

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No, 5

INQUIRY INTO THE NEW SOUTH WALES RURAL FIRE SERVICE

At Sydney on Tuesday 29 February 2000

The Committee met at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. R S. L. Jones MLC(Chairman)
The Hon. R. T.M. Bull MLC
The Hon. J. H. Jobling MLC
The Hon. J. R. Johnson MLC
The Hon. A. B. Kelly MLC
The Hon. D. E. Oldfield MLC(substitute for the Hon M. Jones)

130 or so local bushfire management committees, so that that argument can be put forward for a whole range of mitigation and other measures. However, I am pleased to say that the land management authorities take very seriously their responsibility. They do not always achieve their objectives, of course, because there are a whole range of considerations, not the least of which are weather and financial considerations. The system as a whole works quite energetically to bring about the desired result. It does not always achieve that result, but it tries hard to do so.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFELD: Having implemented those recommendations, do you have any data that establishes the extent of compliance?

Mr KOPERBERG: Yes, indeed we do, but not at hand. We regularly monitor the rate of compliance regarding the preparation of operational plans, referring specifically to the matter that you raise, Mr Oldfield, the rate at which risk management plans are complied with. I would be happy to provide that data if the inquiry wishes me to do so.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Commissioner, how much faith do you have in the effectiveness of fixed-wing water bombing?

Mr KOPERBERG: It depends upon the aircraft. I believe we bring to bear whatever technology can offer us, providing it is cost effective. We have had this argument raging about whether to use huge, converted military aircraft or fancy aeroplanes from Canada, and what have you. We are able to demonstrate, on the basis of cents per litre of water delivered, and the preferred option of the majority of firefighters, farmers and landholders, that agricultural aircraft are effective. They are quick and manoeuvrable, and they have the tremendous advantage of being able to land almost anywhere—in a paddock, on a road, on a track—fill up quickly, and become airborne again. So we use agricultural aircraft extensively. To that extent, we have some 200 casual contractors who have made themselves available for deployment across the State.

I must add that local government is at liberty at any time to engage such aircraft, and it is able to reclaim the cost of doing so from the State. In addition to that, there are four aircraft on permanent contract: two large helicopters, which have the advantage of being able to work in mountainous country and drop their loads precisely where they need to drop them, complemented by fixed-wing aircraft, which can cover greater distances and are particularly effective in grass fires, for instance.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Commissioner, why was not water bombing employed in the Wingelo fire?

Mr KOPERBERG: With the benefit of hindsight, it would have been. But, if we were to send an aircraft to every one of the thousands of fires that occur in New South Wales every year, we would need a fire-fighting force of a considerable number of aircraft. Who knows? Maybe as many as 6,000 aircraft would be needed to deal with all those fires. There was no indication that the Wingelo fire would lead to an event that would cost a life. Indeed, the fire was of such magnitude as to not even have been reported to us.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFELD: Is it corrected that there were aircraft on standby for that fire and that they were not employed?

Mr KOPERBERG: No, it is not. The aircraft were in fact on standby for a major fire that had been burning for some considerable time in the catchment area, the Lake

Burraborang area, which was a major campaign fire threatening adjoining townships and villages and indeed Sydney's water supply, Aircraft were used extensively on that fire. Might I reiterate, Mr Chairman, that the Wingelo fire was not even considered to be sufficiently significant to be reported as a notifiable incident. The fact is that those people were dealing with flame heights of a meter or thereabouts. As has been explained to and accepted by the Coroner, a micro-burst occurred—which is a sudden downward movement of air—causing the fire to fan and erupt quite quickly, causing the firefighters to be overrun.

But, of course, the claims about aircraft having to be applied invariably are made by those with a vested interest in having their aircraft attend. On this occasion, such was certainly the case, Mr Adams provided testimony to the Coroner, which the Coroner noted but took no further. We gave an extensive overview of why an aircraft was not used—simply because there was in that fire no foreseeable circumstances in which suppression would have been aided and abetted by the application of an aircraft.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: You could understand—if you would excuse the pun—the inflammable nature of the next question that I will ask. There has been a consistent allegation made to me in different parts of the State to which I have travelled in the past few weeks relative to the hearings that are taking place. I will ask Mr Rheinberger this question, so I think it is only fair to ask both of you the same question. There is an allegation, strange as it might seem, that when private property is not under direct threat, where fires are essentially in purely bush areas, those fires are not tackled quickly enough and that, to a degree, there is even a policy to allow them to enlarge. What do you say to that allegation?

Mr KOPERBERG: I think it is absurd. I could demonstrate the absurdity of that claim by referring to what occurred in the Blue Mountains in the past couple of weeks. There, remote fires of no threat to anybody in the foreseeable future were the subject of massive suppression action, on one occasion by no less than six aircraft and some dozens of firefighters. Those fires could have burnt in that sort of country for weeks on end and hardly be noticed, let alone impact on any property. Quite the contrary to the claim is the case. In fact, we regard all fire, unless it is within prescribed parameters as part of a hazard reduction operation, as fire in need of attention.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Commissioner, in response to my question about aircraft not being employed at Wingelo and whether it was correct that those aircraft were on standby and were not used, you said that in fact they were on standby for a much larger fire. However, in your answer to the question that I just asked you, you said that small fires in the Blue Mountains that did not pose any great danger or would not damage property were in fact suppressed very quickly by no less than six aircraft. How would you explain the apparent conflict in those two answers?

Mr KOPERBERG: Very simply. The prevailing weather conditions on the occasion at Wingelo did not indicate—as was subsequently proven, because it in fact rained within a very short space of time—that that fire, which was small and insignificant, ultimately would have led to anything. The local authority that had charge of that fire was quite satisfied that the forestry units and brigade units that attended were capable of handling that fire. It was only a unique circumstance that changed that fire environment.

On the other hand, the fire in the Blue Mountains to which I referred was one which was burning in remote seas—under very dry, hot and windy conditions—and ultimately would have had the capacity to become a very large fire that would necessitate the use of extensive resources and threatening all manner of assets, though that would have been

well down the track. But, to ignore that fire when the technology was there would have been unwise. In *my* event, the local authority had called for a particular resource—in this case aircraft—end we gave *them* that resource; whereas, at Wingelo, such a resource *was* not recognised as being needed, nor *was* it asked for.

The Hon. J. H. JOBLING: Mr Smith, you expressed very strong views about minority views and you referred to a submission by Mr Henk Luf of the Rural Volunteer Fire Fighters Association, and to certain allegations. As the submission, which was dated 24 January, is a public document, have you sought to meet with Mr Luf or investigate the matters raised by Mr Luf?

Mr SMITH: Mr Chairman, I have not done that. But, as I said in my closing statement, I would very much appreciate if this inquiry could put to Mr Luf the very questions that I posed. If he has any evidence of that nature, I would certainly urge *him* to place that evidence before the appropriate authority.

The Hon. J. H. JOBLING: Why did you not *make* an approach yourself?

Mr SMITH: Basically, because I believe Mr Luf does not have the evidence.

Mr KOPERBERG: Could I provide supplementary advice on that matter, Mr Chairman?

CHAIR: Certainly.

Mr KOPERBERG: The nature of the RVFFA allegations range, as I said, from petty theft on the one hand to what could only be described as abuses of human rights on the other hand, and just about everything in between. The RVFFA has been told on many occasions, during meetings with Assistant Commissioner Tony Howe and others, that if they believe any of those things are going on, *they* should ensure that they bring those things to the notice of the appropriate authority. Indeed, the RVFFA late last year published a statement that allegations of corruption would be substantiated in January 2000. January has come and gone and we are still waiting.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: I do not have a question, Rather, I issue a challenge. It has *been* suggested that increasing the level of communication might be an advantage to the service. I would challenge you to better the communications that I received from the service and from you, Mr Commissioner, via a recent Wellington newspaper. Those communications are contained in full-page items on the front and third pages. There are further communications on pages 4 and 5, with accompanying photographs. On page 5 on the newspaper is an item to do with you presenting my cousin With the keys to a new tanker. On the next page are some 12 items, making a total of about 18 altogether. I am sure every member of this Committee would be delighted to even equal that level of communication that you and your service received. I sure would like to know how you managed that level of coverage in my local newspaper!

Mr KOPERBERG: Mr Kelly, I would be happy to assist any aspiring local members in that regard.

CHAIR: The Rural Fire Service annual report for 1988-99 indicates that a five-year strategic plan has been developed. Could the Committee have a copy of that?

Water bombers sat idle

LETTIA ROWLANDS

AIRCRAFT fitted with water-bombing equipment sat idle as a volunteer firefighter perished trying to contain a nearby blaze at ground level, a court heard yesterday.

The inquest into the death of David Quinlivan was told three fixed-wing aircraft were at Camden on New Year's Day last year as fire ravaged the Wingello State Forest.

Mr Quinlivan, 45, died when he and seven of his colleagues were forced to take shelter from a fierce firestorm in their tanker.

Yesterday solicitor Mark

Inquest told why planes not used

Howard, representing two of the firefighters injured in the blaze, asked NSW Rural Fire Services training services manager Phillip Robeson why the aircraft were not brought in to help fight the blaze.

Mr Robeson, who has investigated the incident on behalf of the Rural Fire Service, said it would have been an ineffective use of resources to use the aircraft to fight the blaze.

"I would not have thought the use of aircraft was appropriate for this sort of fire, aircraft have a very specific use," Mr Robeson said.

"There were numerous other fires burning which would have been a more appropriate use of the aircraft.

"I do not believe in this particular situation it was the most effective use of resources [to bring in the aircraft]."

The inquest was told the planes, which had been commissioned to fight fires in the Wollondilly Shire, were a 30-minute flight away from Wingello at the time of the fire but received no requests for assistance.

Mr Robeson said certain criteria had to be met to justify

the use of aerial fire bombings for bushfires.

He told the inquest the fire must be located in rugged terrain and be inaccessible to crews at ground level.

The area must also be clear of any ground crew before water bombing could begin, he said.

The inquest has been told the Wingello crew was sent into the forest to carry out back-burning procedures in an effort to control a fire already in the area.

The group were in a radio

"blackspot" which left them without any communication with their command post as a change in weather swept through the area.

The change caused another fire to start and led to the eight volunteer firefighters being trapped in the tanker amid the flames.

Andrew Neale, John Luke Jnr, Mike Young, Roger Robinson, Mike Neale, Gale Pritchett and her husband Frank were all injured in the blaze.

Mr Quinlivan's body was found slumped in the driver's seat of the burned-out tanker.

The inquest, at Bowral Courthouse before coroner John Abernethy, continues today.

Ash Wednesday repeat feared

MELBOURNE — Victorian firefighters were primed, fearing a repeat of the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires, after unprecedented dry winter weather throughout the state.

With summer a month away, firefighters have already fought a spate of bushfires following one of the driest winters in more than a century.

In a possible taste of things to come, fire threatened houses after burning through more than 50 hectares of pine trees near Creswick in the Ballarat region, west of Melbourne, yesterday.

Fire authorities said that detailed planning had put firefighting crews at a high state of readiness for a long, hot and dry summer.

"It's the highest level we have had since

1982-83. It's also the earliest we have had to be prepared," said Fabian Crowe, fire prevention manager with the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE).

His comment referred to the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983 which killed 47 people. This year the fire threat could be greater than that experienced in 1983, Mr Crowe said.

Mr Crowe said there had been 101 forest fires since July 1, compared with the average of 52 between July and October. The Country Fire Authority (CFA) had battled up to 500 fires since July 1, which was double the average, he said.

"The fires have been very flighty. The rates of spread and intensity are far greater than

we would normally expect at this time of the year," Mr Crowe said.

Victoria's Bureau of Meteorology senior meteorologist Harvey Stern said the last 13 months had been the driest since 1878-79 in central Victoria, which included the Melbourne area and west and south Gippsland.

This was "an exceptional event as far as dry weather is concerned", Dr Stern said.

More than 71,000 CFA firefighters and 2000 DNRE firefighters were heavily involved in planning for the summer.

Seventeen aircraft were available to fight fires this year, four more than last year, and the emphasis would be to attack from the air as the first response to a fire.

The Daily Advertiser, Saturday, October 25, 1997 5

NEW 23 AIRCRAFT

Bushfire air raid

SIX aircraft and 170 firefighters were trying to control a blaze in rough rock and scrub in Victoria's south-west last night.

The blaze had swept through about 170 hectares of land on the shores of Lake Corangamite, near Pombornet, the Country Fire Authority said.

"The fire is on private property and is not threatening any homes at the moment. One shed has been lost," a CFA spokesman said.

The fire, which broke out about 3.20pm, was being fought by 23 CFA fire trucks as well as the planes, he said.

\$4m bushfire boost

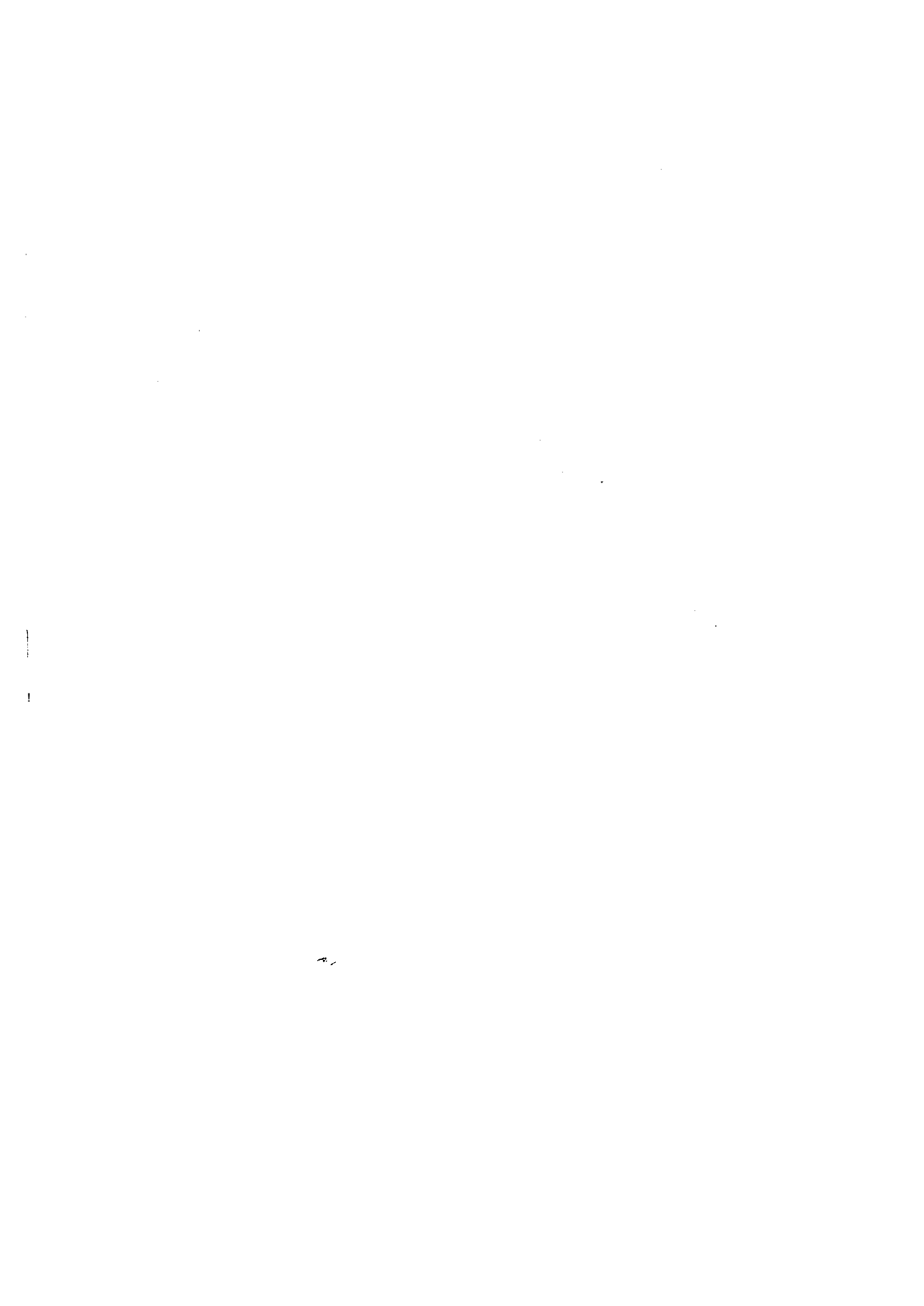
VICTORIA'S country firefighters yesterday received a \$4 million boost ahead of a predicted high risk summer fire season.

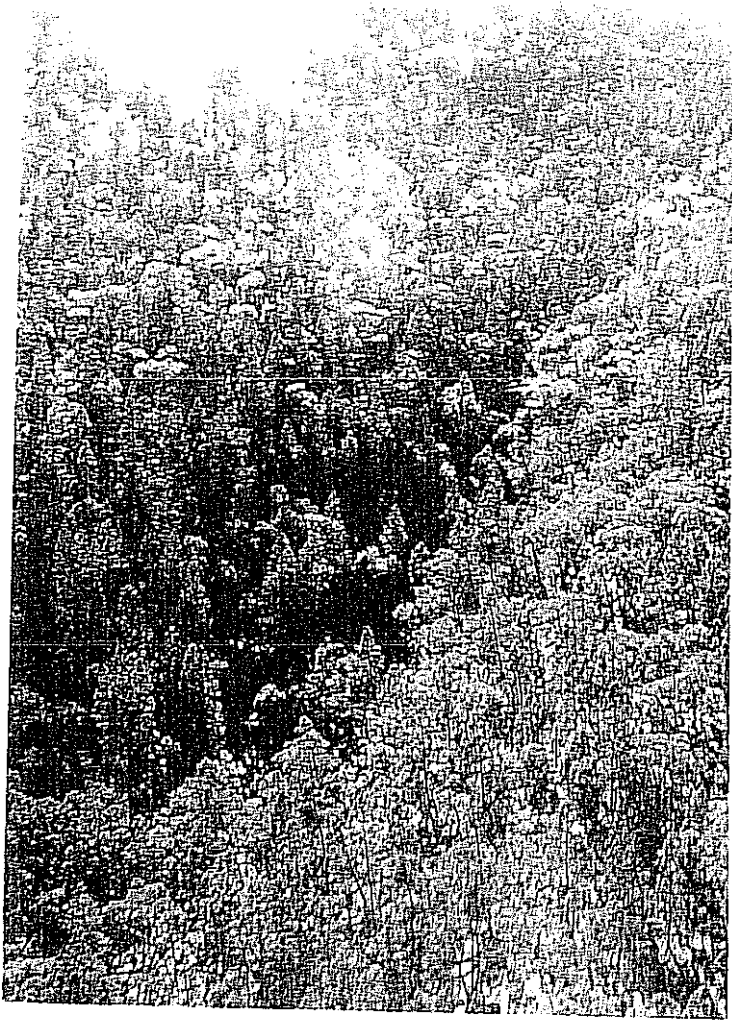
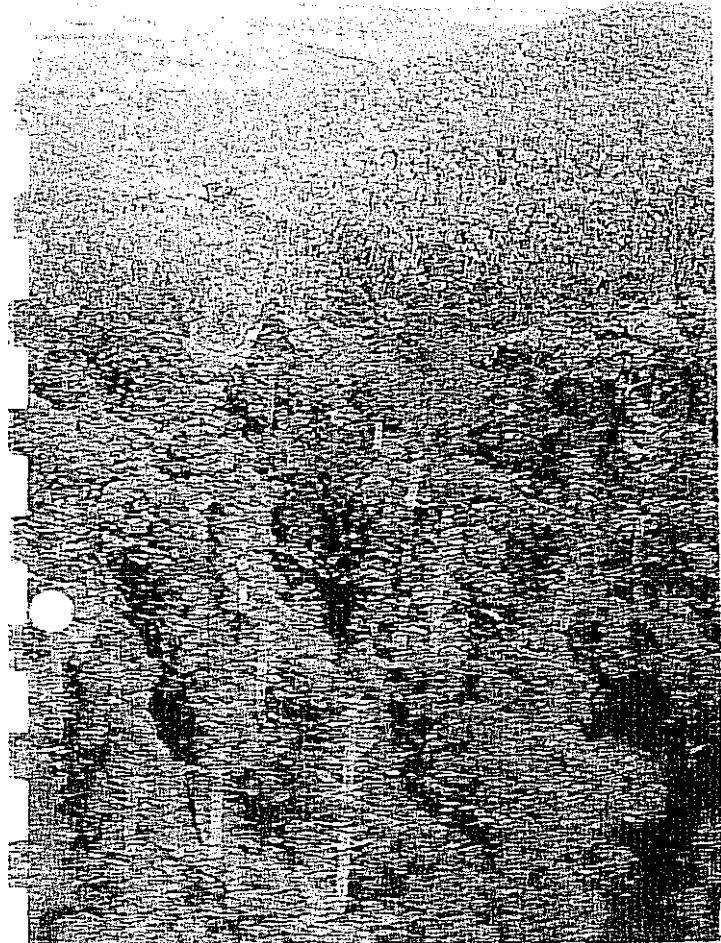
Emergency Services Minister Andre Haermeyer said the Country Fire Authority (CFA) would receive a cash injection of \$3.5 million for aerial support and heavy equipment and \$500,000 for new uniforms.

"We want to ensure, when they go into an extremely dangerous environment, the best available equipment and clothing to provide them with maximum protection," he said.

Mr Haermeyer also named public servant Bruce Esplin as the State's first emergency services commissioner. The new office would ensure the best coordination of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the CFA and the State Emergency Services, he said.

24—THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, www.news.com.au, Tuesday, December 28, 1999—24





GOOBANG NATIONAL PARK 26 DECEMBER 2001

