

Submission Number: NND.001.01339

Submission Of: Judith Benton

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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 was living in a bushfire area, was not evacuated, and did suffer loss.

Where do you live? East Gippsland (S)

Your Submission

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

The response of the Australian defence force to evacuate people from Mallacoota by both sea and air was amazing, as was their care of the community.

I was particularly appreciative of the medic team that allowed me to join them to travel in a bushmaster to Cann River to attend to the pastoral needs of the congregation and community - this was the first time that visiting teams made any effort to engage with myself as a local care provider.

Those who evacuated out on the HMS Choules were very complementary of the care and concern of the crew.

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

I've been in Mallacoota about 18 months, as the Priest of the Parish of Croajingolong, which covers Mallacoota, Cann River and Genoa. This is the only church of any denomination in this area.

As soon as you move into Mallacoota you know there is a bushfire risk.

Our first summer here (18-19) it was a risk that wasn't really emphasised, but by Dec 2019 even as new-comers we knew that this was a place of real risk and with a community wanting to know what to do.

Credit needs to be given to the local CFA who did try to get people to attend meetings to encourage people to make their own fire plan and to find out about a community bushfire plan. However, it seemed everyone came away from these meetings with a different version of what to do WHEN (not if) a bushfire happened.

In November 2019 I asked about the role of the church, being next to the community hall which was the proposed "safer place." I was told that of course the CFA expected that the church would be open, as a place for people to be, and that the CFA would protect it along with the hall for as long as possible. I then asked what we would need to make this happen, and was advised to get P2 masks, safety glasses, torches and water. The CFA gave us 1 box of 10 P2 masks, the rest of these things we acquired as a church.

From all the meetings what was clear was that unless there was at least 24 hours notice of a fire approaching then Mallacoota was going to be in real trouble.

There was no actual safe location for a fire.

There was no facility large enough to accommodate all of the locals, let alone the tourists likely to be in town at the time.

There was no combined agency plan – I suggested we have a scenario day where we rehearse a disaster- and was told that Mallacoota had one 10 years ago.

There was no community stock-pile of masks or safety gear.

The amount of supermarket / pharmacy stock in town may have been adequate if the fire had happened a few weeks earlier, but in the height of tourist season it would never be enough.

Over the weekend before the fire the East Gippsland Shire had produced a "stay out of the forest for fire danger" map. The line of danger cut off at Cann River, and Mallacoota was in the 'safe' zone. I have heard from people who saw this map and decided that it was OK to travel to Mallacoota because it was not in the "danger area." Why did this map not cover all of East Gippsland given the high fire danger?

On the Sunday after the vic emergency app indicated that the fire had begun at Wingan Inlet there was a community meeting at 5pm. I found out about this by accident, I don't believe it was broadcast via the vic emergency app. At this meeting I realised that this fire was likely to reach Mallacoota. That evening I informed the congregation of the meeting the next day at 11am, and I also began to organise food and basic bedding etc for the church to be used as a temporary place for people to be while waiting for the fire to approach.

For many who received my text, this was the first they knew about the approaching fire or the community meeting.

The next morning (Mon 30th Jan) we discovered that the road via Cann River to Melbourne was open on and we were able to evacuate my parents by road at 8am.

Was the road still open at 11am when the community meeting happened?

Why was there not an earlier meeting encouraging people to leave to the west?

Was the road in from Cann River closed over the morning or were people still arriving?

Of those who attended the 11am meeting, many decided to evacuate. I have heard that those who attended were very impressed with the quality and quantity of information given – and those who did evacuate cannot understand why others would stay.

I spent the day at the church, preparing it as a place of hospitality and sleep, and during the day gradually seeing people become more panicked.

A European family in a caravan arrived in the later afternoon. They had just driven into Mallacoota from Eden, not having any idea of the danger they were approaching – the road was open, they had become trapped and it would be a week before they could get out. Why was the road from the North not closed earlier?

By 4pm I had been contacted by over 60 people wanting to stay the night in the church because it was with other people and further from the forest than their houses were. Knowing its limitations I was panicking about when the shire would open a relief centre.

When they did at about 5pm I went across to the Cinema/ hall and spoke to the shire person, who clearly had no idea of what the community plan about gathering at the hall had been. I informed them that the CFA knew that we were in the church, and that people were safe and happy. I was told I needed to evacuate everyone from the church to the beach. I didn't feel that this was the right advice, but once given it I needed to comply.

I then had to turn young families with small children, and people in their 90's out to the beach. As I was doing this the police turned up and asked why I was telling people to go to the beach – I directed them to the council person, who by then had started telling people to go into the hall. At least we were able to relocate a couple in their 90's into the hall. They would tell me after how uncomfortable they have been, unable even to get a cup of tea. We had facilities in the church for 60-70 people, the older residents could have been more comfortably kept there at least until the danger was closer.

It needs to be noted that the community hall / cinema has NO disability access toilets or facilities. All bathrooms are accessed by steep stairs that in the dark would be difficult to navigate safely even by able-bodied people. I have heard of elderly residents who were unable to access bathroom facilities and who therefore sat in their own waste for 24 hours or more. While the church also has no specified disabled toilets, they are at least level to the rest of the building and this alone would have enabled many older people to use them.

By 6pm my husband and I put our own fire plan into action, and evacuated onto the lake in our little boat.

I would discover later that 40-50 people had gone back to the church and slept there until they were evacuated again by the CFA as the fire-front approached. They then returned to the church and slept there, some for up to 4 nights until the HMAS Choules evacuated them.

IF the church was evacuated in the early hours of Tuesday morning, as the fire front approached, how far from evacuating the main hall were authorities?

Had an evacuation from the hall had to occur, what would be the chances of 900+ people plus pets leaving a dark hall, with no emergency exits, into a smoky and fearful environment safely?

We returned to Mallacoota after 36 hours on our boat as we believed we were not coming back to a house. When we returned we went to the hall thinking we would find someone in charge who could tell us if it was safe to go home – no one was in charge. We just went home and discovered we did still have a house.

Right from the start there needed to be an area for LOCALS to go to find out information, to register that they had lost houses and where they were going to stay. Even now, 4 months on, there has never been a single register made of locals who were made homeless.

From the moment I was back I was involved in the recovery efforts, both through the church, the opshop, with the police (as chaplain) and as a VCC chaplain.

I couldn't believe that given the high likely hood of fire how unprepared the council had been.

- Why was there no emergency response plan taking into account ALL of the buildings that could have been used, the main hall, church, opshop and kinder should have had specific known roles to play?

- Why was there no community plan that included engaging with community groups such as the church & local red-cross that had facilities or expertise that could be used?

- Why was there not a container with adequate masks and water onsite?

- When food arrived it was assorted rubbish food from food-banks, why not pellets of well thought out emergency rations and healthy balanced meals? - Milk powder? Dried potato / peas? Camping meals?

- Given that the power was then off for a month, why was there not a faster delivery of cooking facilities like butane gas burners and bottles?

- What would have happened if the hall had had to be evacuated – given the number of elderly and infirm in it without any disabled facilities?

- Given that a large diesel generator HAD been brought into Mallacoota before the fire, why was this not set up in the vicinity of the main hall to enable the 900 or so evacuees in it to have light and power during a terrifying night.

- In 2019 the trees around the airport were removed to 100m from the perimeter fence, why was this not continued between the airport and town to ensure safer access to the airport in an emergency.

It is an absolute miracle that more people didn't die in the Mallacoota fires, and that more properties were not lost.

The 36 hour window enabled a huge number of additional fire and support teams to enter the town, without this we would be in a much worse situation.

The local police worked tremendous hours that first night but would have been greatly assisted if there had been a clear community plan that everyone had known.

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

There needs to be better communication between the states where borders are involved.

The Border between NSW and VIC should have been closed to traffic arriving from Eden on SUNDAY NIGHT when the fire first started and it became apparent that it would reach Mallacoota. It wasn't closed until MONDAY AFTERNOON by which time people were trapped and it was too late for them to evacuate.

So too, the cross border communication afterwards was clearly lacking. As soon as the road north to Eden was deemed safe enough for tourists to be convoyed out, locals who had departed before the fire in their own vehicles also should have been allowed to return. Travelling this road about 3 weeks after the fire, it was clear that it could have been opened earlier.

When the "experts" arrived to take charge of the situation their emphasis was very clearly on the evacuation of people either by sea or by air. In many ways this was completely understandable given the numbers who needed to go – HOWEVER in all of the early response very little attention was paid to locals and their needs.

I recommend that in future other similar holiday towns should have two relief centres set up, one for locals to get the information and support they need around housing, food supplies and what was required for staying, and the second for those seeking to evacuate. To have separated the two out would have enabled much better practical and pastoral support begin given to locals as well as a more coordinated approach to ensuring that locals were registered with support agencies, and that where they had moved to was also traced by someone.

There was also huge discrepancy in the treatment of local workers & volunteers versus those who came into Mallacoota.

Visiting staff were on disaster pay, put up in the best accommodation with 3 meals a day provided - and yes they worked hard for the 5 days their rotation was here for, but local public servants were expected to participate in these same 10 hour+ days without recognition that they had lost property, were traumatised, and were going home to houses without power / hot water, and without the free meals. This made for great bitterness on the part of locals.

Local volunteers were not provided with the emergency services lunches, even though many of these were going to waste due to over-ordering. I have heard that it was decided it was better to use leftover lunches as chicken-food than to give them to volunteers, some who were working 8+ hours a day running the 'relief centre.' - I put this in comas as it was never officially opened by the East Gippsland Shire Council as is protocol, which meant that they provided no funding or resourcing for the centre and locals were left to do the work without recognition or support.

Until the 3rd week after the disaster all of the main emergency services meals were catered for by the Mallacoota Pub, to the detriment of other businesses. Thankfully after week 3 someone saw sense and extended the contract to the other food business in Mallacoota to spread the benefit of this income.

The continual roll-over of support staff was detrimental to the recovery effort, with those who lost houses saying after repeating their story to different people every week they gave up try to access support. Again a separate place for locals to have received support away from the visitors would have made a huge difference.

In an isolated community the local police need to have more information given to them by the control centre. The local police were often left embarrassed by mixed-messages and mis-communication coming from the control centre in Orbost.

IN a disaster there also needs to be someone appointed to be the public voice of true information on social-media. While there were many newsletters and meetings, the majority of people get their information from facebook and this was a platform not engaged by the EMT team, which led to much rumour and mis-information. Having a designated information person would have reduced the efforts others had to go to to continually correct mis-information.

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

I have also submitted much of this information to the Victorian IGEM inquiry.

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