

Submission Number: NND.001.01176

Submission Of: Rob Meaton

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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?

Where do you live? [REDACTED] NSW [REDACTED] Midcoast

Your Submission

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

The local RFS volunteers under the leadership of Fire Chief [REDACTED] and the Elands Community coming to the rescue by providing support /information/resources for community members, our RFS volunteers and other RFS /National Parks and Forestry workers who were deployed to the Bulga Plateau in the early weeks of November .

Elands had fires to the west since September 2019, and on November 8 the long burning Rumba Dump fire got a westerly wind behind it and raced across the landscape through the small communities of Caparra and Bobin. Dozens of homes were lost, including many of our friends.

As our village became encircled by fires, community members began to provide meals for firefighters, official and unofficial. The first meals were served on November 12, after the day of catastrophic fire conditions, when most of the children, mothers and elderly had left the village, from a 'community support hub' established at the old Elands sawmill. Over the month of November all comers were fed, with approximately 1000 meals. Other than a supply run delivered by the local Lions Club, most of our food was paid for from donations raised on a 'GoFundMe' website. We also used donations to equip our 'Black Swan' fire crews with equipment and to buy a comms phone.

We operated a 24 hour desk and roster to ensure that people were also able to get a feed and there was someone to respond to any outbreaks or problems encountered while the professionals were back at their motels. We maintained a 24 hour two-way radio and mobile phone watch, these were solar powered as there was no mains electricity. We conducted several community briefings. Later we were provided with a diesel generator by Essential Energy. Showers and laundry facilities were also provided. The Lions and the Bobin community each brought a trailer load of canned food and toiletries which were displayed and available for any community member to help themselves. After several phone calls to the Wauchope Fire Control Centre, we managed to get some support from Taree Council for fuel. Mostly we had to organise volunteers to bring ute loads of jerry cans up the mountain, which for much of November was dangerous due to falling trees and burning logs. We appreciated the assistance that saw 200L of fuel supplied. Much of it went on fueling the telecommunications tower and exchange. We also provided fuel to the local RFS truck, so it didn't need to leave the fireground for several hours to refuel. When we asked for assistance with this, the response from Wauchope Fire Command was the truck needed to go and get its own fuel. At the time, the truck was on the fireground almost continuously. We were delivering meals to them and often using community water tankers to take water from the water truck provided by Midcoast Council to the firetruck, because even leaving for 20 minutes for a water top-up could have seen the Doyles River Complex fire escape across the plateau and threaten dozens of homes.

A 'situation table' was established with topographic maps that were manually updated as firefighters came in and were able to provide information about the state of the fires. Forestry Corporation were very cooperative with this process and gave us daily reports (and we gave them hot meals). The RFS said they got better information about what was going on from us than they did either directly from Forestry Corp on the fireground or from the Wauchope Command. On one occasion where some 24 firefighters were being briefed on the day's plan, we were given a copy of the briefing notes. The local RFS said they never received anything like that level of information

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

The vulnerability of our telecommunication system on the Bulga Plateau to power outages.

We are regularly subjected to both planned and unplanned power outages and as a result we are without telephone internet services.

Our communication system absolutely failed us during the first week of our bushfire emergency.

On Friday November 8, 2019, the power went off at about 5.30 pm due to fire damage to power poles on the line coming up the mountain from Bobin and wasn't reconnected until 6pm on Wednesday November 20, 2019. The phone and internet service went down at around midnight on Nov. 8 and wasn't restored until late Weds. Night, Nov 13 when a Vision Stream contractor provided and connected petrol generators to the exchange at Beech Road and the mobile tower in the Elands village (which is reliant on signal coming from the Beech Rd exchange). These generators could only run for four hours before needing to be refueled, which was done by community members. These generators were replaced by Vision Stream contractors with hired diesel generators, which were regularly checked and refueled by community members with community supplied diesel.

In the six days before telecommunication services were restored, community members had to rely on bushfire information from ABC regional radio, only if they had a battery powered radio or by listening in their vehicles. The ABC broadcast only limited information, most of which wasn't relevant to us, and kept telling the audience to go to the Fires Near Me website and for road closures go to Live Traffic NSW website. HOW CAN YOU DO THAT WHEN YOU DON'T PHONE OR INTERNET?

THIS COMMUNICATION FAILURE WAS REPLICATED WITH MORE DIRE CONSEQUENCES FOR MOST COMMUNITIES SUBJECTED TO THE BUSHFIRE EMERGENCY AND NEEDS TO BE RECTIFIED, NOT JUST FOR EMERGENCIES BUT FOR POWER OUTAGES THAT HAVE CAUSE OUR COMMUNICATION SYSTEM TO FAIL

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

Acknowledgement of the effects of climate change on our environment and action to mitigate the effects and changes to forestry management and fire management practices to include where appropriate cultural burning.

Better communication systems for our RFS brigades and volunteers and greater acknowledgement of the importance of local knowledge by fire Control centres.

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

Greater back up power for rural telephone exchanges and mobile towers by providing:

More batteries or revise battery schedule, In remote rural villages, we are well used to power interruptions, both scheduled and otherwise.

Years ago, we could expect approximately three days of battery-powered service from the exchange and the 'old-fashioned' flooded cell battery. Not any more. These new AGM batteries are the standard issue, scheduled for replacement every seven years. They may last that long in suburban service, where they are hardly ever exercised. In our location, power outages are commonplace.

Our telecommunications (Telstra tower and local exchange) now cease entirely 6-8 hours after a power outage. When new, these AGM batteries provide up to 2-3 days of battery-powered service, so replacing them every 2 or 3 years would improve service reliability.

OR revert to old style flooded cell batteries.

3. OR use appropriate technology,

ie Hybrid Telecommunication as used for remote and desert telecommunication drawing less power and easily accommodated with solar panel and battery power. exchange and tower (different keys) as per his submission to state inquiry

Provide access and instruction to the local RFS Captain and Deputy on the necessary steps to install a portable generator at phone towers and exchanges, should power outages, particularly in emergency situations, mean telecommunication services fail due to lack of power

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