

STATEMENT BY CHIEF MINISTER, JON STANHOPE

**RELEASE OF THE REPORT OF THE INQUIRY INTO THE
OPERATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE JANUARY 2003
BUSHFIRES IN THE ACT**

4 AUGUST 2003

Thank you for joining me.

Today I am releasing the *Report of the Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*.

The report, prepared by the former Commonwealth Ombudsman, Mr Ron McLeod, is a comprehensive analysis of the actions taken by ACT Government agencies to protect us from bushfires and a rigorous assessment of our response to the fires once they had started.

The report also represents a significant milestone in the bushfire recovery process for the people of the ACT.

Mr McLeod's report contains a number of serious criticisms and identifies many areas where we can improve our performance.

As Chief Minister, and on behalf of my Government, I accept these criticisms. I commit myself, and my Government, to fully implementing all 61 of the recommendations.

I would like to extend my thanks to Mr Ron McLeod, his colleague Mr Stuart Ellis and his staff, for the quality of the Inquiry report and its recommendations. I would also like to thank all those within our community who made submissions to the inquiry. It is only through such submissions that the full story of the events and lessons from January can be known and understood.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all those who contributed to fighting the fires and dealing with their aftermath. You all deserve our

thanks, as do all those who have contributed to the recovery in the most professional, sensitive and efficient way.

On the 18th of January this year we, as a community, faced the worst natural disaster in our history.

The bushfires that swept through the Territory and into our city tragically claimed the lives of four members of our community, injured many others and destroyed 500 homes.

When I announced the establishment of this independent inquiry on the 10th of February, I said that we must learn from our experiences and ensure that we are better placed to respond to similar situations in the future.

I remain firm in that commitment.

The recommendations set out in Mr McLeod's report provide a clear program for action. My Government is committed to implementing this program in full.

We have already implemented many of the recommended measures or have taken steps to ensure they are completed before the beginning of the next bushfire season.

I would like to touch briefly on the key lessons identified in the report and outline the steps my Government is taking to address them.

The first key point made in the report is that the fires in the ACT could have been fought more aggressively in the first 36 to 48 hours.

We accept this criticism, and have already begun work on a number of major initiatives to ensure our response is more prompt and comprehensive in future.

Cabinet has already agreed to a key initiative – a significant increase in our aerial fire fighting capability through our participation in the National Aerial Firefighting Strategy and increased funding by approximately \$750, 000 a year for this initiative.

In addition, we allocated \$2 million over the next three years in the recent budget to better maintain fire suppression trails in national parks. We will also provide additional heavy fire fighting equipment and additional quick response fire teams for the summer period.

The second key lesson is that the information provided to the community could have been more timely and comprehensive.

Again, I agree that we can do much better and have taken action on two major initiatives.

We are developing a comprehensive bushfire preparation and awareness campaign that will begin before the next bushfire season. As part of the campaign, each household in the ACT will receive a comprehensive kit before the end of September. This kit will provide guidance on how to prepare homes for a potential bushfire threat and actions to take in the event of such an emergency. That kit will be supported by an extensive advertising campaign.

We are also finalising a detailed community communications plan to include in the ACT Emergency Management Plan so that we can provide information to the public in a more comprehensive and timely manner. We will finalise this plan in consultation with the local media and relevant community groups.

The third key lesson is the need for better coordination between the Emergency Services and the police on whether citizens should remain in their homes or evacuate in the event of a bushfire.

The ACT Police and the fire services have now developed a comprehensive agreement on the appropriate approach, which will be made clear in the information to be provided to households.

The police and fire authorities will continue to consult to ensure that all personnel are fully aware of these policies and the appropriate responses in particular circumstances.

The fourth key lesson is the need for a more extensive program of fuel reduction in parks and forests.

The Government agrees that a greater level of fuel reduction is needed. We are implementing an accelerated program of controlled burning and other fuel reduction measures such as hand clearing of key areas of bushland adjacent to housing. We will allocate additional resources to this task.

The report contains many other recommendations, some relating to the key findings I have summarised, while others address issues such as training for firefighting personnel, occupational health and safety, firefighting equipment, liaison with interstate agencies and the scope of our emergency services legislation.

Other recommendations go to the heart of the adequacy of our emergency services facilities and the structure of the Emergency Services Bureau.

My Government is committed to implementing all of the recommendations in the report, including the recommendation that the Emergency Services Bureau be replaced by a statutory authority.

Another very important recommendation is the establishment of a bushfire abatement zone between the Murrumbidgee river and the urban areas. This proposal will be addressed extensively in the Options Paper of the Non Urban Land Study which will be released next week.

I have established a Taskforce to implement the Inquiry's recommendations.

Recognising the importance of these issues, this taskforce will be made up of the Chief Executives of ACT Government Departments and the Chief Police Officer, and will be chaired by the Chief Minister's Department, Mr Robert Tonkin.

Their task will be firstly to recommend a detailed response plan for each recommendation, and then to direct their implementation. This detailed response to all 61 recommendations will be tabled in the Assembly in the week commencing 18 August.

My Government will also bring forward a comprehensive package of supporting expenditure proposals in the form of a Second Appropriation Bill.

Our aim is to learn the lessons from our experience in January and to take all the actions we can to ensure that the circumstances are not repeated.

Mr McLeod and his team have conducted a thorough and comprehensive analysis of our bushfire prevention and firefighting actions. His findings identify a number of shortcomings – all of which are systemic in nature.

I cannot promise to make us completely safe in the future – but I can promise to make us better prepared and equipped to deal with the challenges ahead.

I have learned the lessons from the tragedy of January 18 and am ready to move forward and work with the community to ensure we are - as Mr McLeod says, better able to deal with the range of bushfires that we are more likely to encounter in the future.

I would again like to thank Mr McLeod and his team for an excellent report. I would also like to thank all those who contributed to the inquiry. And most of all, I would like to once again thank all those – including the many members of our community – who fought the fires and have worked tirelessly to help us recover.

As Mr McLeod said:

The event was a terrible experience, and it is seared into the memory of so many in the ACT; but like so much in life, it also highlighted the huge capability of human endeavour under pressure and the healing capacity of the human spirit.

In conclusion I would like to read from pages 242-243 of the report – Mr McLeod's final words:

Thank you.