

COAG Bushfire Inquiry...2003-12-05

General.

Timber Communities Australia (TCA) Nationwide organisation with State and local Branches . Membership is predominantly country people many of whom are landholders and volunteer firefighters. They depend on the land and natural resources for sustenance. Uncontrolled bushfire is therefore a critical threat to their existence and livelihood.

Bushfire Prevention.

TCA acknowledges that bushfire is a natural occurrence in Australia and can never be eliminated. There are measures however to substantially reduce the impact and damage caused by bushfire. Fuel volumes must be reduced . This can occur in the following ways...grazing , cool burning , selective logging and firewood collection. There is clear evidence in the Namadgi National Park where areas which were burned in 1983 have regenerated much more quickly than in those areas which had not been burned for 50-60 years or more.

Education.

Urban residents are generally ignorant of the extreme danger associated with natural disaster including bushfire. This is evident by TV footage of residents fighting fires in thongs T-shirts and shorts often carrying a plastic bucket of water to engage an inferno. They are reluctant to reduce fuel levels and merge with conservationists when a suggestion of winter burning or other fuel reduction methods are mentioned. An education program is urgently needed.

Rural Fire Service (NSW)

The RFS is top heavy , over bureaucratic and autocratic. Over regulation and dictatorial attitudes within the hierarchy have substantially reduced the operational effectiveness of the agency . Volunteers are demoralised by intimidation and a political agenda conspired by the Government and Greens and delivered by the Commissioner and his paid disciples. Meeting of volunteers across the State is testimony to the allegation that the Rural Fire Service Association is not a democracy and is not representative of volunteers. Volunteers need an organisation to represent them which is free from the influence of the Commissioner.

The RFS has been an effective organisation in improving equipment standards and training.

Operational matters

Fireground operational control must be handed back to Brigade Captains. The declaration of Sect 40 by RFS HQ is often premature and more designed to give power to the Commissioner than to expedite the control of a fire. Similarly fire mitigation measures must be returned to the Brigade with an uncomplicated system of hazard reduction approval being made available at Brigade level.

Equipment

The Elvis Skycrane is more of a political statement than an effective firefighting tool. The Canadaire CL415 or local agricultural aircraft are far more effective in an immediate response capacity. The CANADIAN Integrated Fire Management System is by far the most effective fire management system in the world.

(THE AUTHOR HAS FLOWN IN THE CL 415 in operations in CANADA)

Too much emphasis is placed on fire control and not enough on fire prevention. The cost of one Ericson Skycrane could provide sufficient funds to PAY professional firefighters to conduct fuel reduction burns in high risk areas.

Hazard reduction

Greater emphasis must be placed on grazing as an effective method of fuel reduction even on the urban / rural fringe.

Total Fire Bans

Control over Total Fire Bans must be handed back to local authorities to avoid the ridiculous situation where it is raining at one end of the State and dry in the other but a Total Fire Band is applied across the State. The RFS "cries wolfe " too often when declaring TFB.

Conclusion.

Volunteer firefighters have no confidence that Governments will listen to advice . Most politicians are too busy playing politics to listen to good advice from practical people on the ground. Failure of the States to allow their paid fire officers to give evidence to the Nairn inquiry was nothing short of a National disgrace. The worst fires are yet to come. The South-East Forests of NSW will burn with catastrophic results and significant loss of life and property. These warnings have not been heeded in the past and we have no reason to believe anything has changed .

PETER COCHRAN.....State Manager TCA , NSW

Former.....

Fire Control Officer Cooma- Monaro Shire

State Member for MONARO (Shadow Minister for Emergency Services)

Property owner and victim of the 2003 Kosiuszko National Park fires

40 years as a volunteer firefighter and still fighting