

AERIAL AGRICULTURAL ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA LTD.

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1 December 2003

Mr Stuart Ellis, AM
Chair
COAG Bushfire Inquiry
Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
3-5 National Circuit
Barton ACT 2600

Dear Mr Ellis

Re: AAAA Submission to the COAG Bushfire Inquiry

Please find attached the National Aerial Firefighting Strategy developed by the Aerial Agricultural Association of Australia (AAAA) to assist with the COAG Inquiry into Bushfires.

The AAAA represents the interests of many of Australia's aerial firefighting operators including both rotary and fixed wing operators. Further information on the Association can be obtained from our website at www.aerialag.com.au

AAAA has made consistent submissions to all of the recent fire inquiries, including the most recent ACT and Federal parliamentary inquiries. The transcript of evidence of the Association representatives to the Federal Parliamentary bushfire inquiry is available through the Federal Hansard record of the Ballarat hearing on 30 July 2003 (see www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/bushfires/).

Australia has a wonderful fire fighting resource available to it through the use of either agricultural type aircraft, purpose built fire bombing aircraft based on ag. aircraft designs, or heavy rotary aircraft also used in agricultural operations.

The key messages of the Association are:

- all States and Territories should have a significant aerial firefighting capacity utilising a mixture of fixed wing and rotary winged aircraft
- aircraft play a vital role in fire fighting when used properly
- fire authorities must use the right aerial tool for the job
- fire authorities must commit to aggressive initial attack using aircraft
- fire authorities should ensure appropriate support equipment and trained staff are available to support aircraft, or they should contract out the support services to aerial operators as well
- fire authorities should take a better strategic approach to the use of aircraft, targeting key areas where the aircraft comes into its own for infrastructure development and positioning
- all States should commit to the development of agreed best practice standards and methods in close cooperation with aerial (both fixed wing and rotary) industry leaders

- all States and the federal Government should offer long term (i.e. 3-5 years) contracts for aerial firebombing to enable operators to build-up aircraft, skilled crews and best practice operating procedures.

Some States have got it right, or are well on the way to best practice in terms of their use of aircraft. A few are doggedly clinging to poor management practices, unacceptable tasking systems and ineffective use and support of aircraft.

In terms of the use of aircraft in fighting fires, it is a case of ensuring 'the right tool for the job'. AAAA supports fire authorities use of both fixed wing and rotary aerial assets on fires, but based on a fair assessment of capabilities, cost and effectiveness.

Australia's agricultural aircraft fleet leads the world in terms of its level of sophistication and the professional approach pilots and operators can bring to fire fighting.

Both rotary wing and fixed wing have their strengths and weaknesses. While fixed wing aircraft have fast ferry times and lower hourly operating costs on their side, rotary aircraft are flexible between roles and can operate at slower speeds. Both are highly effective and accurate when operated by skilled pilots.

Again, it is a question of the right tool for the job and only good planning can enable access to the right equipment at the right time.

Economics plays a part in this equation, with fixed wing fire fighting aircraft from the agricultural industry being able to deliver thousands of litres of retardant or suppressant to the fire front for the least dollars of all aerial firefighting equipment. This is particularly evident where longer ferry times are required from refilling site to fire front, such as would be the case over heavily timbered country, where many bushfires in NSW, Victoria and the ACT occurred during the last fire season.

A very successful component of bush fire management in recent years in a number of States (especially Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia), has been an in-principal decision by authorities to utilise fire bombing aircraft in bushfire control, particularly through a firm commitment to aggressive initial aerial attack of fires.

There is a range of academic and field based research that clearly indicates that the use of aircraft in this role should be made a vital part of bushfire management in Australia. CSIRO's Bushfire Behaviour and Management Unit and its predecessors have carried out comprehensive research into the issue (such as *Project Aquarius*) and the recommendations support the use of fire bombing and aggressive initial attack by air.

In particular, the advantages of using aircraft in putting out or suppressing the size of fires from lightning strikes is very clear. This becomes even more effective when the fire has commenced in rugged terrain or heavily timbered areas, such as the Canberra fires' origins with some ten lightning strikes over a week before the fire reached Canberra.

Aggressive initial attack using aerial fire bombing has been proven successful in research and in the field and can be credited with the saving of millions of dollars worth of assets, both in the aggressive initial attack role and in close-in asset protection work. This is on top of the usefulness of aircraft in supporting and protecting ground based fire crews.

During various stages of the January fires, a number of fixed wing fire bombers were on the ground at Tumut awaiting better visibility and tasking from NSW controllers.

However, for at least one day just before the Saturday fires sweeping through Canberra, there was sufficient visibility to see the fire front from 1000' above Canberra Airport as it came over the Brindabellas (over 20 km). Unfortunately, tasking onto the fires at that stage did not occur, other than a small number of helicopters being tasked with minimal impact on the fire.

Using the right tool for the right job and understanding that different tools come with different economic costs and opportunities is an important part of management of fires.

Those States that are currently using aerial agricultural operators in an aggressive initial attack role have been able to change their management approach from generally reactive to a more proactive approach - being able to contain small fires and manage them accordingly, thereby freeing resources for better training and other initiatives.

Agricultural aircraft have proven their worth in fire fighting time and time again and all States should have the same level of protection afforded by such a resource.

All States and the Federal Government should work together to ensure that every State has air attack coverage provided by agricultural operators over those areas strategically identified as requiring it.

The AAAA and a number of fire fighting operators would be interested in providing a demonstration on the capability of the aircraft used and related issues if the Inquiry felt that would be useful. **Please let me know if you would be interested in such a demonstration.**

As this is a relatively brief submission, the AAAA would appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Inquiry to expand upon the significant capabilities of Australia's own firefighting aircraft and personnel.

For further information or to discuss any of the issues raised, please do not hesitate to contact me on 02 6262 8256 or by email phil@aerialag.com.au.

Yours sincerely

ORIGINAL SIGNED

Phil Hurst
Executive Officer

Attachments:

AAAA National Aerial Firefighting Strategy

Media Release: *Aerial Firebombers Welcome Federal Bushfire Report* - 5 November 2003

Media Release: *ACT Needs Its Own Aerial Fire Protection* - 4 August 2003

Media Release: *Ag Aircraft Play their Part in Firebombing* - 2 January 2002