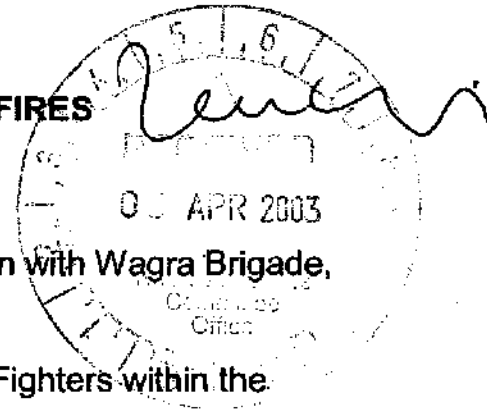


**SUBMISSION**

**INCIDENCE and IMPACT of BUSHFIRES**



I am a farmer and volunteer fire fighter (Deputy Captain with Wagra Brigade, NSW Rural Fire Service).

I am also the elected representative of Volunteer Fire Fighters within the Holbrook local government area.

I have had many years of experience as a volunteer fire fighter with CFA (VIC) in Gippsland and more recently with RFS (NSW) in the Upper Murray. Both these areas are hill grazing country with bushland adjacent to farmland.

During the last week in January 2003, five trucks (fire fighting appliances) with two crews for each truck, from the area surrounding Albury were sent to the Tumut Fire Control area. This task force included two Category 1 tankers and three Category 7 tankers.

Category 1 tankers carry a large amount of water, but because of their size, have limited ability on narrow fire trails. These tankers are used mainly in cropping areas. Category 7 tankers have increased ability to access narrow fire trails but carry less water. In hard to access areas, the Category 1 tankers were used to provide "on the spot" refill for Category 7 tankers. This co operation avoids the need for Category 7 tankers to spend a lot of time travelling to water points for refill.

The task force was deployed in the fire containment operation near Wee Jasper. We worked two twelve hour shifts from 7am to 7pm and 7pm to 7 am respectively. Each crew worked for 3 days and were then relieved by a fresh crew from Albury area.

The area in which we were working to contain the fire comprised high plains farmland (sheep and cattle grazing) and State Forest (native hardwood and pine plantation).

Our attempt to contain the fire was based on burning a break around the fire to prevent it (the fire) from spreading further. In particular, to prevent the destruction of the village of Wee Jasper.

On the third day of our involvement (30th January), at about 2pm the wind rose to 70kph and the temperature increased to above 40 degrees Celsius. The fire broke out of the prepared containment area and the village of Wee Jasper was in danger of being destroyed. The 7pm to 7am volunteer crews (fresh from Albury area) prevented the destruction of the village by asset protection activities.

The information I think important for your consideration, is my interpretation of the cause of the fire jumping the prepared containment lines and the impediments to controlling the outbreak as well as the issue generally relating to aging of rural land holders.

## **WATER**

- Water was very scarce and long distances were travelled to fill.
- Most of the water was taken from private farm dams. (for several days stock were scared away from their water by helicopters and trucks).
- There was one water point available within the State Forest area, and by day three it was almost empty.
- The one water point available within the State Forest area was in a position of severe risk to fire fighters when the fire ran out of control after jumping the containment lines. (Of no use when most needed).
- One large semi trailer tanker was available on occasion to provide refill for fire tankers. When the fire broke out, the semi trailer could not leave the safety of prepared safe area (bulldozed areas with no fuel on the ground).
- When the semi trailer ran dry, we had no water.
- **State Forests need to provide water points which are adequate to defend their assets and which are accessible during emergency conditions.**

## **WEED CONTROL**

- When burning a black area around the fire, we were unable to burn green blackberries growing in gullies. We tried to burn them with the help of "drip torch fuel" a mixture of one-third petrol and two-thirds diesel. No matter how much fuel we put on them, they would not burn.
- On the third day wind increased to 70kph and temperature increased to above 40 degrees Celsius.
- Under those conditions the blackberries burst into flame. The flames raced up the gullies and into the tops of trees. This caused breaching of containment lines.
- **If State Forests had sprayed their noxious weeds. The fire would have been contained.**

## STATE FOREST TANKER PARTICIPATION

- During the blacking out operation prior to the fire breakout, State Forest crews worked in conjunction with volunteers conducting the back burns and black outs.
- During the critical time of trying to control the breakout, volunteer resources were directed to prevent State Forest pine plantations from burning, while leaving farmland to burn.
- During the critical time of trying to control the breakout, no water was issued from any State Forest fire fighting appliance.
- During the critical time of trying to control the breakout, no State Forest appliance left the safe areas.
- **Perhaps the State Forest appliances were being held in reserve for extreme emergency use.**
- **Perhaps they felt less prepared or able to deal with a dangerous situation than volunteers.**
- **Perhaps they were not inclined to participate.**
- **Some volunteers felt that the State resources should have been deployed to protect State owned assets while volunteer resources concentrated on private asset protection.**

## UPON RETURN TO HOME

- When we returned to our community it was necessary to call a public meeting to deal with ill feeling from some residents cause by having 3 members (all of us over 50 years old) of our brigade, out of the local area for 3 days during high risk period.
- **Older members (seventy plus) of remote rural areas are fearful of their vulnerability to fire.**
- **As aging of farming communities increases, this issue will increase to cause disunity.**
- **Increased co operation between local government in NSW is needed to provide assurance to isolated rural communities that assistance will be provided by younger volunteers from nearby urban areas when needed.**

Ken Drane