

Submission Number: NND.001.00736

Submission Of: Gwen and David Jagger

Your Details

Email address:

Phone:

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?

Where do you live? Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional (A)

Your Submission

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

This submission is made mostly in the context of the Royal Commission's term of reference b: specifically addressing "arrangements for improving resilience" to bushfires, "what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts", and "whether accountability for natural disaster risk management" in this context "should be enhanced". In short, as below, it is primarily about the prior arrangements not the emergency response to the bushfires.

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

This submission is made mostly in the context of the Royal Commission's term of reference b: specifically addressing "arrangements for improving resilience" to bushfires, "what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts", and "whether accountability for natural disaster risk management" in this context "should be enhanced". In short, as below, it is primarily about the prior arrangements not the emergency response to the bushfires.

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

How is that Australia proved so ill-prepared for the disaster of the 2019/20 bushfires after more than 200 years of experience with bushfires?

Two related answers are obvious: 1. we seem particularly adept at ignoring the science, though the current Coronavirus crisis might be dragging us kicking and screaming to a place of more respect for scientific warnings of disaster, and 2. the 2019/20 bushfires were clearly of a magnitude of calamity we have not previously seen.

This is a joint submission from Gwen Jagger (aged 85) and David Jagger (aged 58) reflecting on and relaying their experience of together twice fleeing these bushfires as massive fronts approached Gwen's property south of Braidwood in NSW. Not scientists, their submission is made mostly in the context of 2 immediately above, and the Royal Commission's term of reference b: specifically addressing "arrangements for improving resilience" to bushfires, "what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts", and "whether accountability for natural disaster risk management" in this context "should be enhanced".

Gwen has happily lived for 33 years on a bush block, [REDACTED], some 45km south of Braidwood. Of course bushfires have burned in the district before. Anecdotally, their incidence has increased. But last summer, with fire fronts to the south and east joining up and bearing down, and with David and some of his immediate family attending, Gwen was forced as she never has been before to flee fire, once as far as Queanbeyan and once into Braidwood. This was despite – or perhaps facilitated by – Gwen and [REDACTED] being as prepared as possible for what loomed. Gwen pays for that preparedness, and David and family help when they can, coming from their home in Alice Springs.

How come it's quite suddenly effectively expected that an 85 year-old woman must flee from her home not once but twice in quick succession, to pay for hotel rooms and/or rely on elderly friends in town for refuge, to casually contemplate returning to nothing left of the house she built? Is this the 'new normal'? Unfortunately probably not.

For Gwen and many thousands of other Australians, last summer may be a breeze compared to what's ahead. Unlike with the Coronavirus, we are not trying near hard enough to get climate change under control though the impacts will without doubt last much longer. Primary school science shows bushfires increase in their geographic range, frequency and ferocity with climate change. This is stark in Gwen's experience at [REDACTED]. If we don't now slow the rate of global warming that is central to changing climates, the future looks increasingly worse even for Gwen's generation and certainly then the generations to follow.

So, the essential action to mitigate worsening fire impacts is to address climate change. It's well understood this is a global challenge. But countries that have most means to address it but are internationally viewed as failing to pull their weight against it while indisputably contributing most per capita to it – countries that clearly have so much to lose from bushfires and other climate change damage and so much to gain from a more rapid transition to a renewable energy economy – must do more. Countries like Australia. Otherwise, how can we expect others to act decisively?

As to whether accountability for risk management in this context should be enhanced, 85 year-old Gwen on her bush block sets a decent benchmark. Her consistent, detailed preparedness for bushfires constitutes her management of the risk to the extent now possible. She understands all individuals must take responsibility, and there is a cost. But Australian governments, especially the federal government, must be held accountable for failing to adequately address climate change with suitable policies, targets, restrictions and incentives, and thus failing to manage the huge risk this poses to human life and property, to say nothing of biodiversity and the economy. If they cannot address it because of political vicissitudes, the task must go to stable, sensible, scientifically grounded and suitably empowered institutions at arms-length from government. This might do the job and enhance accountability for it that is now shrouded in half-truth at best. One such institution

might monitor and regulate the fossil fuel industry's influence on government. Many Australians like Gwen and David are fed up with the political fiddling – and the bullshitting – while the bush burns.

Locally, so soon after last summer's fires, Gwen is already tired of the talk of some in her district that national park loving greenies and the national parks and wildlife management authorities are to blame for the fires. Yes, the fires burnt in national parks, but equally fiercely in nearby state forests separately managed. The amount of fuel reduction burning in both domains is again being called into question, while plenty of experts say this has strictly limited effect in arresting fires as huge and hot as last summer's. Gwen and David will leave that to the scientists.

Gwen knows first-hand that the window of time now to do such burning is diminished with climate change, a problem while some need remains despite the limitations yet the resources for such land management seems equally diminished. The Rural Fire Service had in fact scheduled a fuel reduction burn on Gwen's block well ahead of the bushfires, when quickly the winter window closed with the early onset again of weather too warm and windy for this work. Her block's access road leads into the nearby national park. In years passed, Gwen would relatively frequently encounter park rangers on the road or inspecting a small picnic area just inside the park. She recently recounted this to a lone and now rarely seen ranger there, who regretted that their number had been so reduced – jobs lost – that regulating park fires, much less fighting them, had now become pretty thin on the ground.

It seems to Gwen that our national parks are increasingly considered expensive and dispensable luxuries, when their forests are of course essential to biodiversity and as 'carbon sinks' to absorb greenhouse gasses emitted from burning fossil fuels, a key cause of global warming.

So, a key immediate action to take to mitigate the impact of bushfires now is for governments to adequately resource the agencies charged with, and experienced in, such mitigation to do the necessary work early, strategically and very carefully on the ground, including in national parks. To improve their preparedness – our preparedness in the face of the risks – this means retaining the staff who have built up years of such experience and if necessary hire more. To enhance government accountability for this, the benchmarks must be the on-the-ground accounts of the agencies' experts – and affiliated scientists – of the geographic extent, best practice, costs and benefits of such work possible with the resources available for it.

In multiple bushfire emergencies simultaneously across very wide areas as experienced last summer, communication capacity is a critical resource. In Gwen's experience, failings may be as much a matter of poor coordination and kinks in chains of command. She was lucky to get insider information, so to speak, from her next door neighbour who was one of the firey heroes voluntarily fighting the fires till well after midnight on successive nights and who reported to her the next morning or indeed by phone from the fire lines. This was far superior information for her safety compared to what came comparatively slowly and less than accurately officially from his agency. We will significantly improve responses to bushfires if such communications are improved.

Finally, practically, Gwen recommends local listings of handypeople, available especially to the elderly to help prepare their bush and outer suburban blocks – cut grass and scrub, remove rubbish, clean gutters, etc – well ahead of bushfire seasons. These might be state or federal government funded casual positions, perhaps through local government, providing employment lost in last summer's bushfires and in the Coronavirus crisis. Governments seem to now have deep pockets in crisis times, and society now something of an appetite for sensible measures based on the science. Bushfire crises should be no different.

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

This Royal Commission is a window of opportunity ajar to independently yet very forcefully urge much stronger Australian government action, based on indisputable science, to address climate change, the climate change that is well-known to be worsening not only bushfire disaster but the disaster of prolonged drought and increased frequency and intensity of storms. Please don't waste the opportunity.

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

Supporting material provided:

Gwen Jagger at [REDACTED], readying to escape bushfire.jpg

Some of Gwen and David Jagger's bushfire preparation.JPG



Dear Fireys,

For you to best protect this place:

- Functioning and recently tested sprinklers x 5 flagged red and white; two near-ish northern corners of main house, two near-ish western corners of granny flat (one of those between house and granny flat), one on the pump shed back near-ish the creek..... Simply turn on the relevant taps till the sprinklers rotate 360° (otherwise there is insufficient pressure overall).....

The two sprinklers near-ish the house's northern corners may need a light knock on the 'hammer' that rotates them. Ladder and broom handle there for that (they tend to ~~seize up~~ seize up a bit).

- Bins with water near main house and granny flat, as advised, to splash with buckets onto window frames etc.
- Fire trail/fire break of sorts cut along, outside western fence of home paddock up to the shed that is back towards the front gate.
- Hoses available to wet that fire trail/break and the small top tank; and the front of the granny flat.
- Generator with fuel near main house with power lead connected up, ready to go if ~~mains~~ mains power fails, namely to keep the pump/sprinklers going.
- Gutters should be quite clear of leaves.
- Gas tanks turned off.
- Full water tank near shed back towards front gate, with fire fighting fittings to use on that shed if needed; and for you to fill up.
- House and granny flat unlocked if needed.

Many thanks: Gwen Jagger [redacted] and
David Jagger [redacted] Stay safe!