

SUBMISSION BY V.M.JEFFERY, AFSM

PREFACE

The fires that devastated Canberra suburbs on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2003 were a national disaster and a national disgrace that could have been prevented and should not have happened.

Those in charge of the suppression effort and the mismanagement of the fuels have tried to portray the event as a natural phenomenon to hide their own failures.

This is a monstrous lie that is nothing more than an effort to divert attention away from the absolute mismanagement in both areas and which in the case of the fuels began some thirty years ago. In the case of the destruction of the suppression organisation it began about ten years ago with the usurping of Bush Fire Council's statutory role by the Director of the Emergency Service Bureau, Michael Castles and the subsequent run down in suppression capacity with the support of senior bureaucrats and politicians at all levels.

**The bush fire disaster of the 18<sup>th</sup> of January was not a climatic event but purely a management/political orchestrated national disgrace that could have and should have been avoided.**

My comments are supported by my fifty odd years involved in bush fire administration, bush fire control and bush fire fighting at all levels.

I have tried over a long period to forewarn those in control from head of Governments down that this disaster was inevitable if nothing was done about. They have all chosen to ignore scientific experts and experienced persons like myself, choosing to put their heads in the sand rather than face reality.

Nothing was done about it any level except to let the fuel loads build up further and to let the suppression organisation sink deeper into a hole of inadequacy, arrogance and domination leading to depressing lowering morale.

**All in all an ever escalating recipe for a major disaster**

I have enclosed my comments of various aspects of the disaster event from the history that has led up to the actual event and the aftermath. These comments are supported by copies of documents appropriate to the subject and I hope that my detailed submission may be of assistance to your inquiry.

At the end of my submission I have enclosed a list of unanswered questions.

Yours sincerely,

## THE EVENT

THE BUSH FIRES OF 8<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> January 2003

### WHY WEREN'T THEY CONTROLLED?

Wednesday January the 8<sup>th</sup> was forecast as an extreme fire danger day with the expectation of dry thunderstorms. This was in January during a fairly severe drought and experienced bush fire fighters would surely expect the possibility of a number of lightning strikes starting fires that would need to be suppressed as soon as possible to prevent escalation in size and then damage.

In the past when BFC was in control of its operations, on a day with a weather forecast of extreme bush fire danger and dry storms, suppression forces were always strategically stood up in a position to rapidly attack any ignitions either from lightning, accidents or human endeavours. For instance there would have a least been a tanker at Bulls Head, a tanker and light unit plus the Forestry dozer at Uriarra, a tanker and light unit at Pierces Creek, at least a tanker and 2 light units at Stromlo plus the BFC dozer on the float with the BFC grader at Stromlo ready to roll immediately. The chopper also would be standing by in the paddock at Stromlo or in the air and not tied up in controlled air space at the airport.

Compare this with the situation on January the 8<sup>th</sup> when there was only one tanker and one light unit for the whole lightning prone area and no dozers or graders available on stand by. I understand that the chopper was at the airport and the pilot in Queanbeyan. In the former situation those lightning strikes would have been hit fast and hard by those units on stand by and backed up by other Parks and volunteer brigade units. The fires would not have been left unattended until completely blacked out.

Indeed the lightning started three fires in the Cotter Catchment at Bendora, Stockyard Spur and Ginini plus another a bit further away at McIntyres hut in the former ACT lease area but now poorly managed by NPWS.

That area had been previously leased to ACT Bush Fire Council for bush fire management because it was recognised as the big danger area for damage by bush fires to Canberra. Regular hazard reduction was carried out by BFC and any fire starting in the area was hit hard and fast by BFC units. ACT in its so called wisdom relinquished the lease in the mid nineties and the fuel loadings were allowed to escalate dramatically. Because of the remoteness from NSW units and the grossly escalated fuel loads, the lightning strike at McIntyre's hut on 8<sup>th</sup> January should have also been hit hard and fast by ACT units.

**These four fires from the time of ignition, unless controlled quickly, were going to pose a very significant risk to the ACT pine forests and Canberra suburbs. It was absolute criminal complacency that they were not hit hard and fast but allowed to spread.**

However although the dry storms eventuated, the weather on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January from a fire danger rating point of view, didn't reach anywhere near the extreme ratings forecast. In fact in the mid afternoon of January the 8<sup>th</sup> in my own Tharwa area we had eight fires lit along the roadside over a distance of about 6 kilometres and my own brigade alone controlled them all with very little difficulty to small areas and not one of them came close to crossing the road. Certainly they could not have been contained so simply on an extreme fire danger day.

**Because the weather was much more favourable than forecast even though the old level of strategic stand by was no longer available, the fires could have and should have been controlled before daylight on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January.**

Whilst monitoring the response on the RFS radio I was amazed at the casual approach to attacking these fires. After all this was January, in the middle of a drought and in country with the highest fuel loads ever. I have had fifty years of experience successfully fighting and controlling lightning strike fires and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. We had never let a lightning strike develop into a full scale bush fire before in the history of BFC with most of them controlled on initial attack in much worse fire weather conditions than we had on January 8<sup>th</sup> and for the next week.

#### **So what went wrong?**

A few units were initially dispatched, no massive attack to hit the fires hard and fast as would have been prudent at this time of the year. In fact even the meagre suppression forces were all pulled off the fire for the night of the 8<sup>th</sup> and no control measures were initiated until well into the morning of Thursday the 9<sup>th</sup>. This tactic was inexcusable and allowed the fires to spread unabated.

**It was obvious that sadly those in charge of the response had absolutely no comprehension of the destruction potential of this type of fires in that location at that time of the summer. Or was this arrogance, incompetence or both? Whatever it was, it was inexcusable.**

My brigade members and officers have extensive experience in fighting lightning fires from being the largest brigade with common boundary with the Namadgi Park. I believe that I would be by far the most experienced officer in this type of fire in the ACT organisation. I have been fighting and successfully controlling lightning fires for over 50 years. My brigade units were not called for initial response as expected and were not called in until several days later. Despite my experience I was not formally given a control role during the whole sorry event. I self activated my self as brigade captain at various times to successfully initiate and control protection of my own community. Even that role was interfered with by inexperienced Park's officers and ineptitude from Curtin when "Oscars" with doubtful legality were placed over me.

My monitoring of the radio confirmed to me a continuing litany of tactic and strategy failures. Officers on the ground appeared to have little if any experience in this type of fire and head office in Curtin seemed fixated on running every little step of the operation from their computers in the control room.

**Bush fire control operations are only successful when ran by experienced competent officers controlling operations directly on the fire ground.**

To my mind no part of the suppression assault was successful despite a week of very favourable weather with very little wind and an unseasonable easterly influence. Back burns failed miserably for many reasons including incompetence and inexperience of controllers, unnecessary interference from Curtin, ill conceived tactics, inappropriate and too late use of heavy machinery etc. Virtually every team from my brigade returned with sad tales of stuff ups and failures.

This mismanagement continued right up until the fires finally completed their disastrous run. All attempts to back burn in the heavy fuel loads the way that they were being handled were doomed to failure. All the incident controllers were doing was extending the fronts of the fires until they joined together to exit the mountains in a mighty many kilometre wide fire front. If the strategies were not going to be successful, those fires would have been better left unattended. At least all the firefighters would not have been completely worn out by the time the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> arrived.

Once the conflagration commenced on January the 17<sup>th</sup> when the fires developed excessive energy in up slope runs in the massive fuel loads that Park's management had allowed to develop against all wisdom, research and advice, the fires were destined to do massive damage in suburbs of Canberra, in the pine forests and in the farmlands. No suppression force in the world could stop the fire then and suppression forces would be over run leaving the successful survival of life and property basically in the hands of individuals.

To assist individuals to better protect themselves, their neighbours and property, people needed to be aware of the possible fire storm, as brigade Captain, I advised everyone in the Tharwa, Naas, Tidbinbilla community by letter on Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup> that they were going to be burnt out as soon as the weather deteriorated and the fire would make its run. The success of this advice is there for everyone see. However it is regrettable Government Managers in my area who received my advice chose to laugh at and ignore my advice and so a great deal of Government assets were lost as a result. Canberra people were still being told up until the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> that the fires were under control. This lack of truthful advice to the public about the fires is inexcusable and possibly, criminal.

**These fires were never under control and were never going to be controlled in the mountains once the non existent initial attack failed. Why wasn't Canberra people told the truth?**

**Were the incident controllers in Curtin so inexperienced, inept and incompetent that they were blind to bush fire behaviour in these conditions of massive fuel loads, drought conditions, summer winds and temperature? Or was it sheer arrogance in face of their mistakes?**

I am not in a position to comment on what happened in other areas, Communications broke down completely with Curtin. I had to rely entirely on my own brigade resources, the preparedness of this community and of course common sense and initiative. One saviour for us was that we had taken the initiative in this community after the 1984/85 fires and raised \$30,000 to install our own brigade radio network, known as the Tharwa radio.

Because of this foresight and initiative, our community based on Tharwa, had communications where most others failed. This included vital communications with some land holder units equipped with Tharwa radios. Unfortunately we had no communication with NSW units who use UHF radios for on ground communication. Unfortunately the Chief Fire Control Officers banned ACT brigades from using vital and practical. UHF radios. Also it should be noted that the CFCO tried on several occasions to have the Tharwa radios banned from all vehicles. However fortunately he was unsuccessful, public community pressure prevailed.

A further hindrance in the rural areas was that the CFCO had ordered the removal of all BFC radios from private vehicles. This meant that brigade officers and in my brigade case my Deputy Captains were unable to operate officially as controllers with private vehicles. We only have one command vehicle in volunteer brigades, unlike brigade officers in Forests and Parks all have their work vehicle equipped with RFS radios. A very short sighted policy that further weakened the effectiveness of the land holder component of rural volunteer brigades.

**Communication's policies of the CFCO established in collusion with ESB has been particularly unhelpful to the successful control of wild fires.**

**SO WHY WASN'T THE FIRES CONTROLLED?**

**Simple really, a dangerous mix involving lack of will coupled with arrogance, complacency and inexperience in all management areas including the Rural Fire Service, Emergency Service Bureau and Parks and Conservation.**

## ESB HIJACKING OF BUSH FIRE COUNCIL'S ROLE ILLEGALITIES AND IMPLICATIONS TO JANUARY 2003 EVENTS

The BUSH FIRE Act is very clear on the statutory responsibilities of the ACT Bush Fire Council and the Chief Fire Control Officer.

Bush Fire Council with a balanced membership operated very effectively and efficiently from its inception until the 1990's. Across that sixty or so years, BFC had its own budget with separate votes for such items as fire suppression, trail maintenance, equipment, hazard reduction etc. Council oversaw the operational activities, appointed officers and built up an outstanding level of loyalty and morale. Firefighters related to BFC because BFC was on the whole made up and managed by experienced members drawn from a broad cross section including land managers, fire fighters both volunteer and paid, conservationists, researchers etc. BFC's record in wild fire control over this period was carried with pride.

However, from the mid nineties there was a deliberate push by the Director of the Emergency Services Bureau, Mr Mike Castles, who obviously had to have the support of the Departmental Secretary, and the Government, to undermine the legal rights of the ACT Bush Fire Council. Mr Castles somehow or other convinced others that he had a role to play in all of BFC's statutory commitments and thus was conceived the undermining of the successful achievements of BFC.

Myself as Chairman of BFC for over 12 years until 1991 faithfully stood up for BFC's important and critical independence, leading it to the position that the ACT had the best bush fire fighting and administered organisation in Australia. The independence of BFC under the Bush Fire Act was reinforced and supported by various senior officers and Ministers in a considerable amount of correspondence. Copies of some of this correspondence are attached as well of copies of parts of the BFC and Emergency Management Group Corporate Plans etc., which clearly state the important independent statutory role of BFC.

From the point of Mike Castle's Emergency Service Bureau's interference and hijacking of Bush fire Council's legal statutory role the quality of bush fire administration and management deteriorated rapidly, culminating in the disastrous events of January 2003 and the national disgrace of January 18<sup>th</sup>.

**There is no doubt that there were two main basic contributing factors that were the underlying cause of the disastrous January wild fires. Firstly the mismanagement by the Parks and Forests and secondly the destruction of the suppression efforts by the illegal interference of the bureaucrats in ESB into BFC statutory role with the obvious support of departmental senior officers and politicians. The resulting disaster is now history.**

Attached are copies of various correspondence and statements that establishes the history of a successful independent A.C.T. Bush Fire Council up until the interference and hijacking by the Director ESB:

1991 Bush Fire Council Facts Sheet

A clear and accurate statement of the role and responsibilities of BFC

1993-96 ACT Emergency Management Group, Corporate Plan

Clearly outlines the relationship between the Group and BFC. Why was this changed?

1983 Letter from Mr Tony Blunn, Secretary of Dept.of Territories and Local Government when the A.C.T was under Federal control, clearly detailing the relationship between his Departmental officers and BFC.

1987 Letter from John Turner, Deputy Secretary Operations, A.C.T. Central Administration Office, A.C.T. Government. This letter reinforces that BFC business was to continue being treated the same way under self government as acknowledged by Mr Blunn.

1983 letter from the First assistant Secretary Lands to Minister Mr Uren which confirms once again the accepted view of the role of Bush Fire Council.

1990 Letter from A.C.T Government Solicitor giving his interpretation of the role of BFC and the Chief Fire Control Officer. This interpretation reinforces the established and accepted roles.

1989 Letter from the Government Solicitor providing a definition of "Body Corporate" which further establishes the independence of BFC.

1988 Letter from the CFCO to the Director, Parks and Conservation which correctly summarises the responsibilities of the CFCO under the Bush Fire Act.

Prior to the above correspondence etc., all Bush Fire Council Annual Reports from the establishment of Bush fire Council outlines the accepted legal role and responsibilities of Council, All those Annual Reports were presented to and accepted and endorsed by numerous Ministers.

**These letters and sheets clearly establishes the accepted legal responsibilities of Bush Fire Council and the CFCO under the Bush Fire Act up to the mid nineties. The acceptance of these procedures by all involved up to this time must render the subsequent hijacking of the role of BFC by ESB and the run down in suppression capacity and capability as totally illegal and irresponsible.**

## LACK OF FUEL MANAGEMENT, NAMADGI AND ACT FORESTS .....A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN.....

There were two major reasons for the scale of the disaster that hit Canberra and district on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> January:

- . The enormous build up of fuels in and the mismanagement of the Government managed parks and forests, and,
- . The criminal interference of the Emergency Services Bureau into Bush Fire Council's statutory responsibility and obligations with the subsequent deterioration of vital suppression management culminating in the failure of senior officers to control the fires.

This section of my submission will deal with the mismanagement of fuels. It is well known and accepted that the more fuel that you provide to a fire, the greater the energy output will be. In the lounge room it is more warmth on a winter's night, in the case of wild fire it is more intensity and potential for destruction. This is well documented and copies of some of that documentation are attached.

The sheer intensity of the fires and their abnormal but not unexpected behaviour that did so much damage to the A.C.T was caused by the massive fuel loads in Namadgi, the pine forests and the former NSW lease area plus the degradation of the pine forests through poor misguided management.

Those in control of the fire suppression, the Government land managers and their political masters have tried to portray this wild fire event as a climatic event. Their reason for this suggestion is to cover their gross ineptitude in managing these areas, despite repeated and continual warnings of the inevitability of a disaster that has built up over some thirty years of mismanagement.

**This disaster that was nothing short of a national disgrace was a political/management conceived disaster and definitely not a climatic event as those responsible for the mismanagement, the bureaucrats and Government would like us to believe.**

Certainly we were in the grip of a severe drought in January, but no worse than many other droughts where we have successfully controlled many lightning strike and man made fires. The January the 18<sup>th</sup> disaster was conceived many years ago with the placing of these large areas under Parks management and the removal of grazing and the negative attitudes of that management to their community protection responsibilities. Despite all the warnings and the inevitability of a major disaster, Park's management with the support of their senior bureaucrats and political masters continued on their blind path towards this disaster.

**These managers took no steps whatsoever to mitigate the possibility of wild fire escaping from their management areas and must be held accountable for such criminal mismanagement.**



The Gudgenby fire of January 1983 which occurred in similar drought condition should have been a wake up call but the warnings by the very experienced Chief Fire Control Officer, Mr Cliff Parsons and the ACT Bush Fire Council went unheeded. A copy of portions of Mr Parson's report are enclosed for your reference. The fuel loadings have been allowed to build up many fold in the twenty years since then and nobody cared.

However in 1994 a consultant, Mr Howard MacBeth was engaged to report on the management of the Government areas in relation to fire. Mr MacBeth's report was scathing of that management and rather than do anything to remedy the problem, Government and management tried to bury the report. A change of Government saw the report surface and the new Minister, Mr Humphries took a positive step towards attacking the fuel management problem and to his credit, put together a task force to consider an approach to dealing with the problem. I was a member of that task force.

Following the report of that task force headed by Mr Graham Glenn, Minister Humphries in a press release in 1995 headed "Bush Fire Management Set For Overhaul" the Minister appeared to provide confidence that at last Government and management were going to do something about the fuel management problem.

**What followed was an absolute insult to the community as a whole, those in the community who suffered so much in the January fires, the members of the task force who put so much effort into producing a positive solution and the fire fighters who put their lives on the line in fighting fires made extremely more dangerous by the lack of fuel management in parks and forests with Government support.**

Parks and Forest management deliberately set out to evade their moral and community responsibilities under the fuel management legislation by producing fuel management plans which were nothing more than heaps of meaningless papers deliberately designed to confuse and intimidate the reader and which camouflaged the fact that nothing was to be done to reduce the dangerous proliferation of bush fire fuel loads. To make matters worse, these irresponsible fuel management plans were signed off by Minister Humphries and other senior Government and bureaucratic officers.

Copies of my comments on these disgraceful documents are enclosed together with patronising responses to my concerns. Further following a request from Minister Humphries I supplied him with my advice on the fuel management and suppression deterioration problems. Humphries ignored that advice. A copy of that advice is attached.

**The major reason for the abnormal intensity of the fires on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> January was the high fuel loads in the Parks and Forest areas which had been allowed to build up by management and political complacency over some thirty years of deliberate mismanagement.**

On the subject of the management condoned and politically supported dangerous build up of bush fire fuels, I have attached copies of various communications and reports. These include the following:

- . Excerpts from MacBeth report of September 1994 with reference to fuel loads.
- . Media statement by Minister Humphries headed "Bush Fire Management set for overhaul" on launch of the results of the Glenn report on fuel management. 1995 providing some hope that at last the problem was being faced up to. Unfortunately this led to nothing positive.
- . My comments on the inadequacies of the first draft plan, 1997
- . Patronising reply by Dr Colin Adrien, September 1997
- . Fax from Minister Humphries private secretary, Steven Foreshaw, suggesting that he would recommend to the Minister not too endorse the plan. However the Minister did endorse the do nothing plan. 1997
- . My further comments on the release of the second two year fuel management plan further indicating my disgust at the negative attitude of the plan. March 2000.
- . Following a request from Minister Humphries I supplied him with a long list of failures and suggested remedies. Despite the seriousness and enormity of the problem and the risk, nothing changed. January 2002
- . My comments on the latest 2 year draft of the fuel management plan, still a do nothing document. September 2002.
- . A copy of the Bush Fire Council and CFCO report on the Gudgenby fire of 1983 highlighting the C.F.C.O's advice even then of the dangers of allowing the fuel loads to escalate.
- . "Rethinking the role of fire management services", an article by Mr Stephen Petrie in the CFA magazine "Fire Management Quarterly". A very well researched and presented article that has many appropriate implications to the management of the fire threat to the ACT, both past and future. June 1995

**My recognition of the potential disaster of the build up of widespread fuel loads in the parks and forests is well documented over a long period. I tried to warn officers at all levels up to the head of Government but sadly no one listened, or wanted to listen.**

## COMMENTS ON ACT PARKS AND CONSERVATION SERVICE

### FIRE MANAGEMENT POLICY

I have attached some pertinent parts from the above policy statement which are of particular interest to the January fire event.

1.1 Under the heading “The dual responsibility for fire management”, the service states that it “is also subject to the fire control laws in the same way as other landholders”.

This statement is important in that it states categorically that the service recognises its responsibility to adequately maintain its land in a manner that endeavours to minimise the escape of fire from its lands and that it has a responsibility if a fire escapes and other persons are impacted by that fire. This is what occurred in these fires and the service did nothing to mitigate that risk so it should accept responsibility.

This section also recognises “Whereas only the bush fire agency has a role in fire control” it must be questioned why officers of the service continuously interfered with and influenced control decisions to the detriment of the best fire control efforts.

1.4 Under the heading “Fire Management Objectives” the policy clearly states as two of its main objectives are: “to protect human life and assets within and adjacent to management areas” and “to take reasonable steps to prevent the spread of fire to neighbouring property”.

These are very essential and laudable objectives, but one must ask why the service has avoided its obligations under these objectives by allowing the fuel hazard within its management areas to reach such a level to make a large scale wild fire devastation inevitable

3.7 Under the heading of “Let Burn Policy” it states: “It should be recognised that early suppression of a small fire, with minimal accompanying disturbance, is preferred to later suppression of a larger fire, inevitably accompanied by more disturbance and greater cost”.

Once again a laudable objective but why wasn't this put into practice on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January when the lightning strikes could have, and definitely should have, been controlled with very minimal damage?

**The ACT Parks and Conservation Service has failed miserably to meet its own fire management objectives and, by its inaction, has committed the community to a disaster that should not and need not have happened.**

## LESSONS NOT LEARNT FROM THE 1983 GUDGENBY FIRE

In January 1983 a fire swept through the Gudgenby Nature Reserve on one of the worst fire weather days ever experienced in the ACT. The fire was well established before it was detected because of the heavy dust and smoke haze. The fire burnt out 36,000 ha and took about three weeks to control, but was controlled despite the delayed detection and the periods of much more adverse weather than this January. The drought factor was about the same.

Even then the heavy fuel loads were causing suppression difficulties but the Chief Fire Control Officer, Mr Cliff Parsons noted “I believe it is a credit to the Bush Fire Council and all the other supporting organisations that a disaster was averted, as weather and fuel conditions at the time of the fire were extreme”.

Mr Parsons also noted that “A most important factor which contributed to the rapid rate of spread of the fire, as well as increasing the difficulty of suppression, was the dangerously high build up of tinder dry fuels. A lack of fuel management and to some extent the successful early suppression of previous fires in the area were responsible for this level of fuel”. Importantly Mr Parsons went on to say that “On the other hand, prescription burning for fuel reduction had been carried out in the Cotter Catchment for many years and its value was clearly demonstrated during the suppression activities in this area”.

As a result, Bush Fire Council recommended to the Department that hazard reduction, or prescribed burning be undertaken in the Gudgenby Reserve in accordance with a management plan so that reasonable protection could be given to the reserve and adjoining areas. In addition, Bush Fire Council recommended that fire management including prescribed burning, be continued in the Cotter Catchment to protect the catchment and the quality of Canberra’s water

Mr Parsons went on to state categorically that “it is important that the recommended steps be taken to reduce the scale and intensity of future fires”

**Had Mr Parson’s and the Bush Fire Council’s recommendations been heeded, the intensity and thus the damage from the January 2003 fires would have been minimised. Further the conditions under which the 1983 Gudgenby fire was detected and successfully suppressed was many times far worse and difficult than the January fires.**

ACT BUSH FIRE COUNCIL WARNINGS IN NOVEMBER 1982,  
Pre 1983 Gudgenby fire

Because of the extended drought of 1982/83 and the possibility of an extended serious bush fire danger season , as Chairman of the ACT Bush Fire Council I directed the Council Secretary to advise the Secretary of Department of Capital Territory of this fact and to update him on the possible implications. A copy of that advice is attached. This was passed on to the Minister.

It has been touted by some that the January 2003 fires were an abnormal climatic fire event. This was not the case. The ACT was in the grips of a very severe fire danger period in 1982/83 and in fact that severe fire danger commenced much earlier in 82/83 with the fire danger rating going off the scale as early as the 25<sup>th</sup> November 1982. The drought index was 132 at the end of November 1982. This summer never reached these levels and in fact the 8<sup>th</sup> of January was forecast as an extreme day, the fire danger rating didn't get anywhere near that level. From the 8<sup>th</sup> of January to the 17<sup>th</sup> January the weather if anything from a firefighting perspective was very benign and favourable with a mainly moist easterly influence.

It needs to be pointed out that extreme care has to be taken in comparing present day fire danger ratings with the past as present management are calculating ratings on a different criteria which gives higher readings than that used in the past.

**The abnormal fire behaviour of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> January was a result of the build up of energy from the burning of the highest fuel loads on record in the Cotter Catchment, Namadji and Tidbinbilla and the winds were a purely local phenomena caused by the energy expelled by the fire.**

There have been many summers with worse bush fire conditions, 1938/39; 1952/53; 1967/68; 1972/73; 1978/79; 1982/83; 1985/86 to name just a few.

In fact it would be hard to find a more favourable weather pattern for January bush fire control than that week after the 8<sup>th</sup> January and yet these fires were not controlled. Why not when you compare conditions with those experienced by us in the past history when a robust initial attack was mounted against lightning strikes or when experienced committed leadership prevailed as in the Gudgenby campaign fire?

**On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1972, with a controlled fire still burning at Wark's Camp in the Cotter Catchment, a dry lightning storm struck the ACT with 100mph winds and ignited 6 lightning strikes. Despite the adverse weather all six lightning strikes were controlled on initial attack plus the Wark's Camp fire was held and kept under control.**

1977 PROPHECY BY Mr ALAN McARTHUR, CSIRO principal research scientist.

The late Alan McArthur warned as far back as 1977 that large areas of Canberra could be devastated in a wildfire and suggested a scenario with a fire running up Black Mountain from the west and spotting over a large area of Canberra.

McArthur's warnings were aired again after the Hall fire of 13<sup>th</sup> February 1979 when that fire escaped initial attack because a large amount of Bush Fire Council resources were committed at a fire on Mt Painter, which had it escaped it would have fulfilled the scenario forecast by McArthur,

In a report by Bush Fire Council to the Secretary of the Department of the Capital Territory following the Hall fire, his attention is drawn to this fact and a map was provided showing the extent of possible spotting if the Mt Painter fire had escaped. It should be noted that Bush Fire Council units successfully controlled 11 other outbreaks on this extreme bush fire weather day. I believe the map is very conservative in its estimate of the extent of possible damage from a Black Mountain fire. The weather on that day, the 13<sup>th</sup> February 1979, was much more extreme than either the 8<sup>th</sup> or the 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2003.

The 18<sup>th</sup> January fire advance fortunately missed Black Mountain. This to some extent was because of the fires of Christmas Eve, 2001 diverting this fire front from that area. Had Black Mountain burnt also on the 18<sup>th</sup> January, hundreds of more houses in Canberra would have been lost.

**The 2001 Christmas Eve fire caused an immense amount of damage and identified a magnitude of failings in the suppression organisation. This should have been a warning to ESB and the Government, but nothing was heeded.**

The fuel hazards loads on Government managed lands on Black Mountain and to the west have escalated immensely since 1977.

**McArthur warned of the potential of widespread damage to Canberra as far back as 1977. Nobody has listened.**

## VOLUNTEER BUSH FIRE BRIGADES

### ESB'S INTERFERENCE AND THE BREAKDOWN OF MORALE

Traditionally the volunteer bush fire brigades had an important and respected role when the ACT Bush Fire Council had control of bush fire administration and suppression in the ACT. Their contribution was appreciated and supported, the membership's morale was high with a feeling of belonging.

This has all changed dramatically with the ESB takeover of Bush Fire Council's role and the introduction of the bureaucratic regime of the ESB organisation. Volunteer brigade organisations are now treated as free labour but dominated over by ESB with little if any of the historic autonomy that made the volunteer brigade movement so successful. Any difference of opinion is frowned upon by the ESB bureaucrats and denigrated by those people. Previously when members pulled on the yellow overalls under Bush Fire Council their morale uplifted as they felt that they were part of their own organisation.

ESB, with the avid concurrence of the CFCO, has dictated several conditions upon volunteer brigades that has further widened the division between them and Curtin. For instance, ESB issued a decree that volunteer bush fire brigade funds were the property of the ACT Government! It is not hard to imagine what effect that had on brigade members and the resultant hard fight over the issue has left some very nasty tastes in member's mouths.

ESB further banned having a quiet beer in the fire shed after a hard fire control. This quiet beer has been a traditional rite of winding down after an incident that is very important to the members to wind down and share experiences. This is treating members as children and has brought ridicule to the organisation.

ESB has introduced fitness tests as mandatory in a manner to isolate rural land holder members away from the organisation. The fitness tests are positively dangerous and prove absolutely nothing. As has been proved necessary in the January fiasco, every able bodied person with a bit of common sense and initiative is needed, not just those that have a bit of worthless paper to say that they could do such and such at one single point on one day. Further, to my knowledge at least two members have suffered heart attacks during fitness testing as they pushed themselves to prove that stupid point.

ESB has imposed compulsory medical and police checks on all new members and those shifting from one brigade to another. Once again this proves absolutely nothing and is an imposition on the members and the brigade officers who have to process the rot.

**It is getting to the stage when, heaven forbid, to cover all the impositions and regimentation by ESB, members will have to be remunerated. This will further isolate the brigades from the community.**

Brigade officers are now expected to be at the beck and call of ESB through their "Duty Co-ordinators". Before when brigades were managed by Bush Fire Council, brigades had their own local areas in which they managed fire incidents at the local brigade officer's discretion. Now in a lot of cases, brigade officers are not consulted and other units such as the ACT Fire Brigade are responded without consultation into a local brigade's area. This has led to resentment particularly by rural land holders who have found that their off season agricultural burn offs have been put out indiscriminately.

ESB has imposed equipment onto volunteer brigades that has been inappropriate, badly designed and unsafe. In my brigade's case we were supplied with a tanker that was poorly designed, was fitted with such unsafe features such as plastic brake linings, plastic cab linings, hose reels that wouldn't rewind, unsuitable tyres, plastic pipe fittings etc.etc. Bush fire fighters can be put into a live or die situation by the quality of their equipment and there shouldn't be any short cut or compromise in the quality of all equipment. However, ESB bureaucrats believe that they know everything.

Rural land holder members of volunteer brigades, once supported by BFC as a valuable part of the suppression organisation, have been isolated by ESB and the CFCO. No longer are they supplied with pumps and tanks and RFS radios were removed from their vehicles in a short sighted action by Director ESB. With communications so vital in bush fire operations and every available unit needed, it is hard to come to grips with this show of domination of ESB.

**An enormous breakdown in morale and autonomy of brigades has occurred with the imposition of domination by ESB and the isolation of rural land holders etc.**

Brigades, brigade officers and rural land holders have lost confidence in the operational expertise of the senior officers. For instance the appointment of a Deputy Chief Fire Control Officer, Mr Tony Graham into that position which encompasses the main incident controller role when he had no experience in bush fire control at all further reduced the morale of the fire fighters and officers and was an insult to the community that we are supposed to protect from the ravages of bush fires.

Mr Graham's credibility in relation to his attitude to attacking bush fires in remote areas must come under severe question when, after discussion at the Controller's Group meeting number 58 on the 7<sup>th</sup> August 2001 on the introduction of fitness tests, when asked what would happen if they did not get enough {fitness test passed persons} to fight the fire, Mr Graham said "**they would not fight the fire**". In other words, Mr Graham's statement indicated that he was prepared to let a fire become a major disaster rather than let experienced bushmen who had not bothered to carry out a useless fitness test, attack and control the fire.

**Just as brigade members must have confidence in their brigade officers, brigade officers must have confidence in their senior officers. Unfortunately since the ESB takeover of Bush Fire Council, some senior operational officer appointments have lacked a history of experience and expertise in bush fire control.**



## UNREST AMONGST BRIGADE OFFICERS

In 1997 disillusionment reached such an extreme level that the Chairman of the Controller's Group called a meeting at the Jerrabomberra fire shed on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1997. Virtually all officers, including those from Parks, Forests and Volunteer Brigades attended. The Chief Fire Control Officer and his deputy were not invited.

Attendees expressed grave concern at many developments and in particular the extension of ESB power over Bush Fire Council and the Bush Fire Service and the fact that Bush Fire Council was hampered in fulfilling it's statutory obligations as evidenced by the erosion of Bush Fire Council's authority by ESB.

The meeting instructed the Chairman to advise the Chairman BFC of the seriousness of their concern and asked the Chairman of BFC to pass their concerns on to the Minister. In the letter to Mr Sandison, Chairman of BFC, Mr Alan MacSween the Chairman of the Controller's Group stated "Preserving life and property from the harmful effects of bush fires is the charter of the BFC, not ESB". Other serious matters raised at the meeting and reflected in the letter (copy attached for your information) includes:

- . That lack of hazard reduction is a major concern
- . Authority for fuel management supervision should be returned to BFC,
- . The position of Bush Fire Council as a statutory authority responsible for policy and operations of the Bush Fire Service must be restored and made clear,
- . That the CFCCO was no longer a full time officer of BFC,
- . That the CFCCO was "no longer a hands on boss of the RFS"
- . It was seen that the cause of the problem was the move by the ESB to expand it's bureaucracy into operational matters.
- . The amalgamation of the ES with the RFS was seen as a failure,
- . The erosion of the identity of the RFS by ESB was regretted and there was a strong feeling of manipulation by ESB,
- . Strong criticism of the lack of consultation and the manner of implementation,
- . The Captains stressed that no amount of theoretical training can prepare an individual for a major fire situation,
- . Concerns were raised that the Captains were being treated as free labour belonging to the ESB,
- . There was absolute agreement that Bush Fire Council must regain control of the Bush Fire Service
- . Morale among Captains was at an all time low with experienced Captains leaving the Service because of frustrations, the takeover of RFS by ESB and forced extra theoretical training
- . Finance should not be looked at as a back door way for ESB to interfere with the authority of Bush Fire Council,

**It is not known if the then Chairman of Bush Fire Council ever took the Controller's Group's concerns to the Minister. Certainly nothing improved and the downhill spiral under ESB dominance continued to culminate in the January 8<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> disastrous event.**

## POSSIBLE AMALGAMATION WITH THE FIRE BRIGADE

At various times the possibility of an amalgamation of the Bush Fire Council Operations with the ACT Fire Brigade has been suggested. I have no doubt that this prospect will be raised again now in light of the fire control failures of January. During my period of some thirteen years as Chairman of the ACT Bush Fire Council this suggestion was the subject of various inquiries all of which rejected the option.

This amalgamation would present many more problems than it would solve. I have attached Bush Fire Council's response to the Department of Territories 1983 consideration of a possible amalgamation which outlines the arguments against such amalgamation.

**An amalgamation of the operations of the Bush Fire Service with that of the ACT Fire Brigade is not a satisfactory option. Rather a return of the proper role to a Bush Fire Council, properly supported by Government and the bureaucracy is the best option**

## SOUTHERN VOLUNTEER BUSH FIRE BRIGADE.

### THE THARWA/NAAS COMMUNITY AND THE JANUARY FIRES

Units of the Southern Brigade were involved in trying to control the fires in the Brindabella's from a couple of days after the start until withdrawing on the 17<sup>th</sup> January.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January eight fires were lit over a six kilometre stretch of the Tharwa Road and units of Southern Brigade under my command suppressed all those fires with insignificant damage. About the same time the dry storm lightning lit the fires in the Brindabellas. All our units were standing up at the time and available. These brigade members and officers, being very experienced in dealing with lightning fires in remote areas fully expected a call to assist in a necessary solid initial attack on the lightning strikes.

**It is strange that Curtin avoided using officers and units from the most experienced lightning fire fighting brigade in the absolutely necessary and vital initial attack.**

The fires broke from the mountains on Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> and my brigade had units on property protection at Tidbinbilla and Naas. Although I was given no control role by Curtin, as brigade Captain I organised to carry out a back burn around the western side of Tharwa village and Cuppacumbalong. It was also my plan to back burn on the western side of the Naas Road south from the Namadgi Information centre to the Honeysuckle Creek turn off. A Parks officer, Parks 1, who apparently was put in control of the area without my knowledge held up the burn and as a result with the time lost waiting for her we were unable to get the burn as far south as I would have liked. This resulted in an intense fire making a run down the ungrazed Spring Station Creek and impacting heavily onto the Outward Bound/ Cuppacumbalong area on Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup>.

However, with the help of the Fire Brigade units I was able to get a fairly satisfactory burn around the strategically important western boundary of the village. This burn took the pressure off the village when the main wildfire hit on the Saturday. A completion of the burn south to the Honeysuckle Creek turn off would have similarly taken the pressure off a lot of areas on the Saturday although it would not have stopped the spread of the fire.

**I believe that the Park's officer placed in charged of this area within my brigade area had neither the experience, initiative or confidence to carry out the drastic measures necessary in the short time frame available with the limited suppression forces available.**

When the fires hit our area again on the Saturday our resources were obviously stretched to the limit. I self activated to take control of operations in this whole area as communications broke down with Curtin. I deployed my meagre resources to protect the most vulnerable homesteads keeping one tanker only for Tharwa Village, Cuppacumbalong and Outward Bound comprising some 64 buildings, mainly residences.

A NSW Task Force of some 6 vehicles were in the village at one stage but I was unable to task them as they refused to be deployed by me. There was a further tanker (Headquarters 10) broken down in the village. If I had been able to use the NSW units it would have made the whole district much more comfortable.

**Why were we not able to task the NSW units in our area when they were here on the spot with the fire making its run?**

I had no units available to protect Booroomba, Lanyon and many individual homesteads in the Naas/Tharwa/Tidbinbilla Road areas but people were well prepared being warned earlier in the week that the fires would impact on them. I was comfortable that most properties could protect themselves.

Unfortunately when the fire made its fierce run from Mt Tennant across the Naas Road and through the Ingledene Pines it cut the Naas and Smith's Roads we were unable to reach properties in the Naas area and a house was lost at Fitz Hill despite a land holder unit being in attendance. A further house was lost in the middle of Ingledene pines but because of the heavy fuel in the pines, this house was not defensible.

Once we could get through south on the Naas Road I took the only tanker that I had available at that time, the single unit that I had had available at Tharwa, and proceeded to carry out successful property protection in the Top Naas area before returning to Tharwa.

A southerly wind change late in the afternoon caused more concern as the fire roared down the ungrazed and fuel laden Murrumbidgee corridor and threatened the village once again from the south easterly direction. I then had the assistance of two land holder owned light units who generously came from Smith's Road to assist when the fire burst back across the river and joined a fire run from the south that crossed the Tidbinbilla Road on the north west of the village. This was successfully controlled with no property damage with the limited resources available.

Meanwhile I had units rotating around the area picking up outbreaks in the Lambrigg, Point Hut Road and Lanyon areas.

**I believe that the fire management in my brigade area was very successful.**

We lost only two houses, we lost no lives and had no injuries. The main reasons for this success was that all the residents were forewarned by myself in a circular letter sent around on the 15<sup>th</sup> January. Because of that letter all residents were well prepared, people stayed at home and prepared every pump and vehicle they could lay their hands on and had their relatives and friends around to help them because they knew that the fire was coming and that it would overwhelm all suppression forces. A copy of that letter is attached.

This warning was circulated to the whole of Tharwa, Tidbinbilla, Naas, Lanyon and Smith's Road areas including the Government instrumentalities such as Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, Birrigai and Namadgi Information Centre.

**I understand that the Government instrumentalities scoffed and laughed at my warning. As a result the loss of property in the Government managed areas was abnormally severe despite the concentration of resources in those areas at the expense of rural communities.**

One disturbing occurrence was the appearance of two police constables in the village who announced that they were evacuating the area. Had this occurred it would have been disastrous as it was the people power that prevented many losses in this area. It was fortunate that I was able to short circuit their mission early and advised them that I would not allow evacuation of the village.

**The fundamental experience of bush fire fighting is to avoid evacuation of able bodied prepared people. It is disturbing that against all bodies of evidence, police still persist with this dangerous policy of blanket evacuation.**

There has been a distinct erosion of local management of rural volunteer bush fire brigades and their operations by the actions of ESB. That interference could have very possibly have led to major losses in my brigade area if I hadn't took the initiative upon myself to activate my brigade suppression units and the community as a whole.

**The imposition of inexperienced officers, particularly from Parks, over experienced local brigade officers with local knowledge is morale destroying as well as positively dangerous and a recipe for further disaster.**

Please find attached copy of the following literature:

. The situation update forwarded to all Tharwa/Naas/Tidbinbilla residents and Government instrumentalities on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 2003.

. My Captain's report to the annual meeting of the Southern Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1998 voicing my concerns at the direction the organisation was going.

. My letter to landholders and residents further warning of the problems and appealing to these people to support our brigade.

Questions raised by the wild fire events of January 2003:

#### THE EVENT

1. Given that the lightning strikes occurred in the middle of summer during the worst drought in history with the mountains carrying the highest fuel hazard loads ever, why wasn't a vigorous initial and sustained attack mounted?
2. Why wasn't experienced wild fire controllers put in charge of the fires and given all necessary support to mount a robust initial attack?
3. Why did staff based in ESB headquarters try to control every small action and decision of the on ground controllers and firefighters and to persist with this unsuccessful strategy even after the main event passed?
4. Why did the CFCO persist with a strategy of letting the fires spread and indeed to actually encourage them to spread?
5. Were the land managers allowed to dictate the fire suppression strategy, if so why?
6. Given that experienced fire controllers and firefighters were able to recognise that when the fire had eluded any initial attack, unless substantial rain occurred, it would seriously impact and cause massive damage, why didn't the CFCO and the ACT Government warn people of the danger and advise them to be to be prepared?

7. Why were volunteer bush brigades and their experienced officers ignored in the suppression and follow up activities, being replaced with officers of doubtful experience and legality?
8. Why were NSW units not made available for tasking by brigade officers?
9. Why did Government agencies such as Birrigai, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi scoff at advice from Southern Brigade Captain that the fire was uncontrollable and would impact on the populated areas?
10. Why were rural volunteer brigade officers not kept informed of strategies and tactics?
11. Given extreme fire weather forecast for the 8<sup>th</sup> January including the forecast of dry storms, why weren't units stood up in the lightning prone western areas of the ACT, and further why weren't bulldozers and graders stood up as was the norm in the past?
12. What was the involvement of the Emergency Service Bureau administration in the handling of the fire and was their involvement in breach of the Bush Fire Act?
13. Given that it was obvious on the evening of Friday the 7<sup>th</sup> that the fire was going to impact on the suburbs, why wasn't protective back burning carried out on the western side of suburbs such as Chapman, Duffy, Curtin, Kambah etc., as was done successfully to save Tharwa?

## HISTORY AND LEGISLATION

1. The Bush Fire Act clearly states that the CFCO is ultimately responsible for bush fire suppression in the ACT, did the CFCO assume full responsibility for the suppression actions and consequences?
2. Has the Director of ESB hijacked the legal roll of Bush Fire Council and undermined that roll? Why?
3. Did the departmental Secretary condone and support that illegal intrusion into the BFC statutory responsibility?
4. Why did various Government Ministers also support and condone those illegal manipulations by ESB?
5. Why did the ESB support the intrusion into brigade autonomy by claiming that volunteer brigade funds were the property of the ACT Government?
6. Why did ESB pursue a policy of bureaucratic intimidation of volunteer bush fire brigades which has led to frustration and morale deterioration?
7. Why did ESB purposely divide BFC staff such as Secretary, Training Officer, Fire Management Officer from the control of BFC?
8. Why didn't the Fuel Management Committee under the Chairmanship of the Director ESB publicly and actively condemn the public land manager's dangerous pursuit of hazard amassing?
9. Was it appropriate and prudent to appoint a Deputy Chief Fire Control officer with no bush fire fighting and control experience into the main operational control role of the organisation?
10. Why did ESB steal the equipment and funds and their control from BFC and why did the Departmental Secretary and appropriate Minister allow this to happen?



## DECLINE IN SUPPRESSION CAPACITY

1. Given that the risk of bush fire destruction has increased dramatically with the widespread build up of hazard, why has the CFCO and ESB allowed the suppression ability to decline particularly with the removal of large tankers, bull dozer and grader from BFC ownership, the decrease in water carrying capacity of tankers and the ineffective placement of bush fire tankers with the Fire Brigade?
2. Why has the CFCO and the Director of ESB persisted in supplying sub standard tankers to brigades?
3. Why has the CFCO and Director of ESB undermined the role of volunteer bush fire brigades and their officers in the protection of their own areas?
4. Why has the CFCO and ESB actively alienated rural land holders from the suppression equation by failing to support them with equipment such as pumps and radios etc?
5. What is the legal position of so called "Oscars" who are not brigade officers or DCFCO's under the Bush Fire Act and who assumed control roles over brigade officers?
6. Why has not bush fire fighting control experience been recognised as a priority when appointing officers to fire ground control positions?
7. How does the CFCO and ESB justify the savage reduction in stand by of resources on very high and extreme fire danger days in comparison to that recognised as necessary from experience over seventy years or more?
8. Given the obvious increasing bush fire risk involved why has the CFCO accepted a decline in the suppression capacity of ACT Forests?

## INCREASE IN RISK

1. Given the previous Government's public statements on the build up of hazards on public land and its acknowledgment that something had to be done about it by establishing the Fuel Management Task Force to pursue a solution to the problem, why did that Government condone the negative approach by their land managers to the problem?
2. Why has park's managers allowed hazard build up to take precedent over public protection?
3. Given the build up of hazard that has been allowed on public land, what steps have the public land manager's taken to prevent the escape of fire from their lands?
4. Why has various Governments and the bureaucrats involved including the CFCO and the Director of ESB allowed the public criticism of hazard reduction smoke to take precedent over the protection of life and property?
5. Why has the widespread removal of grazing from public managed areas been allowed to occur at the expense of the reduction of dangerous bush fire hazards?
6. Given that the Canberra water shortage which had resulted in the extreme dryness of foliage contributed immensely to the intensity of the fires when they reached Canberra, why has successive Governments not kept its water supply capacity up to the population increases?

## AFTER THE EVENT

1. Given that experienced bush fire fighters recognised that the main run of the fire was over, why were graders and bulldozers employed to place so called breaks which were unnecessary?
2. Why were local brigade officers and rural land holders not advised of this?
3. Why were local brigades and brigade officers not allowed to carry out security burning in their own areas such as the Top Naas area?
4. Was it now assumed that local brigades and their officers are incapable of carrying such simple operations?
5. It has been the practice since the establishment of volunteer bush fire brigades for BFC to provide coverage for injury to land holder members as well as damage to their vehicles when engaged in bush fire activities for the brigade. Why is compensation for such damage now being refused to the detriment of support for the organisation as a whole?

AFTER THE EVENT,

19<sup>th</sup> JANUARY ONWARDS

Unfortunately those in control in Curtin showed further lack of experience, knowledge of bush fire behaviour and common sense on the days following the event, displaying their continuing arrogance..

Anyone with knowledge of bush fire behaviour knew that the major run of the fires was over on Saturday as the fires had used all the energy built up from the excessive fuel loads of the Cotter Catchment, Namadgi Park, the pine forests and the Brindabella Park. There was then little chance of further major danger until the weather worsened again.

However a large waste of money and destruction of land occurred on Sunday the 19<sup>th</sup> when graders, bull dozers etc., were deployed to put a so called break around the fire edge, irrespective of the fact that in most of the places the fire edge was out and the so called break was running adjacent to roads. In rural land holder areas the earth movers were sent in without reference to lessees destroying fences and creating a huge mess. This was in most cases, was totally unnecessary. In rural areas, these actions should have been placed at the discretion of the local brigade captain. However once again those closeted in their air conditioned bunker in Curtin in front of computers thought that they knew everything.

In my own brigade area there was a pocket of unburnt country at Top Naas that was slowly burning down slope to the west. It was too rough to put out and we needed to either let it burn down to open country or to back burn it and clean it up. However, instead of letting it slowly burn out, without reference to local brigade officers, Curtin kept sending choppers to water bomb it.

On Thursday the 24<sup>th</sup> of January I inspected it with my deputy captain and we decided we needed to burn the hill out and complete the operation. I contacted the incident commander in Curtin on that afternoon and advised him that I in my opinion it would best to burn it out. I requested a grader for daylight on Friday the 25<sup>th</sup> and informed him that my deputy would supervise the grader to put the break in around the bottom of the range and that I would run the back burn from about 11 am onwards using my own brigade units. The incident controller concurred and it was left at that.

However on the Friday morning I was advised by my Deputy that an Oscar (a so called group captain, a level with very doubtful legal standing under ACT law) had arrived to take over the operation. With all my experience and local knowledge, I was sacked! What should have been a simple operation completed by Friday evening became a drawn exercise in wasted and expensive man power lasting several days. Once again Curtin imposing their will on the local brigade officers, instead of simply supporting them.

**The foolhardy actions of Curtin by interfering in the autonomy of volunteer brigades and experienced brigade officers is completely against the successful principles of bush fire management and if persisted with, will threaten the very ethos of volunteer bush fire brigades and the historical effectiveness.**

Further on Thursday evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>, I received a call that there was fire on Booroomba Station on the edge of the unburnt area. Since most of my formal brigade units were otherwise engaged, so as was the procedures built upon nearly one hundred years of self help in volunteer bush fire brigades, I proceeded to direct three rural land holder units onto the fire which was subsequently controlled. Curtin was well and truly advised of my positive actions on a very bad fire evening. However, on the way returning from the fire, one unit owned by Mr Peter Gullett of "Lambrigg" station sustained some vehicle damage when hit by a kangaroo. As has always been the procedure, Mr Gullett applied for assistance from the RFS for repairs to his vehicle. To everyone's amazement, his claim was refused.

This has seriously undermined the principle that members of a brigade formally placing themselves and their vehicles at the disposal of Bush Fire Council, in this case at the direction of their brigade captain, are entitled to compensation for vehicle and personal injury. This has never been refused in the past. Is this another case of the ESB arrogance imposing on volunteer bush fire brigades?

**The refusal of compensation for vehicle damage to a land holder member of a volunteer bush fire brigade who had placed his vehicle and himself at the support of bush fire control operations seriously threatens the very existence of a substantial part of bush fire suppression capacity if the decision is not reversed quickly.**

**This action has further reduced the already low morale amongst volunteer bush fire brigade members that has been produced by the irrational interference and dominating attitude of ESB into BFC affairs.**