

  
7 August 03

Submission

House Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires

Comments to: The Secretary of the Committee

Submission presented by:  
Heather Henderson

## INTRODUCTION

I am writing this on behalf of my husband, Peter Henderson and myself. We are farmers who have property at Gelantipy, Vic, and Orbost, Vic. I am also a registered nurse and mother of two. We employ 6 people plus casual staff in our farming business.

I have sent letters to DSE and CFA to outline our concerns about the bushfire management.

Our concerns are as follows:

### **Decisions were not made at a local level.**

The red alert that was applied to the strike teams at Gelantipy was not made by someone who was in the area or who had local knowledge. It was made by a few people in Gov departments and ultimately was put in the hands of someone who worked in DNRE at Orbost.

The red alert status was not conveyed to any local people. Therefore local people were out fighting fires and looking for spotfires and assuming that the CFA would be there to help them, as conveyed in last communications, but the CFA were not allowed to assist.

The red alert was not applicable to the immediate Gelantipy area, even though it may have been applicable to the Wulgulmerang area.

The red alert was lifted too late.

### **Communications were appalling.**

The CFA stated at the community meeting on the day of the fires, that they would be scanning UHF Channel 6. Almost all locals had access to a UHF radio. All were on Channel 6. The CFA obviously did not do this.

I could hear many people calling for CFA assistance with no reply. Many times I heard "Where are the tankers?" "Why aren't they coming?" "We need tankers, where are they?" "They said they would come?"

I can honestly say that I had every single male in my family, my husband, father, brother, two nephews, two brothers in law, three employees and one friend at Gelantipy, and I could hear them at Orbost, 111km away, screaming for tanker assistance. No reply from CFA. I rang 000 and advised them to get the communication system of UHF channel 6 re-deployed at Gelantipy's Karoonda Park Base. I said: "They are not listening... there is something very wrong at Gelantipy... They said they would listen, and they are not... tell them to turn their UHF radios on to channel 6... they are not communicating." I was extremely stressed by this, as my husband spoke to me an hour earlier and said that he was confident that there were hundreds of firefighters in the area and that they were going to be scanning UHF channel 6 and sending tankers when required.

The woman from CFA who answered my call must have thought about my call. Ten minutes later she rang me back, and advised that I ring Mike Reed, in Bairnsdale CFA. I did this, explaining very carefully the situation, and the response was terrible. Mike Reed, who was in charge of CFA at Gelantipy and Wulgulmerang, who was in Bairnsdale, lied to me. He said " Three tankers have been sent to you husband."

This did not happen. No tankers ever went to my husband or any others in the community. Communications did not improve. They did not heed 000 advice that communications were down.

A few days later I had a most threatening phone call from someone telling me that I should not ever get a transcript of the 000 conversation and that I had no business calling 000, and that I should keep quiet, and that I would be sent bills for the tankers that went to my husband. ( which never went). This call was made by someone in CFA who I would prefer not to mention... someone who is protecting themselves.

I also tried numerous times to ring the base camp at Karoonda Park by telephone to get a message through to ascertain why the CFA was not responding to channel 6 UHF. Karoonda Park have a UHF in their kitchen. It is next to their phone. There was no-one there to man it.

Why not, when there were two hundred firefighters and the Karoonda staff in the adjoining dining room? Very suspicious. Had they turned the UHF off because it was too much to bear, because they could not stand listening to cries for help and do nothing?

I would suggest you find out how this mistake was made, and avoid it in future. Perhaps you should invite Craig Oldis, Orbost to give a submission. He has since left the NRE on account of the occurrences of that afternoon. He was on site and had a senior role to play in decision making at Gelantipy, and was disgusted in the departmental decisions.

If you intend to have communications caravans, make sure they do their job: communication.

I would like to see the ABC radio to broadcast that there were fires at Wulgulmerang. Already one

screaming that she did not know why no CFA trucks were coming, and that their neighbours home had burnt down, that the fire was hundreds of metres tall and full of fireballs, swirling around their home and racing east. I felt that the communication was so disastrous and that people did not know the proximity of the fires. The CFA should have got the message through to people to take refuge and put their safety plan into action. They never put this advice across in the Gelantipy, Wulgulmerang or Black Mountain areas.

When we had a Snowy River Flood in June 1998, the ABC was tremendous in communication. They were not utilised in the same manner during the bushfires, but I am sure there could have been a major role there for such a facility.

### **BACKBURNING:**

We lost fences in backburning that did not need to be burnt.

Two strike teams spent two days backburning the bush west of our farm. They did not put their backburns out.

These fences were one month old.

Therefore we were faced with the issues of managing stock without boundary fences, insurance, and the huge expense of building new fences.

### **Weather**

Our farm at Gelantipy did not get burnt. The SW change came in the form of a drizzle and wind change which swept the fire back upon itself. If the change had come ten minutes later, my father and husband would have been corpses in the paddock or ute. Another half hour would have seen the others as well as the entire district blackened.

My husband and father were at the top of the property. When they became terrified of the increasing intensity of the deafening roar they jumped in the ute and left. They drove through pure darkness with lights and spotlights on high beam across our undulating paddocks, trying to find landmarks and gates. The roar was mainly caused by boulders exploding and trees blowing up. My father has been farming all his life. He has fought in bushfires, and has seen countless major floods on the Snowy River. However, this was a major stress to him, especially since he felt they were very well prepared, but out on their own with no assistance or communication.

Good management contained fires at Gelantipy. All fires at Gelantipy were put out by farmers, mainly my family. Not one fire was put out by CFA.

LUCK prevented the fire from sweeping across the Snowy at Gelantipy. The weather was favourable for one month post fire. And the bush has dried out an awful lot since then.

### **EQUIPMENT**

Our family had great equipment. Super organised. More versatile than the CFA. Some of our neighbours had no decent gear, not even a fire pump. Not good enough.

### **FENCING**

The 3 metre rule of clearing state forest around boundary fences is a joke. We need enough room to get a bulldozer along the fencelines.

### **BULLDOZERS**

Should not be allowed to drive anywhere they please, ripping tracks through shortcuts in the bush. They made a mess with no accountability, pushing the debris up against our fences. So what happens next bushfire? Of course, our fences will burn. They should keep existing fire trails clear, which was not previously the case. They should also clear along the designated line, or along a meaningful area, not just the quickest route.

### **BUSHFIRE HOTLINE**

Many times I rang the bushfire hotline to ascertain the progress of certain fires. However, sometimes I was telling them about the existence of fires. And I know that sometimes they did not heed any advice, because if I rang again to find out about the same fire, it had not been recorded on their database.

Their maps may not have been great, because many times I asked about the fires in the Bowen Mountains, east of Swifts Creek, directly west of Gelantipy, and they could not find the Bowen Mountains.

### **Proximity of Fire Front**

My family met with CFA officials on the Thursday morning of the fires. We had been following all news reports and bushfire updates, and had a map constantly on the table to mark areas of new fire outbreak. The Omeo fires were only 40km from Gelantipy. If a fire can spot 15km ahead, then logic tells us that the fire front could be at Gelantipy if a minor North wind blew up. That is commonsense.

And then again, I think our DNRE and CFA officials should try and talk to some old timers about the speed at which fire can travel through bush. My father states that he remembers fire travelling from Orbost to Cann River in one day.

So Why oh Why did the CFA tell the locals that the fire was predicted to arrive at Gelantipy on the following Monday?? This was told to my family on the morning of the fire. When the authorities, whose speciality is fire and resource management can get this stunningly wrong, in the face of conflicting local knowledge, it is easy to see how people lose ALL faith in the CFA and NRE.

### **Volunteers**

Perhaps you should think about organising childcare so that women could go and do some voluntary work on the assisting committees.

Please contact me if you have any queries.

Yours sincerely,  
Heather and Peter Henderson