



INSTITUTION OF FIRE ENGINEERS – AUSTRALIA Inc.

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Mr Ian Dundas
Secretary - House of Representatives Select Committee on Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Dundas

Submission re Inquiry Into The Recent Australian Bushfire

Thank you for the opportunity to attend the recent public hearing at Parliament House Tasmania. I found the experience beneficial and trust that the evidence provided by the various witnesses will pay dividends to all Australians over time as your committee seeks to develop strategies that will result in increased levels of safety for all concerned communities around this country.

Perhaps a brief background on the Institution of Fire Engineers, and the role we believe we have to play in this initiative, is in order first.

BACKGROUND

The Institution of Fire Engineers – Australia Inc. is a non-profit organisation formed to promote, encourage, and improve the science and practice of Fire Extinction, Fire Prevention and Fire Engineering and all operations and expedients connected therewith.

From a strategic perspective the Institution seeks to give impulse to ideas likely to be useful in connection with or in relation to such science and practice for the benefit of its members and the community at large.

The Institution originated in the United Kingdom in 1918 and over the last 85 years has since grown to around 11,000 members world-wide with Branches in over 20 countries. IFE exists in Canada, the United States, Germany, Singapore, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Sweden, Iceland, Mauritius, India, Belgium and many others. IFE offers to the membership the chance to broaden their professional network and increase their own knowledge through various means that might not otherwise be possible for them in their normal workplaces. At the same time, an opportunity exists for those same individuals to feed back into this grid so that collectively everyone can contribute in their own unique way to the overall information pool.

In Australia, we have around 700 members, and are one of the largest Branches in the world. A National Secretariat, located in Brisbane, provides support to local coordinators in each State and Territory who in turn have the ear of the grass roots membership. The entire infrastructure is about providing direct and tangible benefits to individuals at the coal face.

Our members come from a wide cross section of the fire industry, from recruit firefighters in both the rural and urban settings, through the various layers and arms of 'para' and 'allied' professionals on and up to eminent expert in fields such as scientific research and fire engineering. Indeed anyone with an interest in any fire related activity has the opportunity to join our organization and become part of an extensive global community.

CONTRIBUTION OPPORTUNITIES

We see IFE as being able to offer our services in two primary ways:-

1. Research Initiatives
2. Provision of Community Education Seminars/Training

1. Presently the main funding of the Institution comes by way of membership subscriptions of which about 75% is absorbed into administration costs in one way or another. This is an impediment to the overall mission of the Institution but not something we can easily or quickly overcome. Some progress to this has been made in the last few years, as we have set about streamlining our structure, but the ideal is still some way off.

We offer a few Scholarships both locally and Internationally each year but would wish to see this aspect grow substantially in order to increase the general body of knowledge available to those in the fire industry.

We seek from this Inquiry some recognition of the need for increased funding to private non-profit organizations like IFE to undertake research of relevance to all Australians. We would like to see this made available through either direct deposits to organizations or by way of National Grants accessible by groups such as ours.

It is important to note that we are not limiting the manner in which such funding may be made available, indeed we are open to alternative suggestions, but we do urgently seek support for research activities that will enable our Branch to serve the public in a more concrete and identifiable way.

2. IFE is primarily an educational Institution and seeks to improve, not only its own member's body of knowledge, but public knowledge generally so that everyone can benefit by being better informed.

We believe our services can be used to provide forums in which the issues of fire prevention and management can be discussed and progressed in a healthy and stimulating environment. A variety of activities can be incorporated into these programs.

The issue of *educating the public* was frequently referenced in the many submissions made to the Bushfire Select Committee. It certainly seemed to be a focal requirement expected, even demanded, by witnesses to the Inquiry. Whilst the various Fire Services and Land Management agencies certainly possess the personnel and knowledge to deliver and coach the public in such aspects IFE feels that many of their approaches, both existing and proposed, are or would be seen as biased and lacking the necessary neutrality to be attractive to the target audiences. IFE however is apolitical and can present itself, and its programs, as being free from any conflict of interest or commercial bias.

We would propose that with adequate funding from Government, or other political bodies, IFE could provide ongoing expert tuition or instruction to a variety of groups, or conduct discussion forums and/or community debates to raise public awareness. Further we could run a series of promotional lectures (technical sessions) based on factual information that will secure appreciable market penetration; a goal that we think is vital to the long term success of this review.

Our strength for this comes from our ability to draw upon our membership skills and experience and thereby offer advice in an impartial and objective manner. This is in keeping with the professional image of our organization. Our credibility will allow us to attract an audience and put the message across in an environment that many will find stimulating and thought provoking without the high degree of emotion that may prevail in meetings or sessions conducted by agencies with a perceived vested interest.

Our ability to cater to the needs of all market segments cannot be overstated. From those involved in farm, vegetation or fire management practices right up to engineering buildings to resist the impact of bushfires we have the ability to provide solutions to some of the most vexing questions facing our great continent. Our current financial position limits us from pro-actively and strategically sharing our research, knowledge and experience with those who need it most but with support from Government, and any other parties with an interest in Australia's bushfire risk, we believe IFE can contribute effectively and significantly to the threat posed by wildfire in a positive and productive manner.

We look forward to reviewing the findings of the Committee and trust that IFE will find a niche within the strategies that your panel members ultimately develop. We would be more than happy to discuss these ideas further and develop detailed plans to demonstrate how these programs would, or could, be conducted.

Yours Sincerely

Andrew Comer
President – IFE Australia