

**SUBMISSION TO**  
**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**BUSHFIRE REVIEW**

**SUBMITTED BY**  
**JOHN CARDWELL**

**7<sup>th</sup> May 2003**

### Involvement - CFA

I have been a active member of the Mitta CFA since 1969. I have held the position of 3<sup>rd</sup> Lieutenant and Secretary for a number of years.

I was part of the initial crew when the Mitta CFA tanker was deployed to the Cravensville fires. I was also on the crew when the tanker was recalled to Mitta due to the Razorback fire.

I did several shifts on the controlled back-burn on Razorback ridge. I was also part of the crew at Granite Flat and later at Dartmouth the day the fire raced past Dartmouth the first time towards McDonald's property.

### Involvement - Private

On Australia Day I crewed a private unit at Springpole (near Dartmouth) when the fire was spotting across the Mitta River. The fire then roared into Dartmouth. Later that evening, after the wind change the fire came onto our property at Callaghan Creek. It took two and a half weeks to finally get all fronts to a control line on our property. During that time in consultation with Mr Simon Paton, I planned most of the strategies to successfully contain the fire.

### Disappointment

After 30 years of service to the CFA, it was extremely disappointing to receive a phone call from the local CFA captain's wife, to say a bushfire was heading our way, completely out of control, and the CFA could offer NO support for several hours at least. At the time I thought that would be well after we were burnt out!

### Comments prior to Fire

Our property has approximately a 10 km frontage to Crown land (mostly both Crown & Freehold bush). Like my father did previously, I like to see it burnt every few years for protection against bushfires. In recent years I have been increasingly frustrated by DNRE in doing this. They view if the fire gets onto the Crown they will bill me for putting the fire out (which I can't afford). It is impossible to guarantee a fire won't spread onto the Crown. Also the DNRE will not let a fire burn on the Crown anywhere near freehold land in case they are sued by farmers for lost fences etc.

I saw first hand the folly of having a mineral earth break next to the tree trunks at Webb's (Cravensville Fire) as trees were continually falling across the mineral earth break and consequently the fire was able to breach the control line. Also to maintain the control line required much extra labour ie constant supervision.

**Recommendation:** Some procedure needs to be put in place so property adjoining Crown land can be controlled burned on a regular basis with neither Crown or landholder being sued if adverse weather condition arrive unexpectedly. By being allowed to clear a wider fence break (instead of 3 meters), say 30 meters, on the Crown side of the Freehold/Crown boundary, a mineral earth trail could be maintained and falling trees would not be able to fall across the mineral earth break or damage fencing. This would alleviate most of the problems involving the burning and damage of private fences and grass in paddocks.

### Pines

The Government of the day several years ago bought a private property and planted it to pines, only leaving a very narrow corridor for the main road into several properties including mine. During the fires, at times, certain CFA tankers refused to drive through this pine plantation as they felt it was too dangerous because of the narrow cleared area. I feel our safety (farmers on the other side of plantation) has been compromised and the Government should remedy the situation immediately, as our family has been farming here for over 100 years. (The Gov't has sold the Pine plantation)

**Recommendation:** The Government buy back and restore an easement for the roads without pines to allow safe access through the pine plantation during bush-fires.

### Perceptions

Early on in the fire the people in control seemed very reluctant to be pro-active to the fire. Most noticeable, was the fire on the south side of the Mitta River from McDonald's to Dartmouth, which was just watched for over a week in calm conditions. It was that cold at night fire-fighters were lighting fires to keep warm. Why was that small unburnt area not burnt out! On Australia Day when the strong winds blew up that small area spotted into Springpole, burnt Dartmouth, Callaghan Creek and part of Tallangatta Valley as well as thousands of hectares of bushland. Were the people in charge more obsessed with having an injury free fire, rather than extinguishing the fire! Did OH&S mean more attention was given to meal breaks and time on duty rather than extinguishing the fire!

### Control Lines

We found that John DeWitt's grader was excellent in making mineral earth control lines. He was a lot faster than a bulldozer and had a lot better control in a minimum of depth of soil disturbed. It was pleasing to see him return after the fire to return the soil back over the control line, to restore our pasture.

### Control of Fire

Our farm is remote and completely surrounded by bush and for several days we were on our own. This worked probably to our advantage as we could take collective decisions and immediately act on them. I had repeatedly seen fire crews waiting for days for the fire to burn out to a control line, and when the fire nearly reached the control line a strong wind would cause the fire to breach the control line. It was my strong desire to get the fire-front to the control line as quickly as possible, but safely. Therefore we did a lot of burning out between the mineral earth break and the fire front with almost 100% success. Only once did the fire front breach our control line (excluding spot-fires, which we were able to contain quickly). With hindsight I feel this was the key to us extinguishing 17 kilometres of fire front on our property alone, when previously every attempt failed. It is essential for local land-holders to be fully briefed and involved in decisions on activities affecting their properties, especially where only limited outside resources are deployed. In one instance, we had a control-line was approved by DSE Controller at Dartmouth. We had three bulldozers working at the control line as well as 10-15 personal with rake-hoes, only to find out that the Corryong Controller had lit a fire below us. Naturally all our work was in vain. The Corryong Controller said, "all the bush has to be burnt".

It was, but cost us 1.6 kms of fencing and a patrol line 4 kms longer than it needed to be which then had to be patrolled several times each day for a month.

**Recommendation:** Controlled burnouts are one of the best tools available to a firefighter. The person in charge at the fire-front must have the authority to authorise a burnout with a minimum of delay, say 30 minutes maximum.

**Recommendation:** It is essential for local land-holders to be fully briefed and involved in decisions on activities affecting their properties, especially where only limited outside resources are deployed.

#### Daily change of Controllers

After several days the Controller at Dartmouth asserted his authority. For several days Bob Graham did the day shift. We found him very supportive of our ideas. He required to be informed of our decisions (which is OK) and would usually approve of them immediately and then back us on those decisions.

After his shift finished we had a new controller every day for the next 4 days. This was totally unsatisfactory, as the day was usually almost over before they became familiar with the situation and they would approve of any decision.

It is absolutely critical a person on the fire front can take a decision and act on it immediately!

**Recommendation:** Controllers must be appointed to the same fire area for 4-5 days (till days off come up), so they become familiar with the fire front and topography.

#### Strike Teams

The only CFA tankers allocated to our property for some two weeks were 2 strike teams (approx 9 tankers). If we were able to allocate these as we wished it would have been a reasonable response considering the scope of the fire. We found the volunteers on the back willing to help but they were very restricted by the system. Some of these short comings –

Orders seemed to come from somewhere very remote to the fire. We certainly suggested to Strike Team Leaders what we required with varying degrees of success. Even when they promised to assist us, they often left us without any warning. The worst case was when agreed to patrol for spot fires during a very difficult burnout. On completion of lighting the fire the last tankers were seen just going out of sight (without any explanation of why they left us). Many spot fires occurred from that burnout and the only thing that saved the valley was a fleet of 4 wheels drives from 20 kms away that heard our pleas for help over the UHF radio

Some strike team leaders interpreted the rule that a strike team could not be split as all the tankers had to be in eyesight of each other. We had approx 14 km along an enclosed valley to protect from the fire front. Being unable to place them strategically along the whole distance meant only 1-2 km was being observed and the rest of the properties were left unprotected.

At lunchtime all tankers left their allotted tasks to congregate together for a meal. This could take up to 2 hours, meanwhile the fire was left unattended. At the end of shift all tankers and crew would leave in procession and the next shift would not return till some two hours later. Once again the fire was left unattended in their absence.

The DSE also left the fire-front unattended during change of shifts. The worst case I saw was at Razorback ridge where the crews left and drove to Swifts Creek, briefed the incoming crews, before they drove back, up to four hours later

#### **Recommendations:**

That Strike Teams come under control of a local on the fire front.

Strike Teams eat a packet lunch where they are assigned.

Strike teams change shifts at the fire front. If that is too dangerous, one tanker should leave the fire-front at a time.

One tanker only to leave the fire front at a time for refuelling.

Tankers can be split up over any distance so long as they are still under the control of the their Strike Team Leader.

#### Services

It was noticeable that Telstra considered it too dangerous to repair the phone lines for some two weeks after the fire. All other services continued to be provided as normal including rubbish pick-ups. I was lucky our phone did not go off, but our neighbours did. They found it extremely difficult to receive and send messages even though a satellite phone was provided.

#### Fencing Adjoining Crown

I feel that the Crown should at least pay for half the fencing costs for boundary fences with the Crown. It is normal practice for neighbours to pay half the cost each for fencing. When the land was selected originally the Crown provided the materials for the boundary fence. Also the DNRE has been quick to prosecute any farmer for costs involved in containing a fire going to the Crown, so it appears the Dept wants to eat its cake and have it too. I realise the fences are insurable, but that also costs money. Why should farmers pay to insure the Crown's share?

#### Communications

The public briefings were a good idea. However for those fighting the fire it was impossible to attend. It was also difficult to know where the fire front was in the smoke. I always drove around at night to establish what was alight (you could see flames thru smoke at night) and then estimated where the fire may be during the day by prevailing winds. It would be good if information obtained from aircraft could be distributed to outlying communities. What is on the Internet is good but it assumes everyone has the Internet and the time to look at it providing power & phone are still working. UHF radios were certainly the saviour in communications and I feel they should be fitted to all CFA tankers so there can be 2 way communication with private vehicles.

#### Night Patrols

In a long fire, we had fire threatening our house for two and a half weeks it would be most beneficial for a night patrol to continually monitor the houses from midnight to seven AM. They should have keys, if necessary and a list of people in each house and know where people are sleeping in the house to arouse them if necessary. We had to sleep sometime, and during the above hours seemed the best time as the fire was at its quietest. When we went to bed it was hard to sleep well, as we didn't know if we were going to be burnt to death before morning. We did these patrols with our neighbours before the fire came to Callaghan Creek but were unable to continue them after the fire front arrived due to lack of personal. This could suit a

retired person. The Strike Teams were also asked but we found that they could not be trusted!

**Recommendation:** In a long fire, patrols should be initiated to allow residents and local firefighters a good sleep.

Signed

  
Mr John Cardwell