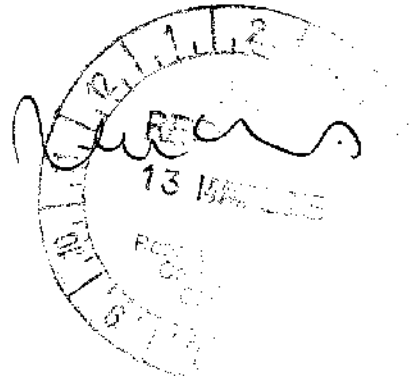


Submission No.325



SUBMISSION
TO
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE
RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES
BY
BRUCE BINGHAM

MINI CURRICULUM VITAE OF AUTHOR

- 1 RETIRED SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE AND CURRENTLY A
FARMER
- 2 FIRST VICTORIAN STATE DISPLAN OFFICER (NOW KNOWN AS
START EMERGENCY RESPONSE OFFICER)
- 3 "AUTHOR" OF VICTORIA'S DISPLAN (STATE EMERGENCY
RESPONSE PLAN) PUBLISHED IN 1985
- 4 ADVISOR TO AND ASSISTED WITH THE COMPILATION OF
VICTORIAS' BUSHFIRE REVIEW COMMITTEE REPORT (APRIL
1984)
- 5 CO-FOUNDER OF THE COMBINED EMERGENCY SERVICES
SEMINAR COMMITTEE (INC) AND PRESIDENT FOR THE PAST 21
YEARS
- 6 VICTORIAN REPRESENTATIVE ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
THE NATIONAL REGISTRATION AND INQUIRY SYSTEM.
- 7 POLICE ADVISOR ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MEDICAL
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- 8 COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE ON MANSFIELD SHIRE
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLANNING COMMITTEE
- 9 MEMBER OF THE BARJARG UNIT OF THE COUNTRY FIRE
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BACKGROUND TO BUIRES IN SOUT-EAST AUSTRALIA

This part of Australia was meant to burn, will burn and should burn. But it should not have intense, destructive wild fires which bring tragedy. Wildfires such as the recent North Eastern and Gippsland Victorian Fires and the Canberra fires have brought untold tragedy to residents, domestic stock, farming enterprises and native fauna and flora.

Bushfires have been part of South-eastern Victoria since the Ice Age. Lightning strikes and the “aboriginal firestick husbandry” have ensured that the flora was perpetuated by fire. It is common knowledge that the majority of this area had a “park-like” appearance when first explored by our white forefathers. This was due to Nature and the aboriginals which co-habited this area. Since white settlers have arrived, we have perpetuated the theory of preventing and extinguishing fires in the grasslands and forest areas. Unfortunately, we have introduced foreign flora and animals and allowed them virtually unchecked to encroach into the forested areas. In many areas the pioneers could drive their drays and horse teams through the open forests due to the lack of undergrowth. This is not possible today.

BUSHFIRE CYCLES

Bushfires appear to follow a cycle but no one can accurately forecast when a significant bushfire conflagration will occur. What is certain however is that the longer a district goes without bushfire or without stimulating the effect of wild bushfire by thinning the vegetation and removing the dead accumulated litter – the more severe a bushfire will be when it comes.

There is a combination of factors, which works together to create conditions that encourage cyclic severe wildfires.

- The cyclic build up of plant growth and dead vegetation
- The cyclic phases of climate
- The cyclic nature of weather patterns

It is interesting to note that major conflagrations have occurred in South-eastern Australia on the average of every 44 years:-

Black Thursday 1851

Black Tuesday 1898

Black Friday 1939

Ash Wednesday 1983

Within this 44-year cycle there is a closer cycle of exceptionally bad fires about every 22 years. There is an accepted ten to eleven year cycle of major wildfires; within this again is a minor cycle of severe bushfires every 6-7 years and at the nucleus the average to mild bushfires which occur each year.

Within these general cyclic patterns individual districts have developed their own cycle. They are different in farmland from bushland or scrub. Victoria’s Western District has a cycle of eleven years for major wildfires. So do the east coast of N.S.W and South Qld; but the cycles don’t match each other. Tasmania

sometimes skips the minor 6-7 year cycle. New South Wales does not have the consistent cycles of Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. In New South Wales one third of the bushfires are severe and one-third of summers are untouched by bushfires.

The changing vegetation of regions directly affects their bushfire cycles due to cycles of growth, drying out and drying off. Grasses are lush and hard to burn until maturity at 3-6 months. Then their aging roots cannot suck up water from such soil and they dry out (cure) and become inflammable. In forest areas leaves, bark and twigs can accumulate by up to 10 tonnes per hectare a year if left untouched. Fifteen (15) tonnes of fine litter per hectare makes any fire, which starts in it uncontrollable.

Droughts tend to happen in parts of Australia in roughly ten-year cycles, each of which has been followed by major bushfires in the southeast of Australia. Australian droughts last from one to five years and in south-eastern forest districts dry out the vegetation so severely that the smallest spark will set it alight. Thirty per cent less rain than usual in the three months before summer foretells a bad bushfire season. These are the conditions that preceded the disastrous bushfires in South-eastern Australia in 2003.

Now having described the background and the cycle nature of bushfires in South-eastern Australia I will address the terms of Reference of the Select Committee.

Reference (a) "The extent and impact of the bushfires and the environment, private and public assets and local communities" – As I was not present during and in the aftermath of the fire, I cannot really comment. However it was obvious that the intensity of the fire was due to the lack of fuel reduction in the forested areas. Fires of this intensity are virtually unstoppable. The build up of the forest floors create the intense "crown" fire that cannot be combated by normal fire suppression methods. The fires therefore come out onto private land causing the enormous losses to private property, farming enterprises and public assets.

Reference (b) "The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfire including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests other Crown land and private property" There is no doubt that these fires were generally started by lightning strikes. The severity of the fires can be sheeted home directly to the management of the forests and parks. There appears to be a culture that has developed within these agencies of "locking-up" vast tracks of forests creating National Parks without due consideration to their management. Existing roads that were used for timber extraction have been allowed to deteriorate, public access has been denied and timber industry, which is so important to forest management, is now virtually non-existent. There appears to be an obvious "city-centric" policy of politicians of all political persuasions to "lock-up" the forest areas. There is no doubt that the conservation or 'green' element in our community has been very successful in persuading political parties to pursue this current policy. This however is detrimental to our forested areas and if allowed to continue will ensure that we will have disastrous fires in the future. There has to be a complete change of culture in forest management if we are to ensure the future of our forests.

Many farmers adjacent to forests or National Parks have suffered unnecessarily due to poor forest management. The responsible government

agencies are “poor neighbours”. They have permitted fuel build-up on farmland adjacent to primary production. There needs to be a clearly defined buffer zone within the boundaries of forest that are regularly cleared of all combustible materials and used as control line in the event of a fire within the Parks or Forest Areas. Far too much of Victoria’s forest and National Parks are locked away without sufficient funds and staff to manage them in a proper manner and to conduct regular fuel reduction burns in the cooler months. I reject the suggestion that the weather patterns have prevented fuel reduction burns as we have had five years of below average rainfall. One of the major recommendations of Victorian “Bushfires Review Committee Report was increased funding to the then Forests Commission for fuel reduction. Shortly after the release of the report the Forests Commission was disbanded and formed part of the now Department of Sustainability and Environment. Unfortunately many of the experienced foresters left the Department and this was a major loss to forest management. The changing culture of this Department has allowed the fuel build up to increase with insufficient fuel reduction burns. It is obvious that if the present trend continues vastly increased funding will have to be made available to ensure that forest and Parks are managed in a proper manner.

Reference (c) “The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bush fire prevention, suppression and control”. It must be said at the outset that nothing will prevent bushfires – what we can and must do is lessen the intensity of future bushfires. This can only be achieved by fuel reduction burns at regular intervals and particularly where the forests are adjacent to private properties. There is a need for well maintained fire access routes throughout the forests and surrounding buffer zones within the boundaries of the Crown Lands. If the forest floors have a relatively small fuel level the ensuing bushfire will burn with less intensity and can be suppressed using normal fire fighting methods. Once a fire becomes a “crown” fire, they become unstoppable by normal means. Since “Ash Wednesday” (1983) agencies in Victoria having a fire suppression role are working very closely together and must continue in this vein. I understand that there was some conflict at the fire front by some environmentalists of the Department of Sustainability and Environment in the degree of fire control lines being established. No doubt the Committee will have submissions verifying this fact. There is no doubt that the lack of hazard reduction was the major factor in the severity of the fires that caused so much environmental damage to the forest and private property and must be foremost in the minds of the Review Committee.

Reference (d) “Appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices”. I have already addressed some aspects of this (reference(d)) but can only stress the need to change the culture of land management agencies that have developed over the past few years. There does appear to be a need to review timber extraction from the forests. Hardwood timber extraction must be re-introduced, as it is valuable and sustainable resource in this country. Proper management will ensure that the forests will be protected for the future. I suggest that governments at all levels and of all persuasions “bite the bullet” and reintroduce logging in State Forests as a matter of urgency. The

presence of experienced forest workers with their equipment and access roads will go a long way in the future of forest management. There is ample evidence that cattle grazing in forested areas ensure that the undergrowth is kept at a manageable level. Reintroduction of these industries will all help with fuel reduction. Sensitive environmental areas will need protection from introduced species.

Reference (e) "Any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches and the appropriate direction for research into bushfire mitigation I have already suggested a number of approaches to bushfire mitigation. However there are a number of eminent bushfire research experts eg. Mr Phil CHENEY from the C.S.I.R.O., Mr David PACKHAM and others who will no doubt make submissions to the Committee and who have the expertise to give conclusive evidence.

Reference (f) "The appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires". I do not profess to have any expertise in this matter. However it is obvious that in the past many dwellings and other infrastructure have been built in fire prone areas. They have been destroyed by fire and rebuilt on the same site of the same material. This was due in many cases to insurance companies demanding a replacement, often using the remains of the fire eg. The concrete slab, toilet systems etc as part of the replaced dwelling. Since "Ash Wednesday" I have written a number of articles and recommended that home owners remain with their homes and protect them from the encroaching fires, provided they have taken the necessary preventative actions as recommended by Victorian Country Fire Authority. Having said this it is obvious that there is no place for the elderly, infirm and children in this situation and they must be evacuated well before the fire front arrives. Victoria and South Australia lost 2200 homes in "Ash Wednesday" and there is now ample research which indicated that 1200 homes would have been saved had the owners remained and protected their homes. I do not have any figures, but I suggest that 90% of the homes lost in the Canberra fires did not have their owners present to protect their own assets.

In many areas of Victoria, residents have 'urbanised' the adjacent forested areas of towns and cities.

It is obvious that it is too late to stop this development but local authorities need to look at providing access and egress into and out of these areas. Trees may have to be removed along these roads to ensure that there is ready access for fire appliances and egress for residents in the event of fires. Fallen and burning trees could have dire consequences in these circumstances and may provide evidence for legal action against local governments or those other agencies having management responsibilities.

Reference (g) "The adequacy of current response arrangements for fire fighting" Having been involved in emergency management for the past 27 years, I am satisfied that Victorian's current response capabilities are excellent. I have always been outspoken against a separate fire management plan as Victorians' State Emergency Response Plan (DISPLAN) has been devised to cope with any emerging - man-made or natural and this includes bushfires. In Victoria we have a

well co-ordinated plan to cover all emergencies – large or small and it has proved itself on a daily basis. However with changing staff, there is an ongoing need for training, seminars and practice due to ever changing technology and circumstances. Governments at all levels must be aware of this requirement and budget accordingly to ensure a state of readiness.

Reference (h) “The adequacy of development of fire fighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions.” It does appear that resource sharing between jurisdictions has come into play during the past few years and should be enhanced for the future. Perhaps there is a need to ensure that there is commonality between agencies eg equipment and communications.

Reference (i) “Liability insurance coverage and related matters.” It was obvious by the submissions to the Bushfire Review Committee (1984) that liability was a major concern in fuel reduction and general preparations due to the fact that legal action may be taken against major offenders leading to widespread compensation, which encourages apathy in individuals and within the community in general. Agencies and individuals must be protected from legal action provided their actions were in ‘good faith’ and the aim was fuel reduction within their areas of reasonability.

The matter of a fire levy as part of insurance in outer Melbourne and rural Victoria is a contentious subject. Many residents are not insured or under insured and cost is borne by those responsible persons who are insured. There needs to be some form of compulsory and universal insurance to ensure that all residents play their part in financing the various fire services. This could be included eg. In Council rates thus eliminating the fire levy as part of the current insurance.

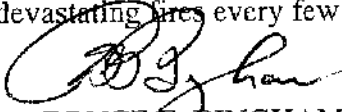
It has been suggested that to ensure the maintenance of volunteers that a discount be offered on fire insurance for volunteers provided that they must first qualify in basic fire fighting skills. This idea has some merit and should be pursued further.

Another subject under “related matters” is evacuation. In Victoria, persons having a pecuniary interest cannot be forcibly evacuated. It appears that this does not form part of the legislation in other States and should be addressed. In Victoria the County Fire Authority is fully supportive of the current and existing legislation and have recommended a “Fire Safety Plan” for every household. The recent fires have indicated that this action has been successful as many resident were saved by the owners remaining and protecting their assets. As I previously stated, this did not appear to be the case in Canberra.

Reference (j) “The roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends taking into account changing social and economic factors.” It is absolutely imperative that volunteers are retained. No State Government can afford the luxury of full time fire fighters across the State. The changing economic situation in rural areas meant that many younger men and women leave for employment in the major cities and town, thus the age of volunteers is ever-increasing. In the past local fire fighters would be called out to combat a fire within their won district. Employers were quite happy to permit their employees to leave in these circumstances. However times have changed and strike force teams are sent out of their areas and in some cases interstate. This does create a financial problem for employers and self-employed fire fighters and

must be addressed. It has been suggested that there would be compensation to the employer or self employed personnel for extended periods combating fires.

CONCLUSION I have made a number of recommendations to date but the over riding factor in the recent fires is the lack of fuel reduction over the past few years that has permitted these fires to be virtually unstoppable. If fuel and hazard reduction is not addressed south-eastern Australia will continue to have these devastating fires every few years



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