

Sub 386

Ames
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Submission to
House of Representatives
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires

By



Rural Fire Service Association
CENTRAL EAST REGIONAL CONFERENCE

BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth Government has established a House of Representatives Select Committee to Inquire into '**Recent Australian Bushfires**'.

The Terms of Reference set for the Inquiry are as follows:

" The Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires seeks to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimize the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on life, property and the environment with specific regard to the following:

- a) The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;
- 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;
- c) the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;
- d) appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices;
- e) any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;
- f) the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly in with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;
- g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;
- h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;
- i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;

- j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors."

The Volunteers we represent wish to acknowledge the increased level of cooperation, particularly in more recent years, that exists between the Government agencies and their staffs. In making this submission and in the examples we provide we seek to draw attention to areas that can be improved by a legislative process that gives greater weight to the protection of lives and property of landholders and occupiers adjacent to State Forests and National Parks.

We wish to draw to the attention of the Committee, briefly, a number of factors relating to these TOR:

- These TOR are broad reaching and not before time and we thank the Government for the opportunity to present our views on these matters.
- In being broad reaching the TOR provide ample opportunity for the community and agencies to have their say on this aspect of Australian community life.
- However, by their very breadth and depth they mitigate against all but the very largest agencies providing comprehensive responses, particularly when viewed in light of the exceedingly short time span within which submissions may be lodged (even bearing in mind the two week extension granted to us within which we must lodge our response). Even TOR a) would require a substantive research effort to do it the true justice that it deserves and we as an organisation of volunteers are simply not in a position to do this.
- Accordingly this submission will be restricted in its comments and focus on the matters that we believe we can make a real contribution to. Our brevity should not be taken as a sign of lack of interest but more our capacity to contribute within the required timescale and our lack of resource. We would appreciate the opportunity to expand on these matters at any hearing the committee may hold. We invite the committee to visit our region and avail itself of verbal testimony and the opportunity for inspections.

The Central East Region of the Rural Fire Service Association (RFS) has prepared the following submission on behalf of its members.

Until recently the Rural Fire Service had an administrative structure based on eight (8) Regions. One of those Regions was the Central East Region. Some time ago the RFS restructured itself and 8 Regions became 4 Regions. The RFS, as the organisation of the volunteer and salaried staff of the Rural Fire Service however continued with an 8 Region structure believing that this structure allows it a simpler and more inclusive consultative relationship with its members.

The Central East Region covers 25 Local Government areas (for details see Appendix 1). It can probably best be described as the arc that provides the ring around the Greater Sydney conurbation and thus provides the vast majority of the bush fire fighting resource for what is probably the largest urban interface fire challenge in the world. Completely accurate membership figures are simply not available to us but a figure of 14,640 was reported in 2000-2001 within 309 Rural Fire Brigades.

The volunteer members of the Service represent an enormous diversity of skills and bring to the operation of the Service a great depth of knowledge and experience that is regularly applied to fire mitigation and suppression. Whilst the Service has a broad and developing formal education and training program it is also, in reality experiential with its members gaining an ever growing body of knowledge built on their ongoing experience as fire fighters.

FIRES AND THE 2002/3 FIRES

The South Eastern corner of Australia is one the most bush fire prone areas in the world. This is a given. The natural vegetation, in many cases thrives on fire occurrences. Fire is an every year occurrence. Some years are worse than others and some seasons are terrible. The 2001/2 and 2002/3 seasons were probably the worst in Australia's recorded history. The fact that no lives were lost in this last season from amongst the firefighters of all agencies and property losses were as light as they were is a credit to the skills, tenacity and equipment of those firefighters not a reflection on the lack of fire intensity which was as bad in places as ever seen.

The following are a variety of statistics from recent severe fire seasons that help to put the recent fire season into context. They relate to NSW only however to place the ACT and Victorian fires into similar context the ACT lost approximately 156,500 hectares burnt and Victoria some 1,054,000 hectares burnt.

COMPARISON OF 1994, 1997, 2001 and 2002 BUSHFIRES

The 2002–2003 was a protracted season with continuous Section 44s for 151 days from 27 September 2002 to 24 February 2003.

1994	1997	2001-2002	2002-2003
No of Fires 800	No of fires 250	No of fires 454	No of fires 459
Principle Duration 30/12/1993 – 15/1/1994	Principle Duration 26/11/1997 – 10/12/1997	Principle Duration 24/12/2001 – 23/01/2002	Principle Duration 27/9/2002 – 24/2/2003
Principal Duration 17 Days	Principle Duration 16 Days	Principle Duration 30 Days	Principle Duration 151 Days
Area Burnt 800,000 ha	Area Burnt 500,000 ha	Area Burnt 754,000 ha	Area Burnt 1,465,000 ha
Perimeter	Perimeter	Perimeter	Perimeter

Not Known	Not Known	4,360 km	10,350 km
33 Section 41f	15 Section 44	27 Section 44	61 Section 44
No. of Section 44 Days – Not known	No. of Section 44 Days – Not known	No. of Section 44 Days 426	No. of Section 44 Days 576
Local Govt. Areas 35	Local Govt. Areas 20	Local Govt. Areas 44	Local Govt. Areas 81
No. of Days Tobans Declared 15	No. of Days Tobans Declared 48	No. of Days Tobans Declared 38	No. of Days Tobans Declared 97
No. of Statewide Tobans 9	No. of Statewide Tobans 3	No. of Statewide Tobans 12	No. of Statewide Tobans 13
Aircraft used 76	Aircraft used 60	Aircraft used 109	Aircraft used 121 (Max. no. Of aircraft used in one day 103)
Firefighters lives lost 2	Firefighters lives lost 4	Firefighters lives lost Nil	Firefighters lives lost Nil
Residential Homes destroyed 206	Residential Homes destroyed 10	Residential Homes destroyed 109	Residential Homes destroyed 86
Other buildings destroyed – Not known	Other buildings destroyed – Not known	Other buildings destroyed – 33	Other buildings destroyed – 33
Outbuildings destroyed – Not known	Outbuildings destroyed – Not known	Outbuildings destroyed – 433	Outbuildings destroyed – 188
Vehicles etc, destroyed – Not known	Vehicles etc destroyed – Not known	Vehicles etc destroyed – 222	Vehicles etc destroyed – 102

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

a) The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities.

As mentioned earlier, to make a reasoned submission on a TOR as significant and of such breadth as this is next to impossible in the time available and the resources available to us. However it is self evident that severe dislocation has taken place across wide areas of NSW, the ACT and parts of Victoria. It is our information that in the New England area of NSW where the fire season began so early, that volunteers were on duty for 6 to 7 weeks almost without break in some cases. What does this do to their lives, their farms and businesses?

Fire, particularly wildfire of the type experienced so often in the last fire season, is no respecter of private or public property. What needs to be done is for a quantification of damage incurred to be undertaken on a scientific basis.

We submit that a proper task of the newly established CRC should be to research the socio-economic effects of bushfires not just the fire component. This

could take into account some of the components raised on TOR (j), particularly the demographic changes taking place in the more rural parts of NSW and the effects that this is likely to have on the Services capacity to provide the service that the community expects and deserves. This is not a criticism of anyone, particularly those members of the Service who have work within this changing paradigm and cope with the difficulties that are their reality.

The cost of environmental damage as opposed to commercial losses is an interesting quandary. Commercial losses are counted quickly and meticulously because of cost/loss recovery mechanisms through insurance or financial grants. Livestock lost in fires are relatively easy to count, as are houses, machinery and fences. Who counts lost native fauna or the economic loss to the community engendered by the vast amount of time devoted to firefighting by volunteers at the expense of their families, their own businesses or their employers?

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.

The vast majority of the fires that occurred during the recent season were caused by natural events, principally lightning strikes. Their severity was also a natural event, burning through enormous fuel loads driven by weather eminently conducive to propagating fire. Land managers cannot affect the weather but they can reduce the fuel loads and provide access trails and buffer zones.

It has been said publicly on a number of occasions in relation to the severity of the recent fires that hazard reduction burning would not necessarily have stopped some of the fires. We agree, however such burning may well have slowed the progress of fires allowing better reaction times by fire suppression crews and a better ability to backburn during evenings (or days given the right conditions or the degree of urgency inherent in particular situations). Situations of reduced fuel loadings are inherently more manageable and are commensurately safer for those fire crews present.

We cannot pass this point in our submission without reference to the enormous fuel loads that were present across wide areas of National Parks. This has resulted from an apparent and ongoing reluctance on the part of the responsible land managers to diligently pursue a policy of fuel reduction. Whereas there may be excuses for this failure to carry out necessary mitigation measures this situation must now be addressed.

See attached maps:

Appendix b1 "Gorrick's Track" and appendix b2 "Eight Mile Track"

c) The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control.

The economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction is a matter for significant scientific study and should be reflected in the work of the CRC.

Adequacy is another matter. It is true to say that we can't hazard reduce everything all of the time but clearly there is a belief across wide areas of the community (both the general community and the fire fighting community) that what has been hazard reduced is just not enough and not enough by a wide margin. Increasing the quantum of land that is hazard reduced raises the question of who will do this work. The National Parks Service (until recently the National Parks and Wildlife Service) clearly has limited resource for this task, both human and material to undertake this and little heart for the task as evidenced by the low area of hazard reduction burns undertaken in recent years. State Forests, as another major land manager, through its clear economic paradigm runs effective hazard reduction programs but only within the area that it is responsible for. It is worth expanding a little on the distinction between the two land managers. NPS is not required to produce a dollar result for the State Treasurer; it is driven by the objectives of the act of parliament that creates it. Its results are more ephemeral whereas State Forests have a 'harder' edge. A monetary return is expected and an economic imperative is part of their management dynamic. Neither are major combat agencies for the suppression of fires and they are not equipped for this task. These are not direct criticisms but our reflection on their reality. This leaves the NSW Rural Fire Service as the 'occupier of the field'. It is trained for the task and well equipped but it is limited by the following factors:

- Hazard Reductions, particularly large scale ones are time intensive in their planning.
- The time available to undertake hazard reduction programs each year is limited by weather and climate (factors beyond our control)
- The 'paperwork' and environmental components increase yearly
- Many trails within National Parks are not designed or built for the type of heavy tankers predominately used by the Rural Fire Service. These trails are built for the size of vehicle used by the NPS which are quite small. These trails are also designed for NPS needs (e.g. environmental access) not necessarily for the support of hazard reduction burning which may require entirely different types of trails in entirely different places. The RFS has no control over these trails nor does it have any control over when NPS completes its paperwork that will be necessary for the undertaking of hazard reduction burning. In some cases delays in this work have delayed necessary hazard reductions for years, some not being completed to this day. Recent legislation intended to change this situation is as yet unproven.
- The volunteer firefighters who would probably be expected to undertake large portions of this work have other lives, at best this work is weekend work and there are only probably 10 of these in any year within which such work can be undertaken. Many factors,

such as wet weather, can radically affect the number of available weekends and the best laid plans for extensive hazard reduction burning programs can be easily 'washed away'. It is true that small amounts of this work can be undertaken during weekdays but the predominant availability of resource is and will remain, weekend based. An assessment has been made of hazard reduction works within "managed lands". It is our view that 80-90% of man hours spent is by volunteers utilising RFS equipment within this region.

In looking at alternatives the long term value of public education programs, well designed and focused have much to commend them. The FireWise campaign falls in to this category and has much to commend it as a vehicle to raise public awareness of the issues involved in land owners/occupiers addressing their own bush fire hazards and risks. A broader application of this campaign is worthy of consideration by the committee.

See attached maps:

Appendix c1 "Yarramundi HR" and appendix c2 "Howe's Sector Suppression"

d) Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices.

This is the nub of our concern as members of an agency directly tasked with the control of bushfire events. The wider community, who suffers the consequences of extreme fire incidents, needs the assurance of a coordinated legislative approach and an infrastructure designed and resourced to mitigate against the destructive impact of a wild fire. The disparate aspirations of the land managers and their respective agencies must be subordinated to the requirement for an effective regime of preparation for such events. Volunteers play a large part in the planning and preparation for fire events along the urban interfaces with bush land and we strongly recommend the provision of adequate infrastructure to cater for the likely results of the extreme fire weather we know we will experience from time to time.

Where there is no adequate access for heavy tankers or for rapid deployment of ground fire fighting forces the ability to establish containment lines is severely reduced. It is much more costly to provide access in the midst of an emergency than with proper fire management infrastructure planning. There are service standards covering the adequacy of fire trails and these standards have not been achieved in areas where firefighting operations have been necessary in the past twelve months. Permanent trails must become a part of the land management infrastructure as the environmental cost of failure to provide such access is greater than the cost of building and maintaining adequate trails. The cost of replacing damaged RFS equipment alone would justify a better managed approach to the problem. During 2001-2002 in the Hawkesbury LGA ,

three fires resulted in the expenditure of \$500,000 on bulldozer hire, \$200,000 on bulk water carriers and \$200,000 on panel damage to RFS vehicles.

Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation.

We are heartened that after many years of seeming neglect an enhanced research posture is being adopted to focus on bushfire issues through the mechanism of a CRC.

We urge the committee to support the work being undertaken by CSIRO headed by Phil Cheney and known as Project Vesta. The fact that the Forest Fire Danger Index is clearly and widely acknowledged to significantly under predict fire behaviour from High upwards is of major concern to those charged with fire suppression and the safe management of fire suppression crews. We also urge the committee to see this work not just as a theoretical exercise but one needing a trial, implementation and refinement process and that such a whole of project approach be funded accordingly.

We have also alluded earlier in our response to TOR (a) to the need to focus on areas of research other than just those that relate to direct fire, the socio – economic sphere is just as relevant for what it does is address the human dimension which is largely neglected. Far too often we see anecdote, hysteria and emotion pass for reasoned and researched debate. We strongly urge the committee to reflect this in its findings.

e) 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.

The issues raised in this TOR have been of very real concern for a long period of time. Many of these matters were handled on a piecemeal basis, if they were addressed at all. Councils adopted their own codes or their own interpretation of existing codes and legislation.

The move by the NSW State Government to incorporate the contents of the document entitled *Planning for Bushfire Protection* as a development control guideline enforced through amendments to the Rural Fires Act in August last year is to be applauded. This attempt to provide a standard code for development and relating to Australian Standards and the Building Code of Australia for the construction of dwelling houses in bush fire prone areas is a significant initiative. It does have a couple of potential downsides. Firstly it has a high degree of centralisation with much of the authority now moving towards the Services Head Office. Secondly and perhaps a little less obviously is the potential for difficulties that may be generated by having two disparate functions within the same organisation. On the one hand we have the volunteer firefighting crews who have a wonderful image with the public whilst on the other hand we have an approval/planning/ enforcement function that may, in

the end not be so well thought of with a consequential deleterious effect on the image and reality of the firefighter.

f) The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting.

Our position as volunteer firefighters is that the initial response, be it within Rural or remote areas, must be maximised to achieve rapid containment of the fire. It is our perception that there is reluctance on the part of some land managers to seek the appropriate emergency support in a timely manner. Where the RFS has provided a well resourced response to such fire events including aerial and ground attack the cost, although high, has been justified by the savings to the environment and adjacent communities in terms of severity of impact, reduction of losses and saving of our most scarce resource, time! The consequence of delay and inadequate response are evident to all in the form of large areas of burnt bush land and property loss.

See attached map:
Appendix f1 "Bala Range Ignition"

g) The adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource between agencies and jurisdictions.

With respect to this we seek to make a further, detailed submission.

h) Liability, insurance coverage and related matters.

The Insurance industry carries a substantial portion of the funding of the NSW Rural Fire Service. Having said that it also needs to be said that the burden of funding the service through this medium does not represent a fair system given the current structure.

Many people (how many? – who knows really) simply do not insure and are then, once they have suffered loss through a fire event, compensated through the means of public appeal. What message does this send to the wider populace?

Additionally only those Insurers based in Australia pay the levy, the rest pay nothing. So only those residents who insure and insure through an Insurer based in Australia actually make this form of contribution to their own protection and well-being. Where is the fairness in that? The Commonwealth, through its powers over the Insurance Industry may well have the competence and capacity to address this problem if States have a reluctance to pursue this issue.

There is another aspect of this issue that needs to be aired. This addresses the issue of homeowners taking greater responsibility for the protection of their own property from the impact of fire. Many residents simply are unwilling to protect themselves, omitting to take even the simplest of precautions even when these are repeatedly pointed out to them. Not only do properties that are either poorly

or totally unprepared create major potential problems from fire impingement they create an unnecessary hazard for the fire suppression crews who may take significant risk to protect such properties from damage.

These are not simple issues. We suggest to the Committee that as part of their recommendations they sponsor a major and focused 'Round Table' event into the whole question of funding that would address these issues and provide opportunities for the discussion of a rebate system (cost reduction) that would recognize the home owner/occupiers adoption of certain bushfire protection measures (or cost penalties for non adoption). The principles to underpin such an approach may well be found in the Rural Fire Services Community Education Programs, in particular the Fire Wise campaign.

The question of liability is a vexed one. We understand that there are a number of legal cases either underway or about to be that will test and explore this area. Certainly the Rural Fires Act 1997, as amended, makes clear certain responsibilities of land owners and managers with regard to fuel and fire mitigation. How this will translate through the legal system is yet to be seen. We submit that this matter should be watched most closely and reviewed at the conclusion of the current and pending legal actions. We understand that this may take some time to eventuate but such is the nature of our legal system. It is hard to see just what regulatory action, other than those relating to the regulation of insurance matters, the Commonwealth could take given that land and land management issues have long been seen (even through the prism of the Constitution) as the province of the States and State law applies. The Commonwealth could however sponsor a national (and funded, even partially, perhaps on a matching State/Federal dollar for dollar basis) public education/cost rebate scheme.

i) The roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

This is a difficult TOR to address as it somewhat ambiguous in its wording. What is meant by the term '*current management practices and future trends*'? One could ask "whose management practices" – the Services, the individuals or the employer of the volunteer- each answer evokes a different response.

We can say this. Without the volunteer there is no Service and this is readily acknowledged and self-evident. What do volunteers want? We want to protect our homes and our community. We want well sorted and adequate equipment with which to perform the task at hand. We want recognition for the immense efforts that we make in this inherently dangerous and difficult work. We want to be managed in a professional way that recognises the difficulties that we face and the personal time that we give, particularly those of us who are self employed. We do not want our time wasted, which unfortunately we perceive

to happen too often (and perception becomes reality all too often and too easily).

We do not believe payment for work done is an issue; in fact it would be the antithesis of what most volunteers seek from the Service – the opportunity for doing a difficult job well and going home. Payment, however structured would bring a host of difficulties that are simply not needed. In fact many view the fact that they are volunteers and 'do it for love' as a point of honour'. Brigade and district management problems would multiply. People should participate because they want to be there not because there is some form of monetary reward or recompense. If payment or the need for such recompense is so great then don't participate. The Service is built on an ethos of volunteerism; payment would deeply erode this invaluable asset.

We believe that there is a growing problem in the more rural parts of the State. This has been recognized by the Service but needs to be put briefly to the committee. There are significant demographic changes taking place in rural NSW. There are less and less people available to form the crews necessary to undertake fire suppression activities. Farms are growing in size and less and less labor is engaged in rural pursuits. Not only are initial crews perhaps harder to find but so are the follow on crews as well and a units sustainability is affected. Dedication to the task will see people work longer and longer and thus become more prone to accident and errors of judgement with all of the consequences that this can have.

This is a major socio – economic trend, recognized by government in other spheres of life, it's impact on the rural firefighter and their capacity to 'do the job' just needed to be clearly stated in this context.

Another factor that can be addressed under this TOR is the impact that the current employment market has on the individual's capacity to participate in the Service. Businesses run on minimal staffing. For many volunteers that opportunity is constrained by the capacity of their employer to release them and when released their absence is often resented with perhaps consequences that go well beyond the particular incident. Many volunteers take portions of their leave to participate. Members of the Service who are small (and micro) business operators simply close up shop or leave their business to participate. These members in particular do not view kindly even a perception that their valuable time is not being put to best use – time not worked equates to no income!