

**Submission to Federal Enquiry into North Eastern Victoria bushfires
of January 2003**

From
The Officers and members of the Noorongong Rural Fire Brigade

Submission No.301

10th May 2003

The brigade met on the 29th of April, with 32 members present, to discuss the events during the bushfires. We would like to inform the enquiry of the following critical issues that affected them. We have not concentrated on the many positive aspects of the overall firefighting effort but rather on issues (in order of importance) that can be greatly improved in the future.

Issue 1 - Remote Incident Control Centres (ICC) seemed unable or unwilling to act swiftly enough upon local knowledge.

For Example

- on Sunday 12th January at 1pm Mitta Mitta DSE and local landholders, concerned with the RAZORBACK SPUR fire, got together and arranged a meeting with ICC DSE staff (at that time in Swifts Creek, 3 hours drive away).
- The meeting took place near the fireground on the morning of 13th January. DSE staff from Swifts Creek came to the meeting (with no maps of their own) and returned to Swifts creek with a firefighting proposal from the locals.
- They were told by ICC in Swifts Creek that the proposal could not be considered
- Ernie Cole (DSE Mitta Mitta, many years experience and awards for firefighting) drove for 3 hours to Swifts Creek at 11 pm that night to press the ICC further for the request and returned to Mitta in the early hours of the morning of 14th January. His proposals were accepted by the ICC.
- On the evening of 14th January 8 DSE "pigs" were deployed by the ICC to a staging area on the Razorback Spur, along with 4 local CFA tankers, 1 (Mitta Mitta) NRE tanker and 2 "pigs". While the locals began fireground duties the DSE pigs deployed by Swift's Creek ICC remained without instructions until 7am 15th January, when they went off shift. At 9am their replacement crews arrived to take over the 8 DSE "pigs", at the ICC staging area in OMEO, 3 hours drive from the fireground. Meanwhile the local crews had to stay behind to manage the fire, for what turned out to be a 24 hour shift.
- Nearly 3 days had elapsed from the first call for help to effective action from the ICC.

Further Example-

- On the 28th January, after fires had ravaged bushland and farmland and threatened the towns of Dartmouth, Mitta Mitta, an ICC was set up in Dartmouth, manned by Bob Graham DSE, with advice from local landholders.
- The operational directions from this ICC, half an hours drive from the fireground, were effective and within 3 days a successful containment line of 27 kilometers was established.

- We believe that it was the local knowledge, rapidly combined with NRE expertise that produced this result.

Issue 2 - Bush-Experienced Bulldozer drivers were in very short supply.

- It is the Brigade's view that the closure and removal of DSE maintenance funding on logging roads and fire access tracks has led to the lack of experience in bush conditions of many bulldozer drivers.
- The resultant environmental damage in bushland as well as the increased risk of injury is a false economy. The maintenance costs of these tracks are merely being deferred to a crisis time.

Issue 3 - Strike Teams from out of Region should be tied in with local advisers.

For example

- On the 19th January an out of region Strike Team (a total of 25 CFA volunteers) played cricket in the streets of Dartmouth when local CFA crews were fully occupied with fire duties.

We thank the enquiry for accepting this submission and would be very willing to present it verbally to yourselves at your appointed time and place.

Colin M. Teek

For

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