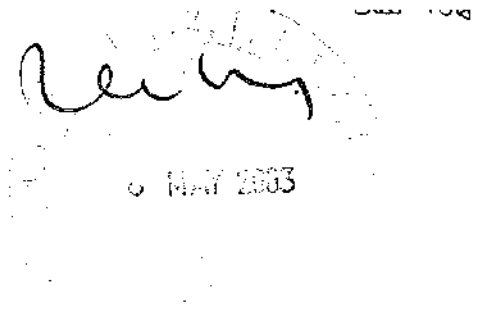


DRY PLAINS RURAL FIRE SERVICE



The Chairman
The House Select Committee on
The Recent Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra Act 2600

5 May, 2003

SUBMISSION FROM THE DRY PLAINS RURAL FIRE SERVICE TO
THE ABOVE COMMITTEE.

Dear Sir,

The Dry Plains Rural Fire Service wish to address their concerns to the select committee arising from the recent bushfires in SE Australia and particularly those within KNP. We consider that these concerns could be common to many fire events in Australia, but particularly those within State controlled lands.

The subjects we wish to address are:

- Hazard reduction of lands to maintain low fuel loadings
- Fire Trails, particularly within the NSW Parks system
- Public Access to public lands, particularly to NSW Parks
- Communications
- Volunteer and paid fire-fighting personnel
- The environment and indigenous fauna and flora

Hazard reduction

Cool burns at appropriate times of the year are far less damaging than wildfire as an intermittent occurrence.

An audit process needs to be developed between agencies in control of state lands and the RFS on the regularity, extent and success of hazard reduction burns.

Our submission rejects the premise that hazard reduction burning is of no practical value in reducing the impact of fire. One example of its value may be viewed northwest of Adaminaby, known as the Denison burn carried out in early October 2002.

An acknowledgement of the value of hazard reduction needs to be recognised, and likewise any audit process (carried out independently) needs to be open to public scrutiny.

Hazard reduction burns are a positive for the fauna in State lands, producing fresh green feed instead of the rank and unpalatable growth now present.

Fire Trails

Fire trails both within State and private lands must be regularly maintained to a standard giving access to no less than the standard fire tankers in use. Failure of maintenance, and even destruction of trails by removal of culverts and revegetation were contributory factors in the time taken to reach fire outbreaks. The safety of the fire fighters was also heightened by the shocking condition of trails within the KNP.

Signage should be standard on fire trails to assist personnel unfamiliar with the terrain to know where they are or need to be positioned.

Positioning of fire trails should be with consultation with the local RFS control officers.

As an aside, usage of heavy machinery must be early in a fire event, possibly sacrificing a limited area of country to save a much larger tract.

Example- KNP fires were started by numerous lightning strikes. Due to the philosophy of fighting remote fires and limited access due to poor trail maintenance, the required machinery could not be delivered to contain these fires quickly. The weather following these strikes was comparatively calm and much could have been achieved prior to the extreme fire conditions that did eventuate.

Public Access

Current restricted access to vast areas of National Parks to other than bushwalking pursuits has led to a declining local knowledge of these areas, paramount in times such as this last fire season.

Encouragement of a more open policy of access eg horse riding, would lead to far better knowledge by the surrounding community of their local environment. It is also important that this knowledge is utilised in the event of an emergency.

Communications

Agencies need individual communication within their own organisation, but it is essential on the fire ground that there be a common means of communication between all bodies involved. Eg UHF radio.

During the recent fires in the KNP personnel under the banner of different agencies (park employees, visiting fire fighters) were unable to communicate by radio even if they were in sight of one another.

Interagency communication was found wanting. The KNP being divided into Northern and Southern regions, one controlled from Tumut, the other from Jindabyne. On occasion when control lines were crossed it was obvious one region was unaware of what the other had organised.

Volunteer fire fighters and paid personnel

Volunteer fire fighters, particularly during extended fire periods, feel disadvantaged by no compensation for use of private vehicles and loss of time and income, particularly relevant to self employed people and farmers. This situation is obviously of no concern to paid personnel, but definitely is when volunteer fire fighters are assisting to control fires on State lands.

The organisation of changeover crews in public utilities needs upgrading to require the next shift to be on the fire ground before the current one departs.

The support network for paid personnel does not extend to volunteer fire fighters. During the current drought many farmers had to remain on fire duty for extended periods of time rather than tending to the welfare of their livestock.

Conclusion

The devastation both within and on the boundaries of the KNP in many areas will have many long-term effects. Serious erosion, loss of mountain huts used by bushwalkers and skiers that have on occasion been a life saving asset, as well as the history that surrounds them all.

The general public at large must understand, that the Australian continent was "farmed" with fire prior to white settlement by our indigenous people, and that the environment, flora and fauna have evolved under this regime. It would appear that this is not understood by the managers of State parks where, rather than being examples of nature at its best, our Parks are becoming **wastelands**, (another word describing wilderness under present management practice).

Fire used by the Australian Aborigine and ignited by lighting and left unchecked is synonymous with this land. We have upset this balance by not allowing fire to be a regular part in the lands preserved for the Australian community and have increased the regularity and severity of wildfires to the detriment of nature and our community.

With regards,
Members of the Dry Plain Rural Fire Service.

Attachment: Letter written by Mr Gordon Day to a friend, Mr Bruce Haslingden, both of whom have a long association with the Snowy Mountains.

Referrals: reading of observations of Eastern Australia late 18th and early to mid 19th century, "A million wild acres" by Eric Rolls, Diaries of Captain James Cook.

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