

A role for the Federal Government in bushfire management in Australia: a submission to the Senate Inquiry in Perth, April 2010

By the Bushfire Front Inc of Western Australia

We recognise that under the Australian Constitution, land management is the responsibility of the States. However, there are many ways in which the Federal government does, or could impinge on bushfire management within the States, both negatively and positively.

A negative example is the potential impact on prescribed burning for fuel reduction which might be engineered through the use of the Federal Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act.

Moreover, the current approach of the Federal Government (which is to provide funds for fighting fires and for post-fire recovery) can be regarded as rewarding the States for failed land management. It is well known amongst fire fighters on the ground that once a fire reaches certain dimensions, the States can call on the Commonwealth to provide funds for suppression. This is a disincentive to aggressive fire fighting.

We suggest a positive strategy which could be adopted by the Federal Government, aimed at improving the standard of bushfire management by State governments.

1. Development of a national bushfire policy.

Australia has no National Bushfire Policy. This has allowed the States to develop their own policy directions, or not, as the case may be. For example, WA has no State Bushfire Policy, but has a mishmash of uncoordinated policies developed within different agencies and Local Government Authorities; this situation is duplicated in other States. Australia needs to debate and then settle on a national policy which will provide leadership and direction to all the States and Territories and a basis for research, operational priorities and education. The adoption of the policy by the States could be encouraged by funding arrangements.

We are particularly keen to see State fire management jurisdictions commit to defined Best Practice. We have drawn up a template for Best Practice that facilitates decisions on funding and allows a systematic audit of performance.

We are aware that there has been a move to develop a national bushfire policy within the Canberra bureaucracy in recent times. I have asked on a number of occasions for an opportunity to have input, but this has not eventuated. I have seen no formal advice on who is doing what, or whether or not there will be an opportunity for consultation. This process, if it does exist, needs to be brought out into the open and to involve specialists within the community as well as public servants.

2. Funding for bushfire operations

The Federal government should provide funds for fuel reduction programs, for road and track maintenance and for the employment of permanent trained bushfire management staff to be located within regions and districts so that they are available for prevention and damage mitigation works programs. All of the States are having difficulty funding these items, or are choosing to not fund them, and the system is suffering as a result. The numbers of full-time trained employees in the bush has declined massively in all States over the last 10 years, and this trend is unlikely to be reversed if left to State governments.

We recommend that the basis of Federal funding for bushfire management is the degree to which a State jurisdiction has adopted the national policy and is meeting agreed Best Practice. In other words, the Federal government should reward the States for good land management, not for their failures.

3. Bushfire Research

The Federal government already provides funds for bushfire-related research in Australia, but this is regarded by many fire operations people as largely wasted. Some good work has been done by the Bushfire CRC, but it has been drawn off into peripheral issues and away from operational and economic studies or critical issues such as the development of burning guides. As a consequence, the Bushfire CRC has not, to our knowledge, provided the necessary focus on the real issues facing fire managers in Australia.

We are aware that a new research model is being considered to replace the CRC when its term is up. We urge the Federal government to take into consideration the views of people like us who have real experience and expertise, but are "outside the system" and usually ignored.

We are especially critical of the funding of research by academics at the Fenner School of Environmental Studies at the ANU, whose work seems to us to be directed at making bushfire management more difficult. We are at a loss to understand why such "research" would be funded at all. Similarly, a great deal of the "research" on climate change by the CSIRO and the BOM is without question a waste of money. If the climate does change, we need to be well prepared, but a high state of preparedness is needed anyway, not because of a computer-generated scenario in which temperatures go up a couple of degrees over the next 100 years.

We want to see a return to the situation where fire research is taken out of the Universities, decentralised to the States, and placed in the hands of practical scientists who are trying to improve the standards of bushfire management, not put obstacles in its way. We want to see research directed at the development of prescribed burning guides tailored for different forest types, at monitoring the effectiveness of prescribed burning programs and proper analysis of the damage and costs caused by wildfires. In particular we want to see cost/benefit studies into the relative value of prescribed burning versus large high intensity fires. This work has never been done properly in Australia, but is central to an underpinning of policy.

A critical issue requiring careful study and analysis is the work of the National Aerial Firefighting Centre. This organisation seems to have been given almost limitless funds, but has never been subjected to an independent review of its value compared for example, with putting funds into fuel reduction, road and trail maintenance and employment of firefighters. A classic example was the decision by the Victorian government to reduce prescribed burning programs, while millions of dollars were spent on hiring Elvis helicopters from the USA which then failed to perform under high wind conditions on February 7th 2009.

4. Education and training

Australians generally are ignorant, or at least poorly educated about fire, especially those Australians who have recently moved out of the city to live in the bush. Schoolchildren do not learn the basics of fire behaviour, fire preparedness and what to do in the event of a fire. High school science students do not study bushfire physics and chemistry. Our undergraduates are fed a constant pap of environmental mythology which is giving us a new generation of park and forest managers who are frightened of fire, ignorant about its use and are full of strange fears about the ecological impacts of prescribed burning. The Bushfire Front has been outraged at the way bushfire science and management is taught to undergraduates in Australian universities these days.... no wonder the country is in trouble with fires!

There is a need for an independent review of this issue, leading hopefully to the Federal Government bringing influence on the curricula at primary and secondary schools in Australia, and terminating the funding of the academics at institutions who are under the influence of environmental activists and have no interest in improving the standards of bushfire management in this country.

5. Performance audit and public reporting

One of the greatest deficiencies in Australian bushfire management is that agencies monitor themselves, and do not publicly report outcomes against performance standards and targets. The only gauge we have of bushfire management effectiveness is the number and size of bushfires, but agencies tend to claim that these factors are determined by weather conditions or climate change, and are not a result of their management.

If the Federal government is to provide “new” funds for fuel reduction burning, road and trail maintenance and employment of permanent staff in agencies, then these funds should be tied to auditable performance. Fire management programs must be based on sound policy (where fire preparedness and damage mitigation have at least equal billing with suppression), and clear objectives, and these must be supported by measurable performance indicators, targets and standards. To keep getting the funds, an agency will have to keep performing to a satisfactory standard.

We further believe that auditing and performance monitoring must be undertaken by an independent body which has recognized expertise. This is not a job for public servants from Canberra who know nothing about fire or its management. Nor should it be done within the jurisdiction of the Minister for the Environment, a department which has been captured by environmentalists. The best place to locate a small independent bushfire group is within the Prime Minister’s Department. The functions of this small group would be

- Policy development and review;
- Establishment of best practice templates and negotiation of performance criteria around them with State jurisdictions;
- Recommending funding priorities for operations and research;
- Establishment of a national bushfire training facility;
- Monitoring performance by State and Territory governments; and
- Public reporting on outcomes.

6. Priorities for the Federal government

In the immediate future, probably the most important jobs are (i) the development of national policy and (ii) getting fire research programs in Australia back on track. The longer these are delayed, the longer it will be before we have the administrative, scientific and economic support for management programs on the ground.

In the longer term, the key challenge will be to see that high standards are maintained year in and year out, not simply in the wake of a disaster. This has always been the greatest weakness in the political approach to bushfire management: i.e. interest declines the longer there are no disasters. In the past, this political weakness was circumvented (to a large degree) by the presence within governments of professional departments dedicated to good land and forest management, staffed by people with long and deep experience with bushfires. They were the “gatekeepers” – they looked after things, and ensured the work was done, year in and year out irrespective of political interest.

Unfortunately the day of the professional department has gone in most Australian states, and departments operate as the land management wing of the political party in office. The days in which

the man at the top started at the bottom are long gone; today most government agencies are led by political appointees with no hard-won experience in the field. New gatekeepers are required. The Federal government, especially the Senate, could play this role.

Conclusions

Federal "intervention" is always resisted by the States, especially when this involves audit of State agency programs by Canberra public servants who are frequently out-of-touch with real-world issues. For a Federal approach to work, the Federal government must be represented by people recognised within the States as knowing what they are talking about.

The standard of bushfire management in all Australian states is low and is will continue to decline without new leadership. The disaster in Victoria was long predicted; similar pre-disposing factors occur in SA, NSW, WA and to a lesser extent Qld and Tasmania. Groups like the Bushfire Front and our counterpart Forest Fire Victoria have been frustrated as our attempts to highlight the problems and push for policy change are denied by State governments and their senior agency people. The Victorian Royal Commission will ensure some short-term political response, but in the longer term, effective and on-going political leadership has got to come from the top, which in the absence of professional performance by the States and Territories, means the Federal government.

Roger Underwood
CHAIRMAN
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