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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Wednesday, 9 July 2003

Members: Mr Nairn *(Chair)*, Mr Adams *(Deputy Chair)*, Mr Bartlett, Mr Causley, Ms Ellis, Mrs Gash, Mr Gibbons, Mr Hawker, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Organ, Ms Panopoulos and Mr Schultz.

Members in attendance: Mr Bartlett, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Nairn, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Organ, Ms Panopoulos and Mr Schultz.

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

The Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires seeks to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on, life, property and the environment with specific regard to the following.

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

(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;

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

(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;

(e) any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;

(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;

(g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;

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

(i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

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

WITNESSES

Committee met at 1.15 p.m.

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. Today's hearing is the third for the inquiry. It follows a hearing in Nowra yesterday and a hearing in Katoomba this morning. It is part of the committee's program of hearings and visits to different parts of Australia. The hearings and visits allow us to pursue some of the issues raised in the 440 written submissions to the inquiry. The committee will be visiting rural areas to see things first-hand and to hear about some of the issues raised in the aftermath of the serious fires that have occurred in recent years. Tomorrow the committee will be holding a public hearing in Cooma.

[1.16 p.m.]

GREENTREE, Mr Adrian, Senior Deputy Captain, Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade

SCHOLZ, Mr Andrew, Deputy Captain, Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade

SCHOLZ, Mr Michael, Captain, Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade

WEARNE, Mr Neville, Secretary, Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. We have your submission, for which we thank you, and I now invite you to make a brief statement in relation to your submission before we move on to questions from the committee.

Mr M. Scholtz—Thank you for the opportunity to appear as a witness in the federal parliamentary inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires. I have been a member of the service for 27 years. The Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade submission is not a single issue document; rather it covers a number of issues which are consistent with the categories outlined in the terms of reference for this inquiry. This afternoon four members of the brigade will be speaking on matters raised in our submission. Members have been selected to talk on matters of which they have a reasonable degree of knowledge or experience. Specifically, I as captain will be talking on items 1, 5 to 10, 12 to 13 and 15 to 18 of the submission. My colleagues Neville Wearne and Adrian Greentree will speak on items 2 and 11. My colleague Andrew Scholtz will speak on items 3 to 4 and 14.

At this point in time, I would like to tender some information to the committee in relation to the items that I will be talking on and, essentially, make the point that I believe the Rural Fire Service is a magnificent organisation, particularly as it is made up mainly of volunteers within New South Wales. I believe that it ought to be the primary combat agency for all fire and bushfire emergencies in New South Wales, commencing with what is termed a class 1 fire through to a section 44 bushfire emergency.

At present, the arrangements for bushfire fighting in New South Wales are such that land management authorities have a unique role in managing fires at the class 1 level. It is not until a fire is declared a class 2 fire or greater that the Rural Fire Service has a much greater say in the coordination of that fire management. At that time, there could be significant difficulties experienced on the fire ground and it may be too late for action to be taken to minimise the size of a fire in its early stages. In that regard, I would like to highlight the philosophy of two services that I have picked arbitrarily. I have chosen the vision statement of the Rural Fire Service and the vision statement of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service. The vision statement from the New South Wales Rural Fire Service is very clear in that its mission is to protect the community and our environment through minimising the impact of fire

and other emergencies by providing the highest standards of training, community education, prevention and operational capability. The objectives of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service are quite considerable. However, there is one that stands out. It says:

... working with the community to conserve and foster appreciation of nature, Aboriginal heritage and historic heritage in NSW.

There are another 10 dot points underneath that, with no reference to fire management. I think that is a critical point. I would like to emphasise once again that I believe the Rural Fire Service ought to be the No. 1 fire organisation within New South Wales and that all the other land management authorities should become supportive agencies which have a legal obligation to support the Rural Fire Service. I justify that on the grounds that last year locally in the Hawkesbury district there was a large bushfire, called the Bala Range fire, that consumed quite a number of hectares. In its infancy it was quite a small fire and it was being handled by the National Parks and Wildlife Service under a class 1 situation.

I will quickly describe what class 1, class 2 and class 3 fires are. I refer to the operational plan for the local area. For the information of the inquiry, 'a class 1 fire incident controller will be the officer in charge of the first suppression agency on the scene, unless relieved or replaced.' In other words, when the National Parks and Wildlife Service turn up to that fire and they are on land which they have control over, they are the fire authority and will dictate the coordination and suppression strategies for that fire. That is only until we come to a class 2 fire, where the incident controller is then appointed by the bushfire management committee and the operational emergency executive to control firefighting operations. In a class 3 fire, the commissioner of the Rural Fire Service will appoint an emergency controller under section 44 of the Rural Fires Act.

The problem we have is that a class 1 fire can escalate very quickly—within hours—to a section 44 bushfire emergency. It is at that time that, if the management of that fire and the coordination of resources are not appropriate, the fire can expand from a small fire—for example, consuming one hectare—to a fire which can end up consuming over 80,000 hectares in three weeks, as was the case with the Bala Range fire.

Moving on, I would like to impress upon the committee that the RFS are recognised experts in the field of rural fire management. In collaboration with government and the community, the RFS have developed standards and policy in regards to rural fire management. We have developed rural fire training programs which are nationally recognised and indeed utilised by other fire authorities. We have the greatest number of resources available—for example, tankers and firefighters—in strategic locations in New South Wales. We are able to respond expeditiously to fires with a large number of resources. We have highly trained volunteers with a broad range of skills and, in many cases, a great degree of invaluable local knowledge. We have a command and control structure in place that is adaptable and can expand as a situation develops. I do not believe that other land management agencies have the capacity that the Rural Fire Service have at present in managing fires. Therefore they should be supportive agencies. I therefore recommend that there should be substantial changes to the Rural Fires Act to enable that occur.

In relation to item 5, I believe the qualifications of fire controllers and group captains need to be upgraded to reflect the responsibilities of those positions. At present, there are TAFE

certificates and diplomas for those particular positions. However, I believe a level of tertiary qualification is required, particularly in the areas of leadership, tactical and strategic thinking, corporate and financial planning, and human resource management.

I honestly believe that the community and the brigades deserve a high level of support and leadership from persons occupying these positions. The positions carry many moral, ethical and legal responsibilities, as set down in the Rural Fires Act 1997 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 1984, as amended. Group captain training courses are available; however, selection to attend courses varies from district to district and many participants are selected arbitrarily by the district office, which means that the best people may not necessarily be selected.

Group captain election procedures vary from district to district. In many cases the election procedures are not transparent and are potentially vulnerable to corruption or organisational skulduggery. Most election procedures are likely to be inconsistent with the electoral procedures set down by the Australian Electoral Commission. There is a conflict of interest when district management select trainees for the group captain training and also determine the outcome of the elections. This has unfortunately resulted from the RFS service standards, which are vague and without much detail and place responsibility for determining election procedures at the district level. There should be a consistent approach across the Rural Fire Service in accordance with the Australian Electoral Commission standards.

I impress upon the committee that the position of group captain has enormous responsibilities, particularly in the management and coordination of firefighting resources in the field. In most large fire emergencies this position is a vital link between the brigades and the incident management teams, and requires a high degree of leadership and tactical and strategic thinking capability.

Item 6 refers to the resourcing of rural fire brigades commensurate with the fire threat. The Wilberforce brigade, of which I am captain, has a dual responsibility for village and bushland components of our area. At present we have two bushfire tankers to service over 800 homes within a large village and over 400 homes in a rural area. We do not have the appropriate village specific equipment to deal with a threat or risk. I believe it is imperative that the service undertake a program to ensure that brigades are adequately resourced to deal with all the risks and threats they are likely to encounter.

Item 7 refers to the strategic rural fire trail network. A good trail is important for quick access—for suppressing bushfires and for mitigation works—and is also vitally important for crew safety. In respect of item 8, the volunteer firefighter relief fund, I wrote a submission through the Rural Fire Service Association some years ago. There is a real problem in New South Wales, particularly where people are self-employed or where their employer does not support rural firefighters. Where there is a protracted fire event in excess of five days, some people are not being paid and are not able to cover basic living expenses. I think it is incumbent on government and the community to start looking at some form of ex gratia payment to those volunteers whose award system does not cover an absence from their normal duties. If this does not occur, the Rural Fire Service will eventually have difficulty in providing adequate manpower for long-term, protracted emergency events. I can attest that one of my volunteers was sacked during a bushfire emergency by an employer who was not interested in supporting the effort at that time.

Moving to item 9, I think that bulk water tankers must be provided by the state government. It is important that tankers be filled on the ground so that they do not have to leave and possibly allow a fire to escape. A properly supplied water tanker is much safer for the firefighters and will provide adequate protection on the ground. Item 10 refers to strategic water supplies. There is a lack of sufficient water resources in New South Wales, particularly in rural and remote areas, such as large wilderness areas, where the Rural Fire Service is engaged in firefighting. We advocate the construction of large dams or other reservoirs of sufficient capacity for firefighting purposes which can be accessed during emergencies to fight fires.

Item 12 refers to vehicle maintenance and repair. We believe that there should be a mobile mechanical unit, similar to that available to the Country Fire Authority, available to the New South Wales Rural Fire Service to repair bushfire units in the field. The time lag at the present time is because a lot of vehicles need to be towed away to be repaired. This takes the vehicle away from the front line for a considerable period of time, and we believe that is unsatisfactory.

Item 15 refers to transportation. This is a very important issue and one that has particularly affected our brigade. Some brigades have to travel in excess of 100 kilometres in private vehicles to exchange crews. There is a potential risk to firefighters' safety on the return trip from fatigue that may result in a car accident. I know of brigades where car accidents have occurred as a result of firefighters being out on the fire ground all night and then having to commute home in their own private vehicles. Accidents have occurred. I believe the Rural Fire Service and, indeed, government have a duty of care to provide rural firefighters with appropriate transport to and from the fire ground. It is important that I distinguish between local fires and campaign fires. Our brigade have no problem in driving our private vehicles to a local fire. However, when it is a 100-kilometre round trip twice a day and firefighters who have been on the fire ground for in excess of eight hours have to drive 100 kilometres home, it can be quite dangerous. I believe that needs urgent action by the relevant authorities.

Item 16 refers to Defence Force assistance. We believe that the Defence Force can offer a lot to the Rural Fire Service and that procedures needs to be streamlined to expeditiously involve Defence Force personnel in assisting the RFS. The role of the Defence Force would need to be predetermined prior to the fire season on an annual basis. Their role could be in supporting logistic support, communications and/or firefighters on the ground. However, I understand there is a fairly lengthy process in organising or mobilising the Defence Force. I would like to see that streamlined so that in the event of a civil emergency the Defence Force could be enacted expeditiously and resourced accordingly to assist the Rural Fire Service.

Item 17 refers to state government departments and statutory authorities. Again, there is a need to preplan for the utilisation and support of all state government resources during fire emergencies. This could take effect through the use of their vehicles. A number of authorities have crew transport which could be made available to the Rural Fire Service.

Item 18 refers to personal protection equipment. At the present time in our local area there is only two-piece firefighting equipment available. We would like to see an option, or the reintroduction, of an appropriate one-piece overall, similar in design to that previously used in the service but upgraded to current standards. One reason for this is that single-piece overalls are more efficient and quicker to don in an emergency call-out. They are less prone to catching on

foliage in the bush, and they are also easier to store and maintain when washing and repairing. If I may, I will now hand over to a couple of my colleagues to speak on two issues.

CHAIR—I am reluctant to interfere and say no, but we do have a time issue and I want to make sure I give my colleagues every opportunity to ask questions about your submission. I remind the others that we do have your submission—it is on the record—so repeating what is in the submission is probably not necessary. Let us restrict it to aspects that you want to add or highlight particularly so that we have enough time for some questions.

Mr A. Scholz—I would like to commence my discussion on this issue by stating up front that the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, land management agencies and private landowners have a duty of care and a statutory responsibility to prevent the occurrence of bushfires in New South Wales under section 63 of the New South Wales Rural Fires Act. I would like to submit that section of the act to the committee. Hazard reduction by prescribed burning is the main practical tool available to rural firefighters to minimise the risk of bushfires and, hence, enable fire agencies and land management authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities.

In the Sydney metropolitan area we have a significant national park estate interfacing with urban areas. The brigade is advocating a balanced approach to managing bushfires in which national parks are managed for conservation values and bushfire prone lands on the urban interface are managed to maximise the protection of human life and property. As a grassroots firefighter, I have witnessed first-hand the ferocity of bushfires burning through heavily timbered forests on the residential-bushland interface and I can tell you that they are near impossible to control. We cannot launch a direct attack on these fires and have to resort to protecting human life and property, at great risk to the public and to ourselves. I do not know whether this is fully appreciated by the opponents of hazard reduction by prescribed burning. I tender to the committee selected press releases from over the last 20 years demonstrating my point.

I draw to the committee's attention the fact that, since the brigade's submission was made, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service has introduced a bushfire environmental assessment code. This code came into effect on 1 July 2003—I suspect in response to previous New South Wales government inquiries into bushfires. The code in part addresses some of the concerns raised in the brigade's submission in relation to hazard reduction. I will now discuss the brigade's submission in the context of that code. I tender a copy of the code to the inquiry. The New South Wales Rural Fire Service web site states:

> Prior to the introduction of the Code the environmental assessment process was complicated, potentially involving up to 22 pieces of legislation and approval from several different regulatory agencies. Lengthy delays were sometimes experienced.

Essentially, the Rural Fire Service acknowledges that the approval process was 'stifled by the red tape involved in gaining environmental approvals'. Therefore, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service has vindicated the brigade's statement that the previous system for obtaining hazard reduction approval for bushfire prone lands in New South Wales was complex, impractical and subject to lengthy delays. Whilst the code is meritorious in endeavouring to streamline the hazard reduction approval process in New South Wales, I stress that, unfortunately, the code does not go far enough in removing the barriers—that is, bureaucratic red tape—to hazard reduction work on bushfire prone lands in New South Wales. Due to time constraints, I submit to

the committee for their consideration a further expansion of the Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade's comments on the deficiencies of the bushfire assessment code.

I would now like to focus on a number of key recommendations in our submission as they relate to the bushfire environmental assessment code. The Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade contends that hazard reduction by prescribed burning in strategic asset protection zones and strategic fire advantage zones, as defined in the New South Wales bushfire environmental assessment code, should be made exempt from the following sections within part 5 of the code: sections 5.2, 5.6, 5.7, 5.8, 5.10 and 5.11. Our second recommendation is that hazard reduction by prescribed burning in strategic asset protection zones and strategic fire advantage zones, as defined in the New South Wales Rural Fire Service bushfire environmental assessment code, are made exempt from the provisions of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979, as amended, and all other environmental, conservation and cultural heritage legislation pertinent to hazard reduction works by prescribed burning. We also recommend that the 500-metre distance stipulated for strategic fire advantage zones in part 5 of the code be amended to become only a guideline figure. We recommend that the size of each strategic fire advantage zone be determined by the local bushfire risk management committee, taking into account local variations in topography, natural and man-made control lines, and constraints for each site. There are several other recommendations that I will not expand upon here due to time constraints, but I tender the recommendations for the interest of the committee.

The brigade recommends that a national centre for bushfire research be established to provide a coordinated and uniform approach to bushfire research in Australia. The brigade contends that bushfire research has been fragmented across Australia and research findings have not been effectively communicated to firefighters at the coalface. The brigade understands that the federal government has taken steps to address this anomaly by creating a National Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, supported by the CSIRO. The brigade supports this action and stresses that it must be appropriately resourced. A national plain English communication strategy should be implemented to ensure that the research findings are communicated to grassroots firefighters. We also contend that a national scholarship scheme should be established and coordinated by the research centre to engage our best science undergraduates to study bushfire causation, hazard reduction, management, ecology, technology and infrastructure.

I would like to talk briefly on legislation. I make the point that if the New South Wales government is not prepared to exempt bushfire prone lands, identified under the New South Wales Rural Fire Service bushfire environmental assessment code, from the provisions of state environmental legislation then the federal government must consider enacting Commonwealth legislation to achieve this outcome.

The brigade contends that if Australia is ever going to be fair dinkum about mitigating the devastating effects of bushfires then all levels of government and society have to accept the potential loss of biodiversity as a trade-off in strategically managing bushfire risks, the principal objective being the protection of human life and property.

The brigade contends that the present decentralised nature of bushfire training in New South Wales is ineffective and inefficient. In the Hawkesbury rural fire district, volunteers have to rely on an old garbage tip with inadequate and defective facilities to conduct structural and village related fire training. We do not have access to modern facilities to adequately train for structural

fires and gas fires. Whilst the brigade understands that these facilities may be available in neighbouring rural fire districts, the system at present does not foster cross-training of volunteers at district level.

To adequately train for these types of fires, we require modern purpose built facilities. I draw your attention to the Victorian Country Fire Authority, which has in place advanced fire training facilities at Fiskville. Under the present system in New South Wales, if generalist or specialist training is not available in the Hawkesbury rural fire district it is difficult, if not impossible, to apply for these courses in neighbouring rural fire districts. This is because the present system is not aligned to cooperative resource sharing and is underpinned by bureaucratic red tape and intransigence by district staff in fostering cross-district training of volunteers. I submit to the committee the brigade's submission on training. That concludes my section of the submission.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr M. Scholz—Mr Chairman, we have only one other item, and that is to do with radiocommunications.

CHAIR—Okay. Could you speak briefly on that and we will get to some questions. This is an important issue.

Mr Wearne—Communications in the Hawkesbury is difficult at best because of the topography. We only have three bases in use—Kurrajong, Grassy Hill and one near Wisemans Ferry. It is a voting system—'first in, best dressed'—wherever the vehicle happens to be, whichever base gets the best signal takes the call. This becomes difficult once you get further away, because of topography. The bases at the Putty Road end, I understand, are being looked at at the moment. There are some ideas on how to correct that problem. Our real problem probably exists around the Wisemans Ferry area because of deep gorges, mountains and rivers, which are all no-noes for radio communication. This is something that needs to be looked into. The three bases are not adequate, particularly around Wisemans Ferry, where you only have to travel over one ridge and you are out of communication again. Communication is vital. It is life dependent and it needs to be addressed rather urgently.

Mr M. Scholz—Mr Greentree would like to make one further comment on radiocommunications.

Mr Greentree—All I would like to say on the radio side is that current networks in use by different authorities vary to a degree. We have two systems—the government radio network, the GRN, and the PMR system. The PMR system is the better system of the two. We would like to see interagencies as well as interstate agencies having access to a radio with that compatibility. So if we go interstate or they come here, they can hook onto our channel. They become a resource to that local incident under that local incident control. In that way you have direct radio communication with all of those resources, whether it be police, ambulance, SES or whatever; you have that communication ability to talk directly to those vehicles in the field as a resource. Maybe that network needs to be looked at, and other areas in government departments and government bodies need to be trained in how to access that and how to get their radios compatible to do that.

CHAIR—Can I confirm that the four of you are all volunteer bushfire fighters?

Mr M. Scholz—That is correct.

CHAIR—None of you are employed by the RFS?

Mr M. Scholz—No. We are volunteers.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I want to ask two or three questions about the local situation. I am interested in hearing what is happening in Wilberforce and what you would like us to do to make your role in fighting fires a lot better than it is at the moment. If a fire starts in your area, who is the group directly responsible to fight it? Is it your organisation?

Mr M. Scholz—Yes, that is correct. The Rural Fire Service is responsible.

Mr MOSSFIELD—When does National Parks and Wildlife become involved?

Mr M. Scholz—The National Parks and Wildlife Service have responsibility within areas that are under their control—land tenure that is national park.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Is there any in your area of Wilberforce?

Mr M. Scholz—Absolutely. Not in Wilberforce, but in the City of Hawkesbury, of which we are a part, there is a significant portion of national park in that district.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I certainly agree with the point you are making. Depending on the stage of the fire and which organisation is responsible for fighting it, it makes sense to have one organisation to fight it. The other point I am interested in is something in which I have an interest through another committee I was on—that is, the role that the media plays in advising residents of the severity of the fires and what action they should take in the event of a major bushfire approaching their properties. Do the local radio stations, ABC or any other radio stations, play a role in advising residents?

Mr M. Scholz—I understand that does occur through the major radio channels. However, Hawkesbury is the poor cousin of the Blue Mountains and a lot of our fires are overshadowed by the occurrence of fires in the Blue Mountains. Historically, also, the fires in the Hawkesbury have been referred to as fires in the Blue Mountains; therefore, it has been difficult for our local area to have any prominence in that regard.

Mr MOSSFIELD—So you would have difficulty, if you knew there was going to be a problem area where houses were under threat, in getting that information through to a local radio station?

Mr M. Scholz—That would be my interpretation. There could be potential problems there given the historical problem of the Hawkesbury area being confused with the Blue Mountains and, indeed, some major stations reporting fires that are occurring in the Hawkesbury as being in the Blue Mountains area. We have a contiguous line of bushland to the Blue Mountains; therefore, it is sometimes confused. There is a local radio station that does report fires and the

activities of fires in the area. However, from a broad based perspective, there needs to be better recognition by those stations of the Hawkesbury as being where the fire is.

Mr MOSSFIELD—How would you advise the residents that a dangerous fire was developing?

Mr M. Scholz—The local radio network certainly would be one of the best ways—and some of the larger Sydney based radio networks, because of the fact that a lot of people commute to the city and could be coming home. Therefore, they would probably pick up, for example, 2CH or the ABC on their way home.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Some problems arise from breakdowns in communication. Would your organisation have a responsibility to notify the radio stations?

Mr M. Scholz—I understand the Rural Fire Service have a media network, and that is facilitated through the media division of the Rural Fire Service.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I flag that as an issue, but I do not want to take it any further. We talked this morning about strategic asset protection zones on the periphery of national parks. You say these zones should be subject to regular prescribed burns. By whom? By which organisation?

Mr A. Scholz—The local district bushfire committee should determine the agencies responsible for the particular burn. Quite clearly, as my colleague Michael Scholz stated in his opening address, the Rural Fire Service is the best resourced organisation in New South Wales to manage fires both strategically and in an operational role.

Mr BARTLETT—Thanks, gentlemen, for your very detailed and thorough submission. Congratulations. I have about a hundred questions I would like to ask, but I am limited to one. You mention under item 7 that we need a strategic fire trail network for fire mitigation and crew safety reasons. My question is: how far short of that are we? Is it getting better or worse, and why?

Mr M. Scholz—That is a fairly difficult question, but I will answer it this way. A lot of the bushland surrounding the Hawkesbury area is actually declared wilderness, and there are a number of significant restrictions to activities in wilderness areas. One of those is access. The advantages of having a strategic fire trail network are primarily based upon the fact that we can access the fires much more quickly and try to stop them, or put them out, while they are small and before they extend into large conflagrations. At the present time, there is a fire trail network within the Hawkesbury. I believe it is inadequate, and we are not able to service the greater majority of our area. That is also due to topographical constraints. We need to enhance the network and try to improve access right across our area for fire suppression and mitigation purposes.

Mr BARTLETT—What is the response of National Parks? Are they generally amenable to you improving access to these areas, or are they being obstructive?

Mr M. Scholz—In some areas they have been supportive; in other areas they are actually closing fire trails, without reference to the Rural Fire Service.

Mr BARTLETT—Obviously that impedes your effectiveness and has safety implications.

Mr M. Scholz—Absolutely. It impedes effectiveness and, basically, limits our capacity to respond expeditiously to suppress fires.

Mr Greentree—I will comment on that as well. With the fire trail network, there should be a system in place to allow us to sectorise the parks or wilderness areas so we can contain a fire to that area, rather than going in with bulldozers ad hoc, in the middle of a state of emergency under section 44, to try to cut new trails to stop it. Those trails should already be there. We should not have to be cutting them in the middle of a major fire.

Ms PANOPOULOS—How far short do you think we are of an adequate trail service? For example, does there need to be a doubling of trails?

Mr M. Scholz—It is hard to speculate on that. I will say this: I concur with my colleague Adrian Greentree in that we need to be able to sectorise the area into manageable lots. We need to break the whole area up into small geographical units so, therefore, if a fire breaks out in, for example, sector A, we would be able to access sector A quickly and have strategic containment lines within which we could back-burn and/or direct the fire attack.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I appreciate that, but do you have a brief comment on the maintenance of existing trails?

Mr M. Scholz—Yes. The maintenance of such trails, again, is disproportionate throughout the area. In other words, some trails are managed quite well and others are managed quite poorly. There are no clear standards to which trails must be maintained at present. I understand that the RFS are developing those. Again, the responsibility for maintenance of fire trails lies with the land management agency. I have to say that I believe the state government has inadequately resourced the maintenance of fire trails for many years.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You comment that the procedure for Defence Force assistance should be streamlined. Are you aware that the procedures require the state government to request assistance from the Commonwealth?

Mr M. Scholz—Absolutely.

Ms PANOPOULOS—From your experience of recent fires, do you think that that request from the state government to the federal government has been made in a reasonable time, or has it been tardy?

Mr M. Scholz—I am not able to answer that question, except to say that my experience on the front line is that there is only a small window of opportunity in firefighting and if we are not able to access resources such as the Defence Force within a short period of time the opportunity is lost. I conjecture that there could be some delay at the state government level.

Mr McARTHUR—In your submission you say:

Public perception that hazard reduction burning is generally 'bad' for the natural environment. This is promulgated by University institutions to science undergraduates and through public relations campaigns run by antagonistic conservation groups.

In view of your strong views on hazard reduction burning, how might that perception be turned around?

Mr A. Scholz—I would like to embellish my answer to that question by submitting to the committee various press releases from key conservation organisations in New South Wales. In a press release dated 21 January 2003 the Nature Conservation Council said:

Hazard reduction burning in the Kosciuszko National Park could increase fire risk to the ACT and surrounding communities ...

In a press release dated 14 February 2000 the Nature Conservation Council said:

The conference will also discuss the possible listing inappropriate fire regimes as a threatening process under the Threatened Species Act. ... It's no longer enough to simply except fire as a feature of the Australian environment and burn with out discrimination.

I think that is a very inflammatory comment by the key conservation organisation, designed to create barriers between volunteer firefighters and conservation groups in New South Wales. In a press release dated 1 November 2002 the Nature Conservation Council said:

The state opposition's recently announced bushfire prevention policy will damage the environment and endanger people's lives.

Again, that is a very inflammatory comment. The council goes on to say:

Encouraging property owners to burn or clear on 'the other side of the fence' detracts from the more important need to manage fuel loads and maintain a state of preparedness within their own property boundaries.

Quite clearly the message from the Nature Conservation Council is that they do not wish to endorse strategic asset protection zones that extend into national park estates or other publicly owned lands. Further, the council says:

The NSW Scientific Committee has named frequent fire as a Key Threatening Process to Biodiversity.

The Nature Conservation Council's vision is:

To ensure that all Bush Fire Management activity is ecologically sustainable while protecting life and property.

Wilberforce brigade contends that, in strategic asset protection zones and strategic fire advantage zones, the protection of life and property and burning for ecological purposes are mutually exclusive.

Mr McARTHUR—You are putting that argument forward—how do you suggest that you change the perception in support of your proposition of reduction burning?

Mr A. Scholz—This is a difficult task insofar as I am a university science undergraduate and, throughout my four years at university, not once did a university lecturer promulgate the positive effects of hazard reduction by prescribed burning to mitigate a bushfire risk. The entire focus of the lecture material was on the concept of burning for conservation values. Therefore, you have an entire generation of students graduating from university who are blinded to the possibility that hazard reduction by prescribed burning to protect human life and property is a reasonable and sensible course of action. I propose that we re-educate students at university level so that they graduate with a balanced view on managing fire. I also propose that we need to engage the conservation groups to accept that there will be the potential loss of biodiversity if we are fair dinkum in our approach to preserving life and property on the urban-bushland interface.

Mr McARTHUR—What might the brigade do about it? What are you actually going to do at the coalface?

Mr A. Scholz—I would like to refer that question to the captain of the brigade.

Mr M. Scholz—Our approach is a strong focus on community education through letterbox drops in our local area, through community days where we can invite the public up to discuss community fire issues and through the Community Fireguard. The Rural Fire Service run a program called the Community Fireguard, which allows community participation in bushfire management. I think there needs to be a strong emphasis on education not only at the tertiary level but also at the secondary school level. Syllabuses need to contain discussions on bushfire management.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think you are winning any points in the whole argument, or not?

Mr M. Scholz—At this point in time there is increased awareness, due to the fact that in the last couple of years we have had two of the worst bushfire seasons on record. However, a lot of complacency sets in, even within six months of fires, and people revert to what they know. There needs to be an ongoing public education program both through the mass media and through the local media.

Mr SCHULTZ—At the outset, I compliment you on your submission and, more importantly, on the verbal contribution that you are making in a very positive manner to what is obviously a very serious concern to you and your brigade. I refer you to page 1 of your submission. In the second paragraph under section 1, 'Control of bushfires during a declared emergency', you make the comment:

> The philosophy of land management in regards to fire management is fundamentally different to the rural fire fighting agencies.

You go on to talk about the National Parks and Wildlife Service and what they manage fire for. Then, in closing you say:

> Therefore the RFS is the most appropriate agency to manage bushfire emergencies.

I suggest to you that that is very much related to section 7, 'Strategic rural fire trail network', where you say:

This is particularly important on all Commonwealth and Crown lands vested in the control of the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service ...

In the context of you being in control of the fires that start inside national parks or crown land and having access to that in very safe and open fire trails, how do you think you are going to be able to come to a very successful outcome with regard to what you are proposing there?

Mr M. Scholz—Basically, the Rural Fire Service—if I can refer to a comment I made earlier—is strategically located. In the Hawkesbury we have 21 brigades, virtually covering the entire geographic area except a large proportion in the northern part of the shire. Therefore, they are able to be accessed rapidly through our paging network and they can be dispatched rapidly. Some brigades are activated and on the road within five minutes. If we get the report of a fire in a remote area, they are able to get there fairly quickly, take action and report back to our fire control officer the necessary resources and/or actions that need to be taken on this fire should it have escalated beyond the control of a single resource.

Mr SCHULTZ—I am not trying to confuse you and go in that direction. What I am saying is that under ideal arrangements as you see them would the Rural Fire Service be responsible for the management of fuel and fires in National Parks and on public lands within a certain parameter? That is the point that I am making.

Mr M. Scholz—Absolutely. That is correct. We contend that that would be the case and that the land management authority, whoever they may be, would be legally obliged under the act to support the Rural Fire Service in those activities.

Mr SCHULTZ—I refer to section 44. We all know section 44 triggers things other than an emergency—it triggers the money flow. How much of the commitment of significant resources is dependent on the knowledge that a section 44 has been declared and that, therefore, the money would be now available? How much of the actual resource commitment is dependent on that?

Mr M. Scholz—Obviously when the fire reaches that stage those sorts of considerations would exist. However, at a local level within the Hawkesbury I know for a fact, after being in the service for 27 years, that if there is a fire which is escalating beyond the control of a single brigade the organisation is resourced and adequately able to respond with numerous resources, be they machines, dozers and lots of other tankers to assist that local brigade. I do not believe there are any financial considerations at that stage. When the fire escalates to the section 44 there may be financial considerations—I have not heard that—but my local knowledge is that the service is such that it will respond to assist our community and to assist our neighbour no matter what the circumstances are.

Mr SCHULTZ—How is your relationship with central command of the Rural Fire Service? Could you describe that in terms of advantages and disadvantages.

Mr M. Scholz—The relationship varies from time to time. Part of the problem for volunteers is that sometimes they do not see the big picture: there are funding constraints and political constraints on the salaried staff of the Rural Fire Service. Volunteers have expectations that are raised by the fact that the Rural Fire Service and the government promulgate documents which suggest that they should have this type of equipment, this level of training and this sort of

responsibility, but some of the time the local brigades are not aware of that, so our relationship varies. Most brigades are committed to rural firefighting through the community involvement of the brigade. They are a community asset and will endeavour to do whatever is possible to assist their community and others in times of need in terms of firefighting.

Mr SCHULTZ—What I am asking is: how much of your local knowledge is restrictively used because somebody does not believe that you should be in control of the fire?

Mr M. Scholz—I am not a brigade captain that has a large bushland area which is subject to protracted fire events. In the Hawkesbury there are a number of senior officers from a broad area that are utilised in the command centre. They may not necessarily be local captains, which is unfortunate at times. But within Hawkesbury—and I speak of Hawkesbury only—there is utilisation of local knowledge. I am not sure of the degree of use and the degree of local knowledge which is then taken on within the management decisions of the IMT.

Mr SCHULTZ—Thank you very much.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You made the point on the first page of your submission about the need for revision of the incident control system to get greater flexibility and simplification of procedures; could you expand on that for the committee?

Mr M. Scholz—The problem we have is that sometimes we are not able to undertake actions on the fire ground until they have been approved through the incident management team. There can be extended waiting periods—from an hour to sometimes six hours or longer. There may be a window of opportunity on the fire ground, for example, to implement a back-burn from a strategic fire advantage line—a fire trail. We have to obtain permission from the incident management team, which could be located 100 kilometres away, prior to that action being implemented. Therefore we could lose the window of opportunity. We strongly advocate, and the brigade contends, that there should be an officer with discretionary power on the ground, at the coalface, who can make affirmative decisions to take whatever action is necessary to suppress that fire at the time and not wait for a six-hour turnaround on decisions because it is 100 kilometres away.

CHAIR—Finally, you mentioned before that a volunteer had been sacked during a fire. What was the flow-on from that? Was that person ultimately re-employed? Do you know the outcome of that situation?

Mr M. Scholz—The outcome was that, no, he was not re-employed. This was prior to 2000; it was back in the 1997 campaign. He was not re-employed. I just want to emphasise and to make the point that the time has come for some support—and I call it a voluntary relief fund—for firefighters and other volunteer services when a protracted bushfire emergency or other civil emergency extends beyond five days. We need to be able to provide an appropriate level of welfare for our families—in other words, a meal on the plate—if we are not being paid in that period, particularly self-employed contractors who may not get paid for three weeks. I can attest to the fact that, as a public servant, I get fully paid for an entire bushfire emergency, but a number of people in my brigade who are self-employed do not receive income during that period, and therefore I believe it is incumbent upon the government to start looking at that.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I have a very brief question. Has any work been done with employers in this regard? You have a list of volunteers and their employers. Is there a community education campaign directed at employers that you know of?

Mr Greentree—To a degree, RFS do promote that publicly and through the media. They have promoted looking after and supporting volunteers. RFS do that to a degree but still, at the end of the day, it is up to the employer—that is what it comes down to.

Mr M. Scholz—Also, in answer to that question, the United States have a federal law that prevents employers from sacking volunteer firefighters. I do not know if they have gone as far as having a system of ex gratia payments, but the time has come when there must be some sort of federal legislation enacted to support volunteer firefighters in protracted fire emergencies.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time today, your submission and the additional documents you have given us. You have made a very comprehensive submission, and the committee are particularly appreciative of the detail which you have given. We probably could have been here all afternoon discussing things further but, because of the size of this inquiry, the number of people we need to see and the number of places we need to go, we have to have some limit on the time we can spend with any one group. But we appreciate what you have provided to us.

Mr M. Scholz—Thank you very much, on behalf of the Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade.

[2.14 p.m.]

LEWIS, Mr Raymond Andrew, Deputy Captain, Planning Officer and Equipment Officer, Kurrajong Heights Rural Fire Brigade

McFADYEN, Mr Robert Cecil, Secretary, Kurrajong Heights Rural Fire Brigade

WILLIAMS, Mr Brian, Captain, Kurrajong Heights Rural Fire Brigade

CHAIR—Welcome. You were here earlier when I outlined the aspects of giving evidence to the inquiry, so I will not go back through that. We have your submission. It is another very good submission. It is on the public record, and the committee members have read it. Would you like to make any particular comments in leading off? If so, please proceed.

Mr Williams—Thank you, Chair. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to address the committee. I would like to talk to the submission. I will start by introducing the Kurrajong Heights area to you. Kurrajong Heights sits on the top of a mountain range completely surrounded by bush. In fact, we have three-quarters of a million hectares of national parks directly adjoining us, being the Wollemi and Blue Mountains parks. No matter which way our fire comes at Kurrajong Heights, it is coming uphill. Kurrajong Heights, along with the entire Blue Mountains region, has been designated as one of the most fire-prone areas in the world. If you go outside at any stage today and look directly west, you will see a number of tall communication towers up on top of the mountain range. They are all within the Kurrajong Heights precinct.

Even though we are living in an extreme-risk fire area, we have been able to live in that area with a considerable degree of safety. That is because over the years we have developed a very sensible mosaic pattern of hazard reduction burning. The burns total 18 in number, and we burn on a seven- to 15-year cycle. The brigade has been established for a little over 50 years. In that time we have never lost a home to a wildfire in an extreme-risk area. Not only do we manage to keep ourselves safe from wildfire but we believe we have greatly enhanced the environment in which we live. We are very proud of that environment. We have actually created our own environment, and we are very proud to show that off if you have the time to have a look at it.

The mosaic plan has been created by local people with local knowledge. I would really like to emphasise the fact that it is most important that we keep that sort of planning at the local level. We have a plan that works. It has kept us safe and it has enhanced our environment. Nobody cares more about the environment than the people who live in it. I think this is most important. We do not need direction from outside. The local people live in the sort of environment that they choose to because they care about it. Our plan has never been broken, but people have decided that we need help to fix it up. It does work, but they have decided that we need assistance.

What has happened is this. The land around Kurrajong Heights used to be all crown land. It is now virtually all national park. With that national park influence we are really slowly losing the right to manage it the way that we really want to. In our submission we speak of one burn that was held up for a period of six years. We were waiting six years after the district committee

approved that plan to be done. We got the go-ahead for it but we had to wait six years for an REF to be done by National Parks. It was not done by the time the bad fire impacted in 2001. The area was not burned before then, and it burned really badly. I will expand on that a little bit later. There are lots of other areas throughout the Hawkesbury in the three- , four- and five-year range of waiting to have REFs done by National Parks. It means that, while we have had this you-beaut plan that has kept us safe for a long period of time, because of these outside influences we can no longer offer the same degree of protection to the community and the environment as we once could.

I would like to introduce my colleague Ray Lewis to you. Ray has had 33 years of experience with the service. He will be helping me at question time. To introduce myself, I have had 34 years of continuous service as a frontline firefighter with the Rural Fire Service. For the last 19 years I have been captain of Kurrajong Heights. I have been elected unopposed to that position. I can assure you that if we were not producing the environmental outcomes that the community expects of us my head would have gone long ago. In the Rural Fire Service I have a group leader qualification. In the 1994, 2001 and 2002 fires I was a divisional commander. A divisional commander is a person responsible for a significant part of the major fire and commands a great deal of resources at times. I am a RAFT leader. RAFT stands for remote area firefighting team. The objectives of that team, as the name suggests, are to go into remote locations and take out fires as quickly as it can, to stop them escalating to major fires. I have given evidence to three state government inquiries into bushfires and one coronial inquiry, so I believe my evidence is coming to you direct from the coalface.

I look upon myself as a practical environmentalist. I am here today as much out of my concern about fires as I am for the environment. Both issues concern me greatly. In my spare time, I am an avid bushwalker and I enjoy, as I am fairly well skilled in, the sports of abseiling and canyoning. I use those skills to explore very remote parts of both the Blue Mountains and Wollemi national parks. Ever since I was a boy I have studied the effects that wildfire has on the environment and I have compared those to the areas that we have managed for the last 50-odd years. I can assure you that the difference is like cheese and chalk. Areas that are only subject to wildfire regimes are going backwards at an alarming rate. I am happy to escort you on a tour through the Blue Mountains and to show you areas that are only subject to wildfire where things are disappearing. I have seen the mountain ash disappear; I have seen the topsoil disappear. It is no longer sustainable to lock areas up, treat them as wilderness and leave them subject to wildfire regimes. We are losing them and we will have nothing to pass on to future generations unless we address the problem.

I believe hazard reduction is a win-win situation. Most people talk about a trade-off between the environment and protection for the community. I believe that we have demonstrated at Kurrajong Heights that you can have the best of both worlds. They are not on opposing sides of the scale. I believe that a sensible hazard reduction management program not only gives you protection from wildfire but enhances the environment that you live in. Areas at Kurrajong Heights have not been subject to wildfire for 50 years and you can see a dramatic improvement. It is cost-effective.

In the old days, all we had really to fight fires were drip torches and we used to be a fire prevention agency. We would do our hazard reduction and most of the summers we would take it easy. Today that role seems to have changed, the Rural Fire Service is a more fire reactive force

than a fire prevention force and so now we use helicopters at $1,000 or $2,000 an hour depending on their size instead of using drip torches which used to cost us, in modern day terms, about $5 an hour to run. Hazard reduction is extremely cost-effective. With sensible fire management regimes, you actually burn less of the country. As a typical example we have just burnt, I believe, 1.4 million hectares of the southern alps in Australia in one go—1.4 million hectares. That is unbelievable and it is a disgrace. If we had had a management regime in there, those fires would not have escalated to that size. By hazard reduction, you actually reduce the amount of country that is being burnt. I would like to show some slides, if I may.

Overhead transparencies were then shown—

Mr Williams—Fires run on fuel. Fuel is the only side of the fire triangle that we have any say over. If you were to go out to your vehicle and start the engine, it would continue to run until it runs out of fuel. The same thing happens with the bush. If we fill the bush up, give it full tanks of fuel and we get a summer fire in there it just takes off. We cannot stop it and it is going to continue to run until it runs out of fuel or we have a change in the weather pattern. If we look at the graph on the left of the slide, we see a fuel loading of 7.5 tonnes. Fuel in the Australian bush builds up at a rate of about two tonnes per hectare per year, so we are looking at a little under four years of fuel build-up there. That produces a fire intensity of some 300 kilowatts per metre of fire front. Going across to the graph on the right, we see that if we increase the fuel load by a factor of four to 30 tonnes that actually increases our fire intensity by a factor of over 17. You can see that once we start to increase the fuels we get a dramatic escalation in fire behaviour.

These figures are supplied by the Rural Fire Service. We use the graph for training and the figures come out of one of our training manuals. It only goes up to a figure of 5,200 kilowatts per metre of fire front. One kilowatt of energy is equivalent to one single-bar radiator. If we look at the graph on the right that is equivalent to standing in a fire with 5,200 single-bar radiators stacked one on top of the other for each metre of fire front. We cannot work in conditions like that. That is pretty frightening but—I have a document in my case and the CSIRO will tell you the same thing—we have had figures recorded in Australia of 100,000 kilowatts per metre of fire front. That is absolutely devastating, it is like a nuclear blast and nothing can survive that. It is absolutely criminal that we allow fuel to get to that level.

On the subject of local fires running on fuel, in the 1994 fire in the Blue Mountains, the fire ran 30 kilometres in a day and half through the Blue Mountains National Park. It was running on heavy fuel as a lot of the fuels in there were 25 years old and it burnt down five homes and a youth hostel as it came out. We had 11 helicopters working on that fire. Helicopters are virtually a waste of time when you have a major wildfire running. If you look at the findings from the 2001 state government inquiry, they will tell you that after you get above 3,500 kilowatts per metre helicopters are virtually wasting their time and I fully support that.

The Grahams Creek fire started in the Wollemi National Park and ran 20 kilometres in a day. It burnt down 13 homes at Blaxlands Ridge as it came out of the national park. Again, that was running through quite heavy fuels. By the way, that fire started in an area which the local brigade had had approved by the district committee to burn. They had been waiting four years to get that, and they could not get the approval from the parks.

What actually burns in a wildfire? This is quite interesting—fuel up to the thickness of six millimetres gets burnt in a wildfire. That is all that gets burnt in the initial blast of a wildfire. When we are carrying out a hazard reduction we are not trying to burn the very guts out of the bush, as opponents to hazard reduction would have you believe. We are only burning fuel up to the level of that thickness. If we can eliminate fuels up to six millimetres in thickness we are going to stop wildfires running. To control the fuels in the bush is not difficult. We do not have to burn it to pieces. All we are trying to do is eliminate fuel up to that thickness. What constitutes 30 tonnes? The answer is, six centimetres. If there is that much dry material on the forest floor, that constitutes 30 tonnes of fuel that is ready for combustion in a wildfire. That is just the rough rule of thumb that the Rural Fire Service work under.

How big do we need to make our hazard reductions, or how often do we need to burn? This slide shows a simplistic view of what we try to do at Kurrajong Heights. We try to burn a three-block, in-depth mosaic pattern. This enables us to extend the burn cycle of burns. We do not support and we never have supported just burning one block between the park or the bushland and the asset. We believe in burning at least three blocks in depth. On this diagram you will see we are burning on a seven-year cycle. We have actually achieved the cycle of between seven and 15 years at Kurrajong Heights by using this method. Being able to extend the cycle between burns is the way we are achieving good environmental outcomes.

If the fire approaches towards the assets in 2003, you will see from this slide that it will get into the first burn which was last burnt in 1996. On a really bad fire day the fire is going to run through that but, on a reasonable day or particularly at night, we could manage a fire in those fuel loads. If it does manage to creep through there on us and gets into the second zone, which was only burnt 12 months previously, it is virtually impossible to run through an area that has been burnt. If anybody tells you otherwise—in my 34 years, I have never seen it. Once ground is burnt, and burnt properly, it is not going to burn again. In fact, when we go rafting we actually land inside the burnt-out area. We know that if we land on the burnt ground we are not going to get burnt again. If people try to tell you that it will burn the second time or two weeks later, I think they are having a bit of a lend of you. If it should spot into the third area, right next to the assets which were last burnt in 1999, we can easily manage the fire intensity in those fuel loads.

How big should we make burns? The bigger they are, the better they work. If we look at our block No. 4 on this slide, we see that this is the fire that actually stopped the 2001 fire from crashing into Kurrajong Heights and Bowen Mountain. That was about 550 hectares in size. The reason we need to have hazard reduction of a reasonable size to be effective is because when we do a burn, we are only probably getting a 70 to 75 per cent burn on the ground. Because we burn to a prescription with a certain amount of moisture in the ground, the gully areas do not tend to burn. We light on the ridge tops and we usually let the fires burn downhill slowly. They go against the wind. The fire is above the animals and they just move slowly down into the gully areas and they are protected. It allows plenty of time. The fire moves slowly, the animals have time to move. The big advantage of burning the bush by hazard reduction and not wildfire is the fact that when we burn, because we burn to that certain fuel moisture content, we leave the humus layer on the ground. After a fire it is most important that you leave a humus layer there to protect against erosion. Included in the evidence that we tendered is a document called ‘Protecting our Forest’ which quotes research that a single thunderstorm after a wildfire can remove the topsoil that took 2,000 years to put there. Two-thousand years of topsoil build-up can be eliminated by a single thunderstorm after a wildfire.

I am not sure about 2,000 years; but when I go canyoning I make a point of always going into the bush after fire to observe what has happened, and numerous times I have been in canyons in the Blue Mountains where the topsoil has been a metre deep in the gullies after wildfire. Just in my short life I have seen a dramatic loss of topsoil throughout the Blue Mountains. It is frightening.

The next slide shows the 2001 fire that impacted on Kurrajong Heights. As you can see, there is no humus left on the ground; virtually everything got consumed. This fire ran quite quickly. Although the farmer had the orchard shown here well prepared—it was nice and green and did not burn—the entire orchard was cooked by radiated heat. I made a point of going back and having a look at this just a fortnight ago. The orchard is completely dead. The livelihood of a farmer has been wiped out by radiated heat. His paddocks were safe enough, because he had them green and they did not burn, but the orchard was cooked by radiated heat—not a good outcome.

The fire ripped through the area shown in the next slide. This was taken under power lines, where there was not a lot of fuel but it still burned fairly hot. As you can see, it is down to mineral earth again. There is a big, deep gully in the middle of that ground sector. The fire jumped across that gully and went up to where the brown meets the green. That line where the brown meets the green is a fire trail that we had put in as part of hazard reduction in 2001. We had burned from the top of the mountain down to where that ground starts. The fire went through the area with tremendous force but never impacted more than 30 to 40 metres into the hazard reduced area.

That hill is quite steep—a lot of it is 15 or 20 degrees. If ever a fire were going to run through the tops of the trees, as people tell you they do with no fuel on the ground, it would have done so here. That was an extreme fire day—the fire behaviour was severe—but the fire trail simply stopped the fire. I have never seen fire run through the tops of the trees. About four major gullies bisect that mountain. The fire eventually crept up the gullies, because they were unburnt in the hazard reduction. But the quickest it got through any of them was some 10 hours, and when it did come through it was only on about a five-metre front, which was no problem whatsoever to deal with. So hazard reduction does work. Middling fires might sneak through them a bit here and there, but they are easily dealt with. My experience is that hazard reduction gives you certain benefits for at least 10 years.

I will skip over a few points which we might cover in questions and conclude by saying that, as I said earlier, I have been to three government inquiries and a coronial inquiry and all of those inquiries have just come up with recommendations. Down the track, very little has come out of those recommendations that has been worth while. I strongly suggest that, after you consider all the evidence presented to this inquiry, you come up with legislation. If you do not come up with legislation, I might jump off one of these cliffs in the mountains. This is the last throw of the dice for us. I am very hopeful that this committee will come up with something worth while, and I hope it will take the form of legislation.

CHAIR—I do not want to disappoint you this early on, but unfortunately a parliamentary committee can only make recommendations.

Mr Williams—I appreciate that.

CHAIR—The committee might recommend that legislation change or be introduced, but at the end of the day it will be up to federal, state or local governments to act on the recommendations it puts forward. You clearly know your area very well. You know your country well, you know the vegetation you are dealing with pretty well too, and you have noticed what has happened to it over quite a long period of time. This committee has heard some evidence that in some—or perhaps many—circumstances regular low-intensity burns could be more detrimental to biodiversity than infrequent wildfires of high intensity. What would you say about those sorts of comments?

Mr Williams—If we go back to how most people work the system, we find that they work on burning just one block between the assets and the bush. If you do that, you have to burn on far too frequent a basis. That is why we would like to go to the principle of a three-block depth. That gives us extremely good environmental outcomes and it gives us protection. For instance, in the Canberra fires, if you had had only one block of hazard reduction done, you would still have got a lot of ember attack. So, to reduce that ember attack, it is most important that we go some depth. I believe hazard reduction should be about one kilometre in depth, depending on the topography, of course. The deeper they go, the more effective they are. I am a supporter of the idea that the entire bushland should be managed to some extent. We should not allow great massive areas to build up and build up, because they are going to burn sooner or later. It is just a matter of time. Kosciuszko is the best example we can give. I came through the Victorian high country a week ago. It is just not right. We cannot treat our environment like that.

CHAIR—You said that the frequency of your burns is a rotational period of between seven and 15 years. Is that variation from seven to 15 just how it has worked out—you could not burn one area when you would have and it got left an extra year or two—or is it quite deliberate in that you have looked at the particular environment and determined those areas that require it more frequently and other areas that will survive and develop much better with less frequent burns?

Mr Williams—Our main fire paths are from the north-north-westerly direction. We burn areas on the eastern side of the mountain a lot less frequently, because on the eastern side of the mountain the moisture is contained more, it is not exposed to the same winds, the build-up on the forest floor rots down quicker and that breakdown process enables us to extend the burn. So we look at it and manage it. It all revolves around fuel levels. We monitor the fuel levels and we do not burn until the fuel levels get to a certain point.

CHAIR—Does the type of vegetation impact on your decisions in that respect?

Mr Williams—What we have found is that while we have big trees—and we have encouraged the big trees at Kurrajong Heights—the canopies tend to interlock. That suppresses the sunlight, retains the moisture in the ground and the humus rots down quicker. If you get wildfire through, it kills your big trees. Once you kill your big trees off, it is a whole different process, because it then tends to come back as scrub. The scrub burns hotter next time because the fuels are more compacted and the big trees disappear. I do not know if you came down from Katoomba via the Bells Line of Road, but between Mt Tomah and Bell, which has national park both sides and receives no fire management regime, there are no big trees left. When I was a boy they were there. It is simply that once the big trees disappear you have to burn on a lot more frequent a

basis. When you can keep your big canopy and the moisture in the leaf litter rotting it away, you can extend the period between burns.

Mr SCHULTZ—So the total ecology of your country changes and the biodiversity of your country changes.

Mr Williams—Absolutely. I have seen a dramatic change in my lifetime. It frightens me that areas that are only managed by wildfire are not being managed at all—they are being destroyed.

Mr McARTHUR—Why haven't other brigades adopted what seems a very sensible technique—your technique?

Mr Williams—We have to fight very hard. I had a meeting yesterday with National Parks and had to get a bit cranky to get my way. It is easy to give in. Some brigades have given up completely. They no longer do hazard reduction, because it has become too difficult. We have fought for years. Luckily I have had good support from my community, and we have stood our ground. The problem with National Parks is that seven or eight years is a long time for a district manager to stay in one area. They do not see long-term consequences of what happens. We have been there our whole lives, and our fathers were there before us, so we know what has happened and we know how to manage the bush. Unfortunately, people do not like to listen to us.

Mr McARTHUR—How have you convinced the local community that your reduction burn is working?

Mr Williams—In 50 years we have never lost a house, even though we are on the very top of a mountain range and we have had a number of major fires come at us. So the community are fairly pleased that they have a nice environment in which to live and they still have a home to live in.

Mr McARTHUR—And do they understand that? Do they have an appreciation in the non-fire years that you have done a good job?

Mr Williams—Yes. We will always have new people coming to the district, and they are the hardest to educate. We sometimes have problems convincing certain landholders that it is necessary, but we generally have quite a good standing within the community. They have supported us over the years.

Mr McARTHUR—What sort of tactic do you undertake to keep the community informed? Do you have a particular process whereby you spread the word?

Mr Williams—After each major fire that threatens us we have a big community debrief and virtually the entire community turns out. We show them what we did, how it worked and what mosaic pattern was in place. We give them quite a thorough debrief of how we stopped the village from burning.

Mr McARTHUR—And the community turn up to that debrief?

Mr Williams—They sure do. After a wildfire you have very little problem getting them to attend.

Mr MOSSFIELD—You said that your program of hazard reduction burning is on a seven to 15 year basis. So, while it may appear to be a long while, is the fact that you have to wait two or three years to get a decision to burn off an area a big problem?

Mr Williams—It is absolutely a problem. That is why our system is starting to break down a bit. We must burn our high fuels before our low fuels, so if we have a ridge top burn waiting to go and it is held up for four to six years, it completely blows our plan out of the water. We have had more fire impact lately because we have not been allowed to keep doing what we have been doing all our lives.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Which organisation makes the decision for hazard reduction burning?

Mr Williams—The brigade comes up with a plan and we take it to our group area meeting. We discuss it to see if it works in conjunction—in a mosaic—with the adjoining brigades. That goes to a district committee for approval. The district committee is very good—they usually approve our plans within three to six months at most. It then gets to the REF, review of environmental factors, stage. The land manager prepares the REF, and that is where the system breaks down. That is the current procedure we have to go through.

Mr MOSSFIELD—It looks complicated from here.

Mr Williams—It is reasonably complicated but, as volunteers, we can work around that if we have to. We would much prefer the old system, where we could kick the leaves on a Tuesday and burn on the Saturday. That was a lot more efficient. But in this day and age, when everyone is answerable, we can still work with that, except when it gets down to the REF, when we are in the hands of the land manager. We cannot proceed until we get the REF.

Mr MOSSFIELD—So there is not a committee that meets and makes a decision?

Mr Williams—Yes, there is. The district committee meets and approves the burn, and then they hand it over to the land manager to do the REF. That is where the system breaks down.

Mr MOSSFIELD—So the National Parks and Wildlife Service is not on that committee?

Mr Williams—Yes, they have a representative on that district committee.

Mr MOSSFIELD—If a decision is made that you go ahead with the burn—

Mr Williams—All sorts of excuses can be used, such as restraints on money. REFs are extremely expensive to prepare, and they have a budget to work to.

Mr MOSSFIELD—So it is more than just making a decision; other things follow that?

Mr Williams—There are a million excuses you can come up with, but excuses cause big fires. In our submission, we list 30-odd burns that were needed prior to the 2001 inquiry. If you look

through that, you will find that most of the national park burns were in the three to six year range of waiting for REFs to be done.

CHAIR—We obviously have a copy of that in your submission.

Mr Williams—Yes.

CHAIR—Do the white and the yellow on your slide have anything to do with that?

Mr Williams—No. The brigade submits a proposal to our group area meeting, where we discuss it with adjoining brigades. It is a flow. We do not have a problem with the local process. The local brigades work well together and the district committee gives us good support.

Mr BARTLETT—You said about the 2001 fire that hit Blaxlands Ridge that you had been waiting for four years for the REF.

Mr Williams—Where the fire kicked off, in Mountain Lagoon, we had been waiting for an REF for four years. It still had not been done.

Mr BARTLETT—This is probably an unfair question but, if hazard reduction had been done prior to that, do you think that Blaxlands Ridge would not have lost the property that it did lose?

Mr Williams—I certainly do not think it would have. The fire started in an area that should have been burned. It was a lightning strike. There may have been other lightning strikes, but the coroner has found that that is where the fire kicked off from. Those were his findings.

Mr BARTLETT—So it is fair to conclude that the delays in the granting of the REF were critical in impeding your effectiveness and also put lives and property at risk?

Mr Williams—Absolutely. One of the things I would like to see is that we get some in-depth burning within our major park areas. You simply cannot let fires run from one side of a national park and come out the other. A mosaic has to be created. Honestly, if I could get a helicopter for five days a year I could keep the Wollemi National Park safe from major fires. You simply drop aerial incendiaries into the ridge tops. That takes the ridge tops out, burns out into the gullies and goes out overnight. The only place you need ground crews is close to assets. It would be just so easy, so simple.

Mr BARTLETT—What would you recommend to speed up that whole process—so that we do not have delays of four or five years—to still provide some protection, given the environmental concerns, and to give local brigades the flexibility they need to do hazard reduction?

Mr Williams—I have never seen a benefit come out of an REF, to be quite honest. In fact, with one of the burns there were two separate consultants, employed by accident, and they came up with conflicting reports. I have never seen a benefit come out of an REF, so I believe they are probably a waste of time. The local community demand that you treat the environment with respect. We live in it and we are the last people that want to destroy it.

Mr SCHULTZ—We all have certain views about national parks and how they operate. Would it be fair to say, as far as national parks are concerned, that over the years governments of both political persuasions have declared more and more national parks and wilderness areas, in many instances without prior knowledge by National Parks, just as a political game leading up to an election? The point that I am getting to is that, while there has been that expansion of national parks and wilderness areas, there has not been a corresponding expansion of resources for the National Parks and Wildlife Service in both manpower and money. In your view, would that be another contributing factor, leaving aside the controlled burns that you might do?

Mr Williams—Yes, absolutely. As I understand it, there are about two National Parks staff for about every 7,000 hectares of the state—I think that is the ratio. They simply do not have the resources. They certainly do not have the resources to deal with fire and they certainly do not have the resources to deal with fire mitigation. I support the earlier comments that the Rural Fire Service should not only be in charge of suppression of fire but be in charge of mitigation. It is crazy to have one authority looking after it in peacetime and then they turn us out to fight the war. That is what is happening. We need to get our hands on the mitigation as well as the suppression.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Your submission is fascinating, coming from years of experience in the field, and I think your knowledge is of great benefit to the committee. I refer to the mosaic burns that you say have obviously worked effectively for your community. Is that example available to other brigades?

Mr Williams—Yes, it is, and we would love to see it go statewide. Burning at least three blocks in depth gives us good environmental outcomes. We are happy to show that to anyone who wants to have a look. We have had a big job. When I went to the 1994 inquiry, I invited the director-general of National Parks to come to have a look at what we had achieved, because the fire was stopped in our region, but I could not get any interest in that. Because we do not have any sorts of university qualifications, people do not want to listen to us; they think bushies do not know too much. It is very hard to get people to come to actually have a look at what we have done.

Mr ORGAN—Brian, you are saying that there have been a lot of positive environmental outcomes and you have just said that you have trouble getting the green side, the environmentalists, to come and appreciate those. Has anyone from that other side come along and helped verify the positive outcomes that you have achieved?

Mr Williams—The only organisation that showed any interest came after the 1994 fires. We invited the CSIRO to come to have a look at how our hazard reduction had worked. They came up, and they were most impressed by it. That is the only organisation that has ever come and had a bit of a look at what we have been doing.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—The government has established a CRC in bushfire research. Perhaps your experience might be pressed upon them as an example for them to come and observe, test and evaluate. As I think the views that you are expressing might certainly get some resistance in some quarters, that sort of scientific verification would be of assistance to you and would certainly be of assistance to the community.

Mr Williams—We would be only too happy to show anyone around.

CHAIR—You made a comment about the fire service changing over the years. Do you think a culture has developed in the bureaucracy of the fire service, outside of the volunteers, that has become very much focused on managing fires, rather than ensuring that fires do not get started in the first place or, if they do, they do not go far?

Mr Williams—The service is going to more centralised control. There are no two ways about that. I would not like to go down to Kosciuszko and tell them how to manage their fires down there. I am a great believer in local experts looking after their own backyard. The local people are the ones with the knowledge. That is the thing. Local people should be involved in the planning; particularly, they should have a lot of say in mitigation, the size of the areas and when they are to be done. I think things need to be kept at the local level. The more centralised the control goes, I think the worse off we are.

CHAIR—I am sure we will be hearing from some local expertise down in Kosciuszko tomorrow at our hearing. I do not think there is any doubt that there is the expertise there. As the federal member who represents that area, I can say that there is a lot of expertise there.

Mr BARTLETT—Following the REF issue again and the delays there, you said in response to Alby Schultz that there needs to be more resourcing for National Parks and that is one of the problems, but you also used a couple of times the word 'excuse' when talking about National Park's response. So, as well as a resourcing problem, it seems that there is an attitudinal problem and an obstruction within National Parks.

Mr Williams—One of the problems now is that National Parks will not do any hazard reduction burning without a helicopter on standby. That limits us greatly. Sometimes we get a very small window of opportunity and maybe we need 15 fires going in the Hawkesbury on the one weekend. That takes a lot of resourcing. The National Parks really do not have the resources to supply the backup for that. Of the Hawkesbury region, 70 per cent is made up of national parks. Most of our fire risk areas are within national parks, and I do not believe that they have the resources to do the job.

Mr BARTLETT—Is it only resources though?

Mr Williams—I also think it is their culture. I would like to say this: most rangers that we deal with are quite good people; I think the rangers are dictated to by their bureaucracy. I think the problem is the bureaucracy not the ranger on the ground.

Mr BARTLETT—That is a good point, thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you to you and your brigade for what is clearly a very comprehensive submission. We thank you greatly for it.

Mr Williams—We greatly appreciate the opportunity.

[2.53 p.m.]

JONES, Mr Ross, Member, Central East Regional Conference, New South Wales Rural Fire Service Association

McKINLAY, Mr Brian Lindsay, Chairman, Central East Regional Conference, New South Wales Rural Fire Service Association

CHAIR—Welcome. I will not repeat the prelude with respect to evidence et cetera, because you have already heard it. We have your submission. It is authorised for publication and it is on the public record. Would you like to make some opening comments in respect of your submission before we move to questions?

Mr McKinlay—In opening, certainly the full submission is not on the web site. There were certain attachments which relate to anecdotal information, and I am not sure if they have been circulated to the committee.

CHAIR—I can explain the situation. As you can appreciate, there have been a huge number of submissions to this inquiry. I think it is the largest number of submissions to a parliamentary inquiry. What we have put onto the web site is basically the main submission, and then the attachments et cetera are available for the committee as a whole. For instance, these documents in front of me are the Kurrajong Heights full submission, but we have not put that with all the attachments onto the web site, because it is just too big.

Mr McKinlay—I was not being critical, Mr Chair; I was just wondering whether the committee members had the full submission—otherwise, I have additional copies with me today.

CHAIR—The committee has had circulated to it a bit more than what is on the web site. But in some cases photos and—

Mr McKinlay—We also have black-and-white prints of those attachments—

CHAIR—You can circulate those. Thank you.

Mr McKinlay—and two full sets of the submission.

CHAIR—We appreciate that. In a lot of cases we have had photos and things like that, which are very difficult to circulate. But each member of the committee is aware that they are available and they can look at that information within the committee process.

Mr McKinlay—My service in the Rural Fire Service goes back to April 1962, and I am a life member of Berowra brigade in Hornsby shire and a life member of the Grose Vale brigade in Hawkesbury. I have been a captain and group captain since 1970—I was first appointed a deputy group captain in 1974. My representation here today is as the chairman of the Central East Regional Conference, which is the conference of volunteers that is part of one of the eight regions of the association. We represent the volunteers within the central-east, which covers the

geographic area from Kiama to Wyong, out to Bathurst and Oberon in the west, and about 23 local government areas and 15,000 volunteers.

Mr Jones—I am the captain of the Round Corner bushfire brigade in Baulkham Hills district and I have 18 years service. Round Corner brigade are responsible for a very small geographic area because we act as the main reserve brigade for our shire and we are regularly sent all over the place. During the last fire season, we operated from the Queensland border to Victoria. My crew spent many weeks in the field. I have all of the prerequisite qualifications for the position that I hold.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Round Corner is in the Dural area—is that right?

Mr Jones—That is correct.

CHAIR—Baulkham Hills—the other side of the river.

Mr McKinlay—In terms of the nature of our submission, we welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the inquiry and we do so with the full acknowledgment of our conference. It has been through an administrative process and is a representation of the views of those local government areas that constitute our conference. As a matter of course, I would like to table as correspondence some information from one of our brigades. It highlights the nature of correspondence between brigades and land managers—in this case within the Wingecarribee district. The submission has been through a process of support; it is not just the submission of two individuals. Ross, will talk about the scope of the submission and the terms of reference.

Mr Jones—We took a fairly simple approach and tried to present a reasoned attitude to this inquiry. We found the Commonwealth's initiative in setting this up provided an excellent opportunity to converse with our members to gain their views about the subjects that were covered. The terms of reference are enormously broad. One could write quite a lot, and obviously one brigade did. We took a different approach and simply tried to put before the committee some views on each of the points. We are particularly heartened by the approach by the Commonwealth in setting up the CRC. There is lots of emotive talk and lots of emotions get released in major disasters like we have had in the last two seasons. If you look at what we have gone through, we have actually gone through two years of this.

If you work your way back through the process, we had lots of fires the Christmas before last. Preceding that, we had a very heavy hazard reduction year. We had major windstorms in Sydney and those alone saw my brigade put in an enormous amount of hours with trees down. We then flowed into another hazard reduction season which was cancelled because the fire conditions were so bad and then we had last summer. My brigade, like probably most of the others, was flat out for two years and it just did not stop. We are heartened by a reasoned approach, particularly with the idea of getting some scientific backing for what sometimes gets very emotive. We have made that point in the submission.

I do not propose to go through each of the items in the submission. I do not think you need that. You can read it. We have tried to keep it fairly simple and straightforward and expose ourselves to more time for questions because you will ask the things that you need to know, not necessarily what we want to tell you. I commend the appendix to you because Brian worked

with all those examples. We would be happy to take the questions that we hope flow from those because they are there to illustrate the points that we are trying to make about cooperation and how to do these sorts of things and the absolute effort sometimes needed to sustain firemen in the field. I think Brian will cover those.

Mr McKinlay—Thanks, Ross. Ross has just outlined the scope of the submission. Our views mainly relate to the thoughts of volunteers on the fire ground. It is not a debate about REFs and those sorts of things. Other people are debating those issues and there are other forums to pursue those issues. Certainly, we can support general statements in regard to that. In detail, the submission looks at the operational advantages that are lost through inefficiencies. Those inefficiencies have an impact upon volunteer staff. Whether it is adequate response, adequate access or adequate resourcing, they all have an impact on duration. When fires run for 30 and 40 days at a time it is very hard to sustain. When you have a year of it with maybe three months out of that year, there is a significant effect on volunteers. Therefore, the submission looks at those things which have an effect to try to improve that efficiency and to try to improve the lot of the firefighter on the fire ground by getting better access.

Our submission could be simply summarised by the fact that we need better fire management infrastructure within those land management areas. There is no dedicated fire management infrastructure. We talk of fire trails. They are rough tracks that have been bulldozed over the years; they have been used by loggers to pull timber out. Our submission details half a million dollars on dozer hire in one district alone in a period of 12 or 13 months and $200,000 panel damage to trucks. Whether people wish to recognise it or not, the RFS has the resources and I refer to the anecdotes in the appendix where we have 35 tankers, a handful of aircraft and half a dozen dozers operating in one section of the fire to put it out—not to back-burn but to put it out. We need to gain access and that access has to be adequate to sustain that in a proper form. Mention has been made of sectors and all that sort of thing. No matter what the issues are there has to be better access. It is not sustainable to take two hours to travel 20 kilometres to cart water to a buoy wall, an 11,000 and 20,000 litre buoy wall. Some crews did two trips for their shift and they travelled 80 or 90 kilometres to get there.

Mr Jones—I can vouch for that. I did exactly that.

Mr McKinlay—That is the argument about the lot of the volunteers. We must provide better access. It does not mean carving up national parks, it means that what we do and what we need to do needs to be better planned, better resourced and properly sustained.

CHAIR—Thank you for those introductory comments. For the record, is the Rural Fire Service Association an association that was set up to represent firefighters?

Mr McKinlay—And staff.

CHAIR—I suppose some of the staff do fight fires occasionally, don't they?

Mr McKinlay—It is an association for salaried officers and volunteers of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

CHAIR—So it is for salaried officers and volunteers and you two are both volunteers?

Mr Jones—True.

Mr McKinlay—Absolutely.

CHAIR—Are the positions on the executive of the association—and I know you are in a separate section and that different sections come together to form the overall association—held by a combination of salaried officers and volunteers?

Mr McKinlay—That is correct. I am an executive member, although I am not speaking today as an executive member. I am an association representative on the Rural Fire Service Advisory Council, which is a ministerial appointment—as a representative of the association.

CHAIR—There are some parts of the state where the volunteer bushfire fighters have resisted being involved in the association. It has been said to me on numerous occasions that the association is run by the salaried people for the salaried people to placate the volunteers. Is that a fair comment or an unfair comment?

Mr McKinlay—I would suggest that the opposite is actually the case, that the volunteers could be disappointed that there is not a greater salaried officer involvement.

CHAIR—I just wanted to get the make-up of the association on the record. And the submission that you have provided is from your particular conference? It did not go up through and get endorsed by the overall association? It is endorsed by your particular area?

Mr McKinlay—It was agreed to and reviewed by the state chairman.

CHAIR—As volunteer firefighters, are you frustrated by the resources that become available to do whatever needs to be done in an emergency—for example, to get access into an area when there is no decent access there? I use the word 'frustrated' because we have seen various circumstances where, clearly, a lot of money has been spent over a short period of time when, if some of that money had been spent a bit more sensibly over a longer period of time, you might not have had to be there in that emergency situation. Have you seen many examples of this?

Mr McKinlay—Our submission draws upon the fact that half a million dollars was spent in bulldozer hire for three fires over that 13-month period. Brian Williams alluded to the Grahams Creek fire. There were significant trail works established at the rear of properties in the Mountain Lagoon and Bilpin area. Shouldn't they have been pre-planned and pre-established without the haste in which they were done? It is the funding, the need and the recognition for that to occur.

CHAIR—Sometimes, in the haste, trails do not really go in in the best possible place for future access or for the environment. They may end up doing a lot of environmental damage when, if they had been better planned, they would not have. Does that happen?

Mr McKinlay—You could state that, most assuredly, that does happen because in a lot of cases the machines are operating 24 hours a day. Whilst there is concern, this is operating, say, adjacent to infrastructure, adjacent to developed areas. Certainly, where dozers are operating in more remote and more distant parts of national parks, there is a requirement that there always be

a fire protection crew for those people. Normally, National Parks people undertake that role. That does not necessarily mean that all those environmental concerns are looked at, but it is obviously an issue because the machines are there to do a job.

Mr Jones—Even with the creation of what we are terming strategic fire trails, you will never get away from the fact that you are going to have to cut new trails. You cannot put your strategic fire trails in precisely the right location for every occasion. What you need is good access from which you can then work rather than pretending that you can get it all into one place in one go beforehand, because you will not.

Mr McARTHUR—If the fire trails in national parks were not adequate, would you take the view that you might not take your tankers and personnel in there because of the danger that might be faced?

Mr Jones—I have personally refused to go down trails because I believed them to be unsafe in the given circumstances—particularly with regard to the fire behaviour that could be expected to impact on us. I think every crew leader would take that same responsible position—or they certainly should.

Mr McKinlay—I refer the committee to the anecdote that is labelled 'The Eight-Mile Track'. It is one of the appendices to the submission. It demonstrates the lack of access that was available and the need for a certain type of access to be made available. There was concern from the National Parks about establishing that form of access, which just had to be done.

Mr McARTHUR—Some witnesses have told us that some of these fire trails have been destroyed and that boulders have been put in their way to stop them operating.

Mr McKinlay—You will find that the appendix on the eight-mile track details that sort of act.

Mr McARTHUR—What is your response to that?

Mr McKinlay—I agree. Trails have been rehabilitated whilst the emergency was still on and without reference to the district or Rural Fire Service manager.

Mr McARTHUR—What is your long-term policy on the fire trail? Are you saying to National Parks, 'You should maintain them'? We are getting evidence that they are destroying them.

Mr McKinlay—The coordinating committee has established certain standards. Very few trails would meet those standards. Certainly in the district with which I am more familiar I can think of just one that meets the standards. If trails were able to be established to the standards set by the coordinating committee that would go a long way towards the position we are stating. But that has not occurred. It needs significant funds; it would be far wiser to spend the funds, as Brian Williams commented, in times of peace because in times of war those environmental safeguards are very hard to acquire.

Mr Jones—To answer your question directly, my information is that that is happening: trails are being closed.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you like to add to that?

Mr Jones—Not particularly, because I cannot give you a specific example. All I can tell you is that my information is that trails are being closed.

Mr McARTHUR—Do National Parks ask you, as a firefighting service, to come and help them in times of wild bushfire?

Mr Jones—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—Surely there is an interesting dilemma facing you. If you know that the fire trails are not operative and that your personnel and trucks are in danger—in a similar way to what occurred during the Linton disaster in Victoria—what is your response to that?

Mr McKinlay—Our response is that we must make stronger representations, through the district committee process and the coordinating committee process, that fire trails meet the standards set down by the coordinating committee—and not endure what we have been enduring.

Mr Jones—And you take each circumstance at its face value. If you arrive somewhere and you cannot get access then you cannot go down there until someone puts a bulldozer through it, moves the stone blocks or gets the trees out of the way. Because if it is in that sort of a state at the start you are likely to find that once you get through the obstacle the trail is in pretty lousy condition and you may not be able to go down it anyway.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you defining the trail as the roadworthiness of the track plus some clearing along the side of the trail?

Mr Jones—I go back to what Brian said: there are trails and there are trails. Some trails, by the nature of their usage, are not dedicated fire trails—they are trails we use to access a particular fire or to get to a particular point to get strategic advantage. If we cannot use it, we just cannot use it—it is as simple as that.

Mr McKinlay—During a time of fire when a dozer has been put in to widen the trail—to put in passing bays and things like that—there is a newly trafficked section of track and track machinery has been operating in trails. We commented in our submission about having to maintain fire lines. At times like the recent summers when there have been very dry periods and low fuel moisture content, you have vehicles operating there for 24 hours a day for about a week.

Mr Jones—And they are heavy vehicles. They are very heavy vehicles travelling necessarily at speed at times. They have large cargoes of water and they are travelling over roads that turn to dust very quickly. Even though the trail is cut you can destroyed it in a day.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Does the bushfire committee have responsibility to determine that the bushfire trails are at the appropriate standard?

Mr McKinlay—The coordinating committee has now set standards for trails. The district bushfire protection committee has responsibility for trails within the jurisdiction of that district committee. It is an issue within our district that has to be determined at this point in time because the coordinating committee has now established standards. Now there is a process of classification. But that also has to be discussed with the land manager. That relates to how a district officer functions and things like that. That is beyond the scope of what we are here to say.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I have one question about the role that you might see for the CSIRO. What further research would you suggest that the CSIRO could carry out into the prevention of bushfires?

Mr Jones—We have outlined a couple of those things in the submission. Certainly it is time for actual research into mitigation and environmental factors—those types of things. That is an area that we can logically address that will help take some of the heat out of the 'burn' and 'opposed-to-burn' groups that seem to exist within the community. Also, we need research to address what the economic costs are, which also goes beyond the anecdotal, so we actually come up with some real numbers and really know what is going on. We have put in the submission that some things are never touched. For example, what is the cost to the community, like in New England where some of those people were out for seven weeks straight? That is never counted. All the money that simply disappeared or that came in because it was needed for support, and the long-term environmental or economic damage to the farms and all those sorts of things never turn up. Until we can cost some of those things against models that are more predictive and are clearer we will never know the true cost of what we are doing so we can compare one method with another method. We need to do those sorts of things.

Mr MOSSFIELD—So which organisation would be responsible to take something up to the CSIRO and ask them to provide the research?

Mr Jones—The CRC will have a process, and that is the process. If this committee, as part of its recommendations, was to recommend certain things, surely that carries some weight with the board of directors of that CRC to say, 'The committee wanted certain things done so let's do them.' The other thing that has to happen is that we need to clearly establish that this is not research for the sake of research. This is research dedicated to a practical outcome. It has to have an implementation phase and a review phase at the end of it so it is no good writing a wonderful learned paper that at the end of the day goes nowhere, because that serves none of us. All we have done is throw some money away. If we are going to do these sorts of things we need to do them properly and we need to establish how we are going to implement what we do in the end.

Mr BARTLETT—Gentlemen, thank you for your submission. I want to refer to one comment you have made on page 8, which I think is a very strong statement and it probably sums it up fairly well. It states:

> The disparate aspirations of the land managers and their respective agencies must be subordinated to the requirement for an effective regime of preparation for such events.

Taken in the context of what you have been saying about deconstruction and maintenance of adequate, effective and usable fire trails, and also your very strong comments about fuel

reduction, from that comment in your submission I take it that you are saying that local fire authorities need to have the final say in these things rather than the National Parks.

Mr McKinlay—The community needs to have that final say. We are saying in another part of the submission that the legislative process governs the actions of the different land managers and authorities and that where you have a threat to community assets—be they private homes, community infrastructure or whatever—the scales have to be tipped very strongly towards the protection of those assets against, sometimes, those environmental values. As has been commented before, we would not be members of the RFS if we did not value those environmental values. That is what we are here for: we love the bush. But you still have to change the philosophy and the thinking of the land managers so that their act does not go to a person's backdoor with those very strong environmental values. There has to be a change in the scale so that the community assets can be adequately looked after.

Mr BARTLETT—So how do we achieve that?

Mr McKinlay—I thought you might have known that! It needs a change in community culture. All legislation has come from community reaction to community values. We need to change the thinking of communities: to understand that we have this problem and you cannot go crook on a National Parks ranger doing what the National Parks Act requires him to do to someone's backdoor.

Mr BARTLETT—So the act is the problem?

Mr McKinlay—Our thinking is that the National Parks Act needs to recognise similar values as those of the Rural Fires Act in terms of hazard reduction and all those things. But that has to be driven from the community as well—they have to understand and want that protection.

Mr BARTLETT—Given the strength of your feelings about the importance of adequate trails that can be used in fire mitigation, and the impact of that on the safety of your crews, and given the number of people involved, I am surprised that you do not have more influence with RFS control and, through them, the powers that be who make the decisions about trail maintenance and construction—that you do not have enough influence to get the results you need, particularly through your association.

Mr McKinlay—The current act only came into effect in 1997 and there have been significant changes to the Rural Fire Service since that time. Our heritage and traditions go back to the Bushfires Act 1949. At that time, there were 140 different local authorities. The Rural Fires Act 1997 changed that. Since that time, there has been a more coordinated, centralised approach, which at times we are critical of. Nevertheless, that is why the coordinating committee now has standards. No doubt, recent experiences are driving these sorts of submissions. These experiences will drive our relationships at our district committees, because there is volunteer representation on those committees and it is up to volunteers to state the values they think are important.

Mr Jones—We understand the dollars. This is not just a wish list, a massive list of trails. If you build them to the right standard they are six-lane highways. It is just not going to happen. We all know that.

Mr BARTLETT—On page 10 of your submission you talk about property owners needing to take some responsibility for the protection of their own property. You make a point about insurance, which I think is perfectly valid. Are you aware of any instances where local government authorities have regulations such as vegetation protection orders and so on that work against property owners being able to effectively reduce hazards on their own property?

Mr Jones—Personally, no—not in my district.

Mr BARTLETT—You have not had any feedback to that effect from brigades in your association?

Mr McKinlay—The common occurrence might be someone with a fairly highly vegetated two-hectare allotment or something like that, which is really a residential situation, and where they have vegetation on their land and they want to do certain works. They cannot effectively do that work without significant barriers being put in their place. Since the amendments to the act last year, there is now legislation in place that at least gives people the ability to have asset protection works carried out around their dwellings and structures, but that is only a recent occurrence. Changes in this process have developed that have flowed from those amendments to the act. They have not really been tested as to how user-friendly they will be for the case you are talking about.

Mr Jones—If I could just amplify that, we get to the question of liability—and we have made some short submissions on that. That is going to test some of those things, because if ordinary landowners are found to be culpable for problems that grew out of their management of their land and they did not do it properly—we have test cases going on right now—the impact of that is going to be very interesting to watch. That may be, and often is, a great changer of minds.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can you see a situation in the not-too-distant future where land-holders outside national parks, say, will take class action against government agencies for what they perceive to be a neglect of their responsibilities, causing enormous amounts of infrastructure and livestock loss to them?

Mr Jones—I would be amazed if that did not happen. We are a litigious society par excellence right now. As soon as one or two of these become a precedent, there is going to be a flood of it.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you see the State Electricity Commission fires in 1977 in Victoria as being a precedent in this type of activity?

Mr Jones—I do not know that fire.

Mr McKinlay—They were the Ash Wednesday fires.

Mr McARTHUR—The SEC was sued because of a lack of maintenance of their lines in terms of tree interference and the causation of fire. That was certainly an interesting test case where landowners received compensation. You are not aware of that?

Mr Jones—I am personally not aware of that, no.

Mr McARTHUR—It is well documented.

Mr SCHULTZ—Can I just refer you to page 10 and then page 12 of your submission, under the heading 'The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting', where in the first four lines you say:

... the initial response, be it within Rural or remote areas, must be maximised to achieve rapid containment of the fire. It is our perception that there is reluctance on the part of some land managers to seek the appropriate emergency support in a timely manner.

That is something a little bit dear to my heart. Would you like to elaborate on that, or is that difficult for you?

Mr McKinlay—No, it is not. Obviously 'rapid response' and so on are all words that we feel. All these are words that we believe really demonstrate the need to contain that fire to the smallest area possible. That is part of the environmental advantages. But it is not only that. If a fire can be contained, as people say, a week is all right, but three, four, five, six weeks for one fire is beyond the pale in volunteers giving of their time, yet they do it as best they can. That is part of the reason for that statement.

As you would be aware, in the way that the operational requirements are within our operational plans within our districts, the first response is a response from near a source. In other words, if there is a fire within a few kilometres of a brigade station, irrespective of who it is, that brigade would respond. Fires within remote areas of the national parks are different. But the nearest response comes back to the land manager. It is the land manager's responsibility until the land manager is in a position where they cannot sustain the ability to control that fire.

Our submission really says that there are no black marks on the wall for someone to put up their hand and say, 'Hey, give me a hand as soon as you can.' It is not a political game; it is not an ownership game; it should be a game to put the fire out as soon as possible across all agencies and across all barriers. That is the principle of what we are saying. In one of the appendices, we use an example of that which relates to the Bala Range ignition. There is a map associated with it, but essentially there was a response which you could argue in hindsight was inadequate. It is very easy to speak in hindsight. There was a response. The resultant fire burnt for 40 days and 80,000 hectares.

Mr SCHULTZ—In your submission, where you refer to the roles and contributions of volunteers, in the third last paragraph you make the comment:

There are significant demographic changes taking place in rural NSW. There are less and less people available to form the crews necessary to undertake fire suppression activities.

When you relate that to the fact that there are many volunteers who are pulling out of their voluntary role because of frustration, which was mentioned earlier today, do you think that the authorities that are responsible for coordinating these volunteers have any idea at all about the dramatic and drastic problems that that is going to create in the future in relation to the numbers of volunteers that are going to be available to fight these fires? Do you think that message is getting through and, if not, what do you feel is the answer to getting that message through?

Mr Jones—That is a really hard question to answer. As we have put in the submission, our experience is that regional and remote areas are slowly losing their populations. Where there were lots of families that occupied farms, they are now aggregated. There are all of those sorts of things; I do not need to go through that with you. We can all see that. It does not take a scientific approach to realise the fact that we are gradually losing people. As to how that affects us in providing future crews who can do things, all I can see is that it is just going to slowly get harder and harder to be able to sustain things. We will always have crews who can do first response; it is when it turns out to be the third lot and dad has been out and the two kids have been out and now it is mum's turn. That is the way it is. When that is all you have got, that is all you have got. In terms of people leaving because of their perception of the service, I have no specific knowledge of that. If that is anecdotal, then that is anecdotal, but I have not had that. In fact my brigade is growing, but then it is an inner urban—

Mr SCHULTZ—What about the situation in the rural areas where people who have got considerable years of experience—some of them up to 50 years experience—are getting on in years and will not be able to physically make the contribution that they have made unselfishly to the community for that period of time? What about the replacement of those people? The issue is compounded. What you are saying is absolutely right. Our young people are haemorrhaging out of our rural areas to the eastern seaboard, for lots of reasons. They do not want to work on the farm and earn 10 or 15 grand a year when they can go and earn 60 grand on the coast somewhere or in urban areas. How do we handle it when people who are in the volunteer service today, many of them in their late 50s and early 60s and who have still got a significant amount to contribute, get out of the system? Surely that is another good argument for the authorities to listen to what is being said in these sorts of forums and to take stock of where they are going with regards to future protection?

Mr Jones—It is not just the farm communities but the depopulation of the towns as well. The schools close, the banks leave; all of those people probably provided some level of service to the Rural Fire Service as well. They are going as well as the farmers. How do you handle it when there is no-one left to take over the corporate knowledge? You don't. There is no trite answer to the question that you pose. It is a very valid question, but there is no simplistic answer to that. You cannot turn around and say, 'We'll grow some more.' You do not to grow 50 years worth of experience; you do not grow what Brian has accumulated in 42 years of firefighting or the little bit that I have accumulated in my nearly 20 years of service. If there is no-one left to pass it on to, there is no-one left to pass it on to.

Mr SCHULTZ—And if you are not creating a climate that is conducive to people coming in and staying to contribute to the service—

Mr Jones—There has to be the people there that you can inculcate into this. If they are not there, they are not there.

Mr McKinlay—I want to add to Ross's comments. We have to give acknowledgement to the Rural Fire Service and to certain media promotional campaigns that they have looked at in rural and regional New South Wales, encouraging recruitment across regional TV and things like that. But that is just one arm. The other arm, of course, is that the association is also a voice for the volunteers and the salaried officers to bring those issues home to the Rural Fire Service. The association does have positions on five standing committees with the Rural Fire Service; the

association president and vice-president form part of the corporate executive group within the Rural Fire Service. There is volunteer representation right to the commissioner level of the RFS, and we should recognise that. It is a matter of passing the word that there is support across the state for people right across rural and regional New South Wales for exactly the position that you are talking about.

Mr SCHULTZ—To make a final comment, we have seen that and we have seen a situation where backup resources such as the wives, daughters and sisters of rural firefighters are now taking an active role in firefighting themselves. The point that I am trying to make is: where do we go from there?

Mr McKinlay—That is right.

Mr Jones—In my own brigade, when I joined, there was one female member. I now have eight. That is not a criticism of anything; it is just a changing fact. I have an officer who is a female, and we are seeing more and more of it.

CHAIR—That is not a bad thing.

Mr Jones—It is not a bad thing at all.

Ms PANOPOULOS—As one of those females who hopes to get up with my training to be one of those firefighters so I can be very useful in my electorate, my brief question is also about volunteers. You mentioned quite correctly that without volunteers there is no service. Putting aside all those other demographic factors, I know from my own electorate there has been particular frustration to the point where some of my volunteer firefighters have resigned or refused to take certain orders to do or not to do certain things. In your opinion, very concisely, what is the single greatest issue frustrating volunteer firefighters that could lead to disillusionment with the service and perhaps resignation?

Mr Jones—Pass.

Mr McKinlay—It might be a provocative comment, but the relationships with volunteer firefighters really relate to a district level. The relationship with the district manager or the fire control officer is critical with those volunteers. There are extraordinary demands placed upon the district staff by the Rural Fire Service in responding to the massive changes that have occurred in five years. One fire control officer has commented to me that 90 per cent of their time is spent in dealing with stuff from head office. You can say that is a criticism in one sense, because where is the apportionment of time for that district manager, the fire control officer, to go and have a cup of tea with those volunteers? It is not there because the demands of process and performance in a bureaucratic system are there all the time. Somehow or other, I think we as volunteers need to say to the bureaucratic system, 'Stop, and give our district managers time to get their breath and talk to us.'

Mr Jones—On the other side of it, it is about managing small groups of people. I have 35 firefighters and four fire trucks. It is my job to motivate those people, to train them and to keep them well managed. They do not care about all the bigger things. They are there because they want to make a contribution and they enjoy themselves. When they stop doing that, they will not

come any more. They do not care about all the rest of it; the care only starts to come at about the captain level, when he or she has to do a whole range of other things, and they are growing. Their biggest concern, and I speak for my people, is that they do not want to see their time wasted. What they give is of great value to them; it is irreplaceable. So when we go to do things we want to be well used. I cannot put it any more clearly or better than that. We want to be well used, we want to be treated properly and we want to get on with the job and come back alive.

Ms PANOPOULOS—On that point, do you think the time of firefighters has been less efficiently used now than it was five or 10 years ago?

Mr Jones—It is really hard to answer that. You have to take circumstances as they come with a particular fire and particular complex. You can head off with all the best of intentions of going to point Y, and point Y will change three times before you get there because the winds change, the fire has gone to another place and everyone sits around and grouses. We all know that happens. It is when other things do not happen properly. These two- or 2½-hour drives in and out—all that sort of stuff—are massively annoying. People get tired, it is dangerous, they do not like it and they will grumble about that, well and truly.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You are two experienced firefighters in the field. What are your comments on the past two seasons and the climatic conditions?

Mr Jones—Climatic conditions could not have been worse. We have had two horrible years in a row. With 99.8 per cent of the state in drought, what would you expect? I do not think it could have been worse. When it hit us in Baulkham Hills it took out half of my shire in 4½ to five hours. You cannot get worse than that. It was just like that all over the state. I went down to the Snowy and watched exactly the same thing happen. The two seasons backed up one on top of the other, with no significant rains whatsoever. It could not have been drier. I do not know whether you have heard BKDI, the Byram-Keetch drought index, which runs on a scale from nought to 200, with 200 being the worst—we were at 200. It does not count past that. That is the end. It was just appalling. Everything burnt. You just had to look at it and it ignited. I cannot imagine two seasons like that in a row again.

Mr McKinlay—You could argue that you could sensibly put in X amount of work of a night-time and achieve a suppression operation that appeared to work, and the next day it would be blown all over the place because the fuel moisture content was such that it just needed a spark that you could not see and the thing was gone, and gone for half a kilometre.

Mr Jones—And the wind behind it was—

Mr McKinlay—It was not just when the fires were running. Every time a back-burn was put in to try to contain and put in a suppression strategy, those lines then became a hazard in themselves because of the hazardous situation where they were being implemented and the fuel conditions they were in.

Mr Jones—Hazard reduction and all the things that we have talked about all have a part to play in the management of fire. Community education is one of the other parts. We have mentioned very briefly in a submission the Firewise campaign and the Firewise community education campaign. I have some material here—I do not propose to show it around; I just want

to leave it with you. It is American, I admit, but the methodology proposed commends itself greatly to communities in Australia. We would like you to have a look at that and to have a think about it, and in looking at your recommendations it is worth looking at.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that. Thank you for the comprehensive submission and additional information. I can assure you that it has been and will be looked at properly as part of our deliberations over the coming months. Thank you for your time this afternoon.

Proceedings suspended from 3.42 p.m. to 4.04 p.m.

HUNGERFORD, Mr Brian Robert (Private capacity)

LANCE, Mr Kurt Albert, AM (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Thank you both for appearing here today. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Lance—I have stated my background in the submission. I have had 35 years experience in the Rural Fire Service—27 of them as a deputy fire captain. I have been on the advisory committee of Kosciuszko National Park for nine years. Now I am just a life member and I do not actively go to fires anymore. I was involved in the firefighters meeting on 17 May in Orange and I am on the management committee of that group.

CHAIR—The comments I made to the other witnesses with respect to evidence also apply to you. We have your submissions and the additional information that Mr Lance has provided. I will now give each of you an opportunity to make some opening remarks. I will just remind you both that we only have a limited amount of time, and there are more witnesses to hear from this afternoon. We have your submissions and all of your material has been or will be looked at very closely, so could you restrict your opening comments and remarks to particular things that you feel should be highlighted or any other information that is not necessarily in your report. That will leave ample time for the committee members to ask questions about your submissions.

Mr Lance—I would like to start with a four-minute video to show you a particular fire and its intensity. The video is much longer than four minutes, but I have rewound it to a certain spot and you can stop it whenever you want to. I would then like to talk about that and also show you some overheads.

A video was then shown—

Mr Lance—My main concern is land management. I have expressed this concern to both parliamentary and coronial inquiries. As an ex-firefighter, I will talk about three items, which I will give you some material on: land management, fuel loads and fire trails. I want to point out—and I will go into details in a minute—that there is no conflict between looking after the environment and looking at hazard reduction. I run a wildlife reserve at the back of my property which I have hazard reduced every eight years. In my experience, it has far greater biodiversity than land alongside it.

I have asked people to come and see it repeatedly since the 1994 fires. I have asked the coroner and various other people to come and look at things, but they have not come. Any National Parks guy that comes here oohs and aahs about the size of the trees in this 33-hectare lot and how wonderful it is. It has been burnt every eight years since I have owned it—one period was 10 years. So I want to highlight that there is no conflict. The environment and hazard reduction are both very important. We live in the country and we love the environment, and that is why we are there.

The video I just showed you was of the Grahams Creek fire which started in 2001. Approved hazard reduction was scheduled for that area, for which our fire control office had waited for five years and seven months, when that fire started. I gave that evidence to the parliamentary inquiry. Mr Gilligan answered it the following Monday, saying that obviously that sort of time frame—he would not use the words 'five years and seven months'—is unacceptable and that there must be a reason for it. One of the parliamentarians asked him, 'Will you tell us what the reason was?' His answer was, 'This was only over the weekend. My preliminary investigations haven't got that far yet, but there must be a reason. It is unacceptable.' To the best of my knowledge, that reason has never been given. I have written a letter to Mr Kelly, the current New South Wales Minister for Emergency Services, and asked him, because he asked that question at that inquiry. I have not had an answer so far.

The reason I wanted to show you that film is that that footage was taken 20 kilometres from where the fire started. It arrived there within 8½ hours. At 7.20 p.m. that night it came from Grahams Creek through to where you saw on the video. I have a map here. The little arrow in the bottom right-hand corner of the map shows the location of where the video footage I showed you was taken. There were two houses there. Four brigades went down to try and save the two houses at Roberts Creek. Out of the four brigades, two of them had untried firefighters. That is one of the things that I wanted to bring to your notice. If we do not have enough hazard reduction, which we have not had for a period of time, you are throwing into that sort of situation firefighters who have never seen a wildfire. That is very, very frightening. Our brigade was down there, but I was not. If I had been in charge down there, I would probably have pulled them out—that is what I would have done in my day.

The firefighters fought for and saved those houses. However, the fire jumped Singleton Road at 9.15 p.m. that night. It jumped across and it played around. It did not go very far that night. It went into an area which had a five-year-old hazard reduction. I will show you a photograph of it. It burnt through that hazard reduction, but it took a day and a half to travel a kilometre and a half uphill. It was a five-year-old hazard reduction. At that time, we were being told by the powers that be—Mr Gilligan and the commissioner—that hazard reductions do not work. It slowed it down sufficiently that it came up to Coolbah Road at the top of the hill and hit the back of my wildlife reserve, which had been hazard reduced that August. It went in about five or 10 metres, and went out.

I went up there that morning with my tractor and a pump just to see what was happening and there were seven of our shire fire units up there. The first thing they said to me was, 'Shit! Am I glad you did that!' They were looking after buildings. There are buildings on 25-acre blocks up there. They were each looking after a house. They did not worry about that part of the fire. They knew it would go out. They could look after the house, and the fire would go out—and it did. From there, that was used as an anchor to do a rake hoe trail down to Irvine Swamp. Malcolm was in charge of that. He used that as an anchor to the rake hoe trail down along the ridge into another swamp. There is one swamp each side. That stopped the fire from going around there.

But then, when we got the coroner's report on that fire, we were told that, in fact, that fire went through an area that was burned in December that year. That area was burned in December that year and, if you look behind it, there is no fire—it is clear. The fire went around the bottom of it. It went around it, burning 13 or 14 houses on its way, on the first day. It did 20 kilometres that day, and it then took a day and a half to do 1½ kilometres up the hill to the other road.

I just want to emphasise that hazard reduction is absolutely necessary and it does work. Sure, if it is not deep enough, a wildfire will jump over the top. We have had some tremendous weather, but, really, it was not anything that had not happened in 1939, when firefighters were fighting using hoses and flappers. They did not have the equipment that we have now. The equipment we have now is a fantastic improvement, but the fires are getting hotter and hotter. Every fire we go to is more dangerous and hotter, purely because of the fuel load on the ground.

I would like to table two scientific documents—two books—about similar situations in America, where they have had suppression of fires for the last 100 years. They are spending $15 billion over the next ten years to thin out the forests and do slow burns. I have given you a little part of this book, which gives some instances, but I would like to table and give you those books. You may want to just read them or buy copies, but eventually I would like to have these ones back. But it is exactly the same scenario—the fuel loads are causing the problem. In Mexico, where they have lots of little fires, they had no fire suppression. There is a satellite item there which shows lots of small fires. When they get over the border into California they become huge fires that are unable to be controlled, because the fuel loads are there—they did not get these little patches of burn, which is what is needed.

After the 1994 fires, as Mr Williams showed you, the Yarramundi brigade had a checkerboard pattern going from the park border to their area. This photograph was taken four days after the fires. You will see that, in an area where it has been eight years since the last hazard reduction, you have a very hot fire and everything is burned crisp. Where you have an area with a 2½-year hazard reduction, as shown on the right-hand side, the crowns did not burn, because there was not the fuel on the ground to bring the heat up into the crowns. There is an area with a 4½-year hazard reduction on the left-hand side, which is halfway between these two. So you need to burn more frequently close to buildings and infrastructure than you do in other areas. But the checkerboard pattern that Mr Williams showed you is definitely the answer for keeping the environment in a good state.

I really do not think I need to tell you any more, except that I have put in writing what I believe about fuel loads, fire trails and land management—and it is not just in our district. I was on the advisory committee of the Kosciuszko National Park, and I will show you a couple of photographs—which I showed to the New South Wales parliamentary committee—of the fuel loads that were in Kosciuszko National Park prior to that fire. I made the statement in May last year that, if something was not done about the fuel loads before the next lightening strike, the fire would end up in Canberra and you would have an absolute holocaust like the Yellowstone fire in America. The sorts of fuel loads—not only the small stuff on the ground but the green shrubbery which then takes the fire into the crowns—were in the vicinity of 80 to 150 tonnes per hectare, and that is why you had the disaster you have just had in Kosciuszko.

CHAIR—Whereabouts in Kosciuszko was that photograph taken?

Mr Lance—It is written on the photograph. That particular one is of the Black Perry Bogong Peaks wilderness.

Mr SCHULTZ—I know it well, Kurt; I have been there.

Mr Lance—When I was on the committee we went through so-called fire trails on various inspections, and I made the statement to the National Parks staff then that there was no way that I would put a crew of mine in there. They said, 'Why not?' and I said, 'With the fuel loads that are on each side, it would be sheer murder to put crews in there.' It really is neglect, in that they close things off as wilderness and then just leave it. No-one sees it, you get weeds and those sorts of fire hazards happening and then there is a disaster. In my opinion there really has not been a greater environmental disaster in Kosciuszko than this last fire.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Lance. Mr Hungerford, would you like to make a statement?

Mr Hungerford—Yes. With your permission, I would like to speak to you for a few minutes to enlarge on my submission. Firstly, I will try to establish my qualifications for making the submission, and then I will try to show you my great concern for what is happening to our national parks and why it is happening. I joined the Bilpin bushfire brigade when I was about 17 because that was what young fellows living in bushfire prone areas in those times did. As well, my father was a deputy in the brigade, and no doubt he encouraged me to do so. That would have been in about 1945.

About 10 years later I was elected as deputy to the Bilpin brigade. In about 1964 I also joined the Mount Tomah brigade in the Blue Mountains, an adjoining brigade to Bilpin, in an endeavour to improve relations between the brigades. At different times over the next 30-odd years I held all the various elected positions on the Mount Tomah brigade, including captain for 18 years. About two years ago, for various reasons I resigned all my elected positions and am now an ordinary member of both brigades.

My father and I have lived all our lives in this area. My father, who died about 45 years ago, showed me on bushwalks and fishing trips what the bush was about, and explained and taught me about the bushfire cycles and their results. I do not think there are many people who have had this generational length of time to compare how the bush in my area was in my childhood and in my father's childhood with how it is now. Most people, including National Parks staff, cannot see the fundamental change that has occurred in the last 40 years because of the short time span that they have for a comparison. This area west of Mount Tomah is now a completely different place from what it was before it was made a dedicated park.

As I have set out in my submission, I believe that it is entirely due to National Parks and Wildlife doing no hazard reduction here. The only fires in this area since that time have been monster, out-of-control wildfires. I strongly believe that, unless in the unlikely event that National Parks and Wildlife completely change direction in their hazard reduction policy, it can never recover. This also applies to other national parks—for instance, the Royal in Sydney. This park has had a succession of enormous fires which are quite unnatural in this area. The proof they are unnatural can be seen by the size of the trees that have been killed. They have been there all that time and withstood thousands of low-intensity fires which have contributed to their growth. They did not evolve to withstand these monster fires, which have been encouraged by National Parks and Wildlife's lack of experience and expertise. Unless and until National Parks and Wildlife are prepared to accept the normal cycle of the bush and cooperate with it, rather than try to force it to comply with their rules and ideology, it will never recover. Unfortunately, in my view the Rural Fire Service over the last few years has secretly or quietly—goodness knows—adopted this no-hazard reduction policy.

That is all I have written, but can I say that I was listening a while ago to the discussion on fire trails and I am old enough to know where the bodies are buried, if you understand. With regard to the recent Mountain Lagoon fire, about which there has been quite some discussion locally, the Mountain Lagoon people built a trail on the eastern side of the village. You probably do not know Mountain Lagoon but on the eastern side of the village there is an extension of the Kurrajong Heights range. They built a fire trail and I think the people who paid for it were an organisation called the Bushfire Prevention Association, which was an association in the Blue Mountains and the Hawkesbury. They paid to put this trail on the eastern side of Mountain Lagoon so that if a fire did come through they would have somewhere to burn back towards and it would not go over the mountain down into Comleroy Road and East Kurrajong.

Two or three years before that fire, National Parks hired a friend of mine, who is a bulldozer driver, to make it impossible to use. He has some backrippers on his D8 and he ripped across this trail and pushed logs onto it so that it could not be used, because they considered that too many tourists were going up there and destroying the area or whatever. This sounds a bit of a joke, but at any rate this fire came and the road was not there to use and they could not do anything. So the fire went up over the Kurrajong Heights range and down into East Kurrajong and Comleroy Road—and most people know what it did. When the fire was in operation, because the Mountain Lagoon fire brigade had the authority they hired my mate with the bulldozer to clean it up. Before he had even moved away again, National Parks hired the same man to go back and rip it all up again. All of that involves money that we are paying. Now it is unusable again. There are plenty of trails that I know of in the area immediately west of Mount Tomah that they have done this to and they are still like it. There is nothing we can do about it.

Before you shut me up, the other thing is that I have an illustration here which Kurt did for me. You were discussing whether anybody else has these areas marked out or has been producing these a bit at a time. The little circular piece you can see in the middle is the botanic gardens on Mount Tomah. Bells Line of Road comes from the top right-hand side and goes out the other side. This has completely been stuffed up now because No. 5 is on what is all national park. They have found there some plants that must not be disturbed. That may not ever be used again. The one on No. 4 is an extension of the botanic gardens, and the particular manager there right now—I hope we do not hurt many feelings—is a New Zealander. As you know, New Zealanders know everything and he knows that a fire will never go through that, so he has told everybody that he will never allow No. 4 to be done because he wants to use it as a walking trail. With No. 2, it is the same fellow, who no doubt has bureaucrat mates. It was set to be hazard reduced three years ago. It still has not been done—and this is one of the reasons I retired—because the same fellow has said that if one spark flies out of that and goes into his gardens we will be for it. The present captain and one of the present deputies are his employees. At the last annual meeting that they held, the locals asked them what they were going to do about hazard reduction. The present captain said, with some justification, that the whole thing was too hard now; he was not going to do anything.

CHAIR—Thanks, Brian, for that information. I refer to the trail that you said was built, dug up, fixed up and dug up again. Would it have been possible or not to put a gate on that trail and prevent access in that way?

Mr Hungerford—There are no fences there. It would not have been easy. There would be no fences within a kilometre—and five kilometres on the other side—of Mountain Lagoon.

Mr SCHULTZ—Kurt, I made that comment before because, as you are probably aware, I was the local member representing the Kosciuszko National Park on the western side and a couple of people—such as I and Peter Cochrane, the then member for Monaro—warned in the early 1990s that that place would go up because of what you described. I advised the Rural Fire Service brigade members in the area not to go in there and put their lives at risk when a lightning strike hit it. I just want to make that point for what it is worth and I just want to ask you: why do you think the comment that you referred to was made by the coroner when the facts that you have outlined say something else? Do you think his comment would be based on advice that he received from somebody?

Mr Lance—All the coroner's advice is based on advice that he receives. The coroner can only go on what is given to him. I have the coroner's report here, as a matter of fact, if you want to look at it. He took some statements that were made by Mr Gilligan and Mr Koperberg about the fire behaviour in that area, but out of the same meeting of the parliamentary committee he did not use any of the stuff that either Brian Williams, who gave evidence there, or I gave as evidence. He did not use that but he used the others' because it is government departments'. Obviously he would rather listen to government departments than to individuals, and therefore he came back with that. But when you look at that particular thing, that is a daily fire progress map that I showed you and that is the fire progress map that was done in fire control on that day, so there is no argument about it and that area behind that December fire did not burn. It may have burned into that fire, but it did not go past it.

Yet he said in his report that it goes straight through fires. At the time that was the line that was being taken by government. Mr Koperberg, Mr Gilligan, Mr Debus—all of them—were playing that line: hazard reductions are not the answer, two years on they are not worth having. I have just shown you a five-year-old one. A fire that went 20 kilometres in 8½ hours took a day and a half in a five-year-old one. When it came to a one-year-old one, it stopped.

We asked the coroner to come and inspect that—and I can show you the documentation. After the 1994 fires we did the same, and I sent it out to all the media people. The only one that replied was Miranda Devine from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and she was not available so no-one saw that. That particular fire that Mr Williams showed you was stopped by a hazard reduction that was four years waiting for an REF to be done. It was eventually done. We asked people to come and look at that. No-one came to look at it.

This is the problem. They have a mindset and it is difficult to get this done. We were talking about the difficulty of the fire trail. You also discussed the difficulty of REFs. Here are some REFs—that sort of document costs an arm and a leg. The REF that I did for that last fire control cost me $1,600. After I gave him a flora and fauna report, which I paid $21,000 for, he used that to do this and I paid $1,600 for it. That is why you cannot get hazard reductions done. A lot of volunteer firefighters feel that it is much too hard.

There is a recent one here done by the same people at Comleroy for a current hazard reduction. Tabled at the back you have a list: 'Schedule 1, Threatened species listed under the Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act within a 10 kilometre radius of the proposed burn area'. That is Comleroy Road. When you look at that you have got sea birds, whales and everything under the bloody sun listed in here, and that cost an arm and a leg to get. So the whole thing is a joke. Mr Williams pointed out to you that there were two REFs done on

the same area by mistake and they differed. Here you have got this sort of thing—whales, grey nurse sharks, and all sorts of other things. This is at Comleroy, 150 miles from the sea, and that is what people pay money for.

Mr SCHULTZ—Having regard to what you have just said, you say on page 8 of your submission:

> This process continues unabated because the only way to reverse these illegal practices is to take Court action. Council staff constantly challenge complainants in terms of, 'Go to Court if you don't like it,' in the full knowledge that most individuals are not in a financial position to take on a Council where Council are using ratepayer funds to defend their legal action—

You say that the authorities are using their considerable cash and financial resources in the full knowledge that people like you are unable to match that sort of money to put a case to them and, therefore, they are pressuring people out of the appeals process because of it. Would that be a fair assessment of what you have just told me?

Mr Lance—That is a fair assessment. The other thing is that they will say they want public consultation and they will listen to you. Mr Gilligan is a wonderful person about public consultation around the Kosciuszko area. In the nine years I was on the advisory committee he would listen but he would take no bloody notice. I can give you instances of motions by the advisory committee of the Kosciuszko National Park.

There was a group captain from Tumut who put a motion forward—I have the record of it here, but I think it was 1996—to do hazard reduction in a checkerboard pattern up to 1,200 metres high, which I seconded. A lady from Tumut who has lived all her life around there, Marjory Smith, was also on the advisory committee, spoke in favour of it. But we lost the vote. There was an English lady there who was representing the Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales, there was Graham Douglas, who is now the adviser to Mr Koperberg, but he was then the secretary or president of the Wilderness Society, and there was a ministerial appointment to the committee who said, 'Well, I don't know enough about fires so I've got to vote against it'. So the three people that did know something about fires could not get their votes through because it was loaded—loaded by people they had put in there. That lady from England—she is an Australian now, I think—lives in Balmain. I think she is chair of the Coordinating Committee of the Bush Fire Council now.

At that meeting when I said, 'Look, if you start the thing crowning, you're going to kill all the wildlife that you're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to save, like the corroboree frogs in the swamps'. They said they could take me to areas around Sydney after the 1994 fires where all the wildlife survived despite the fact that it was crowning. But in the 1994 fires I was out there. I was still an active firefighter then. I was out there for three weeks in those areas and I saw birds dropping out of the sky from the radiant heat and burning. I told them all this but it did not help. They had loaded the group. They only listened to what they wanted to listen to.

Mr SCHULTZ—Marjory Smith is a resident of Tumut and she has been a bushwalker in the Kosciuszko National Park for about fifty years. Is this correct?

Mr Lance—Yes. She takes groups up there every week.

Mr McARTHUR—Mr Hungerford, with regard to the bush trail argument that we have had a couple of other witnesses talk about, could you just rerun the argument you were talking about a minute ago regarding the trail dug up by the National Parks. Can we be quite clear for the record what their rationale was for doing that? As I understand it, the trail was put up and paid for by a volunteer group for a very definite purpose.

Mr Hungerford—I do not think that they were ever called upon by locals to justify it, but I imagine the justification is that they think—with a certain amount of justification—that people who go into the bush with four-wheel drives are pretty horrible people and they wanted to keep them out.

Mr McARTHUR—So it was based on the four-wheel drive attitude rather than the threat of fire?

Mr Hungerford—It was based on the sort of people who go into park. For example, kids on trail bikes. They do not like people in parks.

Mr McARTHUR—What about the alternative view that they were instrumental in stopping genuine firefighters from approaching a fire in a safe and orderly manner?

Mr Hungerford—I think we should be fairly honest about this. The fact is that National Parks and now Phil Koperberg know that there are no brownie points for them in having hazard reductions but there are lots of brownie points when they come riding out of the city to major fires and fix them. Then they are heroes. But there are no brownie points at all for hazard reduction. They put their money where it works for them. They are just people like us—that is what they do.

Mr Lance—While we are talking about that one, there is another fire trail in our area—at Colo—which has been opened in every fire that we have had there and then been closed again.

Mr McARTHUR—What is the rationale for closing it each time?

Mr Lance—Because National Parks want to rehabilitate that area.

Mr McARTHUR—Where the road is?

Mr Lance—Where the dozer has been through. Our fire control spends thousands of dollars to push a dozer track in there—while the fire is still burning. Before the 44 is declared over, they are there planning the rehabilitation of it. That track has been used in every hazard fire that I can remember up there.

Mr Hungerford—As Mr Bartlett would know, there was an enormous amount of time and money spent at the 1994 fire, or a fair way back, on creating what I think was called the black trail which went right along between the Grose River and the main western road, starting from Mount Victoria and going all the way down to the river. As soon as the fire was over, they started rehabilitating it—planting trees on it. It all had to be done again on this last fire. The whole thing is madness.

Mr Lance—The Grey Mare fire trail in the Snowy Mountains was originally put in by the Snowy Mountains Authority. It was maintained by the Hume and some other fire authorities for years. I can remember driving along it in 1988 in a two-wheel drive car. It was in perfect order. You will probably get somebody from Cooma tomorrow giving you evidence—

CHAIR—A couple of the committee members went on the Grey Mare trail, so we saw what they had to do in the middle of fighting the fire to be able to get any vehicles in. I am afraid that you may be disappointed to see what has been done to it since. The committee has seen that, so we know.

Mr Lance—During my evidence to the parliamentary inquiry, Mr Flemming made statements that fire trails in national parks are very well funded—that he has a huge budget for them and they are just as good in the wilderness area as they are in other areas of the park. At that time, I said—and it is in *Hansard*—that he was sitting in an airconditioned office in Queanbeyan and being fed bullshit, because there are no fire trails in the wilderness areas that I would send any crew of mine into. I asked them to subpoena the fire control officer from Berridale.

CHAIR—Barry Atchison.

Mr Lance—But they did not because Barry Atchison would have told them exactly the same thing. That is what happened this time.

CHAIR—Thank you for your submission and your time this afternoon as well as the additional information. We will ensure that the two books are returned to you in due course.

[4.54 p.m.]

BARNARD, Mr Raymond Edward (Private capacity)

BOLLES, Mr Herbert (Private capacity)

NICHOLS, Mr Warwick Dixon (Private capacity)

POWE, Mrs Barbara Mary (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have anything to add to the capacity in which you are appearing?

Mr Nichols—I am here as a resident and a relatively experienced firefighter, with 20 years experience as a senior deputy captain and a deputy captain, now retired.

Mrs Powe—I am a resident of the Blue Mountains.

Mr Barnard—I am an ex-firefighter. I would like to tender for the record a map of where I live—the cross represents my house, in which I have lived for 33 years.

Mr Bolles—When I retired at 61 years of age I joined the Grose Vale fire brigade as equipment officer and served in that capacity until I retired at 70 years of age.

CHAIR—I refer you to the information on the giving of evidence to the committee and the conduct of these proceeding which I spoke about earlier. I will give you each a couple of minutes to add to or highlight some aspect of your submission. We will then ask questions, time permitting.

Mr Nichols—I am very heartened that previous speakers have spoken in exactly the terms of my submission, saying that hazard reduction by fire does not hurt the bush. It does not do what famous people said it would do after the fires that we are now talking about and allow the passage of a wildfire. That is a lot of rubbish. In all my years of watching the bush and experimenting with it and firefighting I have yet to see any damage to the bush by other than a wildfire. I think that probably covers the main part of my submission, but I would like to take the opportunity of adding to the points made by previous speakers.

The Wilberforce people mentioned the communication of the findings of the CRC with the CSIRO, and they made representations that those findings should be made available to all firefighters. I would agree with that 100 per cent but I would love to see it made available to residents in fire-prone areas as well. On radio station reports and how much you can rely on information coming across the radio, I have yet to hear a report of a fire in my neighbourhood that I had personal knowledge of that had anything to do with fact at all. Perhaps the people on the radio have to make news rather than report on it or make it look a bit better than it is, but you cannot rely on it.

Why would volunteers resign? These days it is because of the forces that are acting to stop prescribed burning for hazard reduction. Volunteer bushfire brigade members have to stand before a fire—and we saw on the graphs that there was five megawatts or 5,000 kilowatts per metre of fire front—and try to put it out. They wonder why they are there. Some of them would be getting a bit frustrated at that, because when you have been there you really appreciate that your life has been under threat. In the event that everybody in your brigade understands and has been there and done that for so long, it is a bit frustrating to then find that you are not able to take simple precautions to avoid hazard to the bush and its fauna and to the people who live near or in the bush. So I can understand why some people would choose to resign. You do not want to be a part of those sorts of things.

In earlier years I was at what used to be called a section 44F fire where there were 92 appliances in an area where all the local people said at the top of the mountain, 'It won't burn; it never has—so why are you here?' We were there because a politician had bought a quarter of an acre of land with a house on the top of that hill and so an emergency was declared. Those 92 brigades were there all day. The top of the mountain did not burn. The organisation was atrocious. The Army was called in and pushed in two two-mile-long tracks on either side of a gully and they met at the apex of the gully. Everyone was standing around for several hours until this happened, and we were all wondering why—we did not know—but then they told us on the radio, 'We have a firebreak. Blaxlands ridge brigade'—my mob—'please burn on the southern side of that break from the beginning up to the apex.' So we did.

We got there and we noted that somebody else had been asked to burn on the north side of the corresponding break so the whole thing was an absolute wicked waste. My captain at the time got on the radio and asked had that really been the plan and there was deathly silence. His next radio communication was that we were going home. You are not allowed to go home when there is a section 44. You are not allowed to take your appliance away, but we did, and no-one could complain. After that I refused to go to any section 44F fires. I told everybody in my brigade that I was not going. It appears to me that every time there is one of these declared we burn houses down. I would argue strongly that the events are not like the opposite. When you declare a section 44F there is such confusion and such giant responsibilities attached to people who are thrown into positions that are really very difficult jobs. That is how I see it.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Ms Powe—I would like to quote four paragraphs of a letter I sent on 12 May to our fire control officer in Blackheath. I said:

When I was a child we had bonfire night twice a year. The one I remember most was 11 November to celebrate Remembrance Day—Armistice Day, the First World War. All the timber was gathered from the bush, piled into a clearing and a beautiful bonfire lit for all the residents. Unfortunately, one child dropped a sparkler into the box of fireworks; they all went up and that was the end of it for everybody.

On the weekends our dad always lit the incinerator and burnt all the garden debris. We had the most beautiful garden. I will not elaborate except to say that I am trying to emulate my parents. Dad solved all his problems gazing into the fire and watching the smoke curling up creatively into the sky.

When we lived at Wahroonga everybody burnt their debris in the natural gutters beside the nature strip. The smell of the gum leaves was heavenly.

This was my heritage—a natural environment in a suburb of the city of Sydney, the beautiful city on the harbour.

I thank you for the privilege of being invited to speak at this hearing on 9 July 2003. I would like to recommend that the Bushfires Act 1949 be amended and residents be free to do a controlled burning in their incinerator or barbecue as and when needed. Those who wish to take responsibility should be free to do so. Instead of everybody being made to use wood chipping and pay for expensive machinery it should be realised that wood chipping kills whatever is underneath it—maybe it should be used as a firebreak—whereas potash from bushfires—and you can see it when you go past now—and incinerators and barbecues is cleansing and promotes healthy growth.

I have spoken to residents. We are all of the opinion that if we could be free to clean up we would be relaxed. An older gentleman said his neighbour has a pine tree and the needles come over into his place. He is terrified of bushfires. He scrapes them up and puts them into the big bin and there are still more there. He said that if he were free—we are not allowed to have incinerators—to burn it himself he would relax and be happy.

Another thing is for people to be told very clearly how to keep safe in a fire. Personally I would like to stay in my house. I have learnt all I can. You bring your hoses in so that the fittings do not melt in the heat. You close your windows, you put wet cloths and towels and things around. Please God when the fire goes over you can then go out and put your hoses on and put out spot fires.

I would like to say why my heart is with the firefighters: when I was a child, they saved my brother's life and my life. We were little children sent up to Katoomba in 1942 to be safe from the war. One day we wandered off into a burning house. Suddenly we looked and there was fire right around us. Out of that fire came this big firefighter in his big black serge uniform. He picked us up, one in each arm, walked back through the fire and sent us home. He went back to fight the fire. As children, we went through Hinkler Park and swam in the pond with our clothes on. We never told our mother. We were put to bed without any dinner because we had wet clothes. But if it were not for that firefighter, my brother and I would not be here, so I am very, very grateful.

Mr Barnard—I have read a lot of these submissions, and a couple of common threads seem to come right through the whole lot of them—that is, of course, the ones from anyone with any intelligence. The common threads are the lack of hazard reduction and the fuel build-up—particularly in the interface where the national parks meet urban or rural living, where it is absolutely critical—and almost every case involves an uphill incline, which accelerates the speed of the fire. I have nothing against national parks—in fact, I rather like them. But I believe they are for the people. They should not be systematically locked up and turned into wilderness, the fire trails allowed to get overgrown and cluttered with fallen timber and trees so that they cannot be used. And then, when the weather conditions are adverse, they come back to bite you.

I believe that the national parks and crown land are not being attended to. They are being neglected. This is not causing the fires but it is causing the intensity of the fires when they do

occur, which they inevitably will through lightning strikes, a camp fire or some other means. I believe that the National Parks and Wildlife Service are charged with responsibility for protecting the flora and fauna. I do not think I have ever seen so many dead animals and birds in my whole life as I did after the 2001 fires. If these animals and birds were lost, what about all the delicate flora that would not withstand the intensity of these fires? I am talking about areas where there was a build-up of litter at least a metre deep. The fire burned for a long time. There was plenty of time to put in some sort of a counter to it. Anything else I have to say is set out in my submission. I do not want to get into it, because it will take too long.

CHAIR—We have your submission. Thank you.

Mr Bolles—Regarding the first point in my submission, I cited the example of how Britain ably managed and administered controls of the forest in Assam in north-east India because I think that similar control is absolutely fundamental to the good management—fire and otherwise—of all national parks in New South Wales. If this state's national parks were crisscrossed with fire lines or fire trails of some substance where possible, similar to those of a century ago in Assam, the national parks would be in a far better state for fire control than they are at present. Such action would almost certainly result in a fire outbreak being brought under some control and much of the park saved, with, of course, a great saving of the park's wildlife and environment, which I consider to be of extreme importance.

Under the present NPWS regime, few would argue that, once a fire takes hold, that is virtually the end of the park. The NPWS do not seem to be able to take on board the fact that to surrender a small percentage of the park to substantial fire trails would certainly result in much of the park and its wildlife being saved. When former Liberal Premier of New South Wales Mr Askin brought out an American to combine all parks in New South Wales and bring the NSW NPWS into being, I thought that all my Christmases had come at once. Sadly, I quickly became disillusioned—to the extent that I now hold the view that many of the bureaucracy of the NPWS of New South Wales would be far happier if they sought employment in museums.

I live at an altitude of 600 metres, or 2,000 feet, on the summit of Kurrajong Heights; hence, I am in a position to report to Hawkesbury fire control any fire outbreak—and its compass bearing—that I see in the Wollemi National Park. We live half-surrounded by national parks which are at a distance of only a few hundred metres. To most people—city dwellers in particular—such a semi-rural existence, living in close proximity to national parks, would no doubt appear to be almost idyllic. However, to those of us who choose to live under these conditions, summer bushfires threatening our lives and property is a constant fear and dread. This is because we are aware of the rather appalling situation that there is no fire-hazard reduction of park boundaries. This is brought about by the lack of cooperation between the NPWS of NSW and the New South Wales Environment Protection Authority. The EPA does not allow any form of winter hazard reduction, except within certain weather conditions greatly restricted by finely tuned criteria.

The committee by now knows that winter hazard reduction activities, which a decade ago, to my certain knowledge, took just a matter of weeks from proposal to completion, now take six years. The answer to me is obvious: give full control of winter hazard reduction activities to local bushfire brigades and let them hazard reduce all boundaries of national parks in New South Wales when and how they deem fit. This action, of course, should be entirely unfettered by the

NPWS and, in particular, the EPA. Surely it is far preferable for the community to endure some smoke haze while hazard reduction activities are taking place than to lose lives and property in the ensuing summer. We who live here love and care for the environment; if we did not, we would not live here. However, while we appreciate our wonderful environment no end, we do not actually worship it, as many overboard environmentalists do. All we wish to see are some reasonable and down-to-earth measures of balance brought in, for the first time, to this whole bushfire prevention equation.

Regarding the paragraph in my submission which mentions mosaic burning—as practised by the Aborigines in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory from distant centuries to the present—I was thoroughly delighted to see recently on SBS television an Aboriginal woman doing just that. With a burning stick, she was igniting all vegetation to enable the men to obtain wildlife for their sustenance, and to hazard reduce against future bushfires. The commentary stressed the great importance of controlled fire upon the lifestyle, welfare and habits of the Aborigines living in their natural environment—a simple subject which surely should be studied by all who choose to work in the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales and in the New South Wales Environment Protection Authority.

In conclusion, while I would not like to bring levity into the proceedings, as an individual I have long felt some affinity with dangerous fires. Perhaps this was brought about 48 years ago when, as second officer in a ship which was alongside at Woolloomooloo discharging cargo from India, in the middle of the night, our engine room erupted in an horrific oil fired blaze. The resultant stay in Sydney effecting repairs gave me time in port to stop, in her tracks, a Kiwi on her way to England and marry her!

CHAIR—Thank you all for your submissions and comments today. We like to get comments from a broad range of residents and the inquiry has been able to do that. Sophie, we have time for a few questions.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Nichols, I was very interested to see that in your written submission under the title 'Qualifications' you list yourself as a person who used to oppose hazard reduction, and now you have changed your mind. Could you briefly tell us what led to that change of opinion?

Mr Nichols—Telling you that briefly will be difficult, but I will give it a go. What I did not mention, because it has been mentioned many times before, is that in New South Wales we have a premier who loves bushwalking. All the National Parks people love bushwalking. I can understand their view, because just over 30 years ago when I moved into the Kurrajong area, I walked in the bush and said, 'Isn't this wonderful; it must never be changed. We must not burn it.'

But social pressures required that I join the volunteer bushfire brigade, and truthfully I did so as a conscientious objector. I was very distressed when in two nights we burnt in a circle about 60 square miles. I knew there was a lot of wildlife and, as I saw it, the fire was coming in everywhere. It was hazard reduction, and we did it in the middle of the night. I thought of all the wallabies and kangaroos and perhaps koalas being in a little pile in the middle and the fire coming and burning them all up. Certain wise heads came to see me the next day after I had

made these suggestions. They told me that I was wrong and that if I watched for a few years I would find out. We agreed at that time to disagree.

I have some Hawkesbury sandstone dry sclerophyll forest on my property and so do my neighbours. For 28 years I kept fire of all sorts out of it. When there was a hazard reduction, we checked probably two kilometres to prevent the fire getting in and starting the controlled hazard reduction burn from the chipped trail. I used as an indicator in my experiment a plant called a woody pear. When the whitefella came to Australia, along with the cedars he cut all the woody pears out because they made very nice furniture. This tree has a very corky bark, and when the fire gets into it it continues to burn, not like the smooth-barked eucalypts and angophoras and ironbark type trees. No, this thing burns. I talked to three very elderly gentleman at the time—I am talking 1970—and they told me that, when they were kids, all this bush in the Hawkesbury used to be big trees with grass and very scant understorey shrubbery which contributes markedly to fuel loads. I thought, 'What must be happening is that we are burning it too much'—that was my mind-set—'and so, if I do not burn it, it will all improve.' So over 28 years the litter came and the litter did reduce the population of small shrubs on the floor, but the litter was huge.

I will quickly tell you about woody pears. The ones that are in the bush now comprise a lignotuber—a big lump of wood that has the life force of the new tree. It sends up an adventitious shoot which might get to three metres, then we burn it, it is gone and another adventitious shoots comes up, and it never actually develops into a tree. My woody pears after 28 years were 100 millimetres thick and about eight metres high. They had flowers and fruit. I thought, 'Something's working!' But then we had a wildfire and the woody pears were totally gone. An adventitious shoot came up again, as one did 20 years ago. So I said, 'What went wrong?' What went wrong was that I had allowed too much fuel to build up for that plant with the corky bark. Had a I hazard-reduced that regularly, there would not be sufficient fuel to cause ignition of the bark of the tree. That was the experiment that, along with the evidence of my own eyes, that really caused me to turn around.

We had several wildfires during the 35 years that I have now been there. I was in much of the firefighting and perhaps all of the hazard reduction in those years, and there are still just as many wallabies in my neighbourhood as there ever were. I can see no reduction in their numbers or in the numbers of others—glider possums, very nice little animals, birds and other animals—and to me the nature of the bush has not changed. My personal belief is that we should be striving to put the bush back to the condition it was in when the white man came, which is closer represented by big trees with grass in between them. I think you can only get that by doing regular hazard reductions.

There is a desperate argument by people interested in flora that certain species will not survive if you burn them more than, say, once every 11 years, for example. They are rare and endangered species. But I have this funny feeling that they did not all grow in year 1 and they do not all seed in year 11. I have a funny feeling that a few more grow every year. You can burn out the ones that started 11 years ago, but there are still seeds from the ones out two or three years. So they will survive—as they have. It is demonstrable. All the shrubbery and understorey species which are there today, some of which are classified as endangered, have survived the Aboriginal experience, which is of far more frequent burning than those our regimens do.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you for your honesty.

Mr BARTLETT—I will make a quick comment and then ask a semirhetorical question. Really, everyone here today has made a very strong case for regular hazard reduction. If you look through the submissions, something like 90 per cent of them have said the same thing. As one witness said this morning, 'Ask any drover in the country—when he is cold he throws another log on the fire.' I think that is the argument about the intensity of fires when fuel is accumulated. The question is this: in response to the inquiry, the state government passed legislation—the rural fires amendment act—which came into effect in August last year. Under that act they can prevent approval being given to build on land in areas where they consider there is substantial bushfire threat. Are you aware that they can prevent that from happening? Are you aware that they will not pay compensation for land that is sterilised as a result of that legislation?

Mr Barnard—What happens to the places that are already there? Do they have to be—

Mr BARTLETT—No, it applies only to vacant land.

Mr Nichols—I guess there is some point to that too, but I do wonder: does that mean it was wrong of me to build near the bush? I personally have an adequate cleared area and a hazard reduced area of bush too, so I am not worried about that. But I do not really feel comfortable with people telling me between the lines that I should not be there, that that is bush and that I should get out. I love the bush, as we have heard before. I live there because it is a great place to be and you can have some good experiences.

Mr Barnard—I would like to make one point quickly. They seem to have a thing about four-wheel drives on national park fire trails and the like. The four-wheel drive these days has big wide tyres and a sensible driver treads very lightly and does almost nil damage, yet they leave a pop hole in the gate where a trail bike can go in and zip the place to pieces. I just cannot see the logic.

Mr Nichols—I would like to make just one more comment, because I was asked by an old and wise person in my area to make this one. He has made the observation—which probably is correct—that, on the day of the Grahams Creek fire, had the National Parks sent their helicopter with one of their rapid response teams and slipped into that area when the fire was confined to one tree that had been struck by lightning, they could have put out that fire. I am an ex-employee of Integral Energy, and we for many years tracked lightning storms through our area and had all of the hardware and software there. You could watch the computer monitor; there was a little red dot for a new strike and up came the GPS coordinates. It was a very simple matter to arrange your electricity repairs then. You would have sent a line truck out there when we had probably lost a transformer.

Because of my association with both the brigade and Integral Energy, we did tap into that intelligence. On one occasion I was directed at a weekend to go to a certain grid coordinates because a tree had been struck by lightning and there it was; it was just about to start a fire and we put it out. It was terrific. All of the brigades these days have trained rapid response teams, as do National Parks. There is no reason that they cannot go and tap into that information that says, 'There's a strike,' and go and have a look. We could possibly have saved all of those houses that were lost as a result of the Grahams Creek fire and maybe even the Kosciuszko one.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your submissions and for coming here this afternoon. We very much appreciate it.

[5.26 p.m.]

FERNS, Mrs Helen (Private capacity)

MARTIN, Mrs Freida Joan, Convenor, Friends of East Killara

CHAIR—Welcome and thank you for coming across from East Killara to Richmond to appear at the hearing today. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the parliament. We have your submission, and we thank you for that. Would you like to make some comments in relation to your submission or an opening statement before we give the give the committee an opportunity to ask you some questions?

Mrs Martin—I am the Convenor of the Friends of East Killara, which is a very small area of about 1,200 people. We represent them. I have brought along the commissioned fire mapping that was done last year and signed off by Mr Koperberg in November.

A map was then shown—

Mrs Martin—As you can see on the map, Ku-ring-gai is surrounded by a fire hazard comprising three national parks. From about St Ives down the Mona Vale Road right down Middle Harbour and towards Sydney—with Ku-ring-gai ending here—is Garigal National Park. Here is East Killara. You can see that it is a series of developed ridge tops going out into the national park. Those ridges are extremely sharp escarpments—some of them along the back would be in the 90 per cent range. We have one road, and one road only, leaving this area. I have brought some aerial photographs along, which I will refer to when I come back to this. Further up here is Ku-ring-gai National Park. The fire hazard goes north, it goes west to the Blue Mountains and it goes east to the coast through bushland almost all the way.

Over here is Lane Cove National Park. Again you will see that the ridge tops come out into the national park. I not as familiar with that area as Mrs Ferns is, but I think that these ridge tops are, again, fairly sharp escarpments. Mrs Ferns lives down here, in Bradfield Road. There is a single road down to this development here, and you can see that that development is surrounded on almost four sides by bushland. This area burnt in 1994, and Mrs Ferns will tell that the fire went right to her back door. Her son was in the rural fire brigade and did a sterling job down there. He was 16 years old, it was his first fire and he saved not only his own house but quite a few down in that area. How many houses were lost, Helen?

Mrs Ferns—Approximately 20.

Mrs Martin—You are probably familiar with the front page that day. You saw firemen carrying out women who had stayed in their properties for the simple reason that it was very risky to get out. One lady was picked up out of the bath—fully dressed—and carried out by the

fire brigade. They brought ambulances along here. You can imagine not only the flame attack but also the ember attack here.

I am now going to give you the aerial photographs, so that I can refer to them. I put numbers on the back of them, which might help, and I made a list. I thought we could share them around. The first big ones, marked 1 and 1A, are more or less the same photograph. Overlaid on one of them you will see the road system and the properties. There are 1,200 properties; we are not very big. That one road out crosses the lights from the arterial road, goes up into East Killara and comes right out on the top ridge. Can you see it? It has got the high school and the shopping centre. You will find them on maps 5 and 6 as well. Right in front of the high school—because there was an accident a few years ago in which a child was either killed or injured; male, chasing a ball—they put in very large, thick traffic humps. You can see them—especially on map 5 and map 6—right across the road. That narrows the road down to one road in and one road out.

You will be familiar with the second page of our submission, in which we gave the opinion of a fire brigade officer who the commander had sent on a local matter. He stood on my deck and he made a comment which I do not wish to repeat but which I am sure you are all familiar with. I choose where I repeat that, especially as the gentleman has since asked me not to do so in case people misinterpret him. But those were his words and they were very accurate, and the Rural Fire Service in their assessment agreed with them as well.

We have got a problem, and the biggest problem of all is ignorance. The people who live with us come from very diverse backgrounds—we have South Africans, plenty of Hong Kong and Malaysian Chinese, Japanese, foreigners from Europe, Germans, French, people from everywhere. These people are not as familiar with the situation as we are, and I would have to say that the ignorance amongst the older ones is not exactly inspiring.

A lady who lives right out here on these ridges said to me six weeks ago, 'I'll be very happy when Amy is 16 and she has got her Ls and she can drive Michael and herself out.' If you look at that road down and you think about the escarpments and the amount of fuel around East Killara, you will know that a fire, if it is coming and it is a big one, will come very fast. That road up on the top not only is blocked by the traffic hump but will be pitch black. When you are coming out, there will be no difference as to which side of the road you are coming out on—and that might even apply to my husband. The fire brigade itself will have difficulty getting in.

If there are smashes or traffic hold-ups, as there inevitably will be, anyone who is caught there, given the amount of fuel and the radiant heat, will be in dire trouble. That is why when Mr Koperberg came on 23 September last year and inspected this—he came and stood on the same deck as the other gentlemen—his eyes fell out of his head and there was not a lot of opposition. He acknowledged that we have a severe fire problem. Not only that, but—as you can see on maps 5 and 6 and also on the big ones—there are 1,200 children, as well as teachers and ancillary staff, to come out. If I am correct and the wildfire conditions mean that people cannot see, they will not be neatly bussed out; they will be in a hysterical state over both sides of that road and that will complicate matters not only for the fire brigade coming in but for the police getting people out and coordinating the evacuation. This more or less applies to all these areas.

After the 1994 fires and the coronial inquiry, what was highlighted was not prescribed burning or hazard reduction. With respect, what was highlighted as the problem was inappropriate,

poor—in fact, disgusting—planning. That applies and has applied to all the fires that we have seen since 1994, including in Canberra. Someone decided to put a pine forest next to development, or the other way round. Either way it was a matter of poor and inappropriate planning.

If you look at the map, you will see we have put some dots on it. In the forest of paper, we lost the actual one that was drawn up by Ku-ring-gai council. At the moment, we have a residential strategy that applies, in stage 1, to the properties along the Pacific Highway. Stage 2 will be to put medium-density development out into the pink areas. They will put 600, 500 or 400 metres around each of the pink dots. You can see what it will do to the people. I know where my 600 is because I had one of my members who is a surveyor draw it up for me. You can see where that will leave the people who live on the outer ridges. At least they will not be caught up on the top, where they would be killed by radiant heat. They would have no chance of getting out. I suggest it would apply here. This area is already so overdeveloped, and yet North Turramurra has an enormous amount of SEPP 5 development for the elderly as well as about 15 old people's homes. Right up here there is a high school and up here at the end is Lady Davidson Hospital, with all the war veterans and the elderly.

CHAIR—We can see what you are talking about, but unfortunately Hansard does not have eyes; it only has ears. So that we do not miss some of the points you are making, you might just take it one step further and say what it will mean in one particular case, so that the theme of what you are saying is apparent.

Mrs Martin—Certainly. We will take Mrs Ferns's area. It has one road coming through and, on the map, you can see red right up to the road. This area is proposed to take town houses, villas and dual occupancies, which will increase, for residential development. Having that one way out was serious enough in 1994, without extra development. With the extra development, the people here will have even less chance to get out. That is what we mean by inappropriate planning. The state government is partly to blame, and I think the development push along here has had pressure lobby groups from Ku-ring-gai residents who do not live in these areas and yet are the ones who actually carry more sway at council.

The other point I wanted to make about community education is perhaps one of the most important things we can bring to the committee's attention. I do not mean telling people to sweep their gutters and valleys on their roofs and take out the litter. Most people do not have any idea at all how to act. You may think they do but they do not. They do not know about shutting windows and doing all the things that the lady talked about a little while ago. Maintenance is something that should take place throughout the year, not at the last moment. In our sort of terrain where we are very steep, expecting an elderly person to climb up three floors to put a hose in a gutter is of no use at all. Somewhere along the way the manufacturers will have to come up with solutions, for example, going through the downpipes where you cut the downpipe off and then backfill so it goes all the way up and fills.

These things are not rocket science and yet no one has ever put a mobile clinic, if you like, on the road that is flexible and could go around from one area to the next, not only in Ku-ring-gai but anywhere in bushfire areas, that will actually show people the way you should dress, what sort of footwear you should wear, the way to protect yourself and your family against radiant heat and against smoke inhalation, what goggles are available on the market and give them a

price range, what smoke filtration masks, and how to go about using radiant heat shields. The local council could be educated to understand that, instead of a heat shield being 600 high, the maximum allowed, people should be allowed to build on their properties perhaps a courtyard, tall and thick walls that will provide heat shields when you are staying with your property, which most people are not going to have the choice about because a fire will come very quickly. If somehow or other the federal government could subsidise this, it would help. I know there is always a cry for money and I could see you withdrawing, but if you could subsidise a practical hands-on demonstration that would go from area to area and show people how to achieve protection on their properties it would give them the confidence to stay.

If they run, as the lady is contemplating her 16-year-old daughter doing, she will come out of a car that will be on fire if she is caught on that top ridge, in the same way that on Ash Wednesday people came out of their cars on fire and they were killed in seconds by radiant heat. Somewhere in these papers there is something from Planning New South Wales, and I think it is in the submission, that beyond 3,000 kilowatts per metre you cannot control and you will be killed and material will combust instantaneously. What we have here in this part of Ku-ring-gai is 153,000 kilowatts per metre. It will come if the fire comes in a hurry because with those slopes it will increase more, I would suggest, than four times. It will be carried straight up, and you can see from the aerial photographs that the canopy extends right throughout the developed areas to that top ridge.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. Mrs Ferns, did you have anything to add at this stage?

Mrs Ferns—I really did not wish to address the committee. I would only like to reinforce the planning issues. I do not think this is about hazard reduction. My property backs onto Lane Cove National Park. We did go through the wildfires of 1994. I know exactly what happens. Our street is cut off. We cannot get out. We lose our water. We are on our own and if we do not have a static water supply we have got nothing. We have got no power, nothing. This is not about hazard reduction. I watched in those two years after the wildfires and the fuel loads on the ground were much greater than they are now, nearly 10 years on, because of decomposition. Nobody has allowed for that.

Mrs Martin—I draw to the committee's attention submission No. 60 from Dr Horton. He does not spell out a populist line but he is an educated man who knows his stuff. Environment Australia told me that he is one of the top men in his field in the country. I agree with the position he puts, not because I know that what he says is right but because I have read the work of other environmentalists and fire ecologists. There was work done at the Armidale university as well after the 1994 fires. They more or less said the same thing. There would appear to be quite a strength of educated opinion that prescribed burning is not the panacea that many in the community would like us to believe.

I point out as well that when the fires went across Warragamba Dam they jumped 700 metres without a single, solitary hiccup. I have spoken to people who lived on the other side of the dam, and it arrived with the full force with which it had left 700 metres away. This nonsense of clearing, and allowing residents to clear for 100 metres on slopes as steep as ours, would not even achieve 30 seconds of protection. It would go across 100 metres of cleared land very, very fast. The price we would pay for that in environmental terms and having regard to erosion is

very high. Apart from anything else, you would push the *Eucalyptus camfieldii*—and the last ones grow with us—into extinction very, very smartly. All of them grow within 100 metres.

CHAIR—Thank you. I can assure you that the committee is receiving a wide variety of evidence. As you would expect, there is always conflicting evidence as well. I think it was Dr Horton who made the statement in his submission that there is not a single Australian native species that requires fire to generate, but a very eminent professor at Wollongong University—in fact, the dean of the science faculty—said yesterday in Nowra that that statement is quite false. So we have different scientific views. You mentioned the name of a national park—not Ku-ring-gai and not Lane Cove.

Mrs Martin—Garigal.

CHAIR—Could you tell me when that national park was created?

Mrs Ferns—Roughly 1990, I would think.

Mrs Martin—Yes. It used to be Davidson. Garigal used to be split—the one going down to the east coast through Warringah was Garigal. They amalgamated the two and Davidson became Garigal in about 1989.

CHAIR—So it was a national park prior to that as well?

Mrs Martin—Yes.

CHAIR—Was it there before the development?

Mrs Ferns—All the national parks around Ku-ring-gai have been there as long as man has been in Australia. They may not have been identified as national parks but they are the original growth forests of Australia.

CHAIR—I am talking about the actual declaration as a national park.

Mr BARTLETT—Clearly there is a problem of poor planning, but the question is what to do about it. You make some suggestions about education and so on. I am really surprised, though, that you do not see hazard reduction as a significant part of the solution. Certainly it is not a panacea but clearly, the more fuel you have got, the greater the radiant heat, the greater the intensity of the fire and the greater its movement.

We have already had evidence to say that a four-fold increase in the amount of fuel leads to more than a 13-fold increase in the amount of heat at the fire front. So, whilst some of the other things you are proposing may be useful, surely the less fuel there is in that buffer zone, perhaps for the kilometre leading up to that ridge top, the less heat that is radiated to the ridge top. I am surprised that you would say that more fuel will not mean more heat.

Mrs Martin—I think scientific opinion might debunk that, Mr Bartlett.

Mr BARTLETT—Might debunk the fact that more fuel leads to more heat?

Mrs Martin—No. I think what you are suggesting is that the pattern of fire is coming on the fuel load. I am not suggesting that by any manner of means. That is why when it jumped 700 metres across the Warragamba Dam it did so on no fuel supply at all; it did it across water.

Mr BARTLETT—The reason it had the capacity to jump was, I suspect, related to the intensity of the fire before it reached the dam which was directly correlated to the amount of fuel that was there.

Mrs Martin—You are outside my league; I do not know the answer to that. I do know, for example, that when you look at the top of Jannali here in the photograph you will see the water down below and the green. That is where you are proposing that, for however many metres, you would have hazard reduced. It is untouched. The devastation is on top of the ridge, and I suggest that this, according to the journalist who took this photograph and the firefighter gentleman who made the quote, goes back further this way. This is only the edge. The reason I wanted to show you this was that here it is green and here, further down, there is water and that there is a similarity—except, of course, not as sharp an escarpment. But this is the bit that you are suggesting you would hazard reduce, and it is untouched.

Mr BARTLETT—So you are disagreeing with all the experienced firefighters who are saying to us that hazard reduction reduces the intensity of the fire and the rate of spread of the fire?

Mrs Martin—And do they have scientific degrees?

Mr BARTLETT—They have a lot of experience in the field.

Mrs Martin—I am quite sure they have, but that is not scientific. What I am suggesting is also put forward by firefighters who are advised properly by the science community. Show me where that would have not been fatal to the people on top?

CHAIR—Can you show us where the fire came from in that particular picture?

Mrs Martin—Yes. I believe it came from this direction—and I am not sure which direction that was. It just arrived miles ahead of the fire front.

Mr BARTLETT—Just as a final comment, I might refer you to the work of Dr Phil Cheney from the CSIRO.

Mrs Martin—Please do not.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—You are very critical of the administration at the local level, from what I understand, and this forms the basis of your submission. You say that developments are being allowed to occur in very fire-prone areas and that eternal concessions seem to be being made to these developments and to the pressure for these developments regardless of the state legislation that has been put in place. Am I hearing you correctly? In very simple terms, could you take us through your opposition to what is happening at the local level?

Mrs Martin—Quite frankly, the local level has decided that there isn't a problem. Are you referring to council?

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Yes.

Mrs Martin—Five weeks ago the acting director said to me, 'There is no problem. You're the only person who thinks there is a problem with fire.' That is demonstrably and legislatively untrue—and that was done under state legislation. I think what my submission intended was not to criticise at the personal level. There has been no resolution or answer yet forthcoming that speaks for itself, and this is not translating into outcomes that will not only make properties safer but also stop the rate of spread of fire to other properties in the area.

You cannot make more legislation than there currently is. There is a whole raft of it. Australian Standard 3959 sets everything out very clearly. The document *Planning for bushfire protection* may still have a few hiccups—somebody in the planning department of the Rural Fire Service said that it could perhaps be improved in certain areas and the Australian Standards director told me something similar—but it has been around since 1991, it has been updated and it sets everything out very clearly. Yet it became very obvious to me during that particular problem that it is not being implemented. One of the problems appears to be the manual which is the daily Bible that council practitioners must observe. It set everything out very nicely and clearly as to what they must do and what they must assess.

CHAIR—Can you refer to the name, please?

Mrs Martin—This is *Guiding development: better outcomes* from the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, which all council practitioners must observe. But it does not appear to have been updated to match amendments to the Rural Fires Act, which also brought in, in August, section 79BA of the EP act and a whole raft of legislation that had to be implemented. This *Planning for bushfire protection* document, which has been developed by both the Rural Fire Service and Planning NSW, then became more than just a guideline. Council constantly refers to it as a guideline, but it is not. By virtue of section 79BA of the EP act, it is a planning document. But that is not translating.

Only last week I noticed that the doctor living below me and overlooking my cliff had a load of treated pine and lattice delivered. He is slightly closer to the front than I am. He gives me financial support, so I have to admit that I did not go down and say to him, 'You can't have this; you're going to affect all of your neighbours.' They are fairly close down there. So I looked the other way, because I cannot be the world's policeman—it is not my job. That man is not acting to set somebody else's property alight; he is acting because he does not know any better and the council has neglected to tell him. In fact, I sometimes wonder if the council itself actually knows what it should be implementing.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—So the issue of community education is a critical one, as far as your group is concerned?

Mrs Martin—We think it is critical to ensure that there is a survival outcome for the people, not only in our area but in other areas. There are a lot of things that should be implemented. If

people do not know that they are not going to get out if they run along a top ridge that will be affected by wildfire, then they will run.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I have one final question, which relates to your statement. I will read it back to you: 'We are firmly of the opinion that hazard reduction is not the panacea that some supporters in the wider community would have us believe and rely upon.' You obviously take a contrary view to some that have been expressed here today. What do you say to the following proposition: some would attribute the extreme wildfires that have occurred in the last two seasons to the lack of hazard reduction and some would attribute them to the combination of the factors of extreme climatic conditions and whatever, but, whatever you ascribe it to, the impact of an extremely hot wildfire on the biodiversity of a region is devastating. How do you react to the proposition that extreme heat in wildfires is really affecting the biodiversity of your region?

Mrs Martin—I am not quite sure that I fully understand that. Helen might like to answer that one.

Mrs Ferns—I am sorry, you were saying that, as far as biodiversity goes—

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I was asking about extreme heat in wildfires and its effect on biodiversity.

Mrs Ferns—But I have seen the same effect from hazard reduction burns. It does not matter whether it is a wildfire or a hazard reduction burn; I have seen the same effect and in my own backyard. Somebody commented earlier that the Rural Fires Act does not provide compensation for land that is sterilised by that act. In contrast to that, I then ask why any property owner is allowed to take 100 metres of public land to protect their presence alongside a national park without paying for it. It is the same story in reverse.

Mrs Martin—When you talk about biodiversity it is so complex which is why I tried to shelve the question. On one gumleaf you have about 300 different living organisms and that is where it begins. It begins down in the soil with all the micro-organisms and the leaf litter becomes part of that. You can pick up any book; there is a very good one by Professor Andrew Beattie of Macquarie University and they specialise in the environment. So when you say biodiversity, you have to look at erosion and all the things that fire does. In order for fire to provide protection, you would have to be burning off and I think you would find it cheaper to fund my idea of education rather than actually trying to burn off the vast wildernesses and Garigal National Park and small parks next to it so frequently. It is the frequency of burn-offs that destroys biodiversity. It is not only the plants that really do not like fire. It is—

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mrs Martin, I am sorry but we are in a bit of a hurry and I am next on the list to ask you some questions. You have placed a significant value on expert scientific evidence. Do you have any training yourself with regard to ecology or biodiversity?

Mrs Martin—No, none.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Right. You have very distinct and, if one did not know better, very learned sounding views on planning laws and what is proposed in terms of medium-density housing in the area—

Mrs Martin—I can do slightly better than that, it is not my word at all. I have here the transcripts of the last meeting.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Sure, that is fine. You are fairly convinced because of your experience and knowledge of living in the area, you are firmly convinced that medium-density development will add to problems in the event of evacuation et cetera.

Mrs Martin—That is commonsense. If you are going to put 10 houses where there was one you are going to have 20 cars instead of two.

Ms PANOPOULOS—At the same time there are others who are expert planners in the council who would disagree with you.

Mrs Martin—No, the actual director of Ku-ring-gai council does not have any qualifications in planning whatsoever.

Ms PANOPOULOS—But there are other experts, other planners who have gone into developing these guidelines that would disagree with you because they do not have the direct experience and they do not live in the area that you do.

Mrs Martin—The second part is very definitely true.

Mrs Ferns—Could I just comment on that point. You say 'the experts in this area'. The fact is it is a mandate; it is imposed on this area by state government. State government under state environmental planning policies requires the municipality to put up so many sites and to produce so many thousands of units in any one year. It is not something that—

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mrs Ferns, I can understand that and I can understand at the same time the frustration of local residents. I was trying to paint the picture that here you are as local residents. You know your region, you know the ridges, you know the danger and you can predict the problems with medium-density development in spite of the fact that you have whole state government departments who are supposed to be experts in urban planning and they have come up and imposed this particular plan.

Mrs Ferns—That is right.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I suppose that reminds me of an analogy with the people in my rural electorate who know their area, know their bush, know their farms and know their terrain and yet they have so-called experts telling them certain things. They have ecological biologists and all sorts of experts telling them that they should not control burn, telling them that fires are worse for biodiversity than strangling noxious weeds that kill the natural environment. It is interesting to see that rural residents know more about the local area than the experts and it is interesting to see your position because you know your terrain much better. The other question I want to pose is: have either of you been involved in any hazard reduction exercises?

Mrs Martin—No.

Mrs Ferns—I have had them on my back door, yes. My son was with the Rural Fire Service.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Would the medium-density residential development within the Ku-ring-gai council area—as outlined on your map—as well as increasing the risk of evacuation et cetera in the event of a fire, decrease the value of houses in the immediate vicinity of that medium-density development?

Mrs Martin—I doubt it.

Mrs Ferns—It has not done that to this point in time. I point out that, whilst the state government is imposing these requirements on local government—and I am afraid I am with Mr Carr here—the problem sheets back to our immigration policies. If you bring them in you have to put them somewhere. In view of the fact that Sydney gets 40 per cent of the migrants coming to this country each year then there are going to be these pressures on us and we will have to do away with either the national parks or our bushland reserves, whatever the case may be.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you saying that you should be allowed to live where you live but others who come to this country should be told where to live?

Mrs Ferns—No, I am not.

Mrs Martin—You don't think that is slightly getting away from bushfires and starting a fire in another direction?

Ms PANOPOULOS—I was just following on from Mrs Ferns's point, but I will leave it at that.

Mrs Ferns—I was not suggesting that at all.

CHAIR—We are really short of time.

Mrs Ferns—I know, but I would just like to go back to the hazard reduction question asked earlier. I understand that in order for it to be effective it has to be done approximately every three years. Am I correct?

CHAIR—That is not necessarily correct. There are a variety of views and I think it depends on the landscape. We heard evidence earlier today—you were not here—of reduction burns being between seven and 15 years in the Kurrajong area. There was some very good evidence put forward about that aspect. So it depends on the particular region.

Mrs Ferns—A lot of the documentation I have read states that in order for it to be effective it needs to be done about every three to five years.

CHAIR—No.

Mrs Ferns—With the urban interface with bushland entirely around that one municipality there is no way you could carry out adequate hazard reduction burning. That would probably apply to many areas.

Mr BARTLETT—Has your local bushfire brigade said that?

Mrs Ferns—They have plans. Those plans are never met; they cannot fulfil them.

CHAIR—I need to give Mr Organ the opportunity to ask questions, followed by Mr McArthur.

Mr ORGAN—I would like to thank you for coming because I think what you have brought to this committee is something that I have observed with regard to the urban interface in these very steep areas. That is what it is coming down to here. We are not talking about Kosciuszko National Park or open grassland plains; we are talking about what is happening in eastern Australia in places like Jannali, Sutherland and your area. It is more than a bushfire management hazard reduction issue—which you have rightly brought up, and I can understand that—it is about safety and how you deal with a real threat in the future. This morning we heard from Katoomba City Council and how they have a great working relationship with all the authorities. I assume they deal with a similar area—lots of ridges and lots of similar problems—but you are saying that, as members of the local community who know your area, you have real concerns about how Ku-ring-gai council is operating and how it is linking in with the various authorities. So your main problem is with the city council because they are bringing all these policies together. Is that what you are saying to us?

Mrs Ferns—That is where the implementation takes place.

Mr ORGAN—They are the ones who are not actually implementing things and, as we recently discussed, we were also talking about urban development and medium density. You have a real safety issue here. That is one of the priorities and you feel it is not being addressed. How do you feel you are going to proceed from here in regard to getting a council authority to address these concerns? You have talked about education, but on issues of safety is an incident going to happen and are there going to be insurance issues coming in here?

Mrs Martin—I would be starting with Mr Knowles, who is the minister, and I believe that Ku-ring-gai council has recently put in a request—and I know it was a mayoral initiative—to the state government to consider these areas, and there are six of them. Our concern is that the six are insufficient. If you remember, I think I put in that—

Mr ORGAN—What do you mean by the six areas?

Mrs Martin—They are six hatched areas which are exempted from SEP 5, which is the state environmental planning policy for elderly people—for hospitals, old age homes—and a special dual occupancy which meets elderly or disabled people's needs. The reason why those six areas are hatched—East Killara is the first, Barra Brui next and then working around—is, one, because of the fire hazard and, two, because there are perceived problems with evacuation and water supply. It is put in for domestic use not for fighting fires.

Mr ORGAN—Are you telling us that council are fully aware of all these constraints but they are still going ahead with this sort of regime? You already have a problem and you are worried about—

Mrs Martin—Yes. At the meeting of presentation to the minister's residential advisory committee—MRAC—on 25 June 2003, that committee asked something about it. They say that there are very limited increased yields from dual occupancy. They then say:

Increased yields are more likely to come from stage 2 of the strategy—

that is, those areas around the shopping centres, the pink dots—

which will introduce villas and townhouse development, and dual occupancy, around the neighbourhood centres.

People these days do not go without cars. If we have a problem evacuating the present population and the present number of cars, then we will have an increased problem.

Mr ORGAN—The issue this committee would probably be really concerned about is that you are saying that the issue of evacuation and dealing with these emergency conditions in your view is not being addressed by either the state authorities or the local government authorities?

Mrs Martin—The state authorities have brought in very praiseworthy initiatives and legislation. The changes to the Rural Fires Act are very wide and very encompassing. All these mapping areas have to take place right throughout New South Wales. However, local governments have been given the carriage of making sure that the implementation is done. That is where the problem is arising—it is not being implemented.

Mr McARTHUR—Exhibit 6 is a photograph of the interface between the national park and the urban part of Ku-ring-gai. Are you saying to the committee, just so I fully understand it, that there is no need for a buffer zone between the urban area and the national park and that there is no need for a reduction burn of that combustible material between the national park and the urban area? Is that your position? I want to make sure I have got it right.

Mrs Martin—It is not the only photograph. It shows all those urban interfaces.

Mr McARTHUR—I can observe the photograph. There are a lot of buildings close to the national park.

Mrs Martin—That is quite right, those properties there are interfaces.

Mr McARTHUR—I would have thought that any commonsense view would be that you would have a buffer zone between the national park, which has lots of trees and is a high fire-prone area, but you are telling the committee that that does not matter. Is that what you are saying?

Mrs Ferns—What sort of buffer zone would you propose?

Mr McARTHUR—We have had a lot of discussion about buffer zones and there is a range of opinion, but at least 100 metres would be helpful.

Mrs Martin—It went across the Warragamba Dam, which is 700 metres and filled with water.

Mr McARTHUR—I want to get it on the record. You are saying that you do not worry about a buffer zone, that you are quite happy to be right next to a national park with a high propensity to wild fire.

Mrs Martin—It is not flat or level land. No, do not shake your head, Mr McArthur. These are very sharp escarpments. When you start clearing 100 metres on escarpments as sharp as that then you are going to get erosion. It is not a matter of anybody's guess. These things are very clearly indicated. The soil types have been defined.

CHAIR—If I can help my colleague, I do not think anybody is talking about clearing. Buffer zones do not equate to football fields. Buffer zones involve reducing fuel in a particular area.

Mrs Martin—But actually it would come up even faster on the canopy if you left the canopy and cleared the underneath, and that is written into planning for bushfire prevention.

CHAIR—We will leave that for the experts.

Mrs Ferns—Could I just make one comment on that. State legislation does require that it be done on private land.

Mrs Martin—Upheld by the courts.

Mrs Ferns—There have to be asset protection zones and fuel reduced zones.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you for your comment.

CHAIR—Thank you for your submission and evidence here this afternoon in this inquiry.

Mrs Martin—Thank you for giving us the opportunity.

CHAIR—It is our pleasure.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Bartlett**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 6.17 p.m.