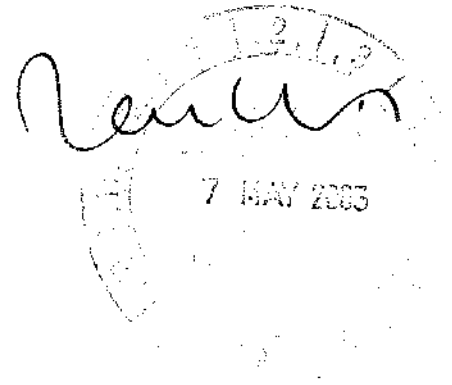


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**SUBMISSION TO THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES**

File: 03/0078

May 2003

Introduction

Singleton Council is pleased to be able to provide a submission to the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires.

This submission is the result of initial deliberations of a Council Committee consisting of the four (4) rural Councillors of Singleton Council, the Director Corporate and Development Services and the Director Operations and final consideration of the draft Submission by Council at its Operations Committee Meeting on the 5th May, 2003.

Singleton Local Government Area

The Singleton Local Government Area (LGA) is located in the heart of the Hunter Valley , New South Wales. The town of Singleton with a population of over 13000 people is only 75 kilometres from Australia's Eastern seaboard and Newcastle and is a comfortable two (2) hour drive from Sydney. The bulk of the NSW population reside within 200 kilometres of Singleton and over 500,000 resides within a 100km radius, placing it in easy access to Australia's most diversely populated region.

The town of Singleton is situated at the junction of the New England Highway (National Route 15), the Golden Highway (State Highway 27) and the Putty Road to Windsor (Main Road 503). There is also an extensive rail network through the area leading to the Port of Newcastle.

The Singleton LGA contains a population of over 21,500 people within an area of approximately 4,900km². Contained within the LGA are the Putty, Pokolbin, Ravensworth, Belford and Stewarts Brook State Forests, Mount Royal, Wollemi, and Yengo National Parks, and the Singleton Military Area.

The area has an extensive tourism industry based on the natural beauty of the location and being the centre of the Hunter Valley Wine County. The location is also renowned for its extensive coal mining and electricity generation industries.

Singleton Council Local Government Area (LGA) Bushfires

Singleton Council provides a significant contribution to the cost of fire resources and control within the Singleton LGA with the net cost for Rural Fire Service activities for sixteen (16) Brigades amounting to over \$448,000 in 2001/2002, an expected cost of over \$442,000 in 2002/2003 and an estimated amount of over \$459,000 in 2003/2004. The cost for the NSW Fire Brigade based at Singleton has amounted to approximately \$36,000 in 2002/2003.

At the time of writing this submission Declared Disaster (Section 44, Rural Fires Act 1997) fires within the Singleton LGA within the 2002/2003 Fire Season has cost over \$500,000 in normal fire fighting resources not including aircraft, burnt over 32,822 hectares and estimated to have caused over \$10,000,000 damage to private and community assets.

Similar extensive fires were also experienced in 2000 and 1994 and the area has had a significant history of bushfires.

Southern Area

In the southern area of the LGA the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service Management records held since 1974 show that human causes account for over 50% of fire ignitions in park areas with the Singleton LGA. The remainder of the fires are caused by lightning, which occurs throughout the season from November to February and has rarely led to major fires, being generally associated with rain from the storm activity.

Fire paths are generally linked to topography, with fires following ridge systems, except under extreme weather conditions where fires have traditionally been pushed across the landscape by strong north-westerly winds. These fires have been difficult to contain due to the ruggedness of the terrain and the fire spotting characteristics of the vegetation. Under these extreme conditions fires have left the southern mountain area and entered the valley floor, particularly in the Jerrys Plains, Bulga and Broke areas. Fires here also exited the Wollemi National Park to threaten property in the Howes Valley and Putty Area.

Northern Area

In Mount Royal National Park (formerly State Forest), NSW State Forests have recorded thirty (30) fires in the thirty-seven (37) fire seasons from 1957/1958 to 1993/94, affecting a cumulative total of 29,560 hectares. The majority of fires have resulted from human sources and lightning has contributed to 23% of fires. Fire paths are influenced by north-westerly and south-westerly winds together with topographical effects and are normally directed toward upslope areas along and leading into the Mount Royal Range.

Similar fire conditions exist in the remaining parts of the northern fire area from Stanhope to Goorangoola and Mirannie except that a large percentage of the area is pastoral country and is subject to grass fires, rather than forest fires.

Central Area

Grassland fires of note are usually associated with strong winds and are uncontrollable until they reach a substantial barrier or there is a weather change. Fire fighting is usually limited to a six (6) to ten (10) hour period followed by twenty-four (24) to forty-eight (48) hours of mopping up.

These grass fires can occur anywhere in the valley floor but the majority tend to be five (5) kilometres either side of the New England Highway and their direction of travel is determined by the prevailing wind which is generally from the northwest pushing the fire to the southeast.

The rapid increase in the rural population due in part to hobby farming and alternative lifestyle groups has created an additional risk factor that is changing the traditional "rural" areas of the Singleton LGA.

Comments in regard to the Select Committee's Terms of Reference

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

- Council considers that there are a number of costs to the community that are not considered as part of the bushfires disaster and are never recoverable, such as :
 - Damage to Council infrastructure such as roads from the movement of vehicles used to fight the fire (watercarts, fire trucks, heavy earthmoving equipment – dozer, front end loaders, motor graders, low loaders, etc);
 - The cost of the damage to farm assets from helicopters utilising farms/properties – wind erosion, loss of water from dams, stress to farm animals.

(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.*

- Council believes that the lessons learned from the Christmas, 1994 Bushfires have not been taken into account and such organisations as the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) allow the level of combustible material to build up to unnaturally high levels. Then fires are lit both naturally and by man in the summer periods that have much higher temperatures and ferocity than is natural and in turn there is much more damage and harm environmentally to National Parks and State Forests;
- Council is aware that some hazard reduction is undertaken in National Parks and State Forests however it is undertaken of most times by helicopter instead of using local knowledge on the ground;
- It is considered that the best land managers in relation to bushfire hazard reduction were the graziers who once used the lands that are now National Parks and State Forests – research needs to be undertaken to study exactly what and how those people undertook hazard reduction;
- The NPWS has closed many if not most fire trails and roads within National Parks and this added with no maintenance of these trails causes access problems at times of fire and hazard reduction;
- There is a common belief amongst landowners adjacent to National Parks and Volunteer Fire Fighters that sometimes there is an attitude by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and others of just letting fires burn in National Parks instead of attempting to safely put the fires out, thus causing much more damage to the environment and increasing the chance of damage to private and public assets near those National Parks. It seems that when the fires start they are left to burn to provide some sort of “hazard reduction” for the future.

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

- It is considered that there is inadequate fire hazard reduction work undertaken today in National Parks and State Forests due to the following:
 - National Parks and Wildlife Service does not have the formula or knowledge to provide appropriate hazard reduction;
 - Hazard reduction burns that are “cold” fires are not undertaken in the August/September period due to “environmental” reasons which are mistaken;
 - Not enough ground proofing is undertaken but instead flyover thermal image work is undertaken that may not pick up gullies and draws.
- There sometimes is the belief that fires are allowed to increase to a certain level to ensure that an appropriate disaster declaration is made for funding to be provided ie Section 44 Declarations in NSW thus providing 100% funding for fire emergency work. If this is the case legislation needs to be changed to ensure that early action is 100% funded which in turn may save the community money by having both less fire damage and disaster costs;
- In NSW the Rural Fire Service has Hazard Reduction Officers responsible for managing and programming of fire trail maintenance however minimal is done for the level of expenditure on this management and supervision due to the lack of resources provided to maintain both the private and public fire trails;
- Council considers that human life, property, then the environment are the priorities, however “hot” fires do not look after the environment and relevant authorities need to start undertaking “cold” hazard reduction that will in turn reduce the risks to human life and property.

(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.*

- It is considered that there is the mistaken belief that there are inappropriate times of the year for hazard reduction, with these times mostly relating to reproduction cycles of flora and fauna. It is these times of the year when less damaging “cold” hazard reduction fires should be instigated. It is believed that the “hot” fires of the summer cause much more damage to the flora and fauna of such facilities as National Parks and State Forests particularly with the unnatural level of combustible material that has been allowed to collect. These larger and “hot” unnatural fires in turn damage more private and public assets when they come out of the Parks and Forests and cost much more in resources to put out, if they are able to be put out;
- A number of years ago the local bushfire brigade in conjunction with State Forests would undertake hazard reduction at the appropriate time to produce “cold” fires, however with these State Forests becoming National Parks the NPWS does not allow this work to be undertaken;

- Many years ago fire trails were constructed by locals using local knowledge. As an example, in the mid 1980's some fire trail work was undertaken by a Committee of locals and Council who would be responsible. Today there are no more fire trails undertaken (Yengo National Park – nil since 1993);
 - Formal channels need to be set up for local information and knowledge to be provided to the officer responsible for hazard reduction, ie Community Consultative Committees;
 - NPWS and State Forest Officers do not know or no longer have a relationship with the Captains of the Rural Fire Service Brigades of the areas adjacent to the National Parks or State Forests;
 - There needs to be more co-ordination between Rural Fire Service Brigade Captains and NPWS and State Forest Officers;
 - Residents in the Wollemi Valley live in fear due to the lack of hazard reduction being undertaken in the Wollemi National Park;
 - A way for improvement is the set up of “Intelligence Cards” most probably based on a Rural Fire Service Brigade Area or an Area of High Fire Hazard, much like the Flood Intelligence Cards of the NSW State Emergency Service, that would be set up using local knowledge and controlled by the Rural Fire Service Brigade Captain;
- (e) *any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;*
- It is considered that research should be initially focused on the traditional basic fire fighting methods to ensure that best practice is acknowledge and used;
 - Back burning during fires particularly timing for most affect should also be high on the agenda of research;
 - Importantly research needs to be undertaken to determine once and for all the comparison of damage undertaken to the environment during “hot” fires in the summer periods and “cold” fires hazard reduction to dispel the belief that hazard reduction at inappropriate times of the year due to fauna and flora reproduction cycles causes more damage to the environment.
- (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;*
- Council believes that the current legislation in NSW that has just started to be enacted should ensure that appropriate development control is undertaken for new development, however property administration of the legislation/regulations is still being determined and adequately resourced. There will also be political problems when development is curtailed by use of the legislation/regulations;
 - It is also expected that private land hazard reduction should be improved by the latest legislation and regulations in New South Wales.

(g) *the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;*

- Council considers that the relevant Authorities such as the NSW Rural Fire Service, National Parks and Wildlife Service and State Forests by and large have some improvement to undertake to ensure that response arrangements for firefighting are adequate and this is summarized by the following comments:
 - sometimes there is a tendency to “overdo” the transfer of outside resources to a fire that has been allowed to get out of control;
 - it is considered that advice from locals is not listened to or is ignored, particularly with fire back burning;
 - the command structure at large fires is not conducive to quick approval of back burning and other fire fighting actions at the fireline;
 - fire control can be in another district far away from the fire with different conditions and time taken for approval for such basic fire fighting such as back burning can make firefighting dangerous ie requests to back burn in the early morning are approved later in the day and are undertaken by the NPWS Afternoon Shift in the high heat of the day;
 - control and command structures are not providing the resources to locals to fight fires but are over controlling the resources ie fires 20 years ago were put out much quicker with resources that are much less adequate and at lower cost;
 - the role of the Bushfire Captain has diminished and responsibility for back burning and fire assessment has been taken away ie the coal face has been disempowered with decisions on firefighting now too centralized at the Fire Control Centre;
 - Fortunately in most areas locally there is a good relationship between the different services ie Rural Fire Service, NSW Fire Brigade, State Emergency Service, etc;
 - There is a need to research the traditional basic fire fighting methods to ensure that best practice is acknowledged and used;
 - Small helicopters have their place, however aircraft need to be used efficiently due to the high cost;
 - The use of the large helicopter cranes has proved to be most effective;
 - A proper public debate needs to happen to determine the suitability and usefulness of the even larger firefighting aircraft;
 - Communication problems of the 1980’s have improved but need more involvement of local Bushfire Captains;
 - Council considers that sometimes Local Area Rural Fire Service Brigades are not used appropriately in the areas that they have local experience, an example is when

there is a huge influx of non-local Rural Fire Service Brigades that do not have local knowledge, the local brigades are not used as much as possible to help or joined with the non-locals to co-ordinate their efforts, consideration is not even given to "Local Community Liaison Officers" from the local brigades with the local knowledge to aid the non-local brigades, this could lead to dangerous situations that risk firefighters lives and inefficient time fighting efforts;

- Council does agree with the recent policy of the NSW Rural Fire Service that if owners of property are adequately resourced they should stay and fight the fire threatening their property and only leave when life threatening situations are imminent.
- (h) *the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;*
- Council has found that power plays of Fire Control Staff sometimes keep the local knowledge away from where it is needed ie on the fire front and the Fire Control Headquarters;
 - Council considers that what is not effectively shared is local knowledge and at the bare minimum officers from such authorities as the NPWS and State Forests should be involved with the local Bushfire Brigades adjacent to their Park and Forest Assets and attend Brigade Meetings.
- (i) *liability, insurance coverage and related matters;*
- Unfortunately the community is not always able to ascertain who is responsible for a fire;
 - Farm assets such as fencing is never insured;
 - The cost of loss of animals, and animal feed is never fully compensated for;
 - Many damaged assets are never repaired or funded;
 - There needs to be better advice to the community on what help is available for such matters as fodder for animals, asset replacement, etc;
 - Council has been fully supportive of the proposal by the Lgov NSW for a change in direction of both funding and control of the Fire Services in NSW ie Lgov NSW Local Government's Role on the Provision of Fire Services in NSW – A Discussion Paper January, 2003.
- (j) *the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors;*
- Consideration needs to be made in regard to compensation to employers for the loss of labour when volunteers are called away to emergencies, in a similar fashion to the army reserve;

- Due to the reduction in local involvement in fire control and hazard deduction the number of local volunteers prepared to assist is diminishing;
- This reduction is of concern because the Local Rural Fire Service Brigade is an important part of the social fabric of small local communities.

Conclusion

Council's submission has addressed matters in regard to each of the Terms of Reference of the Select Committee and considers the problems of the 1994 NSW Bushfires that are still to be properly addressed by relevant Authorities such as inadequate hazard reduction particularly in National Parks and State Forests, the reasons considered why this hazard reduction is not being undertaken and what should be done to change the situation.

Council also believes that appropriate hazard reduction by "cold" fires at appropriate times of the year is more environmentally friendly than the "hot" and ferocious fires of the summer fire season presently being experienced. It is also believed that by looking after the environment in the way suggested by Council also reduces the risk to life and property. Much more research should be centered on the hazard reduction activity detailed.

The submission also considers the local knowledge factor and lists ways this can be used to improve fire fighting and hazard reduction.

It is also considered that the recently enacted legislation (regulations) in NSW will eventually ensure appropriate development control and hazard reduction on private property if proper administration controls are set up and are properly resourced.

Council's submission also shows the local communities concerns with the cost of fire control responses, fire control and command structures and the diminishing role and responsibility of the "experienced" Bushfire Captain.

Council also commends for the Select Committee's consideration the January, 2003 Lgov NSW Discussion Paper – Local Government's Role in the Provision of Fire Services in NSW in regard to a change of direction for both funding and control of Fire Services in New South Wales.

Council is also concerned that the reduction in local involvement in fire control and hazard reduction will help diminish the number of volunteers assisting the community in times of fire emergency. Council also believes that consideration should be given to the compensation of employers for the loss of labour when volunteers are called away for emergencies in a similar fashion to the army reserve.

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Our Ref: 03/0078

Your Ref:

7th May 2003

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires

Please find enclosed Council's Submission to the above.

Gary Woodman
Director Operations