

Submission Number: NND.001.00664

Submission Of:

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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?

Where do you live? Bega Valley (A)

Your Submission

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

- The evacuation centres at Bega and Cobargo were well organised and showed care for people using them.
- Bega Valley Shire Council held frequent information sessions.
- Our local fire teams worked tirelessly and were reinforced by teams brought in from elsewhere.
- Govt staff were based at evacuation centres to assist with organising logistics - they were able to help coordinate movement of animals quickly
- The prompt arrival of RSPCA mobile service at the evacuation centre in Bega was reassuring and helpful
- ABC radio updates - thank you!
- The staff of Regional Assistance Australia have been very professional and demonstrated a preparedness to assist
- The community swung into action to provide services

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

There was no central point of information in Bermagui - the early information sessions were confused and different agencies contradicted each other. The NYE evacuation was conveyed only to those on the sports oval and there was no broadcast across the town that an evacuation was imminent. We were sent south through bushland towards tathra with no certainty we weren't heading towards a fire.

The many fire trucks we saw on our property were lacking suitable equipment. We had to provide hoses and pumps so they could fill their trucks from our tanks and dams. Some of the trucks were so leaky that their tanks watered our driveway. The firies reported that they have to keep their tankers full overnight, but they usually drain due to their leaks.

The Fires Near Me App could not be trusted. Information was not updated in a timely manner; in the latter stages of the emergency it seemed that fires close to us were not being updated. Similarly, new fires were listed (often incorrectly) as "Bushfire Out of Control" which created high levels of anxiety.

Some voluntary relief organisations were reportedly allowed to operate without Working With Children Checks and Police Checks. This placed our community at risk, as was demonstrated by some incidents involving volunteers in Cobargo.

The bushfire relief centres set up to connect us with services did not include essential agencies for primary producers such as Local Land Services.

The army - as experts in logistics - could have been brought in much sooner by the state government to ensure, expedite and streamline distribution of fuel, fodder and drinking water.

The seriousness of our community's situation did not seem to be recognised until the Prime Minister was publicly embarrassed. The trigger for providing emergency relief needs to be reviewed.

Tourists were advised our region was safe to return to despite there being active fire and a shortage of food. The subsequent flare-up of fires that raced towards Bermagui demonstrated the foolishness of this advice.

We live between Bermagui and Cobargo in a locality called Coolagolite. Coolagolite seemed to be off the radar for information. Despite having fires on three fronts for most of 8 weeks, Coolagolite rarely featured in briefings and was frequently given inaccurate information. While advising us that we were safe to return home from Bega evacuation centre, the police could not explain how our area was "safe" while listing all the roads around it that weren't "safe". After a later briefing in Cobargo, a fire advised us that the Dignam's Creek fire was going to head our way "like a steam train" and they "wouldn't and couldn't" try to stop it. This information was not shared with the residents of Coolagolite. There was no door-knocking down our road. On several occasions we found as many as ten fire trucks crossing through our property; our best (and only) intel on some fires came from us asking them.

The seemingly politically-driven refusal to consider how climate change might be contributing to the fires rubs salt into the wounds of farmers and fire-affected communities. We need experts of the CSIRO to be heard. Being told that it's off the table undermines confidence in a holistic response to rebuilding and preparing.

The criteria for eligibility for disaster relief funding seemed to change from "disaster affected" to "flame affected", setting up a hierarchy of victims and creating confusion about eligibility.

The rural financial counsellors aren't in direct contact with - or being briefed by - the funding bodies, so they are forced to make guesses when advising applicants.

Local businesses found themselves competing with products being brought in from elsewhere for free eg. fencing materials were donated and trucked in, which impacted the viability of essential small businesses such as rural suppliers.

Service NSW was not flexible for unanticipated use / movement of unregistered vehicles. Inspection was required before registration at a time when local businesses were closed.

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

- Discuss all potential factors, including climate change
- Consider options for what happens when communications fail eg. mobile towers, resulting in loss of live updates, phone connectivity
- Consider options for safe and regenerative cool burns of national parks by National Parks
- Fund fire resilience projects: eg. wetlands on farms; planting of windbreaks and live firebreaks using fire resistant vegetation; fire safety zones for livestock and native animals; community initiatives to resource fire prep and services
- Establish clear protocols / responsibilities for communication when multiple agencies are involved
- Fund RFS adequately
- Don't announce grant / disaster relief without discussing it with the relevant agencies first
- Improve real time response of Fires Near Me
- Require volunteer organisations to be more stringent about police checks and Working with vulnerable people checks
- Establish policy of "buy local" for disaster relief materials and services when possible
- Train the army in animal euthanasia
- Use the army to manage logistics (transport, water, fuel, medical supplies, roadblocks)
- Recognise that amidst the trauma, disasters also focus thinking by businesses and communities. Relief funding and incentives could focus more on "build something better" or "initiate and innovate" rather than like-for-like replacement.
- Govt agencies could develop their policies for flexibility at times of emergency. Review how to make it easier for people to survive and recover.

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

Is it possible the Australian Government is negligent in ignoring the advice of its own scientific organisation? Is it exposed to legal action?

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