

Chapter 1- Introduction

Conduct of the inquiry

1.1 On 12 May 2009 the Senate referred the following matter to the Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries for report by 26 November 2009.

1.2 The incidence and severity of bushfires across Australia, including:

- (a) the impact of bushfires on human and animal life, agricultural land, the environment, public and private assets and local communities;
- (b) factors contributing to the causes and risks of bushfires across Australia, including natural resource management policies, hazard reduction and agricultural land maintenance;
- (c) the extent and effectiveness of bushfire mitigation strategies and practices, including application of resources for agricultural land, national parks, state forests, other Crown land, open space areas adjacent to development and private property and the impact of hazard reduction strategies;
- (d) the identification of measures that can be undertaken by government, industry and the community and the effectiveness of these measures in protecting agricultural industries;
- (e) any alternative or developmental bushfire prevention and mitigation approaches which can be implemented;
- (f) the appropriateness of planning and building codes with respect to land use in bushfire prone regions;
- (g) the adequacy and funding of fire-fighting resources both paid and voluntary and the usefulness of and impact on on-farm labour; and
- (h) the role of volunteers.

1.3 The committee subsequently sought and received an extension of the reporting date to 13 August 2010.

1.4 The committee advertised the inquiry in *The Australian* newspaper on 20 May 2009. The committee also invited submissions from a range of organisations and individuals including land management and fire agencies, government departments, forestry organisations, volunteer fire fighting organisations, conservation groups and research and technical bodies. The closing date for submissions was 31 July 2009, though the committee agreed to accept submissions throughout the inquiry. The

committee received 58 submissions, as well as a range of supporting material. A list of individuals and organisations that made submissions to the inquiry is at Appendix 1.

1.5 The committee held four public hearings, in Canberra (twice), Melbourne and Perth. A list of witnesses who provided evidence is included at Appendix 2. Responses to questions taken on notice at these hearings have been published in Appendix 3.

1.6 A list of material tabled during the inquiry or provided as additional information is at Appendix 4.

1.7 References to the Committee Hansard are to the proof transcript. Page numbers may vary between the proof and the official transcript.

1.8 The committee wishes to acknowledge and thank those who provided written submissions and gave evidence at public hearings. The committee also wishes to express its enormous appreciation for the time and effort thousands of people across Australia, the majority unpaid, devote to protecting Australians from the sometimes catastrophic effects of bushfires.

Scope and structure of the inquiry

1.9 The committee recognises that the Commonwealth has limited responsibility for bushfire management in Australia. In accordance with the distribution of powers under the Australian Constitution, the primary responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment lies with the states and territories.¹ The most appropriate role for the Commonwealth in this field is to oversee and support the states' capacity to manage bushfire risks to limit the destruction bushfires cause.

1.10 The committee also acknowledges that there have been a number of previous inquiries into bushfires, which are outlined in further detail in chapter 2. It is not the committee's intention to re-examine the specific bushfire management failures these inquiries investigated, though the committee does recognise the frustration of many at the apparent lack of action taken by relevant state agencies in response to sensible reform proposals aimed at preventing similar occurrences. However, the committee has sought to avoid apportioning blame for past events, or directing its proposals for reform beyond what is achievable through initiatives taken at the Commonwealth level.

1.11 Instead, in this report the committee considers the underlying policy areas in which the Commonwealth can realistically take greater responsibility for bushfire management, to help responsible agencies and at-risk communities reduce the incidence and effects of catastrophic bushfires. The focus of this inquiry has therefore been on assisting with effective mitigation strategies and directing resources in a way that most effectively meets this objective, rather than seeking to impose

1 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 1

Commonwealth Government involvement in the suppression and recovery measures implemented during the height of a bushfire crisis. The committee is of the view that the most effective influence the Commonwealth can have is on bushfire mitigation and preparedness, and this report broadly reflects this position.

1.12 The remainder of this chapter outlines the nature of bushfires in the Australian landscape; the different state-based organisations responsible for bushfire management in Australia; the Commonwealth's present bushfire management role; and the potential for the Commonwealth to pursue greater national direction of bushfire policy.

1.13 Chapter 2 outlines previous inquiries into bushfires, including their consistent themes and recommendations, with a particular emphasis on Commonwealth inquiries and the most recent state-based (Victorian) inquiries. This chapter also explores frustrations with an apparent cycle of disaster followed by inquiry followed by inaction that appears to characterise this area of public policy. Government responses to recent major bushfire inquiries are included in Appendix 5.

1.14 Chapter 3 reflects the primary focus of this inquiry, which was bushfire mitigation. In this chapter the committee briefly discusses the Commonwealth's role in addressing the preventable causes of fire, before considering the many complex issues pertaining to mitigating bushfire risks by reducing combustible fuels in the landscape. Finally, the chapter examines additional risk management approaches to enable communities to be more resilient to bushfires.

1.15 Chapter 4 discusses concerns about the co-ordination of fire suppression activities during a bushfire emergency, otherwise referred to as incident control. This includes co-ordinating the roles of multiple agencies during an emergency, and managing the division of decision-making responsibilities between local fire fighters and centralised incident control.

1.16 Finally, Chapter 5 considers the adequacy and priorities of resources for bushfire management. The chapter canvasses a number of issues including the prioritisation of resources for suppression over mitigation; available qualified personnel and volunteers for bushfire management tasks; the information and knowledge available to those responsible for bushfire management; and the adequacy of equipment, access, infrastructure and technology required for suppression and emergency management.

Fire in the Australian landscape

1.17 Fires in the Australian landscape may start from natural causes such as lightning strikes, or from human activity. Human causes can stem from careless acts such as poorly extinguishing cooking fires, throwing lit cigarette butts or children playing with matches; from sparks from equipment or machinery such as power tools or faulty electricity infrastructure; from fires deliberately lit with good intention that escape, such as prescribed burns that run out of control; and from fires deliberately lit with malicious intent.

1.18 The incidence of bushfires resulting from some of these human causes, such as arson and electricity infrastructure faults, may be reduced by preventative action. These are discussed in Chapter 3 dealing with bushfire mitigation issues. However, much of the focus of this inquiry is not on preventing the causes of fires, but on mitigating their intensity and effects on lives and property.

1.19 CSIRO noted that bushfires 'are an inevitable occurrence in Australia'. Their submission to the committee provided some detail of their incidence and effect:

About 50 million hectares of land are burned across Australia each year on average and about 80% of fire-affected areas are in northern savanna regions. Lightning is the cause of almost all naturally occurring bushfires. Human activities account for most of the rest with accidents associated with burning off, campfires and machinery being the most common sources of ignition. While it is difficult to assess the magnitude of maliciously lit fires, between 25 to 50% of bushfires are thought to be deliberately lit.

Bushfires account for about 10 percent of the cost of all major natural disasters in Australia, and are associated with the greatest loss of life.²

1.20 They described the different nature of fire regimes across Australia:

Fire regimes across Australia vary because of variation in the rate of vegetation (and hence fuel) production, the rate at which fuels dry out, the occurrence of suitable fire weather for the spread of fire across the landscape, and ignitions ... Regional fire regimes differ because of variation in one or more of these key drivers. As a consequence, fire regimes in some areas are constrained primarily by availability of fuel, in others by the occurrence of periods of suitable weather. For example, the tropical savannas of the north tend to burn mainly in the winter-spring period and experience high frequency and relatively low intensity fire regimes ... In contrast, the tall sclerophyll (eucalypt-dominated) forests of the cool, temperate south tend to burn in summer and generally have low frequency/high intensity fire regimes...³

1.21 It is the higher intensity and greater potential for harm that has meant the vast majority of evidence to this inquiry has related to the importance of mitigating the severity and effects of fires in Australia's southern areas.

1.22 The committee also considered the likelihood of some parts of Australia facing more serious fire conditions in the future. In their submission to the inquiry CSIRO outlined the potential consequences of climate change for fire risk:

While the impact of climate change is likely to be an increase in the frequency of 'Extreme' fire danger days, the impact of climate change on the structure of the forest, fuel availability and thus the behaviour of

2 CSIRO, *Submission 15*, p. v

3 CSIRO, *Submission 15*, p. 3. See also Dr Richard Williams, *Committee Hansard*, 14 May 2010, Canberra, p. 33

bushfires is not known. The severity of fire conditions or fire danger is calculated through combining measures of temperature, wind speed, humidity and drought into the Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI), which has been used for many decades. With the likely onset of climate change effects, modifications to aspects of the FFDI, particularly the assumptions regarding the rate of fuel drying, should be considered to better reflect the change in drying conditions in future. Under climate change it is expected that current 'windows' for hazard reduction burning will change and possibly narrow, meaning less opportunity to conduct safe and effective hazard reduction burns.⁴

1.23 That is, more days will be conducive to catastrophic fires occurring and there will be fewer days in which to mitigate their effect through prescribed burning.

1.24 CSIRO's submission concluded that although fire will be more frequent, the implications for fire behaviour will be complex, with the effects on the landscape and fuel loads being uncertain and requiring further research.⁵

Bushfire management in Australia

1.25 Bushfire management refers to a variety of activities and measures taken to limit the destructive effects of uncontrolled bushfires on human and animal life, agricultural land, the environment, public and private assets and local communities. It includes bushfire mitigation and preparedness strategies such as fuel hazard reduction and fire trail maintenance across the landscape, in addition to fire suppression measures taken during bushfire emergencies. These land management activities are supported by bushfire-related knowledge, information-sharing and training.

1.26 At the landscape scale, the responsibility for bushfire management in Australia rests with the relevant land managers and fire agencies, the latter being state-based organisations whose jurisdiction is dependent on the land management arrangements in any given location. Australia's disparate land management responsibilities were described to the committee as a 'matrix of tenures in the landscape' and include national parks, state forests, other crown land and privately owned land such as farms.⁶

1.27 Bushfire preparedness and suppression tasks are performed by a range of people including land management agency staff, fire agency staff and volunteers, and private land owners, the latter group often being volunteer fire fighters.

4 CSIRO, *Submission 15*, p. v

5 CSIRO, *Submission 15*, p. 20

6 Professor Peter Kanowski, *Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2010, Canberra, p. 33

State and territory government responsibilities

1.28 This section outlines the distribution of bushfire management responsibilities by Australia's state and territory governments.

New South Wales

Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water

1.29 The NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW) is the department with primary responsibility for land management across the state.

Emergency Management NSW

1.30 Emergency Management NSW (EMNSW) was established in May 2009. In addition to the functions of the former Office for Emergency Services, ENNSW assumed responsibility for several additional services and provides support to:

- the State Emergency Management Committee: the principal committee for emergency management in NSW which is responsible for emergency planning at a state level;
- the State Emergency Operations Controller: coordinates support to combat agencies during emergency response operations and controls the response for specified events for which there is no designated combat agency;
- the State Emergency Recovery Controller: oversees the planning for, and management of, emergency recovery in NSW; and
- the State Rescue Board: established to ensure the maintenance of efficient and effective rescue services across the state.

1.31 EMNSW co-ordinates the state's input to Commonwealth emergency management programs and a range of research and awareness programs. It also administers emergency management grants.

1.32 A key responsibility of EMNSW is the provision of high level policy and executive support to the Minister for Emergency Services. This support includes policy advice and analysis, information and correspondence coordination and liaison with agencies, including the New South Wales Fire Brigades, New South Wales Rural Fire Service and State Emergency Service.

1.33 EMNSW provides policy, administrative and operational support to the State Emergency Management Committee and its various Functional Area committees, along with the State Rescue Board and its sub-committees. It also provides operational

support to the State Emergency Operations Controller and State Emergency Recovery Controller during emergency response and recovery respectively.⁷

National Parks and Wildlife Service

1.34 The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), which is part of DECCW, manage more than six million hectares of parks and reserves across the state. All parks and reserves are covered by fire management strategies, which are used to set out the fire management objectives for particular parks and reserves. Local communities, bushfire management committees, the Rural Fire Service, the Sydney Catchment Authority and other interested parties are consulted in the preparation of fire management strategies. The strategies are used to plan fire suppression, hazard reduction burning and other fire-related operations.

1.35 In addition, NPWS is also responsible for:

- wildlife conservation;
- maintenance of fire trails;
- statistical analysis of species in protected areas;
- mapping of protected zones; and
- combat of salinity and soil erosion.⁸

State Forests of New South Wales

1.36 State Forests of New South Wales is responsible for protecting state forests from bushfires and protecting life and property by minimising the spread of bushfires from state forests. It also has specific statutory obligations in relation to fire management under both the *Forestry Act 1916* and the *Rural Fires Act 1997*.⁹ Fuel management through hazard reduction burning is carried out according to a planning process determined in conjunction with District Bush Fire Management Committees and site-specific hazard reduction plans.

Rural Fire Service

1.37 The NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) was established in September 1997 to replace the Bush Fire Brigades Organisation. RFS is the lead agency for providing coordinated bushfire fighting and mitigation services across over 90 per cent of the state's rural land area, which excludes land managed by (NPWS) and State Forests of

7 Emergency Management NSW website, accessed on 2 June 2010 at <http://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/aboutus>

8 Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water website, accessed on 3 June 2010 at <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/fire/mngfireinnswnatpks.htm>

9 NSW Department of Primary Industries, Primefact 769, *Fire Management in State Forests*, May 2008, p. 1

NSW. RFS regularly assists with hazard reduction burns on land in NSW not under the authority of those two agencies.

1.38 RFA volunteers are also responsible for structure fires in rural fire districts, including over 1200 villages. In addition to bushfires, the RFS also supports other agencies in emergency situations such as transport accidents, flood, storm and search and rescue situations.¹⁰

NSW Fire Brigades

1.39 New South Wales Fire Brigades (NSWFB) is responsible for preventing and responding to fire emergencies and providing direct protection to populations in major cities, metropolitan areas and towns across in New South Wales. The NSWFB also respond to emergencies beyond their Fire Districts to provide assistance to the Rural Fire Service at structure fires.

1.40 NSWFB supports other government agencies such as the NSW Rural Fire Service, State Emergency Service, State Forests, NSW Police Force, Ambulance Service of NSW and the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water both during and after bushfires and other emergencies.¹¹

Bush Fire Coordinating Committee

1.41 The Bush Fire Coordinating Committee (BFCC) provides a forum for government and non-government organisations, with an interest in the prevention, mitigation and suppression of bushfires, to work together. It plays a key role co-ordinating the work of District Bush Fire Management Committees in preparing risk management plans. Under the *Rural Fires Act 1997*, the BFCC:

- is responsible for planning in relation to bush fire prevention and co-ordinated bush fire fighting;
- reviews major bush fire suppression operations to identify opportunities for improvement; and
- is responsible for advising the Commissioner (and the Minister) on bush fire prevention, mitigation and coordinated bush fire suppression.¹²

Fire Services Joint Standing Committee

1.42 The Fire Services Joint Standing Committee (FSJSC) was established under the *Fire Services Joint Standing Committee Act 1998*, and has the following functions:

10 Rural Fire Service website, accessed on 1 June 2010 at http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp_content.cfm

11 The NSW Fire Brigades, *Annual Report 2008-09*, p. 6

12 Rural Fire Service, website accessed on 7 June 2010 at http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp_content.cfm?cat_id=1197

- to develop and submit (to the Minister) strategic plans for the delivery of rural fire services at the interface of fire district boundaries and rural fire district boundaries;
- to review periodically the boundaries of fire districts and, where appropriate, make recommendations (to the Minister) regarding the boundaries; and
- to develop and submit (to the Minister) implementation strategies to minimise duplication and maximise compatibility between the services of New South Wales Fire Brigades and the services of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, with particular reference to:
 - infrastructure planning;
 - training activities;
 - community education programs; and
 - equipment design.¹³

Victoria

Department of Sustainability and Environment (including Parks Victoria)

1.43 The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is one of the primary organisations responsible for bushfire management on public lands across Victoria. DSE is responsible for:

- the provision of advice on the prevention and suppression of wildfire;
- the use of planned burns;
- monitoring fire on public land across the state;
- coordinating appropriate incident response;
- developing specialist fire equipment; and
- managing fire-related training and research.¹⁴

1.44 Parks Victoria is a statutory authority responsible under the *Parks Victoria Act 1988* for providing land management services to the DSE.

1.45 DSE works with Parks Victoria in undertaking fire suppression, mitigation and prevention practices on Victoria's public land. The agencies are jointly responsible for managing bushfire incidents and using prescribed burns to meet land management goals and objectives.

13 Rural Fire Service website, accessed on 7 June 2010 at http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp_content.cfm?cat_id=1201

14 Department of Sustainability and Environment website, accessed on 10 June 2010 at <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenfoe.nsf>

1.46 DSE also works with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and both agencies frequently attend the same fires, with either DSE or CFA controlling the fire as the lead agency.¹⁵

Emergency Services Commissioner

1.47 The position of Emergency Services Commissioner was established under the *Emergency Management Act 1986* 'to provide independent advice to the Minister for Policy and Emergency Services, the Premier, or another Minister as required, on any issue in relation to emergency management.'¹⁶

1.48 The Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner (OESC) provides leadership in emergency management for Victoria and has specific responsibilities for delivering efficient, equitable and integrated fire and emergency services. The Office supports the role of the Commissioner by:

- facilitating cooperation across the emergency services;
- providing independent advice and leadership to government in relation to emergency management; and
- working with emergency services, government departments and the community to improve the safety of Victorians.¹⁷

Country Fire Authority

1.49 Under the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* the Country Fire Authority (CFA) is responsible for '...the prevention and suppression of fires and for the protection of life and property in case of fire ... so far as relates to the country area of Victoria'. This includes bushfire suppression, structure fires, incidents involving hazardous materials and road rescue.¹⁸

1.50 CFA Volunteers provide state-wide fire and related emergency coordination including:

- community awareness, education and safety programs;
- bushfire suppression;
- structural fire suppression;
- transport-related fire suppression;

15 Department of Sustainability and Environment, accessed on 10 June 2010 at <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenfoe.nsf>

16 Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, accessed on 10 June 2010 at <http://www/oesc.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/justlib/OESC/Home>

17 Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, accessed on 10 June 2010 at <http://www/oesc.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/justlib/OESC/Home>

18 Country Fire Authority, *Annual Report 2009*, p. 12

- forestry industry brigades;
- industrial accident response;
- other emergency activities – including flood assistance;
- fire safety input planning for major community risks;
- fire prevention; and
- land use planning advice at municipal level.¹⁹

1.51 CFA also assists with prescribed burning activities.

Forestry Industry Brigades

1.52 There are approximately 24 Forestry Industry Brigades across Victoria with over 700 registered members. Forestry Industry Brigades responded to 465 fires in 2008-09 and had significant involvement in most major fires on Black Saturday and during the following weeks.²⁰ The brigades are operated by forestry companies but are under the control of the CFA.²¹ The CFA provide bushfire training to new Forest Industry Brigade members, as well as advanced training courses.²²

Metropolitan Fire Brigade

1.53 The Metropolitan Fire Brigade was established under the *Metropolitan Fire Brigades Act 1958*. Over 1500 fire fighters are located in fire stations and specialist departments across the Melbourne metropolitan area. Both the CFA and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade report to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services.

Fire Protection Plans

1.54 Fire Protection Plans are developed for each DSE Fire District. These strategic plans address fire protection at the regional level to ensure bushfire prevention and suppression activities on public land in Victoria are conducted in an operationally safe, environmentally sensitive and cost efficient manner. Each Fire Protection Plan is prepared with input from DSE, Parks Victoria and the community, and has four main strategies: bushfire prevention, preparedness, suppression and recovery.

1.55 In addition, three-year forward planning programs (Fire Operations Plans) are also prepared. These plans contain:

19 Country Fire Authority, *Annual Report 2009*, pp 12-13

20 Country Fire Authority, *Annual Report 2009*, p. 29

21 Country Fire Authority website, accessed on 18 June 2010 at <http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/business/forest/index.htm>

22 Country Fire Authority, *Annual Report 2009*, p. 29

- a schedule and maps showing proposed fuel management and ecological burning proposals;
- any new prevention and preparedness programs planned for the immediate three-year budget period;
- details of planned fire prevention related education and enforcement programs; and
- a detailed schedule of prevention and preparedness programs planned for the immediate twelve-month budget period.²³

Tasmania

Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment

1.56 The Tasmanian Department Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment (DPIPWE) has primary responsibility for land management across the state.

Parks and Wildlife Service

1.57 As a unit of DPIPWE, Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) is responsible for the management of a range of reserved lands in Tasmania including national parks, regional reserves, conservation areas and Crown Land. This management includes:

- control of unplanned bushfires;
- planned burning to reduce fuel loads and make fire control easier and safer;
- planned burning to help maintain biodiversity, promote regeneration of plants that depend on fire and to maintain suitable habitat for animals; and
- maintaining assets that assist with bushfire control, for example, fire trails, firebreaks and waterholes.²⁴

1.58 Strategic plans are prepared for each PWS region and fire management plans are prepared for some individual reserves. These plans include details of the natural and cultural values of particular areas, details of the assets requiring protection and any resources within and nearby the reserve that can help in fire suppression. Plans also identify strategies to protect neighbouring settlements and towns.

23 Department of Sustainability and Environment website, accessed on 10 June 2010 at <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenfoe.nsf>

24 Parks and Wildlife Service website, accessed on 16 June 2010 at <http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=890>

1.59 Officers from PWS are involved in fire management area committees organised by the Tasmania Fire Service. The PWS also has a range of fire management specialists (including fire management officers) for each region around the state and a specialist seasonal fire crew is recruited each year to help staff with fire fighting during the summer months.²⁵

Tasmania Fire Service

1.60 The Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) – the operational arm of the State Fire Commission – was created in 1979 through the amalgamation of the State Fire Authority, the Rural Fires Board and 22 urban fire brigade boards. The TFS has 230 fire brigades across Tasmania staffed by approximately 250 career fire fighters and 4800 volunteer fire fighters. In addition to responding to structural fires and bushfires, the TFS is also responsible for:

- responding to hazardous material incidents;
- urban search and rescue;
- emergency call handling and dispatch;
- fire investigation;
- training;
- community fire education;
- building safety;
- fire equipment sales and service;
- building and maintaining TFS vehicles;
- maintaining a state-wide communications network; and
- fire alarm monitoring.²⁶

1.61 The TFS works with the other emergency services across the state, including the Tasmanian Police, the State Emergency Service and the Tasmanian Ambulance Service. The Service also has 'mutual aid' arrangements with Forestry Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Service to ensure major bushfires are adequately resourced and managed. The TFS also participates in:

- the State Disaster Committee;
- the Australasian Fire Authorities Council; and
- the Bushfire CRC.²⁷

25 Parks and Wildlife Service website, accessed on 16 June 2010 at <http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=890>

26 Tasmanian Fire Service website, accessed on 16 June 2010 at <http://www.fire.tas.gov.au/mysite/>

Forestry Tasmania

1.62 Under the *Fire Services Act 1979*, Forestry Tasmania is responsible for the management of approximately 1.6 million hectares of state forest. As part of these responsibilities, Forestry Tasmania has the authority to control or extinguish fires within three kilometres of the boundary of any area of state forest.²⁸

1.63 Fire management on state forest land is undertaken in close co-operation with the Tasmanian Fire Service, the Parks and Wildlife Service and forest industry companies. Forestry Tasmania works in cooperation with these fire management agencies through a program of hazard reduction, training, communication, education on the use of fire and prosecutions for the illegal or negligent use of fire.²⁹

1.64 The committee notes that Tasmania has a formal operating agreement for bushfire management – the Inter-Agency Fire Management Protocol. This is an agreement between Forestry Tasmania, the Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tasmania Fire Service, the three organisations responsible for the management of bushfires in Tasmania.

South Australia

Department for Environment and Heritage

1.65 The Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) is responsible for bushfire across South Australia's parks and reserve system and crown land under their control. DEH is involved in:

- preparing Fire Management Plans;
- fire ecology (applying knowledge about fire and its behaviour);
- fire research; and
- prescribed burning.

1.66 Fire management works and activities are delivered through the seven DEH regions. DEH, as a brigade of the CFS, responds to bushfires on and near state managed land. In addition to working alongside CFS as firefighters, DEH can also take on roles in incident management and provide assistance to other agencies in relation to bushfire response – both interstate and overseas.³⁰

27 Tasmanian Fire Service website, accessed on 16 June 2010 at <http://www.fire.tas.gov.au/mysite/>

28 Forestry Tasmania, 2008 – *Forest Management Plan*, p. 34

29 Forestry Tasmania, 2008 – *Forest Management Plan*, p. 34

30 Department for Environment and Heritage website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at <http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/fire/about/index.html>

Country Fire Service

1.67 The South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS) is a volunteer based, fire and emergency service organisation. The CFS is a statutory authority which reports to the Minister for Emergency Services through the Board of the SA Fire and Emergency Services Commission.

1.68 The CFS, which is made up of approximately 15,000 volunteers and 110 staff, is responsible for protecting life, property and environmental assets in regional and semi metropolitan South Australia. CFS brigades provide assistance at approximately 7,000 incidents per year. These incidents can include:

- bushfires;
- structure and motor vehicle fires;
- road crash rescue;
- hazardous material spills;
- structure and motor vehicle fires;
- support and assistance to the SA Metropolitan Fire Service, State Emergency Service, SA Police, SA Ambulance, and other agencies;
- support for local governments in relation to fuel removal, bushfire prevention and community bushfire and fire safety education.³¹

Metropolitan Fire Service

1.69 The South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS) is the primary provider of structural firefighting services across the state of South Australia. The MFS is responsible for protecting the South Australian community from fire, chemical incidents and other emergencies. Based in the city of Adelaide the MFS is a fully professional organisation that employs more than one thousand staff across 36 metropolitan and regional stations.³²

Fire and Emergency Services Commission

1.70 The South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission (SAFECOM) was established by the Fire and Emergency Services Act 2005. SAFECOM came into operation on 1 October 2005 and replaced the Emergency Services Administrative Unit.

1.71 The primary objectives of SAFECOM are:

31 Department for Environment and Heritage website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at <http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/fire/about/index.html>

32 Metropolitan Fire Service website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at http://www.samfs.sa.gov.au/site/about/_us/our_organisation.jsp

- to develop and maintain a strategic and policy framework as well as sound corporate governance across the emergency services sector;
- to provide adequate support services to the emergency services organisations and to ensure the effective allocation of resources within the emergency services sector;
- to ensure relevant statutory compliance by the emergency services organisations;
- to build a safer community through integrated emergency services organisations; and
- to liaise with the peak body responsible for managing emergencies as well as to report regularly to the Minister about relevant issues.

1.72 SAFECOM is also responsible for the administration of the Community Emergency Services Fund, which was established by the Emergency Services Funding Act 1998. The Fund is the main source of funding for all of the Emergency Sector agencies.

Fire Management Plans

1.73 DEH involves local communities, local government, the CFA and other government agencies, and other key stakeholders in providing information regarding fire management issues in the planning area. This information is considered as part of a risk assessment process where strategies and on-ground works are determined to reduce the risk that fire poses to life, property and the environment across the planning area.

DEH seeks public feedback on Draft Fire Management Plans and once this feedback has been considered and incorporated where necessary, Fire Management Plans are adopted and implemented by DEH.

Forestry South Australia

1.74 Under the Guidelines for Plantation Forestry in South Australia, forest owners are advised that:

- vehicles, machinery and equipment to be used in the forest during the fire season should be routinely maintained and tested, and carry appropriate fire suppression equipment;
- all reasonable precautions should be taken to reduce the likelihood of fire ignition and to actively control fires in the event that they occur;
- companies should develop procedures and plans for risk mitigation and fire management in accordance with Regional Bushfire Prevention Plans;

- information on a company's or individual's forest resources and fire management plan should be communicated to the CFS and other relevant stakeholders;
- the plantation manager should consider the provision of fire suppression equipment and resources to reflect the risk of fire to the plantation and the scale of the business, including the appropriate reaction to predicted weather conditions;
- all employees or contractors with a fire management, detection or suppression role should be appropriately trained to national fire competency standards;
- regional forest industry fire management arrangements may exist and forest owners and managers should be familiar with these systems.³³

Western Australia

Department of Environment and Conservation

1.75 In Western Australia, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is the lead agency responsible for the management of lands and waters including national parks, conservation parks, regional parks, state forests, timber reserves and nature reserves.

1.76 DEC has direct statutory management responsibility for lands under the *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984*, for both biodiversity conservation and community protection. In addition, DEC has 'fire preparedness responsibility' for a further 89 million hectares of unallocated crown land and unmanaged reserves across the state.³⁴

1.77 DEC is supported by officers of the Forest Products Commission and the bushfire brigades of local government authorities in responding to and suppressing fires in the south-west forest regions, the Midwest and the South Coast. DEC has more limited fire management resources in other parts of Western Australia. DEC also works with the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) and local governments in fire management.³⁵

1.78 DEC has a policy of using prescribed fire as a tool for fuel hazard reduction, wildfire mitigation and ecosystem management. The Department notes that planned burns are often undertaken at landscape scales and that in order to achieve both

33 Department of Primary Industries and Resources website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at http://www.pir.sa.gov.au/forestry/programs/farm_forestry/guidelines_for_plantation_forestry_in_south_australia_2009/forest_protection

34 Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation, *Submission 50*, p. 1

35 Government of Western Australia, Department of Environment and Conservation, *Submission 50*, p. 2

protection and ecological management objectives the time of year, fire intensity, and the interval between fires is varied. The Department's submission states that it '... has an obligation to ensure that the condition of the public land which it manages does not pose a threat to human life and property as a consequence of wildfires'.³⁶

Fire and Emergency Services Authority

1.79 The Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia (FESA) was established in January 1999 in an amalgamation of the Fire and Rescue Service, the State Emergency Service, the Bush Fire Service, Emergency Management Services and the Volunteer Marine Rescue Service. FESA provides both emergency services to the Western Australian community and support for more than 30,000 volunteers and 900 firefighters across the state. FESA responds to a wide range of emergencies including fire, cyclones, storms, floods, road accidents, chemical spills and earthquakes as well as undertaking search and rescue operations on land and water.

1.80 FESA provides advice and support regarding emergency management issues to key stakeholders at the local state and national level, which includes the development of strategic fire management plans.³⁷

1.81 Both DEC and FESA provided excellent submissions to this inquiry and Western Australia's bushfire management arrangements are discussed in greater detail throughout this report.

Queensland

Department of Environment and Resource Management

1.82 In Queensland, agencies such as the Department of Environment and Resource Management and Forestry Plantations Queensland are responsible for managing fire on land under their control. These agencies work collaboratively to achieve a coordinated approach to fire management planning, prescribed burning and bushfire suppression.³⁸

Queensland Fire and Rescue Service

1.83 The Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) is the lead agency for managing bushfires and bushfire threat in both urban and rural areas of Queensland. The QFRS is a division of the Department of Community Safety which also includes Emergency Management Queensland, the Queensland Ambulance Service and Queensland Corrective Services.

36 Government of Western Australia, Department of Environment and Conservation, *Submission 50*, p. 1

37 FESA, *Submission 39*, pp 1-3; Fire and Emergency Services Authority website, accessed on 26 May 2010 at <http://www.fesa.wa.gov.au/internet>

38 Queensland Department of Community Safety, *Submission 12*, p. 6

1.84 The QFRS works with other agencies in managing bushfire prevention and risk reduction through initiatives such as the establishment of the State Inter-Departmental Committee on Bushfires (SIDC), the introduction of a Wildfire Mitigation initiative and the establishment of local Fire Management Groups.³⁹

State Inter-Departmental Committee on Bushfires

1.85 In 1994, following recommendations from a Bushfire Audit (which examined the state's preparedness for major bushfires that occurred in Queensland and New South Wales that year) the Inter-Departmental Committee on Bushfires was established.

1.86 The committee provides a forum for the coordination of policy and procedures relating to rural fire management with a view to achieving a consistent, comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to managing fire across the state. The committee is chaired by the Assistant Commissioner for Rural Operations and members include representatives from the Department of Environment and Resource Management, the Department of Transport and Main Roads, the Queensland Police Service, Forestry Plantations Queensland, the Local Government Association of Queensland, Brisbane City Council and the Bureau of Meteorology.⁴⁰

Fire Management Groups

1.87 Fire Management Groups were established with a view to developing a cooperative relationship between the QFRS land management agencies, the community and other stakeholders to allow for a cooperative and coordinated approach to bushfire management at a local level. The groups also work closely with regional committees to ensure fire management at the local level is consistent with regional priorities.⁴¹

1.88 Fire Management Groups are generally chaired by a local Rural Operations Officer, a representative of another government agency, a community group or a local landholder. The groups undertake a variety of activities including joint fire management planning, prescribed burning, community education and bushfire risk management.⁴²

Wildfire Mitigation Initiative

1.89 The Wildfire Mitigation Initiative was introduced in 2008 to ensure bushfire risk mitigation planning is carried out in a consistent manner across the state. The key objectives of this initiative are to:

39 Queensland Department of Community Safety, *Submission 12*, p. 1

40 Queensland Department of Community Safety, *Submission 12*, p. 2

41 Queensland Department of Community Safety, *Submission 12*, p. 2

42 Queensland Department of Community Safety, *Submission 12*, p. 2

- minimise the risk to the public and fire fighters by reducing the potential impact of bushfires and ensure that land owners and land managers understand their fire management responsibilities and contribute to the planning process;
- improve the effectiveness of bushfire mitigation through strategic fuel management and other initiatives; and
- reduce bushfire risk by ensuring that the community is well informed about protection measures and prepared for bushfire events through community programs, such as the Bushfire Prepared Communities program.⁴³

Northern Territory

Department of Natural Resources, Environment, the Arts and Sport (including Bushfires NT)

1.90 The Department of Natural Resources, Environment, the Arts and Sport is responsible for land use planning in the territory. The department is also responsible, through Bushfires NT, for implementing the *Bushfires Act 1980* and supporting landholders with fire mitigation. Departmental staff perform a number of roles, including:

- policy development;
- research;
- maintenance programs;
- education and training;
- administrative support; and
- volunteer brigade support.

1.91 Bushfires NT states that its primary role is 'co-ordinating pre-suppression work to achieve consistent levels of practice most suited to the differing areas of the Northern Territory'.⁴⁴ The implementation of 'best practice' is dependent on research into the effects of fire on the environment. Bushfires NT also operates under a series of policy guidelines, the main ones being:

- protection of life, property and the environment from the effects of bushfires; and

43 Queensland Department of Community Safety, *Submission 12*, p. 3

44 Northern Territory Government website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/natres/bushfires/about.html>

- maintenance of natural resources, including native ecosystems and productive lands, by the use of appropriate fire regimes.⁴⁵

1.92 The objectives of Bushfires NT are identified as:

- to reduce the total area burnt by bushfire in the Northern Territory;
- to involve individuals and the community as a whole in the responsibility for fire management throughout the Northern Territory;
- to promote fire management strategies for all parcels of land in the Northern Territory;
- to promote fire research and analyse study data to achieve best practice; and
- to develop fire education and training programs for landholders and managers, school students and Aboriginal communities.⁴⁶

Bushfires Council NT

1.93 The role of the Bushfires Council NT is to advise the Minister on measures to be taken to prevent and control bushfires in the Northern Territory. Members of the Bushfires Council make recommendations to the Minister regarding measures for effective fire management on land throughout the Northern Territory (with the exception of land within the immediate environs of the main urban centres, which is under the control of the NT Fire and Rescue Service). The Bushfires Council also considers policy and issues affecting the operational efficiency and strategic direction of bushfire management in the Northern Territory.⁴⁷

Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service

1.94 The Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service (NTFRS) is the other primary provider of fire and rescue services throughout the Northern Territory. In addition to attending structural fires, the NTFRS provides other fire and rescue services, which include:

- rescue – road accident and other types of rescue;
- chemical and hazardous material incident management;
- community awareness and education;
- juvenile fire awareness and intervention;

45 Northern Territory Government website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/natres/bushfires/about.html>

46 Northern Territory Government website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/natres/bushfires/about.html>

47 Northern Territory Government website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/natres/bushfires/about.html>

- fire safety compliance inspection of commercial buildings and building plans;
- administering legislation relating to fire and safety in buildings and on rural property;
- rural land management advice regarding the role and use of fire as a hazard mitigation tool;
- hazard abatement;
- fire cause investigation;
- fire alarm monitoring; and
- fire safety advice to the general community.⁴⁸

Local government responsibilities

1.95 Local governments are involved to varying degrees in supporting state-based fire and land management agencies, as well as communities, to effectively manage bushfire risk. Depending on the jurisdiction and nature of the bushfire risk, local governments may be responsible for the following:

- contributing funding for local bushfire brigades;
- hazard identification and management on local government land;
- incorporating bushfire risk assessments into local planning standards and the enforcement of those standards;
- ensuring adequate local disaster response capacity, including volunteer resources; and
- providing public education and awareness about bushfires.⁴⁹

Commonwealth responsibilities

1.96 The committee again notes that Australian state and territory governments are primarily responsible for the protection of life, property and the environment. However, the Commonwealth does engage in bushfire management through a number of different initiatives, mainly relating to providing assistance to responsible state agencies through emergency management and co-ordination support, education and training, research and information sharing, scientific and technical assistance, and public awareness.

48 Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service website, accessed on 15 June 2010 at <http://www.pfes.nt.gov.au/index.cfm?fire>

49 Ellis, S. et al, *COAG National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management*, March 2004, pp 189-190

1.97 The Attorney-General's Department has responsibility for 'whole of government coordination of emergency management activities and crisis management on behalf of the Commonwealth'.⁵⁰ The submission from the Attorney-General's Department stated that:

The Constitutional responsibility for the protection of lives and property of Australian citizens lies predominantly with the States and Territories. The Australian Government accepts that it has a role in supporting the States in promoting community resilience, developing emergency management capabilities and supporting States and Territories when disasters exceed their capacity to respond. The Attorney-General exercises Commonwealth responsibility for emergency management matters through the Attorney-General's Department (AGD).

...

The AGD has responsibility for whole of government coordination of emergency management activities and crisis management on behalf of the Commonwealth. This includes direct responsibility for the provision of a range of mitigation, crisis management and recovery activities in support of the States and Territories in managing bushfires.⁵¹

1.98 The department informed the committee that the government is promoting 'a resilience based approach', which involves the Commonwealth ensuring governments and communities are better prepared for disasters by 'working closely with all levels of government, the private sector and the community to ensure an integrated approach to managing emergencies and disasters'.⁵²

1.99 The Natural Disaster Resilience Program gives effect to this priority:

The Program will consolidate the existing Bushfire Mitigation Program (BMP), the Natural Disaster Mitigation Program (NDMP) and the National Emergency Volunteer Support Fund (NEVSF). This will enable States and Territories to more effectively prioritise and address the risks of a range of disasters and streamline the associated administrative processes.

The DRP is a national program aimed at identifying and addressing disaster risk priorities, including through:

- disaster mitigation works, measures and related activities that contribute to safer, sustainable communities better able to withstand the effects of disasters and emergencies, particularly those arising from the impact of climate change;
- support for volunteers, particularly to address the challenges of volunteer recruitment, retention and training. Projects may include initiatives to increase the recruitment and retention of

50 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 2

51 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 1

52 Attorney-General's Department, *Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2010, Canberra, p. 21

volunteers to emergency services and other groups that contribute to individual and community resilience. They may also be directed at improving operational capability;

- support for local government, to assist them to effectively discharge their emergency management responsibilities; and
- encouraging partnerships with business and community groups to improve their ability to assist communities and be integrated in response and recovery activities and arrangements. The private sector owns many of the critical services that underpin communities, and have capacity to help communities prepare for disasters.⁵³

1.100 Within the Attorney-General's Department, Emergency Management Australia (EMA) is responsible for crisis management, including maintaining situational awareness and improving coordination during times of crisis. EMA is also responsible for activating Commonwealth crisis coordination and assistance arrangements post impact. States and territories can seek assistance from the Commonwealth (through EMA) when their total resources cannot reasonably cope with the needs of a specific bushfire disaster.⁵⁴

1.101 EMA also administers partial reimbursements to states and territories for expenditure on natural disaster relief and recovery measures through the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA).⁵⁵ These include:

- eligible personal hardship and distress (food, clothing, accommodation, emergency repairs to housing, replacement of essential household items and personal effects);
- psychological and financial counselling expenditure;
- restoration or replacement of essential public infrastructure (such as roads and bridges);
- concessional interest rate loans; and
- clean up and recovery grants to small business, primary producers and voluntary non-profit bodies.⁵⁶

53 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 2. The Bushfire Mitigation Program, now consolidated within this program, provided money for the construction and maintenance of fire trails and other accessibility measures.

54 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 3

55 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 3

56 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 4

1.102 The Attorney-General's Department has also been responsible for co-ordinating the implementation of a National Emergency Warning System, which has been designed to enable states and territories to send warning messages to fixed line and mobile telephones based on their billing address.⁵⁷

1.103 The Commonwealth provides funding for fire fighting aircraft through the National Aerial Firefighting Centre, which procures and co-ordinates aircraft on behalf of the states and territories.⁵⁸

1.104 The Commonwealth also serves an important role in providing funding for bushfire-related research, and gathering and sharing bushfire-related information. CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology and Geoscience Australia all conduct research and collect data that assists land management and fire agencies across Australia. This includes information about fire behaviour under different conditions, in addition to complementary meteorological and spatial data, which assist bushfire agencies to make informed decisions when determining appropriate mitigation and suppression strategies.

1.105 The Bureau of Meteorology, in particular, provides essential fire weather services to fire agencies and communities during periods of extreme risk conditions. The Bureau also provides information and services through:

- remote sensing from radar, satellite, and ground-based lightening networks which can provide more accurate observations to support fire weather prediction;
- early seasonal forecast information, which assists fire and land management agencies with pre-season strategic planning (for fire hazard reduction and deployment of fire fighting resources);
- a Numerical Weather Prediction model which provides early guidance on dry lightening; and
- participation as a research partner with the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre.⁵⁹

1.106 The Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) is also funded by the Commonwealth to arrange collaborative research projects between universities, CSIRO and other government or private sector organisations. The Bushfire CRC is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5 from paragraph 5.56.

57 Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 38*, p. 4; Attorney-General's Department, *Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2010, Canberra, p. 23

58 NAFC website, accessed on 8 June 2010 at <http://www.nafc.org.au/portal/DesktopDefault.aspx>

59 Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, *Submission 45*, pp 3-5

Should the Commonwealth have more responsibility for bushfire management?

1.107 Through the inquiry the committee considered a number of specific areas of bushfire management in which it was argued that the Commonwealth should have greater responsibility. These are examined in the chapters that follow. From a broader perspective, the committee also received evidence about the need for an overarching national bushfire policy to provide a framework for a well co-ordinated, best practice approach to bushfire management.

1.108 Bushfire CRC emphasised the significance of bushfire to other policy objectives, suggesting that developing policies on water and biodiversity conservation, urban planning, carbon sequestration and protecting Indigenous culture is futile 'without first critically analysing fire management'.⁶⁰

1.109 The Queensland Department of Community Safety's submission included commentary on the lack of national direction on bushfire management:

Australia does not have a national bushfire policy. The Australasian Fire Authorities Council has a position paper on bushfire management which is comprehensive and strategic in outlook but does not bind States or agencies.

As a result, each of the States has a mixture of policies between various agencies that are responsible for fire management. In some cases, there are three separate policies within the one state, for example one for state forests, one for national parks and one belonging to the emergency services.

There are also separate policies between and within states that do not connect with one another and/or are contradictory. Many local governments have varying fire mitigation strategies, which have been developed independently from organisations with fire management responsibility. Notably, private plantation companies, which now own most of Australia's plantation resources, are not represented anywhere in bushfire policy development.

There is a significant opportunity for State and federal governments to negotiate the structure and direction of national policy that requires all relevant stakeholders to adhere to and implement a minimum best practice bushfire management system.⁶¹

1.110 Professor Kanowski reiterated the COAG inquiry's suggestion for better focus within the Commonwealth for bushfire responsibility. He said:

The Australian Government's administrative structure does not lend itself to any department having a clear responsibility for bushfire strategies in their entirety. It would be better if there were greater clarity and focus

60 Bushfire CRC, *Submission 7*, p. 1

61 Queensland Department of Community Safety, *Submission 12*, pp 6-7

within the national government, mirroring the progress made by states and territories.⁶²

1.111 National Association of Forest Industries (NAFI) also considered that a nationally-guided approach to fire management be taken:

Given the magnitude of future fire risks, and complexities of multiple jurisdictions and land management responsibilities, fire management should be developed through a national process such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), in a similar way as to the treatment of water policy issues.

NAFI recommends that a national government strategy or blueprint be developed and implemented to assist with the reform of public land management for effective fire management. Such a process should build on the initial review commissioned by COAG in 2004 as part of the National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management and start with the development of key national principles that would underpin policies and practices for reform and implementation.⁶³

1.112 Mr Gary Morgan from the Bushfire CRC also noted the dispersed responsibility at Commonwealth level:

...there are multiple agencies in the Commonwealth which have fire responsibilities—there are at least four that I am aware of—and a single focus would seem appropriate. I will just point out that, while we have three tiers of government, all have some sort of responsibility, and unity within that and a common focus would be very worth while with good strong leadership.⁶⁴

1.113 He suggested that the UN's fire management voluntary guidelines would be a good basis for a common approach.⁶⁵

1.114 The Bushfire Front Inc advocated the introduction of a national bushfire policy implemented by a new federal agency:

Australia has no National Bushfire policy and different States and agencies have different policies, or at least different philosophies and priorities. This is exacerbated by the situation at local government authority level, where there is often a different approach to fire management on private land between one councils and its neighbour. The Federal government has not shown itself willing or capable of developing a national policy and State governments are generally not interested in dictating policy to local government.

62 Professor Peter Kanowski, *Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2010, Canberra, p. 32

63 NAFI, *Submission 13*, p. 2

64 Bushfire CRC, *Committee Hansard*, 25 March 2010, Melbourne, p. 16

65 Bushfire CRC, *Committee Hansard*, 25 March 2010, Melbourne, p. 16

...

This Inquiry should recommend the development of a National Bushfire Policy for signing off at all levels of government, and arrange for input from independent experts and scientists. This should be accompanied by the development of a small Federal agency responsible for implementing policy and reviewing and reporting on bushfire outcomes in the States and Territories.⁶⁶

1.115 Australian Forest Growers expressed a similar view:

Australia has no national bushfire policy, nor do any of the State or Territory jurisdictions have over-arching policies which will guide land management, planning and Local Government authorities. As a result there is a mish-mash of policies developed independently by different agencies or Councils, with no coordination and no whole of Government ownership.

AFG calls for the development of a national bushfire policy for Australia, to ensure consistency in land management and planning strategies across all State agencies.⁶⁷

1.116 Australian Forest Growers also proposed that a new body be established to audit a more co-ordinated national approach:

AFG recommends that a much higher level of coordination and standardisation at all levels be developed, along with management plans based upon contiguous fuel type. It may be necessary to review current processes and make them more appropriate. Such historic concerns as interagency coordination, communication system compatibility, and skills capacity should be targeted.

AFG recommends that a National Fire Audit Office (NFAO) be established to provide confidence to the community. The NFAO would report annually to the Federal Parliament against the following terms of reference:

- Assessment and standardisation of essential equipment, communication and coordination between agencies (intra- and inter-state);
- Report on the fire readiness of the country prior to each fire season;
- Oversight of the deployment (by the States) of regional rapid response units to support fire suppression and filling of human resource gaps caused by such things as employee rostering and lack of available volunteers.
- Establishment and implementation of guidelines to compel fire management authorities to recognise and act on important and credible local advice. (This should apply to all fire suppression operations especially initial attack on outbreaks).

66 The Bushfire Front Inc, *Submission 48*, p. 2 and 4

67 Australian Forest Growers, *Submission 16*, p. 7

- Creation and management of a national education program designed to provide a range of options that residents should consider when confronted by impending fire. (The major focus is to provide advice on “stay or go” options when confronted by impending fire and fire preparedness).⁶⁸

1.117 The Planning Institute of Australia advocated an 'enhanced role' for EMA:

...their placement within the Attorney-General's Department is not necessarily the best placement in terms of their long-term ability to fulfil such a broader role. I felt they had a fairly comfortable fit with the Department of Defence because this is something that is a strong threat and challenge to us nationally. Emergency Management Australia potentially is the vehicle for an agency that has the key role of coordinating research, working within the AusDIN framework and promulgating and supporting work such as by the Development Assessment Forum to provide an integrated town-planning response. But, if a core part of their function and responsibilities were improving Australia's preparedness for natural hazards—which is there but not sufficiently resourced, in my view—then I think that would be a large part of putting the mechanism in place that we need.⁶⁹

1.118 The Planning Institute of Australia suggested that the Commonwealth's external affairs power may be used to take 'strong and purposive actions that we see need to be taken from the top'.

1.119 Many of the specific issues referred to above are discussed in greater detail throughout this report.

1.120 Other evidence provided a more cautionary perspective on a more robust Commonwealth role in this area. The Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts told the committee:

...land management is a state and territory responsibility, so you would have to be careful that you were not just adding an extra layer of government for no particular benefit.⁷⁰

1.121 Departmental officer Mr Gerard Early said:

I am a bit hesitant about us at the Commonwealth level telling the states what they should and should not do in terms of the land management and fire regimes that they should be adopting. I think that is properly their

68 Australian Forest Growers, *Submission 16*, p. 7

69 Planning Institute of Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 25 March 2010, Melbourne, p. 36

70 Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2010, Canberra, p. 71

business and they should be much better placed than us to identify the various issues in various landscapes all around the country.⁷¹

1.122 Speaking of the previous federal parliamentary inquiry, Mr Nairn noted the limitations of the process:

...the Commonwealth was in a difficult position because a Commonwealth parliamentary inquiry technically should only be making recommendations where the Commonwealth can act. It can make all sorts of comments about things that it would like the states to do, but we tried—and this was one of the small compromises that I made with the members of the committee—to couch our recommendations in terms of: ‘How can the Commonwealth have a role?’ In a lot of cases, things that we wanted to see done had to be done by the states because they had the control in those areas. So that is why we couched our recommendation in terms of ‘through COAG’, to try to use the COAG process to have the states do those things. But, effectively, what we were saying was: ‘The states should do this.’⁷²

1.123 The committee discusses the Nairn report and its recommendations in the next chapter.

Committee view

1.124 While recognising the limitations on the Commonwealth's authority over bushfire management in Australia, the committee is of the opinion that the Commonwealth should provide a more focussed national direction for bushfire policy. At present, responsibility for bushfire policy at the Commonwealth level is dispersed across agencies and portfolios, without overall responsibility being vested in a single agency accountable to a single government minister or parliamentary secretary. It is the committee's view that bushfire management is of sufficient importance to warrant a more focussed policy approach at the Commonwealth level through such an arrangement, given the potential for more effective bushfire management at various government levels a single Commonwealth agency would bring.

1.125 The committee therefore recommends that the Commonwealth Government examine potential new arrangements for Commonwealth involvement in the development and implementation of a national policy for bushfire management. The committee considers that one option would be for Emergency Management Australia to have an expanded role that appropriately reflects the importance of bushfire mitigation and preparedness and the need to monitor and support the states and territories in this regard. An alternative approach would be for the Commonwealth to investigate establishing a new national bushfire agency answerable to a parliamentary secretary within the government. This agency would co-ordinate the Commonwealth's existing bushfire-related responsibilities performed by Emergency Management

71 Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2010, Canberra, p. 72

72 Mr Gary Nairn, *Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2010, Canberra, pp 6-7

Australia, as well as develop best practice national policy for bushfire management to assist responsible agencies better manage their bushfire risk through mitigation and preparedness strategies.

Recommendation 1

1.126 The Commonwealth Government examine potential new arrangements for Commonwealth involvement in the development and implementation of a national policy for bushfire management.

1.127 The committee makes a number of recommendations later in this report that recommend the Commonwealth take particular action. It is the committee's view that these recommendations would be best implemented through a Commonwealth agency with broader national responsibilities for bushfire management.

