



29<sup>th</sup> April 2003

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

This submission deals with challenges that currently face the Adelaide Hills in relation to a major bushfire event. This type of fire is characterised by its speed and an intensity of heat that increases exponentially as determined by fuel load. Consequently, conventional fire fighting techniques can only be safely employed once the fire has passed or when weather conditions have moderated. The submission focuses on the need to involve both CFS Brigades and the general community in the development of fuel reduction plans that are locally based and community driven. Similarly, a high level of commitment would be required from the State government and its agencies to ensure that plans were implemented in a manner that would dramatically decrease loss of life, property and wildlife during a major fire event.

My own experience in regard to bushfire management has been extensive due to the location of my family property in the Adelaide Hills. I am a fifth generation orchardist whose family has lived in Cherryville for 154 years. The property is 120 hectares in size and straddles the Sixth Creek valley on the northern side of Cherryville. The property is characterised by steep heavily timbered hills and gullies that favour the growth of introduced plant species such as broom, blackberry and African daisy. My parents' business was decimated by the Black Sunday fire of 1955 which travelled from Golden Grove through Cherryville in under one hour. The 1983 Ash Wednesday fire that originated at Anstey's Hill was stopped along our boundary. Current fuel load control on my property is achieved through chemical control of introduced plant species, moderate sheep grazing, mechanical slashing and fuel reduction burns. I have undertaken approximately 400 fuel reduction burns in the last 30 years.

The 1983 Ash Wednesday fires resulted in major changes to the structure of the CFS whereby equipment and training standards improved dramatically. These changes have greatly improved the ability of the CFS to deal with small to moderate scale fires. However, the issue of major fire events has not adequately been addressed in the Adelaide Hills. There is an urgent need for MPs, residents, the CFS and other government agencies to give due recognition to the problem of bushfire fuel loads. Most areas that were burnt in Ash Wednesday have not seen fire since that time. Some areas have 50 years of fuel build up. Introduced plant species have run rampant in the Hills as old fashioned style creek to ridgeline burns have been all but stamped out. National parks suffer the

same type of neglect with heavy fuel loads that include olive, blackberry and broom infestation. These types of problems cannot be solved by putting more highly trained fire fighting strike teams on the ground. There is no doubt that limited changes to the current level of fire fuel will have catastrophic ramifications. Reliable eye witness accounts of Black Sunday describe areas of several hundred hectares being devoured in less than ten seconds. Similarly my own experiences with numerous fires would lead me to believe, that given extreme conditions, areas of high population density such as Stirling, Crafers, and Belair would burn with far greater ferocity than the 2003 Canberra fires. The extreme conditions associated with such fires means that damage can only be minimised by actions that have been taken in the months and years preceding the fire. It is for this reason that I advocate the development of comprehensive fire management plans that deal with fuel loads at the local level. These plans need to step beyond the educational focus that exists in the Community Fire Safe Program. Fire plans should tackle the challenge of fuel reduction in a strategic manner so that a genuine reduction of fire intensity can be achieved. This is not an easy task but it is the only way of reducing losses during major fires.

I believe that there are three principles that would enable fire management plans to become an entrenched component of rural life in South Australia. The first is that plans should be locally developed and based. This would employ accurate local knowledge to determine important issues such as fuel load levels, seasonal conditions, access problems and appropriate fuel reduction methods for a given area. Secondly, I believe a principle of broad community involvement is preferable to either sole CFS input or strict legislative intervention such as household inspections. CFS Brigades provide the ideal local foundation upon which a fire management plan can be built. However the inclusion of local residents, businesses and environmental groups is vital if plans are to be successfully developed and implemented. Thirdly, support for such fuel reduction plans would be required from both the State government and its various agencies in order to facilitate the initial development of fire plans and to help coordinate the implementation of such plans. Currently, local, State and Federal government funding is being utilised in the Adelaide Hills for issues such as pest plant control, fire track access and wildlife conservation. These are all projects that could and should be included within fire management plans in order to maximise the benefits for all Adelaide Hills residents. Each CFS Brigade's fire management plan would overlap or link with their neighbouring Brigade. The end result would be a statewide community and government effort that treats fuel reduction seriously and strategically.

The Adelaide Hills mix of inhospitable terrain with heavily populated streets presents unique challenges. One option could be to implement trial plans through a cross section of Brigades in order to test their practicality. Fuel reduction can not happen quickly and requires consistent attention and persistence in order to realise desired goals. However, it can be achieved when planned and initiated correctly. Vast improvements have taken place in the areas of bushfire prevention through initiatives such as improved police/CFS liaison, water bombing availability and aerial surveillance on bad fire days. Similarly, ad

hoc fuel reduction burns that are few in number, educational campaigns and increased equipment and training levels are a step in the right direction. Yet I must emphasize the urgent need for all stakeholders to accept that given current fuel loads a major fire would be unmanagable. The problem at hand is fuel load and it is not being dealt with in a strategic manner. The consequences of inaction will be heavy loss of life, property and wildlife in a major fire event.

Yours sincerely,



Colin Bungay

### **PERSONAL INFORMATION**

MANAGER/OWNER OF SPRINGHURST ORCHARD

42 YEARS OLD, MARRIED WITH TWO CHILDREN

BACHELOR OF ARTS, ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY

PRESIDENT CHERRY GROWERS OF AUSTRALIA 1995 –1997

PRESIDENT CHERRY GROWERS OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA 1998 – 2000

MEMBER ADELAIDE HILLS REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD 1994 - 1997