



Submission to Bushfire Inquiry 20/4/04

Background

Richard Ian Blyton

Submission No.30

Advanced Dip in Land Management (2001) Uni of Sydney

Member Nimmitabel Bushfire Brigade since 1982

Captain 1997-2003

Organised deployment of 32 Nimmitabel Volunteers to Jan/Feb Snowy mountains fires. We carried out 70 shifts.

Nimmitabel Brigade is a brigade in the Cooma-Monaro Fire District. Our brigade area was not directly affected by the fires, however a spot fire did start within 3 km of our brigade area. We were mainly deployed in the Yaouk, Southern ACT, Colinton and Kalkite areas.

Concerns

I have grave concerns over the management of our National Parks and the resultant effects on neighbours to the National Parks and safety of my volunteers in the field.

1. The build up of fuel has been talked about for years, however NPWS have ignored neighbours' concerns. The time lost in waiting for fire trails to be cleared or constructed contributed to the fire being larger than necessary. Some of these trails were also ill-prepared for the traffic that they had to carry. The fuel loads could have also made retreat difficult and dangerous if weather conditions had changed. (Refer 4)
2. I attended a fire at Mt Morgan area on approximately 14th January 2003. At this fire the NPWS flew in, in a helicopter gave instructions on what we could or could not burn and left again. I felt that the Group Captain should have been able to make the decisions on back burn lines, if NPWS wanted to make the decisions they should have stayed to do it.
3. The Bumbalong Trail was used to back burn off. I felt that it was too dangerous to put my volunteers in to that area (trees were regularly falling across the line). It also took several hours to get in and out of this area, fall back lines were inadequate. In the end I refused to send volunteers into this area as I had concerns for their safety.
4. In all the above situations not enough thought was given to OH &S with regard to my volunteers. Currently volunteers are limited to \$150000-00 payments for injury while fighting fires. At the local primary school we have got \$500000-00 cover for our children for injury for under \$5-00. I feel that the same sort of cover should be taken out for volunteers. The thought that one of my volunteers could have been injured and only received such a small payments has made me more reluctant to send volunteers into National Parks.

My volunteers are fed up with fighting fires in national parks when no mitigation work is carried out our resources are mainly funded by our insurance levy. I doubt that our National Parks have insurance on our natural resources. My volunteers were subjected to up to 20 hour shifts because National Park employees went home after 12 hours. Generally I was very happy with the response of my volunteers (Mainly rural workers, shearers stockmen and farmers).

Park Management

From a park management point of view I observed that a lot of the grasslands in the parks were overgrown and covered in rank grasses. Native animals do not like tall, dry rank grasses (neither do cattle). Native animals such as kangaroos would prefer to graze neighbouring country that is grazed short and kept 'sweet' by domestic animal grazing.

I would not suggest that permanent grazing is an option for national parks, but selective grazing by herded cattle (always on the move) would be a option for removing some of the fuel build up in national parks. Sheep are a better option if stock are to graze a set area as they have less impact on the waterways (stream bank erosion is more often caused by cattle).

My family has a bush paddock that is set stocked with sheep.

In 1998 we shut this paddock up in November (destocked). In months that followed many native plants that we didn't know were there flowered. This suggests that sheep grazing after most grassland species had flowered would have a minimal effect on these species.