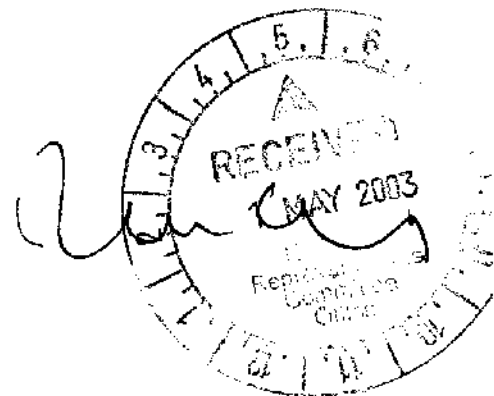


Submission No.70



To.
The Secretary,
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires.
Parliament House
Canberra.

Submission From
Edward G Stuckey, A.F.S.M.,

I am a retired forester. I was employed by the Forest Commission of Victoria and subsequent forest departments for a period of 40 years. During that period I worked in a number of field positions and under took a large numbers of Fuel Reduction Burns, high intensity slash burns and fire fighting operations. For the last 25 years of my career, I was employed in the departments Fire Protection Branch as the Fire Resources Officer. In this role, I advised the department on the adequacy of the department's resources to meet its fire protection and fighting responsibilities. This also involved providing advice in relation to the design and purchase of fire fighting equipment; plant needs for fire suppression and radio communications systems. I also advised the department on matters related to the fire protection regulations, fire record systems, and the design and layout and operation of the central fire control room.

I submit the following observations and suggestions in relation to the Select Committees investigation into the recent Australian bushfires.

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

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

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(b) the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property;

In my opinion the relative increase in the damage to the community by bush fires over the past ten years can be directly attributed to a number of factors including the following;

- the failure of governments to adequately fund land management authorities for fuel reduction burning
- the failure of governments to implement their own planning guidelines which prevent inappropriate development in fire prone areas
- the reduction of permanent full time staff in land management authorities
- the policy of federal, state and local governments to outsource services at the expense of maintaining an adequate trained staff, equipped with suitable plant and machinery that can be use for fire fighting and other disaster management events.
- the introduction of specialised plant for logging which has drastically reduced this source of plant and equipment for fire suppression.
- the reduction of logging has reduced the overall number of personal and equipment available on site for fire suppression
- the closure of Defense Department establishments in southern states has reduced the availability of manpower and equipment form this source.

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

I suggest that the Select Committee consider the merits of;

1. Legislation requiring the construction of water storage dams for fire control purposes on all properties more than a specific land area. Tax relief should be provided for the construction of such dams.

2. Legislation that requires the preparation and lodgment of a fire protection plan for all properties located outside town boundaries. Penalty clauses to apply to insurance premiums for failure to undertake such planning.
3. Legislation that requires the preparation and lodgment of a fire protection plan, as part of a disaster management plan, for all rural townships and settlements. The fire protection plan to be reviewed every five years. Each plan to include an assessment of the impact of wild fire. The plan should include a standard risk assessment procedure which can include known local risk factors that add to or diminish the risk, local fire prevention and protection works, fire evacuation plans, etc.

(d) appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices;

There is an obvious lack of understanding of basic fire behavior in the community and in the media, which often leads to misleading statements and observations. I suggest the adoption of;

1. An education program in fire behavior for school students about year seven level linked to the basic science studies.
2. An education program for the public in fire behavior and the fire environment and ecology of Australia by means of publications, video documentaries, fire plans, etc.
3. Such information to be broadcast at the start of each season and be available in public libraries, schools libraries, video libraries, etc.

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

The current levee for the support of volunteer fire brigades is only collected from those who insure their property. Insurance companies, who make a significant profits from fire insurance premiums, are very reluctant to provide any useful data on the history of claims, etc. I suggest;

1. Australia wide adoption of a system to collect fire brigade levees from all property owners by using the shire rate system rather than a levee on insurance premiums.
2. Australia wide adoption of ABC Radio and TV as public broadcaster of warnings and advice on natural and other disaster a management.
3. Adoption of standard warning tone for use on radio through out Australia for such information.
4. A study of the cost of providing fire protection and fire suppression compared with the value of losses which occur is required to establish how much money the community can afford to invest in providing these services. The study must include the cost insurance premiums and claims payments made by insurance companies.

(f) the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;

Existing planning guidelines and codes are probably adequate for the protection of life and property. The problems seem to in the lack of application of the guidelines by local government and in some cases, the ruling given by state government appeals authorities. I suggest;

4. That planning guidelines relating to the construction of residences and building in high-risk areas should include a mandatory clause, that requires the consideration of fire protection measures.
 1. The classification of public lands which are adjacent to high value public and private assets as "fire protection lands". These lands to be managed primarily for the protection of the adjacent assets from bush fire. It would require a planning system, which prevented the construction of building and assets adjacent to such lands without the inclusion of adequate fire protection works by the builder, owner, lessee, etc.

(g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for fire fighting;

I believe that most states have adequate response arrangements for fire fighting within the limits of their budgets. There is no doubt that many states would engage more personal if they had more funds. I suggest

1. The Federal Government should provide additional funds to states for the employment and training of personnel for the purposes of fire suppression, fuel reduction burning, and hazard reduction burning. The level of funding to be determined by a committee set up to assess the fire season in each state.

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

The adoption of deployment fire fighting forces across state borders is to be commended. I suggest that there is a need to ensure that such actions are legally supported in every way. I suggest

1. The formal legal recognition of interstate fire assistance by making it legal for registered fire fighting personnel in one state to operate under the jurisdiction of other state acts.
2. A formal system for cost sharing where interstate agencies assist another state fire control agency.
3. Establishment of a number of Australian Fire Service Equipment Stores which could hold stocks of fire equipment which can be airlifted to the areas where required. The equipment to be recovered, returned, repaired and repacked for future use by staff from the center.
4. Investigate the supply, at minimum cost, of ex Defense Department aircraft (particularly light helicopters), earth-moving machinery, floats, trucks, etc to Australian fire fighting authorities for fire suppression work.
5. The integration of Defense Department personnel, machinery and equipment into Australian fire fighting agencies for fire suppression purposes.

(i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

The question of liability and insurance cover for fire control staff engaged in suppression operation in other than their own states needs to be clarified. I suggest that there is a need for;

1. Legal recognition and protection of land management staff from the inherent risks involved in the conduct of all fire suppression and fuel reduction burning operations on public and private lands.
2. A legal recognition of the onus on landowners to protect their own assets from damage by wild fires.

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

Volunteers are being asked to shoulder more and more of the fire suppression tasks in Australia. I suggest

1. The training of volunteer fire fighters in bush fire fighting should be increased.
2. Consideration should be made on making payments for undertaking and completion of fire control training rather than payment for attendance at fires. This would ensure a large base of volunteers is available to the community at all times and avoid any problems associated with the lighting of fires to earn money.
3. Consideration should be given to reimbursement of employers who allow employees to undertake fire fighting outside their own brigade areas.
4. Consideration should be given to the establishment of trained fire fighting teams of suitable personnel serving prison terms for no violent crimes..

Should it be required I would be happy to expand on any of the matters listed above.

Yours faithfully

E. G. Stuckey