

Submission Number: NND.001.00883

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?

Where do you live? Bega Valley (A)

Your Submission

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

ABC Radio. Increase its funding.

At the Bega evacuation centre, an amazing job was done by volunteers from not-for-profit organisations and personnel from government services, as they provided material, mental and spiritual support to evacuees.

Daily communication, coordinated by the Bega Valley Shire Council, worked well at the Bega Evacuation Centre.

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

There was no direct communication or action from any government authority about the approaching fires in this area. As the fires approached, we mostly gauged our safety from the colour of the sky as it turned orange and the smoke level, as well as the NSW RFS 'Fires Near Me' App. At our daughter's urging, we left for the Bega evacuation centre at 7:00 pm on the eve of the Badja Forest fire. However, many of our neighbours were only warned about the fires by other neighbours in the early hours of the morning, literally as the fires were bearing down on them and the road to the Bega was closed. The wonderful RFS in Cobargo only have the capacity to defend the town, not any surrounding properties. Ultimately, the message is that there was no prior warning of the magnitude of the approaching fires. We thought we would be back home in the morning, not stuck in the evacuation centre for a week.

While the Bega Evacuation Centre was well managed by the government's Family and Community Services, the personnel had to learn as they went along. The management team was flown in from Sydney and, from personal communication with one of the managers, they felt ill-prepared for what they had to experience and manage. The majority of the day-to-day welfare of the evacuees was managed by volunteers from various not-for-profit organisations, many of whom had gained experience from the Tathra fires. I believe the mental anguish experienced by evacuees may be underestimated by many who have not experienced the threat of fires and the loss of homes.

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

Our understanding is that back-burning decisions need to be made locally, according to conditions, rather than having to rely on a date approved by a central authority.

At-risk local communities need more fire-fighting resources.

At-risk local communities need a more coordinated warning system as to the intensity of the approaching fires. Communication at a household level would be advantageous, perhaps via SMS, when evacuation is recommended.

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

The recent mega-fires must not be regarded or referred to as the "new normal", despite the fact that preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination is having to respond in new ways. Australians can no longer shy away from the reality of human-induced global warming. It has been incredibly frustrating to see the government respond so decisively to the threat of COVID-19, based on scientific evidence and advice, while politicians still pander to anti-science climate deniers. Yet, it seems that more people were directly affected by the threat of bushfires than by COVID-19. We need bold, bi-partisan government policy to tackle Australia's contribution to global warming and the resultant destruction of the environment.

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