

Alastair Paton
23 Allan Street
CURTIN ACT 2605

Monday 8 December 2003

TO: Committee Secretary
COAG Bushfire Inquiry
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
3-5 National Circuit
BARTON ACT 2600
Via E-mail: coagbushfireinquiry@pmc.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

NEED FOR BETTER CROSS BOUNDARY INFORMATION FLOWS

Please accept this submission for the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management which, as an individual, I authorise for publication. I have no monetary interests associated with this topic.

This submission directly relates to my 14 May 03 supplementary submission that I provided to the Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. However, the 14 May 03 submission contained some confidential material so it did not appear on the public record so I have removed that material and attached a sanitised version as background.

Summary of Main Points

The Department of The Prime Minister and Cabinet and COAG are the only Commonwealth entities able to look 'top down' at the flow of information that need to cross traditional boundaries to attain best National practice.

Whilst I have observed a visible increase in community based programs, albeit with good intent, shortfalls exist which highlight the need for a continuous improvement program to be put in place.

Such a program needs to recognise - and naturally encourage - the necessary information flows.

An analytical approach is also needed to ensure that public money is spent to maximum effect.

Community Based Programs

My 14 May 03 supplementary submission (attached) details the need for increased community awareness and just last week I was able to attend, with 120 (or so) fellow Curtin residents, the local Bush FireWise community gathering at Monro Close, CURTIN ACT at 3pm Sat 29 Nov 03.

I was heartened to encounter our very motivated local volunteer fire fighters and a handout where the ACT Bushfire Service and the ACT Fire Brigade thanked the Country Fire Authority of Victoria for their

assistance. Such information flows crossing traditional boundaries is essential if we are to work effectively as a Nation and it is good to see examples of it happening.

After a comprehensive bushfire briefing the gathering got onto some interesting discussion containing some invaluable suggestions, such as:

- a. having hose connectors so neighbours can join hoses to fight fires on the other side of the street, and
- b. neighbours taking walks around the neighbourhood and identifying issues such as blocked fire hydrant risers and fire hazards.

However, it became a bit fuzzy on who we should report issues to. Maintaining hydrants is outside the volunteer fire fighter's responsibly and they themselves described the difficulty they encounter in having them repaired.

This is a prime example on a detailed information flow that needs to occur but will fail because of a weak path, viz: what happens next and who should you tell ?

Wood Chip Masquerading as Mulch

But the situation is worse. Behind the 29 Nov 03 gathering at the end of Munro Place there was a substantial amount of wood chip spread around. In fact the gathering had 'spilled over' onto the woodchip and I found myself standing on it, which was most uncomfortable given it was thick layer of loose dry scratchy chips of wood. We were told that it originated from many of the trees that were 'mulched' after the Jan 03 fires and the local Government had excess and was "giving it away as mulch".

We were then told of the fire hazard associated with wood chip and how embers can quickly take hold on a hot day if the wood chip is dry. Wood chip is a natural fuel and we were told how some houses in Duffy were lost due to embers igniting wood chip close to the house. In latter discussion with the fire fighters I heard a story of how 8 fire tankers (24 ton of water) were unable to put out a pile of wood chip that had caught alight. They resorted to getting a dozer and spreading it out so as to extinguish it.

When I got home I got on the internet and found multiple references describing the wood chip mulch problem in Canberra due to it being so common. This made me ask, should a local government contribute to the fuel loading near houses ? But more importantly, how much of an issue is it ?

Prioritisation of Effort

In the past when I have assisted safety analyses of complex systems I have utilised established approaches such as Fault Tree Analysis to identify the principle issues on which to prioritise effort.

I have looked hard for such an approach in prioritising effort to deal with bushfires, to no avail. With simple goal such as "establish self resilient communities" one is able to analyse the factors that undermine community resilience. For example, wood chip spread everywhere and level 4 water restrictions in force being just two factors which combine to substantially increase the risk of fire.

I have even looked for a recommendation in "A Nation Charred: Report on the inquiry into bushfires Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires" for their approach to prioritisation, to no avail.

A top down approach is needed and the CSIRO could be tasked to create a simple effects based model that supports effort prioritisation. I recognise that many decisions are driven by circumstance, but fires

do not respect boundaries (John Stanhope, ACT Chief Minister, Jan 03) and the prioritisation of spending public moneys should be justified by an analytical basis that maximises the money's effect.

Given the magnitude and complexity of bushfires an analytical approach to resource prioritisation is essential.

Quality Information and Continuous Improvement

As well as prioritisation of effort we also need a system that encourages the flow of quality information and enables us to achieve best practice.

The information flows I am referring to are not high-level ministerial flows, but flows at the working level that need to flow across traditional boundaries.

My 14 May 03 supplementary submission (attached) details some suggestions in this area and I feel that The Department of The Prime Minister and Cabinet and COAG are the only Commonwealth entities able to address such information flows.

Summary

After the Jan 03 bushfires we now have lots of wood chip spread around the place and are facing level 4 water restrictions.

I have observed an increase in community based programs but feel that a top down approach is needed to support a continuous improvement program that incorporates - and encourages - detailed working level information flows that cross traditional boundaries.

ScottCromwell Pty. Ltd (as per attached) are well placed to generate a methodology and associated information flow framework to meet this need.

CSIRO can be tasked to create an analytical approach to ensure that public money is spent to maximum effect.

Yours sincerely.

Alastair Paton
SMIEAust, CPEng

Version of 14 May 03 Submission to the Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires.

Alastair Paton
23 Allan Street
CURTIN ACT 2605

Wednesday 14 May 2003

TO: Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires
Parliament House, CANBERRA ACT 2600
Via E-mail bushfires.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

PREPARING FOR BUSHFIRES BY MOBILISING OUR VOLUNTEER BASE

Please accept this supplementary submission for the inquiry into the recent Australian bushfires that offers new material not included in my initial submission of Friday 9 May 2003. I still submit to the Select Committee as an individual, I have no monetary interests associated with this topic and I authorise the bulk for publication.

Summary of Main Points

- This supplementary submission relates to two committee Terms of Reference (b and j);
- Focus is drawn to the role of volunteers that are involved in preparing for bushfires - such as the "Community Fireguard" in Victoria;
- Message management is highlighted as a vitally important aspect of harnessing good ideas and achieving volunteer mobilisation;
- A new Commonwealth role is proposed to address the need for cross flow of information, especially good ideas and contacts, between the States and Territories;
- Recommendation that the Commonwealth engage ScottCromwell to generate a methodology - and associated information flow framework - for ways in which the Commonwealth can generate flows across State / Territory boundaries to improve: a. utilisation of Australia's volunteer base in preparing for upcoming fire seasons, and b. the upcoming media campaign targeted at homeowners preparing for upcoming fire seasons.

Terms of Reference

Relevant Terms of Reference for the Select Committee include:

- Risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including management practices of private property (Ref: Terms of Reference B); and

- Roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices (Ref: Terms of Reference J).

Background

My initial submission to the Select Committee focused on a new low cost, low water usage Residential Fire Suppression System that I built and prototyped Sunday 19 January 2003 immediately following the Saturday 18 January 2003 bushfires here in Canberra.

I recommended that CSIRO be tasked to evaluate the merit of such systems with a request for priority due to the emerging 2003/04 bushfire threat associated with the nasty drought we are still in (as evidenced by Canberra on Level 2 water restrictions). If the system has merit then it hopefully will be incorporated in a government sponsored media campaign prior to the 2003/04 bush fire season as it is something homeowners can do (with some help and guidance).

A measure of the effectiveness of any Government media campaign is “how many private property owners have taken heed and implemented effective measures to reduce the risk of bushfire to their property”.

As a simple analogy, I consider this a bit like seat belts in cars: you know they are there, but if you haven't put them on they aren't much use when you need them, and by the time you recognise you need them it is a bit late to put them on as things are happening too fast.

Just as seat belts reduce occupant impact in most vehicle crashes (provided they are worn properly), preparatory measures around private property reduce the impact of most bushfires (provided the right measures have been implemented for the specific property).

For the last few months I have been thinking hard on how to improve the rollout of preparatory bushfire defence measures, be they active water spray or passive risk reduction, and volunteer effort is essential.

My aim for this supplementary submission is to raise practical suggestions on how we can increase the mobilisation of volunteers throughout Australia to help prepare private bushfire prone property to minimise the impact of any future bushfires.

Community Awareness

In my initial submission I mentioned how Mick Collins (Ag District Officer, Manager and Fire Safety Engineer, Fire Safety Section, ACT Fire Brigade, Tel (02) 6207 8371, Fax (02) 6207 8387, Mob 0409 844 648, E-mail mick.collins@act.gov.au) was keen to improve community awareness through organized groups.

I was not aware of any such groups in Canberra but later became aware of “Community Fireguard” <http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/cfgindex.htm> which is all about small groups of local residents who - with the help of a Country Fire Authority (CFA) of Victoria facilitator - work together to deal with their local bushfire threat.

This is a great Victorian State initiative where local authorities are providing expert guidance to groups of local volunteers. However, this initiative of linking experts and volunteers appears to be localised within each State / Territory with ad-hoc awareness of what is happening elsewhere in Australia.

A critical focal point for the Commonwealth in increasing such awareness will be Justin Leonard (Project Leader, Bushfire Research for CSIRO Manufacturing and Infrastructure Technology, Tel (03) 9252 6353, Mob 0419 314 968, E-mail justin.leonard@csiro.au) who heads the People and Property Protection Project in the Bushfire CRC (which begins July 2003) which has education as part of its charter.

Education needs to be supported by orchestrated information flow and (pre)organised volunteer activity to implement appropriate preparatory measures to reduce the impact to private property from bushfires.

Role of the Volunteer

By coincidence we are in the “Week of the Volunteer” and my focus is the mobilisation of our volunteer base associated in implementing preparatory measures (such as the "Community Fireguard" in Victoria), which (I believe) is different to our volunteer base associated with emergency callout (such as State Emergency Services and Rural Fire Service).

Both volunteers bases are involved in minimising the impact of bushfires on private property, however each volunteer base operates in different modes - with one ‘preparing for’ and the other ‘responding to’.

An Australian common sense approach is needed here that builds upon existing infrastructure such as the ‘GoVolunteer’ initiative of Volunteering Australia as per <http://www.govolunteer.com.au/> which currently utilises internet portals to facilitate the flow of good ideas between different areas.

Information Flows

Posting of information via internet portals is a valid option when people know what they are looking for at that particular point in time. However, portals are a somewhat ineffective in harnessing opportunities which are only identified through human interaction within a specific community of interest.

Currently there is a wealth of experience and good ideas within each State / Territory and I feel there is a need for facilitation leading to a greater exchange of good ideas from one State / Territory to another.

For instance, just as 'senior' public officers are rotated between Government Departments to gain experience, articulate and enthusiastic 'juniors' can be rotated interstate with the specific purpose of seeking the best of what happens elsewhere, writing it up and letting others know.

A number of times I have witnessed the fate of simple ideas that span multiple organisational boundaries and I am reminded of a comment made by Mr Jon Stanhope - ACT Chief Minister - during the Canberra bushfire crisis, "fires do not respect borders”.

ScottCromwell Pty. Ltd.

I was introduced to Dr. Larry Cromwell (Partner, ScottCromwell Pty Ltd, Tel (03) 9775 4019, Fax (03) 9775 2417, Email larrycromwell@ozemail.com.au) and John Scott (Partner, ScottCromwell Pty Ltd, Mob 0411 125 653, Email john.scott@netspeed.com.au) by the Attorney General's Department prior to us attending the 26-27 March 2003 Business Government Task Force of Critical Infrastructure Protection.

ScottCromwell is 100% Australian owned and from my observation are ideally suited to contributing to a message management framework for the upcoming media campaign with tailored guidance such as their PAMS (Prevention-Avoidance-Mitigation-Survival) risk management strategy framework.

To reiterate, I submit this as an individual and I have no monetary interests associated with this topic, which includes no monetary interest in ScottCromwell Pty. Ltd.

Recommendation to Committee: The Commonwealth engage ScottCromwell to generate a methodology - and associated information flow framework - for ways in which the Commonwealth can generate flows across State / Territory boundaries to improve: a. utilisation of Australia’s volunteer base

in preparing for upcoming fire seasons, and b. the upcoming media campaign targeted at homeowners preparing for upcoming fire seasons.

Role for the Commonwealth

I feel that only the Commonwealth can perform this role in assisting the transfer of good initiatives from one State / Territory to another under an overarching government initiative of “lets do something about this”.

Currently the Commonwealth specifies the “National Standards for Involving Volunteers” and calls for governments and policy makers to both commit and subscribe to the “Principals of Volunteering”, both available from <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/index.shtml>

I propose that only the Commonwealth can take a ‘top-down’ view for the benefit of Australia’s volunteering base with each State and Territory being ‘under’ the view.

However, on preliminary investigation this view appears to be ‘above’ each individual State / Territory responsibility but outside any Commonwealth mandate.

Through a few referred phone calls I have posed this suggestion - with the question "is this something new ?" – to which I have got positive responses and the agreement that it was something new.

The trouble is that I am now unable to identify which area within the Commonwealth has mandate. The closest I got to was the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

(Same) Request for Urgency

We are still in a nasty drought (Canberra currently at Level 2 water restrictions) that results in rural urban interfaces being even more vulnerable to fire.

Detailed CSIRO guidance is still going to be essential but it will take time and hard work to solicit good ideas that span State / Territory boundaries and establish an appropriate message management framework prior to a media campaign that mobilises our volunteer base in implementing preparatory measures.

This is not a simple task and needs to be done properly if the media campaign is to be successful, as measured by the amount of preparatory effort undertaken to protect private property.

Conclusion

Hard work is required if we are to prepare defences for bush fire prone houses for upcoming bushfire seasons, including the upcoming 2003/04 bushfire season – and ‘grass roots’ volunteer pools provide a currently untapped resource base at the local community level.

Harnessing our volunteer base is an effective way to prepare, but that requires detailed direction and guidance through clear message management.

Good ideas and practices exist within each State / Territory on how to do this and the Commonwealth is the only body suitably placed to harness the flow of good ideas from each State / Territory so clear and detailed direction can be promulgated via a Government sponsored media campaign.

Appropriate message management strategies and information flow networks need to be identified for large media campaigns to be effective, and this requires expertise.

In this supplementary submission I again ask that we do something to prepare - whilst we have time - and I still see the House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires as our best hope.

Yours Sincerely,

Alastair Paton
Senior Member, Institution of Engineers, Australia (Mechanical Engineering)
Lieutenant Commander, Royal Australian Naval Reserve (Active)