



LEADER OF THE NSW NATIONAL PARTY
SHADOW MINISTER FOR NATURAL RESOURCES
SHADOW MINISTER FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

June 2, 2003

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australia bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Please find attached a submission by the NSW National Party addressing the terms of reference of the *House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires*.

I note the close of submission date of 9 May 2003 and thank the Committee for its willingness to extend the closure date, as indicated to a member of my staff during a recent telephone conversation.

Reflecting the concerns of our rural and regional constituency, the NSW National Party considers the amelioration of bushfire damage to life, property and the environment to be a highly significant issue for governments around Australia.

Of particular concern to the NSW National Party is the failure of hazard reduction policies and practices of the NSW government and its impact on farming families and all those who live in the urban/bushland interface areas.

The NSW National Party appreciates the opportunity to express its views and articulate its policies to the House Select Committee and looks forward to examining the inquiry findings.

Please contact me on 02 9230 2281 should you require further information about the NSW National Party's submission.

Yours sincerely

ANDREW STONER MP
NSW NATIONAL PARTY LEADER



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Submission

By

The NSW National Party

To The

**House Select Committee
On The Recent Australian
Bushfires**

Response to the Terms of Reference

(a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;

Natural disasters, such as bushfires, strike at the core of communities across NSW. Their significance cannot be overstated. They often wreak major economic and social damage.

The NSW National Party places a high priority on the need for government to be able to quickly and effectively respond to natural disasters. More importantly, however, the NSW National Party believes priority should be placed on preventative measures, such as hazard reduction.

(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;

The NSW National Party believes government policy and the way it translates into government programs plays a major role in determining the impact and severity of bushfires on the Australian landscape.

In relation to land management practices in national parks, the NSW National Party believes that:

- The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) should be required to construct and maintain an effective and open fire trail network in all parks
- NPWS should advise government of the relevant issues associated with the planned bushfire hazard reduction program at the beginning of the season, be required to submit complete fire management plans prior to the commencement of the bushfire season and show throughout the season how the NPWS is implementing fire management plans
- An audit of hazard-risk in National Parks should be conducted in April each year;
- Buffer zones of 50-metre fuel free and 50 metre reduced fuel should be in place for areas where private property adjoins National Parks. Advice should also be taken from national standards in relation to what buffers are required for different terrain and types of bushland; and
- That property owners whose land adjoins national parks should be provided with a “right to clear” potentially flammable material by hand in the above agreed buffer zones

During the bushfires of summer 2003, hundreds of kilometres of fire trails were created in the Kosciusko National Park because no proper trails existed. Fire trails

created during this emergency will cause more damage to the environment than would have been done by properly developed and maintained trails.

Rather than allowing these trails to regenerate, as required under NPWS' management plans, they should be kept clear and maintained for future use.

The NSW National Party is committed to conserving the State's biodiversity and a key to this is better fire management in our national parks.

The lack of adequate fire management in NSW's parks during the 1990's will be felt for decades with ongoing problems such as soil erosion, the loss of thousands of trees, plants and animals, and the habitat of some of NSW's threatened species destroyed.

Lessons must be learned from the 2003 fires.

Creating National Parks without the policy and resources to adequately manage them, which has been the approach of the current NSW Government, is irresponsible. It is little wonder that NPWS has been dubbed "*The Neighbour From Hell*" by adjoining landholders, mostly primary producers.

It is the State's farmers and graziers who bear the cost of the failure of the NSW Government to adequately resource and manage its ever-expanding National Park estate. The direct result of this Government mismanagement, from the 2003 fires alone, was an enormous loss of farm assets and productive capacity, not to mention the psychological impact on farm families.

Another factor contributing to the severity of bushfire is the lack of community awareness and understanding of bushfire risk and appropriate responses.

The NSW National Party believes there is an urgent need to enhance community awareness and understanding about the dangers of natural disasters and the vital work done by emergency services to limit the incidents of avoidable disasters, such as bushfires. People need to be educated to know how to react in emergency situations. This education needs to extend to schools.

(c) the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;

The NSW National Party believes that a focus on hazard reduction practices must become a priority, as it is the key to bushfire prevention, suppression and control.

Hazard reduction has become a low priority in NSW, due in part to conflicting interests of misguided green ideology and sensible bushfire prevention principles.

In 1993/94, NSW National Parks carried out hazard reduction on 50,000 hectares of public land. This area had reduced to less than 7,000 hectares by 1999/2000.

Residents say they haven't seen hazard reduction in neighbouring public lands for decades. NSW now has a backlog of hazard reduction to be undertaken and is at

greater risk of serious wildfires, which not only destroy property and wildlife, but also take lives.

Property owners who either wish to conduct bushfire hazard reduction on their own land or wish neighbouring land managers to hazard reduce are being frustrated by red tape which involves time constraints, notification to several government departments and indemnity clauses. The opportunities to reduce bushfire hazards are escaping due to bureaucratic overlay. This process must be streamlined to allow controlled burning and other hazard reduction in a timely but responsible fashion.

As a matter of urgency, the NSW National Party believes the State Government needs to develop a Statewide hazard reduction auditing system. After eight years in Government, and in knowledge of the recommendations of the 1994 and 2001 bushfire inquiries, the State Government's failure to act on auditing is simply not good enough. Annual audits, published at the beginning of the season for hazard reduction are needed.

NPWS should report annually to Parliament on the finalisation and implementation of all fire management plans for National Parks and conservation areas.

Hazard reduction activities need to be not only reviewed, but expanded to include other activities, such as noxious weed control and feral animal control, especially in National Parks.

All environmental legislation should be reviewed to ensure visual impact and aesthetics of an area do not take precedence over hazard reduction activities.

Local Government should play an integral role in hazard reduction and prioritising fire management practices, such as clearing fire trails and maintenance of bridges.

Local government could also look at methods of detecting fires in conjunction with NPWS. Manned detection towers in State Forests have seen a greater opportunity to detect and extinguish blazes.

Many Councils now have up to 70 per cent of their local government area covered by National Parks.

There must also be reasonable access to land so that fires may be controlled. This particularly relates to fire trails. The National Party believes fire trails must be able to take tankers travelling at speeds of up to 70km/h and also allow access to other larger vehicles such as graders, dozers etc.

Many new National Parks have previously been forestry grazing leases or private property purchased by the NPWS. When cattle are removed from these areas weeds and other introduced species regenerate at alarming rates, which increases the fuel load on the forest floor, leaving it susceptible to bushfire.

The reintroduction of grazing into selected areas would ensure that this undergrowth does not get out of control. With movable solar electric fences grazing could be contained to less sensitive areas to ensure that habitat is not disturbed.

It is disappointing that during this severe drought the NSW Government has not recognised the severity of the situation and open selected National Parks to grazing as the Coalition did during the 1994/95 drought.

(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;

The NSW National Party believes the greatest bushfire risk is in urban/bushland interface areas. However, the NSW Government does not require that public land managers (eg. NPWS, State Forests, Councils) provide and maintain buffer zones between houses and bushland.

Where local Bushfire Management Committees have recommended that such zones be cleared and the relevant authority has failed to act, neighbouring residents should have the right to clear manually a reasonable buffer zone with the approval of the local Fire Control Officer.

Should controlled burning or lopping be required, this is to be arranged through the Rural Fire Service (RFS) or an approved contractor. If there is an expense associated with this clearing, the cost should be met by the agency concerned.

Furthermore, where properties interface with Crown Land, particularly National Parks, there should be maintained a 50 metre fuel free buffer zone and a 50 metre fuel reduced zone. This should be coupled with an increased regime of hazard reduction in the area.

(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;

The NSW National Party believes that controls over new development in high bushfire risk areas are essential to prevent loss of life and property. However, the NSW Government's hastily constructed bushfire planning laws have proven impractical and unjust for many property owners.

Local Government was not consulted prior to the development of the legislation and now has been forced to work with a confusing bushfire mapping process and a complicated development approval process.

Parties submitting development applications now have a longer, more complex and more costly process to follow. Residential sub-division, tourist and other developments now become integrated developments under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979, requiring State Government approval and an additional \$250 fee. There is no right of appeal against such decisions.

By requiring asset protection (buffer) zones to be on private land, the laws offer no protection to residents whose dwellings were approved prior to 1 August 2002. This is the case for many who have lost their homes to bushfire this season, where it was impossible to provide a 70-metre buffer zone on their private land. Perversely, those who wish to reconstruct their dwelling now may be refused because the NSW Government's laws put no responsibility on the adjacent public landowner for providing buffer zone protection.

Similarly, those who bought land that was sub-divided but not developed prior to 1 August 2002 have been caught out under the new legislation. Even where there are a number of houses already built in the same street, their undeveloped properties have been rendered almost worthless due to an inability to build. Yet the State Government refuses to contemplate any compensation. The same is true for house extensions and other modifications requiring development approval, under the NSW Government's impractical policies.

Consideration should also be given to developing a code of fire resistant materials to be utilised in the construction of homes and other buildings located in bushfire prone areas.

In summary, the NSW National Party believes in the need to:

- Ensure a planned and systematic program of bushfire hazard reduction is undertaken on both public and private bushlands.
- Streamline approvals for hazard reduction burns.
- Provide buffer zones on public lands where appropriate between public bushland and private property, to consist of a 50 metre fuel free buffer zone followed by a 50 metre fuel reduced buffer zone. Advice should also be taken from national standards in relation to what buffers are required for different terrain and types of bushland.
- Provide a "right to clear" for buffer zones where Government agencies have not met their responsibilities.
- Ensure provision and maintenance of a fire trail network on public bushlands, including National Parks.

(h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;

The NSW National Party believes the State Government is not allocating enough funding for firefighting equipment or personnel, particularly at the local level.

More funding is needed for local bushfire brigades in NSW by systematically upgrading vehicles, beginning with petrol-powered tankers, accommodation, equipment, communications and clothing.

Continual access during the bushfire season to aerial fire fighting capability, including the Erickson Air-Crane Sikorsky S-64 (eg. 'Elvis'), smaller helicopters and fixed-wing fire fighting aircraft is required.

The NSW National Party believes improved coordination of Rural Fire Service resources with other emergency services is required to deliver the best possible outcomes from available resources.

It is also vital that mutual aid agreements between the Rural Fire Service and the NSW Fire Brigades are mandatory and signed off on as a matter of priority.

An urgent audit is needed of fire stations, SES Unit accommodation and RFS sheds to ensure contemporary standards are being met. The State Government needs to work with local government to progressively upgrade buildings and equipment on a needs basis.

Rural fire fighting fund and fire service levy contributions of local councils need to be pegged to rate levels, in keeping with local government's capacity to contribute revenue.

(i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

The NSW National Party believes the Workers Compensation Act requires amendment to exempt emergency service workers from the threshold of 15 per cent psychological injury. This recognises that these officers work in unique circumstances.

Appropriate additional workers' compensation provisions for police and emergency service personnel, which recognise the inherent risks of their professions needs to be introduced.

(j) The roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

The NSW National Party strongly recognises the invaluable contribution made to our emergency services by volunteers. The contribution by these 'unsung heroes' needs to be better appreciated and understood by the general public. Funding and support to volunteers and salaried officers needs to be increased to allow them to meet the emergency needs of the community.

The State Government has overseen a process of centralisation, bureaucratisation and waste in emergency services in NSW.

Volunteers on the ground are only marginally better off, despite a significant increase in Government expenditure, due to much of the money going to a burgeoning bureaucracy in headquarters.

This trend must be reversed in order to deliver tangible benefits to grassroots emergency services personnel by ensuring that adequate funding and support is available to enable them to respond to emergencies within the community.

The NSW National Party believes that decentralisation of the functions of RFS Headquarters to the local level would lead to an improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service. Decentralising funding away from city-based head office bureaucracies would better support volunteers.

The State Government needs to upgrade emergency services training facilities in rural and regional NSW to allow fresh volunteers to be trained and existing members to be educated in the most recent emergency response techniques.