

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Volunteer Fire Fighters Association

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Inquiry into the Management of Public Land in New South Wales
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Attention - The Hon Robert Brown MLC
Chair of the committee

Re: Inquiry into the Management Public Land in New South Wales

The Volunteer Fire Fighters Association (VFFA) is the only association solely representing the voice of volunteer rural fire fighters in the NSW Rural Fire Service and the VFFA wish to thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the State inquiry into the management of public land in NSW.

1. The conversion of Crown Land, State Forests and agricultural land into National Park estate or other types of conservation areas.

The process of conversion of Crown Lands, State Forests, Marine areas and agricultural land to National Park estate appears to be an internal process within government with limited advertisement or consultation and input by affected communities.

In the case of Crown Lands, the VFFA understands that the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) currently prepare an environmental assessment of the ecological significance of land slated for conversion and submit a report to the Director General of Crown Lands. There is little or no public consultation in this process. Rural communities who use the Crown Land for recreation, four wheel driving, horse riding, timber getting for fire wood etc. are disempowered and marginalised under the current conversion process.

Under the previous State Labor Government State Forests were converted to National Parks for political opportunism in the run up the state election to win green votes, e.g. River Red Gum Forests in south west NSW.

The VFFA contends that the National Parks assessment process is flawed and is biased towards ecological assessment without affording equal consideration of other factors raised above.

Moreover, the National Park estate in NSW is currently known to be in excess of 3 million hectares. It is widely acknowledged that the NPWS are under resourced and struggling to manage the existing estate, which is further complicated when new National Parks are created from Crown Land or State Forest.

The VFFA advocates that a **moratorium** is put in place on the conversion of Crown Land, State Forest and marine areas to the National Park estate until a fully transparent process is developed that enables an objective examination of the social, cultural, recreational, economic and environmental impacts of the conversion which includes an extensive consultation process with local communities and other relevant stakeholders.

The VFFA is concerned that as more land such as Crown Land and State Forest is converted to National Park, areas previously open to the public are locked up and large sections of the community are excluded from the use of the Park such as 4wd clubs, horse riding clubs and fishing and hunting groups. There are also reduced commercial opportunities available to the NSW government upon the declaration of public lands to National Park to generate revenue to fund the management of public lands. E.g. 4wd parks, motocross tracks, shooting ranges, adjustment and select grazing in open woodlands, open cut mining, adventure sports business and eco lodges/motels.

2. The adherence to management practices on all public land that are mandated for private property holders, including fire, weed and pest management practices.

The VFFA contends that as more public land such as Crown Land and State Forest is converted to National Park, less funding is available within the NPWS to fund essential fire management works such as the maintenance of fire trails, asset protection zones and hazard reduction by prescribed burning. This is distinct from State Forests who invest funds back into the forest estate for the establishment and maintenance of fire trails and other fire protection measures.

The VFFA is aware of examples which demonstrate that the standard and level of fire trail maintenance is inconsistent under the current bureaucratic structure where fire trails traverse several public land tenures. There is recent evidence on the north coast of NSW, where an essential fire trail in the Nymboi – Binderay National Park was upgraded to the park boundary and restoration works discontinued once the fire trail entered the adjoining State Forest. This is despite the fact that the trail in the State Forest was in poor condition. Fire clearly has no boundaries, however on this occasion, it is clear that public land management agencies invoked a boundary when it came to managing an essential fire trail, potentially putting the public, fire fighters and the environment at risk from fire. Once again, this demonstrates that public lands are not being managed in a consistent, efficient or cohesive manner.

The VFFA is supportive of the model in Victoria where a “Super Department” known as the Department of Sustainability and Environment was created in which the financial, physical and human resources are shared across the whole public land estate irrespective of public land tenure to manage pests, fire and weeds.

In the first instance, all common backroom functions such as Human Resources, Procurement, Finance, IT and Governance would be amalgamated, followed by the incorporation of operational staff. The VFFA contends that the “Super Department”

model is a more efficient use of scarce public funds for the management of public lands in NSW.

At present in NSW, all the land management agencies appear to work in silos and have a fortress mentality. For example outside of a declared section 44 bushfire emergency under the Rural Fires Act, land management agencies generally work independently of each other in the area of bushfire mitigation and suppression.

In the case of Crown Lands, who are presently managed by the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), the situation is much worse. This DPI administers an area of approximately 36 million hectares of Crown Land (this includes the 3 nautical mile zone and Western Lands Division of Crown Land). A significant proportion of the Crown Land estate is bushfire prone land. The VFFA understands that the DPI has a memorandum of understanding with the NSW RFS to manage bushfire risk on the Crown Land estate. Given the size of the Crown Land estate in NSW, The VFFA contends that it is unreasonable and unrealistic for the RFS to manage the bushfire risk on Crown Lands. Furthermore, the Rural Fires Act 1997 clearly states that each land management agency is responsible for bushfire mitigation on land they manage. The VFFA understands that the Crown Lands Division has very limited resources available for bushfire mitigation works and contends that the Crown Land Division and its senior management have abrogated their responsibilities for bushfire mitigation on the Crown Land estate in NSW.

The VFFA contends that the amalgamation of all NSW land management agencies into a "Super Department" is one way of ensuring that areas designated as Crown Land along with all other public lands such as National Parks and State Forests are considered in their entirety when planning and implementing bushfire hazard reduction works across NSW.

In summary, the VFFA is advocating that all NSW land management agencies are amalgamated into a "Super Department" whereby common standard operating procedures are adopted and all the land management resources are pooled together, streamlined and strategically operate across all public land regardless of tenure/classification. This would improve planning, productivity and free up scarce resources and funds for vital land management works across all public lands in NSW. It is recommended that the committee look at the Victorian model for the management of public lands including the structure, function and funding of the Department of Sustainability.

3. Examination of models for the management of public land, including models that provide for conservation outcomes which utilise the principles of "sustainable use".

See Above

4. Any other related matters.

The VFFA advocates the adoption of the Canobolas bushfire model by all land management agencies across NSW for managing bushfire risk and hazards on public lands. The Canobolas model arose in the aftermath of the 2001/2002 "Goobang Fire" in the Goobang National Park, located in the central west of NSW. It was during this fire, that several major shortcomings in the local bushfire risk management plan were identified.

The Canobolas model is a map-based, bush fire risk management plan that provides a tenure blind, whole of landscape approach to bushfire management. The plan divides the landscape into different zones, allocates risk and then identifies a range of treatment options within each zone.

There is inconsistent funding and approaches to the management of weeds across the public land estate in NSW and this is adding to the fire hazard on the public lands in NSW. Of concern to the VFFA is that flammable weeds such as African love grass are spreading rapidly across the public land and the land management agencies have an inconsistent approach and level of funding to controls these weeds.

There is anecdotal evidence that feral animals such as wild horses (brumbies) and goats are over grazing rainforest fringes on the mid North Coast in Barrington Tops National Parks. It has been suggested that this is causing the destruction of mid and higher stratum shrub and tree species, opening up the canopy, causing higher UV rays to penetrate the forest and drying out the vegetation below, resulting in an increased risk of fire, in what was once a lush, damp green area of the park. The VFFA advocates a catchment based approach to the management of feral animals regardless of tenure and greater intervention by registered shooters to cull feral animals on public lands.

The VFFA supports in principle, the occasional controlled grazing by livestock of open woodlands in designated National Parks which were previously grazed prior to gazettal as a National Park. The rationale behind this concept is to allow limited grazing in a National Park on a commercial basis that would aim to: - a) reduce the fuel load on the forest floor, hence reducing the bushfire risk and rate of spread of a bushfire and b) provide grazers areas to feed their livestock when communities are affected by long term drought. Notwithstanding, the VFFA advocates that further research is required to assess risk and land capability, cost benefit analysis, commercial return to the government and the long term environmental impact of grazing in select National Parks before proceeding forward with this concept.

The VFFA wishes to table one further item for consideration by members of the panel overseeing this inquiry. This matter relates to the mismanagement of hazard reduction works in proximity to Eucumbene Cove village in 2008, **see appendix 1**. It is noted that this area is isolated and is considered to be an extreme bushfire risk posing a significant threat to life and property. To summarize, several issues arose during the planning and implementation of hazard reduction work around the village that include, but not limited; extensive delays to planned works, inefficient use of paid Rural Fire Service State Mitigation Support Teams (SMSS) in delivery of works, high cost of works due to the use of SMSS teams from outside the local area, poor quality of works delivered by SMSS teams. Should the opportunity arise, Mr Peter Cochrane of the VFFA, would like the opportunity to elaborate further at a public hearing in relation to this matter, particularly the planning and implementation of hazard reduction works in high risk bushfire zones and the use of paid RFS SMSS in the delivery of hazard reduction and land management works on public and private lands.

Conclusion

The VFFA wishes to thank again, the Parliament of NSW for the opportunity to make this submission and trusts that our contribution is beneficial to the inquiry.

Representatives of the VFFA would be pleased to be interviewed and provide further information on any matter raised in this submission to the panel overseeing this inquiry, should the opportunity arise in the future.

Please contact me if you require further information or clarification of the VFFA position.

Yours sincerely

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The Canobalas Bush Fire Model



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The Canobalas Zone



The Canobalas Zone covers 11,000 square kilometres.
It includes the Local Government areas of Blayney, Cabonne, Cowra and Orange and is serviced by 1,845 volunteers in 83 Fire Brigades.

The Canobalas Bush Fire Model (CBFM)

Background

The VFFA has acknowledged the dangers due to the present lack of management processes in regards to wild fire suppression within National Parks in the Canobalas zone. The VFFA have refused to enter potentially dangerous fire grounds without a change to the pro-active management processes in situ.

The RFS and the NPWS have acknowledged the issues brought to them by the VFFA. Alex Green from National Parks, (now Vic Parks in Victoria) and David Hoadley (zone manager of Canobalas RFS Orange) have worked with the VFFA on what is now known as the 'Canobalas Plan'.

The VFAA thanks Alex Green and David Hoadley for their commitment to making our volunteers firefighters safer.

What is the CBFM?

The CBFM is a bushfire model that addresses issues relating to volunteer firefighters and fire risk management in National Parks with particular focus on the Canobalas zone.

Key Objectives:

1. Protection of life, property and community assets from fire.
2. Utilisation of ecologically sustainable development principles in bush fire management.

Scope of Plan:

1. Identify risks.
2. Formulation and enactment of risk management strategies. All relevant agencies are to be involved with the development of the plan. Whilst each area may have their own burn plan; they recognise the BIG PICTURE and how it fits together – in fact they assist with the implementation of preventive works. The CBFM primary which develops the plan does not involve itself in fire fighting activities, this is the responsibility of the local brigades and agencies who have had major input into the development of the plan.

CBFM Pilot Plan

1. Fire Trails

Boundary trails, each side of boundary fences, to be to be 60M wide:

- 0-20M from fence to be graded,
- 20-40M from fence to be cleared of all timber which can be grassed up.
- 40-60M from fence to be clear of all trees due to ember risk/spot overs.

2. Internal Fire Trails

- 2M x 4M x 2 Trails, which means 4M of graded trail, 2M either side to be clear of timber or heavy scrub so brigade trucks may overtake one another.

3. Turning Bays

- every 250M-500M for emergency fire crew evacuation.

4. Hazard Reduction Burns

- To be carried out in a period of time identified by BFMC and the Group Captains, Captains and Local Brigades.

This is all about reducing the fuel loading in National Parks. Private Land, this could be as follows in a mosaic pattern:

Burning Periods; 1-4 years hazard burn/cool burn.

10 -15yrs ----- 15 - 25yrs

25 - 30yrs ----- 30 - 40yrs.

5. National Parks or other Areas

- Divide into areas so Fire Fighters are able to contain fires in given areas with available resources/action required. e.g. back burning.

6. National Parks Water Supply

- Adequate water storage in national parks is essential for quick turn around by fire fighting appliances. Access to water to be a maximum travel time by any fire appliance of 45 minutes.

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Background/History on Eucumbene Cove

Eucumbene Cove village consists of 38 houses covering 30Ha on the edge of a 100,000Ha National Park. The village has a north western aspect with typically 25 degrees slopes.

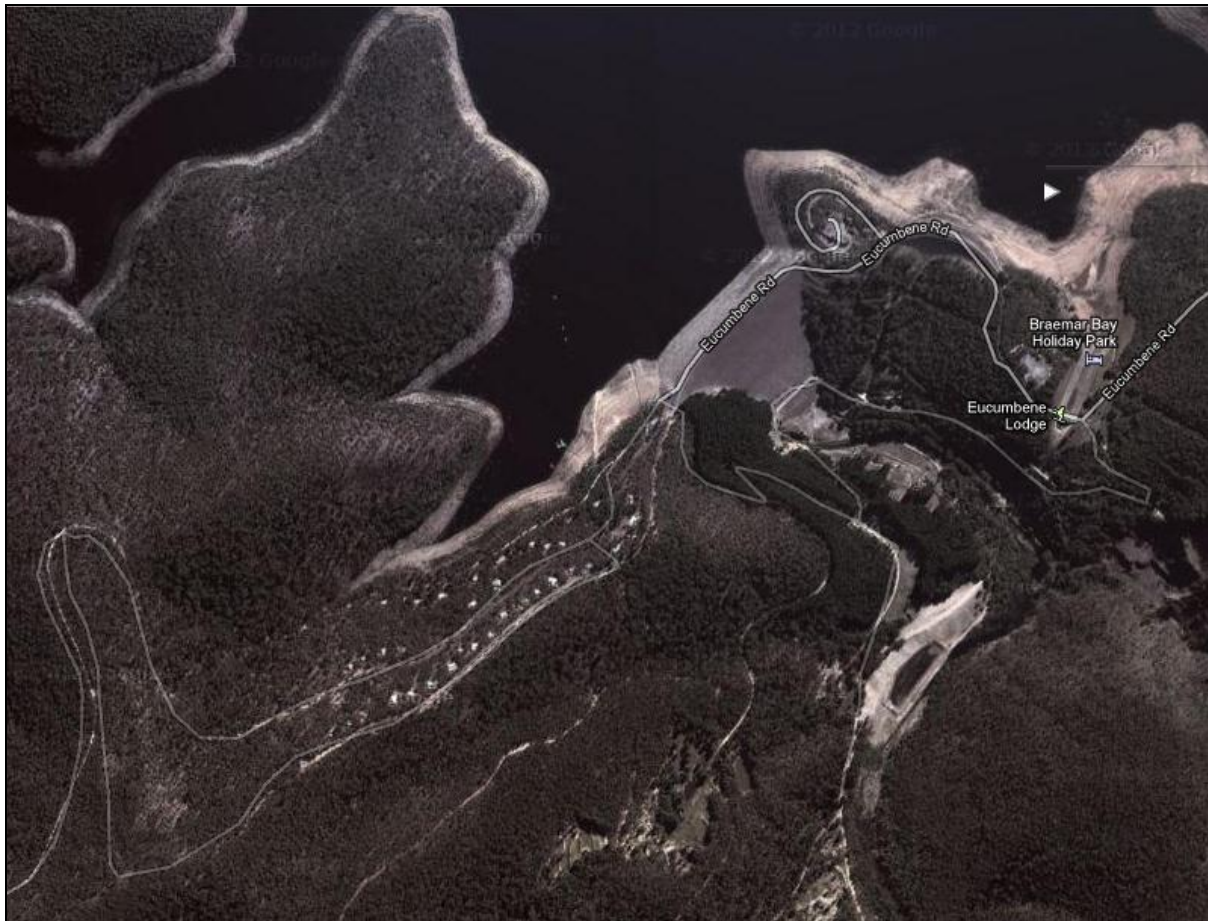
Many of the houses are absentee landholders and many are ill prepared and potentially undefendable in the event of a fire.

The vegetation within the village consists of a low dry – schlerophyl forest type with continuous forest canopy and a suspended layer of Bossiaea Bush.



Vegetation and slope

Under today's conditions, this sub division would never have been approved; given the slope, vegetation, aspect, access and egress.



Satellite view of Eucumbene Cove

The land is owned by Snowy Hydro Limited and homes are leased to the various individuals by Snowy Hydro. It is the land owner's responsibility to ensure the safety of the property and tenants.

Rocky Plain RFB, the local brigade responsible for response to fires and other incidents within the village of Eucumbene Cove have always had grave concerns about problems within this village, particularly access and egress as there is only one road in.

The Rocky Plain Brigade, in conjunction with the Operations / FCO, Snowy River Shire and staff from National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) have been proactive over the many years in trying to minimise fuel loads in and around this village, with numerous Hazard Reduction (HR) burns being carried out.



A HR burn undertaken by the Rocky Plains Bush Fire Brigade in 2010

The Snowy River Bushfire Management Committee (BFMC) had identified this village as an "extreme" risk rating. Strategies to mitigate the risks included vegetation management on the road reserves within the village, removing overhanging trees, removal of debris and establishing containment lines within the village.

In 2008 the RFS Monaro Team sent out letters to all residents and landholders in the village outlining a fire mitigation program proposal for Eucumbene Cove. The proposal included the removal of undergrowth, clearing bark and leaf matter from road reserves, removal of overhanging trees using a local contractor and carrying out HR burns. The HR burns were to be completed using local Brigade resources.

Positive feedback and letters of support for the works thus far was received from the majority of residents within the village. Unfortunately there was one resident who objected to this work. That person claimed that there had been no community consultation resulting in all works suspended.

This complainant subsequently wrote letters to the Local Member, the Commissioner of NSW RFS, the local Brigade, the Snowy River Shire Council, Snowy Hydro and NPWS. Meetings between all parties were conducted to discuss the concerns of that resident.

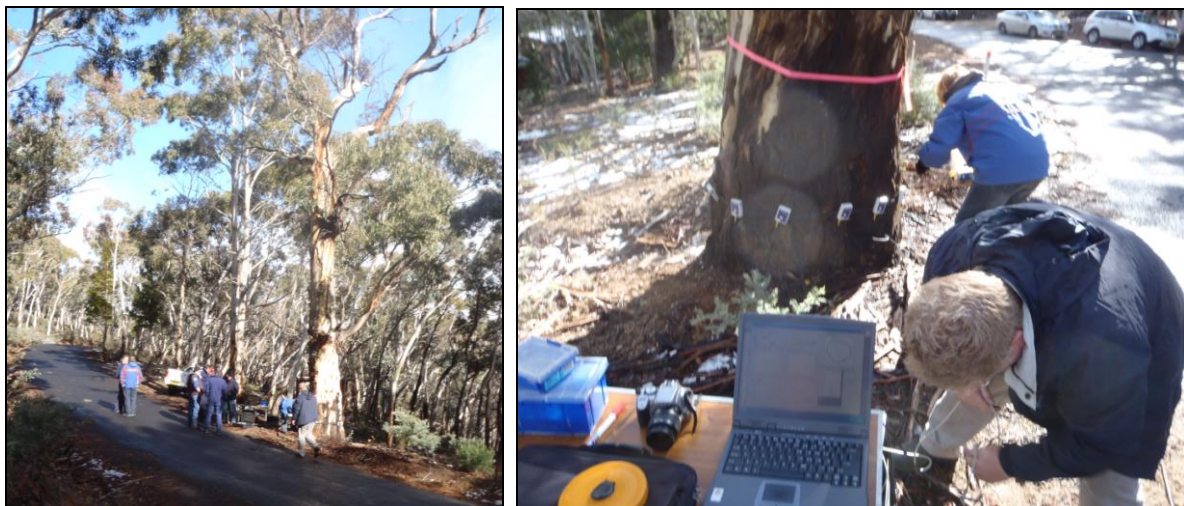
In March 2010 a site inspection to review the fire protection measures needed for the village of Eucumbene Cove was carried out, with representatives from RFS Head Office and the State Mitigation Support Services (SMSS) in attendance.

The RFS Head Office and SMSS delegates made a recommendation without any local knowledge, no local expertise and without any local Brigade input that further vegetation works be suspended, pending a Review of Environmental Factors (REF).

Once the REF was completed, SMSS contractors were engaged to remove any trees that were encroaching upon or overhanging existing structures.

In May 2010 a letter was received from another resident of Eucumbene Cove who stated that the representative from RFS Head Office was on site conducting assessments. They stated that "no machinery will be used for hazard reduction, whipper snippers will be used to reduce the risk and no trees will be removed as they are habitat". This resident is also a member of the Rocky Plain Brigade, He stated that the staff member from RFS Head Office had not consulted with either the local Fire Control Centre (FCC) or the local Brigade but had apparently spent all their time with the Complainants.

The RFS Head Office staff proposed removal of selected trees and saplings, overhanging limbs and debris from the road reserves and in August 2010 employed an arborist (at a huge expense) to assess two trees located on the road reserve. One tree had to be retained in view of its perceived high native habitat value, and the other tree was identified as being too high a risk to be removed.



Arborist used special equipment to check the density of the first tree at a huge cost to the people of NSW



The angled tree ahead (the second tree) was to be saved but common sense would suggest that this tree will eventually fall of its own accord, blocking the road with a huge potential for more serious consequences

In October 2010 the Snowy River Shire Council, the Brigade and Group Captains strongly objected to the retention of the two trees for safety reasons. The trees could fall or shed large limbs which would impact upon the road way, blocking egress, causing injury or death.

These trees are on the road reserve and at this point in time (June 2012) have still not been removed.

The first tree (as pictured on page 4) has since shed the top section of its canopy, blocking access and thankfully without injury to anyone. The tree failure was predicted by local members and their fears for firefighter safety and the safety of Eucumbene Cove residents was validated.

It is ironic that the complainant called in the emergency services to help clean up the road reserve after the tree failed because the predicted egress issue came to pass.

Work was delayed for months whilst waiting upon the REF to be drawn up.

In November 2010 the SMSS were employed to carry out Stage 1 works.

After the completion of the Stage 1 works, the Brigade members along with the Group Captains inspected the site. They were totally disgusted with the level of work and the number of remaining problems that had been left and other problems that had been created.

Examples included:

1. Hard small shrub stumps were cut off at approx 150mm high leaving serious trip hazards and spikes that would be dangerous when fighting fires in this environment.
2. Hollow trees were left for habitat reasons, many of these trees have a fall potential blocking the road and creating a safety issue.
3. Preservation of large habitat zones within the village is not consistent with BFMC recommendations and does not seem to be sensible considering that the village is surrounded by one of the largest National Parks in NSW.



The area in the foreground was identified as a habitat (Lyrebird's nest) the structure in the background is also a habitat (Human)



Many hollow habitat trees remain. Hollow trees like this are at great risk of falling and are problematic during firefighting operations.



This photo clearly demonstrates the road fall potential and remaining understory fuel loads.

The costs involved in employing the SMSS which include:

- RFS Head Office staff wages, travel and accommodation
- REF costs (x 2)
- SMSS Accommodation
- SMSS Welfare
- SMSS Wages
- SMSS Travel
- Hire of 2 x 1 tonne tippers to cart bark and debris (140km round trip to Jindabyne green waste)
- Arborist
- Private contractor from Sydney to remove and chip the pines
- Transport of SMSS containers

The Group Captains from Snowy River have requested that the total costs to works carried out in the Eucumbene Cove area be made available. The NSW RFS do not appear to be willing to admit the expenditure on this project.

The use of the private contractor from Sydney to remove and chip the pines cost \$186,000. This figure was provided verbally by a senior RFS staff member.

We have not been able to ascertain any other costings but a rough estimation suggests that the expenditure could have easily blown out to over \$1,000,000.

In April 2011, the Assistant Commissioner advised that RFS funds would be available to the Snowy River Shire for Stage 2 of this program. He also added that the management and supervision of the work would be carried out by the local RFS rather than the State Mitigation Team.

We are still waiting for this to occur.

The local Brigade members and community are disgusted that the NSW Rural Fire Service could waste public money on a project that is clearly the responsibility of the land owner. Precedence has now been established that the NSW State Government is happy to throw money at anyone's fire mitigation project.