

Mr. Stuart Ellis OM
Chairman, COAG Bushfire Inquiry
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
3- 5 National Circuit
Barton ACT 2600

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Beh
15/12

Dear Stuart,

COAG Inquiry into bushfire mitigation and management

I wish to confine this personal submission to one point: my concern about the growing loss of “corporate knowledge” and leadership skills and experience within bushfire management agencies in Australia.

I came up through a system in which I (like all my contemporaries, and bosses) started as a young forester working in a forest district where bushfire management was part and parcel of everyday life. I was not only formally trained (required to attend schools) I was also required to train others to very well-laid down standards set out in The Forester’s Manual. Two other things were very significant:

- I was mentored by older staff, many of them who had been in the game for 40 years.
- I was required to take responsibility at a young age – by my mid-20s I was a district forester responsible for 200,000 ha of native forest, and by my mid-30s I was a Regional Superintendent. I had to perform, especially when it came to prescribed burning, fire preparedness, and fire suppression. I had to learn leadership skills to survive.

There was nothing unusual about this – but it toughened me, and ensured I knew how to go about the business of bushfire mitigation and management and how to handle men and logistics and a wide range of testing situations. To use an analogy, by my mid-30s, I was very “battle hardened” when it came to bushfires.

Today, in WA at least, all of these systems have broken down. The department has been dismembered, a high proportion of the older field staff have got out, there is little recruitment of young professionals, and no system of mentoring. Because the prescribed burning program is now so small, opportunities for first hand experience have declined. They no longer have and update a field manual, which was “the bible” in my day. The very districts themselves have been closed down, eliminating opportunities for leadership experience and the need for young officers to become involved in training others.

The department itself has been forced into this situation through financial constraints and political and environmentalist pressures. However, they are now also in a situation where senior management did not come up through the system of field experience and leadership responsibility as I did. The Executive Director is a former Canberra public servant who has never worked in the field and none of the Directors of the department’s core programs have any field or fire management experience at all; they do not know enough to know that they don’t know. This leaves operational staff in the field leaderless when it comes to bushfire mitigation and management, because there is no-one above them to inject energy into fire programs, to insist on standards or to inculcate the sort of attitudes needed in effective fire managers in the field. And worse, the lack of recruitment, mentoring and field experience means that no new generation of fire commanders is coming on. Finally, the new emphasis on “ecological management” is ensuring that any staff who are recruited come from environmental science backgrounds rather than

forestry backgrounds —thus they do not even have any academic training in bushfire management to support them.


I have been trying to think how this can be addressed at COAG level. My only good suggestion is that you might push for the creation of an Australian Bushfire Academy. The role of this institution would be to focus on teaching leadership skills to bushfire commanders and agency managers. It will ensure all our senior land managers across the country have a basic understanding of fire behaviour, fire science, fire weather, bushfire management systems, monitoring/audit skills, community relations, policy and incident management. The academy would be run by good people with solid skills and experience. Old hands like Phil Cheney, Athol Hodgeson, you and me might be asked to set it up and oversee its work. Funding would be the joint responsibility of the Commonwealth and the States. It would be located perhaps in Victoria. There would be opportunities for paying overseas participants. There would be a good mixture of professional agency people and vollies. You will know what I am talking about.

Teaching leadership is no substitute for the real thing on the ground, but its better than nothing. I strongly advocate it, if we are not to run into real problems of lack of good men and women to run fire management in this country in a few years time.

On another issue, I have recently published a book of memoirs of my life and times, and one chapter deals with my fire management experience. Let me know if you would like a copy (it costs \$31) – I can guarantee it will make better reading on the plane than reports and files.

Kind regards, *A good luck with the signing,*

Yours sincerely,



Roger Underwood
December 4, 2003