

Media Statement
following the release of the Coroner's Report of the
January 2003 Fires

PETER LUCAS-SMITH

I deeply regret and I am very sorry for the hardship that many ACT residents and families suffered as a result of the January 2003 bushfires and the tragic deaths of four members of the community. With the benefit of hindsight and the exhaustive review (over a number of years now) of the events surrounding the bushfires there are some things that may have been done differently.

Nevertheless at that moment in time with the information and resources available, I know I did the very best I could and to this day I still genuinely wish I could have done more. In reality however, I don't think that any additional bushfire fighting actions would have made much difference considering the unpredictable speed and the ferocity of the bushfires that so unexpectedly overwhelmed us on the 18 January 2003.

Many senior ACT and NSW bushfire fighters during the Inquiry gave clear evidence that the fires were either faster and more intense than anything anyone had experienced and that there was at least, initially, a belief that they would be held in eaten out pasture land between the Murrumbidgee River and the Stromlo Pine Plantation. It must be remembered that the fire travelled 2.5kms between 8am and 1pm and then 12kms between 1pm and 3pm on 18 January 2003.

Inquiries offer no concessions for the operational environment where decisions have to be made based on a range of competing priorities with limited information in limited time. All those involved in the January 2003, many of whom worked tirelessly over the whole 26 days and some in extremely dangerous circumstances, gave all their best efforts and applied their utmost professionalism in attempting to protect the community. The fact that we were not able to protect the whole community from disaster should not diminish the value or good faith intention of those efforts.

It is worth noting the words of Mr Mcleod in his report on the January 2003 fires:

“Experience is the basis of most of the progression of human knowledge, and there is much we can learn from our mistakes. It is inevitable therefore that inquiries of this kind concentrate on weaknesses, errors and shortcomings. They do not dwell to the same extent on those aspects where systems and people performed satisfactorily or in the way intended. ... Any criticism directed at individuals because of the role they were required to perform is in no way intended to question their integrity or their honesty in doing what they felt in the circumstances was the right thing to do at the time”

Peter Lucas-Smith
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