

# Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade

Submission No.204

Hon Secretary  
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**Committee Secretary,  
Joint Select Committee,  
Federal Parliamentary Bushfire Enquiry.**

## **Submission to the Joint Select Committee on the Recent and Past Australian Bushfires**

### **1. Control of Bushfires during a Declared Emergency**

- i. That the **Rural Fire Service (RFS)** is designated the 'sole' combat agency for all fires in a rural fire district, together with all classes of bush fires from level 1 to level 3 and subsequent Section 44 Bush Fire Emergency declaration. Under this proposed system all land management agencies would become legally responsible in supporting the RFS its fire-fighting role. The Rural Fires Act must be amended to reflect this requirement.
- ii. The philosophy of land management agencies in regards to fire management is fundamentally different to the rural fire fighting agencies. The National Parks and Wildlife Service manages fire for conservation purposes, whilst the RFS manages fire to protect life and property. Therefore the RFS is the most appropriate agency to manage bushfire emergencies.
- iii. Incident Management Teams (IMTs) operating from local fire control centres during major bushfires need to listen to the advice of local bush fire officers prior to implementing strategic and tactical decisions on the fire ground. This has not occurred effectively during the recent bushfires in NSW or the ACT.
- iv. A supplementary approach could be employed that authorised a suitably qualified and experienced RFS officer (such as a Group Captain or section leader) working on the fire ground, being able to make immediate critical tactical decisions whilst the situations present themselves, rather than via long turn-around times through Fire Control, resulting in losing any window of opportunity.
- v. There is a need for revision of the Incident Control System (ICS) to review operations, thus allowing for more flexibility and simplification of procedures in strategy planning, etc.

## **2. Radio Communications**

- i. Poor or non radio communication between fire fighting agencies on the fire ground during bushfires that:
  - cross State boundaries
  - between land management agencies and the RFS
  - between the RFS and other firefighting agencies eg NSW Fire Brigade and interstate fire agencies eg Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA)
- ii. It is recommended that the Federal and State Government fire fighting agencies, land management fire fighting agencies and the Federal Department of Communication investigate the establishment of a common two-way radio network to enable fire-fighting agencies to communicate on the fire ground.

## **3. Problems with Hazard Reduction by Prescribed Burning in NSW**

- i. Major obstacles to, and the major reasons for, the lack of, or reduced amount of, hazard reduction being undertaken within in NSW in the result of a complex approval process and the plethora of environmental legislation, planning instruments, policies and plans that serve to inhibit / restrict hazard reduction by Rural Fire Brigades in NSW on public and private lands. We suspect the same problems confront the ACT bushfire management authorities.

Examples of legislation include:

- Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Federal)
  - Environmental Planning & Assessment Act 1979
  - Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995
  - Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997
  - Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997
  - National Parks & Wildlife Act 1974
  - Rural Fires Act 1997
  - Various State, Regional & Local Environmental Plans developed under Environmental Planning & Assessment Act 1979.
- ii. Lack of long term understanding by the Federal & State Governments, Research Institutions (CSIRO & Universities) and Consultants on the relationship between fire and threatened species, populations, ecological communities & critical habitat

This is manifested by:

- a) Inconsistent and ambiguous communications by the NSW Rural Fire Service to Rural Fire Districts and Brigades on the ramifications of the Threatened Species Legislation on hazard reductions in NSW.

- b) Poor funding for research on the effect of fire on biodiversity by Government agencies & Universities. Also reflected by a poor strategic and coordinated approach to research on a national & state level.
  - c) Absence of a long-term scientific body of research on the relationship between fire and threatened species, populations, ecological communities & critical habitat.
  - d) Questionable Reviews of Environmental Factors (REFs) prepared by Consultants to Rural Fire Districts and private landowners on hazard reduction proposals and environmental impacts.
- iii. Public perception that hazard reduction burning is generally "bad" for the natural environment. This is promulgated by University institutions to science undergraduates and through public relations campaigns run by antagonistic conservation groups.
  - iv. There have been many examples in the past of proven benefits in minimising the effects on wildlife owing to previous well planned strategic hazard reduction.

#### 4. Recommendations for Hazard Reduction Management in NSW

- i. That the management and planning of fires in bushland areas should be based on a **risk analysis approach**. The risk assessment should be incorporated into local bush fire risk management plans with NSW.
- ii. That **strategic asset protection zones** are designated on *the periphery of and within* national parks and state forests and other public lands to act as buffer zones between property and natural bushland areas. These zones must be documented in local bush fire risk management plans.
- iii. That prescribed burning is carried out in the strategic asset protection zones at an appropriate frequency to reduce fuel loads to protect life and property. The protection of life and property would be the primary fire management objective in the strategic asset protection zones. The 'core' areas of national parks and state forests can be managed for ecological values or silviculture as determined by the land management agency.
- iv. Guidelines for the creation of buffer zones and acceptable distances should be determined by the RFS in cooperation with the land management agencies.
- v. The buffer zones be administered by local bush fire risk management committees and ratified in local bush fire risk management plans.
- vi. That the National Parks and Wildlife Service is allocated appropriate funding above current funding levels to specifically manage fires, hazard reduction and fire trail maintenance
- vii. That the RFS develop a simplified **service standard** for hazard reduction by prescribed burning for local Rural Fire Service Districts and Rural Fire Brigades. The service standard should include statutory obligations under relevant environmental laws, plans and policies AND a clear matrix or critical pathway detailing the process to achieve an approval to conduct a hazard reduction under the Rural Fires Act 1997.

- viii. Local Bush Fire Risk Management Plans should include a schedule (annexure) and map listing all the threatened species, populations, ecological communities, critical habitat and key threatening processes in the Rural Fire District. Threatened species profiles should also be made available from the National Parks & Wildlife Service.
- ix. The RFS in conjunction with the Department of Planning & the National Parks & Wildlife Service conduct a series of regional and local workshops with Rural Fire Service paid staff, volunteers and private land owners to clarify the environmental laws, policies, plans and bureaucratic processes that effect the capacity of Rural Fire Brigades and private land owners to carry out hazard reductions.
- x. The process and procedures for gaining approval for hazard reductions and the assessment of environmental effects of hazard reductions on the natural environment be streamlined and simplified for use by Rural Fire Districts and private land owners.
- xi. That the RFS become the sole authority for enforcing the Hazard Reduction Notices under the Rural Fires Act 1997 as amended. That the RFS efficiently and consistently enforce the Hazard Reduction Notices, which an audit would demonstrate are not being adequately enforced.

## 5. Qualifications of Fire Control Officers and Group Captains in NSW

- i. That tertiary qualifications be made mandatory and phased in over a period of time, for persons seeking employment as **Fire Control Officers** with the NSW RFS. That these qualifications incorporate 'defence style' management training in areas such as leadership, operations, tactical and strategic thinking, together with corporate financial planning. The rationale is that the management of bushfires is similar to the management of a military conflict.
- ii. That the qualifications for persons seeking to become **Group Captains** with the RFS be upgraded to incorporate management training in areas such as leadership, operations, tactical and strategic thinking.
- iii. That the RFS undertake a review of the **election process** for Group Captains at RFS district level to ensure equity in the election process. The Rural Fires Act 1997 should be amended to ensure that elections of Group Captains are undertaken in accordance with the State Electoral Commission procedures and standards.

## 6. Resourcing of Rural Fire Brigades to be commensurate with Fire Threat

That the NSW RFS resource Rural Fire Brigades according the Standards of Fire Cover report prepared by the RFS. The standards of fire cover identify fire threats to a community and specify the level of equipment that should be provided to meet the threat.

For example the Wilberforce Brigade has dual responsibilities with a Village containing over 800 homes and a rural area. Thus, the Brigade should have an additional 'Village Fire-fighting Appliance' under the standards of fire cover but is currently resourced only with rural fire fighting tankers. These 'Village' units are equipped with other resources, including breathing apparatus (BA), greatly improving the ability to save lives and protection of property in confined spaces (eg house fires), whilst affording much better protection to our fire-fighters.

It is also worthy to note that BA equipment is becoming even more desirable at vehicle fires, with the high level of plastics and other materials used producing some toxic cocktails when combusting.

## **7. Strategic Rural Fire Trail Network**

- i. That a strategic fire trail network is established within each State and Commonwealth territory. Such trails should recognise the importance of fire advantage lines and the need for trails to appropriately comply with OH & S issues.
- ii. That the fire trail network is funded and maintained to ensure access for fire fighting vehicles during bushfires.
- iii. This is particularly important on all Commonwealth and Crown lands vested in the control of the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service, the NSW State Forests, DLWC Crown lands, Aboriginal lands, and large tracks of Defence lands vested under the control of the Commonwealth.
- iv. There should be an appropriate budget provided for the maintenance of these strategic fire trail networks, on an annual basis, by the NSW State Government.
- v. Construction and maintenance of all fire trails should be in accordance with contemporary soil conservation and Australian engineering standards.

## **8. Volunteer Fire-fighter Relief Fund**

That a Volunteer relief fire-fighting fund is established by State Governments to financially compensate fire-fighters who are away from their normal employment fighting fires for a period exceeding three (3) working days. This would only apply to those volunteers whose leave of absence is not covered or unable to be supported by their employer, and the self-employed.

## **9. Bulk Water Tankers**

Bulk water tankers must be provided by the State Government to all local RFS districts not on reticulated water supplies to ensure an adequate supply of water for fire fighting vehicles at the fire front. The cost of 'hiring' water carters over recent campaigns may have indeed covered the purchase of at least one or two of these vehicles. At a minimum, these tankers should be equipped to carry out fire fighting rolls as appropriate (eg pump and live reel).

## **10. Strategic Water Supplies**

All strategic water supplies across State and Commonwealth territory should be mapped for their fire fighting capability and this information made available to local fire fighting agencies. In addition, the RFS should investigate the provision of permanent water resources in remote areas (eg dams) for fire fighting purposes, particularly in NSW National Parks and Estate Forests.

## 11. Logistical Planning & Support to Fire-fighters

The NSW RFS is deficient in the area of logistics planning and support for firefighters on the fire ground. The solution is either to create a specialised logistics section within the RFS or arrange a memorandum of understanding with the State Emergency Services to provide logistical support.

## 12. Vehicle Maintenance and Repair during Bushfires

That the RFS create a mobile mechanical unit to support task forces sent to bushfire emergencies out of their normal area. The mobile unit would go with the taskforce and provide support in a similar way to the mobile units that support the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA).

The present system of relying on local Council mechanical workshops is not working effectively, particularly where fire tankers breakdown in remote areas.

## 13. Refueling of Tankers in the Field

The RFS engage mobile fuel tankers to support task forces sent to bushfire emergencies out of their normal area.

## 14. Training System for Rural Fire-fighters

- i. The **decentralised** system of training bushfire fighters at local government level is not working effectively in NSW. Training standards are being applied inconsistently across the state of NSW.
- ii. Presently in NSW, if training is not provided or on offer in a Rural Fire District, Volunteers are unable to apply or attend training in a neighbouring Rural Fire District.
- iii. The RFS must establish **regional training centres** where training resources are shared between Rural Fire Districts more effectively. These centres should offer specialised training (eg village firefighting and breathing apparatus) that cannot be offered or resourced within local Rural Fire Districts.
- iv. There should be a greater recognition of Requisite Prior Learning (RPL) when addressing the re-accreditation of persons qualified in for example, tanker driving, use of chainsaws, and other fire-fighting skills, etc.

## **15. Transportation**

Appropriate vehicles must be provided for the transportation of fire-fighters to and from the fire ground(s). There have been far too many instances where volunteers have been pressured into driving their own vehicles into wild fire areas owing to inadequate supply of RFS or other sourced vehicles. Vehicles left unattended in isolated areas are certainly vulnerable, not only to the threat of fire, but theft as well, and would probably raise a question as to their insurance cover. Also, there has been difficulty in the past in obtaining compensation for volunteers' out of pocket expenses in using their private vehicles. Transportation could be partially resourced as outlined in item 17 below.

## **16. Defence Force Assistance**

That the procedures be streamlined to expeditiously involve the Defence Force Personnel to assist the RFS in all areas during any major fire emergencies. This normally takes in excess of two days to activate, through the relevant State and Federal Government administrations.

An example in the Hawkesbury is the utilisation of the resources that can be provide by the RAAF Base at Richmond, not only on the Base itself, but aircraft fire protection at helipads during refueling. In the past, an RFS tanker had to be used for this purpose, restricting the fleet capabilities. The RAAF is uniquely setup and experienced for aircraft protection.

## **17. State Government Departments and Statutory Authorities**

There is a need of the pre-planning for the utilisation and support of all State Government resources during major fire emergencies. For example, DOCS (welfare), STA and Government fleet (transportation), SES, GIS operators, RTA (earth moving equipment, etc).

## **18. Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)**

- i. Currently in the Hawkesbury, only a two-piece fire fighting uniform is available. However, we would like to see as an option, the re-introduction of an appropriate one-piece overall, similar in design to that previously used in the Service, but upgraded to current PPE standards.

Our reasons for this is that a single-piece overall is more efficient and is quicker to don in emergency call-out situations, and is less prone to catching on foliage in the bush. They are also easier to store and maintain when washing and repairing.

- ii. A dual-purpose helmet meeting both the standards of bush and village fire fighting be adopted by the Service and issued to all volunteer fire-fighters. This is particularly important for those brigades that have these dual responsibilities.

Currently, Wilberforce Brigade has purchased some of the "Bushranger" helmets approved for the dual rolls, and issued to strategic fire-fighters in the Brigade.

In conclusion, it should be noted that part of this submission is a reprint of the Brigade's comments and suggestions put forward to the NSW Rural Fire Service Association (RFSA) of some four years ago, with some current and outstanding issues dating back to around 1994.

There are numerous issues that the State Government has 'side-stepped' or failed to enact legislation. Some of these would indeed save lives and protect property, enhance fire-fighting capabilities and reduce the risk to RFS volunteers, and need to be urgently addressed.

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade by Captain Michael Scholz; Deputy Captain Andrew Scholz; Deputy Captain Adrain Greentree; Deputy Captain Bill Rodger; and, Member Neville Wearne.

We wish to thank the Federal Government for the opportunity to comment, and the encouragement given to the Brigade by Macquarie MP Mr Kerry Bartlett, in providing a submission to the Joint Select Committee into the Investigation of the recent Bushfires.

The Brigade trusts that the Committee finds the information provided in this submission to be beneficial and is happy to expand on any or all of the points outlined, or indeed discuss any other relevant matters.

Yours faithfully

Neville Wearne  
for  
Michael Scholz  
Captain

Wilberforce Rural Fire Brigade

9<sup>th</sup> May 2003

cc Mr Kerry Bartlett, MP  
Federal Member for Macquarie

cc Mr Kim Ford,  
Chairperson,  
Hawkesbury RFSA