

Appendix 5.

IGEM REVIEWS AND FIRE ATTACK

IGEM is again reviewing fire performance and it is prudent to reflect on previous similar reviews that have pointed out deficiencies that have clearly not been addressed in the intervening years. Are we again going through the same process of review with no tangible outcome for the better, or will this inquiry be different this time (Hard to imagine when not even a Royal Commission can be fully implemented on some key aspects)?

We will consider, in some detail, IGEM's previous work – particularly in 2014 to highlight the problem.

Initial Attack/Utilisation of Responses - extracts from IGEM's 2013-14 Fire Season Compliance Report – Section 3.3, pages 33-39 of 105.

While many policies and procedures are laid down on paper there is an over concentration on process rather than delivery. The constant reference that these matters will be addressed in 2014-2015 pre-season briefings points to deficiencies in training programs and, particularly, practical experience.

Operational reviews by IGEM have from 2014 have repeatedly raised concerns that clearly have not been addressed by Government agencies and have emerged, yet again, as problems in 2019/20 despite earlier assurances they would be rectified.

To reiterate:

Key issues outlined in the 2013-14 East Gippsland community reports

There was a lack of an integrated initial attack, due to resource constraints as a result of significant fire activity across the state.

Local knowledge was not used to inform the initial attack.

Inefficient utilisation of resources.

Key issues outlined in the Post Season Operations Review

Different initial firefighting strategies and tactics (immediate aggressive direct attack compared to indirect attack).

Understanding of each agency's expectations and needs and how they may impact on response outside their respective areas of responsibility.

Understanding of and application of pre-determined arrangements that are necessary when working across the various agency boundaries.

Individual personnel knowledge and experience.

Local relationships between agency personnel.

Differing agency doctrine in relation to where the Incident Controller is located.

Without trying to “reinvent the wheel” nor to dismantle the interagency model of AIIMS (which is vital in dealing with large scale interagency disasters) there needs to be some clear operational lines of responsibility reinforced if fires are to be kept small.

Local (Level 1 and 2) fires must still be managed locally as they always were, when they occur outside severe weather conditions. Remoteness of a fire, or a number of simultaneous small fires, should not be a reason for moving to central control. Within the Country Area, the CFA should, and mostly do, respond quickly on a local basis to fires that are managed with local accredited staff – volunteers or career firefighters. New arrangements for Fire Rescue may change this. Fires within the Fire Protected Area must likewise be managed by local accredited staff (the Fire Boss who takes the role of a Level 1 or Level 2 Controller) who calls in extra resources

as required. These fires should not be subsumed by central control and EMV should have no direct role to play. FFM Vic, as delegated by The Secretary DELWP under the *Forests Act* as of 1962, must discharge the responsibilities legislated in the *Forests Act* 1958.

The issues arise with the decision making on severe fire weather days, when the ICC's are all set up in advance of fire outbreaks or when the number of incidents increases. This is where there an overconcentration on process occurs, and the State control centre makes decisions about resource allocation and tactics. This is where issues like de-prioritising fires in remote country on a "risk to assets" basis happens, and fire strategies are developed without key local inputs. This "risk to assets" approach ignores the potential for remote fires, particularly in areas of high fuel load, to build up to such a size and ferocity, that they become unstoppable and the "assets" that were being concentrated on are undefendable.

But perhaps the problem also relates to the resources available. Volunteers numbers (VN) in the CFA have been declining for years. At the time of the "Ash Wednesday" fires in 1983, VN were quoted at around 100,000. In 1998/99 the total VN was 65992 and this had dropped to a reported 59136 by 2003.(CFA Annual Reports) Recent reports (CFA at a glance website) list VN total as 53424 and operational 33093 as at 1/04/20 and anecdotal evidence now estimates that, with the formation of the new Fire Rescue split with career firefighters and volunteers being treated differently, VN numbers are expected to decline further. P Hunt (Weekly Times 14/11/18) shows a 9% decline in operational VN in the 4 years 2014 to 2018, and outlines many of the reasons for this. These include volunteers being treated with disrespect and being underutilised as some of the factors.

Likewise, the number of skilled forest workers has steadily reduced over the years – a combination of a reduction in full time forest workers employed directly by DELWP and National Parks service and a drastic reduction in native forest logging.

Staff numbers accredited and available for fireground duties in DELWP, appear to total some 1700 out of a total workforce of around 3500 (True Cost Doc) and this is similar to FCV staffing levels available in 1983 of 1660 (TCD) but there is some doubt over the availability of the DELWP staff for active fireground work. It is true that DELWP now employs over 600 project firefighters each summer, but this was also the case in earlier years (FCV, 610 in 1983), and they do not make up for the great loss of skills and knowledge previously available and reduced workforce under AWU award.

The logging industry had a significant work force in the forests highly skilled in forest work including bushfire fighting, plus a fleet of heavy bulldozers equipped for forest work strategically located throughout the forest. Their local knowledge of the country and access routes was also highly valued. This has now dwindled to the point where some areas have none of these people or machines now working in the area.

Statistics from a comparison of the fires in January 1985 and January 2003 (True Cost Doc) list the number of bulldozers used on the fires in those years. In 1985 there were 75, and only 61 in 2003.

Recorded numbers of machines available over the years are not well quantified, but the numbers above indicate a reduction during that period which has no doubt widened in the intervening years.

So, when attack on growing fires is considered by ICCs, the resources that they may want may not be available. During the recent fires when radio warnings were frequently broadcast to rural communities, the advice to leave was often prefaced by the announcement that there may not be fire fighters available to deal with your situation and you should leave. This emphasises the point that resources these days are limited.

So, what is the solution?

The first element that must be enacted is that priority is given to rapid and aggressive first attack on ALL FIRES. If, due to multiple fires starting almost simultaneously (say with a dry lightning storm), and ground resources are limited, then the massive aerial resources now available must be used judiciously to buy time for ground crews to get to the fire. There is no substitute for ground attack on a fire where fuel and fire are separated. Aerial attack is particularly useful to dampen fire behaviour but it generally does not have a lasting effect and only temporarily breaks the "fire triangle". A single line of command from accredited local staff, backed up by

the resources now available through the AIMS system, will always prove to be the most effective way to attack fires in the initial stages. Complicated process must not be allowed to get in the way of this approach and whilst the current priorities are important (led by the primacy of saving life) the first priority must always be to put the fire out as soon as possible. Currently, this does not feature in the first 5 published priorities, but if successful first attack is delivered, all other priorities are automatically achieved.

The second element must be to increase the number of skilled, trained and suitably equipped people who work in and around the forest and the Country Area (for CFA firefighters) on a year-round basis. The supplement of Project Firefighters for the summer period has, and always will be, a most important resource to bolster capacity during the fire season, but this approach does not provide the continuity that a skilled, year-round workforce provides. Clearly the decline in native forest logging is a major factor that can only be reversed by the expansion of multiple use management of forests rather than a policy that looks only at passive “preservation”.

A program that reverses the decline in operational CFA members must also be instituted or the fragmentation of rural firefighting skills in rural areas will be a millstone around the neck of the community for a long time to come. The concept of Fire Rescue for areas where the rural/urban interface has extended over many years will possibly work there, but it will not work in the remote and rural settings where committed volunteers with local knowledge and connections are the backbone of rural fire control.

The third element is a broadscale fuel reduction program that prevents the long term build up of fuel levels in the forested areas, including National Parks.

Remote fires, in particular, must not be given the free run through heavy fuel loads even in the initial stages of a fire, or they quickly become uncontrollable and become mega fires that threaten assets that may appear well protected by local fire prevention work.

There has been much criticism of large scale burning in “remote” areas as just “making up area numbers to meet targets” but strategically these fuel reduction programs must be an integral part of an overall fire prevention strategy. The concept of accepting a 70% risk reduction target promulgated in the Safer Together policy is seen as seriously flawed by many highly experienced fire experts across the country and this must be reviewed and a more strategic planning approach which includes at least the 5% minimum target recommended by the 2009 Black Saturday Royal Commission reinstated. There is something seriously wrong when the overhead costs of fuel reduction vastly exceed the operational costs (DELWP Annual Reports) indicating that process is more important than target achievement, and this must also be reviewed and rectified.