

Submission Number: NND.001.00882

Submission Of:

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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? The options above do not accurately affect my situation. I have a property near Nowendoc, south of Walcha, which was burnt out. I live there only part of the time and also have a residence in Sydney.

Where do you live? Walcha (A)

Your Submission

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

The parties responsible for the response generally did all that could be expected of them, and more, under the circumstances. This included many heroic actions that went well beyond the call of duty, and well beyond what could

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

However, the circumstances were so extreme that none of the normal approaches to dealing with bushfires worked, and nor could they have been expected to have worked.

For example, at my property just south of Nowendoc (between Walcha and Gloucester on [REDACTED]) there was no water available for fire fighting because the rivers were dry and all the dams were dry. The sources of water normally available to firefighters simply did not exist. Hence they were, despite doing all that they could and much more than they should have in terms of their own safety, were effectively helpless. All they could do was monitor the situation and request an occasional aerial drop although to actually get one they had to compete with other demands on limited aerial resources which could not reasonably cope with the vast extent of the fires.

The REAL PROBLEM was the UNPRECEDENTED nature of the circumstances. The shockingly severe drought had radically reduced the moisture in the landscape to create a situation that had never occurred before. As a result all vegetation was tinder dry, the ground was totally dry, ALL dams in the area had dried up, and the rivers that had never dried up before were dry, so that there was simply no water resource available for fire fighting.

As the circumstances were well beyond anything previously experienced, the entire infrastructure developed to address the risk of bushfires was simply inadequate and unable to effectively respond, despite the best efforts of all involved.

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

The FIRST STEP which needs to be taken in order to address this issue is a clear and unambiguous recognition by both Federal and State governments that climate change has and is continuing to change the nature of the problem to be addressed, and a very dangerous and frightening way. In essence, there needs to be a basic paradigm shift in governmental thinking, and this needs to flow down through all levels of society.

From this many things flow. For instance:

- The fire season started in late August 2019, that is months earlier than normal. Hence the assumption that it is possible to carry out enough control burning during winter months has to be set aside in relation to planning for future extreme events.
- Fire seasons in the north and south hemispheres now overlap and this overlap will continue to increase. As a result the assumption that aerial resources from the northern hemisphere can be leased by Australia has to be set aside in relation to planning for future extreme events.
- In future extreme events it may simply not be possible to fight fires from the ground, or at all. Even aerial firefighting becomes too dangerous in certain weather conditions.
- The increasing duration of the fire season means that the existing model of volunteer RFS brigades supported by full time RFS resources may no longer be viable. I have noticed signs up at RFS stations asking people to volunteer, including at stations that I know used to have a waiting list of eager volunteers. This is an indication that the recent fire season was simply too much for volunteer staff to economically survive.

In summary, the FIRST STEP is an integrated national / state body authorised to pursue by all means possible an understanding of the dramatic and ever increasing effects of climate change, on the basis of this to implement radical changes to the fundamental assumptions that underlie our existing response infrastructure, and progress all required actions to facilitate the radical changes in the structure of our response systems. Given the accelerating impacts of climate change, the integrated body would need to operate in effect on a war footing, with rapid implementation of required actions free of political interference.

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

The worst thing that the Royal Commission could do would be to get bogged down in detail, pick over the bones of events, point the finger at people and organisations which almost without exception did much more than was reasonable, and deliver up multiple recommendations for minor adjustments when in fact radical changes in thinking and systems are needed. Central to this is an understanding and recognition of how climate change is upending the basic assumptions that our society has been built on, and addressing how this fundamental change in circumstances affects our thinking about how to respond.

I note that while the main current focus is the 2019-20 bushfires, the natural disasters to be confronted in the future are many and varied. My own recent experience is a case in point, with my property burnt out in the 2019-20 fires, then exactly a week later the roof of my office penetrated by a large tree limb during a freak local storm, then a little over a month later my wife killed by a freak lightning strike (2 strikes at the same location, with the first starting a fire and the second some time later when the storm had apparently passed killing my wife when she felt it was safe to check the by then significant fire), extensive damage to my business caused by the lightning strike, and then some flooding

caused by subsequent extreme rainfall. At my age it is improbable that I will be able to recover from the events of one summer. The real challenge for the Royal Commission is attack the big issues (the impacts of climate change) relentlessly to the extent necessary to kick-start fundamental change in thinking by both government and society. Everyone must come to terms with the severity of what we are facing by the climatic changes that are already unstoppable, and the extreme risks that arise if action to mitigate continues to be inadequate.

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