



SUBMISSION

TO

**THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE
2001/2002 BUSHFIRES**

MADE BY

**THE NORTHERN SYDNEY REGIONAL
ORGANISATION OF COUNCILS**

The Northern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils takes this opportunity to:

- 1. Thank the NSW Parliament's Joint Select Committee on Bushfires for the opportunity to make a short submission to its Inquiry, and**
- 2. Express concern at the extremely short timeframe available to make such submissions. Although we readily acknowledge the courtesy extended to us by the Committee Chair in being able to make a late submission the time available has simply not allowed a full consultative process over this very important issue to take place. As a consequence of this time constraint our submission will not have the same depth as it otherwise might. We are available to expand on any issue raised should the Committee so wish.**

BACKGROUND

The bushfires that so threatened vast areas of NSW over the 2001/2 Christmas/New Year period have been adjudged by many as the worst bush fires to affect NSW in recorded history, worse even than those of 1994.

In all over 745000 hectares across NSW were burnt out over a period of some 3 weeks. The weather conditions supporting these fires, many of which were deliberately lit, were unprecedented as were the fires themselves. In spite of these conditions no lives were lost, and given the scope and severity of the fires there was minimal property loss.

It is now opportune to take advantage of the opportunity presented by both the both this inquiry and the subsequent Coronial Inquiry to discern what lessons can be learnt from such experiences.

THE NORTHERN SYDNEY EXPERIENCE

The fire that started in Pennant Hills Park at about 1500 hours on January 1st 2002 burnt out a considerable portion of the Park over that day and the next two days. Although relatively small in comparison with other fires of that period (total area affected by fire including wildfire and back burning was some 630 hectares) it burnt with considerable intensity and threatened many of the homes that enclose Pennant Hills Park and Lane Cove National Park.

In spite of the speed with which the fire developed and its intensity no homes were lost to the fire. By the end of the second day the wild fire had been contained, back burning was nearly complete and 'mopping up' operations were well underway. By the third day only mopping up and patrol activities were being undertaken.

1. FIREBREAKS

The length and breadth of firebreaks both established and future needs to take into account the reality of fire behavior under conditions that exceed HIGH on the Forest Fire Danger Index, particularly in view of the results being revealed from Project Vesta on fire behavior on the FFDI at VERY HIGH and EXTREME ranges.

Cost implications may well be heavy but as a starting point should reflect the current cost burden.

2. WATER PRESSURE

Although it is recognized that in normal times the current system of mains surrounding the Pennant Hills/Lane Cove Park area is considered sufficient in both 1994 and again in 2001/2 significant problems were encountered in some locations with water pressure for limited periods of time. The fire services very quickly took what mitigating steps that were open to them however the Government should require Sydney Water to increase the mains capacity in selected areas to take into account these periods of crisis. This should be done in conjunction with the relevant Local Government.

3. ADDITIONAL LABOUR SUPPORT FOR HAZARD REDUCTION

The Government should explore the opportunity presented through the 'Community Service Offender Program' to undertake limited hazard reduction management work within the skills available of participators. Costs involved in equipment, clothing and project management/supervision should rightly be borne by State Government.

4. COMMUNITY PROTECTION REGISTER

The Attorney General should develop and introduce a program to register convicted arsonists in a Community Protection Register.

5. NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

The NSW Police Service in conjunction with Local Government should act to enhance the current Neighborhood Watch Program to include, where appropriate, a watch for arsonists. Appropriate training should support this for participants.

6. 'PLANNING FOR BUSHFIRE PROTECTION'

In December 2001 Planning Circular C19 (BUSH Fire Zones) and the Australian Standards that apply to building in bushfire prone areas were replaced by the new documents '*Planning for Bushfire Protection – Guide for Councils, Planners, Fire Authorities, Developers and Home Owners*'. This is a joint publication of Planning NSW and the NSW Rural Fire Service.

We understand that a process is underway to formulate this document as a SEPP (NSROC has sought by way of formal letter to the Minister for Planning an opportunity to participate in the making of this SEPP and to provide the benefit of its experience through the fires of 1994 and 2001/2 to this process). This needs to be done as a matter of haste

Additionally where planning is truly a matter of 'life and death' such as the interaction with SEPP 5 the application of the principles contained within '*Planning for Bushfire Protection*' need to be absolutely paramount.

Guidelines issued to the Land and Environment Court should reflect this with complete clarity so that SEPP 5 developments are NOT placed in areas determined to be under real bush fire threat.

7. INSURANCE

Although it is recognized that under the Rural Fires Act 1997 Insurance interests are major contributors to the cost of providing the NSW Rural Fire Service there should be a simple Inquiry or Round Table discussion into this funding that would reflect opportunities to the public for a rebate system (cost reduction) that would recognize the home owners adoption of certain bushfire protection measures (or cost penalties for non adoption). These principles could be easily adopted from the Rural Fire Services Community Education Programs.

8. OWNERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Rural Fires Act 1997 places considerable onus on the 'owners' of land with regard to the management of fire and fire hazard. This ownership and accountability responsibility should not be yet another unfunded mandate. Resource provision to public agencies should be commensurate to the task at hand. It is not good enough to place responsibility onto an agency and then provide it with little or no resource to undertake the task. It should then be an option for that agency to transfer the work and the resource to another agency for them to undertake the work involved through a Service Level Agreement type arrangement.

NSROC reserves the right to come back to the Government at a later date and present further material on this issue.