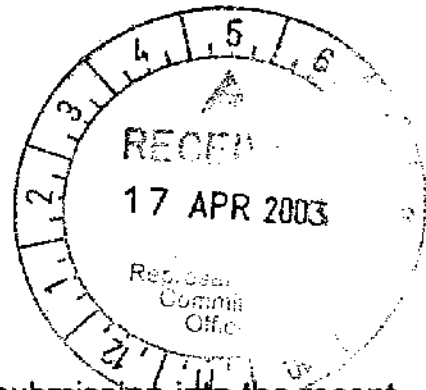


8-04-03

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT. 2600



Dear Secretary,

It is my humble request that you accept this submission into the recent Australian Bushfires,

By way of introduction may I draw a profile of myself in regard to my fire fighting knowledge and experience.

I joined the Cunningar Bushfire Brigade as a new member in 1950

Became the honorary Secretary/Treasurer 1952-1969

Sen /Vice Captain 1966-69

Captain 1969-1987

Deputy Group Captain for Harden Shire Fire District 1979-86

Honory Deputy Fire Control Officer Harden Shire 1986-1995

Harden District Group Captain 1995-2003

Member of the Rural Fire Service Association 1996-2003

Chairman Central Region RFSA (Volunteers) 1997-2000

Deputy Chairman Central Region(volunteers) 2000-2002

Secretary Central Region RFSA (volunteers) 2002-2003

Member of RFSA Executive 1997-1999

Member of Rural Fire Service Advisory Council 1997-1999

I have gained Rural Fire Service training to Group Leader level in all necessary disciplines (certificate enclosed) .I have been actively engaged in all local fires and many fires in adjoining bushfire districts,in recent times I have led taskforce teams of 12 to 25 volunteers to section fires in Peakhill, Glenn-Inness,Khancoban,Nundle,Nowra, Canberra,Yass fire Districts.

In my opinion measures that can be implemented by governments, Industry,and the community to minimize the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on Life,property and the environment are:

(a) There needs to be an education program set in place that directs its Aims and objectives towards the general community leading, directing,advising,and Planning as to how what and why certain activities should be carried out in the reduction of impact of a bushfire on the environment,private and public assets,and local communities. Reason Firefighters can do many things for the community however it would be of significant advantage to the community if the residents knew and were able to respond and assist firefighters to an incident and not become another emotional problem

All land managers and agencies need to be more active in their management of the land or property under their title in regards to mitigation and hazard reduction

(b) The greatest cause of and risk factors contributing to the impact and spread of bushfires on the community is the lack of hazard reduction and the failure to plan and carry out a hazard reduction program. In the community there is a great need to assist volunteers who are busy people to engage in all hazard reduction work. In government departments there seems a reluctance to provide funds or time to hazard reduction.

(c) The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction should be measured against the cost of the recent Canberra fires. Reason if the mountain country had been continuously hazard reduced in an organized manner over a number of years then the catastrophe that hit Canberra in mid January would not have happened. The same can be said in regard to all the Mountain fires. Reduce the Hazard and reduce the impact of the fire on all factors.

(d) There are many methods of hazard reduction that may be implemented by land managers to prevent wild fires from occurring eg: Burning In some areas not necessary or appropriate.

Ploughing or cultivation has a limited application

Grazing Most of the rural areas of the State carry some population of stock and as a result fire does less damage to the community. If grazing were reintroduced into the land controlled by the National Parks and Wildlife service and other Government Agencies then the level of litter would be reduced and as a consequence any fires would not be as severe

If grazing were to be introduced into NPWS then it should be managed in some form of rotational grazing system allowing the land to recover and the natural fauna and flora to develop.

Stock could be managed in these areas by electric fences or drovers so that the animals would not over graze or erode the soil structure

The policy of NPWS to close off large areas of land to the public may be a noble gesture for conservationists and naturalists however as seen in the recent bushfires and historically some form of hazard control is absolutely necessary in the harsh Australian environment.

(g) In most section 44 incidents response arrangements are adequate however having said that there is room for improvement.

Volunteers as a rule are working and consequently a certain time lapse occurs in collecting a team whether it is for a local fire or a section 44 fire. There needs to be an understanding by volunteers that not all personnel will be available at any one time.

There is a very real need for Fire Control Officers and other Executive staff to be trained in assessing a situation and responding to it at an

earlier stage of a fire especially sec 44 fires so that the volunteers ,may be able to respond more quickly

A system needs to be developed to overcome the seemingly constant confusion of office staff in regards to instructions coming from higher up And the overload of red tape associated with an out of area fire.

(Included for reference recorded events of the taskforce to Canberra)

(h) In most of my recent trips to section 44 incidents the deployment of firefighting resources have been good however the Canberra fire was in my view looking at it from a taskforce leaders position disastrous.

Reason. (My comments) The fire in the Brindabellas ignited on or about the 8th January 2003 Why was nothing done to call in extra resources to protect Canberra and its environment before 14:30 on the afternoon of the fire (see my record if events) My information is that the fire would have been in the City by that time

Why did it take two @quarter hours from our arrival at Yarrowlumla Fire Control till the taskforce arrived at Fairlight property

Why did the taskforce travel through the suburbs of Holder and Duffy, which were still burning, to a property, which did not need protection?

Why was the Taskforce allowed to wait in the suburb of Holder for one and half hours and not be tasked?

The cooperation and assistance given to me as a taskforce leader by people of the NPWS and Forestry in my recent trips to section 44 fires has been excellent, I say this from experiencing the support given in relation to aircraft and dozers, both units were put at my disposal on a number of occasions which enabled efficient and timely control of the fire edge.

In my view the Rural Fire Service in NSW and the fire fighting authority of other states should handle all fire fighting activities with support from other agencies, It is absolutely imperative that, as in rural areas, local knowledge be readily available for the deployment of firefighting equipment and personnel.

(j) The rolls and contribution of the volunteers is unmeasurable given the fall in population of the rural areas,added to this situation the expected response by the fire service to other incidents namely: Motor vehicle accidents, Property fires, and other call outs it is becoming increasingly Difficult to maintain a Trained and ready crew.

The financial demands placed upon volunteers although small are for ever present however this problem could be resolved if some form of retainer was available to Trained Volunteer crews who accepted the added responsibility of MVAs Property fires and other incidents

If a volunteer was to receive a retainer then the continuing problem of training could be overcome as their would be an incentive to train by the volunteer and some control by the Fire Service.

Because of the upgrade of tankers and equipment in the NSW Rural Fire Service it is also becoming more incumbent upon volunteers to be professional in the use

of their equipment and firefighting techniques. With more and more technical equipment becoming available to volunteers there is a real need to define the responsibilities and ability to these people

As there is a move toward zoning and joint management in the NSW RFS it maybe time to look at revising the brigade boundaries and rationalizing the equipment issued to brigades in doing so a higher level of response could be expected from volunteers within a local fire district

Thankyou for receiving this submission and if requested I would be available for further discussion.

Yours faithfully

A W Holding AFSM. JP.(Retired)