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TO SELECT. COMMITTEE Bushfire FAX. NO. 0262774424.

FOR ATTENTION COMMITTEE SECRETARY

FROM ALEX. HOOPER

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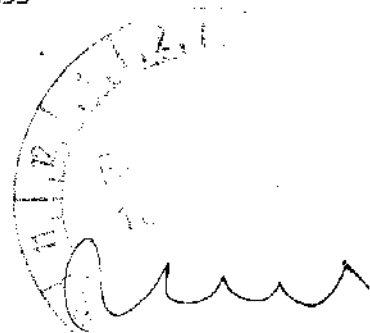
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SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS

SUBMISSION TO COMMITTEE
ON AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES 2003

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SUBMISSION



**TO Federal House of Representatives
Select Committee on 2003
Bushfires**

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Date 9th May, 2003

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Page 1**Preface**

The January/February 2003 bushfires which occurred in Central Gippsland, Latrobe Valley and East Gippsland were predicted by many experienced Rural residents. It was the end result of CFA Management policies that have for some time focussed on Outer Metropolitan and Urban needs, largely ignoring Rural areas. Along with the neglect of fire prevention requirements and fuel reduction by Public Land managers, it is obvious that CFA and other Agency's managers have neither the expertise, knowledge, practical experience or will to address the problems that have been exposed in the 2003 fires.

Introduction

It must always be remembered that the CFA Act requires the Authority to provide "effective control of the prevention and suppression of fires". This was not complied with during the 2003 fires largely because of CFA Senior Management policies, and dependence on technology and aircraft operations, largely ignoring local expertise, experience and equipment. In the past these fire fighters have provided extensive protection to rural Victorians, and when CFA units were side tracked by CFA bureaucracy and ill-considered management decisions, individual community members using private equipment gave the same protection to their community in recent fires.

Observation and Comment

(a) It has been estimated Plantation damage within Central Gippsland and Latrobe Valley is approximately \$60 million. When this is added to other losses, the cost to the Community will clearly be felt for many years. The latrobe Valley fire placed under threat Victoria's electricity supply, the result could have been a much larger disaster than when Esso gas production was interrupted.

(for support information see Attachment A)

(b) These comments along with other actions by Municipalities, under pressure from Agencies such as DSE etc, is restricting landowners and local Brigades from reducing hazards and fuel on roadsides etc, even declaring some as "areas of significant vegetation" have created 'linear fuses' making the spread of wildfire much fiercer and certain than previously. Municipalities are not complying with Section 43 of the CFA Act that requires "take all practicable steps (including burning) to prevent the occurrence of fires on, and minimise the danger of the spread of fires on and from -

[a] any land vested in it or under its control or management and

[b] any road under its care and management."

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- (b cont) An example of what is occurring across Victoria is in the Cowwarr area on the 'Three Chain Road' where the road was previously designated under the Council Fire Prevention Plan and regularly fuel reduced, proving invaluable in 1978 in controlling the spread of a serious wildfire. This road now is a declared Native Vegetation area, and has developed into a 'lineal fuse' creating a threat to valuable farming land and the wider community.
(for support information see Attachment A and B)
- © It is imperative to have an effective fire fight, important that all resources and local personnel are recognised and harnessed in the emergency. The current CFA Management is ignoring these valuable resources and indeed present policies and Standing orders are directed to excluding these from the fireground. This is a recipe for disaster as was proved during the recent fires. If the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires had been managed as our 2003 fires and allowed to burn for 59 days all Victoria and Eastern Australia would have been destroyed. Due to the rapid spread of Ash Wednesday, these fires were reduced by an aggressive fire attack using all resources available.
(for support information refer to Attachment C and copy letter to Gippsland Times)
- (d) The Commonwealth Government should look at a Liability and Insurance Cover for all "Good Samaritians" who go to the assistance of "their fellows" when needed. This could have limitations to prevent excessive payouts.
- (e) The question has to be asked why has CFA Management failed to address the needs of Rural Victoria as occurred in the recent fires when creating an atmosphere where private equipment and personnel continued to operate and protect Rural remote areas in their time of need, whilst CFA equipment and crews were sidelined on Management directions. Is the Authority so much under Government control since the 1998 Section 6A CFA Act amendment giving Ministerial power of direction and country Victoria holds little political power. It is fact that there are only 20 percent of Total Brigade turnouts in Rural Brigade areas. Present CFA Management appears to be focussing on the needs of outer Metropolitan, Urban, Government Agencies and Multi national brigade asset protection where the call outs are, and will continue to increase along with the areas political clout. The end result being Rural areas becoming of lesser and lesser importance.

Final Comments

It is obvious that the time has arrived to consider future "effective control of prevention and fires" within remote Rural Victoria. This area consists of 95 percent of the total Country area of Victoria under CFA control. There seems no doubt this cannot be achieved by the area remaining within the control of the present CFA Board and Management. They do not have the "capacity or will to provide for remote rural Victorians needs". A new Agency to provide these needs could be:

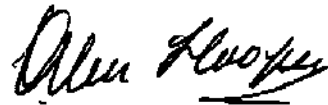
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- Rural Fire Board of nine members
- Rural Fire Board to consist of four Council nominees from municipalities within Rural Brigade areas, four Rural Volunteer Fire Brigade members, three of whom must be rural property owners, one nominee from DSE to be a person actively employed within fire prevention and suppression as a major part of his/her employment.
- Local co-ordination and administration of Groups and Brigades to be within each Municipality area provided by the appropriate Municipality.
- Funding to continue on an Insurance Levy basis as no better system has been devised. A major anomaly at present is that property owners are being used to provide funding to service non property owners requirements, with the levying of a tax upon a tax upon a tax, with the end result being the Victorian Government provides only 6.2 percent of the total CFA funding. This could be adjusted by reducing Insurance levies contribution of the total CFA Budget to around 40 percent instead of the present 77 ½ percent.

Conclusion

A new Agency would remove political influence and break the CFA Management fixation with the 80 percent turnouts within outer metro and urban areas. A new Agency would have a high priority to provide the needs of remote rural Victoria. Thus with expertise and local knowledge concentrating on resourcing, service delivery and management appropriate to these areas, this will remove the isolation and lack of attention now felt by grass root rural volunteers. At intervals of three years there would be an opportunity to pass judgement through the ballot box on the performance of Management.



Alex Hooper