


15 July 03

The Secretary
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
The Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House

Submission No.453

**OUTLINE OF FURTHER SUBMISSION BY
MARK DOUGLAS and PAUL GARRETT**

Below is an outline of our further submissions to the Committee at its public hearing in Canberra on 15 July 2003. The comments are related to the items detailed in paragraph 2 in the Resolution of Appointment of the Committee

(2) (a) The extent and impact of the fires on:

'the environment' There was a dramatic effect locally.

Gardens which formerly constituted a microclimate were destroyed. Large and varied bird populations have been lost especially satin bower birds and small finches.

Forests that provided shelter from sun and wind have gone.

'private assets' The estimated total cost to each household was about \$5,000 despite insurance. This was mainly due to hidden costs such as medical and chemist, phone, water, garden, travel and accommodation and car cleaning. See also (2)(i) below re insurance.

'local communities' 25% of Duffy was destroyed and perhaps up to some 3000 people are directly or indirectly effected. There is a low return and rebuilding rate and Duffy is effectively a new suburb with all attendant disruption.

It still feels like a 'war zone' and we are glad to get away from the continuous activity nearby such as a dusty mulching operation which is still going on about 50 m from houses (including on Sunday 13 July). A strong sense of dislocation endures.

The health impact has not been publicised but it is significant in both long and short term.

(2)(b) The cause and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the fires:

Essentially the major factors were lack of preparation and planning (see Michael Boyle Submission at page 1).

We knew that it was not 'if' but 'when' we were to be hit by a fire. We thought (naively) that there were effective fire fighting resources in NSW and the

ACT to protect Canberra. We thought that at least the National Institution of Mt Stromlo would be protected by Commonwealth Authorities and that the local Forests HQ on nearby Cotter Road would be protected by local Authorities, thus providing us with some degree of protection.

The intensity and speed of the fire was not unprecedented or a '100 year event' or 'like an earthquake' as has been claimed. Fires of similar intensity and speed were experienced in 1952 (see Simon Grose article p11 Canberra Times January 27 2003) and at a slightly lesser intensity in the fires of December 2001. The wind direction and speed at that time of the year is wholly predictable.

The real risk factors apparently had never been assessed.

(2)(c) The adequacy of hazard reduction.

Hazard reduction has been long used effectively by foresters, farmers and others for mitigation of fire intensity. There was no evidence of such reduction to the North and West of Canberra at any time before the fire.

There was significant fuel build up in the local forests particularly around the HQ of the ACT Forests and this provided extra fuel for what a fire officer in a radio interview shortly after the fire described as *'a wave of flame bursting from the top of the pine trees which flowed over the houses and splashed deep into the suburb'* (Duffy). We believe that hazard reduction in the nearby forest areas and beyond would have done much to limit the intensity of fire.

Open areas did not seem to be of great assistance. The open areas to the west of Warragamba Avenue and Eucumbene Drive which were about 100 m wide and adjacent areas of forest about 400m wide which were logged in 2001 did little to impede the fire storm. Indeed the forest areas which had been logged but not cleared of debris and the areas of forest which were burnt in the 2001 fires but not cleared added further fuel to the fires in 2003.

It was the embers blown onto houses and into gardens which caused most houses near us to catch fire well after the fire storm had passed.

(2)(d) Appropriate land management policies to protect property.

There was no evidence of any land management policies or practices that were designed to mitigate potential damage from fires. This was particularly evident from the lack of action after the similar fires in 1952 and December 2001.

In the 1994 Report 'The Fire Hazard Reduction Practices of the ACT Government' given to the ACT Government by Mr Howard Mc Beath made 40 recommendations designed to protect Canberra from exactly the damage which occurred on January 18 (see The Australian 22 p4, 23 January p5). To quote Mr Mc Beth in the article on 23 January, 'if the Recommendations had been fully implemented.... the impact of these events would have been significantly reduced'.

Policies to implement the Mc Beth Recommendations would be a good start for NSW and the ACT.

To be effective in the long term, such policies and legislation should be specifically aimed at fire control. They should not be affected by politically fashionable issues and thereby be watered down over time as appears to have happened for many years before the January 2003 fires.

(2)(f) Existing planning and building codes.

The best fire protection outside the house was a metal fence which ensured that the fire did not go down the side of the house. These should be mandatory in areas of fire risk. Prudence is not rewarded by insurance companies. If a highly flammable wooden fence is to be replaced by a fire safe metal one, then only the cost of a basic wooden fence is allowed.

(2)(g) The adequacy of current response arrangements for fire fighting.

Experience on 18 January demonstrates the current system is totally inadequate. From our experience and all reports about what happened before the fire, 'complacent' and 'ad hoc' are words that come to mind. This does not refer to the actions of the fire and police officers on the ground on the day who did a magnificent job and who deserve our highest commendation.

The management system should be totally reviewed if possible throughout Australia and the issues identified in the M Boyle Submission should be addressed

(2)(i) Liability and insurance matters.

Liability for the damage caused by the fires is being considered by several Enquiries. So far no person has accepted responsibility for the protection of Canberra from the fires and has stood aside pending the outcome of the enquiries.

The Committee might look closely at the role of the insurance industry in the aftermath of the fires. Most home owners are probably underinsured. The average policy seems to be based on about up to \$1000 per square. Reports are that realistic rebuilding costs are as high as \$1500 to \$1700 per square. Conversely if there is any suggestion of overinsurance, then the Industry appears to be only paying such lesser amount as it considers appropriate. The companies seem to have an important role in determining a realistic replacement valuation yet collects premiums without acknowledging it.

Mark Douglas

Paul Garrett

14 July 2003