

**Submission Number: NND.001.00665**

**Submission Of: Sally Josh**

### 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?

Where do you live? Bega Valley (A)

### Your Submission

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

1. Firefighters. On 23rd January in particular i was personally grateful for the solid and calm manner in which the visiting fire crew (from Tasmania) who came to defend properties in our road [REDACTED] near cobargo) conducted themselves. It was very reassuring to know there were, on this occasion, a number of firetrucks, both local and visiting, in the locality as we evacuated on that day, particularly as we knew neighbours were staying to defend their places, it gave us confidence to know our neighbours would be assisted to defend and would be safe.
- 2. The countless kindnesses and hard work of the many volunteers. For example: being met by an animal welfare league volunteer at Bega evacuation centre who quickly reassured us that our animals were welcome and safe; the people providing cooked meals for those with no way to make their own food- a particular shout out to World Central Kitchen who set up in Bermagui but ensured Cobargo and surrounds had access to this food service; bushfire relief centres at cobargo and quaama offering basic essentials, help, kindness and hope to so many who were so traumatised.
3. Neighbourhood group emails and texts kept us informed about who was at home and who'd evacuated when fires were active. Very valuable in a rural locality where neighbours are not always physically close by.
4. ABC local radio news, particularly updates by local fire captains kept us informed. So essential.
5. The online published 'predicted fire spread' maps. Great use of technology and even though frightening its good to know what the worse case scenario could be on bad predicted fire days in order to plan. The 'hot spot' maps were also informative for us in the same way.
6. Bega valley shire updates. The mayor Kristy McBain, and support team, were outstanding, visiting local towns ensuring people were given reliable information, answering questions and concerns, correcting misinformation. Showed level headed responsibility in what seemed an apparent leadership void, particularly in the days following new years eve. Demonstrated compassion and care for the community and took responsible action in very challenging circumstances (no phones or internet for several days so the only option was to go to each individual town or village and give public meetings).
7. The RFS fires near me app and the ability to 'set a watch zone' was extremely helpful, WHEN it was able to be updated regularly by RFS and WHEN there was internet coverage.
8. The less formal venues that were set up at extreme short notice in bermagui - the surf lifesavers club and later the country club. Not evacuation centres but they took matters into their own hands as a necessity, as possibly 4 thousand(?) People from bermagui and surrounding villages streamed in as they were told to shelter in place at the waters edge. These venues set up a 'safer place' with food, drink, toilets, offered a calm place to be. Pets were welcome. Staff and volunteers at these venues were helpful and kind. Notice board, announcements by local police and council representative were centred around these venues. It was so terrifying on NYE 2019 in Bermagui. WE WERE SO SCARED.

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

1. Messages about seriousness of predicted fire danger not getting through to some people. On 30th December 2019 the message about the potential devastating seriousness of the predicted NYE fires the following day (Badja forest road fire) didn't seem to penetrate. It seems a lot of people (despite the combination of the strongly worded warnings on 'fires near me' app, news, announcements from senior fire officials and the predicted fire spread map, and the blackened leaves falling from a yellow evening sky,) were NOT preparing to leave the next day. This worried me, as i was concerned from what I'd seen and heard that 31st was not going to be an ordinary fire day. Something about the wording, or delivery didn't seem to reach people or didn't make people think 'ok, that means me'.
2. NO prediction of NYE firestorm, so are the systems keeping pace with escalating fire conditions? Despite the warnings as above, NO prediction was made that a firestorm would erupt in the NIGHT TIME of 30th December/ early hours of NYE and race uncontrollably through Wandella, Yowrie, Cobargo, Quaama and Coolagolite. Even if people in those localities HAD planned to 'leave early' on the morning of NYE as recommended, that was many hours too late. In other words, the prediction system was not up to scratch in the context of those extraordinary fire conditions. If it had been, people would have been advised to leave on 30th. Many of my friends were woken to flames, or to emergency messages, some tried to fight a fire that could not be fought, some were burned, some lost animals, some fled literally for their lives. Its a miracle more people did not die.
3. Messaging about evacuation centres or where to go not reaching everyone. This was in particular in reference to NYE fires. Many people seemed to think Cobargo show ground was the place to go. Others had no option but to go there, as it was too late to go elsewhere. Showground however was only a place of last resort. So the messaging for where to go, and not go, should have been made clearer.
4. Emergency messages not reaching us soon enough, and worry that reliance on text messaging for emergency in a poor mobile reception area is a risk. The fires near me app map showed two long fingers of burning in the badger forest road fire at about 3.30.am when i woke. I'm not sure how accurate that was. It put the wind up me though. I saw online there were road closures in Coolagolite. I didn't know that a firestorm had been devastating Cobargo 10 minutes to the south of us. We got up and started to get ready to leave, called our neighbours across the road, having seen a glow in the horizon to the west. My partner and myself, 3 dogs and cat left at about 05.30. Thinking thank god we have no chooks at the moment. Feeling numb. Can this be happening. Thinking that people, stock and wildlife will die today. So worried about neighbours who had chosen to stay and fight. The air was completely still. On the drive over to bermagui, which is where we had decided

to go, the RFSNSW emergency text message came through, for Coolagolite residents to head to bermagui. We thought oh at least we're doing the right thing, but why has this only just come through, and what about dignams creek?. We arrived in bermagui a bit before 06.00.

5. A lack of timely information, lack of anyone in charge, apparent lack of firecrew resources and police on the ground in bermagui on 31 December 2019 - early days of January 2020. The 2nd text arrived saying shelter in place at the beach shortly after we arrived in bermagui.. Hundreds of cars were parked all along the foreshore, many more arriving. No one really knew what was going on. There were a couple of fire trucks, going out to check spotting i think. From people arriving, many of them friends from cobargo, some strangers we met that day, we soon learned of the devastation. Many people had no idea if their house had burned. Most told harrowing stories. We had no idea whether our house in [REDACTED] was still standing. There was no information because what was playing out just behind bermagui was an emergency the magnitude of which the local services could not have been expected to manage, certainly not without outside help and significant reinforcements. I was thinking about the local fire crews and how could they even try fight something this huge.too dangerous. I was amazed that people seemed so calm. They believed someone was in charge. The sun did not rise but we stared at a red and black horizon and shivered.

6. Mixed messages, no messages, no power. Lack of emergency communications facilities hampered everything. No contact between bermagui and the outside world. This led to rumours and misinformation. Roads closed or not? Able to go back into an area or not? Safe to stay in bermagui or not? There's petrol or not? Its understood that telecoms and power will go down in these situations. It just seemed there were no contingencies in place to quickly set up emergency power and comms at a community level. Few generators (woolworths and the club had big ones luckily) and who has cash these days, so with no ATMs working most people had no money.

7. Tourists were not discouraged from holidaying here on the south coast when it was not safe (and were encouraged to come back prematurely). It was a nightmare for all. Personally we spent 8 hours on the road on 2nd Jan (along with some locals evacuating and many canberrans returning home from ill advised holidays prematurely). This journey should take 3 hours. We were in thick choking smoke, crawling up the mountain to Canberra. We'd been told at the Bega evacuation centre where we'd arrived that morning 'if you can leave and don't need to be here in the bega valley, then don't be here'. I took this to mean Bega evacuation centre has finite resources so we should go. Having tourists here in this area in a time of such dire emergency was a bit of a drain on our very limited resources and thus a risk for everyone's safety.

8. Lack of fresh drinking water. Water contamination affected the towns served by brogo dam due to fire damaging purifying equipment. Lack of a local contingency /equipment to replace meant boil water notices and the army had to provide back up equipment. Not just households but also businesses, those that were operating were severely affected.

9. Lack of emergency housing. It months on from the fires now, and I'm hearing that some people who lost homes are still living in tents heading into a cold far south coast winter. That's very saddening. Surely with all the funds available something better should be in place for those with no home or insurance?

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

1. Leadership must invite, make space for, and heed expert advice and act responsively, LEARN from this terrible black summer. don't repeat mistakes yet again. Don't politicise.

2. The Covid 19 response shows the Australian government can act speedily and listen to advice, so can we please make sure this includes acting on advice about climate change strategies. The evidence is there.

3. Don't 'just do more HR burns'. Lobbying for burning more forest in the old way of 'HR burns' or more clearfell logging to stop fires will not stop the terrible type of fires such as we experienced this summer. The fire burnt short dead stubble on local farms, and even rainforests burnt in Queensland. So doing this same as usual will do nothing except just ensure more wildlife habitat loss and put carbon into the sky. We need to consider, and act on, different strategies that manage the effects of climate change. Looking around here we can see a lot of forest already gone, some has burned twice since 2018 (Yankees Gap). Countless stories of wildlife running away burning, dying. Stock burnt in agony or unable to get to water. As humans we should be responsible, its inexcusable to allow animals to be in harms way like this. Maybe we need education and incentives for farmers and landholders. Lets not do business as usual because clearly that's not working.

4. Improve the warning systems. Updates through the RFS and other states similar services are important so we need reliable internet including satellite for rural areas. Resource rural fire teams to always be able to keep their site /app updated. Its not an added extra 'if there's time'.its essential.

5. Fire services: could they be national?. At least onsider integrating states systems, as we are interested in seeing what's going on in Victoria( so do we have to have 2 apps on our phone?) . Fires cross borders, so really lets just have one service hey? We had Tas, Qld and SA firefighters here anyway.

6. Ensure ALL fire services have enough resources in case we ALL have fires at the same time, just as we did this year. Need to be able to ramp up numbers of firefighters, leaders and equipment rapidly, (and potentially in multiple areas, simultaneously) This wasn't possible for our locality, and there were only a few brave firefighters on the ground with an unfightable fire. Need to consider what equipment and personel are really available locally, given logistics and trave.g. I can come to a standstill as was shown this summer. Also on resources.....please can we compensate fire and emergency disaster workers who are missing work thtu volunteering selflessly. The least we can do.

7. Better access to water bombers,.really stark difference seeing what was thrown at fire in kangaroo valley compared to here. Too little too late down our way. I realise in some conditions you can't fly but we had clear days at first.

8. Campaign reminder on tv for people to RING 000 when they see smoke or flames, don't assume someone else reported it. Instance of this here this summer. People driving by reignited tree on highway.

9. Training for emergency responders on phone should be improved? They need to be quick and efficient, with perfect access to IT location resources. My experience was that the 000 responder seemed slow to take us seriously, indicated [REDACTED] not on map, made us feel like a hoax caller when in fact smoke was behind our neighbors house. It turned out this fire was the one that burned the southern part of [REDACTED] road including 2 houses and we had to evacuate that day.

10. Consider a whole rethink of what the army can be used for. Do we need a civil force for disasters now that we have so many? . The army were here, and were great but..... they're the ARMY!

11. Plan for disasters better, REALLY PLAN!!!! Involve local councils, as it was shown this summer that they were extremely active and responsive but they need resources! Have a disaster planning system that is nationally integrated, because when we all use the same terminology and systems we understand better and make fewer mistakes.

12. The insurance companies need to be induced to have more flexible and useful products, easier to understand. Friends I've spoken to have been disappointed to hear what's not covered.

13. Recovery coordination should have improved, coordinated systems. User friendly they are not. Forms i have been told by numerous friends were not easy to complete. Recovery centres to assist are good but very infrequently staffed by the required agency in small rural towns. Possibly an online assistant or virtual help room might be an alternative for some. The face to face recovery centres are VITAL tho, so please do not do anything to degrade them, they need enhancing if anything. Brilliant work being done.

Using centrelink for the \$1000 bushfire payment was not useful for me. Not everyone has a centrelink number(no children, no parents in Australia, not a pensioner and never been unemployed so apparently i don't exist!?)

Why not use the ATO for this purpose?

14. Have more capacity to respond at local levels with equipment and goods that can be shared as needed such as water purifiers, generators and things like relocatable kit homes.

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

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