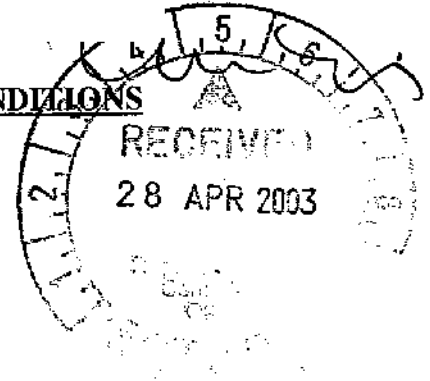


SUBMISSION INTO THE 2003 ACT FIRES AND CONDITIONS
SURROUNDING THEM



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SYNOPSIS OF REFERENCE: It is the intention of this submission to comment on the 2003 ACT Bushfires, the events leading up to and surrounding them. I will comment on practices and policies of the ACT Emergency Services Bureau and the ACT Bush Fire Service and other agencies which have relevance or are deemed to be a factor in the effect of recent fires. Comments will be confined to areas in which I have experience and hence can offer a professional perspective.

MY FUNCTIONS AND DEPLOYMENTS RELATED TO 2003 FIRES: I was deployed in a fire-fighting capacity on the 8th of January 2003 to the Bendora fire, and subsequently attended on a continued basis the stockyard spur fire, Mount Gingera fire, the Ororal Valley and other locations in the Cotter-Catchment area. On Saturday 18 January I was deployed to Kambah Pool Road, the property 'Milapuru', Pine-Island, Gordon, Banks, Bonython, Uriara Crossing, and Glenloch Interchange and other areas.

To whom it may concern,

I was involved, in my capacity as a volunteer fire-fighter with the ACT Bush Fire Service in the bushfire-fighting operations between the 8th and 26th of January in an effort to suppress wild fires originating in the vicinity Bulls-head Cotter Catchment reserve, which also impacted on Canberra suburbs on the 18th of January.

I have been an active volunteer fire-fighter for some four and half years, during which time I would consider myself to have developed a comprehensive knowledge in Bushfire suppression operations, protocols within the ACT Bush Fire Service (BFS), and the ACT Emergency Services Bureau (ESB). I would contend that my experience and knowledge in these areas positions me to make and informed comment on the fires

HAZARD REDUCTION BURNING

I would first like to comment on the practice of Hazard Reduction Burning. Hazard Reduction burning entails the ignition of selected sections of bushland in conditions of low-fire danger, under closely controlled and regulated conditions. Such burning is conducted in sections of bushland which are deemed to have a potential to be of strategic and tactical importance in the suppression of a wildfire, should one occur in that area. By reducing fuel loadings in an area, it creates a condition such that in the event a wildfire should pass through it, the intensity and propagation of a fire is reduced to an extent such that it is manageable by fire fighters, which in turn assists them in their ability to control or suppress a wildfire.

It is my position that hazard reduction burning has proven to be an extremely effective practice in achieving this end. There is a direct and indisputable correlation between the conduct of this practice and a reduction in fire risk and successful fire suppression. It is a practice accepted and advocated by both fire-fighting services, respected ecologists and environmentalists. Not only does this practice assist authorities in the containment of wildfire, it is postulated to have positive environmental effects by stimulating growth and regeneration of vegetation.

When I first joined the BFS, my brigade in conjunction with other brigades and governmental agencies, would conduct on a regular basis hazard reduction burns. Some of my colleagues who have been in RFS longer than I have inform me that in the early to mid 1990's such burning was conducted at an even higher frequency.

In the time preceding the 2003 fire, no hazard reduction operations were conducted in the areas that the fires originated, nor in many of the bushland areas adjacent to the parts of Canberra where the fire impacted. I would contend that the lack of hazard reduction operations undermined the BFS' ability to suppress or contain the fire, as authorities were confronted with a lack of strategic or tactical areas which might have been more conducive to fire suppression or containment. **The lack of hazard reduction burning therefore complicated the ability of containment, and is therefore a factor leading to the fires impact on Canberra. This factor could have been mitigated had the BFS been permitted to conduct more hazard reduction operations.**

It is my view, formulated from my own experience and reliable knowledge from colleagues, that the reason such burning was not conducted was because of political considerations. The ACT government was deterred by complaints from residence of smoke and air pollution that is resultant from such burns, and consequently sought to prevent many such burns from taking place. I would submit that one has to balance the sensibilities of residents and their irritation from smoke pollution, against the devastation, destruction, and danger that is highly probable to arise if this practice is not conducted. On balance, I should think that later consideration should outweigh the former. The ACT government erred in its decision to allow the sensibilities of constituents interfere with such an important practice.

I should also note that the drought experienced during 2002 reduced the number of days available in which such operations could be conducted. There were however numerous days permissive to hazard reduction burning. Notwithstanding, the benefits of controlled burning remain in effect for a number of years after a burn. It was possible for burns conducted years in advance which would have still benefited in the control of the 2003 fires.

In addition, some conservationist /lobby groups are opposed to the practice of hazard reduction burning, and sought to dissuade the government from authorizing them. Although I have no authoritative evidence to demonstrate the government was influenced by such groups , I would strongly encourage the committee explore the link between the environmentalists lobbying and the reduction in hazard reduction burning.

Another constraint on the practice of hazard reduction burning is the cumbersome and protracted bureaucratic process associated with gaining authorisation to conduct burns. This excessively bureaucratic process prevents and deters authorities from attempting such burns.

In light of the benefit of this practice, I would suggest the following recommendations be implemented:

- The government acknowledge the importance and value of the practice of hazard reduction burning as an effective and viable means for assisting in the control and suppression of wildfire
- The government facilitates an increase in hazard reduction burning in areas deemed to be of strategic or tactical value in the control and suppression of wildfire.
- The government take actions to reduce the constraints imposed upon fire authorities by cumbersome bureaucratic requirements in the conduct of hazard reduction burning

ADEQUACY AND PROVISION OF TRAINING

I would first like to commend the dedication and efforts of my fire-fighting colleagues. It is my opinion that for the duration of the incident they exerted themselves to the utmost, and did everything within their capability to control the fire. The following observations and criticisms are not directed at fire-fighters, but at the ACT Emergency Services Bureau.

I submit that the capability and capacity of fire-fighters to combat the fire to the fullest extent possible was undermined by inadequate provision of training – specifically a lack of it. Many volunteer firefighters were deprived of training necessary in the conduct of firefighting duties. This lack of training prevented them from performing functions on the fire ground to the best of their ability. Three examples I will provide in adequate training, or an absence of it, are in the area of chainsaw training, defensive structural fire protection, and first-aid training.

Chainsaws

The ability to use a chainsaw is of fundamental importance for operating in a bush environment. Effective and safe use of a chainsaw enable firefighters to clear obstruction to dirt tracks and fire-trails, to fell and trees which may have burnt and therefore pose a danger of falling on either personnel or property, and enables firefighters to clear an are in preparation of a fire-break. It is extremely important that all fire-fighting personnel should be instructed in the usage of this machinery.

Unfortunately, the ACT ESB only provides such training to a very small percentage of personnel each year. A brigade (usually consisting of between 20-50 active personnel), would be lucky if 10 people were trained in this each year. **After four and half years of active service with the BFS, and being considered a senior and experienced fire-fighter, I still have not receive instruction in the usage of chainsaws.** Consequently, any person who has not received instruction is not permitted to operate this machinery (for obvious occupational health and safety reasons). As a result, only a small amount of people are able to perform a function of fundamental importance to bushfire fighting.

During this incident, I can recall numerous occasions during which there was needed for chainsaw qualified personnel to perform certain tasks where there were no qualified personnel available. These tasks consequently were not performed, which delayed the firefighting effort and exposed bushfire personnel to unnecessary danger.

Structural fire protection training

Defensive structural fire-fighting (referred to as 'village protection in NSW') is a training module which is designed to enable firefighters to effectively protect property, particularly on urban fringes. This module is considered to be of fundamental importance by bushfire fighting agencies around Australia, and is recognised as the training module that enables firefighters to protect houses under threat from fire.

The BFS has not provided this fundamental of training to ACT firefighters, whereas all interstate agencies teach this module to their personnel. As a result, firefighters were not properly trained in the protection of houses in an urban area and were therefore not properly trained to fight the fire on the 18th of January once it impacted on the urban fringe. I implore that this committee explores this further.

This module had been instructed up until the mid 1990's. Although it is still recognised as being valuable training, and is taught by all interstate agencies, the ACT ESB provided no explanation as to why it has not being provided. I can cite an occasion during 2002 in which the Rivers ACT Volunteer Brigade went to NSW to compete in the NSW Rural Fire Service championships – an event in which different brigades compete against each other in fire-fighting skills. Rivers Brigade realised that NSW required this training in

order to compete and requested that ESB facilitate the instruction of the module. ESB rejected this request although it was bough to their attention that this skill was not provided, but was considered important.

Notwithstanding their inadequate training, to their credit firefighters improvised to the best of their ability once the fire impacted on houses. I do believe that had the BFS received instruction in this module firefighters would have greater success in combating the fire once it impacted on Canberra. Although such training would not have prevented the loss of property Canberra saw, I do believe that had it been provided, more houses would have been successfully protected.

First-Aid training

As the incumbent first-aid officer at the Rivers Volunteer Brigade, I am well placed to comment of the adequacy of first-aid training amongst volunteer fire brigade personnel. It has been my position since commencing in the position of first-aid officer the current first-aid training and equipment provisions are grossly inadequate. Volunteer fire-fighting personnel, including first-aid officers.

I have made representations to ESB in my capacity as first-aid officer on repeated occasions expressing my concerns regarding the inadequate training of first-aid officers. ESB were unresponsive and dismissive. **Please see attached copies of representations to ESB regarding inadequate training.** Please refer to these correspondence for an exact detail on the nature of my concerns.

As events transpired, many of my concerns were realised. There were accidents in remote locations where a professional first aid response was unavailable. (I make reference to a crash in the Oraoral Valley of a NSW fire tanker on the 16th of January, an insect sting to a fire-fighter allergic to insect stings who had a life-threatening reaction, smoke inhalation in remote locations to name a few). The fact that these incidents were not more sever and result in a fatality can only be attributed to good fortune, and not the capabilities of first-aid officers. **Had I been confronted with a critical injury in a remote location, I am not confident that my training equips me to satisfactorily attend to the casualty.**

It is not my position that this lack of training is responsible for the intensity of the fire, but such inadequacies exposed fire-fighters to unnecessary and avoidable dangers, and prevented them for fighting the fire to the fullest extent possible.

Given the inadequacy of volunteer training and its negative consequence, I would submit that the following recommendations be acted upon:

- Levels of training provided to ACT Volunteers be bought into line with interstate standards.

- Specific attention be given to the provision of defensive structural fire-fighting (village protection) modules, and more advanced levels of first-aid training.
- Greater training in general be facilitated by the ACT ESB

ACT URABAN FIRE BRIGADE AND FIRE BRIGADE UNION

During my service as a volunteer firefighter I have had cause on numerous occasions to work in concert with members of the ACT Urban Fire Brigade. I have observed during this time what I would describe as a 'superiority complex' amongst urban firefighters. This is manifest in a general reluctance to adhere to standing operating procedures in liaising with volunteer personnel at an incident. This procedure exists for two purposes: the first is that the bushfire radio frequencies provide better reception and transmission in rural and remote areas. The second is that by having both agencies using these channels, both agencies have access to all information which may be communicated regarding an incident (which is of critical importance) whilst facilitating easy inter-unit communication between agencies.

Standard Operating Procedures for bushfire incidents dictates that when BFS volunteers and Urban fire brigade personnel are working in concert, the Urban fire brigade will change to, and use, the designated bushfire communication radio frequencies for any radio traffic. It was realised in the preliminary inquiries into the Christmas Fires of 2001 that Urban personnel were not following this procedure, and they were advised to address this problem.

Irrespective of the SOP's and any recommendations, I have seldom heard urban fire brigade units communicate on bushfire frequencies whilst they were attending bushfires or working in concert with the BFS.

On the afternoon of the 18th of January when the fire impacted on the Canberra suburbs, my unit was deployed to the Banks/Gordon/Bonython area to conduct property protection. My unit was tasked to work in concert with urban fire brigade units. During this time, the urban units did not communicate on the bushfire radio frequencies. As a result, my unit was deprived of valuable information relating to fire behaviour, fire position, properties under threat and access points to the fire. Consequently, my ability to effectively respond and defend properties was diminished.

Compounding the problem of urban fire brigade reluctance to interact with volunteers firefighters, is the disposition of fire brigade union. The fire brigade union holds the fear that the BFS might usurp some of the job functions of paid firefighters, and as such seeks to obstruct the provision of services and training to the BFS.

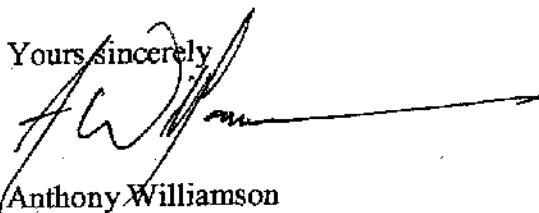
I have been advised that the ACT ESB has nominated union obstruction and intransigence in bureaucratic channels as a factor in their decision not to provide defensive structural fire fighting training and advanced first aid training. I urge this inquiry process to explore this issue further.

In light of these shortcomings on the behalf of the urban fire brigade and its union, I submit that the following recommendations be considered:

- The communication systems of both the ACT urban fire brigade and the BFS be upgraded
- The ACT urban fire brigade be compelled to adhere to all standing operating procedures regarding interaction and communication with the BFS when both agencies are working in concert
- The culture of 'superiority' within the ACT urban fire brigade be addressed.

I would encourage in the strongest possible terms that the inquiry contact me to elaborate on any of the points mentioned in this submission, or for any other matter related the BFS or the recent fires.

Yours sincerely



12/04/03

Anthony Williamson
Rivers Bushfire and Emergency Services Brigade