

Sub 374

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO BUSHFIRES 2003



This submission is made by Harry Ryder, landowner, VFF member, CFA volunteer, Mountain Cattleman and representative on the Alpine Conservation and Access Group.

ISSUES/PROBLEMS THAT AROSE DURING THE COMBATting OF THE FIRES

- Fire lines repeatedly being breached.

Fires should have been stopped inside national parks. Active fire lines must not be left unattended or fires will continue to jump containment lines. Restrictions placed on strike teams initiating backburns means that opportunities to enhance control lines are missed because of restrictions placed on backburning.

SUGGESTION-Training/accreditation in backburning to ensure that fire crew leaders are appropriately trained in making the critical decisions quickly in the field rather than reverting to those that inhabit the incident control centres to try and make a decision. This is where most frustration's originate from.

- Work Times

Paid fire crews working bankers hours, arriving on the fireground at 11-00am with the intention of starting backburns etc through the hottest part of the day. Backburning etc. should be done at night and be blacked out and completed before the heat of the day, both for control and safety of firefighters. *No firefighters have lost their lives fighting fires at night.*

- Crew changeovers being done away from the fireground.

There should be greater use of buses to transport crews from the staging area to the fireground so that all equipment remains in the area of the fire.

- Excessive time being wasted at staging areas waiting for briefings etc.

With modern technology weather briefings and instructions could be done when crews change over on the fire ground.

- Lack of communication

Communication between volunteers and conservation department firefighters needs clarification. There were examples of end of shift debriefings not taking place. Confusion over radio channels etc.

- Local knowledge

Local knowledge was not sought in many instances and examples of when help was offered, it was often rejected to the detriment of the result.

- Existing fire trails not being maintained to allow safe access

Fire lines in timbered country should, where time permits, have more effort put into removing potentially troublesome trees with excavators, dozers or chainsaws before the fire arrives. This would minimise danger of working with half burnt trees during the fire.

- Lack of accountability throughout the command structure.

Name of officer in charge of fireground and the whole chain of command should be printed in the local newspaper or listed on the Internet every day so the general public knows who is responsible for what section, on what day, in order to foster a culture of accountability.

RECOVERY SUPPORT.

- Agencies failing to accept responsibility

The 'passing the buck' attitude between government agencies made it difficult for any person affected by the fire to obtain information. Landholders were made to feel that they were second class citizens during and after the fire.

- Immediate post fire assistance not made available.

Re-tensioning of all fences cut to allow machinery onto private land to construct fire control lines should be done as a matter of course or landholders compensated.

FUEL REDUCTION PROGRAMS

- Detailed fire reduction plans should be released each Spring and detailed actual post fire reduction results released in Winter.

The total inadequacy of fuel reduction throughout the forests and parks led to the inferno that we just had. A history lesson for the land managers would indicate that the land before white man arrived received regular burns of low intensity by aboriginals and not always in Autumn. Burning a few dozen hectares here and there accompanied by numerous press releases is virtually useless and may as well not be done.

If a fuel reduction burn is commenced but not completed for any reason, then either a further attempt should be made, or that area becomes first priority in the following season.

- Towns in areas adjoining parks and forests must be protected by regular fuel reduction programs

The local CFA volunteers should be allowed to carry out protective fuel reduction burns in zones in the forests around their towns.

- Alienation of locals in the fuel reduction process leads to lingering bitterness.

There is a distinct feeling amongst rural people that they are excluded from the process of planning fuel reduction programs and that priorities of those making

the decisions are very different from those of people who have to live in the affected areas.

- Education of the general public and tourists to places adjoining National Parks and State Forests.

Effort needs to be directed at educating the general population to raise their awareness of the importance of the fuel reduction program being completed each year and the significance of its role in environmental management.

REHABILITATION OF FIRE CONTROL LINES

The fiasco that occurred in Northeast Victoria over the failure of Parks Victoria, D.S.E. etc to do any rehabilitation of fire lines on private land was incomprehensible. Landholders who had watched for weeks while fires burnt around inside the National Park wondered if they would still have a house left standing at the end of each day. At the end of the fires these people were then given the final kick in the guts by being told that the fire control lines that had been put through their private property to stop the fire coming out of the national park were not going to be rehabilitated by the government agencies. "They were the responsibility of the landholder." In some case pastures that were cut for haymaking were carved up by D8 bulldozers. Farmers should not have to be treated like this.

ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE TO FARMERS AFFECTED

- Fencing

The offer of half cost materials for dog proof fencing which had burnt in the fire was laughable if it wasn't so sad. Fencing between neighbours is on half cost basis, not 3/4 - 1/4. And dog proof fencing is great if you can fence all your boundary's. But what about the landholders who lost kilometres of fencing but do not need dog proof fencing? The Government must accept the status quo and realise that they are responsible for half cost fencing wherever their boundary adjoins freehold land.

As a landholder that has had 400 acres burnt, 4 km of internal fence burnt and about 5 km of fire control lines put through my property I have not been eligible for any compensation that is practical to accept. (dingo fencing and fence line clearing were offered but not accepted for obvious reasons)

As a holder of a licence to graze cattle on the Bogong High Plains in the Alpine National Park it is fascinating to observe how the Alpine Meadows that are grazed by cattle were the only areas of the Alpine National Park that did not burn. Over 4000 Ha of alpine grassland were saved from fire because of the fuel reduction done by the grazing of cattle. Ungrazed areas were comprehensively decimated. The potential for increased cattle grazing to reduce fuel loads throughout the mountainous public lands needs to be considered given the present constraints on smoke caused by fuel reduction burning.

CONCLUSION

Much good work was done during the fires however submissions to this inquiry will tend to focus on the problems that arose.

The above comments are made in good faith and are not to be taken as criticism of individuals during and after the fire. Rather, the comments are made in the hope that the problems that arose can be rectified and lessons learnt from the mistakes.