



**Submission to the
House Select Committee on the
recent Australian Bushfires**

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NSW Parliament

May 2003

HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES - TERMS OF REFERENCE

- (1) That a Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires be appointed to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on, life, property and the environment.
- (2) That the Committee shall have specific regard to:
 - (a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;
 - (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 land and private property;
 - (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;
 - (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;
 - (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;
 - (i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;
 - (j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and
 - (k) future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.
- (3) That the Committee consist of 14 members, 8 members to be nominated by the Government Whip or Whips and 6 members to be nominated by the Opposition Whip or Whips or by any independent Member.
- (4) That every nomination of a member of the Committee be forthwith notified in writing to the Speaker.
- (5) That the Committee have leave to report from time to time but that it present its final report no later than 6 November 2003.
- (6) That the foregoing provisions of this resolution, so far as they are inconsistent with the standing orders, have effect notwithstanding anything in the standing orders.

Background

The Outdoor Recreation Party has, since its inception in 1995, concerned itself with issues of access to, and management of National Parks. The Outdoor Recreation Party member of the NSW Legislative Council Malcolm Jones, the author of this report, has monitored bushfire management both in NSW and Victoria over the past decade.

The growth of the Green movement during the late 1980's and through the 1990's has resulted in changing attitudes towards land management across Australia.

Fundamentalist environmentalist ideology has contaminated good management of the NSW National Parks Service (formerly NPWS) and Parks Victoria. NPWS' style of policy is one of exclusionism and an almost imperialist grasp for territory, irrespective of adequacy of resources to adequately manage such areas.

The Carr Labor Government in NSW, has also embarked upon a program of declaring vast areas of the National Park estate as "wilderness" under the Wilderness Act, which are total 'no go' areas for motor vehicles, this naturally will include fire tankers.

A philosophy of locking up tracks, either permanently or for 'management only access' purposes, frequently results in the same tracks not being maintained appropriately, becoming overgrown and impassable.

A philosophical reluctance to hazard reduce also exists within the NPWS. Hence the reduction in levels of hazard reduction undertaken.

This is evidenced by the following statistics :

Total area burnt in prescribed burning operations on NPWS managed lands since 1993	
Year	Area prescribed burnt (ha)
1993-1994	47,816
1994-1995	35,778
1995-1996	25,572
1996-1997	15,866
1997-1998	9,601
1998-1999	12,971
1999-2000	6,752
2000-2001	19,733
2001-2002	31,703

Clearly a resistance exists within the NPWS philosophy towards hazard reduction reflected in the 60% reduction in activity. Only slight improvement in NPWS' hazard reduction program can be seen in 2001/2 compared to what has been the case in recent years, following the devastating fire season of the summer months.

A reluctance to adequately attempt to reduce fuel on the ground, combined with locked trails and overgrown management trails, wilderness areas, and a philosophy of letting nature do its own thing, has been the reality of the past eight years in NSW.

Australia is experiencing hotter summers, whether caused by global warming or not, it is becoming a reality. Weather conditions whilst extreme, are cyclical and predictable.

I made the following statement of dissent to the Report on the Inquiry into the NSW Rural Fire Service, in June 2000, in which I was a sitting member.

"The Director-General of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Brian Gilligan in his evidence, emphasised the importance of hazard reduction in the strategy of combating rural fires. However Table 6 entitled "Total Areas Burnt in Prescribed Burns on NPWS Parks and Reserves 1993-99" illustrates the drastic reduction in areas burnt from 1993-94, was 47,816 ha to only 12,876 ha in 1998-99, with a low in 1997-98 of only 8,302 ha.

During the same period the National Park estate has increased by approximately 50% in size to 4.5 million ha, with the addition of over 150 new parks.

Conditions in 1999-2000 will create an abundance of fuel loads on the ground which, together with any cyclical change in conditions from wet prevailing weather to dry conditions, particularly along the eastern seaboard, have the potential to create extreme fire conditions in the summer of 2000/2001 or subsequent years.

Therefore, notwithstanding the Director-General's comments regarding how much better the NPWS are at hazard reduction, unless efforts are increased in the future the horror firestorms of 1994 will again revisit us."

During the 90's, in NSW, the environmental movement growth has resulted in staffing Government agencies with an 'extreme green ideology.' The tendency had also been to centralise management in urban areas rather than use local knowledge or experience. However since 2000, the need for local knowledge has been realised and a more decentralised approach is now being taken.

Following the horror fire storms of 2001-2003, whilst the forests may rejuvenate, the massive loss of wildlife, in the most hideous manner, makes a mockery of the so called environmental management or conservation areas.

Fire Preparation

Sadly fire preparation is undermined by Government agencies being extremely reluctant to allow hazard reduction practices.

Although the compensation of providing new equipment, aircraft etc is appreciated by the community, volunteers are still asked to drive petrol vehicles into fire hazard areas, and personal equipment is still difficult to obtain by brigades. Notwithstanding the provision of new equipment, all this has still resulted in the worst catastrophes in living memory.

Training for volunteers is probably as good as can be achieved for unpaid volunteers. The compliance required is at a tolerable optimum.

The morale at brigade level has been generally good. However friction does exist between brigades and management.

Fire Control Officer communication with brigades is generally poor.

During the Inquiry into the NSW Rural Fire Service, the Commissioner identified 'communication' as a major problem. A communication protocol was therefore established prior to the completion of the inquiry in June 2000. However at the brigade levels the complaints continue about communication plus the attitude of Rural Fire Service management.

Similarly, in rural areas volunteers can be placed under the direct control of NPWS officers. Many rural people, have been extremely disadvantaged by the Carr Government's so called 'conservation reforms.' Not only do they believe such reforms have contributed greatly to the disasters, but there is a lingering and very real resentment caused by NPWS officers being the agents of these reforms in their communities.

This does have an effect on recruitment and retention of volunteers and therefore affects preparedness of brigades.

Prior to 2002, obtaining permission for a private landowner to hazard reduce private property was unnecessarily difficult due to red tape. Since 2002 regulatory reforms have not improved this situation.

Fire Fighting

During the 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 fire emergencies, the record of safety and protection of volunteer lives in NSW is very commendable and important.

The use of sophisticated equipment, heavy lift helicopters, fixed wing aircraft, new fire appliances etc appear to have worked well.

However the deployment of volunteers is frequently reported to us as chaotic.

Volunteers are treated as amateurs whilst paid officers of Government agencies, often with little experience, risk assessment, and local terrain fail to acknowledge common sense suggestions, and act in an unwarranted authoritarian manner.

Having visited many brigades, the post emergency morale problems are severe and will result in retention problems of volunteers with much knowledge, experience, bravery and ability.

Whilst politicians and senior agency management like to pour adulations on volunteers, they are generally very reluctant to address **their** concerns and the spin doctoring which massages their actions is frequently deeply resented by volunteers.

Frequently during large operations volunteers are placed under the direction of NPWS/Parks Victoria officers. The issue of priorities i.e. identification of assets to receive protection, and the chain of command from one Government agency to another Government agency's volunteers becomes an issue. This is caused by the lingering resentment held by many country people towards NPWS/Parks Victoria officers, for the lock up of public land, and past and present disregard for their opinions and feelings, are major issues to be addressed.

Victorian Timber Issues

An issue highlighted by the fires in Victoria, is the destruction of Mountain Ash, or as it is known in Victoria, Victorian Ash.

Hundreds of thousands of hectares of Victorian Ash have been subjected to the fires. This type of tree grows above 800 metres and provides very valuable timber.

Once subjected to fire the timber dies and will remain standing for 20-30 years. A large area of land between "The Pinnacles" and "Arbuckle Junction" approximately 50 kilometres north west of Licola in Victoria, has many thousands of hectares of dead Victorian Ash trees, killed by fire years ago. The area is devastated, aesthetically dreadful, a financial disaster, and an ecological nightmare.

If the timber can be harvested within 18 months of being affected by fire, its usefulness as a marketable timber can be saved. This type of timber can be saved by storing it under water for many years before milling. By removing the timber and using the cash proceeds to replant young trees, the area can be restored to ecological health very quickly, and another "Arbuckle Junction" can be avoided.

A great deal of the Victorian Ash timber now affected lies inside the boundaries of National Parks. Herein lies a perceived difficulty, the philosophy of both the Victorian Government and Parks Victoria are unlikely to approve such removal, or are likely to procrastinate until the 18 month deadline passes.

If action is taken to remove this timber, to be replaced with appropriate plantings, the benefits will be as follows:

An ecological disaster will be averted.

The National Parks will be restored to health a lot sooner.

The tourist industry will be revived sooner.

Work will be generated in the high country.

Revenue will be generated from the timber for the communities' good.

Recommendations

1. Regional conferences, meetings with senior personnel from head office, the Rural Fire Service/Country Fire Authority and NPWS/Parks Victoria to meet with volunteers on the volunteer's home ground to discuss local and procedural issues.
2. Revision of the role of the Fire Control Officer to not only represent management to the volunteers but also to meaningfully and effectively represent volunteers to management, which is not generally the case at the moment.
3. A revision of the juxtaposition between NPWS/Parks Victoria officers and volunteers is essential.
4. Urgent action should be taken to extract as much damaged Victorian Ash timber as possible, prior to the 18 month deadline, to enable replanting.

Conclusion

Australia cannot afford and will not tolerate the catastrophic fire seasons of 2001/2 and 2002/3. Meaningful preparation is essential to prepare for such catastrophes. Excuses were made for 2001/2 by Government agencies that were further embarrassed by repeat disasters the following year. The House Select Committee report must strongly encourage the State Government with a reluctance to take appropriate preventative action, to take necessary steps to prevent further disasters.