



NCA and ACT Government must find way for Pierces Creek residents to return home

The Pierces Creek settlement – one of three rural settlements in the ACT which were devastated by the January 2003 bushfires – should be rebuilt to accommodate the return of the original residents, according to the recommendations of Federal Parliament's National Capital Committee.

The Committee conducted an inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority in determining the extent of redevelopment of the settlement and handed down its findings today. The Committee made two recommendations:

- 1) **That the National Capital Authority negotiate with the relevant ACT Government authorities to facilitate the return of the original residents of the Pierces Creek Forestry Settlement as soon as possible; and further, that:**
 - the number of houses to be rebuilt at the settlement remain as small as practicable; and
 - the original residents, if eligible, be given the opportunity to purchase their houses.
- 2) **That the National Capital Authority report back to the Committee in December 2004 with an update as to how the implementation of Recommendation 1 is progressing.**

In the Committee's view, there are two priorities in determining the future of the Pierces Creek settlement: the return of the original residents, and the preservation of the National Capital Open Space System.

The ACT Government has indicated its plans to re-establish the former settlement with an increase from 13 houses to 50, based on a series of non-urban land and sustainability studies which found that it would not be feasible economically to merely restore the settlement as it was.

While the Committee understands that the ACT Government has a responsibility to the Territory taxpayer, the reality is that the unique situation which exists in the ACT means that any substantial expansion of Pierces Creek would defy the long-standing safeguards in place to protect the National Capital Open Space System which gives Canberra its 'bush capital' character.

The Committee also felt that such extensive redevelopment would create an entirely different community to the one that existed prior to the fires and would not be in the interests of the original residents. The Committee therefore does not agree that a re-established settlement needs to be to the level of 50 houses proposed by the ACT Government.

The Committee has also recommended that returning residents be given the option of purchasing their house, if eligible. This may necessitate a small increase in the number of houses to be established at the settlement. However, the Committee is not best placed to provide advice as to what would be an appropriate number of houses for the re-established settlement, and believes that this should be negotiated between the National Capital Authority and the ACT planning authorities.

For media comment:

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