

**Submission Number: NND.001.01163**

**Submission Of: Helen Templeton**

### Your Details

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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? I am a trained member of my local Brigade, but stayed and successfully defended my own home rather than join a team on a local truck

Where do you live? Snowy Monaro Regional (A)

### Your Submission

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

Extra help in the form of Strike teams were in the area ahead of the main fire danger day and available on 1 February to fight the main fire. SES visited all homes to check residents were prepared if they were going to stay....although I thought this would have been a role for the local RFS brigades -community engagement, meeting the people in their area, knowledge of what an adequate fire plan and preparation would look like.

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

Our western boundary is with ACT-Namadgi National Park. Advice from ACT Emergency Services differed in format and timing from advice issued by NSW RFS - for example the RFS issues fire spread maps for the next 24 hours, while the ACT issues them for the next 48/72 hours. In one case the date of a fire spread prediction map issued by the ACT was wrong, causing even more confusion. The Orroral fire started 30km NW of us on 27 January. I feel the ACT was slow to react to the fire and water bomb or surround it with retardent on day one. Over the next four days the fire spread through the National Park - again no evidence of them trying to slow the spread to the east and south with retardent. It was a fait accompli that the fire would eventually burn over us, under the strong NW winds forecast for that week. It will never be known whether retardent would have made any difference, but the point is, despite us being in a direct line, they made little effort to stop it or slow it heading in our direction. As the fire crossed the border into NSW it became the "Clear Range Fire" - although it was still the "Orroral Fire" in the ACT. Stupid and unnecessarily confusing for border residents to keep track of all information.

Use of the Strike Teams in the days prior to 1 February was poor. Rather than drive the local roads and become familiar with the territory they were to defend, meet the property owners who were going to stay and defend, they were kept at local Brigade stations, sitting around doing nothing. A massive waste of precious volunteer time and resources.

The Cooma Fire Control Centre apparently had a massive communication failure - there did not appear to be a backup plan for such an eventuality.

As of 5am on 1 February it was obvious the Bumbalong Valley was going to be hit badly, but again no air resources were called for to lay retardent lines along the NSW/ACT border with Namadgi National Park. The Incident Action Plan for 1 February did not even show any buildings/assets along the western side of the Murrumbidgee River in the Bumbalong Valley, yet there are 18 properties along here - 11 of them permanently occupied. The SES and RFS knew we were here to come and check on us in the days prior to the fire, yet the people who most needed to know - the firefighters on the day had a map that showed nothing here worth protecting. This map was signed off by the Regional RFS Manager in [REDACTED] - he obviously doesn't know his territory/doesn't care. Hard to know which one. This same Plan, also showed that the fire was expected to burn to the north and south of Bumbalong, and resources were positioned for that eventuality. However, at 5am on 1 February, 1/2 hour after the plan was signed off, it was blatantly obvious that the plan was wrong. But resources were not re-allocated to the actual threat - instead left in position as per the plan. There needs to be much greater flexibility at the local level to respond to need rather than stick to an out-of-date plan, but this does require a level of leadership and skill that is not always available under the old model of organising Brigades

In the days following 1 February, there was NO follow-up blacking out activity by any local Brigades along this road - Downstream Road, despite ongoing flare-ups. Calls for assistance from residents were met with a "do it yourself" response. In fact we have never seen a fire truck along here since 1 February or any meaningful visit from the local Brigade Captain/Deputy Captain. Leadership is sadly lacking and beyond the skill set of the local Brigade

The RFS pre-fire visit consisted of a frightened community liaison officer who proceeded to frighten rather than inform residents. This officer made no attempt to assess our preparedness, yet suggested that we had no hope of surviving if we stayed and defended.

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

Cross border arrangements still need a lot of work. The ACT put out a fire spread map that showed the fire ending at the NSW border - patently ridiculous and very unhelpful, particularly for those of us just across the border and in the line of fire. ACT trucks were keen and available to assist in NSW on 1 February, but were told to return to ACT...and do nothing.

The NSW RFS needs to have strong and professional local leadership in community engagement and management of a volunteer workforce. A professional cadre staff dedicated to each brigade or couple of brigades could be a workable model, with one of their roles to ensure the local community is as prepared and informed as possible. They should also take the top leadership role in the Brigade and so get away from local politics and putting people who are qualified and able to lead in the top role. The focus needs to change from putting out and responding to fires to actually preventing/mitigating them on local properties.

There is a groundswell of recognition that the traditional burning regime is a valuable tool for mitigation. National Parks and fire services need to work with traditional knowledge holders to apply these regimes under an increasingly hotter and drier climate. The RFS needs to get on board.

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

This fire season has shown so clearly that "states rights" and artificial borders mean nothing in the natural world. The states and Commonwealth need to urgently work out management arrangements that transcend parochial state politics. I applaud the use of the Defence Force in assisting in the recovery. I think it would be useful to bring them into play much earlier in the piece. This last fire season was long and torrid for the volunteer fire fighting force. Providing additional Defence crew members to RFS trucks would have provided desperately needed relief to RFS crew members. Defence personnel could undertake duties such as as drivers, navigation/comms with very little additional training or part of blacking out crews requiring only basic level firefighting skills, but always under the control of trained RFS Crew Leaders.

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