

*Murray*  
24 July 03



Towong Shire Council  
*Legends, Lakes and Valleys*

***Submission prepared by the  
Towong Shire Council for the  
House of Representatives  
Select Committee on the recent Australian  
Bushfires  
July 24th, 2003***

Following the recent bushfires experienced in Victoria and particularly in the north east and the area known as the Upper Murray, the Towong Shire Council's a number of issues specific to the the impact of the bushfires on local areas ranging from the Biggara, Nariel and Tallangatta Valleys, Corryong to Mitta Mitta and beyond have arisen.

◆ **Water**

There is a lack of available water in close proximity to the fire front.

The topography is steep and land use ie: forest and parks, mean that there is few natural water holding points. This placed a huge draw on private dams to fight fires on crown land,. It also lead to significant delays in hauling water to the fire front due to long haul distances and difficult terrain.

It is not a question of being able to gain access to private supplies but that there should be a network of strategic storages, ie: dams, within a reasonable distance to perpetual firefronts and consistent with the fire defence system to be used eg: road tanker or helitanker.

In upper catchments the supplies cannot be readily restored especially in periods of drought.

Such a system could provide significant environmental values if integrated into wildlife corridors and catchment management plans. Such storages would need a legitimate entitlement to water to protect the catchment and subsequent water quality. The storage dams would be for the specific use of fire protection in times of need.

#### ◆ **Communications**

In this area there are limited to non-existent communication facilities.

The topography in the areas of the fire is steep and rugged. Population is sparse and as a consequence radio communication on secure channels is limited.

Most agencies have their own radio channels and cross communication between field operators is not always possible. This leads to situations where intentions can be misinterpreted as instructions pass from one group to another.

Eg. Brigades were interpreting protection of assets as protection of houses and let paddocks burn. In this area the paddocks are the heart of the business.

In more general terms the role of disseminating information is also hampered.

Who in today's society would believe that there was only one printer available in the shire to print A1 size fire plans, or that their mobile phone would not operate in most of the fire affected areas, or that e-mail is so slow that for most of the area it is still tomorrow's technology.

This lack of communication can also lead to secondary problems when main control centres are remote from the fire front and knowledge of local cause and effect conditions starts to diminish.

#### ◆ **Individual Impacts and Recovery**

Bushfires happen in summer and consideration needs to be given to how vulnerable individual property owners become to the risk of a limited autumn break. Whilst this year is extreme and has affected the whole community, similar impacts can occur on a lesser scale in any year. In fighting fires people expend large amounts of energy, stock management is ignored, water supplies get consumed and stock feed reserves are heavily drawn on.

There is also considerable property damage done in defending the fire that is not seen as any great impost to the casual observer. Eg Gateposts get knocked by passing bulldozers, fire control breaks across paddocks need to be reworked and resown with the paddock out of production, fences are cut, often in inappropriate places and dam water levels are lowered. Negotiation over the extent of damage

allowed in good faith can become an issue and lead to feelings of being taken advantage of.

It is therefore imperative that recovery is timely and effective to restoring peoples lives to the pre fire conditions.

The recovery support from government agencies has been excellent from a total perspective however it must be remembered that the focus needs to be on individual situations.

Eg It is of little benefit providing funding for dog proof fencing that is more expensive than normal fencing if it is not required.

**Submission prepared by Towong Shire Council's Manager Technical Services, Mr. Peter Lenaghan.**

**Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact Mr. Lenaghan on (02) 6071 5100.**

**Towong Shire Council  
P.O. Box 55  
TALLANGATTA. 3700  
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