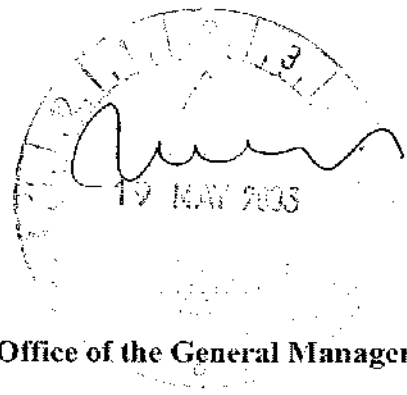


Submission No.329



Office of the General Manager

16 May 2003

Reference: C00474 (4)

The Chair
House of Representatives
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra

Dear Sir,

Re: Submission by the Blue Mountains City Council to the Committee

Thankyou for your letter of 22 April inviting Council to make a submission to the Committee regarding the experience of Council and our local community in the recent bushfires.

The Blue Mountains has had a long and detailed history of dealing with the bushfire threat which our residents have lived with since the settlement of the Blue Mountains. Often quoted as one of the most fire prone areas in the world, the City has developed in a manner which allows a firm interaction with our World Heritage environment while understanding, adapting and even accepting the risk of ongoing bush fire threat.

While the bush of the National Parks and the villages is a key feature of the lifestyle that our residents enjoy, bush fire is also a key concern. Through the education programs, development controls, mitigation programs and suppression activities Council participates in and supports, our community recognises bushfire as a factor of living in the area.

With my staff, we have prepared this submission to highlight some of the factors that influence the management of fire in the Blue Mountains. I would like to invite the committee to visit the area, speak with our staff, view our resources and understand our appreciation of the problem.

If you have any queries on this submission or wish to discuss either visiting the Blue Mountains or having staff give evidence, please contact Councils Emergency Management Officer Matthew Harper on 02 4780 5681 or 0414 195681 or mharper@bmcc.nsw.gov.au.

Yours faithfully,

MICHAEL WILLIS
General Manager

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Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: *Less emphasis is needed on the impact of a single fire event with more emphasis placed on the long term impact and management of the environment. This will involve a community wide change in attitude toward fire and its results. Unfortunately this may be impossible to achieve.*

Recommendation 2: *Governments, Developers and Residents must accept that living in a bush environment involves risks, one of which is bushfire.*

Recommendation 3: *Government develops a "Statement of Understanding" that can be included into legal documentation that places an emphasis on a property purchaser to accept personal risk from bushfire and take steps to protect their own properties from that risk.*

Recommendation 4: *That the Committee considers the joint responsibility of asset owners to ensure their assets are resilient from fires, rather than make judgement based wholly on the fire origin or transmission medium.*

Recommendation 5: *The committee support the implementation of the Emergency Risk Management Approach*

Recommendation 6: *The Committee recommend that further research be undertaken on the accumulation of bush fire forest fuels in different locations and different forest types and the effect of the hazard reduction at different loads. The execution of this research be carried out by a multidisciplinary organisation to allow the recognition of environmental and fire management aspects of the process.*

Recommendation 7: *Any body established for such research be established in conjunction with the existing expertise and utilise as much existing information as possible.*

Recommendation 8: *The Committee recommends further research into how homes survive fire impact. That any research is carried out by a multidisciplinary team to ensue a holistic approach to home safety.*

Recommendation 9: *The Committee recommends that evacuation plans or safe havens/bunkers are not acceptable alternatives for bushfire resistant construction, access design or hazard management through landscaping.*

Recommendation 10: *The Committee recommends that no volunteers be given any form of financial benefit when undertaking emergency duties for under a period of 10 working days. Where an ongoing emergency continues past this time, then benefits be extended to all volunteers registered with a recognised emergency service/relief agency while committed to undertaking urgent relief work.*

Recommendation 11: *The Committee considers a range of methods in which the government can recognise the effort put into volunteering by large portions of the community.*

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Introduction

The Blue Mountains City Council is an area of 1,405 square kilometres to the west of the Nepean River on the outskirts of metropolitan Sydney. Due to the severe terrain in the area, settlement has been based primarily on a single ridge system running East-West across the area, over a distance of approximately 80 kilometres.

Development in the area is characterised as a series of 27 townships and villages, with individual identities and most with a bush barrier between the townships. This has developed strong senses of community in the townships as well as a feeling of belonging within the Blue Mountains.

Bush Fire History

The Blue Mountains has had an ongoing fire history which has impacted on the residents of the Blue Mountains since settlement. The Bush Fire Risk Management Plan highlights the following:

“Between 2 and 40 wildfires have been recorded per year, with an average of around 14 wildfires per year. Around 88% of these fires have been less than 1,000 ha in size with 72% of fires less than 100 ha. About 9% of wildfires have been between 1,000 and 10,000 ha in size with 3% over 10,000 ha. Most large scale fires have occurred in November and December.

Since the 1900's, sections of the City of Blue Mountains have suffered severe fires in the seasons 1915/16, 1926/27, 1936/37, 1944/45, 1951/52, 1957/58, 1968/69, 1977/78, 1979/80, 1982/83 and 1993/94...

...Since 1911, 580 houses have been destroyed by fire, on four occasions since 1951 a single fire has destroyed more than 50 properties – mainly houses, but including churches, a school and several shops. Damage to urban areas has occurred on 19 blow-up days within 11 major fire seasons. Most properties destroyed were in vulnerable localities adjacent to northwest-oriented valleys. Fourteen deaths have occurred as a result of wildfires since 1945”

(Blue Mountains Bushfire Management Committee, Bushfire Risk Management Plan p10 para 2.2.1)

Since the inception of this Plan, severe fire seasons have occurred in 2001, 2002, and 2003, predominantly as a result of the most severe drought in local history. During these fire seasons there have been 8 major fires and 13 homes lost as well as several business premises. The businesses affected included the largest commercial nursery in the area, a loss which threatened many jobs.

The single greatest ignition source is human intervention. Investigation into the 8 major fires from 2001 to 2003 show that only one fire, the Mt Hall fire, can be attributed to natural causes (lightning). All other fires have shown to have reasonable evidence to show arson or careless use of fire as the fire cause.

Blue Mountains City Councils Commitment to Bush Fire and Emergency Management

Blue Mountains City Council has had a long and proud history of supporting and leading the response and responsibility of Local Government in the provision of Bush Fire and Emergency Management, this commitment continues today in the following ways:

- **Full Time Emergency Management Officer.** Council is proud to have the first (and currently only) full time Emergency Management Officer in NSW. This officer manages the interactions of the emergency services with the Council, ensures that Councils responsibilities to the community are being managed and that Council can respond to a range of emergency situations in support of the emergency services or where the Council has a primary response role.
- **Full Time Bush Fire Management Officer.** This officer manages the lands under the care and control of Council and provides specialist and technical advice to the Council, Residents and agencies on the management of fire in the local area.
- **Full Time Fire Hazard Inspector.** This officer is responsible for inspecting complaints of bush fire hazard on private lands as well as conducting targeted and random inspections of high bush fire danger.
- **Full Time Bush Fire Mitigation Crew.** This team manages Council lands to minimise the potential for fire to enter or leave council lands in an uncontrolled fashion.

This team works together to provide the residents of the Blue Mountains with a comprehensive mitigation and suppression program within the bounds of Councils management.

- **Financial Support:** Blue Mountains City Council also provides a high level of financial support to the Rural Fire Service and the State Emergency Service through the collection of a special levy on residents in the local government area. Set at \$32.45 per property in the 2002/3 rate year and raising \$1,119,000, the levy is spent solely on the provision of Emergency and Bush Fire Management. A break-up of the levy is shown in figure 1.

A portion of this amount is paid to the NSW Bush Fire Fighting Fund under the Rural Fires Act. In 2002/3 this amount was \$425,000, which returned \$3.1M in equipment, service and insurances for the Bush fire management in the Blue Mountains.

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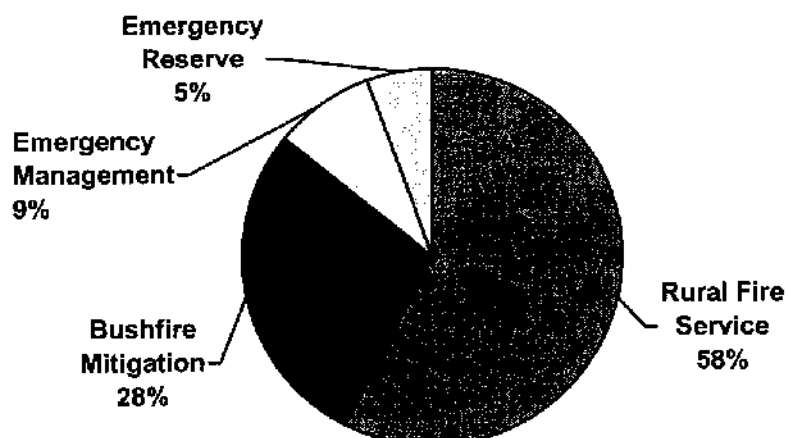


Figure 1

- **Development Control:** Blue Mountains City Council has lead the community in ensuring a high level of bushfire resilience is provided at the household level through our development control plan for Development in Bush Fire Prone areas. It must be noted that no homes that have been built to comply with this standard have been lost in fires impacting on areas developed following these standards being implemented.

Council has also supported a high level of post impact bush fire research through the work of Mr Brian Crane, one of Councils Principal Building Inspectors. This work has looked at buildings in both the mountains and Canberra to determine how buildings survived the fire impact. This work has been from a different perspective to the more traditional research of the fire agencies and CSIRO and has shown how building standards and home maintenance can determine the ability of a home to withstand fire.

- **Local Policies:** Council has provided for our bush fire environment (and our high storm incidence) through the production of policies that assist residents to undertake basic and life/property saving measures on their own properties. These include provisions in the local "Tree Preservation Order" to allow hazards to be removed and the release of an "Open Burning Policy" to assist resident to reduce the bush fire hazard on larger private properties. Council also provides a mulching service for up to 2 cubic meters of green waste three times a year for all properties in the City Area which enables residents to have an ongoing hazard management program for both bush fire and storm.

Specific Comments on the Terms of Reference of the Committee

(a) The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public asset and local communities.

Within the local area the bushfires have had an impact on all aspects covered under this point. It is very difficult however to pinpoint the bushfires as the sole factor in what has been a difficult time in the local economy.

- **Impact on the Environment:** The impact from the fires has had a wide ranging impact on the environments which it touched. Many areas suffered severe impact, which while was severe due to the drought conditions, was also aided by the drought in minimising erosion from the effected landscape. In many areas, the fires have had a degree of beneficial action, cleaning up known rubbish dumping areas, weed removal and possibly some feral animal control.

The actual impact of fire on the environment is difficult to establish. It is true that areas have undergone some degree of evolution due to the impact of severe fire, but looking at the fire history over the past 100 years, this is possibly no different from the impact of fires from as early as 1915. The change of impact is mainly due to the change in land use, and population movement around the area.

Recommendation 1: *Less emphasis is needed on the impact of a single fire event with more emphasis placed on the long term impact and management of the environment. This will involve a community wide change in attitude toward fire and its results. Unfortunately this may be impossible to achieve.*

- **Impact upon Private Assets:** The impact on a wide range of private assets has been felt across the entire community. HOWEVER, this also must be seen in a historical context. The area surrounding Cross Street, Warrimoo, impacted in the Christmas 2001 bush fires suffered severe fire impact in the 1958 fires with homes lost at that time. Work done in 1994 by Chris Cunningham (University of New England) showed a lack of appreciation by residents in the area as to the potential for a repeat of similar conditions and fire behaviours.

One of the outstanding results of both the previous and most recent fire season is the significant difference in the amount of preparation and the acceptance of bush fire risk by residents. In the early period of the 2001 Christmas fire, it was noted that many residents had not undertaken the most rudimentary efforts to protect their own properties. This was often in contrast to well prepared and well equipped neighbours. Over the 2001 Christmas fires over 8000 homes were door knocked with residents given immediate advice to prepare their homes. While a complete parallel cannot be drawn, no homes that were doorknocked and took rudimentary precautions in either the 2001 or 2002/3 fire seasons suffered severe damage.

This does however show that the advice provided by Council and the Fire Services over many years is correct- that a well prepared home, occupied with prepared (physically and mentally) persons ready to carry out damage control will minimise the impact of fire.

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The key challenge here appears to encourage residents to have an ongoing personal and property protection plan which maintains bush fire risk at an acceptable level, and those persons that live in such areas must make personal decisions about ensuring that their own properties are prepared for bush fires.

There is a misunderstanding that fires that emanate from other areas and impact onto other properties are the sole responsibility of the originating land and the blame for such fire spread lies with the owner of the originating property. The ultimate damage to a persons private property or life results from fire entering their land and then impacting on their property. It is the responsibility of all landowners to ensure that their own assets are properly maintained, protected and managed, on their own property, and this is not the responsibility of the adjoining property owner/manager. In this, there is a responsibility that all land managers reduce the risk of fire starting and moving off their properties

To assist this process, Blue Mountains Council has collected home videos of fire impacting onto properties in the Blue mountains in the most recent fires. These videos show extreme fire impacting onto well prepared properties with well prepared and committed residents. This video will be available for educational purposes by the end of June. A copy will be forwarded onto the Committee if requested.

Recommendation 2: *Governments, Developers and Residents must accept that living in a bush environment involves risks, one of which is bushfire.*

Recommendation 3: *Government develops a "Statement of Understanding" that can be included into legal documentation that places an emphasis on a property purchaser to accept personal risk from bushfire and take steps to protect their own properties from that risk.*

- **Impact on Public Asset:** Council has been fortunate not to have suffered from significant damage to public asset. Council has also been fortunate enough to have great support from the State and Federal Governments, through the provision of funds for the restoration of infrastructure damaged during the 2001 fire season. While the restoration of these areas has been difficult and expensive, the Council has received significant assistance at every stage of the work.
- **Impact on Local Communities:** Within the Blue Mountains, our local communities have experienced a range of impacts, not all negative. The community spirit fostered by the fires has resulted in the strengthening of many community links and creation of new ones.

Some problems are still evident although these are difficult to measure with other activities in the world. The local tourism economy was severely impacted on by the 2001 Christmas fires, a situation which was not assisted by the follow-up fires in 2002/3.

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(b) The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown lands and private property.

Council wishes to express its concern that the debate over land management practices and the effect of fire appears to be discussed and directed by persons without a sufficient knowledge of land management practices or historical data.

The most recent fire seasons have occurred at the end of a long and very severe drought. Across the Blue Mountain area, this drought has had a series of effects which must be taken into consideration when querying land management practices:

- The drought has been so severe that forest fuels have been maintained in a very dry condition for a long time. The effect of this is that when the weather conditions deteriorate and there is an ignition, then the potential for fire spread is significant. It also makes the removal of such fuels by burning very hazardous.
- The Weather conditions on the days when fires started were severe. Fire and land management authorities as well as Council were very aware of the potential and had taken precautions to ensure resources could respond to outbreaks quickly. The number of fires in the local area that were suppressed soon after detection are a testament to this.

The management of private property and the ability of fire to spread onto adjoining lands from private or public properties and then to assets is the issue. Fires have traditionally burnt in forested areas with supervision for many years, either for the interests of Hazard reduction, pasture regeneration or forestry management. It is when these fires cross the boundaries into another holders land and damages an asset, environmental or created that an issue arises.

More effort and resource needs to be provided to public authorities to ensure that co-operative efforts between private and public landowners to provide this buffer between properties. The responsibility cannot be automatically deemed to be the public landowner/manager or vis versa. Only through co-operation and an equal effort are the only way to ensure an equitable management of risk. The Canberra (and Wallacia) fires have shown that large fuel free areas such as multi-lane roads or water courses do not provide sufficient protection to assets if they have no bush fire protection measures inbuilt or maintained.

Recommendation 4: *That the Committee considers the joint responsibility of asset owners to ensure their assets are resilient from fires, rather than make judgement based wholly on the fire origin or transmission medium.*

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- (c) The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control.**
- (d) Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices.**
- (e) Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation.**

In making comment on the above three criteria, Blue Mountains City Council would like to emphasise its support and commitment to the Emergency Risk Management Approach currently adopted within the Emergency Management Stakeholders across the Commonwealth.

It is our belief that bushfire must be considered as a part of the emergency risk management context and the context adapted at all levels will assist in the prevention, suppression and remediation from bushfire impact. If all stakeholders, Commonwealth bodies, State bodies, Local Governments and landholders applied a full risk management strategy to their holdings, then the bush fire risk would be placed in its correct context.

It is prudent at this point to support the changes of the Natural Disaster Relief system suggested by the COAG review but not yet adopted. These changes will benefit the entire community by requiring governments at all levels to manage their infrastructure according to the risk level and the history of risk in the area. The current system of “replace like with like” promotes the ongoing sub-professional management of critical infrastructure.

Recommendation 5: *The committee support the implementation of the Emergency Risk Management Approach*

With respect to hazard reduction, as pointed out earlier in the submission, the greatest hazard reduction is to reduce the hazard at the asset and directly reduce the risk, not at a distance where the hazard reduction does not have an effect on the risk to the asset. To this end, Council wishes to state that broad-scale hazard reduction as may be carried out in National Parks or State Forests are part of the land management role of the managing agency and may not be the most appropriate way to undertake hazard reduction to reduce hazard around private property or assets.

This is not to say that the ongoing reduction in bushfire fuels in large tracts of bushland are not required. It is an obvious advantage that fires which start by natural means in remote areas may be easier to suppress in areas with managed fuel loads, than unmanaged fuel loads, however more research must be conducted into the accumulation of bush fire fuels and the optimum time and manner to remove these fuels. For example, work undertaken in the lower Blue Mountains by Chris Cunningham of UNE (*Cunningham, 1984, Recurring natural fire hazards: a case study of the Blue Mountains, NSW, Australia, Applied Geography Vol 4*) suggests that fuels can accumulate to a level to support running fire in as little as three years,

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however this research was not undertaken for other locations. The concept of undertaking broad-scale burning to reduce fuels every 3 years throughout South Eastern Australia to prevent bush fire is unworkable and unsustainable, environmentally or economically and would not be accepted by the populations of these areas.

Recommendation 6: *The Committee recommend that further research be undertaken on the accumulation of bush fire forest fuels in different locations and different forest types and the effect of the hazard reduction at different loads. The execution of this research be carried out by a multidisciplinary organisation to allow the recognition of environmental and fire management aspects of the process.*

Recommendation 7: *Any body established for such research be established in conjunction with the existing expertise and utilise as much existing information as possible.*

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(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 bushfires.

Blue Mountains City Council has lead the community in ensuring a high level of bushfire resilience is provided at the household level through our development control plan for Development in Bush Fire Prone areas. It must be noted that no homes that have been built to comply with this standard have been lost in fires impacting on areas developed following these standards being implemented.

Council has also supported a high level of post impact bush fire research through the work of one of Councils Principal Building Surveyors. This work has looked at buildings in both the Blue Mountains and Canberra to determine how buildings survived the fire impact. This work has been from a different perspective to the more traditional research of the fire agencies and CSIRO and has shown how building standards and home maintenance can determine the ability of a home to withstand fire. The work has been done from the perspective of a building surveyor with over twenty years of experience and has involved detailed questioning of the residents.

From this research, we are concerned that recent changes to planning legislation in NSW does not reflect the actual manner in which homes burn down in a fire. These changes have revolved around providing significant distances between bush and assets but do not sufficiently address ember attack from a fire. The experiences of the Canberra fire appear to support this proposition with homes damaged by ember attack well inside the traditional “safe” area. There is general concern that the ‘blunt instrument’ of large Asset Protection Zones will conflict significantly with Councils environmental objectives. The provision of such clearing is an ongoing maintenance issue and may contribute to provide “at-risk residents” with a false sense of security.

Recommendation 8: *The Committee recommends further research into how homes survive fire impact. That any research is carried out by a multidisciplinary team to ensue a holistic approach to home safety.*

Emerging over recent years is a trend to utilise emergency and evacuation plans to reduce either construction standards, site costs or landscaping changes when considering bushfire conditions. Council opposes this practice as it tends to take the “best case scenario” rather than the “most likely”. Where this practice is applied to aged care or hospital facilities, the danger to the future residents is unmeasurable. Similarly, concepts of “safe havens, bunkers, and fire proof areas” are opposed due to the unreliability of maintenance and training over a long period of time.

Recommendation 9: *The Committee recommends that evacuation plans or safe havens/bunkers are not acceptable alternatives for bushfire resistant construction, access design or hazard management through landscaping.*

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- (g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;**
- (h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;**

Blue Mountains City Council fully supports and recognises the expertise in the response arrangements for fires in the local area. Reaching back to 1994, Council has seen the advantages of the nation wide co-ordinated response, and was proud to host fire authorities from every state in the last fire season as well as provide and support from our local area to Victoria and the ACT.

Between the agencies and jurisdictions in the Blue Mountains, the co-ordination of fires results into an effective and efficient single agency fighting the fires, with the support, staff and resources of Council, Rural Fire Service, Fire Brigade, State Emergency Service, Police, National Parks, Sydney Water, Sydney Catchment etc working as one to attain the common goal.

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(i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

Council does not wish to make comment on this matter

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

The Blue Mountains is a very giving and cohesive community with a huge number of volunteer organisations. During the past two fire seasons, we have seen volunteer groups become more interested in assisting the fire authorities in conducting both the response to and recovery from bushfire.

An issue that has caused a considerable amount of concern to Council is the lack of acknowledgement for the wide range of community volunteers who undertake urgent community work in a fire situation. This has the effect of driving a considerable wedge between some community groups. In particular, the decision to extend benefits to bona fide bush fire fighters who were not paid due to being committed to bush fire activities but not to the State Emergency Service workers who worked beside them to protect the community has caused financial hardship and distrust between volunteers.

Recommendation 10: *The Committee recommends that no volunteers be given any form of financial benefit when undertaking emergency duties for under a period of 10 working days. Where an ongoing emergency continues past this time, then benefits be extended to all volunteers registered with a recognised emergency service/relief agency while committed to undertaking urgent relief work.*

The issue of maintaining volunteer/employer interest is a very difficult position, especially during large periods of non activity as well as extended high activity. While the volunteer ethos is that of not accepting compensation for this work, there are some ways in which the government could show a greater level of moral support to volunteers. This could be as simple as recognising laundry deductions for laundering volunteer uniforms in a similar method as work clothes.

Recommendation 11: *The Committee considers a range of methods in which the government can recognise the effort put into volunteering by large portions of the community.*

Blue Mountains City Council
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Katoomba
(02) 4780 5000
Contact Officer: Matthew Harper