

Submission Number: NND.001.00864

Submission Of:

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? Kangaroo Island - Duncan, Parndana

Your Submission

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

Local farm units

Local CFS

Army response

Mainland units

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

- Poor Behaviour During An Emergency
- Slow Decision-Making
- Too Many Committees
- Poor Communication
- Poor Management of National Park
- Too Much Politics and Egos
- Lack of Respect for Locals and their Knowledge
- Equipment and Technology

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

Words cannot describe how angry locals are about the KI bushfires. The issues outlined above are just a drop in the ocean of the issues that need to be resolved. Locals are angry that their hands were tied by bureaucracy. Their homes, businesses and lives were lost because of poor decisions by government agencies. The best thing that can come from these processes is removing those barriers that prevented the fire from being fought the way it should've been. Make decisions ahead of time, reduce the number of decision-makers, improve communication systems and let the fire be fought. Locals want to see a common sense approach that puts them and the lives of their families first.

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

See attachment

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

Supporting material provided:

KI Bushfires 2020 [REDACTED].pdf

Kangaroo Island Bushfire 2020

To: The Royal Commission on Bushfires 2019 – 2020**Subject: Kangaroo Island Bushfire**

I am writing this submission on behalf of my Kangaroo Island (KI) family, as they have been deeply affected by the event and are now focussed on rebuilding their lives. In writing this submission we hope to contribute to the Royal Commission process and provide insight into the disaster. We hope that the commissioners can devise better strategies on all subjects so the community is better prepared for future bushfire emergencies.

**THE FIRE**

On 3rd January 2020, our family farm was lost to the fire that destroyed much of Western Kangaroo Island. It was a fire that reduced many homes to ash, killed many animals, destroyed livelihoods and took lives. My brother and his family lost their home. It was the home of our childhood, and

held many cherished belongings and memories. Unfortunately, it's a similar story for our neighbours and the sporting clubs in the area. Very few in the district escaped the wrath of the flames. The Western End of the Island has been charred beyond recognition.

During the fire the locals were nothing short of sensational. They put their own lives at risk (and on hold) to stand alongside their mates in trouble. The men in our family all fought the fire. As farmers, they have their own fire-fighting units, and spent considerable time battling the fire. Our Step-Family's farm was among the first to be affected before and over Christmas, and they had a tough fight on their hands.



A family home neighbours the Parndana CFS and they worked tirelessly for their community. With them at the helm, we knew we were in safe hands. It was very moving to see so many vehicles at the command centre. Over Christmas trucks from far and wide drove past our door. We were thankful to have them.

AREAS IN NEED OF ATTENTION

- **Behaviour During An Emergency**
- **Slow Decision-Making**
- **Too Many Committees**
- **Poor Communication**
- **Poor Management of National Park**
- **Too Much Politics and Egos**
- **Lack of Respect for Locals and their Knowledge**
- **Equipment and Technology**

Kangaroo Island Bushfire 2020

Behaviour during an emergency.

Unfortunately, the trouble seemed to start when the 'Big-Wigs' from Adelaide got involved. A fire emergency is not a time for egos and playing politics, yet that is exactly what happened. And it has happened many times before.

Slow decision-making caused by Too Many Committees

Too many agencies were sitting around that decision-making table at the KI Command Centre. Decisions about how to manage the fire went through too many hands. Some decisions were even being made in Adelaide. **A fire emergency is a time for swift action and decision-making.** Unfortunately, slow-decision making is a significant issue that locals are fed up with. Bureaucracy and red-tape should be nowhere near an emergency situation.

Example: The Ravine fire on Kangaroo Island

Just before New Year, lightning strikes sparked more fires on the far west of the island. The community worked hard to contain it, but as some were in the National Park there were significant issues. The firefighters were literally standing and waiting for permission (from Adelaide, National Parks etc) to fight the fire in front of them. The locals knew that a firebreak could slow the fire and protect the remaining park (and the Island). Unfortunately, the permission had to come through the official channels. Well, it came through too late and the fire had escaped containment lines. This was the fire that turned into a monster. It destroyed most of Flinders Chase National Park, killed two people and destroyed many homes, including ours.

Why couldn't decisions like this one be made ahead of time? Or by fewer people? Prompt action is required during an emergency situation. **The fire won't wait.**

There is no reason why an overarching document or strategy couldn't be developed that provides permissions for certain actions. Get all the relevant stakeholders around the table and work-out a strategy that promotes action. Decisions including those about establishing fire-breaks could be made ahead of time. Give those working on the ground the opportunity to gain control over the fire quickly.

Poor communication and slow decision-making cost lives.

With so many people on the island fighting multiple fires, communication was a nightmare. The CFS website was well out of date and inaccurate. Information was not flowing to the right places or the wrong people were providing inaccurate information.

Example: Local efforts to bridge the communication gap

One local man, who had been fighting the fires near his property took it upon himself to be at the KI Command Centre. He wanted to make sure that the new crews on their way to the fire ground were given the right information about the current status. Up until that point, they weren't.

Our step-family's farm was amongst the first to be hit by the bushfire emergency. My 82 year old stepfather and his son worked extremely hard to save their property. The local community all pitched in to help.

Another Example: Permission from Headquarters

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After the worst of the fire had passed, the men were patrolling their property looking for hot-spots. A large hot-spot was found and they called for firetruck assistance. The firetruck arrived and brought the hot-spot under control. In the meantime, my step-father had spotted another hot-spot only a few hundred metres away. He asked the firetruck crew to attend to it. They said **'No, as they had to get permission from headquarters.'**

This is just one example of a very large problem. The water bombers spent hours sitting idle waiting for permission and instructions from headquarters to fight the fire when that time could have been used actually fighting the fire. It links into the previous point about slow decision making. Do you have any idea how ridiculous locals find this kind of behaviour when their homes are under threat?

I've worked in public sector and I know how slowly the wheels turn. This is not an effective management strategy for any emergency.

Flinders Chase needs a better Fire Prevention and Management Strategy

On Christmas Eve I took my husband and children to Flinders Chase National Park for the day. It was a magical day, we watched the seals at Admirals Arch, walked amongst the Remarkable Rocks and had lunch at the café. It's sad to think that it's all gone.

The national park plays an important role in conserving KI's natural beauty. Unfortunately with that beauty comes the risk of fire. Fires have been happening at Flinders Chase since it was established in 1919.

The park's fire infrastructure and prevention methods need to be better maintained. This is a source of much anger and frustration for the people who live in the area. The fuel load in the park at the time of the 2020 fire was extremely high.

Just to be clear... the locals didn't want the park to go up in flames. They know too well what happens when a fire gets into the park. So that's why they were so eager to get the Ravine fire contained. Not only is a fire impossible to fight in the park, dealing with the government to gain access is a nightmare. A nightmare that has been experienced many times.

Lack of Respect for Locals and their Knowledge

It was disappointing to see how little respect the 'officials' had for the locals and their knowledge. Kangaroo Island is predominantly farmland. Farmers know their properties and how they respond to fire. The people living on KI have had years of experience dealing with bushfires. KI is an island and the weather is unpredictable and changeable. During a bushfire, a change in wind direction can spell disaster, just as it did in January 2020.

The people in charge, just don't listen, because they think they know better. This kind of attitude is very dangerous during a fire emergency. It puts lives at risk and the locals off-side, when their pleas fall on deaf ears. Imagine their frustration when crews are being sent to the wrong location, or water-bombers sent to the wrong place. Locals shake their heads in disbelief when water-bombers are sitting idle and their homes are under threat. As some locals battled to save their properties, they watched as water bombers flew straight over, leaving them to fend for themselves.

Many crews from the mainland remarked on how this fire was unlike any they'd experienced. They went away with a new respect for Kangaroo Island and the challenges faced during a bushfire.

Perhaps there needs to be a manual developed for Kangaroo Island. Wouldn't it be useful to hand a fire controller from the mainland an in-depth instruction manual on how to fight a bushfire on

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Kangaroo Island? It would be great to have information available to inform those coming from the mainland about KI's idiosyncrasies.

Equipment and Technology

It was clear from the outset that the CFS was grossly under-equipped. In this day and age, there is no excuse for not having the most up to date technology assisting in fire management. Being prepared, means ensuring that the necessary tools are available and ready to go. This includes everything from computer programs, protective equipment to accurate maps. Fire is part of the Australian landscape, and funding it to ensure we are prepared needs to be made a priority.

Much more could be written about the fires and their impact on Kangaroo Island, but I am mindful of the many other submissions. You just have to look at the charred remains of the family home, and of the island to see the impact. Now those affected have to re-build their lives. But because they live on an island so far away, they believe they will be forgotten. They may not be a highly populated area like the Eastern States, but they are important and they suffered just as much. **The places affected by the KI bushfires were not even included on the online submission form for this process. That in itself speaks volumes.**

Conclusion

Words cannot describe how angry locals are about the KI bushfires. The issues outlined above are just a drop in the ocean of the issues that need to be resolved. Locals are angry that their hands were tied by bureaucracy. Their homes, businesses and lives were lost because of poor decisions by government agencies. The best thing that can come from these processes is removing those barriers that prevented the fire from being fought the way it should've been. Make decisions ahead of time, reduce the number of decision-makers, improve communication systems and let the fire be fought. **Locals want to see a common sense approach that puts them and the lives of their families first.**