

Submission Number: NND.001.01386

Submission Of: Tim Hitchins

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? Port Macquarie-Hastings (A)

Your Submission

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

Aircraft

The immediate response to fires this season was done very well with respect to the way aircraft were dispatched to most fires. Often aircraft were on scene and had a fire knocked down before ground crews even arrived, which I have no doubt saved dozens more properties.

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

Fires Near Me

The issuing of public warnings and the use of Fires Near Me was very troubling on a lot of occasions over the past fire season. On many occasions there were delays in excess of 45 minutes from when a fire was reported to 000, and when the first 'Advice' icon popped up on fires near me. Many members of the public commented to me personally that they had stopped looking at fires near me as it was not accurate. They then began searching for other methods such as the Sentinel hotspot mapping etc. to try and get more accurate information. Fires Near Me is only as good as the information coming in from the field, and those who have responsibility for inputting that information into the program, and I feel that this is where the issue was.

Generally speaking, when our radio communications are run through the OCC at RFS HQ, when a fire is reported to 000, the OCC operators immediately 'authorise' the incident in ICON which (from my understanding) then creates a marker in the system showing the active incident which is then mirrored in Fires Near Me. This is done extremely well in Sydney, but is severely lacking when operated by the local Districts. I suspect that some of the operators responsible for this system locally do not actually know completely how the system works.

Many times within the Mid Coast District I have heard staff members say that they purposely do not 'authorise' an incident until a brigade gets on scene to confirm if there is a fire or not. In many of the areas we operate, the absolute best case scenario would be 20 minutes from the notification time, until a truck arrives on scene. In more western parts of the district with huge distances between brigades, and likelihood that some brigades do not even have enough members to turn out in the first place, it can be well over an hour until a fire truck investigates a 000 call. For years I have been of the opinion that this puts lives at risk due to the public being unaware of a reported fire until someone pushes one button an hour later to confirm that a fire exists.

I believe it would be far better to immediately authorise all incidents in the system so the public have more trust in Fires Near Me. This would also reduce the number of 000 calls received if the public can check the app and see that the fire they're looking at is already being investigated.

RFS Local District Communications

Several years ago the Hastings LGA merged with the Taree LGA. Then, more recently the Taree, Great Lakes and Gloucester LGAs all merged. This caused Hastings to also be merged, bringing 4 former LGAs and Fire Districts all into one. Apart from the logistical issues of training and operational events hours apart from each other (but still within the same district), it also meant that the 4 Districts now operate on a single radio network.

During periods of heightened operation activity this simply does not work.

During the most recent fire season, in the Mid Coast District there were several occasions where I personally tried for in excess of 20 minutes to contact our local Firecom by radio before I was able to get through due to the significant traffic, and often out-of-their-depth radio operators were struggling to handle the transmissions. We were assured many years ago that if there were large incidents throughout the district, that the radio channels would be split and there would be Comms centres working from both Wauchope and Taree simultaneously to reduce the traffic. This never occurred during the 2019/20 fires.

Whilst it is wonderful that volunteers offer their time to work in the communications areas of the District, on Extreme fire days with constant communication traffic, there should be protocols in place to bring in assistance from professional radio operators (like work in the OCC) to handle the job. Trying to pass time-critical important information and being told to speak slower and repeat yourself 3 times is just not good enough when the conditions are like they were. Toward the end of the season an operator from the OCC was working out of the Wauchope Fire Control Centre, but this was for a night shift when there was little activity, and the volunteers continued operating through the day with the same problems encountered day after day which frustrated some crews so much that they gave up trying to pass information by radio, myself included. On numerous occasions I contacted other crews directly by phone about incident location, activity, and tasking, as the information was so difficult to extract from the official radio channels, and was often given incorrectly.

Four districts combined into one is not a reasonable solution for managing times of significant fire activity. There needs to be a process in place to either permanently reduce the size of these areas (eg. split Hastings LGA away from Mid Coast like it used to be), or prepare a plan to split radio channels when a certain amount of traffic occurs, especially when there are days of prior notice for severe fire weather being forecast.

RFS Local Dispatching of Incidents

These were truly unprecedented conditions and the stress of staff/volunteers in the dispatching process would be immense, but at the end of the day, we are an emergency service, and it is disappointing that the system fell down so many times in relation to the timely dispatching of brigades to 000 calls, even on days where there were far fewer jobs occurring.

Some examples include 21 minutes from time of 000 call for a brigade to be notified of a large log dump alight beside the Pacific Highway.

A fire reported near a campground west of Laurieton where it was 77 minutes from time of 000 call to when a brigade left the station to investigate due to a failing to notify that brigade until over an hour after the initial report.

A fire near the Pacific Highway at Middle Brother where there was a delay of 27 minutes from the 000 call to when a brigade (with crew at the station already at the time) were first asked to respond to the incident.

All of these incidents had the potential to quickly develop into life-threatening situations and it is very disappointing that the same things happened over and over again, often on the same day.

These delays have been happening for years with little more than a 'we'll try and do better' when raised with District staff. I recall several years ago in our brigade area there was a delay of almost 20 minutes before we were notified of a Semi-trailer carrying fertiliser which had rolled and was leaking fuel on a dirt road near our fire station. There was a similar delay several months later to a structure fire on a farm in another part of the District where a significant amount of machinery was lost - in this case the closest brigade only arrived when they did due to members of the public contacting them directly. If OCC can page a brigade within 2 minutes of receiving a 000 call and it takes our local District 7-60 minutes to do the same, the system is broken and this needs to be urgently reviewed as lives are at risk. If this means all brigades are dispatched to 000 calls by the OCC, then the job is passed to local districts for management, then that seems like a very good solution that has been raised and rejected several times.

Notification Of Brigades

In addition to the points raised above about congested radio networks and poor practices of dispatching brigades to incidents, from a brigade level, when these things are occurring, it is nearly impossible to find out where you have been sent when paged for a fire call.

Several times it has been raised with the Mid Coast District office that we should be able to receive the location of a fire/incident via the paging system - this occurs in many other locations around NSW, but is an intentional act within Mid Coast to refrain from doing this.

It has led numerous times to brigades sitting at their stations for upward of 15-20 minutes waiting for a break in the radio traffic to find out the most important piece of information - the incident address, so they know whether to turn left or right when they depart the station.

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

Safety of First Responders

Fire Ground Radios for adequate communication between fire-fighters.

After every major bush fire, one of the biggest items to come out at an AAR is the breakdown of communications. All new NSW RFS trucks come equipped with 5 Watt Fire Ground radios. These are fantastic pieces of equipment that are crucial to properly communicate with other vehicles and crews on the fire ground. Unfortunately there are very few older trucks that have been retrofitted with these radios, causing those crews to rely on the 1W hand held fire ground radios that at times don't even have the ability to properly transmit/receive a message from someone you can physically see, due to the interference of smoke, terrain, etc.

My brigade has 3 vehicles, and only 1 has a 5W mounted fire ground radio - if the service is going to hold on to older vehicles for longer than ever (we've been told 25 years), they all need to be retrofitted with the latest technology necessary.

Even on a fire ground such as Lindfield Park Road, with relatively flat ground and quite a short distance between sides of the fire, the most effective method of communication was to drive around until you found the crew you were looking for. This is not appropriate for the safety or organisation of crews on an active fire ground, and could have been significantly improved by all trucks having adequate radio communications installed.

Safety of First Responders

Trucks

In 2019, for all fire trucks to not have heat shield blinds and adequate crew protection sprinklers is disgusting. It has been years since NSW RFS trucks began getting fitted with full cab-spray systems, yet as far as I am aware not a single vehicle in Mid Coast District has been retrofitted. If the NSW Government is going to continue sending volunteers into increasingly dangerous fire conditions, it is an urgent matter to have all RFS vehicles fitted with the best possible safety equipment. I am honestly astounded that no-one was killed this season by being over-run.

Masks

Dealing day after day with thick, choking smoke is horrible, and personally leaves me with a cough lasting weeks, as well as increased fatigue and nausea. Several members of my brigade vomited during incidents or while returning from them, due to the continuous ingestion of toxic smoke. The RFS only provide a P2 dust mask, which the NSW Health Department even suggested was not adequate for the task of continued exposure to heavy smoke. On the day forecast to be the worst of the season in the Hastings LGA, we were told by the local RFS District that they had no P2 Masks in stock to give us. So, we had family members of our volunteers who travelled around to about a dozen different stores until they eventually were able to purchase masks that we used to stock our trucks on this day.

In November I spent approx. \$350 buying myself a full-face P3 mask from Draegar. I honestly believe this mask saved my life on a number of occasions when overcome by severe smoke while engaged in property protection. I am also reasonably confident that without this mask, the owner of [REDACTED] would be missing at the very least, the right half of his house. There is no way I could have extinguished the burning gutters of this property and checked the house for occupants without the Draegar mask. These should not have to be purchased by volunteers at their own expense, just to breathe clean air on a fire ground.

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

Meals for Volunteers

There is no word except 'disgusting' for the way volunteers in the Mid Coast District (specifically Port Macquarie-Hastings LGA) were treated in relation to being fed while on the fire ground.

My brigade wrote a letter addressed to the NSW RFS Commissioner (and also sent to numerous senior RFS staff) regarding the serious failings

of the District in relation to the welfare of the Volunteers. The only response we ever received to this letter was an email acknowledging the letter had been received, with no follow-up whatsoever. I have attached a copy to this submission as it describes the concerns raised in more detail, and highlights just how bad the problem was. This included multiple days in a row of 17 hour shifts without being provided with a meal, days of watching other emergency service organisations at the same fires consuming meals provided by their superiors, and on the few occasions where a stale, unrefrigerated egg and lettuce sandwich was provided, the refusal of other agencies to eat the RFS-provided food due to hygiene concerns and the overall disappointment in the support given by the RFS to crews in the field.

If you don't have adequately nourished and fatigue-free volunteers the response will be affected.

The volunteers I worked with stood between towering flames and homes for days on end. I don't believe it is too much to ask for them to be humanely treated and provided with the 'basics' that keep them safe and healthy.

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

North Shore Rural Fire Brigade Letter to NSW RFS Commissioner
3/11/2019

Sent to the following individuals:

Shane Fitzsimmons, Rob Rogers, Trina Schmidt, Jayson McKellar, Jason Heffernan, Rebel Talbert, Ben Shepherd, Kam Baker, RFSA Hastings Branch, Brian McDonough (RFSA), Steve Robinson (RFSA)

Dear Commissioner Fitzsimmons,

We write today on behalf of North Shore Rural Fire Brigade to express our significant disappointment at the way volunteers are being treated within the Mid Coast District of the Service, particularly in relation to volunteer welfare and the provision of meals for crews at incidents. Frankly, we feel the actions of this District hold our volunteers in contempt.

Over the past twelve months and beyond, we have attempted several times to improve the situation for volunteers in this District through communication and requests through the chain of command within the Mid Coast District.

The Executive of our brigade has raised this issue numerous times through our Group Officer, and through various levels of staff, all the way to the District Manager. Unfortunately there was no positive outcome. We are happy to provide relevant email threads as evidence.

It is well known that most DTZ's within the Service provide adequate welfare for their crews at long running incidents, where crews are on fire ground for extended periods of time. These examples can be heard on a daily basis when our District radio network is being operated by the OCC in Sydney.

North Shore Brigade is on the far northern border of Mid Coast District and Region East. Whenever our crews cross this line into Lower North Coast District, appropriate meals that well exceed our expectations are always generously provided within hours of arrival. A LNC volunteer recently joked with one of our crew members that they were 'sick of getting Subway for lunch', but they always, without fail, received a meal within 3-4 hours of arriving at an incident. There couldn't be a starker contrast between these two Districts which share a common border.

Crews within Mid Coast have been advised by the District Management that ALL RFS vehicles STATEWIDE must carry provisions to be self sufficient for a period of 24 hours (citing a catering standards SOP which I believe [REDACTED] has previously noted must not be used by Districts to avoid their obligations). We don't disagree with carrying food, but believe this should be for emergencies only when it is impossible to provide a meal (and supplied by the RFS), such as how FRNSW operate.

A District Officer replied to North Shore Brigade in writing following a request for ration packs (to allow us to stock for this 24 hour period), advising "There is currently no ration packs stored within the District. These would generally only come into the store during major protracted firefighting campaign's and then distributed during those events. They are not an item that is stored and provided by the District Office in an ongoing basis".

When directly asked in writing where our 24 hour supply of food is supposed to come from, the email replies from the District Office ceased, at which time a meeting was organised between the Brigade Executive and Acting District Manager.

At this meeting (early in 2019), the Brigade was told by the ADM (we are not quoting as the meeting was not minuted) that all Brigades are required to fundraise to stock our trucks with the required 24 hour supply of food as ration packs are too expensive for the district to buy.

We were also advised at this meeting that meal options such as pizzas and Subway were not permitted by the RFS to be provided to members as they did not meet RFS 'health and nutrition standards' (even though other agencies - FRNSW, FCNSW, NPWS - regularly provide these meals to RFS volunteers when working on incidents under the control of their agencies). A question posed was "Are you telling me that it is healthier for a fire fighter on a twelve hour shift to eat nothing rather than a subway salad sandwich". There was never an answer provided to this question.

Throughout all of the discussions by email and in person, several examples were provided of large, long running fires with several crews attending, which were burning in close proximity to major towns, where no effort was made by Mid Coast District to provide meals to crews, even when requested, and even in some cases when other agencies were sitting metres away eating food provided to them by their superiors.

Another recent specific example of this which was widely talked about was on Monday 19th August at the Lindfield Park Road Fire. After a day on the ground, FRNSW were actually expecting RFS to provide meals to their crews but they were never organised. The Fire and Rescue Duty Commander arrived at approximately 2pm with McDonalds meals for all FRNSW appliances. Around this same time, over the fire-ground frequency, the RFS incident controller was heard telling RFS appliances that they could leave the fire ground for a short period of time to 'get something to eat' at their own personal expense as there was no food going to be provided - an action which astonished all crews on scene.

While the Lindfield Park Road Fire was under the control of FRNSW, crews received a meal every time FRNSW did. As soon as RFS became the controlling agency, all meals stopped, and FRNSW began supplying their own to their fire fighters, leaving the RFS volunteers with nothing as Mid Coast refused to supply anything to us.

It has also been brought to our attention in the past two weeks (before the S44) that a member of a Hastings LGA Brigade attended a Local Council meeting to raise the issue of Mid Coast RFS refusing to feed members (as the District constantly use the excuse of it being a 'funding issue' due to local council budget contributions). We are yet to meet with this member to get more information, but thought it better to keep the matter in-house to try and get it resolved, hence this email.

Past events behind us, fast forward to the past week since Mid Coast was declared Section 44.

Members of our brigade have been consistently out for approximately 10 days straight working on various shifts.

Many brigades are still missing meals to this day even this far into the S44 through an apparent lack of organisation and planning.

Of the fire grounds which have been provided meals, every meal of every day is sandwiches (believed to be made by the Tuncurry Catering Brigade).

The work of the catering brigade is greatly appreciated by the volunteers here, but for the IMT to rely on a pack of sandwiches for dinner to keep a firefighter fed and healthy after a twelve hour shift is not reasonable. The nutritional content of an egg and lettuce sandwich does not suffice for an RFS volunteer who has been working hard all day.

The biggest issue with the sandwiches is that they are being delivered to fire grounds unrefrigerated, and being given to crews.

Our brigade used a TIC to measure the temperature of an esky used to transport our 'dinner' sandwiches last week and they were 17 degrees. Considering the various meats and egg on these sandwiches it is a disgrace that this is what volunteers are made to eat. Many have chosen to go hungry over fears of food poisoning.

The crew of North Shore 7 were tasked with night shift at the 'Bills Road' (Ballengarra) fire on Friday 1/11/19. Our truck left the station at approx. 5pm to be on scene when required. Late in the evening, they were delivered a cardboard box containing a plastic bag for each crew member. Inside each plastic bag was two sandwiches (warm on arrival), an apple and a small juice. This was the dinner provided to our crew that night and the ONLY meal provided during their 15 hour shift. The disgruntled crew returned to the station just after 8am on Saturday morning, having eaten practically nothing since lunch the day prior due to the inedible 'dinner' provided, and there being no plan for their breakfast.

On Friday 1/11 a day shift crew from North Shore left the fire ground at approx. 8pm, 14 hours after departing the station that morning. Whilst leaving the fire ground they were offered 'dinner' which had been delivered to the group officer - unrefrigerated sandwiches. The crew declined, as did most others according to the group officer. To rub salt into the wound, on the same fire ground in a nearby paddock FRNSW had their Rehabilitation Van set up and providing meals to all crews (reportedly butter chicken from a local restaurant).

The thing that is most upsetting and frustrating for volunteers here this past week, is that while we have been on the ground facing the prospect of either no food being delivered, or warm stale sandwiches with questionable food hygiene, the IMT have, as usual here, been living well. On 1/11/19 while our crew had 2 warm sandwiches and an apple for 15 hours of work, it is reported that the IMT at the Wauchope Fire Control Centre had a comfortable serving of nachos. It has also been suggested that in the last week dinner for the IMT has consisted of roast meals and lasagne (hearsay, but we doubt these claims are false). If the IMT isn't prepared to eat the same meals being sent to the volunteers that they are in control of, something is not right.

Commissioner, we ask for your help. We have exhausted all avenues within our District to raise this issue. Many members have tried over many years without success. We know of volunteers (from various different brigades) who are considering leaving the service

altogether as they feel so disrespected and worthless in the way they are treated in this area of the most basic of human needs.

We don't believe it is an unreasonable request for a volunteer fire fighter, who has left their job and their family, to receive a nutritious and adequate meal when they get hungry after working in dangerous and fatiguing situations in the protection of their local community.

In summary, the issues are:

1. What is the RFS policy and procedure for supplying food to volunteers on a fire ground - for both long running campaigns, and shorter incidents which still extend beyond several hours and normal meal times? Does the RFS recognise an obligation to provide meals to volunteers in these circumstances?
2. Are volunteer Rural Fire Brigades expected to fundraise to supply trucks with a 24 hour supply of food?
3. Is this 24 hour supply of food stored on trucks supposed to replace an obligation of a DTZ to provide meals?
4. Do you agree that unrefrigerated sandwiches are not an appropriate 'dinner' (and only meal) for a crew on a 15 hour shift?

We would welcome a meeting with you to discuss the matter, should your schedule allow.

It would be appreciated if you could please acknowledge receipt of this email at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

North Shore Rural Fire Brigade