



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES
Ms Elizabeth Lee MLA (Chair), Ms Bec Cody MLA (Deputy Chair)
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Submission Cover Sheet

Review of ACT emergency services
responses to the 2019-20 bushfire season

Submission Number: 13

Carbon Forestry

Date Authorised for Publication: 4 August 2020

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The Hon. Guilia Jones
Shadow Minister for Emergency Services
ACT Legislative Assembly
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15th June 2020

Dear Ms Jones

SUBMISSION TO ACT BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

I am writing this submission to you as a concerned member of the public, but also as a past employee of ACT Forests and a past Deputy Chief Fire Control Officer (DCFCO) with the Rural Fire Service (RFS), a position that I filled for 16 years. I also acted as Chief Fire Control Officer (CFCO) for periods amounting to 9 months, and was a member of the ACT Bush Fire Council for 6 years.

Although I have not been employed by the ACT Government for 19 years, I still keep in touch with ACT Parks and Conservation Service personnel and still have many friends in the volunteer ranks of the ACT Rural Fire Service.

My concern is that through these contacts, I am aware that morale in the RFS is at rock bottom, both in the paid and volunteer ranks. I believe that the RFS has been in decline for a number of years, and have outlined a lot of these reasons in the attached appendix. Unfortunately a lot of past decisions now cannot be reversed.

The RFS is in a possibly unique position in Australia in that it consists of paid firefighters from forests and parks services and volunteers. In other states, the forestry, parks and volunteers exist as separate firefighting structures. Because of this situation in the ACT, there has to be a balance and a great deal of tact, diplomacy and sensitivity in the handling of the volunteers, and this did not appear to happen in the past fire season.

The RFS had always appointed a forester or a person with land management experience in the role of CFCO until the most recent appointment, when a Fire Brigade member was appointed to the role. As well as fire management expertise, the CFCO must have an excellent understanding of land management issues, and this has not occurred of late. The next CFCO should be appointed from outside the ACT, and be an experienced fire fighter and land manager.

From discussions with volunteers I know, the problems with morale started with the absurd instruction that units could not respond to fires under lights and sirens. This gave them an immediate message that they were not trusted and their response was not of great consequence. The next issue arose from the summer fires when they could not cross the border to attend fires

in NSW. Nothing makes a volunteer more appreciated than being able to attend interstate fires and assist their interstate colleagues. Their shifts were also poorly managed on the Namadgi fire, leading to fatigue, and their efforts were overlooked compared to praise offered to defence and interstate firefighters.

Although the Namadgi fire appeared to be well managed, the heavy use of aerial fire suppression is questionable. I would offer the opinion that the dropping of retardant from the DC10 was costly and largely ineffective. I was involved in early research into the use of aircraft for fire suppression, and the early results showed that it was not a cost effective method of suppression. These results were verified by a major research project titled "Project Aquarius" undertaken by the CSIRO Forestry Division with Australian Government funding.

The other major problem with the Namadgi fire was the message to the public. While understandably nervous after the 2003 fiasco and poor messaging, this time the messaging went too far the other way. Anyone with a basic understanding of weather patterns and the ability to read a map would know that the likelihood of the fire reaching the southern suburbs of Canberra was very low, and the warnings went too far the other way and was akin to "crying wolf". The messages should have gone along the lines that there is a large fire to the south of Canberra but there is no immediate or foreseeable danger but Canberra citizens will be kept informed. What went out to the general public created un-necessary fear, confusion and panic.

Bushfire management consists of Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery, (PPRR). Although Parks staff have been endeavoring to undertake prevention, a lack of funding has hindered this, plus prevention does not get much publicity whereas response (i.e. large aircraft dropping retardant and water) does.

I believe what now needs to happen are discussions using external personnel to restore morale and confidence in the RFS, especially among volunteers. I can be contacted on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] if you wish to discuss any of these issues with me.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]
Ian McArthur

APPENDIX

THE DECLINE OF THE ACT BUSH FIRE SERVICE

1986. Appointment of first non forester as Chief Fire Control Officer. Brief was to increase volunteer fire fighting force. Up to then, volunteer brigades used to receive cascaded down land management units, after this volunteers received all new units while departmental brigade unit age increased.

1988. The creation of Namadgi National Park. The lower Cotter catchment which had been logged and managed by ACT Forests became part of the NP and almost immediately many tracks were closed and became overgrown. Also broad scale hazard reduction burning ceased.

1989. Management of the bush fire service passed from the land management agencies to the emergency service agency. Focus changed from prevention (hazard reduction) to response.

1990s. ACT BFS disposed of D4 bulldozer and grader. These machines were used to maintain fire breaks around the ACT. The excuse was that they were not in the business of owning earthmoving equipment.

1990s. ACT BFS relinquished the lease on an area in NSW that was acquired to undertake hazard reduction burning to protect the pine plantations. Cost was the excuse, and this is the area where the McIntyre's hut fire commenced in 2003. The last burn in the lease area was in 1993.

1996. Removal of 5 heavy tankers and 5 light units from ACT Forests and redeployed to the urban fire service. The rationale was that they would be available 24 hours a day at strategic locations around the urban fringe. The reality was that the urban fire service always initially responded an urban pumper to any grass or bush fire, and were reluctant to go too far from the urban area.

1997. The ACT emergency Service withdrew significant funding from ACT Forests for standby and fire suppression activities. At its height, ACT Forests manned 7 heavy tankers, 8 light units and had 3 bulldozers and a float available. Funding was because 90% of fires attended by ACT Forests were not in areas managed by ACT Forests.

1998. Due to loss of tankers and declining staff numbers, ACT Forests ceased to place standby crews in strategic locations on days of very high and extreme fire danger. The major fire in the ACT in 2003 was only 5 minutes from where a large tanker would have been on standby, with a light unit a further 15 minutes away.

1990s. It became extremely difficult to undertake fuel reduction burning. Comprehensive plans had to be prepared, and ACT BFS staff seemed to take delight in trying to find criticism and fault with the plans. Worse still, staff would be called at all hours of the night after a burn when a member of the public reported these fires, and staff would be ordered to attend and ensure that it was safe, even though everyone knew that was the case. This added significantly to the cost of undertaking these burns.

All this contributed to a massive decline in staff morale, and a feeling of despondency.

1999. ACT Forests disposed of all plant and the float, removing the capacity to respond heavy equipment to any fire.

2001. ACT Forests made redundant 26 staff member (professional and industrial) with over 500 years of firefighting experience. This included foresters and overseers with control experience, as well as 3 very experienced plant operators. This was done on the basis of turning ACT Forests into a profitable Government Business Enterprise, but totally ignoring the firefighting capacity and community benefit.

2003. Canberra bush fires. A total disaster.

- Poor response to initial report. The standard operating procedure for response was not followed. According to the SOP, 9 heavy tankers and 9 light units should have been responded. Response was only 50% of this. Phil Cheney expressed it that if Roger Fenwick was still the CFCO, he would have within 5 minutes every available unit, heavy plant and anything else would have been on the move, he would not have held back.
- The fire controller responded was very inexperienced. Two highly qualified Deputy Chief Fire Control Officers were overlooked and ignored.
- The fire controller sought advice on fire fighting on the 1st night. She received no guidance, and as a consequence removed all units from the fire on safety grounds, despite hoses being run out to the edge of the fire. Nonattendance at a fire overnight was also in contravention of the standard operating procedures.
- Even on subsequent days, insufficient units attended the fires, and no one went near one of the ACT fires for the first 3 days.
- There was an over reliance on the use of helicopters to drop water on the fires, instead of getting more ground crews and heavy machinery on the fire ground.
- Poor planning, lack of prepared plans for incoming fire controllers, and lack of up to date maps for fire controllers hindered efforts.

All the basic lessons were forgotten in the 2003 fires.

- Every large fire starts out life as a small fire.
- The bigger the suppression effort in early stages, the higher the chances of success.
- You need to be on top of lightning fires before 11am the following day before weather conditions deteriorate.
- Firefighting is inherently safer at night, due to cooler conditions, higher relative humidity, lower wind speeds. Vision on the fire line is very good with a slow burning fire, crews can work closer to the fire edge un far more comfortable conditions, and long lengths of rake hoe lines can be established, then held the next day. From experiments for Project Aquarius and hand lines, I calculated that 4-5 rake hoe crews could have got around at least 2 of the ACT Fires the 1st night. Crews were available, but not responded.

The ACT Government did not like the way the coronial inquest was progressing in 2004/05, and tried to have it closed down on the pretext of bias. The inquest returned adverse findings against 4 members from the ACT emergency service.

Post Script: 2016. Nothing has been learnt. In January, a lightning strike started a fire in southern ACT. Despite remote area crews being immediately available to attend, and being calculated that they could have reached the fire with at least 30 minutes of daylight left. No action was taken. The commenced the totally farcical suppression action, and I heard on the news that on a 14 hectare fire, 12 helicopters and one large fixed wing aircraft were attacking the fire. Suppression ended up taking 5 days, when it could have been achieved in the 1st night. Yet again, the nefarious excuse of crew safety at night was cited as the reason for inaction.

2020. Namadgi National Park fire was an exercise in creating un-necessary fear and panic in the community. Anyone who has a basic understanding of weather patterns and fire behaviour knew that the chance of the fire reaching the southern Tuggeranong suburbs was extremely low, yet the message was different which caused a lot of fear, panic and uncertainty in the community. In addition, the aerial suppression undertaken was largely ineffective and inefficient, and there needs to be a drastic re-assessment of the role of aerial suppression in firefighting.