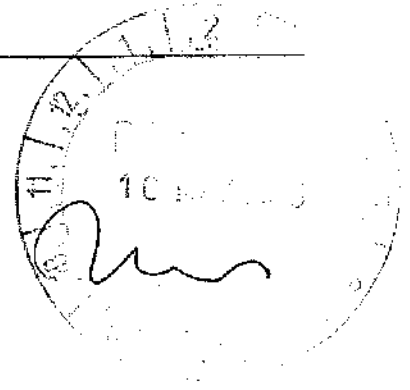


Newsome, Silvana (REPS)

From: John McDermott
Sent: Friday, 9 May 2003 11:15 AM
To: Committee, Bushfires (REPS)
Subject: Nairn Select Committee on recent Australian Bushfires



9 May 2003

Mr Ian Dundas

Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires

Department of the House of Representatives

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Australia

Submission No.226

Dear Mr Dundas.

As Director and Chief Pilot of Australian Helicopter Company, McDermott Aviation, I'd like to request the opportunity to appear in front of the Inquiry by House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires and offer a succinct submission to assist in an overall successful outcome for it. May I Start by offering the Committee a brief background on McDermott Aviation. McDermott Aviation is the largest, most professional privately owned Heli-Aviation Company in Australia, established in 1982 & incorporated in 1983.

Our Helicopter fleet consists of **Seven** Bell 47 Turbine Helicopters **Eight** Bell 204 'Medium Lift' Helicopters and **Three** Bell 214B 'Heavy lift' Helicopters. Our Helicopters are classified in Transport Category, along with the size of the 214B in particular, they are capable of carrying 14-15 Fire-Fighters/passengers. The internal capacity of the B204 and B214 enable us the added advantage of being able to carry/relocate Bambi Buckets, equipment and or passengers within the cabin and travel at cruise speeds of 135-140 kts (260-270 kph).

Over the years we have been involved in Fire spotting and Fire bombing for DPI Forestry, NSW Parks & Wild-life, NSW Rural Fire Services and a number of privately owned forest companies. During the most recent fire disaster in Sydney -NSW, our helicopters were deployed into some of the most severely effected areas, regularly flying 10 hour operational days per helicopter, with all scheduled and unscheduled maintenance carried out 'after-hours' to ensure all machines were available for tasking each morning. During one eight-week period we flew 817 hours with three B204's, with only one unscheduled maintenance issue resulting in one aircraft being unavailable for one day! Two of our B214's flew a total of 800 hours from October 2202 to February 2003 and provided a 99% availability call out rate.

My aim is not to throw criticism nor pass on what should have occurred now with the wisdom of hindsight, however we do believe this is the right arena to put forward our views and capabilities for 'correctly' run aerial fire fighting operations within Australia. The current system of calling machines, (helicopters) in once the fires have reached critical stage is a long way short of correct utilisation. Some of the issues which became obvious were the lack of interaction from air to ground units which is vital for effective control. To overcome these problems, there needs to be a dedicated Helicopter fire fighting unit established, which will allow training of fire fighters with interaction and better use of aerial support for the ground units. This at present not only does not occur, it can not occur with the present set up and approach of only calling when things have got out of control. With this in mind, we believe, there needs to be established aerial capabilities, such as those used in USA and Europe. I know there will be plenty who say that millions of dollars were spent on Aerial attack this season, but the critical point I am trying to make is how that money was spent and who

10/05/2003

was capable of quantifying the effectiveness? I can assure you, as an owner/operator/pilot who had up to six of our large helicopters engaged on fire fighting activities this past season, there is much room for serious improvement.

McDermott Aviation is the only Australian company able to provide up to seven or more 'medium-large' sized (1500 - 3500kg capacity) helicopters (we own eleven). I offer below a few suggestions, which I believe may assist in maximising the resources, value for money and resource efforts utilised in Australian Fire-Fighting efforts.

To enable the establishment of a serious and effective Aerial Fire fighting service, we believe a few steps should be considered.

- a) Contracts offered for establishment of Medium sized helicopter's capable of water/foam bombing loads of >1200liters and passenger capabilities of at least 8 pax's placed/based in strategic locations. These machines should be 'contracted' say October through February, allowing operators to feel secure in investing in 'improved' technology and ensuring proper and correct training is regularly implemented. To enable this to work, contracts similar to those in place in Victoria would need to be established, as, reliance on Medium or Larger sized helicopters to be available on an 'ad-hoc' basis is unrealistic, as the investment to the operator is too great. At present there is a reasonably large pool of 'light' helis available (Jet rangers/Squirrels) but these machines have a very limited effectiveness and dollar value for 'water bombing' Currently NSW/ACT Fire Services are totally reliant on Medium or larger machines' *hopefully* being available on a call when needed basis
- b) Better use of 'contractor' supplied 'total package', i.e.; allow the contractor to be responsible for running operations at the Heli-base with respect to heli ops, refuelling etc. This would release the 'volunteer' fire fighters to the fire ground and improve efficiencies and safety issues with regards refuelling and operations around helicopters etc. In our case all our 'ground personnel' are fully trained and regularly checked for proficiency.
- c) Consider allowing contractors to supply their own fuel trucks and support equipment. Considerable savings could be available to Fire Authorities utilising contractor-supplied fuel, without tying up large capital investments from Fire Agencies.
- d) More consultation should be undertaken between Fire Agencies with regards machinery utilisation and co-ordination. Smaller Bell Jet Rangers flying around with between 300-400 litre Bambi Buckets is neither an effective nor cost efficient means of fighting fire from the air! These machine can however be used for repositioning fuel supplies etc so as to allow for optimum use of the larger machines nearer the fire ground.
- e) We introduced the two 'heavy lift' (3500 litre) 15 passenger Bell 214B helicopters this season, which proved extremely efficient and cost effective. We believe better utilisation of this type of machine locally owned and operated could be made by the Fire Authorities and would be a far better use of funds, compared to the 'panic' situation, which can occur when things get out of hand. Some of the 'hype' being reported on some of the over-seas machines should be viewed critically and to some degree sceptically. Once again, we are able to provide first hand experience of many of the 'over-stated' achievements credited by some of the media. We should point out, we are not taking anything away from the usefulness and abilities of some of these machines, however, similar resources are now available within Australia at considerable savings to the user and 'in or out' of season!
- f) It must be emphasised, that Australia has the equipment, pilots, and skills to run these operations. It will require a concerted effort by all involved to 'tune' a very effective and useful tool to supplement the existing ground services currently employed.

Mr Dundas, we would ardently desire the opportunity to appear before and offer accounts to the

committee on first hand basis, where I'm sure the prospect to answer questions and provide technical and accurate reporting would be advantageous for all. I trust this very brief submission provides some food for thought, and as mentioned welcome the opportunity to discuss any of these matters further. Good luck!

John McDermott
Director/Chief pilot
McDermott Aviation Pty Ltd