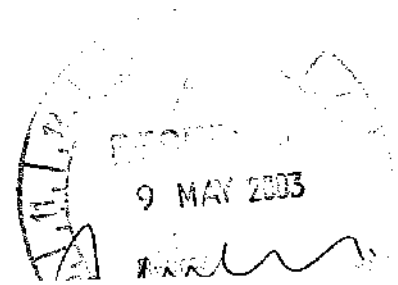


9 May 2000

The Secretary
Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Submission No.213

By email: bushfires.reps@aph.gov.au

Submission from Andrew Southcott MP, Member for Boothby, SA

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires.

In my submission, I would like to highlight the risks associated with residential housing in a bushland setting, which can be found in a number of Australian cities. It would be desirable for the Committee to consider the unique issue of feral olive infestation, which is present in parts of the Adelaide Hills. An examination needs to be made as to whether the combined efforts of Local and State Governments are effectively able to reduce fuel loads and implement adequate bushfire prevention strategies. My question is this: Is there a role for the Commonwealth in making bushfire prevention activities eligible for Natural Heritage Trust funding? This is an issue which I urge the Committee to investigate and report on.

Discussion

In South Australia, the Adelaide Hills and the Hills Face Zone contain a high bushfire threat. This was highlighted by the 1980 and 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires, which destroyed hundreds of homes and in which several residents and a volunteer fire-fighter died in the Hills.

The Hills contain residential development within areas of undeveloped woodland. This combination can also be found in Sydney in areas such as the Blue Mountains and Sutherland Shire, which have both been recently affected by bushfire.

In the electorate of Boothby, The City of Mitcham controls 342 hectares of undeveloped woodland. The areas managed by Council have a woody weed infestation. The major woody weeds in Mitcham include feral olives, broom and boneseed. Feral olive infestations pose risks for fire fighting due to their high flammability and the intense heat they create when burning. I am told that they generate a higher temperature than eucalypts.

The infestation of woody weeds is not just on Council reserves. It is also rife within private property, as well as the Belair National Park, which is managed by National Parks and Wildlife SA. Reducing the fuel load, and hence the bushfire hazard, requires a coordinated approach with households, Local Government and State Government.

At present, the City of Mitcham is spending \$840,000 over three years to control woody weeds. The Council requires assistance from the South Australian Government to access bushfire prevention funding and grants from the Emergency Services Levy fund.

Both the Council and I have examined the possibility of Natural Heritage Trust funding to assist with woody weed removal. The Council has discussed the issue with the Natural Heritage Trust and understood that weed removal would not be eligible for funding, at this time. Under current arrangements, funds from Natural Heritage Trust 2 will be distributed from the Commonwealth to the States via accredited integrated natural resource management plans for each region. In the region of Greater Adelaide and the Mount Lofty Ranges, the City of Mitcham is lobbying to include woody weed eradication in the plan.

To remove woody weeds, The City of Mitcham uses a "cut and swab" technique involving a chainsaw and herbicide. Stem injection with a herbicide has the advantage of retaining habitat but does nothing to reduce the fuel load. The Council estimates that the cost of using the cut and swab technique is \$15,000/hectare. It also estimates that maintenance costs are \$2,000/ha.

I am advised by the City of Mitcham that up to 20,000 homes could be at risk due to the woody weed infestation throughout the Adelaide Hills. I am also providing your Committee with a copy of a funding application, which the Council has sent to the SA Government. The application outlines the enormous costs for a local council of undertaking bushfire prevention activities in such an area.

It appears clear that in the Adelaide Hills, Local and State Government do not have the resources to completely reduce the bushfire risk to residential homes.

Conclusion

The Committee should recommend that Natural Heritage Trust 2 funds are available for bushfire prevention activities such as woody weed removal. Removing feral olives should not be precluded from the criteria.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Southcott MP
Member for Boothby

Encl.
Ref. AJS/ JD