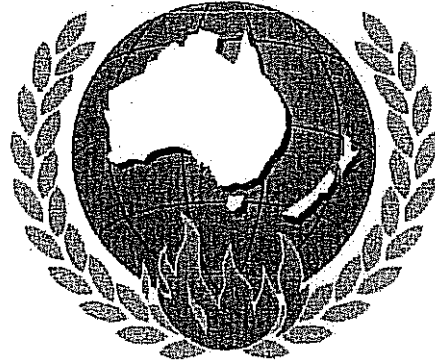


**AUSTRALASIAN ASSEMBLY OF
VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE
ASSOCIATIONS**



**The Australasian Assembly
of Volunteer Fire Brigade
Associations Inc.**

RESPONSE

TO THE

**NATIONAL INQUIRY ON BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT,
PREVENTION AND MITIGATION**

**CONDUCTED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS**

DECEMBER 2003

SUBMISSION FROM THE AUSTRALASIAN ASSEMBLY OF VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE ASSOCIATIONS TO THE COAG NATIONAL INQUIRY ON BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT, PREVENTION AND MITIGATION

Preamble:

The central outcome of the various inquiries following the bushfires of last summer is that for the foreseeable future the volunteer firefighter is fundamental to all our considerations.

The flexible skilled labour force and professionalism that volunteers provide in vast numbers enables fires to be fought at minimum cost. If they were to be paid at normal rates no government would be prepared to meet such costs.

With that in mind it is essential that any decision to be made that will affect the volunteers, involve those volunteers in the decision making process. This is especially so when changes or extensions to the current workload they accept are considered. For example to propose a vast increase in the level of fuel reduction burning and assume that volunteers would participate is presumptuous and requires extensive consultation.

The difficulties and frustrations of volunteers have also been evident when bodies having responsibilities for the volunteers have made decisions supposedly in their best interests without consulting them. Volunteers who have been made to stand back and wait when their natural instincts and past experience have suggested taking affirmative action are justifiably angry in such situations.

The fire prevention measures that state or local government can impose upon private landholders are generally accepted as the appropriate approach to bring about fire prevention

When state, territory or local governments, which are exempt from such legal requirements, consequently fail to carry out the prevention measures they impose on private citizens, it is a source of deep frustration, resentment and annoyance. This is particularly so when those volunteers are then called upon to fight fires within that government land. Perhaps all government land managers should be bound by the same rules and those rules be enforced by the fire service.

One other thing that must be borne in mind was the unique nature of the fires of last summer. The time duration as well as the extent of the fires was unprecedented. If however this is now to be repeated in the future, the whole issue of our approach needs to be reconsidered. There is some evidence to suggest that long-term climate change could indeed bring about such circumstances.

1. Outcomes of various inquiries.

House of Representatives Inquiry

We are aware that the 58 recommendations of the House of Representatives Bushfire Committee were essentially agreed unanimously by the members of the committee. However a number of those recommendations affect or relate to other bodies, such as the Bushfire CRC, "volunteer firefighters" or the various states. For the Federal Government to adopt

these recommendations without first consulting with the affected bodies would be a slap in the face to the very people on whom the government is dependent and to be counter productive.

For example, the recommendations concerning the various concessions offered to volunteer firefighters arose from the recommendations of one state based volunteer organization. In making its recommendations the particular organization didn't have time to widely canvass its constituents to determine if they agreed to such proposals. In any case it would seem that the actual implementation of recommendation 27 would be open to abuse. It would seem to be far better to identify such issues and consult widely with the affected groups before a decision is reached to adopt such a recommendation.

We are encouraged from our discussions with some members of the now officially disbanded House Select Committee that they retain a continuing interest in having their recommendations put into effect. We understand that the government minister now responsible to act on those recommendations is being urged to respond prior to the COAG Inquiry report being submitted. We submit that those recommendations should be subjected to consultation with the volunteers prior to adoption. This may mean that some recommendations are not acted upon at this time. We see that as an appropriate outcome.

Victorian (Esplin) Report

The Victorian Inquiry conducted by the Emergency Services Commissioner can be seen as fine tuning of an already sophisticated operation. The lessons learned over recent years regarding cooperation between the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the CFA were put into effect. The Commissioner identified a number of deficiencies and in more than 150 recommendations spelled out ways to overcome them.

There has been some criticism of a number of his recommendations, but by and large these criticisms involved degree rather than total opposition to the recommendation.

The Commissioner and the Victorian Government have been satisfied and warmly appreciative of the fire suppression efforts on the part of both professional and volunteer firefighters. The government's willingness to consult with the volunteers through their associations has produced an increased level of confidence.

There is no doubt that the Victorian Inquiry and the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Victorian fires saw the same thing in two different ways. We recognize that it is the role of the COAG Inquiry to look at these different approaches and form its own opinion.

ACT (McLeod) Report

The Inquiry report is a clear demonstration that the fires faced by Australia's smallest fire service were totally overwhelming.

The report implies if certain actions were taken immediately upon ignition of the fires that eventually raced into the Canberra suburb of Duffy the fires would not have inflicted such damage.

The benefit of such hindsight should not be used to criticize the actions taken at the time without also acknowledging that the fuel management regime adopted around Canberra led directly to such intense fires.

The fuel management regime had previously been criticized and the extent of such fires was predicted.

The lesson from Canberra is that in such interface situations (between forest and residential areas), unless the fuel has been reduced, losses of this nature are inevitable when the coincidence of climate and topography come together.

For that reason, the fuel management recommendations in the McLeod report should be adopted widely in similar interface situations.

2. Building agreement between volunteers and fire authorities as to what can reasonably be expected of them.

Charters

The Victorian volunteer associations reached agreement in 2001 (the Year of the Volunteer), with the Country Fire Authority and the Government to consult widely on all issues affecting the volunteer firefighters.

There are other agreements and memorandums of understanding derived from this Charter that exist in other states as well.

What they all demonstrate is the willingness and commitment to consult, recognizing that the volunteers by their efforts are worthy of such consideration. This culture of consultation is now becoming entrenched within the organization. Managers at all levels recognize that effective decision making follows effective consultation and that volunteers who have been consulted bring even greater commitment to their tasks.

It is essentially an issue of all governments demonstrating respect and understanding for the largest volunteer workforce in Australia.

The Lake Bennett Declaration

At its recent conference in Lake Bennett (NT) the Assembly called upon the Federal Government to extend that process of consultation across all state governments and across the political divide by proposing a annual consultation between fire service ministers, the Prime Minister and Federal Leader of the Opposition and volunteers, to identify issues that they agree upon and to take to take action jointly to implement them recognizing that normal political divisions are not appropriate in such circumstances.

3. The issues that need to be the subject of consultation with volunteers.

Length of commitment in "Campaign" fires.

The term "campaign" has been used to characterize the new fire regime our volunteers have been concerned with over the last decade.

The first such campaign fire involved the interstate tasking of firefighters essentially to **fires** in New South Wales.

With repeated incidents of such fires over the last decade the tactics and logistics operations have been refined and now the interstate transfer of firefighting resources is as sophisticated as any military commander could wish.

The essential characteristic of such “campaign” fires has been their extended duration.

When volunteers from the various states and territories made their personal commitments to participate they did so in the expectation of their involvement being for a limited period.

They were able to forego work, take recreational leave, use public holidays, and have their pay made up by their government or private employer, or put off to the future, paid work yet to be done. In effect they were able to minimize the personal economic effect on themselves and their families. It should also be acknowledged that for some participation was a free holiday to do what they like to do in new surroundings. The camaraderie involved in such a commitment has always been an important reason to participate.

With the fires of the last summer Victorians had their own “campaign” to contend with. Not only did they return to New South Wales but had the opportunity to work with interstate firefighters in their own backyard, the Gippsland and northeast forests.

Fire fighting campaigns have also been conducted to the United States on a number of occasions. Such participation has been limited to firefighters and incident managers rather than vehicles. The experience transferred to their own firefighting service has convinced managers as to the benefits of such involvement.

The North East & Gippsland fires last summer involved commitment over a seven week period. By the end managers were both aghast and concerned that the operation went so long and covered such a vast area.

The drain on both financial and human resources have given them cause to think. Is this the start of a long period of such fires? Do they need to consult with the volunteers as to what they can expect in the future in the way of volunteer commitment?

In a similar way those volunteers who did participate actively in the campaign fires have somehow been portrayed as different to their fellow members who stayed to organize or to maintain their local firefighting capacity. The campaigners were provided with mementoes of various sorts, public receptions and the general recognition as “heroes.” It is important that the volunteers be recognized for their efforts but equally the volunteers who remained behind should not be alienated from their fellows.

4. Involvement in fire prevention, burning off activities.

One of the prime recommendations of the various inquiries is that extensive fuel reduction should be carried out to limit the extent and reduce the intensity of subsequent wildfires.

We accept that proper fuel management regimes are an essential part of the protection of private and community assets. These community assets should be seen to include both the natural and built environment.

As mentioned above we believe that in the same way there is a legal obligation on private landholders to reduce the threat of fire escaping their property to their neighbours the same obligation needs to be accepted by local and state government land managers.

They must bear the full cost of the fuel reduction required and that includes the cost of labour to carry out that fuel reduction.

It may be that volunteer firefighters are involved in that fuel reduction. It should not be automatically expected that “you are volunteers, you do it for nothing.”

There needs to be consultation with those volunteers to determine just what will be the arrangements under which the work will be done.

The nature of the requirement for fuel reduction on private or public land in order to protect neighbouring assets needs to be decided. It may be considered essential on an overall land management that particular areas are fuel reduced to a greater extent and that work is carried more frequently.

It may be that volunteer brigades are more willing to carry out such work on a voluntary capacity to develop defensible areas in order to protect the brigade area, and its assets for which they are responsible.

Whatever the situation it is now essential that ongoing consultation be established and that new ground rules are developed.

5. Impacts of fuel reduction burning

With a much increased regime of fuel reduction burning there will inevitably be a range of criticisms and concerns expressed by members of the general public.

There will be complaints about the extent of the smoke produced and the effects of the smoke. Certain people who have respiratory problems will be adversely affected and those responsible for the burning may face public criticism and possibly civil action as a result of such medical impacts.

It is a problem that needs to be addressed at a government level in terms of the legal situation and also it is an appropriate area for research by the Bushfire CRC as the House of Reps Inquiry suggests.

Fuel reduction doesn't always require burning off. It can include heavy grazing, mechanical or chemical removal. These are also activities that introduce their own problems. Once again it requires thorough planning and discussion if the fire risk is to be reduced to manageable proportions.

6. Specific issues Recommendation 26 of the House of Representatives Report

We are pleased to see that the Report of the House of Representatives Committee has taken up our suggestion for EMA, AFAC and the Assembly to work together to bring about the standardization of equipment, procedures and communication across Australia.

We strongly endorse the submission provided under separate cover by Mr. Rex Hall AFSM Chairman of the Cross Border Joint Working Party, set up by the Assembly and involving the South Australian and Victorian Rural Fire Brigade Associations.

In their response and in comments made to the Assembly's Conference it is clear that whilst their work has been specific to the Victorian-South Australian border the issue should be seen Australia wide.

It is an area for governments to work closely together. At its recent conference in the Northern Territory our delegates saw the last few kilometers of the standard gauge rail link being put into place. They are firmly resolved that the standardization of fire hoses and other equipment across Australia should not also take a century.

7. Community Education

Whilst fuel reduction plays a significant part in the management of fire suppression it is only a tool in an arsenal when it comes to the management of the impact of bushfires. A complementary and arguably increasingly successful tool is that of community education. In many states, particularly in NSW and Victoria, highly successful community education programs played large part in mitigating the impact of bushfires over the last two seasons,

Community education is also an area where volunteers have shown an extraordinary degree of interest and commitment, For example, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service has run an annual Community Education Conference for its volunteers over the last 7 years. The interest from volunteers has now reached such proportions that the conference has had to relocate closer to Sydney to find suitable size venues.

In closing we must emphasize that consultation with volunteers in the development o future responses to bushfire emergencies is essential to the continuance of a viable professional volunteer firefighting force.