

**Submission Number: NND.001.01388**

**Submission Of: Kelly Small**

### 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? Soon after the bushfires where I live on Central Coast were controlled, my family in Batlow, NSW was evacuated and stayed with me. Their town suffered significant impact

Where do you live? Central Coast (C) (NSW)

### Your Submission

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

I was connected with my community through social media - Facebook. We had a Central Coast Community alert group. I also followed NSW RFS on Facebook and all my local RFS Stations pages. Central Coast RFS posted detailed updates on the fire conditions as did Hawkesbury, NSW RFS posted regular updates on alerts and escalations.

I also had the firesnearme app on my phone. I set up a 20km boundary so was able to receive all alerts on time when fires broke out near my home region.

These aspects got me through. Most important for me was being able to be connected to people in my community even on the worst days - share information, check on people and let others know that people were safe. This helped keep me calm.

Being able to share information to inform and help others was also good. People then could contact and pass on information to people in their network via phone if they knew people didn't have access to social media updates. A wildlife rescue just outside of Batlow coordinated an emergency evacuation response of all their wildlife through Facebook. They put out a call for help out through Facebook and because people could easily share it with their network enough people responded and drive there to help them evacuate.

The local RFS fighting the Mt Gospers fire and the other bushfires in the region that eventually merged into one, were just great. So resilient and keeping our communities in the loop on their firefighting efforts daily. We felt involved and a part of the response. They even responded to our comments on social media when they had a free moment.

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

The Dunn's Road fire which hit My Mum's hometown of Batlow, much of the Snowy Valleys and Snowy Monaro regions was a very difficult experience. The bushfire moved so quickly that a significant area was under immediate threat within a very short period of time. It literally equalled the size of the Mt Gospers mega fire within a matter of days. Whereas Mt Gospers had taken weeks to get to the huge size it was, Dunn's Road fire escalated within days between Christmas and New years 2019-2020. It ignited just around Christmas and Mum's town was gone 1 week later. Dunn's Road fire started a long way from Batlow, ignited by lightening and we thought it would be extinguished before it reached Batlow. But one night the bushfire moved a significant distance due to a prolonged strong wind blowing it in a South Easterly direction. It literally looked like someone has laid a trail of accelerant in that direction that went for tens of kilometers. And then the wind changed again the following day & blew in a Northeasterly direction, so that there was literally a wall of fire that went for kilometres approaching the whole region. (I have map images of this trajectory). I recall government alerts on Facebook & various media and internet channels for landowners to start preparing their land and moving stock out the area, if possible. There was a 48 hour window. We knew a natural disaster was approaching rapidly. I was involved with alerting the local community. A Dunn's Road Fire Emergency Facebook page was set up for local community to communicate with each other. It was an invaluable community resource. People lost phone contact when phone towers were impacted, but could contact us on Facebook, as they still had internet. Some needed emergency response as their land was burning. So they could put a call for help on the Facebook page and people could call on their behalf. During this time few people slept through the night, there was alot of activity and people sharing information & alerts throughout the week providing updates, coordinating responses, organising modes of transport. Some farmers just cut their fences. There was no way they could get all their stock out in that amount of time. People were scrambling to get trailers & floats to evacuate their horses. People from areas as far away as Victoria were helping with response efforts as communities joined together, to help in whatever way they could. I just wish the farmers could have had more help with their stock. Those poor animals were left to burn. Farmers did everything they could but it would never have been enough in the time they had available. I wish large B doubles or trailers could have been coordinated from other regions across that state to save their stock. Fire fighters saw the animals burn alive in paddocks...they couldn't do anything...such a valuable resource for these farmers, but also they have a personal attachment to their stock- they have suffered a great deal.

Transport logistics for rural areas was a significant issue I witnessed during this time and it was amazing to see the community rally to overcome these as best they could.

Loss of telecommunications was also a high risk factor in these bushfires (electricity outages as well)- once people lose these they have no means of communication to get help. What I experienced was that NBN - internet access saved alot of situations from being much worse and possibly even saved lives as we could coordinate responses on behalf of people.

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

I don't know if the community response to the Dunn's Road fire and Central Coast bushfires were unique or it also was similar in Victoria

communities and South Coast and so on. But I do know people rallied together and communicated through Facebook- it was needed and it helped. I don't know if NSW RFS or a government department could set up something similar for people to join but also have professional, trained people to be a part of and reasons to requests for information and assistance for each community, if they come under threat of an encroaching bushfire. I don't know who would be responsible for setting these up - likely local or State Government - perhaps the new Resilience Department for NSW. Areas that are impacted need a communications response unit, dedicated to their community. But once a fire is a risk to a region then that community needs this set up for the time they continue to be under threat of the bushfire. It needs to be 24 hours internet and phone access to this response unit, to get up to date information. They need a social page where people can chat, ask a question online and respond and also get a professional, informed response to questions asked. Community participation and interaction with each other is important as it helps people remain calm. It may just be a matter of setting up a Facebook Group for that response unit, but having it administrated by those with the correct training for the bushfire response. They would need to find the local community group pages in that region and just let them know they are available online and invite them to join the group. Dunn's Road Fire Emergency Facebook Group had hundreds of new members join during the Dunns Road fire emergency. The group is now archived (no longer active, but all posts can still be viewed).

Because I had already been through months of bushfire threats on the Central Coast I was able to provide alot of information (even how to understand the firesnearme app and use it and know what the alerts mean). The residents in the Snowy Valleys region had had no concerns for bushfires before Christmas, then out of nowhere their region was about to burn down. They had to know how to get information and where to get it and they didn't have much time available at all- it was a matter of days and hours. I had basically been trained by my local RFS following them during the Central Coast bushfires. I had the resources and information available from NSW RFS. So I passed alot of this information to the community around Batlow, Tumbarumba and surrounds in a very short space of time. I was available around the clock. I didn't sleep for days, over concern for the community, making sure I was available to provide help in any way I could.

We need to consider the value of loss for our rural communities. For farmers with livestock- not only the physical losses of their animals but the emotional and mental impacts that has on them. Could transport companies be on call for these types of disasters in rural regions to coordinate additional transport support for farmers to relocate stock at short notice. Would the cost of this logistical service provision to aide farmers and minimise potential loss suffered be worth investing in to mitigate future losses in these regions. There would have been time to get stock onto trucks and out of the region if there had been a coordinated response and resources available.

Farmers have already endured prolonged drought and now bushfires. I visited Batlow at Christmas just before the Dunn's Road fire started. My heart broke when I arrived and saw how dry the region was. I am not sure if locals were aware of how drastically the landscape had changed as they see it every day. My last visit had been 6 months prior. I could not get over the dryness, the hills were brown. It really was extreme. The grass everywhere looked like straw. My Mum's garden has withered. I didn't have the heart to tell her I could see it had been suffering despite all her efforts to save it. I think this dryness of the land, played a role in how quickly the Dunn's Road fire traveled a huge distance in such a short amount of time, as opposed to other bushfires that had been burning throughout NSW for weeks, but were able to be contained to some degree.

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

Christmas and New Year was a very difficult as Batlow was put on a mandatory evacuation notice. Basically, everyone suspected the worst- that the town was going to burn through. Because of it's location, only one main road in and out of town, it was in no way safe for people to stay as the fire encroached. In spite of this the local RFS stayed. I cannot commend them enough for their bravery. They put their lives on the line for the town. They knew once those roads closed by the fire there was no way out. And the fire actually surrounded the whole town in a circle. It was extremely tough the night the town burnt. We had no communication with anyone in there and we all were just thinking the worst. I will never forget it. But these heroes saved the township. Shops still stand because of their incredible efforts. I would like to acknowledge their selfless bravery and service.

I am continuing on with my efforts to help with the bushfire response and have created a business 'Australian Bushfire Help', to provide ongoing information to people impacted by the bushfires and to coordinate volunteer help. There are many people helping in the response efforts and their efforts are ongoing. So I help to point people in the right direction to get the help they need or to contribute where it is needed. The community response has been simply outstanding. People have helped each other and been so supportive to offer help and assistance and volunteer time and donate. Many people from Sydney have donated time, goods and services to help regional communities.

Finally, my great concern is for the surviving native wildlife. My background is Environmental & Marine Science(BSc Hons 1). We did lose over 1 billion animals. One of my previous academic lecturers , Professor Chris Dickman, has reconfirmed this figure estimate. There may be naysayers, but there is no doubt that that is a conservatives figure. I believe the government response has been totally inadequate to this loss. Land is still incredibly devastated with no food and water provided anywhere for surviving wildlife for the months since the bushfires extinguished. Rescuers have been locked out of bushfire impacted regions for months. Rescues are even now still receiving survivors. A few fortunate ones stumble across a humans path and are brought into rescue. The condition these animals come in is horrendous. Starving and dehydrated, they have been left for dead. Now with severe infection set into wounds they endured from the fires. Many have to be euthanised which if found earlier, could have had their life spared. Those that recover will have hundreds of maggots removed from their wounds and weeks of antibiotics.

Many wildlife charitable organisations provided assistance but much of it had to be location specific as they simply don't; have the numbers of staff needed to cover the the vast regions impacted, literally millions of hectares of bushland that was burnt. One of my friends had to plead with the local council to permit aerial food drops into the region. He has been driving on roads where he is permitted access, for months putting food and water stations out for wildlife (as far from the roadside as possible- so animals don't wander onto roads and get killed). Not one government department has been in this region providing a coordinated response for wildlife rescue. It is devastating for those that care about Australian wildlife. There is nothing left on the land for kilometres. It is totally burnt through. Just burnt wood. What chance do our wildlife have? I have alot of photos, records, cases documented. I can provide material, if the wildlife rescue response is considered a matter that the Royal Commission would like to consider in it's review.

Australia has the highest extinction rate for mammals of anywhere in the world. What has just happened to our wildlife will lead to extinction future events. We will be made aware of these soon as the toll becomes more apparent. Finally I would like to point out, that if areas were deemed unsafe for rescues to go in to aid wildlife in need, how long is a reasonable time to prevent access after what has also become a National wildlife disaster? Because this lock out went on for months in some regions and well after fires were officially extinguished.

Also, I would like to add that I know of one exception made, because an International wildlife organisation was so concerned for Australian wildlife they sent a team over to help rescue efforts. As they were trained in fire impacted areas they were allowed into an area which had a

koala population. They were a small team and because of their limited resources could not save all the wildlife that survived in the area. I have some questions around this:

1. Why did it take an International organisation to find a possible solution for wildlife rescue to continue immediately after the bushfires?
2. Why was this exception made when local rescues were turned away and not offered any solution?
3. At a time when response time was critical, why couldn't a solution have been made at the time wildlife desperately needed human intervention?
4. Why couldn't a trained unit, who know how to navigate land impacted by bushfire take a wildlife rescue team into an area and guide them and ensure any risk is minimised?

This was allowed for an International group- so it was an option available. But no effort was made by government agencies responsible for a response, to coordinate any response like this. Instead gates to National Parks were locked and no access granted - no negotiation.

A koala was found at the base of a tree only a week ago. It's strength was too weak for it to climb the tree. How long it had been there no one knows. It was dehydrated and starving. It was a survivor of the bushfires. The wildlife rescue took it in and did all they could. It's lungs were terribly damaged and it passed away, bleeding from its nose and mouth. How the koala survived as long as it did, after the bushfires no one knows. I cannot bear to think how many of our wildlife are out there now suffering terribly, needing help and are not getting found.

Finally:

Hazard reduction has commenced. Unfortunately, burnt, injured koalas are coming into rescues from these hazard reduction burns. I don't know when Australia is going to improve the protections for koalas, particularly as their extinction is now predicted by 2050. But surely after the very well known devastation to their populations in the bushfires, Nationwide, they could be given a little more protection at this time. Shouldn't it be mandatory for Koala spotters to go in and relocate any koalas in any region with planned hazard reduction burns where surviving koala populations are located. Koala spotters are used in areas due to be logged, surely they should be used for areas due to be burnt as well.

One of the locals in my region, Mangrove Mountain, had his yard on fire for days. His property backed onto bushland. He stayed at home to do property protection. His wife and he would hear koalas scream as the fire hit the koalas in their tree homes at night. He will never forget that. ABC 730 covered this story in an episode at this time.

Koalas are slow and lumberous compared to the speed of a firefront. What chance did they have in their trees? Little to none. The images I have seen and the stories I have heard will haunt me and many Australians for the rest of their lives. Even now my heart breaks for what these defenceless animals have endured. We are forever changed.

I can provide images from both the Central Coast and Snowy Valleys regions leading up to, during and post bushfire impact if required.

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