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BUSHFIRE FIGHTING

As a professional forester, I have been engaged in bush-fighting in western Australia and in northern, southern, and mid-western New South Wales, always at the firefront and not merely in administration or logistics.

It is an unpleasant, dirty and often frightening and dangerous activity and my sympathies are with those who have to be or have volunteered to engage in it.

The object of this submission is to offer suggestions to reduce the necessity for people to engage unnecessarily in bushfirefighting, by reducing where possible the number and severity of such fires.

There are two basic premises, almost self evident facts: Small fires can be controlled and extinguished, Large fires can seldom be controlled without great effort and expense and damage and often cannot be put out by any human agency - only the forces of nature, the wind or the rain.

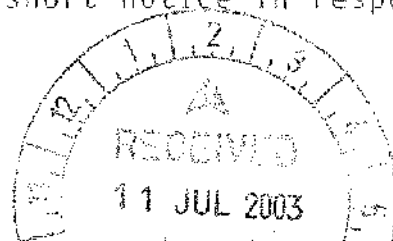
The whole object of Bushfire fighting must therefore be either to prevent the fires from starting(very difficult since many if not most, are caused by human agencies), or by detecting them and controlling them while they are still small and within the range of successful human intervention.

All very good sentiments but how can this be achieved?

1. Early detection - a system of firetowers or similar observation points which will cover most or all areas of possible fire initiations.

These must of course be manned by competent personnel with proper communication facilities so that those responsible for provision or co-ordination of the personnel and equipment can act properly and effectively.

2. The formation and training of 'ready-response' sections (within the present firefighting and organisation bodies) who must be willing to volunteer to act at short notice in response to a call for their services.



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As well as their usual training in firefighting, they will have to be willing to be transported as rapidly as possible (probably mainly by helicopter). Small or spot fires or arsons often occur in places out of reach of wheeled transport. Or difficult of access even on foot by people carrying firefighting equipment - except perhaps the McLeod tool (rakehoe).

At any rate, it is essential that they arrive fresh and untired with adequate equipment and necessary supplies as near as possible to the source or area of the still small fires.

If necessary a water carrying helicopter can back them up if they found it helpful to have such assistance. Good radio communication between all involved is essential.

The task complete, or if they are in danger of being overwhelmed, they can be retrieved by the most helpful and comfortable method.

This method does not mean that the present procedures are to be superseded but enhanced. Even if the 'ready-response' cannot completely extinguish the initial fire they will make it more possible for the regular forces to apply their method more successfully and efficiently and to 'control' the fire before it becomes too big and uncontrollable.

Whatever is done by present methods, with all the efforts and goodwill, fires will 'get away' but if we can reduce their numbers by putting out many 'small fires' it will be a great advantage and improvement.

It may be argued that this R/R method will be difficult to implement and be very costly. The argument is specious as the present cost of bushfires is not just the cost of firefighting and loss of homes and property and sometimes lives. The enormous damage to the ecology, the plants, trees, birds and animals damaged or killed in large uncontrolled fires, not to forget the impact on the so called 'greenhouse effect' which is not just ephemeral are not taken into account or even attempted to be estimated.

Yours faithfully,

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