

23<sup>rd</sup> May 2003

The Secretary  
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir

**Re: Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires**

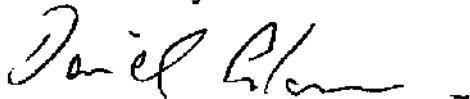
I wish to make a submission regarding the Bushfires in the Kosciusko National Park in the summer of 2002 / 2003.

My background is as follows; a member of the Numbla Vale Brigades since 1972, Captain of that Brigade for 16 years, Group Captain for 10 years, Shire Councillor for one term and my present position for the last 8 years is Chair of the Snowy River Bushfire Management Committee. During the recent fires I acted as a Deputy Incident Controller and in the local area as a Divisional Commander.

The Snowy River Rural Fire District Group Captains and myself have presented a submission. I fully support the Group Captains submission as well as the submission of Kurt Lance. In this submission I propose to elaborate on some of the points already raised and also to expand on some of the points that were raised with four of the Committee members at a dinner at Jindabyne on the 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2003. I must thank them for the opportunity in meeting with them.

It must be noted that the points made are my own and not necessarily the views of the Snowy River Bush Fire Management Committee.

Yours sincerely



David Glasson  
Chair SRBFMC

### **Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2003, there were some 50 lightning strikes in the Alpine areas from the Victorian Border to the ACT. Approximately 30 of those strikes were in National Parks and the remainder on private property. Within 24 hours all of the fires on private land were either extinguished or contained. As we all know the Section 44 for the Kosciusko South Complex of fires was revoked at 10.00 a.m. on Monday 24th February, 2003, some 47 days later.

Why such a different result? Simply that the private lands had less fuel and had better access - two points that are critical in any fire management policy. This highlights the fact that in the KNP hazard reduction is inadequate and that the fire trail network is sub standard. These facts were well known to all prior to the most recent fires and I refer to Kurt Lance's submission and an attached letter from the Adaminaby Bush Fire Brigade of 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2002.

Snowy River Rural Fire Service has not had any funding for fire trail maintenance for three years. This is partly as a result of Policy No 2/01 Fire Mitigation Works Funding from the NSW Bushfire Coordinating Committee (policy and correspondence attached). This Coordinating Committee seem to be out of touch with many issues relating to fire suppression and mitigation in this area.

Fire Trails in the KNP are poorly planned, constructed and maintained. This was evident in the fires where some 35 bulldozers and graders were needed to allow access to the fires; despite the statement made by Minister Debus on 18<sup>th</sup> February that every single one of the 1,100 km of fire trails within the park had been maintained over the past two years. How can a Minister be so poorly informed? Perhaps the fact that that he held three portfolios, Attorney General, Minister for Emergency Services and Minister for National Parks and Wildlife where there can be a definite conflict of interest. We need a fire trail policy that is developed locally, using local knowledge, which will take into account the terrain, vegetation, aspect, soil type and importance as well as being properly funded.

Hazard reduction in the KNP is of prime importance. This may be by cool burning, grazing, chemical control or by some other method. Ideally it would be a combination of many methods suitable to the terrain and environmental sensitivity of the area. The park is under staffed and this makes it almost impossible for any quantity of work to be done. The State Government has to address this serious issue as volunteers cannot be expected to continually spend large amounts of their time doing work for the park. Special hazard reduction squads could be employed on a seasonal basis and perhaps these might even include some of the local landowners who understand the neighbouring environment and its requirements.

Communications on the fire ground using the RFS network and inter agency was extremely poor and at times life threatening. The RFS has recently installed a PMR radio system that has major flaws in this hilly region. We were led to believe that senior RFS radio technicians were in the area but they were never seen in the field where perhaps they could have witnessed the problems encountered. I am aware that the military have systems that are perhaps better suited for inter agency fire fighting efforts.

The local brigades found that they were totally under equipped in the terms of fire tankers. Many private vehicles were on the fire ground for long periods with no financial reimbursement coming to the owner. The RFS has a policy of funding based on the financial affordability of the local council. Areas that have a high rate base have a larger allocation of RFS funds. Nearly 40% of our local budget goes on costs back to RFS Headquarters. We need funding to be on a needs basis rather than the present situation where many areas are poorly equipped.

In all fires local knowledge is essential for the effective planning and control of such events. With the KNP policy of almost total exclusion of people from the park how can local knowledge be maintained? Park staff are often moved to another area in NSW on a regular interval and we lose that knowledge and, compounded with the fact that there is minimum hazard reduction done in the KNP, many of the staff have no appreciation of wildfire behaviour in the area.

One must ask what role does the KNP Advisory Committee play. I have heard from a member of that committee that he had no knowledge of the KNP Fire Management Plan until after these recent fires. It is a concern that fire management appears to be low on their list of priorities.

Dave Darlington as Incident Controller and Barry Atchison as Deputy Incident Controller did an excellent job during the section 44 and must be commended. However, why was Tim Sheppard, NPWS Eden, brought in to relieve Dave Darlington on his days off? Tim was out of area with no local knowledge and not a deputy incident controller. I believe this could have been better managed using local personnel more effectively.

Senior RFS staff came to Jindabyne but only one visited a local brigade station. Surely they should have given the volunteers moral support. They were accommodated in the higher class accommodation in Jindabyne where as the volunteers from away were housed at the Station Resort - a budget class of accommodation. The leaders should have been with their troops.

On the fire ground there is a growing problem arising with Park employees receiving large amounts of overtime payments (over \$50,000 was not uncommon). The volunteer is usually self employed and using his own vehicle and hence incurring numerous costs over and above lost working hours. For this reason, unless there are major changes in the management of the KNP, it will be hard see why any volunteer would willingly fight fires on public lands.

We are led to believe by the State Government that the lengthy drought was the reason for the extent of the fires. If so, why wasn't any fire control preparation done? Generally land managers have to adjust their management according to the season; in a drought farmers have to de-stock; foresters have to have fire breaks around their plantations etc.

The NSW Government has strict environmental policies mainly through its agency of the EPA. In the past these agencies have prosecuted organizations for breaches of the law such as Transgrid for clearing under power lines to the west of Canberra. It is interesting to note that this clearing was invaluable in the recent fires in maintaining the power supply to Canberra. As a result of the recent fires in the KNP tremendous damage has been done to the environment, some of which will never recover. The assets of Snowy Hydro have been badly affected with silting of the dams a major concern; Country Energy lost over one million dollars of assets; Telstra lost the fibre optic cable to Thredbo; Gaden trout hatchery had polluted water from the Thredbo River and yet there are no prosecutions. Would this be the same if, for example, a private pine forest had caused as much damage in a similar situation. I would hardly think so.

Many landowners lost both boundary and internal fencing. Provided the landowner is not insured KNP will pay for fifty percent of the replacement of the boundary fence only, and none of the internal fencing. If the land owner is insured he or she has to make a claim through their insurance company and suffer the financial implications of doing so. Is this not a little unbalanced particularly when the insurance premium has already attracted a fire levy?

Since the fires the area has had some rain and some areas have started to revegetate. One gets the feeling from stakeholders in Jindabyne that nothing unusual has happened. How can this even be considered? Over the summer there was up to 1600 fire fighters involved on any one day and many millions of dollars, both private and public, was expended and there was nothing unusual? I hardly think so. I trust your Committee will investigate so many of these complex issues and make change. This is essential for everyone, including some very good and talented people in the KNP who cannot express their concerns. It is also imperative for the future of National Parks and other public lands in this country.

In summary the areas that need to be addressed are:

- Hazard reduction (it does work).
- Fire Trails - Funding, location, standard and maintenance.
- Local Input - Fire mitigation and suppression.
- Communications.
- Funding for Brigades.
- A change so these fires do not happen again.