

Cooma District Council of the NSW Farmers Association submission to
House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent
Australian Bushfires

The Cooma District Council of the NSW Farmers' Association area of responsibility runs down most of the Eastern side of the Kosciusko National Park, many of our members who adjoin the park were severely impacted on by these fires.

Attached you will find two maps of the actual extent of the fire in Kosciusko the first from the 15th January and the second shows the 2nd February.

- a. The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities.**
- Over forty eight thousand hectares of private land have been burnt out by the recent bushfires plus 80% of the Kosciusko National Park. Most of these fires came out of the public land and were controlled on private land.
 - The loss of wild life is an unknown figure, as "stock" counts within the park are not done however reports are that they are high. Very little stock was actually lost on private land.
 - The impact of the very hot fires and the resulting total lack of ground cover may be a problem with future weed infestation. Serrated Tussock is well known as a viable seed that germinates readily where there is little opposition. The KNP may need additional resources to control future weed infestations.
 - Some of the heritage of the mountains has been lost with the huts.
 - Some businesses within the region suffered while others prospered (providing services to firefighters) Tourism stopped completely and the flow on effects were felt by many businesses, café, accommodation, service providers, including major towns well away from the fires, eg Cooma.
 - One serious concern is that individual firefighters gave of their time and talents freely at sometimes great personal cost (no wages, having to employ someone else to feed stock etc) while the "public servants" that were firefighting were paid both normal wages and overtime. Further "the public servants" had worked the required number of hours they just left and in most cases they were not replaced so the impact of this on the voluntary fire fighter was very serious. Fires don't stop.
 - Erosion is and will continue to be a big problem. One of our members told me he had put in a new dam just before the fires and that it was now filled with silt as run off after such hot fires.
 - Since the fire there has been a huge increase in wild dog numbers coming out of the park – many more have been seen than usual. There have been a number of attacks on livestock but whether or not wild dogs attack stock the fact that they are about is most unsettling for the landowners it has a detrimental psychological effect as farmers management of their stock is of prime importance.

- Damage to local roads by the use of heavy machinery and truck during firefighting may not become apparent until months after the actual fire. There should be a uniform method of reporting such damage.
 - Some private landholders, especially hobby/lifestyle farmers, have allowed the build up of dangerous amounts of undergrowth all in the name of conservation are very misguided and measures should be taken to inform/educate them about their responsibilities as good neighbours
- b. The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other crown land and private property.**
- Fuel buildup is created has been caused by National Park management decisions to no longer allow grazing in the park, and in
 - lack of persistence in hazard reduction control (if the weather was inclement there was no reallocating of a time slot for the not burnt area)
 - Deterioration of fire trails within the park, regrowth, the removal of culverts, bridges etc.made it almost impossible for fire fighters and their equipment to access the fires.
- c. The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention and control.**

Fire was used as part of the management of the mountains, by both the aboriginals and white pioneers, right up until the National parks and Wildlife took over that management. Therefore the environmental impact of no hazard reduction has been dramatic with deferent vegetation patterns emerging by the changed management techniques. This in turn has resulted in:

- Native animals move onto private land to graze on fresh pastures
 - Fires are generally hotter than cool burns undertaken at regular intervals
 - A fire like the one we have just experienced is an unnecessary expense for the State and volunteers that good management should be able to prevent. Therefore prevention must be better than cure, There is no agreement and the last say is with government and/or the minister who may have a political agenda other than the good management of the park
- d. Appropriate land management policies to mitigate the damage caused by bush fires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices-**
- Both Land and Fire Management plans need to be formulated with NPWS, Rural Fire Service personnel, local fire control officers, volunteers, local landholders and local government. They need to not only be in place but also acted upon. There should

be flexibility within the plan to make sure that all the recommendations for that particular season are carried out and/or that they head the list for the next time round if there are good reasons for delay.

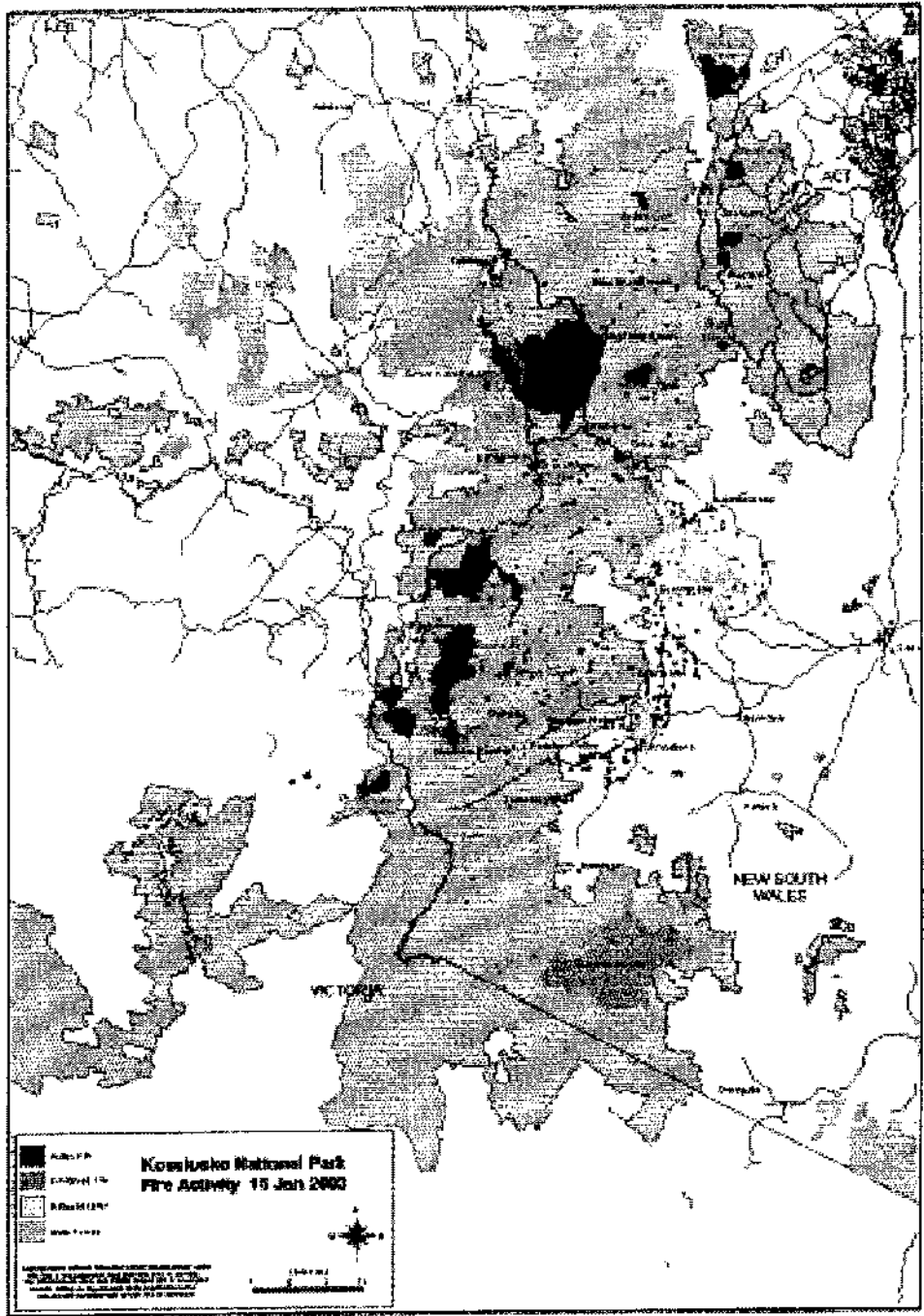
- During the Regional Forest Agreement discussions/negotiations, some aboriginal elders involved were taken to look at land of aboriginal significance. When they came back to the next meeting they said they felt that the region was badly neglected and was a disgrace – they also said they would like to clean up all the fallen overstories and to sell it for woodchips or put it into a large enclosure. The wildlife had no fresh pasture. The area should be fired. It was suggested at the meeting, that the Park Service make available this important aboriginal heritage land, allow them to manage it as they felt appropriate, and that the Park service manage the adjoining land as they thought fit - and for the results to be monitored – this was not taken up. There is an opportunity to do this now.
 - The introduction of a buffer zone on the edge of the park (in public not private land). This could for instance, take the form of a fire break of reasonable width (more than 2 fire trucks).
 - That all the fire trails be kept open and in good order so that access can be gained quickly
 - Fires started by lightening, in inaccessible areas, could be better controlled by attending promptly, and not waiting for a Section 44 to be declared.
- e. Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation:**
- People who lived in and used the area over many years should be consulted regularly. The experience of local people should not be ignored by a necessary fire control system
 - Firefighting technology, especially communications needs to be continually upgraded. The fact that there were so many groups not able to communicate during the 2003 fires could have lead to the loss of lives. This must be addressed.
- f. The appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;**

Information could be made available with rate notices, about the protection of property and life from bushfires. One problem is the build up of combustible materials in one's neighbours property – eg national parks etc. We must all be responsible.

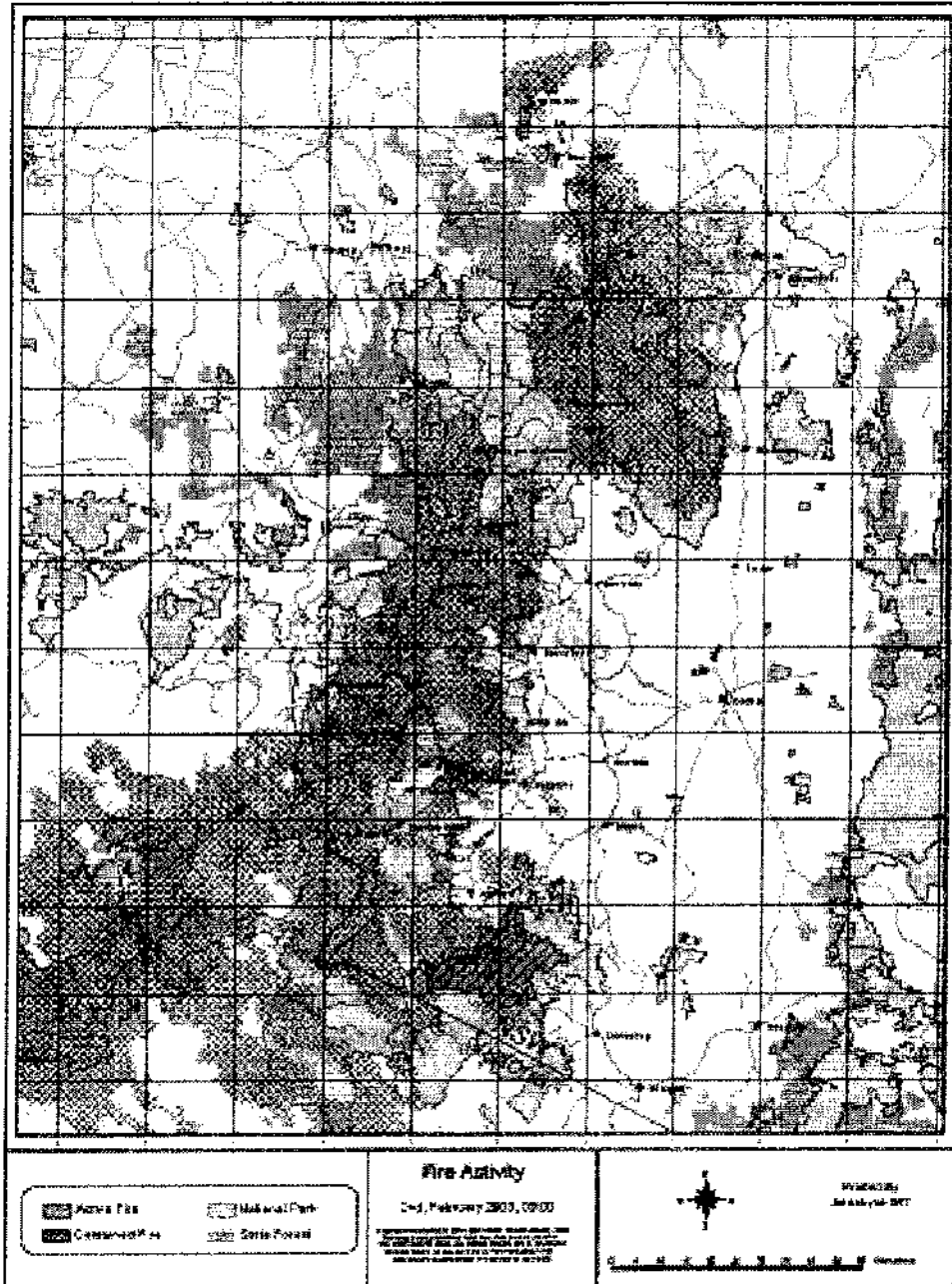
g. The adequacy of current response arrangement for firefighting

- The fact that local fire fighters and the National Park people could not communicate directly while in the field was a problem – their radio systems are not compatible.

- The rostering system for all firefighters must be tight so that firefighters do not leave without replacements or making sure that there is adequate support for those left on the ground.
 - The preparation of fire trails within the National Park slowed down the response time in being able to get into burn back
 - In some cases park staff placed odd restrictions on firefighters, which did not seem to be compatible to the seriousness of the situation; eg unload a water tank as it was too heavy for the fire trail and not to put a culvert in because of fauna and/or flora protection.
- h. The adequacy of deployment of fire fighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions.**
- Communications should be integrated, so that all involved know what is going on
 - Compensation for volunteer firefighters for the use and wear and tear of private vehicles and loss of time and income, should be looked at.
 - Support that is available to paid firefighters should also be available to the volunteers.
 - There is the story of the amount of food that was wasted at Delegate about Christmas time and the cost of providing airconditioned marquees that were so noisy the firefighters had to move outside.
 - All the problems should be discussed at a workshop of all contributors and solutions found.
- i. Liability, insurance coverage and related matters.**
- The State has been looking at boundary fences, with a view to help with replacement. No offer is being made for the loss of internal fences, yards, grass, shelter etc.
- j. The roles and contributions of volunteers including current management practices and future trends taking into account changing social and economic factors.**
- The hours and skills contributed by the volunteers have been way beyond the call of duty and the value to the community is immeasurable. The loss of time and work on their own personal jobs has not been calculated, and has not been taken into account when calculating the financial cost of fire.



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