

Submission Number: NND.001.01254

Submission Of:

Your Details

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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? I live in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and did suffer personal or financial loss

Where do you live? Port Macquarie-Hastings (A)

Your Submission

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

Assistance and co-operation from immediate neighbours.

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

From my experience (and anecdotally, the experience of others) the Rural Fire Service (RFS) appears to have a complete disregard for the rights of individual landholders, and shows an absolute refusal to acknowledge and utilise the wealth of knowledge held by long term landholders. In steep and rugged terrain, the behavior of previous fires, the existence of trails and fire choke points (not to mention rural infrastructure) could be invaluable. Instead of availing themselves of this knowledge (sometimes gained over generations), RFS personnel refuse to interact with landowners, and instead charge through properties without any consultation, and without any concern for biosecurity protocols or livestock control. In times of dire emergency this sort of behavior may at times be excusable, but in the ordinary course of fire control planning is completely unacceptable, and potentially illegal.

Again, from my experience there is no accountability of RFS personnel for their actions, as RFS hierarchy simply brush off complaints with no repercussions.

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

To prevent a recurrence of the last fire season, greater emphasis should be placed on hazard reduction burning in the cooler months. Rather than put themselves in potential danger fighting wildfires in summer, RFS personnel could assist with hazard reduction in the winter months, greatly reducing fire risk in summer. Invoking the bush-fire danger period artificially early prevents a significant number of hazard reduction burns by reducing the hazard reduction window. Last winter, the bush-fire danger period in the Port Macquarie Hasting area was brought forward by two months - despite the bush-fire danger period being characterised at the time by the RFS as "Low". I know that several neighbours had to abandon planned hazard reduction activities because of this action by the RFS.

During fire control activities, back-burning (a legitimate and necessary practice) should be supervised and controlled to prevent the back-burn escaping and causing damage to adjoining properties. The property damage that we suffered in last year's fires was the result of a back-burn lit by RFS personnel who then left the area. The resulting fire was far greater in intensity than the fire it was lit to control, and subsequently caused thousands of dollars worth of damage, and cost even more to control.

Greater acknowledgement and utilisation of the wealth of knowledge held by landholders is also key to fire management and control.

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

By any measure, the control of bush-fires over the spring and summer of 2019-2020 was a disaster. In any other field, the performance of an organisation responsible is measured and, if found wanting, that organisation is held to account. I would argue that the task of the RFS in NSW is to keep us safe from bush-fire. Whether due to a lack of hazard reduction (which the RFS control or should assist with), a lack of preparedness, an attitude of arrogance, or a lack of skill, they have not kept us safe. The RFS should be held accountable.

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published anonymously