

Submission No.442

Introduction

My name is Patricia Shergis (Mrs) and through my company Arlesheim Pty Ltd I am the owner of 331 hectares in Cooma Monaro Shire Council in the area known as Yaouk Valley via Adaminaby. The property is a working cattle property and is known as Old Yaouk. We share a border with Scabby Nature Reserve (previously we held the lease on this approx. 1000 hectares) on part of our eastern boundary and with private individuals on our other boundaries. However we are in close proximity with Namadgee National Park and Kosziusko National Park.

I am the immediate past chairperson and member of the Study and Investigation Committee of the Country Women's Association of NSW and I understand the Association has made a submission on behalf of its members. I am making this submission in my private capacity as a landholder.

I would like to state from the outset that I am extremely grateful and also impressed with the way in which the January 2003 bushfires were handled. We lost some 10 kilometres of fences and 50 hectares of grazing country which, given the circumstances, to have lost so little, I believe was a very good outcome.

There were however many mistakes made or deficiencies encountered during the 3 week period when Yaouk Valley was threatened and it is because of these that I have chosen to make a submission. This is in the hope that these shortcomings can be evaluated and hopefully eliminated in similar situations. There is absolutely no criticism intended and no desire to apportion blame in any way.

There will always be, I believe, communication problems whenever so many agencies are concerned. These fires were no exception.

I am commenting merely on situations that I was personally involved with.

One aspect of concern was that there appeared to be little use (if any) by the "on the ground" crews of accurate ordinance maps. Hand drawn mud maps seemed to be the order of the day. The accuracy of these maps depended upon who had drawn them. In the initial stages of the fire the existence of several properties which did not have permanent residents was unknown to the authorities. Fortunately my staff were able to alert the brigades of their existence and they were included. The only person I saw with a compass was the overall commander Peter Carter and grid references were an unknown commodity. Given that most of the parties involved in fighting these fires were not locals, surely the best and in fact only way of finding their way around would have been with accurate maps and the use of grid references.

To give an example - a neighbour and I called for assistance of a fire tanker when we had a spot fire and were out of water in our 1 tonne tanker. We asked Peter Carter for this assistance and he called for a tanker. The tanker from Booamba was assigned and we could hear the radio transmission of "we are going through a steel gate is that right" they were told that was correct and to keep going, then we heard "we are going through a gate with a sheep and cattle sign on it" - yes, that was correct, keep going. It would seem like stating the obvious that all except one gate in Yaouk Valley is steel and most of them have sheep and cattle signs on it. Anyway, they duly arrived at the road to our homestead. Our homestead is on a corner with a road running north and a road running east. They proceeded to turn down the easterly direction. We caught up with them and told them they were heading in the wrong direction (remembering we were the ones that had called for their help and know exactly where they should be going). They ignored us, got on the radio and said "we are going past the homestead, is that correct" and they were told "Yes". However, they should have been going past the homestead in the northerly direction not easterly. Needless to say they were of no use whatsoever and a waste of manpower.

Surely at least compass points should be used in directions and not vague "landmarks" like steel gates. This is basic commonsense, particularly when one is unfamiliar with an area.

We also found, by their own admission, that many of the rural brigade members who came from areas such as the Riverina had no idea how to fight a fire in the mountains. They were used to grass fires. We were constantly following the tankers that had used very little water on large burning logs which flared back up again and presented an on going danger. None of the out of area members were aware of how to use a rake hoe (also known as I believe a Macleod tool) or even the need to break up a log and then water it. Watering it without breaking it up is just a waste of time and water.

The origins of the Bush fire brigades were really years ago a group of people getting together to defend one another's properties. In a real emergency they may have been called to other towns or areas in close proximity. In my early days of fire fighting with Yaouk-Shannons Flat brigade we rarely went past Cooma. In those days our equipment was very basic and to buy equipment we had chook raffles or dances at the Shannon's Flat hall. Since incidents such as Ash Wednesday in South Australia and the Blue Mountains fires, this has all changed. Now brigades are well equipped at tax payer expense (as well they should be) have a totally different command structure and the members need to undergo constant training (as well they should). Insurance and possible litigation issues are very real. Brigades members are frequently called to fight out of their area, sometimes out of their state and occasionally in other countries. It is therefore vital that brigade members are trained in all aspects of fire fighting - not grass fires for the Riverina and mountain fires for Snowy Mountains Brigades. What started off as a casual volunteer group has now become a bureaucratic organisation - much to the chagrin of some of the older members. However times and technology have changed and we must all change too - but we must not ever forget the experience and knowledge of the older members of both brigades and community. This to some degree was lacking in the fires around Yaouk Valley. Some of the residents were told they were too old to assist. Perhaps they were too old to physically assist but they are a valuable resource and should not be ignored.

Change over of crews was in some instances conducted in the dark. How can brigades who have no idea of the area or terrain and equipped with hand drawn mud maps be expected to find their way around in the dark? We spent quite a bit of time giving directions to lost crews, including one tanker driver who had ended half way up Mount Morgan with a full load of water and spent over half an hour backing down again - great driving skills on his part but the consequences could have been horrific.

In another situation we were asked by the Police Commander what our fall back position was going to be in case we were surrounded by fire. We have and always have had a fire strategy which we followed to the letter. We have a large concrete (supposedly nuclear proof) cellar which is well equipped with professional air filter, water, food, etc. etc for such an emergency. He was most impressed felt it would be more than adequate for our safety. Sometime later one of the brigade members asked the same question. He told us we could not possibly shelter there and should "hop up in the back of the tanker cabin" if necessary. We explained our situation and advised it had been cleared by the Police. It took a lot of convincing him. In a stressful situation it is not comforting to have conflicting advice. It should be the responsibility of one person and one person only to oversee such matters and not have another party giving a different opinion which is only confusing.

In another situation a burn back was undertaken inside a fence - not outside it. That meant that the neighbour lost her fence for no reason other than the fire should have been lit half a metre away.

Fire breaks were pushed through with dozers and graders, our dam was used for water bombing by choppers (which we believe were the ultimate savours of the Valley - not to take anything away from the ground crews) and fences were lost.

We were advised at the time of the fires the breaks would be made good, our dams refilled after the fires and under Section 44 money would be available for repair of fencing. I hasten to say, the breaks were fantastic - whether or not they were made good and whether our now empty dam was refilled is incidental - but we were told these things would happen.

To date - now some 4 and half months later our dam is still empty - we have smoothed our fire breaks ourselves and only last week was some action being taken about fencing. My company was adequately insured for fencing and has been paid by our insurance company. However we share a section with NPWS and also with uninsured neighbours. We cannot proceed to repair any of these fences as the Premier's Department are involved with claims. What does the PD think we have been doing with out stock in the past 4-1/2 months. Why has all of this taken so long?

When I first enquired after the fires regarding assistance with fences - knowing it was usual under Section 44 to receive this (on behalf of neighbours) I was told by both Cooma Monaro Shire and NPWS Jindabyne that no funds were available. Ultimately this proved incorrect, but the assistance for fencing adjoining NPWS land is administered by a different party from the assistance for private fences and the assistance with internal roads which were damaged is apparently administered by yet another party. Most of this information has been passed on by individuals and not any government body. It seems the best source of information is the local pub!!

Summary

I repeat that I believe the outcome despite problems was fantastic and I congratulate all those who were involved, particularly Peter Carter - I don't think anyone envied him his task and the helicopter pilots.

The matters that I believe need to be considered are:

Better communication - not only between those fighting the fires but also with residents

Use of accurate maps and grid references and compass points, not vague land marks. GPS in fire tankers should be considered - certainly expensive but if they save one life they would be worthwhile

Better overall training for fire fighters - not just training for local conditions.

Consideration given to change over in daylight hours so that crews have an opportunity to fully acquaint themselves with conditions and not having to stumble around in the dark in areas that are foreign to them.

More use to be made of local knowledge and experience. The "Old timers" can still compliment any technology.

Better follow up - enable parties to get back to normal as quickly as possible - otherwise don't promise what you can't deliver. Also make affected parties aware of what assistance is available. Shire records can surely be accessed and individuals notified. Relying on the bush telegraph is not good enough.

I thank you for the opportunity of this input and would be more than happy to address the committee at a public hearings.

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