

## **Future directions for the Commonwealth: toward a national bushfire policy**

### **Increased role and accountability for Commonwealth agencies in bushfire policy**

- 8.1 Through the recommendations in the preceding chapters the Committee has expressed the view that it is both within the interests of the Commonwealth and in accord with its responsibilities to become more actively involved in bushfire management. At present, the Commonwealth plays a relatively passive role through the provision of assistance to fire suppression efforts, 'one off' payments for additional equipment in bad fire seasons and contributions to recovery strategies after the event through the NDRA. The Commonwealth has relatively little input into the fire mitigation and suppression policies, which can ultimately be a significant determinant in the level of these payments.
- 8.2 The call by the IFA for a national policy on bushfire mitigation and suppression expresses succinctly the direction in which the Committee believes Australia must move in order to more satisfactorily manage the risk of bushfire.<sup>1</sup> The Committee recognises that a very nascent national policy may be developing through fora such as the AFAC, but there is a long way to travel down this path. The formation of a national approach and policy on bushfire

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1 Institute of Foresters of Australia, *Submission no. 295*, p. 1.

management requires an exhibition of political will. The Committee's recommendations outline elements of what might be called a virtual national policy on bushfire management. Many recommendations imply an enhanced role for Commonwealth agencies, particularly EMA.

- 8.3 A case in point is the funding for fire fighting aircraft provided to states and territories through EMA for the 2003 fire season. Rather than merely responding to requests for assistance, the Committee believes EMA and commonwealth departments involved in fire fighting, primarily Defence, should have a more proactive role in determining the most effective type of aerial resources to be made available and how these resources are best used, for instance in rapid response after detection of a bushfire.

#### **Recommendation 55**

- 8.4 **The Committee recommends that the functions and administration of Emergency Management Australia be reviewed to develop an organisation that is proactive and involved in the development and implementation of national policy on emergency response.**
- 8.5 One policy forum in which the Commonwealth can develop a more proactive role is the Australasian Fire Authorities Council.

#### **Recommendation 56**

- 8.6 **The Committee recommends in acknowledgement of the expertise that the Commonwealth can bring to the Australasian Fire Authorities Council and of funding already supplied to the Council for the development of a National Aerial Firefighting Strategy, that the current status of Emergency Management Australia on AFAC as an associate member be upgraded to full membership and that full membership also be extended to the Department of Defence.**

- 8.7 The Committee was concerned that in its submission and during a public hearing in Canberra the Department of Transport and Regional Services was unable to provide breakdowns of the specific emergencies or even types of emergency, for instance bushfire, flood or storm, for which funding under the NDRA had been provided.
- 8.8 DOTARS subsequently advised the Committee that as NDRA assistance is calculated using a state's aggregate eligible expenditure over a financial year on all qualifying disasters the level of assistance for any one event can only be approximated.<sup>2</sup> Costs can also be claimed over a three year period, increasing the difficulty of isolating expenditures for specific events.
- 8.9 The Committee sees the ability of the Commonwealth to know what type of disaster relief its assistance is funding as an appropriate principle of accountability. Additionally, an indication of expenditure on a natural disaster on which management practices have some bearing, such as bushfire, could provide a rough and ready indicator of comparable levels of the adequacy of appropriate management practices across jurisdictions.

### Recommendation 57

- 8.10 **The Committee recommends that the Department of Transport and Regional Services review its record keeping practices to show the type of emergency for which assistance is provided through the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements.**
- 8.11 The Commonwealth's concerns and interest to ensure adequate prevention and suppression of fires would be served by the development of a national approach and the other measures outlined above. As also outlined above there is a need for some accountability and performance measures to ensure that the Commonwealth's investments through programs such as the National Heritage Trust, its financial commitments through disaster relief funding and its direct contributions to fire prevention are protected. The Committee believes that while performance measures would be difficult to

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2 Letter from the Department of Transport and Regional Services, 26 September 2003, providing answers to questions taken on notice at the public hearing on 21 August.

specify there is a case for requiring agencies that access Commonwealth assistance in what ever form to have comprehensive bush fire management plans in place.

### **Recommendation 58**

- 8.12 **The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth require state and territory governments to have in place comprehensive bush fire management plans as a pre-requisite for accessing funding from the National Heritage Trust and like programs.**

### **Research**

- 8.13 The Committee's attention was consistently drawn to the inadequate level of knowledge about the relationship of fire with the environment (particularly the effects of intense wildfires on the landscape) as restricting the development and implementation of fire mitigation practices such as prescribed burning and grazing. Hopes that the poor state of knowledge in this area would be alleviated were consistently placed with the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre.
- 8.14 The Committee supports the development of the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre and sees practical merit in the five proposed programs. The Committee believes that it is imperative that the practical value to end users is the primary determinant of all research funded by the Centre.

### **Recommendation 59**

- 8.15 **The Committee recommends that Program E of the Bushfire Cooperative Centre, which is tasked with the development of the next generation of fire researchers and dissemination of the Centre's work, be tasked further to collect and respond to feedback, particularly from the on ground volunteer levels of fire brigades, on the practicality of its outputs and their future requirements.**

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## National standards

- 8.16 There has been a significant increase in inter-jurisdictional cooperation of fire suppression agencies in responding to bushfire emergencies over recent years. Fire fighters from around the country have found themselves assisting colleagues in other states and territories with increasing frequency since the 1994 fires to the north and west of Sydney.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the 2003 fires showed, as did the fires in 1939 and 1983 before them, that fire does not respect territorial distinctions and jurisdictional boundaries.
- 8.17 The Committee is of the view that the current lack of national standards in key areas continues to restrict the effectiveness of fire suppression efforts in this country: a parallel can be drawn between the current state of bushfire management and the inefficiencies that prevailed before the introduction of a national rail gauge. Telling as this parallel may be, it does not reflect the far more tragic consequences of inefficiencies in bushfire management that may arise in the loss of life, property and heritage.
- 8.18 Through its recommendations the Committee has expressed its view that the Commonwealth can contribute a valuable leadership role and forum for developing several national standards. The Committee hopes that the recommendations in this report will provide an impetus through political fora such as the Council of Australian Governments and administrative fora such as the Australasian Fire Authorities Council to move toward bringing about a comprehensive national policy to bushfire management that includes agreed standards on the management of public lands and fire suppression activities as well as building and planning standards.

Gary Nairn  
Committee Chair  
23 October 2003

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3 John Gledhill, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 August 2003, p. 6.

