

NSW GOVERNMENT BUSHFIRE INQUIRY INTO THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRE SEASON

I wish to submit the following information to the above inquiry and thank the Government and the Inquiry Panel for the opportunity. I present this as an individual although my background is 40 years as an Operational fire fighter with the NSW Fire Brigades, (now known as Fire and Rescue NSW) spending my last 16 years of service as an Inspector with the Fire Investigation Unit in the capacity of Fire Investigation Officer.

My qualifications in the area of bush fire operation are as follows:-

1. In November 1981 I was appointed an honorary Fire Patrol Officer under Section 42(2) of the Bush Fire Act.
2. In January 1982 I served as a Hazard Reduction and Training Officer with the NSW Fire Brigades Bush Fire Section. I was trained to give instruction both practical and theory in water tanker driving, chain saw operation and hazard reduction techniques.
3. In October 1987 I was qualified in aerial map reading and bush fire plotting.
4. In November 1987 I qualified as a 41F Nominee under the Bush Fire Act for the Sutherland District Bush Fire Protection Committee. In June 1988 I attended a NSW Fire Brigades 41F Nominee's Training seminar.
5. I have attended the following courses to do with bush fire operations
 - a. NSW Fire Brigades Bush Fire school in August 1978
 - b. Bush Fire Council of NSW Bush Fire school in August 1982
 - c. NSW Fire Brigades Bush Fire school in August 1984
6. I have also been a serving Committee member of the Sutherland Bush Fire Protection Committee from 1987 to 1991

During my employment with the NSW Fire Brigades I have attended many bush fires within the Sutherland local area both as a fire fighter and Officer in charge. I appeared as an expert witness at the NSW 1994 Bush Fire Inquiry regarding fires that impacted on the Sutherland Shire. In 2002, I also provided a statement of evidence to the Coroner's inquiry regarding the cause and origin of a disastrous bush fire which impacted on Stanwell Tops and Helensburgh on Christmas Day 2001.

With the disastrous fires around the State of NSW in the summer of 2019-20 causing death, destruction and unprecedented losses, my objective is to provide a safer environment for the communities of New South Wales in times of bush fires and also safer working conditions for fire fighters, whether volunteer or career.

CAUSES

All fires are based on three elements – heat, oxygen and fuel. Of these, fuel is the only element which can be manipulated before a fire event. The fuel can be reduced to lower the intensity of the fire, generally by Prescribed Burning (or hazard reduction) or by removal of the fuel by the creation of fire breaks.

The higher temperatures experienced during the last few months can also assist with the rapid combustion of available fuel. Strong sunlight can heat forest litter, twigs and leaves to a temperature above the air temperature and also assist the ignition and combustible process of a fire.

Strong winds and currents generated by the fire's progression create spotting, therefore starting fires that are quite distant from the main fire front.

It would appear from media reports that many fires burning within the jurisdiction of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Corporation and the NSW Rural Fire Service had been allowed to burn for many weeks without any attempt to contain.

During the recent catastrophic conditions a number of these fires increased in size and were unable to be contained. They then joined together to become one mega fire.

Back burning operations designed to contain blazes contributed to property and wildlife losses. More than half a dozen homes around Mt Tomah were lost in back burning operations in the Blue Mountains when a fire was lit to stop the south western flank of the Gosper Mountain's blaze. Up to five back burns implemented to contain this blaze were lost, each one accelerating and expanding the fire area.

The behaviour of back burns during these catastrophic conditions is unpredictable.

Another twenty homes were also lost in Clarence and Bilpin with some speculating these losses were also from back burns. Another back burn conducted to stop the Green Wattle Creek fire from advancing has been blamed for property losses in Balmoral in the Southern Highlands.

PREPARATION AND RESPONSE

Current back burning practices and strategies need to be reviewed.

Fires originating in remote areas, normally the result of a lightning strike, need to be contained immediately. The use of remote area fire fighting teams (RAFT) who have the capability of putting out blazes in deep bushland, should be utilised by the fire fighting agencies along with aerial attack.

Under the Rural Fire Service Act the RFS Commissioner is required to take charge of bushfire fighting operations and bushfire prevention measures as he considers necessary to control or suppress any bushfire in any part of the State. If, in his opinion

- that has assumed or is **likely to assume** such proportions as to be incapable of control or suppression by the fire fighting authority or authorities in the local area, or
- if a bushfire is not being effectively controlled or suppressed by the fire fighting authority or authorities in the local area

It appears the RFS is becoming a reactive force rather than a fire prevention source, resulting in the loss of skills in the planning and execution of fire prevention strategies.

A review of bush fire management is required immediately to curtail the "*environmental vandalism*".

Unfortunately friction between the Rural Fire Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service has always existed. The RFS feels that the NPWS do not carry out sufficient hazard reduction activity and they often use back burning operations on the National Parks and Wildlife Service land to achieve that goal.

A most disturbing trend that appears to be increasing is that members of the RFS are too hasty to introduce back burning operations during the early stages of fires. These back burning methods are often used, dispensing with the more conventional methods, ie attacked by lines of hose. The result of this "*drip torch first*" mentality is the large scale enlargement of the fire.

I observed evidence of this in 2005-6 whilst working with a NSW Police "Arson Strike Force" investigating the massive bushfire that destroyed the Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park. Whilst standing on a high vantage point observing the kilometres of bush destruction surrounding us an RFS Officer commented to the surprise of all of us that **80% of the bush area destroyed was the result of back burning operations**. He did not display any concerns regarding that remark.

Findings of inquest into the deaths of three volunteer fire fighters and also an inquiry into a fire at the Royal National Park, Grays Point on the 9th January 1983 by Coroner B J Wilson Squire found that there were irregularities as to the bush fire brigades' operations and makes reference to a back burn put in by fire fighters escaping and being unable to be contained. Similar problems arose from a bush fire which occurred in January 1994, some eleven years later on Wednesday 5th January 1994 within the Royal National Park adjacent to Heathcote; as was given in evidence to the Coronial 1994 Bush Fire Inquiry. This inquiry also addressed the fire which impacted on Bangor, Illawong, Alfords Point, Sutherland, Como and Jannali, which resulted in a fatality.

Unfortunately, events like this are still occurring today.

Co-ORDINATION AND DEPLOYMENT

I find the aforementioned disturbing and detrimental to the safety of the community of New South Wales. An effective and efficient fire service cannot exist while two separate chains of command are in place. It is of prime and immediate importance that a singular command structure be established.

This can be implemented by a single fire service and a single fire Commissioner. The merging of the RFS and Fire and Rescue NSW would also improve equipment resources and communication systems.

A single fire service with two operational arms – rural and urban - would come under the authority of one Commissioner.

In 1996 the respected Deputy State Coroner, John Hiatt recommended an overhaul of the control system. His principal recommendation was the amalgamation of the two fire services. A single fire service has got to lead to more co-ordination, and co-ordination is an important aspect of fire fighting.

The Rural Fire Service Association (the representative association for volunteer fire fighters and staff members of the RFS in New South Wales) has identified superficial benefits including reductions in corporate infrastructure costs, simplified command structure, etc. (policy papers ref. 2004/2010). The RFSA does not support a move to merge services into one body covering the entire State. The RFSA has produced a fear campaign to its Members regarding a single fire service.

Implemented correctly, the RFS would still remain a volunteer-based organisation and the State's fire protection would be better served as well as a financial saving.

Thanking you

William Powell AFSM, JP

If you would like further information, please contact me on [REDACTED] or

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