

Submission Number: NND.001.01022

Submission Of: Andrea Tulloch

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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? Snowy Valleys (A)

Your Submission

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

As landholders our preparation for the fire season was a standard one with slip on fire fighting units and general practice, with grazing etc. Once the blaze started we responded well as a community. There is a place for smaller fire fighting units and especially on private land they were essential. These units plus family members and neighbours worked well together to man these. Issues arose with how the NPWS and RFS interacted with locals that unfortunately changed the game. There is a place in the RFS for smaller units as well as larger ones to ensure access particularly in hilly country as it is not practical for larger tankers.

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

We live on the Ellerslie Road, Adelong. Our property borders the Ellerslie Nature Reserve. We have approximately 5km's of boundary with the National Park. Our experience of the fire was a frustrating one. We were threatened and burnt with spot fires on our farm between Saturday 28th December 2019 and January 3rd 2020. It became a battle not only with the fire but with the RFS and NPWS. We were burnt out to 95% on January 4. What wasn't burnt out was finished off on Friday 10th January 2020.

The fire started with lightning strike in Takajo plantation on Saturday 28th December. Our neighbour [REDACTED] rang the RFS and asked them to check for a fire at approximately 8am on the Saturday morning. It had been smoky all week due to all the fires in NSW so it was hard to get a clear picture. We could smell pine in the smoke for the first time all week. There was no call raised until closer to midday whereby the fire had spread quickly in the pines. We don't know what happened with the RFS and towers for the ensuing 4hr period. It quickly spotted onto our back paddock and spread into the National Park on the first night.

The fire spread south quickly and all efforts were focussed on the southern spread. In the north there was some containment that was not completed and dozers etc were sent to various locations but containment lines were not finished. The fire was effectively let to burn in the Ellerslie Nature Reserve until close to New Years Eve. See picture of my husband being the only vehicle on the ridge at the northern end on our property that was always under threat from the fire.

Firebreaks were burnt on the boundary of our property as the impending weather was coming. There was no way that they were then going to be able to contain fire front that extended 5km on our boundary. Our property was going to effectively be used as a fire break for the northern end when the wind change was due. The back burn was done without the input of our local knowledge. We begged them not to use the Yaven Creek as a firebreak. It was too steep and scrubby. The back burn was also so far away from where the fire was burning in the Reserve at this point that local knowledge suggested that it was ineffective as a management tool. They burnt it anyway and we believe it was from here that we were burnt out. On Jan 4 it spotted in several directions from the national park behind our paddock. It spotted to the Snowy Mountain Highway and again from the back to our house paddock as well as several other spots. It burnt out our property of 3100 acres in a short time. It burnt through to Adelong destroying 4 homes and upwards of 23 properties including stock and quality farm land.

The fires continued to burn and parts of our property that had not burnt on Jan 4 were lost on Jan 10. We were still blacking out trees on the property into and after the Australia Day weekend. It was a long physically and emotionally taxing time. We lost 97% of our land, our fences, some stock and infrastructure such as hay sheds. We lost our fodder reserves including silage, hay and straw that was budgeted to last to June for our autumn/winter seasonal weather break. We lost trees that were hundreds of years old that will never be regrown in our lifetime. My husband and his cousins saved our homes.

Unfortunately in the follow up since the fires it has become apparent that there is a disparity between losing a home and a livelihood. Charities and some assistance only recognise a loss in losing a home, we feel that losing a livelihood is just as bad if not worse. If we could have had a choice between losing the farm or our home we would choose our home because the loss to our farm can't be accounted for: how do you calculate the loss of ground cover which is feed but also landscape care? Everyone wishes to keep carbon and look after our environment but ours was stripped needlessly bare with the fire that could have been contained. We now have ongoing weed issues due to the stripping of the cover. These plants aren't healthy stock feed. The ongoing cost is immeasurable and is not easily fixed in the foreseen future. We have to replace fencing, clean dams and regrow woodlands for protection for the landscape and stock. These are issues of global significance if we can recreate a healthy farm environment it will help environmental issues as well as grow food. We are primary producers.

The government assistance was appreciated and significant. However, it only covers half of our fodder bills without even looking into the cost of fencing for stock management and regrowing the herd and flock back to full health. Livelihoods should be acknowledged as a loss not just homes. Our emotional physical and financial impact is ongoing.

Importantly going forward we feel that there are measures that need to be put in place regarding fire awareness and future protection for private forestry and National Parks. As land holders we take responsibility to defend our country – these businesses and departments should also do the same.

Private Forestry:

Hume Forests manage the plantation at Dunns Road where the fire ignited from lightning. All forestry should be mandated to have:

- Firebreaks within the plantations and on all boundaries.
- Weed management of blackberries and all ground material should be cleared to allow for access.
- Water resources should be available within the pines for fighting fires.
- Active patrolling by staff with slip on units available for quick and easy access.

National Parks and Wildlife Service:

National Parks staff actively told locals that they were running the fire during the fire. It was declared a Section 44 at midday on Sunday 29th December yet there was only minimal staff managing the fire. Unless I am mistaken at this point there was no other Parks fires in the region at this time.

- NPWS staff only did day shifts. They attended meetings each morning subsequently letting fires get hot and active before any attempt to control them.
- NPWS staff left the fire ground each evening to go home or '...to a New Year's Eve party...' when locals were actively fighting the fire.
- NPWS staff would not discuss local landscape knowledge to assist with fire fighting.
- NPWS staff were gone when we were burnt out as it was too dangerous.
- NPWS staff actively withdrew machinery for containment when it was possible to get lines in and moved containment lines back so far that it extended the fire front excessively.
- NPWS staff travelled over known tracks with machinery but never 'dropped the blade' to clear the tracks of leaf litter. This effectively let the fire trickle over the tracks where they could have contained it as the fire was not in the canopy at this stage.
- NPWS also effectively need to maintain tracks and buffer zones.

The NPWS stated after the fire that the RFS was really running the fire at the northern end of Dunns Road. Which leads us to ask:

RFS:

- Why was there little containment for the first three days of the fire?
- Why did they light backburns on our boundary when the fire was way back in the Reserve. The backburn is what flared on Jan 4 and burnt us out.
- The RFS also didn't take on local advice regarding the firebreak.
- RFS suggested using the Yaven creek as a firebreak – this is scrubby and steep and with local knowledge it was never going to work. It smouldered until the catastrophic day where it flared and spotted burning us – 3000 acres at Coorumbene and our second block at the northern end of the range. It also burnt all the way to Adelong destroying four homes and many productive acres and stock.
- Section 44 declared midday Sunday 29 we feel they should be declared early at the start of the fire and the fires put out rather than growing and becoming catastrophic then being declared.

Ultimately we were burnt and without further ado we never heard from either authority regarding the outcomes of their decisions. We have tried to discuss the issues with the parks and RFS but there is no recourse for us except in inquiries like this one.

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 changes that are needed is a general shift in land management for National Parks and particularly for Private and State Forestry. There was a fire in this area in the 1980's when the ignition point was still farm land. It was controlled and contained without this extensive loss of country, because there was access.

There needs to be access and boundaries placed on National Parks and forestry to ensure that there are breaks between large blocks of forestry and boundary fences. They need to manage their weed loads ie blackberries. There needs to be monitoring throughout the fire season of their properties to stop fires quickly. The shift needs to be in essence to stop fires by full impact/force to begin and then ease off rather than let it burn and we will contain it in several kilometers time.

There needs to be local environmental knowledge from landholders taken into consideration when RFS and NPWS are making decisions as we are the ones that live and know the land better than others that may only visit on occasion when emergencies may have arisen. We had several occasions when my husband and local contractors who work with us regularly pleaded with the managers of the fire not to light back burns in and on our land in areas that were not going to improve our outcomes. They told us in no uncertain terms to go away and let them make the decisions - and they were standing on our land! We were the ones burnt out with complete loss of income. They go back to their jobs - we never see them again, we are profoundly effected by their management of the fire yet there is no recognition of this.

I also believe that environmental burns are the future of fire management in these reserves not control burning. As landholders we also need to look at landscape re-hydration - ways to manage our landscapes to encourage healthy water use.

Pine trees in our environment suck so much water from the drying landscape, we need to find alternate ways to grow different more environmentally suitable timber crops to provide resources we require. As farmers of beef, lamb and wool we constantly review our land management use and ways to become more sustainable - this needs to be done on a larger scale by these businesses and government departments. Keep it simple and effective and our environment will be better off - it will also mitigate these huge fire disasters from occurring on such a scale again.

Financially we have had assistance from the RAA which has been gratefully accepted. We have had difficulties dealing with government bodies regarding fencing and clearing fence lines to refence safely (which is very important safety wise as we have boundaries on the Snowy Mountains Hwy). The LLS has announced assistance with the cost of this, however, no one seems to take responsibility to help us clear the line ie take out burnt scrub and trees that have grown through and on fence lines on the council side of the fence on the highway. The cost to make it safe for us, our contractors and road uses has fallen to us financially at a time when we can't afford it. Trees need to be cleared to build the fence, then to have a small break before the trees grow again because if a storm/wind hits trees they come down destroying fences - stock end up on a road and we are then liable. We need this assistance.

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

RAA and the government assistance has been gratefully accepted. We have found it disappointing that loss of livelihood has not generally been acknowledged by the charities as a loss. We saved our house but lost all else.

We grow a lot of food as a region and we are all sensing that our loss has not been acknowledged as a community.

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