

The 2003 Canberra Fires (B)

On Wednesday 15 January 2003, the Chief Fire Control Officer of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Peter Lucas-Smith, had been fighting fires ignited by lightning in the Brindabella Ranges on the border of the ACT and New South Wales (NSW), to the west of the capital city Canberra, for a week.¹ Lucas-Smith's firefighting teams had been clearing fire-breaks in the forests and conducting aerial water-bombing to quell the fires, but they were not considered contained.

Wednesday, 15 January

On Wednesday the fire danger index remained at 19,² however some westerly winds were gusting at higher elevations and these began to move the fires east, further into the ACT.

A Bureau of Meteorology officer began attending management meetings at the ACT Emergency Services Bureau and issued a briefing which forecast "extreme fire weather conditions... with strong winds, high temperatures, low humidity and a high degree of vertical instability in the atmosphere" for the weekend, 18 and 19 January.

Around noon Peter Lucas-Smith and some members of his staff met Phil Koperberg, NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Commissioner and some members of his staff at the NSW RFS offices in Queanbeyan. Their purpose was to review the status of various

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¹ Refer to map, exhibit 2, Part A

² Where 50 is extreme, see Part A

fires in the vicinity of the ACT, to make some decisions regarding the allocation of personnel and resources to the various fires, and to discuss the weather forecast for the coming days. Lucas Smith said Koperberg and his staff “extended to me their confidence that [the McIntyre’s Hut fire] was going to remain contained.”

Koperberg disagreed with this account of the meeting.

“We talked in broad terms about the likelihood of the fires, particularly the McIntyre’s Hut fire, remaining contained. We painted a number of scenarios, one of them being the eventuality of the forecast for Saturday 18 January which included very high temperatures, very strong winds and low humidities, and the probability of the McIntyre’s Hut fire, particularly, breaching its containment lines. It was conceded that not only was that possible but it was more than likely. It was generally conceded that the fires were going to reach the suburbs of Canberra... So during the course of the meeting a number of scenarios were canvassed, and it was the canvassing of those scenarios that led me to make an open-ended offer for resources, which I would not have done were I to have considered that there was not a potential threat.”³

Koperberg said that he and his staff were more pessimistic than their ACT counterparts at the meeting. One said in response to discussions about the weather forecast and the likely impacts: “...Canberra is going to get hammered.” Koperberg says the ACT representatives at the meeting were a little offended by this talk by outsiders. “I formed the opinion that... Peter did not share my belief about the potential seriousness. He had every right to do that, or not do that, as the case may be.”⁴

At the meeting, Peter Lucas-Smith requested from NSW four task forces of five units each, with management and support personnel totalling 200 firefighters, and some additional aerial resources. He said he believed “that our [current] resources were insufficient to contain the fires we had, let alone if the fires escaped.”⁵ Koperberg committed to provide these resources to the ACT the next day.

Lucas-Smith said his request for extra resources was motivated by a need to bolster the suppression efforts at the Stockyard Spur fire which had become the ACT’s highest priority. Phil Koperberg says he believed that these extra resources were sought by Lucas-Smith for the broader protection of the city of Canberra as a whole. Koperberg was surprised that the ACT was not requesting more resources. “I thought the request was light, if one was anticipating a worst-case scenario.”⁶

Koperberg did an interview with ABC TV in the mid-afternoon of 15 January. During the interview he said: “This is probably the worst threat to this part of the state in many, many decades... The Brindabella complex of fires are certainly a potential threat to some very valuable assets, not the least being some mature pine forests on the border of Canberra and, indeed, the ACT itself.”⁷

³ Coroner’s Court of the Australian Capital Territory, Day 23, page 2091.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, Day 11, page 984.

⁶ Ibid, Day 23, page 2101.

⁷ Ibid, Day 23, 2086.

Media releases issued by the ACT Emergency Services Bureau throughout the day reported that:

- The Bendora fire now covered 1150 hectares and successful back-burning overnight had provided a continuous containment line around the south-western, southern and south-eastern flanks of the fire.
- There was a high fire danger rating but no Total Fire Ban. The public was asked to be mindful of the dry conditions; similar conditions were expected to continue for the next few days.
- Easterly airflows were expected in the next few days, with north to north-westerly swings. It was also expected that rising temperatures and decreasing humidity from Friday until early the following week would place additional pressure on firefighting operations.

The Stockyard fire now covered about 2300 hectares. Efforts to contain the fire were hindered by the fact that there were only two narrow access routes to the fire, and there was difficulty deploying additional resources.

Thursday, 16 January

On Thursday the temperature rose to 33 degrees and humidity fell to 20 percent. The forest fire danger index rose to nearly 30. Winds were predominantly from the east, although mid-level winds were coming from the west ahead of an advancing frontal system which the Bureau of Meteorology expected to arrive over the weekend.

In the morning, Mike Castle and Peter Lucas-Smith briefed the ACT Cabinet, including the Chief Minister Jon Stanhope, and separately later in the day the Chief Police Officer and head of the urban area fire brigade. The briefing notes contained detailed summaries of the history of the fire, weather forecasts for the coming four days and information on the firefighting effort and resource deployments.

A range of assets were listed as being “under threat”. They were the Cotter reservoir catchment area, the ACT pine plantations, and the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Tracking Station. The “urban edge” was also listed as being “under threat”. Jon Stanhope said:

“Mr Lucas-Smith made it clear to us [at the briefing] that the fires presented a serious situation. He explained what was being done to contain the fires, and that the firefighting operations were occurring on a 24-hour basis. He presented a range of theoretical possibilities about the development of the fires, but I do not recall the details. He explained that the fires were, at that time, west of constructed and proposed containment lines and that firefighters were hoping to keep the fires within those lines. Cabinet was informed of the NSW assistance and the other assistance [that] had been sought and the disposition of the firefighting resources.

We were informed that Monday was seen to be a ‘bad day’ in terms of fire danger. We were briefed upon how the legislation governing the declaration of a state of emergency operated (See *Exhibit 6*), and consequential appointment of the Chief Police Officer as Territory Controller. My memory is that the issue of the state of emergency arose out of a discussion of damage to the electricity infrastructure, more notably the implications for the power supply to Canberra if the fire caused [damage].

There was a general comment about the possibility of the fires reaching urban Canberra. In that context, it was mentioned that the western-most suburbs, Weston Creek and Dunlop, would be the suburbs towards which fires might travel in the event they did spread. The possibility of the fires reaching urban Canberra was not discussed in a manner that conveyed to Cabinet any understanding that the fires were a direct threat or that it was envisaged or anticipated that houses within the urban area were then at risk. Comments were more to inform us of current firefighting efforts, and that if the fire conditions deteriorated and the fires were not contained, government might need to be involved in consequential decisions.”⁸

ACT Treasurer Ted Quinlan said he left the briefing with the understanding that Monday 20 January would likely be the danger day for Canberra. He had the impression that Lucas-Smith was expecting a major fire but not “a 40-foot firestorm.”

Mike Castle said the briefing that he and Lucas-Smith delivered did not address in detail their plans or recommendations for informing the public about the advance of the fire or any process for encouraging evacuations in the case of the fire appearing likely to enter the suburbs of Canberra.

ACT Emergency Services Bureau media releases issued during 16 January said that:

- The Bureau of Meteorology forecast that the wind would shift to the north-west and pick up considerably over the weekend.
- The Stockyard fire had now burnt 3500 hectares, Bendora 2100 hectares, McIntyre Hut 5600 hectares.
- Two hundred volunteer firefighters arrived at 6pm from elsewhere in NSW – the Hunter, Great Lakes, Coffs Harbour and Lismore areas – and were deployed to the Stockyard fire. They joined around 250 ACT firefighters and Department of Defence personnel already engaged in containing the fires.
- The northern area of Namadji National Park was closed.

Phil Koperberg of the NSW Rural Fire Service said in a media interview that day: “The current weather forecast and the fact that vegetation in the southern part of NSW and the ACT is extremely dry means the potential for fire to impact on increasingly more populated areas is very high.”⁹

Members of the ACT Fire Brigade (urban) spoke with Peter Lucas-Smith later in the day. He said that the fires could get out of control and be as big as the wildfires of 1939, 1952, and 1985 but the information was not to leave the room because he did not want to alarm the media or public.¹⁰ They said Mr Lucas-Smith had said he would deny the comments if they got to the media.

As the day drew to a close, a Total Fire Ban was declared for the five days from midnight on 16 January to midnight on 21 January. This had never before occurred in the ACT, with most fire bans declared for one or two days.

⁸ Coroner’s Court of the Australian Capital Territory, Day 37, page 3608.

⁹ Ibid, Day 24, page 2178.

¹⁰ Doherty, M., “Cabinet Told of Threat”, *The Canberra Times*, 19 February 2004.

Friday, 17 January

Westerly winds picked up during Friday and peaked at around 35 kilometres per hour in the afternoon, with temperatures in the mid-30s. The fire danger index reached 50, the extreme zone.

All three fires travelled east during the afternoon, covering about 10 kilometres before the wind died down in the evening. Seventeen aircraft continued water-bombing throughout the day. Firefighters at the three fires unsuccessfully sought to establish new containment lines as winds moved them in an easterly direction, past previously constructed breaks. Crews eventually withdrew from the Stockyard Spur and Bendora fire fronts as the fires moved rapidly to the east. Later in the day as the wind died down new containment lines were established in front of the McIntyre's Hut fire and it was reported to be at "contained" status.

Approximately 450 staff were working around the clock on suppressing the fires. The ACT Fire Brigade (urban) put its entire staff complement on standby. The Brigade added more staff to its communications centre and prepared its vehicles and radios for the advance of the fires in the coming days.

The ACT Fire Brigade Commissioner requested additional resources on standby from the NSW Fire Brigade, and in this request nominated Monday 20 January as the day when these resources would likely be needed.

At 6.00 pm a planning meeting took place at the Emergency Services Bureau headquarters. Peter Lucas-Smith said the meeting focused on a strategy of using grasslands to the east of the Murrumbidgee River as a control line to delay the advance of the fires. There was also significant planning discussion regarding property protection for rural landholders east of Canberra and approaches to protecting the Uriarra pine plantation. That night 42 rural landholders were advised that their properties were under threat.

The following scenarios were discussed:

- The potential for the fires to reach the Uriarra pine plantation by midday the next day
- The potential for the fires to reach the Cotter pub and reserve by 4.00 pm
- The potential for the fires to reach Narrabundah Hill in the Canberra suburb of Duffy by 8.00pm.

At 6.15 pm Mike Castle told reporters that the ACT had sufficient trained personnel to cope with the emergency.¹¹ The Emergency Services Bureau had been flooded with offers of assistance from members of the public for the firefighting effort. In the 2002 fires, the ACT police had been engaged to doorknock neighbourhoods and provide warnings about the risk of the approaching fire. One resident said that the fact that police were not doorknocking neighbourhoods in 2003 led them to think that the fires were less serious than the previous year.

¹¹ McLeod, page 40

By 8.50 pm winds picked up again and the Emergency Services Bureau issued a media release indicating that spot fires were occurring over containment lines at all three fires.

Peter Lucas-Smith had worked from early in the morning till beyond 9.00 pm every day since 8 January. The weather forecast for the weekend was for almost impossible conditions for combating fires.

**Exhibit 6: Extract from section 20 of the Emergency Management Act
(ACT)**

(1) Where the Chief Minister is satisfied that:

(a) an emergency has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur;

(b) the emergency is, or would be, of such a scale, or of such a nature:

(i) to constitute a significant danger to the health or safety to persons in Territory, property of the Territory or the environment of the Territory; or

(ii) as to cause significant disruption to the essential services in the Territory;

the Chief Minister may, by writing, declare that a state of emergency exists.