

NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry,

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Submission to Bushfire Inquiry

2019/20 Bushfires

Introduction

Without doubt the 2019/2020 Official Fire Danger Period will be one to remember and very few of those who experienced the fires will not forget in a hurry.

The fires which impacted a significant proportion of the eastern seaboard and tablelands districts of the eastern states were like no one has seen in living memory. This was the perfect storm that escalated over a period of months due to extended periods of severe drought impacting the country. These fires were ultimately extinguished by the sheer hard work and determination by all persons involved combined with nature providing some much needed rainfall.

Given that the enormity of these fires could be regarded as a once in a lifetime event it is difficult to make any real comparisons to past fire fighting efforts. The nearest events in relatively recent times to which it could be compared with would include the Canberra Fires during January 2003 and The Black Saturday Fires in Victoria during February 2009. However these events almost scale into insignificance in comparison based upon the enormous areas that were burnt and the period of time that the fires burned relentlessly for.

Personal Background

I am 62 years of age and have lived in the Braidwood District all of my adult life, growing up and working on a family property for a significant proportion of that time.

My involvement with the NSW Rural Fire Service (NSWRFS) commenced in December 1975 when I joined the Charleyong VRFB and have been heavily involved with the organisation ever since.

I have held the positions of Deputy Captain, Captain and Group Captain plus was employed by the NSWRFS as a Salaried Officer to hold the position of District Inspector for the Tallaganda District between 1999 and 2003. I currently hold the position of Deputy Captain with the Braidwood VRFB.

Operationally I have extensive operational experience during the years, both on the fire ground as well as in a control room environment. The more notable fires which I had involvement with include the Deua Fire S44, 2001/02 (Planning and Operations), Highlands Fire S44, 2001/02 (Operations), Touga Fire S44, 2002 (Planning, Operations, District Liasion), the Canberra Fire, 2003 (Operations) and the Wirritin Fire S44, 2013 (Operational in the field). I have also been on deployments across NSW plus interstate to Victoria and Queensland.

My involvement with the recent major fires commenced early November with a five day deployment to Port Macquarie before the fires started as a result of lightning strikes locally on the 26th November last year. I then worked continuously over multiple shifts on these fires over a period of almost 10 weeks until rain finally assisted in containing and extinguishing them in February.

Fires attended include the North Black Range Fire, Currawan Fire, Charleys Forest Fire, Clyde Ridge Fire, Badja Forest Fire and the Jinden Fire.

I would like to address the following subjects based upon personal experiences during the recent fires and knowledge gained over my time involved as a member of the NSWRFS.

- Incident Management
- Fuel Management
- Resourcing
- Funding

Incident Management

One crucial element with fighting wildfires is to ensure they are managed by the most appropriate organisation.

Land management authorities will have varying agendas based upon their own responsibilities and land management policies. These agendas however can at times have a significant impact upon how fires are responded to initially and then managed which can influence the overall outcome of that fire. What can unfortunately occur at times is that the various land management authorities will mount a response that may not necessarily be sufficient enough but is guided more by their own individual land management policies. This can then result in fires escalating beyond what it may have been if a more appropriate response was mounted.

The ideal situation is to ensure the most appropriate and effective response is mounted based upon prevailing factors surrounding every individual wildfire.

There will be circumstances whereby the response may simply be to observe and monitor the progress of a fire if conditions are favourable enough to allow for that to occur and whereby any impact resulting from that fire would be minimal or perhaps beneficial from a fuel reduction/environmental perspective rather than be destructive.

For example a lightning strike in remote areas under the right conditions could result in an area effectively being fuel reduced as the fire spreads slowly with low intensity to a point where it will self-extinguish as it would naturally do back in the days before European settlement. At the opposite end of the scale the response would need to be one of responding more than sufficient resources in an endeavour to minimise the spread and potential damage which may be caused.

In addition there can be differing opinions between land management authorities and the local fire fighting agency regarding what containment strategies should be implemented which can then lead to friction and less cooperation.

It is my firm belief that the local fire fighting agency should take immediate control of all wildfires rather than having the situation whereby it is necessary

to take over at a point where the fire has escalated beyond the capabilities of the land management authority. For rural NSW the relevant fire fighting agency should be the NSW Rural Fire Service.

Land management authorities such as Forests NSW, NPWS and Water NSW, for example, can and should oversee and manage their own fuel management programs including undertaking fuel reduction burning but as soon as any fire is classified as a wildfire upon those lands the control and management of that fire should automatically come under the control of NSWRFSS.

The primary responsibility of the NSWRFSS is to protect the community by responding to and suppressing all wildfires. This is not the primary responsibility of land management authorities and private landholders.

The NSWRFSS should still seek guidance from the relevant land management authority when developing containment strategies and tactics in relation to taking into consideration that authorities land management policies and the environment but ultimately the responsibility should rest with the NSWRFSS in order to avoid clashes of varying fire management policies.

Recommendation

That all wildfires which occur on all lands within Rural NSW come under the immediate control of the NSW Rural Fire Service for mounting an immediate response and ongoing management of that wildfire until it is declared to be extinguished.

Fuel Management

One of the major contributing factors to the devastation caused by the recent fires was the amount of fuel that existed within the forests primarily on lands managed by government authorities. Without doubt the combined effect of massive fuel loads, severe drought combined with severe fire weather conditions resulted in the catastrophic destruction we saw inflicted on people, property and the environment.

There needs to be a significant review of fuel management policies covering all lands both, public and private, to ensure fuel loads are properly managed to reduce the build-up of material that has been occurring over many decades.

In particular there needs to be a focus on reviewing standards for Asset Protection Zones (APZ) to ensure communities can have increased protection against the impact of wildfire. There are numerous villages and settlements along the South Coast of NSW for instance that have only a single road access in and out meaning those communities can very easily become isolated if that road is cut by fire. It becomes virtually impossible to evacuate as well as have a route for fire fighting resources to access the area to provide assistance. Examples of this are Mallacoota in Victoria, Guerilla Bay south of Batemans Bay, Potato Point, Bawley Point and Kioloa to name but a few. It was sheer good fortune that more carnage did not occur during the recent fires.

An example of where fuel reduction provides clear evidence of its benefits can be seen was on the Charleys Forest Fire in the areas along Webbs Fire Trail and Gulf Fire Trail at Charleys Forest, east of Braidwood. The fuel loads east of Webbs Fire Trail was burned during the Wirritin Fire during October 2013. The area east of the Gulf Fire Trail which extends northwards from the end of Webbs Fire Trail to Wog Wog was not burned. Both these areas were burned during the recent fires. The difference between the two areas following the recent fires is dramatic in that the area burned in 2013 received minimal damage compared to the area surrounding the Gulf Fire Trail which was virtually devastated. There were virtually no breeches to the west of Webbs Fire Trail whereas the Gulf Fire Trail was breeched for its entire length. The fire behaviour in the country east of Webbs Fire Trail was very benign in comparison due to the greatly reduced fuel loads.

It is acknowledged that large scale fuel reduction is not always achievable for various reasons meaning the alternative is to look at ensuring Asset Protection Zones adjacent to residential developments in particular plus access roads are sufficient enough to help minimise any potential impact from wildfire.

Cultural burning practices need to be further investigated and reintroduced into the landscape where at all possible. Investigation and demonstrations being conducted by those experienced in the principles and methods show that it can be very effective in reducing fire intensity where it has been implemented.

Recommendation

That a review is undertaken into fuel management for all lands whether public or private and policies developed in order to minimise the potential impacts of wildfire upon life, property and the environment.

Resourcing

The subject of resourcing can be contentious in that many would say that there should have been more resources made available to fight the recent fires. Resources were certainly extremely stretched throughout the campaign but it needs to be put into perspective. On a number of occasions you could never have had enough resources to try and protect life and property as the intensity of the fires burning under horrendous conditions was simply too extreme.

Ordinarily it could be said that we have enough resources within the Lake George District to manage most incidents in general but this past season was something extraordinary that no fire fighting agency could plan for.

There is certainly room for improvements and upgrades to the NSWRFs fire fighting fleet. There were calls made from some sectors during and following the days of devastation saying there should have been more trucks and more aircraft made available but it's not that simple. You can't just click fingers and they suddenly appear. Firstly where does the additional funding come from? Secondly how do you crew them with an already stretched volunteer base? And thirdly you need the infrastructure to accommodate the additional trucks and aircraft. For example, there is very little change out of \$400k for a new Cat 1 Isuzu tanker. It then would take a substantial amount of money to build an extra bay onto a station to accommodate that truck if the land was available. It would then require another 10 members to properly crew that vehicle over two shifts. This also requires brigades to find those additional members to be begin with, to then have them trained to the appropriate levels (Crew Leader qualification can take a number of years of training and experience to gain). Many brigades do not have the population base to draw membership from.

Resourcing for the NSWRFs has grown significantly over the past 20 years especially. Smaller incidents can generally be dealt with using local resources. Larger fires have drawn from resources from other districts and have in general

been adequate enough. This past season was something totally different due to the number of fires, the size and timeframes that they burned for stretched resources well beyond all available resources on the worst of the days.

Acknowledgement needs to be given to the local landholders and others that banded together to protect their own properties as well as support the RFS and other agencies using their own vehicles and equipment throughout the fire fighting period. The members of the “Mosquito Fleet” formed their own strike teams to cover the different areas being impacted by fire. They were reasonably well organised and were very effective overall but would have been better if they communicated with the RFS so as to better coordinate their resources.

Recommendation

For a review to be undertaken into the resourcing model to ensure the most appropriate protection is provided for the protection against and suppression of wildfires in the State of New South Wales.

Funding

The NSW RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons was very praising of the NSW State Government for providing record funding to the NSW RFS for this financial year.

It is acknowledged that there are limited funds available that the government can contribute annually which means that any additional funding needs to be sourced elsewhere.

One approach that was attempted to be implemented was that funds raised through the insurance levy component of insurance policies would be taken over by local government and raised by adding this levy to annual property rate notices. For mind this would be a much fairer way of ensuring that every land holder contributed towards the funding of the fire services rather than the current system. The current system means that land holders that do not comprehensively insure their properties do not contribute to the fire fighting fund.

We consistently hear about properties being lost and they have no insurance followed by the huge fund raising efforts that are mounted to support the people affected. A much fairer system is one where everyone contributes.

Recommendation

That the proposal for the funding of the Fire Service Levy be raised through Council Rates instead of through insurance policies be revisited to ensure all property owners contribute towards the fund.

Yours Sincerely

Danny King

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