

# Memo

To: Chairperson COAG Bush Fire Inquiry

From: Greg Pobar

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Submission to COAG Bush Fire Inquiry ..... from Greg Pobar (himself)

## **About Greg Pobar**

I am presently the acting Manager of Planning and Resources for the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia. I have, for the last five years, been the District Manager Perth North for the Fire Services. Prior to that I have acted as the Director Community Safety FESA and the Divisional Manager of the Bush Fires Service responsible for community safety. My fire service career commenced when I joined the Department of Conservation and Land Management in 1986 where I gained my fire management experience. I was seconded to the Rottnest Island Authority in 1993-95 where part of my duties was emergency coordination management.

I am well experienced and trained in type 3 wildfire incidents (Scale 1-3 Incident Management system) including major campaign fires in urban rural interface areas of Western Australia including high risk locales around Perth. I have been deployed to New South Wales Wildfires and Cyclone damaged communities in Western Australia in Incident Management Teams. I have conducted myself in all ICS roles including Incident Commander. I am trained by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority as an

On Scene Coordinator and have additional experience in the adoption of incident command and planning at major oils spill and shipping disaster events in Western Australia.

## **My submission**

I present this submission as my personal submission. It does not reflect the views of the Fire and Emergency Service Authority of Western Australia or any other organization I have associated myself with or referred to.

### **1. Large Incident Management**

**Large urban interface wildfires that threaten communities, and their expected management, are beyond the realms of the many fire service managers, many fire service organizations and these circumstances cannot be easily remedied within the present structures and cultures of fire service organizations.**

The current role and structure of fire services throughout Australia, particularly career services orientated around urban centres, has been based on a recruitment/role/service model of technical expertise turning out in small groups with specialist equipment to fight fire, with the creed of protecting life, property and the environment.

I have witnessed well experienced and seasoned fire officers, recognised for their service to the community and competency, having spent years responsible for a crew and appliances, perform poorly and cause a resulting negative impact on a community as a result of their inability to work openly with a myriad of other agencies, deal directly with stressed community members, be aware of the socio/political implications of their actions and step out of the role from being the leader of a fire crew, to that of a community welfare expert.

In many organizations, the decision to “mass” train fire officers in these competencies has been attempted over the last ten years. I have been actively involved in these programs and have realised that very few people, even after training and experience, can or even wish to, take on the roles of responsibility in a type 3 incident. This applies particularly to volunteers.

Additionally, in an organization structured as that of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, the number of available managers with competencies to conduct these roles would not meet the requirements of a single Type 3 incident shift. As a result, there is a reliance on volunteers in this role that in some circumstances, leads to irresponsible encouragement (often direction by command or legislation) of volunteer officers to work well outside of their capability.

I have observed volunteer incident commanders attempt to deal with large threatening wildfires in Western Australia, (a responsibility of local government under the Bush Fires Act) and have seen these officers, who are not career fire fighters, fail within their own communities and then watched them suffer within their communities as a result of their efforts.

Additionally, every large wildfire almost certainly becomes subject of a civil or criminal proceeding, at the worst a coronial (I am presently involved in preparation for a coronial after the death of a fire fighter at a type 3 incident earlier this year, under the command of a volunteer fire control officer) or at the least, a freedom of information request by an investigator, insurance claim assessor or an uninsured member of the community seeking to recover loss.

While the development of dedicated incident management teams is becoming the norm (as adopted in the United States), cross agency team development is yet to be fully realised in Australia. As well, incidents grow at a rate where the insertion of these teams usually occurs after the impact that results in the loss, confusion and demand for accountability.

Recently, within Western Australia, the Bush Fires Act has been amended to allow FESA Officers to directly take command of a large incident at the request of a local government. This is a big step in taking the pressure of a volunteer incident controller however the organization is still faced with the competency development and resource levels to be realised in these type incidents.

- *Specialist management teams (not line managers) should be immediately deployed on defined triggers, with ongoing triggers determining the build up of management support. Independent, identified and rostered incident type 2 and 3 cross agency teams (that train and exercise together), should be established as a priority across emergency services of the nation, supported at a national level but coordinated by an independent state authority.*

## **2. Community Preparedness**

**Some individual home and property owners may be prepared to protect their properties from a low intensity or moderate wildfire or mitigate the impact of the fire, if allowed to, but communities will never be fully prepared for wildfire.**

## Community Certainties (Pobar 2001)

**A Community of any size will exhibit the extremes in bush fire preparation at any one time. Fire fighters and emergency services will be unable to determine who is prepared for wildfire and who is not during an incident.**

**Many people, even those prepared, will be severely distressed and confused with the onset of a bush fire and on many occasions, not be at home, nor will they get home.**

**Despite best efforts, the fire services will be unable to attend every property when threatened by bushfire.**

**Families will be separated during bushfire.**

**Despite best efforts, not everyone will receive advice or warning.**

**Fire fighters and Police, as individuals and regardless of direction, will continue to exercise their independence of authority based on their own interpretations and legislation and force evacuation on occasion.**

Given these certainties, our promotion of preparedness, our criticism of lack of preparedness and the communities understanding of wildfire behaviour and consequence are misguided.

Some facts

There are circumstances where, no matter how prepared a home owner is, their life may be under threat.

There are circumstances where, no matter how prepared a home owner is, they may have to evacuate.

In these circumstances, if their home is lost, and their life is saved, then that is a positive result.

Recent wildfire losses have shown, that even communities expected to be low at risk can experience severe property and life loss in extreme circumstances.

- *We cannot continue to promote the existing bush fire preparedness messages without reference to the community certainties. To do this, a collective review of the present uncoordinated community programs across Australia should be recommended.*

### **3. Stay or Go**

**I refer you to my paper written for the Australian Institute of Police Management , 'Empowering Stay or Go, Consideration of the welfare of the Community during Bushfire in Western Australia', which explores the Australian culture of volunteering, staying behind and helping fight fire. This**

**developed culture can save lives and property and also cause the loss of life and property.**

Regardless of what opinions there are in the fire services, there are obviously circumstances where a home owner can stay and circumstances where no one should be in the area at all (for example, what emergency service worker would allow residents to run between properties across fallen power lines, simply to allow them to protect property.... yet it is advocated that we do).

Legislation gives fire managers the authority to evacuate. What happens if this does not occur and life is lost ? The fear of litigation in some States of the United States has resulted in the creed, 'if in doubt, everyone out'. Although our culture is different, what protection is in place to ensure legal protection to a fire officer who does not use the powers of legislation to protect life? Is his/her personal judgement greater than legislation?

Considering that fires can radically change their behaviour in minutes, who makes these decisions and how are they made? How is the community informed? These are our common failings as managers. Part B of my paper suggests how this could be achieved.

This is a complex subject and is explored in my paper.

- *Incident Controllers and Fire Service Managers require a simple field tool, integrated with a community preparedness system (for example cyclone warning color coding) to allow for the fast determination of action to be taken by the emergency services and clearly understood by the community. (Refer to Part B of the paper enclosed).*

## **Conclusion**

I believe that it is these three points of submission, that continue to create the ongoing concern of the adequacy of emergency response to the community when threatened by wildfire.

I provide this submission within my level of experience and competency. I am prepared to talk to this submission at interview if required.

Greg Pobar