



## STANTHORPE SHIRE COUNCIL

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Our Reference JD:JD

If telephoning or calling, please ask for:  
Jeanette Davis

16 May 2003

House of Representatives  
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sirs

Stanthorpe Shire experienced severe bushfires in October 2002 that resulted in a declaration of a State Disaster. These responses relate to that bushfire episode. Stanthorpe Shire is located in the southern area of Queensland approximately 250 km south west of Brisbane. The Shire has a population of 10 000 people, about one third of whom are employed in the agricultural sector. The fires affected almost 300 square kilometers of the Shire.

Council wishes to make comment on the following points of the Inquiry terms of reference:

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

The public assets that were lost included road and rail infrastructure (bridges, guide posts, signage) and telephone and electricity infrastructure.

The private assets that were lost included houses, sheds, farm infrastructure (irrigation, trellising and fencing) machinery and equipment (tractors, pumps), tree crops and vine crops as well as pasture and vegetable crops.

The bushfires in tandem with the drought have contributed to some economic decline in the Shire and the main town (Stanthorpe).

It is considered that there needs to be an emphasis on post disaster trauma counseling in order to maintain individuals and the community.

- (b) the causes and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires.

One of the acknowledged factors that contributed to the impact and severity of the Stanthorpe bushfires was the fuel load on private property and the lack of private and strategic fire breaks. Many property owners had not taken action to reduce fuel load, had not created or maintained adequate fire breaks and had not implemented other strategies which can reduce the threat of fire. This lack of preparedness possibly results from a lack of knowledge and education.

- (c) the adequacy of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention suppression and control.

Strategic, timely and effective hazard reduction burns are difficult to arrange and carry out as the Queensland system requires that all property owners and neighbours must give their consent to the burn. It is considered that there should be some circumstances where hazard reduction fires may be authorized without the agreement of the adjoining land owners.

- (g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting.

Communication problems impacted on the firefighting response. The Incident Control Centre was slow to establish because of lack of know-how and lack of information about the nature of the disaster. A person with local knowledge of the terrain and road conditions and development patterns in the affected area needs to be incorporated into the Incident Control Centre.

The fire, ambulance and police units in the field were unable to communicate with each other as their radios were on different frequencies.

The radios used by the fire and ambulance services were often unusable because of limitations caused by local topography.

There is ongoing concern about the way that the evacuation of areas was carried out. There needs to be local information provided to inform the decision making about when areas should be evacuated.

- (h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources.

At the beginning of the fire the small rural units were pressed into property protection. These units are not suited for this purpose because they cannot carry sufficient water. The large urban units were unable to access some properties because of narrow gateways, overhanging trees, and steep inclines.

There was enormous support from agencies to assist and in particular by those that owned heavy earth moving plant and equipment suitable for fire fighting. It was recognized that there is a need to log in the use of volunteer labour and plant equipment and to determine the cost of their involvement.

- (i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters.

Many of the members of the Rural Fire Brigade are self employed farmers. During the emergency many lost crops as a result of not being on farm for an extended period to arrange and carry out irrigation or harvesting. Others who were hurt in the fires have not been able to return to work on their farms. There is no specific guidance as to how these volunteers can be recompensed for lost income.

Up to date information about what is covered by SDRA and NDRA is required.

- (j) the roles and contributions of volunteers.

The number of people volunteering to help in the emergency was enormous, however many of these volunteers were unprepared and untrained. People arrived to help fight the fires without proper protective clothing and with little knowledge of fire fighting procedures. There was no information provided to food preparation areas (staffed by volunteers) on the appropriate food and drink requirements for fire fighters.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry.

Yours faithfully

TP Brennan  
Chief Executive Officer