

Time submitted: 28/04/2020 10:13:33 AM

Submission Number: NND.001.00975

Submission Of: Durras Community Association NSW

Your Details

Email address:

Phone:

Preferred means of contact: Email

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? Durras Community Association

Your Submission

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

See attached submission

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

See attached submission

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 attached submission

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

See attached submission

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

Supporting material provided:

Letter - Royal Commission Submission -28-4-20.pdf

DCA Submission - Royal Commission into Natural Disasters 2020.pdf

Durras Community Association

Email: [REDACTED]

Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin AC (Retd)
Dr Annabelle Bennett AC SC
Professor Andrew Macintosh
Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements
Locked Bag 2000, MANUKA, ACT 2603
Sent by email: rcnda.enquiries@royalcommission.gov.au

Dear Commissioners

Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Please find attached a submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements from the Durras Community Association which represents the interests of the ratepayers and residents of South Durras on the NSW south coast.

If you require any further information, please contact me via email or on [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Dr Trevor Daly
President
Durras Community Association

28 April 2020

Email: [REDACTED]

Facebook: Durras Community Association

Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020 – Durras Community Association NSW

This is a submission from the Durras Community Association which represents the interests of ratepayers and residents of South Durras located on the NSW south coast. The recent Currowan bushfire closely threatened our coastal village in late 2019 and we were very lucky not to suffer any direct property damage or loss of life unlike other communities on the south coast. This was largely due to the actions of firefighting personnel in preventing the fire reaching the edge of our village and crossing Durras Road by creating firebreaks by bulldozer, aerial waterbombing and through targeted backburning, along with favourable weather conditions on key days.

Our community feels for those nearby who have suffered lost loved ones and properties in the Black Summer 2019-20 bushfires and we wish to extend our sympathies and support to them. While those on the NSW south coast directly impacted must now focus on their recovery, the South Durras community feels we can help assist by focusing attention on what can be done better in future for all south coast communities like ours. While Durras was spared this time, our village is still under significant risk from future bushfires which could occur as early as next summer.

At a large community meeting held at South Durras Hall on Saturday 15 February 2020 (attended by approximately 150 local ratepayers, property owners and residents), the Durras community unanimously agreed on a list of actions which need to be taken by all levels of government and a range of agencies and organizations and implemented as soon as possible to better protect South Durras and other regional communities from bushfire.

Key actions and demands agreed at the Durras community meeting included:

Telecommunications

Upgrades are urgently needed to local telecommunication infrastructure servicing South Durras NSW for mobile phone, landline and NBN, including installation of backup power via batteries and/or generators, so that telephone and internet communications are not lost during mains power outages.

Electricity

A fireproof electricity supply network is to be installed ASAP to service South Durras, North Durras and Depot Beach, NSW comprised of either underground cables or new power poles made of concrete, fibreglass or other flame proof materials. The fireproof electricity supply is to extend from the Princes Highway to South Durras village. Automatic isolation switches are to be installed on the network so that when one area loses power other areas are not cut off unnecessarily.

Fire Trail Network

A network of fire trails is to be established around the entire perimeter of the private land of South Durras NSW to allow unimpeded access for firefighting trucks from the local NSW

Rural Fire Service (RFS) brigade and other firefighting vehicles. The trails are to be gated with keys held by the local RFS brigade and relevant land managers (e.g. NSW National Parks and Wildlife staff - NPWS). The fire trails are to be regularly maintained by the relevant land managers and the local RFS brigade with annual checks made prior to each summer bushfire season to ensure all trails are clear of fallen trees and vegetation which could impede vehicular access.

Buffer Zone around South Durras

A managed buffer zone is to be established around the entire perimeter of the private land in South Durras NSW and linked to the fire trail network. The width of the buffer and ongoing management of the area is to be based on expert advice on bushfire mitigation and property protection, with further consultation on the design and management of the buffer zone to be held with the local Durras community. Buffer zones are also to be established and maintained around the Telstra mobile phone and NBN towers located at South Durras.

The buffer zones are to be managed on an ongoing basis by the relevant land managers (e.g. NPWS, NSW Crown Lands or Eurobodalla Shire Council -ESC) with assistance from the local RFS brigade and other Durras community volunteers (e.g. Landcare, community working bees).

Bushfire Hazard Reduction on Public Land

Bushfire hazard reduction works are to be undertaken on an annual basis (or more frequently if required) on all public land surrounding South Durras NSW. The types of fuel reduction and bushfire mitigation actions undertaken are to be based on expert advice, and may include vegetation clearing, manual and mechanical fuel removal (slashing, mulching, removal of green waste) and controlled burning or Aboriginal cultural burning. The bushfire hazard reduction actions are to be organized and carried out by the relevant land managers (e.g. NPWS, Crown Lands or ESC) with assistance of the local RFS brigade and other Durras community volunteers (e.g. Landcare, community working bees).

As an immediate action, Forestry Corporation NSW are requested to clean up the logging debris located in State Forest on the western side of Princess Highway near Benandarah.

An annual report on the bushfire hazard reduction works undertaken by each public land manager around South Durras is to be provided to the Durras community.

The Durras community notes that bushfire hazard reduction works along the boundaries of the Murrumbidgee National Park with private properties in South Durras NSW requires significant improvement. Many local private landowners are working consistently on hazard reduction on their land but are not seeing the same thing being done in the National Park over the fence.

Bushfire Hazard Reduction on Private Land

Private property owners in high risk areas such as South Durras NSW are to be encouraged and supported to undertake bushfire hazard reduction measures, including manual and mechanical fuel reduction, on their properties to reduce the risk to their dwellings and other approved structures (and those of their neighbours) without interference or restrictions by

any government agency (whether local, State or Federal). This includes the unrestricted use of the 10/50 Rule for vegetation clearing in NSW on all residential properties in South Durras (which have already been mapped by the NSW RFS as subject to either flame, radiant heat or ember attack). See:

https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/85355/SouthDurras-Bush-Fire-Survival-Map.pdf

An immediate review of the 10/50 Rule should also be undertaken by the NSW Government to ensure consistency between vegetation clearing rules applying at State and local levels for bushfire risk areas (e.g. 10/50 Rule vs Council zonings and tree preservation restrictions).

There should also be consistency between the vegetation clearing rules and the size of required Asset Protection Zones (APZs) applied to both newly constructed and existing dwellings. Currently older dwellings are usually not afforded the same level of APZ bushfire protection as new dwellings.

At present, landowners can make a formal complaint online about a bushfire hazard on neighbouring properties on the NSW RFS website. <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/Bush-fire-hazards-and-your-property/reporting-a-bush-fire-hazard> The RFS can then inspect and advise and direct landowners to take appropriate action to remove the bushfire hazard. While the RFS has the clear legislative capacity to issue hazard reduction notices for private properties there seems to be a general reluctance to issue formal notices to property owners in many areas (including South Durras NSW) in response to complaints received. This needs to be addressed by the State Government and the RFS should be required to report annually on how many bushfire hazard reduction notices it has issued in each Local Government Area.

The Durras community is also concerned about the costs to landowners of maintaining regular hazard reduction on private properties. It is recommended that local councils allow property owners in high bushfire risk areas (such as South Durras NSW) to take their green waste to Council tips free of charge (using rate notices as proof) or establish more regular Council collections of green waste (e.g. weekly collections rather than fortnightly). When an active bushfire is in the area, Councils should temporarily adjust their green waste collections and service rules for those areas under threat so property owners can take last minute actions to reduce fuel on their properties before the fire arrives.

As well as three caravan parks, there are many private properties in South Durras NSW which provide temporary rental accommodation (e.g. AirBnB etc.). All properties being used for holiday rentals should be required to have a bushfire plan which is made available to customers to advise on what they should do in the event of a bushfire at South Durras (including when to leave, how to prepare for ember attack, evacuation areas etc.).

Tax deductions for Bushfire Property Protection

Property owners in high bushfire risk areas such as South Durras NSW should be allowed to claim tax deductions for the costs of installing bushfire protection equipment, such as firefighting pumps, roof sprinklers and metal gutter guards, generators, additional water tanks etc. These deductions should be allowed by the Commonwealth Government from 1

July 2020. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements should recommend to the Commonwealth Government to take this action as soon as possible to support those property owners who are being proactive in reducing their bushfire risk.

Other Bushfire Issues Requiring Action

The south coast of NSW has a large number of coastal lakes. These provide useful firebreaks during times of active bushfires but their capacity to assist with fighting bushfires is currently underutilised by the NSW RFS. There is need for local RFS brigades (including the South Durras RFS brigade) to be appropriately resourced and equipped with a waterborne firefighting capacity (e.g. vessel based pumps or firefighting boats as are used in other countries) to fight fires on the edge of lakes such as Durras Lake. This capacity would greatly assist with preventing spot fires from jumping from one side of the lake to the other.

There is a need for the NSW RFS and other firefighting agencies to be provided with an increased remote firefighting ability (e.g. more firefighting aircraft, deployment of trained remote ground crews etc.) to attack and put out bushfires when they first start and are small in size. A more aggressive approach to new bushfires is required than has been the case previously. When new bushfires start, regardless of their location, they should be hit early and hard with as many firefighting resources as possible to prevent them spreading. The common approach of letting new bushfires keep burning out to containment lines has proven to be flawed in many cases and is very risky as weather conditions can change rapidly. In the early stages of a bushfire there needs to be more attack and less defence.

The NSW RFS needs to make far greater efforts to attract younger volunteers for local brigades. Too many brigades are relying on older retirees to go out on firetrucks many of whom are physically unfit for active firefighting duties.

The NSW RFS needs to ensure that updated bushfire preparation educational materials is provided to all property owners in high risk areas for bushfire. There are too many property owners (especially those with holiday homes who are not permanent residents) that are ill-informed about the bushfire risk to their properties. Just putting information on a website is not enough.

The NSW RFS and local Councils need to establish better emergency management measures in small regional communities for when normal communications (such as phone and internet) are cut off. For example, emergency sirens which can be set off when bushfires or other dangers are about to occur, and the establishment and publication of emergency muster areas for evacuations (e.g. areas near boat ramps for coastal communities such as South Durras for potential evacuations by sea)

Action is Required Now

The Durras Community Association requests that all of the above actions and proposals listed above are addressed and included in the recommendations of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

Implementation of these actions will require additional staff and resources to be provided by Governments to the responsible agencies, including NSW Rural Fire Service, Essential Energy, National Parks and Wildlife Service and Crown Lands. Support should also be provided to regional local councils, including the Eurobodalla Shire Council. The costs to government of implementing the above measures needs to be weighed up against the financial value of all the regional properties (including those in South Durras NSW) worth many millions of dollars that could potentially be lost in bushfires. As has been shown by the recent 2019-20 bushfires, the cost of recovery far exceeds the costs of better emergency prevention and preparedness.

The Commonwealth and NSW Government and local regional councils must also work together to remove inconsistencies in relation to the regulation of bushfire hazard reduction on all land tenures and the proper implementation of emergency response management measures. Many regional communities, including South Durras NSW, have had enough of the political infighting and buckpassing between various levels of government. We do not want to see any further stonewalling, lame excuses or bureaucratic delays which endanger our lives and properties. If current laws, regulations, policies and zonings need to be changed to help better protect local regional communities like ours from future bushfires and other emergencies then they must be changed – without delay. All Governments and agencies need to support local communities like ours and not get in the way of what needs to be done for public safety. Emergency preparation and response must be above politics and administrative nitpicking. This is about people's lives and homes.

Let's see some action please.

Thank you for considering our comments.