

26th May 2003

The Secretary,
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires,
Parliament House Canberra,
ACT 2600.



Dear Sir,

One of the main reasons for the breakdown in relations between the RFS hierarchy, its paid employees and farmer volunteer brigade members west of the mountains is the failure of the "top down" command structure as applied in Sydney, Blue Mountains and coastal areas. This method cannot and will not work west of the mountains for the following reasons:

Most brigades in rural areas, perhaps with the exception of village brigades and hobby farm subdivisions, are manned by landholders, who belong to these brigades with their own interests and those of their neighbours first and foremost. Their primary focus is to access a fire as quickly as possible with as much manpower as is available and contain the fire to as small an area as conditions will allow. The more drawn out and the further from the fire the chain of command stretches the more delays are likely and wrong decisions made.

The "top down" structure has evolved in coastal regions due to the density of population and the fact that brigades recruit their members from a diversity of occupations. Their training needs, response to fire calls and the type of fires they face are very different from rural areas. These differences have been pointed out to RFS on numerous occasions in the past but there has been a persistent refusal to acknowledge their existence.

There is a wealth of information available through bodies such as the Aerial Agricultural Association of Australia and Bush Fire Behaviour and Management (CSIRO) that should be used by the RFS when making policy decisions that effect the firefighting capabilities of rural brigades. Decisions such as use of aircraft, involvement of outside help, backburning etc should always be made by the captain and group captains on the ground and the decisions should be facilitated by RFS personnel, not made by them. There is no substitute for local knowledge when fighting fires west of the mountains—it cannot be done from maps and plans. The brigade members are there because they have to be, not because they want to be. There is no pool of willing volunteers jumping at the chance to join these brigades and there will be an increasing number of resignations of existing members unless the RFS and its employees learn to change their attitude and listen to their volunteers instead of the deaf, dumb, blind and arrogant approach they are using at present.

When any of these points are raised they fall back behind occupational health and safety and litigation concerns, but surely a fire that is accessed early and kept small is a lesser percentage risk than one that is allowed to get away because of unnecessary protocols, over regulation and bureaucratic inertia slowing down the response of practical self-reliant and experienced firefighters.

A possible solution could be the abolition of one full time position in each fire control district and the appointment of one liaison officer per shire for the three or four months of the fire season—say—November, December, January, February. These liaison officers would be local people with a wide knowledge of the district and considerable practical experience of firefighting—a retired fire captain would be ideal. This may help to bridge the gap between the volunteer brigade members and the paid RFS employees.

Yours Faithfully,



Stephen Laver

Member, Reids Flat Bush Fire Brigade for the past 35 years

POINTS COVERED IN THIS SUBMISSION

1. Breakdown of relations between RFS and its volunteers.
2. Why is this happening?
3. Possible Solutions.