

Sub 384

Numbers 03/06/03

Contact:-

Your Ref:-

Our Ref:- 04.15.0 (Rawlings/RG)

29 May 2003.

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir

Re: Submission to House Select Committee on recent Australian bushfires

Recently Bombala Council was involved in the bushfires that spread through the Kosciusko National Park. The information relies on the Council's first hand information and information provided by Rural Fire Service Volunteers during the fires and at the local debrief after the fires.

The fires called on many people from different backgrounds and organisations and was, for this area a major event. In this submission Council has provided the information in the format of the terms of reference of the committee as closely as possible.

Executive Summary

- The recent fires have impacted heavily on road infrastructure.
- The potential financial impact on a small Council to fund a fire of this size is enormous.
- Self employed volunteers would have lost considerable earnings due to being unable to run their farms and businesses.
- Historically the area of the recent fires was regularly burnt, preventing large build up of fuel.
- Information suggests that the fire trail network was not maintained or sufficient to allow good access to some National Park areas for fire fighting purposes.
- There was little support for preventative actions to be taken prior to fires entering into areas ahead of the fire fronts.
- Concerns have been raised as to whether the increasing area of National Parks have been commensurately funded.
- Existing legislation has been put in as a blanket approach without underlying processes in place and this has diverted resources from assessing appropriate development only in traditional rural areas.
- The recent fires highlighted logistics and communication as being problem areas.
- Volunteers expressed concern over the apparent lack of notice taken of local knowledge and experience that they could offer.
- Co-ordination of the various groups and equipment also needed improvement.

..2/..

(a) The extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities

Bombala Council was fortunate that where fires did break out onto private land in the local government area this could be quickly contained. The major cost incurred by the Council was in the damage done to the local road network by the heavy vehicle traffic. Council has identified \$430,000 worth of work that will be required to be undertaken. Some of this work will not need to be undertaken straight away, but other work will, with some having been already carried out to return the road to a safe state. Most of the impact has been due to the life of the roads being severely shortened by the much larger traffic volume and weight than for which the road network was designed to cope. At this stage an application for funding has been lodged, but no response had been received as to what level of funding the Council will receive.

Council also expects to face a minimum cost of around \$16,000 for the costs of fire fighting that can not be claimed back under the Section 44 funding. These are funds the Council does not gain from any other source and will result in other services being reduced to fund the budget shortfall. Fortunately the cost of the Section 44 was undertaken by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Funding the entire cost of the operation would have been beyond the resources Bombala Council has available. The Council is aware of other Councils that have had their resources stretched by taking on this obligation. With what seems to be an increasing number of large fires the issue of who bears the short term costs needs to be reviewed. These events are funded by the NSW State Government. It is considered appropriate that the NSW Government, and it is suggested that the Rural Fire Service is the most appropriate body, incur the cost.

The volunteers will have lost considerable income. Many have effectively lost one month's income, as instead of working their farms they have been involved in the fire fighting activities. This will have the inevitable impact on the local economy as the flow on effect of the lower farm incomes are felt throughout the year.

(b) The causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property

During the time of aboriginal occupation it is commonly accepted burning was a part of the regular maintenance of the areas occupied. That such practices were used in this area are supported by the Botanist and Explorer, Alan Cunningham who wrote, while crossing the Tuggeranong Valley, on 18th April 1824:

"These interesting Downs had been burnt in patches about two months since, and as the tender blade had sprung up, these portions, having assumed a most lively appearance, formed a striking contrast with the deadened appearance of the general surface, still clothed with the vegetation of last year. It was common practice of the aborigines, to fire the country in dry seasons where it was wooded and brushy; to oblige game of the kangaroo kind to quit their covery [sic] and subject themselves to be speared. The object of these people had in view in firing the herbage of clear open tracts was, that as the young grass grew immediately after such an ignition, especially should rain succeed the conflagrations, which often times were very extensive, Kangaroos and Emues [sic] were tempted to leave the forest brushes to feed on the tender shoots, and were thus likewise exposed to their missile weapons."

Historically it is also known that the Kosciusko region was grazed by the early European settlers. Part of the process, according to local history, was to burn off the portions of the land after the stock was moved out of the area. The combination of the grazing and the burning would have significantly reduced the amount of fuel build up.

It needs to be determined as to whether the organisations currently controlling the bush lands are now maintaining the same level of control of the ground fuel that has been carried out by those people previously managing the area. An increase in this level of fuel would result in higher risk of fire and, in the event of a fire, increased severity.

Access to the areas of fire is another issue that can have a large impact on the severity of fires. Anecdotal evidence from the local community indicates that a number of fire trails had not been adequately maintained, allowing for the trails to be overgrown and impassable. Considerable effort was required to re-establish these trails to allow access to the fire areas. The fire trails also provide containment lines and lines from which back burning normally can be carried out. For these reasons it is considered that the reduction of an effective system of fire trails would also have contributed to the intensity and impact of the fires in the Kosciusko National Park and surrounds.

(c) The adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;

While the main fires were burning in the Kosciusko area the management team at the Bombala Fire Control Centre reviewed what was in place to prevent fires spreading from the National Park and doing significant damage to the farmland that surrounds it. It should be noted that in many areas where the fire broke out, jumping containment lines, a situation was created where the emphasis was only on protecting houses and lives. At the time the public message being given out was that it was only a matter of time before the fires reached the Bombala area. Pre-empting the need, a number of firebreaks were created to protect private property and houses. Had the fire escaped the National Park into this area it is considered that this work would have saved large areas of farmland and minimised the danger to households, helping free resources to contain the fire.

Unfortunately there did not seem to be widespread support for such preventative action, with the emphasis being on where the fire actually was. Nor are there funds available for remediation of the areas that have been disturbed by the creation of the firebreaks. Council considers the cost of such works and remediation to be small compared to the cost of additional lost pasture and crop that would occur without the work. These costs should be funded from within the emergency as, similar to insurance, they would save a large amount of money if they were needed.

(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.

In New South Wales an increasing portion of land has been converted to National Parks. Concerns have been raised that there has not been a commensurate increase in the funding of the organisations responsible for maintaining the land. Accordingly proper land management practices are not seen as being carried out as a result of shortfalls of funding. Council does not have any facts on the extent of this or whether it is occurring. Instead this is the opinion of those who have been living in the region for a long time and who have watched the transition of the area over that time.

Great concerns have been expressed by the community over the lack of adequate preventative measures, such as controlled burns, and maintenance of infrastructure such as an adequate fire trail network. These points have been noted previously in this submission.

(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.

Existing changes to the legislation in New South Wales have been put in place through a blanket legislation approach and without the underlying processes being undertaken to ensure the system works adequately. The result of this is that rural areas such as Bombala have the entire area (excluding the towns and villages) nominated as a bush fire prone area. In addition initially no funds were provided to local government with which to establish systems, undertake investigation or to try to get the legislation to work.

Prior to the legislation coming into place many rural areas were already controlling bushfire risks in development. This is an issue that is generally well known of through the traditional rural landowners and is well catered for. The legislation was a reaction to the loss of houses established of primarily urban dwellings in rural lifestyle settings, which was often done only with lifestyle and amenity in mind, and not the potential danger due to fire. It is considered that the impact of this legislation has been to divert resources in most rural areas from proper assessment of applications needing a closer bushfire review due to all applications effectively requiring this.

(g) The adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting.

The recent fires outlined a number of issues with the current approach to fire fighting for large incidents. The Bombala Fire Incident Team was set up relatively late in the overall fire. Yet despite this there were a number of problems, particularly with logistics. It would seem that there is a need for better co-ordination in the set up stage. Perhaps there is a need for the NSW Rural Fire Service to have some of its staff trained in the setting up and running of these Incident Control Centres so that smooth operations can commence from the first stage. It was noted that in the area there was a high reliance on the National Parks and Wildlife Service and NSW Forestry for staffing and professional skills at the top levels of the management. This was considered surprising to many of the volunteers who thought that the Rural Fire Service would have been the most qualified fire fighting personnel.

Logistics and communication were the areas that seemed to have the most problems. For the logistics, this was probably more notable in a small town like Bombala, where the local resources were very quickly soaked up by the influx of people. There may be advantages in setting up a logistic supply chain in advance that can be utilised to run needed goods and supplies into remote areas with short notice.

Communication systems were noted as being inadequate by the Brigade Captains. It was noted that the different organisations had different frequencies, and no common means of communicating. It was also noted that the UHF frequency selected by the NSW Rural Fire Service for communications was not suited to the area. It was pointed out that the best communications were achieved through the Council's VHF radio network.

Concerns were also expressed over the provision of Ambulance services. It was noted that in the early stages of the fire there were services provided close by, but in the later mop up stages these were withdrawn. Local Brigade Captains were of the opinion that this later stage of operation was more dangerous due to the danger of falling burnt trees and the large amount of chainsaw work that is carried out in the mop up work.

It was noted that the standard of fire trails in the area needed to be reviewed. Standards are seen as being required to address a number of problems that existed with access to the fire trails, such as the height of rollovers. It was also identified that improved signposting was required, with a number of signs in poor condition.

Bombala Council has been facing reduced funding for equipment and operations due to the cost of head office activities increasing well in excess of the rate pegging allowances given by the NSW State Government. Council has been maintaining its contribution level in line with rate pegging increases. It has little other choice, as without additional income it cannot increase expenditure. Unfortunately the limitation of rate pegging does not seem to have been imposed on the NSW Rural Fire Service. This has seen an increasing portion of the funds available going outside the area and less available for maintaining fire trails, equipment and training within the area. This is seen as having increasing implications over the longer term for the provision of services. It is considered that over the longer term this trend can only result in a decrease in the adequacy of resources available to fire fighting.

Concerns were also raised at the degree of plastic parts on the fire trucks. The amount of damage caused in the fires highlighted the issues to the Brigades. This raised concerns in their minds as to the potential danger of fumes from the melting plastic parts.

(h) The adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions.

In the debrief of the local Fire Brigade Captains it was noted that there was several incidence where personal protective equipment was not available. In part this related to equipment to meet the current emergency, such as face masks, but concerns were also expressed about the level of personal protective equipment the brigades had overall.

Concerns were also raised at the local level about the lack of local input to the Incident Control Team. Rural Fire Service Volunteer personnel reported difficulty in getting decisions made and in getting staff at the top level to listen to the advice they were giving based on their local knowledge and position on the ground. Some problems occurred due to the fire being controlled through Jindabyne. This extra step in the communication process slowed down the decision making process.

Council also experienced problems with the allocation of resources. Bombala Council was providing graders and water tanks for the effort. On several occasions problems were experienced in getting directions for what activities the plant should be undertaking. On one occasion the Council was not informed that water tanks would not be required due to the fire crews standing down. This resulted in the Council sending out the men and equipment to a deserted fire front.

Another issue experienced by the Council was the ability to supply plant due to the timing of the fire. The first fire (known as the Slaughterhouse Creek fire) occurred over the Christmas period, with the Council having a large portion of its workforce on leave and a number of these out of the local area. This reduced the ability of the Council to respond with the full resources that otherwise would have been available. It is difficult to make a suggestion as to how this could be overcome, but it is a factor that may in the future again slow the provision of resources.

Communication between the incident management team and the Rural Fire Service Volunteers had some problems. The local Fire Captains noted in their debriefs that at one stage they had a liaison in the field from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, while this was in place they felt the communication was

reasonable, but after the liaison position was gone communication deteriorated. This indicates that there is a need to ensure that there is good links made between the various organisations at the ground level.

The provision of maps was seen as a problem area. Local brigades complained of not having maps provided to all crews. Without these maps it was difficult to comprehend what was happening and what was required. It was also noted that often the maps provided did not have grid references, making it difficult to work with and accurately report on. The provision of maps is seen as being an area that was under resourced. A notable comment during the debrief, following a discussion on the merits of a GPS system to allow people to accurately determine their position, was "We can't even get portable weather readers for each crew, let alone a GPS."

Overall without a combination of the resources of the various organisations the fire situation would have been much worse.

(i) Liability, insurance coverage and related matters.

There are concerns over the approach taken to funding of losses through the bush fire. It is understood that people who undertook to insure their property were required to provide for the repairs and losses through their insurance claim. Meanwhile those who did not have insurance received grant assistance. This provides a negative message to people in regard to insurance. Considering that in NSW these insurance policies are a large portion of what funds the Bush Fire Fund it seems to provide a double benefit, in that these people do not contribute to the cost of the fire protection services in the first place and then receive better assistance afterwards. If funding is to be made available to uninsured people an equivalent amount should be available to those who have, rightly insured their property.

(j) The roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

The recent fires did little to improve the relationship with the volunteer fire fighters. During the fires communications with the volunteers was not adequate and during some stages neither was the sustenance provided. There were considerable conflicts because of this and antagonism over perceptions of different treatment for the different groups. More needs to be done to ensure that all people working on the fire are seen to be treated equitably. Many of the small issues became the largest problems. Things like crews from outside the area being fed before and after shifts, while locals were expected to go home after a 12 hour shift and prepare their own meal. This left the volunteers feeling as if they were not considered as important. There has also been expressed a growing feeling that the expertise and experience of the volunteer is being downplayed in preference to the "professional". The volunteers believe strongly in the value of their local knowledge and the value of being on location at the fire and express concern when their information does not seem to be considered in the decision making process.

In addition there are increasing requirements for undertaking training courses. In many incidences the volunteers have been expressing concern over having to undertake training for "skills", chainsaw courses for example, that they feel they are competent in. The system needs to be reviewed to assess competency and then undertake training as needed, rather than the current system that requires training to get the certificate, regardless of the need.

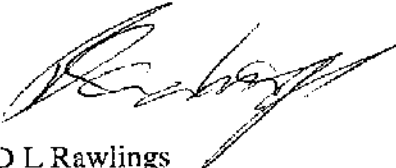
Finally it needs to be recognised that there has been a fundamental change in how these volunteers are treated in New South Wales, and possibly throughout Australia. The volunteers are often taken well away

from the areas they live in and are placed alongside people who are getting paid for the same efforts. Originally the volunteers were protecting their own local area and were working only with volunteers.

This has changed, but the way the volunteers are treated has not. When volunteers are called upon to leave their area or serve in a major incident, consideration needs to be given to their receiving appropriately different treatment. A large portion of the volunteers from this area are self employed or farmers. While they are fighting fires their livelihoods fall behind and their income stops. The belief that the volunteers will still be paid by employees, and accordingly not suffer for being a volunteer, is not normally true in rural areas. Accordingly there needs to be consideration of how these volunteers are to be compensated for their losses while they are acting in this way, whether it be through access to unemployment type benefits or some other form of remuneration, the cost of their service to the state or the country needs to be recognised.

It is hoped that from the experience of these fires, problems can be identified and processes put into place to ensure that an effective system of fire prevention and control is in existence. Such a system needs to fully recognise the efforts that are made by the volunteer fire fighters and the value of their knowledge and experience in dealing with fires in the local terrain and weather. If further clarification is required please contact Council's General Manager, Mr David Rawlings on (02) 6458 3555.

Yours faithfully



D L Rawlings
GENERAL MANAGER