

SUBMISSION INTO THE RECENT
AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Clerk Assistant (Committee's)
House of Representatives
Parliament House,
CANBERRA, ACT, 2600

I would like to make a submission to the House of Representatives Select Committee as invited.

To introduce myself, my name is John Gibbons, a retired Police Officer of the NSW Police Service of 36 years. I own a house at Yellow Rock in the lower Blue Mountains and experienced the bush fires in January, 1994 and again in December, 2001.

There are three submissions that I would like to make.

- 1 The selective back burning of National Parks, Crown Land and land administered by councils and other public authorities.
- 2 Back burning of bush adjacent to railway lines and roads/highways.
- 3 Having firefighting authorities working together and responding to concerned resident's requests.

SUBMISSION 1

In following the progress of the bush fires that we have experienced, it seems to me that all of the land administered by and used as National Parks, there was little chance of getting on top of the fires due to the fuel load on the floor of the parks and other crown lands.

I heard on the radio one day when the former member of Moura, Mr Peter Cochran was being interviewed and he stated that cattle used to graze in the National Parks but are now restricted. He also stated that bushmen used to go into the parks and randomly set fire to small areas to reduce the fuel quantity. This allowed all animals to escape from that area and would allow the bush to regenerate and make fresh food for the cattle. The next time they went in there they would do another area and subsequently over a period of time, fresh food would be produced together with the reduction of fuel on the parks. From what I observed on the TV radio and seeing what happened in the Blue Mountains, no animals would be able to survive that extreme fire.

SUBMISSION 2

Again in following the progress of the bushfire, it seemed difficult to understand why bush with a high fuel content is allowed to build up adjacent to railways and roads/highways, where trains have to be stopped for lengthy periods and road traffic either stopped or diverted.

It would make sense to me to have the bush beside these facilities selectively back burnt for at least 100 metre over a period of 3 - 4 years and again rotated. This would allow the railways and roads to function unless stopped for emergencies and excessive smoke in the area that may cause accidents.

SUBMISSION 3

A residents committee was formed after the bushfires in December, 2001 to address issues as a subsequence of the fires. It was ascertained that the area of Yellow Rock did not come under the immediate control of the NSW Fire Brigades but under the Rural Fire Services of NSW. Due to this arrangement, we have been unable to have Community Fire Units (CFU's) located in the area.

I wrote a letter approved by the Winnalee Neighbourhood Centre and Yellow Rock Residents Committee to the Zone Commander of the NSW Fire Brigades at Kateomba to have the small area of Yellow Rock rezoned to enable us to be placed on the priority list to have these CFU's installed.

After a considerable time when I thought that I was being given the run round, I wrote to the then Minister for Emergency Services for NSW, Mr Bob Debus setting out the situation. After what I consider to be a longer than normal time, I received a reply from the Commissioner of the Rural Fire Services stating in essence that the situation was going to remain the same and that his service together with the NSW Fire Brigades would work together if required. He also stated that the residents were invited to join his organisation if they so desire. This in fact does not alter the situation where CFU's can be installed and utilized by the locals who can be trained in it's use to protect their private properties. It is understood that the CFU's would not be used for bush fire fighting as such.

It is apparent to me that the Commissioner of the Rural Fire Services who is in charge of a predominant volunteer organisation is reluctant to relinquish ground regardless of the concerns of the community, who wish to participate in the event of the fires approaching their property. It should be pointed out that the equipment could also be used outside bush fire times in the event of one of the houses catching alight through heating and cooking appliances and would be used prior to the arrival of the RFS and/or the NSW Fire Brigades.

I am not sure if the response to my letter was even handled correctly. It was sent to the Minister who is the state member for the Blue Mountains and then forwarded to the Commissioner of the RFS who is also a Blue Mountains resident. I consider that it should have been discussed at least at the District Emergency Management Committee level where all of the participating organisations could talk on the issue raised.

I would also like to say that there is no problem with the RFS which as I said are made up of dedicated volunteers and do a very good job. It has been raised by me to allow the locals to have some active input into the protection of their personal property without being members of the RFS which I would imagine support anyway by the way of donations etc.

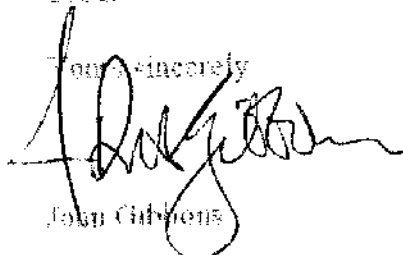
The area in question, as highlighted in the attached map is on the end of a ridge and is only about 1 or so kilometres from where the NSW Fire Brigades border is. It can easily be extended without having to define new boundaries. To this area, there is only one way in and out thus leaving it in a very difficult position in the event of bush fires. The CFC's would be used to complement the services provided and not in opposition to them.

A perusal of my records indicate that I paid \$32.43 to the Blue Mountains City Council in my last rates for Emergency Services Bushfire and I will be paying the CFC, a fire service levy of \$63.25 in my insurance premium which is now due. A total of \$95.70. And I ask, what for, a partial service. This amount must then be multiplied by the number of land owners in the area together with the number of insured properties.

I have enclosed a copy of the letters that I have sent and received and also a map of the subject area. It can be seen that it has taken 12 months from the date that I sent a letter to the Zone Commander, NSW Fire Brigades to the letter that I received from the Commissioner, RFS with a negative reply. I would also like it noted that I contacted the Ministers office on the 31 March, 2003 to find out what had happened to my inquiry (C) dated the 29/10/2002 and the letter (H) turned up on the 2 April, 2003 and was rubber stamped the 24/3/2003.

- A Letter to Zone Commander, NSW Fire Brigades, dated 18/4/2002
- B Letter from Zone Commander, dated 24/10/2002
- C Letter to Mr Bob Debus, Minister for Emergency Services, dated 29/10/2002
- D-E Letters from Mr Debus, dated 5/11/2002
- F Further letter to Mr Bob Debus, dated 10/2/2003
- G Letter from Mr Debus, dated 12/2/2003
- H Letter from Commissioner, RFS, dated 24/3/2003
- I Map of area in question.
- J Photo taken of the fire opposite my house in the PM of the 26 December, 2001.

Yours sincerely



John Gibbons