

SUBMISSION TO THE COAG INQUIRY ON BUSHFIRE MITIGATION AND MANAGEMENT

FROM EUROBODALLA SHIRE COUNCIL

Introduction

This Shire suffered fires in December 2001 to January 2002 and November to December 2002. Staff and volunteers, from a variety of agencies across Australia, have demonstrated the ability and willingness to work together to fight fires that had the potential to seriously impact on the built environment. Fortunately through the efforts of the firefighters the fires were largely able to be contained to National Park and State Forests land.

Eurobodalla Shire Council and its community are extremely grateful to the volunteers and paid personnel who gave of their time, skill and energy to fight and contain these fires

This submission is provided by way of comment against the terms of reference.

Term of reference:

the impact of bushfires on the environment, human life, property and the economy;

Comment

- *There was a significant impact on water quality in the Moruya River which resulted in the need for a high level dosing with chlorine to ensure potable water quality standards were maintained.*
- *The commonwealth/state government in a joint funding arrangement, could resource the acquisition and indexed library management of satellite and aerial imagery for:*
 - *analysing the extent of fire scar after each wildfire event;*
 - *mapping the extent of hazard reduction annually;*
 - *analysing the extent that hazard reduction altered the path or intensity of wildfire;*
 - *analysing the vegetation communities resistance to wildfire with view to encouraging planting those species in urban fringe areas subject to fire attack;*
 - *the effect of hazard reduction and wildfire on water catchment run-off and water quality;*
 - *providing the mapped and analysed information to local governments for updating fire risk constraint maps for land use planning and development assessment, and for preparation of statutory State of the Environment Reports annually.*

Term of reference:

the impacts of fire mitigation strategies, such as hazard reduction, on the environment, human life, property and the economy;

Comment

- *It was observed that the fires in the most recent fire burnt through areas that had burnt in the wildfires less than 12 months previously.*
- *It would be beneficial to:*
 - *assess the life-cycle effect of resources expended in hazard reduction and rehabilitation of landforms/vegetation/habitat and public and private buildings after a fire event, compared to infrastructure investment in utilising urban wastewater for firefighting and ecological investment in creating introduced ecosystems by planting risk areas with fire-resistant vegetation communities;*
 - *assess the life-cycle effect of resources expended in hazard reduction and rehabilitation of landforms/vegetation/habitat and public and private buildings after a fire event, compared to Research and Development investment and subsidised construction of buildings and structures in fire resistant materials.*

Term of reference:

bushfire mitigation strategies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land, other open space areas adjacent to urban development and private property;

Comment

Consideration should be given to:

- *revising the effect of NSW state planning legislation on ad hoc/site specific development assessment decisions in terms of cumulative effect of clearing on vegetation/habitat and run-off to waterways;*
- *the effectiveness of asset protection zones (APZ) by clearing as a tool to protect private and public buildings;*
- *the effectiveness of the legal (conveyancing) tools requiring property owners to maintain APZ, fire trails, boundary clearances and escape routes;*
- *upgrading the Building Code of Australia (BCA) to mandate the construction of buildings and structures in fire resistant materials and provide onsite storage and pumps for water for firefighting in identified and mapped high fire risk areas;*
- *upgrading state planning policies to prohibit residential occupation of defined densities in extreme fire risk areas;*
- *establishing a mechanism to plan and design for infill or linear mitigation measures where developments or subdivisions do not occur “in line”;*

- *a mandatory requirement through legislation to master-plan urban and rural residential subdivisions to incorporate fire mitigation measures including flora/fauna assessments, emergency access and escape, slope, wind direction etc. This may include use of ridgelines and gullies through clustering of vegetation communities, species and stands of trees to reduce intensity and transport of fire;*
- *introducing vegetation communities resistant to wildfire with a view to encouraging planting those species in urban fringe areas subject to fire attack;*
- *implementing community title approaches to hazard reduction, placing obligation, investment and risk on property owners, rather than public purse;*
- *upgrading the Building Code of Australia (BCA) to mandate the requirement for the construction of buildings and structures to be in fire resistant materials and provide on-site storage and pumps for water for firefighting in identified and mapped high fire risk areas;*
- *upgrading state planning policies to prohibit residential occupation of defined densities in extreme fire risk area.*

Term of reference:

the use of existing fire fighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency of resource use and co-operation between agencies and between jurisdictions;

Comment

- *Resources should be allocated to contain fires as soon as possible after ignition has occurred. This will often require air attack by water bombers on fires in remote areas started by lightning strikes. Such allocation of resources is cost prohibitive for local government, outside of a Sec 44 declaration. It is therefore vital that provision be made in the legislation for prompt state government financial resourcing of fire fighting. This must be available prior to the fire becoming sufficiently large for a usual Sec 44 declaration to be made. By the time the declaration is traditionally made the need for commitment of resources is significantly greater. The Fire Control Officer or RFS Regional Manager needs to have delegated authority to make the Sec 44 declaration.*
- *It is however satisfying to record that a number of fires that resulted from lightning strikes were able to be extinguished very quickly through aerial water bombing during the course of the most recent Sec 44 declaration in this Shire. This reduced the number of fires that had to be addressed by the Incident Management Team.*
- *There is a significant need to provide administrative support to the fire fighting operation in a variety of roles. This support does not require fire fighting expertise and was generally provided by Council staff and volunteers from within the community. It was however pleasing to note the willingness of other government departments, to also make staff available for this role, should the fires have continued.*

- *The ability to resource share was impeded in one area. This is the area of computer based mapping. Computer generated maps are used to record fireground planning and to communicate tasks to brigade captains. Difficulties arose because of the incompatibility between Council's mapping system (GIS) and that used by National Parks. (Council uses Mapinfo and NPWS uses Arcview). It is understood that the RFS utilises Mapinfo and it would have been extremely beneficial if all other Agencies used the same system.*

Term of reference:

the adequacy of infrastructure and human resources for fire mitigation purposes;

Comment

- *The prolonged duration of recent bushfires placed great demands on the volunteers. This often resulted in personal loss in terms of:*
 - *loss of employment or pay;*
 - *cost of vehicle to travel to RFS pick up points etc.*
- *As a considerable number of volunteers are employed by Council, they were encouraged to take on additional shifts. Council was more easily able to sustain their time away from work and did of course continue to pay such staff. There needs to be recognition of the additional costs sustained by Council in the loss of productivity from these staff whilst they are involved in fire fighting or carrying out administrative support roles.*