

Submission to the House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires (the Nairn Inquiry):

This submission is in addition to and in association with the previous submission entitled 'An account of the Fire at Jindabyne in January 2003' by Peter Rankin. The observations/criticisms have been taken from the previous submission and summarised here with some further recommendations.

For consideration by the Nairn Inquiry :

- 1. The fire that burnt the Crackenback Range and surrounds and which resulted in considerable property damage, was made worse by the National Park's aerial incendiary bombing, and general poor management of the fire situation.**

Background :

On or around the 27th of January 2003, the National Park dropped aerial incendiaries along the back of the Crackenback Range. No local land holders or fire fighting groups that were affected by the incendiary dropping were made aware of the intention of the Park at this time. No crews were on these fires, the National park appeared to be watching these fires, but no action was being taken by the National Parks to contain these fires, as it was considered to be back burning.

When trying to determine the threat to our property from the fires, I ran across a national park fire crew sitting in their truck on Marshall's road and introduced myself. Their job, I was told, was property protection of the houses on top of the hill. They said that they were monitoring the fire down below them. The plan from the National Parks perspective was for the Wren's Nest fire to burn itself out up against Marshall's road.

I understand that the decision to incendiary bomb or back burn was probably a decision made by the incident management team under the authority of the rural fire service and not National parks alone, and that this is a power they have under the bushfires act. Aerial ignition to burn out areas may be a legitimate strategy, but only if it is conducted in a professional manner and when there is a real chance of success. This normally means that there is a trafficable break around the area and the incendiaries are placed in a pattern to burn out the fuels inside the break in 6 - 8 hours so that the area can be mopped up well before the extreme fire weather occurs.

Investigation required :

- i) Was there a firebreak around the area to be burnt out?***
- ii) If so why was it not successful? If there was no chance of achieving the burn out before the weather deteriorated then it should not have been carried out as an incomplete burnout usually only makes the fire bigger and the situation worse.***

The Inquiry should examine the competency and experience of the authorities conducting the fire fighting operation.

- 2. There was a critical time when the Crackenback Range fire which was threatening our property could perhaps have been contained, so why wasn't it?**

Background :

Wednesday the 29th of January 2003 was the last day that we could have been successful in containing the fire that threatened our property, Gunnadoo. It was general knowledge that the weather forecast for Thursday the 30th of January 2003 was for 'gale force winds from the North-West'. We attempted to get a firebreak put in, but to no avail. We could not get a dozer, as the only available one was to be used elsewhere. We did get a four-wheel drive tractor from the National Park, but the tractor was not as effective as we wanted as it took ages to break the surface of the ground. The driver explained that it had skids on the blade (a National Park protection device to stop ripping up the ground).

Investigation required :

- i) Who had the authority to determine when and where critical fire fighting equipment was deployed ?*
- ii) Did this authority give reasonable consideration to the needs of all landholders being threatened, or was it influenced by personal priorities ?*

The Inquiry should examine the impartiality or otherwise of authorities conducting the fire fighting operation.

- 3. The National Park's current policies led directly to this explosive fire situation by allowing a build up of fuel in the Park. The National Park needs to change their lockup policy on park country.**

Background :

The local farmers have been concerned about the fuel build up in the Park for some time and predicted this situation. Elderly farmers who have lived all their life in the region believe there was at least a 60 year build up of fuel in the Park neighbouring their properties.

The National Park should in my view maintain a well-defined plan of fire trails and access and have a fuel reduction work plan for the cooler months. During times of low fire danger fuel reduction needs to be done to help to reduce the heat involved in fires if they occur. Burn-offs should be planned and carried out. There are very large tracts of land within the National Park that have no access. Open up the Park where possible and maintain access to possible containment lots and good water sources.

The environment will gain from the lower fuel (cooler) fires and the public can once again get access to 'their' natural areas of flora and fauna. You cannot remove fire from the natural course of events however the risks and impact can be reduced. Fire is an ecological process as natural as the sun and the rain but it needs to be managed. Low intensity fuel reduction burns also provide a greater range of diversity because of their patchiness. If high intensity fire is required in some areas for specific regeneration then it can be prescribed and controlled.

This is a difficult point to get across, as to make any real change on the lock-up policy, the government and therefore the people of NSW most of whom live in

Sydney and other big cities largely unaffected by bushfires, need to change their concepts of what National Parks are for.

I believe that Parks are for people not just bush walkers and park staff. Therefore there should be a wide range of activities including lease grazing, 4WD recreation etc. **Considering the extent and severity of the fires it is difficult to imagine any activity that could do as much damage as the recent bushfires.**

Recommendations :

- i) The National Parks should introduce a policy of extensive prescribed burning both for fuel management and biodiversity.*
- ii) The National Parks should remove the locks and encourage wider access both for recreation and fire management and lease hold grazing. Consider cooperative arrangements with interest groups for trail management.*
- iii) Strengthen the capacity of initial attack on fires by understanding the basic principles of fire suppression. All fires in summer need a bare earth trail around them the fuel burn out and mopped up. Hand tool work with the rake hoe is essential in rough terrain but also access the earthmoving equipment.*

4. **There needs to be better co-operation, co-ordination and planning between National Park crews, local fire fighting crews and non-local fire fighting crews.**

Background :

The National Park crews were in property protection mode outside the park and there seemed to be little co-operation or co-ordination with the local volunteer crews. National Park crews operated on a different communications channel to the regular bush fire teams.

The non-local fire crews crew sent into areas had no idea of how to get onto areas and had little information. The overall work plan in addressing the fires was sketchy; crews were here and there without any consistency in the approach to fighting the fire. Direction changed from one day to the next with the change in crew leadership.

During the time leading up to the fire front passing through my parent's property, my parents were given very little information about where the fires were and what was going on.

Recommendations :

- i) The fight against fire does not stop when it is not the fire season. The cooler months need to be used for planning, training and mapping out the areas of access water supply and trail conditions.*
- ii) Local crews need to get to know the local landowners and their access. They need to work with the property owners and understand the names of places and trails.*
- iii) Communications (phone numbers, CB channels etc) and fire plans need to be sorted out and made available to all fire fighting crews. In a rural area it is good idea to have a communications set-up with the fire crews so that the local landowners can tune into and communicate if needed. UHF CB is good, and then at least people involved in the fire who have local knowledge in the area can direct and assist where needed (we found that mobile phone was critical).*

- 5. The Police seemed to be out of touch with the real situation. They were on the scene after the event and were arrogant in their communication.**

Background :

Shortly after the fire front had swept through our property, and with us in quite a state of exhaustion and black from head to toe, a white official 4WD arrived with some pristine dressed police inside (very neat and tidy, with radio blazing etc). With an air of assumed authority, a police officer jumped out of the vehicle and told us that we 'all have to be evacuated'! We told him we were not going, as there was a lot to do in mopping up the remains, and we had stock all over the place and some possibly burnt that we needed to check. The Police were not very happy with us and tried to press their view. Eventually they got back into their vehicle and left. The police officer appeared most upset that nobody seemed to be taking any notice of him, as it did not look good with the group he had in the vehicle. In most situations when coming into contact with the Police they were very supportive. This was a very out of ordinary event. It was not that we were not respectful it was the attitude and approach of the police that was out of touch with what was going on around them.

Recommendation:

NSW should have legislation the same as Victoria where people who own property or have valuables on the property cannot be forcibly evacuated in the event of a fire.

- 6. Roadblocks inhibited local assistance with knowledge and skills to assist families in trouble. It appeared as though the local community were not allowed to provide assistance in fighting the fires.**

Background :

I arrived at Jindabyne at 6:00am on Wednesday 29th of January with the aim of assisting my elderly parents who were quite isolated on their property. The Alpine Way was closed and I knew I had to get a pass. I searched all places to get a pass. After walking through all the offices in the National Park building and asking for an access pass with no success I then tried the local police station. All doors were locked and there was no answer upon knocking. I then found out that the Snowy River Shire office, which had a notice that they were not open until 8:00am, gave out passes. I then thought 'enough was enough' and I was going up the road anyway. Once I arrived at the roadblock I told the person I had done all I could to get a pass and that I was going on without one. He was a little upset with me, but I told him I could not wait any longer, at least not until 8:00am and I proceeded with some frustration from the roadblock personnel.

My parents were quite isolated prior to and during the fire. Obviously 'gawkers' need to be prevented from getting in to areas that put themselves and others at risk, but surely the local community should be able to help their neighbours in times of need. Never underestimate the rural communities' willingness to help their fellow man, especially in assisting with stock handling and fighting fires (some have fought many fires in the past).

Recommendation:

A limited number of locals who have been identified by landholders as people they would like to have assistance from, should be given identification cards to enable them to help out.

7. Non-local fire fighting teams need to be better prepared for fire fighting in many different terrains and conditions, and not just the urban interface.

Background :

The non-local teams were reluctant to take on the hard yakka of raking a fire. There was a comfort zone around their trucks and within hose length that was difficult to get them away from. I guess this could be the new school of thought and part of their training - it appeared that if you could not drive to it you could not fight it!

Fighting fires in a mountainous country where you cannot get vehicles is a labour intensive process. The rake is used to rake the fire back on itself. If it is too hot then you need to rake the fuel away from the fire until it cools. This can be over a very large area. In large fire fronts containment lines need to be identified and put in, if there are no fire trails or roads to work to. If conditions are right 'black-out' from the containment lines back to the fire (burn off or back burn). If the wind is up and raking is not possible then work on holding containment lines (jump on spots over the containment line). In gale force wind situations property protection is possibly the only course, prepare all threatened properties in the line of the fire run, if necessary cut fences and open gates where possible to let animals move away.

Recommendation :

Volunteer fire fighters that might be deployed to forest and other non-urban interface areas should have some training in fire fighting in many different terrains and conditions and should at least have training in fire line construction with hand tools.

Submission made by :

Peter Rankin