

Review of NZ fire services: Implications for forest owners

The Hensley Report on the Review of Rural Fire Services in this country, resulting from the Canterbury fires of 1988, was released on December 1, 1989 by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Dr Michael Bassett. It contained one particular far-reaching recommendation, which will place the control of rural fire at the national level (The National Rural Fire Authority - NRFA) under the New Zealand Fire Service Commission and the Minister of Internal Affairs.

For over a hundred years, rural fire control has largely been in the hands of Ministers of Forests and State forestry organisations, commencing with the Commissioner of State Forests in 1885.

All the report's recommendations have been accepted by the Government and the date of implementation will be October 1, 1990.

In the meantime a rural fire working party has been set up by Government to consider how best to set up the NRFA in the New Zealand Fire Service Head Office organisation. It will report to the Minister of Internal Affairs by March 1, 1990 on "an appropriate structure within the Fire Service for representing the interests of rural people, fire fighters and forest owners", as well as funding arrangements.

Background

The review was initiated by the then Prime Minister, David Lange, early in 1989 following vegetation and plantation fires in the Christchurch region (Christchurch City, Rangiora and Dunsandel) in November and December 1988.

Severe drought conditions prevailed at that time in Canterbury and arsonists took advantage of that situation on several occasions to light unlawful and damaging fires. Statements were made in the media that the safety and security of people and property were at risk.

The demise of the NZ Forest Service on March 31, 1987, with the consequent loss of resources and expertise, was also stated to be a contributing factor when some fires became difficult to control.

The Prime Minister, as Head of Security, ordered Mr Gerald Hensley

HENSLEY REPORT MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

1. "Rural fire structure to be based on local government".

The New District Councils and some City Councils became rural fire authorities on 1st November 1989 under the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977.

2. "That services be delivered through Rural Fire Authorities (R.F.A.'s)."

R.F.A.'s will have similar responsibilities as the present variously named groups. Equipment will be standardised and requirements stiffened, based on fire hazard and other criteria. Properly trained volunteer fire parties will be encouraged and more established.

3. "That coordination of the R.F.A.'s be carried out at regional level."

This confirms the present situation where there are regional rural fire coordinating committees (RFCC) in various parts of the country plus the committees in Northland and Coromandel. RFCC's will be administered by the Regional councils who will appoint a "Coordinator" who may be shared between less fire-prone regions. The RFCC's will consist of the Principal Rural Fire Officer of each R.F.A. plus the Fire Service Area Commander with the Coordinator as Chairman.

The Committee will be responsible for the efficiency; the Coordinator will for implementation. They will produce a regional fire plan and make arrangements with adjoining regions.

4. "That a National Rural Fire Authority (NRFA) is established."

This unit will set and oversee national standards and administer the Rural Fire Fighting fund. This will mean a Rural Fire Code of Practice, audits of RFA's and Regions, national training programmes, rural fire awareness campaigns, fire statistics, building a fire hazard data base, fire equipment specifications, research etc.

5. "That the NRFA should be the Fire Service Commission."

6. "That the NRFA should be assisted by a National Rural Fire Advisory Committee."

7. "That organisations with rural fire interests be responsible for their own routine costs."

8. "Extra-ordinary costs for fighting larger fires be met from an expanded Rural Fire Fighting Fund."

The present Rural Fire Fighting Fund (R.F.F.) of \$500,000 was too small for the 1988/89 fires. In addition, funding criteria are restrictive and administration procedures lengthy. R.F.A.'s will be eligible only if they meet NRFA standards.

9. "That the Rural Firefighting Fund be funded 50:50 by the Fire Service Commission and by the special levy on R.F.A.'s."

10. "That a new Forest and Rural Fires Act be passed."

This Statute would clearly define the principles, details, safeguards and responsibilities of the "new look" in rural fire control.

(Domestic and External Security Co-ordinator – DESC) to set up a committee and review the system for providing fire services to rural areas. Other committee members were from the Ministry of Forestry, the Departments of Conservation and Internal Affairs, the NZ Fire Service and DESC.

In March submissions were called for (over 70 were received) and two public meetings were held.

A draft report was submitted to Cabinet on June 26, 1989, and approval was given for the draft to be used as a basis for a second round of more detailed discussions. The Committee subsequently visited the six main centres and a total of over 300 people attended these meetings. A further 60 written submissions were received.

With the exception of the placement of the NRFA in the NZ Fire Service Commission the remainder of the recommendations were generally endorsed by most of the people and organisations making submissions, although there is still concern over the funding proposals.

A significant proportion of submissions (large forest owners, NZIF, NZFOA) wished the NRFA to be the Ministry of Forestry and not the Fire Service Commission. The arguments for the Commission included the fact that they were institutionalised, areas of vegetation within city areas now demanded closer fire fighting attention, and the fact that the Fire Service had good relations with RFAs in any case (111 calls and Volunteer Fire Brigade turnout). These arguments won the day.

Comment

The preparation and recommendations contained in the final report were not all plain sailing, particularly with regard to the placement of the NRFA in the Fire Service Commission.

The New Zealand Forest Owners' Association and the Ministry of Forestry fought hard to set up the NRFA in the Ministry. This resulted in Government delaying implementation on October 1, 1989 with the setting up of the Working Party to report to the Minister of Internal Affairs. With legislative backing it was felt that the Ministry could have done the job. The expertise will have to be transferred to the Fire Service in any case.

The Hensley report admits that the Fire Service has limited capacity to handle spreading fires in vegetation and forest, as was shown in Christchurch and Wellington in the 1988 fires.

Conditions were not easy for fire fighting in 1988 and, in my opinion, even the

presence of the New Zealand Forest Service would not have made any radical difference. There was extreme danger in Ashley, Eyrewell and Balmoral Forests and that would have been the Forest Service priority. The Christchurch city area would have been outside the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. The major Dunsandel fire blew up so quickly under strong north-west conditions that no organisation could have prevented the initial spread. As in the case of almost all dangerous fires it was the change in wind and weather which enabled the fire to be brought under control. However, Forest Service experience would have been very beneficial in the areas of rapid co-ordination and control assistance of the Dunsandel fire particularly, but also in the Rangiora area.

A rural fire co-ordinating committee was set up in Canterbury early in 1989 following the fires. The work of this committee, as for others in the country, will be a power for good in the prevention and control of fires in the future and especially when new legislation provides the necessary teeth.

In the final analysis a political decision has been made to place national rural fire matters in the hands of the Fire Service.

Other forest fire-fighting countries have not followed this pattern – Australia, USA and Canada especially. In Western Europe, because of dense populations and network of communities some countries have placed all fire organisations under the urban fire umbrella. This has not been successful in Spain and problems have arisen in France and England.

It behoves all of us in the rural areas, therefore, and those with forest interest especially, to make sure that rural needs are kept in mind by the Fire Service Commission and Minister of Internal Affairs.

The forest and rural representatives on the Working Party have a great responsibility therefore to ensure that the objectives are met.

Other recommendations will strengthen rural fire prevention and control especially in local government areas of responsibility. In the past they have often relied upon either the Forest Service or the Fire Service or both. Forest Owners have rarely shirked their fire responsibilities.

Neill Cooper
Committee Member
Hensley Report

Canadian forestry goes full circle

After being shunted from one department to another for three decades, Canadian forestry is once again to have a federal Department of Forestry.

The first autonomous Department of Forestry was created in 1960 but it was to become, in rapid succession, a branch of a variety of other parent organisations. In 1966 it became part of the Department of Forestry and Rural Development; in 1969, the Department of Fisheries and Forestry; was moved to the Department of Environment in 1971; and transferred to the Department of Agriculture in 1984. In 1988 it became a separate department, "Forestry Canada", operating through Orders-in-Council but early in 1990 is to become a full federal Department of Forestry under its own Act.

Mandate

The mandate of the new department will include: national leadership in the development and co-ordination of forest policy; forestry research and development; co-operation with involved orga-

nisations across a wide range of areas of forest management and protection. This reads remarkably like the functions of our own Ministry of Forestry which, according to the Minister, is about to be scrutinised by Cabinet to see if it should go out of existence.

Impetus

The Canadian impetus for the restoration of full departmental status has come from their private forestry sector, which was concerned at the lack of clear policies, especially for the sustainable management of forests. This lack was undoubtedly a result of the secondary status of forestry within other departments that had much wider responsibilities than forestry.

It is to be hoped that New Zealand forestry does not have to go on the same merry-go-round, when we already have the central Government structure that has taken Canada 30 years of trial and error to develop.

Colin Bassett