

Submission Number: NND.001.01313

Submission Of: Rebecca Thorley

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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? Greater Mogo Fire Recovery

Your Submission

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

What worked well during recovery was our databases and speaking to residents on their properties, going door to door, street by street. This was vital to assess what their actual needs were and triage them appropriately. We could then send our limited resources and volunteer help to where it was needed first. Those that often need the most help do not ask and this way you find these people, their neighbours "dob them in". The locals on the street generally know who needs the most help and where to find those that are not on their property or at least supply their contact information. This approach is especially important when most residents are retired elderly like in our area. This communal approach helps locals help other locals too. The below "fire impact form" is what was developed over the past few months. It evolved from just noting who needed generators, water, fuel, tools etc. to asking more questions as nobody else was. It now includes 160 residents in our area.

- First Name, Email, Last Name, Phone, Address
- Is your house uninhabitable? Yes/No
- Where are you living? Primary House /Living in another place (trailer, shed, "make do") on my property/Living elsewhere/ Need Accomodation/ Other / Prefer not to say right now
- What trades / services do you need? Electrician/ Plumber/ Gasfitter/ Builder / Carpenter/ Asbestos evaluation/ Landscapers/ Fencers/ Tree Assessment / Arborist/ General clean up crew/ Transport/ Domestic help, cooking, cleaning, washing etc./ Fodder for stock/ Fodder for wild animals
- Do you have power? Mains power/ Generator/ Need generator/ Need an electrician to asses my house, wiring, temporary setup/ Need an electrician to connect my generator directly to mains/ Need an electrician to connect my house back to mains
- Do you have water? Yes, have pressure from water pump, gravity fed or town water/ Yes but no pressure due to no power for pump/ Yes but no pressure as pump damaged or destroyed/ No, due to water storage or catchment system being damaged or destroyed/ Yes but it is contaminated
- Do you have a functioning hot water system? Yes/ No, because I have no power/ No, because my generator does not work with my hot water system/ No, it was damaged / destroyed/ other reason/
- Do you have a functioning sewerage/ septic system? Yes/ No, I do not need a temporary solution/ No, I need a temporary solution
- Is the below destroyed or damaged: Water tanks/ Water catchment area/ Water pipes/ Sheds or workshops/ Tools and machinery you usually use to maintain your property/ Residential fences / gates etc./ Rural fencing / gates etc.
- What tools and machinery do you need to maintian / fix your property or provide income?
- Were you at your house when the fire came through? Yes/ No
- Most people have been mentally affected by the fires, would you like (can pick more than one); A phone call from the mental health line/ A visit from a counsellor/ A chat and a cup of tea with a local/ A chat with another resident who stayed to defend their house
- Are there any essential services you need access to immediately?
- Is there anything that can be done immediately to make you feel more secure / safe at your property?
- What is most important to you?
- Any other helpful information?
- If filling in form for a neighbour please provide your contact details below

Because we ended having the only useful information on residents, I sent lists and information to the army, Crisis chaplains, Lifeline, NSW mental health teams, Samaritan's Purse, The Bushfires Housing Assistant Team and also contact lists to cross check registrations with other agencies such as Laing O'Rourke (NSW cleanup).

The Office of Emergency Management or local council would not supply any information on residents to anyone. They would not give Laing O'Rourke information, such as rates databases so they could cross check their databases to see if they were missing any registrations in the areas where they knew everything was destroyed. Residents wanted this to happen at the town meetings.

The OEM (Office of Emergency Management) would not tell us if residents on our database were registered for clean-up, registered with the recovery centre or had been assigned case workers. Residents did not know themselves as their experience was so confusing at the Recovery centre and databases were lost and mixed up all the time. We were the only group that could contact some residents by driving to them if they had no phone or internet. But OEM did not think this an issue to address.

The large aid organisations were just as restricted with what they could share. At no point during this entire exercise has any resident complained that they received a water tank or a call from a mental health line or that Samaritan's Purse showed up to assess and remove dangerous trees. Or that they were added back onto the clean-up list when their registration was lost.

During a natural disaster, there needs to be a centralised database and all agencies need to be able to share at least basic contact information to cross check databases. The database must be collected systematically, door to door, so that the correct demographics are known and the type of help needed can be assessed. No single disaster is the same, the needs of our community (retired elderly on 4 acre blocks) is entirely different to another. Getting information to these people then becomes easy. You message those you can, you call landlines and you drive to those with none. When appropriate resources or grants become available, victims don't need to fill in new forms, you can assess the information from the database and then contact those who meet the criteria. Victims then don't need to seek help, are kept updated and aid is supplied efficiently. It also keeps the aid organisations honest because you can check that aid is actually reaching residents.

Unfortunately our database was not utilised beyond sending lists to other groups and for our own use. OEM had access to all our information but did not act on it except to have Lifeline contact the residents.

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

We are fire affected residents ourselves, I evacuated to the beach, my partner stayed to defend, only just saving our house. We then worked with the RFS and neighbours putting out spot-fires for 4 days straight. We were one of the lucky few with a house, mobile fire tank and pumps, chainsaws, water still in our dam, fuel etc so went around helping others including dropping generators at pharmacies. We ended up basically becoming an "aid organisation" because no-one else was on the ground helping. I can only speak for our experiences in Mogo, Jeremadra, Malua Bay, Woodlands, Runnyford and Bimbimbie in southern NSW. I have visited over 100 residences and listened to their stories. I spent 3 months driving nearly every street in these areas, trying to get them power, water, shelter etc. We had about 40 volunteers who would regularly volunteer, mostly qualified tradesman and labourers. We now have a database of over 160 residents that we contact regularly.

Taking all these things into account, we know what was and wasn't done on the ground. I have spent over 3 months pleading for support on the ground. Saying it is unacceptable for fire affected locals to be driving around trying to make sure elderly have fresh water over 6 weeks after the initial fires. We have spoken to the heads of all the government organisations and aid organisations. Many meetings, a lot of talk, with nothing eventuating. The Mogo township received some press but it was actually spared the complete devastation that affected the surrounding areas and suburbs.

In Victoria, the Red Cross worked with the army to do a welfare check on residents and then the army helped with clean-up. In NSW, in our area (I can only speak for the suburbs above); no systematic welfare check was done on residents. Not the Red Cross or the army or any government or aid organisation actually checked on residents on their properties to see how the fire had impacted them. There was a "loss of life and structure" check (yes or no then house or outbuilding loss) immediately after the first fire with no details taken or follow up. Then some Public Works people checked for asbestos and taped off damaged structures.

Our area was a warzone, no power, no phone, no water, no internet, no radio, no petrol, no access, no outside help. The army arrived eventually. They were given addresses for water drops, chopping up downed trees and urgent fencing repair work (supplied by us as we were the only ones who knew anything) but they disappeared quickly after Laing O'Rourke got the clean-up contract without completing anything except cleaning up the botanic gardens. The army was cleaning up the botanic gardens when elderly were literally dying in their back yards and not being found for a week because no-one was checking in on them except one resident, me in a Subaru. Laing O'Rourke has now barely started the clean-up almost 4 months since the fires. I am yet to hear back from the OEM on what they have actually achieved beyond having Lifeline call our database after months of meetings. They have now left local council with the task of dealing with the majority of the recovery work. But our council doesn't even have anyone dedicated to fire recovery. In the worst hit area.

To date, no government or aid organisation can say they know that they have responded appropriately to the fires because they have not assessed how people have been impacted. They have no demographic information beyond total structure losses. They have no idea who has been missed / neglected / still without essential services / still living in rubble. Instead, they have relied on residents going into a Recovery centre or magically knowing when a "pop up" recovery centre will appear in their town. We went to the one "pop up" one that was at the local Boomerang centre and a total of 3 residents came because no-one knew about it. We are still encountering residents that don't know that a Recovery centre exists (it is closed now anyway) or that there are grants available. There is still terrible phone reception, poor internet access and many residents, mostly elderly, still don't have their Telstra landlines reconnected, just 5 mins from town.

This was not a fire one day and recovery the next, it was 6 weeks of constant new fires, new evacuations, new road blocks, heatwaves and days on end without phone, internet or power. No-one checked on residents throughout this time. We were just 2 residents driving around dropping off generators, water pumps, water, petrol etc. We started keeping track of who needed what as so many were in need and no help ever arrived. We ended up trying to doorknock as many as possible. Our pleas for help were ignored. Meetings held, nothing happened. Residents died.

When the traumatised and sleep deprived residents did get into a Recovery centre (leaving their properties unguarded to looters) they then had to plead / prove their need / explain how they were affected to multiple agencies and fill out multiple forms. And were then told "no you don't meet the criteria" for most forms of support. This humiliating, exhausting and stressful trip would take between 5 and 7 hours and many never returned for these reasons.

The aid and government agencies did not track who or what they said "no" to, only who received help. So they have no idea of the actual demographic of the disaster. What the real needs were, or how badly residents were affected. Figuring out what the actual need is, is essential to responding to a disaster. We then started to amass a huge database of who needed essential services; power, water, shelter, mental health help. As well as what their situation was on their property, what was damaged, what tools they needed access to etc. This information was offered repeatedly to all the aid and government agencies. No-one wanted to know about it and when they did ask for it, they did not act upon it or lied about what was done.

Not being checked on, being made to beg for help and humiliated, no clean-up etc then developed into it's own problem. Residents went into self preservation mode, into survival mode and stopped asking for help or seeking it. Additionally, the majority of residents in our area are retired elderly. They will not ask for help unless visited on their property. They will sit in their house, looking at their destroyed property, month after month.

The younger, wealthier residents or those closer to town, the "squeaky wheels" and those who know how to get what they needed said they had a good response to the disaster. These are the ones with internet and social media access. The ones that got the media attention and had their places cleaned up first or had council return their calls. That is 6 out of the 160 on our database.

The attitudes and ignorance of government staff did not help either. We were dropping emergency water supplies and the response from council was "it has rained now, their tanks should be full". Unfortunately you can't catch water if you have no tank, or no roof or your roof is covered in asbestos debris or your tank was still contaminated when it did rain so was unusable.

Then again, they don't know how many residents lost their tanks so are unaware it is an issue. Because OEM did not think this important information to get from us (they knew we had it). Or they would say "their insurance should cover it" but they have no phone to call and book a water delivery and are relying on us driving by and seeing if their 1000L water tank that we supplied them with is nearly empty. If they could call, by the time they booked and waited for a \$200, 10,000L water delivery for a 1,000L tank, they would have been out of water. When trying to get a water ticket so we could use a fill point to deliver water using our own 1,000L tank and pump on the back of a ute, we were told no, they are on drought restrictions.

I had to explain numerous times that if you have no power, you have no water because you can't pump your water from your tank. "They can pick up bottle water from an aid centre" Again, I have to explain that an elderly couple cannot drive, lug all of their water into a car, out of a car, into the kitchen, the bathroom etc during 40 degree days when they have no power for air conditioning. And how do you shower with bottled water?

Most residents needed practical assistance due to no essential services; power, water, shelter, mental health help. Also dangerous trees, dangerous, unstable debris.

The emergency grants from the Red Cross and other groups were only available to those who had their houses destroyed. The majority of residents had everything but their house destroyed: fencing, water tanks, water pumps, septic, power infrastructure. Everything they need to fix their property was lost too as sheds, tools and machinery gone. But they had their house so did not qualify for any assistance.

Registering at the recovery centre did not mean anything or that you get any practical help. The categories they put people in did not apply to the situation. Insured vs uninsured/ low income / low asset does not apply as everyone was somewhere in-between and didn't fit either category. And it really had no relevance to if you needed immediate financial and practical assistance. To explain further:

- You are on your own if you are insured. But this does not take into account those who's insurance went to their mortgage, or the huge number of underinsured. Many who were underinsured decided to do the free NSW clean-up and took the payout for their insurance clean-up so they could use it to rebuild to the now (much more expensive) fire codes. But then this clean-up is still yet to happen. As of the 11th of April, of the 160 on our database, 5 have been completed and over 25 have not even been contacted yet despite registering months ago so are living in rubble or displaced. If you are fully insured it does not mean you still don't need help with essential services. No phone reception to call your insurance agency / no internet / no trades available/ huge backlog on orders for water tanks and other essentials. Trades were not being allowed onsite due to dangerous trees not being assessed or removed by council. So even as power was restored to the streets, the residents remained not connected to the street.
- Then if you are un-insured / low income / low asset you get a case worker assigned and maybe a payment for contents within 4 weeks of being approved. On the 3rd of April there were still no case workers assigned.

A Red Cross official representative announced at our town meeting in front of everyone that they were (finally) starting to door knock in our area that day. On multiple occasions I have heard their reps (and the head of the Red Cross) say they had been door knocking when they hadn't. Which is bad enough. But to then announce it on the 11th of March, in front of 40 residents and other aid organisations..... and then not do it (2 full weeks before Covid-19) is a whole new level of deception.

The National Bushfire Agency sent a summary of one of our town meetings. The Issues / Concerns raised section is good. The action owner/ outcome section was incomplete, completely inaccurate and in no way goes to solving any of the issues raised. Many were never carried out. The meeting was called because of the mental health crisis in our area, the suicides, and also the lack of any welfare checks. And somehow one of the "action owner/outcomes" was for our community group to keep door knocking and check in on locals and vulnerable people. IT'S NOT OUR JOB!

"Community led recovery" sound great, except when then entire community is affected and every organisation refuses to work with or help them and instead makes them do the job of all the government and aid agencies.

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

As mentioned before, during a natural disaster, there needs to be a centralised database and all agencies need to be able to share at least basic contact information to cross check databases. The victim database must be collected systematically, door to door, so that the correct demographics are known and the type of help needed can be assessed.

To do now

- Emergency responses must be planned for assuming all communication systems can be lost, with back-up plans in place.
- feul stations need an automatic transfer switch at minimum with a suitable input for a generator, preferably, installation of a generator.
- Essential assets such as radio repeaters, phone towers, water towers etc. need to have their own fire suppression system including a remote system and regular maintenance/ clearing and systems checks.
- Evacuations centres need to have sufficient fuel for generators and keep them maintained (Tomakin club twice ran out of fuel / generators broke down)
- Pharmacies, vets, medical clinics etc need automatic transfer switches and ideally back-up generators.
- Residents should be able to stay on their property to defend but they must be prepared (combination of a course and essential check list: back up fire pumps, fuel, large water reserves, proper PPE, VHF radios).

In the event of a catasrphic forecast;

- feul reserves need to be brought into the area.
- portable communication systems need to be brought into central hubs.
- Pre-emptive feul rationing in remote areas prior to fire day. Feul stations must keep a proportion available for RFS, SES, police etc. (Batemans bay ran out of feul)
- Greater presence of police to evacuate tourists to lighten the load on small communities that may become isolated for an extended period of time

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

As emailed tonight, we urgently want more time to supply the commission with a proper timeline of what happened and forward the relevant emails and meeting minutes as well as the information supplied to different groups that was never acted upon. Only then can it be clear how all the different organisations failed to work together. There is so much more that needs to be said but we are too busy with recovery work. We need another week.

Please refer to our website www.greatermogofirerecovery.com for more information on what happened in our area, both during the fires and during the recovery. The pictures, videos, "reports from the ground" and the "our story" tabs are very informative and show the utter chaos that went on during the first week of January. I will send a few images of our databases

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

NND.001.01.01313 – Addendum – to question 6

The groups that effectively helped residents; Rotary clubs, Samaritan's Purse, Lifeline, the Bushfire Housing assistance team, Co-ordinate/ PHN and the Disaster response legal service. These are not the ones talking about what they have done, they have been too busy doing it. They are the ones stretching their resources and funding to the max or they are operating outside what they usually do, changing how they operate to meet the need. The way they approach and operate during recovery works.