

# **Submission 2019-2020 Bushfire Inquiry.**

## **Background**

My name is Henk (Hendrik) Luf

I was educated in the Netherlands and I have a transport engineering background. I have been a transport journalist since 1980 and I am still active in the transport field both in terms of transport preservation, transport systems design and still have some media involvement both here and overseas.

I moved to Woodford in 1988

I am a volunteer member of the Valley Heights Locomotive Heritage Museum serving as its Chairman for two years. I am currently the Planning and Development Manager.

I have held senior volunteer positions at the Mid Mountains Neighbourhood Centre (Vice-Chair) as well as the Hazelbrook Bowling Club (Finance Director)

I have some limited European experience in major fire tactics dating back to the 1960's

I have been a RFS member since 1992 serving at Comms, Woodford and Lawson. Not currently field-active due to a lung problem.

I was the President of the Rural and Volunteer Fire Fighters Association RVFFA for five years.

## **Purpose of my submission**

Although I was not active during the 2019-2020 this due to the lung problem, I kept very much abreast of how things progressed during the season thus far using my RFS experience and tactical knowledge as to analyse the situation as it progressed.

My findings may be of use to the Inquiry as to formulate its findings and recommendations.

Fires are a natural occurrence in this country going back thousands of years so, in over terms, there is nothing special about a fire. Human habitation increased fire occurrences and early indigenous Australians subsequent using fires for both environmental as well as for protection purposes. Since European settlement there are a number of fires that stand out in terms of severity and size. The dates of these are 1851, 1939, 1972 and 1974. Major loss of life fires in more recent times were the Victoria Black Friday, Black Saturday, Ash Wednesday fires.

# **The 2019-2020 Fires.**

As normally happens just about every year, the 2019-2020 NSW fires first made their presence felt in Northern NSW. As Spring turned into Summer fire incidents occurred further south as they normally do. Due to both the drought, adverse weather patterns and the amounts of excess fuel-loads, this year's fires were much more severe than the normal fire patterns with the exception of the 1851 and 1939 fires which were of more or less the same size and intensity.

## **Fire ignition causes.**

They are drought, lightning strikes, fuel-loads, arson and stupidity.

### **The drought**

The ongoing drought has had the effect that vegetation and soil texture have been extremely dry and that as a result any fire activity running over the top of drought affected areas tends to increase rather than decrease. Where ground-fuel-loads are high, chances of a fire ending in the trees are much higher than when the fuel-loads have been reduced or adequately kept at sustainable levels.

### **Lightning strikes**

Lightning strikes are always a problem for firefighters. Fact is that a lightning may ignite a tree days after the actual event the reason for that being that following a strike, a tree may simmer or burn from the inside out following which a tree may split or fall over thus igniting the surrounding area.

## **Recommendation.**

A much more accurate platform should be introduced as to monitor lightning strikes with such a platform to be publically available

### **Fuel loads**

It is abundantly clear that excess fuel-loads have contributed to the intensity and spread of all this year's fires. Add to that the drought aspect and one is able to conclude that fuel-load levels were a timebomb just waiting to go off. Although some hazard reduction burns were carried out during winter and spring, fuel-load levels, especially in parks and reserves, have been totally ignored no doubt authorities no doubt hoping the problem would simply go away via rain periods. Some areas have not been looked at or dealt with since the 1970's. Even in my own area in the Blue Mountains fuel-loads have been neglected and ignored. I will get to the hazard reduction issue shortly.

# **Arson**

Even though it was denied at various points throughout the duration, arson attacks are a major problem for the community as well as for firefighters. When there has been a deliberate ignition, firefighters on the ground will often not be able to tell where the resulting fire may have come from putting the community as well as themselves at great risk. When one looks at the location of the various fires since October, and in the absence of lightning strikes or accidents, one can only point the finger at the arson aspect. I have the feeling that authorities appear to discount arson way too quickly but in the end the various court processes will tell the true story of arson attacks even though I suspect that only a small number of arsonists are actually caught.

## **Recommendation,**

That arson offences attract major mandatory prison sentences of 20 years plus and the Crimes Acts in the various States be adjusted accordingly. I also recommend that a much more serious process be adopted against juvenile offender via the courts and child protection agencies. Given the fact that 'terrorism by fire' threats have been made overseas some of which have been carried out, an additional Crimes Act offence of 'terrorism by fire' is warranted

## **Accidents.**

Ignition by accident is a common occurrence during fire seasons. Farmers might light up a rubbish pile and then often leave the unattended. We have seen fires ignite via motor vehicles with their engine running over grass patches the exhausts then starting a fire

## **Hazard Reductions.**

The facts having been well established as to the causes and the severity of these fire them being the drought, lightning strikes, substandard land management, arson and stupidity, the time has come for some major changes to be required as to how to minimise loss of life and property. Fires progressing through a recently hazard-reduced area of land may not be contained but it will at least slow down the spread of such fires. There are many close to population areas throughout NSW and Victoria that have not seen their ground fuel-loads reduced since the 1970s while others have not even been looked at for at least 20 years. Processes of getting areas hazard-reduced are way too slow and priorities of when or where to burn are often subject to conservation concerns rather than life and property concerns. Current processes also allow for political interference to take place.

## **Recommendations.**

That only fire authorities should have hazard reduction powers and that protection of life and property must rate above all other considerations.

That hazard reductions be carried out strategically as to protect assets

That the application/approval hazard reduction process has a 30 day time limit attached to it.

That rural land owners be required to remain with their approved burns from light-up to black-out.

That land owners, including Local, State and federal Government land owners, be legally liable for failing to ensure that hazard reductions are properly carried out on a regular basis.

That legislation be put in place to enforce hazard reductions be conducted when appropriate on private lands.

That fire trails be maintained into fully operational condition once every six months

## **Fire authorities.**

Both the RFS as well as NSWFR did a very good job fighting these fires and I was saddened to see loss and injuries of fire fighters as well as civilians. There are however some issues that need to be highlighted.

One is truck safety as well as the age and effectiveness of a number of older tankers that need to be replaced. Another is the issue of self-employed volunteers whilst yet another is the P2 mask issue. There is also the issue of the RFS ignoring the independent VFFA organisation while the RFS-created RFSA was totally silent during the whole fire season.

## **Recommendations.**

That an investigation into the safety aspects of fire appliances be held in relation to roll-over and 'trees on truck' situation as to ascertain if roll-bars should be fitted on future appliances. A number of older tankers should be replaced as a priority.

That an investigation with volunteer involvement be conducted in relation to payments to self-employed volunteers during long-duration campaign fires.

That the P2 mask matter be cleared up as to ensure all safety aspects are complied with and the issuing of these masks is not conducted as the primary commercial contract consideration with 3M.

That P3 masks be investigated as possibly a safer and better mask.

That the RFS approach the VFFA as to engage this independent volunteer representative organisation as to foster a better relationship between volunteers and management.

Note: The since defunct RVFFA a number of years back and the current VFFA are two different entities run by totally different people

## **Funding.**

The fire services question funding and staff cuts cropped up during the season also involving NPWS and the issue must be resolved as to what are the facts.

## **Recommendations.**

That fire services funding be increased by substantial amounts should Governments insist that climate-change is the main ignition driver.

That funding levels need to be reviewed regardless of the alleged climate-change argument as to enable sustainable hazard reduction processes to be carried out long term

That NPWS funding be increased and returned to sustainable levels

## **Federal Government response.**

I am of the view that given the Federal Government has External Powers available to it as to act in all types of emergency and other national interest situations, the Federal response was too slow when matters were getting out of hand. In the end, the ADF did extremely well under difficult conditions.

## **Recommendations.**

That the Federal Government fully deploy its External powers in major emergency situations via the EMA (Emergency Management Australia). The EMA already exists but extra staff and expertise levels may be required.

## **Donations.**

Millions of dollars was donated by the wider Australian public aimed specifically to support bushfire victims only for the donors to discover later that the various organisations were and are withholding funds for purposes other than intended, the Australian Red Cross being a main offender with previous form in both Haiti and during the tsunami episode. It is my view that donated funds for specific purposes must be used for such purposes only.

## **Recommendations.**

That funds donated for specific purposes be used for such purposes only via legislation if necessary and that those organisations failing such requirement lose their charity status if found in breach.

## **Conclusions.**

Given the fact that bushfires and droughts are a fact of life in Australia as well as the fact that Australia has had fires bigger than the current ones (1851, 1939 to name just two), I am of the view that the causes the 2019-2020 fires were as followed.

Drought, lightning strikes, incompetent land and parks reserves management via political interference, arson, and stupidity. In my view. And given all of the facts as the fires progressed, climate change was not a factor in this instance.

Henk Luf.