

## Submission Number: NND.001.00711

### Submission Of:

### Your Details

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Preferred means of contact: Email

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 live in an area affected by bushfires, was not evacuated and suffered personal property & financial loss

Where do you live? Blue Mountains (C)

### Your Submission

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

Looking after ourselves worked well... Having moved to Berambing (at the foot of Mt. Tomah and ringed by Mt. Wilson & Mt. Irvine) in the Blue Mountains as a child in August 1968, I have now experienced and survived four major wildfires - 1968, 1979, 1994 & now 2019. The 2019 fire was up there with 1968 with the lack of assistance from Fire Services, back then we fought the fire with wooden spray carts, leather whackers & metal knapsacks with family and a handful of brave neighbors, this was before the time of Out of Area Strike teams and aerial firefighting abilities. This time we fought the fire with cubes on utes with firefighting pumps & handheld fire extinguishers & watering cans when the fire burnt our underground irrigation systems in the height of the blaze, and once again with a handful of brave family members only. The firetrucks drove in to our property saw that we were on our own, my husband and son were asking them for help and promptly drove away.

The RFS Fires Near Me phone app was a very good source of up to date information (almost a Bible at times), however most of the fire information related apps including Sentinal started to wain under the huge overload of fires on so many fronts.

Local residents that stayed and fought for their homes with local knowledge and sheer guts & determination using cubes on utes if available, to extinguish potential fire threats to properties and vigilance throughout the ordeal and for weeks afterwards as many potential re-ignition points remained smoldering. As a matter of interest in Berambing - we had very little assistance from Big Red Fire Trucks - the residents that stayed and fought (remember we didn't have an evacuation order) saved all our houses and sheds, the ones that fled lost their sheds and cabins & camper/caravans, the few fire trucks that did stay and help - saved those peoples homes. The trucks left quickly and we stayed, regularly visited the abandoned properties and kept extinguishing potential problems, you have no idea how long a patch of agapanthas can burn for!

The crews that repaired our power poles and lines and restored power to us have been absolutely amazing. We had weeks without power as our district burned on three separate occasions, but each time, they kept coming back.

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

When the Gaspers Mtn fire first ignited (under the Running Stream name) NPWS were too concerned about saving the Wollemi Pine grove at any cost... massive error, relying on fire retardant only, and only to protect that small area. The main fire was up and away under the conditions in that area at the time, this enormous lack of "duty of care" to the community at large totally ruined & pretty well wiped off the face of the Earth the flora & fauna that is in their care on behalf of the NSW citizens. There was little, or no initial Bushfire response by NPWS, which in turn created the Gaspers Mountain Fire.

Communication between Fire Services in my area was terrible on so many levels - Hawkesbury RFS, Blue Mountains RFS, Lithgow RFS, NPWS, NSW Fire & Rescue add into this the outsiders in Strike teams - no one seemed to know the basic's... locating street numbers seemed to be a major obstacle, the use of incorrect names of fire trails was also a very common problem, this was so confusing for the teams which resulted in wasted time attending emergencies, resulting in losses. Local authorities being relegated to the background and outside teams taking control whilst local knowledge was desperately needed but either ignored or not even considered, whilst again precious time was wasted.

The false sense of security / safety for residents by the number of appliances & teams in the area, but were not actually used to fight fires and protect properties. Something has changed in recent times.... fire crews now no longer seem to be extinguishing fires and or spot fires, time and time again it came to light - if it's burning - oh well, let it burn. If it's about to burn- oh well, let it burn. Getting out a fire hose and using water to extinguish flames seems to be in the past. My husband saw three fire trucks over a 6 hour period in the driveway of the neighbors timber house, they self evacuated when realizing the wildfire was upon us and took the lid off their concrete water tank for firefighters to use before they fled, their shed & pop-up camper which was located on the fence line of the neighbors on the other side was slowly burning and could have easily caught the houses on fire, on each occasion my husband begged for them to put it out, thankfully the last crew did. The shed and all it's contents along with the camper were all completely lost.

We were surrounded in 2019 with an outstanding number of NSW Fire & Rescue Service vehicles and personnel, only to watch them continuously drive past our properties to a safe place for them to hide from the raging firestorm that was Berambing. I hear that we were not alone in this situation, many other areas also found this to be the case, NSW Fire & Rescue basically behaving in a cowardly manner, looking after themselves with their big red fire truck and leaving the residents to fend for themselves. When they weren't running away, they sat around watching properties burn, while trying to protect and save our own family properties (2 adjoining) when being impacted by the fire, our neighbors property was catching on fire - my brother spotted a fire truck just sitting and watching our place burn, he ran to them to ask for their help with the neighbors house as we were unable to extinguish her house (she was in Perth) they sat there in their truck and asked for the street number...to which the reply from my brother was, "it's the house there in front of you that is burning!!" reluctantly they went to her

house.

We did not receive any evacuation orders - instead we were left to fry .... I understand that the local Hawkesbury command at Bilpin at the time were utilizing aerial firefighting aircraft in the Bowens Creek area of Berambing as planes & helicopters were flying around us for 2 hours or so, but had failed to notify the RFS personnel/authorities that issue evacuation orders, of our impending plight, the aircraft suddenly disappeared & were replaced by an inferno. Why weren't the aircraft deployed to protect the residences of Berambing in the Blue Mountains? The area the aircraft seemed to be focusing on an area which is an historical fire pathway into the Hawkesbury district via Bilpin on the northern side of the township.

The phones - land lines went down, the mobile phone service is woeful at the best of times. However Telstra did manage to strengthen mobile service at times, it was very hard/ impossible to contact family/friends at the time, they thought we had all burnt to death. But to lodge a phone service as not working, the customer must make a phone call to Telstra to lodge it at the time, not once we have service again, our roads were all closed so we couldn't even drive to somewhere to get reception to make a call to say we had no phones! Telstra said they couldn't send crews out to make repairs for weeks, even though the power people were there to help us in a matter of days, why? Oh and Telstra advised that having phone service/mobile phone coverage wasn't an essential service which is why there was no need to do repairs quickly.

Couldn't use phone landlines for weeks, emails (no power) and no mobile phone coverage & roads closed in every direction. No communications, couldn't call insurers, council assistance, pay bills... received late fees etc, took months for Banks to understand and reimburse.

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

NPWS must be required to carry out successful Hazard Reductions, the area in which I live has had one attempt in the past 25 years, NPWS/Royal Botanic Gardens (same Govt. Dept) waited until wet weather & fired some incendiaries into the bush, watched it snuff out in the damp conditions and declared that they had completed a hazard reduction of the area! Is it any wonder the bush/wildfire was so intense? The bush here has never burnt that completely, the rocks burnt to powder, there was no wildlife left to save, they were vaporized.....

Fire must be considered a tool allowed to be used for Hazard Reductions and continue to allow Back Burning operations

- We have droughts - therefore no water for aerial combat

- Fire retardants are expensive and ruin drinking water collection/storage (used in non town water communities who are usually the ones under threat of bush fires)

- Fire weather is usually very windy so aircraft are grounded.

- Fire & Rescue don't have suitable equipment & therefore training to fight bushfires in the rural areas - they have no water storage on the trucks so need to take bulk water carriers with them in a congo line, as many of the bushfire impact areas have no town water- therefore no hydrants. The trucks are very heavy, low to the ground and not equipped with 4WD capabilities to travel on rough and dirt fire trails or even onto most rural household properties.

Councils need to use some commonsense/cut red tape, when it comes to Private landholders preparing properties for upcoming fire seasons and need to be allowed to use gentle fire techniques/ Aboriginal methods in cool weather for small patches of rocky, sloping bush land which cannot be slashed & potentially dangerous trees to be felled, without having Dept. of Land and Environment knocking on the door with massive fines.

EPA - stop listening to the noisy, ill informed, self centered City folk who choose to reside in the smog ridden Sydney basin, who don't care for a bit of extra smoke in the air during the cooler burning months. There is a very small window of opportunity to conduct successful hazard reductions particularly in the Blue Mountains due to our weather conditions. Surely after learning to stay indoors to avoid inhaling bushfire smoke riddled with the ashes of all our furry creatures including the koalas (which ironically they want to save! - easy, allow hazard reductions!) for so many months during this fire season and now with the self isolating Covid-19 laws, and the City folk have had a taste of real smoke, perhaps the EPA might also show common sense and allow the hazard reductions to go ahead.

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

The Blue Mountains of NSW is unique in it's terrain, it varies so much from one area within it to another - chalk and cheese really, unfortunately when it comes to bush fires one local area council usually claims it as their own - on this occasion a council area with a very big ego. This is why the Gaspers Mountain fire didn't cause the devastation of private property, National Parks, businesses and homes in Berambing, Mt. Tomah, Mt. Wilson, Mt. Irvine, Mt. Tootie, Mountain Lagoon, Bilpin, Blackheath, Mt. Victoria, Bell, Hartley, Dargan & Clarence. The egotistical and inept handling by Hawkesbury RFS Control of a backburn at the Cnr of Bells Line of Rd & Mt. Wilson Rd at a known favorite ignition point by prior arsonists was, in my view, combined with the laid back and complacent attitude of the out of area Commands put in place by Hawkesbury to take care of the back burning in an area notorious for "getting away to Wynnes Rocks & heading for Mt. Tomah", along with "jumping Bells Line of Road and getting into the Grose Valley".

No one particular council has the knowledge base for the entire Blue Mountains area - even down to individual RFS brigades in the same community. My area for example, Mt. Tomah (Blue Mtns LGA) and Bilpin (Hawkesbury LGA) - Berambing lies closer to Mt. Tomah by many kilometres, however we are split into both of these council areas, the result is always that Berambing is left to look after ourselves - Mt. Tomah don't want to come off the mountain and Bilpin don't want to travel 10kms west, neither brigade really understands the terrain or weather here nor as it seems during and after these 2019 season fires, really cares either, even though Berambing residents belong to both brigades, we drop right through the cracks. There is not enough residents or funding I suspect to create our own brigade here, we are only small fry. Although it's been a longtime dream of mine to create a Berambing brigade, we have defended very successfully by ourselves, we were the only ones in our area not to have a house burnt down during these fires, some equipment for our community to use would be of great assistance.

Local Council RFS / NPWS coordinators & planners now fear serious repercussions due to the disastrous outcome of the ill fated, ego driven backburn at Bells Line & Mt Wilson Rds. If their skill and knowledge base determine that due to circumstances of a fire situation, that they have to put in place an essential back burning operation, they may make the difficult and unthinkable decision not to, and this will result in

massive losses to property and possibly life.

Perhaps a positive and meaningful use of recent bushfire funding would be to create a Combined Mountains Region Group for the coordinating, planning, mitigation, communication, training, sourcing and allocation of resources and deployment of personnel and suitable appliances for the region. This would ideally consist of people from all the applicable LGA's of the Mountains area, Blue Mountains, Lithgow, Hawkesbury & NPWS gaining a knowledge base that would stand the entire region in good stead for the future. The purpose would be to ensure that this local knowledge is used, and more importantly listened to and taken on board when (not if) the next round of bushfires hits the region. It makes good sense to group this area into a geographical region more so than council regions, I'm sure it works under LGA jurisdictions in say the Far West of NSW as the terrain is very similar from one area to the next and so the issues of horses for courses wouldn't arise. For a LGA that sits on the Hawkesbury River to have total control over a fire running wild in extremely dry rugged, mountainous terrain at over 1,000 metres, that won't accept local knowledge, is totally beyond belief.

There is nothing left of my little part of paradise adjoining the Blue Mountains National Park, no flora, no fauna, everything burnt - and the beast that was the Gospers Mountain Fire, never even came here, I'm just devastated as is our entire District.

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