
COL ADAMS AERIAL SERVICES PTY. LTD.

* TOP DRESSING *SEEDING *SPRAYING

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December 28th 1999

The Hon. Richard Jones MLC
Committee Chairman
Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No 5
Inquiry into the NSW Rural Fire Service.
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
Sydney NSW 2000.

Dear Sir,

I thank you for the opportunity to present a submission to your inquiry in respect to items (b) and (f) in the Terms of Reference.

With the current fire season upon us, the general public has a right to expect that our Rural Fire Service is adequately prepared to meet any threat. Perhaps this is not the case. It is with a great sense of frustration that I recount my experience of the attitude of NSW bushfire authorities to utilizing aircraft in fire control.

The use of aircraft as "fire bombers" is regarded by most modern fire control authorities as an integral component of their fire fighting strategy. Early suppression of fires in inaccessible and remote locations and supporting and protecting ground crews and property with precision delivered retardants and foam is where these aircraft excel. Under Australian conditions, the more advanced fire control authorities (particularly Victoria and South Australia) regard suitably equipped large capacity agricultural aircraft as the most cost-effective aircraft to deploy. In these two states a veritable squadron of 'fire bombers' are under contract and are extensively and very effectively utilized each fire season. As an example of this I refer you to a small news item in the Daily Telegraph 16.12.99 page 25 which succinctly illustrates the Victorian approach to bushfire containment (copy attached). I sincerely hope that NSW does not have to experience an "Ash Wednesday" disaster to realise that early containment is the key to fire control.

As an operator with 34 years experience in aerial agriculture and 27 years experience in aerial fire fighting, I made my first representations to the NSW Bushfire Department in the late 1970's. The point that I have been trying to convey is that large capacity agricultural aircraft, when properly set up and flown by pilots experienced in these operations, are highly effective in fighting fires. The other point I have been trying to make is that this type of equipment and experience is not available on an ad-hoc basis. These aircraft have to pay their way and no commercial operator can afford to have them standing idle during the fire season when they could be profitably employed in the rice or cotton industries. Again, no responsible operator would pull an aircraft out of on-going work commitments to meet ad-hoc requests for fire fighting. The only way to ensure that

aircraft are available is to have an adequate number of operators contracted to supply their aircraft as and when required – as they do successfully in Victoria and South Australia.

From the outset, my dealings with the Bushfire Services have revealed an earnest and myopic campaign to denigrate the concept of aerial fire fighting. This opposition seems based on the personal prejudices of the bushfire hierarchy as they have little experience with the techniques, no recognized qualifications in aerial fire controls, and no desire to draw on the experiences of their more professional counterparts in other states. The alarming part about the whole thing is the lengths that they are prepared to go to defend their position. Unfortunately, the people meant to make the decisions, a veritable procession of Ministers for Emergency Services, have been fed a consistent diet of self-serving tripe by Bushfire Services.

In the early days my approaches were dismissed by the bureaucrats as being totally inappropriate for the NSW situation. They conceded that fixed wing aircraft may have a place in grass fires but asserted that they were of no value in rough terrain even though the Victorians have effectively used them for nearly 34 years as the first line of attack in rough and remote areas.

Following the success and subsequent publicity of independent use of aerial fire-bombing in local fires in the late 1980's (lives and much property saved using only small capacity aircraft) the bureaucrats changed their tack slightly. To avert allegations that they did not have all bases covered, they sought 'expressions of interest' from aerial agricultural operators prepared to use their aircraft to fight fires if required. While I and a number of my colleagues replied to this request, we did not receive a single acknowledgment from Bushfire Services. However, this so-called register served a political purpose. Bushfire Services were then able to state, with a relative degree of truthfulness, that they had the aerial fire-fighting side of the equation covered – they had a list of aircraft that they could call on as the need arose, the much quoted ad-hoc arrangement. They ignored the fact that few of the aircraft on the register were actually suitable for the task, or that many were not readily available as they were committed to other work during the fire season, or that the majority of pilots had no experience in fire fighting. They failed to mention the fact that no-one in Bushfire Services had done any planning for their use – developed any contingency plans for supplying the basics such as retardant and water. They also failed to mention that no-one from Bushfire Services had the slightest idea of how to utilize aircraft to fight fires. All this didn't matter as they could state that they had a register of aircraft and ad-hoc arrangements and therefore there was no need to specifically put aircraft on contract.

The real mentality of the bushfire bureaucrats was revealed during the Sydney/East Coast fires in January 1994. In the face of the most devastating fires in the history of NSW and with men and equipment coming in from interstate and New Zealand, nine fire fighting aircraft sat on the ground in Victoria because NSW authorities steadfastly refused to use them. Despite their much vaunted register, no suitable aircraft were available in NSW. The fires burned for three days before behind the scenes political pressure forced the

NSW authorities to bring the Victorian aircraft in. Despite their assertions that fixed wing aircraft were of no value in rough terrain, the NSW authorities deployed them mainly in the Blue Mountains. A cynic may suggest that this was a ploy to keep them away from the news cameras as well as an attempt to prove them worthless. As an example of their effectiveness, the fires in the Grosse Valley were controlled by the combined efforts of fixed wing aircraft and ground crews despite dire warnings from the commissioner that no fire had ever been controlled in that area (ABC radio, Lateline with Tony Delroy, January 1994). Ground crews were even erroneously warned that the retardants were carcinogenic!! After the fires, the commissioner confined his prejudices by asserting that fixed wing aircraft were of limited value.

To circumvent any further criticism, the Department did enter into contracts for two rotary and two fixed wing aircraft in 1995. Again, this looked good on paper and the aircraft themselves were suitable but the limited numbers of aircraft/operator experience and the lack of expertise and commitment within the department means that the state is still without an effective aerial fire-fighting capability.

There are two more recent fires which serve to reinforce my argument that the Rural Fire Service is failing both the community and its volunteer members with their recalcitrant attitude towards early fire suppression and the effective use of aircraft. The first instance is the Wingello fire on **January 1, 1998** in which one fire fighter was killed and others severely injured. While I am loathe to make 'political capital' from this tragedy I am still haunted by the belief that it would never have occurred if the 'powers that be' were more pro-active in controlling fires. While this particular fire has been the subject of a coronial enquiry, I believe that the coroner's report failed to address a few pertinent details. I understand that the fire was first detected on the morning of January 1, 1998. At this stage it was a small fire that could have been contained/extinguished with one or two loads of retardant. The Wingello fire had actually flared up and killed and injured the ground crew before our aircraft were directed onto another fire about 10-12 minutes flying time from the Wingello fire. Despite our observations that the targeted fire was under control on arrival with our first loads, we were directed to drop another nine loads on it (12 loads in total). I may be a cynic, but I believe that the order to 'bomb' the Mt Jelore fire was a deliberate attempt to deceive the public that the aerial resources were fully committed elsewhere and not available to attend to the Wingello fire in the early stages. This is patently untrue. This fire could have gone down in the records as a minor lighting strike that was eliminated within an hour of it first being detected.


The second fire to illustrate the deficiencies of the Rural Fire Service in aerial fire control is the Pilliga fire of 1997. The Rural Fire Service was at the forefront in media releases stating that it had the largest fleet of aerial fire-bombers ever assembled in the state fighting of fires. It failed to mention that of the eight aircraft engaged, only four were suitably equipped for the task and at least two were being used in contravention of ~~Air~~ Navigation Regulations (with respect to radio capability). It is not my intention to denigrate the contribution that my colleagues made in fighting this fire but I do object to the fact that the Rural Fire Service used it as an opportunity of pretence in so much as its ad-hoc arrangements were effective!

It would be extremely difficult to get an objective assessment of the value of fixed wing fire bombers from any person in the upper echelons of NSW Rural Fire Services. It would be far more profitable to seek the opinions of the Victorian or South Australian authorities and of interest to get their 'off the record' assessment of the competence of their NSW counterparts.

The main argument from the Rural Fire Service against the utilization of fixed-wing fire-bombers seems to have swung from their perceived effectiveness to their cost of deployment. It is my understanding that their use in other states and in many other parts of the world is based on the cost-effectiveness of early fire suppression as opposed to the damage/costs of attempting to control major fires. Admittedly, there is little media exposure to be had from tooling around scrub country dropping retardant on lightning strike fire, and fewer opportunities to get on television wearing uniform, braid and ribbons if bushfires are kept small enough to barely make a mention in even the local media. ~~Is~~ everyone forgotten that big fires always start as little fires and that the main aim of the bushfire authorities should be to keep them small.

I am available to further discuss the matters raised in this submission at any time.

Yours faithfully,



Col Adams.

encl:

1. Press clippings
2. Letters which serve as references and background.
3. A paper by Richard J Alder B.For.Sc(Hons.)(Melb.), Dip.For.(Cres.), M.I.F.A. -
FIGHTING BUSHFIRES FROM THE AIR.

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March 16 2000

The Hon Richard Jones MLC
Committee Chairman
Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No 5
Inquiry into NSW rural Fire Service
Parliament House Maquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000.

Dear Sir,

**RE. Submission from Col Adams (Col Adams Aerial Services P/L) submitted
December 28 th 1999.**

Having read pages 31-33 of the transcript of your inquiry at Sydney on Tuesday 29 February 2000 and not being afforded the opportunity to defend myself or expand on my submission, if I may, please allow me to add to the following.

Statements to the Coroner and to your inquiry along with some RFS media releases are misleading to say the least and with all due respect to yourself and committee no one would have the slightest idea about how firebombing works making it very easy to be snowed.

THE FACTS ARE:

- * The reasons given to the Coroner (Wingello Fire) as to why the firebomber aircraft were not used are in complete contradiction to an operation that was carried out within an hour and only 20 miles from the Wingello tragedy. This firebombing operation was ordered by the RFS to be carried out on a fire that was already under control.
- * Agricultural aircraft are not used extensively for fire control in NSW.
- * There are only 4 fixed wing aircraft in NSW suitably equipped for fire bombing:
 - 1x Air Tractor 802 based at Scone - on contract to RFS
 - 1x M 18 Dromader based at Goulburn - on contract to RFS
 - 1x M 18 Dromader based at Crookwell - not available to RFS
 - 1x M18 Dromader based at Cootamundra - currently firebombing in Victoria

* RFS were looking for fixed wing firebombers on the following dates:

19 Jan 2000

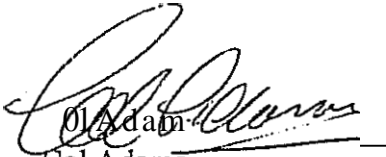
20 Jan 2000

21 Jan 2000

No fixed wing aircraft were available in NSW including the contract aircraft which were not placed on contract until the end of Jan 2000.

The Scone based aircraft was firefighting in Victoria whilst the Goulburn based M 18 was still being prepared to meet contracts requirements and not affected by the fuel crisis as one RFS media release infers (Air Fuel Crisis 11 Jan 2000)

* RFS have canvassed nearly every operator in NSW in order to "get the numbers up" and of *the* 140 odd aircraft (fixed wing) no doubt some are suitable for spotting, mapping and transport but any agricultural aircraft except the above CANNOT be regarded as firebombers.


Col Adams