

Chapter 4 – Co-ordinating fire suppression

Introduction

4.1 This chapter briefly examines issues relating to the effectiveness of fire suppression arrangements in Australia, recognising that co-ordinating fire suppression (or incident control) is primarily the responsibility of the various state-based fire agencies. The committee heard evidence on the following two related aspects of bushfire incident control:

- Co-ordinating the roles of different agencies during bushfire emergencies.
- Managing decision-making responsibilities between local fire fighters and centralised incident control.

4.2 Evidence to the committee emphasised that an early response to bushfire ignition is critical in minimising the damage bushfires cause. For instance, CSIRO stated:

...despite mitigation actions some bushfires will start, so improving the success of initial response to fire will be critical to reduce the chances of large fires developing.¹

4.3 Australian Forest Growers cited the Canberra fires in 2003 as an example of the dangers of leaving small fires to burn:

There is a pertinent need to attack fires rapidly with the aim of keeping them small. The ACT fires of 2003 could have been extinguished on the first day if the crews attending had been allowed to work overtime that night.

...

The deployment of crews immediately in the event of possible fires, and withdrawal of them if later there is no need, is preferable to waiting until there is a large bushfire event before deploying a large fire fighting force.²

4.4 When considering evidence on the roles and responsibilities of different agencies and different levels of hierarchy, the committee has done so within the context of the crucial importance of early response to successful fire suppression.

4.5 Another important aspect of bushfire suppression is the ability for fire fighters to physically access fires and other strategic locations via the existence and proper

1 CSIRO, *Submission 15*, p. v

2 Australian Forest Growers, *Submission 16*, pp 5-6

maintenance of fire trails. This issue is discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of the adequacy of resources devoted to bushfire management.

Co-operation across responsible agencies

4.6 As described in Chapter 1, fire suppression responsibilities are determined by each state's land management and fire agency responsibilities. In the first instance, fire suppression is the responsibility of the agency with control over the land. Incident control arrangements then become more complex when fires escape and require multiple agencies to co-ordinate the suppression effort.

4.7 During recent major bushfires, co-ordination between agencies has attracted substantial criticism, which has been detailed at length in the earlier Nairn inquiry and the recent Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. This inquiry has not sought to reproduce this evidence or re-investigate past failures. Instead, the committee has considered evidence on what contributes to effective inter-agency co-ordination.

4.8 Tasmania was cited as an example of successful interagency co-operation. Professor Peter Kanowski highlighted Tasmania as 'one of the most successfully integrated sets of bushfire management arrangements between different land tenure managers and the private sector'.³

4.9 Former chief officer of Tasmania Fire Service, Mr John Gledhill, suggested that Tasmania does not have the 'turf boundaries that quite often occur in other places'.⁴ Although there is a protocol in place in Tasmania enabling effective co-operation between the various responsible agencies to occur, Mr Gledhill emphasised that good working relationships are critical for the written protocol to be effective during an emergency:

It probably happened a lot easier in Tasmania because it is a small place that does not involve a lot of people, but at the end of the day I think the critical thing is the will of the people to work together. It is very fundamental. Interpersonal relationships really underpin the whole thing. One of the areas that I was very keen to promote was facilitation of people working together and associating together outside of a work context. Those sorts of relationships really are powerful ways of getting the cooperation you need when emergencies occur.⁵

4.10 He provided the following example to the committee:

It is at the stage now where, regardless of what the land tenure is, whoever is deemed to be the most appropriate person to manage that incident will be appointed. I can recall that even probably nearly 10 years ago, when we had a significant fire on the edge of Hobart burning in an urban interface area,

3 Professor Peter Kanowski, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 34

4 Mr John Gledhill, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 3

5 Mr John Gledhill, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 4

we had a Forestry Tasmania officer as the incident controller, and the fire involved houses as well as trees. That was a significant move forward, and it was an indicator of the will to get over the turf boundaries. In a legal, technical sense it should have been the Fire Service in charge of that incident, but for a number of reasons—including that it interfaced with the forest—it was deemed that a Forestry Tasmania person was a more appropriate person to have in that position.⁶

4.11 Mr Gary Nairn also indicated that Tasmania best managed conflicts between various state departments and agencies over control:

One thing that was really prominent from the evidence we received was the conflict between various state departments and agencies—who controls what? We looked at this in a number of states and found that Tasmania was probably the standout state ... They had got their act together and established what was called an interagency fire management protocol.⁷

4.12 He contrasted Tasmania's arrangements with those in other states, commenting that the various Tasmanian agencies 'knew exactly where they all stood when fires broke out'.⁸ The report of the select committee stated:

It appears to the Committee that the adoption of the inter-service protocol in Tasmania has been instrumental in the development of a culture of cooperation that is focussed entirely on controlling wildfires regardless of who owns and manages the land. This compares to the culture in New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory where there is still an element of competition and, at times, confusion and conflict, over 'ownership' of fires.⁹

4.13 Mr Nairn stressed the importance of cultural attitudes, rather than the exact nature of the inter-agency protocols established:

You can start to specify and say, 'In this sort of circumstance, this agency will take the lead' et cetera. However, if all agencies agree how a fire should be managed without worrying about being necessarily in control then the culture is created during the time they operate under such a protocol. It does away with the emperor type feeling that some people in high places might get—that their organisation is the only organisation that knows anything about this and they will control it, come what may. That is the type of bad culture that was clear from the evidence we got.¹⁰

4.14 Mr Nairn expressed disappointment to the committee that the select committee's recommendations about inter-agency co-operation were not implemented:

6 Mr John Gledhill, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 5

7 Mr Gary Nairn, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 2

8 Mr Gary Nairn, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 2

9 Mr Gary Nairn, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 2

10 Mr Gary Nairn, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 8

...we recommended to all the states that, rather than go off and reinvent the wheel, go and have a look at Tasmania and do something about it. Tragically, I do not believe that has occurred at all since 2003, and I understand from recent reports of the Victorian royal commission that the conflict between the various departments and agencies in Victoria has been highlighted. I think that is absolutely appalling, given that it was highlighted to the extent that it was in my inquiry and report.¹¹

4.15 Western Australian arrangements were raised during the inquiry, with Western Australian Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) recently being granted the right to take operation control of fire suppression on local government and state government owned land such as state forests and national parks.¹² The Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) told the committee that the new arrangements had not yet affected them directly:

The government expects, as it obviously is entitled to do, that there will be full collaboration, close co-operation and, if you like, seamless operation between us, FESA and local government authorities and, indeed, within the state emergency management arena are more broadly. That legislative change was made fairly late last year, before the last season. There was not a circumstance during the summer just gone where a fire that we were in control of was subjected to that ability for FESA to take control of it, as I understand, but that legal ability is now there is a consequence of a parliamentary committee's report and the decision the government made.¹³

4.16 However, officers noted that FESA had exercised its control over local government managed fires.¹⁴ This change has implications for the decision-making responsibility of local people, which are discussed below from paragraph 4.24.

4.17 As with jurisdictional boundaries within states, bushfires also do not recognise the separation of fire fighting responsibilities across state boundaries. These problems were most evident during the Canberra bushfire disaster in January 2003, when fires left to burn in NSW in moderate conditions contributed to the fires that ultimately devastated some of Canberra's western suburbs.

4.18 The select committee's report on that fire found that opportunities were not initially taken to extinguish fires when conditions were suitable, and that there were co-ordination deficiencies between NSW and ACT agencies that meant available

11 Mr Gary Nairn, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 2. Mr Nairn's evidence related to recommendation 25 of that report, House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires, *A Nation Charred: Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires*, October 2003, p. xxiv

12 DEC, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 29 April 2010, p. 15

13 DEC, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 29 April 2010, p. 15

14 DEC, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 29 April 2010, p. 15

resources were not best utilised once the fire reached Canberra.¹⁵ The committee recommended that Emergency Management Australia facilitate better co-operation across state borders:

The Committee recommends that Emergency Management Australia initiate a process involving Australasian Fire Authorities Council and the Australian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigades Association to review the coordination of cross border fire fighting arrangements and inter-state deployment of fire fighting resources. The review should specifically consider training on the full range of equipment and procedures likely to [be] encountered, standardisation of equipment and procedures, communication and the provision of information about local characteristics such as access to water.¹⁶

4.19 Emergency Management Australia (EMA) outlined the work the Commonwealth is now doing to assist with better co-ordination between state jurisdictions:

...we have also offered to the jurisdictions—which has been accepted by some and not yet by others—to be a coordinating body between them. If you say Victoria, for example, has another experience as they did last year, if they come to us and say, ‘We need a whole range of resources from other jurisdictions’, we have agreed to say, ‘We will go out and source those for you and get them from there to you, to save you having to do that activity, but you will still obviously have control of them, use of them, et cetera.’ That has been seen again as another proactive step.¹⁷

4.20 Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) commented that the Commonwealth had an important role in co-ordinating different agencies. However:

I think the Commonwealth at EMA would have a very hard time having a very hands-on role. I think you would not be able to do it.¹⁸

4.21 The committee notes that all Australian fire and land management agencies have adopted the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS), which has been established to integrate the 'activities and resources from multiple agencies for the resolution of any emergency situation' through a consistent incident management system.¹⁹ AFAC commented that:

15 House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires, *A Nation Charred: Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires*, October 2003, p. 106 and p. 180

16 House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires, *A Nation Charred: Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires*, October 2003, p. 185

17 EMA, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 26

18 AFAC, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 19

19 AFAC, *Submission 39*, p. 10

The increasing frequency and complexity of multi-agency operations across state and territory boundaries and the growing demands of emergency management, means there needs to be a universally understood and consistently applied incident management system. AIIMS provides the single management structure that facilitates the bringing together of all resources, from one or several organisations, to work co-operatively and cohesively in resolving an incident.

It is AFAC's strong belief that Australia needs a nationally consistent Incident management system so agencies can work together during emergency events. While reviews and analysis of the system are always ongoing and welcome it must be understood that any proposed changes that will affect the structure or operation of AIIMS must be done nationally in consultation with all parties.²⁰

Committee view

4.22 The committee agrees with AFAC that it is not practical for the Commonwealth to have a more direct role in improving co-operation between fire agencies during bushfire emergencies, either within states or across state boundaries. The Commonwealth can assist with co-ordinating resources and developing standard operational systems across jurisdictions, but it is not for the Commonwealth to dictate to individual fire agencies the manner in which they co-operate with their intrastate counterparts or those across state borders.

4.23 The committee does strongly endorse the Tasmanian approach to inter-agency co-operation during bushfire emergencies, though, and suggests that all fire agencies ensure they have similar protocols in place to enable successful co-ordination. Communication between different agencies and their on-the-ground personnel needs to be seamless to ensure the best protection for the community and fire fighters. The committee also notes that while written protocols are important in this regard, just as important during an emergency is a willingness to co-operate and yield authority and control over resources where required. No written protocol can instil the co-operative attitude required to ensure it is successfully executed during a bushfire emergency. It is incumbent on those in positions of authority within these agencies to develop good working relationships prior to a crisis so a co-operative approach does eventuate when needed.

Local control during bushfires

4.24 A related and more controversial topic is the continuing debate about the distribution of decision-making authority once a bushfire escapes the control of local fire fighters. The committee received considerable complaint about the negative consequences of restrictions on local decision-making and local action once control of a bushfire suppression effort had passed to a centralised incident control structure. The basis for this complaint was that the inability of locals on the ground to exercise their

20 AFAC, *Submission 39*, p. 10

local knowledge and respond quickly to changing circumstances hampers bushfire suppression. Evidence also suggested that local landowners are being prevented from tackling initial outbreaks because of bureaucratic interference.

4.25 Mr Nairn commented that this had also been a critical issue during the select committee inquiry into the 2002-03 bushfires:

One of the overwhelming views that I got out of the inquiry was the importance of local knowledge. Everywhere we went they said really the people in the region, those people on the ground—whether they were just individuals involved in the local fire service, companies involved in the timber industry or people looking after the parks and things—really have the knowledge about that particular area. As you would know, with differing landscapes, differing climates and differing vegetations, you can get different things happening when fire starts. One of the criticisms that a lot of people had of their incident control systems and some of the authorities that were supposedly managing the fire was that they did not have the local knowledge. A lot of local people felt that they were patted on the head and told: ‘We’re the experts from head office. Don’t worry about it. Let us.’²¹

4.26 The select committee report recommended that:

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth, through COAG and the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, initiate an overhaul of the incident management systems used by bush fire agencies in Australia to better incorporate local knowledge and expertise and better understanding of the needs and circumstances of local rural communities in the management of major fire events.

The Committee also recommends that this overhaul should aim to:

- Refine the system to facilitate setting up simple command and control structures, closer to the fire ground, in tune with the ever changing local fire ground conditions and needs of local communities;
- Include training of incident management personnel on how to engage and involve local people in planning and management of fires;
- Establish national models for community fire planning and provide for the integration of community fire plans into incident management; and
- Include national reporting of the success of incident management of fires as a means of auditing the cost effectiveness or incident operations.²²

21 Mr Gary Nairn, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 5

22 House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires, *A Nation Charred: Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires*, October 2003, p. 169

4.27 The view summarised by Mr Nairn above reflects the opinions provided to the committee during this inquiry. Australian Forest Growers suggested that local people had been marginalised: 'the carpet has just been ripped out from under local controllers and the early intervention of local brigades'.²³

4.28 In evidence before the committee in Perth the WA Farmers' Federation (WAFF) emphasised the benefits of having properly equipped local people to deal with initial outbreaks before they escalate.²⁴ Forest Fire Victoria Inc also spoke of the importance of local action early:

Fundamentally, firefighting on extreme fire days like Black Saturday is totally and utterly ineffective. The only time when firefighting in severe conditions is effective is in initial attack—and there it is very effective—and in mopping up and the tedious firefighting when the weather gets better. Initial attack means local response. Local response means the farmers with a ute and something on the back. Action is being taken almost everywhere to exclude those people from the initial response.²⁵

4.29 Australian Forest Growers concurred:

...the earlier you can get to the fire and deal with it, the easier it is to control it. The longer you leave a fire, the bigger it becomes and the more difficult it becomes, and then it can take weeks to put out. Our view is that the more rapid the response, the more rapid the firefighting effort, the better chance you have of getting a fire out. ...There is no doubt that people did react very quickly to the Black Saturday events: they were extraordinary circumstances. As a general rule, the quicker you can get to a fire, the more engaged the local firefighters can become, the more chance you have of getting it out while it is small.²⁶

4.30 They stated that this requires allowing landowners to be able to act with greater autonomy:

...it is important to give the people who own the land the responsibility to deal with the fire. We think that the people who own the land have an incentive to get it out quickly. I think your question was kind of whether you put it in a state agency's hands or leave it in the landowner's hands. Our view would be that the landowner has an incentive to get that fire out quickly. If it goes into state hands, that incentive to get it out quickly is not quite as great.²⁷

4.31 WA Farmers' Federation complained that workplace safety imperatives were stifling volunteers seeking to protect their own properties:

23 Australian Forest Growers, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 91

24 WAFF, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 29 April 2010, p. 46

25 Forest Fire Victoria Inc, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 67

26 Australian Forest Growers, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 86

27 Australian Forest Growers, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, p. 86

When we get farmer volunteers, their aim is to get the fire out as quickly as possible and to save as much property as possible. What we have got creeping into some of the thinking from FESA is that safety is the absolute ultimate: with anything you do, if it is going to involve some sort of personal risk, you do not do it. For most of the farmer volunteers protecting their property is actually akin to personal risk because if we lose feed at the beginning of summer, for instance, for the next six or eight months, that is actually all of our viable income gone. So there is definitely some tension between the people who are running the fire organisations on what the priority should be.²⁸

4.32 The Volunteer Fire Fighters Association of New South Wales told the committee that the NSW fire service had become too bureaucratised:

The Rural Fire Service now has about 700 paid staff. There is \$70 million going just in wages. We have this enormous bureaucracy. To have fires managed properly, you need to bring it back to the local level. The local person is the expert in this area. If we could deal with fires at the local level, we would have much better results. The bureaucracy is just too big.²⁹

4.33 Mr Brian Williams of the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association of New South Wales indicated that local knowledge was more responsive to incidents as they developed:

In my own area, I like to be in control of the fire. I have had a lifetime of experience there and I know the area best. To be perfectly honest, when we had section 44 fires threatening us, the control centre would be sending out an incident and action plan to work with for the day. On many days I did not open it, because it is 12 hours out of date when you get it. It is just nonsense. The guy on the ground calls the shots. It is really that simple.³⁰

4.34 The Association of Volunteer Bushfire Brigades of Western Australia indicated that local brigades have retained a level of control until fires become too difficult to handle. They told the committee that a good working relationship exists between local brigades and the Department of Environment and Conservation.³¹ However, WA Farmers' Federation told the committee that communication between locals and command centres could be improved in that state:

There is always a bit of a contest between the FESA hierarchy and the local bushfire hierarchy being the fire control officer. I think that is what he is referring to there. It is getting better. Really, the only way for that to

28 WAFF, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 29 April 2010, p. 48

29 Volunteer Fire Fighters Association of New South Wales, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 44

30 Volunteer Fire Fighters Association of New South Wales, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 45

31 Association of Volunteer Bushfire Brigades of Western Australia, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 29 April 2010, p. 39

improve is more communication between the volunteer side and FESA. FESA recognise that without the volunteers they really have not got a force.³²

4.35 Mr John Gledhill commented that there needs to be a point where control over fighting a fire needs to shift as the situation escalates:

Certainly Tasmania is not immune to the situation where volunteers feel that they have had their fire taken away from them and they have been roughly treated by someone in a higher authority. That happens and that is just one of those things you have to work around. But there is an understanding by most that that is the system within which we work, and the resourcing and the appointment of people is subject to change. As an incident grows there should be the expectation that people may well change.³³

4.36 The Rural Fire Service Association of NSW suggested that a consistent statewide approach was needed:

...it was inevitable that, after some of the major events that took place, there needed to be a change in culture to try and look at having some universal approach across the state. There were different levels of fire equipment, to start off with. Junee might have had a council with a high or low rate base, because the allocations are based primarily on the ability of the councils to raise their statutory contributions. So you had inequities developing from shire to shire. You had differences in enthusiasm. You might have had an honorary fire control officer in one shire and a part-time or full-time fire control officer in another shire. There was a need to look at the councils, the decentralised nature of the organisation, and come up with a structure which still recognised shire and council boundaries but had an overarching degree of accountability and levels to meet the need.³⁴

Committee view

4.37 The committee understands that bushfire emergencies do require a formalised incident control structure to ensure that suppression measures in one area are not countering efforts in another or risking the lives of fire fighters. However, it appears on the basis of evidence to this committee that this objective is impeding the legitimate actions of fire fighters on the ground, who are attempting to deal with changing conditions in the most effective way. The benefits of a centralised incident control management structure are totally nullified if fires are allowed to burn out of control while local fire fighters wait for the approval to respond by those likely to be unfamiliar with local and up-to-date conditions. The committee is of the view therefore that bushfire agencies should review their incident control management

32 WAFF, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 29 April 2010, p. 48

33 Mr John Gledhill, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 25 March 2010, pp 6-7

34 Rural Fire Service Association of NSW, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 12 March 2010, p. 83

systems to 'better incorporate local knowledge and expertise and better understanding of the needs and circumstances of local rural communities in the management of major fire events'.

4.38 The committee makes further comment on the resources available to landowners to tackle initial bushfire outbreaks in the next chapter.

