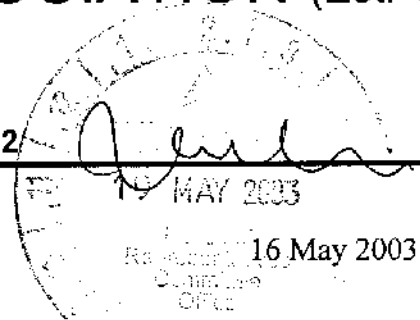


A.C.T. RURAL LESSEES' ASSOCIATION (Est. 1927)

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

Submission No.330

Dear Sir,

Attached is our submission to the Commonwealth Government's inquiry into the recent bushfires in the ACT and southern NSW.

In forwarding this submission it is appropriate to point out that the losses incurred by the ACT rural community were near disastrous. Some 60 farms were affected (most completely burnt out) with 7 homes completely destroyed together with a large number of buildings, many kilometres of fencing and significant stock losses: 5000 sheep, 200 cattle, 35 horses. Sixty-three per cent of leased rural land was burnt out and 32 per cent of land under agistment was also burnt. In addition to these losses many farms will have a negative cash flow for up to 24 months.

From our submission the Committee is invited to note our firmly-held view that the firestorm that occurred on 18 January could have been ameliorated or even prevented had the ACT and NSW fire authorities been more proactive in combating the fires when they first occurred, i.e. on or around 8 January.

In addition the failure of government authorities to control the build up of combustible material in softwood forests, river corridors, national parks and nature reserves was a significant factor. Systematic failure on the part of the ACT and NSW bushfire authorities was, in our opinion, the major cause of these fires.

Also enclosed with our submission is a paper prepared by Mrs Judith Blundell, of 'Brookvale', Uriarra, ACT, which was submitted to the ACT Government's inquiry into the ACT bushfires and which we consider to be particularly relevant to your inquiry. Mrs Blundell has indicated she has no objection to it being laid before your Committee.

We also enclose a copy of our submission to the ACT Government's study into the Non-urban Bushfire Affected Areas of the ACT. While not directly related to your terms of reference it does point out the particular values of ACT farms in terms of landscape and their importance to the setting of the National Capital as well as their economic value. We believe that these considerations are relevant to your Committee's inquiry.

Finally, members of our executive are available to meet with the Committee as convenient to expand on any points made in our submission.

Yours sincerely,

H.J.P. Adams
H.J.P. Adams AM
President

- enclosures:
1. ACT RLA submission
 2. Paper by Mrs Judith Blundell
 3. ACT RLA submission to Study in Non-Urban Bushfire Affected Areas

House Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires

Submission by ACT Rural Lessees' Association

Introduction

The ACT Rural Lessees' Association (RLA) was established in 1927 to safeguard and promote the interests of ACT landholders in the development of the National Capital and its surrounds.

Many of our members have experienced intense bush and grassland fires over the past seven decades and have made constructive contributions towards the management of wildfire in the region. They have been in the forefront of the volunteer bushfire brigade movement and can draw on many years of experience.

Over the past few decades the knowledge of wildfire, the advent of much-improved firefighting equipment and communications technology have enabled bushfires to be controlled in a manner not previously possible. The investment by government in new equipment has been significant and has paid dividends in situations short of the catastrophic fires in 2002 and 2003.

It is against the above background that our submission has been developed in a way that is constructive, yet critical where we believe criticism is relevant to the solution of wildfire in the ACT.

It is the view of the Association that wildfire of the nature experienced in the past two years can be prevented by the better use of resources, by improved firefighting strategies, and by more timely and sustained initial intervention.

Summary of Damage

In the ACT 56 farms were affected by the bushfires, with 89 structures destroyed, including some dwellings. In addition, there was extensive loss of livestock, fencing, pasture and fodder. The affect of the bushfires, apart from losses generally includes lost production for up to 24 months, which means that many farms will have a negative cash flow over this period.

Situation Prior to Fires Occurring in the National Parks

For many years Association members have been critical of poor land-management practices in the national parks of NSW and the ACT, as well as in river corridors, ACT pine forests and nature reserves. The particular concerns have been the build-up of fuels in these areas with the invasion of woody weeds, such as blackberries, briars and teatree into these areas. It is the view of our Association that there has been a reluctance on the part of governments (NSW and the ACT) to reduce fuel loads in

these areas and to control the woody weed burden. The usefulness of grazing in some of these areas in controlling fuel build-up has been overlooked.

Finally, management plans for these government-controlled areas, where they exist, do not have in place an effective audit process which is essential in assessing on a regular basis the fuel build-up in these areas and the attendant fire risks.

The concept of wilderness areas being 'no-go' areas needs to be re-examined.

National Park Fires

A number of fires were initiated by lightning strikes in the forest areas to the west of the ACT prior to 18 January. It is our understanding that seven fires in the Tinderries were also started at the same time by lightning. These were all extinguished before they got out of hand. On the other hand, the Emergency Services Bureau (ESB) initial response to the fires west of the ACT was inadequate. Indeed, insufficient resources were committed to these fires when they were containable. It is our understanding that fire-bombing of these fires was not considered, that a number of fire trails were inaccessible through poor maintenance, and that fire-fighting vehicles were even prevented from entering these forest areas. It is clear that the policy of letting wildfires started by natural means (lightning) burn themselves out is untenable. Instead, a rapid reaction fire-fighting force should be deployed as soon as a forest fire develops.

One of the principal concerns of the Association was the lack of focus by the ESB in committing sufficient resources to all of the fires to the west of the ACT in the very earliest days (8 and 9 January). The Association's strong view is that all of these fires could and should have been extinguished in the first two days. There are many ways in which fires can start and many may result in serious damage to property and the community. However, the fires commencing on 8 January are not in any of these categories and all should have been easily contained. Association members who attended these fires in the very earliest hours were amazed at the lack of concern shown by ESB and hold the view that the fires could and should have been easily contained on January 8.

Many Association members are extremely upset at the open ridicule they experienced from ACT government officers in the period between 8 and 16 January, when they expressed the view that the wholly inadequate response would lead to a disaster to landholders and city people alike.

Situation Prior to 17/18 January

Members of our Association believe that much more should have been done to control fires in the Namadgi and McIntyre Hut area prior to the fire storm of 18 January. Furthermore, it appears that the emerging situation was not appreciated by the authorities concerned. Indeed, at a fire situation briefing by Environment ACT on Thursday 16 January landholders were informed that there was no specific concern as far as their interests were concerned: some were openly ridiculed by senior Environment ACT officers. Furthermore no interest was expressed in obtaining local knowledge from landholders adjoining the forest areas. In addition there appeared to

be a distinct lack of communications between NSW and ACT authorities in their appreciation of emerging fire threats.

17/18 January

It is evident that fire brigades and fire control resources were overwhelmed on the day and unable to cope with the myriad of spot fires that developed as the day progressed. It was a day of desperation, trauma, smoke and confusion. The intensity of the firefront, coupled with wind generated by the fire itself made it impossible to tactically control fire-fighting resources. This appeared to be equally applicable to the helicopter resources where wind and smoke made rotary wing operations dangerous. In regard to the allocation of resources, we have already pointed out the lack of communications and coordination between NSW and ACT units which was a major deficiency. Also it is our view that units could have been better stationed to meet the emerging threat. Some appeared to have been given a roaming brief which appeared to be ineffective and totally frustrating to landholders who were desperately battling the fire and at the same time observing ACT government vehicles and fire units seemingly cruising up and down the roads.

Immediate Post-Fire Response

The immediate proactive response by Environment Act was commendable, particularly in the removal of dead animals, constructing pits, and putting down animals severely burnt. This is a degrading task, nevertheless some landholders believe there was room for improvement.

Response Post 18 January 2003

It is worth recalling that on Thursday 30 January the bushfire index reached 139, one of the highest ever recorded in the ACT. It is relevant therefore to speculate what the situation would have been had the bushfires broken out on such a day. We make this point because 'blow up' days are not uncommon in the ACT so that in developing plans to control and contain bushfires in the environs of the National Capital the worst-case situation must be considered. Another feature of the January fires is the fact that many of the fire-prone areas of the ACT had been destroyed by fire 12 months previously.

Drought Issues

It is relevant to recall that much of the ACT was in drought, with ACT landholders coping with a 'once in a century' drought. This meant that water supplies were very low. On the other hand, the lack of grass on the open areas reduced the intensity of the firestorm.

The Science of Bushfires

It is the view of the Association that the science of wildfire control in the Australian environment is an area for ongoing research. We believe that a technical approach is needed to the problem of controlling fuel loads in national parks, forestry and nature reserve areas, and that it should be a statutory requirement to reduce fuel loads when they have reached a prescribed level. The concept of developing a subjective

approach to fuel control, we believe, has failed, and that a protocol such as that which exists in Western Australia should be considered.

Relevant to the science of bushfires is the need to appreciate the effect on the natural ecology, particularly wild life and soil biota. It is clear that severe wildfire of the intensity of that experienced on 18 January has a particularly devastating effect.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, it may be fairly stated that the January 2003 bushfires had a devastating effect on the ACT rural community, not only in respect of economic losses incurred, but particularly in relation to the trauma and personal losses which many leaseholders experienced. Monetary assistance can never compensate for personal losses suffered when one loses one's home. Of particular importance is the economic loss attributable to the fires, which in many cases will have a major effect extending out for at least 24 months.

The Association also concludes that the principal causes of the fires were:

- ineffective management of national parks, pine forests, river corridors and nature reserves;
- poor appreciation of the situation developing in the national parks prior to 18 January;
- reluctance on the part of government authorities (ACT and NSW) to extinguish the forest fires in the very earliest days of the fire;
- lack of communication with landholders bordering national parks and river corridors;
- poor cooperation between ACT and NSW fire authorities; and
- poor tactical deployment of resources.

The Association concludes that the 18 January bushfires could have been prevented, had a more proactive program been initiated immediately after the lightning strikes.

The Association recommends that the ACT Government:—

1. Consider the implementation of a statutory requirement to reduce fuel loads in government-controlled lands be introduced.
2. Review its management plans for national parks, river corridors, forests and nature parks, particularly with a view to including an annual audit process which focuses on, among other things, the level of fuel in these areas.
3. Examine grazing on a controlled basis as a fuel control measure.
4. Pine plantations should not be replanted where in the event of a bushfire they pose a threat to rural or urban property.