

Submission Number: NND.001.01149

Submission Of: [REDACTED]

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? Forestry

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? Australian Forest Contractors Association

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?

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:

BRC_AFCA April 2020 FINAL.pdf

AUSTRALIAN FOREST CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION

ADVANCING FORESTRY CONTRACTING SINCE 2002



Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

(Bushfires Royal Commission)

Submission: Australian Forest Contractors Association (AFCA)

April 2020

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1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 The Australian Forest Contractors Association provides this submission in the context of representing Forest Contracting Businesses who work within the forestry sector and play an important role in both fire management preparedness and suppression during a bushfire event.
- 1.2 This submission does not address the full Terms of Reference of the Bushfires Royal Commission. Accordingly, AFCA supports the submissions of organisations within the forest industry that have addressed matters in greater detail and that have the expertise and scientific knowledge relating to matters such as forest fire management. The submissions supported include:
- Institute of Foresters of Australia and Australian Forest Growers
 - Victorian Association of Forest Industries
 - Australian Forest Products Association.
- 1.3 Forest Contracting Business are a significant resource who are deployed extensively during a bushfire event and during recovery phases. They are high skilled and trained with specialised equipment which are unique and relied upon.

1.4 Recommendations

- a) Undertake a broad assessment of the impact of historical landscape management on fire impacts and audit the implementation and outcomes of previous bushfire inquiry recommendations. This information should be used to guide development of local regimes for bushfire risk management.
- b) Governments increase expenditure and commitment to off-fire season land management to mitigate wildfires and reinstate a more considered balance with in-season emergency response to wildfires.
- c) Support continued development and promotion of the benefits of appropriate silvicultural management (including mechanical fuel reduction and forest thinning) at the landscape-scale in reducing bushfire risks and improving forest resilience.
- d) Provide support for a nationally coordinated bushfire fuel reduction program using a regionally appropriate mix of approaches such as conventional planned burning, Traditional Owner fire management practices (cultural burns), mechanical fuel reduction and forest thinning.
- e) Regionally appropriate land management should be achieved by encouraging State and Territory governments to maintain professional land management staffing levels regional and rural towns. Agency personnel should work with local forest workers to maintain detailed geographic and fire knowledge.
- f) Improved recognition and understanding of the value the forest industry plays, particularly forestry contacting businesses in maintaining an efficient and cost-effective ground-based firefighting capability including the provision of skilled operators with specialised forestry equipment.
- g) Improve collaboration of fire organisations by redefining the framework and clearly articulating the roles and responsibility of a response based on respective expertise and training.

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2. Who is AFCA and Who Are Our Members?

- 2.1 The Australian Forest Contractors Association was established in 2002 as a national membership body to represent Forest Contracting Business which harvest and haul timber. The association is governed by an elected Board which is voluntary and represents member across states and territories. The organisation is supported by modest resources and includes a General Manager.
- 2.2 AFCA advocates on behalf of its members and focuses on key issues of importance including safety, training and creating opportunities that encourage business viability long term.
- 2.3 Forest Contracting Businesses include harvest and/or haulage operations, within both plantation and native forestry and are generally small to medium sized businesses. Many of the businesses are generational family owned run in regional settings. Approximately 60% of the direct jobs in the forest industry are generated by those working for Forest Contracting Businesses.
- 2.4 Harvesting and loading operations require specialised forestry equipment which is specific to the environment within native and plantation operations across both private and public land. A Forest Contracting Business requires significant investment in equipment to provide its services to forest managers which engage their services with a harvesting machine costing in order of \$800,000 to over \$1 million per machine.
- 2.5 Similarly, haulage trucks and trailers have been specifically designed for their operations and the environments and are not transferable to other industry sectors for use.

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3. Forest Fire Management

- 3.1 It is well established that fires have historically featured in the Australian landscape and that a range of vegetation types utilise fire as a means to regenerate. In addition, there has been a long history of forest fire management on the southern and eastern coast of Australia which is well documented and has received a significant amount of commentary over time.
- 3.2 There is also an extensive history of inquiries, reviews and recommendations following bushfires across the Australian landscape which consider the collective efforts of bushfire management, mitigation and response. These should be reconsidered as part of the commission's review with an emphasis on consideration of the success or otherwise of recommendations and government responses as guiding material for the outcomes of this Bushfires Royal Commission.
- 3.3 Most recently, there has been a great deal of focus on the balance between fire prevention and fire preparedness activities including prescribed burning, management of forestry understory and creation of reducing fuel to lower risk of fire spread and damage to the environment.
- 3.4 AFCA believes fuel management is key to reduce the risk of fire spread and damage to the community and environment. A well-managed landscape and forests that have good access, lower fuel loads and greater biodiversity all reduce the risk of devastating bushfires.
- 3.5 Forest Contracting Businesses both formally and informally have contributed to fire prevention and preparedness activities over time, particularly in the public estate. Moreover, AFCA believes that it is necessary to focus efforts to improve and increase fire prevention and preparedness.
- 3.6 Forest Contracting Business operations create access into the forests areas by road construction and maintenance as part of their operations and are responsible for many road networks throughout the forests. The creation of access and maintenance of these this is vital for fire prevention and firefighting activities. There needs to be further emphasis placed on the important role that roads create in creating fire breaks and improvements in management of fuel loads along roadside verges to create greater protection of landscapes and assets.
- 3.7 To this end AFCA supports the concerns and recommendations of organisations within the forest sector who have the scientific expertise and knowledge with regards to forest fire management. In particular, AFCA supports the comments and recommendations presented in the Submission by the Institute of Foresters of Australia and Australian Forest Growers to this Bushfires Royal Commission.
- 3.8 AFCA also supports submissions from industry bodies including submissions sited from the Australian Forest Products Association and the Victorian Association of Forest Industries.

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3.7 Recommendations

- a) Undertake a broad assessment of the impact of historical landscape management on fire impacts and audit the implementation and outcomes of previous bushfire inquiry recommendations. This information should be used to guide development of local regimes for bushfire risk management.
- b) Governments increase expenditure and commitment to off-fire season land management to mitigate wildfires and reinstate a more considered balance with in-season emergency response to wildfires.
- c) Support continued development and promotion of the benefits of appropriate silvicultural management (including mechanical fuel reduction and forest thinning) at the landscape-scale in reducing bushfire risks and improving forest resilience.
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- e) Regionally appropriate land management should be achieved by encouraging governments to maintain professional land management staffing levels regional and rural towns. Agency personnel should work with local forest workers to maintain detailed geographic and fire knowledge.

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4. Contribution during an emergency response and recovery

- 4.1 Forest Contracting Businesses have a range of skills and knowledge on bushfire behaviour and preparedness often with generational experience within a business as well as an unique local understanding of the environment and landscape.
- 4.2 Forest Contracting Businesses are often the first responders to a bushfire as they act as spotters across the landscape and monitor public and private landscapes while operating within them.
- 4.3 Forest Contracting Businesses operations also contribute to risk reduction at the landscape scale by maintaining the essential network of forest access tracks that provide emergency services other agencies the capacity to reach the fire front at short notice.
- 4.4 Many Forest Contracting Businesses are required to be formally trained in wildfire response and are highly skilled operating within a forest setting. These skills and knowledge are relied upon in local response to bushfires. In addition they have well established safety management systems and standards for forestry operations as well as working in bushfire-affected areas.
- 4.5 Specifically during a bushfire fighting effort they undertake a range of activities with specialized equipment unique to their operations including:
- firebreaks and containments lines
 - back burning
 - construction of roads and tracks to access defendable lines or ensure burnt areas extinguished effectively
 - tree falling and removal of dangerous trees to create safe passage to access area of wildfire
 - clearing of road lines along highways and forest roads to remove hazardous trees so they can be reopened and accessed by the community
 - asset protection.
- 4.6 Forest Contracting Businesses and their employees commonly have a range of skills and experience specific to fire management and recovery including:
- direct attack firefighting
 - road clearing and fire trail construction
 - indirect firefighting, including back burning
 - night firefighting where significant gains may be made under lower fire danger conditions
 - strategic planning in fire containment and suppression, incorporating access tracks and other infrastructure
 - fuel reduction implementation, including burning and mechanical fuel reduction
 - local knowledge and experience
 - occupational Health and Safety and risk assessment in extreme wildfire situations.
 - replant and restoration of damaged forests, infrastructure and environmental areas especially drainage and road and track maintenance.

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- 4.7 Forest Contracting Business are a significant resources which were deployed extensively as part of the 2019/2020. While it is difficult to quantify the total contribution and assistance in both the firefighting and recovery phases two case studies are included in this submission to provide insights into the contribution and resources.

Case Study 1: NSW Plantation, Tumut/Tumbarumba

Small Forest Contracting Business

Hours

- 19 days (consecutive)
- 7 am up to 9 pm daily
- 1200 hours (approximately)

Workforce

- 3 volunteers
- 2 paid operators

Recovery

- Dangerous tree removal post fires for 123.5 hours
- Dozer/skidder rehabilitation work 200 hours

Observations

- Felt under resourced and observed a lack of coordinated communication and resources.
- In future, clear framework for priority support and consideration of assets and populations densities
- Clearer governance and recognition skills/training of the range of stakeholders (paid firefighters and volunteers, forestry) prior to and during bushfires, who is the governing agency for on ground management and decisions on best way to respond to fighting fires.
- Reimbursement of payments was slow and generally over 60 days from point of invoicing

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Case Study 2: Victoria, East Gippsland (Public and Private land)

During the 2019/2020 Bushfires Forest Contracting Businesses played significant role in the East Gippsland local firefighting efforts.

In summary this included:

- Commenced forest fire management activities late November 2019 – April 2020 (includes recovery operations)
- Over 15 harvest and haulage businesses supported the firefighting effort
- Over 45 pieces of specialised forestry equipment
- transportation support to move equipment from location to respond to new fire fronts and mitigation efforts.
- Over 80 employees from forest contracting businesses directly involved in the firefighting effort
- Recovery work post fires included removal of dangerous trees and clearance of road and highway verges prior to reopening to the public

Observations

- significant and immediate availability of specialised equipment immediate re-deployed to support effort
- harvesting equipment has the capacity to remove large dangerous trees safely unlike general construction machinery
- fire activity was difficult to control along state and local roads and should be a focus of fire preparedness and off-season mitigations to mechanically reducing fuel loads which will improve fire breaks and increase protection of landscapes and assets
- inefficiencies in decision making for tree removal to make roads safe to access for public including use of timber that was to be removed and ownership

4.8 Recommendations

- f) Improved recognition and understanding of the value the forest industry plays, particularly forestry contracting businesses in maintaining an efficient and cost-effective ground-based firefighting capability including the provision of skilled operators with specialised forestry equipment.
- g) Improve collaboration of fire organisations by redefining the framework and clearly articulating the roles and responsibility of a response based on respective expertise and training.