



ALPINE SHIRE

9 May 2003

Sophie Panopoulos MP  
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Submission No.240

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Dear Sophie,

**BUSHFIRE INQUIRY**

Please find attached the Alpine Shire's submission to the Federal Bushfire Inquiry.

You will note that the outcome of the public meeting held on this matter on Monday, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2003 is attached as Appendix 1 for your information.

I look forward to discussing this matter further with you.

Yours sincerely,

**DOUG SHARP**  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**



ALPINE SHIRE

## **BUSHFIRE INQUIRY ALPINE SHIRE SUBMISSION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a community and organisation, the Alpine Shire was severely impacted upon by the fires that raged through the north-east in January 2003. The fire crisis in the Shire lasted for some 24 days, affecting virtually every area and community.

Given this impact, the Alpine Shire is uniquely placed to make a submission. In doing so, the Council has drawn on its own experiences, as well as those of the community as expressed at a public meeting on the matter.

This submission will look at the various phases of the fire threat – preparation, response and recovery. Where Council has direct experience it will comment. Otherwise, reference will be made to the outcomes of the public meeting. (*Appendix 1*)

### **BACKGROUND**

The scale of the fire as it affected the Alpine Shire is shown on the attached plan. (*Appendix 2*) At various times over the course of a 24 day duration, all major communities in the Shire were on fire alert simultaneously, creating an unprecedented situation. Communities from Dinner Plain to Myrtleford, Nug Nug to Mount Beauty, were time and again directed to implement fire plans and/or evacuate.

Public Information meetings were regularly held throughout the Shire, conducted by the Council in conjunction with the combating authorities.

Council commenced a Fire Information Call Centre, operated up to 18 hours a day by staff on a roster basis for 15 days as the fire threat worsened.

The Shire's Emergency Management Plan was invoked. All Shire resources were directed to the fire threat from that point.

A Municipal Emergency Co-ordinating Centre (MECC) was established in the Bright Council Chamber and ran for 2 weeks of the fire threat. Evacuation Centres were established in each of the main towns of Myrtleford, Mount Beauty and Bright, operated by the Shire.

All regular services of the Shire, including Home and Community Care Services, were either severely curtailed or halted during the fire threat period.

An estimated 30% of the resident population evacuated from the Shire during this period.

Impacts were significant. These are rated as follows :

- ❖ Major loss of tourism and economic development during the region's busiest period of the year.
- ❖ Significant operational losses to the Shire.
- ❖ Community infrastructure lost or damaged.
- ❖ Communities in the Alpine region, such as Dinner Plain, Hotham and Falls Creek, were isolated for lengthy periods, requiring food drops and airlifting of personnel.
- ❖ Community Support Programs were fractured, that is local fund raising, fetes and sporting events, which are important to the community fabric, namely sporting groups and charities.
- ❖ Community, businesses and Shire placed under severe stress from the prolonged and erratic nature of the fire threat.

## **FIRE PREPARATION**

Comments received at a public meeting on this aspect relate to the following issues :

- (1) Lack of fuel reduction burning by Government authorities in the years leading up to the fire. This had increased the fuel load in National Parks, thus exacerbating the fire risk already heightened by drought and low humidity.
- (2) New National Parks should not be considered until there are adequate resources to manage them.

## **FIRE RESPONSE**

### **(a) Communication**

- (1) The combating authorities, DSE and CFA, established Incident Management Teams (IMT's) to manage the fire fight at the local level.

Initially one IMT was established for the Shire, but as the fire grew it eventually reached a stage whereby 4 IMT's covered the Shire. These were located at Ovens, Mount Beauty, Swifts Creek (not in the Shire) and Beechworth (not in the Shire).

Co-ordination between various IMT's and the MECC was disjointed and inconsistent. Some were very good with their communication, others poor, particularly those located outside the Shire. This had severe implications for running the Call Centre and for the management of resources.

*Suggested that one IMT be established per municipality.*

- (2) As the official Call Centre, the Shire should have been provided with the most up-to-date information on a regular basis and in advance of the media. This was not the case, meaning that the value of the Call Centre was open to criticism because it was behind the media in public advice.

*Suggested that when a Call Centre is established for the combating authorities, it must receive the latest information first and regularly.*

- (3) The Shire's experience from running the Call Centre was that it was very well received by the public, notwithstanding difficulties with information flow. Its relationship with the MECC was excellent and this allowed it to respond to the public as quickly as the MECC itself could be advised from IMT's.

Utilising the Shire and its staff meant that the Call Centre was operating very quickly and with people who were familiar with the local area. This proved to be very comforting and helpful to callers enquiring about local conditions.

*Suggested that Shires continue to be used as Call Centres.*

- (4) The Shire conducted a series of public information meetings at the request of combating authorities. These were staged around the Shire to alert communities as situations worsened. They were very well attended. Public feedback has indicated that the meetings were very well received and helped communities come to terms with the fire threat and make necessary preparations.

*Suggested that the practice of public information meetings be continued at times of fire threat.*

- (5) Weather forecasts were relied upon to assess the fire danger and use of resources on a particular day. As a comment, continued unfounded predictions of windy weather hampered fire fighting and caused anxiety.

(6) The comments received at the public meeting on this aspect focused on –

: Poor communication between local CFA Brigades and the CFA command.

: Inadequate local knowledge being provided to visiting Brigades causing confusion and frustration.

**(b) Local Knowledge**

Comments received at the public meeting related to an under-utilisation of local knowledge by the combating authorities – DSE and the CFA. This led to a problem with identifying local areas and conditions.

*Suggested that greater use be made of recently retired and experienced personnel by inviting them to contribute at IMT's.*

**FIRE RECOVERY**

**(a) Anomalies**

Centrelink

Access to Centrelink benefits was denied to a number of people because they were isolated by the fires and unable to initiate the process in the required time. This was particularly evident at the Alpine resorts of Mount Hotham, Falls Creek and Dinner Plain.

*Suggested that retrospectivity be applied in these instances.*

Containment Lines

Containment lines established in private property by combating authorities for overall fighting purposes were seen as the landholder's responsibility for rehabilitation purposes. This caused great anxiety and anger in the farming community with respect to loss of production and erosion etc.

*Suggested that where containment lines are ordered by combating authorities, rehabilitation is the responsibility of the State Government.*

**(b) Access to National Parks**

More than 90% of the Shire is covered by National or State Parks. They form a vital part of the tourism infrastructure and environmental amenity of the Alpine area. The Parks are used by bushwalkers, tourist operators and other recreational users who take advantage of the extensive walking track network.

The fires affected most of these areas. For safety reasons many of the tracks remain closed or restricted, although they are progressively being cleared.

While they remain in this condition tourism, and the livelihoods that depend on it, is affected. It is vitally important that access to the Parks be restored as quickly as possible for the sake of livelihoods and confidence.

**(c) Salvaging of Timber**

The public meeting passed the following motion :

*“That the areas of Alpine Ash and other millable timber killed in the recent fires in the State Forest and National Park be allowed to be salvaged.”*

Supporting this position was the view that the local economy has been severely affected by both the fires and loss of the Mount Beauty Timber Mill. This is seen by the public as a way of taking advantage of a wasted resource and improving economic opportunities.

## **FUTURE MANAGEMENT**

The north-east fires resulted in major protective works being undertaken around towns and villages. Some of these involved bush clearing, creation of containment lines and clearing of fire access tracks.

Whether or not all these works should be maintained or are appropriate in the long-term is open to assessment. Nevertheless, such consideration should be given so that communities can feel assured that adequate protective measures are in place against the risk of fire.

*Suggested that the range of protective works necessary to ensure safety of communities is assessed and implemented.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- (1) That in the interests of improving communication from the CFA to Municipal Emergency Control Centres, one incident Management Team (IMT) be established per municipality.
- (2) That when Call Centre is established for combating authorities, it receive the latest information first and regularly.
- (3) That Shires continue to be used as Call Centres because of their relationship with the Municipal Emergency Control Centre and their capacity to harness local information.

- (4) That the practice of public information meetings conducted by Shires on behalf of the combating authorities at times of fire threat be continued.
- (5) That greater use be made of recently retired and experienced personnel by inviting them to contribute at Incident Management Teams.
- (6) That retrospectivity be applied to the payment of Centrelink benefits in circumstances where people are isolated during prolonged events and are unable to access the service.
- (7) That where containment lines are ordered by combating authorities, rehabilitation is the responsibility of the State Government.
- (8) That the range of protective works necessary to ensure safety of communities be assessed and, if required, implemented or maintained.
- (9) That the comments received and noted from the public meeting (*Appendix 1*) be considered further by the Inquiry.

DOUG SHARP  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER