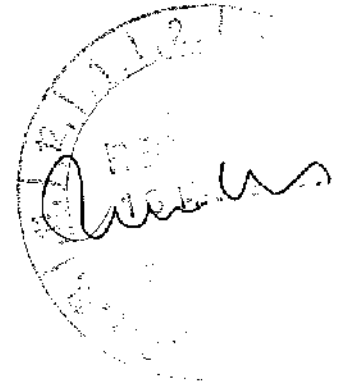


Sub 182



Committee Secretary
Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
ACT 2600

5th May 2003

Dear Sir,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this proposal to the Committee in the wake of the recent summer fire disasters in NSW and the A.C.T.

As Senior Pilot and manager of a company that has been at the forefront in the supply of helicopter services since they were introduced in fire control and management, I am able to contribute some ideas and solutions to the ongoing problems associated with fire management and suppression.

Recommendations- From an aviation perspective there are some key areas of concern which collectively reduce the efficiency of fire control. These are:

- **Lack of designated aircraft with remote crews assigned to areas of the state that are particularly susceptible to wild fire.** These areas are often under the control of the NPWS, an organisation that is often criticised for its inability to control such fires. The reality is that, with limited resources, this organisation has staff who are highly experienced in organising and dealing with these situations and they should be used accordingly.
- **Delayed response and action subsequent to fire detection.** The decision making process is too slow where state operations authorisation is required. Centralisation of such processes is far too time consuming and decisions need to be made in the field by competent local staff.
- **Lack of training of field staff in procedures around aircraft.** NPWS staff are proficient in this regard however, other agencies, to a large degree, require more training.

- **Inadequate tasking of Aircraft.** Some incident management teams have a lack of understanding of the capabilities of types of aircraft and pilots.

We see: -

- Medium helicopters used in mop up exercises when light helicopters should be used.
- Inexperienced pilots tasked to difficult jobs.
- Aircraft continually flying when they are totally ineffective.
- Heavy helicopters continually missing targets on bombing runs and in fact light helicopters being much more effective on the same task.
- Mapping runs and surveys being undertaken over and over again, much of which is simply pleasure flights.
- FLIR runs being carried out at the wrong stage of the fire with totally useless information being reported.
- The list goes on.

I advise that during the 2000/2001 fire season Heli-Aust supplied helicopter services to the Sydney Catchment/NPWS Seasonal fire crew. The purpose of the group was to have a team of well trained remote area fire fighters who were also winch trained and supported by initially a light Squirrel helicopter on stand by to protect the Sydney Catchment. The response time to a fire was in most cases as little as 30 minutes. Patrols were carried out as a deterrent to arson attacks and every smoke sighting or lightning strike was inspected.

During the period between Christmas and the New Year alone, 5 fires in remote areas were extinguished within a very short period of time. This was due to the quick response time to insert crews and begin water bombing operations. The model worked extremely well and was very cost effective (details of which have been documented).

As a result of this experience it is evident that there is a need to assign helicopters and designated trained crews to certain target areas. There is no need to assign large expensive aircraft for this purpose as with quick response to fires a Squirrel helicopter is just as effective and more practical for use in patrols and training during period of less fire danger.

The proposed model could be broadly summarised as follows:

- Designated helicopter would ideally be a winch equipped AS350 Squirrel. These helicopters are fast and very cost effective for crew insertion, patrols, training and accurate water bombing.
- Specialist trained fire fighting crews to support initial fire insertions who would also assist in training days during low fire danger periods.
- Bases for these designated helicopters and fire-fighters would be staged at locations such as Grafton, Coffs Harbour, Bulga, Blackheath and Kosciusko. These teams would move depending on seasonal conditions. For example the Grafton team would move to a location further south as the fire danger patterns changed.
- Initial response to fires would be quick gaining time for additional ground crews to locate to the fire. Decisions can then be made to deploy further aviation resources if required. It may also be pertinent to have medium helicopters on contractual arrangements based in strategic areas to cover several regions which could then be deployed as required.
- Costing- A winch equipped Squirrel helicopter contracted for such purposes, utilised at an average of 2 hours per day (training, survey, initial response) will cost somewhere in the order of \$2500.00 per day. The hourly rate of such an aircraft is less than half that of a medium helicopter and less than one tenth that of most heavy helicopters.

In summary, to have contracted helicopters and fixed wing bombers based at such locations with trained remote fire fighters a fast response to fires will be assured. It is also advantageous as the resources can also be used for the much needed training of other ground based members.

Statistics from the 2000 fire season in Canada show that of the 1533 fires that grew beyond initial attack capability, the largest was contained at 380 hectares. This was achieved by quick deployment of resources.

This is where we going wrong. Fires are being attacked too late and therefore become out of control. The mentality of throwing large numbers of aircraft, some of which are flown by inexperienced fire pilots, at out of control fires is not working. We need to be more efficient and the agencies should be looking for a core group of dedicated operators to support their needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to place these proposals before you.

Yours faithfully



Jim Norrie