



4 May 2003

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission No.249

Dear Sir/ Madam,

House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires

I wish to make a submission to the inquiry.

My submission is of a general nature, relating to the management of major fires. I am a fulltime Regional Officer with the Country Fire Authority of Victoria (CFA) however I would like to make it clear that my submission does not necessarily reflect to official views of CFA.

The bulk of my submission is the report I completed as the recipient of the 2002 Churchill fellowship, and is entitled "*The Lord Mayors Bushfire Appeal Churchill Fellowship to study the training of firefighters in the command and control skills necessary to manage major fires.*".

This report was completed following an intensive study tour of USA and UK looking at current world trends in training for both structural fires and wildfires. The committee is welcome to reprint all or part of the report should they wish.

The report represents only a summary of all the information gathered during the study tour. Extensive supporting documentation is available should the committee require it.

Submission:

Improving Incident Management skills for those involved in Command and Control Roles

This submission relates in particular to paragraphs (e), (g), and (h) of the Terms of Reference.

I do not wish to reflect adversely in any way on the individuals who managed the major fires during the 2002-2003 fire season. I do believe however from my direct observations during that time and from more general experience that the training of personnel who manage major fires can be improved.

This is not to say that Australian practices are significantly worse than other countries with similar risks, indeed many of our fire services provide a service equal to any that I have seen in the world. Rather, I believe that we should be constantly improving our systems, training and technology to enable our personnel to function at the highest level.

Australia currently lacks a national level course or program to impart skills to those involved in major fires. By comparison, the USA reaps the benefits of a comprehensive training program which progressively develops skills up to a very high level – (National Wildfire Co-ordinating Group training programs) . The training curriculum for Australian firefighters is very good, however there are significant gaps at the higher levels.

The proposals to establish a Co-operative Research Centre to investigate issues relating to bushfires will be very valuable. The paradox is that the more information available to incident managers, the more difficult their task becomes because of potential information overload. A rapidly developing bushfire has the potential to overload both people and systems very quickly. Consequently a high priority must be placed on decision support systems, and training for personnel in decision making and incident management.

I believe that improvement can be made in the following areas:

- Building links with academic research and use of current material in training programs;
- Establishment of a national level incident management course,
- Effective inclusion of “Lessons Learned from Case Studies”, both in formal training programs, and for individual skills maintenance,
- Integration of computer simulation into training for command personnel;
- Inclusion of “Human Factors” issues in training and development for command personnel;
- Incident management exercises that recognise the importance of team interaction to successful incident management (most training programs tend to concentrate upon giving the individual skills and qualifications);
- Skills maintenance programs for command personnel at all levels;

- Allocating sufficient resources to command training. This may be resource intensive, but capital investment (e.g. computer simulators) cannot take the place of appropriate staffing for command training;
- A formal process of analyzing effectiveness of individuals and teams following operations and exercises.

More information is included in the report of my Churchill Fellowship, which forms part of this submission.

I would be happy to expand upon the submission should the committee wish.

Yours faithfully

Stephen Walls

Recommendations of Churchill Fellowship Report

(Direct excerpt from the report, page 23)

As a result of this study tour, the author recommends that Australian fire services and land management agencies:

1. Investigate the use of high-level command simulators such as Hydra or Minerva by Australian fire agencies.
2. Continue to support the development of Australian scenarios of Vector command simulator.
3. Establish links with key agencies and individuals in the UK and USA in order to exchange information.
4. Disseminate information from overseas sources within each agency with a particular emphasis on getting information to personnel likely to manage major incidents.
5. Support research into human factors issues related to command roles.
6. Continue to review material from USA, UK and other countries to determine potential for use in Australian training programs.
7. Promote links with academic researchers both in Australia and overseas
8. Promote and support research by fire service personnel into operational command issues.
9. Establish exchange programs to allow serving members of Australian fire agencies to participate in command training and observe operational activities with leading fire services in the UK and USA.
10. Ensure that qualifications to undertake command roles include an evaluation of both the individual's role related skills, and ability to work as a member of a team.
11. Take every opportunity to disseminate Case studies of lessons learned from major incidents throughout Australian fire services, identifying both good and bad lessons learned.
12. Support future study tours (whether by Churchill fellows or not) to investigate relevant areas of interest in similar fields.

About the Author, **Stephen Walls:**

19 years experience as a professional officer in the Country Fire authority (CFA), and prior to that 5 years experience as a volunteer firefighter. Currently holds the rank of Regional Officer.

Academic Qualifications: BAppSci, CertTech (Fire Tech), Grad Dip Bus (Mgt), MBA (HRM).

Professional Qualifications: Graduate Member of Institution of Fire Engineers (by examination)

Has held position in charge of CFA Training College (Fiskville), and management positions advising on operational policy and training at CFA headquarters. Currently Operations Manager of CFA Region 15 based in Ballarat.

Member of national working party advising on Incident Controller training for the Australasian Fire Authorities Council since 2000.

Operational Experience: Incident Controller, Deputy Controller and Planning Officer at number of Type 3 incidents, including wildfires and Longford Gas Plant. Member of first deployment of Australian firefighters to wildfires in Northern Rockies region of USA, August-September 2000. Deputy Controller at Swifts Creek and Ovens during the major fires in North East Victoria and Gippsland in January and February 2003.