



Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Submission Form

Please complete this form if you would like to provide input or comments about coordination, preparedness for, response to and recovery from the 2019-20 'Black Summer' bushfires.

Personal and Background Information

1. **Full Name** Katie Johnston
2. **Email** [REDACTED]
3. **Mobile/Telephone** [REDACTED]
4. **What is your preferred method of contact if we want to follow up with you?**

email, then phone

5. **The Commission would like to understand the views of community groups based on their respective experiences and background.**

- a. Please select Option 1 if you are providing input and comments primarily based on your personal situation.
- b. Please select Option 2 if you are providing input and comments primarily based on your professional knowledge, qualifications or experience, or on behalf of a group or organisation

Option 1: Based on your personal situation, please complete the following.

- a. What was your personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? Please choose all that apply.
 - I was not living in an area affected by bushfire
 - I lived in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and didn't suffer personal or financial loss
 - I lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, but didn't suffer personal or financial loss
 - I lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, and I suffered personal or financial loss
 - I was part of the emergency response as a fire fighter on the ground
 - I was part of the emergency response as an aerial fire fighter

- I was part of the emergency response as health professional
- I was part of the emergency response as an Australian Defence Force member
- I was part of the emergency response as a Commonwealth or State government employee
- I assisted the emergency response as a community support volunteer
- I assisted the emergency recovery (i.e. after the fire event) as a community support volunteer
- Other

b. Where do you live? Please provide your Local Government Area, town name and post code.

Local Government Area	Shoalhaven
Town name	Yatte Yattah
Post code	2539

Option 2: Based on your knowledge, qualifications or experience, or your role representing a group or organisation, what is your area of expertise? Please choose all that apply.

- Emergency/disaster response and/or management
 - Environment/land management
 - Land use, planning, building standards
 - Impacts of changes in climatic conditions
 - Wildlife conservation
 - Traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians
 - Community welfare
 - Other
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Input / Comments

6. In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

Fires near me app. ABC radio

7. In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

Limited resources, no warning on worst day

8. In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

increased resources

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

My story, please see attached word document

10. Do you intend to provide supporting material?

Yes

No

If you are providing any supporting material, please include it with your Submission if possible. If you need to send it separately (e.g. if you make a Submission over the phone), please ensure supporting material can be clearly identified as relating to your Submission by including your name or other identifier so that it can be considered with your Submission.

11. Do you agree to your submission being published? (Mandatory)

Yes, I agree to my submission being published in my name

Yes I agree to my submission being published anonymously

No I don't agree to my submission being published

Once you have completed this form, email it to rcnda.submissions@royalcommission.gov.au or print the form and post it to the Royal Commission at:

National Natural Disaster Royal Commission
Locked Bag 2000
Manuka ACT 2603

Our Story by Katie Johnston

On New Years Eve Dec 31st 2019 my family and I woke to the news that Batemans Bay was being hit with fire and saw a lot of fire trucks going south from our house just off the highway at Yatte Yattah. As I work down there, I was distraught for my friends and work colleagues.

We then noticed fire starting at Pointer Creek, moving beside us down Myrtle Creek gully on its way towards Conjola which is on the other side of the highway from us. Our neighbours, including a volunteer firefighter, noted we were in an alright position, and unlike other evacuations we had been a part of over the last month, had received no messages from the NSW govt or RFS to leave now if you were not going to stay and fight. We had one water tank and our land was very dry, so we had already discussed leaving as part of our fire plan.

As we watched closely and conversed with our neighbours, we received a message from the RFS stating it was now too late to leave and to bunker down. We were shocked. I put water in our bath and wet towels just in case. We had myself, my partner, our 2 children, a dog, guinea pig and two turtles. However, as the fire beside us came closer, we realised/suspected we also had a fire coming up the gully behind our property as well. We could not stay.

We got everyone but the turtles into two cars and as we left our house, realised our road was on fire on both sides. There was minimal to no visibility as we turned onto the highway and we prayed no one else was coming. As we drove down the highway trying to get to Milton – the only way we could go – there was large flames on both sides of the highway, minimal visibility and it was getting extremely hot. My children were understandably very distressed. I had seen a small home with two people with garden hoses back up the highway and turned around thinking we had more chance of survival with others, and the car would not make it through the flames much longer.

By the time we got out of the car, it was hot, smoky, and the flames were coming towards the small cabin. I begged them to let us in, and this family saved our lives by letting us in to the cabin, with their 2 children and 8 dogs, while they continually doused the outside of the cabin with water. Here we huddled for over 90min, hearing a truck blow up and not knowing if the flames would consume the tiny cabin. We tried to send messages to family of our love, and prayed that our children would survive or go quickly.

During this time we heard one fire truck go by the cabin on the highway, I was hoping it might stop but it didn't. After over 90min, a police car had got through to us, and offered us passage to Milton. I have never been so thankful in my life, and it was only then I thought we would get out of this OK. We followed them back to Milton, and even though it was minimal visibility in some areas, the fire had crossed the highway by this time. I could not believe the cars still worked, though my partners car door would not open and he was getting in and out through the open window. The car smelt of fire and soot for a month after, and we had to get rid of it.

When we were allowed back to our property a few days later, there was nothing left. The bath I had thought at one stage to get in was black and buckled. If we had stayed, we would all be

dead. Someone died on the street with the small cabin, and just up from our property. We lost everything but one bag of some nicknacks and clothes I had thrown together in 1 minute, and some of my son's toys. We lost the turtles. Family pictures, heirlooms, things from ours and our childrens baby years all gone. But we are alive. We had unpacked our bags a week ago when we had evacuated with a Pantec truck full, but the fire had not come near our area then and we became complacent. We also were used to the multiple messages informing us of what was happening and when it was time to leave. But we received none of that this day. We did not see or speak to one RFS person besides our volunteer neighbour.

I wish we had left early. I wish I had thought to pack our special things early and be more ready. I wish we had been told to 'leave now' instead of 'its too late' ,and end up having no other choice but to stay and die or run and try.

Thank you for letting me tell my story.