

Submission Number: NND.001.00875

Submission Of: Allan Douch

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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?

Where do you live? Bega Valley (A)

Your Submission

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

Speaking as a lifetime local in Bermagui (67 years) and spending my entire working career in the Forest of the South Coast, I thought the local combined fire fighting teams did an excellent job in saving lives and property. (RFS, Forestry, NPWS and private contractors with heavy earth-moving equipment.

In catastrophic and unprecedented conditions the outcome could have been far worse.

Police and Emergency Services all performed amazingly well in road access and evacuation centres.

The Bega Valley Shire Council employees worked tirelessly to keep the town running with water, sewage and media updates.

Local ABC radio updates were so important to keep everyone informed. Having a battery operated radio was an advantage to hear the broadcasts once the power was not available.

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

The main area of concern was lack of communication. Once the bushfires took out power lines and phone towers and phone communications , Bermagui was literally in the dark for almost a week. With no power , no supermarket open and no fuel available there was a huge feeling of panic.

There were a number of town meetings but without communication it was almost impossible for people to be made aware of these meetings plus when there was a large crowd outside the surf club no one could hear the presenter. It became hugely distressing to be finally advised at a large town meeting in the Country Club that everyone in Bermagui had to evacuate as there were not enough resources to defend the town. Roads became clogged and travel to Bega and beyond took many hours. This occurred when the town was full of tourists and thousands of people left within 24 hours.

A lot of fire trails and old roads in the Forested areas surrounding Bermagui were closed or left overgrown with vegetation or eroded. These were untrafficable and had to be opened with machinery to gain access for fire fighting crews to access the the firefront and establish control lines.

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

Commenting on Bushfire disaster arrangements for the township of Bermagui and surrounding Areas.

Preparation-Firebreaks- A major firebreak needs constructing from Wallaga Lake to Cuttagee Lake. This break needs to be 30 to 40 metres wide cleared of vegetation and be maintained, slashed or mown before each fire season.. Closer to town back up breaks need establishing to separate the forest from the dwellings. These also need maintaining and kept clear. These Fire breaks could be used as control lines to conduct Hazard Reduction and Property Protection burns outside the fire danger period.

Mitigation-Several people should be employed by the RFS (paid Employees)in the Bermagui area to maintain these breaks and keep roads and trails open in the surrounding forests and bushlands. Suitable equipment would be needed. They could also plan and establish Hazard reduction burning areas, blocks to be burnt in conjunction with land tenure owners or custodians. These burns would need to be planned on a 5 year rotation bases and carried out by voluntary RFS crews, Forestry Corp and NPWS as per land tenure.

Better Communication services need to be established. Major Power Lines underground and fireproof poles. Phone Towers need to be fireproof with back up generators installed in fireproof bunkers. On ground firefighting agencies all on one radio channel for emergencies. Major generators available for town supplies if cut off by fire. Environmental laws need adjusting to make it easier to conduct hazard reduction burns. We have seen our wildlife has suffered a huge loss and some species may never recover because of the intensity of the fire. Burns carried out under more favourable conditions and controlled as done by Aboriginals for thousands of years do less harm to the environment. Response and Recovery-Federal & State Governments need to work together. Our Armed forces should be trained in firefighting and recovery and be available to respond to help in a bushfire emergency and then recovery co-ordination. Local Governments need to seriously look at where housing developments are permitted to build especially where houses are constructed in conjunction to forested areas.

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

I have had a lot of experience on the ground in bushfire fighting and management after 50 years of working in the bush-45 of those employed by the Forestry Commission of NSW. I have been involved in all aspects of firefighting from Fire Tanker operator, Crew Leader and in later years as Divisional Commander in charge of up to 70 firefighters and machine operators. In the 1970's when I commenced work with Forestry there hazard reduction fires scattered across the countryside during winter months. This created a chequerboard burn effect and because it happened on a regular basis the fuel load did not build up in the forests as they have over the past 30 years. Bermagui is still surrounded by unburnt forest and with the continuing Drought residents are very concerned with a major bushfire occurring in the next 12 months.

Fire consists of 3 Aspects:

Temperature-the hotter the day the more fierce the fire

Wind-The stronger the wind the faster the fire travels

Fuel-The heavier the fuel load on the ground the more intense the fire.

We can't control the Weather conditions but we can reduce fuel loads on the ground and reduce the intensity of the fire.

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