



Phone:

Dear Gary - As discussed briefly at the Barra Fair.

The Queanbeyan/Canberra branch of the NSW Farmers' Association has provided a member of the ACT Bush Fire Council for many years. This ended in December 2000 (at the end of my ten years, from 1990 to 2000) when the Council was reconstituted to provide "a balance of people with different strategic bushfire management expertise" (letter from Brendan Smyth, MLA).

During my membership, I produced several papers reflecting my concern that the City of Canberra and the adjacent region should be preparing for a major fire disaster. In the enclosures, for example, the paper "Bushfire on the Residential Fringe" opens by referring to a huge bush fire breaking in to the urban or closely settled areas; the "Disaster Planning Brief" shows a method of planning responses to most disaster eventualities, and was written when I discovered that the ACT Disaster Plan appeared to cover only Command, Control and Communications, and did not consider consequential operations; "Firex 94", first written in November 1993, proposes computer models and on-ground exercises between the ACT Fire Brigade and the ACT Bush Fire Service, and specifically mentions in paragraph 2 development of a computer fire spread model and other work "to indicate the effect of an approaching bush fire, or more probably wind driven masses of burning material on houses and other structures in the ACT". Paragraph 3b of the same paper concludes:

"Should we think the unthinkable, and consider a worst case with bush fire breaking into the built up area....."

Unfortunately, these papers were written in a period when the Bush Fire Council had lost its independent authority and control of finances, and none of the proposals were proceeded with.

There should be references to all the material mentioned in Bush Fire Council minutes.

I believe the Queanbeyan/Canberra branch of the NSW Farmers' Association may submit copies of the enclosures to the ACT and NSW inquiries. Although the enclosures refer to preparation for a fire disaster, the Association may make separate submissions on hazard reduction practices.

My intention is not to review the past, but to present several proposals for reconsideration given the experience of the fires of January 2003. I hope the enclosures may be of some use to you.

I hope to see you for a brief discussion of the proposals before I depart for New Zealand on 12 April, returning here 2 May.

Best Wishes

Sandy Sordani

2 APRIL 03

## CANBERRA AND YARROWLUMLA BUSHFIRES 2003

### INTRODUCTION

1. I have been a member of the Burra Bushfire Brigade since 1975, including three years as President, and a member of the ACT Bush Fire Council for ten years, including three years as Chair. My experience includes disaster planning, and training for and assisting in disasters during service in the Royal Navy, and several years as an analyst in Defence Central Studies Establishment during service in the Royal Australian Navy. I have been burnt over in a vehicle while fighting the 1985 Yarrowlumla fires, and burnt over in a house during the South Coast fires in Christmas 2001.
2. I developed the attached papers during my time in the ACT Bush Fire Council. They were not then accepted for various reasons. The papers are not presented to review the past, but because I believe that experience in the recent major fires suggests that the papers be reconsidered.
3. It should be clear that:
  - a. I have absolute confidence in the ACT Chief Fire Control Officer, Peter Lucas-Smith, and the ACT Fire Commissioner, Ian Bennett.
  - b. This submission is apolitical. I have forwarded it to Mr Steve Pratt, MLA, ACT, and to Mr Peter Webb, NSW State Member for Monaro, because I have discussed bush fire matters with both in the past.
  - c. I have no wish to return to the ACT Bush Fire Council.

### PAPERS

4. The following attached papers are submitted for consideration:
  - a. Bush Fire on the Residential Fringe.

This was first written for the ACT Bush Fire Council, and was specifically for residents of the Canberra urban fringe. Many people prefer a narrative style. It was rejected by the ESB. The paper was adapted for Yarrowlumla Shire rural residential areas. It was circulated to all residents of the Burra Bush Fire Brigade area, with the community newsletter, two years ago, and again in November 2002. Residents' reactions before, during and after the January 2003 fires have been positive. It may be a useful additional source of information to ACT residents.
  - b. Community Emergency Awareness.

Written and first presented to the Bush Fire Council in 1996. I had had several discussions with the then Yellow Pages Marketing Manager who was most receptive. I felt strongly that an initial trial in the ACT would be best. The ESB insisted that it should go to the Public Relations sub committee of Emergency Management Australia. That sub committee said that the media and the public would have difficulty interpreting an alpha-numeric map and attempted to use my contact with Yellow Pages for a different purpose. They were ignored by Yellow Pages. The users to whom I have spoken – Police Officers, City Fire Brigade and Bush Fire Officers – saw value in the proposal. I emphasise that the illustrative map in the attachment is not ideal. A purpose-designed map covering Yass to Bredbo and Bungendore to Brindabella would be appropriate. The method

should improve the public information flow. The final map would include outlines of suburbs in addition to the alphanumeric presentation.

c. Disaster Planning Background Brief.

Written and presented to the Bush Fire Council when I was Chair (1995-1997). It was based on my early training and particularly on my final six months in the Royal Navy when I was tasked to write a prototype disaster plan for a sample area of the UK. The area included a small naval dockyard, a shore base, an army base, a commercial port, a town of some 20,000 people, and a rural area. The projection was for disasters from aerial bombing to nuclear attack. The method I developed was to list every conceivable event, then follow through the consequential requirements and the authorities and units which would fulfil the requirements. The only "disaster plan" for the ACT of which I am aware gave lines of command, control and communication between departments. I saw no reference to action. A proper disaster plan may have been prepared subsequently, but I believe, for example, that the aged residents of Mirranjani Nursing Home were evacuated to Erindale College where there was no bedding for a considerable time. A disaster plan based on a detailed "Event Analysis" should cover most if not all such contingencies. The attached Brief is not comprehensive and is illustrative only. I understand the reason for its rejection by the ESB was that it would create inter-departmental problems. The method may be used to develop more detailed disaster plans for the ACT.

d. Firex 94.

Presented to the Bush Fire Council in early to mid 1994, proposing a series of increasingly more complex joint exercises between the Bush Fire Service and the ACT Fire Brigade, to prepare for a serious bush fire entering the suburbs, which would conclude with a hot fire exercise near a sealed fringe road, but not near houses. Compatibility of equipment and communications had been examined, but my experience is that on-ground practical exercises are essential. The 1994 exercise was not proceeded with, but such exercises may have been held subsequently. If not, then practical joint exercises of this type are strongly recommended.

## OTHER MATTERS

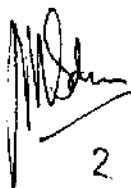
5. Another suggestion I made which should be reflected in Bush Fire Council Minutes include (in the mid nineties) a proposal for an Auxiliary Bush Fire Warden Service, in which local volunteers would be given limited basic training in fire ground safety and in the protection of blocks of homes – say, a warden for each street. The wardens would be aware of neighbours with special needs. If funds were not available to outfit the wardens fully, then they could equip themselves in the manner of the old rural bush fire brigades with "Opp. Shop" natural fibre overalls, boots etc. The proposal was rejected as the ESB could not afford to train and equip the wardens fully, and consequently could be held accountable under OH & S regulations. The proposal should be revised and reconsidered.

6. Mr Pratt and Mr Webb have both seen a video I made showing preparations around a home for the approaching Christmas 2001 bush fires, the home (from within) being burnt over, and the surrounding desolation the following day. At the time the primary aim was survival and not the making of a video. I was available to make the video because recent surgery prevented my full participation in fire fighting. A part time ACT teacher borrowed the video in late 2002 to show to classes of children. The children were aged 8-9 years old and 11-12 years old. We have received about seventy letters from the children indicating both age groups had learnt useful lessons. Our local Rural Fire Service (Bush Fire) Brigade uses the video as a basic training device for new residents. I loaned a copy of the video to the ESB in late September 2002, explaining its apparently successful use with schoolchildren. The success appears to be because it is a personalised "home video" of a real event. I collected the video a few weeks later but have not yet had any comment from the ESB. There may be value in this and similar videos being shown to schools, as suggested by Mr Pratt in the Legislative Assembly in November 2002. A copy of the video is enclosed.

7. The designation of Bush Fire Prone areas in the ACT has been discussed several times in the Bush Fire Council. The official view was that there would be serious implications in the additional cost of future houses, and the reduced value of existing houses, together with probable increased insurance premiums for these areas. I understand that areas at risk now will be so designated, and that new housing will be to an appropriate standard. The matter was discussed during my final term toward the end of 2000. The Council minutes should reflect a suggestion I made that there could be a compromise by which existing houses in fire prone areas, and those in adjacent areas could take steps to improve house safety at low cost, such as replacing wooden paling fences with wire netting or, at higher cost, by steel panels. Other steps include selection of fire resistant vegetation, offering to mow firebreaks beyond the back fence, ensuring that eaves and spaces under the house are fully enclosed by non-combustible material, and that any external slatted decks have a lined underside. These and other actions are mentioned in the paper "Bushfire on the Residential Fringe".

#### CONCLUSION

8. It is again emphasised that the above comments and attached papers are offered as a contribution to the future. I am prepared to discuss any of these issues further, but do not wish to have any formal contact with the ESB.



2 APRIL 03

James M. Sandison