

5 The public dimension

(How the community can help itself and what support it can expect from the authorities)

Historically, fire services have grown out of a combination of the concern of local communities about their own safety and the support of the insurance industry, which has had a financial interest in reducing losses from fires. The raising and maintenance of urban fire brigades have gradually become a responsibility of the state, although vestiges of insurance industry funding remain. There has also been a trend towards substantial state funding of rural fire brigades, although to a somewhat lesser degree.

From the community's point of view, the significance of these changes has been the move towards greater reliance on government to provide fire-suppression services. This is particularly the case in most capital cities. In earlier times, the community's commitment to protecting itself was more pronounced than it is now although the heavy reliance on volunteers in bushfire services around the country is a continuation of the practice that grew out of a strong sense of community self-reliance.

In more recent years, around Australia there has been a swing back towards greater engagement of the community in voluntary (and in some cases compulsory) fire prevention and mitigation aimed at supporting the fire-suppression activities of the formed brigades. Relative to the costs of supporting fire-suppression activity, the rate of expenditure on prevention and community education programs has risen markedly in most jurisdictions.

One theme that runs through this report is the need for a greater involvement of the ACT community in helping itself with personal and property protection. This involves the authorities working in a closer partnership with the community, helping citizens to better understand the nature of the fire risks they face, what they can do about improving their personal and property protection, and what kind of assistance they can expect from government agencies.

This chapter develops the theme of changing the focus from reliance solely or largely on the government to provide full protection against the ravages of fire, to a shared arrangement, whereby the public is helped to have a better sense of fire awareness and encouraged to take on a greater measure of self-protection, with government providing the protective back-up through the professional services it will continue to maintain.

The first step is to increase the community awareness of the nature of the risks it faces, so that people will be more receptive to the education initiatives that need to be promoted by the fire and emergency authorities.

The Canberra community's awareness of fire risk

Despite the major fire events that have occurred during Canberra's history, and the recording of fire corridors through what are now Woden and Tuggeranong, the fact that no urban houses had been lost to bushfire since 1952 had given rise to a belief that the houses of suburban Canberra were not vulnerable to bushfire. Even the intrusive fire event in December 2001 failed to adequately alert Canberra residents to the fact that their homes could be at risk. A number of factors have supported this conviction:

- the historical absence of suburban homes lost to bushfire
- urban development in Canberra being limited to the valleys and not on hills and ridges, areas that have proved so vulnerable to fire in the Blue Mountains, the Dandenongs and the Adelaide Hills
- the ACT planning controls, which clearly define the edge of urban development—in contrast with the ribbon-like and scattered urban fringe in many other towns and cities, where there is a more obvious bushland character to the urban–rural interface
- the large tracts of cleared land around Canberra, which appear to present a low fire risk to much of urban Canberra
- the non-declaration by government of any of the ACT as 'bushfire prone' in terms of the Building Code of Australia—avoiding the requirement to 'bushfire-proof' suburban homes
- the lack of unambiguous official warnings and advice that Canberra suburbs were vulnerable to bushfire damage
- a general failure to realise that Canberra residents were vulnerable. A Kambah resident was reported in *The Courier Mail* on 20 January as saying, 'We did clean our gutters and put on the right clothes, but none of us were really prepared. I mean, this is Canberra, you do not expect fires'.

It was suggested to the Inquiry that ESB, and as a consequence Canberra residents generally, had adopted an attitude of denial—not only long-term denial about the potential bushfire threat to homes but also, once the initial fires were not contained, a denial of the possibility that seasonal north-westerly winds could push the fires directly towards Canberra. This might seem a harsh comment, but there is substance in the message.

The Inquiry is of the view that, at a general level, the Canberra community has not been sufficiently well prepared to understand the nature of the bushfire risk that is present as a consequence of the siting of the city in a bushland setting. As the events of January 2003 showed, the pride the city takes in being known as the Bush Capital also carries with it a reminder that the unique environment people enjoy comes at a price.

Public education

A major new program of community education is called for to remedy this situation and to help residents understand how they can better protect themselves and their property from bushfire damage. Canberra will always be a city prone to occasional serious bushfire attack, and the realisation of this needs to pervade the psyche of the city, its inhabitants and those who govern it. Among specific measures that might be taken are the following:

- community television announcements about bushfire prevention and preparedness
- school programs focusing not only on fire safety in the home but also on safety during bushfires
- visits by emergency services to aged care, childcare and other facilities for vulnerable groups, advising what action to take when there is a bushfire threat
- roadside signage showing the daily bushfire risk—along major corridors in Canberra, not just along the approaches to forests and parks
- advice about local fire prevention measures, perhaps issued with rates notices
- a concerted effort to convince the community that smoke haze associated with fuel-reduction burning is an unavoidable consequence of limiting the risk of damage to the city.

These are but a few suggestions. An expanded and continuing campaign of community education about bushfire risks and how individuals and households can prepare for them is required. The campaign should emphasise that this is a shared responsibility for the entire Canberra community, with government, emergency services and residents all having a part to play. In terms of bushfire protection in Australia, the best-prepared communities are those that have accepted the sharing of responsibility between government and citizens.

In the 2003–04 Budget the ACT Government allocated \$100 000 for a trial with some local community groups in urban fringe areas, who will be supplied with firefighting equipment and training as a self-help initiative designed to help people protect their properties when fire appliances are unavailable or delayed. While this provides an excellent opportunity for community engagement and education the concept has been adopted elsewhere in Australia only by the NSW Fire Brigade. It also provides an excellent opportunity for local fire crews to relate to local residents. The Inquiry considers it worthy as a trial, and that it should be extended to rural leaseholders, although effectiveness should be critically reviewed as part of the trial.

The unpredictability of bushfires, the speed with which they can present a serious threat, and their intensity and spread (which far exceeds the normal fire experience in built-up areas), mean that no government or community can guarantee that fire services will be able to attend all residences or structures that might be threatened by large bushfires. As a consequence, members of the public must assume greater responsibility for protecting themselves and their property against the potential impact of bushfires.

Under the ACT's *Emergency Management Act 1999* the Executive Director of ESB is responsible for conducting education programs and vulnerability analyses and coordinating public information related to emergency management. ESB advised the Inquiry that the December 2001 bushfires had raised the Canberra community's awareness of potential bushfire hazards and that ESB had undertaken a number of community education and awareness activities in the lead-up to the 2002–03 bushfire season:

- The release of the draft Bushfire Fuel Management Plan 2002–04 for public comment in mid-August 2002 provided an opportunity for ESB, Environment ACT and the Conservation Council of the South-east Region and Canberra to emphasise the possible severity of the pending bushfire season.
- Under a sponsored initiative, the United Firefighters Union distributed a *Fire Prevention Handbook* to primary school children in the ACT. The handbook

included advice from the ACT Bushfire Council's publication *Will you Survive?* informing residents about preparing their homes for a fire threat.

- A two-page colour feature on mitigating the potential effects of a disaster appeared in the *Canberra Times* on 28 August 2002. The feature included advice from the ACT Bushfire Service on preparing for bushfires.
- Advice on the probable severity of the 2002–03 bushfire season was provided in mid-October 2002 as hazard-reduction burns were carried out around Lady Denman Drive and Orana School. Residents were advised to clear bushfire fuel away from their homes.
- In October–November 2002 the Director of the ACT Bushfire Service advised residents through the print media and radio to take action to clear vegetation from around their homes and to establish some type of defensive zone.
- An article in the *Canberra Times* on 29 November 2002—after the launch of the Bushfire Fuel Management Plan 2002–04—gave advice to residents on twelve measures to prepare their homes for bushfires.
- On a number of occasions the Director and Manager Operations of the ACT Bushfire Service gave radio and television interviews about the potential severity of the 2002–03 bushfire season, what people could do to prepare their houses, and what to do under a total fire ban.
- On 24 November 2002 members of the Rivers Volunteer Bushfire and Emergency Service Brigade conducted an awareness session for residents of Chauvel Circle in Chapman, providing advice on measures they could take around their homes and what to do if a bushfire threatened them.

I strongly support the view that people should be encouraged and assisted by government, wherever possible and prudent, to protect their own properties and to co-operate with their neighbours in this task

— Chapman resident

All these initiatives are commendable. But a higher profile campaign is still needed. A sustained effort must be made to ensure that the message is heard and absorbed. Experience with community education campaigns such as those on drink-driving, wearing seat belts, and the dangers of smoking illustrates the difficulty of changing attitudes quickly. Modifying the community's attitude to bushfire threats—from one of indifference or benign acceptance to a positive

and continuing realisation of the reality—will not happen simply because the January experience is so recent. Constant reinforcement will be needed.

ESB's public education capacity should be strengthened. It has one full-time officer engaged in 'public relations', part of which is public education. Public education needs to have a much stronger emphasis within the organisational structure, so that ESB has the capacity to support an upgraded program of community education and support.

Fire authorities around Australia now endorse a policy of encouraging well-prepared people to stay with their properties when threatened by bushfires. The basic advice householders need is well established but it needs to be promulgated and reinforced if it is to be widely embraced. ESB, with government support, is responsible for ensuring that this happens.

Recommendations

- ESB should be allocated additional resources so that it can upgrade its public education capability to support a stronger, continuing campaign of public education directed at improving the Canberra community's bushfire awareness, its understanding of the nature of the threat, and its knowledge of how people can better protect themselves and their properties. The campaign should draw on the public education experience of interstate bushfire authorities, particularly the Country Fire Authority of Victoria.
- Initiatives such as fire guard and other forms of direct community support should be introduced to encourage self-help arrangements in the community.
- The message to the community should include acknowledgment that in major bushfire emergencies
 - the authorities are unable to guarantee that firefighters will always be available to assist
 - householders generally need to take sensible precautions and be prepared, if that is their choice, to protect their own lives and properties
 - the authorities are committed to doing all they can to help, including advising the community on how best to go about achieving a higher degree of personal and household self-reliance.

Public information

By far the strongest and most frequent criticism expressed in public submissions to the Inquiry concerned the lack of early warning to the community about the fire threat. Many submitters drew attention to the contrast between the dearth of information provided in the period before 18 January and the large amount provided to Belconnen residents during the following week.

Information given to the public during an emergency can serve a number of purposes:

- provide an honest and realistic assessment of what has occurred and what more to expect
- give the community the best possible indication of precautions they should be taking if there is the possibility that the threat will be ongoing and may escalate
- inform the community of immediate relief activities
- warn the community of post-disaster hazards
- motivate a required public response to the emergency
- provide direct assistance to those adversely affected
- assist with evacuation and other recovery procedures.

Media alerts and updates

As noted, ESB had issued a number of media alerts and provided media interviews in October–November 2002, warning of the early start to the 2002–03 bushfire season and total fire bans and providing advice to people about preparing their homes for a bushfire threat. The media also received information on early fire outbreaks in Namadgi National Park (29 October 2002) and on Black Mountain (5 November 2002) and a number of grass fires around Canberra (1–6 and 16–24 November 2002). On 5 December 2002 the then Minister for Police, Emergency Services and Corrections, Mr Ted Quinlan MLA, also issued a media release announcing the deployment of one task force from the ACT to assist in fighting fires in the Bateman's Bay area.

From 10 January 2003 ESB issued regular (at least daily) media updates on the fires at Bendora, Gingera and Stockyard Spur. The releases were in a standard

format, providing information on the fires' status, the fire ban status, the resources deployed, land and property damage, and road and nature park closures, as well as advice about reporting fires or suspicious activity; new information was clearly identified. They also contained information on community safety (personal and property safety), health warnings, weather details and advice about community access to information. These releases were supplemented by releases from Environment ACT, detailing restrictions on park access, and health warnings for high smoke levels from the ACT Chief Health Officer. The media release information for each day preceding 18 January is detailed in Chapter 2.

ESB provided a number of media updates on 18 January. At noon and 1pm the media updates advised that the extreme weather conditions had caused a number of spot fires to cross containment lines. The McIntyre Hut fire, which had become known as the Northern fire, had burnt out about 18 000 hectares (1 pm). A spot fire that had crossed the ACT–NSW border during the night had entered the north-western corner of the Uriarra pine plantation. The Bendora fire, which had been renamed the Middle fire, had burnt about 10 000 hectares (1 pm). A spot fire threatened property in the Tidbinbilla and Paddys River Valley, and ESB had contacted residents in the area the previous night to advise them to prepare their property; no residents had been evacuated but recovery plans were being made for a possible serious threat. A spot fire from the Stockyard fire complex (by then known as the Southern fire) was threatening property in the Naas and Top Naas areas and posed a threat to property in Williamsdale and Royalla. More than 80 firefighting units had been deployed in the ACT, involving 250 personnel per shift.

The local ABC radio also monitored events; the program record at Radio 666 is as follows:

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| 7.30 am | Interview by Executive Director ESB gives no indication of any problems east of the Murrumbidgee River. |
| 7.55 am | <i>Local news broadcast.</i> Public advised that road closures mean there is no access to the parks west of the Murrumbidgee River. National parks and recreation areas are closed. Executive Director ESB advises that the fires are spotting out of containment lines. |

9.00 am	<i>News broadcast from Sydney.</i> A fire update by John Winter (NSW Rural Fire Service) advises of a major fire battle. Tidbinbilla should prepare but there are no evacuations.
9.30 am	News headlines announce that the fires are edging closer to the ACT.
10.00 am & 11.00 am	<i>News broadcast from Sydney.</i> ACT on heightened alert.
1.00 pm	<i>News broadcast from Sydney.</i> Fires less than 10 kilometres away from Canberra. Residents on the western edge are advised to prepare for fires and take precautions to protect their homes.
1.05 pm	<i>First local update.</i> ABC Radio 666 announces that it will provide updates on the fire situation throughout the day. Fires have entered the Uriarra pine plantation and firefighters are dropping back to the edge of the forest to fight the fires there. Information and warnings are given about the fires and property damage; advice is provided about how to deal with fire if it approaches.
1.10 pm	<i>Reporter update following ESB briefing.</i> Advises that the next 24 hours would be 'horrendous' with 40°C degree temperatures. The fires are 8–10 kilometres away, with a spotting potential of 8–10 kilometres. Residents of the western edge of Weston Creek are advised to take precautions. Road closures announced.
1.52 pm	<i>Local update.</i> Situation has worsened. A caller advises that Pine Island has been evacuated. The western edge of Weston Creek is in danger; ESB advises residents of the area to be ready for fire.
2.00 pm	<i>News broadcast from Sydney.</i> The fire front is approaching Canberra and is less than 10 kilometres away. Major roads are closed. Chief Fire Control Officer advises that firefighters are on property-damage duty only.
2.05 pm	<i>Local update.</i> Cameron Wade (NSW Rural Fire Service) advises that the southern fires have crossed the Murrumbidgee River. There is a threat to property on Smith's Road; the Monaro

Highway is closed. Advice provided on wearing appropriate clothing. Warning to Weston Creek residents is repeated.

2.29 pm *Local update.* Fires starting to hit Canberra suburbs. Reporter at Ginninderra Falls reports flames four times the size of trees across the Molonglo River. Fire moving very quickly. Helicopters present but the water is being blown away.

2.32 pm The Standard Emergency Warning Signal is sounded for the first time. The message that was read stated that there has been a major deterioration in the ACT fire situation. There was increasing risk due to spotting from fires to the west. A number of suburbs are placed on alert and residents are urged to return home. The list of threatened suburbs is repeated.

The Executive Director ESB and the Chief Fire Control Officer held a media conference at noon on 18 January. A media representative who was at the conference informed the Inquiry that the advice given was that the situation was bad but there was no cause for panic. The fires were estimated to be 8–10 kilometres away, with spotting occurring 8–10 kilometres in front of them.

At 3.30 pm the Chief Minister, the ACT Chief Police Officer and the Chief Fire Control Officer held a media conference at which a state of emergency was declared—some three-quarters of an hour after its authorisation.

The Standard Emergency Warning Signal

The Standard Emergency Warning Signal is a signal that is played for 15 seconds every 15 minutes for two hours; it is followed by an official announcement.

The first official request to broadcast the Standard Emergency Warning Signal was issued by ESB to the media via fax at 1.45 pm. At this time ESB was aware that the three major fires were spotting considerable distances. For reasons never made clear to the Inquiry—although it appears likely to have been inadequate fax-streaming—the ABC radio did not receive the advice until 2.31 pm. The emergency message to the ACT community was authorised by the Executive Director of ESB. The message listed suburbs on the western urban edge, in Belconnen and Weston Creek that should be on alert for approaching fires. Further suburbs were added to the list in subsequent broadcasts. The message also provided advice on precautionary measures residents should take if fire approached their houses.

It is clear from events that work needs to be done to improve the alert mechanisms for residents. Among suggestions from the public were air raid-type sirens, colour-coded alert messages for increased threat levels, and Standard Emergency Warning Signal messages being broadcast in major shopping centres.

ABC Radio 666 told the Inquiry that it received the Standard Emergency Warning Signal instruction at 2.31 pm (three-quarters of an hour after it was supposed to have been transmitted by ESB) and aired it at 2.32 pm. The delay between ESB's release of the message and Radio 666's receipt of it was explained to the Inquiry as technical—a fault in the automatic bulk-addressing function on ESB's fax. This is not satisfactory: better processes should be implemented for the direct dissemination of critical emergency information to media channels.

Public submissions to the Inquiry also strongly criticised having only one radio station or communication medium broadcast the emergency warning message. Further, people commented about a general lack of understanding of the significance and meaning of the Standard Emergency Warning Signal. Some residents suggested that the Signal should have been supplemented by police sirens in areas of particular risk.

Canberra Connect

ESB advised the Inquiry that the Christmas 2001 fires demonstrated the need to broaden the then current media arrangements to encompass wider aspects of community information. During 2002 the Executive Director ESB met with managers of Canberra Connect, the Government's gateway to information and services, to explore ways of using its call centre and web presence to facilitate the provision of community information during an emergency. This would supplement the Police and ESB as a source of authoritative information. Coordination arrangements to increase Canberra Connect's information provision capability were finalised on 18 December 2002.

As noted, authorities began preparing for possible fire impacts in rural areas of the ACT on the evening of 17 January. The Canberra Connect call centre was activated at the same time, in preparation for increased information needs during the weekend. It was initially arranged that the call centre would be staffed on Saturday from 7.00 am to 7.00 pm (rather than the more limited normal weekend times), but ultimately the centre operated 24 hours a day from 18 January until 28 January, when the state of emergency was lifted.

A 1800 telephone number was also established at the Police communications facility at the Winchester Centre and an 'ACT Bushfire Status' website was constructed within the existing ESB website.

The Canberra Connect call centre was heavily used throughout the emergency: the equivalent of three months' call volume was processed in 10 days. In addition, 181 000 people visited the ACT Bushfire Status website between 17 and 27 January. The Inquiry was advised that at the height of the emergency people were contacting the call centre in an effort to locate friends and relatives; to gain updates on the fires; the status of road closures and the evacuation status of suburbs; to find out where the evacuation centres were; and to gain information about what to do to prepare their homes.

As the emergency continued into Sunday people called to donate their time or resources to victims. Suburbs in Belconnen and Weston Creek remained on alert, and concerned citizens and employers kept in contact with the call centre to receive updated information. Calls from people volunteering their time and resources continued throughout the week. Canberra Connect has continued to play a support role for the ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce by providing information on the bushfire recovery since January.

Overall, the Inquiry considers that Canberra Connect played an extremely important role in information dissemination during the emergency. The system responded rapidly to the need to scale-up its activities, and it quickly developed new processes when the need arose; for example, the Canberra Connect number was quickly established as a national and international number. Online services also responded rapidly; for example, with assistance from CITEC, an online and phone donation facility was quickly established to take donations from around the world.

The Inquiry was advised that Canberra Connect has carried out its own internal analysis to identify where its scaling-up capabilities might be improved. The Inquiry recommends that the role Canberra Connect has demonstrated it can play be included as a part of a revised Media Sub-Plan of the ACT Emergency Plan.

One means of ensuring that Canberra Connect can play a more vital and continuing role during major emergencies is to upgrade its facilities to include an uninterrupted power supply. A recommendation to this effect follows.

The media

Media management is an important aspect of any emergency response. The media is both a source of information for emergency services (from reporters in the field and community calls) and an effective avenue for disseminating information about the emergency to the community.

As discussed, ESB had been in regular contact with the media in the lead-up to the events of January 2003. The Inquiry is satisfied that ESB had in operation adequate arrangements for these routine activities. Basically, the media unit consisted of one professionally trained media officer, although the officer was relatively inexperienced. The Inquiry considers though, that ESB was ill-equipped to quickly scale-up its media and information management capability to cope with the demands of a major emergency.

The ESB submission stated that, as a consequence of the December 2001 fires, the Executive Director ESB presented a briefing on emergency management to public relations staff from all ACT government agencies. From that briefing, a list of PR expertise that could be drawn on to assist with information dissemination to the media and the public in an emergency was compiled. A roster of PR staff available during the Christmas–New Year period of 2002–03 was prepared. ESB drew on this network from 10 January to supplement its in-house support, as well as receiving some assistance from the media unit of the Chief Minister’s Department.

Despite the injection of additional personnel, the coordination and management of these disparate resources left a lot to be desired until an experienced media consultant was engaged to take over the management of media relations generally. As a result, from the afternoon of 20 January, the situation began to improve substantially.

A well-managed media function greatly helps with the management of an incident. The Inquiry recommends that action be taken to strengthen the media and public relations capacity within ESB. It would be advantageous if this area were integrated with the unit responsible for developing and implementing an enhanced community education program. The media function should be coordinated by an experienced media person who understands the demands and sensitivities of handling a large-scale emergency, and this person should have adequate support, which might include means of drawing on additional resources at short notice when a major emergency does occur. These arrangements need to be tested to ensure that they will work effectively when necessary.

It is apparent that on 18 January there were problems with ensuring that public information was provided consistently both to the media and to Canberra Connect. This was highlighted in agency submissions, in feedback from media staff, and in community comments. Staff should be well versed in media requirements in terms of deadlines and the need for accurate, up-to-date information. It is important that there be continuing liaison with the media at all stages of an emergency. It is equally important that there be robust processes for ensuring that information is consistent and that rumours can be confirmed or denied promptly.

The media should also be well supported by having satisfactory facilities to work in. The Inquiry was advised that the media facilities at Curtin were inadequate: there was not enough space and only one dedicated phone and fax line, and major problems were encountered when the power supply was interrupted. Ideally, there should be a discrete media area, with dedicated phone and fax lines and an uninterrupted power supply. Back-up systems should be available in the event that all communication fails.

Some comments were made in the media about ESB not having an up-to-date media contact list. The Inquiry pursued this with staff in the ESB media unit. They stated that there was a current contact list for the media but that it needed to be checked with the various media outlets to determine who was on call for that particular weekend, given that it was school holiday time and that stations would switch to national programming in the afternoon.

A debrief ESB conducted with media personnel on 7 March identified a number of matters for consideration in a revised media management strategy:

- better access for journalists to the fire front and use of a ‘pool system’ for television footage
- better marketing of sources of public information—for example, the Canberra Connect website
- using radio for information dissemination as well as purely for news
- an increased public information profile in ESB
- raising the level of awareness of and providing training for media personnel in connection with bushfire and other fire and emergency-related issues, including the Standard Emergency Warning Signal

- using ‘crawlers’ on all television stations to alert people to listen to their radios in the event of an emergency
- during an emergency, having a different ESB liaison officer dedicated to each arm of the media—radio, television and the print press
- having a number of spokespersons—not necessarily ESB personnel—available to address the media when incidents occur
- providing media awareness training for firefighters in the field
- using email as the preferred way of disseminating press releases, information, and so on.

The only effective communication means were the radio for an initial warning, talking with our neighbours ... family and friends. The radio alerted us to the state of emergency ... but this was patchy and did not give a good indication of what was actually happening.

— Chapman resident.

In the course of discussions with the Inquiry, various media representatives made a number of other practical suggestions (which have been passed on to ESB) that would improve the quality of the working relationships between ESB and the media. They would make it easier for the media to fulfil its role as well as allow ESB to make better use of the media as an ally in any future emergency.

Some of the confusion in the information relayed by the media during the afternoon of 18 January was a consequence of the existence of two operations centres—ESB at Curtin and ACT Policing at the Winchester Centre in Belconnen. While ACT Policing was concentrating on police and recovery related matters, Curtin remained focused on fire-related media information. Partly because of the physical separation, the different interests of the two centres and communication difficulties between them, a coordinated and unified approach to the media was very difficult to maintain.

On Sunday 19 January there was agreement to redirect media inquiries from ESB to the Police Operations Centre. General communications difficulties between the two centres continued, however, and on 22 January the media functions in relation to the continuing fires, and to recovery, largely returned to ESB. By this time the media consultant engaged to coordinate and manage the entire media and public information activity had regained control of the situation.

ACT Policing's submission to the Inquiry commented:

Issues of media liaison and coordination highlight the need for one physical or at least 'virtual' centralised information collection and dissemination point, definite coordination and sharing of information to obtain a common approach, and the benefits of senior officers liaising and agreeing on the content of media releases ...

There are also resourcing issues for media management that are worth further consideration. Both ACT Policing's and ESB media units called on extra staff to assist them. These officers also needed to coordinate and liaise with private sector groups (like infrastructure utilities) who issued their own releases. The job of managing and coordinating the media is vital, a fact well recognised in the ACT Emergency Plan. Media resources were stretched and appear to have needed additional capacity as there seems to have been a period at the height of the emergency where media releases were re-broadcast with by then inaccurate and potentially dangerous information while SEWS messages appear not to have been updated regularly. This is problematic given the importance of the broadcasts for informing people, retaining public trust and keeping people safe.

The Inquiry agrees.

Recommendations

- The Media Sub-Plan of the ACT Emergency Plan should be reviewed to include a greater focus on the provision of community information.
- Well-defined, well-practised processes should be developed to support the delivery of information to the public. This includes improving the alert mechanisms for residents prior to an emerging danger period.
- Media communications systems and facilities at ESB headquarters should be improved.
- There should be greater coordination of the content of whole-of-government media releases and messages.
- Back-up power should be available for the Canberra Connect call centre.

- The Community Information Sub-Plan of the ACT Emergency Plan should be reviewed to reflect needs broader than just media arrangements.
- The role Canberra Connect has demonstrated it can play should be included as a part of a revised Media Sub-Plan of the ACT Emergency Plan.
- Before each bushfire season familiarisation briefing sessions should be held for the media.
- ESB should have the capacity to engage an experienced media director to be available in an emergency, to coordinate the provision of information to the media and for general public information purposes.

Evacuate or stay?

The apparent inconsistency in steps taken by the Police to evacuate people at certain stages during 18 January when advice emanating from the Emergency Services Bureau was encouraging residents to stay with their homes if they felt confident about doing so attracted much adverse comment, both immediately after the fires and during the Inquiry. Submissions to the Inquiry cited many instances of disagreement between the police and local residents who wished to stay or to return to protect their homes.

This difference of view has been debated by police and firefighters in Australia for many years but has now been resolved in most jurisdictions by legislation or agreed protocols. In Victoria, for example, while the police have the power to remove a person who is on land or buildings threatened by fire, they may not do so if the person has a ‘... pecuniary interest therein or in any goods or valuables whatsoever thereon ...’ (s. 31(4) of the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*). The NSW Rural Fire Service policy is that capable people should not be evacuated from properly prepared dwellings that are likely to be affected by bushfire, although the Service advises people that if ordered to evacuate by the police they should comply. By agreement, however, senior police must seek advice from the Rural Fire Service incident controller before authorising an evacuation.

The call to evacuate was unnecessary and resulted in several houses in our area being lost as there was no one available to extinguish the fires. Most of our street was saved by those who ignored the evacuation warning

— Kambah resident

In an endeavour to obtain a nationally consistent approach, the Australasian Fire Authorities Council presented a position paper, 'Community Safety and Evacuation During Bushfires', to a meeting of Australian Police Commissioners held in Canberra in October 2001. The paper, the full text of which appears in Appendix G, makes a number of important points:

- *Bushfires regularly threaten communities throughout Australia.* In the preamble it is noted that responsibility for reducing loss of life and property lies jointly with government, communities and individuals and that fire authorities are not able to guarantee the presence of a firefighting vehicle and crew to protect every residence during a major bushfire or multiple fires.
- *Houses protect people and people protect houses.* Research conducted over many years following major bushfires in Australia shows that most buildings losses are the result of sparks and embers starting small fires. If adequate preparations have been made, a building will usually survive the initial passage of a fire front. People who are well prepared and take shelter in their homes have an excellent chance of survival. Homes will also be saved if people remain to extinguish small fires that start in and around them.
- *Fire authorities no longer advocate large-scale evacuation of people from threatened areas.* Research into Australian bushfire fatalities shows that last-minute evacuation is dangerous and can cause greater risks than remaining in the fire area.
- *Communities at risk from bushfires should be allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for their own safety.* Where fire protection measures have been taken, able-bodied people should be encouraged to stay with their homes. When there is sufficient warning time, people such as the very young, the old, the infirm, those who feel they would not cope with the trauma of fire, and those who have not taken sufficient measures to protect their homes should leave. The decision to stay or leave during a bushfire must be made following careful consideration of all the factors bearing on the situation.
- *Authority to evacuate.* The Australasian Fire Authorities Council considers there should be a national framework that allows and encourages members of the community to take responsibility for their own safety and that of their property. The Council also considers that a decision to evacuate people should be made by the lead fire-combat authority. It notes that the time involved in dealing with resisting citizens can seriously hamper the process of warning and evacuating other members of the

community. Citizens should be able to choose the option that best suits them—for example, sheltering in their own home, moving to a neighbour's home, or relocating to a nearby point of refuge.

With the exception of Queensland, which wanted to seek clarification on certain matters before expressing a view, the Police Commissioners accepted this policy framework. The ACT was present at the meeting.

The Inquiry is satisfied that the Australasian Fire Authorities Council position represents the soundest framework available to guide the authorities in dealing with this aspect of bushfire crisis management. A common, coordinated approach between the police and the fire authorities on this important and sensitive issue in the course of an emergency is essential; agreement in advance would also greatly assist with incorporating the policy in community education programs. Knowledge of how the authorities will act in a crisis is an important and integral part of an expanded community education and information responsibility the ACT authorities are urged to embrace (see 'Public information', in this chapter).

During the Canberra bushfires, ESB advice to the public was consistent with the Australasian Fire Authorities Council framework. After the state of emergency was declared, in mid-afternoon on 18 January, and the Chief Fire Control Officer had been appointed Alternate Controller, he acquired the power to 'direct the movement of persons, animals or vehicles within, into or around the emergency area' (s. 27(1)(a) of the *Emergency Management Act 1999*). However, he did not formally exercise this power at any stage during the crisis.

The Chief Police Officer, believing that he continued to hold the powers vested in his office when the state of emergency was initially declared, could have invoked the Emergency Management Act powers to authorise police actions aimed at compelling evacuations. This does not appear to have occurred: the Inquiry was informed that police actions that involved attempts to force evacuation resulted from individual decisions of police officers 'on the ground' and were based on normal common law police powers.

There seems to have been no real coordination between the Police and ESB before police took unilateral evacuation action in the field. There may have been some consultation between individual police officers and firefighters on site, but there should have been consultation at a policy level with ESB before ad hoc action of this kind was taken. At the very least, this would have helped to avoid confusion and inconsistency—in the advice the authorities were giving to the

community on one hand and in the actions of individual officers in the bushfire-threatened areas on the other.

During the December 2001 fires similar divergent views about evacuation emerged. Although there was an intention to resolve the different approaches, this had not occurred before January 2003, when the inconsistencies were again evident.

Police culture places great emphasis on their role as guardians of society and protectors of the citizens they are there to serve. Positive values flow from this, exemplified in a strong police response to situations that endanger the lives of citizens. This lies behind the traditional inclination of police to use their powers to require people to withdraw from situations of danger, in the belief that removal from the source of a hazard eliminates the risk. In many circumstances this is the appropriate response, but in bushfire situations experience has led to the view that a different or modified response is generally better. At least, the matter needs to be resolved at a policy level rather than relying on the judgment of police in the field.

Large numbers of people were leaving Duffy and the Police were assisting in making their evacuation as safe and orderly as possible. This action is essential but I do not believe that their role should extend beyond this to forcing people to leave. Police should not be allowed to do this.

— Duffy resident

ACT Policing's defence of its actions during the fires covered the following points:

- Attempts were made to clarify with ESB the policy to be followed in relation to evacuations, but communication problems as the crisis approached its climax created difficulties.
- Attempts were also made to consult fire authorities 'on the ground' who in some situations supported evacuation action.
- It is acknowledged that where police officers in the field were unable to obtain advice from fire authorities, they exercised their personal judgment in situations where they believed evacuation was the appropriate course to adopt.

- They believed that their actions resulted in the rescue of a large number of people (162 alone in Duffy it was suggested) who were elderly, ill-equipped or appeared shocked or distressed.
- They believe the low loss of life supports the police policy of evacuating people.

The Police acknowledge that an agreed policy is needed for the future. They accept that a common and coordinated approach by the authorities is preferable, that an informed and prepared public is necessary and that it is unfortunate that an agreed policy framework was not finalised, following the 2001 fire experience, prior to the 2003 events. However, it wasn't and the police believed they needed to act in the way they did, in the absence of a policy that suggested otherwise.

The Inquiry accepts that the Police acted in good faith and in many situations their efforts were welcomed by the members of the public they assisted. It is equally true, though that in many other situations their actions did not accord with the wishes of people who wanted to return to or remain with their homes.

The Inquiry is also aware that there was debate about whether Canberra homes were 'well prepared', so that it was appropriate for people to stay with them, and that the advice issued by ESB was not always timely: lack of advice was still a problem in some instances after people had left and the fire front had struck. However, these perceived deficiencies should not cloud the need to clarify the policy and consistently apply it in the field in the future.

Conclusion

The problem of conflicting advice and philosophies in the ACT in relation to evacuation needs to be tackled outside the circumstances of a major crisis. The framework adopted by the Australasian Fire Authorities Council should be followed to the maximum extent in developing a policy formulation suitable for the ACT.

The Inquiry is also attracted to adoption in the ACT of the provisions in the Country Fire Authority Act of Victoria, which while providing authority to evacuate people in bushfire situations, excludes police from evacuating people who choose to remain, to protect property in which they have a pecuniary interest. This provision is considered to be more in line with contemporary societal values.

When the policy framework is settled ACT Policing and ESB should develop a training program suitable for police and fire personnel dealing with the provision of guidance to the community in relation to ‘evacuate or stay’.

Recommendation

ACT Policing and the Emergency Services Bureau should develop as a matter of urgency—and before the start of the 2003–04 bushfire season—a joint protocol covering their policy on community safety and evacuation during bushfires having regard to the framework adopted by the Australasian Fire Authorities Council and the evacuation provisions in the Victorian Country Fire Authority Act. The protocol should be promulgated widely as part of future community education and information programs, and it should be incorporated in the training and operational procedures of both services, so that it is followed consistently during future bushfire events.

In urban/interface areas such as Duffy, there should be a strong onus on property owners to take responsibility in preparing their property for possible bushfires...this could be something along the lines of neighbourhood watch

— Duffy resident



The recovery centre at Lyons. Photo courtesy ACT Publishing Services.

The recovery

An examination of the recovery phase of the emergency is relevant when attempting to gain an understanding of the impact of the January 2003 fires on the Canberra community. It also casts light on one aspect of the ACT's preparedness for dealing with a major community emergency.

Immediate recovery actions: 18 to 27 January

Recovery action initially focused on ensuring that people who had been affected by the fires were safe, had access to essential services, and were able to obtain accurate and helpful information.

The ACT Emergency Plan, which provides the basis for responding to emergencies in the Territory, contains a number of sub-plans. The Community Recovery Sub-Plan sets out the management arrangements that have been developed to enable recovery action to begin immediately in the event of a major disaster.

Recovery training had been carried out in November 2002. As a consequence of this exercise designed to test the procedures in the Community Recovery Sub-Plan, relevant staff in the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services, which has primary responsibility for the Sub-Plan, were familiar with the procedure for establishing evacuation centres.

On 18 January four evacuation centres were established, at Phillip College, Erindale College, Lake Ginninderra College and Narrabundah College, each with staff and a full complement of support services—including registration, first aid, food, clothing, personal support workers, and housing. The centres accommodated about 5000 people during the first 48 hours. Initially they operated 24 hours a day, but this was scaled down as the need subsided. Immediate financial assistance was offered to victims, a number of organisations provided support, and the ACT community and businesses were generous in the provision of food, blankets and other goods. Almost from the outset offers of assistance began coming in from outside the Territory.

Coming within the framework of the Health Emergency Management Sub-Plan of the Emergency Plan, Canberra's medical emergency services, ambulance service and hospitals experienced an unprecedented level of demand from people with bushfire-related injuries. Three people with severe burns were transferred to Sydney. Disability ACT successfully coordinated the evacuation of over 20 group homes that were threatened between 18 and 21 January.

Over 40 000 ACT residents lost utility services during the fires. Restoration of infrastructure damaged during the fires was managed successfully under the Infrastructure Recovery Sub-Plan and involved ACT government agencies, ActewAGL, the National Capital Authority, and telecommunications organisations. Facilities were repaired by 25 January and residents were able to resume normal service use.

The provision of information to people directly affected by the crisis, as well as to the wider Canberra community, was crucial to the recovery process. The media—in particular, radio—were instrumental in providing information about access to evacuation centres.

A 1800 Bushfire Information Service hotline was established to provide information, support and advice for Canberra residents and interstate callers. Canberra Connect became the central point for information dissemination. As this service became more widely publicised it assisted in alleviating the heavy load on the emergency services 000 hotline. On 18–19 January Canberra Connect received over 25 000 phone calls and 50 000 website visits from people with a range of queries about the fire event and the immediate recovery activity.

The Inquiry considers that the system of managing public information for the recovery generally worked well. At the peak of the crisis, however, many callers would have had difficulty getting through. In addition, the information that was available for passing on might not always have been as precise or helpful as callers would have liked. Canberra Connect is carrying out its own evaluation in order to determine how to augment its demonstrated capacity to manage the information dissemination process in future emergencies.

The Inquiry recommends elsewhere in this chapter (under the heading ‘Public information’) that the Media Sub-Plan of the ACT Emergency Plan be reviewed for the purpose of establishing more robust communication processes and ensuring the provision of timely, helpful emergency information to the public in the future. The Inquiry also recommends that Canberra Connect be more formally integrated into the emergency information management process.

The Bushfire Recovery Taskforce has identified a number of areas where improvements might be made to the community recovery planning process (see Box 1 on page 196); it advised the Inquiry that the matters raised will be examined and built into a revised Community Recovery Sub-Plan, work on which is under way.

The Inquiry agrees that specific responses targeted at people who were directly affected offered an extremely effective way of managing the recovery process. It notes, however, the comments of some rural landholders and residents of rural settlements, who by and large felt that the focus of the recovery effort, especially in the early phases, was on urban areas and urban residents who had lost their homes. The revised Community Recovery Sub-Plan needs to ensure that action is designed to support and respond to the needs of all sectors of the community.

After the state of emergency

The evacuation centres closed on 27 January and were replaced by the ACT Recovery Centre, which had opened at Lyons Primary School on 24 January. The Centre was the primary contact point for services, including distribution of disaster assistance and information to people affected by the fires. The Centre was well publicised and much used.

The Inquiry considers that the Recovery Centre operates well, and this was generally reflected in comments made in the public submissions. One of the Centre's strengths arose from early identification of the need to adopt a case management approach to assisting victims. This initiative was highlighted as 'best practice' in discussions the Inquiry had with emergency service managers in other jurisdictions, who have been observing activities in the ACT. The Centre also developed valuable direct links with community sector organisations.

ACT government agencies moved quickly to implement more medium term recovery activities—meeting accommodation needs, including for ACT Housing clients; developing a range of government financial grants for affected households, businesses and rural lessees; managing waste and establishing safe disposal sites for contaminated waste from block clearance; instituting a streamlined demolition and building approvals process; dealing with emerging public health and safety concerns (such as asbestos); monitoring air and water quality; providing services to replace lost personal records; conducting road safety inspections and cleaning up roads and verges; removing fire-affected trees; carrying out environmental restoration in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi National Park; restoring fences in rural areas; and carrying out salvage operations in ACT forests and clearing away burnt pines. Processes were also implemented to support ACT Public Service staff affected by the fire event.

Box 1

The Bushfire Recovery Taskforce has identified the following areas for improvement to the community recovery planning process:

- Develop procedures for maintaining up-to-date contact numbers for the Community Recovery Team.
- Expand the degree of participation of government agencies and key community groups in the preparation of the Community Recovery Sub-Plan.
- Review the Major Technical Systematic Failure Sub-Plan so as to include major technical systems providers.
- Investigate the co-location of response and recovery operations centres, including emergency power supplies, back-up telecommunications, access to the ACT government network, and appropriate accommodation.
- Develop processes for effective and regular liaison between disaster management agencies at the planning and activation stages.
- Review the Community Recovery Sub-Plan to more explicitly define the roles and responsibilities of participating agencies.
- Improve processes for issuing emergency financial assistance to victims.
- Improve the management of donations.
- Develop procedures for effectively managing public information, including public health and safety information, and appeal processes.
- Develop safety plans for the frail aged and people with disabilities.
- Adopt case management and community development models as best practice.
- Consider the need to establish dedicated management arrangements for planning for and coordinating community welfare recovery services to respond to emergencies in the ACT.

These activities were complemented by the community response, which was overwhelming: over 1000 volunteers registered through Volunteering ACT to help with the clean-up and rehabilitation of the environment, and the Bushfire Appeal, established at arm's length from government, raised some \$8.5 million.

Overall, the Inquiry considers that the response to the emergency—including the activation and implementation of the Community Recovery Sub-Plan and the wider recovery process—has worked extremely well. The public submissions generally reflected this view.

The Inquiry particularly considers that the successful early establishment of the evacuation centres illustrates the importance of well-developed, pre-planned, well-rehearsed emergency management procedures. The benefit of including community groups in the Community Recovery Sub-Plan was demonstrated in the valuable support they were able to provide.

Nevertheless, considering that this was the first time such procedures had actually been implemented, it is natural that there were some things that might have been done better.

Longer term recovery

The Government instituted special arrangements for coordinating and managing the longer term recovery process. While individual Ministers and agencies were responsible for particular aspects of the recovery, the Chief Minister took formal responsibility and provided a focus for whole-of-government coordination of the recovery effort and community participation. The ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, comprising ACT residents and government officials and chaired by Mr Sandy Hollway, was established on 24 January to advise government, provide leadership for the recovery, and act as a bridge between government agencies and the community. The Taskforce is supported by a high-level secretariat that coordinates and manages the wide range of recovery activities, both within government and across the community. The Taskforce Action Plan, released on 12 February, identifies six goals for recovery under the general themes of supporting people, community involvement, clean-up, rebuilding, learning lessons, and building a stronger future.

A Community and Expert Reference Group, which brought together community groups, fire-affected residents, unions, the business community and the Commonwealth, was established on 3 February as the main advisory body to the Taskforce, to ensure that the recovery strategy was informed by

community views and needs and by local knowledge and expertise. The Group has directly intervened and assisted in a number of areas as well as playing an important role in identifying and monitoring factors associated with community health and safety. It has also provided early warning of issues generally and been a channel for communication between the Taskforce, government and the community in responding to the concerns of urban and rural residents. It provides direct feedback to government, to assist in targeting and streamlining program delivery.

The longer term recovery effort is well under way. The task involves support for affected individuals and families and extensive rebuilding and restoration. Proposed expenditure of \$22.8 million in 2003–04 will build on the \$29.7 million spent in 2002–03 to meet initial needs in supporting people, community involvement, clean-up and rebuilding, and learning lessons and building a stronger future.

Among the programs identified in the 2003–04 Budget are continuing the Recovery Centre's operation, to provide a broad range of support services; business assistance grants; interest subsidies; additional resources for counselling; free school bus travel for students who have had to relocate; activities to ensure community participation in the recovery effort (including running a community firefighting units trial); and continued cleaning up and rebuilding.

In addition to recovery activities directly supported as government initiatives, over \$44 million from insurance cover will be invested in rebuilding and other replacement activity, excluding ACT forests. This will involve reinstating damaged and destroyed assets—including fire and ambulance stations, the public health facilities in Holder, bridges, public housing, playgrounds, depots, signage, observation towers, fencing, and replacement of vehicles and equipment. A further \$21 million of insurance cover will be used for clean-up, debris removal, and replacement of a depot and property in ACT forests.

It is estimated that the ACT will receive about \$17 million from the Commonwealth under the natural disaster relief arrangements. Among the areas where the Territory seeks assistance are costs incurred for personal hardship and distress relief; restoration or replacement of essential public assets; interest subsidy grants to small businesses; psychological counselling; and other acts of relief and restoration. Additional Commonwealth assistance is being made available to individuals through programs of agencies such as the Department of Community Services and Centrelink. The ACT has also asked the

Prime Minister to consider providing further assistance for the recovery and, in particular, for addressing the longer term impacts of the disaster. Four main areas of direct assistance have been sought—a tourism promotional package, a forest industry package, a ‘re-greening’ the ACT initiative, and an improved emergency communications system. To date the Commonwealth has agreed to provide \$0.5 million towards the tourism promotional package and \$1 million towards the forest industry package. It has also made a commitment to work with the Territory to develop proposals relating to other requests.

The ACT Government has announced two land use reviews in response to the fires. The Minister for Planning announced on 12 February a review of urban-edge land use. Coordinated by the ACT Planning Authority, the review is investigating the planning, design and management of the urban edge, including current urban-edge treatments, design standards, guidelines and management approaches. It will assess the bushfire risk to residential property and whether any areas should be considered for bushfire-prone designation. It will also examine future residential and other land use areas.



Repairing powerlines as part of the recovery process. Photo courtesy ACT Publishing Services.

The second review—of the non-urban areas of the ACT that were affected by the fires—was announced by the Chief Minister on 19 February. This study will be informed by the development of a new draft business plan by ACT Forests and a recreation study being developed by Environment ACT. The results of the review will contribute to the development of the Canberra Spatial Plan.

Conclusion

The Inquiry considers that the ACT authorities responded to the damage caused by the fires in a well-organised and effective fashion. The ACT administration was well prepared for the recovery operation, even though the Emergency Plan had not previously been exercised or tested in all of its elements. The wisdom of devoting time and effort to pre-planning and the development of procedures for dealing with significant potential emergencies, which can take many different forms, was amply demonstrated by the recent experience.

The Emergency Plan and those of its sub-plans that were activated served their purpose admirably. It is inevitable in times of major emergencies that not everything will work exactly as planned for, and some problems and difficulties did occur in the early hours and days of the recovery process. Overall, though, it is the judgment of the Inquiry that the ACT authorities responded extremely well in quickly restoring a sense of order and security to the ACT and the citizens whose lives were tragically affected by the bushfires.

The members of the ACT community, and its commercial and community-based organisations, also deserve acknowledgment for the generous and energetic way they responded to the crisis, assisted by an equally generous array of people from outside the Territory.

Forestry settlements: a situation where greater community engagement was needed

The Inquiry spoke to residents of various settlements that were virtually wiped out by the fires. Although they expressed general concerns about a lack of initial response, their major criticism concerned their sense of isolation and abandonment once the fires reached their settlements. Efforts were made by Police to advise residents to evacuate on the morning of 18 January, but this advice did not reach everyone. Furthermore, many residents chose not to take the advice, assuming that the firefighting resources at their settlements would be there when the fire front reached them.

Firefighting resources were withdrawn from forestry settlements before the arrival of the fire front—apparently with no warning and certainly with inadequate communication with locals. This left residents with the least appealing options of evacuating late or remaining to defend what they could, often with depleted water supplies and inadequate firefighting equipment. In one instance, the fire units were withdrawn from one settlement only a few kilometres away, much to the frustration of residents battling to save their homes and possessions. What this highlighted to the Inquiry was the need for these settlements to have received clear advice about what resources would be available to assist them and what plan was in place by the authorities. Redeployment of resources without advice being given to the residents of isolated settlements caused special concern.

People living in isolated communities or locations in the ACT away from the built-up area of Canberra do not expect the same level of responsiveness from the emergency services as those who live in the city. This is an accepted part of choosing to live away from the city where these services are generally concentrated. Equally, though, the authorities have a particular obligation to these citizens, especially if they live in a more bushfire exposed environment, when major fires break out. The experience of some of the forestry settlement residents suggests that there were some breakdowns in the level of support provided by the authorities and that is unfortunate. It is hoped that the recent experience will act as a stimulus for building closer relationships on both sides in the future.

These sentiments apply to all people living in rural parts of the ACT. The Inquiry detected a significant level of discontent between some of these members of the ACT community and the authorities, whom they regard as excessively city focused at times. It would be disappointing if this gulf were to continue. Rural dwellers add a richness to the Territory. Many have played an important

role in helping to protect Canberra from the ravages of bushfires due to the value their properties play in mitigating bushfires before they reach the city boundaries and through their past and present strong support of the volunteer-based Bushfire Service.

Recommendation

A sub-plan of the ACT Emergency Plan should be developed to assist with the design of special arrangements to cater for the needs of those ACT residents who live beyond the city bounds.



Burnt young pine forest clearly showing the direction of the fire storm. Photo printed with permission of the *Canberra Times*.