

Submission Number: NND.001.00751

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation?

Your Submission

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

See submission, enclosed

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

See submission, enclosed

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

See submission, enclosed

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

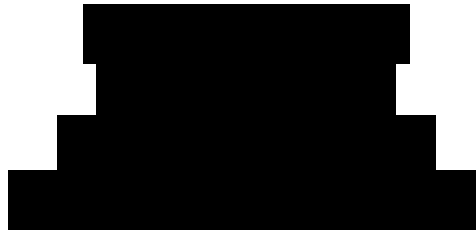
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Supporting material provided:

RC submission.pdf

SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO NATIONAL NATURAL DISASTER ARRANGEMENTS



This submission is made based on my personal experience, my professional knowledge (having worked in emergency management) and previous residential arrangements.

My submission highlights what I saw as the issues which caused significant problems at the time, and which are equally relevant following the 2020 bushfire disasters in NSW, Victoria and the ACT.

Background

I worked in Victoria in emergency management in the lead-up to and the subsequent disaster known as *Black Saturday* in February 2009. I was the Government Relations Manager at CFA and part of the executive leadership team at the time of the disaster.

Areas of bushfire response that worked well and didn't work well

Communication Issues

In the days and weeks preceding *Black Saturday* the operations area of CFA endeavoured, with Government support, to engage with communities in Victoria about the anticipated danger of the fire season.

What worked well was the engagement with Government (as the key stakeholder and funder of CFA) so that there was significant buy-in from the upper levels of Government. This meant that the Premier and senior Ministers (including the Police and Emergency Services Minister) were out and about, almost spruiking the need for communities to be prepared for the season. I know that this worked well because I was with the Premier and Minister for most of those events. Significant numbers of media were present and reported on each and every occasion.

What didn't work well, for whatever reason, was the uptake by many sectors of the community in being prepared. As an example, I listened in horror to evidence at the subsequent Royal Commission of one resident who, on the day of the disaster, was working to prepare for his child's birthday party. When asked by one of the lawyers at the hearing whether he heard the emergency warning on the ABC radio that morning, he indicated that he hadn't. Indeed, he further indicated that he'd not heard any of about four warnings – which were severe. His response? Essentially, he outlined how he was preparing for a birthday party (for a child under 10) and couldn't be expected to listen to the radio on "every day" there was a high fire danger.

The response indicated, at least to me, the expectation Victorians had that if there was a fire – anywhere – a fire truck would magically appear in their driveway and, by some superhuman effort, the fire would be extinguished. It also suggested that there was much education needed at the grass roots level to ensure that communities understood that this simply could not occur within current resources.

Following the disaster, there was a multitude of communications issues – most of which occurred with the media seeking input to various stories or rumours (think *Rumour File* on Radio 3AW). These inevitably diverted staff from other, more pressing, matters.

The Premier and the Minister for Police and Emergency Services did their best to quell what I called the storm of media questions by making themselves available each and every day for many months after the event – whether it was on the fireground during the disaster, or launching a fire truck or opening a new station in the months following the disaster. The Premier, in particular, was tireless in his efforts to work with Brigades and the communities they served, to help rebuild communities.

One of the less than ideal outcomes was the memorial service conducted on a Sunday in the weeks following *Black Saturday*. It was assumed by Government that scores of volunteers would attend. This was despite several conversations I and others had with many at a senior level that volunteers were simply too tired and would want to spend a day with their families. It was explained that they would be happy to go to their local brigades and watch a live-stream of an event, but we knew they'd be loath to leave their homes for an event in Melbourne.

Notwithstanding the warnings, Government pressed ahead and I will never forget the phone calls on the day asking me where all the volunteers were. They had done as we predicted and stayed with their families. The event was held at the Tennis Centre so it was hard to hide the fact that there were not many volunteer or career firefighters in attendance.

Information technology (IT)

IT is always a thorny issue in the emergency services environment. On 7 February 2009 I was able to see, at a glance from my laptop, the unfolding drama. I was concerned that there were so many fires and the weather was so very bad. With a click of my mouse I could tell many things about the fire – one of the important things to me was how many assets (trucks, etc) we threw at it. If I saw anything above around 10 assets I knew it was a large

fire. Of course the information included the size of the fire and which area of CFA was responding and the prevailing weather conditions.

One of the issues addressed by the Royal Commission following *Black Saturday* was the differing IT systems across emergency services (eg, the Department of Sustainability and Energy who managed forest fires). I'm almost certain the Ambulance Service had a different system. All of this was reflective of different organisations who had different funders.

During the 2019/20 fires, I found the NSW app incredibly cumbersome. It was not intuitive and didn't seem to tell the user much about a fire. It was important to me to know about a specific fire as I own land in the affected area.

The IT and its infrastructure need to be more sophisticated, faster and fit for purpose. It goes without saying that it should be much better co-ordinated. It should also be able to be updated by each jurisdiction in real time – there were often very long delays in seeing updates over the recent disaster.

Layers of Government

Prior to *Black Saturday* my observation was that there was little, if any, interaction with the Federal Government. The exception to this was the annual “meet and greet” media event on the tarmac at Essendon Airport for the arrival of the aerial skycranes and crew from Canada and the USA.

On one of my visits to Canberra I attended the Emergency Response Centre and, for the life of me, could not figure out what work was undertaken in that environment. The large room looked formidable, but there didn't seem to be many people and it was unclear what job they did day-to-day. I'm sure I'm not alone in being confused about what their role was during summer 2019/20.

At the State Government level there was significant interaction – both with the Department of Justice and with the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and the Premier, as funders of the CFA. Little, if anything, went to the Premier or Minister from CFA without going through the Department of Justice.

Many MLCs and MLAs also had significant interaction with CFA – at the local level – as there was always good press to be had by being photographed with CFA volunteers launching a truck or “popping in” for morning tea (or whatever) under the guise of checking the health of volunteers (as at February 2020 there are some 1,220 community-based volunteer brigades in Victoria with just under 56,000 volunteers).

The interaction with local government tended to be routine – planning issues around construction in bushfire prone areas and compliance with regulations, etc.

On *Black Saturday*, and for many months afterwards, my phone ran hot with requests for politicians and others to be escorted to firegrounds and brigades in fire-affected areas. This caused significant grief – not just in any attempt to arrange the logistics – because many

firegrounds were still “live” and a substantial number were crime scenes where there were still deceased persons in public areas.

Interaction at the senior level of the executive arm of government (both federal and state) occurred quickly. It was important for (what I called the) funders to see for themselves the carnage which the disaster had wreaked so that there was a good understanding of the level of funding and other assistance which may be required.

What more junior politicians, their staffers and some members of the media failed to understand was the need to allow professional firefighters to do their jobs without the encumbrance of a politician looking over their shoulder or asking questions. It particularly rankled that less than 12 hours after the disaster, with the unfolding loss of some 173 lives, I was being asked by staffers for photo opportunities for their masters. Declining such requests was often met with abuse and the inevitable “don’t you know who we’re talking about?” question. Or the “why is the Premier/PM” allowed to go and not us?”.

So there were all levels of government almost jockeying for positions – which left poor old local government squandering on the sidelines of their local communities; trying desperately to aid these communities.

At the Federal level the input of the Prime Minister was welcome and certainly bolstered career firefighters, volunteers and communities. What didn’t help was the almost immediate revving up, in a political sense, by those on the other side pointing the finger at CFA and its members for some perceived inadequacy in their remit.

CFA HQ had a visit from the (then) Minister appointed by the Prime Minister to assist in the rebuilding of communities. His visit to be briefed on the disaster was lost on many, as it occurred a little late (but in line with his appointment). Nevertheless, his visit was welcome as he stressed his willingness to cut through any Federal red tape required by CFA. But his appointment should have been made on day one or two.

Post Black Saturday Recovery

It was depressingly obvious following the disaster that recovery was a long term proposition. While the State and Federal Governments meant well, the funding was simply too slow in getting to those in need.

I observed many families living in caravans on their properties in September 2009 – a very depressing way of life for those in parts of the State where it had been a particularly cold winter with rain and snow so caravans and everything they owned were in the mud.

One of the other significant delays was, what I termed, changing the goal-posts for building. Most councils, quite rightly, endeavoured to ensure there would be no repeat of *Black Saturday* by changing a number of planning activities, including:

- a) designation of bushfire prone areas;
- b) minimum construction standards depending on bushfire attack level (BAL);

c) vegetation management; etc.

While each of the protections had safety as the important issue, the costs of meeting those requirements in many instances, precluded many residents from rebuilding in their communities.

Compounding the issue was the reckless price gouging by many builders (also seen in Canberra in 2003) which essentially priced many residents out of rebuilding a structure sufficient to meet the local government requirements and large enough to house their families.

Of course, insurance companies then inserted their layer of bureaucracy and many folk found it too hard to build or insure in an environment where they may have lived for more than 20 years.

The planning changes also had consequences for landowners who had not yet built. For example, I know of landowners in the Bass Coast Shire of Victoria who found themselves on land that was worthless – because the planning changes meant there was absolutely no envelope that could accommodate any structure within the BAL requirements.

Even the cost of clearing properties was prohibitive for some. This can be contrasted with the NSW Government's approach following the Tathra bushfires of 2018 to undertake land/block clearing on behalf of residents.

Announcement of Royal Commission

Most of the CFA staff welcomed the announcement by Government of a Royal Commission to examine all elements relating to *Black Saturday*. This was on the basis that all areas had worked tirelessly in the lead-up to, during and following the disaster.

It appeared to many in CFA that the Victorian community thought that CFA had done a terrible job and “couldn't even put out a fire”. Despite these fires behaving like no fire beforehand or since. Many, myself included, felt that the object of the Commission was to find a scapegoat – and CFA fitted the bill.

Yes, there were elements where the organisation could have performed better. There were elements where other organisations could have performed better. But to have attack dogs go after individual employees day after day in the hearings was incredibly stressful. There did not appear to be any understanding that CFA career staff and volunteers lived and worked in the communities most affected by *Black Saturday*.

Getting bogged down on almost minutiae (think Police Commissioner having a dinner break when others also had a dinner break) was reprehensible and showed a lack of understanding about the roles of various organisations at the Emergency Co-ordination Centre.

What needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery co-ordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

There are a number of changes which could be made which would improve the response within Australia to disasters.

First and foremost should be a ***national*** approach to disasters, as any significant disaster has an impact on all jurisdictions – whether it is a fire burning across borders, floods crossing state lines or emergency service volunteers/career staff being seconded to assist in any emergency. This is also important insofar as international involvement occurs for many disasters in Australia. Such an approach should include a national and single app to monitor fires. People cross Australian borders regularly and should be able to monitor their safety with one app.

It goes without saying that a properly co-ordinated national approach would improve the communication issues – for all jurisdictions.

The National Cabinet which was established comprising the Prime Minister and Premiers/Chief Ministers from each jurisdiction for CoVid-19 is a good example of a national approach to a disaster. This model could also be used for fire, flood, etc. Supplementing such a model could be a sub-set of the National Cabinet comprising National Fire Chiefs and/or National Emergency Services leaders. Their advice could then feed to funders during the course of any disaster.

Suggested changes could be as follows.

1. There should be an integration of emergency services both at the bureaucratic and political level so that any response is seamless to those communities most affected.
2. It should be clear where the responsibility starts and finishes for each layer of Government so that there is no jockeying for position when a disaster occurs.
3. There should be clear and documented roles for leaders at each layer of Government when there is a disaster.
4. Information technology across jurisdictions needs to be consistent – not just in its nomenclature, but in look and feel. The NSW app was far inferior to the Victorian app in the 2019/20 summer. One app would be desirable.
5. Any national IT solution should be capable of being updated by each jurisdiction in real time.
6. Updates to any app should be regular – over summer 2019/20 it was often days between updates.
7. There should be no visits by politicians to disaster areas unless approved at an operational level.
8. There should be regular briefing by Federal and State leaders to the Opposition in relevant jurisdictions during a disaster – it is too much for those on the ground to be taken off important operational duties to escort these members around disaster

- areas for nothing more than photo opportunities. (Perhaps the National Opposition Leader should be included in any National Cabinet to advance this process.)
9. Governments need to be clear with potential guests of governments (ie international dignitaries) that, while their visit is welcome, it might be welcome at a later time.
 10. Far more education, particularly around fire, needs to occur within communities. It seems that the “stay and defend” option is not ideal given that fires are behaving less and less predictably.
 11. Funding for victims needs to hit the ground much faster than it did in the *Black Saturday* and the 2019/20 fire disasters. Australians expect that when they make a donation to charity to assist in relief efforts, their donation will get to the relief effort quickly. Sadly, we have found that this is not the case.
 12. There should be a measured response to changing planning and other laws following a disaster. To many in Victorian communities it seemed like an almost knee-jerk reaction which affected their ability to recover financially.
 13. There needs to be a very close eye kept on price gouging in the wake of disasters. The 2003 Canberra fires and *Black Saturday* are both evidence of occasions where residents, in their endeavours to replace their homes, simply could not afford to because local builders were charging ludicrous sums for construction.
 14. Similarly, insurance companies need to be monitored by Government to ensure claims are made quickly and without significant efforts to shirk their responsibility.

And finally, as an aside I would recommend that the Royal Commission be more tolerant of fire and emergency services staff in their hearings. It is natural for anyone affected by such a disaster to look for a scapegoat. In the case of the 2019/20 fires, the fire should be the scapegoat rather than those who worked tirelessly to extinguish blazes across State lines.

As with CFA in 2009 and ACT Fire and Rescue in 2003, there are many activities which may have been performed better. By and large the fire services in both communities performed extremely well and it would be a shame if anyone was held up as a scapegoat.

Conclusion

I believe the most important shortcoming in the natural disaster over Summer 2019/20 was the lack of a co-ordinated national approach across jurisdictions – across all elements of activity. If there is a co-ordinated response to support those affected by the disaster, then Australia will be in a much better position to deal quickly and effectively with emerging issues around disasters.