

Media Statement on the release of the Coroner's Report on the January 2003 Canberra Fires: December 2006

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As the Executive Director of the Emergency Services Bureau (ESB) during the destructive fires of January 2003 I want to take this opportunity to once again express my sincere sadness at the tragic loss of four lives, the injuries people suffered and the devastating impact of the property loss that occurred as a result of these fires.

I have not had the opportunity to analyse this final report. However, I would like to make the following observations:

- It is easy to be blinded by the wisdom of hindsight when hearings such as this are conducted. Decisions relating to these fires were made in good faith by many very experienced personnel based on their professional assessment of what was known at the time, not on what ultimately occurred.
- The personnel at ESB worked tirelessly throughout the fire emergency using their expertise and professionalism in attempting to protect the community. This emergency ran some 26 days from 8 January 2003 to 2 February 2003, even though this inquiry was limited to the period ending 18 January 2003.
- The nature, ferocity, speed of spread and extent of the impact of the firestorm on the 18th of January 2003 was not predicted by highly experienced fire behaviour and bushfire fighting experts, and, as such, the significant efforts of the ESB emergency agencies and NSWRFs were overwhelmed.
- In my view all of the persons involved in some way in responding to this 2003 emergency, be they volunteer bushfire fighters, departmental bushfire fighters, fire brigade members, ambulance officers, emergency service volunteers, pilots and aircrew, AFP officers, ESB staff, Canberra Connect staff, media liaison officers, personnel from federal and interstate agencies, members of the Australian Defence Force, many volunteers from community organisations and some as purely spontaneous volunteers, recovery workers and many other departmental and agency staff – all worked relentlessly, some for the full 26 days straight, over very long hours, in extremely dangerous, difficult and harrowing conditions for the benefit of the Canberra community – both urban and rural.
- It should be remembered the McIntyre's Hut fire was the fire that ultimately burnt into Canberra on the afternoon of 18 January 2003. That fire was at all times being managed by the NSW authorities, who, when it commenced its fateful run after 1pm on 18 January 2003 courageously continued their efforts to halt its progress.
- Prior to 18 January had the view of the many highly experienced fire behaviour and bushfire fighting experts in ESB been that the fire might actually impact on suburban Canberra then advice to the residents would have reflected that.

It is true that ESB did not fully appreciate the risk that this fire presented to urban Canberra until it was too late – but the evidence clearly establishes – neither did the NSW authorities. The following are brief details of the circumstances I and others faced during the course of the fire emergency and in particular on 17-18 January 2003:

1. The worst case prediction given by experts on the evening of 17th January 2003 as to what might occur the following day did not have any fire reaching the urban edge let alone burning into the suburbs.
2. Almost every witness at these hearings attested that they held a view that the fires could be stopped or slowed if the fire burnt into the eaten out drought ravaged grasslands between the Murrumbidgee River and the urban area. As it transpired the fire behaviour up until about 1.00pm on Saturday 18 January was significantly under the worst case predictions that had been made the previous evening.
3. From 1.00pm on Saturday 18 January 2003 the fire behaviour was extraordinary and nobody predicted it. The McIntyre's Hut fire travelled as far in the two hours from 1.00pm to 3.00pm as it had in the preceding 10 days
4. The Standard Emergency Warning Signal was issued at a time when the McIntyre's Hut fire was over 8 km from the interface. Nobody ever envisaged the fires would travel that last 8km with such extraordinary speed and ferocity.
5. No one (including very experienced firefighters like Tony Bartlett, Neil Cooper and fire behaviour expert Phil Cheney) predicted the nature or scale of the firestorm that eventuated on the afternoon of 18 January 2003. It is clear that none of these persons anticipated fire entering the suburbs that afternoon.
6. On the night of the 17 January 2003 NSW Rural Fire Service (NSWRFS) actually released ACT resources from the McIntyre's Hut fire. Nobody from NSWRFS then indicated any belief that that fire was going to break its containment line and burn into urban Canberra within the next 24 hours.
7. NSWRFS lost over \$1 million worth of supplies and equipment when its base camp located adjacent to the Stromlo Settlement on the edge of Duffy was destroyed. Not even the NSWRFS, who had responsibility for the McIntyre's Hut fire, believed the fire posed the threat it ultimately did that day. Similarly, NSWRFS set up a relief crew camp at Greenhills on the Friday evening only for those crews to be burnt over the following afternoon.

Mike Castle
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