

Submission Number: NND.001.01239

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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? Bega Valley (A)

Your Submission

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

Cooperative fire fighting. Fire response agencies (NPWS, Forests NSW and RFS), worked together at field and IMT to predict, respond to and then suppress bushfires in very demanding situations.

Information for the community. The coastal zone of SE NSW was evacuated, in a timely manner at the peak of the tourist season, the impact on the economy is enormous but this action saved lives and reduced workloads on response agencies and tier firefighters.

Air support, stretched thin but well coordinated. Regular media updates were dependable. Local ABC updates were appreciated but the messaging became too large (locals want information for their situation quickly and accurately so as they can make an informed response).

Formation of evacuation centers.

In the SE of NSW it was decided NOT to undertake large back-burns, the risk of these accelerating the fire front was well considered. This decision, based on knowledge and experience of competent IMT's saved life and property. Back-burns implemented in other parts of the state were impossible to control and accelerated fire spread closer to life and property. Back-burning in periods of extreme dryness are hard to control, exceed limited fire fighting resources, require at least of 5 - 8 days of settled (calm) weather to consolidate otherwise a back burn will and increase overall risk

Weather Monitoring and predictions to allow for fire predictions. The BOM and other sites gave access to good tools that allowed for planners to predict when and where to place resources.

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

In NSW RFS legislation requires Bushfire Risk Plans. Fire agencies define assets at risk and then design areas for treatment for implementation by all agencies and the community. The risk plan and its implementation is subject to audit.

These fires spread through all vegetated areas REGARDLESS of hazard reduction history. Prescribed burning, to reduce fuels, in all tenures including National Parks, State Forests and private property was irrelevant on most days in these dry conditions.

Levels of hazard reduction, to reduce fuels, became especially irrelevant on days of very high to extreme fire weather with bushfires impossible to contain regardless of fuel levels.

I am an experienced Fire Manager (retired now but 40 yrs experience). Over 2019/2020 I observed fire spread daily (Border, Werri Berri, Big Jack, and other fires), noting fires spread quickly at maximum intensity regardless of recent hazard reduction programs, even forested areas that had been treated by planned burns in the past 3 years were of limited use to mitigate the spread of these fires. During the season I looked at fire maps and compared them with areas that had been burnt to reduce fuel levels. I have extensive knowledge of which areas had been treated as well as an advanced understanding of fire behaviour. I also worked in Bega Fire Control as a planner, assisting as RFS resources were overtaxed.

Control of bushfires was successful at the interface between property and bushland, except under catastrophic conditions. Hazard reduction burns, covering many hectares, in broad areas away from this interface, did not assist in mitigating fire spread.

Outside the agencies this fact was not appreciated during the fire season, with some media commentators and some political statements blaming the damage on life and property on high fuel levels. At various times a generalised statements blamed high fuel levels and a perceived lack of fuel reduction, specifically in National Parks areas.

Objective analysis of the fire spread maps and history of fire mitigation does not support these statements.

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

Improve cooperative fire management qualification based training attended by agencies.

"Spot" trackers/locators on all appliances, plant, contractors and even personnel so resources can be tracked by IMT's at all times. This is so easy to do but will provide lots of information for control centers and others. Day to day fire effort can be altered more easily.

NSW: Consistent radio identifiers of fire fighting resources. NPWS uses a number for an individual fire fighter, RFS volunteers use vehicle and position labels. Forests NSW are different again. NATIONWIDE: One radio system. Fund it federally, but ensure the sub networks can be partitioned for operational reasons.

Use of heavy plant. Design and implement cross agency training for using heavy plant to implement appropriate fire breaks/fire trails to suit the circumstances. Even large fire breaks have failed to stop fires on days of extreme fire behaviour, wasting resources, increasing risk for operators and damaging the environment. This was especially obvious in the SE forests of NSW. Some trails were seen as logging operations rather than well managed fire breaks.

Fire modelling has traditionally depended upon Byram Keetch indices combined with estimates of vegetation mapping, expected weather and terrain mapping. There are more sophisticated systems being researched but there is a reluctance for some states to evolve past Phoenix modelling; there are a lot of 'clever' graduates out there with high levels of IT skills who could be fostered to develop fire spread models if

they are supported to do so.

It is important that as areas re-vegetate, fauna recolonise and soil health is restored that these processes are monitored by well designed research projects.

Grazing and logging is NOT a valid method to reduce fuel levels in National Parks. Both impact upon fragile areas and cause long term damage to natural areas.

The NPWS of NSW and conservation agencies in other states have had budgets cut and positions deleted. Reinstating a high level of staff with robust environmental training to enable natural areas to be nurtured. It takes years for a Ranger to develop local knowledge regarding the environment that they work in, they are then well based to manage for the natural and cultural values in a Park and then share this knowledge with the community. The community will then develop a deeper understanding of the role of fire in natural systems and feel less fear.

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

These fires spread quickly in an unprecedented fashion driven by extreme weather sets over all terrain and vegetation types, regardless of the history of hazard reductions and width of fire breaks. It was/is drought and the drought is accentuated by changes in the climate.

This last summer we depended upon local heroes to save lives and infrastructure, but we lack leadership to admit that we are in a climate crisis and instigate measures to reduce carbon emissions.

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