

11.3 MURRAY REGION FIRE PROTECTION GRANT - TUMUT AERODROME HANGAR - ATTACHMENTS

Attachment Titles:

1. Letter Received From Fire Reference Group
2. Letter industry funding from SWG
3. BFMC Letter of Support - Heavy Helicopter Hanger Grant Proposal

Attachment 1 - Letter Received from Fire Reference Group

Department of Primary Industries
and Regional Development



7 November 2024

Snowy Valleys Council
Att: General Manager, Mr. S. Pinnuck
info@svc.nsw.gov.au
cc jham@svc.nsw.gov.au

Re: Invitation to apply for Tumut Aerodrome Aircraft Hangar Project - Plantations Fire Protection Fund.

Dear Steven,

I am writing to you in my capacity as Chair of the Plantations Fire Reference Group (FRG). The Fire Reference Group comprises representatives from the Rural Fire Service (RFS), the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD), the Softwoods Working Group (SWG) and plantation owners.

The Plantations FRG has worked with the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development to identify projects for consideration for the Murray Region Plantations Fire Protection Fund (PFPF) established by the NSW Government. The FRG identified priority projects and suitable applicants with input from a regional prioritisation group consisting of plantation growers, representatives of industry, councils, fire authorities and facilitated by the Softwoods Working Group.

The funding programs aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Prevention of bushfires occurring or spreading by constructing new and maintaining established strategic fire trails and asset protection zones.
- Building of rapid response capability and suppress fires and prevent their spread such as towers, remote sensing and camera technology to detect fires early.
- Improvement of tactical and operational response with additional fire tankers, equipment and infrastructure.

One of the projects identified by the FRG is the construction of a specialist aircraft hangar at Tumut Aerodrome. The hangar will enable specialist firefighting aircraft to be temporarily or permanently located within the region. The combination of local terrain and hazardous weather conditions in the Snowy Mountains regions can result in unsafe and dangerous flying conditions between Cooma (the current location of firefighting aircraft for the region) and the Murray Region including around Tumut which can prevent access in key response times. The proposed project would provide better protection to the communities of the region including the Tumut and Snowy Valleys communities.

Snowy Valleys Council are the identified project owner as it is responsible for the Tumut Aerodrome and the construction of the hangar complements the Tumut Aerodrome infrastructure upgrade plans. The project is an important part of a suite of projects identified to improve fire detection, prevention and response in the region.

At a recent FRG meeting, it was noted that Snowy Valleys Council (SVC) declined an invitation to apply for funding construction of a new aircraft hangar at Tumut Aerodrome. The FRG expressed unanimous disappointment regarding the Council's decision, made on October 17, and believes the facility is crucial for both immediate and long-term fire protection in the region. The FRG request the decision to be revisited at the Council's meeting on November 21 with Council receiving a second invitation to apply to the PFPF for 'Tumut Aerodrome - hangar for fire suppression aircraft'.

The Council's meeting also considered a land acquisition proposal as an alternative to the hangar project, but it was determined that the proposal did not meet the necessary requirements for the PFPF funding. The PFPF is being delivered through a closed non-competitive process with only invited applicants able to apply for identified projects.

Following the October 17 meeting, the FRG identified that the SVC may not have had the all the relevant and correct information available to them at the time of the decision. The FRG provides the following information to address concerns raised by the SVC and to assist the SVC in making an informed decision regarding the second invitation to apply to the PFPF. Information that may have been incomplete or potentially misunderstood include:

1. **Strategic Role of the Hangar:** The RFS would at times, based on operational demand be able to base the Bell 412 or similar specialist helicopter in Tumut if a suitable stabling facility were available. The specialist helicopter is equipped with advanced heat-sensing technology, including Forward Looking Infra-Red (FLIR) cameras, which allow for aerial surveillance and fire detection, even in low-visibility or nighttime conditions. The Bell 412 can also transport personnel, deploy winching operations, and conduct water drops up to 1,400L per drop utilising a 'belly tank' arrangement.

The hangar would also be suitable for the soon to be commissioned Black Hawk aircraft (which could be located at Tumut at times based on operational priorities) which provides excellent initial direct attack capability due to its high performance and water drop capacity of 4,000L utilising a 'belly tank' arrangement.

Additionally, a NSW firefighting authority, Forestry Corporation of NSW would be able to utilise the facility to locate their contract aircraft based on operational activity.

2. **Complementary to Local Services:** The new hangar would not conflict with local service providers. True North has an existing use contract with the National Aerial Fire Fighting Centre (also see <https://www.nafc.org.au/>), which includes allocations for Tumut. These contracts have fixed terms and are reviewed periodically on a commercial arrangement. Hence the new hangar would complement these services for the region.
3. **Multi-Use Facility:** When not required for the specialist firefighting aircraft, the hangar would be available for other uses.
4. **Interim Maintenance Funding:** While the RFS may not assume maintenance costs until the new Fire Control Centre is complete, the Softwood Working Group (SWG) is confident it can secure an interim funding source.
5. **Alignment with the Master Plan:** The precinct's Master Plan includes provisions for a hangar.
6. **Commitment to Tumut Fire Control Centre:** While the RFS remains committed to a Fire Control Centre in Tumut, prioritisation for this Program delivery has resulted in delayed roll out of some Fire Control Centres. Despite this, the RFS is committed to the completion of the new Fire Control Centre.

Since October 17, the FRG has also reviewed the General Manager's list of requirements for Council to reconsider the project. Below are the details and additional commentary for each point.

1. Need for the Hangar

The proposed hangar would provide strategically important infrastructure that will enable rapid, timely deployment of specialized aircraft, critical for quick fire response in the SW Slopes region. This need was underscored by outcomes from recent State and Federal inquiries, including the 2019-20 Royal Commission. Relevant commentary from the 2020 NSW Bushfire Inquiry Final Report include:

- *Firefighting strategies including improving capabilities for immediate detection of new ignitions, especially in remote areas, and fast responses to keep new fires small..... and we need to understand and predict better when fires might escalate into dangerous, extreme fires....*

- *We need to push available technologies harder, especially fire science, remote sensing, data science and artificial intelligence to equip us better to understand what happens during a bush fire and respond more quickly.*
- *Ideally, technology will be harnessed to minimise the risk to first responders. We need to grab what is becoming possible in terms of manned and unmanned aircraft and vehicles, and think big about what will make firefighting, and living in the community with fire, safer.*

The hangar would provide safe and secure accommodation for helicopters, such as the Bell 412 which is equipped with cutting-edge fire management technology. It will also enable timely aircraft mobilization and safer conditions for ground crews by identifying active fire fronts and high-risk areas even at night.

It is interesting to note the extent of aerial capacity that is either currently available or being developed by government agencies such as the RFS.

- There are currently six Bell 412 helicopters in service and two Black Hawks (currently being prepared for operational duties) that could potentially be deployed to the SW Slopes region and stabled in Tumut.
- The NSW RFS Bell 412's can undertake the following activities:
 - Winching of personnel
 - Fire-bombing using either a fitted tank of approximately 1400 litre capacity or an approximately 900 litre bucket
 - Camera technology for mapping, surveillance and long-distance viewing
 - Accurate GPS tracking
 - Forward Looking Infra-Red (FLIR) technology. This facility is essentially defence technology in the civilian sector and has very stringent security requirements.
 - Adjust their working profiles in about two hours to take account of the incident requirements. E.g. With a bucket, winching gear and camera platform, there is the capacity for an additional 4 fire crew on board as well. Removal of various equipment can enable a carrying capacity of up to 8 people.
 - Nighttime surveillance and camera work.
 - Operational capabilities not available locally.
- When operational (estimated to be December 2024) the Black Hawk helicopters will also be eligible for stabling in this facility. The Black Hawk is a high-performance aircraft with fast turnaround times and excellent direct attack capability. The Black Hawk has a water bombing capacity of 4000 litres utilising a 'belly tank' arrangement.

As you are aware, in protecting the plantations, agricultural crops and the community "early detection and rapid response" is the critical strategy. A general 'rule of thumb' is that on a day with a

Fire Behaviour Index (FBI) of 25 and above, effectiveness of initial direct attack reduces considerably after 30 minutes from ignition time. Once a fire has established in one plantation in these conditions, it can destroy pine at a rate of several hundred hectares per hour, at a cost of up to approximately \$4m per hour.

As you are aware, the landscape and geography where plantations are located and across the region, is inherently variable. From undulating cleared farmland to rugged and mountainous alpine forests with elevations similarly ranging from less than 200m to over 1200m. This has meant that an initial response to a fire incident may not be as timely or informative without the immediate availability of well-equipped, specialist aircraft such as the Bell 412, Black Hawk or similar. This type of resource will be of value to all the first response agencies including FCNSW, NPWS and Local Government, emergency services, Police, Ambulance, Rural Fire Service (RFS) and State Emergency Service (SES).

2. Project Scope, Dimensions, and Costs

The complete set of plans used for the Cooma Hangar facility has been provided to the SVC. Further engineering and costing details are being provided with recent consultation occurring between SVC staff and RFS. Final commitment to the project will follow cost verification and signing of the funding deed. Hence there is still time to finalise cost estimates subsequent to this initial application being lodged.

3. Maintenance Funding Commitment

Third parties are willing to commit to maintenance costs for the hangar until the new Fire Control Centre is operational. This could be formalised during the application process.

4. Council Funding Obligations

The Council can ensure the project funds sought are for a sufficient quoted amount and the PFPF provides sufficient contingency for funded projects through the program rules. The contingency will allow for reasonable project costs that exceed the original budget. It is unlikely the budget will be exceeded if the project is completed within the timeframe.

5. Importance to the Community

This project will enhance fire suppression capabilities for the South Western Slopes plantation zone. The Tumut hangar would also allow for the potential stationing of additional specialist firefighting aircraft. The SWG and RFS strongly supports positioning such aircraft in Tumut, which would increase aerial fire management capabilities to protect the region's communities, environment, and industries.

The FRG identified several key reasons for prioritizing this project:

- Lack of current hangar facilities prevents storing aircraft with specialist firefighting equipment at Tumut Airport.
- Aircraft stationed in other regions may face delays reaching Tumut due to weather or competing emergencies.

The need for increased aerial fire management capabilities and fire detection, management and prevention for the region is highlighted by the fire risk identified in the NSW Government Climate Impact Profile. The following is an excerpt from the document:

Very high to extreme fire danger days are projected to increase by 10–50% and the conditions conducive to large and intense fires (such as prolonged drought, low humidity, number of days with high temperature and high wind speeds) will more likely than not increase.

SVC is the designated project owner, given its responsibility for the Aerodrome and the Tumut infrastructure upgrades. The proposed hangar is one of several planned improvements aimed at bolstering fire response and protection for the area. Having a hangar facility at the Tumut aerodrome allows for specialist firefighting aircraft to be in the region at high-risk times to reduce the risk of aircraft not being able to respond to bushfires due to hazardous weather conditions.

Conclusion.

Investing in this critical infrastructure will provide comprehensive protection for not only the forestry industry but also agriculture, horticulture, tourism, and the communities of the South Western Slopes. Improved aerial firefighting capabilities will also enhance community safety and resilience across the Snowy Valleys region.

The FRG is committed to supporting priority fire protection projects such as this one and willing to assist the SVC as much as possible. We would be pleased to meet with you, your Councillors, or staff to provide further insights into the project's benefits for the SVC community.

Sincerely



Karen Kneipp

Chair, Plantations Fire Reference Group

karen.kneipp@dpird.nsw.gov.au

Attachment 2 - Letter industry funding from SWG

*"Growing Trees, Growing Timber,
Growing Communities"*

13th November 2024

Mr Steven Pinnuck
Interim General Manager
Snowy Valleys Council

Sent via email: spinnuck@svc.nsw.gov.au

RE: Industry funding for Hangar maintenance – letter of intent

The Softwoods Working Group (SWG) and its members were instrumental in advocating for, and successfully receiving \$13m as part of the Plantation Fire Protection Fund (PFPF) from the NSW Government.

The funding is provided to the region to support fire prevention, detection and rapid response suppression for the purpose of protecting the plantation estate and neighbouring communities. As such, the SWG coordinated numerous discussions between key industry members, land managers, RFS and council to prioritise the infrastructure and assets that would provide the best outcomes for fire management.

The erection of a Hangar, located at the Tumut aerodrome was identified as a key piece of infrastructure by the group and supported by the Fire Reference Group. As such, the Snowy Valleys Council have been invited to apply for funding for this project.

The SWG industry members have agreed to support council in managing the maintenance costs associated with the Hangar. The intent of their agreement is detailed below:

PO Box 519 Lavington, NSW 2641 | P 0438 873 307
E info@murrayregionforestryhub.com.au | ABN: 33 241 194 030

1



*"Growing Trees, Growing Timber,
Growing Communities"*

The industry members of the SWG (Visy, Hyne, AKD, FCNSW and Southern Cross Forests) agree to pay a maximum of \$10,000 annually for the purpose of maintaining the building and providing necessary utilities and amenities. Costs incurred may include such things as insurance, utilities, cleaning (as required), and other amenities for the hangar to operate for the purposes of providing emergency services to the Murray region community of NSW.

The industry members of the SWG agree to pay this for a maximum of 5 years, or until the Fire Control Centre is finalised and the Rural Fire Service (RFS) take management rights of the Hangar as part of the Tumut aerodrome Master Plan.

The SWG will assist in managing the collection of funds to the value of the maintenance costs on behalf of the industry members.

Can you please include this information to inform the decisions of the Snowy Valleys Councillors for the upcoming meeting, 21 November 2024.

Should you have any queries please don't hesitate to contact me at any time.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carlie Porteous', written in a cursive style.

Carlie Porteous
Executive Officer

Attachment 3 - BFMC Letter of Support - Heavy Helicopter Hanger Grant Proposal

Snowy Valleys
BUSH FIRE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE



Address all correspondence to: Executive Officer, PO Box 401 Tumut NSW 2720. (riverina.highlands@rfs.nsw.gov.au)

The General Manager

R24-3274

Mr Steven Pinnuck

Snowy Valleys Council
76 Capper St Tumut NSW
2720

11 November 2024

Dear Steve,

Letter of Support- Fire Fighting Hanger Proposal

I am writing on behalf of the Snowy Valleys Bush Fire Management Committee (BFMC) following our Spring ordinary meeting last Thursday. One of the key issues raised during general business was the recent decision by Council to not support the establishment of an aircraft hangar at the Tumut Aerodrome, which forms part of a DPI grant application aimed at enhancing local firefighting capabilities.

After careful consideration, the BFMC has resolved to formally request that Council reconsider its position on the matter and provide support for the aircraft hangar grant application.

The Committee believes that the establishment of a dedicated hangar facility at Tumut Aerodrome would significantly improve our local firefighting capabilities. Specifically, it would facilitate the pre-positioning of a heavy rotary wing aircraft, along with the necessary support services, during periods of heightened fire risk. This would greatly benefit our community and the surrounding softwood industry, enhancing our collective ability to respond to fire threats and other emergencies in the region.

Since the catastrophic fires of the 2019-2020 fire season, there have been substantial advancements in aerial firefighting techniques and technologies. The BFMC feels that it is crucial for our region to embrace these developments in order to provide the best possible fire protection for our community and industries. Early detection and rapid suppression of ignitions are key to effective firefighting, and having the infrastructure in place to support these strategies is vital.

We thank you for your attention to this matter and look forward to a positive outcome that will benefit the safety and resilience of our region.

Yours sincerely,

Superintendent Jon Gregory
Executive Officer
Snowy Valleys Bush Fire Management Committee