

## Polo Flat Private Airfield & Farm & Disabled Flying Centre

Tuesday, July 01, 2003

### Submission to the Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires

**Background:** The Rural Fire Service asked to use Polo Flat Airfield on 20 January 2003 in a panic, needing to evacuate the aircraft from Jindabyne urgently as the fires had made operations from there dangerous. They remained at our airfield until 24 February, leaving behind a facility so badly damaged that it is still not fully operational. We are still waiting for payment.

#### **Terms of reference:**

(a) from the above, it is apparent that the extent of the impact of this on our assets has been extremely bad. We have had to close the cross strip, severely limit flying operations and cancel disabled flying training courses. With escalating costs and a much reduced income our business may not survive much longer.

(b) to (f) no comment

(g) and (h) It was obvious that there was a serious problem of command and control between the NPWS and NSWRFs as far as the aviation firefighting resources were concerned. Both went on bushfire checks to the same sites, duplicating each others' efforts, and neither seemed able to make an operational decision. A nine to five 'office routine' is not the way to conduct serious bushfire operations and the pilots concerned were frustrated and felt they were wasting their time on the ground. Unfortunately they will not comment publicly as they would be 'black-balled' by the firefighting organisations, and as the aviation industry is already in crisis they are not prepared to jeopardise their future livelihood. Frankly – after 60 years in aviation and having commanded three squadrons and run large airfields, I consider that the lack of experience and amateur approach to the conduct of air operations that was displayed is something that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

(i) no comment

(j) The volunteer firefighters who were operating at our facility were hard-working and we were impressed with their dedication. However, they were unsafe. They had not been trained in several important aspects of equipment use as well as aviation and general workplace safety.

- On the first day the hydrant at our refuelling point was connected to a hose with the wrong fittings, resulting in a massive flood of water which washed out the car park and underneath the administration building.
- They seemed to be totally unaware of the dangers of smoking close to hay stores, aviation fuel dumps, aircraft refuelling points and aircraft (despite regular reminders and signage).
- They had to be constantly reminded to keep clear of aircraft, propellers and moving vehicles.
- Hoses, chemical containers and other obstacles were not kept contained in safe areas. Empty containers and rubbish were allowed litter operational areas and rotor blades and propellers then blew the litter into paddocks, endangering aircraft and our stud animals.
- Chemicals and fuel were several times dumped next to fences, with spillage endangering our animals. Chemical spills have scoured several areas within less than a metre of fences so badly that they are still evident.
- When the threat was declared to be over, everybody just disappeared and left the stores all over the airfield for my wife, myself and a friend to clear up and organise removal. To say that I was unimpressed would be a gross understatement.

In conclusion, I consider that there is a very serious problem with lines of communication, areas of responsibility, delineation of command and control and fundamental knowledge and experience of aviation operations. A two week course and periodic simulated exercises is hardly the way to combat real and deadly bushfires, however enthusiastic the volunteers.