

Submission Number: NND.001.01217

Submission Of: Malcolm James Balsille Hay

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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? Hawkesbury (C)

Your Submission

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

The effective areas of bushfire response was where climatic conditions changed i.e. Rainfall, change in wind direction or intensity and temperature change allowing fire crews to extinguish fires. All other response tactics were impotent in the face of extremely dry, hot and windy conditions.

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

In my experience the Tactical Back Burning engaged by the RFS was the most destructive and dangerous act i have ever witnessed. During the Gospers Mountain Fire i was working at Caloola, south of Bathurst. Travelling from and returning to my home in Kurrajong everyday along the Bells Line of Road.

From the start of November 2019 extremely strong and dry Westerley winds dominated the weather pattern. These winds fanned the Gospers Mountain Fire pushing it in a North Easterley direction through the Wollemi National Park towards Mellong.

From the Property where i was working i had a very clear view of the Western fall of the Wollemi National Park and the Blue Mountains National Park.

On the 13th of November 2019 i noticed an increase in the amount of smoke coming from the Gospers Mountain Fire. On my drive home i noticed the fire was mushrooming on the Western side of the where it had previously burned and gone out. I found this difficult to understand as the wind was a constant strong westerly wind. I was later informed by an RFS volunteer that the RFS was conducting a Tactical Backburn Operation and was quote " Blacking out the area". I was left perplexed by this event as in my opinion the fire had moved out of this area, only to be reintroduced by the RFS.

The Dry, hot and windy conditions continued for the rest of November with the wind predominantly from a West and South Westerley direction continuing quote "Catastrophic fire conditions"

On Friday the 6th of December i was informed that the Bilpin RFS would conduct a Tactical Backburn Operation at Mountain Lagoon up to the Northern side of the main township this was conducted in very favourable conditions with low winds and 4mm and 3mm of rain being recorded after the Backburning operation which was in my opinion very fortunate as this area was tinder dry.

On Saturday the 14th of December the RFS conducted another Tactical Backburn Operation at Mt Wilson. This fire was lit in a Dry Schelophyl forest after a long period of drought in unpredictable conditions with tinder dry forest litter on the ground in summer.

This was part of a larger Tactical Backburn Operation that was planned by the RFS.

This Fire introduced by the RFS was never part of the Gospers Mountain Fire nor in the prevailing weather conditions was the Gospers Mountain Fire ever a threat to the areas burnt by this fire.

On the 15th of December this fire raged out of control destroying everything in its path.

Even after this irresponsible and negligent event, the RFS continued with their flawed strategy of Backburning introducing more fire to the West of this fire all the way to Lithgow.

I was unable to travel on The Bells Line of Road after this event and had to drive to work along the Great Western Highway.

On Friday the 20th of December I became aware that the RFS were going to close the Great Western Highway so that they could conduct yet another Tactical Backburn Operation from Hartley Vale to Blackheath.

This Tactical Backburn burnt out of control from West to East. Destroying Train lines,Power lines,Houses,hundreds of thousands of hectares of the Blue Mountains National Park,Wildlife and finally hitting Bilpin from the South after the wind changed from a Westerley direction sparing Kurrajong Heights,Kurrajong and other Grose Valley localities.

All of this fire was lit by the RFS and classified by them to the public that it was part of the Gospers Mountain Fire.

This is incorrect the Gospers Mountain Fire never moved in a Southerley direction into these areas.

It is my belief that these Tactical Backburn Operations are the cause of all of the damage to the Blue Mountains National Park between the Great Western Highway and the Bells line of Road and to vast areas of the Wollemi National Park,Bell,Clarence,Mt Wilson,Mt Tomah,Berambing and Bilpin.

These Tactical Backburns destroyed all Wildlife in their path and the effect on the Ecosystem is unknown.

These Tactical Backburns destroyed hundreds of millions of dollars of infrastructure.

These Tactical Backburns were impotent in reducing the size and impact of the Gospers Mountain Fire.

I have have photographs and phone recordings of events related to this fire and i write this in good faith in the hope that these events will never happen again.

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

I believe That the people in charge of lobbying for funding for an organisation should not be making operational decisions.

I believe that preparation is the key to bushfire survival.

I believe that people in bushfire prone areas need to provide their own emergency response systems i.e. mobile firefighting equipment,fire suppression systems and safe evacuation routes.

Roads should be used as bare earth firebreaks, widening and clearing the shoulders of roads and maintaining this bare earth firebreak.

From my experience hazard reduction does little to temper a fire. It is leading people into a false sense of security and should not be used as a fire mitigation strategy.

Small Fires extinguish easier than a large fire, increasing the size of a fire in unpredictable, hot and dry conditions is clearly not a tactic to be engaged.

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

I believe that the leadership of the NSW RFS has to be scrutinised. During the bushfire crisis if the majority of the media spin coming from the RFS is regarding funding then questions need to be asked. Who is looking after the Fire ?

I have only provided information in regards to what i have witnessed which was the Gospers Mountain Fire which in my opinion was handled impotently and negligently.

Bilpin was hit by a fire from the south on the 21st of December that was lit by the RFS on the 6th of December on the north side of the town. If not for a southerly wind change at 5.45pm on the 21st of December this fire would have continued all the way to the Hawkesbury river engulfing all before it.

It was an out of control Tactical Backburn.

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