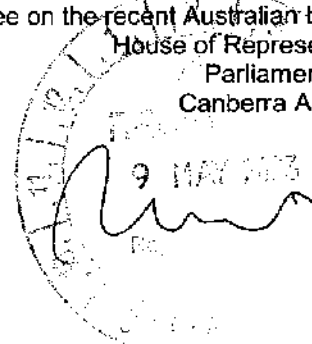


Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires

Preface

We hope that the following information regarding our experience during the summer of 2003 will be useful to the House Select Committee, especially with regard to future forest and bushfire management, and can prevent the devastation occurring again. The following terms of reference are addressed:

- (a) The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;
- (g) The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;
- (h) The adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;
- (i) Liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

Through explaining our experience of the bushfires, we hope to demonstrate that there was a lack of appropriate firefighting help, both in the early stages of the fires when they were confined to National Park and State Forest, and 19 days later when the front passed through the Ormeo Valley. This resulted in extensive damage to our property, Hinnomunjie Station, and has had a severe financial impact on our lives and livelihood.

This has led us to the following conclusions:

1. There was Government negligence in not controlling fire in National Park and State Forest land in its early stages;
2. That the firefighting response needs improvement;
3. That the policy of 'Let it burn and protect lives and assets' is essentially flawed.
4. That State and Federal Government bushfire assistance to landholders has been wholly inadequate.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Our Experience of the Bushfires

On the 26th January 2003 bushfires caused extensive damage to Hinnomunjie Station, situated in the Omeo Valley, approximately 20 km north of Omeo on the Mitta Mitta river in the Victorian High Country.

The Razorback Fire began from a lightning strike on January 8th, 19 days before the fire swept through the Omeo Valley. By January 11th, it was visible from our property, and by January 12th it had spotted further fires, to the extent that four distinct fires could be seen.

Between January 19 and the fires hitting, a crew was sent to the valley to carve firebreaks through private property. This primarily consisted of a bulldozer with a 12/14 foot blade; a blade of this size is too wide to enter through gates of normal width and as such would destroy gate-posts, necessitating their replacement, regardless of whether they were burnt or not.

The CFA sent a strike team to Hinnomunjie Station on January 20th to allow Mrs Leanne McCormack to attend the CFA/DSE fire meeting at Omeo, but left again on her return.

On the morning of Australia Day, January 26th, a noise akin to that of a jet engine could be heard from the north. The sky was a vibrant orange, and the smoke thick. A hot northerly wind was blowing and there was little doubt in our minds that the fire would finally come through the valley that day. In our area of the valley there were only the residents—not a single CFA or DSE truck or strike team was at hand to protect our property or that of our neighbours, including 17 houses, thousands of head of stock, two historic wooden bridges and many hundreds of kilometres of fencing. As such, defense against the fire was handled solely by the residents, with neither professional nor volunteer help or equipment.

At approximately 9:45 am, the DSE phone-tree system out of Swifts Creek alerted the residents to the approaching fire, however the advice was that "it is still a long way from you yet." To which Mrs McCormack replied "My husband says it'll be here very soon because the north wind's been up since 7:30 this morning." The DSE replied that there was no wind with them in Swifts Creek, so that was unlikely. At 10:15, she rang back requesting help, which was denied, as the situation in the valley was deemed too dangerous to send a vehicle. Ten minutes later, the fire front swept through the valley, cutting power and telephony, and leaving the valley burnt and completely isolated.

There is an inherent contradiction in the actions of the DSE on that day: first the advice was that the likelihood of the fire reaching the valley was low. Half an hour later, the valley was too dangerous for CFA or DSE crews to enter. The disparity between these two responses is enormous.

Mr and Mrs McCormack and our neighbours felt completely abandoned.

Within half an hour, the fires again came through the valley, this time from the south, having very nearly reached the township of Omeo, and burning all that which it had missed on its first pass.

The houses being situated alongside the Mitta Mitta river enabled the residents to use river water to protect themselves and their dwellings, but the absence of any CFA/DSE help was, and is, unacceptable. Indeed, the historic Hinnomunjie Bridge caught alight, and the fire was put out by residents who formed a bucket-chain, after the fire front had passed. It is across this bridge alone that access to private property and bushland to the north can be gained. Indeed, it was a timber bridge of historic as well as practical importance.

On our property alone:

- 90% of our pasture was burnt (approximately 4,000 of 4,500 acres).
- 150 kilometers of fencing was burnt.
- 12 cattle had to be destroyed.

Fortunately, the homestead and stock were saved primarily by the efforts of Brian and Leanne McCormack and their family. In addition, an historic planting of Lombardy Poplars on the riverbank appeared to deflect the full force of the fire from the homestead and the stock, which had been mustered in close.

This plunged us immediately into severe total drought conditions. As a direct result of the bushfire, we were forced to urgently sell cattle at reduced prices, to purchase extra feed and agistment at high prices, incurring extra transport costs and extra labour costs as are applicable to an emergency situation – to provide temporary fencing, immediate stock feeding and cattle work.

We now face very drastic on-going problems. To continue as a viable business, we must rebuild our herd, which will take years. We have suffered from loss of income, as well as the effects on normal trading and projected future sales. Hay which we had reserved for animal consumption during a dry winter is now all used up because of the fires.

No substantial rain has fallen since the fires and we now face a continuation of these extreme conditions until the spring. Moreover, rain that has fallen higher on ground has had flash-flooding effects. These include fire debris filling the Mitta Mitta River and Livingstone Creek, resulting in the water being periodically undrinkable for either humans or livestock.

The trauma of the fire experience itself and the pressure of the long lead up to the disaster has had an adverse effect on the physical and mental health of all those involved.

We continue to find it astounding that no CFA personnel or equipment were in the vicinity of the property in the Omeo Valley on Australia Day, despite the knowledge that the fire had been threatening from the north for the previous 19 days.

Our Conclusions, and the Issues Raised Thereby:

The fires were inadequately treated from the outset. The nature of Australian bush means fire can spread quickly requiring aggressive firefighting techniques. We believe they should have been fought in the national park immediately, while the fire was still of a manageable scale. With all the sophisticated equipment and technology available to the authorities and with water in the nearby Dartmouth Dam, surely this could have been achieved. By extension, why don't we have at least one 'Elvis' type water bombing aircraft per state given the danger of fire in Australia?

We believe it is the responsibility of the State Government of Victoria to manage the national parks. The Razorback fire was started by natural causes in the Alpine National Park. As such, it is the responsibility of the State Government to ensure that such fires, which begin in their jurisdictions, do not leave their jurisdiction and cause physical, financial and emotional harm to any citizen of Victoria. Is the policy for managing the national parks appropriate? What about fuel loads, back burning, access roads? It is due to poor forest management—in particular negligence with regard to the level of fuel loads in National Parks—that this disaster has occurred. Indeed, a report by the Victorian Auditor General, released yesterday, May 8, was highly critical of the level of fuel reduction achieved by the DSE, in particular, that it had not reached the levels it had set as targets.

The DSE and the CFA were responsible for the firefighting operation. Fires were left to burn until they were huge and extended out of National Park land causing enormous economic damage to public and private assets. This situation is unacceptable.

We believe opportunities were lost. The weather varied from day to day, with not every day having strong north winds threatening lives and property. The lessons of history too seem to have been ignored. The pattern followed by the 2003 fires was very similar to that of the 1939 fires, where the fires swept out of the bush in a manner consistent with the earlier fires. Indeed, Hinnomunjie Station fared better in 1939 than it did in 2003.

Some measures were taken, such as containment lines bulldozed on public and private land to the north of the property. However these proved to be woefully inadequate after the fires were allowed to burn for 19 days and become huge in size. The backburning, if any, from these lines was not enough to make proper containment work.

Information for Hinnomunjie Station from the DSE control centre in Swifts Creek was, we believe, inadequate. Those in charge were unable to give specific information regarding the state of the fires endangering us and had extreme difficulty with locations. Useful fire information, critical at the time, came from overhearing the local Benambra CFA leader over the CB radio, rather than through official DSE/CFA Command Centre at Swifts Creek.

There is a great amount of experience and local knowledge available from CFA volunteers. In particular, this relates to the intimate understanding of the countryside and terrain of the area that its inhabitants have. Not enough use was made of this resource. We believe that the fire co-ordination centre, in this case at Swifts Creek, approximately 60km away, was under the control of the DSE, who were lacking in local understanding, rather than the local CFA volunteers, who do possess this knowledge. In addition, we understand there was confusion regarding areas of jurisdiction.

There is a belief in the area that there was in place a policy of "Let it burn; protect lives and assets". This policy is contradictory. Naturally, lives must be protected above all else. But what is the definition of an asset? In the case of these fires, it seems to be a house, and only a house. In the Omeo valley, each house was protected by its occupants, not the authorities. Of 17, two were lost.

But as primary producers, our asset is our business—pasture, fences and stock. It is our livelihood and adds to that of the local community. A house does not support you.

Finally, government assistance to landholders is virtually non-existent despite frequent public announcements. Under the circumstances of such a natural disaster, surely State and Federal Governments could contribute to the replacement of fencing where private land adjoins national park, government land and roads. This is the responsibility required of private neighbours, and yet, in this case, where there is significant evidence of negligence and poor fire management on the Government's behalf, they have retreated further from this responsibility, when in fact they should be more inclined to do so. They are not bearing the responsibility of being 'good neighbours'.

Some help has been offered for replacing 'dog-proof fences' adjoining government land. Unfortunately, the specifications are such that it is more expensive to build the fence and receive assistance, than it is to build a suitable one without this aid. The co-ordination and management of this programme is almost laughable: at Hinnomunjie Station we began, after receiving approval, to build a dog-fence according to the specifications received from the relevant authorities. When half-finished, an inspection took place, during which we were advised that the fence we were erecting was incorrect. The specifications we had been supplied were not in fact the correct specifications, but had been subsequently altered, and we had not been advised.

Various amounts of money have been pledged by both the State and Federal Governments, the bulk of which has been donated to a 'Bushfire Relief Fund'. Also announced by the State Government was the allocation of \$50,000 to each of the four shires affected by the fires. On

further investigation as to the allocation of these funds, we have been advised by the East Gippsland Council that the money is to be spent (if it has not already been) on congratulatory events for volunteers. None of this money, it appears, has been allocated to the victims of the fires, but rather to those members of the CFA who voluntarily contribute their labour in the belief that should fire threaten them, others will volunteer to help them, and those paid workers of the DSE already on the State payroll. It leads one to wonder how the much larger funds are to be spent. Of the bushfire relief money we are told is offered, why does so little find its way to help those who suffer the loss?

It is our sincere hope that lessons learned from this disaster will be acted upon and not just disappear and be lost to those who may face fires in the future.

Margery I Scott & Elizabeth A Strang