



13 May 2003

Submission No.300

Select Committee on Bushfires
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

I refer to an article in the Blue Mountains Gazette of 23 April 2003 wherein Kerry Bartlett MP, Federal Member for Macquarie invited submissions in relation to a parliamentary inquiry into last summer's bushfires.

I have been a resident of Warrimoo in the Blue Mountains for 34 years and during that period have seen a number of major bushfires, the most recent in Warrimoo being Boxing Day 2001 when despite the best efforts of personnel from the NSW Fire Brigades (NSWFB), Rural Fire Service (RFS) and NSWFB Community Fire Units (CFUs) seven homes were totally destroyed and another seven severely damaged.

In March 1998 I submitted an application to the NSWFB for the establishment of a CFU in my street. I did so after reading about the success of CFUs in the 1997 Menai bushfires. Those CFUs were then part of a pilot program by NSWFB. Cross Street Warrimoo is located out on a ridge and except for the road in it is surrounded by dense bushland on all sides. The two CFUs in Warrimoo (MHP-43 and FHP-40) made significant contributions to containing the fires in Cross Street not just on Boxing Day 2001 but by pro active hazard reduction work beforehand. Key functions included :

- Requesting and in some cases assisting residents to reduce the amount of ground fuel around their homes including their guttering.
- Regularly checking the operation of hydrants.
- Painting and identifying the location of hydrants.
- Identification of static water supplies (swimming pools and water tanks with a capacity of more than 1000 litres and fixing a reflective SWS plate to the front fence where required.
- Community education of residents including the importance of not covering over hydrant covers or parking vehicles over hydrants.

With bushfires active in the lower mountains our unit (MHP-43) was activated on Christmas Day 2001 and set about preparing for the possible arrival of a fire. Being

mindful of the fact that in all major fires in Cross Street over the last 30 years during which the reticulated mains water had failed, members of the CFU then went about creating additional static water supplies (SWSs) by placing tarpaulins/liners in seven or eight box trailers and filling them with water. This was a strategy that paid dividends as when the mains water inevitably failed the following day every trailer was sourced as a supply of water for portable Davy pumps and was particularly useful for the extinguishing of spot fires.

It is lamentable that in my view the devastation that occurred in Cross Street Warrimoo on Boxing Day 2001 was significantly contributed to by once again the failure of the reticulated water supply and the appalling condition of timber power poles.

The middle and lower ends of Cross Street contain about 80 homes and are part of a new subdivision that was created in the early 1960s. To cater for this subdivision the existing water main in the top part of Cross Street (which was settled in the early 1900s and only contains 20 homes) was merely extended. In any future bushfires in Cross Street it is inevitable that the mains water will again fail unless mains of increased circumference or a dedicated line for fire fighting is installed.

To add to the misery of residents of Cross Street on Boxing Day 2001, they were without electricity for a few days due to a number of power poles catching fire and cross members collapsing and bringing down overhead wires. The condition of the poles was such that large pieces of timber had come away in many places on the poles enabling hot embers to lodge in the gaps and ignite the poles. Up until the Electricity Commission of NSW was split up into a number of distributors regular inspections of power poles occurred and unsound poles were marked for replacement. Unfortunately, our local distributor appears to work on the premise that it is more cost effective to wait until a pole falls down before replacing it.

One would have thought that those events would have triggered some action by Integral Energy in ensuring that all the remaining poles in Cross Street were sound. Any such optimist would have been doomed to disappointment. Twelve months later in December 2002 I wrote to Integral Energy advising them of five power poles in various states of decay. The response was total inaction. Following an approach by me the Blue Mountains Gazette ran a front page story with pictures of decaying poles. The following day Integral Energy crews descended on Cross Street with cherry pickers and ladders. Did they replace any of the poles? No. One was treated to the spectacle of three or four men attacking the poles with hatchets/tomahawks and hacking off decaying pieces of the pole but still leaving extensive amounts of rotten timber particularly around the cross members to play hosts to hot embers in the future. One can only compare the activity to a Marx Bros farce. It is ironic that I was prompted to contact Integral Energy in the first place on receiving a glossy pamphlet from them lauding their bushfire prevention efforts. The pamphlet stated inter alia that Integral Energy inspects "the entire electricity network on a regular basis with annual inspections in bushfire prone areas to identify and correct issues which could become dangerous". That statement can only be described as so much claptrap. I can only assume that the so called annual inspection was done from a

helicopter as anyone who was not classified as legally blind could not have failed to see the condition of the poles. The state of decay had not occurred in the preceding months but over many years.

The NSWFB Community Fire Unit program has been an outstanding success in many areas over the last few years in helping to reduce the impact of bushfires. Some of the reasons for their success are the facts that members of CFUs live in the same street, they have their equipment on hand contained in trailers or fixed cabinets and they know the topography of their street and surrounds like the back of their hand. From a modest beginning there are now 225 CFUs in operation across the state with in excess of 3500 members. A further 9 to be installed before 30 June. Their success and public profile has resulted in NSWFB receiving in excess of 300 applications this financial year.

The ethos of self help in protecting your own home and helping your mates has resulted in ordinary people living in urban/bushland interface areas can see the value of the CFU program in being properly prepared in defending their own streets. Prior to the advent of CFUs fire services had to leave pumpers or tankers with crews to deal with spot fires that erupt after the fire front had passed. The allocation of these valuable and scarce resources was necessary as property is often destroyed by these spot fires if not extinguished. CFUs can now monitor and extinguish these fires enabling fire services to be reallocated where needed and follow the fire front.

Yours sincerely

Frank Fitzpatrick