

Submission Number: NND.001.01109

Submission Of: Kassey Dickie

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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? Industrial relations/ Workers rights - Representing members who work in the field of Environment/land management, Emergency response and management, Wildlife conservation

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? Community and Public Sector Union State Public Services Federation Branch Victoria

Your Submission

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

Please see attached submission document

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

Please see attached submission document

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 attached submission document

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

Please see attached submission document

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

Supporting material provided:

CPSU RCNDA submission 2020.pdf

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Introduction

This is a submission on from Community Public Sector Union, State Public Services Federation Victorian Branch (CPSU) on behalf of CPSU members who work as bushfire fire fighters across Victoria.

These women and men are highly trained, professional, dedicated and passionate about the work they do and the communities they protect.

They are fire fighters who;

- fight bushfires with hand tools,
- light back burns and burning out operations with hand held drip-torches,
- supervise and assist machinery contractors to construct mineral earth bushfire control lines,
- plan and implementing Incident Action Plans within Incident Control Centres,
- fill 80% of roles within Incident Management Teams,
- warn communities and provide advice when bushfires threaten, and
- are often placed in circumstances where controlling the bushfire means accept a level of personal risk.

The submission details the concerns that these fire fighters had with the conduct of the 2019/2020 bushfire control operations. Particularly it details those concerns where these operations were not conducted as safely and as efficiently as possible. It also details the concerns regarding efforts to contain bushfires either early at first attack, or later, when they had become campaign bushfires, to manage the campaign bushfire in as safe and efficient manner as possible.

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Aims

To assist the Federal Royal Commission in making recommendations that will substantially improve the effectiveness of bushfire firefighting operations in the future. Particularly this relates to the following:

1. Managing forest fuels across the landscape so that surface, elevated and bark fuels are managed at a level where they do not allow large running bushfires to develop. If these bushfires do develop under extreme weather conditions, then they will encounter an area of reduced fuels within 2-5 kilometres of ignition. This will be primarily achieved by instituting a new quasi-traditional approach to broad scale burning. This approach will reduce surface, elevated and bark fuels to the levels which will not support a large running fire.
2. Keeping the forest road and track network in both State Forest and National Park in a condition where it allows for rapid first attack and to also perform the role of safe and effective fuel breaks. These will assist in the conduct of back burns and burning out operations. Keeping major highways and major secondary roads in a condition where they provide safe and effective fuel breaks from which fire fighters can conduct bushfire control operations, as well as protecting the general public from being potentially injured or killed by a major running bushfire.
3. Maintaining personnel and equipment levels that is adequate to manage fuels 12 months a year, and also safely and efficiently suppress bushfires during the bushfire season. This would require increases in permanent works crew levels and revisions of the summer fire fighting personnel model. Equipment needs to include dedicated fire fighting vehicles equipped with certified ROPS/FOPS and dedicated fire fighting plant such as bulldozers, excavators, tree harvesters, skidders etc. This needs to be made up of, a combination of departmental and contractor capacity. Dedicated fire fighting aircraft, and dedicated bushfire support equipment including bushfire camps, Level 1, 2 and 3 Incident Control Centre (ICC) Office facilities, and other ancillary equipment such as: fuel caches; forest depots; appropriate safety signage; and vehicle and machinery maintenance facilities (departmental and contractor).
4. Properly training, accrediting and keeping current the Australian Defence Force in forest fire fighting to help in coming fire seasons.
5. Reviewing the current doctrine which places too much reliance on aircraft, and the notion that aircraft can put out fires in the forest.
6. Starting a new program of fuel hazard reduction on the forest/grass interface, including better management of fuels on forested and grassed private property. This would be a collaborative project between FFMVic, the CFA (Country Fire Authority

Victoria) and the local landholders. Planning for this would be carried out by a multi-agency and landholder taskforce.

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What needs to improve?

The way we manage forests in Australia needs to change urgently. We need to acknowledge the expertise of people who are appropriately qualified and experienced in this field. It is critical that their knowledge and expertise is used to help guide the re-introduction of new quasi-traditional burning practices. These practices will improve the safety and ecological viability of our forests for all Australians.

What is at issue?

The 2019/20 Bushfires on the East Coast of Australia were some of the worst in Australia's history. An unprecedented number of hectares were burnt. Over the summer of 2019/20 people lost their lives including two FFMVic (Forest Fire Management Victoria) fire fighters and one FFMVic contractor. All three were involved in fire fighting efforts at the time of their deaths:

- Bill Slade of Parks Victoria (PV) - killed by a falling tree
- Mat Kavanagh of Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) – killed in a motor vehicle accident
- David Moresi contractor – killed in a motor vehicle accident

In addition to the human toll countless native animals, birds and forests have been reduced temporarily to blackened sticks, huge amounts of private assets including people's homes and farms destroyed. This did not need to happen.

Despite the best efforts of all our emergency services workers, aspects of the fire fighting effort were under resourced and in some cases poorly managed. There was unresolved division between the decision makers with perceived levels of unnecessary interference hampering the best efforts of regional staff to respond to the fires.

What has happened in the past?

Forest fire fighting in Australia has changed dramatically since 2003. 2003 Eastern Victorian Alpine Bushfires brought the first multi-million-hectare fires (1.3M Ha) since 1939, forest fire fighters found that trying to control fire in forests, particularly on bad weather days was practically impossible.

A significant lesson from 2003, and then the summers which followed including 2006/07, 2009, 2013/14 and 2017/18, was that the best place to try to control bushfires was on the interface between forest and grass.

Forest fuels had simply become too highly loaded, and too dry to safely work in the forest.

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What were the key lessons from the 2019/20 Fire Season?

1. The forest road and track system in Victoria has been let fall into serious disrepair. This is especially the case in Victorian National Parks where many roads and tracks have been closed for a variety of reasons, including the lack of suitable resources e.g. D4 Bulldozers, Dedicated Forestry Mulchers etc. This has meant that in many cases bushfire first attack by road or track has been hampered by lack of access, slow access or inability to quickly move heavy machinery to the fire.
2. Serious neglect of broad scale fuel reduction burning has meant that forest fuels had been allowed to increase to levels where there was little or no variation in fuel levels across the broader landscape. This allowed extremely damaging bushfire 'runs' through the landscape in each of the mega-fire bushfire seasons mentioned above.
3. Fire fighting personnel and equipment had been allowed to drop to levels where forest fire fighters could not do their jobs safely and effectively. This is compounded by long decline in the native timber industry meaning that the capacity of highly skilled forest industry operators and machinery is significantly reduced.
4. We saw a continuation of the trend of increasing reliance on aircraft for fire fighting. Aircraft do not put fires out in forest. They are a useful tool, but it is only the difficult and dangerous work of ground crews constructing mineral earth control lines that can actually control a bushfire.
5. It was evident that Incident controllers were impaired running fires including community messaging, area of operations, specific resource requests, implementation of any backburns, etc.
6. Multi agency resourcing requires a certain skill set and qualifications. It is important for organisations to work together but is not always practical in implementation. The appropriately qualified and experienced people from cooperating agencies need be the contact points from each agency.

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Case Study (Alpine fire)

In the early stages of the 2019/20 bushfires access was restricted because tracks maintained by DELWP and Parks Victoria were overgrown with scrub or were blocked by fallen trees. Had they been open the likelihood of controlling some of these fires at a small size during first attack would have been high.

DELWP and Parks Victoria need improved funding to keep our track network open, so fire fighters have a better chance of containing all bushfires at first attack.

One particular bushfire was in a wilderness area, and bulldozers were not allowed to be used to construct control lines. If this had been allowed, it is likely that one of the significant bushfires would have been controlled at first attack.

There was too much interference on Incident Control Centres (ICCs) by Regional Control Centres (RCCs), and even by Melbourne based roles from the State Control Centre, State wide Bushfire Response Controllers (SRCs), Chief Officers and Emergency Management Victoria personnel. Some ICCs were not allowed to back burn, even though weather and fuel moisture conditions were appropriate. They were only given permission to back burn once the bushfire had started to make significant runs, by this time it was too late.

Regional Controllers (RCs) SRCs, RAC's must have significant experience in the type of bushfire being managed. This is not currently a requirement. The current lack of requirement for this experience means that they cannot perform the role at the required level and poor decisions are made.

There is not enough staff in the DELWP Regions to run IMTs. DELWP should look at boosting functions in regions and encourage people to apply for these new functions. Many DELWP positions could be advertised with a preferred location outside Melbourne, when they become vacant and are re-advertised.

Many Gippsland Incident Shift Plan (ISP) maps had restrictions which made it very difficult to manage the bushfires. These were things like rare plants, or rare animals, therefore complicating decision making about where fire fighting machinery could access. This made it very difficult for first attack or when spot fires occurred outside established fire control lines.

The final outcome of this was that all these areas finished up getting burnt by very hot bushfires.

A national protocol needs to be developed jointly between the states, territories, and the Commonwealth on how endangered native flora and fauna in the path of a fire (or in an area designated for a fuel reduction burn) should be managed.

A lot of recent fuel reduction burns (up to 3 years old) were a significant help in protecting towns.

Other fuel reduction burns which were a bit older (perhaps up to 8 years old) made back burning much easier, as they had reduced the bark and elevated fuel hazards. It is suspected if any bushfires had started within these, the chances of them being contained at first attack would have been much greater.

We need practical restrictions to achieve planned burning and more funding to do them safely and effectively.

Major highways like the Princes Highway in Gippsland, need to be cleared back at least 40 metres on either side to establish them as Safe and Effective Firebreaks based on fire behaviour science regarding ember density, spotting distance and radiant heat thresholds. They could then be easily back burned off to make good strategic breaks. They are currently unsafe for both fire fighters and the public when impacted by bushfire. It was extremely disruptive to communities and the fire fighting effort to have National Highway 1 (Princes Highway) blocked for so long.

DELWP and PV need better resources to do the job.

Increased funding needs to be spent on bushfire research and development within DELWP/FFMV. Universities or contractors simply cannot do the tasks required for effective bushfire research and development. DELWP and its predecessors were historically leaders in bushfire research and development – see (Fire) Research Reports 1-95. Currently DELWP has very little capability invested in this area.

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Recommendations

1. Start a new approach to broad scale burning across forest in eastern Australia based on a quasi-traditional model.
2. Properly resource forest fire fighters with modern, fit for purpose vehicles, aircraft and equipment. This includes adequate numbers of vehicles with certified Rollover Protection Systems and Falling Object Protection Systems (ROPS/FOPS).
3. Stop closing roads and tracks particularly in National Parks. Build and maintain a road and track network in both forests and parks which provides forest fire fighters with safe and effective firebreaks, from which to both defend against bushfires, and also launch useful and effective fuel reduction operations.
4. Employ, train, accredit and keep current enough forest fire fighters to adequately resource all the Level 1, 2 agency fires.
5. Train, accredit and keep current the Australian Defence Force in forest fire fighting to help in coming fire seasons.
6. Review the role of the Incident Controller. (Case Study below)
7. Review resource coordination in particularly the role of Regional Controllers. Investigate employed dedicated IMT roles and review key roles that should be agency only.
8. Investigate a focus on “Safer Together” projects i.e. Township Bushfire Mitigation Plans which is about (tenure blind) creating defendable space, strategic breaks, roading assess & egress with clear signage within Townships. These could be led by Municipalities (MFMPC) and given more powers for compliance of the plans and exemptions from planning schemes.
9. Examine the approach to carrying out planned burns in comprehensive fashion.
10. Implement a standardised Death and Disability insurance scheme nationwide for forest fire fighters similar to the system in place for FFMVic fire fighters. David Moresi the contractor who died in Victoria was not covered by the scheme for his work.

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