

Submission Number: NND.001.00678

Submission Of: Rhonda Ayliffe

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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? I lived in the area affected by bushfire I was not evacuated and I suffered personal and financial loss

Where do you live? Bega Valley (A)

Your Submission

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

The local RFS brigades prioritised lives rather than property in their individualised and targeted response. Countless lives were saved due to their actions - in particular the actions of the Cobargo, Quaama and Central Tilba RFS units.

The ad hoc community response in the aftermath that became the Cobargo Bushfire Relief Centre was incredible - a model for local disaster relief that far outperformed the muddled and mixed messages from the official evacuation centres (that were unreliable, were open then closed then open, were situated in places of more rather than less danger than the Cobargo site and NYE were not able to be safely accessed by the evacuees from the wider Cobargo region.) The Relief Centre was spectacular in supporting the needs of primary producers in the establishment of the Cobargo Fodder Fund.

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

The SMS alert system (too late, too undefined, incorrect information about which direction to evacuate to... in our case we were directed toward active fire.... fortunately we ignored what we knew was incorrect advice)

telecommunications (which were totally lost during the crisis)

the police - most of whom were not local to the area they were tasked to so they couldn't even find locations without local residents assistance - they seemed to struggle with their role or purpose and certainly were uncomfortable with taking any initiative to assist people in need -- at the cobargo showground they just watched as the locals organised everyone and everything, including keeping track of who had evacuated and whether they had left family members behind to continue to fight for their home. Late in the day it occurred to the police that this information might be useful....

BVSC, State and Federal response was woeful with the exception of the intervention of State MP for Bega, Andrew Constance. BVSC initially refused to acknowledge or accept the evacuation centre in Cobargo as it wasn't an 'official' centre. BVSC have continued to privilege recovery in the south of the shire over assisting Cobargo and district (despite the fact that 3/4 of the lost homes and all the loss of life in the shire occurred in and around Cobargo.) - During the fire emergency (prior to the Big Jack fire reaching emergency status) BVSC actually tried to ramp up the return of tourists. This was a slap in the face to all the homeless people of Cobargo and completely insane given the events that had occurred, were occurring, and did indeed eventuate. State response was slow - 'rapid relief' was anything but rapid. Having to deal with multiple bushfire recovery agencies was ridiculous -- even moreso as it had to be accessed via the phone (and telecommunications did not work for an extended period). The Federal response was muddled, contradictory, woefully inadequate, far too late, sometimes duplicated other assistance.

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

More resources and autonomy for local RFS units

Acceptance of climate change as a factor that increased the intensity of the fires and will continue to be a problem with fire preparation and hazard reduction long in to the future.

Improved reliability of telecommunications

SMS evacuation alerts must be delivered with better information - not a 'one-size-fits-all' message. One of the biggest problems during the NYE fire emergency was that this occurred during the night, when most mobile phones are turned to 'do not disturb' or left in another room - SMS messages in these circumstances were next to useless - unless there is a way to override the DND phone setting there's no point sending a message and expecting it will be effective or enough.

main thoroughfares need to have wider cleared corridor to ensure that these major arteries are not closed for extended periods.

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

I was raised in a 'fire' household - so I was prepared for the inevitability of a major fire affecting my region almost all my life. I was told the history of the deadly 1952 fires that raced from the monaro to the coast and warned about the probability of this occurring again. I have lived in my home beside the Kooraban NP, just north of Cobargo, for over 30 years and each one of those years I have looked at the NP to my west expecting fire to come. In the weeks prior to the firestorm on NYE I watched the progress of both the Badja Forest Rd fire and another fire in Belowra (both of which I identified as fire threats) on fires near me app - I rarely left our property as we have no neighbours other than the NP

between us and these fires. Days prior to NYE I packed our most precious items into our vehicles and did further fire preparations around our old weatherboard home. I fully expected the fire to impact us and we prepared as best we could. I didn't expect that our home would be saveable if conditions were bad so I had prepared for and identified numerous options for an emergency late evacuation as we had decided we would stay and fight for as long as we were safely able. I remained awake through the night of December 30 - December 31 and watched from our home a few kms north of Cobargo, as the fire impacted my hometown and then turned and moved in our direction. We were fortunate as the fire lost a lot of its intensity by the time we had to save our home on NYE. The fire front remained in the Kooraban NP only a few hundred metres (to a couple of kms) from our home for the next 5 weeks - in total received 9 SMS evacuation notices from 31 December - 23 Jan. We did not evacuate and our local knowledge combined with local RFS advice (and luck) helped us to save our home. Had we followed the SMS evacuation advice we would have been trapped on the highway or Bermagui-Cobargo Rd (attempting to go to either the Narooma, Bega or Bermagui evacuation centres as directed) and we would have lost our home.

I would like the Royal Commission to know how magnificent our local community was and remains in response to the crisis. Much can be learned from how Cobargo responded to its emergency.

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