

## Summary

On Saturday 18 January 2003 the bushfires, which had been burning in the hills to the west and south-west of Canberra for more than a week, reached the perimeter of the city. The result was widespread damage to rural properties, parks and forests, houses and urban infrastructure, estimated at approximately \$300 million. Tragically, four people died.

The ACT Government established this Inquiry to examine and report on the operational response to the bushfires.

The Inquiry is of the view that the fires, started by lightning strikes, might have been contained had they been attacked more aggressively in the 24 or so hours after they broke out. Nevertheless, the dryness of the vegetation after a prolonged, severe drought and the high volume of flammable fuel that had accumulated over time—coupled with weather conditions that were extremely conducive to fire—meant that once the fires gained a hold they proved extremely difficult to contain or suppress. Indeed, the fires on 18 January were accurately described as ‘unstoppable’.

Emergency service personnel performed creditably, but they were overwhelmed by the intensity of the fires and the unexpected speed of their advance on 18 January. By mid- to late-afternoon of that day, the situation on the south-western fringe of Canberra was grim. Four lives were lost, many injuries were sustained (including three people with severe burns), more than 500 homes were destroyed and many others were badly damaged, as were important items of infrastructure, including the historic Mount Stromlo observatory. Almost 70 per cent of the ACT’s pasture, forests and nature parks were severely damaged.

Any major emergency presents an opportunity to review the authorities’ preparedness and how they performed when put to the test. It is not surprising that post-mortems of this kind reveal weaknesses and shortcomings, and that is the case with this Inquiry. By identifying deficiencies or areas needing improvement, important lessons can be learnt for the future.

On the positive side, the Inquiry found no lack of commitment or endeavour on the part of the hundreds of people who, in an official, volunteer or private capacity, contributed to fighting the fires and dealing with their aftermath. In the course of the Inquiry many examples were cited of outstanding service by both emergency workers and private citizens.

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A good deal of emergency planning had been undertaken in recent years. A formal, comprehensive ACT Emergency Plan existed. All the government agencies involved in emergency management had been taking their responsibilities under the plan seriously and the Chief Executives of those agencies had been meeting regularly to review, improve and test the Plan. As a consequence, at the highest levels of government there was a good understanding of each agency's roles and of the mechanisms and special arrangements that needed to be activated.

The recovery section of the Plan worked exceedingly well in dealing with the large number of people who needed temporary shelter and assistance as a consequence of the fires.

On the negative side, inadequacies in the physical construction and layout of the Emergency Services Bureau centre in Curtin were a hindrance. The centre was unable to handle efficiently the large amount of data and communications traffic into and out of the centre at the height of the crisis. This affected the operational managers' ability to control and direct their assets on the ground and was a major source of difficulty in dealing with the hundreds of residents who were seeking support or advice.

It is the Inquiry's view that during the course of the fires the poor facilities and operational command arrangements at the Curtin centre appeared to result in an excessive focus on tactical decision making—at the expense, sometimes, of a broader strategic approach. The Government should take urgent steps to upgrade the Bureau's operational command and control facilities, either at Curtin or at a new location, to overcome the weaknesses exposed, and incident command arrangements need to be reviewed.

The organisational and institutional arrangements in the ACT for dealing with emergencies of all kinds—although in operation in their present form for only a relatively short period—worked reasonably well but were not optimal. Emergency service organisations were hampered by the legacies of some past decisions and by deficiencies in facilities at their disposal. The Inquiry makes a number of recommendations with a view to rectifying these shortcomings.

Deficiencies in the provision of information and advice to the community were a major source of criticism put to the Inquiry. In contrast with the steps taken the following weekend—when the community was placed on very high alert—on 18 January, and before, the provision of information about the progress of

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the fires, the seriousness of the threat and the preparations the public should be making was seriously inadequate.

At a general level, the Canberra community had not been sufficiently well prepared to understand the nature of the bushfire risk that exists as a consequence of the siting of the city in a bushland setting.

A major program of community education is called for to redress this situation and to help residents understand how they can better protect themselves and their property from bushfire damage in the future. Canberra is—and always will be—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.

One particular aspect of information provision that attracted much adverse comment, both immediately after the fires and during the Inquiry, was the apparent inconsistency in the advice being given by the Police to evacuate at certain stages during 18 January while the Emergency Services Bureau was advising residents to stay with their homes if they felt confident in doing so.

Many instances were also cited of differences between the Police and local residents who wished to stay or return to protect their homes. This difference of view has been debated by police and firefighters around Australia for many years and has generally been resolved by the development of agreed protocols. The problem needs to be dealt with—outside the circumstances of a major crisis, since that is not the time to be dealing with what is essentially a divergence in philosophical and practical approaches.

The level of government funding provided over time to the emergency services in the ACT appears to be generally consistent with that provided elsewhere in Australia. The Inquiry considered, however, that a more detailed examination was necessary to be fully satisfied on this point.

Apart from the city of Canberra and its immediate surrounds, the ACT covers a sizeable geographic area, most of it publicly managed land that, in the main, is economically unproductive. It is difficult, bushfire-prone country, although, as part of the alpine ranges, it has high value as a scenic asset and is an important part of the national estate. The question of whether the full cost of land management associated with this wilderness area, the conservation of the biodiversity it contains and the protection of the national capital from the inherent bushfire risk should, or can, continue to be fully borne by the relatively small ACT population base should be re-examined.

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The Inquiry found some equipment and resourcing deficiencies within the ACT's emergency service organisations. Some are already being addressed; others are in need of attention. The Inquiry hopes that these shortcomings can be fully rectified soon.

A primary concern for many ACT residents who participated in the Inquiry was the quantity of fuel that had been allowed to accumulate in the publicly managed parks and forests. Fuel management practices have been a source of much debate and controversy in recent years, and the experience of south-eastern Australia during the summer of 2002–03 has given new life to the debate.

It is the view of the Inquiry that controlled burning is the only broad-scale practicable means of reducing the build-up of fuel loads in the extensive parks and forests in the ACT. The practice provides no guarantee that bushfires will be prevented, but when they do occur their intensity will not be so fierce and they will be more amenable to early containment or extinguishment. Controlled burning requires experience, a suitable mix of personnel and equipment, a properly planned and carefully managed approach, and an understanding of and sensitivity to the potential for damage to natural ecosystems. The Inquiry recommends that, as a part of a revised fuel management regime for the ACT, there be greater emphasis on controlled burning. To support this program there needs to be an adequate level of funding.

A more streamlined approval process is also recommended so that the authorities are able to take better advantage of the small window of opportunity the weather provides each year to undertake safe controlled burning operations.

The Inquiry further recommends that the public land managers in charge of forests and parks in the ACT shoulder more responsibility by being given a more active role in fire mitigation on the lands entrusted to them. One way of achieving this is for the forest and parks brigades to be given primary responsibility for the initial response to bushfires that break out in the lands they manage.

To enhance their capacity to take on this role, it is recommended that they engage some additional seasonal workers to assist with fire-mitigation and suppression tasks over the summer. In this way a larger pool of employed personnel with an understanding and knowledge of the forests and parks would be available to be deployed more quickly and effectively than is the case at the moment. These workers would form the nucleus of a small but highly mobile quick-reaction capability to improve the responsiveness in reacting to bushfires when they have just broken out.

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In addition, both the forests and parks authorities should have dedicated access during the bushfire season to a small number of light graders and bulldozers, capable of speedy transport to fire sites. This equipment could be strategically placed to assist rapid deployment.

Greater attention to the maintenance of a network of strategically placed access tracks and fire trails will aid future fire-suppression efforts. During the fires too much effort was expended in reopening and regrading overgrown access tracks, which detracted from the firefighting effort.

Some increase in resourcing to deal with fires more aggressively and more quickly would be money well spent as it is likely in the long run to be the most effective method of suppressing fires in a way that minimises the risks to firefighters and the public and reduces the prospects of damage to the natural environment and to property.

The support of the Commonwealth and New South Wales Governments throughout the crisis was considerable. The Queensland Government also assisted generously. The formal ACT–Commonwealth arrangements for emergency relief, which are well established, worked very smoothly and quickly. The relationship with NSW also worked well, but it is reliant on informal contacts and the general bonding and spirit of cooperation that has grown up over time between adjoining fire fighting organisations. These informal arrangements need to be formalised to provide greater certainty and clarity in the future.

Negotiations between the Emergency Services Bureau and the NSW Rural Fire Service have already begun, with the purpose of developing a memorandum of understanding. The talks should be based on the need to strengthen coordination and planning of the firefighting efforts of both organisations when there is the potential for fires to cross jurisdictional boundaries, so as to facilitate a more unified, strategic approach. An agreement at government-to-government level would also be of value.

The Inquiry also recommends some legislative changes. The ACT *Emergency Management Act 1999* was thoroughly tested and is basically sound, but some changes to provide government with greater flexibility in the manner of its future implementation would be useful. The ACT *Bushfire Act 1936* is well out of date and should be completely revised to reflect current circumstances and needs.

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The January 2003 bushfires highlighted the difficulty a small jurisdiction such as the ACT faces in attempting to deal with a crisis of this magnitude, notwithstanding the support that can be drawn from other states and the Commonwealth. It is in the ACT's interest to continue to be fully involved in national reviews and initiatives aimed at strengthening Australia's capacity to respond to very serious emergency events, some of which will occasionally occur within the ACT. Initiatives currently under consideration or review, including the future use of aerial assets, are referred to in the report. A necessary condition of external support is that the state or territory involved has made full use of its own resources.

The Inquiry found in the structure of the ACT's emergency service arrangements inefficiencies that frustrated emergency workers and volunteers in their efforts to make their contribution as effective as possible. Taking into account the ACT's size, the Inquiry considers it would be more efficient if all the ACT emergency services, their assets and their personnel (with their considerable skills), were maintained and managed within a single, larger operational body specifically set up outside the framework of the ACT Public Service. This would bring the various emergency service bodies closer together and would facilitate more flexible use of equipment and personnel, to better meet changing circumstances and a variety of different types of emergencies.

The proposed new body—the ACT Emergency Services Authority—would need its own legislation and its own management and governance arrangements, and it would report directly to the ACT Government through the relevant Minister. A move in this direction would be consistent with the trend elsewhere in Australia towards greater integration between the different emergency service bodies and a stronger 'all hazards' approach to emergency management. The proposed ACT authority would replace the existing Emergency Services Bureau.

Finally, the Inquiry's report emphasises that protecting the ACT community from bushfires is not just the responsibility of the ACT Government. It is a shared responsibility. As elsewhere in Australia, when confronted by a large-scale bushfire emergency of the type experienced in January, ACT citizens need to understand that the authorities cannot guarantee that in all instances emergency workers will immediately be on hand to assist. People can protect their own interests by keeping themselves well informed about bushfire risks and how to deal with the occasional bushfire incursions within the city boundaries, with the assistance and support of the authorities. A much stronger emphasis on working with the community in building together a

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much more robust set of prevention and mitigation strategies and practices is strongly recommended, whereas to date the priority has mainly been given to building up the ACT's suppression capacity.

It is inevitable that serious bushfires will occur in the ACT from time to time. They are not one-in-100-year events.

The public can also help by supporting greater levels of community protection as a result of government initiatives or community-based self-help schemes. The states that have more experience in dealing with serious bushfires have strong mutual-support programs involving government and the community working closely together in bushfire prevention. The report suggests some similar approaches for the ACT.

In all the Inquiry makes 61 recommendations, and I commend them to government for consideration. A number of the recommendations entail additional expenditure. The aim is to prepare and sustain the ACT authorities and the community for dealing more effectively with bushfire emergencies in the future. In formulating them, I have been mindful of the financial demands continually made of government across a broad range of activities.

The ACT Government is already committed to considerable expenditure directly arising from the restoration of services and the replacement of infrastructure destroyed or damaged in the fires. Expenditure on improving the capacity of emergency service organisations is an investment in the future: if it is undertaken wisely, it will help reduce future expenditure related to bushfire damage—some of which, with prudent planning, is avoidable.





Inquiry team at Bendora with ESB personnel. Photo courtesy ESB.