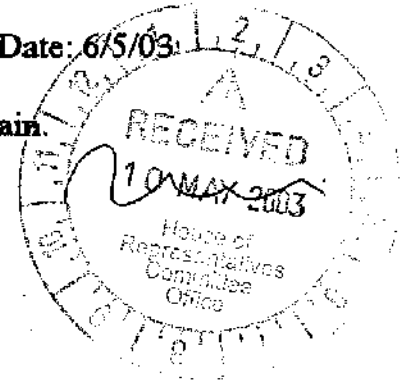


Submission No.189

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires

Submitted by: Barry John Mapley
As an individual –
Current C.F.A. Ovens Eurobin Fire Captain.

Date: 6/5/03



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INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

- ❖ **Terms of reference: (g,h and j) Management of firefighting resources and management practices.**

The C.F.A. has been in existence for over 60 years and **has been** one of the best fire fighting organizations in the world.

In the 2003 bushfires in N.E. Victoria and Gippsland, the operations were run from an incident control command center, often as far as 100 km from the fire. Incident control Command was conducted with little or no site knowledge and even less feedback.

A running fire, especially in mountainous terrain, such as surrounding areas of Mt Buffalo National Park, cannot be commanded from a map. Local area knowledge and experience is essential for both effective control as well as safety. Often time is of the essence with a wild fire in full swing, waiting for an off site decision from command, who really don't have the full picture of where and what is happening, can be detrimental to the outcome of any situation.

E.G. On the Tuesday approx. one week after fires started the Mt buffalo fire was running through pastoral properties in Wobonga lane, Eurobin. These properties back on to National Park. Just two km along the same road Wobonga Lane changes to Hughes Lane. Fire was also advancing from the other end of Hughes lane, once again in National Park.

Hughes Lane was deemed **too dangerous** to enter due to only one access road in and out. Hughes lane is a bitumen road and there is at least 100metres from the road to the bush along most of its length that is

pastoral land or irrigated crops. The entire length the other side of the road is pastoral land that backs onto the Ovens River. The residents were well prepared and going to protect their property. All of the local C.F.A members knew that there were safe, fall back areas, all the way along Hughes lane, some of these being their own properties. However they were ordered not to enter. This was a safe accessible area, in which the fire could be stopped from damaging property and also stop any risk of it advancing on the townships further up the valley.

I believe that the local D.G.O, Fire Captains and their Representatives should have equal power of running the fire as the Strike Team Leaders, or more. Local Officers not only have local terrain and access Knowledge but the majority, also have prior local fire knowledge. Our local C.F.A management have more than 40 years knowledge each, of local fire behavior in our area.

Strike Team Leaders have the power to send or not to send crews into areas to control fires. Most strike team leaders have fire experience with different area fires, but not with this area – **This Fire!**

I have fought fires in three different states, have over thirty years of fire fighting experience and yet, when fighting a fire in Sydney there was a lot I then learnt that I had not experienced in our terrain.

Our drivers have had practical 4WD terrain driving experience. Often our trucks are confident to go in areas that perhaps flat land drivers are not.

I invited the Ovens Incident Control Commander to come and inspect a control line that I had particular concerns about, but could not get any action taken. He agreed to come and check the problem and jumped into a Holden commodore to inspect control lines near Ovens.

This fire was fought in rugged 4WD terrain. There are no control lines that can be inspected from a two wheel drive vehicle.

This is a prime example of the lack of understanding of the local terrain and conditions.

Local C.F.A. trucks and crews are being ordered by Team Leaders to sit on the nearest bitumen road and wait in safety, while their own properties and those of their neighbours are under threat. These properties can be safely protected from open grazing land whether they have one access or five.

Safe fall back areas are often all the way along single access areas in valleys, such as the Buckland, Ovens and Buffalo valleys. During the

recent 2003 fires the Great Alpine Way through the Ovens Valley itself had few accesses available with Mt Hotham closed, Mt Beauty and the Buckland Roads all under threat.

Local fire brigades are well aware of the safe fall back areas in their own regions.

Suggestions:

- More local direction from the experienced officers in the area.
- Often at shift changeovers, information would be delayed or lost all together about the previous shifts incidents. If the commanders, changed midshift, perhaps then information would flow on better through the crews. The officer then has time to get up to date and ask relevant questions from the people that have been there for most of the day or night, whilst taking in, the changed circumstances since his last shift ended.
- As a Local Fire Phone manner, not only was the phone ringing constantly because of immediate threat, but also because people wanted information on what was happening where.

A hotline should be set up and advertised on all News reports for anyone wanting information. Also ask people to only ring their fire number in case of emergency. People manning the fire phones are often in the thick of it and this ties up and tires out another unpaid resource.

Signed Barry Mapley

Barry Mapley (Fire Captain - Ovens Eurobin C.F.A)