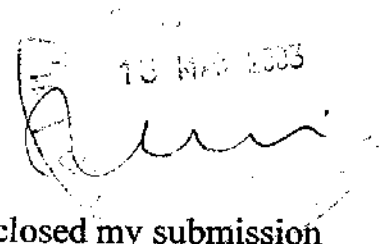


Submission No.289

The Committee Secretary,
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires.
Parliament House.
CANBERRA A.C.T. 2600.



Dear Secretary,

Please find enclosed my submission
concerning the recent bushfires.

May I take this opportunity to thank those
concerned for creating this enquiry and thereby giving the public a chance to
contribute to this most important debate.

Yours sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Alan Harris.

Alan Harris.

Submission on Recent Bushfires by Alan Harris.

The devastation of the recent bushfires was so vast and their impact so intense, touching many facets of our lives, that serious measures must be taken to prevent any likelihood of a re-occurrence in the future. The heat and intensity of the fires were such that any native flora and fauna in their path were damaged immensely – some lost forever, as were many private and public structures. Significant suffering was felt by communities as a whole and in particular by those who lost lives, loved ones and property.

From information available it appears the majority of fires resulted from lightning strikes, with many of these happening in National Parks. Regardless of how the fires started, or where, their resulting impact and severity was determined by: -

1. How soon the fire was detected.
2. The amount, and dryness of combustible material on the ground.
3. Prevailing winds, temperature and humidity.
4. The accessibility for fire fighters to get to the seat of the fire.

With the above considerations in mind: -

- a. How effective are the existing fire detection methods? Should there be more manned towers in forested areas, especially during thunderstorm activity or periods of high temperature/low humidity. Is there any automatic bushfire detection equipment available, say a form of radar? If not, perhaps, if feasible, research could be pursued to develop such a device.
- b. Control of the amount of fuel available for a fire is crucial, that is, if fire fighters are going to have any chance of containing an outbreak. Recent fires have highlighted the need to have regular hazard reduction programs in place and functioning. However, to achieve such an objective bureaucratic obstacles may require modification or removal, as exist in the NSW NPWS.
- c. The greatest asset available for containing, controlling and ultimately extinguishing bushfires are fire fighters on the ground. Therefore, it is imperative, where possible, before the fire becomes an uncontrollable conflagration, that these personnel have the ability to gain a rapid, unimpeded access to the seat of the fire.
- d. Following the recent fires the merits of the large helicopter water-tankers, leased from America, were very evident, especially where they reduced a threat and permitted ground crews the opportunity to contain outbreaks. Consideration should be given to Australia purchasing some of these units. They could surely provide valuable service for other activities outside fire risk times.

National Parks

In NSW the National Parks and Wildlife [NPWS] has received a lot of criticism for its failure to implement coherent management practices across the board. Although to date it has never admitted to any shortcomings.

A disturbing aspect of National Parks in NSW is that they are expanding at an unseemly indecent rate, often without possessing a coherent operational management program for bushfire control. Evidence the absence of one for the Budawang/Morton National Park where from the NPWS Web site, updated April 2003 - it has been under review since 2000. This is just one example of the NPWS being unable to produce a workable program. Even when there is such a plan there is no guarantee it will be implemented as was the case in the Goobang National Park in 2001. There a coronial inquest found that the Park authorities had "forgot" to carry out their fire prevention program.

Apart from the NPWS failure to carry out the very expansive hazard reduction needed to protect the wildlife they have been created to tend, their reluctance and consequent failure to do so has put many properties and lives, outside the Parks, at risk.

It appears the powers in NPWS and Government has been of the mind that for a National Park to function it should be locked away from any outside interference. They seem to have overlooked the mayhem that can result from the ravages of a severe fire, despite the many warnings derived from past fires and words of alarm from many fire experts over the years. We must learn to live in harmony with nature and that includes its beauty and its horror.

Fire-Trails

The most damning of all practices pursued by the NPWS has been the deliberate blocking and failure to maintain fire-trails.

The obvious reason for blocking these trails is to keep the public from using them to access the Parks. Methods of denying such access includes the deliberate digging of ditches across the trail or large amounts of material - including huge boulders dozed to form an impenetrable barrier and in some instances locked gates. All this occurs without any apparent instruction permitting such action appearing in the Act under which the NPWS receives its power.

The unhealthy pre-occupation the NPWS has for keeping vehicular and other traffic out of the Parks comes at an unjustifiable cost of denying the necessary access needed by fire fighters. Anyhow, what is so wrong with the public accessing enjoying National Parks? They after all belong to the people. Rangers, with regular patrols, could ensure there are no unacceptable practices or behaviour occurring.

The failure to maintain fire-trails in good order was found to be the major reason why the fire that ravaged the South Coast of NSW in 2001 became such an inferno. The

Coronial enquiry found this fire began in the Budawang/Morton National Park from a lightning strike, but rapid access to the seat of the fire, which if achieved could have contained the flare-up, was denied to fire crews because of the poor condition of fire-trails. The Coroner called on *all* agencies [the area travelled included State Forests] to improve their trails. A spokeswoman for NPWS was later heard on the South Coast ABC radio to audaciously say, "... the Coronial enquiry had completely exonerated the NPWS from any blame." This flies in the face of first hand accounts from fire crews on how impassable the trails are in that Park.

There have been many reports in the media where Fire Captains of many years standing have complained of the unusable condition of fire-trails in National Parks, but especially, of late, the Kosciusko National Park. In the absence of navigable trails during the recent fires some 1000 kilometres of emergency breaks were created in that Park, in otherwise undesirable areas. Apparently the NPWS has since conducted expensive restoration work on these unplanned trails. An expenditure that would not have been necessary if the trails had been properly maintained in the first instance. An interesting objection to fire-trails being accessible to the public was mounted by a Councillor in the Eurobodalla Shire Council. He contended that authorities responsible for maintaining fire-trails could be subject to legal action from vehicular accidents occurring because of trail conditions. This, if a real problem, could be readily addressed by legislation being enacted to exclude such authorities from any legal liability as a result of miss or malfeasance of fire-trails. Users of these trails would do so at their own risk.

Hazard Reduction

Apart from the need for the NPWS to become more actively involved in reducing their fuel loads, many neighbouring private landholders also have the same problem. From media reports, over recent years, there appears to have developed a litigation phobia among these people should there be a loss of control of a burn-off. Hence, it would appear the question of hazard reduction and its ramification goes beyond what exists in National Parks.

The NSW Rural Fire Service now has a policy that should a hazard reduction burn-off be required by a private landholder that person will perform the physical lighting of the fire, notwithstanding fire personnel being present. This is apparently designed to remove the Fire Service from any liability should the fire get out of control and create damage outside the landholder's boundary. This then raises the issue of how extensive is a landholder's Public Liability Insurance and what happens should resulting fire damage exceed the amount covered?

The question of liability, should a burn-off get out of control, could be greater than what a landholder's insurance would cover. Hence, a real stumbling block has been

created which discourages a hazard reduction program from being implemented that would otherwise be desirable.

It would seem the most sensible approach to hazard reduction programs is for all to be under the total control of the RFS, after all they are the experts in this field, both inside and outside of National Parks. The Government would warrant the RFS should compensation be necessary as a result of a fire getting out of control and causing damage.

The worry here is that under the present circumstances the landholder could be on a hiding to nothing should a fire, knowingly lit by him, get out of control. Hence, the likelihood of spontaneous fires, of "unknown origin", could increase significantly. Alternatively, they could simply do nothing, thereby permitting the fuel to accumulate to dangerous levels waiting for the next inevitable fire.

Expansion of RFS.

It is amply apparent that the only agency able to design and implement a coherent, workable and cost effective fire control program, without fear or favour, is the RFS. They, having the most expertise in this field, should be responsible for the planning and implementation of all hazard reduction programs and have exclusive control for the design, creation and maintenance of fire-trails. Obviously in liaison with affected parties. For the RFS to perform this latter task they would need to be provided with the requisite earthmoving equipment and operating staff, which would be a sizable financial undertaking in the first instance. However, this outlay would be peanuts compared to the gains a well-built and cared for network of fire trails would offer.

Fire Fighters

Many deserved accolades have been heaped on the efforts of fire fighters, but do many people *fully* appreciate the sacrifices many volunteers and others associated with them make. Apart from the deprivations all fire fighters suffer, heat, smoke, irregular hours, lack of sleep, showers etc, and not least putting their lives at risk, the volunteer has no idea how long the commitment to fight fires may last. Equally, employers whose employees are volunteers have no idea as to how long they will be deprived of their staff member. Seldom is the extent of the employers' contribution heard or acknowledged. Some, especially the small business, must do it hard during these uncertain times. But, perhaps the one volunteer doing it hardest is the self-employed. They have the added anguish of knowing that while needed to fight fires they have absolutely no income. Maybe, during this period they could receive some form of welfare payment to offset their contribution.

An additional problem for the volunteer is what happens if they should be injured or worse killed while fire fighting. Compensation for either occurrence appears to be

minimal, with many fire fighters waiting extended periods before receiving any payment, some have difficulty getting answers to correspondence concerning justified claims. Claims for compensation should be expedited promptly. The amount of compensation payable for injuries and death of volunteers should be made public, so the wider community can assess whether such coverage is adequate.

Compare the foregoing with a fire-fighting employee of the NPWS. It is understood that these people immediately go on a higher salary level to fight fires and are then paid double that rate while actually involved in the fighting. They are also covered by a generous compensation package should they become injured or killed.

Bush fire appeals are held for victims of fires, which is as it should be, but should not a similar appeal be held for the volunteers? As many are out of pocket from their generous and community spirited actions, surely the receipt of a few dollars, tax free, would be more useful and a way to say thank you, than a ticker tape parade [which requires more time off work] or a medallion. Contributors to such an appeal, apart from the general public, should include insurance companies - and they should give generously -, as these firefighters must save them millions from payouts. Ironically, insurance companies, apart from the house owner, have the most to lose in the event of a fire, but appear not to risk a cent to save a house, whereas the insured pays via a compulsory fire levy within their household insurance policy.

The volunteer fire fighter is undoubtedly the backbone of Australia's bush fire fighting effort and as such should be treasured. Sometimes, it appears from the actions and words of some, that they are not taken seriously until an emergency occurs. With the great number of serious bushfires Australia experiences, during warmer, dryer periods of the year, we would be lost without them.

Boycott

Is where, for a variety of reasons, fire fighters have refused, because of concern for their safety, to attend fires if they should occur in certain areas. One instance is the Goobang National Park, mentioned earlier, and is because of the RFS disagreement with the Park's fire management policies or lack of them. Another example is places like Guerilla bay and Rosedale on the NSW South Coast where houses are built in a very heavily wooded environment with only one road for access. When a fire strikes here, and it's only a matter of time, there will be a massive loss of property.

Media

The Sky News continuous television coverage of last summer's fires was tremendous. They managed to inform the public about the status of the many concurrent fires regularly. The only reservation about such coverage is that they are obviously dependent on updates from the field. These seemed to be forthcoming from the fires

around Sydney, and later in Canberra, but not the South Coast of NSW. Here, there were warnings over the local radio stations, at around 11.00am, for people, in some areas, to prepare for evacuation because a fire in the Buckenbowra area had jumped its containment line. This information was not relayed to the fire headquarters in Sydney during the day, as there was no such report on Sky News.

The information emanating from the local radio stations was not very helpful in that they simply advised that if more information was needed to ring a Fire information number or check a Council Website. Thankfully, the fire fighters brought the fire under control but for many hours there were many anxious moments, mostly caused by not knowing what was happening.

Under circumstances such as these it is imperative for Radio and TV stations to play an active role in keeping their listeners and viewers apprised of any threatening fire's status, but they can only do so if regular updated information is coming from the regional fire headquarters. To this end it would seem the appointment of a local Media liaison officer is essential for the duration of the fire.

Conclusion

In making this submission I do so with some humility, being cognizant of the fact that I am just one voice. What decided me to do so, is that there seemed to be an absence in the reports I have read on bushfires, of the issues I have raised above.

Most importantly, if we are to come to grips with effectively combating the continual threat of serious bushfires during the warmer drier months, we need to change direction from that taken over previous years. Certainly, what I have suggested in the forgoing would be a massive shift but I firmly believe it would achieve the objective of reducing the severe risks we regularly experience each year.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to record and submit my thoughts. I hope they are helpful.