

## Debus responds to fire critics - in the post

Bob Debus, Member for Blue Mountains and Minister for the Environment, has written to residents who had their names listed in an advertisement published in the BMG (6.12.06) calling upon the State Government to hold an 'independent review' of the Grose Valley Fire.

"The advertisement was published in the context of what appeared to be an organised campaign. Many people in public positions were receiving emails, some of them wildly hostile to the Rural Fire Service (RFS), and Gregg Borschmann was researching an article which later appeared on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald where it read like a bizarre left-wing answer to Miranda Devine," Mr Debus said in his letter.

"Most people writing to me appeared to have no understanding that the Rural Fires Act requires close co-operation between all land managers and that National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) staff were in consequence a critical part of fire management planning throughout the event.

"Neither was there an understanding that backburning was being used as a fire-fighting method when 'direct attack' methods were ineffective or unsafe for fire-fighters.

"The membership of the RFS in the Blue Mountains represents a cross section of the community and numbers nearly 2000 . . . The reality for them is that this fire had to be fought in exceedingly difficult, physically exhausting conditions of extreme weather. They have been aware that present conditions of extreme drought have made all fires exceptionally hard to extinguish. This fire was nevertheless contained to an area smaller than that of any of the many other Grose fires in memory without loss of life or property.

"The majority of volunteers I have spoken to

have responded to the advertisement with feelings of anger and a sense of betrayal. Even had the advertisement not been published before the fire was extinguished, it would still have been provocative. For example:

"It ignores the existence of a series of established agency and interagency procedures for assessing fire operations and strategy, implying instead that we need other methods to establish the truth.

"It suggests that local knowledge should be used, although the Incident Management Team consisted of local RFS and NPWS people of vast experience.

"It suggests that we need to 'better manage fire in this landscape' but fails to notice that this is the principle upon which NPWS and RFS permanently conduct themselves. . . It suggests, in an agreeable armchair manner, that we need to give more consideration to the issue of "large scale backburning in severe conditions" without any acknowledgement of the stressful circumstances of uncertainty and danger in which fire-fighters will inevitably make such decisions in real life.

"It appeals to the widespread fear in the community that the Blue Gum Forest has been destroyed forever, although the loss of trees is likely not to be great.

"On the other hand, it makes no persuasive case at all for the establishment of an 'independent inquiry'. That would inescapably create the public perception of an investigation into significant operational or strategic failure on the part of fire-fighting agencies.

"Nevertheless, there is every good reason to encourage dialogue between the agencies and the community to increase understanding and further develop firefighting methods."