

Submission Number: NND.001.01046

Submission Of: REINA HILL

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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? Eurobodalla (A)

Your Submission

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

ABC South East Local Radio (Bega)

RFS - Fires Near Me APP - Bush Fire Information Line - 1800 679 737

Local on line media - Beagle News (Bega)

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

Emergency evacuation - up to date information about where to go. The first time I was ordered to evacuate I arrived at designated location (Hanging Rock Sports Stadium) to find that the venue had been moved to another location. As I am elderly and live alone, that caused me concern and confusion as I had arranged to meet friends there. Instead I relocated to a nearby friend where I stayed for the next four nights.

I did register with the Red Cross and let my friends know, but I felt things could have been handled better as we had no idea of the level of danger and if our property was under immediate threat.

I was subsequently advised to evacuate three more times but decided to relocate to family in Canberra via a very circuitous route as the Kings Highway was closed. I stayed in Canberra until it was safe to come home and highways were open to traffic.

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 RFS and their informative Fires near Me App and emergency messaging - Although we were advised via local ABC radio that the fires were advancing southwards to Batemans Bay and we should prepare our properties, I did what I could manage on my own and left my home of 30 years not knowing if it would survive.

Subsequently the fires did come close to Long Beach on three occasions and on Jan 4 RFS advised by text message that the we should leave . 30 mins later were we informed that, it was too late to leave and to proceed to go to a designated safe place. Although I was still in Canberra, this was devastating news, as not only did I have neighbours and friends still in the are, but one again faced the prospect of losing my home.

Fortunately the great containment and control work of the RFS and a fortuitous change of wind direction, saved Long Beach and other nearby beach suburbs. But it was a very anxious time for residents who were expecting the worst.

I am extremely grateful to the RFS and the fire fighters who did such an amazing job in saving property and lives during the recent catastrophic fires.

They are true heroes and deserve appropriate commendation.

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

The worst aspect of the catastrophic fires was the lack of emergency assistance and total lack of Government preparedness to respond to warnings of a pending catastrophic situation. This was not only the Federal Government, but also our local Shire Council.

Both failed to heed prior warnings of Fire Chiefs and other experts, who warned of the impending disaster due to conditions leading up the event.

The findings of new Climate Council Briefing Paper titled This is not Normal, released in early 2020, found that;

1. The catastrophic, unprecedented fire conditions currently affecting NSW and Queensland have been aggravated by climate change. Bushfire risk was exacerbated by record breaking drought, very dry fuels and soils, and record breaking heat.
2. Bushfire conditions are now more dangerous than in the past. The risks to people and property have increased and fire seasons have lengthened. It is becoming more dangerous to fight fires in Australia.
3. The fire season has lengthened so substantially that it has already reduced opportunities for fuel reduction burning. This means it is harder to prepare for worsening conditions
4. The costs of fighting fires are increasing. Australia relies on resource sharing arrangements between countries and states and territories within Australia. As seasons overlap and fires become more destructive, governments will be increasingly constrained in their ability to share resources and the costs of tackling fires will increase.

5. The government must develop an urgent plan to (1) prepare Australian communities, health and emergency services for escalating fire danger; and (2) rapidly phase out the burning of coal oil and gas which is driving more dangerous fires.

This advice was also given during the first anniversary of the Blue Mountains bushfires in 2014, when Shane Fitzsimmons, NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner, warned that Climate change was having an impact on every level of fire management when he advised that, With more days of high fire danger, there is now a shrinking window of opportunity to carry out back-burning and other hazard reduction. If our window of opportunity continues to shrink, in order to get those really important pre-season activities underway then, yes, there's a broader argument that needs to be had around matters of climate change and its effect on fire management and fire seasons. (ABC News 17 Oct, 2014)

This was reiterated by Greg Mullins, AO AFSM, Climate Councillor and Former NSW Fire Commissioner, at an Emergency Leaders for Climate Action press conference on 14 Nov 2019 on how climate change is impacting hazard reduction burns and he warned that, Fire risk will continue to escalate in the future without sustained and substantial efforts to tackle climate change.

Australia is a substantial contributor to global climate change through the domestic burning of coal, oil and gas, as well as our fossil fuel exports.

We are the 16th largest emitter globally and one of the largest exporters of coal and gas in the world. (Channel 10's The Project)

These warnings from professional bushfire experts simply cannot be ignored. Their predictions of unprecedented catastrophic fires were borne out during the catastrophic fires and outweigh the 'opinions' of non expert councillors. These are the same councillors who choose to disregard expert departmental and RFS advice to Council in regard to the Eurobodalla Rural Lands Strategy in 2018.

Expert advice confirms that climate change was indeed a major contributing factor during the 2019-20 bushfire season, which clearly influenced the frequency, intensity, timing and location of of the fires.

My recommendations:

1. Climate change must be recognized by all levels of government, agencies and other entities as a major component of bushfire management policies, laws, practices and strategies and building standards and their application and effect.
2. . Co-ordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Australian Government, other state and territory governments and local governments is vital to ensure that human resources and emergency equipment can be allocated and in place immediately an emergency is declared.
3. Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks be a priority for all levels of government and must be reviewed on a regular basis in keeping with IPCC reports on climate change.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my concerns to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry.

Reina Hill.

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