

Submission Number: NND.001.01191

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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? Hawkesbury City Council

Your Submission

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

- Local knowledge of brigade personnel in the Hawkesbury Rural Fire Service was instrumental in their success in defending many dwellings in the district
- The coordination of out of area resources by the Hawkesbury RFS; specifically out of area RFS, international and ADF resources
- Community engagement protocols; reinforcing State and Local level combat agency information via multiple communication channels

The value of hazard reduction, that has been undertaken over many years in accordance with strategic plans prepared and implemented by local and state agencies/land managers, was demonstrated through the ability of brigades to provide containment and protect large numbers of dwellings and other buildings, despite the massive scale of the Gaspers Mountain fire

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

- Telecommunications affects emergency response capacity and has been a longstanding issue within the Hawkesbury Local Government Area and requires a national response.

Due to the size and terrain of the Hawkesbury LGA mobile phone coverage is limited in many areas. During the fire event landlines were also affected by fire and tree damage to overhead cabling. Difficulties were also experienced with telephone exchange power supply.

Enhanced line maintenance and clearance by the telecommunication providers would improve the communications as would expansion of the mobile phone network. This would provide a sound basis for future GPS vehicle location and tracking systems.

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 focus of the disaster arrangements is primarily focussed on response –what is required is a funded, coordinated and prioritised approach to planning and preparation. For example, planned maintenance of fire trails is required; rather than resourcing and mobilising heavy plant to establish degraded routes during the fire emergency.
- A key focus for the future must be on developing fire response capacity through planning, infrastructure provision and ongoing training as well as continuity planning for emergency and other agency personnel.
- There is a need for enhanced and ongoing resilience and planning campaigns within the broader community for emergency response in general, with the goal of having an informed community able to respond to and adapt to the circumstances of any particular event. This is highly relevant where the community may only experience fire disasters on an intermittent basis and the community memory fades or remains solely focussed on the circumstances of previous events. What the behaviour of these fires demonstrates is the variability of the events and the need to be adaptable to the circumstances. This should be supported through the funding of permanent disaster management and community resilience personnel for either a local or restricted regional area to provide the necessary continuity and response capability for and between events, noting that disasters are not solely restricted to fires. This was highlighted by the impacts of extreme storms and riverine flooding in the Hawkesbury area immediately following the fires which compounded the impacts on the community, the environment and recovery
- Enhanced communications networks are required with use of designated media including national and local radio broadcasts being utilised to provide consistent messaging. This may involve the timely reallocation of shared community radio frequencies to be used to transmit warnings in affected areas
- The trend towards land use of peri urban areas which adjoin bushland and National Parks, such as the Hawkesbury LGA, for equestrian and other large animal/stock has highlighted the need to consider evacuation and the impact of this on firefighting response. Funding to establish appropriate infrastructure to manage the relocation and temporary housing of large animals, particularly horses, is highly desirable. The use of Hawkesbury Showground, which provided this capability during the fire event, highlighted the need to have suitable accommodation, security and animal welfare response at an early stage of a fire event. Whilst this was a generally satisfactory outcome, it did highlight the need for a coordinated “people and animal” response to ensure welfare is addressed where return to home may be delayed for considerable time. It also highlighted the limited availability of such facilities should other occupations or activities be running concurrently.
- There is a need to ensure that fire fighting activities are supported by the provision of contemporary and suitably sized facilities to manage, coordinate and provide logistical support for fire fighting operational management. The scale and duration of the Gaspers Mountain fire brought into sharp focus the need the Hawkesbury Fire Control Centre for a new purpose built facility to enable it to combat and coordinate future firefighting more effectively.

The current inadequate facility required the installation of demountable buildings to accommodate the additional logistical and planning support teams. This involved the annexation of the adjoining public school playground for over three months.

It is highly desirable that a future facility incorporate an Emergency Operations Centre on site, operating semi autonomously from the Incident Management Team. This would reduce the demand on the provision of an RFS Liaison Officer as well as provide enhanced intelligence and data sharing for supporting a coordinated emergency response.

• Recovery has been hindered by the delays in providing clean up services to the community. The Hawkesbury community were initially impacted in November 2019, however due to the extensive impacts of the 19/20 bushfires across the state, residents have had to endure the emotional impacts associated with losing their homes for a lengthy period of time due to the current process for managing the clean up. Whilst it is understandable that impact assessment capacity was stretched across the State, and that there is a need to ensure the accountability for public expenditure under the Commonwealth / State funding arrangements, more timely and close engagement with Local Government would address a number of aspects of recovery.

The current recovery process has seen significant delays to impact assessments; lack of clarity regarding the scope and eligibility for clean up; delayed clean up; and a lack of information regarding status updates from the principal contractor Laing O'Rourke.

The public perceive this as a lack of coordination between Federal/ State/Local authorities and this has led at times to confusion and angst amongst the community. The difficulties Local Government has faced in attempting to access information regarding these recovery activities has further contributed to the emotional impact on its community as they look to the local authority for support and answers; answers we are not always able to provide.

Local government is often best placed to provide the input necessary to achieve an early, coordinated and responsive approach to support the needs of the community during the recovery process.

Local government can work within the set guidelines established by State and Federal authorities to ensure a consistent approach, whilst maintaining probity of allocated funding.

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

This submission to the Royal Commission is restricted in its intent to matters associated with the Gospers Mountain Fire in NSW and its relevance to the Hawkesbury City Council local government area. It is also limited to broad issues affecting the community and Council in its ability to manage the emergency and its outcomes.

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