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**AUSTRALASIAN ASSEMBLY OF
VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE
ASSOCIATIONS**

Submission No.399



**The Australasian Assembly
of Volunteer Fire Brigade
Associations Inc.**

**RESPONSE
TO THE
AUSTRALIAN
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
BUSHFIRE COMMITTEE
INVITATION FOR SUBMISSIONS**

MAY 2003

RESPONSE:

The Australasian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigade Associations (AAVFBA) welcomes the opportunity to make this written submission to the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires and asks for the opportunity to amplify these submissions at a public hearing

This response has been prepared by the Secretary of the Assembly,

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INTRODUCTION.

This has been prepared in response to the request for input to the House of Representatives Bushfire Committee. Given the short time frame that has been imposed by the Committee it is a response written by the Secretary of the Assembly and circulated to senior members of the Assembly and Volunteer Associations for perusal prior to submission to the Committee.

It is not an attempt to deal with each of the terms of reference one by one. Indeed it questions the value of doing so given the limited powers that the Federal Parliament possesses to influence what happens in the states or territories in regard to bushfires.

It does attempt to view the situation in strategic terms and is not concerned with the minutiae that might be the subject of various disgruntled submitters.

It proudly asserts that the volunteer firefighters of Australia do and have done an extraordinary job in protecting life and property from the threat of wildfire. It acknowledges that improvements are always possible but that such improvements need to be evolutionary and cooperative rather than imposed.

The submission identifies several issues which are within the prerogative of the Federal Government such as the question of climate change due to greenhouse warming and questions why such a significant issue is not part of the terms of reference.

The submission welcomes the public exposure consideration by the Bushfire Committee might give the issue but believes that ongoing interaction with the key firefighting authorities is the preferred way to bring about considered change.

WHAT IS THE ASSEMBLY AND WHERE DOES IT FIT?

The Assembly is the umbrella body of volunteer fire brigade associations in Australasia. It was established over twenty years ago in order to take issues that affect volunteer firefighters to federal governments. Whilst the firefighting services within Australia are state based we have increasingly found that certain issues apply across state boundaries and need attention at the Federal level. It represents volunteer associations in all states and territories and in New Zealand.

The Assembly has been the sole voluntary emergency service organisation which has sought to establish an Australian (and latterly, an Australasian) wide presence to represent its constituents.

To its credit the Federal Government through Emergency Management Australia, as part of its contribution to the Year of the Volunteer, staged the first ever National Summit for Emergency Sector Volunteers and their managers in October 2001. This summit was co-sponsored by the Department of Family and Community Services. Over four hundred and thirty delegates attended which included a significant number of volunteer firefighters. The apt title for the summit was "Value Your Volunteers or Lose Them." The four main themes were Recognition, Legislation/Protection, Training and Funding.

One of the conference outcomes was the recognition of the need to establish a national, peak body to provide appropriate advocacy. At this stage a forum has been established rather than a peak body and it has been agreed that its Chairperson must be a genuine volunteer. The body is called, the Australian Emergency Management Volunteers Forum. It is chaired by Major General Hori Howard AO MC ESM (Ret'd) who has had a long career in emergency management following his distinguished military career.

Following letters of concern and request from a number of our member associations, the President of our Assembly, Mr. Cam Stafford, A.F.S.M. of South Australia represents fire volunteers on this forum. Meetings of the forum are being held quarterly and are proving of considerable value.

We should point out that the National Summit revealed that volunteer firefighters alone, are represented by an Australasia wide body, that is, this Assembly. It is a tribute to the foresight of those who established this body 20 years ago. It is sad, that others have not followed our example. Given the range of threats to volunteerism, it may not be long before other peak bodies join us.

HOW DOES THE ASSEMBLY OPERATE?

The Assembly is made up of two volunteer representatives of each of its member associations, usually senior office holders. It elects a President and 2 Vice Presidents from its numbers and another Executive Committee Member. It appoints a Secretary who acts in an unpaid role.

The Assembly meets annually and discusses issues of mutual concern and identifies ways in which those concerns might be resolved. The Executive Committee is empowered to

take such actions between conferences. The Executive Committee uses e-mail, teleconferences and meets in person several times a year, with one of those meetings held in Canberra.

The Assembly is funded by subscription from its member associations.

For a number of years Executive members have visited Canberra to speak with senior politicians and bureaucrats on issues of concern. Over the last year those issues included the need for a coordinated approach to bushfire research, (which has been achieved with the establishment of the Bushfire CRC), a number of issues relating to road transport and the need for a standardization of hoses and fittings on firefighting appliances.

As can be imagined with a body that attempts to focus on the strategic issues concerning its members it is not well equipped to identify and respond quickly to issues such as a Federal Parliamentary Enquiry into Recent Australian Bushfires, the media announcement of which was made on 29 March 2003, with submissions to be received by 9 May 2003.

We have asked our member associations to identify their concerns, we have then assembled them and emailed our Association's Secretaries or Executive Officers with this written response prior to providing it to the Committee.

Whilst we are willing to make this submission to the Committee we feel that there are better approaches that can be taken to obtain a strategic overview of the effectiveness of bushfire fighting agencies.

OTHER FORMS OF INQUIRY INTO OCCURRENCE OF FIRES.

One such is the system that was established in Victoria following the Ash Wednesday Fires of 1983.

The then Victorian Government established the ***Emergency Management Act of 1986*** which ultimately led to the establishment of the post of Emergency Services Commissioner. Under powers delegated to him by the ***Emergency Management Act***, the Commissioner can be asked or can decide to hold an inquiry into the performance of all State Government Departments and emergency service agencies, specifically his functions and powers are, as outlined in the Act.

21C. Functions and powers of the Commissioner

- (1) The Commissioner has the following functions--
 - (a) to establish and monitor standards for the prevention and management of emergencies to be adopted by all emergency services agencies;
 - (b) to advise, make recommendations and report to the Minister on any issue in relation to emergency management;
 - (c) to encourage and facilitate co-operation between all agencies to achieve the most effective utilisation of all services;
 - (d) to act as the Executive Officer of the Council;
 - (e) any other function conferred on the Commissioner by or under this or any other Act.
- (2) The Commissioner has all the powers necessary to perform his or her functions.

In effect the Commissioner has a responsibility to monitor all emergency services on an ongoing basis and report on their effectiveness. When a particular incident occurs the Commissioner can undertake an enquiry, either alone or with independent experts into any or all aspects of the incident. This ongoing approach enables the expertise of the Commissioner to be built up over time, to be used to advantage and to quickly respond without the need to master a background of information.

A Royal Commission is always open to use by a state or federal government and has been used widely around Australia over the years. In Victoria, the masterful Royal Commission conducted by Justice Leonard E. B. Stretton following the disastrous fires of January 1939 has proven to be the model by which all such Commissions (and Commissioners) should be judged.

The letters patent were issued on January 27 1939, just 14 days after the disastrous Black Friday, 13 January. Stretton provided his report to the Victorian Governor on the 16th May 1939. It comprised some 41 foolscap pages of elegantly written prose based on the thorough investigation he carried out through the length and breadth of Victoria.

In his recommendations Stretton proposed the establishment of a statewide fire service (this became the Country Fire Authority), the management of forests for fire protection (which would involve fuel reduction burning), the control of property owner's burning off by local government and cooperative planning for fire prevention.

After the intervening Second World War, Stretton's proposals were put into effect. The structure he foresaw has served Victoria well for just on 60 years. Victoria has seen no reason to conduct a Royal Commission into bushfires ever since.

It has had other inquiries following major fires. Those inquiries took the form of a Board of Inquiry in 1977, under Sir Esler Barber into the Western Victorian Fires, and in 1983, the Ash Wednesday Fires were examined by the State Coroner, (Mr. A. R. Ellis, S.M.) who has long had the power to investigate major outbreaks of fire as well as the power to inquire into the cause of death.

In the Ash Wednesday fires some 47 Victorians died, including 14 volunteer firefighters. It was appropriate for the Coroner to conduct an inquiry. He did so and one of the outcomes was the recommendation to establish the post of Emergency Services Commissioner with the power to monitor the performance of the emergency services.

Thus the development of emergency service cooperation in the fight against wildfire has been an evolutionary one in Victoria since the establishment of the CFA in 1945. It is a model that has been copied (for example by South Australia and Tasmania) or been looked at enviously by states such as New South Wales, that have increasingly moved towards such a model.

Victoria can be well pleased with its performance in fighting the largest fires in the last 60 years which consumed some 1.3 million hectares of forest, around 75,000 hectares of farming land, 41 houses, over 200 other buildings, 3,000 km of fencing, some 11,000 head of stock and caused 1 accidental vehicle death.

Victoria has recognised that it is not necessary to hold a Royal Commission or Board of Inquiry into the fire, it has decided to ask the Emergency Services Commissioner to do his

job and identify the improvements that need to be made to a very effective system.

In carrying out such an investigation the CFA and the Commissioner are open to input from any part of the fire service be it from the paid staff or the volunteers.

Such an approach enables the public, various groupings of firefighters and affected personnel, and the public to make an input. This input may be in writing or in person in public hearings.

It allows for the input to cover the full gamut of responses, such input might include complaints related to the most minute aspects of the firefight (such as the quality of the sandwiches provided, or whether they were made in an approved kitchen) to the broadest strategic issues (such as whether the fires in the forest should even be fought).

It needs a person, or persons of skill with extensive experience in the field to identify the key issues that can lead to improvement of organization performance.

For that reason an emergency services commissioner has the capacity and power to bring about improvement in performance within a state or territory's fire service.

COMMENT REGARDING THE ROLE OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES BUSHFIRE COMMITTEE.

It is appropriate for members of the Federal Parliament to conduct inquiries to in order to inform themselves and their colleagues about public issues.

The usual reason such inquiries have been held in the past is because the Federal Parliament has some legislative power or responsibility to take particular actions that might arise from an inquiry.

When a federal inquiry is held into a subject that is seen to be the sole responsibility of state or territory governments, such as fires and firefighting there is potential for political conflict between the two highest levels of government.

When we have an historical co-incidence of all state and territory governments being Labor governments and the Federal Government being a Liberal-National coalition there is the potential for seeing a House of Representatives Inquiry as a political point scoring exercise.

As a consequence the Bushfire Committee may have a major problem in convincing the state or territories to adopt the findings of the committee. This is to be regretted.

The Assembly has, over more than twenty years been urging federal governments of both political persuasions and senior public servants to recognize that there is a role for them in the battle against fire as it affects our society and our people. It has usually met considerable reluctance to intrude into other jurisdictions. The coming together in the Assembly develops a broad overview and that is what drives us.

In doing so we recognize that it is essential to work with both sides of politics and all levels of government.

Our volunteer fire brigades have always contained people with the full range of political views. Volunteer firefighters, being intensely practical people, have always recognized that in order to bring about improvements in their service it is necessary to play the political game.

Volunteer fire brigades only ask their members to commit themselves to helping other community members in the fight against fire. The altruistic spirit that encourages people to join volunteer fire brigades crosses the political spectrum. The effort to bring about "improvement for the good of the service" can lead to some strange political alliances.

It is the very nature of volunteer organizations that the members work together to bring about improvements. Whether the members are company directors, cabinet ministers, truck drivers, ministers of religion or labourers they all recognize that each one has the capacity to contribute in some way for the benefit of their organization. Firefighters are the ultimate networkers. It is often said within fire brigades that money is what you use if one of the members can't get the required goods or services "for nothing."

In the same way volunteers resent it when they are not consulted about an issue that concerns them. As volunteer members of brigades they are incensed when their parent fire authority, or state or local government take any action which they perceive to adversely affect their brigade.

Several years ago an industrial dispute over an enterprise bargaining agreement between the Victorian Country Fire Authority and its small band of paid firefighters threatened the relationship with its 60,000 volunteers. The volunteers brought about a formal agreement between the volunteers, the CFA and the Victorian Government to consult on issues of concern. The development of this Charter, (like the Magna Carta in 1215) serves to highlight to those in power that it is essential to acknowledge the contributions of those who carry out the essential tasks.

More importantly, when the participants are volunteers we need to understand, they will not strike when they are disgruntled, they will merely walk away. To guarantee them a place at the table when issues affecting them are being discussed is the most prudent thing to do.

The concept of a Volunteer Charter is spreading across Australasia, and at the last state election the Victorian Government undertook to spread the concept to all the other volunteer emergency organisations in the state. We are also aware that the Victorian Emergency Services Minister has urged such an approach on his interstate colleagues.

One of the central lessons to be learned from a commitment to consultation is that it takes time. Time to ask those in the lowest level of the organization, time for them to discuss the issues with their colleagues, time for the opinions and decisions to work their way through the various levels of the organization and time to get a response to questions raised.

It is for that reason that a timetable of less than 6 weeks from the establishment of the Bushfire Committee to the closing date for written submissions is likely to mean that the contributions (including this one) are not fully tested by being submitted to wide ranging discussion within the firefighting organizations.

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE.

One must assume that the Terms of Reference that are provided have been through a consultation process of selection and modification. In examining the terms of reference it is clear that the legislative responsibility and management of all of those factors is the responsibility of states and territories. Unfortunately one must also assume that obvious potential terms of reference that are not included have been deliberately excluded.

It is disconcerting that none of the terms of reference specifically refer to climate or climate change.

When Australia has just experienced the hottest year (2002) on record and when five of the hottest years on record have occurred in the last decade one must reasonably ask whether that climate regime has contributed to the extent and intensity of bushfires.

The frequency of bad fire years seems to be increasing in line with temperatures. New South Wales has suffered major forest fires in 1994, 1997, 2001/2 and 2002/3. Surely it is appropriate that one of the terms of reference should relate to climate change, fire frequency and intensity.

When the federal government has legislative responsibility through the Bureau of Meteorology one must ask why no term of reference relates to studies of climate change as a predictor of severe fire weather conditions.

Given that the primary cause postulated for the apparent climate change is the so-called "enhanced greenhouse effect" due to increased consumption of fossil fuels. One is left to ask whether the exclusion of a term of reference relating to "greenhouse warming" is due to the reluctance of the federal government to sign and ratify the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework on Climate Change.

Again when one looks broadly at the Terms of Reference it is clear that they are written from a viewpoint that regards "bushfires" as inherently bad.

Term of reference (a) sees bushfires as having an, (presumably, bad) impact on the environment, private and public and local communities.

(b) suggests land management practices contribute to the impact and severity of bushfires

(c) refers to impacts of hazard reduction on bushfires,

(d) refers to the land management practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires,

(e) refers to alternative mitigation approaches

(f) refers to appropriateness of existing planning and building codes for protecting life and property from bushfires.

(g) refers to adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting

and (h) refers to deployment of firefighting resources, with (i) relating to liability and (j) the

role of volunteers.

It would seem that the assumptions are that all bushfires are bad and that if we take undefined alternative approaches we will be able to successfully fight all bushfires.

This seems to be in line with the tabloid newspaper and television approach that considers any forest burned in a wildfire as having been destroyed. It doesn't acknowledge that fire in our forests usually has a revitalising effect on those forests and that our present Australian environment is largely a creation of aboriginal "firestick farming."

Given the central role the federal government has in maintaining the Australian biodiversity the question needs to be asked how the fire management procedures now in place, proposed or implied would impact upon it. Indeed the question needs to be asked whether the naturally occurring wildfires need to be fought at all in our forests? This is a very provocative question that has not as yet been adequately answered. It is clearly a question that should be asked in any inquiry into bushfires.

The Australian environment is an artefact of the aboriginal practice of "fire stick farming." By regularly burning areas of the bush in order to move through it and encourage regrowth of grass that would attract grazing animals that could be killed for food, the aborigines did two things, they reduced the fuel load of shrubs and fine fuels and they selected fire tolerant species. Thus eucalypts, acacias and banksias that could survive occasional fires, (or indeed needed occasional fires to activate their seeds), survived in relatively greater numbers and came to dominate the Australian environment over the 40 to 60,000 years that the aborigines managed Australia before the coming of the white man.

This coincided with the decline of the last ice age and it can truly be said that the modern Australian environment was created by the firestick.

Whilst Australia has a comparatively small area of forests it is those forests that produce the severe fire outcomes. Grass fires occur sporadically and at time can become widespread and destructive of the built environment. However drought years which produce the sort of weather compatible with rapid spread of fire lead to lack of grass cover and hence low risk of fire. It is the forest fire problem that leads to this inquiry.

When white Australians first considered the management of the forests they thought that the exclusion of fire was the appropriate step to take. Such exclusion preserved the trees which the early settlers saw as the key component of the forest, after all they provided two of the most important commodities for early agricultural settlers, timber and wood for heating and cooking fires.

The early settlers were able to generate grazing land within the forest by removing trees at a controlled rate. The grazing pressure that the animals exerted usually managed to keep down the fine fuel and shrub layer. In effect the primitive agricultural practice counterbalanced the need to carry out fuel reduction burning, at least in the areas adjacent to settlement. Fires certainly did escape control and a number of incidents of fire in the nineteenth century gave a hint of the fire horrors to come in the twentieth.

As the towns and cities grew and the demand for timber and wood accelerated, the forests were attacked with far greater vigour. It was at this time in the 1860s to 1880s that the first clear impact we were having on the forests became apparent. The large trees were chopped down, the protection that those trees gave the soils was gone. The slow release

of water that the mature forest provided was gone. Erosion, water shortage and timber scarcity confronted the settlers in many areas of Australia late in the nineteenth century.

It was then that Government Botanists such as Dr. Ferdinand Mueller in Victoria proposed the establishment of exotic plantations of pines, which out of their natural environment of North America or Europe, without their native plant pathogens or insects made spectacular growth rates and began to ease the timber shortage.

Forests Commissions were established in the various states with the role of managing the remaining hardwood forests and tending the exotic softwood plantations. Once again the exclusion of fire was seen to be of critical importance. It was necessary to preserve all of the timber possible because it was needed for even more uses including paper and composition boards.

By managing the forests for timber and firewood without the impact of grazing animals it was possible to restore the water retaining capacity of those forests. Thus the forest catchments once again became important in the water supply provision for growing cities.

By creating the protected forests we were also creating an increasing fire risk, especially for those people who lived on the urban-forest interface. Fine fuels and shrub layers had been building up for perhaps fifty years without major fires. When drought coincided with high temperature and summer winds any dry lightning strike to ground could spell doom.

Serious fires in the late 1920s and the late 30s in various states of Australia were a sign of things to come. As people moved into the urban-forest interface in increasing numbers from the 1960s on due to lifestyle considerations, (in conjunction with commuting to work in nearby cities), or simply due to lack of other land near major cities, the problems became more acute.

The forests over the last 30 years have been increasingly recognized as wildlife habitat, a recreational resource and a landscape to preserve. This has coincided with a better scientific understanding of forest management and a recognition that the fine fuels and shrubs nourish the incipient bushfire and turn a lightning strike ignition into an inferno.

Fuel reduction burning in the urban-forest interface has become the means of reducing the intensity of those fires. No-one, aware of the potential will ever suggest that fuel reduction burning removes the threat of wildfire. It is only by maintaining the low fuel levels around the populated forest perimeter that it is possible to mitigate the threat to a reasonable extent.

With Australia increasingly moving to plantation forestry in order to preserve native forests the employment impact is to remove personnel from public lands to private lands. The implications of cost on the public purse need to be spelled out and explained. So too does the potential fire hazards arising from intensive farm forestry operation such as blue gum plantations. There is evidence that fine fuel levels are an even greater concern in such plantations. It is good to see that the CSIRO is carrying out investigations with the CFA and the South Australian CFS into such concerns.

Public campaigns developed in the 1980s, often following a major fire disaster, to convince local residents that they could prepare to defend their own properties from threat of fire. People were encouraged to have water stored, to have pumps and hoses and to actively defend their properties from the fires that threatened.

There is a reasonable amount of experience that demonstrates that this approach is effective. It was the approach commonly adopted in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania over recent years. The residents were told not to rely on fire trucks which would be off fighting the main fire itself. It was up to residents to protect their own properties, or to leave early and hope for the best, hoping that passive protective measures taken earlier would suffice.

A number of tragic incidents of firefighters being killed in direct firefights, in fact, often in what were thought to be minor fires, have dramatically changed the approach adopted by fire authorities. The loss of five firefighters at Linton, Victoria in December 1998 was followed by a Coronial Inquest that concluded a range of safety measures must be undertaken. This included recognizing that there is a real limitation to the capacity to directly attack a major bushfire.

This response does not look at the "tactical issues" of the management of the fires but rather a number of strategic issues that might be glossed over. Certainly the logistics operations employed were very effective and have improved as a result of considerable recent practice. This is an attempt to examine the strategies used and to suggest what more needs to be done to prevent or more effectively manage our wildfire/built-interface problems.

THE 2003 VICTORIAN FIRES AS A CASE IN POINT.

The Gippsland/North-East fires of January and February 2003 mark a watershed in modern Victorian rural firefighting practice. Instead of adopting a policy of active, aggressive firefighting the policy which governed the firefight could be identified as safety first and "built-asset" protection. As a consequence the fires ran for more than 50 days and at times it looked like the "southern blue-water break" might be required to control them.

One can trace the genesis of this policy through the experience of the New South Wales Campaigns of 1994, 1997, and especially over the last two years. It is clear that a dedicated "built-asset" protection policy led to fewer losses from fire. The CFA had previously adopted a policy of aggressive firefighting so much so that in its advice to home owners in high risk areas it told them to make their own preparations to stay and fight (or leave early) because they couldn't rely on the availability of fire trucks that would be fighting the running fire.

There are possibly two key reasons why this policy has been adopted, the first relates to the deaths of firefighters at Linton which led to the more cautious, "safety first" approach and the second is a recognition of fire research evidence that a direct attack is only likely to succeed at very low fire intensities of say 3 MW/m of fire front when the fires concerned were producing intensities of 50 to 100+ MW/m.

The Gippsland/NE fires were both extensive and intense. The area within the final fire perimeter reached about 1.3 million hectares, although perhaps only 50% of that was burnt, and of that perhaps 20% was due to burning out. Fire intensities clearly reached the extreme levels on occasion. There were however many times when crews simply sat back and watched when intensities were low and well within the firefighting capacity of the assembled resources.

It is also true that fire behaviour was erratic at times and often more affected by the slope of the terrain and katabatic effects at night. There were many occasions when fire intensity at night was greater than during daytime when temperatures were as much as 20 degrees higher.

There is little doubt that the fire intensity was exacerbated by the fuel load within the forest. The practice of fuel reduction burning is intended to reduce fuel loadings to the extent that fire intensity is reduced. The fuel reduction policy as practiced in the past by the Department of Natural Resources & Environment and Parks Victoria zones public land from Zone 1 which is burned for built-asset protection to Zone 5 where fire is excluded for ecological reasons.

This fire season, which coincided with a record drought, saw the fuel reduction policy put to the acid test and it failed spectacularly. It appears that the fires in Gippsland and the North East were all ignited by dry lightning strikes and to have lost 1.3 million hectares demonstrates that the processes put in place following the 1939 fires as a result of Stretton's Royal Commission have failed. Whilst fires are inevitable in Australian dry sclerophyll forests it is only by management of the fuels that we can reduce the fire intensity. If the fine fuels and shrub layer are not managed on an ongoing basis, fires such as we have experienced are inevitable.

We need to reexamine forestry management in order to reduce the risk of repeating disasters like that which occurred in Canberra.

We have little control over the geography and none over the weather and climate. The only factor we can do anything about is the amount and distribution of forest fuel.

We know what we can do about the problem. The inquiries by Coroners or Royal Commissioners following major bushfires have all recognized one thing. We cannot extinguish large running forest fires. All we can do is to take action prior to the fire starting to reduce the forest litter which provides the critical link that enables a lightning strike to become an uncontrollable forest fire.

Fire researchers, like Phil Cheney of CSIRO have conclusively proven that fuel reduction must be undertaken to give us any real chance of managing our problems in the future. The Australian environment was created by the firestick farming of our aboriginal forbears. When Lt. Cook, (as he then was), first spotted Australia in 1770 he noted the large number of fires burning in the bush. Cook did not arrive in summer, but late April. The fires were autumn fuel reduction burning. It seems that the aborigines burned the bush in that way for maybe 60,000 years. The environment that Cook saw resulted from that burning regime.

It is by keeping fire out of the forests that we allow the litter buildup to occur. In the same way by restricting grazing in them we also allow a litter buildup.

Rather than holding inquiries which tell us what we already know we need politicians to have the courage to argue for their findings and to provide the money to enable their advice to be implemented.

As we move from logging native forests to plantation forestry we need to ensure that we spend the necessary money managing the forests. We will need to employ forest workers to conduct fuel reduction burns. We will need to use aerial ignition in remote forests. We

will have to work for years to reduce the fine fuels and then to keep them at a manageable level.

The usual response from forest managers is to say that they were not able to complete all of their scheduled fuel reduction burns. We don't hear that they managed to burn all they had planned and caught up on burns from previous years. The consequences are clear, we either manage the fuel on an on-going basis or we "lose the landscape" as we did so spectacularly this year.

The actual financial cost of this fire is still being estimated. Figures range from \$60 to 200 million for the actual firefighting operation. The cost of loss of timber, potential loss of rare fauna and/or flora, economic costs associated with water supplies and impact on soils can only be guessed at. This loss may never even be quantified. It may well be suggested that we need to look at the long term impacts and that one such fire over a period of 50 years is acceptable.

What is clear is that had a proportion of the firefighting costs been devoted to fuel management earlier, such losses may well have been considerably reduced. It is only by spending what is needed to manage the fuel on an annual basis that we can truly say that we have the fire problem under control.

One of the key cost factors was the use of aerial firefighting equipment, ranging from small fixed wing aircraft to heavy lift helicopters and everything between. The public mythology that has been built up surrounding "Elvis" and his ilk needs to be thoroughly evaluated in the light of this experience. Smoke and high winds clearly limited their use at times. Again there appear to have been many examples when the use of a helicopter demonstrably extinguished part of the running fire perhaps in relation to threatened buildings. One would hope a cost benefit analysis, especially in relation to the heavy lift helicopters can reach some worthwhile conclusions.

We can only count our blessings that the long running Gippsland/North East fires didn't coincide with one or more "blow-up" days that could have seen us trying to cope elsewhere without the fire appliances already deployed. It must also be acknowledged that it was only the existence of brigade owned tankers that allowed CFA tankers to be committed for weeks on end in anticipation of a need in the towns and villages on the moving perimeter of the Gippsland/NE fires.

In the same way the unprecedented use of pumper strike teams for asset protection depleted the pumper force. With the cooperation of MFESB (Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board, the fully paid central Melbourne fire service) standby pumpers eased the shortage in a number of areas. It would seem that the alternative of temporarily installing large capacity plastic or concrete water tanks or portable plastic dams, in conjunction with high pressure pumps and small diameter flat hose was not considered.

The experience of the Canberra firestorm would, once again, seem to demonstrate the correctness of the observation that rarely are structures lost by direct flame contact but rather by the ember storm associated with the fire. The use of large numbers of temporary stored water supplies along with associated pumps, hoses and sprays could have obviated the need for the pumper deployment and may well have allowed many of the tankers to have been returned to their stations.

If "built-asset" protection is to become the accepted strategy in such fires it is necessary to consider the appropriateness of \$200,000+ tankers being used when \$10,000 worth of pumps, hose and tanks can provide even better protection. Further, the pre-planned installation of such tanks should be examined as a major strategy in areas potentially threatened by fire. The option of deploying several experienced firefighters to work with existing home owners to fight such fires, rather than using the relatively limited capacity of CFA tankers to protect individual homes, should be examined.

Another aspect of the firefight that needs to be commented on is the public information provision. Given the length of time involved it was not surprising that public information meetings were initiated. From what one can gather they were well attended and informative. The problem still exists for fast running fires. How do we ensure that the public, threatened by the fire are advised in a timely and accurate manner? The possibility of using AM or FM radio transmissions to portable radios needs to be considered. Certainly there would have been problems with the terrain in using such equipment, however this is a problem that has been highlighted back as far as the Ash Wednesday fires and little real progress seems to have been made.

THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF VOLUNTEERS.

We are apt to think that when volunteers are involved in a firefight it costs nothing. The reality is quite to the contrary.

An economic study, apparently one of the first of its kind, carried out in 2001 for the Victorian CFA and their volunteer associations, indicated that the unpaid value of their labor, for all firefighting activity, would amount to some \$450 million, fully three times the annual budget of the CFA.

Now the firefighters were not paid for the firefighting activity BUT some of them were paid by their employer who continued to pay them for their normal work even though they were away fighting fires. Presumably a number, such as public servants, were paid because their manager didn't inform head office that they were absent from official duty. Many volunteer firefighters are self employed and put their fire fighting duties before their own business, presuming that they could do their income producing activity later, often in family or leisure time.

Other firefighters, especially those involved in short term deployments interstate, take advantage of weekends, flexitime, rostered days off, annual leave or other previously agreed arrangements with their employer.

The usual demands on firefighters time in terms of their day to day activity is generally unobtrusive. Brigades called on to attend more fires usually have a bigger population base to draw their members from. Small brigades in isolated villages and towns throughout Australia generally only attend a small number of fires per year. House fires, usually the central reason for the brigade's existence, tend to occur at night, a time when rural residents are usually not at work.

It is only when bushfires last for an extended period that individual brigades and firefighters are called upon to work as firefighters for long periods to the detriment of their normal employment. In most cases this has involved a short period of active firefighting

over a day or two and then an extended mop-up and patrol period. Fortunately this only occurs occasionally in a volunteer's career and most vols are prepared to put it down to experience, and then talk about it with their mates for the next twenty years.

The apparent increase in bad fires over the last decade has led to a streamlining of the interstate deployment process. The logistics operation is now a model of efficiency that far exceeds what the armed services seem able to do. The short term deployments, have in fact, served as working holidays for many volunteers and have had a positive input to their volunteer careers and to their own brigades.

There is no doubt that the demands of modern life are imposing some stresses on volunteer firefighters but the general picture is quite rosy. Volunteers, over recent years have had all the opportunities for action that they could wish, their material needs, once deployed have been well looked after, they are consulted and listened to before, during and after their deployment and are working with good equipment and with paid personnel who recognize and appreciate their skills, abilities and dedication.

Naturally there is the potential for exploiting volunteers on extended duration fires. When volunteers are not in the action but merely undertaking patrol activities that are legitimately the work of paid staff then the volunteers might tell the managers "where to stick it." Fortunately fire managers whether paid or volunteer are aware of such situations and try to ensure that they do not arise.

As well as developing the working relationships between volunteers and paid staff, including interstate cooperation, recent experience has seen the wider application of equipment. This has involved different firefighting tankers and support equipment. It has involved the use of heavy lift helicopters and sophisticated mapping techniques. There can be no doubt that the various state firefighting organizations have benefited from this cooperation.

There are however some deficiencies pointed up by this interstate activities. One such is the complete compatibility of small equipment such as hoses and fitting. Whilst adapters and matching pieces are usually carried we have not yet reached the stage where Australia wide standardization of equipment has been reached. Economics is slowing exerting its unseen hand in the evolution of a series of fire trucks but there is still to be much to be done.

POSSIBLE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR FIREFIGHTERS.

This submission has generally recognized that there is no federal government legislative responsibility for most of the issues raised as terms of reference. There are however several areas that federal government initiatives could be taken.

A federal government initiative to standardize hoses and fittings would be welcomed as would the support of the federal government through the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre to undertake a scientific evaluation of fire fighting appliances and the design of a series of standard appliances.

Ongoing support for the Bushfire CRC should lead to a proper evaluation of the effectiveness of aerial firefighting techniques and the further development of aerial ignition techniques for fuel reduction burning.

Another issue, which again has not been a part of the terms of reference for the enquiry relate to what might be called the "post-September 11" response.

Whilst one is reluctant to raise the issue for public discussion there are obvious potential for terrorist acts in regard to bushfires in Australia. Indeed it has been said that the judicious dropping of aerial ignition devices from several light planes flying over south eastern Australia in an average summer could have a devastating effect in loss of life and property.

Had a terrorist controlled plane crashed into the Rialto Tower in Melbourne or Australia Square in Sydney, volunteer firefighters would be called upon to assist in the extrication of victims.

If a foot and mouth outbreak occurs in Australia it is inevitable that volunteer firefighters would be called upon to assist with stock incineration as they are routinely in the Goulbourn Valley in Victoria to incinerate cattle which die from anthrax.

If terrorists were to spread anthrax spores it is likely volunteer specialist firefighters would be called to assist with decontamination.

Volunteer firefighters along with State Emergency Service personnel are readily available, widespread, equipped, trained and disciplined and are used to using their initiative in dealing with novel situations. They would form a second line of defence to the police, fire, ambulance, public health and armed services in any disaster both natural or man-made.

One of the responses by the US Government following September 11 was to set up the Department of Homeland Security under a Cabinet level Secretary, Tom Ridge. His department links all those federal and state bodies that have any potential involvement in maintaining the security of the homeland.

This seems to be an initiative that has been rejected by our federal government. It has been raised in public debate by former Labor leader, Kim Beazley and rejected by Defence Minister Hill and Attorney General Williams who has responsibility for Emergency Management Australia.

Whilst states and territories would reject any attempt by a federal government to take over responsibility for managing fire services it would seem that there is room for discussion that could lead to a bipartisan approach to enable Australia to deal with a range of imminent threats both natural and man-made. It is an approach that should be taken.

SUMMARY OF AREAS OF CONCERN FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION:

1. *Further development of the "built-assets" protection strategy and considerations as to when such a policy should be used.*
2. *Adequate provision of money and people to complete enhanced prescribed burning program on an annual basis. Additional funding is needed to overcome backlog problems.*
3. *Closer examination of the established fire protection zones in the light of this experience*
4. *Need for a thorough going cost-benefit analysis of aerial firefighting strategy. The limitations of such a strategy need to be identified and addressed.*
5. *The examination of a range of strategies for asset protection including pre-installation and provision of portable water storages, pumps and hose systems instead of or in supplementation to CFA tankers and pumpers.*
6. *The development of an information radio system that can be used to provide up to date fire information and advice.*
7. *The standardization of firefighting fittings throughout Australia and the development of standardized firefighting appliances.*
8. *The establishment of an overarching body that collaboratively and cooperatively brings together emergency service organizations to meet perceived natural and human caused threats.*

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