

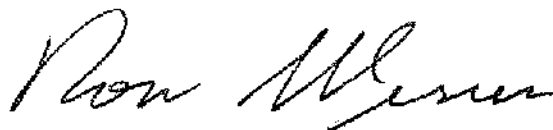
Mr Gary Nairn MP
Chairman
Parliamentary Bushfire Enquiry
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Nairn

Attached are copies of letters (earliest date first) relating to the bushfires on the NSW South Coast and in the ACT region.

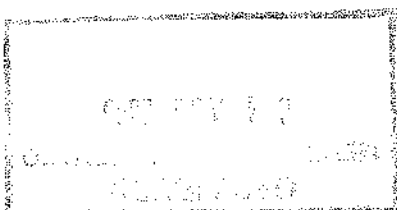
They were prompted by my view that the initial responses in both fires were inadequate.

Yours sincerely



Ron Messer

24 July 2003



SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE OPERATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE JANUARY BUSHFIRES

In this Submission I propose a general issue which the Inquiry might explore and offer three comments.

THE GENERAL ISSUE

In December 2001, a bush fire was detected in difficult terrain west of Nowra. It was not contained and when a day later strong, dry, westerly winds arrived, it began an uncontrollable run eastwards to the coast with considerable property damage.

In January 2003, a number of bush fires were detected in the ranges west of Canberra. They were not contained and when some days later strong, dry, westerly winds arrived, they began an uncontrollable run eastwards to Canberra with loss of life and considerable property damage.

The parallels are obvious. (There have been other similar events in the history of bushfires in NSW.)

At the time of the Shoalhaven fire I was residing in Bomaderry. I was given some first hand information from a local Fire Captain. In consequence, I wrote two letters. A copy of each is attached.

The letter to the NSW Commissioner was acknowledged but never responded to.

The ACT bushfire has reinforced the view contained in the letter to the NSW Joint Standing Committee on Bushfires.

This Submission is to ask the Inquiry to explore the general issue outlined in the attached correspondence.

COMMENTS

1. Finger Pointing

In 1889 an earth dam burst above Johnstown in the USA killing over 2000 citizens of downstream towns. Many in Johnstown blamed the disaster on the poor maintenance of the dam by the recreation club that owned it. The

exception was one Cyrus Elder. He had lost his wife, a daughter and all his possessions. He had as much cause as anyone to lash out at the club. But he did not. He admitted that Johnstown residents had long been edgy about the dam and said, *'Therefore, if anybody be to blame I suppose we ourselves are among them, for we have indeed been very careless in this most important matter and most of us have paid the penalty of our neglect.'* [*The Johnstown Flood*, David G McCullough, Publisher - Hutchinson, London.]

I wonder if some in Canberra's south western suburbs might now be inclined to share Cyrus Elder's sentiments?

2. Public Policy

That old adage 'If it can happen, it will.' must remain central to public policy relating to people and their property. The bean counters must be restrained from discounting risk in their financing of bushfire programs.

3. Physical Barriers

Following the Shoalhaven fire, there were reports that barriers such as metal boundary fencing and fire retardant hedges helped reduce fire damage by limiting the exposure of buildings to embers and radiant heat.

Ron Messer
14 March 2003