

Submission Number: NND.001.01108

Submission Of: John Black

Your Details

Email address:

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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?

Your Submission

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

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

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

I have outlined a case in the attached document for more autonomy to be given back to local Bush Fire Brigades, particularly in relation to hazard reduction.

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

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

Supporting material provided:

Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements-J L Black Apr2020.pdf

Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

By Dr John L Black AM

28 April 2020

Dear Chief Marshal Binskin, Honourable Dr Bennett and Professor Kerr

I wish to make a short submission to the Royal Commission expressing my observations about management of hazard reduction burns in my local village in the Blue Mountains of NSW.

I have been a member of the Warrimoo Volunteer Bushfire Brigade since 1976. I have held positions of President, Senior Deputy Captain, Deputy Captain and remote area crew leader. My field officer duties ceased in 2007.

My comments relate to protection of the Village from wildfire and how this deteriorated once responsibility for hazard reductions was removed from the local Brigade.

Warrimoo is a village on the Lower Blue Mountains with an elevation of around 750 m and in one of the most fire prone regions of southeast Australia. The population is around 2,400, with approximately 800 houses spread along several main ridges with deep forested gullies below.

When I joined the Brigade, there was a policy to undertake hazard reduction burning around the whole village. The burns were for only 200-300 metres behind the dwelling to provide an area of reduced fuel. The village was divided into five sections, delineated by approximately 1 metre wide, permanent rake-hoe, walking trails. These trails designated the outer edge of the hazard reduction burns from the built-up areas.

One area was burned each year outside the main 'bushfire season'. This provided a protective zone behind the houses with fuel not accumulating for more than five years. There were strict controls on conditions under which the fires were lit to ensure flame heights remained no greater than 1 metre. These hazard reduction burns were of enormous value for training new recruits in all aspects of fire behaviour and safety. Members of the Brigade learned which gullies would form 'funnels' where the fire would run faster and where additional care was needed to protect specific homes and infrastructure.

This regular burning did change the nature of the vegetation, compared with other areas of the forest. However, the sole purpose of regular burning was protection of the village homes and buildings and the area covered was miniscule compared with the Blue Mountains forest as a whole.

Although Bushfire Brigades in the Blue Mountains were under the overall control of the Council run Headquarters, each Brigade was largely autonomous in relation to hazard reductions.

However, in the early 1990's the authority for hazard reductions was taken from local Brigades and given to a Bushfire Committee. This Committee consisted of ten people, with only two from the Volunteer Brigade movement and others from different sectors of the community.

This Committee made decisions about which hazard reduction burns could be undertaken. As a consequence, hazard reduction burning at Warrimoo was greatly diminished and the threat to the village greatly increased.

There are now areas in Warrimoo that have not burnt since the 2001 wildfire. Fuel loads are over 30 tonnes/ha and right up to the back of houses. This is now a disaster waiting to happen.

It is the local people who have the intimate knowledge of the area and the needs of the community. With centralisation of bushfire activities, the specific needs of communities are too easily lost. Most people join their Bushfire Brigades to protect their local neighbourhood. It is enormously frustrating when a clear need for hazard reduction cannot be undertaken, because others from different locations make the decisions. People lose interest in their local Brigade.

I understand that central coordination is needed when large fires threaten many locations. However, I believe it is important for local Brigades to maintain their autonomy, particularly in relation to hazard reduction. Fuel loads immediately adjacent to infrastructure are critical for determining the intensity of wildfires and safety of a community.

Over centralisation of decision making relating to many bushfire activities does not serve local communities best.

Yours sincerely

Dr John L Black

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