

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on recent Australian Bushfires

Submitted by: Jack Hicks



1/5/2003

Inquiry Into The Recent Australian Bushfires

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am a farmer living at Dederang a Mountain Cattlemen running cattle on the Bogong High Plains and the captain of the Dederang Fire Brigade.

I was actively involved in the fire fighting campaign from start to finish.

I have made a list of the more serious problems we had during the fires.

They are as follows.

1. Initial attack on the lightning strikes on the 8th of January was too slow.
2. Access tracks: Largely had not been kept open.
3. Equipment: Bulldozers with lights & fuel trailers suitable for fire fighting were not available. Aircrafts sat on the ground to much in the early parts if the fires.
4. Water supplies: were not adequate because of the lack of maintenance.
5. Containment lines & back burns: were not carried out correctly. These incorrect techniques were putting lives & property at risk
6. CFA Strike teams: were not utilised properly in a lot of cases.
7. Incident control centres: were to big & lacked local experience in the initial stage of the fires. Radio communication was not good. Parks Vic Staff should not be incident controllers.
8. Local knowledge: was not used enough early on.
9. Fuel Reduction: had not been done properly prior to the fires.
10. Litigation: Some Fire Crews were not performing their duties properly in fear of litigation.

The following is my response to these problems.

1. **Initial Attack:**

All Wild Fires must be attacked immediately by the best and safest means available on the day.

A control centre must be set up for each fire.

Local people should be consulted at all times.

Each fire must be managed on its own merits.

2. **Access Tracks:**

All fire access tracks must be open before the start of the declared fire Restriction season.

Summer fire crews using chainsaws bulldozers & graders must carry out this work for training and familiarisation of the area they will be working in for the fire season.

3. Equipment:

Each District or area must have adequate equipment to safely protect the community along with its assets & public land.

This equipment must include Bulldozers with Lights, Fuel Trailers & Transport to carry them to the fire.

Crews need hand tools & quick attack units to go straight to the fire.

Aerial attack is needed on standby 24hrs a day in each area to spot fires, water bomb & back up ground crews when needed.

4. Water Sources:

Must be maintained at all times. Wherever possible build new storages eg dams, tanks or quick fill access points along streams.

5. Containment Lines& Back Burning:

Containment lines must be used wherever possible to stop fire. They can be existing roads or be constructed by bulldozers etc.

Back burning must be done as soon as possible it should be lit along the containment line first and let suck or run back into the fire front. By using this method the safety of the fire crews is guaranteed.

6. CFA Strike Teams:

Strike teams must be got onto the fire lines as soon as possible.

Local CFA tankers & crews should not be part of a strike team.

Strike team leaders should not be part of the fire management team.

Strike team leaders must be responsible for the safety and welfare of the team.

Strike teams should change shifts on the fire line at all times if possible

7. Incident Control Centres:

An Incident control centre must not get too big.

It should cover no more than one fire or a district or a valley.

It must be headed by staff from the agency in charge of wild fire suppression in that area. Parks Vic staff should never be in charge of a fire.

It must have local knowledge in it.

One Radio Channel for each fire.

It should be set up at a suitable pre planned site.

8. Local Knowledge:

Should always be used in control centres to help with planning , With strike teams as guides, To assist bulldozer operators and many other jobs.

9. Fuel Reduction:

Fuel Reduction must be carried out on all land to prevent wild fire.

Also around towns and public places to save lives and assets.

Municipal Fire Prevention Committees are already formed in Victoria to deal with fire prevention planning. This public committees role

should include, Inspection of all fire prone areas. Assist with the

drawing up and implementing fuel Reduction Plans. Conduct

Inspections after the fuel reduction burns to make sure they have been successful. If not put them back on top of the list for next season.

Methods of fuel reduction to include

Autumn Burning.

This work should be carried out before the fuel load reaches an unsafe level and at least on average once every 5 to 6 years for each area . Clearly depending on the timing of autumn brakes safe autumn burning can take place from late February through to early June. Fuel Reduction Burning should be a joint operation between the relevant fire suppression agencies eg in Victoria CFA & DSE. Fuel reduction burning is a good means of training and must be encouraged.

Grazing

Grazing is a very successful means of fuel reduction. This is very evident in the Victorian high Country where the cattle have been grazing for over 150 years. Large areas (thousands of hectares) of the Bogong High Plains did not burn when the fire came up out of the scrub. Where fuel reduction had been carried out by grazing the fire literally went out. If the wind or weather conditions did carry the fire across open grasslands the fire was only a cool burn just singeing the tops of the plants The Snow Gums & Bog Communities, have been saved by the cattle grazing around them. The birds and wild life are still there alive.

The Mt Nelse areas of the Bogong High Plains that have had cattle excluded from 12 yrs ago against the wishes of the cattlemen & sensible people, have burnt very hot and will never completely recover. The fire has burnt the plants right down into the roots. The heat of the fire has scorched the earth leaving it very prone to wind and water erosion. The cattle should never have been removed.

Mt Buffalo is a very good example of a national park without a fuel reduction plan. Cattle were excluded some 75 yrs ago. 3 big wild fires in the last 30 years. This must not be allowed to happen any more. Cattle Grazing is the only means of fuel reduction for alpine grasslands.

It will be very important to maintain grazing in the alpine high country that has been burnt. The regrowth of the plants in the grazed areas that have cool burnt will be prolific in the coming year. If this area is not kept fuel reduced it will burn again just like Mt Buffalo has.

Grazing should be reintroduced back into all alpine areas to prevent future wild fire. Grazing should also be used as a means of fuel reduction in forests, along roads, on reserves and on other public land.

10. Litigation:

Once a fire is going Occupational Health & Safety has no place on the fire ground. Common sense and good training must prevail at all times. The crews & equipment must be covered by a good insurance policy.

Signed: Jack Hicks
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