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22 May 03

21 May 2003

Mr Garry Nairn M.P.  
Chair  
House of Representatives  
Select Committee on Recent Australian Bushfires  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2630

Dear Mr Nairn

### **JANUARY BUSHFIRES 2003, THREDBO**

Thredbo and the other NSW ski resorts were threatened by the January 2003 bushfires in the Kosciuszko National Park. Simultaneously fires were also affecting the Victorian alpine areas and the ACT.

Some 45 fires were reported commenced on 8 January 2003 by lightning strikes in the Kosciuszko National Park and by 17 January 2003 many of these fires had joined into 14 large fires. Thredbo was in the middle of its busy summer holiday season and the 10th Annual Thredbo Blues Festival was due to commence on Friday 17 January 2003. Approximately 1700 visitors were in the Resort, marquees and decorations erected, and the majority of the musicians were present.

On the instruction of the local area Police Commander in charge of the Snowy River Disaster Plan, the Resort was evacuated under the supervision of the Police at 7.30pm on Friday night, 17 January 2003. The majority of visitors chose to return to their homes, and a number remained in the Village that night before returning home first thing on the Saturday morning. Some Thredbo residents, fire brigade and essential staff were then centrally accommodated at the Thredbo Alpine Hotel which then served as the central point of focus for Thredbo during the subsequent fires.

The Police imposed restrictions on travel to and from Thredbo and these were assessed on a daily basis. The Company engaged a qualified bush fire consultant together with an in-house bush fire coordinator and established good liaison with the Fire Control Centre in Jindabyne. The Thredbo Resort is a gazetted fire district and the NSW Fire Brigade stationed additional resources in the Village for the duration of the fires. The emphasis on the fire fighting effort at Thredbo was directed towards the protection of life and property and was generally left to the responsibility of the NSW Fire Brigade.

It was seen that management of the bushfire threat in Thredbo consisted of two possibilities:

1. The threat of a bush fire entering the Village as a fire front and in this regard fires existed to the west of the Village at various times in the areas of Hannells Spur, Saturday Peak, Bogong Creek, west of Dead Horse Gap, Bald Hill; and
2. Spot fires caused within the Resort emanating from embers being blown in from the main fire fronts approaching.

It should be noted that in 1998 Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Limited as head lessee for the Resort prepared two Bushfire Management Plans to address bush fire vulnerability. These strategies were prepared by Bushfire & Environmental Services Pty Limited in conjunction with the CSIRO. These strategies addressed the two perceived threats of bushfire entering the Village as part of a fire front along with fires commencing within the Village in advance of a fire front. The reports developed as part of an overall resort risk management strategy addressed issues such as the bush fire preparedness, evacuation centres, and building design.

In the lead up to the fires approaching Thredbo an effective Village Perimeter Bushfire Protection Strategy was put into place by Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Limited to minimise the risk. In a number of areas trees and understorey vegetation around a number of vulnerable sections of the Village (eg, Riverside Cabins and Woodridge) had grown considerably and posed a threat of building destruction and could have resulted in fire transferring deep into the centre of the Resort. An effective Village Perimeter Bushfire Protection Strategy was thus put in place and coordinated by the Company and its consultants.

Simultaneously our consultants, along with the NSW Fire Brigades briefed those persons remaining in the Village on issues to do with bushfire preparedness and action to be taken in the event of a fire, including OH&S and evacuation issues. At the same time, arrangements were put in place to carry out back burning around Riverside Cabins and to the west of the Funnel Web ski run to establish a hazard reduced area between the edge of the Village and the approaching fire front. The back burn operations were coordinated by NPWS planners (Dave Woods and Pam O'Brien in particular) and the NSW Fire Brigades. At Crackenback Ridge, a dozer trail was established to connect the golf course to the ski run above the Village so that back burning could, if required, be carried out from this new trail. Up until the Village lost all mains and electricity, the snowmaking system was utilised to wet down assets and to supply water for the back burning operations along the Funnel Web ski run. The gravity fed resort water supply was also augmented.

We would make the following comments in respect of the January bush fires in no order of priority:

- Historical and biological evidence confirms five major wildfires occurred on the ski slopes above Thredbo C1926, C1900, C1886, C1830 and C1790 (Banks JCG, 1986). A further conclusion is that fire in the Thredbo Valley generally spreads from the north west (eg Geehi Valley).
- The widespread nature of the January 2003 fires certainly spread resources thinly over a wide area (Victoria to ACT).
- The graphic media coverage of the bushfire destruction in suburban ACT had two effects:
  - It focussed the attention of those remaining in the resort on what damage a bushfire can cause;
  - It prompted the media to pay particular attention to Thredbo with the result that at various times Thredbo was reportedly being burnt down.
- The loss of Telstra communications cables (landline phones, mobile phones, fax and email) following the burning down of electricity poles east of the Village restricted communication to essential calls only on the Company's satellite phone. There are inherent problems relying on portable satellite phones in dire emergency situations. The proposal to currently re-establish the Telstra phone lines to Thredbo above ground, along the electricity poles is in our view, sheer folly.
- In hindsight the decision by Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Limited to argue for the retention in the Village of some essential and experienced staff, along with some long-term sub lessees proved to be correct. Additionally and when permitted by the Police, additional workers were brought into the Village on a daily basis to assist with bushfire management strategy implementation and essential services. Problems did occur with police restrictions for many staff needed in the Resort on a daily basis for essential services. On other occasions staff were allowed in but could not attend as their own properties were under threat.
- The Company maintained regular formal contact with all persons remaining in the Village during the bushfire period as well as with the fire control centre.
- The Company's snowmaking ponds were used extensively for water bombing on the fires adjacent to Thredbo. A lagoon at the Sewerage Treatment Plant was also placed on hold as a water bombing resource.

- RFS have been particularly slow in accessing the Development Applications.

The Resort operators are working with PNSW to adopt a more holistic approach in and adjacent to the ski resorts. Obviously this also needs to involve both the NSW Fire Brigades and our landlord, the NPWS. The utility of the golf course, the ski runs etc as fire breaks needs to be acknowledged as opposed to building singular ugly fire proof in-fill buildings in a Resort that is primarily established.

Yours faithfully

**KOSCIUSKO THREDBO PTY LIMITED**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Clifford', written over a vertical line that extends downwards.

Kim Clifford  
**General Manager**