

Submission to the Federal Bush Fire Enquiry Sub 307

Fires - N.E. Victoria, particularly Mt. Buffalo and Buckland Valley.

Property / Owner - Bruce Lumsden (48) Dairy farmer Buckland Valley.

Lead up - dry years from 1997 with the exception of a flood in the spring of 1998

Data - based on local knowledge. As a farmer where ~~the~~ seasons are so keenly noticed I am dependant on favourable conditions for profitable farming outcomes.

- farmers tend to talk endlessly about the weather and the variations in the seasons.

Conditions - were excellent for bushfire in the summer of 2002-2003, the autumn / winter / spring and early summer of 2001 and 2002 had been very dry. Rainfall had been very low.

- an electrical storm without rain had started fires on the mountains and ranges on Wed. 8th of January 2003.
- the scene was then set for the possibility of extensive fires and maybe all fires joining up - that eventually happened.

Premise - hindsight is a wonderful luxury. At the time of the fires, time frames and outcomes were not known

- it had been a long time since such a large fire had been fought so all organisations and personal had to be reacquainted with the practicalities of such a large task.

Observations and criticisms :-

The C.F.A. - the organisation I have been a member of since age 16.

- experience 1972 Mt. Buffalo fires
- 1985 " " " including own entire property
- 2002 completed minimal skills training - thought it to be a very good idea.
- the organisation is now very well equipped in comparison to years gone by. All fire fighters turned out in C.F.A. fire fighting protective gear (which I wore at all times) made fire fighting so much easier and safer.
- my comment is what I saw and experienced in the Buckland Valley but have heard similar stories from other fire areas.

The C.F.A. - the size of the fires meant C.F.A. paid officers took overall control. It appeared these officers ran rough shod over local officers particularly the group officer and his deputy paying little regard to their knowledge, experience and recommendations.

Problems - new C.F.A. standing orders made C.F.A. tanker units and strike teams virtually ineffective against the fires and fighting the fires (most situations) in the valleys via Buckland and Devils Creek.

- C.F.A. officers were paranoid about litigation to the point where fire teams were not allowed to fight fightable fires.

- in my judgment cowardice and "un-Australian" behaviour was displayed by the strike teams.

- strike teams appeared to operate with very little communication to any locals, i.e. brigades or the people who lived there.

- strike teams were totally inflexible and seemed to think that a fire would wait while it made lengthy assessments.

Successful fire fighting - dedication of local people (more often than not C.F.A. members) using private units and local brigades that in some cases disobeyed C.F.A. orders to help fight fires and protect people and their assets.

- without the above far more farmland would have been burnt and possibly towns

Back Burning - in many situations the only effective method of fighting the fires coming out onto farmland from State Forests and National Parks. The ruling that made this a criminal offense on a day of total fire ban was totally inappropriate. The possibility of fire fighters being charged for such is an absolute insult and intolerable situation.

- C.F.A. officers adherence to this rule made it extremely difficult to fight fires in some local situations and more often than not an advantage situation was lost.

Back Burning - time and again the advantage situation for back burning was lost hence reducing or maybe stopping the fire because of a higher authorities inability or unwillingness to make an effective decision.

Fuel Reduction Burning - has occurred in State Forests over the years. I thought the D.S.E. (formerly D.N.R.E) had done a pretty good job given the variation of weather conditions which can occur in the autumn when it is suitable for such.

- it was evident during the fires that areas fuel reduced did not burn as hot.
- fuel reduction will not stop bushfires, it will only help reduce the intensity of fire and make it easier to control a fire in a given area.
- it should be noted the 1939 bushfires occurred with devastating outcome in an area when current fire restrictions did not exist and farmers and graziers practised regular "burn-offs".
- National Parks must be included in fuel reduction burns in the future. Fire does not distinguish between State Forest and National Park. The lock up mentality only leads to more extensive and intensive fires ~~as~~ demonstrated by Jan. 2003.
- N.P. management appears to be far too inflexible when trying to fight fires in National Parks. If it had been more receptive to how the fire could have been fought eg. 1972, maybe the fire could have been contained to Mt. Buffalo.

Overall - the weather which of course was responsible for large fires also worked to contain the fires to mostly the bushland, State Forest and National Park. If hot windy conditions (say above 36°C) had continued day or end without the cool southerly and "smoke" in changes probably all the valleys and maybe some of the towns would have been burnt.

Whilst so many people worked tirelessly to overcome the bushfire threat the points I have raised could have made fire fighting more effective in the Buckland Valley / Mt. Buffalo area where I live and farm with my family.

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20th Nov. 2002