

*David Ferry*

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## **Submission to the House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires.**

**by David Ferry, resident of the Stromlo Forestry Settlement  
and former ACT Forests/ Bushfire Council Employee.**

### **Background**

The Stromlo Forestry Settlement is located directly north of the suburb of Duffy. The Settlement was established in the 1950's to meet the needs of housing and community facilities for Forest workers and their families. Prior to January 18 the settlement was composed of 20 cottages that were/are owned by ACT Housing since been handed over by Forestry in the 1980's. All of the cottages were occupied prior to January 18.

The settlement contained in total 8 fire hydrants, 6 standing hydrants and 2 ground level hydrants all of which were located directly in front of the cottages and 1 was located at the forestry depot. These hydrants to my knowledge had not ever been tested to ensure they were in working condition. Other than the hydrant located at the depot there were no hoses or attachments for the other hydrants. Four of these hydrants were previously used by forestry workers in the 1990's and earlier, also by fire fighters in the 2001 fires for filling tankers and other various fire fighting equipment. The others have remained unused.

### **Employment/Bushfire Experience-Background**

I began with forestry in January of 1972 as a forest worker and my family and I took up residency in cottage 22 at the Stromlo Forestry Settlement. After a number of years as an offsider to the tanker drivers and attending over 300 hundred bushfires I then took up the position of tanker driver with the ACT Bushfire Council a position I held for over 25 years. In this time I attended in

excess of 1500 fires possibly more within the ACT and surrounding region. In this time I accepted Canberran of the Year on behalf of the bushfire fighter of the ACT, was awarded the National Medal in 1993 for service to the Australian people for fire fighting, in 1994 my crew and I were sent to assist in the Sydney fires for a period time and I was also named a hero of federation in 2000.

During the Bushfire season my primarily role was to constantly man the tanker and have it fully prepared in preparation for a call out. Part of this job was to ensure all equipment that was located on the tanker was in proper working condition, serviced regularly and that any faulty equipment was replaced immediately.

In the off seasons prior to 1979, when the Commonwealth still held a lease on NSW land to the north west of the ACT boarder forestry/bushfire council conducted regular burn offs of this area for the protection of Canberra. The lease expired in 1979 as was not renewed and as a result hazard reduction was no longer carried out in this area.

Forestry/Bushfire Council were responsible for the maintaince of Fire breaks/trails in and around the Canberra region for which a well managed plan was carried out on an annual basis. Towards the end of the eighties this practice started to diminish and by the nineties had virtually ceased. Hazard reduction burns also began to suffer the same fate and by the mid nineties all responsibilities of such burn offs were handed over to the volunteer fire fighters basically for training purposes.

As the years progressed through the 1990's Forestry no longer undertook any such regular activities of burn offs and fire trail maintenance within the ACT boundaries. The Forestry workers were on the odd occasion required to perform such duties although only within the confines of the pine plantations. On many occasions the older Forestry workers (including myself) had warned Peter Lucas-Smith of the dangers the ACT was now facing as a result of many factors. The possibilities of been burnt out by a fire/s coming from the north-west, from the Brindabella/Namadgi areas. Such information was simply dismissed by Peter Lucas-Smith. In one incident Peter Lucas-Smith replied with 'you guys are always saying that, but it has never happened'. Well it has now!!

Come 2001 forestry along with the backing of the Minister for Urban services – Brendan Smyth forced 26 long serving Forestry workers into redundancy. With these dismissals almost 600 years of Bushfire fighting

experience within Canberra was also lost and not replaced. Christmas 2001 saw the first major bushfire hit the ACT since 1985.

### **Recount of the events of January 18 2003.**

**9.30am**

'Bindi' (Phillip WHITTAKER) from the Uriarra Settlement, pulled up out front of my topside neighbour 'Diggers' (cottage 21) I went over to say 'hello' I asked Bindi 'if he knew where the fires were exactly?' he replied 'behind Glovers'. Glovers a rural property behind to the north/west of the Uriarra Settlement. 'Bindi then received a call on his mobile informing him the fire was closing in rapidly on the Settlement and for him to return to Uriarra immediately. Bindi left for the Settlement at that precise moment.

'Heathy' (Anthony Heath), my neighbour from cottage 23 and myself then approached the N.S.W Rural Fire Base Camp in search of a stan pipe and hoses, as we have a ground level fire hydrant directly across the road between our two cottages – we were unsuccessful. We returned to our respective cottages and I started to prepare my property for what was now to be the inevitable, setting a pulsating sprinkler to wet down the exterior, roof and surroundings of the property.

**12.00pm**

My youngest daughter 'Janine' rang at this exact time checking up on the current situation with the fires. My wife 'Kay' informed her that I was currently preparing for the worse. Janine left her place of work at Gungahlin immediately and headed home.

Janine arrived home at approximately 12.40pm saying 'the police were setting up road blocks on the intersection of Uriarra road and Coppins crossing road, access towards Uriarra and Belconnen was now impossible. Kay and Janine began to pack Janine's car with our irreplaceable belongings of family photos, memorabilia, personal papers and a few items of clothing. By this time the smoke was starting to head more of a south eastly way and the wind was slowing increasing.

**1.15pm**

Janine rang Canberra Connect inquiring of the actual location of the fires and their current direction. I listened to what my daughter was saying as she relayed to us the information she was being told by the operator, after explaining our actual location the operator informed us the fires at this time were not of any threat, but to still prepare anyway and to call for updates later on. At this time the wind had started to pick up and was becoming quite strong.

**1.30 pm**

It was at this time I noticed the N.S.W Rural Fire Service were packing and preparing to leave, they left not long after, driving pass myself and my neighbour 'Digger' they did not acknowledge us or stop to inform us of the immanent danger. In fact we were not given any evacuation orders by any member of the emergency services until it was basically to late, the fire had jumped the cotter road and was burning within the boundaries of the Settlement, when a sole fire fighter (who I believe was with the NSW Rural Fire Service) came running through the settlement yelling at us to get out.

**2.15 – 2.30 pm**

We attempted to ring Canberra Connect again; we received a consistent engaged signal but were finally connected on our fourth attempt. We informed the operator at Canberra Connect of our location. After bringing our location up on her computer screen, we were informed the fire was heading directly towards us and we were to prepare our property and to also prepare to evacuate, that we would be evacuated when that time came and we had approximately 1 to 1½ hours in which to prepare. The fire was upon us within 14 minutes.

Time after this became irrelevant, I saw the pines in Deeks park go up and yelled to my daughter 'if your car is packed get – the fire is here' the fire had spotted into Deeks park pines and had now crossed the cotter road and was burning in the Stromlo settlement. My daughter drove off down the road to the cotter road and safely made it out. At this time the NSW Rural Base camp went up in a ball of fire. I then told my wife to leave, at this very moment the fire ball crossed the top of our cottage. As Kay drove off a second fireball came through at an alarming speed, the noise was like that of a jumbo 747 passing,

the heat was unbearable such heat I've never previously experienced and everything around was now on fire.

It was at this very moment I was to put my years of bushfire fighting knowledge into action, I tried vigorously to save my neighbours cottage no. 23 I was unsuccessful. For what seemed like hours I raced around my yard putting out whatever was alight and burning. My sheds caught alight and as I was attempting to put the blaze out when the doors were blown off and my eyes were severely burnt along with my eyebrows. I was taken to the Canberra hospital by a member of the NSW rural fire brigade (who had at sometime returned to the settlement after the fire had passed through) in one of their light units, where I was treated for my injuries. I was reunited with my family some 8 or 9 hours after the fire went through.

## **Conclusion.**

It was four days before I was able to return to the settlement due to my eyes. I was completely devastated to see that only 3 cottages out of the 20 were all that was left still standing. The other cottages were nothing but rubble. To date, I have found the biggest hurdle that I have had to face, was been informed by the mechanic employed by Forestry 'Paul Graheme' that the largest tanker within the ACT Rural Fire Service was fully loaded and sitting unmanned along with 2 light units at the ACT Forests headquarters at the Stromlo settlement. The headquarters were situated less than 30 metres from the cottage of the late Dolly McGrath who died as a result of the January fires. I have since that day openly admitted that if I had of been aware that these vehicles were simply left unused I would of in some way taken control of the vehicles if not the equipment to help not only myself but also my neighbours to better fight the fires with the hope of saving more homes.

**David R Ferry.**