

Uriarra
07/06/03

Submission
to the House Select Committee on the
recent Australian Bushfires
by the Residents of Uriarra Forest,
Canberra ACT

23 May 2003

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This submission is made by the residents of Uriarra Forest, Canberra ACT in response to the Inquiry by the House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires.

We believe this submission addresses the following elements as stated in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

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

The Uriarra Community had secured ACT Government support to continue the community at Uriarra Forest – copies of these letters are contained in Attachment B. Following the bushfires of 18 Jan 2003, this support appears to have been rescinded. Since the bushfires, many residents have been relocated in urban areas, this has been an extremely difficult adjustment as many had been long time residents of Uriarra.

- (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

The submission highlights the land management practices of the governing body – particularly in the Recount of events by Bill Bates on page 6. As stated in Environment ACT's website, Map 25, (Attachment A) which includes Stony Creek Nature Reserve, Uriarra Pine Forest and rural leases outlines the assets in the area potentially at risk from bushfire. Fire Management Unit's (FMU's) 25.1 and 25.2 are responsible for managing these assets. According to Mr Bates, none of these actions had been undertaken. To further illustrate this, many of the residents of Uriarra are former forestry workers who have lived in the Settlement for over 30 years, these residents have seen a massive decline in hazard reduction/fuel management in the past 15 years.

Prior to the early 1980's when the management of Uriarra Settlement was handed over to ACT Housing, the settlement was well prepared and managed for the event of a bushfire. Firebreaks throughout the forest and the settlement were always maintained. Grass around the settlement and main roads were kept low through regular slashing. Fire hydrants located in the village were also well maintained.

The past 15 years has seen a reduction in ACT Forestry workers – these men were fully trained and experienced bush fire fighters who knew the geographical area well. Fire hazard reduction had also been reduced in and around the settlement. Evidence in the decline in fire break management can be seen at the base of Mount McDonald where a large pine tree now grows in the middle of a previously well maintained fire break. In addition paddocks around the settlement had been replanted with native gums and pines, thus creating a great fire danger for the settlement

The residents strongly believe that had more fire reduction been carried out and more consideration been given to the welfare of the settlement and its residents the following stories of the January 18th bushfires would not have been so devastating.

- (g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting, and
- (h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions

The recount of events by fourteen residents, clearly shows the inadequacy of response arrangements and the ineffectiveness in the deployment of firefighting resources. By way of example, NSW Firefighters positioned at Uriarra Station commented that they were unaware of the existence of the settlement 1km up the road.

Please contact Ms Donna Murphy on the address below should you have any queries arising from this submission.

Ms Donna Murphy
Treasurer
Uriarra Community Association
Cottage 34
Uriarra Settlement
COREE ACT 2601

Jennifer St George (Secretary)

Bianca Bianca Anthon
President
Uriarra Community Association

23 May 2003

Background

Our village, 17 kms west of Duffy was established in 1928 to provide housing and community facilities for Canberra's forestry industry. Prior to the 18th of January, it consisted of 22 three bedroom houses that have been owned by ACT Housing since the early 1980s. All but three of these houses were occupied. Our village had a household water hydrant system – a fire hose and hydrant at the front perimeter of every 2nd house. The water for this system came from the village's main water supply. The village had three concrete tanks with a capacity of 20,000 gallons, each gravity fed from Bendora Dam. Only 2 of these tanks were in use – the third tank had been out of use for the past 6 years. In addition, the village had 1 galvanised steel tank holding 10,000 gallons intended to be used solely for fire fighting purposes. This tank was not turned on.

The hydrant system was installed by Forestry many years ago. To the best of one resident's knowledge (Mr B Bates, Cottage 38), neither the hydrants or hoses had been maintained over the last 15 years.

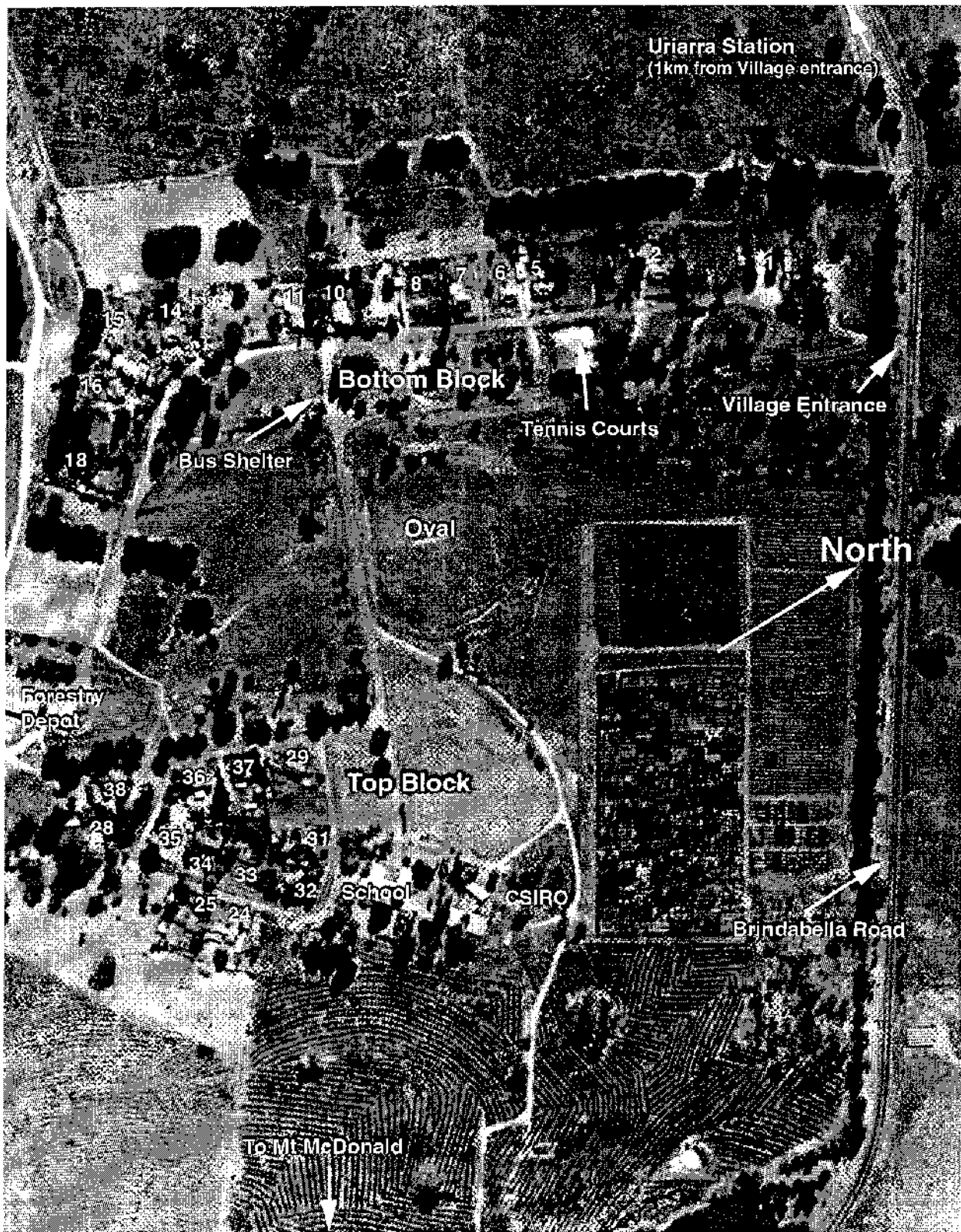
Summary

We believe that this submission recounts the events as accurately as possible and raises many important issues and questions. During the week preceding the 18th, when our village was used as a base for fire fighting operations, we had been told by the firies at Uriarra 'don't worry, we'll look after you.' Up until the fire fighting personnel left the village on Saturday morning, we had all been under the impression that they were staying to help us fight – we were living with a false sense of security. We are all experiencing a feeling of total abandonment, that our lives and homes were worth less than cattle yards. Homes that we had to watch burn after our fire fighting efforts were rendered useless by the lack of water and suitable fire fighting equipment.

This submission by Uriarra residents details events that took place on the 8 January 2003 and up to and including the 18 January 2003. We believe that this submission recounts the events as accurately as possible and raises many important issues and questions.

The submission includes recounts of events by the following residents:

- Mr Bill Bates, Lanyon Gardens, 3 Peron Place, Banks, ph 6294 1682
- Ms Mandy Annetts, 36 Uriarra Forest
- Mr Neville Ryan, 2 Bradley Crescent, Uriarra Forest
- Mr Michael Anderson, 49 Bugden Ave, Gowrie, ph 6236 5181
- Mr Jason Houghton, 32 Uriarra Forest, ph 6236 5152
- Mr Jason and Mr Trent Watt, 29 Uriarra Forest, ph 6236 5136
- Mr Mick Kavanagh and Ms Donna Kavanagh, 10 McIlveen Pl, Oxley
- Ms Donna Murphy, 34 Uriarra Forest, ph 6236 5159
- Mr Toby Whittaker, Mr Phillip Whittaker, Ms Bianca Anthon, 1 Bradley Crescent, Uriarra Forest, ph 6236 5177
- Ms Rebecca Annetts, 36 Uriarra Forest



Recount of events by Bill Bates

Bill Bates has been a resident of Cottage 38 for the past 55 years.

8 January 2003

Three separate fires were started from lightning strikes on Wednesday 8 January 2003:

- 1 at McIntyres Hut
- 1 at Bendora Dam
- 1 at Stockyard Spur

For 6 days following, the wind came from the east blowing the fire back towards Brindabella. After this the wind changed direction and blew from the north west.

I believe that the fire could have been stopped during the first 6 days whilst the weather conditions were favourable. In the Uriarra Forest area, no firebreaks had been maintained for the past 10-15 years, nor had any hazard reduction been carried out during that time. Further to that I also believe that there were no experienced leaders who knew the country and tracks.

Stockyard Spur Fire

On 8 January 2003, the 10 person crew sent out to fight the Stockyard Spur fire noted that it was about 50 by 70 metres. The track to get to the fire was over grown. The crew was keen to walk in and stay overnight and put the fire out – it was about 9pm. After radioing it's intentions into Emergency Services Bureau, the crew was told that the track was too dangerous and to go home. Conditions were mild enough at this time to have stood a good chance of putting the fire out.

Bendora Dam Fire

On 8 January 2003 a 12 person crew had raked a trail around the fire and maintained a hose line around fire. They had arrived between 5-6pm and wanted to stay the night and continue fire fighting efforts to contain the fire but were told to go home. When they returned the following day the fire had jumped containment lines and was out of control. This fire burnt for several days before crews were sent in to work around the clock to try to bring fire under control.

This fire burnt over to Mount Franklin – down to Brindabella and the River and by this time had burnt approx 100 acres of land.

A two chain firebreak put in in the mid 1950's extending from Mount Franklin to Mount Coree across the top of the range had not been maintained since 1970. This should have been graded in an attempt to stop the fire.

Wednesday Night 15 January 2003:

The water supply in the settlement ran out on Wednesday night. I phoned ACTEWAGL, who came out that same night and determined that the tankers filling from the water supply had emptied the water tanks that service the settlement. The tanker drivers were advised by ACTEWAGL to start filling up at an alternative location.

On Thursday 16 January I saw a person remove the fire hose from the box in front of Cottage 35. This person was definitely not a resident. To the best of my knowledge, this hose did not reappear.

Saturday 18 January 2003

10.00am:

When I left the settlement, helicopters were still taking off from the oval, fire bombing Blue Range – I saw no fire fighting personnel at the settlement at all. As I drove past Uriarra Station, I passed several tankers going into the Station.

Recount of events by Mandy Annetts

Mandy Annetts along with her husband Mark and 3 children have been residents of Cottage 11 for 17 years.

Saturday 18 January 2003

11.00am:

My family and I were given the choice to either leave or stay at the settlement. We were advised by a fire that we had about 10 minutes to decide. Whilst we were being told this my son Raymond, aged 20, saw a fire out the front of our house taking the coupling off the fire hose. We are still unsure what happened to the coupling but as we knew ours was missing we were able to find another one to fit at the Forestry Depot.

2.00pm:

Both myself and my eldest daughter decided that we should try and leave the settlement as we had packed our car with photographs and family pets. We started to make our way to the main gate (and exit) of the settlement, but after seeing trees on fire next to main gate we turned around and went back to the house. My husband Mark and son Raymond told us that we should get out straight away as pines and eucalypts behind our house were on fire. We thought that a safe exit might be available through the Forestry Depot until we saw the wall of flames approaching from that direction. A fellow resident, Paul Galvin (subletting Cottage 10), suggested the best thing to do would be to drive through the fire to get to a place that had already been burnt. We drove through the fire front at the tennis court with flames from burning trees touching the car bonnet. We could hear windows breaking in nearby Cottage 5, eucalyptus trees 'popping' and branches falling off trees. By the time we reached the main entrance, the trees were still alight and there was debris all over the road but we were able to get safely down to Uriarra Station. The other Uriarra residents that had left the settlement were assembled at the front gate of the Station, we weren't at any point asked about our welfare or the welfare of the residents still in Uriarra. We told a fire-fighter from Queensland about the houses under threat less than a kilometre up the road at Uriarra, his response was to this was 'what houses?' Whilst we were at the entrance to Uriarra Station, a couple of fire trucks drove past small spot fires without even stopping to put them out.

After the fire front had passed through the settlement, I then went back to the settlement with a fellow resident Donna Murphy to check my house and get Donna's vital medicines. We saw fire-fighters filling up a grey fire tanker from a hydrant in front of Cottage 1. We overheard the fire-fighters saying 'there is no pressure here – let's piss off – I should be able to fill up from the dam at the station.'

Recount of events by Neville Ryan

Neville Ryan has been a resident of Cottage 2 for the past 32 years.

Saturday 18 January 2003

10.30 & onwards

I arrived back from town and noticed that fire hoses had been rolled out. I had my own coupling inside the house as I didn't trust anybody. I began to prepare my house and hosed it down. Then I went to Bindi's at Cottage 1 and started putting out spot fires.

The wind was blowing from the north west with the fire approaching the settlement entrance. Myself and residents from Cottage 1 fought the fire with hoses for about 30 minutes then a large fire hit the back paddock behind my house. I then ran back to my own house (40 metres), the fire beat me there. There were sheds on fire. Donna Murphy (from Cottage 34) was at my house wetting it down. We knew it was time to go. We drove to the bus shelter where other bottom block residents were grouped. We attempted to get out via the old Forestry Depot. The fire was still roaring and had hit the CSIRO plot and was running up around to the school and the back of the settlement. I was unaware there were people up at the school end of the settlement. One resident suggested that we get ourselves to where the fire had already burnt. We had to drive through the fire at the tennis courts, the wind was so strong it was lifting the vehicle up. We drove down to Uriarra Station where other residents from Uriarra had gathered. I waited there for around 20 mins whilst fire units were putting out fires around the Station's cattle yards. There were 2 light units at a vacant house ½ km north of Uriarra Station.

Back at Uriarra

Bottom Block

We came back to Uriarra settlement. Put out a fire on the fascia boards at Cottage 1. Also put out a shed that was on fire. The water started running out. Cottage 14 was still standing - this house did not burn until a couple of hours later, it caught fire from a small spot fire next to the house, we had no water to save it.

Top Block

We went up to the top block, Cottage 32 was still alright. We put out what we could at Donna's house (Cottage 34).

I went back to Uriarra Station again to get help to put out fires at the top block. Spoke to a male and female fire fighter, I asked if they had a full tank, they said yes, I then asked them to come and help put out fires at the settlement. They came in straight away (they said they didn't know there were any houses at the settlement). We drove past Kevin Cotters' house (Cottage 16) and Cottage 14, they were still standing but Kevin's house was alight. The fire fighters then followed me to the top block. Fire fighters put out some fires, bamboo was exploding at Cottage 32. The fire asked me to help radio their position back to their boss. The person in charge on the radio

“revved” it up the female fire fighter saying ‘what are you doing in there, you should not have gone into Uriarra’.

He was obviously not too far away because he came up to the top block outside the school. He abused the female fire fighter again for not radioing through the reason they were at Uriarra Settlement. Her response was that a resident approached her at Uriarra Station and asked for help. Neville went over and questioned the man in charge but he did not respond. Then 4 or 5 trucks (or light units) came around. They did not get out because of bamboo exploding. They then put a fire out at the boundary of Cottage 32.

Recount of events by Michael Anderson

Michael Anderson has been a resident of Cottage 5 for 37 years.

Saturday 18 January 2003

Approx 12 Noon

I got to Uriarra at approx 12 noon, there were a couple of helicopters flying around but no fire-fighting personnel anywhere. I noticed that the fire hoses had been rolled out to the back of the houses. I was told that at 11.00am that morning fires had come and rolled out the hoses, we were all under the impression that they were getting ready to fight the fire. What I didn't know at that time was that some of the nozzles had been removed from the fire hoses. The nozzles were critical to our fire fighting effort, without them the hoses were of no use at all.

During the week leading up to 18 January, the settlement and oval was used as a base camp for fire fighting operations. We knew that uncontained the fires would head our way.

At some stage during the day on Saturday 18 January, the base camp and all personnel were relocated to another location. This was done without any word to the residents. At no time was I told to evacuate. We realised that this was a serious situation and we started evacuating belongings from homes and loading up available vehicles. We were running out of time, we knew that the fire must be getting close because all of the fire fighting personnel had packed up and left. We were working together to try and get what we could out of the houses.

1.30pm

As we were discussing what action to take, we saw the flames coming down the back of Mt McDonald toward us, we knew that we were in trouble and that we only had 20 minutes or less. Some of us went to the hoses and that was when we discovered that the nozzles had been taken off. There were only a couple of residents who were able to use their fire hoses. Residents that either kept their nozzles separate to the fire hose or those that noticed in time that their nozzle was missing and were able to get a replacement from the Forestry Depot. Only a very small number of residents had access to a useful fire hose.

We shared the nozzles to get the hoses working to some degree. The fire fighters had left the settlement - it was just the residents, the hoses and a couple of nozzles left to fight the fires. When the smoke got too thick we knew that we had to organise getting residents evacuated. I rang 000 and they told me we could get out via the Cotter Road. Obviously they had not had an update, we knew that because of the direction that the fire had come that that was not a safe exit for us - there were no exits for us at all, the fire had come at us from three directions.

I drove down to Uriarra Station - there were between 8 and 10 fire units there waiting for the fire front to hit. I spoke to a fire in a tanker and told him that there were people in trouble at Uriarra Settlement and that we would need help to get them out of

there. He told me that he couldn't leave but he got on the radio to try and get us some assistance but to no avail.

When the fire went through the Station, it headed straight for Uriarra Settlement and it was about 2 minutes after that that Uriarra went up. I was at the Station trying to get help to get the people out when my home burnt. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the residents managed to get themselves out of the settlement by driving through the fire front and down to Uriarra Station. After a quick head count we determined that there were about 8 people still unaccounted for. I managed to talk a fire in a Landcruiser to take me back to the settlement, a fire tanker followed, at one point it got too dangerous and we had to turn around. At that stage all I could see was my house on fire and a couple of sheds, there were no other houses on fire. By the time we managed to break through, the main fire front had passed and there were only 2 or 3 houses on fire. We found the remainder of the residents standing on the oval on a bare patch of dirt about 100m sq that hadn't burnt. Two young men (Jason and Trent Watt aged 20 and 22 of Cottage 29) had managed to save their house and a couple of others nearby using just ice cream containers and small buckets.

When we drove out of the settlement 80% of the houses were still standing, the water supply had been exhausted and with no other help we just had to watch the houses slowly burn.

3.00pm

The fireies arrived and congregated at the entrance to the settlement, a couple had come up to the top block of houses at the residents' request. They were later told by their supervisor to get back to the gate.

A short time later they came and asked what the residents wanted them to put out – they put out a couple of stumps burning under the school.

Recount of events by Jason Houghton

Jason and his family have been residents of Cottage 31 for 12 months.

Ever since my family moved to Uriarra my partner Nicki has been trying to get a fire hose as the one in the box directly out the front of my place was missing. After repeated telephone calls over the 12 month period, including a call to a Minister by my father, a fire hose was delivered by a representative from Transfield on Thursday 16 January. This person then checked the other hoses and connections in the settlement and told his boss that they needed to be replaced as the hoses had deteriorated and some of the attachments were the wrong size. That work was to have been done on Monday 20 January 2003.

Friday 17 January

A representative from ACTEW informed me that he had told the tanker drivers not to fill up their tankers from the settlement water supply because the settlement will run out of water. He told me to keep an eye on them to make sure they don't continue to fill up.

Saturday 18 January

10.00am

I noticed that Paddy (Barry Graham, former resident of Cottage 37) and Jason Watt were connecting the hoses to the fire hydrants, I ran outside to see what was happening and was approached by a security guard who had been working with air operations, he said get all your stuff together and get out. I packed the caravan and car with our belongings and took Nicki and our 3 children aged 8, 4 and 3 months to Nicki's mother house at Chapman.

12.00 noon

I arrived back at Uriarra and hosed down the roof and surrounds of my house. With the help of a couple of other residents including Matt Young from Stromlo Forestry Settlement we prepared the School by hosing down roof and school grounds. I approached a fire in a light unit and asked his advice about what we should do, he said the best thing to do was to stay and fight - spot fires would come through before the main front. He was the last fire fighter that I saw in the settlement, but before he left he filled up his light unit (400 litres) from the hydrant out the front of my house. I asked him if was staying to help, he said no, then I said 'so you're not staying to help but you're taking our water'. He said 'yes'. The following day he approached me, he asked if we were cranky with them, I said 'how do you feel', he just shook his head.

The fire came from the north west and skirted the edge of the settlement around us. Two pine trees at the corner near my house were alight. Rowan Williams and I attempted to move our cars away from the houses as they were gas powered. We got only half way around the block and discovered that the fire was raging to the back of the settlement and several houses behind us were well alight. That fire then joined

with the one coming from the south. It wasn't safe to continue in that direction so we turned around and put our cars on the oval and suggested that other residents do the same.

We continued to put out spot fires until the water ran out. The main front then came through. Everybody had to take cover, I took cover under my car, the wind was strong, and debris was flying around. I rang 000 on the mobile phone and advised them that there were 15 people trapped in the settlement and asked if anybody could help us. We were advised that they couldn't help. I rang again a couple of minutes later as residents were frantic and terrified, I was told the same thing.

Michael Anderson (Cottage 5) turned up with a fire in a Landcruiser followed by a tanker, and found us on the oval. They said they would take us out of the settlement. I asked if the main front had passed, they said yes, I then said 'c'mon then, lets start putting some of these houses out'. They said 'no, they were only in the settlement to remove the residents'. We persuaded them to stay and put out the site shed at Cottage 29. A few more trucks turned up, myself, Gavin Holding and Neville Ryan (Cottage 2) asked a fire fighter in a light unit to put out spot fires around Donna Murphy's house (Cottage 34) as hers was the only one among many that had not burnt. The eaves on the house next door to me (Cottage 32) were alight, we decided to put those out first before meeting the fire at Cottage 34. We then noticed that the fire had driven straight past Cottage 34 and kept on driving out of the settlement. We chased him, whistling, shouting, trying to get his attention but he just kept on driving. Gavin, Neville and I then proceeded to put out the spot fires at Donna Murphy's.

After this, approximately 3 tankers and 3 light units then turned up and stood around for 20 minutes discussing what to, they assessed the area, and said 'it'll be right' - there were several homes alight at this time. Cottage 32 was beginning to burn but they didn't put it out. I talked with a person who seemed senior, he couldn't tell me why the fire in the light unit had taken off when we had asked him for help.

It got dark, there were still fires burning. We had to put out fires with water from the tap using small buckets and water from a 44 gallon drum I had in my back yard. All night we were putting fires out this way.

Even the next morning spot fires were still burning and we continued to put out fires. A huge tree caught fire next to the school, we were able to put that fire out with a fire hose, as the water pressure had built up by then. The only fire fighting personnel I saw on Sunday were SES officers from Queanbeyan delivering food to the residents.

The surrounds of the school were monitored over the next couple of days by the residents as the tan bark in the playground was continuing to burn.

Recount of events by Jason and Trent Watt

Jason and Trent and their family have been residents of Cottage 29 for 27 years.

On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights we saw water tankers and fire units filling up from the Forestry Depot. The water tanker was used to wet down the oval where the helicopters were landing.

Saturday 18 January 2003

Trent

I knew things were bad on Saturday morning so I drove my girlfriend into town. I came straight back to Uriarra; I was only gone for approx 45 minutes. I rang my brother Jason at the coast and asked him to come home. I rolled out fire hoses at the top block and checked and fitted nozzles. I then went down to the bottom block to help residents prepare their homes.

I knew from residents at the bottom block that nozzles had been taken from the hoses, I looked for another one at the depot but was unable to find one. I came back to the top block to prepare for the fire. I was told by a firefighter "I won't tell you to leave because the fire won't come through here". Not long after that all fire personnel left.

My brother arrived back from the coast at approx 2.00 pm. He had to drive through a police roadblock and flames on Mount McDonald.

Trent and Jason

We were watering down the house and the paddock in front of our house when the fire hit.

The fire came at us from three different directions, we couldn't see what was happening down the bottom block because of the smoke. We thought we were going to die. We had no water pressure and were using a bucket and getting water from a slow dripping tap. We kept putting out spot fires around our house and others at the top block. All other top block residents had moved down to the oval.

Michael Anderson (Cottage 5) came back to Uriarra with a firefighter in a Landcruiser. We were told to leave but would not. We knew our house would burn if we did. We were told we were only hit by one fire front and the major fire was still coming through.

While we were fighting the fire using buckets and a slow dripping tap a fire fighter approached and said. "Good job fellas" then asked for a drink. We thought he was going to help us. After having a drink and washing his hands he took off.

The hut in our backyard and parts of our garden were on fire. We were desperately trying to put them out. A fire unit came around the top block. We screamed and screamed at them to stop and help. Eventually they did stop and help, however by this time we had mostly put the fire out ourselves.

Recount of Events by Donna and Mick Kavanagh

Donna, Mick and their 3 children aged 8, 5 and 16 months have been residents of Cottage 7 for 11 months.

Saturday 18 January 2003

10.00-11.00am

We saw firies walking up from the back of our house to the hoses. They said that everything was pretty calm, that we should stay calm and water everything down. They told us that our back fence would be their containment line.

Not long after that they all left. We were left on our own to fight for our homes and our lives.

Recount of Events by Donna Murphy

Donna and her two children aged 11 and 8 have been residents of Cottage 34 for 12 years.

In the fortnight leading up to the fires, Uriarra was used as the air operations base for the helicopters – this was reassuring for the residents here until the day of 18 January.

Approx 11:00am

An officer from the NSW Fire service came to my house and told me not to panic and to think about packing personal belongings, which I proceeded to do. In the meantime a resident was pulling out fire hoses around the top of the settlement, he was having problems with finding what fittings went where. These have not been maintained in the 12 years that I have lived here.

Approx 12:30pm

I went to help another resident pack some personal belongings, I thought we would have been given a final warning to evacuate, but no. I thought I should try and leave so I drove down Brindabella road to no avail, there were flames everywhere, so I tried Uriarra road and it was the same. I had no choice but to go back to the settlement, at this stage there was not a fire truck in sight anywhere.

I went to Neville Ryan's house, it was only a matter of 20 minutes and the fire front came, first from the back of the settlement where the eucalyptus trees had been planted, then straight up and through the main road, then from Mount MacDonald and through the pines. We jumped into Neville's truck and went to the Forestry Depot where at least 10 cars were trapped (babies and children included) - the fire was also coming through the forest - we were surrounded. I rang 000 and told them we were trapped and to get some help, their response was 'I know' and they hung up. Our only choice was to drive through the flames to where the fire had already burnt and we all headed down to Uriarra Station. To our anger and disbelief there were fire trucks hosing down cattle yards.

When a fire truck finally came past us we practically had to beg them to go back into the settlement as we knew there were people trapped in there.

Michael Anderson (Cottage 5) went back with them to show them where to go and in the hours afterwards the men were going back and forth, trying to put houses out but they had no water. There was none left in the pipes and fittings were missing off the hoses, it was useless. One fireman told us that we had to get out of there (in front of Uriarra Station) because the main fire-front was still coming, the fire we had just gone through was "CONTROL BURNING". No one could tell us if we could drive to town. Fire trucks just kept driving past and finally the residents drove in a convoy to town at about 9pm.

Recount of events by Toby Whittaker, Phillip Whittaker and Bianca Anthon

Toby, Phillip (Bindi) and Bianca have been residents of Cottage 1 for 21 years

Saturday 18 January 2003

10.30am

Fire fighters were connecting the hoses to the hydrants. Toby went and discussed with them what was happening. He was informed of the following: 'The fire is on its way, we are warning people to start collecting personal possessions. The fire may not be here until later this afternoon. We are going to man the fire break but most of our resources will be located at the school, we are advising that if anybody would like to stay and help fight the fire that the school will be highly manned as a last resort'.

After the above discussion no sooner had we come into the house thinking, where on earth do we start than a fire fighter ran into the house and told us to "grab what you can and leave".

Toby and Bianca packed the car and Bianca left for her mother's place.

Toby, Phillip and Neville Ryan double checked the hoses to see where the fire fighters had positioned the fire hoses, as there were no fire fighters to be seen, they checked to see how far the hoses would reach in order to protect the properties. They then proceeded to take precautionary measures eg. soaking down the houses and properties, being vigilant of the fire and spot fires in anticipation of help from fire fighters.

Andrew, a previous resident of Uriarra, arrived by driving through the fire in order to help.

Raging fires appeared from 3 directions, enclosing the only road in and out of the settlement, trapping many residents trying to escape. Winds whipped into what seemed like a hurricane, increasing the fire's ferocity and speed.

Toby, Phillip and Andrew continued to fight the spot fires with one fire hose and a household hose. The firestorm approached from behind, which then required their full attention, with flames leaping at least 30-40 metres high and the wind, smoke and ashes driving at them. It was evident to Andrew that they were fighting a losing battle. Toby and Phillip soon realised that one hydrant hose and one garden hose was useless, being unable to breathe with the heat and smoke they made their way to their vehicles and tried to establish the safest way to retreat.

The only way and the safest way was to drive through the fire on the only road in and out of the settlement to reach the dam at Uriarra Station (1km) down the road. Once they had reached the dam they realised that there was no sign of any other residents from Uriarra. Toby and Phillip proceeded to turn around to find and help other residents. With the winds and the fire still roaring through the settlement, it was

impossible to return the way they had come through only minutes before. They returned back to the dam.

Within a minute or two the rest of the residents from Uriarra settlement had created a convoy in order to follow each other through the smoke and fire to the safety of the dam. Neville Ryan, being the last vehicle of the convoy, appeared from the smoky haze with flames leaping from the back of his utility. Slamming on the breaks to pull over onto the side of the road both Donna Murphy and Neville Ryan jumped out of the vehicle. Donna ran down the road as Toby and Andrew ran towards Neville to help him save what was left of his possessions in the back of his car. After throwing burning materials off the back of his car, managing to save the majority of his possessions they all returned to the safety of the dam and other residents of Uriarra.

It wasn't long after that that the first of the fire brigade appeared, we found out that they hadn't come to help but were returning to the dam to fill up the tanker to fight fires on farm sheds no more than 2-3 kms away.

The residents pleaded with the fire brigade to help put out fires on their homes with the response being that 'they were under orders to hold their delegated position'.

From that point we returned on our own accord to save what was left of the community. It wasn't until the community had saved what they could with the depleted water supply that the fire brigade finally arrived, consisting of approximately 3 units to help put out the remaining smouldering fires.

Recount of events by Rebecca Annetts

Rebecca Annetts together with her parents Mark and Mandy have been residents of Cottage 11 for 17 years.

Saturday 18 January 2003

I was at a friends house in Duffy when I received a phone call from Mum, she told me that they had just been told they could either stay with the house or leave.

When I got to Uriarra at approximately 11.00am I packed my car and cats, then helped with hosing down the house and sheds. It was a really hot day and the wind kept changing direction all the time. By 11.30am all the fire rescue helicopters and fire trucks had left the settlement.

Out the front of my house (Cottage 11) there is a fire hose and water hydrant. My brother Raymond and father Mark went to use it, only to find that the hose fittings were missing. Luckily we found one at the old forestry depot we could use.

At approximately 12noon we noticed smoke towards the direction of town (in the direction of Coppins Crossing Road). This worried me as now there was fire behind and in front of us, blocking the two main roads to get out. Then we saw flames jumping about 100ft in the air in the direction of town. Mum and Samantha (my sister) got in mum's car. I, with our three cats got into my car. My brother and father wanted to stay to try to save our house. When I drove towards the gate out of the settlement I realised straight away we couldn't get out that way as there was fire at the gates and it was quickly heading our way. We went back up to the house to tell Dad.

I rang my friend Karen West using my mobile to tell her we couldn't get out and asked her to get us help. Then Dad came running from the backyard saying 'we've gotta get out of here'. I told him there was fire blocking the gates – we were stuck. Karen rang back to say she had called 000 and they told her they were sending a helicopter out to get us and to tell us not to worry.

By this time most of the residents of the bottom block were in their cars gathered at the front of my house. My Dad suggested we all go to the old forestry depot to maybe get out onto back roads. However, when we got up there we could that there was more fire roaring through towards us. This meant that there was fire now coming towards us in three directions.

We drove out of the depot and stopped about 50 metres down the road. The smoke was getting thicker, no one knew what to do, and fire was coming in almost every direction very quickly.

It was getting hard to breathe, I realised that there was no way out, and we were going to die. I imagined we would be found the next day, a mass of burnt bodies huddled together. I could see everyone else felt the same, we were starting to really panic. The Paul, my neighbour, took control and decided our only way out was to drive through the fire – we had to try to get to where the fire had already burnt. Paul had

tried to drive through a few minutes before and said he couldn't see a thing, but it was our only chance. So we turned on our headlights and drove. Paul lead the way, I was next, then Mum. I can't remember who was next. I think that if we had waited any longer to make that decision we would have died.

Driving out of Uriarra seemed to take forever, I couldn't see anything except smoke and flames and occasionally the tail lights of Paul's car. The whole time it was extremely difficult breathing.

Finally the smoke cleared a little and I could actually see Paul's car. We drove out of the gates of the settlement and went left towards Uriarra Homestead. I couldn't see any cars behind me.

There were spot fires burning everywhere, a lot of the area between Uriarra and the Station was already burnt and the smoke wasn't as thick. Then I saw a huge wall of fire across the road in front of me, I had no choice but to drive through. Finally I got down to the intersection of Brindabella Road and Uriarra Crossing Road, directly out the front of Uriarra Homestead. I couldn't breathe very well and was coughing so hard I was dry-retching. Still I couldn't see anyone else coming behind us. Paul and I waited. There were other Uriarra residents there, having escaped the settlement before us. Finally the other cars appeared. The last car – Neville Ryan's looked to be on fire. We all started yelling and ran towards him to quickly put it out. Everyone is uninjured thus far, however we realise there are still people in the settlement. Fearing for their lives, Mick Anderson (Cottage 5) persuaded some firemen to take him up to the settlement. We discovered there were at least six fire trucks at the Homestead putting out cattle yards. Where were they when we needed help?

When Michael came back from the settlement with the firemen they told us that everyone was alive and accounted for.

We sat on the road for about six hours with little water and no food. The helicopter turned up after a few hours to take out any women and children who wanted to leave. Most people however stayed because they had nowhere else to go.

No medical assistance or otherwise was offered to any of us by the fire fighters or the residents of the homestead. At one point I went with Paul, Dad and Ray (brother) up to the settlement to have a look. My house was well and truly burning, however the house just up the road (Cottage 14) was still there. There was a fire truck out the front but they just drove away without offering any assistance. Next time I saw that house, it had burnt down.

Eventually we all made our way to Cottage 29 (the Watt residence) where everyone stayed that night. Only the back tap had sufficient running water, as the water tanks were empty.

That night I slept on the lounge room floor beside my three cats. I slept with my shoes on for fear of the house catching fire and having to leave again. Outside everything was still smouldering, and all night I could hear trees crashing down. Some of the men slept in shifts to put out the spot fires that threatened the remaining houses.