

The Secretary of the Committee,
Inquiry into recent Bushfires in Australia,
House of Representatives,
Parliament of Australia,
Canberra, ACT 2600.

Submission No.26

Dear Secretary,

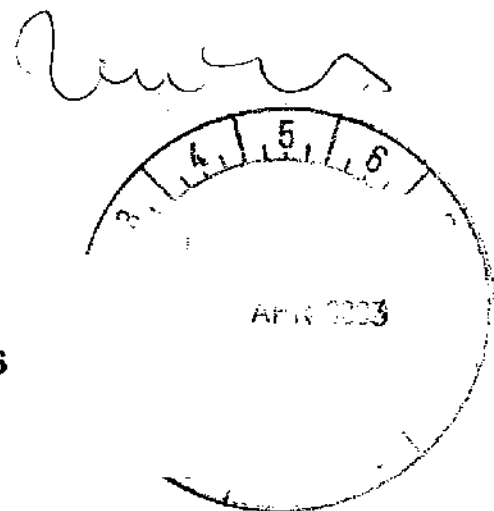
Comments on recent Australian bushfires

The problem of bushfires in Australia can be summarised in one word – Motivation. When smoke fills the air and a fire threatens there is a magnificent effort made by all involved in suppressing the fire and one can only wonder at their success, given the paucity of resources available to complete the task.

Touching on b, c, d, h and j, of your terms of reference, overcoming inertia of complacency, when there is no fire threat, is the most difficult part of maintaining a high priority of interest from State Governments through to residents. The process of preparation of bushland in vulnerable areas is a long term constant. Managing bushland is not easily achieved in one season, fuel levels are constantly being increased throughout the year and reach dangerous depths very quickly, a fact that is easily overlooked as the appearance of the bush does not appear to change.

Residents in fire prone areas lose interest when the rains start and the fire risk recedes. If there has been a fire close to their residential area then interest is lost because “it won’t happen again for another thirty years”. It will be interesting to observe how many residents re-building in Canberra, for instance, will incorporate independent sprinkler systems into their homes ready for the next fire. There is no guarantee that a season like 2002-3 will not happen again. It will be interesting to see how many insurance companies insist that appropriate protection measures are incorporated into the new homes in fire ravaged areas. Not enough emphasis is placed on the relatively low cost of incorporating such measures to protect homes. Not enough emphasis is placed on the help that such measures afford those whose job it is to fight the fires to prevent the loss of homes and other premises.

Local Government Rates may have to include incentives to be actively involved in the process of fire prevention at all levels of ownership, residential, commercial, industrial and rural. State and Local Government bodies also need to be encouraged to demonstrate their effectiveness in managing areas under their control. They are not in a position to preach to the community when they are so negligent themselves. In fact it is the very poor management of areas, under their control, that contributes to the intensity of the fires. The alternative of denuding areas likely to be a threat is not acceptable, as has been the case in our particular Shire.



Bushfire warning systems are totally inadequate at present.

- Phone systems don't work – not all numbers in any given area are connectable because of silent numbers.
- Answering machines take many of the messages.
- Diversion to mobile phones is haphazard.
- Mobile phones are not always switched on.
- Internet web sites are not available in every home
- Radio warnings require listening to specific stations at specific times and fires do not recognize these limitations and pause while we get the information, if and when it is available. Our experience in 2003 has shown the reporting of fires to be very selective and unreliable. Residents seeing or smelling fire need information long before there is a need to evacuate, to make appropriate preparations to evacuate or to stay and fight the fire. Anxiety increases when ignorance prevails.
- I have advocated a mobile siren system mounted on fire/police vehicles that have a learned code of signals that can be sounded say, within two kilometres of the fire front. Such sirens would penetrate homes that are air-conditioned and sealed against summer heat and the occupants distracted by some activity within the home, paying little attention to events outside.

Further with respect to j, in your terms of reference, it has become obvious that there is a valuable role for residents to contribute to the prevention and suppression of fires. There is a need for official recognition by fire-fighting authorities of resident groups and recognition for the need for further education and encouragement to improve this process. Again, encouragement via Shire Rates may be necessary. Penalties should apply for those who do not meet certain requirements. These should include a range of penalty levels on levels of preparation. The additional income raised from those who are unwilling to prepare can be used to fund the volunteer brigades.

Say, 50% increase in Rates for those who do nothing.

-35% increases for those who only establish fire breaks and don't maintain them throughout the season.

-25% increases for those who have firebreaks and maintain them.

-15% increase for those who belong to a street based community fire group.

-10% increase for those who implement the preparation advocated in the community based fire prevention manuals.

-No increase for those who install independent sprinkler systems and follow the preparation steps out lined in the manual.

Insurance Companies and Lending Authorities should also acknowledge efforts to protect property, this would help keep premiums down. The cost of fire losses would not have to be passed on to the insuring public. Ex-gratia payments should be made to all victims of fire not just to those who have NOT insured. Payment to those who have not insured is unfair to those who have.

These observations are based on five years experience in coordinating a street group of intelligent and fairly willing residents.

Best wishes in your endeavours,

Yours faithfully,

