

Submission Number: NND.001.01166

Submission Of:

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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?

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 Victoria more than 1.6 million hectares of forest was burnt in the fires. East Gippsland had been experiencing extreme low rainfall in the lead up to the bushfires, with climate change exacerbating the extreme drought, and record-breaking heat, greatly increasing the bushfire risk. East Gippsland has been subject to years of poor land management, and intensive logging practices which have known, scientific links to bushfire severity. Logging removes moisture from the soil and leaves young eucalypts which burn at a higher intensity than older stands of forests. Logging has increased risks to bushfire severity in East Gippsland, and there are also clear links between logging and climate change. Victoria's forests are the most effective in the world at storing carbon.

-There are strong links between native forest logging, climate change, and increased bushfire severity. Human impacts such as logging, and climate change, must be considered in order to minimise severity of future bushfires.

-Patches of unburnt vegetation within burnt areas must be protected from 'burning out' by fire crews, whenever possible. The burning of these natural refuge areas increases the ecological impacts of wildfire and inhibits the recovery of plants and wildlife. As well, backburning operations near and around unburnt forests that are threatened by bushfires, must be extremely considered as there are high risks for backburns to get out of control. In the month of January backburning was conducted in unburnt forests in the Errinundra National Park on high risk fire days. This was an extremely irresponsible and dangerous operation, and there was no transparency or communication with communities about the nature of the burns. This must be avoided in the future, and more opportunities given for community input, and careful consideration of backburning practices, and fire suppression activities.

- So-called 'salvage logging' compounds the impacts of both fire and logging, and subjects fire-affected forests to mechanical disturbance during the critical recovery stage of forests and ecosystems and should not be allowed in fire impacted regions. The ecological impacts of salvage logging are well known and researched. Salvage logging also has known links to increased bushfire severity.

- Its very important that there are resources and strategies for putting out fires at the point of ignition, as early as possible. This will decrease the risk of bushfires getting out of control and continuing to burn for longer periods of time. This may decrease severity and impacts of fires.

-Following consultation with the Goongerah community (East Gippsland, Victoria) after the bushfires in 2014, the key factor which locals identified as their gravest concern when it came to bushfires was road access in and out of the community to Orbost. Goongerah has no shops, petrol stations, pharmacy, or access to essential services.

-It is extremely important that road access remain open for residents. Some Goongerah residents travel to Orbost for work. Following this season's fire events the road was intermittently closed, reopened, closed again, making it extremely hard for residents to know when or if they could leave their homes to get supplies, or be able to go to work, or would still be able to access the road to go home. Following the tragic events of the fires this was extremely traumatic and frustrating for residents, especially considering it was the number one concern which was identified after the last major fire event in 2014.

- There was also poor communication from the Incident Control Centre (ICC) in Orbost when residents were attempting to get information regarding the road closures. These are key factors in the State response to the fires which severely impacted community members, and which should not be repeated.

-This summer's bushfire season was an unprecedented catastrophe which impacted the lives of people across the country. There are key factors which contribute to the intensity, frequency, and duration of the bushfire season. Climate change, drought, and poor land management practices such as logging, and unnecessary planned burns, have all contributed to this. It is essential that these are key considerations for future preparation and response to bushfires.

-It is important now that the state government conducts extensive surveys into the impacts to forests and wildlife and take swift actions to ensure forests, wildlife, and biodiversity values in and outside the fire extent are protected.

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

- The government must commit to addressing the impacts of climate change, in the context of decreasing the likelihood for even more severe

bushfire seasons, which are made more intense by global heating and climate change. Likewise, the government must commit to an end of native forest logging and land-clearing, as an emergency response to the bushfire crisis.

- Long-term climate change combined with short term weather changes are critical drivers of fire. As the climate warms, the frequency of severe fire danger days increase. A warming climate exacerbates the wildfire risks already posed by legacy issues such as inappropriate planned burning regimes, logging and arson. Strong action on climate change is a critical response to these unprecedented fires, and ruling out new fossil fuel projects which have direct links to climate change and emissions.

- Planned burns and other fuel reduction processes (such as slashing) should be directed to where they are most effective: close to assets such as towns in need of protection. To reduce the flammability of the broader forest landscape, the Victorian government should set targets to protect and restore older stands of vegetation and forest types, as older growth is historically less flammable than younger post-fire growth. Broad-scale planned burning can reduce critical wildlife habitat features, such as tree hollows and hollows in logs, as well as refugia for animals. Ineffective and counterproductive burns place a great risk on biodiversity values .

- All planned burns must be extremely well considered, planned, and be based on necessity, rather than arbitrary quotas. Offset protections for flora and fauna affected by burns should also be considered.

It is extremely important that First Nations peoples have a key role in burning operations, and more work is done to promote and foster Indigenous land management knowledge and strategies. As well, a lot more work needs to be done in communication and consultation must be done to center Traditional Owners in decision making processes.

- There needs to be much clearer regulation and assessment of hazardous tree removal to avoid the wholesale roadside clearing that happened following the bushfire season. There have been numerous, ongoing reports of overzealous and unnecessary removal of roadside trees, with little oversight from the Department of Environment. The impacts of the bushfires on habitat for wildlife is profound. Every care should have been taken during the road clearing and hazardous tree removal to ensure only dangerous trees were removed, and proper assessments done on individual trees to avoid unnecessary clearing.

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 anonymously