

## 7 Summary of recommendations

### Fuel management

1. The ACT Bushfire Fuel Management Plan should be reviewed in the light of changed circumstances since the January 2003 fires. Increased emphasis should be given to controlled burning as a fuel-reduction strategy.
2. The Victorian Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land should be used as a 'best-practice' guide when revising the ACT Bushfire Fuel Management Plan and a similar set of priorities should be developed in relation to zones identified in the Plan.
3. An addendum to the existing 2002–04 Bushfire Fuel Management Plan needs to be prepared prior to the 2003–04 bushfire season, noting the extensive consultation process required under the *Bushfire Act 1936*. This addendum should focus on the area unaffected by the 2003 fires and the buffer zone surrounding Canberra's exposed northern and western perimeter. The addendum should be submitted to government for approval.
4. An annual audit of achievements under the Bushfire Fuel Management Plan should be conducted, with the results reported to government and published.
5. A public information strategy should be prepared to educate the ACT community about the beneficial and protective aspects of fuel-reduction burning and about the degree of inconvenience that will inevitably result for ACT residents during such burning. This should accompany the public launch of the revised Bushfire Fuel Management Plan.
6. The approval process for individual fuel-reduction burns that are consistent with the government-approved Bushfire Fuel Management Plan should be simplified so as to enable the limited time when the weather conditions are right to be used to maximum advantage.

### Fire access

7. Clear policy guidelines should be developed and implemented to support the identification of a strategic network of fire tracks and trails and their establishment and maintenance. An audit process should be instituted to ensure that the policy's effectiveness is regularly monitored.
8. A risk assessment should be conducted by ESB to assist in determining access needs across the ACT, linked to interstate requirements, with advice being provided to land managers.

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9. ESB should coordinate the development of emergency management mapping products such as 'map books' for police, land managers, emergency service crews and incident management teams; these should be produced in both printed and data form.
  10. Greater opportunity should be provided for all senior firefighters to become more familiar with remote areas of the ACT.
  11. Sufficient funding should be provided for additional crews and plant, so that a program of improved fire access and trail and site maintenance can be implemented.
  12. Responsibility for fire access should lie with the land managers: advice and auditing functions should be the province of the fire authorities.

### Aerial operations

13. Aerial bombing should remain a capability used in the ACT during bushfires, with particular emphasis on using the aircraft for water bombing as an immediate response—as soon as fires are detected. This should be backed up by the use of ground crews.
14. A small number of ACT firefighters should be trained as air attack supervisors, to provide a capability when the number of aircraft involved requires it.
15. To enhance its initial attack capability as well as to provide it with greater flexibility in the utilisation of aerial assets, the ACT should employ a medium-lift helicopter, rather than a dedicated light helicopter, to support its fire-suppression operations during the peak of future bushfire seasons. Such an aircraft, coupled with the potential use of the Snowy Hydro Southcare helicopter (when it is not engaged for medivac purposes), would provide greater flexibility and a far more formidable first-strike capability.
16. The ACT Bushfire Service should seek a joint agreement with the NSW Rural Fire Service, for the purpose of providing the ACT with enhanced capacity to draw on the aerial expertise, aircraft availability and efficiencies afforded by a much larger bushfire service.
17. The ACT Bushfire Service should explore conducting a joint trial with the NSW Rural Fire Service to assess the effectiveness of retardant bombing.
18. The ACT should continue to participate in Commonwealth-level discussions

that may result in enhanced aerial support for firefighting becoming available on a national basis in the future.

### The Emergency Service Bureau headquarters facility

19. The ACT Government should take urgent steps to upgrade the Emergency Services Bureau's operational command and control facilities—either by carrying out a major refurbishment of the existing facility at Curtin or, preferably, by locating to a more suitable alternative site, where a more functional, longer term operations centre can be developed.

### Incident command and control

20. The ACT Bushfire Service should review the current Incident Control System arrangements, through an inter-agency workshop involving ESB, the ACT Fire Brigade, the Department of Urban Services and ACT Policing, to better clarify the application of the system. In particular, incident controllers should not be expected to operate when separated from their supporting elements; they should function as part of a cohesive, integrated management team.
21. ESB should establish joint ICS teams, made up of ACT Bushfire Service, ACT Fire Brigade and Department of Urban Services personnel, to jointly manage emergency incidents within the ACT, regardless of location or the services' areas of responsibility.
22. Facilities at ESB headquarters should be such as to provide the best opportunity for the ICS to function at a tactical and strategic level in accordance with the Australasian Fire Authorities Council doctrine.

### Vehicles and other equipment

23. Four rural pumpers should be added to the fire service fleet, specifically for use in the urban–rural interface.

### The Rural Fire Control Manual

24. Work already begun on the review of the *Rural Fire Control Manual* should be resumed with the view to replacing the manual by new publications that cover the following:
  - a document detailing public policy in relation to fire management
  - an operational policy manual for internal use
  - a supporting set of standing operational procedures covering techniques and practices reflected in the Basic Training Modules publications.

## Training and development

25. In conjunction with the land management agencies, ESB should undertake a review of training and development needs for personnel involved in firefighting activities and develop a detailed future plan, identifying any additional funds required to support such a program. The plan should be submitted to government for consideration as soon as possible. It should take account of the comments and recommendations in this report that bear on training and development, including the need for secondments interstate with other fire authorities.
26. The Government should consider the proposals when they are submitted with the view to allocating some additional funding to enable the bushfire authorities to improve the training and professional development opportunities available to paid and volunteer personnel, in the interests of increasing their skill base and experience.
27. An outdoor training complex for all of the emergency service organisations should be provided; ESB should develop a detailed proposal for submission to government for consideration.

## Occupational health and safety

28. A procedure should be adopted whereby important operational decisions affecting the safety of firefighters are discussed with a more senior officer before implementation, whenever this approach is feasible.
29. The responsible Minister should clarify the application of the ACT *Occupational Health and Safety Act 1989* to volunteers by issuing a ministerial directive.
30. Upon the Minister's directive coming into force, a legislative amendment should be made to continue the application of the protections against prosecution afforded under the *Bushfire Act 1936*.

## Relationship between the fire management and land management agencies

31. The Chief Executives of the Department of Urban Services and the Department of Justice and Community Safety should work together to develop the means by which the public land managers and the ACT Bushfire Service can achieve a stronger, mutually supportive relationship.

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32. Operational procedures should be amended once additional land management resources are in place, to reflect the responsibility of land managers to initiate the first response to fires on land that they manage—within the overall operational response of the ACT Bushfire Service.

### Commonwealth and interstate contributions

33. An automatic weather station should be located in the Brindabella Range to assist with fire weather forecasting.

### Scaling-up

34. The current discussions aimed at developing a possible memorandum of understanding between the ACT Bushfire Service and the NSW Rural Fire Service should proceed as a matter of urgency.
35. The ACT should initiate discussions with New South Wales authorities in relation to ways in which the current relationships could be developed at a regional level, with the aim of strengthening the linkages between kindred agencies and identifying how the resources available in the ACT and the surrounding regions could be more easily mobilised in serious emergency situations—to the advantage of both jurisdictions.
36. The level of resources for the training and operational exercising of volunteer bushfire and emergency service personnel should be increased, to improve current skill and experience levels.
37. Environment ACT and ACT Forests should employ additional summer personnel as firefighters and fire prevention workers to improve the ACT's firefighting capability, particularly in terms of rapid deployment to fires in remote areas.
38. These staff should provide land management agencies with a capability to be first responders to fires on land they manage.

### Public education

39. 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.

40. Initiatives such as fire guard and other forms of direct community support should be introduced to encourage self-help arrangements in the community.

41. 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

42. The Media Sub-Plan of the ACT Emergency Plan should be reviewed to include a greater focus on the provision of community information.

43. 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.

44. Media communications systems and facilities at ESB headquarters should be improved.

45. There should be greater coordination of the content of whole-of-government media releases and messages.

46. Back-up power should be available for the Canberra Connect call centre.

47. The Community Information Sub-Plan of the ACT Emergency Plan should be reviewed to reflect needs broader than just media arrangements.

48. 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.

49. Before each bushfire season familiarisation briefing sessions should be held for the media.

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50. 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?

51. 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.

### Forestry settlements

52. 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 ACT residents who live beyond the city bounds.

### A more unified and independent emergency services organisation

53. The separate organisations that make up the emergency services group that is coordinated by the Emergency Services Bureau, and the associated arrangements, should be replaced by a statutory authority, the ACT Emergency Services Authority.
54. The proposed authority should be headed by a Chief Executive Officer.
55. The position of Chief Executive Officer should be advertised and filled on a contract basis before the enactment of the legislation. In this way the person appointed can contribute to formulating the legislation and the transition process can begin without delay.
56. Upon the abolition of the Emergency Services Bureau, a small policy formulation unit should be established in the department that supports the Minister responsible for emergency management.

## The Emergency Management Act

57. The ACT's *Emergency Management Act 1999* should be reviewed with the aim of preparing legislation that provides as follows:

- In a declared state of emergency, the ACT Government should have the capacity to appoint as Territory Controller a person who is considered to be best qualified to take this role, having regard to the nature of the emergency or event giving rise to the declaration.
- The Controller shall have the capacity to delegate to a nominated person any or all of the powers that have been assigned under the instrument of appointment as Controller.
- The chair of the Emergency Management Committee shall be appointed by the Minister responsible for the administration of the Emergency Management Act.
- There should be a capacity for different levels of special powers and the capacity for escalation to be invoked to assist in the management of emergencies, having regard to the differing scales or types of emergencies that may arise or the changing nature of an emergency during its course.

## The Bushfire Act and other legislation

58. The *Bushfire Act 1936* should be reviewed and redesigned to reflect contemporary needs, and the ACT Bush Fire Council's role should be re-expressed in the Act to more accurately describe its current activity.

## Bushfires and land planning

59. A fire-abatement zone should be defined between the north-west and western perimeter of Canberra and the Murrumbidgee River and the foothills of the Brindabella Range.

60. A set of Bushfire Protection Planning Principles in relation to fire mitigation and suppression should be adopted and applied to future developments in the designated abatement zone.

61. The abatement zone should be declared a bushfire-prone area, and the requirements of the Building Code of Australia—in particular, its standards for bushfire-prone areas—should be applied to all future developments in the zone.