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Report to Environment Committee
from Debbie Cunningham, Emergency Management Officer

**Environment Division Involvement in Rural Fire Management
15 – 20 January 2001.**

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to :

- inform the Committee about the role of the Emergency Management Department during the Upper Hutt Fires; and
- outline the lessons learned that will enhance the Department's role in future events.

2. Background

On 15 January 2001 suspicious fires broke out in exotic forests close to Avro Road (Pinehaven) and Reynolds Bach Drive (Silverstream) in Upper Hutt. The pine plantation forests were ready for harvesting and contained approximately \$1m worth of export timber. A substantial number of residential properties were also under threat, especially in the areas of Avro Road and Wyndham Road.

2.1 Timeline of events

Monday 15 January 2001

The first outbreak of fire was reported near Silverstream (Reynolds Bach Drive) on Monday afternoon. This fire was extinguished quite rapidly. At 7:30pm on Monday night, 15 January, around seven suspicious fires were ignited near Avro Road, Pinehaven. Upper Hutt City Council Rural Fire

staff managed this event through the night. Of these, three were extinguished overnight. The remaining fires turned into underground fires, which made them difficult to locate and manage. The only way to deal with these fires was to use lots of manpower and water. A bulldozer was used to clear access to the fire ground and to provide safe turning points for the water tankers.

Tuesday 16 January 2001

Emergency management staff from local authorities in the Region were called in around 5:00am, 16 January, to assist in the incident management of the event. An Incident Management Headquarters was established at Silverstream Fire Station.

Around four areas of fire remained in Pinehaven. A strong wind warning was in place, which grounded helicopter attacks on the fires. Wind measured at Avro Road sometimes exceeded 140km/h.

Wednesday 17 January 2001

On Wednesday afternoon another suspicious fire was ignited at Reynolds Bach Drive. Additional fires also broke out in Plimmerton and Ascot Park. The Plimmerton fire required diversion of some resources from Upper Hutt, but was not considered suspicious. The Ascot Park fire was extinguished early that afternoon.

At this stage the Incident Management Headquarters became a Regional Rural Fire Resource Co-ordination Centre. The purpose of the regional management team was to co-ordinate resources between the fires at all of these locations. It was particularly important to monitor which rural fire forces had been adequately rested between shifts and which helicopter resources were available. Between 15 and 28 fire appliances and three helicopters were used in the Plimmerton/Ascot Park fires. By the afternoon the Incident Management Team had deployed all available staff and equipment. Fire fighters worked in extremely treacherous conditions - unstable ground, thick smoke and slopes of up to sixty degrees. An urgent request was made to the National Rural Fire Authority and the NZ Army to provide support in the form of manpower and equipment.

By Wednesday evening the Plimmerton fire was extinguished, but continued to be monitored.

The Upper Hutt fires continued to require additional personnel to fight fire and mop up hot spots that became known after the use of heat seeking equipment. One previously extinguished fire at Silverstream re-ignited. Two fires remained in Silverstream. Notifications were delivered to residents of three Upper Hutt streets advising them of what to do should evacuation be required. There was a low possibility that this may have been required.

Thursday 18 January 2001

Additional small fires were extinguished at Pomare, Plimmerton and Upper Hutt on Thursday. Mop up operations and dampening down hot spots continued. The Plimmerton fire was declared out at 6:30pm.

Friday 19 January 2001 – Saturday 20 January 2001

Regional co-ordination ceased on Friday 19 January. Another two hot spots were found at the Avro Road fire and both were dampened down. Clearing up of the headquarters was conducted on Saturday 20 January. The mop up operations (removing of fire gear from the fire grounds) was concluded on Saturday January 20.

Throughout the event it was estimated that 1.5 million litres of water was used to fight the Upper Hutt fires. The Red Cross served and distributed 840 cooked meals to fire fighters (which do not include the approximate 100 meals for management staff). This is an average of 70 fire fighters being fed per day for a period of four days.

The total area burned in the Upper Hutt fires was 14-16 hectares out of 50 hectares of exotic forest.

By effectively putting these fires out, it ensured a saving of at least \$1m of export timber and it also minimised the ecological and visual damage to the environment of Pinehaven.

2.2 **Organisations involved**

At all stages throughout the fire events ultimate authority lay with the Rural Fire Authority within whose boundary the fires were occurring. In Upper Hutt this was the Upper Hutt City Council Rural Fire Authority and for the Plimmerton fire this was the Porirua City Council Rural Fire Authority.

Fire fighting on these fires involved responders from the following agencies: Wellington City Rural Fire Force; Hutt Valley Bush Fire Force; Department of Conservation; Wellington Regional Council; Wainuiomata Bush Fire Force; Eastbourne Bush Fire Force; Te Horo Bush Fire Force; New Zealand Defence Force (Trentham and Linton); New Zealand Fire Service; Wairarapa Bush Fire Forces; Upper Hutt Community Rescue; Helipro; and Westpac Trust Rescue Helicopters.

Support and management staff came from the following agencies: Fire Police; NZ Police; Upper Hutt Community Rescue; Red Cross; National Rural Fire Authority; Wellington Free Ambulance; Wellington Regional Council; Kapiti Coast District Council; Porirua City Council; Wellington Emergency Management Office; Hutt City Council; and Upper Hutt City Council.

2.3 Environment Division staff involvement

At 5:00am on 16 January, Emergency Management Department staff were called in to be part of the incident management team for the event. This was based on a mutual aid agreement between all Councils in the Wellington Region for the purpose of managing emergencies. Both Rian van Schalkwyk and Debbie Cunningham worked long hours during the event (75 and 52 respectively).

Rian van Schalkwyk, Manager Emergency Management was part of the incident management team and Planning/Intelligence Manager. This role involved assessing the availability of fire fighting crews and requesting, tasking and standing down crews working on the Upper Hutt fires. The role also involved displaying this information in the headquarters and briefing the next shift of staff. Briefings were conducted to fire fighters arriving on the scene about where they were being tasked to and what their role was. In addition long term planning and strategies were brought to the attention of the Incident Controller. Assistance and advice was provided to the Logistics Manager and Incident Controller.

Debbie Cunningham, Emergency Management Officer was part of the incident management team as information officer. This role involved managing media interest. Press releases were generated up to 5 times per day and the media were briefed on the progress of the fire fighting. The role also involved maintaining a watch on all media coverage (radio, television and newspaper). Television crews who visited the scene were hosted and interviews arranged with the Incident Controller. In addition the role involved answering public enquiries. This was important particularly after a notice was delivered to residents of three Upper Hutt streets advising them of what to do should an evacuation be required. The final part of the role was maintaining a log of all important decisions, actions, and movements of people or equipment.

Kirby MacLeod, Resource Advisor, Consents Management was utilised by the incident management team to document the event. Mr MacLeod is a trained firefighter and an Emergency Management Department volunteer. This enabled him to go onto the fire ground and video the fire fighting methods being utilised and the management systems set up for the event. This footage will be valuable for future training purposes.

Mr MacLeod was utilised for 5 hours on Wednesday 17 January.

2.4 **Wellington Regional Council fire fighting crews**

Fire fighters from the Wellington Regional Council crews were utilised on a number of occasions. This is because there are contractual arrangements between WRC and each Rural Fire Authority in the Wellington Region. Throughout the course of the fires Dean Hearfield, Ranger, Parks and Forests, served as Incident Controller/Operations Manager, Air Operations Manager and Crew Boss. Robin (Lofty) Blake, Ranger, Parks and Forests, was also a Sector Boss and Crew Boss. At least eight additional WRC staff were involved as fire fighters.

3. **Lessons learned**

Developing relationships with emergency management responders is critical before an event occurs. The relationships that have been developed between WRC Emergency Management staff and other emergency managers and responding organisations were valuable in this event. This meant that effective communication could be established with the most appropriate person.

Visually displaying information is important in a headquarters. Throughout the course of the event numerous ways of displaying information were tested and a number of excellent formats emerged. These formats will be built into emergency management volunteer training for 2001.

Proactive media management is important. The media had direct access to information about the latest developments at the scenes of the fire. There was considerable media interest and regular news releases relieved the pressure of having to repeat the same message a number of times.

Our intention now is to:

- develop a standard operating procedure for media relations during such an event. This should involve consultation with the Communications Section and include agreements to utilise their skills where appropriate;
- make Emergency Management volunteers aware of the lessons learned from this event as part of their training programme for 2001; and
- revise the content of the training session that covers visually displaying information in the headquarters. Emergency Management volunteers should become familiar with the new methods used in this event.

4. **Recommendation**

That the report be received and the contents noted.

Report prepared by:

Approved for submission:

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