

Management and coordination of fire suppression

Incident management – Bureaucratisation of fire fighting and shortcomings in incident control systems

- 5.1 The Committee is concerned that the ineffective response to some of the 2003 fires may indicate systemic problems with incident control systems. This concern is reflected in a considerable body of evidence put to the Committee about the centralisation of decision making within incident control centres established at some distance from the fire ground. Clearly the problems outlined above and in the evidence about incident control did not occur at every stage of every fire but the pattern is such to lead the Committee to consider this matter seriously.

Failure to use local knowledge

- 5.2 The evidence outlined in chapter 4 clearly shows that the initial response to the fires that caused so much damage in January 2003 was neither effective nor in line with the expectations of the affected communities. The Committee considers that the damage that was done by these fires is evidence enough of some degree of failure.¹

1 The Committee also considers that any view that the fire fighting overall was successful is untenable given the losses that occurred in urban and rural areas of the Australian Capital Territory.

- 5.3 Much of the evidence presented to the Committee points to situations where the advice of local landholders and experienced, knowledgeable volunteer fire fighters was ignored. The outcome in some cases was that running fires caused avoidable and preventable damage.
- 5.4 This can be seen in the evidence from the north east of Victoria, where the Mudgegonga Rural Fire Brigade for example noted that:
- Local knowledge was not utilised enough in nearly every circumstance [that is] it would have been better for a local to have been deployed with each Strike Team and Sector Commanders ...²
- 5.5 The Dederang Rural Fire Brigade submitted that:
- The DSE would not allow competent local CFA crew leaders to take charge of fires. DSE Incident Control Centre (ICC) were using outside personnel with a lack of local knowledge to run the fire operations. In some instances there was blatant disregard of local input and expertise.³
- 5.6 The Carboor Brigade outlined an instance where a crew in consultation with the local brigade Captain devised a plan for a back burn to stop fire burning towards private property in the Buchland Valley. The crews on the fire ground agreed that the plan was 'possible, safe and effective' but it was vetoed by a controller in a distant control centre.⁴ The Carboor Brigade submitted that their crews were poorly utilised by the control centres during the fires in the north east, except for the first crew to attend the Eldorado fire which, at that point, was still being managed from the fire ground.
- 5.7 A fire brigade Captain from the Mount Buffalo area in north east Victoria, in a private submission to the Committee stated that in the 2003 bushfires in his area and in the Gippsland, the operations were run from remote incident control centres, often as far as 100 kilometres back from the fire. He argued that a running fire, especially in mountainous terrain, such as surrounding areas of Mount Buffalo National Park, cannot be commanded from a map and that local area knowledge and experience is essential for both effective control as well as safety. As an example he cited an instance where local CFA members knew a road to be safe to enter with good fall

2 Mudgegonga Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 39*, p. 2.

3 Dederang Fire Brigade management Team, *Submission no. 152*, p. 3.

4 Carboor Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 264, Attachment p. 2*.

back areas (some of these being their own properties) but the incident control command told them not to proceed.⁵

- 5.8 The serious consequences of ignoring local advice was demonstrated in the north east, in the Nariel Valley, where according to a submission from that area, a lack of regard to local advice resulted in a significant area being needlessly burnt:

DSE personnel were asked NOT under any circumstances to burn on the west side of the Nariel Valley, particularly in the Upper Nariel area. However, this was done with the result being a firestorm that blasted through ten properties.⁶

- 5.9 The serious consequences of this approach were also seen in the outcome of the fires that ignited to the west of Canberra on 8 January. One local landholder submitted to the Committee that:

We are also of the opinion that any claims to have 'contained' this fire were very ill-conceived; and that any media releases claiming such reflected either amateurism or wishful thinking, or lack of local knowledge. We do not subscribe to the notion that having a bull dozer track around this fire on one side, and having the Goodradigbee River on the other equates to having it 'contained'. The so-called 'containment' lines were not close to the fire front, and represented no more than very small impediments for this fire to jump. I do not believe any of the 'locals' considered this fire to be 'contained' at any stage.⁷

- 5.10 The fire did cross the Goodradigbee River (on 17 January⁸) and then later, as the locals predicted, burnt back to the east, and subsequently contributed to the major impact on Canberra and rural areas in the Australian Capital Territory on 18 January. The Committee considers that it was a serious error to consider that the fire was contained, especially when sound local advice to the contrary was available.
- 5.11 The failure to heed local advice had serious consequences in the Australian Capital Territory where Mr Val Jeffery had warned authorities over a long period of time and immediately before the fires overran parts of the Australian Capital Territory, but was generally dismissed by those in authority. Just a few days before the fire broke out he circulated a letter warning local residents in and

5 Barry Mapley, *Submission no. 189* p. 1.

6 Johan Kohlman, *Submission no. 432*, p. 2.

7 David Menzel, *Submission no. 343*, p. 2.

8 Wayne West, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 July 2003, p. 32.

around the rural village of Tharwa to take precautions and he unilaterally took action to establish a protective fire break around the village. His warning was generally heeded by residents and land holders, and loss of private property was minimised. His warning was dismissed by the managers of public land and facilities in the area which eventually suffered significant losses.

- 5.12 On the day that fires burnt the urban edge of Canberra another fire started near Burrinjuck Dam further to the north and west from the Australian Capital Territory. The Captain of the Adjungbilly Rural Fire Brigade that has responsibility for fire fighting in that area submitted to the Committee that his brigade and others contained the fire on the western side of the Murrumbidgee River. Based on their experience of a previous fire he warned authorities that the fire on the eastern side of the river would spread unless back burning was undertaken. He was told that back burning was not a priority. The fire however did spread as the locals had predicted and after some pressure a back burn was carried out a week after the initial advice had been given. By that time the forecast had again deteriorated and, in the view of the locals, the back burn had been lit in the wrong places. The local view was dismissed as 'paranoid', but the fire got away and it took another week of work by the volunteers before it was contained. In concluding his submission the local Captain observed that 'you cannot fight a fire and control it from an office it has to be on the fire ground'.⁹

- 5.13 This was not a problem unique to New South Wales. The same observation was made in relation to fire control in Victoria:

the fires appeared to be controlled from an office away from the fire ground where knowledge of conditions is unknown.¹⁰

- 5.14 Nor was the failure to consider local knowledge a phenomena of the 2003 fires:

I would like to add something similar to that. In the 2001-02 fires, as a part of the brigade, we wanted to do a back-burn around a house to hopefully save the property and requested permission to do it. We radioed the fire control centre in Braidwood and then they had to contact Moruya because the incident controller was there. We had to wait three and a half hours to get permission to put a 600-metre back-burn in. In the end, they flew a helicopter over us to see exactly where

9 Bill Kingwill, *Submission no. 175*, pp. 1-5.

10 Carboor Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 264*, p. 1.

we were. We had two deputy group captains, two or three captains and some deputy captains there ready to go, and in the time it took them to do that the wind had changed and it made our task twice as hard to do.¹¹

- 5.15 Whilst the problem of ignoring local knowledge seems not to be confined to any one area the nature of the knowledge can be very localised. The Captain of the Brindabella Brigade was concerned that the lack of knowledge of the different conditions in the mountains hampered effective decision making by controllers unfamiliar with the those conditions:

Throughout the campaign there was a total lack of understanding by planners and controllers of the daily pattern of fire weather in this part of the mountains. Many windows of opportunity for fire management were lost because burning was undertaken at inappropriate times.¹²

- 5.16 The specific nature of local knowledge was demonstrated in the Nariel Valley where it was submitted that: 'I personally frequently told DSE about our local wind conditions and was not believed ... You can stand in our backyard and have wind coming at you from the North and a few feet higher up the hill it is coming from the South.'¹³ This unwillingness to accept reports of local conditions was repeated in other submissions:

On the day of the fire, we were rung up at a quarter to 10- we usually get our phone call at half past seven or eight o'clock – and I said to them, 'How come it is so late? We have had strong winds since half past seven, coming from the north.' They said, 'Oh, we have got no wind down here.' And I said, 'It is coming from the north,' but every time we told them that they would not listen to us. Within half an hour it was on our back doorstep. I rang up for help and by this time we had a spot fire at the turnoff at the valley and we could not get any help at all. So we – the 17 houses down in the valley – had to defend ourselves.¹⁴

11 Terence Hart, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 July 2003, pp. 39–40.

12 Peter Smith, *Submission no. 378, Attachment A, p. 20A*.

13 Johan Kohlman, *Submission no. 432, p. 2*.

14 Leanne McCormack, *Transcript of Evidence*, 28 July 2003, p. 15.

- 5.17 It was not just reports of local wind conditions or predictions of fire behaviour that were sometimes ignored. Reports of actual fire were sometimes disputed by remote incident control centres:

When we did actually see spot fires in the area and reported them, it took up to seven hours for them to respond to what we had seen. They told us that we were not seeing spot fires at all, that the planes had not seen it in the morning. The reality was that we were watching them burning probably about one kilometre away from us. This happened a couple of times. The last time it happened I actually lost my cool with them and told them that they were breaching their duty of care and if they did not do something we would sue them if the fire came through these two areas. That is when they decided we had a fire in the area.¹⁵

- 5.18 The establishment of centralised and remote incident management centres was an integral part of the response to the fires, but it came at a cost. The Committee notes the submission by the Captain of the Brindabella Brigade:

The increasing centralisation of Incident Management and the diminishing involvement of local brigades in decision-making have led to a demonstrable decrease in the aggression initial response.

Initial response should not await the formation of Incident Management Teams and the development of long-term strategies and plans. This is where local brigades are best suited to respond to fires in their areas whilst back-up is being organised. They have the local knowledge of terrain, access, fire behaviour ... In many cases the local area has better early intelligence of fire than Fire Control. As the incident develops, Fire mangers have a much better overview and the role of brigades changes accordingly ...¹⁶

15 Elizabeth Benton, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 July 2003, p. 50.

16 Peter Smith, *Submission no. 378*, p. 9.

Incident Control systems

5.19 The standard incident management model developed for use in Australia and adopted by the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) is the Australian Inter-agency Incident Management System (AIIMS), although as the McLeod inquiry noted its implementation by fire authorities does not always strictly follow the prescribed model.¹⁷ The system is intended to provide clear definition of roles and responsibilities for incidents where the response involves a number of elements and it incorporates identification of a clear incident commander. This approach also involves functional delegation and management by objectives. This system was described by AFAC in the following terms

one of the earliest [significant achievements of AFAC] ... was the development of an incident control system for the command and control of operational incidents. We have a national system now that fire organisations in all states and territories use. It enables us to operate interstate in a cooperative way on incidents – at least in the management of incidents – and even to the extent of operating overseas now, which we have successfully done on a couple of occasions in the US, using the system which is very similar to theirs.¹⁸

5.20 An experienced volunteer fire fighter and former brigade Captain outlined the changes that have occurred in New South Wales as incident control systems have been implemented:

Incident Control formally [sic] consisted of an incident controller working from the foreground, liaising with landowners and ground crews directly and by radio and communicating logistical requirements by radio to a base station. This system had the advantage of direct knowledge of the fire situation and being able to plan based on the direct input of brigades and landowners. The disadvantage was the large workload placed on the controller, the lack of phones and office equipment and the large amount of tasks required to be covered by one person. Incident Control Systems were developed to cover the shortcomings of this system and are normally located at control centres remote from the fire ground. While this has improved logistics, there has been a

17 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 119.

18 John Gledhill, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 August 2003, p. 2.

loss in fire ground awareness and input of local knowledge. Although the use of divisional commanders has attempted to address these shortcomings, in some situations incident controllers are not responding to advice from divisional commanders resulting in ineffective and hazardous fire fighting efforts. Advice from divisional commanders must be acted upon as they are the ones at the scene. An alternate way to address this would be the use of a mobile command centre located at the fire ground for fire command with the remote centre used mainly for logistics.¹⁹

- 5.21 The VFF explained how this situation has developed with the CFA, Parks Victoria and the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) moving to the use of the Incident Control System:

This practice has seen a lessening of the relevance of the operational “chain of command” and the importance of democratically elected leaders, elected in recognition of their experience and skills ...

Insufficient use of local knowledge in the Incident Control Centres (ICC) has been highlighted on many occasions.²⁰

- 5.22 Mr Graham Gray a former forester experienced in bushfire control commented on the changes and the effectiveness of current organisational structures for major fires and noted the demand for additional staffing resources that the incident control centres create:

large fires of the type seen recently are demanding larger and larger management teams, which tend to draw in relatively inexperienced people who assume very significant authority. This resource hungry control set up is not resulting in better fire management. Because the bill is being picked up by someone else (Rural Fire Service) for these emergency events there is little accountability and an incentive to move to this form of management as a costing exercise rather than a fire control imperative. This control structure is built on the Australian Interagency Incident Management System (AIIMS) model that tries to ensure that the fire is managed locally.

As an example of the way incident management teams have become unwieldy at the recent Snowy Mountains fire, the day shift for 16 February at Jindabyne was managing 16 helicopters, 1 Sky crane and 4 fixed wing aircraft. The control

19 Gary Owers, *Submission no. 81*, p. 1.

20 Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission no. 423*, p. 10.

centre personnel totalled 37 of which 5 were incident management team, 18 were planners, 14 logistics; in addition there were 5 managing air operations (not pilots) and they were supporting 71 personnel actually on the fire line. All this 16 days after the last day of severe weather and when all fires were at mop-up or patrol stage! All but three of the control centre staff was from National Parks ... relying on drawing fire managers from current staff positions may be putting inappropriate managers in charge because of their seniority within their organisation, rather than because of their fire fighting expertise.²¹

5.23 Dr Kevin Tolhurst also commented on the staffing needs of incident control centres:

The requirement to work safely when fire fighting was emphasized by the Linton Coronial Inquiry. The safety of fire fighters must always take the highest priority. However, better systems need to be put in place to reduce the amount of valuable skills and expertise tied up in maintaining the paper trail. Often the most experienced fire fighters were involved in an incident management team rather than on the fireline. Once the requirements of the Incident Management Teams were satisfied, the rest were left for fireline duty. With the reducing number of experienced fire fighters nationally and internationally, this meant that most of the experience was in the office not in the field and this resulted in much lower achievement rates on the fireline and lost opportunities. Whilst I acknowledge the need for experience people in the Incident Management Teams, there needs to be a better balance between field and office. A certain amount of streamlining and centralizing is needed.²²

5.24 The views of Mr Gray and Dr Tolhurst are somewhat at odds over the experience and knowledge of incident control centre staff but there is some other evidence to suggest that in some cases the incident management members were not the more experienced or most appropriate personnel:

The 'control' of the fire is in the hands of RFS staff personnel in the IMT, (Incident Management Team) remote from the fire and in most cases staffed by people with little or no on site

21 Graham Gray, *Submission no. 97*, p. 7.

22 Kevin Tolhurst, *Submission no. 210*, p. 3.

fire ground senior management (Divisional) experience. Indeed it would not be unusual for most members of the IMT to have NO fire ground experience.²³

- 5.25 This view was supported in the Victorian context by a submission from an experienced CFA brigade Captain and Deputy Group Officer in the Gippsland area:

We as CFA volunteers are very concerned of the career officers that are now manning the incident control centres. Since about 1990 CFA stopped sourcing these recruits from volunteer areas who have had previous experience in the rural areas and know the culture of rural communities. There is no doubt with the extra large amount of recruitment the government has implemented through the CFA we will see more of these inexperienced officers impacting on volunteers in Incident Control Centres and general fire suppression. It would have a devastating effect on volunteerism.

It is my feeling these officers will take on a controlling role over volunteers. I strongly suggest that the local volunteers have control alongside these officers who can play very important roles of knowing the culture of the top end of the CFA and could get a much quicker and co-ordinated response for the volunteers at the fire front. It should be noted that the control of a fire is at the fire front not in the Incident Control Room. The ICC responds to the requests of the control point at the fire ground.²⁴

- 5.26 Another CFA Group Captain, making a personal submission, identified a need for improved training and post incident reviews for incident control centre staff:

I do believe however from my direct observations during that time and from more general experience that the training of personnel who manage major fires can be improved.

This is not to say that Australian practices are significantly worse than other countries with similar risks, indeed many of our fire services provide a service equal to any that I have seen in the world. Rather, I believe that we should be constantly improving our systems, training and technology to enable our personnel to function at the highest level.

23 Alan Davison, *Submission no. 69*, p. 1.

24 Maurie Killen, *Submission no. 371*, p. 5.

Australia currently lacks a national level course or program to impart skills to those involved in major fires. By comparison, the USA reaps the benefits of a comprehensive training program which progressively develops skills up to a very high level ... The training curriculum for Australian fire fighters is very good, however there are significant gaps at the higher levels.²⁵

- 5.27 One central point is clear from this evidence. The Incident Control Centre process involves large numbers of personnel who must have experience and knowledge as well as sound leadership, management and communication skills. Within Incident Control Centre personnel there must be people with local knowledge.

Problems with incident control systems in the 2003 fires

Remoteness and lack of local input

- 5.28 A report on the fires in north east Victoria submitted to the Committee and strongly reflective of local views, says that the CFA changed its organisation with an increase in the number of paid staff and a downgrading of the authority and autonomy of local volunteer fire fighters.²⁶ This was accompanied by the introduction of centrally managed incident control systems with fire controllers and bureaucrats from the CFA head office moved in to control fire fighting efforts:

DSE officers and paid CFA officers effectively stripped all autonomy and authority from volunteer Captains and other CFA volunteers who collectively offered literally thousands of years experience in firefighting, and were intimately familiar with the local terrain and the characteristics of its wildfire behaviours.²⁷

- 5.29 The report also outlined what happened during the fires in the north east:

incident control centres were established in locations such as Mt Beauty, Swifts creek, Dartmouth and Corryong with remarkable numbers of bureaucrats and controllers in each. In Corryong for example up to 72 staff were involved in management chain. Even allowing for the usual 'confusion of battle' this approach to emergency response produced

25 Stephen Walls, *Submission no. 249*, p. 2.

26 The Eureka Project, *Submission no. 128, A case of burning neglect*, p. 22.

27 The Eureka Project, *Submission no. 128, A case of burning neglect*, p. 13.

outcomes which might be reasonably be described as a comedy of errors.²⁸

- 5.30 It was explained how this approach was associated with the deployment of strike teams and out of area crews with little knowledge of local conditions and without local supervision. Instead these units were subject to command and control from the Incident Control Centres. One consequence was that:

There appeared to be little or no capacity for central command to differentiate between the contributions which the various categories of fire fighters were able to offer. Consequently the DSE/CFA control appeared to adopt the lowest common denominator in allocating tasks and approaching the issue of occupational health and safety ...

The central command process lacked a conduit for such local information to filter up...²⁹

- 5.31 The problems caused when incident control centres are remote from the fire ground were exemplified in a submission from the Noorongong Rural Fire Brigade. A fire fighting proposal was worked out at the fire ground by locals and DSE personnel from Swifts Creek. The proposal was then relayed in person to the Incident Control Centre at Swifts Creek, which was three hours drive away, but the proposal 'could not be considered'. A local DSE officer experienced in fire fighting then made a round trip to Swifts Creek in the middle of the night to press the case, which on this second attempt was accepted. It is incomprehensible that experienced fire fighters should be required to go to such exhausting lengths and absent themselves from the fire ground to achieve such outcomes. In this case after the plan was agreed to, the local volunteers set about the fire suppression effort but DSE units deployed by the remote Incident Control Centre remained without instruction until the end of their shift.³⁰

- 5.32 In comparison to the situation outlined above the submission from the Noorongong Brigade refers to another situation where an incident control centre was established nearer to the fire ground (30 minutes drive) and manned by a DSE officer advised by locals. The operational directions from this centre were described as effective and within three days a successful containment line was established.³¹

28 The Eureka Project, *Submission no. 128, A case of burning neglect*, p. 22.

29 The Eureka Project, *Submission no. 128, A case of burning neglect*, pp. 23–24.

30 Noorongong Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 301*, p 1

31 Noorongong Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 301*, p. 1.

- 5.33 Similar expressions of concern about attempts to control fires from an office without local input, such as the comment reported above in relation to the Burrinjuck fire, were repeated in relation to the Victorian fires:

[There was] ... lack of management on the fire ground, the fires appeared to be controlled from an office away from the fire ground where knowledge of conditions is unknown. ... We firmly believe that those volunteers such as ourselves now need to be listened to (our brigade has 19 out of 50 members with over 25 years active experience each). Rather than a group of over educated inexperienced people who seem to be the ones who are in control of situations such as occurred this year. Fire fighting happens at the fire front not in an office.³²

- 5.34 In some cases it was not just local volunteers who were ignored by remote commanders. In the Buchan area a Parks Victoria officer concerned about the safety of the site proposed for a base sought to make arrangements to use the local resources centre. The site originally designated was described by locals as the most dangerous place to be in should the fire hit. The proposal to move to a safer location was overruled:

I was a volunteer at the resource centre when ... [a Parks logistics person] ... came in. He was shown what the centre had to offer and offered full use of it. He was impressed by the site position and facilities in place. He requested use of a phone to ring ... (the Parks Victoria Incident Controller) ... who would have to approve the change of site. Permission to change the site was denied.³³

- 5.35 The Committee can see from this evidence how the remote and centralised command systems, as put in place during the fires in New South Wales and Victoria contributed to the failure to utilise local knowledge and to the delays which resulted in the possibly preventable spread of the fires.

32 Carboor Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 264*, pp. 1-2.

33 Kim Van Dyk, *Submission no. 471*, p. 2.

- 5.36 The management of major fires, with the resources that can now be made available needs strong command and control, logistics and, communications support. Some form of centralised incident control is necessary and inevitable, but unless properly managed and implemented there can be real problems, as indicated by the evidence reported above. Proper incident control should include devolution of some tactical decision making to fire fighters on the ground.

Lack of coordination within incident control centres – lack of continuity

- 5.37 A lack of continuity in the staffing of senior control positions was a problem referred to in north east Victoria. For example, there were problems when relief incident controllers were brought in for single shifts and did not develop a full understanding of the local situation. This caused delays in the decision making process:

After several days the Controller at Dartmouth asserted his authority. For several days [he] ... did the day shift. We found him very supportive of our ideas. He required to be informed of our decisions (which is OK) and would usually approve of them immediately and then back us on those decisions. After his shift finished we had a new controller every day for the next 4 days. This was totally unsatisfactory, as the day was usually almost over before they became familiar with the situation and they would approve of any decision. It is absolutely critical a person on the fire front can take a decision and act on it immediately!³⁴

- 5.38 The Committee was advised that one of the major issues with incident management teams is that it takes time to set up properly in a remote location, close to a fire. An incident controller usually has to set up his social networks from scratch, bringing in people from a variety of agencies and backgrounds. Often people are brought in with credentials and accreditation in the key functions of the incident command system, but not necessarily with the local knowledge. Before these formalised incident management teams came along, there used to be rural social networks in place, where people had trust in one another, and knew how to get a response together quickly. These social networks still exist in rural areas and play an important sociological support role in a cohesive rural community, but are not now drawn into the process.³⁵

34 John Cardwell, *Submission no. 178*, p. 3.

35 Nic Gellie, *Report on: Causal and Risk Factors, Fuel Management, including Grazing and the Application of the Australian Incident Management System*, p. 31.

5.39 An analysis of the evidence indicates that incident management teams were not always in contact with local people from the start, and did not always involve local people with local knowledge in an incident management team. There were often cases where highly experienced yet not accredited people were advised that their services were not required. It would appear that training in the incident management system has not always filtered down to a local level, so that in the event of a major fire emergency, these local resources could not be readily drawn into the fire fighting effort. There were plenty of examples of lack of involvement or exclusion of local bushfire brigades who had the social networks, local knowledge of fire behaviour, the fire trail system, and the lessons learnt from previous large fires.³⁶

5.40 Problems with the turn over of staff in the incident control centres and the subsequent lack of continuity were also summarised by Dr Kevin Tolhurst:

Short-tour of duty times for volunteers and for Incident Controllers led to slippage in the understanding of the fire and local conditions. Greater continuity of fire fighters and Incident Controllers is needed to maintain a continuity of philosophy and understanding of local conditions. This can be achieved by employing fast turnover crews in simple environments, and by arranging for a deputy Incident Controller to stand in for the 1C while they rest. On 1C should be given the responsibility for a fire for its duration. This could be achieved provided arrangements are put in place for rest periods and for subordinate ICs when the 1C is not on duty.³⁷

Failure to provide information to locals and other incident control centres

5.41 The Committee has already noted problems that arose because controllers failed to use local knowledge. Another problem that was evident was the failure of incident control centres to communicate decisions to locals and alert them to developments with the fire situation:

Information for Hinnomunjie Station from the DSE control centre in Swifts Creek was, we believe, inadequate. Those in charge were unable to give specific information regarding the

36 Nic Gellie, *Report on: Causal and Risk Factors, Fuel Management, including Grazing and the Application of the Australian Incident Management System*, p. 31.

37 Kevin Tolhurst, *Submission no. 210*, pp. 3-4.

state of the fires endangering us and had extreme difficulty with locations. Useful fire information, critical at the time, came from overhearing the local Benambra CFA leader over the CB radio, rather than through official DSE/CFA Command Centre at Swifts Creek.³⁸

- 5.42 The failure to communicate with locals lead to inefficiencies in the overall fire fighting effort according to a submission from the Kioloa Rural Fire Brigade which turned out to assist with the fires in the Canberra region:

At the recent Canberra fires our brigade experienced numerous communication problems with individual landholders, in that they were not notified or informed regarding proposed fire fighting affecting their properties.³⁹

- 5.43 This evidence is consistent with the views put by landholders in the Australian Capital Territory. The ACT Rural Lessees' Association explained that a briefing on developments with the fires in and around the Territory was provided by Environment ACT but they did not seem to have much information:

they gave us a briefing on Thursday the 16th in relation to the fires in Namadgi. I must admit that I was somewhat dismayed when I asked a question about the McIntyre's Hut fire, which was to the north-west of us and the one threatening Uriarra Station, and they had no information available at that point in time. The CEO of Environment ACT went away and made some phone calls so that we could be brought up to date on the McIntyre's Hut fire.⁴⁰

- 5.44 It is salutary to note that the briefing provided to the Australian Capital Territory landholders was also inadequate. By that time the fires had been going for eight days and would, within the next two days, overrun the rural areas and spread into Canberra. The ACT Rural Lessees' Association stated that the authorities were dismissive:

Many association members are extremely upset at the open ridicule they experienced from ACT government officers in the period between 6 and 18 January, when they expressed the view that the wholly inadequate response would lead to a disaster to landholders and city people alike.⁴¹

38 Margery Scott and Elizabeth Strang, *Submission no. 211*, p. 4.

39 Kioloa Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 242*, p. 2.

40 Tony Griffin, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 July 2003, p. 85.

41 ACT Rural Lessees' Association, *Submission no. 330*, p. 2.

- 5.45 Mr Wayne West, who tried desperately to alert the New South Wales RFS to the situation in the Brindabellas told the Committee how little contact the RFS initiated:

We had no communications. The Rural Fire Service did not come and see us. They did not send men up to our place to ask us whether we needed assistance or to disagree with my comments that I made to them on the phone. There was no contact from Rural Fire Service to us; it was just one-way traffic. On the only day that we did actually speak to a Rural Fire Service officer, he asked whether we needed any help. ... We never heard from that officer nor received any firefighting equipment or any assistance at all at any time. Even on the night of 17 January, when the fire crossed the Goodradigbee River to the western side, we rang fire control and asked for assistance and we were told to ring Triple 0. That was the 24th phone call.⁴²

- 5.46 The failure to communicate with locals was most dangerously evident where back burns were lit on or adjacent to private property. The VFF, for example, reported instances where back burning operations were commenced on private land with 'complete disregard' for the impact on landholders. It was stated that one farmer saw DSE crews leave a back burn unattended at the end of their shift putting at risk his own property and neighbouring farms.⁴³

- 5.47 Mr Craig Ingram MP, in his submission stated that:

My office has had complaints from a number of farmers that farmland was destroyed in backburning operations. One individual, in the Tubbut area, had his entire property burnt out in a controlled backburn, whilst his stock was still on the property. He was in the area preparing his property, but was not informed of the department's intentions.⁴⁴

- 5.48 One submission from north east Victoria noted that 'D.S.E. carried out back burns within a kilometre of towns without informing local C.F.A. captains or the community.'⁴⁵ A submission from the Kosciuszko area also reported that a back burn was lit on the Crakenback Range without any advice to either landholders or fire fighting groups that were affected.⁴⁶

42 Wayne West, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 July 2003, p. 35.

43 Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission no. 423*, p. 12.

44 Craig Ingram, *Submission no. 148*, p. 5.

45 Robyn and John Scales, *Submission no. 161*, p. 3.

46 Peter Rankin, *Supplementary Submission no. 421*, p. 1.

- 5.49 Landholders from Gelantipy in Victoria told the Committee that on their property unnecessary back burns, which were left unextinguished and unattended by strike teams, burnt out their fences.⁴⁷ It was suggested in the report done by the Eureka Foundation that the DSE required containment lines to be constructed on private land because they could not get management approval to build fire breaks on national parks.⁴⁸
- 5.50 There was also evidence from north east Victoria of the failure of an incident control centre to communicate with other incident control centres, as well as ignoring locals:
- In one instance, we had a control-line ... approved by DSE Controller at Dartmouth. We had three bulldozers working at the control line as well as 10-15 personal with rakehoes, only to find out that the Corryong Controller had lit a fire below us. Naturally all our work was in vain.⁴⁹
- 5.51 Command and control problems seem to be an area where things have the potential to go wrong with major multi-agency campaign fires where control is provided from remote centres. With the Brindabella fires to the west of Canberra the local brigade Captain reported that the fires were 'under the control of four Incident Management Centres making coordination a significant cause of delay where different strategies overlapped.⁵⁰
- 5.52 The owners of Tom Groggin station on the Victorian side of the New South Wales state border and abutting Kosciuszko National Park told the Committee that their knowledge and understanding of the property was dismissed by the fire managers from the NPWS. The park managers lit burns that jumped inadequate control lines and burnt out part of the property, despite objections by the owners who correctly predicted the outcome. The park managers also later lit a major back burn in the Victorian sector negating the fire fighting efforts of the owners who at the stage were waging an unsupported campaign to save the remainder of their property.

47 Heather and Peter Henderson, *Submission no. 464*, p. 4.

48 The Eureka Project, *Submission no. 128* p. 15.

49 John Cardwell, *Submission no. 178*, p. 2.

50 Peter Smith, *Submission no. 378*, p. 10.

- 5.53 The Committee is concerned that the evidence is symptomatic of a greater problem with the breakdown in communication and lack of trust between rural landholders and public land managers. It demonstrates serious failure, at least in some cases, in the conduct of incident control centres. It suggests also that there is a need to review that way the centres work and how AIIMS is applied in Australia.
- 5.54 One explanation for the development of the role of incident control centres is provided by Dr Tolhurst:

The prospect of litigation and the need for information and accountability has blown the size of Incident Management Teams out of proportion. The need for large office space and high-tech facilities such as online computers, faxes, photocopiers, GIS printers, telephones, radio communications, etc. has led to Incident Management Teams being located a long way from the firefighting crews and the fire. This leads to good communication with Melbourne and the media, but poorer performance and information to the fire fighters. This leads to inefficient firefighting efforts. A review of the functions carried out in the IMT and those that can be carried out regionally or centrally is needed.⁵¹

Proposals for review of incident control systems

- 5.55 The incident control system used in the Australian Capital Territory was closely reviewed by the McLeod inquiry. The Territory system is based on AIIMS but the manner in which it has been implemented in the Territory was found by McLeod not to be totally consistent with the AFAC endorsed approach.⁵² The Committee has examined McLeod's findings to see what insights it might lend to the solution of the problems identified in the evidence gathered by the Committee. The Committee considers that some of the problems identified in the evidence could be overcome by the appointment of locally experienced field commanders, within the overall Incident Control System structure and, with clearly delegated authority to make timely tactical decisions.

51 Kevin Tolhurst, *Submission no. 210*, p. 3.

52 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 121.

- 5.56 McLeod noted that under the Australian Capital Territory system it is the intention that the incident commander in the field has the authority to make tactical-level decisions on the fire ground. However there are problems because, under the Territory system, the incident field commanders are not in a good position to be responsible for managing the entire response to the incident, largely because the support they required is centralised in the incident control centre. People in the field lack proximity to and awareness of the planning and logistical support functions that remain at the centre and do not deploy to the fire ground. The controller's reliance on support and advice from the service management team at the bushfire service headquarters created an impression, real or otherwise, that headquarters was controlling or directing events.⁵³ It appears that one of the problems in the January fires was that the field commanders not only lacked real authority but that they had to spend too much time getting or attempting to get briefings and instructions from the centralised head command centre.
- 5.57 The Committee believes that with major campaign fires there will always be a need to balance the capacity of field commanders to take decisive action with the need to put local circumstances into a larger regional strategic picture. Limiting the role of local commanders and centralising decision making entirely in remote centres as occurred in some of the 2003 fires however does not appear to have been the right balance.
- 5.58 The McLeod report looked at the approach adopted in the Yarrowlumla Fire Control District, where the incident controller was the senior officer in the Fire District. An Incident Management Team operated with him at the district office in Queanbeyan with sector or divisional commanders in the field. Mr McLeod considered that this system was consistent with that adopted in Victoria and South Australia and that it allowed for continuity and a consistent strategic outlook. He noted also that under this system the role of field commanders was to implement action plans developed by the Incident Management Team.⁵⁴ The Committee has already referred above to evidence to show that this approach was not entirely satisfactory. The delays it created and the failure to utilise local knowledge from the field resulted in adverse outcomes as far as the suppression of the fires in the Brindabellas was concerned.

53 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, pp. 121–123.

54 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 121.

- 5.59 The Committee notes that McLeod called for authorities in the Australian Capital Territory to review the current Incident Control System arrangements and suggested that incident controllers should not be expected to operate when separated from their supporting elements but that they should function as part of a cohesive, integrated management team.⁵⁵ Mr McLeod also suggested that adopting an approach consistent with that used by the New South Wales RFS would make it easier for Territory agencies, and inter-state fire crews, to work more closely together.⁵⁶
- 5.60 The Committee notes a 'significant number of submissions' received by the inquiry into the 2002–2003 fires in Victoria conducted by Mr Bruce Esplin, the State's Emergency Services Commissioner, criticised the management of the fires for ignoring local knowledge at both the tactical and strategic level. That inquiry found that the AIIMS based incident control systems used in Victoria Incident Control System is a sound command and control system, but that 'in some locations, it was applied in an inflexible way that resulted in opportunities to safely attack the fire being missed'.⁵⁷
- 5.61 An approach that more effectively incorporates local knowledge prior to and during fire events was outlined in a local fire planning model. This approach, addresses the problem of how to create better relationships and co-operative fire fighting strategies between local people and incident management teams. It takes into account:
- the local fire environment;
 - local fire risks and threats;
 - vegetation and fuels;
 - fire history, both wild and prescribed fire;
 - documentation of assets at risk, both natural and cultural;
 - fuel management plans;
 - maintenance and development of the local fire trail system;
 - location of natural fire advantages;
 - location of water sources for helicopters and tankers;
 - other key facilities, such as halls, fuel and food outlets; and

55 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 127.

56 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 126.

57 Bruce Esplin, *Interim Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003, Victorian Bushfires*, August 2003, p. 9.

- accurate and readable maps.⁵⁸
- 5.62 A local community fire plan is a bottom up approach to fire management, which involves local rural communities in planning how best to deal with local and bigger fire scenarios. A local fire plan can also put in place some basic principles of operation, which can be documented for incident management system teams to use, and to establish who are the leaders in the local community, and how best to make use of all people in a local community. These community fire plans can be integrated into broader risk management plans. When this level of local planning is incorporated into a regional risk management, they provide a useful level of detail, which can bear fruit in a fire incident, whatever its size. They also provide the link between local knowledge and its use in the development of appropriate fire strategies in major fire incidents.
- 5.63 An example of this approach was put in place in the Blue Mountains along the eastern section of Bells Line Road between Mount Tomah and Kurrajong Heights. In the development of this plan time was spent on the ground documenting all the necessary information to support a community fire plan with the local bushfire brigade captains, and at the same time informing the community through local meetings what the process of community fire planning was, and how the community can become involved. The results of the community fire planning were annotated onto maps and information on individual landowners and their assets were entered into a database, including the availability and suitability of private owned water sources.⁵⁹
- 5.64 The interim report of the Esplin inquiry states that both the CFA and DSE have agreed that the criticisms are valid, acknowledging that Incident Controllers at the Incident Control Centres did not always give due weight to local knowledge, experience and data from the fire ground to maximise strategic management and appropriately support tactical fire fighting at the fire front.⁶⁰ The interim report goes on to recommend that the CFA modify its operational procedures to ensure that local knowledge is flexibly and appropriately incorporated into tactical and strategic fire management and that the CFA continues to

58 Nic Gellie, *Report on: Causal and Risk Factors, Fuel Management, including Grazing and the Application of the Australian Incident Management System*, p. 32.

59 Nic Gellie, *Report on: Causal and Risk Factors, Fuel Management, including Grazing and the Application of the Australian Incident Management System*, p. 33.

60 Bruce Esplin, *Interim Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires*, August 2003, p. 10.

work with its brigades to complete the integration of AIIMS-Incident Control System with the group structure. It also recommends that

the DSE reviews procedures to ensure that all Incident Controllers and Incident Management Teams have full access to those Departmental, Parks Victoria or appropriately experienced and qualified community members who can provide local knowledge and expertise in the development of fire suppression strategies and that advice from the fire ground is incorporated into decision making.

- 5.65 The Committee heard evidence relating to the incident control systems in New South Wales where, for example, a comprehensive submission from the Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade called for a 'revision of the Incident Control System (ICS) to review operations, thus allowing for more flexibility and simplification of procedures in strategy planning, etc'.⁶¹ The submission from the Brigade suggested that Incident Management Teams operating from local fire control centres during major bushfires need to listen to the advice of local bush fire officers prior to implementing strategic and tactical decisions on the fire ground. It was stated that this had not occurred effectively during the recent bushfires in New South Wales or the Australian Capital Territory. The submission went onto suggest that:

a supplementary approach could be employed that authorised a suitably qualified and experienced RFS officer (such as a Group Captain or section leader) working on the fire ground, being able to make immediate critical tactical decisions whilst the situations present themselves, rather than via long turn-around times through Fire Control, resulting in losing any window of opportunity.⁶²

- 5.66 Comments were received from other New South Wales fire fighters. One experienced volunteer submitted that:

Most if not all fire ground Division and Sector leaders across the State will confirm that this present management control system has major flaws. This is best highlighted in a large fire, rapidly moving and fluid situation on the fire ground, a situation where we least need things to go wrong. The problems range from poor choice of control lines, delays, lack of appreciation of the situation by the IMT, communication bottlenecks, lost requests, misunderstandings of priorities,

61 Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 204*, p. 1.

62 Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission no. 204*, p. 1.

and the urgency of resource allocation. *It seems a small change but the IMT role should be to support the fire ground commanders not dictating to them.*⁶³

- 5.67 Mr Gray submitted that ‘the time has come to look at a few specialist positions, very experienced in fire fighting operations, to be brought in to direct the fire fighting for large scale fires’.⁶⁴ He told the Committee that:

Talking to some of the people involved in the fire, it became apparent to me that a number of the people in significant control roles were in fact departmental people who had an administrative capacity but did not particularly or necessarily have a long firefighting history, and certainly not at that high level. I believe that the AIIMS model, which we have used for some time, probably now needs to be reviewed. Maybe we do need to go to a model that identifies particular individuals that have the capacity to fight fires as well as manage the fire event. I am suggesting we need some work done that looks more closely at that.⁶⁵

- 5.68 Mr Stephen Walls, a Regional Officer with the CFA of Victoria made a personal submission based on the findings of his Churchill fellowship intensive study tour of the United States of America and the United Kingdom looking at current world trends in training of fire fighters in command and control skills. He suggested that:

The paradox is that the more information available to incident managers, the more difficult their task becomes because of potential information overload. A rapidly developing bushfire has the potential to overload both people and systems very quickly. Consequently a high priority must be placed on decision support systems, and training for personnel in decision making and incident management.⁶⁶

- 5.69 Mr Walls proposed that improvements could be made in the following areas:

- Building links with academic research and use of current material in training programs.
- Establishment of a national level incident management course.

63 Alan Davidson, *Submission no. 69*, p. 1.

64 Graham Gray, *Submission no. 97*, p. 7.

65 Graham Gray, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 July 2003, p. 69.

66 Stephen Walls, *Submission no. 249*, p. 2.

- Effective inclusion of "Lessons Learned from Case Studies", both in formal training programs, and for individual skills maintenance.
- Integration of computer simulation into training for command personnel.
- Inclusion of "Human Factors" issues in training and development for command personnel.
- Incident management exercises that recognise the importance of team interaction to successful incident management (most training programs tend to concentrate upon giving the individual skills and qualifications).
- Skills maintenance programs for command personnel at all levels.
- Allocating sufficient resources to command training. This may be resource intensive, but capital investment (e.g. computer simulators) cannot take the place of appropriate staffing for command training.
- A formal process of analysing effectiveness of individuals and teams following operations and exercises.

5.70 The SCC proposed a way to improve local cooperation with incident control centres. It suggested that a system of regional teams be established with RFS staff employed in the regional centre and in local district offices and then brought together during emergencies to form regional incident teams. It was suggested that this would create a team of incident managers familiar with the local needs of particular geographical areas. The Council also proposed that regional centres of excellence be created to develop the skills of local volunteer incident team members.⁶⁷

5.71 The SCC proposal would help but the problems identified in the evidence to the Committee may need a more comprehensive approach. The Committee notes particularly the submission from one well recognised expert in fire behaviour, Mr David Packham who expressed concern about the replacement of local experienced fire controllers by the incident management system. Mr Packham, who advised the Coroner for the inquiry into the deaths of fire fighters at Linton submitted that:

My examination of Linton caused me to conclude that the IMS may be suitable for a professional agency with a slowly developing situation but for a rapidly moving fire it failed and will continue to fail. It is slow to establish and takes no

67 Shoalhaven City Council, *Submission no. 451*, pp. 2-3.

account of how a community actually works ... It fails to take account of local knowledge, relationships, trust and most importantly networks. It has no place in a community based fast initial attack fire brigade service. Its failure in Linton in my opinion was a major contribution to the placing of firefighters in harms way.⁶⁸

- 5.72 Mr Packham's submission rings true in light of the all the other evidence that the Committee has received about the short comings in the response to the 2003 fires. The evidence clearly establishes that there is a need to review incident control systems, particularly AIIMS and the management of incident control centres. There has to be greater local involvement in decision making, with a greater role for brigade captains, and local fire control officers. There is also a need to stop incident control centres from becoming a forum for inter-agency rivalries.
- 5.73 The Committee believes there is considerable merit in the various proposals and recommendations put forward by the McLeod and Esplin inquiries relating to incident control systems, as far as the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria are concerned, but the Committee believes that the evidence from a wider stage suggests that a national review of incident management is required in light of the experiences of the recent fires in south east Australia.

68 David Packham, *Submission no. 395*, p. 5.

Recommendation 23

5.74 **The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth, through the Council of Australian Governments and the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, initiate an overhaul of the incident management systems used by bush fire agencies in Australia to better incorporate local knowledge and expertise and better understanding of the needs and circumstances of local rural communities in the management of major fire events.**

The Committee also recommends that this overhaul should aim to:

- **refine the system to facilitate setting up simple command and control structures, closer to the fire ground, in tune with the ever changing local fire ground conditions and needs of local communities;**
- **include training of incident management personnel on how to engage and involve local people in planning and management of fires.**
- **establish national models for community fire planning and provide for the integration of community fire plans into incident management; and**
- **include national reporting of the success of incident management of fires as a means of auditing the cost effectiveness or incident operations.**

5.75 AFAC is undertaking a review of AIIMS. The Committee is concerned to ensure that the Australian community gets better outcomes than the devastation of the major fires in 2003. The Committee is also concerned to ensure that the Commonwealth Government does not pay disaster relief funding for possibly avoidable events. The Committee therefore makes this recommendation to ensure that the important lessons of 2003 are learnt and that any review of AIIMS is not limited to some academic revision of the system documentation or is concerned only with compliance with the existing system.

- 5.76 A consultant engaged by the Committee to examine communications matters (see Communications section in chapter 6) observed that very few of the people that commented on communication issues had actually seen a documented 'communications plan' although some agencies do have written plans. The Committee believes that the lack of communication plans or at least the lack of awareness of such plans, needs to be addressed. The planning of communication should be undertaken on a collaborative basis involving all of the agencies likely to be involved.
- 5.77 The Committee notes that unless the basic framework is developed well ahead of an incident, time will be lost or a communications plan will not be promulgated to the people involved at the various levels of the suppression effort. The consultant found that with some jurisdictions not providing input to the inquiry it was difficult to determine the extent of the communication planning problems. There was sufficient evidence to say that at some incidents, communication planning was far from satisfactory.⁶⁹

Recommendation 24

- 5.78 **The Committee recommends that the state and territory bushfire agencies ensure that, on a district basis, communications are addressed within the district operations plans and that the plans are capable of easy adoption to incident action plans.**

Inter-agency cooperation

- 5.79 Any reform of incident control systems is unlikely of itself to result in much improvement to the management of major fires unless the review also takes account of inter-agency cooperation. The trend to increasing inter-state deployment of fire fighting personnel and equipment means that inter-state coordination should also be considered.
- 5.80 The Committee was told that in both New South Wales and Victoria that inter-agency competition, rivalry and lack of cooperation hampered fire fighting during the 2003 fires. In New South Wales for example the Farmers Association submitted that a key complaint put

⁶⁹ Brian Parry and Associates, *Report on Communication Issues*, September 2003, p. 39.

forward by its members was the lack of common effective resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions. This was seen in:

- Ambiguities between agencies as to which are responsible for a fire or for hazard reduction burnings.
- Within agency confusion as to the zone or regions responsible.
- Inability to gain clear permission for private actions to prevent fire spread from any agency involved in the fire ground management and.
- Poor recognition and use of local knowledge to set suppression priorities, back burns and the establishment of emergency access tracks.⁷⁰

5.81 Fire fighting crews from the NPWS in areas adjacent to Kosciuszko National Park were said to be in asset protection mode outside the park but there was 'little co-operation and co-ordination with the local volunteer crews. This extended to the national parks crews operating on a different radio frequency.⁷¹ The General Manager of the Thredbo resort, which was under severe threat from fires in the park expressed confusion about the respective roles of various agencies:

we are a bit unsure about who looks after bushfire management now. We have the New South Wales Fire Brigades, we have the management side of the Rural Fire Service –and I would particularly separate the management side of the Rural Fire Service from the day-to-day bushfire brigades – we have the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and since December 2001 we have had Planning NSW ...

there was a lot of confusion at the time in regard to who was really responsible ... we are in a quite unique situation where there is a declared fire district, in relation to which we give funds to the urban firefighters. They were always on hand, but at the same time in terms of some of these decisions we ended up having a committee of 12 people involved in making a decision about back-burning or whatever process was going to go on. It took a lot of time, and there were mixed messages and no clear line of communication.⁷²

70 NSW Farmers Association, *Submission no. 318*, p. 24.

71 Peter Rankin, *Submission no. 421*, p. 3.

72 Kim Clifford, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 July 2003, pp. 71–72.

5.82 The situation in north east Victoria was reportedly just as confusing with agencies said to be in competition, resulting in delay:

But what happened – and I am only talking about the Buffalo River side – was that DSE, National Parks, CFA and Primary Industries were all wanting to control this fire, plus the Hancock’s to a degree. So you virtually had four government departments all wanting to control this lovely, big fire.

All these government departments could not work together. If one has to wait an hour to get permission from the other one, what is going on? All the CFA volunteers want to do is get in, put the fire out and go home. It cost most of us one month’s work. We got nothing done for a month, but we join the CFA to put fires out and – like some of the others have said – not to get tied up in all the bureaucracy that goes on. There seemed to be a lot of bitching between the government departments.⁷³

5.83 The VAFI reported similar concerns arising from an apparent lack of coordination between DSE and CFA elements involved in the fire suppression effort. It was said that during the fires, participants in the fire effort reported examples of impediments created by public land managers not cooperating with fire fighters, particularly in national parks:

- In a Mullundung State Forest, a dozer operator was stopped by an officer from crossing the road into a flora and fauna reserve to follow the fire, and was only allowed in one hour later, by which time the fire had escaped.
- Parks' back burning fire trails have in many cases only allowed to be one dozer blade in width—compared to at least two in State forests – allowing the fires to jump, and creating unsafe situations for personnel.
- Operators were not permitted to cross streams or to put in side cuts again allowing fires to get away.⁷⁴

73 Ian Johnson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 July 2003, pp. 68–69.

74 Victorian Association of Forest Industries, *Submission no. 212*, p. 10.

5.84 It was also said in Victoria that the CFA was sometimes deliberately left out of the loop by DSE incident controllers.⁷⁵ However, there was also evidence to suggest that sometimes even DSE crews on the fire line were not totally in the picture:

It seems to me that DSE controllers on the fire line were not trusted by ICC in at Ovens, because they would make decisions, call in to do something and they were told, 'Wait out and we'll get back to you.' It could be four, five, six hours before they ever got back to them and it was far too late to do anything. There was a breakdown in the chain of command somewhere.⁷⁶

5.85 The IFA believes that on the whole, resource-sharing between agencies in the states and territories is necessary because the decline in basic fire fighting resources and that it is being reasonably well done in Australia. The Institute noted however that antagonism between agencies is a factor in some areas. It was suggested that this would be hard to reduce in a climate where there is overall lack of agreed objectives.⁷⁷ The Committee agrees with these sentiments and sees that there is a need to look further at agency integration, coordination and cooperation in bushfire matters.

Land managers as fire control authorities

5.86 Following the fires that burnt into Canberra in January RFS brigade captains from the mountain areas adjacent to the Australian Capital Territory submitted to the Committee that one agency should be responsible for the management of wildfire situation across all land tenures.⁷⁸

75 Russel Smith, *Transcript of Evidence*, 28 July 2003, p. 59.

76 Tony Menz, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 July 2003, p. 63.

77 Institute of Foresters of Australia, *Submission no. 295*, p. 20.

78 Tim Webb, *Submission no. 179*, p. 2 and Peter Smith, *Submission no. 378*, p. 9.

5.87 Evidence from brigade captains else where in New South Wales indicated similar sentiments. Representatives of the Wilberforce Brigade noted that arrangements for bushfire fighting in New South Wales are such that land management authorities have a unique role in managing fires at the initial (class 1) level and it is not until a fire is declared a class 2 fire or greater that the RFS has a much greater say in the coordination of that fire management. The Committee was told that once a fire has reached the class 2 category:

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.⁷⁹

5.88 The Captain of the Wilberforce Brigade told the Committee 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.⁸⁰

5.89 Mr Peter Webb noted that although the NPWS in New South Wales is in fact poorly resourced for fire control, it manages very large areas of land and relies on the RFS to help them control fires.⁸¹ He suggested that this arrangement would be more effective if:

the Rural Fire Service personnel were in fact given the authority and were tasked and if the fire control operation were set up with the Rural Fire Service in control. We found in some cases that the Rural Fire Service was in control. Locally (the Brindabella fires), the Rural Fire Service FCO was the incident controller with the National Parks as deputy. That did not occur for a few days, mind you, and that was part of the delay. In Kosciuszko, the National Parks and Wildlife Service was in fact the incident controller and the RFS was the deputy. I think in that particular case the Rural Fire Service deputy incident controller ... had far superior knowledge in the local area and fire control and he really should have been in control the whole time.⁸²

79 Michael Scholtz, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 July 2003 (Richmond), p. 2.

80 Michael Scholtz, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 July 2003 (Richmond), p. 3.

81 Peter Webb, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 July 2003, p. 4.

82 Peter Webb, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 July 2003, p. 4.

- 5.90 At a broader level the NAFI referred to the conflicts between the policies and practices of the range of authorities involved in fire suppression and land management that in some cases lead to the obstruction of fire fighting activities. These policies can be underpinned by regulation:
- There are also a number of direct regulatory impediments to sound fire management. These are usually related to 'conservation' policy arrangements such as ... rejection of emergency earthworks and backburning operations. During the Victorian fires there were reported instances of actual obstruction of the activities of fire fighters by officials purporting to implement such regulations.⁸³
- 5.91 The Association submitted that where regulations are generally exempted from compliance with sound fire management there should be emergency overriding arrangements in place. The Executive Director of the Association told the Committee that in New South Wales the organisation with ultimate authority should be the RFS and that the NPWS should be accountable to the RFS in terms of fire management issues, and that similar arrangements ought to apply in other states.⁸⁴
- 5.92 Mr Athol Hodgson reflected on the Stretton report of the 1939 fires and quoted the report:
- No person or department can be allowed to use the forest in such a way as to create a state of danger to others. If conformity with this rule cannot be brought about, the offender must be put out of the forest, or, in the case of a public department, its authority curtailed or enlarged ...⁸⁵
- 5.93 Mr Hodgson believes that the approach subsequently adopted in Victoria failed to meet this test in that it provided that: 'in any national park or protected public land proper and sufficient work for the prevention of fire shall be undertaken only by agreement with the person or body having the management and control thereof ...' In his written submission he said of the division of responsibility and the conflict in Victoria that: 'A law that places on one agency, the duty to carry out proper and sufficient work for the prevention and

83 National Association of Forest Industries, *Submission no. 420*, p. 6.

84 Kate Carnell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 14 July 2003, p. 29.

85 Athol Hodgson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 July 2003, p. 77.

suppression of fires in every state forest and national park, and allows another agency to compromise that duty is a bad law.⁸⁶

- 5.94 The NAFI proposed that a single service be created in each state for bush fire management and control purposes and that these agencies provide services to all public and private land managers. It was suggested by the Association that single unified fire management agencies would end post event blame shifting, allow for more effective accountability, and allow transparency in funding outcomes.⁸⁷
- 5.95 The Committee examined the approach taken in Tasmania and found much to recommend. It does not involve a single agency model but it does require much more integration and cooperation between agencies than appears to be common in some other states. The approach in Tasmania was outlined in the Forestry Tasmania submission:

In Tasmania, long duration, multiple tenure firefighting events are managed by combined Incident Management Teams (IMT), coordinated through a Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (MAC). This process is underpinned by an Inter-Agency Fire Management Protocol between the Tasmania Fire Service, Forestry Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Service ... These cooperative arrangements ... include fire management planning, training, detection, research and representation at national and international meetings. The result has been an improved response to large bushfire incidents with better coordination and use of specialist resources from each agency. The overall unit costs to the State for the existing levels of preparedness are reduced, compared to the case where separate approaches are taken by individual land managers and the statutory fire authority.⁸⁸

86 Athol Hodgson, *Submission no. 450*, p. 11.

87 National Association of Forest Industries, *Submission no. 420*, pp. 6-7.

88 Forestry Tasmania, *Submission no. 173*, p. 6.

5.96 The Tasmanian system developed because there are extensive areas of public forests being managed by different agencies and extensive areas of forested privately owned land under various forms of land tenure. Mr Evan Rolley of Forestry Tasmania explained that:

It has been that very simple but profound point that has led Tasmania to develop what is unique in the country, and that is this interagency fire management protocol, which basically puts the fire service, the parks service and forestry together in a single unified group ... there is a seamlessness about all of the activity, be it the planning activity, the training activity or the equipment purchases ... Quite frankly, I do not think we could have dealt with the issues we dealt with in the last season if it had not been for that very seamless activity.⁸⁹

5.97 Mr Rolley provided an example of how this seamlessness works:

A fire is reported ... or it has been picked up as part of a detection system, either from a tower or from our aerial detection system ... the whole system is completely unified, so we do not have a fire service and a parks and a Forestry Tasmania aircraft. One aircraft flies over this landscape and reports the fires in a coordinated way with the tower system that supports it. So as soon as that is reported, the closest available resource goes to the fire immediately and commences an assessment of the appropriate suppression strategy and commences that work.

That information then is relayed on so that it is centrally coordinated through the fire service. The Tasmanian Fire Service incident control room will have information about all of the fire activity. That can be reinforced with either fire service or parks or forestry resources as required. Depending on the scale of the fire, you have different levels of resourcing and different organisational structure, but that all comes through this ICS system ... This is not an issue of what uniform badge or braid you have on; it is about the expertise that is available on the site, the team of people assembled and the tasks assigned to those team members. It could easily be a forestry person with fire service people working to him or it could be the other way around. It could be a forestry team working to an incident controller who is a fire service or a parks and wildlife officer.⁹⁰

89 Evan Rolley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 1 August 2003, p. 2.

90 Evan Rolley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 1 August 2003, p. 5.

- 5.98 In Tasmania the role of the Multi Agency Coordination Group is to monitor the state wide fire situation and appoint incident management teams. It also assesses the outcomes from each season, using a formalised and detailed assessment process, and develops strategies to address weaknesses and opportunities for improvement. The importance of this structure was explained by Mr Rolley:
- It is driven down from the top level by the State Fire Management Council, which is chaired independently but which has on it as a statutory body all of the major stakeholders involved in fire in Tasmania. Again, its leadership comes from the fire service. It has Forestry Tasmania, the Parks and Wildlife Service, local government, representatives of the TFGA, the private land-holding, farming community and local government. It has a wide canvas. It meets quite regularly, certainly every six to eight weeks, depending on the issues. It meets and reviews all of the significant issues. People identify initiatives and then work by sharing resources together.⁹¹
- 5.99 The Committee believes that the Tasmanian approach is more appropriate than the development of a single agency approach to all rural fire management issues. As indicated above however the Committee is concerned to see that more effective and transparent arrangements are put in place. The Committee believes also that it is in the national interest for the review of incident management systems proposed above to look at more than just structures and process within incident control centres. There is a need for the states and territories to review and improve the coordination between the various agencies within each state that have an involvement in fire suppression.
- 5.100 It appears to the Committee that the adoption of the inter-service protocol in Tasmania has been instrumental in the development of a culture of cooperation that is focussed entirely on controlling wildfires regardless of who owns and manages the land. This compares to the culture in New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory where there is still an element of competition and, at times, confusion and conflict, over 'ownership' of fires.

91 Evan Rolley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 1 August 2003, p. 2.

Recommendation 25

- 5.101 **The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth seek to ensure that the Council of Australian Governments seek the adoption by all states and territories of multi-agency protocols and agreements for fire management, similar to those in force in Tasmania.**

Coordination when fires cross borders

- 5.102 There has been a trend towards greater inter-state deployment of fire personnel in recent years and the protocols to make this work seem to be increasingly effective. This success however seems to be dependent on visiting crews being placed under the direction of the receiving state's authorities. There seems to be less adequate arrangements in place where fires straddle state and territory borders as occurred in the high country and on the borders of the Australian Capital Territory and the two jurisdictions make independent responses.
- 5.103 There were problems on occasion when fire fighters crossed state and territory borders, and even across municipal borders. The owners of Tom Groggin were in a good position to observe the effectiveness of inter-agency and cross border fire fighting efforts. They found the chains of command between the RFS and the NPWS were 'confused and unclear'. They also found that position on the New South Wales and Victorian border meant that they:
- suffered from a lack of a coordinated approach. Depending on where the flames where at any time we fluctuated between being the responsibility of one control centre or another with the inevitable consequence of confusion and chaos. Effective progress in protecting our property was only made when we took control of our destiny.⁹²

92 Trevor Davis, *Submission no. 376*, p. 3.

5.104 The IFA referred to the growing tendency for fire fighters to move inter-state to provide assistance to each other, and noted this is a good thing, but suggested that:

the efficiency of interstate movements would be improved with further standardisation of equipment, communications and incident control systems.⁹³

5.105 Other submissions referred to communication problems and a lack of coordination when units were deployed, or sought to assist, across state and territory borders. This seemed most evident in relation to fires on the western border of the Australian Capital Territory:

One of the important shortcomings that we have identified in our communication was the poor communications and coordination that existed between the ACT and New South Wales fire authorities. We believe that that was a significant contributing factor.⁹⁴

5.106 It seems, in part, that the New South Wales authorities did not understand the requirements of the Australian Capital Territory and on 18 January some units were transited through areas in dire peril to take standby asset protection in areas that were no longer under threat. Mr Alan Holding, the leader of a task force from Harden deployed by the New South Wales RFS to assist with fires in the Canberra region told the Committee that his group and others were sent to do property protection in areas to the west of Canberra which by that time was not under threat. His group transited through and later returned to areas of suburban Canberra where houses were still catching alight from ember attack. He was concerned about the failure to call out his group before 18 January, that is before the fire developed to an uncontrollable fire storm. He was also concerned about the apparent lack of coordination between Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales authorities in making the best use of the resources available. He noted that such problems with major fires were not usual but arose in this instance because two jurisdictions were involved:

In most of my recent trips to section 44 incidents the deployment of firefighting resources have been good however the Canberra fire was in my view looking at it from a taskforce leaders position disastrous.⁹⁵

93 Institute of Foresters of Australia, *Submission no. 295*, p. 20.

94 Harold Adams, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 July 2003, p. 79.

95 Alan Holding, *Submission no. 28*, p. 3.

5.107 Mr Holding raised a number of questions about the deployment of his group:

- Why did it take two and a quarter hours from our arrival at Yarrowlumla Fire Control till the taskforce arrived at Fairlight property?
- Why did the taskforce travel through the suburbs of Holder and Duffy, which were still burning, to a property, which did not need protection?
- Why was the Taskforce allowed to wait in the suburb of Holder for one and half hours and not be tasked?⁹⁶

5.108 The delays in deploying the Harden task force are further detailed in a log of events attached to Mr Holding's submission. His task force returned to the Canberra suburbs when they ran out of water and it had become apparent that they could do more useful work protecting houses there. They sought specific tasking but were told by the RFS that discussions were being held with the Australian Capital Territory fire control. After an hour and a half no instructions were forthcoming and the task force returned to Harden.⁹⁷

5.109 Authorities in the Australian Capital Territory seemed, at that time, unaware of assistance available from New South Wales or were either unable or unwilling to use such resources:

This is anecdotal, but a number of my friends and extended family were firefighters involved in the Canberra fires and the fires in this area in 2002-03, and we concluded there were resources available that were not being used. Whether Canberra declined or did not know how to access the resources or whatever else, there did not appear to be – if not the will – the procedures in place to declare what assets were available. We had crewed tankers with fresh crews sitting here in Cooma ready to go to the ACT. Terry tells me there were crews in Tallaganda Shire who, when they heard about what happened, of their own volition were ready to jump on tankers and go across there. I cannot discern what happened; it may well have been that the higher commands from the ACT made some pretty bum guesses about how that fire was developing so that nothing happened.⁹⁸

96 Alan Holding, *Submission no. 28*, p. 3.

97 Alan Holding, *Submission no. 28*, Attachment.

98 John Snell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 10 July 2003, p. 39.

5.110 The Committee notes that there was a lot of effective and well appreciated cross border assistance. The McLeod inquiry noted that many of the submissions that it received referred to difficulties with operational communications and a lack of coordination between New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory authorities.⁹⁹ Calls were made for greater coordination and cross-training between New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory bushfire units and for the development of a common bushfire control plan. However, the McLeod report also details the considerable assistance provided by New South Wales. The New South Wales authorities attempted to deal fires that were within their own area of jurisdiction, but threatening the Australian Capital Territory. They also provided direct support to the Australian Capital Territory:

- A liaison officer from NSW Rural Fire Service was stationed at Queanbeyan for extended periods during the emergency and on 18 January, the NSW Rural Fire Commissioner dispatched an Assistant Commissioner who visited ESB.
- On 18 January, as a result of liaison between staff at Queanbeyan and Curtin, a number of aircraft operated out of the Yarrowlumla Fire Control District as the McIntyre Hut fire spread into the ACT. The Rural Fire Service Commissioner diverted an Erickson air crane from Jindabyne to Canberra, which was directed at property protection.
- Extensive GIS support in the form of line scans from aircraft, mapping products, and fire plots, was provided by the NSW Rural Fire Service, both during and after the fire.
- At the request of the ACT Fire Brigade, the NSW Fire Brigade provided a task force comprising four urban pumpers, two support units carrying portable pumps, and two command vehicles. It arrived in Canberra during the evening of 18 January.
- On 16 January, the Ambulance Service of New South Wales was formally asked to provide assistance. Two crews arrived on 17 January and on 18 January a liaison officer and further crews arrived. A NSW aero-medical helicopter also provided support to the ACT, releasing the Snowy Hydro Southcare helicopter to continue firebombing.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 75 – refers to such problems as ‘commonly reported in submissions.’

¹⁰⁰ Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 59.

- 5.111 Mr McLeod noted that the Australian Capital Territory Bushfire Service and the New South Wales NPWS have a cross-border agreement on fire management and suppression but there is no similar documented agreement between the Australian Capital Territory Bushfire Service and the New South Wales RFS. Where support has been provided it depended more on personal contacts and continuing relationships rather than formalised plans and agreements.¹⁰¹
- 5.112 The McLeod report noted also that over time, a good relationship has built up between the Australian Capital Territory Bushfire Service and the New South Wales RFS, and an atmosphere of mutual support exists. It has been common for one service to provide support and assistance to the other: 'However, the arrangements have never been formalised'¹⁰².
- 5.113 The Committee notes developments in the state border area of western Victoria and south east South Australia where a joint working party of the South Australian Volunteer Brigades Association and the Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association has been working to identify and address the issues that arise across state borders. In this instance the volunteer fire fighters have taken the lead in responding to these problems but have done so in a national context and have called for state fire and emergency services to adopt a national approach and to develop a national strategy.
- 5.114 The Committee notes also the guidelines for cooperation between Victorian and South Australian fire suppression organisations in the southern border area promulgated by the Southern Border Fire Coordination Association. This is a comprehensive document that covers a wide range of matters from legal issues to the allocation of radio frequencies, and deals with all aspects of fire suppression. The Southern Border Fire Coordination Association is a body formed by representatives of organisations with fire suppression responsibilities and capabilities, and organisations with statutory responsibilities in the area.¹⁰³

101 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 161.

102 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 161.

103 Southern Border Fire Coordination Association, *Guidelines for co-operation between Victorian and South Australian organisations on fire suppression in the southern border area*, p. 2.

5.115 The Committee believes that there is great value in informal personal relationships. The lack of such relationships and the distrust between incident controllers and fire ground captains appears to have been an impediment in some situations during the 2003 fires in several areas in south east Australia. However, there is also a need for more formalised regional responses to cross border fire events, as has been developed for the southern border area. Mr McLeod suggested that the best arrangements for managing fire suppression and providing the necessary specialist support would be based on a larger regional approach. He envisaged that the initiatives that should be pursued are part of planning and preparing for an integrated, regional approach include:

- Greater opportunities for joint exercises and training.
- Closer cooperation in the coordination and planning of responses to major bushfire emergencies.
- A stronger sense of 'jointness' in managing large regional firefighting operations.
- Greater cooperation in the deployment of equipment and personnel.
- Closer links in the development of communication protocols.
- Adoption of common incident control arrangements.
- Agreement on common operational terminology.¹⁰⁴

Most of these principles appear to be embodied in the guidelines adopted by the Southern Border Fire Coordination Association.

5.116 The Committee agrees with the proposal from the South Australian and Victorian volunteers for a national approach to issues facing volunteers when responding to cross border incidents. The formation of the Southern Border Fire Coordination Association and the promulgation of guidelines seem to be necessary and worthwhile developments. It appears that volunteer fire fighters involved in implementing those guidelines have identified a number of issues that affect them and which need clarification. The need to consider issues related to inter-state cooperation and coordination arises also with more formal deployment of resources to assist another state deal with major emergencies within the boundaries of that state. In this

104 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, August 2003, p. 162.

regard the Committee notes that the discussion paper that has arisen from the South Australian and Victorian joint working party states, in relation to major interstate deployment, that such deployment:

has presented a number of challenges in areas of training on unfamiliar equipment, compatibility of equipment, access to water, terminology, etc. In general these deployments have proved successful, however improvements can always be made and lessons learnt from these deployments should also be considered in a national perspective.¹⁰⁵

Recommendation 26

- 5.117 The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia initiate a process involving Australasian Fire Authorities Council and the Australian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigades Association to review the coordination of cross border fire fighting arrangements and inter-state deployment of fire fighting resources. The review should specifically consider training on the full range of equipment and procedures likely to be encountered, standardisation of equipment and procedures, communication and the provision of information about local characteristics such as access to water.**

¹⁰⁵ Discussion paper by Rex Hall, chairperson Joint Working party South Australian Volunteer Fire Brigades Association and Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association.

