

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires

INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Submitted by
Robert Bethune for

Date: 3 May 2003

Dear Sir / Madam

My wife and I breed cattle on approximately 540 acres at Callaghan Creek, mid-way between Dartmouth and Mitta Mitta in North East Victoria.

Our property, herd, finances and way of life were devastated by the recent bushfires.

Property and financial losses

The fire tore through our property on Australia Day 26/1/03. Our hayshed containing approximately 1000 small square bales of hay was burnt to the ground. The shed cost \$23,000.00 to replace and the hay would be valued at \$10 to 15,000.00 in the current market. It was not insured. Several kilometres of fencing were also destroyed which will cost thousands of dollars to replace. This included boundary fencing to Crown Land, other neighbours and internal fences.

We lost about half our pasture on 26/1/03 and for the following five days until 31/1/03 we lost more pasture each day, caused by spot fires. The cost of this loss of pasture is at least \$2,000.00 per week for fodder, which has to be fed out daily to keep our core breeding stock alive. It is an on-going expense, as the pasture has not yet re-established and there is now little prospect of it doing so until Spring. Until this fire went through us we have not previously had to face the expense of purchasing fodder because in the past we have cut our own hay, for supplementary Winter feeding only.

We have had to sacrifice cows to the market as they became in too poor a condition to keep and it would cost us too much in fodder to keep them alive. Weaner calves, which were not ready to sell, also had to be sent to market and sold unfinished at reduced prices.

We lost twenty calves due to the stress on their mothers caused by the fire. These would have been worth \$10,000.00 as weaners.

Post bushfire, the limited rain that has fallen has caused dams to be filled with ash and silt washed down from the hills due to there being no vegetation to stop it. The expense to clean out our dams will run to several thousand dollars. If they are cleaned out too early it is likely that they will re-fill with ash and silt, until such time that the undergrowth re-establishes.

Loss of lifestyle

Our farming operation is a 5 hour drive from our home in Melbourne. Before the fires I would normally work on the farm Monday to Friday and drive home on weekends to see the family for school sport, family recreation, etc. Since the fires I have had to spend virtually every day at the farm and go for weeks at a time without seeing the family. We did not ask for this but the bushfires forced it onto us.

The now daily requirement to feed livestock means that I cannot just leave the property at any time I like for a couple of days to see the family. Once I could.

On the few occasions that I have been able to get neighbours to feed out for me I can get to Melbourne but then I have to spend most of my time in the office dealing with administrative matters. There is just no time to have "time off" to enjoy a normal family lifestyle that most Australians are able to.

Local knowledge

The bottom of the Callaghan Creek valley has a pine plantation at its entrance with the main Callaghan Creek Rd passing through the middle of it. Locals made it known to authorities that we needed to have fire tankers on the inside of the plantation in order to protect the 9 dwellings, dozens of outbuildings and thousands of acres of pasture in the valley in the event that the fire spotted across into the plantation, which seemed inevitable at the time and did actually occur. The fire was burning less than a kilometre away but only one tanker, from Granya, was allocated to this gigantic task.

What then ensued is the plantation did catch fire and tankers were stuck on the other side unable to get through to protect property. One local tanker took the initiative and came through the plantation. In doing so they were able to save the house of one of my neighbours.

Lack of communications and back-up support

In the evening of 26/1/03 when the fire was very close to hitting us, the Granya tanker was calling over their CFA radio for support but got no reply. I then placed an emergency telephone call to 000 and asked for support, as the fire was imminent.

I then rang Captain John Scales of the Dartmouth brigade to see if he could find out what was going on, as I knew that there was a CFA communications base at Dartmouth. He rang back at around 8:35pm with the news that a CFA strike team would be in the area in approximately 1 hour.

That strike team did not arrive and I understand they were diverted to Mt Beauty, leaving us to burn.

Construction and patrolling of control lines – lack of support

I was out on CFA duties in various local areas from 13/1/03 until 22/1/03 when I then had to focus all my attention on my own property. On 22/1/03 the fire front came past Dartmouth on the other side of the Mitta Mitta River and was spotting ahead towards Callaghan Creek.

I was constructing control lines on my property and patrolling them, mostly alone, for virtually 24 hours a day from 22/1/03 until 31/1/03. The main front did not hit our property until 26/1/03, however the potential for the fire to spot over the river was ever present and it did go over on several occasions before the 26th but those spot overs were controlled. On 26/1/03 at approximately 2:30am DSE crews were withdrawn from the Dartmouth / Callaghan Creek area.

In the days after the main front passed there was some support occasionally from the CFA however I believe it was only given a low priority because our pasture was probably not deemed by authorities to be an asset needing protection. We lost pasture for six consecutive days.

Definition of assets to be protected

The authorities definition of an asset to be protected needs to be reviewed. Buildings, bricks and mortar, etc are obvious assets, however a farmer has other assets that also need to be protected. They include pasture, livestock and fences, without which a farmer cannot operate.

Blame

The blame for the devastation caused by the bushfires should be directed squarely at DSE. The easiest time to control a fire is when it first starts. The Razorback bushfire could have been contained when it was in its infancy if resources had been concentrated on it. I understand that the fire had a containment line all the way around it very early on but that DSE then chose to withdraw resources from this fire, saying "they would put it out later". History now shows us what a bad decision that was.

Another contributing factor to the fires reaching catastrophic proportions was DSE's neglectful mismanagement of the forest, allowing fuel levels to build up to excessive levels over the years and not reduce the hazard by carrying out sufficient "cold burns" when safe to do so. When putting out spot fires in the bush around Mt Granite we were clambering through bark and leaf litter up to our waists.

Another example of neglect was as stated above, when on 26/1/03 at approximately 2:30am DSE crews were withdrawn from the Dartmouth / Callaghan Creek area, leaving only the Dartmouth CFA tanker, of which I was a crewmember and some private local crews to look out for spot overs. We had no problem with the DSE people on the fire front – they were just doing what they were told to by their superiors. The problem lies with DSE management of their people and resources.

Compensation

If a farmer starts a fire on his land and it gets out of control and into Crown land then the government makes him pay for the costs of putting out the fire and restoring the damage done. However if the fire starts on Crown land and comes into the farmers land and destroys his property then the government just wipes their hands of the problem. This is patently unfair.

Granted the fires were initially started by lightning strikes but given the DSE's neglectful mismanagement of the forest before the fires started and their bungling mismanagement of resources to contain the fires, they should be made to compensate those people like my family who have had their livelihoods destroyed by the fires.

CFA Strike Teams

It seems that some strike teams treat going to a bushfire as a bit of a tourist outing.

On 17/1/03 I was on duty on the Dartmouth tanker on the Razorback track. We had two other tankers with us plus two DSE slip-on units. It was a very hot day with the fire coming straight up the hill at us and our job was to try to stop the fire spotting over the track. Conditions were very hot, smoky and dangerous with people gagging for breath and dry reaching. One DSE worker had to be taken away to hospital for treatment. We were under resourced for the task at hand. In the end the fire got away from us and we had to evacuate by driving through the fire to a turn around point and then back out through the fire again.

We found out later that while we were fire fighting under these arduous conditions a strike team was enjoying a cool swim in the creek half an hour away. That strike team consisted of the following tankers – Eltham, Warrandyte, St Andrews, Wattle Glen and Hurstbridge. We really could have done with their support.

The stupid thing is that the CFA controller in charge of that part of the fire that day, DGO Graham Redmond, did not even know that the strike team was in the area. Another example of how CFA communications should get their act together.

Later in the day the above strike team drove in along the 6 Mile Track where we were blacking out hot spots. We waved to each tanker as they went past us but they would not even give us the courtesy of a wave back – they sat up with their eyes straight ahead not even looking at us. They went down to the 1 in 5 Track where they stayed for only one hour before then proceeding to the Dartmouth Hotel. They did get to use some of their gear however – one of them hit a cricket ball onto the roof of the Hotel so they got to use one of their ladders to retrieve it.

Those tankers sat idle at Dartmouth all night. There were many local CFA crews who could have manned those tankers during the night and done some worthwhile work but such was not the case. What a waste of resources.

Signed 
ROBERT BETHUNE