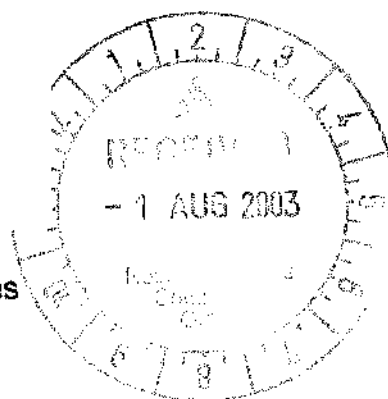


61 3 57 218196

Submission No.465

30 June 2003

The Chairman
House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires
Department Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Sir,

SUBMISSION TO THE 2003 FEDERAL BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the 2003 Federal Bushfire Inquiry.

We are not the type of people who would ordinarily write to such an inquiry, however comments made by Premier Steve Bracks this week dismissing the Federal Bushfire Inquiry have prompted this submission. By snubbing this bushfire inquiry, Premier Bracks is dismissing the views, opinions and experiences of fire fighters and landholders in North-East Victoria. We hope that something comes out of this inquiry and it's not ignored like all the other inquiries, but we won't hold our breath.

If the Premier thinks that everything is fine and the fire fighting was well managed and he refuses to acknowledge that things could have been handled better, we could really be wasting our time. The fact that the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Parks and CFA staff have been prohibited by the State Government from giving evidence to this inquiry, smells of a cover up.

If the Premier believes in his advisers, he should visit us at ground level, he should speak to ordinary people to find out what really happened.

There is a lot Mr Bracks can learn from the volunteers who placed their lives and livelihoods on the line to fight the 2003 bushfires.

Premier Bracks has shown he simply has no understanding of the affect these fires have had on our region, in fact his visit to Myrtleford during the fires was only to the Savoy Club where he was guaranteed the most media attention for the least effort, for Premier Bracks not to even spare five minutes to visit the Myrtleford Fire Brigade and the Myrtleford Fire Brigade Ladies Auxiliary and meet and speak with the volunteers and fire fighters who were placing their lives on the line to save the property and livelihood of their mates, shows the contempt with which he holds country people. It shows he has become arrogant like Mr Kennett and shows his out of touch with common people.

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If Premier Bracks actually listened to real people who have been affected by his Government's park management policies he would be aware of instances similar to the following:

- On the 8th of January when the fires started, two of our mates who were logging in the area, actually saw the lightning strikes hit the plantation and start a spot fire. They immediately advised Hancock Plantations who were able to use a rake-hoe to put those fires out instantly. It is almost inconceivable that all of the fires in early January that were started by lightning strikes, could not have been put out had they been addressed immediately.
- On the 22nd of January Chris Bonacci was called to the Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP) to conduct a back burn to defend the HVP Plantation along Flagstaff Road. Whilst we were supervising the blaze, two vehicles arrived with journalists and a television crew. The female journalist approached the crew and we were informed that a Department of Sustainability and Environment officer had to be in the camera footage. After putting on clean overalls, which looked barely worn we were instructed to 'give him something to do', so we handed him a rake-hoe that he used to pose with for the television footage. The television crew then asked our fire crew how to get to the fire front. We advised them that this was not possible and in any case we had better things to do.

This is the only example we physically saw, however there are many stories of photographs of men on the fire front being staged specifically for a newspaper photograph or television crew, one needs only to ask around in places like Myrtleford. We have nothing to gain by providing this evidence and we ask for nothing.

That evening the crew went from operating a controlled back burn to overseeing an uncontrollable fire at Buckland Gap, near Beechworth. Over the period of the shift we had three separate DSE officers in charge, the lack of communication between these officers and the absence of any fire strategy lead to the back burn becoming so big that it was ultimately it took off and it was uncontrollable. Later that evening after our shift had ended and our people could no longer fight the flames, we had no choice but to leave that fire burning out of control. This was a waste of a night's work because of the disorganised and changing instructions from DSE staff. In addition there were so many DSE staff and vehicles present at this fire that there was traffic congestion and cars banked up. There were so many people that most of the DSE staff were just sitting around.

The DSE's management of the fires was something we would never have imagined to be so incompetent. Their lack of practical knowledge of fire fighting and local geography was obvious. It does not appear that the DSE had any actual bushfire strategy in place.

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- On one occasion we identified that a back burn was needed to combat a local bushfire, however it took four days to acquire permission to back burn at Buffalo Creek. Had the DSE listened to our locals and given due consideration to their on the ground knowledge, and had granted permission to back burn immediately, this fire would not have destroyed the land it did and would not have reached the intensity it did. On another occasion, Trevor Dwyer wasted 10 hours waiting for instructions at Nug Nug. His time could have been better used elsewhere.
- We know of occasions whereby bulldozers were urgently required on-ground, however on one occasion it took DSE five hours to locate their bulldozer in the Harrietville area. The department simply did not know where their equipment was.
- Members of the Rosewhite RFB together with at least two other brigades were on at least one occasion sent out to a fire front by the DSE where they waited and watched a slow moving fire. We spent the night waiting for the flames to arrive, however this exercise was a waste of time as the fire moved exceptionally slowly. We could have been utilised elsewhere on real fire fronts or at home. It would have been better if DSE officers were used to patrol this fire through the night. We are volunteers and we would have been better off at home.

We have no doubt that DSE management were simply so ill prepared for this bushfire crisis that when it occurred, they simply had no idea how to address this disaster. Clearly DSE did not have any clear understanding of the level of forest fuel in the State Government managed parkland or they would have had emergency plans in place.

Upon the realisation that they did not have any appropriate strategy to combat the flames, instead of asking local people who understand their local terrain for advice, we have no doubt DSE simply decided to let the fires burn out.

University educated DSE staff did not want to bow down to local uneducated cockies – but maybe they are just copying the Premier. We may not have university degrees in park management but our hearts are in the right place and we have faith in our common sense.

As a consequence of the management of the 2003 North-East bushfires, the morale of CFA members in our area, most especially members of the Rosewhite RFB since these fires is very low. Evidence of this is the motion passed at the Rosewhite Rural Fire Brigade Annual General Meeting held on Tuesday 24 June 2003:

*That members of the Rosewhite Rural Fire Brigade may choose not to attend fires on Crown Land after the fires have been burning for 48 hours, unless remuneration and conditions as provided to Department of Sustainability &

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Environment employees engaged in similar work, are also provided to volunteer members of the Rosewhite Rural Fire Brigade."

Next time there is a fire in a national park we would be hesitant to attend unless there is a concerted effort by government agencies to put out the fire.

If the Government wants the CFA to continue, they will need to change the way they manage a fire and how they utilise volunteers. They need to be able to manage their land to reduce fire risk and when the fires do occur they must realise that volunteers are not just cannon fodder with limitless time to be used at the whim of some DSE controller.

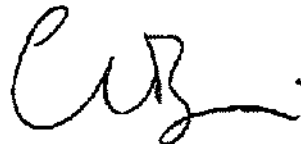
It looked like a game of chess and the volunteers were the pawns.

We have lives to live and an income to earn. We don't want to be heroes, we just want to genuinely help our good neighbours.

Yours sincerely



MR TREVOR DWYER
Brigade Captain
Rose White Rural Fire Brigade



MR CHRIS BONACCI
Member
Rose White Rural Fire Brigade