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Submission Of:

Your Details

Email address:
Phone:
Preferred means of contact: Email
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? East Gippsland (S)

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?
Please See Attachment
In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?
Please See Attachment
In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?
Please See Attachment
Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?
Please See Attachment
Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published anonymously
Supporting material provided:
Submission [REDACTED].pdf

Personal Submission by [REDACTED]

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

Please accept my submission to the the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. My submission relates to the coordination of recovery activities in the aftermath of the fires in Victoria.

Background

My submission is based on firsthand experience gained whilst working as a volunteer with BlazeAid in East Gippsland covering the period 23 Jan to 20 March 2020. This work included working on [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]. These are my personal views and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of Blazeaid

I have recently retired after a varied and interesting working career, which included over twenty five years' experience in Engineering Management, Project Management, and Construction Site Management. Most of my experience was in the Steel and Aluminium Industries, including two Overseas Postings in The United States and the United Kingdom.

This was followed by a second career with over ten years' experience in Equipment Finance Management and seven years running a small customer focussed service business.

In addition to my practical experience I have a Degree in Mechanical Engineering and an MBA.

My submission is directed to the following;

Extract of Letters Patent

- a. the responsibilities of, and coordination between, the Commonwealth and State, Territory and local Governments relating to preparedness for, response to, resilience to, and recovery from, natural disasters, and what should be done to improve these arrangements, including with respect to resource sharing;*

with particular emphasis on Coordination during the recovery phase.

My suggestions are that;

1. Governments establish better Case Management, to support individuals impacted by Natural Disasters to navigate the plethora of assistance available particularly including the need for multiple registrations.

2. Governments improve the degree of Coordination and Cooperation between Commonwealth and State Government agencies, local councils and the not for profit agencies.

I have also appended an extract from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (see Appendix 1) which highlights similar issues.

Discussion

The need for Case Management

BlazeAid established a Camp with Volunteers in Bruthen, Victoria to assist the impacted Property Owners, mostly for the rebuilding of fences after the Bushfires. This Camp was up and running in January 2020 with the first work commencing on properties on the 23rd of January 2020. Prior to this, a Town Meeting had been held and a significant number of properties registered.

We were able to deploy quickly as BlazeAid had been established for over 10 years, having been founded in response to Victoria's Black Saturday Bushfires of 2009. It was one of earliest organisations to establish in the impacted area, rather than being based in the regional town of Bairnsdale.

The people who had registered had typically experienced the Bushfires first hand or had evacuated just prior to their property being overrun. It was fairly common for them to start to share some of their story after we had spent a few days of work on their property with them. We were sensitive to their situations and didn't ask too many questions. However most of them seemed relieved to be able to share their story.

In a lot of cases, property owners showed significant signs of depression and we were able to help them to get started on the recovery journey simply by focussing on a do-able task.

When you sit around in a paddock chatting and sharing lunch with a property owner, you start to develop a good appreciation of some of their frustrations. There was a huge amount of mis-understanding and frustration about the registration processes for Assistance. Many people that had been impacted did not realise that they needed to separately register with each agency and soon got confused with all the different terms and conditions etc.

After quite a few of these conversations it struck me that there is a need to establish a better Case Management Approach where people are supported along their journey and for someone to advocate on their behalf. It's terrific that there are so many organisations that are willing to help, however for the person needing help the sheer volume of people becomes bewildering to point of paralysis.

This issue was raised in the Victorian inquiry following the 2009 bushfires. It would appear any mechanisms put in place following that inquiry were not adequate for this instance.

A robust case management system should be put in place before the next, inevitable occurrence.

The need for better Coordination and Cooperation

When I helped some Property Owners by acting as their Advocate to deal with Government agencies it also became clear there is a need to drastically improve the level of Coordination and Cooperation between various levels of Government.

In one instance, some trees had been bulldozed onto a property during the initial fire suppression efforts. There was no complaint from the Property Owner that this wasn't the right thing to do at the time, but due to the size of the trees, he wasn't in a position to remove the trees himself. He was hoping to get assistance from either DELWP or the Local Shire who maintained the local access road, but after dealing with both of these organisations for a while, he became depressed as there was no resolution in sight.

After getting involved in inspections with representatives from DELWP and correspondence with the Shire I was astounded by their inability to work cooperatively on what should have been a routine recovery task.

Robust mechanisms should be put in place and regularly tested to ensure coordination is timely, relevant and effective.

Appendix 1

Excerpted from;

Parliament of Victoria
2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission
ISBN 978-0-9807408-1-3
Published July 2010

Volume I 978-0-9807408-2-0

SUMMARY REPORT

RELIEF AND RECOVERY

The destruction wrought by the bushfires of January–February 2009 resulted in one of the largest recovery efforts seen in Australia. The Commission’s observations on the early relief and recovery efforts are based on accounts of people’s individual experiences and information it examined. Recovery for people, communities, local economies and the environment is difficult and requires a long-term approach. This process is being facilitated by the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, established on 10 February 2009.

In view of the scale of the disaster, the Commission considers that overall the initial relief and recovery efforts were well managed. Municipal council relief centres were generally activated quickly. They provided assembly points and places of refuge for people displaced by the fires and helped to lay a foundation for the progressive build-up of relief and recovery services. The Commission heard many expressions of gratitude from people affected by the bushfires for the care and attention they received at relief centres. The State and Commonwealth Governments’ relief initiatives were generally prompt and well coordinated. The Minister for Police and Emergency Services coordinated recovery efforts at the State Cabinet level, as would be expected.

People from local communities, and then the wider community, responded generously to the obvious need for support to be provided to people rendered homeless and dislocated by the fires. Food, clothing and bedding flooded in to relief centres, and a great debt of gratitude is owed for this generosity.

But the chaos caused by a disaster of this scale inevitably meant that unanticipated situations arose and some plans failed. The Commission recognises that relief and recovery processes are complex and are made more so when the emergency is rapidly escalating and occurring at multiple locations. Continuing fires, inaccessible roads and loss of power and telecommunications hindered relief efforts and interfered with communication and mobility. This stress on the system brought into focus some community concerns about initial relief and recovery processes:

- *The registration process in relief centres was frustrating to many as recovery agencies separately collected personal information from bushfire-affected people, adding to their trauma and slowing the agencies’ ability to respond. It took some time for coordinated collection of information to become effective.*
- Medical services were not always available locally, and initially there appeared to be poor coordination of some first aid services.
- Post-fire welfare checks were not well coordinated, especially for small, isolated communities and individuals who remained on their properties.

- Roadblocks were a source of frustration and difficulty for local residents, Victoria Police, the Department of Primary Industries, CFA volunteers and others coordinating relief efforts.
- Non-insurance and under-insurance have impeded the rebuilding process.
- Fencing bordering public land remains a problem because of the requirement that private landowners bear the full cost of restoring damaged fencing between their property and public land.
- The coordination of animal relief after the fires was fragmented.