

**Submission to the Select Committee on Recent Australian
Bushfires regarding the NSW/ACT fires in January 2003**



Submission from: Dr Katja Mikhailovich

Contact address:

Submission No.198

Submission based on my experiences during 8th – 23rd January 2003 at my property, Ulmurra, 3km from McIntyre's Hut, in the Brindabella Ranges.

Property address:

Property location:

Latitude: 35° 17'35", longitude 148° 44' 25"

1. Background

1.1 I am a resident of the ACT living at 22 Waratah St, O'Connor. I have a 200-acre rural property along the Goodradigbee river bordering with Brindabella National Park. The property, named Ulmurra, is 86km from Canberra and 63 km from Tumut. It is accessed via the Brindabella Rd via Namadgi National Park and also has access via the Brindabella National Park. The property is heavily timbered with remnant native bush and has 15 hectares of flood plain along the Goodradigbee River directly adjacent to Brindabella National Park. The property is approximately 3km from McIntyre's Hut, the area in which lightning strikes occurred and started the fire in this area. The property has a small house and has been used to agist neighbouring stock.

2. Overview

2.1 This submission is based upon my involvement in property protection on my property as a result of the fire started by lightning in Brindabella National Park. It covers the period 8th –23rd January 2003. It is based both on my recall of events and diary notes that I made during that period.

2.2 I would like to comment on matters relating to the fire which commenced near MacIntyres hut on the 8th January 2003. I wish to raise specific questions for the inquiry's consideration. *In particular I have grievance with information received from NSW Fire Control, and the lack of fire fighting services in the McIntyre's Hut area on the on the 8th 9th 10th and again on the night of the 17th and 18th January.*

2.3 NSW Fire Control

2.3.1 During the period between 8th-18th January the information I was able to obtain from Fire Control was mostly unhelpful, in that the information provided was too general to be of any assistance as a property owner. For example when I phoned to asked for a fire update before driving to my property from the ACT, I was informed that there was active fire in the area and they were not able to give anything more specific information. More accurate information was gained from local residents who were aware of the progress of the fire front, the speed of travel of the front and the direction of the wind. This was all necessary information in determining the need to be at the property for property protection. *Why was fire control unable to give more accurate information about the progress of the fire between the 8th-18th January?*

2.3.2 Fire control did not appear to be aware of houses in the proximity of McIntyre's Hut, including my own, despite the fact that I had personally informed them of the same. *Why was fire control unaware of houses in the area?*

2.4 Lack of NSW Rural Fire Services/other fire fighting services at crucial periods

2.4.1 Fire services to the McIntyre'sHut area were absent in the crucial early stages of the outbreak of fire on the 8-10 January when the conditions were amenable to bringing the fire under control. During this period I observed the fire from my property. It was moving slowly with little effect on the canopy structure of the trees whilst burning through the undergrowth of the bush in Brindabella National Park. However during these three days there were numerous occasions in which the wind conditions changed so as to present considerable concern that the fire could jump the river (forming a natural boundary between my property and the Park).

2.4.2 On the day of the 18th January no fire fighting personnel were present. As the fire progressed south east towards my property we were alone until a NSW Forestry Fire Crew arrived equipped with a bulldozer. They did not come prepared to engage in property protection apart from creating a fire break around my house and yelling at us to leave us to leave the property. We had approximately 10 minutes to do this from the time of their arrival. They then followed us out of the property after putting the dozer in the river? They then met us at a neighbouring property (Wyora) to which we were evacuated. *We were not provided with the option of staying to protect our house. Is this standard practice?*

3. Summary of Events Related to Fires

3.1 Wednesday 8th January

I was alerted to fire 3 km from my property by a neighbour, Mr Wayne West, on Wednesday 8th January 2003. I phoned Fire Control on 62971840 at 8.30 pm and was informed that there was no danger to any property at this time but I should take appropriate measures to prepare the property against fire. They were not aware that any houses existed in the area and I informed them this was not the case.

3.2 Thursday 9th January

I travelled to the property on Thursday 9th to assess the proximity of the fire. The fire was approaching from a north easterly direction with winds against it from the south. I returned to Canberra on Thursday evening as my neighbour Mr West was prepared to watch the approach of the fire. Mr West was in contact with Fire Control at this time. On this day the fire was burning very slowly and low to the ground.

3.3 Friday 10th January

On the evening of Friday 10th I received information from Mr West that a northerly wind was pushing the fire quickly and the fire was approximately 1 km from the boundary of my property. He advised me I should return to the property and I did so. The fire was clearly visible from my property.

3.4 Saturday 11th January

On Saturday 11th firefighters from Brindabella Fire Brigade arrived to engage in back burning within the Brindabella National Park. The National Park also had a dozer in the area to create a firebreak running under powerlines. On Saturday afternoon 5 helicopters commenced water bombing the fire which was approximately 0.5 km from the northern boundary of my property. Water bombing continued for the remainder of the day as the fire (backburn?), appeared to have broken through the containment line created earlier in the day. As a northerly wind picked up the fire started to spot all across the mountain directly across from the river flat and house. It jumped across a firebreak that had been put in that morning under power lines. Night fire crews arrived from Brindabella Rural Fire Brigade arrived and worked through the night on backburning operations.

3.5 Sunday 12th – Monday 13th January

3.5.1 During the 12th January Wayne West filled his dam continuously with water from the river for the helicopters to use for water bombing which continued across the river in Brindabella National Park. Fire approached the riverfront approximately 500 meters from the house. On the Sunday afternoon Brindabella Rural Fire Brigade firefighters returned to Brindabella after receiving news of fires in the proximity of the Brindabella Valley. No fire crews were left to monitor the fire that was now in close proximity of my house. I had no firefighting equipment on the property and Brindabella fire brigade left us with a 20-litre firefighting knapsack. We took shifts watching the fire through the night to ensure it did not jump the river onto our property. Water bombing continued on the Monday despite the Rural Fire Brigade withdrawing their services. Mr West patrolled the riverfront along the Park boundary over successive nights without any support.

Why were we left unattended for property protection by Rural Fire Services when there was still active fire in the area?

3.5.2 On Monday 13th January National Parks fire crews arrived to work on the ground on the dozer fire break track leading from the ridge to the river in the National Park. At this stage the fire appeared to be under control but not completely contained. On Monday afternoon I returned to Canberra to purchase additional sprinkler systems for around the house and to attend work. Again Mr West agreed to patrol my property in my absence. On Monday afternoon I again phoned NSW Fire Control to assess the progress of fire-control efforts in the Park as the fire had burnt to the river edge within 200 meters of my house. Again I received very general information that did not enable me to assess the risk to my property.

3.6 Wednesday 15th January

On Wednesday 15th January I phoned NSW Fire Control again to assess the progress of the fire control efforts and movement of the fire. I was only able to get general information such as "a fire is still active in the area". They were unable to give further information and I relied on contact with neighbours, and staff from Timberlands Pty Ltd. Again Fire Control informed me that they were not aware that there were any houses in the area. This was despite the fact that:

- fires were burning within 200 meters from my house
- the fires were in an area which had seen extensive water bombing and on-ground personnel
- I had previously informed them that I had a small house on my property.

At this time, NSW Fire Control was also only able to give general information about road closures. I had to contact the Brindabella Fire Brigade on a daily basis to assess safety to travel along Brindabella Road to access the property.

3.7 Thursday 16th January

3.7.1 I returned to the property on Thursday and part of the riverfront opposite my house was still burning slowly in the afternoon. No fire crews were present in the evening. About 9pm a strong northeasterly wind blew up. I checked the riverfront to find the fire had jumped the river onto my property. I extinguished the fire and telephoned Mr Fred Baker an employee of Timberlands and Wayne West who arrived with a firefighting pump and tank. A little later another neighbour David Menzel arrived to assist.

3.7.2 This fire was the result of the backburning operations conducted over the previous weekend. The fire flared up on the Brindabella National Park side of the river and began to burn back into unburnt country, threatening to jump the river again due to the change in wind direction. This fire, on the other side of the river to my property, was brought under control at approximately 1am. Had it not been for the firefighting equipment and efforts of my neighbours, I believe the fire would have jumped the river again that evening and been in the pines very quickly.

3.8 Friday 17th January

3.8.1 Members of the Remote Area Fire-fighting Team were conducting mopping up operations on foot. Water bombing of spot fires continued with helicopters. I returned to Canberra on Friday afternoon believing the fire was under control, despite small spot fires still burning and water bombing under way.

3.8.2 Just before midnight on Friday 17th I received a phone call from Wayne West to let me know the fire had jumped the river again at Tommy's flat, just to the north of my property. He said it was moving quickly towards the pines above the river and back in a southerly direction. He told me that he had reported this to NSW Fire Control. He advised me to return to the property.

3.8.3 I arrived at 8am on Saturday 18th with two friends and began pumping water around the house. As forecast it was already extremely hot and dry. The wind was blowing from a northerly direction. During the previous evening Timberlands staff had moved an old fire-tanker belonging to the company to my property, leaving it next to the house paddock. This was the only piece of firefighting equipment available apart from a portable backpack. Unfortunately there was no-one present on my property who could use the old fire-tanker. There were no fire crews, and no water-bombing helicopters. *Why was there no property protection or fire crews present on the morning of Saturday 18th when the fire had been reported on the previous evening?*

3.8.4 During the morning Wayne West sent a message to us via a friend, Gary, who told us that NSW Forestry fire crews would be arriving to help with property protection. During the morning Wayne West and friends periodically visited my property to check on our safety and to assist with final fire preparedness, knowing that we had no experience of firefighting. We could hear the fire and see it spotting down the hill towards our property. It was about half a kilometre from where we were at the house. The wind was blowing from the east and later in the morning began to blow from a northerly direction. NSW Forestry fire-crews eventually arrived; I am not sure what time, but think it was towards midday. They told us we would have to leave immediately. They said the fire was jumping 300 metres at a time. They bulldozed a firebreak around the house. At this time we left the property to be followed by the forestry personnel shortly afterwards.

3.8.5 The fire burnt through the entire property. The fire went right through the house paddock bar the green grass surrounding the house itself (green due only to extensive watering over the last week, and wet from prolonged watering on the morning of the 18th). The house itself, with well wetted timbers, also survived. Fire burnt through Wayne West's entire property and his house was completely destroyed. The fire continued to burn through to Canberra that afternoon.

3.8.6 Wayne West and David Menzel (from Wyora Station) went back down to the property on the evening of the 18th and put out spot fires around my house, again unassisted by any fire fighters.

3.9 Thursday 23rd January

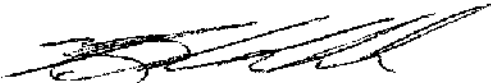
I was unable to return to the property until the 23rd January due to fires burning along the Brindabella Road. I again phoned Fire Control on the 20th January to assess whether it was safe to return to the property. Again I was informed in very general terms that fire remained active in the area but with no specific details about the spread of the fire in relation to access to my property or about how safe it was to return.

3.10 Summary

I offer this account in the hope that it may contribute information about the McIntyre's Hut fire. My key questions are as follows:

- *Why was NSW Fire Control unable to provide useful information about the fire in relation to my property during the period 8th -23rd January 2003?*
- *Why were no rural firefighting service resources allocated to the area during the 8th-10 January?*
- *Why did NSW Fire Control fail to act upon the report by Mr Wayne West on the night of the 17th January 2003?*
- *Were NSW Fire Control aware of the inclement weather conditions expected on 18th January?*
- *If NSW Fire Control had responded to the report by Mr Wayne West on the night of the 17th January, would the fires have burnt through to Canberra with such devastating results?*

Signed:



Date:

1/5/03

Dr Katja Mikhailovich