



SELECT COMMITTEE ON BUSHFIRES

**SUMMARY OF
CORONIAL FINDINGS**

**Kenthust Bush Fire (Oct 1991)
Grays Point Bush Fire (Dec 1985)
Byadbo Bush Fires (Dec 1990)**

September 1994

Parliament of New South Wales

CORONIAL INQUIRIES

KENTHURST FIRE

Inquest into the death of Shirley Anne Dudley and Emma Selina Tracy Burns
Fire Inquiry concerning fire at 13 Orana Road Kenthurst

CORONER: MR J HIATT

October 1991

BACKGROUND:

The deaths and the fire to these premises arose out of what has been referred to as "the Kenthurst bushfire" on 16 October 1991.

FINDINGS:

- Court is satisfied that the fire control centre at Kenthurst was at the time properly resourced with appropriate personnel and equipment to direct the operation to control the bushfire.
- Evidence of considerable fire fighting efforts of others, including the police and residents and other members of the community in assisting the fire fighting brigades.
- More than adequate liaison and communication at the centre between the fire control officer, the fire brigade, the police service and other emergency services.
- Exceptional circumstances lead to the deaths. Sheltering in a house should only be done when it is properly prepared for the purpose. In this case, the evidence establishes that the house was not properly prepared, by cleaning vegetation to a reasonable distance from the house and there was an absence of a non-flammable windbreak on the exposed elevation. There was also evidence of combustible material having been stored under the house.
- A consideration of the total evidence before the court shows that those in charge acted in a professional and efficient manner to co-ordinate all the resources then available at the various stages during the fire in an endeavour to save lives and property and bring the fire under control in very extreme conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Need for some mechanism to be built into the organisation by a fire control officer or the bushfire service or the Baulkham Hills Council to have a person available in the high risk residential areas during bushfires to account for all persons in the area.
- Need for better liaison between authorities and members of the community on restrictions on hazard reduction through environmental controls.
- Members of the community should be encouraged to furnish information about particular risk areas for bush fires.
- A bush fire prevention officer should be appointed.
- Department of Bushfire Services and the Baulkham Hills Shire Council should make available sufficient funds to appoint:
 - a) a prevention officer at the Baulkham Hills Shire Council; and
 - b) to provide additional funds for training and use of volunteer fire brigade personnel in major hazard reduction works so that hazard reduction can be carried out during the week when conditions are favourable.
- The prevention officer should confer and operate at the direction of the District Fire Committee and the Fire Control Officer. The prevention officer will have three principle functions:

Firstly:

- a) to identify and rate bushfire risk areas in the Shire;
- b) to liaise with the district Fire committee Bushfire Brigade Captains to assess the major hazard reduction works considered necessary to be carried out;
- c) to be available to landholders in the community to confer and educate on hazard reduction in respect of private property, and of course in high bushfire risk areas other agencies such as those in control of Crown Lands;
- d) to confer, liaise, and programme with the voluntary bushfire brigades, back burning and fire hazard reduction works;
- e) to supervise control of hazard reduction;
- f) to prepare maps of the bushfire risk areas and place on those maps the positions of houses, fire trails and identify thereon exceptional high risk areas which require regular reduction action, maintenance and inspection. To visit householders in these areas at least once during a relevant period to tender advice or information on fire hazard reduction and to identify to

private landholders and others, any fire hazard in need of reduction. And to accept information for such residents and other persons to assist in the performance of his duties.

Secondly:

To be available at the direction of the fire control officer at major bushfires:

- a) to liaise and provide information as to the positioning of houses in risk areas; and
- b) to be available for or to delegate to other persons the duty of accounting for people in houses in bushfire affected areas as the need arises.

Thirdly:

To report to the Minister through the District Fire Committee on the state of bushfire hazard management and preventive measures at least once per year at an appropriate time.

These recommendations are not exhaustive, but clearly there is a need to have a prevention officer to properly implement the prior hazard reduction plan and the fire control officer to carry out his duties in respect of fire control.

INQUIRY INTO A FIRE AT ROYAL NATIONAL PARK GRAYS POINT.

CORONER: B J WILSON

13 December 1985

BACKGROUND:

Between the 9th and 11th of January 1983, a bush fire occurred in the Royal National Park burning 337 hectares of the park before it was extinguished. During the afternoon of 9th of January whilst fighting the fire some volunteer bushfire fighters of the Heathcote Bush Fire Brigade were overwhelmed by flames. Keith Campbell, Thomas Anthony Bielecke and Gregory John Moon died and six other members were severely burnt.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding:

- Confusion appeared as to the meaning of radio code signals used during the fire.

"When a volunteer bush fire brigade is fighting a fire, either alone or in co-operation with other brigades or authorities different understandings of such signals can lead to disaster."

Recommendation:

- The authorities should agree on a uniform system of radio signals and the situations in which they are to be used.

Finding:

- No explanation why volunteer fire fighters did not use the radio to advise of their predicament or seek help.

Recommendation:

- The Bush Fire Council should draw attention of all bush fire brigades the need to emphasise in survival lectures the importance of the use of radio in a life threatening situation.

Finding:

- Evidence showed inadequacies with the current tankers used by the Bush Fire Brigades. What is required is a short-wheelbase, multi-drive vehicle of great rigidity and strength to traverse narrow, steep and rough trails.

Recommendations:

- New tankers should be made available to all brigades as soon as possible.
- Training in simulated emergency situations should be incorporated into training programs for bush fire fighters.
- Every effort should be made to convert both engines and water pumps to diesel because of the increased safety it provides with its higher flash point.
- Council should consider the development and manufacture of a lightweight and flame proof blanket for fire fighters and ensure that instructions in its use are incorporated into training.
- The Bush Fire Council should investigate if helmets which comply with the standard it recommends provide sufficient protection for bush fire fighters and should conduct an immediate survey to ascertain the make and Australian Standard number (if any) of all helmets on issue to fire fighters.

Findings:

- For whatever reason it is quite clear that NPWS resources during the time of the fire were inadequate to control or suppress anything other than a very minor fire in the most favourable circumstances.
- Section 41F of the Bush Fires Act is not free from problems. These occur up until the stage that the Chief Co-ordinator of Bush Fire Fighting taking charge of fire fighting operations involving several authorities.
- Another matter of public importance raised by the evidence is that dissension has arisen between the Sutherland Shire Council and the NPWS about entry to the Council's brigades onto National Park land. The evidence indicates that volunteer fire fighters are concerned about their safety in the RNP because of lack of hazard reduction and the poor condition of trails.

Recommendation:

- The safety of the community residing in areas adjoining the Royal National Park, and the safety of the many visitors to the park, require that any doubt concerning the instant and unfettered entry of the volunteer brigades into the park should be immediately resolved.

Finding:

- Evidence revealed that hazard reduction was not carried out because of a lack of funds.

Recommendation:

- It may be possible for members of the Sutherland Bush Fire Brigade to conduct hazard reduction in the National Park. This would be cost effective and provide ideal training for volunteer brigade members in all aspects of bush fire fighting, including safety and administration.

BYADBO WILDERNESS BUSH FIRES

CORONER'S COURT, BOMBALA

CORONER: MR A J JORDAN

17th December 1990

BACKGROUND:

Inquiry under section 15(1) of the Coroner's Act into four separate bush fires during January of 1988 within the Kosciusko National Park.

FINDINGS:

- NPWS refused to allow a fire retardant known as "Phoscheck" to be used to suppress the fires due to a blanket policy against the use of fire suppressants. However, phoscheck was used successfully against the fire with the permission of Victorian officers when the fire approached the State border under the ambit of the Border Fire Agreement.
- Deputy 41F Controller's Report was manufactured by the Deputy 41F Controller and National Parks Officers to conceal the blanket policy restriction on the use of suppressants under whatever circumstances.
- NPWS did not take any direct action for five days to contain the fire. This action is inexcusable considering the weather conditions at the time.

"One wonders what would be the reaction of the NPWS if a fire was ignited on private property with a potential to escape into National Park and no action to contain and extinguish the fire was taken for a period of five days by the Brigades or the occupier of the private land.

- NPWS witnesses were unreliable and not much weight could be attached to their evidence.
- Difficulties were experienced with radio communication after the radio transmission tower for the Bombala Shire frequency was destroyed by fire. NPWS refused to assist the fire control officer with the use of their radio facilities.
- NPWS did not do everything within their power to contain and extinguish the fires at an early stage, due in no small part to the fact that they did not co-operate fully with outside fire-fighting agencies such as the Forestry Commission of NSW and the Local Bush Fire Brigades. NPWS should have exhausted the local avenues of

help and resources available to it before drawing on resources from other areas of the State.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The Fire Control Officer for the Bombala Shire and all other Fire Control Officers for Shires surrounding the Kosciusko National Park in NSW be issued with a radio accessing the frequency used by the National Parks and Wildlife Service on a full time basis.
- NPWS should review their policy on the use of fire retardants such as "Phoscheck" within the Kosciusko National Park, and the approval to use it to be more readily available and quicker to obtain.
- NPWS consult with others on the possibility of constructing addition fire trails within the Park, thereby enabling early back-burning operations to be undertaken and also providing more fall-back positions for personal undertaking those operations.
- NPWS should re-create the positions of Ranger stationed in Bombala which was recently abolished. This would allow for a quicker and more effective on-ground liaison between NPWS and other fire-fighting agencies.