

Submission Number: NND.001.01344

Submission Of: Gail Stevens

Your Details

Email address:

Phone:

Preferred means of contact: Email

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? Eurobodalla (A)

Your Submission

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

Given the ferocity and extent of the bushfires, the deployment of limited fire fighting resources was incredibly effective.

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

The number of mixed messages given. For example, residents of Malua Bay were advised to evacuate to the beach only days later the accepted wisdom was that this was not a preferred option. Having evacuated to the beach we found, due to the destruction of mobile towers and internet connections, the people in charge had to wing it, didn't know next steps and as the fire came closer (almost across the road) had no plan B. As an evacuation point Malua Bay Beach had no generator in place for power, no mobile or internet booster for communications and no food or water,

There seemed to be no concept that communications could be as badly damaged as they were. TV and radio consistently referred people to the 'fires near me' website when this was pointless if no internet coverage was available.

Our area was without power for 13 days. If households had no solar battery or petrol generator then they needed to rely on bagged ice to keep food fresh, car chargers for mobiles and batteries for radio to keep up with news.

The rumour mill was not well managed. For example the local Bunnings was rumoured to have burnt down - this was not true. There needs to be some way for local authorities to develop a 'myth buster' system either through local radio or posting updates at local information points.

Based on this summer's experience with telecommunications, do not rely on internet or social media. Do not rely on everyone being tech savvy. Less than 64% of Eurobodalla residents have an internet connection and nearly 42% of residents are over 60 years of age.

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

Australia needs a national policy which at least broadly outlines what needs to happen and how states/territories work collaboratively with the commonwealth. This was clearly missing and we endured policy on the run.

For future events (and based on current forecasts there will be future events) locations identified as evacuation points must have emergency generators and equipment that offers some sort of mobile coverage to enable at least some communication with the local emergency HQ.

There is no point storing them in the nearest city if the roads and airports are closed due to conditions.

I would like to see the Aboriginal technique of burning for land management tested (given a chance over several years not just one) and if found effective incorporated in pre-fire management.

While the response was as good as we could hope for, the poor communication from the national government needs significant improvement and there needs to be early discussion i.e. well before the next fire season for how this can be improved. Another matter for improved response action might be Australia purchasing its own water bombers. The idea of NSW sending the only one working in our state across to WA, while altruistic, is not viable in the long run. If Australia need to borrow money to fund at least one per state then that's what needs to happen.

Fire recovery seems to have been swallowed up by COVID-19 so can't comment.

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

It would be good to see a broad view of natural disaster taken with this Commission. Australia experiences fire, flood and drought in a regular cycle and they are all natural disasters to the families they touch. Our water management is critical to fighting fires and mitigating drought. In my opinion the current Murray-Darling arrangement is not working. We should look at, over time, winding up the cotton growing industry in such a dry continent. River flows must first of all ensure clean drinking water for all settlements along rivers. Secondly ensure environmental flows to protect Australian flora and fauna. Thirdly for key food crops and livestock and finally for secondary crops.

The idea that anyone/entity can buy water and then sell it back is neocapitalism gone mad!

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