



6-4-03

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Dear Sir,

SUBMISSION

I feel I should send a few thoughts to the above committee. It is in two sections the first is brief headings of my thoughts and section two a more detailed description. Please read a least the first section.

Firstly I should say that I was not either involved or effected by the recent fires in the N.E. or N.S.W., but I am a country person, a farmer and a member of the C.F.A. for over 50 years.

My family came to Steiglitz, a gold mining area in the Brisbane Rangers about 35 Km North of Geelong in 1854, and my branch has lived within 6 Km. of it ever since. The family took up land and began farming in 1880, I still own that land, which has about 6 Km. of boundary with the Brisbane National Park. My father farmed it all his life, also helped fight bush fires from about 1920, and was a foundation member of the Anakie Bush Fire Brigade which was reformed in 1938 and was active to the late 1970's. I have been a C.F.A. member for over 50 years, including a Captain for 14 years. I have said this to show I am experienced in the land and fire fighting not just a urban blow in as many are that make comments about these things these days..

I think the following are problems with the fire fighting system that must be looked into.

SECTION ONE

THE WAY THE GREEN MOVEMENT DECTATES UNWORKABLE RULES, IS ONE OF THE WORST PROBLEMS. THEY DO NOT WANT ANY REMOVAL OF TREES OR NATIVE PLANTS AT ALL. JUST LEAVE A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN. LOOK AT THE RECIENT FIRES.

THE LACK OF FOREST FIRE BRAKES AND FOREST ACESS ROADS MAKES FOREST FIRES MUCH HARDER TO FIGHT.

IF THE BACK BURNING AT FIRES IS NOT CONTROLLED OR PATROLED PROPERLY THE BACK BURN WILL TURN INTO ANOTHER FIRE FRONT--A BIGGER FIRE. THIS HAS OFTEN HAPPENED LATELY AND MUST BE STOPED.

FUEL REDUCTION BURNS OFTEN ARE NOT BEING PUT OUT, OR PATROLED TILL SAFE AND SO ALLOWING THEM TO ESCAPE AND BECOME A FIRE

FUEL REDUCTION BURNS ARE BEING HELD WHEN CONDITIONS ARE NOT SAFE, ONLY BURN IN THE LATE AUTUMN AND AFTER RAIN NOT THE SPRING

THE LACK OF FUEL REDUCTION BURNING IN FORESTS AND ON ROADS HAMPER FIRE FIGHTING

THE LACK OF CLEARING AROUND HOUSES IN THE BUSH AREAS IS DANGEROUS. HOUSES SHOULD HAVE A CLEARED AREA UP TO 60 METERS WIDE AROUND THEM, EXPECIALLY IN STRINGY BARK OR MESMAITE BUSH AND ALL SCRUB REMOVED IN THAT AREA.

THE WAY THE C.F.A. HAS BEEN ALTERED IN THE LAST FEW YEARS HAS IN SOME WAYS MADE IT LOSE MANY EXPERIENCED MEMBERS. THEY HAVE BEEN REPLACED OFTEN BY NOVICES WHO HAVE HAD LITTLE EXPERIENCE. THIS OFTEN SHOWS UP IN BIG FIRES

THE C.F.A. FIRE CONTROL HQ." VIC FIRE" STAFF OFTEN DO NOT KNOW MANY COUNTRY AREAS AND THEY ARE OUT OF TOUCH WITH THE COUNTRY PEOPLE

SOME C.F.A. STAFF HAVE LITTLE PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE OR COMMON SENSE

SOME C.F.A. TRAINING NOT ALWAYS MOST EFFECTIENT -- TOO MUCH IS READ OUT OF A BOOK. SEE FIRST AIDE [SEC. 2]

THE DOWN TURN OF FARMING HAS CAUSED THE LOSS OF MANY PRIVATE FIRE UNITS AND THEIR EXPERIENCED OWNERS IN MANY AREAS. THEY ARE VERY VALUABLE IN A LARGE FIRE EXPECIALLY AS THEY WILL KNOW THEIR AREA. OFTEN THE C.F.A. DOES NOT APPEAR TO WANT PRIVATE UNITS AT A FIRE, WHY?

CAN TOO MUCH TRAINING MAKE THRILL SEEKERS TURN INTO ARSONISTS? SOME OF THE TRAINING COULD MAKE FIRE FIGHTING SEEM A VERY EXCITING ADVENTURE. IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT SOME FIREMEN WILL LIGHT FIRES JUST TO BE ABLE TO GO TO A FIRE.

FAR TOO MANY FIRES ARE STARTED BY ARSONISTS. THERE HAVE BEEN POSSIBLY UP TO 100 ROAD SIDE FIRES LIT WITHIN 25 TO 30 Kms. OF HERE SINCE 1995. THE WORST ONE BURNT 1000 HAS. THREE WERE LIT WITH IN 1/2 HOUR LATE ONE NIGHT. HOW MANY WERE LIT IN THE N.S.W FIRES?

ARSONISTS ARE BEING LET OFF WITH TOO LIGHT OF A SENTENCE, OR NO SENTENCE AT ALL. THERE MUST BE MUCH HIGHER SENTANCES -- BIG FINES OR GOAL TERMS, NOT JUST A SLAP ON THE WRIST.

SOME BRIGADES ARE GETTING UP TO ABOUT 50% OF CALL OUTS THAT ARE NOT NECESSARY . AFTER A WHILE MEMBERS LOOSE INTEREST IN TURNING OUT UNLESS THEY KNOW THE CALL IS NECESSARY

IN SOME BRIGADES THERE IS OFTEN A LACK OF MEMBERS TO CREW TRUCKS DURING WORK HOURS, SO NO TURN OUT.

WE MUST BE ALLOWED TO SLASH OR BURN ROAD SIDES AND RAILWAY LINES TO MAKE FIRE BRAKES. SOME ARE TRYING TO STOP IT BECAUSE OF " SIGNIFICANT NATIVE VEGETATION" AREAS. NATIVE VEGETATION WILL NOT STOP A FIRE.

ARE THERE TOO MANY "EXPERTS" OUT THERE TELLING US ALL WHAT TO DO? HOW MUCH DO THEY KNOW ANY HOW?

IT MUST BE REMEMBERED THAT WE WILL SOON GET A BUMPER SPRING, RESULT GRASS AND STUBBLE AS HIGH AS THE FENCES. THEN GET A HOT DRY AND WINDY 6 WEEKS IN JANURARY AND FEB. THEN A HEAT WAVE --40 DEGREES AND 80 TO 100 Kms. WINDS. FIRES WILL START EVERY WHERE --WILL WE BE ABLE TO HANDLE THEM ? NO. DO NOT FORGET ASH WEDNESDAY 1983 ALSO 1977, 1944, 1939 THEY WILL HAPPEN AGAIN.

SECTION TWO

Since the National Park came to this area we have seen more and more bush access tracks being closed, fire wood removal banned, and little being done about fire breaks. In many parts of the bush there is a large build up of litter. There is also many more urban people coming into the area which must make a bigger risk.

I must point out that I am 100% in favour of fuel reduction burns in the forest. In fact I have asked that certain areas near my fence be burnt because of the build up of rubbish.

It must be pointed out that the burns must only be done when it is safe, **NOT IN LATE SPRNG** because stumps can smoulder under ground for weeks. I know of one stump that burnt for

about 4 weeks after the She Oaks fire in 1982. Also spring is the time birds nest and many plants flower and seed, so that time is out, especially if the weather is dry. The best time is the late autumn AFTER A GOOD FALL OF RAIN. After rain the bush may not burn as fiercely but would not get away as easily, and would not stay alight for days.

It must be a rule that the outside 50 meters or more MUST BE PUT OUT completely and be patrolled for say a week.

The D.S.E worry us the way they conduct their fuel reduction burns.

On 7th April 2003 there was a fire in the Cobaw State Forest which is in the Cobaw Range between Woodend and Lancefield. I understand from the media the D.S.E. had a burnoff in the forest on Friday, on Sunday night it was left unattended, the wind rose and the fire relit and off it went.

At 6.30 p.m. on the 7th. on the C.F.A. web site they said there was 460 personnel, 46 tankers and 3 aircraft at the scene.

About 4 p.m. that afternoon a strike team was sent from the Leopold, Mannerim Ocean Grove area [S.E. of Geelong] to Woodend for that fire. From Ocean Grove to Woodend would be app. 130 K.Ms. The task force returned app. 24 hours later. I believe the fire burnt app. 1200 H.A.s.

The D.N.R.E. held a fuel reduction burn in Steiglitz in the Brisbane Rangers, on Monday the 8th of April 2002. Fire Restrictions were still on in that area at that time.

I went past the area on Wednesday the 10th. about 4 p.m. and it was still alight.

I must point out that we had, had a very dry period for the last four months to then, having had up to that time only 76 mm. of rain when the average is about 178 m.m.

The burn off covered about 2 Ha. or less. I walked around the edge and counted at least 20 lots of smoke coming up with in about one chain of the edge. There was a big old hollow stump about 2 ft. in diameter burning below ground, with in 4 m. of the east edge.

Possibly the worst was two patches of smouldering leaf mould. One near the north east corner was app. 3 m. in diameter. The other was app. 7m. by 18m. on the edge on south west corner. Much of this area the leaf mould was smouldering up to app. three inches deep. Also there were some stumps and dead Grass Tree butts burning. Note this was on the south west corner the worst area if a strong north wind had blown up. There was a Force Four or at times stronger wind for most of the morning of Friday the 12th.

There was not even a rake hoe trail put around the fire.

The fire had burnt about half way up about 75% of the Stringy Bark trees. A week later most of the leaves were dead on 50 to 75 % of these trees .

Many people complain that the D.S.E. people often knock off and go home at 4 or 5 o'clock, and do not patrol there burns.

I feel there should fire breaks put through the bush either on the north of a east -- west road or west of a north south road at regular intervals. If they were say 30 to 50 meters wide, and not too many trees were left [none would be best] the area should then be slashed every spring. Then fire trucks could move around easily. If another strip perhaps 50 to 100 meters beside it was burnt often would make it much safer. By doing this there would be places where we could attack a fire.

Many of us feel there is too much BACK BURNING done to try and stop fires. Back burns are all right if they can be controlled and not let get away. They must also be patrolled. I am told that many back burns became major fires in the NE and N.S.W. This is very bad and must be stopped

One of the reasons I feel I should send a submission in is the result of what I read in a letter on page 16 of the Weekly Times of April 9th 2003. Under the heading of "FREE FIRE INQUIRY IS A MUST" is and I quote " Premier Bracks, with his insensitive remark that he would listen to " experts and not C.F.A. volunteers" I think this points out what many of us know has been happening since about 1996-97 when Governments began " FIXING THE C.F.A"

We used to be controlled by local people who knew the area, the people and the way we operated. Now we are told by Vic Fire what to do. their operators are perhaps over 100 Kms. away in Melbourne, often they do not understand country problems or how we think and operate and usually DO NOT KNOW THE AREA WHERE THE FIRE IS, possibly have never been in the area in their life.

This shows how many of the modern C.F.A. staff have not had practical experience, or have no common sense. When our last fire truck was delivered, some of us noticed it was about 20 cms. higher than the truck it was replacing and 62 cms. [app. 2 feet] higher than our brigade tanker. It was mentioned that it would not go along many bush tracks. The answer was you do not go along bush tracks, you get a Helicopter. What does a helicopter cost, \$1500 plus a hour or more and perhaps takes 30 to 60 minutes to get there. Naturally we do not go in a bush track in front of a large fire, but what if it is a small lightning strike or camp fire we would have it out before the helicopter got there.

I do not want you to think I am against training, if it is done right. When I was captain I started either the first or second regular monthly training session in the group in August 1988, it is still going. We tried to do practical things to keep the members interest.

Later the C.F.A. said EVERYBODY had to do a Minimum Skills course. Many practical experienced men felt it was unnecessary to do it in some brigades, as a result we lost a great amount of experience. These people have been replaced by new people who have little experience, and often people fresh out from urban areas who do not know the country. Some brigades are finding it hard to get a crew for their truck during working hours, and can not always turn out their truck.

FIRST AIDE Some of the training may not have always been the best. This is an example. I went to a First Aide course recently for the brigade. It was to be over 6 or 7 nights. I missed the first one, the last one was cancelled, we had the exam on what should have been the second last night. There were about 34 multiple choice questions, we were told about 3 answers, I was last to finish, was helped with 2 or 3 still only got I think 19 right a result I felt I was not capable to do first aide but we all passed, was that effective?

A bad problem in many members opinion is the number of times a brigade gets paged to go to a call but it turns out we are not wanted. From my records, out of the last 123 turn outs our brigade has had, 50% of them have been false alarms or we were turned back before we got there.

I realise mobile phones are often to blame, some one see something, reports it with out checking what it is or where it is. They often do not know where they are. Many members are getting sick of it and some are waiting to make sure they are needed or staying at home instead of going.

Some of us are suggesting the C.F.A. should run short information advs. on the TV. to tell the public to check and try to make sure we are needed. It is very annoying to be repeatedly called away from our work for nothing. some of us do have work to do.

I heard on the A.B.C. [30/4/03] part of a interview with a man from the N.E. [I think his name was Simon Patton or similar] saying about some of their problems, including refusal of food that was not made in a certified kitchen. Also a bulldozer was offered by a local but was refused because it did not comply with the D.S.E. rules, it was too big.

The next day I heard a reply from the minister Mr A. Haermeyer, M.P. He seemed to dismiss all complaints. His main thought seemed to be no one was killed, he seemed to dismiss the fact that all the damage was done, houses burnt, farms burnt, animals killed, forest burnt and the huge cost including loss of firemen's wages. He could not seem to see there were any real problems.

There was a fire in Bamgamie [near Meredith] on 3 January 2001. I know there was a problem with the food there. A lady near the fire wanted to supply food and drink [cups of tea and coffee] to the firemen. The powers to be refused her offer of sandwiches etc because she had not been accredited for food. Instead they got food from Ballarat [1/2 hour drive further away] Instead of getting sandwiches and a cup tea or coffee they got Kentucky fried chicken and cans of soft drink. Chicken would be a much bigger health hazard being brought that far on a hot day. Many of us love a cup of tea or coffee. I always think when they refuse local ladies food it must often offend people.

I am told by one man who was in the N.E. they were given ham sandwiches at 7.30 A.M. with no way of keeping them cool on a 40 degree day, by mid day they had to throw them out. They had no cool water that day. One man finished up in hospital. Where is all the great planning?

I hope this has been of some help to you, I have tried to be constructive not destructive.

Yours faithfully,
Jack Boardman

Ph.

Boardman