

Submission Number: NND.001.00514

Submission Of: John Scattergood

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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 can only speak of the Border Trail fire and similar in the Kyogle and Tenterfield LGAs which ran Nov and Dec 2019.

I'm sure the relevant State and Federal Authorities will say it went well and they followed their plan(s) and met all expected outcomes in dealing with unprecedented fires. However the fire would have been unmanageable if it weren't for the local farmers who banded together and provided a fire fighting response beyond that of the RFS, NPWS, and Forestry. A local earth moving contractor cleaned fire trails, put in new trails and supplied bulk water tankers to support the fire fighting in the field.

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

The Command and Control structure at the local level was non-existent!

The nearest Command and Control was 60km away in Kyogle and the nearest RFS Control Centre was 100 km away in Casino. 'On ground' decisions were over-ruled by Control Centre staff 100 km away based on computer modeling. It is not possible to model all the inconsistencies into a computer to be able to deal with local issues. As a result land owners with years of local knowledge were disregarded by staff in air conditioned offices whose computer advice was contrary.

Flow of information to local residents was non-existent initially and then became late and generic - talking about situations that had occurred hours before. There is a need for a local HQ manned 24/7 where information can be disseminated. This includes those residents that decide to self-evacuate to leave details of their movements.

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

Across border Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)

Both across state borders and intrastate where fires are burning across two or more LGAs and two or more fire districts

Local farmers who fit out their own vehicles to fight fires and their support staff providing sustenance need a legal standing

Proper lines of Communications between operations and local communities to provide timely and correct information

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

The attached documents were submitted to our State (NSW) Local Member Jannelle SAFFIN (Labor). She advised that she had taken them to her Minister of Emergency Services to raise in parliament.

I also have a 30 page document of comments that I downloaded from social media from people across Qld, NSW and Victoria who had been directly affected by the fires. Overall they tended to indicate poor state governance in controlling the build up of ground fuels.

We as a country are always going to have bushfires! If the ground fuel levels are maintained at a manageable level - there is a number of ways this can be done, then fires of this magnitude will not be repeated.

If the outcomes of this Royal Commission are ignored - like all the other Commissions of Inquiry conducted over the last 60+ years then we will be having this same discussion in another 10 to 15 years. Any outcomes need to have an independent overseeing authority that can ensure outcomes are met and no longer ignored.

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

Supporting material provided:

2019 FIRES - Inter Border Cooperation.docx

2019 FIRES - The Pod Squad - discussion paper.docx

2019 FIRES Communications to Residents.docx

2019 FIRES - THE WAY FORWARD

A discussion paper – **Inter border cooperation**

The Border Trail Fire was one of the first fires of the 2019 – 2020 fire season.

The village of Woodenbong was the closest residential area to the fire. The fire spread across the North Western edge of the Kyogle LGA, the North Eastern edge of the Tenterfield LGA and along the NSW / Qld border.

Kyogle LGA falls in the Northern Rivers Zone, based in Casino; whilst Tenterfield LGA falls in the Northern Tablelands Zone, based in Tenterfield.

The fire originated in Queensland (Qld) in inaccessible country and burnt without controls being applied for a number of days; crossing into New South Wales (NSW) during this time. When the fire became accessible it had grown considerably. The fire was larger than available RFS resources at that time could deal with.

On Wednesday 15 January, 2020 at the Woodenbong Bushfire Recovery, Community Meeting to discuss recovery options available to the community there was a brief presentation on the fires and some of the problems experienced were raised.

When asked why the fire was not attacked whilst still in QLD RFS representatives reminded that they were NSW and had no jurisdiction in Qld

When asked why the hall at Urbenville was not part of the evacuation plan, but Woodenbong residents were expected to drive past this centre and travel a further 35 minutes to Bonalbo over poor roads Kyogle Council representatives advised that as the Urbenville hall was not in their LGA they could not use it in their evacuation plan.

At best this could be described as administrative incompetence.

If we follow this administrative 'logic' – does that mean that those people who have Woodenbong as their address but live in the Tenterfield LGA could not be evacuated to Woodenbong because that is in the Kyogle LGA but could go to the Urbenville Hall and would not be required to go to the Bonalbo Hall if Woodenbong village was evacuate?

Administrative incompetence meets a real live situation.

As a matter of urgency there needs to be a memorandum of understanding (MOU) developed between NSW and Qld about cross border interaction. If a Remote Area Firefighting Team (RAFT) could have been committed to the fire whilst it was small and in Qld the anguish of the fire and the weeks of man hours to fight it when it entered NSW would not have been required.

It was suggested that this would be very difficult to achieve; however in my earlier days in emergency management I organized a complete re-write of the Kosciusko National Park Counter Disaster plan that involved the states of NSW and Vic, and the ACT. Which resulted in a two day conference and a successful re-write.

I am also aware of a MOU between NSW and ACT relating to bush firefighting in the border areas where one service could cross the border without waiting for approval on the day because it was already given by the MOU.

It is not impossible to develop MOUs but they need to be developed early whilst the 'Lessons Learnt' are still fresh.

MOUs between the two fire zones and the two emergency management area should be rapidly developed due to them both being in NSW.

Advice was also given that a further meeting would be conducted in Woodenbong to discuss the lessons learnt from the fire and permit the residents of the Woodenbong area input into development of plans for overcoming future emergencies.

This paper is submitted to generate discussion so that an appropriate course of action can be developed and undertaken so as to develop a better working relationships between areas so that borders do not become a barrier in effectively dealing with emergencies.

Regards

J.A. SCATTERGOOD (John)

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2019 FIRES - THE WAY FORWARD

A discussion paper – **The Pod Squad**

The Border Trail Fire was one of the first fires of the 2019 – 2020 fire season.

The village of Woodenbong was the closest residential area to the fire. The fire spread across the North Western edge of the Kyogle LGA, the North Eastern edge of the Tenterfield LGA and along the NSW / Qld border.

The fire originated in Queensland (Qld) in inaccessible country and burnt without controls being applied for a number of days; crossing into New South Wales (NSW) during this time. When the fire became accessible it had grown considerably. The fire was larger than available RFS resources at that time could deal with.

A group of locals, predominantly farmers, banded together and kitted out their private 4 X 4 vehicles with 1000 litre Intermediate Bulk Containers (IBC), commonly known as pods, pumps and hoses. Somewhere between 25 and 30 of these vehicles were active on and about the Border Trail fire line.

Anecdotally it has been regularly stated that without the 'Pod Squad' the fires would not have been able to be brought under control in the time frame that they were; and more extensive damage would have been the most likely outcome.

The Pod Squad used UHF Citizen Band radios to communicate amongst themselves and when signal was available mobile phone to RFS units.

The Pod Squad have no legal identity, would not be covered by any insurance, even their own as they were on an active fire ground. Their associated support group, those providing sustenance and other support to those on the fire line would be in a similar situation.

This situation needs to be addressed as the Pod Squad is a valuable resource and these legalities should not stop this resource from being utilized. This resources has been replicated at a large number of fires in NSW and Victoria (Vic) so the situation is not just an isolated case, confined to this area.

In 1994 New South Wales Fire and Rescue developed the Community Fire Unit concept. This is the precedence that I rely on to put forward this proposal.

The Government needs to develop a similar concept that could then cover the Pod Squad(s) throughout NSW. Points to consider should include but are not limited to

1. The level of initial training required,
2. Refresher training requirements,
3. Minimum standards of equipment to make a 'slip on' fire unit, and
4. The level of assistance provided in the production of the unit.

To be able to maintain communication between the RFS and this group the RFS should consider fitting out their fleet of fire fighting vehicles with UHF CB radios.

Whilst it is hoped that NSW doesn't find itself in a similar situation with fire, if we don't develop from the lessons learnt during this fire season and we do have a similar situation we need to have everyone working together to ensure we minimize the impact on the residents of NSW.

This paper is submitted to generate discussion so that an appropriate course of action can be developed and undertaken so that a scarce and finite resource (the RFS) can be supplemented with local available equipment when required.

Regards,

J.A SCATTERGOOD (John)

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2019 FIRES - THE WAY FORWARD

A discussion paper – **Communication of Information to Residents**

The Border Trail Fire was one of the first fires of the 2019 – 2020 fire season.

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Kyogle LGA falls in the Northern Rivers Zone, based in Casino; whilst Tenterfield LGA falls in the Northern Tablelands Zone, based in Tenterfield.

The fire originated in Queensland (Qld) in inaccessible country and burnt without controls being applied for a number of days; crossing into New South Wales (NSW) during this time. When the fire became accessible it had grown considerably. The fire was larger than available RFS resources at that time could deal with.

Prior to the fire breaking out there was a watching brief maintained on the fire with limited information flowing to the residents.

Once the fire began its run, there was initially no information flowing to the residents of Woodenbong relative to the fires.

Eventually information began to appear on the Woodenbong RFS Facebook page but this was patchy as the brigade was busy fighting the fire; the Northern Rivers RFS Facebook page which was more regular but also somewhat generic.

The Woodenbong Driveway service station was a good source of up to date information as that was the refuel point for fire trucks and staff of the service station endeavoured to give up to date information for the residents.

There were many individual Facebook posts that were not accurate but declared themselves to be so and without a Communication Plan that local residents could refer to for concise and truthful information the individual Facebook posts did create some angst among residents, some of who self-evacuated based on that information.

There was no central point for those who decided to self-evacuate to leave information as to where they were going. It became anecdotal knowledge.

There is a need to have a 'Command Centre' in the village for the dissemination of information and the collation of logistical information like those who had self-evacuated.

Having an Emergency Management Centre in Kyogle 60 km away and a Fire Control Centre in Casino 100 km away was of no benefit to Woodenbong.

This was exacerbated when the Summerland Way was closed on two separate occasions when impacted by the fire.

A local 'Command Centre' would also provide a central command point for the Pod Squad to work out of and a cross link between agencies that are on the ground and be able to make time sensitive decisions and not have to rely on Command Centres that are 60 or 100 km away.

This paper is submitted to generate discussion so that an appropriate course of action can be developed and undertaken so as to develop a better working relationships between agencies and local resources to be able to effectively dealing with emergencies.

Regards

J.A. SCATTERGOOD (John)

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