations where assistance may be required urgently. Lack of radio coverage has led to a number of incidents where the lives of firefighters could have been at risk. Improvements to radio coverage in our area of operations are currently underway. The other problem is radio congestion during major fire events, where at times it is impossible to send a message due to the number of other calls. Effective communication is an important safety issue, as well as an important issue in the effective control of bushfires, and improvements should be investigated.

Also at an operational level, it is often the simple things which have a big impact on the role of volunteer fire fighters. Major equipment such as fire tankers, brigade fire sheds etc are now generally modern and well equipped, however simple issues such as the supply of firefighting uniforms to new members can be difficult to obtain. Minor frustrations such as these often affect recruitment and retention of new members.

In general, the operation of the Rural Fire Service is seen as an effective and well managed organisation which generally manages the risk and suppression of bushfire. Improvements in hazard reduction, fire trail management, communications and resourcing of local Rural Fire Brigades are considered ways of further improving bushfire prevention, suppression and control and hence reducing the impact of bushfire on local communities and the environment.

Yours Faithfully,

Anthony Shorten
President
Colo Heights Rural Fire Brigade

Matthew Maude
Captain
Colo Heights Rural Fire Brigade