

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Select Committee on the recent Australian Bush-fires
Terms of Reference
Submission from the Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board

A) The extent and impact on the environment private and public assets and local communities;

The extent recent summer bush-fires had a major impact on the lands on the entire western side of the Board area.

The impact included the following:

- Farms land, buildings, fences were entirely or partly burnt.
- All land-holders were fortunate with very few stock losses.
- Smoke haze for many days induced worry as to unclear where-abouts and approach of fires
- Shepherding of stock away from fire directed time away from normal farm operations
- Time spent with Local fire brigades
- Concern and commitment to fires did not allow normal social events to operate eg. Annual Shows, Rodeos
- Concern that the Eastern side of the Board is bounded by National Parks that are administered by similar policies that has seen the large scale fires on the Western side.

B) The cause of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bush-fires including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests' other Crown land and private property

Lightning strikes across a long line within Kosciuszko National Park on the one day started the majority of the fires that burnt out of control.

Risk factors that contributed to the impact of the fires included:

- Heavy fuel loads
- Good rains in the Autumn of 2002 were followed by a dry winter, spring and summer. Board records show the Board drought area commencing on the eastern side and extending to the western side by January 2003.
- Increasing numbers of Wild dogs have been reported on the western side over a number of years. Their presence and predation has consistently produced reports of diminishing browsing animals within and adjoining National Parks.

Submission No.309

C) The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bush –fire prevention suppression and control

Environmental impact of hazard reduction.

- Since earliest exploration and settlement of the Monaro fire has been part of the environment. The presence of fires was used as a management tool for both hazard reduction and grazing management. Out-of-control bush-fires have also occurred. Despite all of the above large tracts of the Monaro have been regularly gazetted for National Parks and later declared Wilderness areas.

Current adequacy of Hazard reduction

- With the declaration of large tracts of land as National Park, hazard reduction has had to rely heavily on the use of "select windows of opportunity" for control burning. The reduction of fuel loads by browsing animals (either by grazing or trampling) has diminished.
- Community safety and expectations have seen the implementation of "fire restrictions" periods. To comply with community safety these restrictions are enforced but this severely limits the use of fire for hazard reduction.

Economic impact

- The impact to domestic livestock from bush-fire coupled with the drought conditions, reduces the economic contribution to Rural Monaro. Lower stock numbers equal less income.
- The Tourism Industry has introduced another source of income to the Monaro. Tourism also suffered dramatically from the Summer bush-fires.

Other strategies for bush-fire prevention, suppression and control.

- Maintenance of all Fire-trails and tracks is a priority that has not received due emphasis.
- Communication for all levels of Bush-fire control agencies is a priority that has not received due emphasis.
- The impact of browsing animals in regard to hazard reduction as identified by prior knowledge, as evident by where fires were contained has not received the scientific research it deserves.

D) Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bush-fires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices.

There is no evidence of community awareness of such post fire land management policies and practices when fires have burnt on such a large scale. Avoidance of such intense fires has and is a priority of all local individuals and local agencies.

We suggest a meeting between all parties:- Representatives from:

- Rural Fire Service
- NSW Farmers
- National Parks & Wildlife Service
- State Forests
- Land & Water Conservation
- Conservation groups
- Landcare

These representatives should be heads of their departments that are fed the concerns of staff from the ground up. They all need to agree that the present policy for Fire Management is not working and come up with policies that have the best chance of providing the least impact on the environment, public and private. This should be "Fire Management Plan" and be a living document. A working committee to be formed from above agencies to make sure the Plan is working and make changes when/where is necessary.

E) Any alternative or developmental bush-fire mitigation and prevention approaches and the appropriate direction of research into bush-fire mitigation.

As Above.

- Research – Working committee to have input and immediate access to all available data.

F) The appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning in protecting life and property from bush-fire.

- The Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board can only address the issue of land use planning. The Board has evidence the sub-division of large tracts of land mostly in close proximity to National parks of a more "bush-like" nature for life-style as opposed for rural use. Much of this land is held by absentee landholders that compounds the problem of good communication with regard to all land management issues. Education of these landholders and the general public on these issues should be a priority.

G) The adequacy of current response arrangements for fire-fighting.

- The developments in local communication was identified as a help as opposed to previous fires.
- Asset deployment from else-where was good but suffered from delays in decision making at a more regional level.

H) The adequacy of deployment of fire-fighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions.

- The Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board was not involved directly in the fire fighting. Staff were available at all times to assist with and assess fire related animal welfare issues.
- There was a problem regarding communication in the field due to unavailability of mobile phone coverage and insufficient two-way radio communication between all agencies.

I) Liability, insurance coverage and related matters.

- The issue of fire damage to private property from fires emanating from the National Parks, particularly internal damage, loss of grazing fodder reserves is impacting severely on affected land-holders. This stress is only partly alleviated by compensation as the disruption to one's life is impossible to calculate particularly as the fires were seen as inevitable under pre-fire land/fire-trial/hazard reduction management practices.

J) The roles and contributions of volunteers including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

The contribution from ratepayers of our board is to be commended. A lot spent up to 4 days per week fighting or assisting with other fire related activities for about a month. This resulted in essential activities in the management of their properties to be modified or neglected. The most crucial of these activities was the hand feeding of stock.

Ratepayers have expressed the view that they will not jeopardise the management of their own business unless the fire directly threatens their property. This is not in the normal spirit we Australians are used to. This attitude can be directly attributed to the opinion that the extent and ferocity of the fires relates back to mismanagement in allowing fuel loads to reach the high levels they were at across such a large area.