

Rec'd 30/3/07

Commissioner of the NSW Rural Fire Service



Wednesday 21 March 2007

Dear Members,

On Monday night, 12 March, you may have seen an ABC Four Corners report entitled 'Firestorm' which purported to investigate the impact of climate change on bushfire in Australia and around the world. While the program did touch on climate change issues, it also contained claims that the RFS's response to the Macintyre's Hut fire in January 2003 was inadequate.

Let me make it perfectly clear to you all that the NSW Rural Fire Service utterly rejects these claims.

The core of the Four Corners program is an undisguised allegation that a direct attack should have been made on the Macintyre's Hut fire on the afternoon and evening of 8 January 2003, and that our failure to do this led directly to the Canberra firestorm, the loss of 500 homes and the death of four people.

For the record, a crew was sent in shortly after the fire was detected. The crew leader determined it was not safe to undertake a direct attack given the size of the fire, the terrain and numerous other smaller fires reported in the area. This was relayed to the incident controller who rightly took the decision not to commit crews to direct attack at that time.

This decision has been supported by the RFS throughout the numerous investigations into the fire and was vindicated by the NSW Coroner Carl Milovanovich in September 2003 after his inquiry when he found:

"I am of the view that to have sent firefighters into the Brindabella Range on the afternoon of 8th January 2003 would be contrary to all basic firefighting knowledge and would have placed professional and volunteer firefighters in potentially grave danger."

Four Corners, for reasons of their own, did not see fit to even refer to the NSW Coroner.

At all times our overriding concern is and will always be for the safety of our volunteer crews. Our Incident Controllers take their responsibility for your safety very seriously and will not put you at risk simply because well meaning but untrained people think action should be taken.

The suggestion that somehow our firefighting efforts caused the Canberra firestorm is an unwarranted attack on the integrity and credibility of our Service and ignores the established facts. We will be taking the matter further with the ABC.

Sincerely,

Rob Rogers AFSM
Acting Commissioner NSW Rural Fire Service