



1st May, 2003

Submission to the Inquiry Into the Incidence and Impact of Bushfires.



Dear Sirs,

Firstly I would like to congratulate the House of Representatives on instigating this inquiry. It is very desirable to get the opinion of as many citizens as possible.

I am a rather elderly person and have lived in rural Victoria all of my life and have been involved with firefighting organisations for many years. I am a fourth generation farmer and have been a land owner since 1947. I first became a registered member of a Rural Bush Fire Brigade in 1936 and have been a registered member ever since. I am no longer an operational member but am still interested in brigade matters. I was a member of the Leslie Manor Brigade 1936 - 1944, Freshwater Creek 1944 - 1956. I was inaugural Captain of Mt Duneed Brigade and held that position for six years. Later was Lieutenant in Connewarree Brigade and for twenty years was Secretary of the group which established and manned the Mt Duneed Fire Spotting Tower. I operated a mobile radio for Mt Duneed and Connewarree brigades for probably thirty years. I am a life member of the Victorian Country Fire Authority and the Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association.

Regarding Inquiry items:

- (a) Many people do not realise the impact that fires have on the lives of ordinary rural people. It is a consciousness that is always here, and during the summer period seems to dominate our lives, being always on call. Serious fires have a devastating and long lasting effect on rural communities. Passersby may think that everything is fine after a fire when fences are rebuilt and the grass is green but it leaves an indelible scar on the victims.
- (b) (c) (d) (e) & (f). You will no doubt have very many submissions regarding land management practice but I think that fire risk can be mainly covered by one thing. Fuel reduction.

There are many people better qualified than I to offer advice on bush hazard reduction as my experience has been mainly with grass fires. I think however that fuel reduction is by far the most important and probably the only practical way of reducing the fire hazard. Grazing and cool burning certainly have their place, but if it is to be burning, then the Victorian DES and similar organisations in other states will need a lot more money and resources.

To achieve real and effective fuel reduction, governments will need to challenge the environmental movement to upset the current idea that forests should be turned into wilderness. This has become something of a "sacred cow". It may lose many votes for some, but would also gain many. We cannot allow biodiversity to become a religion. Who turns out to fight the fire? Certainly not the "Green" people.

The present arrangement in Western Australia may be well worth investigating, by which (according to press reports) they have a mandatory maximum forest fuel load of 7 - 8 tonnes per hectare, and have not had a serious bushfire since 1961.

- (g) I consider that the present fire call response arrangements need examination. From this view of a spectator (as I now am) the present methods of brigade turnouts seems almost ridiculous. The number of false alarms and misleading reports (mainly from well meaning mobile phone users) is very worrying. The system we have here now, when all fire calls go straight to "Vic. Fire" in Melbourne, just does not work well. The people in Melbourne of course do not know anything about our local set up or topography and turn out tankers to incorrect locations as indicated by the mobile phone users. Sometimes tankers from several brigades may search the countryside looking for the fire. No attempt seems to be made to telephone check with local people on a local fire tower.

The original operator may have no local knowledge and the position of the fire - if any, and may be many kilometers out. This is a great waste of time for the many conscientious volunteers concerned.

They are all very busy people but unfortunately their time does not seem to be valued by the CFA who turns them out without proper information. This is perhaps understandable on a day of acute fire danger, but the same system seems to prevail throughout the year. I feel that the sooner brigade turnout control is returned to local Region HQ or groups, the better.

I do not pretend to have all of the answers to this turn out problem but it seems to me that the current system is fostering a culture of rushing to fires. This is very wrong. The accepted thing in rural fire fighting has always been 'get there as soon as possible, but do not rush and take risks'. This has worked very well for well over a century. No one has ever previously mentioned deadlines - for a very good reason.

The present arrangement whereby the CFA alert a brigade, through pager and if they do not report as having turned out in a defined number of minutes they call out the next brigade and so on. This often results in a ridiculous 'overkill'. This demonstrates the obvious inefficiencies of centralised and remote control.

This system may work well where there are professional firemen on duty waiting to be called out, but with volunteers who are going about their ordinary occupations it is a recipe for disaster. We just cannot have volunteers rushing in cars to the local fire station, often on dangerous country roads. They can often arrive at their station stressed up and not really fit to handle a tanker and engage in a fire fight which requires one's full concentration and capacity.

I recall very clearly the first advice on fire fighting given to me by my late father (a very experienced fire fighter) "Never run to a fire" "you will be useless when you get there". This was about 1930 and I think it is still very profound.

The CFA officers in Melbourne may feel that quick turn outs reflect some sort of credit on them but sometimes a few minutes saved may be very expensive. The whole turn out system needs close examination. The arrangement thirty years ago worked pretty well.

- (h) This is probably beyond the scope of ordinary firefighting people and must be managed by governments.
- (i) Liability and insurance is a matter which unless taken very seriously could eventually destroy our volunteer fire service. This can only be handled properly by the members of the House of Representatives. They have been talking about this in Parliament and playing with the matter for several years now, and it is time for some real action. Not good enough the push it off onto the individual states, we must have uniform laws throughout Australia, and quickly, before many things fall apart.
- (j) The contribution of volunteers is really not appreciated and if they are not consulted more on their role, they will gradually disappear.

I am concerned about the seeming inconsistency in the attitude of both fire fighting authorities and courts of law to arsonists and people who light illegal fires for various reasons during the summer period. If the fire gets away and causes serious damage or loss of life, it is taken very seriously, is a serious crime and sometimes, brings a serious punishment. If however, the fire does not get away and by sheer good luck does no serious damage, it is taken very lightly by everyone concerned. This is ridiculous, as it is the same offence and breaks the same laws. I have found this to be the case during my whole firefighting experience and I cannot understand it.

There does not seem to be any section of this inquiry dealing with the actual firefighting methods currently being used, and possible improvements. This is very important.

I feel that we still have a long way to go in developing and improving our methods, sophisticated though they are, but still very dangerous and really not very effective.

Mr Phil Cheney of the CSIRO Forestry Division and for whose opinion I have the greatest respect, was reported as having stated after the recent devastating fires in Canberra - that we still cannot handle fires on an extreme day. Very, very true.

Aircraft are fantastic but probably few realise just how expensive and how hazardous. We have been very lucky so far not to have had a disaster considering the conditions under which they operate.

I had the privilege to serve with the RAAF during World War II as a ground engineer (ex Sgt No 10874) and have had some experience of operating aircraft under hot conditions.

I have been trying since 1993 to promote a new and different method of fighting grass fires. My suggestion is to introduce a very strong blast of air to blow the flames back into the burnt area on the flank of a fire, using a small jet engine, tractor driven fan or blower, aircraft engine and propeller with guard - the possibilities are endless.

Wind has always been the enemy of firefighters. I think we must be able to provide our own controllable wind and be able to keep well back from a fire. Imagine fighting a fire from across a railway line or a creek or a stony barrier. We always seem to run out of water but we would never run out of air.

I have offered my suggestions to three different Regional Officers (CFA Region 7), to the CFA Chief Officer and to the Chairman. To Mr Phil Cheney CSIRO. To Commissioner NSW Fire Service Mr Phil Koperberg.

The response has always been the same, they thank me very politely for the suggestion, but they do not think it would work and are not prepared to try it. No-one, no-one, has ever offered to discuss this with me. I have never suggested this method for firefighting in a situation of heavy fuel loads but it could have great possibilities for rescue work or blowing fire away from a house or other building.

The reason that people seem shy of this suggestion is probably they just do not know what I am talking about when I mention an aircraft slipstream, and I do not mean that from a little 'Cessna' but something from a 1000 - 2000 hp engine or the almost unlimited blowing capacity of a modern gas turbine jet engine.

Unfortunately the aeronautical knowledge of many people is limited to what they see through the window of a 747 but they would be very surprised to know what is happening outside.

There is nothing new about blowing out fires, I am sure that our stone age ancestors must have used tree branches to beat out fires before they had suitable containers to carry water.

I think I have seen it all and used the lot, tree branches, leather fire beaters, knapsack sprays, hand operated low down pumps. I have taken part in the development of truck mounted tanks and motorised pump during the 1930's right through to our great modern tankers and the various aircraft. We cannot stop now. It is still not nearly good enough.

I well know that during 1940 - 45 the free world was fighting for its very existence. We just had to win, and any suggestions were seriously considered and evaluated. Some worked well. A few came to mind. 'Degaussing' of ships, (changing the magnetic field of ships to repel magnetic mines). 'Window' (to confuse enemy radar). Bouncing bombs. Pop riveting guns (which revolutionised repairing bullet holes in aircraft). We then had in authority, people of vision. I am sure there are still those people. Defeatism never gets us anywhere.

I am not trying to sell something. I am trying to give something to the service.

R. C. Baker

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "R. C. Baker". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name.