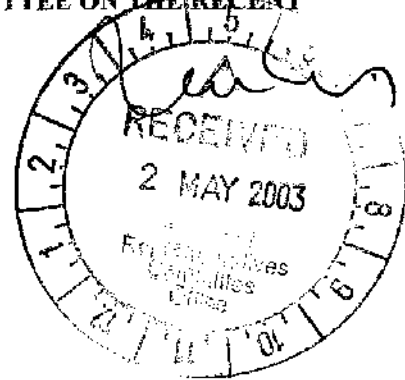


COMMITTEE SECRETARY, HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT  
AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

SUBMITTED BY:



DATE: 25<sup>th</sup> April 2003.

INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES.

DEAR SIR / MADAM,

Locality: North Eastern Victoria.

DSE

The recent fires bought out again the arrogance of this Government Department.

I don't condemn every employee in the DSE but the performance of the higher officers and some of those in charge of these fires was appalling.

The equipment available to them, with aircraft for spotting and bombing, tankers, bulldozers, heat detection gear for finding fire in all the smoke, communication equipment, mapping that we all obtain from their Department, plus men and lots of other machinery is "state of the art" by world standard.

Why then were the fires left to burn for so many days with out any attempt to get them out?

When they reached disaster status why were they still not attacked in the forest?

Why was Yabba Road, where I live, declared a containment line in their planning? This shows a blatant disregard for any landholders in this area. Their grass, fences, stock and property were totally disregarded.

Why were Local CFA kept out of helping for so long?

Why were CFA crews from out of this area given no support with a local person to guide them? [The smoke had visibility down to hundreds of meters for many days.]

Why did DSE turn up in discussions with the local tourist map from the Shire, as their map of the area, and have no idea where the fire front was? The Shire Tourist Map had no information for fighting fires in this Shire, the DSE have all the topographical maps of Victoria at their disposal, and not one was sighted here.

Why did they turn away bulldozers that arrived to help because their blades were of a different width? Every minute they pontificated, acres of forest perished.

Why did it take so long to make a decision? Precious time was lost because no decisions were made at, or near the front, they were sent to Central Command, pondered upon and by the time a

decision was made weather conditions deteriorated and opportunities lost, and those willing to put the fire out frustrated day after day.

The DSE person to advise on the situation of the fire that was approaching our area, at a public meeting, had no idea where it was. It was made clear that the local landholders could tell him exactly where it was.

Why change crew's miles from the fire, leaving it unattended, and making it harder for incoming crews to get a grip of the situation?

What is asset protection? This term was used throughout the fires. It didn't seem to be the forest, the asset of all Victorians. It wasn't the fences, grass or stock, the assets of landholders. It was classified, in these fires, as a house.

All the DSE and CFA professionals got paid every day and during these fires, were paid penalty rates. The volunteers of all persuasions, CFA, Red Cross, SES, and many others, left their own jobs to help voluntarily, or did their own job and then they volunteered to work. They never expect to be paid as volunteers, and never have. However to find that their livelihoods, earning a living from their own businesses in this area, were totally disregarded in these fires has left little credibility with those in charge of this disaster.

Perhaps Professional Fire Fighters and DSE fire fighters should be paid on performance and results.

There needs to be more fuel reduction burning done and landholders next to the crown should be able to undertake their own fuel reduction burning to protect themselves from future fires. There is a perception held by DS&E that they alone are the only ones responsible enough to light a fire.

### CFA.

At a Local level there is no better help or assistance available to all who live in this area. They have put out fires since it's inception in the 50,s and assisted in all sorts of other crises. All people at this level are unpaid volunteers.

Above the local level are the professional CFA. I am sure there are some competent ones there. My experience tells me there are some very incompetent ones also.

Why did they not insist on sending local knowledge people, with all trucks, out of their areas, particularly those from the flat parts of Victoria?

Why did some strike teams assist in attacking the fire, when others sat around houses playing cards and killing time when the fire could have been fought, and precious grass and fencing saved?

Why does a volunteer need a police check?

Why can't the Captain of a brigade vouch for volunteers in his own area? We wasted young competent people because of the absurdities of a Police check and minimum skills requirements, when these skills were very obvious with the people I was involved with.

The CFA fire levy on insurance is totally unfair. Only people who pay insurance contribute to this fund. It would be more equitable if this was raised through rates or a fee per registered voter. Fire Brigades do not discriminate between who pays insurance and who doesn't.

### OH&S and LITIGATION

There are major problems here, with OH&S and LITIGATION, and possibly some of the causes of the "don't get close - let it burn" approach to these fires, lay in these two areas.

Litigation has gone too far. We support the most lawyers per head of population than anywhere else in the world. They have a vested interest in all these excess rules.

Fire is very dangerous and fighting fire extremely dangerous, BUT it can be fought with commonsense and all the benefits of past experiences and the wonderful equipment at our disposal.

Fire does not work to regulation so many regulations have no use what-so -ever when fire fighting in the bush is required.

The OH&S rules and regulations need to be seriously looked at.  
Litigation is causing the demise of our society. The sue or be sued mentality stops people from helping those in need.

It is ANZAC DAY as I write this, and it may be prudent to remember that it was the men at the front who fought and battled and made the legend, despite the fumbling bumbling lack of support and direction from those above them in rank. These fires are not unlike the Gallipoli campaign.

The untold damage to the forest, and waterways of Victoria will take generations to recover. The people affected by the mismanagement of fighting the fires and the total lack of support by the Government and Government bodies is disgraceful and some may never recover.

\$400,000. for community recognition is a waste of money. This money would go along way to restoring fences, clearing decent width fence lines, providing fodder and preventing mental health to those who have been effected.



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**Attached two problems encountered prior to these fires.**

1. Letter from DNRE Senior Prosecutor

As a neighbour I was threatened with being fined, when a burn in my paddock slowly crept through into the crown. In October 1997, our local brigade attended when it was observed there was a fire and contained it with no additional help required by the department. This was in October along way from the fire season and in fact did them a favour. Their attitude was far from favourable, with an interview being held, evidence taken and finally a curt letter from the dept., with a warning that offences of this nature can bring severe penalties.

2. Letters pertaining to trying to get a fire permit, to burn a log on river flats in April 1991.

A seven day saga going from Shire Council, to CFA, to Council, to Fire Captain and DNRE, all with conflicting directions.