

NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

Submission by Ian Brown

OAM BA (Earth Sciences)

22 May 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This submission is based on my personal knowledge, experience and observations over 40 years. I am a 35-year resident of the Blue Mountains, a very bushfire-prone area. I have a graduate degree in natural science and several other qualifications including a Ranger Certificate (NPWS). From 1980 to 2000 I worked in land management with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, with 17 of those years in the Blue Mountains.

In NPWS I was a ranger, senior ranger, planning officer and operations officer (2nd in charge of the Blue Mountains District). I was involved in over 100 bushfires, mostly in the Blue Mountains but also other regions, including many emergency declarations (s41F in those days, now s44). I worked in roles from basic fire crew member to divisional commander, planning officer and incident controller. As operations manager I had oversight of all NPWS bushfire activities in the district. I worked more than 120 shifts as a divisional commander or higher, and was trained as a Crew Leader, a Planning Officer, in ICS and as an emergency controller. I served on two District Bush Fire Committees as the NPWS representative. I have a National Medal for firefighting. Like so many people, I have some practical and scientific knowledge of bushfire, but continue to learn.

Since leaving NPWS I have worked as an environmental consultant in protected area planning, environmental assessment and heritage communication. This has involved numerous projects across the Blue Mountains. Together with being an experienced bushwalker and nature photographer, this has given me a deep knowledge of local landscape and ecology.

I have maintained a strong personal and professional interest in bushfire, especially bushfire suppression with close observation over many years. I bring to the issue many perspectives, mainly operational, but my understanding of bushfire has broadened since I was actively working on fires. This led to my involvement in a community-based lobbying effort after the 2006 Lawsons Long Alley emergency fire in the Blue Mountains (commonly referred to as the Grose Valley fire) aimed at promoting changes to how wildfires are managed and reviewed.

1.2 This submission

I am a co-author with 11 other people on a separate major submission to the Inquiry. But this submission is purely personal. It does not include all the issues I am concerned about. The purpose is to bring to the attention of the Inquiry a few specific matters and to address them from my personal experience and observations. History is included where it helps to illuminate issues and to show that they are longstanding. Some hard questions are tackled, but I hope constructively, with a view to improved practices and outcomes. If anyone is offended I hope that they can look past those feelings to the very real impact of these issues on volunteers, other firefighters, fire agencies, communities and the environment.

This submission addresses the following issues:

- Outcomes from this Inquiry
- Review of bushfire suppression
- Media and power
- Information and transparency
- Firefighting structures

Recommendations are grouped together at the end.

I am available for further consultation with the Inquiry if required.

1.3 The 2019-20 NSW bushfires

As widely noted, this season was terrible, and came as a shock to many. The task faced by firefighters and emergency managers was overwhelming, with so many large fires spread so far across the landscape. Resources were frequently inadequate to properly carry out suppression tasks. People stepped up to perform roles in which they were not comfortable. Despite these very difficult circumstances, the overall suppression effort was remarkable, with many lives and properties saved.

These fires placed an enormous burden on everyone involved, from decision-makers to firefighters on the ground. The NSW firefighting agencies are very effective and exemplary. Everyone does their utmost, but in all fires there are adverse events, systems fail and things go wrong, often unavoidably. Such crushing events make it even more imperative that firefighting processes are as robust and as effective as possible, for everyone's sake, not least for firefighters.

2. ISSUES

2.1 Outcomes from this Inquiry

As I suggested at the Inquiry's forum at Lithgow, the issues being addressed by this Inquiry are too broad and complex to be effectively dealt with in the Inquiry's timeframe. As well as making recommendations on matters that can be acted on before next fire season, it is hoped the Inquiry will turn its mind to recommending

mechanisms by which issues and recommended actions can continue to be analysed and resolved after the Inquiry hands down its report.

For instance, detailed scientific analysis of what happened during the fires will inevitably extend beyond the life of this Inquiry. A full understanding of events is critical to further analysis of related questions, which will take longer again. Research questions should include, for example:

- the usefulness of past prescribed burns during fire suppression;
- the effectiveness of various firefighting strategies (eg. aerial attack, backburning);
- how well public warnings worked.

It will not be enough to recommend that these things are investigated, without addressing funding, mechanisms, commitment and why some basic issues have not been adequately analysed in the past.

The report of the Inquiry should also address some fundamental sources of public debate in bushfire management, by explaining the facts. Bushfire policy is fraught with ideology and unsubstantiated opinion. One controversial area is prescribed burning (also known as hazard reduction burning, a poor term), which is often reduced in public discussion to competing assertions.

The actual science and experience of prescribed burning is pretty clear, as expressed by numerous scientists and fire agencies: it can be helpful in suppressing some wildfires in some circumstances, but has limitations and practical difficulties and is only one of the available tools for managing bushfire impacts on assets. There are other misunderstandings, myths and conspiracy theories that could be clarified or debunked with the authority of this Inquiry.

2.2 Review of bushfire suppression

This Inquiry is admirable, but for some issues it is an admission of failure on what should be routine processes for government. NSW lacks a transparent, rigorous, blame-free and effective process to routinely review major bushfire operations. Minimal community information or feedback occurs after events. If these things happened as a matter of course then this and previous inquiries may not have been necessary.

Proper review was a prime request of the post-2006 community campaign in the Blue Mountains (see below), and has still not been achieved. It is understood that the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute (BMWHI) is covering the aftermath of the 2006 Grose Valley fire and subsequent Grose Valley Fire Forum in their submission to this current Inquiry, so only a few aspects will be addressed here.

2.2.1 Aftermath of the 2006 Grose Valley fire

Despite the passage of 14 years, some key points about the post-2006 process are still relevant, including the issues raised by the community. This is not ancient history

because a number of key firefighting documents are still current which date from the same era (eg. *BFCC Policy No. 2/2006 Management of Bush Fire Operations*).

The most provocative issue of the 2006 Grose Valley fire was the initial backburn carried out on the first night. This expanded, accelerated and spread the fire into the Grose Valley, without achieving any containment benefit. This adverse event has never been officially acknowledged, though widely known inside the operation and in the broader community. Documentary proof of this event has been sighted (by many people), but not obtained.

One reason for the official silence may be that the Local Member stated in the local newspaper that he had been advised that no backburns had escaped. This would have made it impossible for any public servant to say otherwise. In correspondence to myself, the Local Member emphasised that he had acted in this matter primarily to 'defend the morale of the RFS' who he said had been widely offended.

The offence was caused by informal controversy within the community, culminating by a full-page advertisement in the local paper, funded by 144 people through community subscription (in which I was involved). The advertisement called for an 'independent review' into aspects of the firefighting operation. The issues raised by the community in the advertisement and elsewhere were summarised by the BMWHI in a report on the subsequent forum¹ (see below):

Community members called on the State Government to undertake a thorough and independent review of the management of this fire, involving all stakeholders. Principal among the issues raised by the concerned residents were backburning, impacts of frequent fires, under-utilisation of local expertise, and economic costs. The community members also called for adequate funding for rehabilitation and environmental restoration works, to conduct more research and training in certain areas of fire management, to improve pre-fire planning and to develop management systems to better capture and utilise local knowledge.

BMWHI Grose Valley Fire Forum

The Government, through the Local Member, reacted to the call for an independent review by commissioning the BMWHI to organise a forum, as well as noting the routine section 44 debrief and report to come.

The subsequent Grose Valley Fire Forum involved a range of stakeholders including the fire agencies and produced a detailed set of recommendations supported by all. The recommendations were adopted into a program for action by RFS and other agencies. This program, which was ambitious, progressed slowly over many months until staff changes at Katoomba RFS reduced official commitment and the final outcomes were minimal.

In effect, the community concern was deflected into an ineffectual bureaucratic process that the agencies could ignore without consequence. It became apparent that the agencies resented the controversy and had no appetite for responding to it. It is accepted that they may have felt any negativity about the fire was unwarranted.

¹ Chapple, R. and Booth, S. (2007). *Report on the Grose Valley Fire Forum, Mount Tomah Botanic Garden, Saturday 17th February 2007*. Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, Katoomba.

Section 44 report, 2006 Grose Valley Fire

The community was promised the section 44 report before the forum, but it was never officially provided. It was finally seen some time later but the content skirts around the key events and issues of concern. The report was written by the local RFS Superintendent who was also the section 44 Incident Controller for the fire. Notes of the preceding inter-agency debrief are slightly more direct, but still avoid detailed consideration of strategies and adverse events. Perhaps the public debate had the effect of suppressing free discussion, but this experience is similar to many such debriefs in ensuing years up to the present (see below).

Correspondence with the NSW Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee

In response to correspondence from the concerned citizens group, the then local member and Minister for the Environment suggested concerns about the fire were a matter for the NSW Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee (BFCC). A small subset of concerned community members (numbering 10, including myself) wrote to the BFCC on 6 June 2007, pursuing an official response to the issues. Three key issues were covered in some detail:

- better wildfire review processes;
- improved early response capability;
- control strategies and backburning.

That letter is attached to this submission. Please note how pertinent these issues and the specific questions remain today.

An extended exchange of letters and phone calls between the group and BFCC ensued until a final letter from the BFCC dated 18 July 2008. This letter answered question 6 about wildfire review with a simple affirmative, but still did not address any of the issues raised in any detail. It stated that issues “*with regard to Section 44 bush fires and the reporting thereon were the prerogatives of the Commissioner of the Rural Fire Service and not those of the Committee*”. Note that the Commissioner chairs the BFCC. The BFCC also referred our letter to the Blue Mountains RFS Superintendent with suggestions on consulting with the community.

In response to this deflection, on 16 July 2008 our group wrote to the RFS Commissioner, as responsible for section 44 matters, seeking a response to our 6 June 2007 letter to the BFCC. A holding reply dated 23 July 2008 was received stating: “*The matters you have raised will receive appropriate attention and a response will be forwarded as soon as possible*”. It cannot be guaranteed that such a response was never provided, but available records end at that point. This unproductive exchange illustrates a number of issues with accountability.

(NB: Documents relating to the entire post-2006 process are held. It seemed excessive to include numerous documents in this submission, but they can be provided to the Inquiry on request.)

2.2.2 The importance of review

Like everyone else, I made many mistakes in my bushfire career, so I would never want to ‘point the finger’. However to promote a culture of learning it is important to unflinchingly and objectively analyse events, in an organised and blame-free way, to recognise what went well and how to create more of the same, and also to identify where and how improvements can be made.

Large bushfire operations are one of the most intense, complex and costly activities undertaken by government. They involve loss of life and property, community disruption, infrastructure damage, environmental impacts, economic effects and great expense. And yet in NSW minimal routine analysis is undertaken of actions and outcomes and no independent oversight exists. These processes are crucial for cost-benefit reasons alone, and essential to determining if the various impacts of bushfires are being minimised. The community needs confidence that this is happening.

2.2.3 Understanding bushfire suppression

It is worth noting that NSW has no over-arching strategy or objectives for bushfire suppression. The Rural Fires Act provides little guidance. The State Bush Fire Plan (2017) is a document about how bush firefighting is organised and co-ordinated, not about strategy or objectives or how firefighting is to be done. Other levels of plan including District Bushfire Operations Plans and Risk Management Plans also have an organisational emphasis.

When large fires are happening, it is difficult for the public to understand what the overall objectives are (beyond the obvious protection of life and property), why various strategies are being pursued and if they are working. It is sometimes possible to find out some of this informally at community meetings, but this is a sub-optimal and highly variable solution. Overall strategy at state operations level is rarely articulated, and has no transparent basis. This lack of understanding can lead to confusion at the time and controversy later (see below).

The situation is in stark contrast to the unending and very active public debate over strategies to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak. The virus is different in many ways from an active bushfire, but is remarkably similar in other ways. There has been no suggestion that just because there is general agreement that governments and authorities have overall done an excellent job of managing the outbreak, that the “Ruby Princess” and Newmarch House problems should be ignored. Far from it, everyone agrees they must be examined to establish causes and learn lessons. It is worth contemplating why there is so little public disclosure or discussion of actions to contain bushfires.

Rigorous and formalised review processes would reduce confusion and controversy and encourage better communication to the community during and after fires, benefitting all. Firefighters especially have a lot to gain. Many are confused, traumatised and concerned over things that happened, and disillusioned about processes to deal with them. Formal processes should be mandatory and enshrined in the State Bush Fire Plan, at least, along with over-arching principles for bushfire suppression.

2.2.4 Controversial 2019-2020 bushfire events

There were many controversial events in the 2019-2020 fires, but only a few will be discussed here. The Inquiry will be well aware of these events and others from media, other submissions and their own inquiries. It is startling that more than five months after the Mt Wilson Road backburn of 14 December 2019, there is still no official explanation or report about the event. This adverse event was ill-advised and subsequently disastrous.

People in Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine who were actually involved in local fire operations at the time still do not know how the decision was made or exactly what happened, despite a local 'debrief'. Others, who do know, are not saying. The local paper (*Blue Mountains Gazette*) has never reported that the Grose fire with all its impacts and trauma came from this backburn. There is much hearsay, misinformation, anger, confusion and frustration in all communities that were impacted, but no answers. The few official comments in the media about this event were neither accurate nor complete and only added to the misinformation. The 'cone of silence' has again descended. It is unacceptable.

I have lived close by at Mt Victoria for 35 years and this event is remarkably similar to others from previous fires in the same general area (see above for 2006). None have ever been seriously investigated, reported on, or explained to impacted communities, so its no wonder that history keeps repeating. At the start of the 1994 Bell Range Fire, I witnessed first hand from a helicopter (the first over the fire after it started) a 'panic' backburn in very high winds at almost the same location of the 2019 backburn escape. This backburn accelerated the fire, immediately crossed the Mt Wilson Road and was in the Grose Valley just hours later.

The 19 December backburn that struck Balmoral is another example. I don't live nearby but I am not aware of any public acknowledgement or explanation of what happened.

Another controversy has erupted over the fires that struck the Conjola Park-Lake Conjola area on the South Coast late in January. In this case RFS have done their own analysis and reported their draft conclusions to the community, in the context of this Inquiry's community consultation. It is not clear why this event has been analysed and reported on while others (such as Mt Wilson and Balmoral) have not.

All three events have at least one common factor, which is community debate both before the adverse events and following. It remains unclear whether this debate influenced the decisions, or if so how.

2.2.5 Independence

The Conjola events have been analysed by RFS, who conducted the firefighting operation. They have probably done a very good job but it is human nature that such an investigation can never be completely objective nor inspire full confidence in the conclusions. Independent inquiry into such events is not only best practice but essential. Most other fields of government activity have independent oversight, even the Police, Army/SAS and intelligence services.

2.3 Media and power

The State Bush Fire Plan (2017) mandates that the Rural Fire Service “*provides a single source of bush/grass fire information across the State through the NSW RFS public website and social media platforms, regardless of which agency is combating the fire*” (page 14). A single point of media output during fires is necessary and appropriate and is used to provide helpful warnings and information to the public.

The State Plan also says: “*The NSW RFS may establish a joint media information centre drawing personnel from participating and supporting agencies during periods of significant fire activity*” (page 14). The reality is that only RFS spokespeople or politicians appear in the media during fires. The exclusion of other voices is not itself a major concern. More worrying is that this exclusion means that other agencies rarely get mentioned or publicly recognised for their contribution to the firefighting effort.

RFS volunteers will always dominate in numbers, so they will be the most visible in the media especially in spectacular battles to save houses. But Fire and Rescue NSW, National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation contribute in significant numbers and important roles in many fire operations, often out of the public eye.

During the 2019-2020 fires a figure of around 3,000 was often quoted as the number of firefighters ‘on the job’ on any given day. At the same time NPWS were quoting their numbers at around 300. Fire and Rescue would have made at least a comparable effort. If others were contributing at least 600 then that equates to 20% and a considerable proportion of the total firefighting effort. And these were all professionals, most highly skilled and in significant roles. Both agencies filled critical positions in most IMTs. Interstate teams would also have made up a significant percentage.

Sometimes even firefighting efforts that are dominated by FRNSW or NPWS are still presented as an RFS-only activity. This is not entirely due to RFS media management, because media outlets often translate all operations as being RFS, even when given accurate information.

This lack of recognition in the media and community is important. It not only offends and frustrates the hard-working staff of these other agencies, but has serious political ramifications. If the public don’t know what agencies do, then they cannot support it, and may criticise the apparent lack of action. If politicians don’t know what these agencies do, then they may regard them as unimportant. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As the RFS Commissioner has emphasised many times, the involvement of these agencies and the special skills they bring are critical to the state’s firefighting capacity and efforts. As an ex-employee of NPWS, I particularly know the specific importance of NPWS skills in remote area fires, aerial attack and IMTs.

The media silence by other agencies extends outside actual fires and has become routine. NSWFR and NPWS offer minimal comment on bushfire operations at any time. They rarely even comment on associated issues such as prescribed burning, and restrict themselves to putting out background factual material where they can.

A recent example occurred in mid-May. Prescribed burns carried out in Royal and Marramarra National Parks were presented on ABC TV news as primarily RFS operations. Although it was mentioned once that NPWS led the operations, all the ‘talking heads’ and commentary were from RFS volunteers. Such operations in national parks are often assisted by numbers from the RFS, but planned and managed by NPWS. Given the public debate about prescribed burning, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this story was driven by the RFS PR machine.

For good reason the RFS and volunteers enjoy an enormous level of public support and goodwill. This extends to the media who tend to readily accept what the RFS says about fires. The RFS media team is very effective. But this power should not be used to obfuscate or exclude other voices. While remaining factual, there are many opportunities to shape how the public thinks about events.

A case in point is the difficult and controversial issue of backburning. When backburns escape it is often reported that “the fire broke containment lines”, even if the actual fire is some distance away and unconnected. Authorities are reluctant to admit backburn escapes. When such breakouts create a distinct and unconnected fire, they are still labeled as the main fire. Multiple distinct events are often conflated under “the fire”. Names are important and facts matter.

The backburn at Mt Wilson on 14 December 2019 is an example. When it crossed the line it was a day before it was acknowledged as anything other than the “Gospers Mountain fire” (still 10 km away at the time), and then it was in response to the media reporting the fact. This new fire soon came to be officially called the “Grose Valley fire” as that became the main arena and it was a distinct operation. But later this fire (still unconnected to the main fire) was again being referred to by spokespeople and in the media as the Gospers Mountain fire, even when it burnt houses down at Bilpin on 21 December. This is still happening five months later.

The fire that impacted Balmoral in 19 December saw a similar reluctance. It would seem that this has not yet been publicly acknowledged as a backburn disconnected from the main Green Wattle Creek fire (15 km away at the time).

Obfuscation can confuse and mislead the public, and makes it more difficult after the event to reach a common understanding or to discuss what happened. This was a factor in the post-2006 Grose Valley controversy, when it was publicly stated that no backburns had escaped when it was widely known inside and outside the operation that a number had. This has never been admitted; perhaps there is a problem of definition. Ultimately, this confusion is damaging to the important credibility of fire management and the RFS and adds to community concern.

2.4 Information & transparency

It remains difficult for anyone in the public, from outside of agencies and operations, to get basic information about fires after the event. FiresNearMe is an excellent advance and a very helpful platform during fires, but then the maps and announcements go behind layers of bureaucracy. Linescans, though not published on FiresNearMe, are an example of useful information that is difficult to access.

Linescans are infra-red maps of fire activity, scanned by a dedicated aircraft flying over the fire. Their main purpose is for mapping the fire and planning control operations. During fires linescans are readily available on the ICON system to anyone with access, which includes most members RFS and other agencies within the operational network. Some are widely and informally shared, even on social media. Linescans are accurate primary data with no human interpretation, and hence no obvious issues of confidentiality or liability. They can be compared to weather records.

Linescans are fundamental to fire analysis and interpreting what happened, and an essential resource for independent researchers. In an ideal world, they would be readily available as a public resource. They could be uploaded like other information to a permanent online facility like SEED.

While preparing this and other submissions, I asked RFS for access to linescans. This was the sequence of events:

1. I was initially told (by phone) that RFS could not release any linescans without a GIPA request, because some fires would be subject to coronial investigation. Since they didn't know which fires, they would need to refer any request to the Coroner for a decision on release. Implicit was that the Coroner was unlikely to approve release of linescans related to a coronial investigation.
2. I emailed the Coroner's office to ask about this and they replied thus: *The NSW State Coroner has no objection to the release of the line-scans by the RFS. If the State Coroner's office is contacted by the RFS seeking the State Coroners view as to their release we will advise the RFS of the Coroners position.*
3. I went back to RFS by email and gave them this response. They replied by phone to say they would need to check the Coroner's advice and a GIPA was still required. They would not release them under an 'informal request' (an option under the GIPA ACT and RFS public information policy). It seems that RFS requires a GIPA is for any information that is not already public, an unhelpful position which however appears to be compliant with the GIPA Act. An email confirmation of the RFS response was requested but is still awaited, more than a month after the above exchange.

I will therefore lodge a GIPA request but there was no chance of getting linescans under this system in time for various submissions.

Linescans seem to be caught up in a classic bureaucratic labyrinth, which surely could have been resolved some time ago according to the leading principle in the GIPA Act of *a presumption in favour of the disclosure of government information unless there is an overriding public interest against disclosure.*

2.5 Firefighting structures

Some inherent difficulties emerge from the way bushfire suppression is structured in NSW. I'm not offering a coherent analysis here, rather a free-ranging discussion and questioning based on my experience, observations and reflections. I can't offer any pat answers to the issues below, but they deserve examination.

2.5.1 Volunteerism

The volunteer basis of the RFS is a powerful and essential resource with many positives. We simply can't do without them. But it has some downsides which need to be managed.

As an agency, much RFS time, resources and effort is devoted to managing, developing and maintaining the volunteer force. This provides the community with a very large and skilled bushfire labour force at a relatively cheap cost. However it must detract from the many other crucial functions required of RFS management. This can be seen as a kind of conflict of interest that also inhibits the proper review of operations.

Perceived 'criticism' tends to be framed as an attack on self-sacrificing volunteers who are doing their best and risking their lives in awful circumstances. This perception of firefighting is of course true, so most of the public don't understand the management structure that sits atop the volunteer force, or the IMT structure that directs operations during fires. They just see brave and exhausted volunteers battling the flames and generally assume they must be self-directed. This impression is cultivated by the RFS media team, which helps to suppress any community concern about how fires are managed. After all, the volunteers are our neighbours and our friends, a critical part of the community.

The RFS is in many ways like a family, and the former Commissioner often described it thus. It's wonderful that people feel connected to this greater organisation, all engaged in a praiseworthy endeavour. This builds satisfaction, coherence, camaraderie and solidarity against a serious threat. But just as in the army or any other organisation, this can also lead to less desirable features, such as a culture that has inward-looking elements of tribalism and groupthink.

There is a limit to how many volunteers can be expected to make the commitment necessary to become trained and experienced to the expert level required for critical and complex high-level roles. That some have in the past and will continue to do so is admirable and very valuable, but there is a need for a better balance between volunteers and professionals. More professionals are needed now and even more in the future, for key specialist roles like divisional commanders and IMT, air operations functions.

The RFS currently operates almost as a regulator-operator of client-contractor model, with the volunteer force being the contractor providing services to the RFS manager. There are strengths to this arrangement, but perhaps greater separation could be desirable and worthy of examination?

2.5.2 Firefighting agencies

RFS provides leadership and huge numbers of people and resources in bushfire, but it is not the only source of expertise. FRNSW, NPWS and Forestry each have vast experience, capability and staff with high-level skills, even if far fewer numbers. My observation has been that each of these agencies have their unique perspectives on how to manage fire, based on their agency culture and experience. Each agency brings special and complementary skills to the ‘table’. All are valuable and should be valued and maintained.

For instance, Forestry are used to bushfires in managed landscapes with good vehicle access. FRNSW are also vehicle-based but mainly used to structural firefighting and property protection. They have rigorous command and safety systems. NPWS deal mainly with remote RAFT fires and long campaign fires, because that’s what they deal with every year. All these different perspectives and skills need to be given respect and used for maximum benefit in fires. I don’t think they are because RFS dominance lacks an element of humility.

This can lead to unproductive and sometimes damaging conflict and competitiveness between agencies. Anyone who has ever worked on a multi-agency fire will have seen this. These agencies have different ways of putting out fires. Any of them can be the ‘best’ way; it depends on circumstances. However this conflict is often denied. In an interview the former RFS Commissioner was asked about the Keelty report into the 2018 Tathra fire² finding that such conflict existed. He reportedly answered that it was ‘misinformation and ‘industrially loaded’³.

2.4.3 Local vs centralised control

This is an extremely vexed issue. Many frontline volunteers complain about the ‘white-shirts’ trying to run the fire from too far away when they don’t know anything. They insist all fire control should be run by the locals and object to the ongoing centralisation of management. The managers know that not all locals are expert or sensible and they rarely have the full picture in a major fire, but they do. My observation is that both are right, and both are wrong. Ultimately, you want the best, most skilled and knowledgeable people making key decisions. The trouble is, sometimes these people are locals, and sometimes they are in management. Certainly many people, at all levels, only see a part of the picture at any one time.

The answer to this conundrum will be difficult, but I suspect it comes down to how management is done. Local knowledge is critical, but so is the big picture and technical expertise. In theory, good management and leadership weds all the best input together into an agreed solution (strategy). In firefighting, this sometimes would have to be done quickly, and that’s when tensions can erupt into open conflict and even insurrection, which does happen. Volunteers are hard to discipline, and sometimes they are right.

Surely other industries must have navigated this problem successfully?

² Keelty, M (2019) *Bega Valley Fires Independent Review*, Dept of Justice, NSW Government

³ Snow, D (2020) Lunch with RFS boss Shane Fitzsimmons: tears on the darkest days, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 January 2020

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1. Outcomes from this Inquiry (ToR 4)

1. In the Inquiry report, include processes and mechanisms to ensure that research, analysis and the resolution of issues, as well as recommendations and identified outcomes, will be pursued to completion beyond the Inquiry, by specifying targets and accountabilities.
2. In the Inquiry report, seek to clarify and debunk misunderstandings and myths that contribute to a fractious community debate over bushfire management, by presenting the facts and scientific understandings.

3.2 Post-fire review (ToR 2)

3. Establish and resource a mandatory review and lessons learned process for large bushfire suppression operations, based on best available practice and incorporating detailed event compilation and analysis, timeliness, independence, a blame-free approach, thoroughness, technical expertise, documentation, monitoring and public reporting.

3.3 Bushfire suppression plan (ToR 2)

4. Develop a NSW bushfire suppression strategy, including mandatory arrangements for post-fire analysis and review.

3.4 Media accuracy (ToR 3)

5. Ensure that official fire information gives a true picture of suppression events and the role of all agencies.

3.5 Technical fire information (ToR 2)

6. Review the technical bushfire information that is provided to the public by RFS and other agencies, and how it is made available, to maximise the information readily available and improve openness, transparency and community understanding of operations.

3.6 Firefighting structures

7. Undertake a review of the strengths and weaknesses of existing structures for bushfire, both inter-agency and intra-agency, and develop long-term mechanisms for addressing them on an ongoing basis.
8. Retain, strengthen and respect the critical role and specific strengths of all firefighting agencies, especially FRNSW, Forestry and NPWS.

ATTACHMENT:

Letter from 'Grose Fire Group' to NSW Bush Fire Coordinating Committee dated 6 June 2007

(NB: Further documents are held and available to the Inquiry on request).

Mr Dick Tucker
Executive Officer
New South Wales Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee
c/- NSW Rural Fire Service

cc. The Hon. Nathan Rees MP
Minister for Emergency Services

6 June 2007

Dear Mr Tucker,

We are an informal group of Blue Mountains residents, and are writing to the New South Wales Bush Fire Coordinating Committee (BFCC) following correspondence with the NSW Government in relation to concerns about the Grose Valley fire of 2006.

Specifically, we attach our letter of February 2007 to the Premier, and the response (dated 15 March 2007) provided by Mr Bob Debus, then Minister for the Environment and Member for Blue Mountains. Our letter includes a detailed explanation of our call for a more comprehensive review process for the Grose Valley fire, and all significant wildfires. You will note that Mr Debus' reply answered this key issue by deferring to the BFCC: "I cannot imagine any Minister imposing new review procedures without consulting the Coordinating Committee for that would entirely undermine the inclusive and practically effective arrangements now established."

Although it was open to the Government, Mr Debus as the Government's representative, or the Minister for Emergency Services to refer this issue and our letter to the BFCC, this apparently has not occurred. So we are now doing so.

Better wildfire review processes

We would appreciate the BFCC's consideration of review processes for the Grose Valley fire and all major wildfires, as explained in our attached letter. We understand that there have been many improvements in the way fire is managed, and that the BFCC provides an effective co-operative mechanism for dealing with many fire-related issues. However we respectfully submit that recent history has confirmed our view that fire review processes can be improved.

As we understand events, the processes of inter-agency debrief and section 44 reporting that have been followed after the Grose Valley fire have fallen far short of the detailed and objective analysis that we believe to be reasonably required if future fire suppression is to fully benefit from past experience. And there has as yet been no outcome, report or

information openly released to the public – nearly seven months after the event and with the next fire season looming.

We commend the Grose Valley Fire Forum held by the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute on 17 February 2007 at Mr Debus' request as a positive step forward, which resulted in some useful recommendations. However public involvement was limited and proceedings were severely constrained by not having a detailed analysis of the fire 'on the table'. Also, the forum was a one-off event generated in response to local public concern and does not represent any advance in standard review procedures.

We would therefore appreciate the BFCC's response on the following:

1. What are the existing standard procedures for reviewing wildfire operations? How do they ensure objectivity and thoroughness?
2. What happens to section 44 reports after they are submitted? Are they public documents?
3. How do these standard review procedures provide for positive learning from both success and failure, and the propagation of those lessons across and through firefighting agencies?
4. How do the review procedures allow for the identification and consideration of issues of a non-local, statewide significance?
5. How do these review procedures provide for both input from, and feedback to, the wider community?
6. Does the BFCC actively promote a culture of ongoing review, self-assessment, learning and improvement within firefighting agencies?
7. Does the BFCC see any need for upgrading standard wildfire review procedures?
8. Does the BFCC see any merit in the type of review we have proposed? If not, we would appreciate being given the reasons.

There are two other major issues we wish to raise with the BFCC.

Improved early response capability

There is an apparent need for improvement in first response firefighting, and in particular an improved capacity for remote area firefighting. These issues were highlighted in the early response to the Grose Valley fire, and also seem to have been significant in other recent fires within NSW and interstate.

There has been major investment in vehicle-based firefighting in recent years and ongoing. This is necessary and we support it. However there does not seem to have been a concomitant level of investment in remote area firefighting capacity. We all know this is often the first line of defence, and when it fails, large-scale backburning as occurred in the Grose Valley fire can be the inevitable outcome – with associated increase in costs, environmental damage, risk to communities and danger to firefighters.

When vehicle-based capacity is disproportionately available compared to remote area firefighting capacity, it is likely that adopted strategies will reflect this imbalance: "To a man with only a hammer, every problem looks like a nail". There were clear issues in the Grose Valley fire of helicopters not being provided for remote operations, at times a shortage of trained RAFT personnel, and other related problems. Conversely, there was such an abundance of vehicle-based personnel that many could not be utilised and were sent home.

The availability and effectiveness of RAFT personnel is vital to the early (safe and cheap) containment of fires in large natural areas with high environmental sensitivity. We are keen to know what is being done to improve this critical area of operations, across all fire agencies.

Backburning

Backburning is an issue closely associated with first response. There have been many incidences of backburns being lit under high-risk conditions and subsequently escaping. This occurred in the Grose Valley fire. Many backburns that escape or become over-extended end up being counter-productive and would have been better left unlit.

Inappropriate backburns seem to occur most often in the early response to wildfires, before incident management teams are fully operational with the planning section providing appropriate guidance.

We are concerned that although the science of fire behaviour and backburning is quite advanced, and guidelines could be developed to help decision-making, this does not seem to be happening. There is also an apparent reluctance to review, admit and learn from events (which comes back to better review processes).

We understand that there will always be an element of judgment in backburning decisions, but this needs to be minimised by the effective application of science and standard operating procedures. The current situation would seem to leave too much responsibility on those firefighters unfortunate enough to have to make hurried decisions on the ground.

There must be a huge amount of data available for analysis about backburns that have worked and those that haven't. Researching this data to develop guidelines should surely be a priority to assist firefighters?

We would appreciate learning of what is being done to improve backburning decision-making and implementation.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues and we look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

(on behalf of the 10 signatories to the attached letter to the Premier of 11 February 2007)