

3 The public submissions: a summary

(A summary of submissions to the Inquiry from members of the community and some interested organisations)

The Inquiry's terms of reference were published in the *Canberra Times* on 22 February 2003 and members of the ACT community were invited to present submissions. Initially a deadline of 31 March 2003 was set for receipt of submissions, but through public comments the Inquiry made it known that submissions would continue to be received throughout the term of the Inquiry.

The Inquiry received over 130 written submissions. It also had discussions with a number of individuals and representatives of particular groups who sought to expand on the matters raised in their written submissions. In addition, some people chose to discuss their concerns directly with the Inquiry, rather than provide a written submission.

The majority of submissions were from people drawing on their personal experience (and that of friends, family and neighbours) of the events leading up to and on 18 January. A number of submissions were also presented by individual firefighters and emergency service volunteers.

The submissions raised many matters for consideration. In keeping with the Inquiry's purpose of identifying lessons that might be learnt from the event, many people put forward suggestions aimed at augmenting the ACT's capacity to respond more effectively to large-scale emergencies.

The Inquiry also had the opportunity to review comments made by the ACT community in other public forums—including the print and electronic media and publications such as *How Did the Fire Know We Lived Here?*¹—and in some submissions presented to other reviews.

The main issues raised in submissions to the Inquiry are summarised in the rest of this chapter, generally under headings that correspond with the terms of reference. Many of the submissions were relevant to matters discussed in depth in the report. Some are dealt with in Chapter 2, some are dealt with in the chapters that follow. However, others, particularly those dealing with individual situations that occurred in the course of the fires, could not be investigated by the Inquiry, whose examination was essentially directed at systemic issues. This chapter does not test or analyse the comments made; it merely summarises what the Inquiry was told. Inclusion of comments in this chapter should not be taken to imply that the Inquiry agrees with or has accepted the validity of the comment. The fact that someone holds that point of view is nevertheless

worthy of note, since all the matters raised helped the Inquiry gain a greater understanding of the multiple and differing effects an event of such magnitude can have on the lives of those exposed to it.

Risk management and planning

Submissions questioned the level and adequacy of the Emergency Services Bureau's risk management and planning before 18 January in anticipating whether and when the fires might move out of the mountains and affect the city and its immediate surrounds. Submissions queried whether the seriousness of the threat from the mountains was recognised early enough—particularly given the extreme weather and drought conditions—and whether the bushfire authority and ESB management had undertaken adequate contingency planning.

Submissions also queried whether any lessons had been learnt from the 2001 Christmas fires and, if so, what measures had been taken to better prepare emergency service agencies, land management agencies and the community generally for another significant bushfire threat.

Submissions questioned the adequacy of overall emergency planning in the ACT—especially the need to test plans through exercises, so that authorities do not become overwhelmed by an event. It was noted that no large-scale exercises on dealing with a major bushfire threat to the city had been conducted. Other comments related to urban and rural firefighters' ability to deal with fires on the urban fringe, given their specialised training in either property or forest and grassland fires. At a general level, respondents called for a comprehensive approach to bushfire risk planning, involving emergency service agencies, land managers, and people with past experience in fighting fires in the forests and mountains.

Organisational preparedness for the bushfire threat

Discussion of fuel management in ACT parks and forests was an important part of many submissions. The comments reflected the wide and complex debate about management of fuel loads on public lands—including the use of and constraints on hazard-reduction burning and the implications of policies and practices associated with the maintenance of parks for ecological sustainability, biodiversity and other environmental purposes. Submissions queried whether any lessons had been learnt about excessive fuel loads in ACT forests influencing the severity of the 2001 fires.

The level and appropriateness of resources applied to managing ACT public lands generally was questioned, as was the practical value of planning documents such as the ACT Bushfire Fuel Management Plan² in enabling agencies to prepare for a bushfire threat. People also disputed the adequacy of the program of grass mowing and tree pruning around the urban edge and of the maintenance of bush areas inside suburbs.

Some submissions concluded that government land managers should adopt more active fuel management practices. Calls were made for an urgent review of the fuel management plans for national parks, river corridors, forests and nature parks. Suggestions were made for the introduction of an annual audit or reporting process to focus on the level of fuel build-up on public lands. A number of submissions emphasised that people with longstanding experience of and familiarity with these areas should be directly involved in the development of management plans.

Some submissions on fuel management were associated with wider planning concerns about the placement of parks and forests close to the suburban edge and the problem of urban encroachment on buffer zones on the outskirts of the city adding to the bushfire risk. Some submissions suggested that stronger building regulations are needed for bushfire-prone areas.

The related subject of fire trails and firebreaks around property and assets was raised in submissions from firefighters and residents alike. There were calls for an urgent review of the maintenance program and access arrangements for fire trails in the ACT's parks and forests. The need for more comprehensive and up-to-date maps of the firefighting trail system was also raised.

In relation to operational preparedness, the comments in submissions focused on the adequacy of fire-suppression organisations to combat major fires in the ACT. Submissions claimed that there has been a serious deterioration in suppression preparedness in the last 10 years: firefighters and officers are being subjected to a significant amount of theoretical training but commensurate priority is not being given to practical field-based training; officers and firefighters are being discouraged from using their initiative; and bushfire management is being determined by budget considerations, which has limited the capacity to deal with large, occasional events.

A number of experienced bush and forest firefighters questioned in submissions the view that the fire on 18 January was an unpredictable, one-in-100-year event. They cited the history of bushfires in the ACT as evidence that a major

conflagration was inevitable. In addition, they criticised the level of planning to predict an impact on the city edge, as well as the strategy for deployment of resources in the early days of the event.

Some submissions commented negatively about the loss of experienced firefighters from government land management agencies. In their opinion, the ‘downsizing’ of ACT Forests’ workforce in the mid-1990s resulted in a significant reduction in the number of people with first-hand knowledge of the mountains. More importantly in their view, it reduced the Territory’s specialist firefighting capability, especially for quick-response and remote area firefighting. These submissions contended that the ACT has moved from a highly trained and experienced paid strike-force capability to a situation of reliance on volunteers who are not as familiar with the mountains. Further, it was proposed that the policy of reduced hazard-reduction burning in the parks and forests has greatly limited the opportunity for departmental and volunteer firefighters to gain skills in dealing with fires in forest and mountain areas.

The response

Many submissions acknowledged that the ACT’s resources were completely overwhelmed by the severity and scale of the fires on 18 January. They paid tribute to the heroic efforts of volunteer, departmental and paid firefighters in the face of conditions on the day. Nevertheless, there was much comment about the authorities’ inability to contain or suppress the fires in the period leading up to 18 January. Questions were asked in submissions about the strategy used to combat the bushfires—whether there was a lack of urgency because authorities were used to relatively small bushfires and not simultaneous fires; why the known level of fuel build-up in the parks and forests did not ensure a larger initial and direct response, particularly given the benign firefighting weather experienced during the first week after the lightning strikes; and why suppression activities were not undertaken during the first two nights of the campaign, on 8 and 9 January.

Resource deployment attracted considerable comment. Submissions from residents in the worst-affected suburbs and in some rural areas noted a lack of firefighting personnel on 18 January and wanted to know where resources had been deployed. Many felt they had been left on their own to fight the fires. Experienced volunteer bushfire fighters questioned the amount of resources deployed in the first days of the campaign; urban firefighters thought they were not adequately warned of the fires’ potential impact on the city; and emergency

service volunteers felt they were seriously under-exploited in the support roles for which they are adequately trained.

Submissions suggested that a collapse in command and control systems in the latter days of the campaign adversely affected ESB's ability to respond to the fires. It was suggested that some resources remained idle in depots or were under-utilised; others could have been more effectively deployed elsewhere. Further comments dealt with operational communications problems. Difficulties with the immediate availability and use of heavy machinery and aerial firefighting resources and with the timing of requests for interstate and Commonwealth assistance were also raised. In relation to aerial resources, the Inquiry received a number of submissions from aircraft suppliers who were promoting the advantages of aerial fire bombing in putting out or suppressing fires in rugged terrain and heavily timbered areas.

ESB's management structure and command and control arrangements

Criticisms were made in submissions of the command and control relationship on 18 January between the ACT Fire Brigade and ESB. Problems with the interaction between the urban and bushfire brigades were also highlighted—incompatible communications systems and a perceived general reluctance on the part of some urban brigades to adhere to the Standard Operating Procedures in liaising with volunteer personnel at an incident. (The SOPs state that, when the two services are operating together, urban fire brigades are to use the designated bushfire radio frequencies for communication.)

Personnel in the bushfire service commented in submissions on differences in the command and control philosophies of the ACT and New South Wales bushfire services. They perceive that incident control system arrangements in New South Wales are more aligned to the national approach, with bushfire brigade captains maintaining greater operational independence and responsibility than in the ACT, where brigades are commanded centrally and are individually tasked by ACT Bushfire Service headquarters.

Submissions from volunteer bushfire brigade members also reflected problems with organisational arrangements and believe that volunteers are seen by some as 'free labour'. These submissions also claimed that conditions imposed on them by the ACT Bushfire Service have significantly degraded morale—for example:

- brigade funds being pooled as the property of the ACT Government

- the introduction of mandatory fitness tests, making it difficult for some experienced rural landholder members to continue as volunteers
- compulsory medical and police checks on all new members and on those changing from one brigade to another, which are seen as an imposition on members
- overly centralised control and tasking
- no input from brigades on equipment purchases
- the removal of bushfire service radios from private vehicles and of pumps and tankers from rural landholders, which has increased their isolation.

Submissions from ACT Emergency Service volunteers also expressed a number of concerns about the management of their units under the ESB structure. Of particular note is the perceived loss of identity of the ACT Emergency Service and the difficulties experienced with a unified management arrangement with the ACT Bushfire Service. Comments also highlighted the need for better coordination and interaction between all units in ESB, including combined training opportunities and sharing of information on roles and responsibilities.

A second area of general comment on ESB's organisation and management structure raised in submissions concerned the role of the ACT Bush Fire Council. It was claimed that the transfer of the ACT Bushfire Service from the land management agencies to ESB in 1992 resulted in a change in emphasis, away from fire and fuel management and towards response. This was compounded in 1996, when the Bush Fire Council surrendered its lease of 16 500 hectares in the west of the Brindabellas.³

Submissions argued that the Bush Fire Council's statutory responsibility for management of operational bushfire matters has been diminished. It was suggested that the Council's focus is now on establishing and maintaining links between a broad range of groups and individuals associated with bushfire management in the ACT. Submissions recommended that the *Bushfire Act 1936* be amended to establish single legislation on bushfire administration and to reflect the Council's redefined role as an advisory body. Submissions suggested amendments should also be made to reduce the maximum membership of the Council to eight or so members plus deputies, to specify that members are drawn from outside the public service, and to ensure that members are selected and appointed on the basis of expertise and knowledge of bushfire matters.

A number of submissions suggested that, in order to achieve optimum effectiveness, ESB should have a different position in the administrative structure: its current placement in a department concerned with law and justice is at odds with a culture of emergency threat and risk. Others suggested that ESB's inclusion in the departmental structure adversely affects its budget. A number of observations were also made about the inadequacy of ESB's premises in coping with aspects of the January emergency, especially power outages, media and communications facilities, and room for the scaling-up of personnel requirements.

Public information and communication

Comments in submissions on ESB's public information strategy fell into three categories: lack of early public information about the threat; the need for better public education on fire awareness and preparedness; and uncoordinated evacuation information.

The lack of early warning to the community about the fire threat was by far the greatest criticism expressed in public submissions to the Inquiry, and it was suggested that this starkly contrasted with the volume of information provided to Belconnen residents in the week following 18 January. Submissions indicated that they had observed increased activity by emergency service personnel from midday on 18 January—including road closures; for example, Cotter Road was blocked and fire personnel were in the area at 1.30 pm—and questioned why this did not prompt an immediate warning to residents.

Although submissions generally acknowledged the positive contribution of the media (particularly ABC radio) in informing the public on 18 January, there were strong criticisms about the inadequacy of only one radio station or medium broadcasting the emergency warning message. Submissions reflected that Canberra residents were unaware that the ABC would be the main provider of information in an emergency, and no information was provided on commercial radio networks until much later in the day. Many people submitted that they were at home watching television: no advice was televised about either the alert or the need to turn to ABC radio for more information.

Submissions reflected that the Friday and Saturday editions of the *Canberra Times* gave no indication of any imminent danger to the city, although some people did note that page 10 of the Saturday edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried an alert that suburbs of Canberra should be prepared for evacuation. Some submissions described that, although Canberra residents were generally

aware of the fires in the bush, they relied on the absence of a specific warning and left their homes to travel to the coast or took refuge from the oppressive heat in cinemas and shopping centres, where they were indoors and unaware of changing conditions. Others continued their vacations interstate.

Submissions also commented about a lack of general understanding of the Standard Emergency Warning Signal. Some residents suggested that the Signal should have been supplemented by police sirens in areas of specific risk as an alert to residents.

Other comments in submissions referred to the lack of information about the position or direction of the fires: rural residents claimed they were not informed when fire had entered their properties, and people who were evacuating in the suburbs did not know whether they were driving into the path of the fire or away from it. The timing of media messages was another concern expressed, with the radio advising people to return to their homes and prepare to fight the fires as houses were burning. Submissions indicated that road closures were also wrongly reported, adding to the confusion, and information given out through hotline numbers was reported to be several hours old. It was suggested that some advice was also puzzling; for example, people followed instructions to fill their baths with water but did not understand the purpose. Some submissions noted that public information was also a problem during the 2001 fires.

The general feeling reflected in submissions was that public information was not adequately coordinated between the Police and ESB. Submissions indicated that people felt very strongly that they ought to have been able to rely on prompt, accurate advice and warnings on which to base their decisions. It was suggested that systems for collecting, collating and disseminating information should be well established and rehearsed with key agencies and the media. Useful suggestions were made for the implementation of a staged fire-alert warning system similar to cyclone warnings used in other parts of Australia.

Community preparedness

Many submissions noted the need for better public education on preparing for bushfire, especially for people living in rural areas or on the urban–rural interface. People acknowledged that heavy property losses were inevitable because of the nature of the fires but felt the losses would not have been so extensive had people been better prepared.

Submissions reflected that people generally considered ESB should emphasise that individuals have primary responsibility for preparing their property for a bushfire threat. Householders should be provided with information about minimising fuel levels around their homes and making homes more fire resistant; for example, many people observed that timber fences acted like fuses in the face of the fire front. It was proposed that they should also be encouraged to develop a fire plan and to have fire kits of appropriate equipment prepared—as well as be better informed about the role of emergency service agencies. Some submissions called for the introduction of strong penalties for not carrying out fire preparation tasks. Importantly, people felt that they should be well informed about how to deal with an approaching fire.

While many submissions relayed stories of successful property protection, others commented on the inability to adequately protect their property as a result of age or disability. Suggestions were put forward for better community support for people who are unable to cope in emergency situations; examples are the introduction of a neighbourhood fire prevention component to the Neighbourhood Watch scheme and the introduction of community fire units. The latter proposal would see local communities having access to hydrants and hoses and being trained in their use.

Evacuation

The most common criticism relating to evacuation on 18 January was the lack of a consistent message. Submissions reported mixed messages—public announcements advising people to stay with their homes and fight the fires if they were capable and prepared and, on the other hand, orders to evacuate from police on the ground.

A number of criticisms were made about the action of police in forcing evacuation by using the threat of arrest. Submissions claimed that police are not experienced in fires and are therefore unable to make informed decisions about the need to evacuate. They felt that the need for evacuation should be assessed by experienced firefighters and that advice should then be issued to the police to carry out evacuations.

Submissions claimed that police were not well trained in bushfire evacuation and increased the gravity of the situation by spreading alarm: people were made to leave relatively safe areas with no idea where to go and which roads were safe to travel on, with no idea where the fire was, and with poor visibility and traffic congestion impeding the firefighting efforts.

Some residents reported in submissions that they were ordered to evacuate just as they had managed to bring the fires burning around their homes under control. They felt that forced evacuation prevented them from responding to the fires and they believed fewer houses would have been lost had people stayed to defend their property. Indeed, there were many reports of houses being saved by residents' action as people stayed with their homes and suppressed fires that started from ember attack. Submissions reflected general support for the concept that residents should stay with their homes as long as they are well prepared and able to do so. Residents felt they had the right to make their own informed decisions about evacuation and should not be forced or be threatened with arrest if they refuse to leave.

People who, for one reason or another, were not prepared to stay with their property indicated in submissions that they should have had early advice on the need for evacuation. This included clear advice about the location of evacuation centres and what people should do once they arrived at the centres. Some submissions suggested that assistance for people who cannot self-evacuate—in particular, people with a disability and the elderly—should also be better coordinated. Most comments were closely linked to the need for early advice to the community about the threat and general public education about what to do in an emergency.

Submissions generally reflected that the evacuation centres worked well, although they were at times chaotic. There were suggestions for improvements to the registration process—in particular, the need for system linkages between evacuation centres and medical facilities (especially the hospitals) to help with locating people.

Coordination and cooperation between agencies

Utilities

Although some areas had adequate water pressure throughout the emergency, a number of submissions stressed that a loss of water pressure was a significant impediment to their firefighting efforts. Other hindrances mentioned included gas explosions and burning or melting garden hoses. Submissions suggested that public education on preparing for bushfires should include information about alternative water sources—for example, swimming pools and separate water tanks—in high-risk areas.

The lack of adequate water supply was a particular criticism in submissions from residents in rural areas. A number of rural residents submitted that their water supplies were diminished because they had been used to refill firefighting tankers. One submission indicated that in one rural settlement the water tank reserved exclusively for firefighting was not accessible. Other residents reported the loss of hose fittings, which rendered their firefighting equipment useless.

Inability to isolate the urban gas supply was also raised, and a number of submissions observed that gas meters were a significant fire hazard in the suburbs on 18 January. There were calls for clearer instructions at household meters on how to turn the gas off and for a better response by authorities in switching off the gas supply under emergency conditions.

Many residents acknowledged quick action by utilities in facilitating access to telephone services and in restoring power, water and gas services to affected areas after 18 January. The mobile telephone system's inability to cope with the emergency was noted in numerous submissions, and some people suggested that telephone and electricity cables should be placed underground.

Interstate coordination and cooperation

Difficulties with operational communications and a lack of coordination between NSW and ACT authorities were commonly reported in submissions. Operational personnel claimed that differences between ACT and NSW rural fire units' communication systems significantly hindered the firefighting effort; this included differences in radio systems and frequencies, unit call signs and signage, command structures, and communication protocols and procedures. There were also reports of communication difficulties associated with air support; submissions indicated that units on the ground could not identify air support elements because they carried no unit or call-sign markings.

Calls were made for greater coordination and cross-training between NSW and ACT bushfire units and for the development of a common bushfire control plan.

ESB's equipment, communications, training and resources

Communications

A number of submissions highlighted problems with operational communications—notably airwave congestion and the incompatibility of communication systems, including with the ACT urban fire brigade. ACT Emergency Services units reported difficulties with current arrangements

that see them sharing a radio channel with the ACT Bushfire Service. It was reported that it was necessary to resort to personal mobile phones for operational communications, a situation that was exacerbated by network congestion. It was urged that there be one channel dedicated to interservice communication.

Submissions reflected that congestion on the mobile and land telephone networks was also seen as a serious problem for the community trying to contact emergency service agencies. It was suggested that the communications system develop the capacity to scale-up for large incidents, with multiple lines and operators.

Equipment

Comment on the amount and adequacy of bushfire-suppression equipment was a feature of a number of submissions from operational personnel. A common criticism was the view that the ACT has reduced its firefighting capacity by no longer maintaining its own key physical resources for fire prevention and suppression—in particular, heavy tankers and bulldozers. Submissions indicated that there has been a reduction in the number of vehicles that can carry large amounts of water. It was also suggested that there has also been a reduction in the number of radios in privately owned and rural vehicles. There was a call for a complete review of the ACT's stock of bushfire-suppression equipment.

It was also noted in submissions that the ACT has extremely limited capacity in terms of aerial firefighting equipment—that is, agricultural-type aircraft or purpose-built fire-bombing aircraft and water-bombing helicopters. Questions were raised about Air Service Australia's rescue and firefighting resources at Canberra Airport that were not used.

Submissions contended that ACT bushfire units lack the best-practice protective equipment and systems currently being used by other bushfire-fighting agencies in Australia. It was asserted that the latest tankers to be purchased are poorly designed and equipped—with, for example, plastic door handles and fittings, rubber vacuum-brake lines, poorly designed storage areas for tools, and poorly located hoses. Similar problems were mentioned in relation to urban firefighting vehicles: the burnout of one fire appliance was allegedly caused by a fault in the appliance, which was known to other fire services. The adequacy of fire hydrants and water tanks for people living on the periphery of the nature parks was also queried.

ACT Emergency Services personnel questioned the supply and leasing arrangements for vehicles in their service, claiming that there are too few vehicles and that the leasing arrangements prevent customisation for equipment storage and to meet other needs.

Training

Training was raised as an area of difficulty in many submissions from fire and emergency service personnel. Among the matters covered were better training for emergency service personnel in basic firefighting and in setting up, maintaining and decommissioning staging areas to facilitate logistics support; training for ACT Emergency Service personnel in all aspects of the Public Safety Training Package; and more comprehensive across-the-board training for bushfire fighters in chainsaw operation, defensive structural firefighting, tanker driving and first aid. Many submissions said that programs used to be run in these areas but had been curtailed or had ceased. For urban firefighters, leadership was an important factor: no permanent district officer had been appointed in nine years.

As noted, many people felt that the ACT—and particularly the land management agencies—had lost personnel with experience in fighting bushfires, especially large mountain fires. Submissions suggested that the events of January 2003 highlighted the need to devise a means whereby experienced firefighters can be retained to provide advice to land managers and bushfire management and to mentor volunteers.

An important corollary to the provision of training is adequate funding. Operations personnel questioned in submissions the allocation of funding for training between different services. Calls were also made to expand the opportunities for more combined training with adjoining NSW bushfire brigades and between the different ACT emergency service bodies.

The need for better general training for people who live in fire-prone areas was linked to community preparedness.

Resources

As noted, there was considerable comment in submissions about the apparent lack of firefighting personnel in affected areas. Many people agreed, however, that there would rarely be sufficient resources on hand to deal with the multiplicity of outbreaks of fire in times of severe bushfires. It was suggested that if resources are stretched it is necessary for members of the public to defend their own homes, but this will be successful only if the community is properly prepared and has received early and clear advice on the nature of the threat.

Operational personnel directed particular criticism in submissions at the lack of high-quality, detailed maps of the ACT and surrounding areas and of access areas, trails and firebreaks in parks and forests. It was also suggested that volunteers with sound local knowledge should accompany outside units deployed in the area and that global positioning equipment should be fitted to all emergency vehicles, including private vehicles that are routinely used as part of an emergency response. A number of submissions—especially from emergency service volunteers—spoke of the need for stronger operational procedures, including enforcement.

Comments by the key representative groups

The Inquiry received submissions from a number of constituted groups representing fire and emergency service operations personnel and from the major rural leaseholder group. The bodies concerned agreed to the following summaries of their submissions being included in the report.

The United Fire Fighters Union

The United Fire Fighters Union (ACT Branch) provided a brief written submission and a two-hour interview to the Inquiry and raised a number of matters in the local press.

The administrative arrangements under which the ACT Fire Brigade has been operating in recent years have changed the intent of the reporting lines in the Fire Brigade Act. The UFU recommended that the Fire Brigade should comply with the Act. The UFU believes that only ACT Fire Brigade members should have command and control of all firefighting resources within the built-up area. It was claimed that various equipment, communications, training, leadership and management issues contributed negatively to the ACT Fire Brigade response to the fires. Specifically, it was claimed that the limited performance of the ACT Fire Brigade was the result of poor ongoing management by ESB. Furthermore, the Union believes that control of the fire event should have passed to an ACT Fire Brigade Incident Management Team once the fire reached urban Canberra.

The Volunteer Brigades Association

The submission from the Volunteer Brigades Association provided general information about the history of bushfire brigades in the ACT and the establishment of the Association, its purpose, and the support it provides to both bushfire fighters and emergency service volunteers. The submission highlighted a number of matters the Association has raised with ESB of behalf of volunteers:

- training of brigade members—including in first aid, off-road driving, fire suppression and emergency service activities
- the safety and suitability of equipment—including clothing, vehicles and other items used by members
- support services for members in the field—for example, communications, water, food and fresh crews
- the proposed issue of additional equipment—such as winter jackets for bushfire volunteers, global positioning systems, compasses and satellite phones.

In meetings with members of the Association's executive, the Inquiry was advised that there are some concerns about the longer term future for bushfire volunteers in the ACT, with many members perceiving that government relies on them heavily and is increasingly imposing controls over the volunteer brigades. Further, although morale following the January 2003 fires is generally sound, there is some frustration because bushfire fighters feel they were not effectively deployed, especially on 8 and 9 January. On these and subsequent days resources were on standby but only limited resources were deployed to suppress the fires resulting from the lightning strikes.

The Association advised the Inquiry that all brigades are able to guarantee full vehicle manning for two shifts; most could guarantee rotating three-shift manning. During a long event, however, some volunteers may have difficulty securing release from their employer; for self-employed volunteers, the situation is financially more difficult. Problems with vehicle limitations—in particular, the number of vehicles available and the lack of qualified tanker drivers in some brigades—were also identified, and increased training of bushfire fighters in chainsaw operations and the inclusion of chainsaws on light unit vehicles were recommended.

Most importantly, the Association stressed that volunteers need to be consulted and be able to put forward their views about any proposed changes to operations or organisational arrangements as a result of the January 2003 fires. The volunteers feel that in the past they have been afforded inadequate opportunity to comment on changes that affect them but, more importantly, acceptance of previous volunteer proposals has not been demonstrated in subsequent process change and this has significantly affected morale.

The ACT Fire Controllers Group

The ACT Fire Controllers Group was formed in 1995 following the withdrawal of the CSIRO Division of Forest Research from the ACT Bush Fire Council. The Group comprises all the operational officers within the ACT Bushfire Service, from deputy captain up. These are the people, whether volunteer or departmental, who make the decisions on the ground and fulfil the role of incident controller or take up a position within the Incident Control System structure. The Group aims to provide fire controllers with a mechanism for raising specific concerns with the Bushfire Service or other areas.

Fire controllers' primary concern is the safety of people at an incident. To perform this function effectively, they need adequate resources, training and support. The Group identified a number of ongoing issues related to training and the funding of training, including the need for equity in funding allocations for training across all service areas of ESB. Although the group acknowledged the opportunity for combined training across services in areas such as four-wheel-drive training, there was still a need for specialised training in each area. In relation to the Bushfire Service, the Group highlighted a pressing need for specialised training in tanker driving and tree felling.

Communications are also a concern. The Group stressed that resolution of communication problems between and NSW units must be a priority. There should also be a consistent approach between the ACT's firefighting services and adherence to Standard Operating Procedures to support firefighters in the field. Internally, a process needs to be established whereby grievances within the brigades or services can be aired and resolved.

The Fire Controllers Group is unfunded. Executive members pointed to the Group's success in organising safety-awareness information nights that are well supported by members but require access to minor funding to continue. They also highlighted the need for funding support and control of representation on the national organisation. It was recommended that the *Rural Fire Control Manual*, which describes the organisation's structure, legislative powers, duties, and other matters such as policy and training, be reviewed and updated.

The ACT Rural Lessees Association

The ACT Rural Lessees Association promotes the interests of landowners who have responsibility for the stewardship of the ACT's rural land; this makes up some 22 per cent of all ACT land. The following concerns were raised in the Association's submission and in a subsequent discussion with the Inquiry:

- *Fuel management.* The Association questioned land management practices in the national parks, pine forests, river corridors and nature reserves where fuel had been allowed to build up over time. Alternative fuel management tools such as grazing to reduce hazards, have been overlooked and there is no audit process for assessing the fuel build-up and the attendant fire risks.
- *Fire response.* The Association considers that greater priority and resources should have been devoted to the fires in the initial stages. It noted that some fire trails were inaccessible as a result of poor maintenance and that firefighting vehicles were prevented from entering some areas.
- *Early warning.* In a briefing to landowners on 16 January, Environment ACT raised no specific concerns about the fires. There was also a lack of communication with landholders bordering national parks and river corridors. The Association did however, commend Environment ACT's response in supporting landowners after the fires.

Other general comments concerned the need for ongoing research into wildfire control and the need to resolve communication and coordination difficulties between NSW and ACT bushfire authorities.

The Association made the following recommendations:

- that there be a statutory requirement to reduce fuel loads on government-controlled land
- that management plans for national parks, river corridors, forests and nature parks be reviewed and an annual audit process be introduced to focus on the level of fuel in these areas
- that grazing, on a controlled basis, be examined as a fuel-control measure
- that pine plantations not be replanted where, in the event of a bushfire, they would pose a threat to rural or urban property.

Conclusion

The Inquiry thanks all the people and organisations that provided submissions and comments to it, including those it met in person. It especially thanks the many people who suffered distressing losses or had harrowing experiences during the fires, for stepping forward and participating in the process. All comments received, both written and oral, were of considerable value in helping the Inquiry to be as well informed as possible.

Overall, the submissions were positive in nature. Although many criticisms were made, and many people were angry, the vast bulk of the comments were directed at helping to identify shortcomings and deficiencies, so that lessons could be learnt for the future. In particular, there was widespread appreciation of and gratitude for the personal efforts of the firefighters and emergency workers who struggled valiantly against what can only be described as overwhelming odds.

Notes

- 1 Matthews, S 2003, *How Did the Fire Know We Lived Here? Canberra's Bushfires, January 2003*, Ginninderra Press, Canberra.
- 2 Bushfire Fuel Management Plan 2002-04, issued in November 2002.
- 3 This followed comment in the *Report of the Task Force on Bushfire Fuel Management Practices in the ACT* that 'on balance ... the fire protection values were likely to be better managed and the fire trails better maintained if the area is managed by one of the ACT Government land managers. However, if the ACT cannot increase the level of management ... the lease should be surrendered to NSW'. Glenn, G 1995, *Report of the Task Force on Bushfire Fuel Management Practices in the ACT*, p. 18.



Residents attempting to protect their homes with limited water pressure. Photo courtesy ESB.