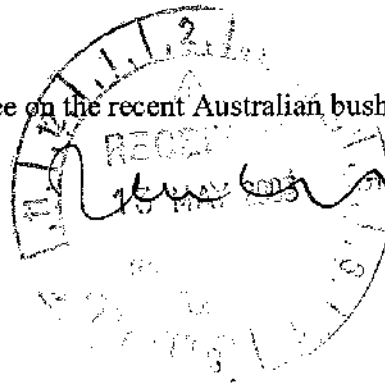


Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires



Submitted by: Terry Cardwell

Date: May 7 2003

INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Dear Sir/Madam,

The following comments and observations are made which are considered relevant to the terms of reference of the inquiry.

- (f) *the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires*

The proximity of the pine trees in Hancock's pine plantation to the Callaghan Creek Road caused several major problems to the residents living adjacent to and along the Callaghan Creek Rd:

1. On January 25 when the fire was burning along Enevers' Track towards Callaghan Creek, all CFA trucks and crews (with the exception of two which was already at a neighbour's property) were denied access and prevented by the local controller from responding to repeated requests for assistance, as the risk to the safety of crews was deemed to be too great to travel through the plantation. Consequently when the fire burnt through 4 properties along Callaghan's Creek beyond the plantation at around 2100, property owners and their families had to fight the fires as best they could without any CFA assistance. By the time additional tankers arrived at approximately 2215 the fire had already caused significant pasture loss as well as an entire haystack.
2. At around 1500 on January 26 when the smoldering pines once again exploded into flames my sister and I who had gone to the Dartmouth Control Centre were unable to return home, or contact family members, as travelling through the plantation was impossible and only deemed to be safe some 40 minutes later when escorted by a local DSE truck.

If the separation distance between the plantation edge and the road had been increased to an appropriately safe distance, personal safety and access would have been ensured, along with a reduction in property losses.

(g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;

It is believed that had the DSE acted expediently and appropriately on the lightning strikes and ensuing fires in the Razorback area prior to Jan 26, as opposed to passively managing these fires, this would have significantly reduced the subsequent pasture and asset loss sustained by the property owners along Callaghan Creek.

(h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions

It was stated at a local briefing that there was a lack of communication in the control of the fires between the dual control center of Corryong and that at Mt Beauty. This meant that the fire fighting response was not affectively managed. To illustrate this, on Wed Jan 28 at 0800 assistance from the Mt Beauty control center was urgently requested. The first CFA strike team did not arrive till about midday. This delay resulted in property owners being subjected to additional personal risk as well as further pasture losses.

(i) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices

Throughout this difficult period, the untiring and selfless efforts of the many CFA volunteers was exemplary and deserves both our personal gratitude and public recognition of the outstanding work performed. In particular, Mr. Bob Graham, in his capacity as a the local DSE controller, provided regular comprehensive updates, liased regularly with landowners and kept the local community informed.

**OTHER MAJOR ISSUES:
COMMUNICATIONS**

Phone communication for most of the Callaghan Creek landowners was totally cut from 0200 on Jan 26 when the fire destroyed the land phone lines.

Those affected by the loss of the phone were forced to drive approx 5 kms to the closest functioning neighbour's phone.

No other option existed since the Callaghan Creek area is not covered by the mobile phone network.

The Telstra response to our repeated requests for assistance was to state that the damage was in a "Red Area" and consequently they could not send maintenance crews to restore the lines. This is inconsistent with the fact that during this period the Towong Shire routine weekly garbage collection was maintained.

Furthermore no effort was made by Telstra to provide alternative communication.

In desperation and as a last resort, we obtained the mobile phone number of the area manager of Telstra Countrywide (Andrew Cottrell) and demanded that a satellite phone be made available. A satellite phone was provided and delivered by the Tallangatta Police

later on the same day. However, the satellite phone was not a reliable means of communication. This may have been attributable to the dense smoke in the area affected.

ASSISTANCE

Following the containment of the fires in early February the Government instituted two assistance programs:

- The Stock Containment Fencing Assistance
- Small Business Bush Fire Relief Program

Neither of these provided the necessary assistance at the time it was most required i.e. immediately after the fire. Seemingly the processing of applications for assistance did not commence until 18th of March which was the closure date for lodging applications.

End of submission