

Submission Number: NND.001.00285

Submission Of: Simon Curry

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation?

Your Submission

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

I am currently a salaried member of the NSW Rural Fire Service and worked in the State Operations centre in several roles from Major Incident Coordinator to logistics and also worked in the District Offices as a Logistics Officer and Rural Liaison Officer. My experience extends over 16 years in the Fire Service and I have undertaken many roles over the years in planning and response.

I believe one area that has improved immensely is public warning and messaging, the improvement in technology has made people more connected and I believe that tapping into social media worked well of informing the public of current fire situations and locations. Regular media grabs were beneficial in keeping the public informed and providing confidence in the government.

I believe the response of aircraft was of value up to a point where the conditions were favourable or where individual premises were under immediate threat to assist firefighters on the ground with property protection. Once Fire Danger ratings reached extreme to catastrophic, water bombing and retardant had little effect on the spread and intensity of fire.

The overall firefighting effort of volunteers and salaried staff on the ground was excellent and they did the best they could with the resources they had under impossible conditions

I believe that having a separate agency for recovery and building resilience that has been announced is a move in the right direction. This agency though needs to work closely with firefighting agencies for the purpose of future planning and preparation and must have a compliance role.

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

I believe the NSW RFS continuing with a major restructure of its workforce during the height of the bushfires was a poor decision. I know of several high level Fire Officers with many years of service and knowledge that left the service in the height of the fire season due to the realignment and I believe this affected the NSW RFS ability to fill management roles in the State Operations centre with effective people. This added to poor morale of staff and I have no doubt affected people's performance and decision making.

I believe under a normal bush fire season, even with several major fires, I believe agencies were at a level to respond adequately. As the season turned out anything but, fire agencies could not supply the resources to combat such large areas of fire from all areas of the state at one time and I believe this should have been foreseen with the drought and dryness of the fuel in all areas of the States - refer the introduction of the Royal Commission into the 1939 Bushfires in Victoria. It reads as if it was the lead up to the 2019/1920 Bushfire season.

I don't believe the coordination of State and Federal governments worked well, especially with the use of the ADF. I worked personally in the NSW State Operations centre trying to get an Army crew that were already tasked to the northern area of the state to help with moving equipment around and use their expertise as qualified chainsaw operators to clear roads to allow access for firefighters, house loss assessors and members of the public to return home. Because there wasn't a specific tasking order to carry this role the crews would not engage in this activity. I sought an approval email from the Army Liaison officer in State Operations which was returned through myself and to the crews. As this approval was not an official tasking order the crews would not carry out the tasks and the job was not completed.

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

The use of Federal support needs to be streamlined. The use of the ADF should also be seamless and utilised early without any fear of loss of decision making or takeover but as an extra resource. Maybe something similar to a section 44 in the NSW RFS where it is declared when a local district has not the resources or capacity to manage a large incident in their area and requires extra assistance. A trigger point could be set up where the ADF or Federal resources are activated. Ideally ADF personnel would benefit from having training in bush firefighting as part of their initial training where they could assist in large scale operations where resources are short.

Coordination between interstate agencies needs to be more streamlined. Not one state can supply all the required resources, so seamless protocols need to be in place with a continued focus on a national approach to uniformed communications, training, technology and sharing resources with assistance and guidance from combined agency councils like AFAC.

Bushfire Risk Management planning needs to be overhauled with the introduction of usable risk management plans and solutions for making Bushfire Management Committees more functional. Many committee members don't understand their agency role within the committee and play a passive role with decision making. Champions in this field like the Canobolas Bushfire Management committee based in Orange NSW need to modelled across the country with their strategic planning and operation and possibly used as a mentor for other Districts with their innovative Bushfire Risk management plan that assess and rates each brigade area for risk. This assessment of each brigade area is used as a whole of business approach so training, resources, equipment, vegetation etc. all feed into the assessment and then each brigade area is then assessed and rated so treatments can then be put into place. For example, a brigade area that had a lot of vegetation such as a National Park in their brigade area and had less resources and personnel would rate at a higher risk than a brigade which was closer to a major centre with many resources and well trained personnel.

Encouraging our young people to join volunteer organisations is paramount. Cadet programs, school programs and youth participation needs to be expanded and promoted with incentives to join agencies. Pathways into firefighting agencies with National qualification training not only provides succession planning to maintain their workforce but provides employment opportunities which is especially beneficial in rural and remote communities.

I believe the mobile network needs to be more robust and measures need to put in place to protect the communication towers from fire both with pre approved extended asset protection zones and the use of fire proof materials that protect cabling and infrastructure. On the South Coast there were reports of no emergency warnings or messaging getting through due to damaged communication towers.

More effort needs to be focused on preparation and mitigation. This season showed that no matter how many resources we had we still couldn't meet the required level of response. More effort is needed to reduce fuel levels- not only in our National Parks and Forests but on private property as well. Environmental legislation is convoluted and complex and prohibits regular burning with unrealistic fire frequencies (See the below document on Indigenous Cultural Burning which highlights how to manage the Australian bush using the right fire).

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

Introduction

I am making this submission under the terms of reference for Traditional and Cultural burning. I currently hold the position of State Aboriginal Program Coordinator for the NSW Rural Fire Service. I have worked for the Service for 16 years and over that time have held operational roles at a senior level but primarily in community engagement, preparation and planning and the past 4 years in the Aboriginal Program Coordinator role. I am not of Aboriginal descent but have worked closely with Aboriginal people over the past four years and particularly in the Cultural Burning field with people from the Firesticks Alliance and Local Land Services. I have worked with people such as [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] recognised fire practitioners promoting and conducting cultural burning in the landscape. This submission of cultural burning and its benefits is not an answer to bushfire prevention in its entirety but an important tool to help reduce the impacts and the intensity of bushfires.

Background

Cultural Burning has been carried out by Indigenous people for over 60,000 years for many different purposes including bush regeneration, fuel reduction, ceremony and even warfare. After many years working with Indigenous fire practitioners I have learnt that cultural burning is vital for the survival of the bush and the protection of communities from bushfire. Cultural burning is not the answer to protecting all communities from bushfire but an important tool that can be strategically used especially on the urban interface areas to reduce the intensity of bushfire. Cultural burning is a method of cool burning with a minimal flame height of around half a metre that is ignited with a spot pattern. Cool burning is hot enough to remove surface/ near surface and mid-story fuels but cool enough not to damage the ecology such as seed banks in the soil and flora and fauna. The ignition pattern of a spot that slowly burns outward in a circle that allows animals and insects to escape. Cultural burning when conducted correctly has minimal white smoke and does not burn the canopy, which is seen to be sacred to many Indigenous cultures. It is very important not to burn the canopy as this causes leaf loss and more sunlight which in turn causes more mid-story growth with species of sclerophyll shrubs which generally are more flammable and thus causes more intense fires, so it is vital that the bush is burnt cool to prevent continuous hot burning cycles.

Issue

Current Hazard reduction practices are carried out using line burning techniques which is igniting a line of fire using drip torches. This rapidly increases the fire intensity which in turn damages the bush and creates the cyclic hazards previously discussed of rapid mid-story fuel growth. This plus environmentally legislated fire frequencies preventing regular burning creates continuous hot cycles of burning with an excess of mid-story fuel which allows fire to quickly escalate into the canopy in bushfire conditions. Cultural burning fire frequencies are very complex and learned by years of experience, not a broad-brush approach depending on the vegetation type. Fire frequencies in cultural burning knowledge is layered and based on many things such as aspect, soil types, fuel types, flowering and time of year. Reading country is a learned skill and the bush is burnt when the bush is ready to be burnt not to a pre-determined fire frequency, this may be from one year up to many years or even areas that should be protected and not burnt.

Environmental legislation has added to the lost knowledge of burning and this is evident even in our farming communities which was once a normal farming practice. Fear of prosecution from breaching environmental law has deterred landowners from protecting their land by reducing fuel with fire. The complexity of environmental law not only confuses the private sector but also agencies trying to meet hazard reduction targets. The Environmental Assessment Code was developed to assist in gaining approvals for hazard reduction due to complexity of the legislation. This type of complexity is a real deterrent to hazard reduction burning and the development of the 'Code' has done little to address the red tape with complex and convoluted requirements, especially when it comes to fire frequencies.

Drought has an effect on fire intensity with drier soil, fuel and humidity. This is why cool burning is so important in the changing environment. Burning at night or early evening and morning will reduce the intensity of the fire. This was common practice in Indigenous culture.

When using the fire triangle, fuel is the only factor we can control so it makes sense to invest in this area. Having worked in bushfire risk management, rarely are hazard reduction targets met. This is due to many factors including trying to make hazard reduction burning fit into our life style by burning only in the daytime, on weekends or when the smoke won't affect us. As previously said – 'Burn the bush when it needs to be burnt', the window of opportunity is now so limited to burn when hazard reduction is conducted it is often in a hurry with too much intensity.

Recommendations

- Fire and Land management agencies need to invest in educating all staff and volunteers in traditional methods of burning. This can be achieved by attending Cultural Burning workshops, forums and conferences – see National Indigenous Fire Workshops
- Areas where cultural burning practices will benefit local communities in the protection from bushfire need to be identified and included in the local Bushfire Risk Management plans as a specified treatment.
- Governments need to invest in employing more experienced fire practitioners and Indigenous Rangers to allow more cultural burning in our National Parks and Reserves.
- Environmental Legislation regarding fire frequencies needs to be reviewed with input from Cultural Burning Practitioners to allow more frequent burning. Current legislation regarding Cultural Burning under the Native Vegetation Act is broad and often not considered valid by environmental bodies.

Conclusion

There will need to be a major cultural shift from current burning practices to implement Cultural Burning as mainstream. I believe we have little choice but to move forward and learn about the Indigenous ways of managing country by good fire. Australia has unique vegetation that has adapted to fire over of thousands of years and Aboriginal people learnt to manage the landscape with fire. Cultural Burning must be not only be seen as an important tool for reducing bushfire hazards but also an important part of Aboriginal culture. Working on country and having connection to country is an important part of Aboriginal culture and should be treated with respect as part of healing. Fire agencies would benefit from Cultural Awareness training to appreciate the importance of fire to Aboriginal people. Building relationships and trust with Aboriginal people will be paramount in the success of Cultural Burning into the future. There is a major push from Indigenous groups to implement cultural burning and I recently was involved in a group discussion involving practitioners, academics and fire agencies from across Australia and all agreed that traditional burning practices must be adopted not only for fuel reduction to protect our communities but to protect

our flora and fauna from the devastating affects of bushfire.

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