



21<sup>st</sup> April, 2003

**Submission No.32**

Mr Ian Dundas  
Committee Secretary,  
House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires  
Canberra

Dear Mr Dundas,

**Submission for inclusion in Bushfire Inquiry.**

I would be pleased if you would include my attached submission for discussion by your Select Committee at the forthcoming inquiry. This communication is being forwarded to you both by e-mail: **Bushfires.Reps@aph.gov.au**; and by post.

Yours sincerely

Brian Hungerford

Submission for consideration by House of Representatives Select Committee  
on the Recent Australian Bushfires

Author: Brian Hungerford,

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2003.

I wish to discuss – and I believe that your committee should discuss – the results of a gradual but radical shift in the policy of fighting bushfires in NSW over the last few years.

This is a policy which has been put into place by Mr Phil Koperburg since his becoming NSW Commissioner for Bushfires.

I would like to make it quite clear that this submission is not a personal attack on Commissioner Koperburg as I regard him as a friend, having worked under him as Bushfire Brigade Captain when he was Fire Control Officer (FCO) in the City of Blue Mountains. Indeed, I regard him as the outstanding FCO of the half dozen or so under whom I have worked during my time as a volunteer with both the Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury groups.

The change in policy I refer to is from (1) the protective stance of reducing the amount of fuel which could be a danger in the fire season *as the traditional first priority* to (2) that of the confronting stance of putting fires out when they occur *as the new first priority*. I have no doubt that Commissioner Koperburg would deny this claim.

This policy of putting fires out as the first priority (rather than that of fuel reduction to prevent the severity of fires) has been the policy of The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) for a long time, and I claim that it has been embraced by NSW Commissioner Koperburg.

There has been *no* consultation with “grassroots” fire fighters on this matter. One can only conclude that Commissioner Koperburg has refrained from this consultation because he knows that grassroots firefighters object to it.

The NPWS maintains its policy (of refraining from hazard reduction) for two bureaucratic reasons:

- 1) because of its failure, time and time again, to satisfactorily carry out hazard reductions planned and implemented by the NPWS, without close liaison with Bushfire Brigades.
- 2) because of inevitable criticism from a majority of the public which is based on both lack of understanding of the issues involved in fire control (*the responsibility, surely, of the media, and of city-based greens*) and in a strong dislike by the public of both the smoke and the blackened bush resulting from hazard reduction operations

I submit that the end result of this policy has been more, and more intense, **uncontrollable** wildfires.

I have no doubt that Commissioner Koperburg, together with the NPWS, can produce reams of statistics to prove my claims wrong. The NPWS has become increasingly expert over the years in slanting statistics to "prove" its stance.

It is not very hard to find examples of bushland under the care of NPWS which has suffered calamitous damage directly as a result of this policy of no hazard reduction. I have personally pointed out some examples of this quite unnecessary damage to parkland and wilderness areas, time and time again, to NPWS over many years.

I will quote one good example of this permanently damaged bushland that is close to where I live in the Blue Mountains. This is that part of the Blue Mountains National Park (now proclaimed Wilderness Area) bordered by The Darling Causeway, the Grose River, the Wollangambic River, and the Mt Tomah – Mt Wilson – Mt Irvine chain of mountains.

When NPWS first took control of this area it was much the same as when Captain Cook landed in Botany Bay in 1770. In my teenage years this beautiful area was mostly heavily timbered with some naturally-occurring heathland and some grassland, it was parklike. *There is no doubt that it had been regularly burned, with cool fires at the correct time of the year, for not hundreds, but thousands of years*, first by its aboriginal inhabitants and carers, and then by white men, for similar reasons, that being to keep the area free from extreme wildfires. This country had evolved from this type of conservation over many thousands of years.

Since NPWS started "saving this for future generations" there has been absolutely no genuine effort to reduce hazardous build-ups of fuel in this area. On only one occasion it tried, and it failed. This was in spite of the fact that the local bush fire brigades had been offering support or offering to do the hazard reductions themselves, and begging for the work to be done in the interests of both public safety and the conservation of the environment.

The only fires in this area since NPWS assumed control have been completely out-of-control wildfires, and invariably NPWS has refused to accept responsibility. NPWS is very experienced indeed in shifting blame.

Other than a few trees along the sides of Bell's Line of Road (to which the road itself has given some sort of protection) virtually all the big trees have now gone, standing dead or rotting on the ground. Some of the Brown Barrels (*E. fastigata*) grew to enormous size and must have been hundreds of years old. The only place these can now be found is on private property, out of NPWS areas. The wonderful patches of Mountain Ash (*E. oreades*) which grew on easterly slopes protected from normal fires and wind are now all dead, replaced by seedlings which will never (under present management practices) grow into big trees because the next big fire will kill them, victims of NPWS policy. The Black Ash (*E. sieberi*) are now all suckers growing up from blackened stumps. The once-magnificent area is now a succession of degraded, scrub-covered ridges.

Even if in the unlikely event that NPWS reverses its methods of "conservation" it would take many hundreds of years to revert to the way it was only forty years ago. It is very obvious that in spite of all their expertly "spin-doctored" talks the hierarchy

of NPWS has neither understanding of, nor love for, the bush, but view it merely as a vehicle for making their living – a very good one too, by my standards.

This is the policy which Commissioner Koperburg has embraced. I was once his enthusiastic supporter when he was Fire Control Officer of the City of Blue Mountains, when his priorities were headed by the safety and well-being of the volunteer firefighters. His priorities now are quite different, with his prestige, his power, his department's size, and his political influence at the top of his list. He now views the "grassroots" firefighters as merely a means to his ambitions, just as NPWS views the Parks and the Wilderness areas merely as a career base.

Volunteer Firefighters now have no real influence on any decision making, either short or long term. This has had a profound effect on the type of personnel the Brigades are now attracting.

If all the Bushfire Council's sophisticated administration, expensive machinery, huge amounts of money (taxpayers money) spent on aircraft etc., really meant better fire control then I would say that maybe the end justifies the means. The end result now is extreme wildfire.

I do not believe that the results of all this huge bureaucratic effort are an improvement at all. I believe that rather than an improvement, the end product is worse. Politically motivated half-truths like "Hazard reduction would not have stopped the fire" should not be accepted as a good enough response to the recent disastrous damage caused by extreme wildfires. Hazard reduction does not stop bushfires, this is not the purpose of hazard reduction.

The purpose of hazard reduction is to reduce the intensity of any bushfires, to make any bushfire more controllable, to make it safer for firefighters to try and stop the bushfires **before they become unstoppable wildfires.**

The pronouncement of Commissioner Koperburg that "Any hazard reduction would not have stopped this fire" (referring to the recent Canberra fire) was without doubt cooked up by his clever team of spin-doctors, but it did result in putting a huge number of experienced Bushfire fighters offside. This sort of thing plays with the lives of Bushfire Brigade field crews. Of course, people like Minister Debus and Premier Carr re-quoted it with glee, for it showed the public that the huge damage from these fires was not their fault.

On a recent (last spring) inspection of conditions at Mount Tomah which I had been asked to be at with the present captain of Mt Tomah Brigade and with a senior officer from Katoomba Fire Control, I was asked for my opinion as to the need for hazard reduction in an area West of Skyline Road. I agreed with those present that hazard reduction was the only way to save the houses along the road from a wildfire, but that while in my opinion such a burn could have been done a month or so earlier, a burn at that stage would not be without risks. The officer from Katoomba Fire Control said : "If you do it and something goes wrong we will all be crucified. If you do nothing and a major fire comes through and half the houses burn down in spite of your best efforts because of the stupid places they have been built in, you will all be greeted as heroes. Take your pick!" The hazard reduction was not done. This is one reason almost no hazard reduction burns are being done by Volunteer Brigades.

This incident shows as much as anything the need for a change by Commissioner Koperburg in the lead he gives to those who are supposed to be looking after the Volunteer Firefighters.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that radical change is desperately needed.

Because NPWS has demonstrated complete lack of expertise in hazard reduction, and because NPWS has demonstrated a lack of understanding of the whole principle of hazard reduction, it should be denied any input into the planning of hazard reduction either inside or outside National Parks and Wilderness Areas. NPWS should also be denied any membership of Commissioner Koperburg's team, as both organisations share the same faulty ideology.

Probably this is not the correct place to recommend principles that should be adopted for hazard reduction, even if it is possible to do so for the entire state. I believe that rather than trying to force the bush to comply with bureaucratic principles it is reasonable that the bureaucrats learn to live with the natural cycles of the bush evolved over many thousands of years.

If hazard reduction must be left to some government department, I would suggest that The Forestry Commission should be given the job.

Until such time as these changes occur, uncontrollable wildfires will continue to give the media the headlines it thrives on.

Brian Hungerford

April, 2003.