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To: Committee, Bushfires (REPS)

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Subject: Rocky Plain Bushfire Brigade submission to house select committee into 2002/2003 bushfires

Submission

BY

ROCKY PLAINS BRIGADE

TO

House select committee into 2002/2003 bushfires

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Relevant terms of reference of the house select committee

This submission relates to the following specific terms of reference of the house select committee:

- (a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on local communities;
- (b) the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks;
- (c) the adequacy of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;
- (d) the adequacy of current response arrangements for fire fighting; and
- (e) the roles and contribution of volunteers.

1.2 Purpose and context of this submission

The purpose of this submission is to highlight the experience of the brigade, it's members and local community during the 2002/2003 fires in Kosciuszko National Park and Snowy River Shire.

The context of this submission relies on direct personal experience of the brigade and it's members.

2 ROCKY PLAINS BRIGADE

2.1 Rocky Plains brigade area

The Rocky Plain Brigade area covers approximately 600 square kilometres generally extending from Kosciuszko National Park in the west to the Berridale/Adaminaby Road in the east to the southern edge of Lake Eucumbene and extending to the Hilltop/Kalkite area to the south.

2.2 Brief summary of membership and equipment levels

The following are brief details on the brigade:

1. It has three (3) equipped fire vehicles supplied by the NSW Rural Fire Service;
2. It has a fire shed located at Round Plain on the Rocky Plains Road that has water however is not supplied with electricity, toilet or permanent radio facilities;
3. It has approximately fifty (50) members with an active membership of around fifteen (15);
4. It has a number of private vehicles with slip on units provided by landowners; and
5. It has two (2) brigade supplied slip-on units.

3 2002/2003 FIRE SEASON

3.1 Nature of fires and campaign duration

The 2002/2003 bushfires in Snowy River Shire were significant fires at a regional, state, national and international scale. The duration and extent of fires has been mapped and documented by a range of fire agencies including NSW Rural Fire Service and NSW National Parks Service. This submission does not intend to

expand on the nature or extent of the fires.

3.2 Brief overview of brigade involvement

The Rocky Plains brigade was involved in the fires from approximately the 8th January 2003 to the 18th February 2003. The brigade also acted as a forward control division for fire operational activities in the Kalkite to Providence Portal areas as well as areas up to 25 kilometres within Kosciuszko National Park as well as adjoining private lands. **An indication of operational time for the brigade was approximately 1200 man-hours per day during the peak of operations. This does not include support activities and associated man-hours.**

4 KEY ISSUES ARISING FROM 2002/2003 FIRES

4.1 Operational (fire suppression)

The following are the key operational issues arose during the 2002/2003 fires:

- Radio communications (e.g. single channel PMR network overloaded quickly and areas with lack of radio coverage)
- The benefits of using UHF radio systems (e.g. vehicle to vehicle communication)
- Communications with aerial support on the fire line (e.g. long communications chain from fire line to aerial support)
- Limits to effective back-burning due to high fuel loads within the Kosciuszko National Park (e.g. Round Mountain)

4.2 Logistics (co-ordination and support)

The following are the key logistics issues arose during the 2002/2003 fires:

- No electricity available to the Rocky Plains fire shed
- Lack of permanent radio systems at the Rocky Plains fire shed
- Lack of shower and toilet facilities at the Rocky Plains fire shed

4.3 Fire management (fire trails and hazard reduction)

The following key fire management issues arose during the 2002/2003 fires:

- Lack of fire trails protecting private property within the Snowy Plain area on the edge of the Kosciuszko National Park (Grey Mare fire trail is the only north south fire trail located west of the Gungahlin River to protect private property in Snowy Plain)
- Lack of maintenance of existing fire trails within the Kosciuszko National Park (e.g. Grey Mare fire trail was impassable by 4WD vehicles)
- Decommissioning of existing fire trails by NSW National Parks Service (e.g. Farm Ridge fire trail)
- Removal of tactical fire trails – those trails constructed during a fire and then rehabilitated (e.g. Far Bald Mountain to Doubtful gap trail)
- Time involved in construction/repair of trails during peak fire activity as well as during key fire suppression weather (e.g. Grey Mare fire trail)
- Lack of strategic fuel management by fire in areas that experienced major “fire spot over” activity – e.g. western side of Eucumbene dam, western side of Eucumbene River between the dam wall and Kalkite and Snowy Plain.

4.4 Inter-agency relationships

The following key inter-agency issues arose during the 2002/2003 fires:

- Delays by NSW National Parks Service for essential fire trails and fire management activities including threatened species and potential aboriginal sites (e.g. Grey Mare fire trail area and Eucumbene River area)
- Delays by NSW National Parks Service of supplying earthmoving equipment for essential fire trail construction (e.g. Kalkite Mountain to Eucumbene River)

5 BRIGADE RESPONSE ON KEY ISSUES

5.1 Recommended changes

The Rocky Plains brigade considers that the 2002/2003 fires provide an opportunity to review fire management practices and operational response. The recommended changes are specific to the operational area of the brigade and are based on the practical experience of the brigade and its members.

5.2 Operational (fire suppression)

- More repeaters for the PMR radio system to improve radio network coverage
- All fire management and suppression agencies are provided with UHF radio systems

5.3 Logistics (co-ordination and support)

- Electricity to be made available to the Rocky Plains fire shed
- Permanent radio systems at the Rocky Plains fire shed
- Shower and toilet facilities at the Rocky Plains fire shed

5.4 Fire management (fire trails and hazard reduction)

- A boundary trail protecting private property from Teddy's Creek to Crooks racecourse within Kosciuszko National Park to protect the Snowy Plain area.
- Brassy Gap trail to be opened and classified as a fire trail.
- Maintenance to an agreed standard of the Grey Mare fire trail.
- Farm Ridge fire trail to be opened and classified as a fire trail.
- The Far Bald Mountain to Doubtful gap trail to remain open and not rehabilitated.

National Parks Service to undertake fuel management using fire on the western side of Eucumbene dam between Burkes track and Providence Portal, the western side of Eucumbene River between the dam wall and the Snowy River/Waste Point and those areas of National Park adjoining Snowy Plain area.

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