

ACT SUSTAINABLE RURAL LANDS GROUP INC

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CORONERS INQUEST INTO CANBERRA 2003 FIRES

SUBMISSION BY WAY OF ORAL COMMENT

ACTSRLG members are rural landholders and our focus is on the grasslands we hold. We have a collective long term district knowledge and historical perspective.

Whilst there has been a large volume of information provided to the inquiry it is impossible for all information to be made available.

Our members landholdings stretch North South from the southern boundaries of Belconnen to the Murrumbidgee River west of Kambah Pool. With the exception of the Stromlo forest the fires traversed our members lands on their way to the Canberra urban area. We have heard the descriptions of the fires progress put to the inquiry. We do not agree 100% with the details. With the exception of the progress of the fires on the northern boundary we do not wish to be concerned with the other areas. In relation to the northern boundary we observed a separate fire along the Molonglo Corridor after the main front hit Stromlo/Duffy. Containment of that fire was possible because of the grazing practices on farm land in the northern part of the valley and without that fuel reduction the fire would have burnt into the Belconnen Urban Area with the southerly wind change. It was also significant to that fire's containment that the Christmas 2001 fires (ie an involuntary burnoff) had occurred as the 2003 fires would have been much more intense and very likely would have reached Black Mountain and the Urban Areas beyond. In relation to the shape and extent of the northern boundary our understanding is that a relatively few rural landholders and friends played a critical role in limiting that fire. We would like these contributions to be recognised.

In relation to the grasslands per se we note the comment by Mr Cheney early in the inquiry that in his view the grasslands to the west of Canberra reduced the intensity of the fire as it travelled towards the urban area. He also noted that it might not have felt like it at the time. That is also our observation and we ask that this point and this aspect of future land management options be recognised in the coroners report.

Our members have argued for some time that the pattern of land usage to the west of Canberra and west of the Murrumbidgee ought be a mosaic of grassland and forest such as to enable better fire control and fuel reduction practices. We see no reason why some of the forested land to the west could not be returned to grasslands as it was at an earlier time. This would add to the ACT asset stock (properly managed grassland areas for instance in small holdings will be a higher asset value that forest and support higher economic function) provide increased income to the ACT budget, structurally improve the fire risk pattern in the highest risk fire source area and provide a sound financial basis for increasing rather than reducing fire management resources in the area. We ask also that you include this point in the Coroners report.

Our members are very concerned about the proposed Bushfire Abatement Zone. It is technically questionable, will provide a mirage of protection to urban and other dwellers, and, critically, that

its existence will be used bureaucratically to limit the extent of the overall bushfire mitigation actions that are necessary in this fire prone area. Almost that entire area of the BAZ is uphill – once a fire is in that type of country every 10% of slope (up to around 30%) doubles the speed of the fire. The logic is that if we are seeking protection from an approaching fire from the west we ought be more alert when the fire is travelling downhill and so seeking to extinguish it on the west of the river and making sure that any spot fires are contained in the area to the east of the river. The BAZ objective is really most economically managed in terms of the area burned, assets destroyed and environment obliterated by dealing with the lands to the west – reducing fuel loads and putting out fires as soon as they light during high risk periods.

Of particular concern is that the majority of the land West of the river is government land. It generates very little direct income. The reality is that parks don't pay cash – the economic rationale relies on parks being a public good.. In budgetary terms this means that there is no income against which to offset the cost of ongoing fire mitigation services. There are always budgetary pressures and we can see already that what was set in stone less than 3 years ago, the ESA, has been offered up as a budgetary saving. Responsibility for management of public land in the ACT is confusing and the loss of the independence of the ESA means that no real accountability exists for the fire risk outcome of management practices in ACT government managed lands.

In 1994 Howard Mc Beth said that it was not a matter of if but when a major fire again strikes Canberra. This is a maxim that needs to be imprinted in the ACT psyche so that such an event does not become a disaster such as we witnessed in 2003 and which brought so much heartache and debilitation to people who had been told, they and their representatives in the LA were reassured on a number of occasions, and so, rightly, believed that they were being protected. Clearly they were not.

The warnings were there – experienced older people (Bill Flint, Val Jeffries to mention just two) publicly asked responsible officials in the years leading up to 2003 including Ministers of the ACT to take action to avert the risk.. How do we incorporate wisdom into our equations of risk management in environmental matters.? The managers of the ACT seem unable to deal with this and seem to have little regard to these warnings. The ACT is a small jurisdiction - we will benefit in costs from the managers being more open to outside advice and at times criticism. If you assess the skills and knowledge available in the ACT community it is hard to believe the outcome of 3 years ago. Representatives of our group were at a meeting with senior officials (including the Director of Forests) in Macarthur House at 3pm on 8 January 2003 (as a result of representations we had made concerning excessive fuel loads in ACT Forests) when the first of the fires was called in on a cell phone. One of our older members familiar with the local area and fires in the region over the last 60 years made the comment to the officials “I would not like to be living on Eucumbene Drive”. Clearly nothing was done in response to that comment. Why not? Therein is the real risk to the ACT.

Make no mistake the so-called red steer will return – it is just hiding in the bush waiting for the right time to jump out. It must be planned for and managed on an ongoing basis.

We thank you for conducting this Inquiry in the manner you have.

John Lowe
President
ACT Sustainable Rural Lands Group.