NSWAA Submission to the 2020 NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Introduction

NSWAA represents a majority of commercial beekeepers in NSW. Bees are responsible for pollinating $15 billion worth of the Australian agriculture output. NSW is the largest beekeeping state and also the largest honey producer. Beekeepers are the second largest commercial users of our state forests. Beekeepers can use the forests at any time of the year - depending on flowering events. However state forests are rarely used in spring. Summer, autumn and some winters state forest and National park sites are extensively utilised by beekeepers.

Unfortunately a lot of beekeepers were in state forests when the fires were at their most active during late spring and early summer. 9809 hives have been reported as burnt and 88,094 hives have lost their field bees. This means the hive is no longer productive as it has lost its work force. Given the drought and floral resource lost to bushfires most of these effected hives will not be available for almond pollination in August 2020.

NSWAA Comments

Paragraph numbering is as per the Terms of Reference.

1. *Factors contributing to fire intensity ….* - Many beekeepers reported that large areas of drought stressed eucalyptus trees were dropping dry leaves which is a normal eucalyptus drought strategy. This increased the fuel load on the forest floor. Many leaves remaining on trees looked dry - especially on ridge country. This caused ground fires to quickly become crown fires.

Fuel loads in non logged areas of some state forests were very high. The Tantawanglo mountain area of the South East National Park had extremely high fuel loads and not had fuel reduction burns since its incorporation into a National Park many years ago.

2. *Preparation and planning by agencies …..* - Hazard reduction burning has not been taking place across the landscape at a scale to have a burn every decade. Some small pockets have been burnt but very few large scale hazard reduction burns have taken place - in particular in National Parks. Anecdotally this is due to less field staff and less staff trained in fire fighting techniques. Every agency person who drives a government 4WD vehicle should have fire training and be on a fire team.

5. *Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks.* Softwood plantation (state owned) should have a 50m buffer zone around them. Also there should be a 50m (along road) buffer zone running north south and east west in large pine plantations. There should be dedicated log dumps (turn around points or safe zones) in pine plantations.

Hardwood forests should have clear smooth log dumps on main forest roads. These can be used as turn around points or water points - where water tankers can turn around and refill fire trucks. Currently there is no requirement by logging contractors to leave bee sites or log dumps in a clean useable condition.

Given how dry the state was due to the drought there should have been extra precautions in place.

There should have been ready reaction teams on standby during thunderstorms (lightning events) and 36 hours after to put lightning strike fires out as quickly as possible. With lightning tracking technology crews could have been directed to specific areas.

In late winter and early spring all fire and management trails should have been cleared and possibly widened due to drought.

All water points (creeks, dams etc) should have been checked for water in spring. A lot of normal water points were dry due to the drought.

Extra hazard reduction burning can be done in early spring in drought years. This was not done even though low hazard reduction targets were not met in autumn.

8. *Emergency responses to bushfires, ….* Responses to some fires were too slow. Easier to control a small fire than wait until it is a large self serving fire. There should have been ready reaction teams on standby during thunderstorms (lightning events) and for 36 hours afterwards to put lightning strike fires out as quickly as possible. With lightning tracking technology crews could have been directed to specific areas.

Conflict between agencies seems a major reason why some small fires escalated into uncontrollable wild fires.

Beekeepers have reported that fire management was too far from the fire front. In most cases local fire fighters have a better idea on fire behaviour and management in their local area.

Defence should have been called in far earlier (was never called in - was put in by prime minister). The relevant state disaster plan was not followed.

Back burning operations were not done early enough or far enough ahead of the fire.

All burms (rollovers) and drainage line works on state forests and National Parks roads must enable a fully loaded fire truck to negotiate them at a speed greater than a crawl.

Evacuation orders of populated areas has to be coordinated. Police have to be involved with traffic management. When visitors to the far south coast were told to evacuate - it was over a eight hour drive from Bega to Canberra - which is a trip that takes approx 2 hours and 30 minutes. The slow traffic was not caused by poor visibility due to smoke - but lack of traffic control at traffic entry points to the main road and also at roundabouts within ACT.

11. *Public communication and advice systems and strategies.* When a bushfire control centre is set up the contact telephone number needs to be made public. Bee hives were lost due to beekeepers not being able to access the forest and remove their bees. In one case beekeepers were not allowed in the forest and seven days later the fire burnt their hives even though the hives could have been removed from the forest within three hours. These hives could have been safely removed from the forest. This event occurred in the northern fires.

With a central contact point beekeepers who are not local can get the latest information and if safe may get permission to get in and remove their hives. In the case of the Batemans Bay fires it was a case of who you knew.

In drought years beekeepers often have to provide water for their bees. Normally this is done on a weekly basis. When large areas of Public land (State Forests, crown lands and National Parks) are closed for extended periods there needs to be a protocol which allows beekeepers to continue to do this - if safe to do so. The protocol should include contact numbers for beekeepers to contact to request permission to enter these public lands (if safe to do so) to water and also feed their bees (livestock).