

Submission Number: NND.001.00446

Submission Of: Adam Richards

Your Details

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my personal situation

What was your personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? Have property in a fire affected area, was an off-duty firefighter who formed part of the emergency response

Where do you live? Shoalhaven (C)

Your Submission

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

- The fires are out

- Emergence of a coordinated team, made up of local people with mixed skills, who were able to manage the critical needs of 3000 frightened and under-resourced community members who were cut-off and isolated by fire. This was the Currawan fire that hit Conjola Park but progressed east to the villages of Manyana and Bendalong

- Community resilience and willingness to be guided by that same coordination team.

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

- Communication into isolated communities once cut-off did not exist. Phone towers and broadband were heavily reduced and over-subscribed. Ability to connect with emergency planning was almost zero.

- External support was widely inadequate when 3000 people became isolated in Manyana / Bendalong

- ABC radio reports that advised people to 'get out of the south coast' even after they were cutoff, caused significant duress amongst people who we were trying to keep calm. Blanket reports created hysteria that didn't apply to our situation (fire had burnt out 60% of the danger to us) This information must be specific to the area or not broadcast. Local liaisons within a community communication plan would help this

- No recognized emergency body or organisation took control of the situation (that situation being no power for days, diminishing food and fuel, growing medical evac requirements, sewer and garbage buildup AND a returning fire-front due 3 days later)

- Volunteer firefighters are just volunteer firefighters. They did an excellent job of responding to reports of fire but have no capacity to manage an emerging humanitarian crisis.

- Lack of strike teams capacity available to protect communities

- Volunteer firefighters were physically and dangerously exhausted. They had been all over the state for months prior and were severely depleted when the fires arrived in their district. Huge effort but poor people/fatigue management

- Fire information apps (Fires Near Me) lack up to date information and detail which was observed to cause greater anxiety to people. This information must be current 'up to the minute', or should not be shared with the public who misconstrue the information

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

- Communities with potential for isolation in a natural disaster need to develop a communications strategy that includes localised power (solar/battery), necessary equipment (radios, tablet) and an emergency contact that is focused on humanitarian needs and not emergency response.

- Experienced logistics and emergency management people need to be on the ground within hours of a community becoming isolated in a disaster. Those people can be choppered in with communication equipment and a response plan that can identify community resources and leaders, as well as liaise with external agencies for support

- Use military resources (transport, technology etc) however DO NOT use military people as liaisons. This is tricky however local communities dont like authority or outsiders. In our experience, tourists appreciated leadership and guidance while local people wanted to get on with 'looking after themselves'. We didn't have a mutiny per se, however it was obvious that the communication and response 'footprint' had to be considerate of local expectation and support. Military people would need to be less rigid and 'emotionally adaptable'. The use of military capability for supply and medical needs would have been invaluable

- Operating a Cat 1 tanker is not difficult and the training could be completed relatively easily. Basic bushfire-fighting is the same. Could military personnel be trained in both, and a state govt fleet of tankers be kept in reserve, available to all services as surge capacity when required? A 'civil service' fleet

- Incident Command of an event the size of these bushfires should not be the responsibility of a volunteer organisation. Whilst salaried

members of that organisation should have the necessary skills and knowledge, it was obvious at times that they were overwhelmed. Troops on the ground 'did their best' but were lacking at times where accountability for actions was essential

[Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?](#)

- Only those on the fire ground can understand the danger and difficulty of having two operationally and culturally different fire services on the same fire ground. As an instructor with a professional fire service, and who has been a volunteer firefighter, the sooner we are all working to the same SOG's and response protocols, the safer firefighters and the community will be.

Someone just needs to show the political fortitude and merge the firefighting services in NSW. Let the wrangling occur and fade, and let us move forward together and professionally aligned. The state of the relationship between the two major fire services in NSW is criminal and completely unfair to both groups of firefighters and the communities they seek to protect

Kind Regards....Adam Richards

[Do you agree to your submission being published?](#) Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

[Supporting material provided:](#)

NYE fires 2019-20 Final.pdf

New Year's Bushfires – Redhead Villages, Lake Conjola 2019/20

Introduction: The involvement of Adam Richards (AR) and [REDACTED] (AMc) was based on the observation that the local Manyana RFS crew were exhausted from days / weeks of firefighting both locally (Currowan Fire) and intrastate. This timeline is not a reflection of the RFS firefighting experience for which they will have their own story.

It was also realised that they were the only 2 x appliances (Cat 1 and Cat 7) protecting the 5 Redhead Villages of Nth Bendalong, Bendalong, Manyana, Berringer and Cunjurong Point. It is estimated that approx. 3000 people were holidaying or residing in the villages. Fires remained active in the area but not in the immediate vicinity.

After fire hit the Villages on Dec 31, AR and AMc (FRNSW) made contact with RFS Group Officer 4 [REDACTED] and offered to coordinate the non-fire related/humanitarian responsibilities, leaving RFS crews to respond to fires. He accepted. Supt [REDACTED] (ret) supported the effort with advice and guidance. The rest of the Logistics and Medical team evolved out of Manyana Hall – lead by [REDACTED] (SCG) and Remote Area Nurse, [REDACTED] (RVD)

Contributors to this timeline – [REDACTED], [REDACTED] (and [REDACTED]), [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

31 December 2019 – Tuesday (New Years Eve)

- 1000 Fire impacts Conjola Park with great intensity (89 homes lost) and is observed from the Cunjurong Point boat ramp to be moving quickly towards Berenger and CP
- 1030 - AR on the beach in the morning watching significant smoke plume rising from back of Lake Conjola. Conditions changing quickly
- Hoses are pre-deployed by RFS crew along CP Rd in the morning as firefront expected to run from Conjola Park, west towards Cunjurong Point on a NW wind
- Introduce myself to Manyana RFS Capt and offer assistance from AMc and myself to man trucks if they require. [REDACTED] takes number and calls an hour later asking for assistance
- At Bendalong, [REDACTED] (Reg Nurse and owner [REDACTED] [REDACTED]) talks to [REDACTED] at Bendalong Cafe and directs him to liaise with [REDACTED] (Paramedic) at Manyana Hall as he has been treating a lady with Anaphylaxis
- First fire front hits Cunjurong Point at approx. 1300
- <10 minutes from impact, Southerly steers fire away from CP but Berringer hit hard. 1 x home 20% damaged. Fire continues in NE direction towards Nth Bendalong
- Power lost to villages at approx. 2-3pm
- Fire creeps into back of CP and Manyana (between Berringer lake and CP Rd) with 2 x waterbombing choppers working on it for an hour. Fire wanders through bush on west side of CP Rd overnight
- Bendy and Manyana advised that Community info meeting would be held at 0900 the next day.

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- Guiltily enjoyed NYE with family at home

1 January 2020 – Wednesday

- Day 1 no power
- 0600 – AR conducted damage inspection with [REDACTED] in Manyana PC (RFS 4WD) – Berenger, Bendy Rd, Nth Bendy. Bendy Rd blocked with trees and active fire
- 0800 - Manyana PC used to broadcast meeting information to Manyana / Cunjurong Point. Bendalong communities advised through [REDACTED]
- 0900 - Community Info Session held at Bendalong and Manyana at 1000. Approx 500 in attendance. Items covered inc – Fire update, Roads update, power outages, food and water, departure options, medical needs
- [REDACTED] introduces himself to AMc at info meeting. People with health concerns are directed to hall for medical assessments. [REDACTED] establishes medical/first aid team at Manyana Hall
- [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] liaisons to Bendalong planning needs. Working closely with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] at Holiday Park and [REDACTED] (paramedic) establishes first aid post in park office
- Sometime after this, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] introduces themselves to [REDACTED] and Manyana Hall established as coordination centre. [REDACTED] establishes a logistics team
- [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] arrived at the Manyana Hall to find a family that had evacuated Rustic Caravan Park and taken refuge. Various volunteers come forward. Logistics and Medical team established with [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. They set up first-aid station and conducted medical assessments
- [REDACTED] (Local landscaper) introduces himself and offers to acquire a vessel to go to Ulladulla by sea. First supplies start arriving via informal sea based channels by lunch time. A number of trips made that day with additional 'boat people' supplying from Ulladulla to the South and Sussex to the north.
- Informal supply lines arrive at Green Island via unknown boats and jetski's. Numerous supplies left on beach. Teams of locals with 4WD's collect and bring to Manyana Hall. Other supplies coming via Bendy boat ramp
- [REDACTED] and family arise as transport network working tirelessly to move supplies around villages. First to start handing out acquired milk and juice as it is brought in via Bendalong boat ramp
- Police set up road blocks all day at entry to Bendalong and at Inyadda / Curvers intersection.
- Bendy Rd and Princes Hwy closed in both directions. Much speculation and rumour regarding what is open and what is closed.
- One holiday maker advises he has chartered a helicopter to get his family out but wants to supply 'backloads' of supplies. Generous offer but were unable to coordinate logistics due to poor comms and short timeframes.

2 January 2020 – Thursday

- Mass departure – attempt 1

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- Borrowed Forestry vehicle from [REDACTED] whilst he slept after a tough nightshift south of Conjola
- Active fire, damaged poles and wires, fallen trees. All considerations as to the safety of cars on the Bendy Rd and if departure possible
- Planning and logistics meeting at 0800
- Community Info meeting at 0900 – updates and departure planning. Approx 600 attend
- [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] meet up to arrange a triage team in Bendalong as cut off from Manyana due to roadblocks. Many people travelling between villages by concrete path
- Community meeting generated a lot of enquiries with people wanting to leave. Community BBQ started for those needing to cook and who were running out of gas. Urgent scripts for medication required. [REDACTED] provides scripts that were taken to Ulladulla by 'boat people' ([REDACTED])
- Plan to start Bendy departure at 1000 and Manyana at 1100
- Approx 400 cars line up in queue's along Curvers Dr to depart if conditions safe. Police advise that there will be no night departures.
- Long day with constant fire and tree activity. Bendy Rd secure however Princes Hwy closed all afternoon with tactical burns. No departures
- At 1900 people are advised to return to their homes. No one is openly unhappy despite food supplies zero (some recover food from bins)
- Messages put on social media indicating actual needs, start to produce inbound offers of assistance. Two names emerge as [REDACTED] (Deli Truck – Nth Nowra) and [REDACTED] (Treading Lightly- Ulladulla)
- AR receives numerous supply offers via message and phone call. Difficult to manage due to poor comms. Outbound messages via social media and text messages providing information on specific needs.
- Social media messages being sent out at 0400 each morning when network not congested

3 January 2020 – Friday

- Mass departure – attempt 2
- 0600 – Road assessment with [REDACTED] (Manyana RFS) in Manyana PC. [REDACTED] swaps to Group 4 vehicle to leave us with Manyana PC
- Medivac successful at 0700. 40 cars through to Princes Hwy under escort of Manyana PC and police. Advice was that if this had not been successful by midday, hospitalisations were possible
- At turn-off, found young fella who had ran to Milton to get his car on Wednesday was still waiting to get in. Police not allowing access. He had waited for hours/days to get in and it took much negotiation with police before he followed the water tankers under Manyana PC escort
- 0830 - Police receive misinformation and jump the gun on departures. Road not clear and approx. 80 cars go out onto Bendy Rd. Fortunately no issues
- Second smaller medivac (10 cars) out first, with all cars starting to head out at 0900 under police escort (front and rear). Only 4 police vehicles available in morning so progress slow however the arrival of up to 10 Hwy Patrol by 1200 moved things faster
- AR spends day at Inyadda/Bendy Rd intersection working with Police

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- AMc and [REDACTED] McG work with holiday makers providing updates and reassurance.
- All out by 1500 but stragglers coming out of houses after waiting out the queue. Police eager to depart. Messages put out in Bendy, Manyana, CP that road closing at 1630 and all must be out or staying in situ.
- AR drove Cunjurong Point and Manyana with patrol car using yelp to get attention. Unfortunately, generated PTSD issues in 2 susceptible locals (as witnessed)
- No more departures after 1700 and approx. 3000 people successfully removed from the villages. No injuries or issues
- 1800 - [REDACTED] McG attended Curvers Dr street meeting to provide safety, property preparedness and protection advice in readiness for potential fire threat predicted for Saturday.
- [REDACTED] (caravan park managers) [REDACTED] (DR) and [REDACTED] meet up to discuss Bendalong evacuation strategy and arrange community meeting
- 2330 - 3 x food trucks arrive (via [REDACTED]) escorted. 2 x trucks accepted; 1 x load sent further south
- Roadblock password established with police – 'Manyana Emergency Supply Delivery' – Will never know if it worked
- Package food and water supplies excellent. Fresh food and fuel struggling. Boats have been siphoned to get unleaded. Diesel in urgent need

4 January 2020 – Saturday

- Second and Third fire fronts hit (afternoon)
- No travel day. Bendy road closed except for emergency services
- 0700 - Met with RFS ([REDACTED]) to receive fire briefing
- Planning and logistics meeting at 0900 – generators and fuel, power and sewerage reported into creeks. Medical being wound back. [REDACTED] defending home but he and medical team maintain presence in Hall
- Community Info meeting at 0930 – discuss fire and tactics at home. [REDACTED] remains point of contact at Hall / Coordination centre.
- Community meeting Bendalong media room caravan park 1000
- Trail bike requested for communication access to Bendy/Manyana should fire cut the roads (proves invaluable)
- Sea-based deliveries ceased at request of AR/AMC due to changing conditions
- 3 x Bendalong residents jump onto boat at Bendalong boat ramp and get taken to Ulladulla. Other Bendy residents start arriving to media room caravan park (x 23 people)
- 1530 – North Bendalong impacted by fire due to NW winds. Nth Bendy cut-off as all crews withdraw. 12 x residents remain protecting homes. Fire spreading across Bendy road towards Manyana, and along Washerwomans Beach towards Holiday Park.
- [REDACTED] (Forestry) advises flames above tree line south of Bendy Rd and fire travelling quickly towards Curvers Rd
- AR deploys to Curvers Dr via new pathway (on trail bike) and makes contact with approx. 6 homeowners preparing to defend homes. [REDACTED] McG provides

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updates on progression from his vantage point. Manyana headland heavily smoke covered. Visibility poor

- Fire progresses towards Manyana under North Easterly wind change. [REDACTED] McG calls for firefighting resources via 000 to Curvers Dr as numerous properties come under direct threat.
- Northern Beaches RFS Strike Team arrive in Curvers Dr to assist local crews and Forestry crews with property protection. Fire spots into rear yards of properties between The Lookout and The Bridge and quickly extinguished by local residents and RFS crews with no major property damage.
- Firefighting in Curvers Rd for approx. 1hr with 1 x lightweight structure lost, otherwise minimal damage. Two RFS strike teams in Curvers Dr
- Southerly arrives and fire threat in Manyana eases. Bendalong now threatened for the second time and Bob McG advises, via 000, that firefighting resources enroute to Manyana are now required at Bendalong.
- With Southerly starting AR deploys back to Bendalong via Inyadda. Bendy road starting to be covered with burnt branches and trees. Still accessible but conditions worsening. Advised by [REDACTED] McG that FRNSW Strike team inbound but arrival time unknown.
- Arrival at Holiday Park, Bendy road being heavily impacted by fire and fire moving East towards park. Zero visibility and flames reaching across the full width of road. Was certain that houses were being impacted.
- AR contacting FireCOMMS seeking aerial support as no fire protection in Bendalong
- Liaised with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and decision made to remain in common building (rather than beach) with all persons (approx. 23) sent into the communal building. Braced for potential fire impact.
- FRNSW strike team arrive through smoke and flame despite trees and debris on road. RFS strike team close behind returning from Manyana. Runner 1 deploys hose around communal building with 5 x firefighters however fire doesn't progress past the front gate of holiday park
- Both Strike teams extinguish fences and gardens with no structures severely damaged
- During this time, another fire starts on the NE side of Cunjurong Pt boat ramp (Ottawa St) but no firetrucks available. AMc on scene to monitor conditions and advise residents, as helicopters maintain control of the fire.
- 1 x member of the public evacuates to the ocean with a boogie board and spends 4 hours battling conditions to get back to shore (1km south of from where they went in)
- 1530 - [REDACTED] conducts radio and TV interviews describing situation
- Late afternoon - Medical team members ([REDACTED]) go to Manyana RFS station to treat heat illness amongst volunteers

5 January 2020 – Sunday

- 0600 – AR conducting damage inspection in Manyana PC. Notice smoke rising from structure in poplar St, Bendalong. 1 x garage was lost and another was damaged
- Community meeting 1000 at Manyana only.
- Trauma Councillors ([REDACTED] and [REDACTED]) join coordination team and reach out to assist locals

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- Generator fuel reserves critical in both Bendy and Manyana
- Sea-based deliveries ceased via social media messaging.
- Contacted by Milton based man willing to drive 120L of fuel up beach in registered beach buggy. Arrives at 1430. Fuel rationed to 5 litres per person for generators.
- Residents encouraged to do tip runs and empty bins. Many do
- Rumours of clear access to Milton on roads. Unconfirmed information that only residents with identification will be let back in
- Raptor and other police appear more regularly to patrol villages
- Ice trucks arrive
- Team meets with Redhead Villages Association and Yulunga Hall Committee to discuss transition / formalising of recovery responsibility. ██████████ appointed Recovery Leader to work with locals to sustain the community until the return of power and 'business as usual'
- 2100 - Power returned to hall via donated generator that is hard wired to building (C&B Hayes)

6 January 2020 – Monday

- 0830 – New committee meeting
- Community info meeting – conducted by AR introducing ██████████. Approx. 100 in attendance. Confirmed road access to Milton Ulladulla and Nowra
- With road access secure, decision made to reduce supplies to an 'emergency only' amount
- Shoalhaven Council provide first level of support with 40ft refrigerated container delivered to coordination centre (and to Bendalong). Some food included
- Shoalhaven Council close the tip
- Logistics team start to direct supplies further south
- Official advice is no one to come to the area until power returns
- Un-official advice is that only those who are wholly self-sufficient should come to the area
- Power restored to sections of Nth Bendalong
- Medical ceased and returning to business as usual. People can drive to medical needs in local towns

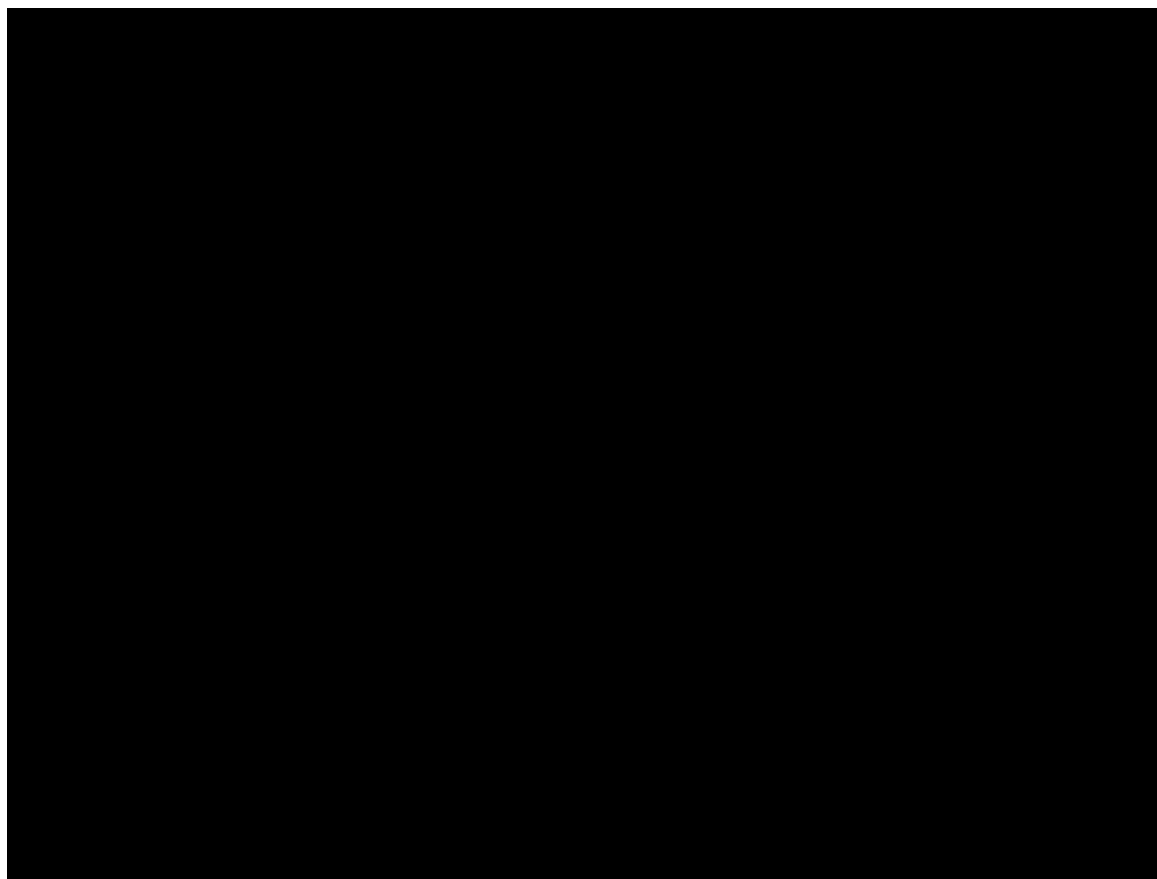
7 January 2020 - Tuesday

- Recovery committee meeting 0830
- Community meeting conducted by ██████████ – approx. 80 in attendance
- AR departs Manyana at 1130 and Bendalong at 1330
- ██████████ and ██████████ depart at 1230
- Power restored to sections of Manyana by late afternoon

Footnotes:

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- The bushfires in and around the Redhead Villages behaved almost as predicted. The fires impacted with some intensity, however in reality the fire came in as predicted by local fire authorities. This made reassuring the public and planning possible scenarios easier
- The blanket messages put out on ABC radio regarding evacuating villages on the south coast was not an accurate reflection of what was safe or impending in our area. Holiday makers anxiety was increased due to being told they 'must be out of the area by Saturday Jan 4' when conditions would deteriorate. However, without a secure road (egress) and with a reasonable understanding of what expected fire behaviour would be, that anxiety did not help people or coordinators
- Interestingly, Villages on SW lake Conjola not formally organised until after Jan 6 when first request to coordinate is published on social media.
- The success of the Planning and logistics 'coordination' team was based on a respectful understanding that each member was both capable and delivering on the role they volunteered to do. It arose organically and never fell to a formal leadership structure.



Absent – 