

Submission No.191

S. Loiterton,



Committee Secretary  
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires  
Department of the House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Ma'am,

I wish to submit a submission to the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires.

I am a volunteer with the A.C.T. Emergency Service and played a part in the response to the bushfires around in within Canberra. As a volunteer with an emergency service involved in the preparation and response to such disasters I have some comments that may be of interest to the committee. I should also like to make it clear that I make this submission on a personal basis and do not claim to be representing an organisation.

If you have any queries concerning this submission I can be contacted on (02) 6270 4348 during business hours.

Yours sincerely,

S. Loiterton

A SUBMISSION TO THE  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
SELECT COMMITTEE  
INTO THE  
RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

SUBMITTED BY

S. LOITERTON

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This submission relates to two of the matters being investigated by the committee, namely: the adequacy of current response arrangements for fire-fighting, and the adequacy of deployment of fire-fighting resources (in particular the effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies).

I am a member of the A.C.T. Emergency Service, and have been for nearly 17 years. The A.C.T. Emergency Service undertakes a variety of emergency response duties, including bushfire response (usually as logistic support). Another significant role is that of storm damage mitigation.

In the Australian Capital Territory the volunteer units of the A.C.T. Emergency Service are co-located with brigades of the A.C.T. Bushfire Service. Sharing accommodation, some vehicles and equipment. This arrangement has been in place since 1997 after the A.C.T. Government announce a joint management structure for both organisations (discussed later in this submission). This has created a rather intimate resource sharing relationship.

The accommodation is shared between two services. Members of both services located at a particular shed have equal and essentially full access to the shed and resources contained within. There was an apparent increase in resources which could be put to use. Indeed this is one of the reasons put forward for the co-

location. However, this also has negative repercussions which, predictably, became quite apparent during the responses to this year's bushfire disaster.

Each A.C.T. Emergency Service Unit is limited to one vehicle, a Toyota Troop Carrier capable of carrying 11 persons. This limits the capacity of ACTES units to fully activate, as units typically have a membership of 20-30 volunteers. It is argued that the resource sharing, by which the A.C.T. Emergency Service can utilise the A.C.T. Bushfire Service's command vehicle capable of seating 5, effectively provides a second vehicle for ACTES use. A fact glossed over is that this only provides for a total of 16 seats, less than the number of members in the majority of units. And less than the number of members activated on any one day by the unit in which I am a member between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> January. The argument is also used for not purchasing a second vehicle for ACTES units.

Another significant fact is that while the A.C.T. Bushfire Service is in need of its command vehicle it is unavailable for A.C.T. Emergency Service use. Hence, during the bushfire response (which also included a response to a severe storm caused by a tornado which impacted Canberra at the same time) the A.C.T. Emergency Service had to operate without the shared resource, hence limiting the extent of its response. As a natural consequence many members utilised their private vehicles for response operations.

The use of private resources will quite naturally place a cost burden upon the member. One of the outcomes of a national summit on volunteering in Australia was that no volunteer should be left out of pocket as a result of volunteering.

Another resource shared is the radio network. On the 18<sup>th</sup> January the radio network was completely utilised for bushfire related messages. The A.C.T. Emergency Service effectively had no intra-service radio communications. This was sustained for several days. Many volunteers used their personal mobile phones instead. Again incurring a cost to themselves. For some this was in time reimbursed, however this is not standard policy.

Of, course during non-emergency situation the sharing arrangements do work effectively. Similarly if only one service is active at a time there is rarely any conflict of interests. However, being a part of an emergency service means hoping for the best, preparing for the worst. As it currently stands such a comprehensive sharing of resources as exists in the A.C.T. is akin to planning for the best, hoping for the best.

I referred previous to a A.C.T. Government restructure of the management of the A.C.T. Emergency Service and A.C.T. Bushfire Service. Under this arrangement both services share the same management, i.e. they are both managed by the same people, with the same chief officer. The Director of the A.C.T. Emergency Service is also the Chief Fire Control Officer of the A.C.T. Bushfire Service. The support staff are likewise not service specific. These arrangements were vigorously opposed by many A.C.T. Emergency Service volunteers at the time of implementation. This had dramatic effects on January 18<sup>th</sup>, the day of the bushfire disaster impact upon Canberra.

I and at least 30 of my colleagues were left at a staging area without tasking on January the 18<sup>th</sup>. Indeed we were ordered to remain at the staging area. We were effectively sitting around do nothing when the community was in dire need of the assistance we were trained to perform. Add to this the fact that an equal number of volunteers were on stand-by at sheds but not deployed, and many others who were not even called to active duty. This is despite repeated attempts to seek tasks. Houses were burning, the public were trying to make their way to evacuation centres through thick smoke and ash, and A.C.T. Fire Brigade officers were calling for vehicles to evacuate residents without cars, yet we were not asked to provide assistance. People dressed in synthetic clothes, short sleeves, and untrained in fire-fighting were used instead of trained personnel with adequately clothing and personal protective equipment to perform such a task.

The cause of this I believe lies in the shared management of the two volunteer organisations. Quite naturally the A.C.T. Bushfire Service was extremely busy. The focus was on the bushfires. The focus on bushfires left the A.C.T. Emergency Service volunteers standing around without tasks.

It may be claimed that we (ACTES volunteers) were not fully trained structural fire-fighters. This means little. We are trained in fire survival and basic fire-fighting techniques. We are trained to respond to a wide variety of emergencies. We are trained to direct traffic, yet many intersections used by evacuees were left unattended. We are trained in storm damage operations. Canberra was struck by an F2 tornado at the same time as the bushfire which caused damage to scores of houses and left roads blocked by falling trees. Yet no response was dispatched until late the next day. The focus was on the bushfire operations, which fully took the attention of the management.

During a debrief in the weeks after the disaster the management of the A.C.T. Bushfire and Emergency Service were brought to challenge on this issue. They claimed they did not know we were available. Even though we had placed many, many, calls advising them of such during the disaster. The ineffectiveness of the shared management arrangement meant that they were incapable of even recognising that half of it's personnel were doing nothing. This is, to me, astounding, and a natural consequent of the management structure.

I have been a volunteer with the A.C.T. Emergency Service for 17 years. It has been to my dismay to see the effectiveness of the A.C.T. Emergency Service diminished over the past 6 years because of too much resource sharing, particularly the sharing of management.

As I mentioned above the resource sharing used in the A.C.T. is not all bad, it does have some benefits, just not during major emergencies. Given the focus of emergency service organisations it means little that resource sharing is effective at times other than during emergencies. Effective resource sharing should ensure that resources that cannot be used by more than one party at a time are not considered shared. Where resources are considered to be used by more than one party at a time should be extensive enough to allow such. While the arrangements in the A.C.T. are not generally used elsewhere in Australia it serves as a useful warning as to the folly of too much resource sharing. Unfortunately it has taken the tragic events of last summer for anyone to take notice.