

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR
THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

TABLING STATEMENT

**Report of the Inquiry into the Operational Response to
the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT**

**delivered by
Jon Stanhope MLA
Chief Minister**

19 August 2003

Mr Speaker,

This afternoon I table the Report of the Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT, prepared by Mr Ron McLeod AM, and the Government's Response to that Report.

Mr Speaker, on the 18th of January this year, the ACT experienced the worst natural disaster in its history. Bushfires swept through the Territory and tragically caused the deaths of four people and injuries to many others, in some cases very serious injuries. It also inflicted a very heavy loss of private and public property. The event was of a scale ranking it as one of Australia's worst single-day natural disasters.

In February 2003, in recognition of the need to quickly understand the lessons of this terrible event, the Government commissioned an Inquiry into the preparation for, and operational response to, those bushfires by the ACT's emergency services organisations. The principal aims of the Inquiry were to ensure that the lessons of this devastating event were effectively learnt, and to identify improvements that would both minimise the risk of, and enhance the ACT's capacity to respond effectively to, events of this kind in the future.

The Inquiry, undertaken by the former Commonwealth Ombudsman, Mr Ron McLeod, provided its report to the Government on the 1st of August 2003. I publicly released the Report on the 4th of August 2003.

The Government has now considered Mr McLeod's Report and its recommendations in detail. The Government Response, which I also table today, provides details of the measures that are being taken to give effect to each recommendation, as well as a number of additional initiatives that the Government is taking to improve operational performance. This Government response is supported by a Supplementary Appropriation Bill which includes the necessary additional funding for the implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations and related initiatives.

As I have stated before, the McLeod Report is critical of many aspects of the operational response to the January bushfires. Equally, the Report acknowledges the personal commitment of the many people involved during the bushfire crisis and since then in the recovery phase.

As I said when I released the Report on 4 August, my Government is committed to implementing the 61 recommendations of the Report, as quickly as possible.

Both from studying the Report, and from its own observations, the Government has learnt many lessons from the experiences in January, and is continuing to take all the actions it can to ensure that these are fully understood and addressed. Mr McLeod's Report provides a particularly valuable contribution through its recording and assessment of these lessons and by articulating specific future directions and actions.

The Coronial Inquiry into the cause and origin of the January 2003 bushfires and the Inquests into the manner and cause of the four associated deaths will produce a separate report. The Government looks forward to the receipt of the Coroner's Report, and will then address any additional findings and recommendations at that time.

The actions that the Government is taking in response to Mr McLeod's Report, and the additional measures that the Government has committed to, can be grouped broadly into five key themes of: Fire Mitigation; Improved Emergency Response Capability; Communications and Public Information; Operational Procedures and Policy; and Organisational and Legislative Change. I will now outline the principal issues and government actions against each of these key themes.

Fire Mitigation

A range of fire mitigation activities will be undertaken prior to, and during, the 2003-04 bushfire season, with an additional \$1.684m being sought for that purpose in the Supplementary Appropriation, adding to the \$0.5m provided in the 2003-04 budget.

In particular, an extensive program of accelerated fuel reduction work is already underway, including physical fuel removal from certain suburbs and an extensive mowing program. Further extensive fuel reduction and access trail upgrades will be undertaken.

The Government will also be reviewing and revising a number of relevant policies and practices to address issues raised in the McLeod Report. Work relating to the identification and delineation of a Bushfire Abatement Zone has already commenced, and the recent release of the Non-Urban Land Study Shaping our Territory - Options and Opportunities for Non Urban ACT, together with the Urban Edge Review, will enable specific details around this zone to be considered by the Government and incorporated into the draft Spatial Plan.

Improved Emergency Response Capability

Both in response to the McLeod report and through separate initiatives, the Government has a number of programs in place to improve emergency response capabilities.

Initiatives to be completed before the start of the bushfire season include: the ACT's participation in the National Aerial Fire fighting Strategy; equipment including volunteer brigade command vehicles, fire fighting tools and heavier turnout coats; additional training in incident management systems; and the Community Fire Units pilot program. These measures total \$1.97m in 2003-04.

Initiatives targeted for completion during the bushfire season at a total cost of some \$3.7m include: engagement of additional personnel (including for command and control, bushfire risk assessment and additional seasonal staff to increase our ability to respond more quickly and extensively to fire outbreaks, particularly in remote areas); additional equipment such as light dozers; improved information systems; and additional access and familiarisation training for senior fire fighters.

Some major additional equipment items including four all terrain tankers, a replacement fire tanker to protect the Googong Foreshores and a forward casualty unit are expected to take longer to acquire due to their size or complexity. These major pieces of equipment represent a further investment of some \$1.755m.

Communications and Public Information

Particular attention is being paid to greatly improved community awareness programs and to emergency services communications equipment in the lead-up to the coming fire season.

In particular, bushfire awareness kits will be provided to all households before the start of the bushfire season and a broad range of other information channels and events will be used to ensure that the people of the ACT have a much greater awareness of bushfire season preparedness and the steps to take in the event of fire. Funding of over \$0.5m is being sought for this purpose

The proposed improvements to emergency service communication systems include improved radio reception in rough terrain, implementation of the Computer Aided Despatch system, and the proposed major upgrade of radio communications infrastructure.

Operational Procedures and Policy

Operational procedures and policies are also being addressed, through a clear and agreed approach by ACT Policing and Emergency Services, to the key question of fire safety and evacuation. Incident Command and Control procedures and the Rural Fire Control Manual are also being upgraded. A formal memorandum of understanding between the respective fire authorities of the Territory and NSW is also being developed as recommended by Mr McLeod.

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

Organisational and Legislative Change

The Government agrees with Mr McLeod that for a small jurisdiction such as the ACT it is vital that all relevant emergency service resources are effectively coordinated and deployed, especially when a major risk arises. Accordingly, the Government agrees that a new independent and better integrated and coordinated emergency services organisation should be created to provide the opportunity for greater, and more effective, operational capacity and capability.

The Government recognises the important and valuable contributions made by each of the existing services, and the detailed structure of the new authority will be developed in close consultation with all the existing professional and volunteer services.

But there are many other interest groups who can claim a legitimate right to be consulted as the detail of the new authority is settled. To name just some: representatives of the volunteers; the industrial representatives of the permanent workforce such as the United Firefighters' Union; the Bushfire Council.

There will be other individuals or organisations that may claim to be able speak on behalf of some of these groupings, and the Government is determined to be as inclusive as possible in this complex work. Consultative arrangements will need to be established with all the relevant groups.

Of course, Members of this place will have an important role in the establishment of the new authority, in whatever form it takes. Ms Tucker has already raised with me the notion of a round table discussion of possible models and ways forward, and the Government is not averse to such a suggestion.

But it has to be kept in mind that this is a complex issue. The McLeod Report itself intentionally does no more than outline a general concept. It may not be possible to satisfy the desires of everyone who has an interest, simply because of conflicting agendas or opposition to non-negotiable features. That said, the Government will make every effort to have our consultation processes accepted as genuine and effective.

A further complexity in developing a suitable model is the need to respond also to Mr McLeod's recommendations about legislative change. Some of the work in developing the model will depend, for example, on the outcome of reviews of the Bushfire Act, and the Emergency Management Act. Some elements will require sensitive negotiation with affected groups, for instance in deciding an appropriate command structure to sit over the two fire agencies. Inevitably that will take time to negotiate and develop properly. But hasty decision making can lead to flaws that will be difficult later to correct, and the Government will proceed with caution so that we can get it right.

This important task will be managed by the Chief Executives' Taskforce led by Mr Robert Tonkin, the Chief Executive of the Chief Minister's Department. The Taskforce will be supported by a small fulltime secretariat.

The Government believes that this process will ensure that the knowledge, skills and abilities of all services are preserved and enhanced, to ensure that the objectives that Mr McLeod has set out for the new Authority are achieved. The recommendations of the Taskforce and the outcomes of the consultative process will be referred to the Government for decision.

The Government has determined that a Commissioner will head the new authority. As recommended by the Inquiry, the Government has taken urgent action to scope, advertise, and fill the position on a contract basis as soon as possible, so that the new Commissioner may assist in the necessary relevant transitional processes and formulation of required legislation. The position was advertised on 16 August 2003 and will be filled as soon as possible.

The Government has set 1 July 2004 as a reasonable target for the commencement of the new authority, with its supporting legislation. A great deal of the required operational and cultural change can occur before this date.

Mr Speaker, the tabling of this Government Response to the McLeod Report signals yet another milestone on the road to recovery for the Canberra Community after the bushfires, and the continuation of the path to discover the possibilities of the opportunities that are before us. Our capacity to withstand serious emergencies in the future has been strengthened and we are now underpinning this capacity with more resources, training, communication, equipment and systems, and with initiatives designed to provide better and more effective services and protection to the community.

Obviously further consideration on the part of the Government is required to develop detailed implementation for some of the recommendations, the key one being the establishment of the new emergency services authority. The Government recognises that there are key stakeholders that will have legitimate and valuable views about the details and directions needed to establish such an entity. As stated earlier, close consultation with these stakeholders will occur to ensure these views are effectively considered. There is much at stake to ensure that all affected parties are involved, in the processes that move us toward the future of emergency service management in the ACT.

Finally I would once again like to thank Mr McLeod and his team for the tremendous effort involved in putting this report together. I would also like to thank the many people who, in an official, volunteer or private capacity, contributed to fighting the fires and dealing with their aftermath. There are many members of the community who have given their time freely, both prior to and during the January bushfires as well as having contributed to the recovery process since the fires.

I thank all those people. I would also like to thank all those people in the ACT Public Service that have worked so hard and professionally to ensure that those services that have been vital to provide to the people of the ACT in the wake of such a large emergency, have been provided in the most sensitive and efficient way.

The recovery process continues to be a massive task and I am proud of the way the community and the Government are working together to move forward.