

**Committee Secretary**  
**House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires.**



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**Address:-**

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**INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES.**

Dear Sir / Madam,

Our family live in the Callaghan's Creek Valley in North Eastern Victoria. This is a relatively isolated valley, and during the recent bushfires, we had active fires within ten kilometres of us for over four weeks.

The combination of our isolation and the length of time that our property and we were at hazard gave us a unique insight into the way things were approached locally.

What we provide now is a collection of observations *from our perspective*.

**Resourcing.**

During the first half of the fires, we were most frustrated to continually note the media reporting there were enough resources.

Despite the fact that fires were very close to our valley, there were no fire fighting resources in or near our valley, not even to patrol for spot fires. This task had to be performed by residents on a 24-hour basis, and was a major source of frustration and fatigue.

Any help would have been valuable at this stage. No specialist knowledge was necessary, just the ability to drive, use a radio for communication and keep watch. This type of role would have been ideal for Defence Force personnel, or indeed almost any able bodied person.

***We feel that the request for Defence Force personnel was made far too late. Their considerable resources would have been of great value much earlier, so there needs to be a streamlining of procedure.***

The Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade was not utilised at any time. The reason that we were given was that they are not trained in bushfire fighting and could therefore not be deployed.

Victorian Country Fire Authority, (C.F.A.) fire fighters do a brief course known as "minimum skills", that alerts them to the special hazards of fighting bush fires.

***We recommend that the Melbourne metropolitan fire fighters undertake the course of minimum skills. Further to this, we feel that the Melbourne fire fighters could have been used for home defence. This would have released an equivalent number of C.F.A. units to pursue other duties.***

During the second two weeks of our fire situation, as other fire fronts calmed down, more resources became available for our area. The problem now became the way that resources were used.

A common occurrence most late evenings, when temperatures were high, humidity low and fires actively burning, was that the C.F.A. and Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment (D.S.E.) would head back to their respective bases for evening changeover and meals. This left us with uncontrolled fires and no resources.

***We urgently recommend that during times of active fire, crew changeovers happen at the fire front.***

It is a well established practice that when there is a major fire in New South Wales, large numbers of Victorian fire fighters go to assist. We understand that initially, the Canberra fires occupied the N.S.W. fire fighters, and that some units did eventually come to Victoria, although none to our area.

The point we wish to make is that we have heard speculation that the presence of N.S.W. fire fighters was kept to a minimum. This is said to be for the cultural reason that N.S.W. fire fighters receive payment, while Victorians do not.

***This needs to be investigated, because if true, withheld valuable resources when most needed!***

During the zenith of the fires, it was obvious that sufficient resources were not available, and that if more severe fire weather had occurred, a disaster would have resulted. We called our local state MP, and recommended that a *State of Emergency* be declared, so as to assist with resources.

He passed this on to his leader, and that evening, the Victoria opposition leader requested that a State of Emergency be declared.

The government stated that this was not necessary, and that they already had enough resources.

I cannot express how abandoned we felt by our state government at this moment.

We knew how little there was between devastation and us. The prospect of losing our life's work and perhaps our lives, only to be told that things were not urgent enough.

No government ministers had come, (or have come since) to our area, preferring to haunt the more populous areas where the fires posed a far lesser threat.

We feel that they made these statements in ignorance of our situation, and at no time realised the true severity of the situation.

***We believe that the ability to declare a state of emergency in Victoria needs to be streamlined.***

### **The Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment.**

In Victoria, this was reported to be the combating authority. We often heard spokesmen proudly stating on the media that this fire was "their" fire.

We were alarmed to go to a local public meeting to be told by a representative that their plan was to let the bush burn. He said that fire was natural, and that they would only be engaged in property defence.

This plan was seen by the community as flawed. They were alarmed by the strategy of watching and not containing the fire.

A frustrating happening during the fires was that of "split command".

This is where a single fire front is carved up into two zones, each controlled by different people in different areas. This made any decision making almost impossible, and different fire fighting strategies were being employed at different parts of the same fire front at different times.

***We believe that each fire front requires only one overall commander.***

We experienced a number of different commanders during the fires as they "rotated through" Just as one became acquainted with the local situation, they were replaced.

***In times of severe fire, the D.S.E. should keep commanders who have become effective at the fire front if possible. If they require days off, they should return to the same fire front.***

Although we only had a small sample size, a clear trend emerged in management style of the local fire commanders.

We had two young, recently qualified commanders, and two, long time employees, both near retirement.

The younger people were hesitant to make decisions, as they were worried that a bad decision would harm their future career prospects. They felt that no decision was better than one that involved any risk, ( is there any decision in an emergency that involves no risk?) and were circumspect. They also gave a lot less credence to locals and local knowledge. They preferred to rely on technology, even when it could be clearly shown to be wrong.

By comparison, the older more experienced commanders listened to locals, and granted them a small degree of autonomy. They were more likely to make a "courageous" decision, and these factors resulted in a far more effective fire fighting effort.

***We feel that the culture of the Victorian DSE needs to be examined. It needs to become more inclusive of community and allow local managers to become autonomous to a degree and to be allowed to make potentially hazardous decisions in emergency situations. They also need to recognise the value of experience and the ability to deal with people, and rely less on academic qualifications.***

## **UTILITIES.**

A major frustration during the fires was the refusal of the utilities to come into what they referred to as *a red zone*.

Early in the fires, our phone lines were burned at the entrance to our valley at one small point that we had identified. The **Telstra** management refused to allow staff anywhere near our valley, despite the fact that it was completely safe to do so, because of the *red zone* declaration

They eventually supplied portable satellite phones that were delivered by our local Member of Parliament. These were largely ineffective at the height of the fires due to poor signal strength because of thick smoke.

Later on in the fires, our electricity supply was interrupted by a minor fault on a power pole at the entrance to our valley.

Similar to Telstra, **Texas utilities, (TXU)** refused to send any staff into a *red zone*. We explained that our ability to pump water to fight the fires depended on electricity, but to no avail. A private electrician later corrected the fault, and power was restored.

*We feel that The Victorian Occupational health and Safety act needs to make allowance for employees of utility organisations involved in emergencies. Further to this, a system of voluntary emergency rostering and escort by fire fighters into possibly hazardous areas need to be instituted.*

### **The Aftermath.**

Since the fires, we have had no representative of the Victorian government inquire as to our well being in any way, shape or form.

Despite the government announcing massive funding of recovery efforts, none has trickled down to anywhere close to here.

The farming sector, who suffered the greatest damage, seem to have been placed at the end of the queue.

They have once again chosen to fund the more populous districts, where problems were far less severe by mainly spending on tourism advertising.

Would we be too cynical in suggesting that this style of spending also serves to keep the advertising agencies and media outlets happy with the government?

*We feel the fire recovery funds would be far better spent on infrastructure improvement in the affected areas that would benefit all residents.*

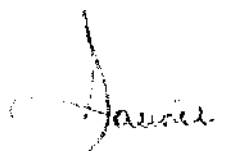
This fire event will leave its mark on the people and the land that they occupy.

This was a devastating fire. It was eventually managed only by a period of favourable weather, and the fact that the fire had turned away from populated areas.

All we have heard since the fire is how well it was all managed.

This was not the case.

Our systems of fire management need to be urgently updated, and our relief efforts better targeted, not just for the vocal few, but for **all** residents of our communities or the decline of the rural regions will only accelerate.



Laurie Smith



Eden Smith.