



Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Submission Form

Please complete this form if you would like to provide input or comments about coordination, preparedness for, response to and recovery from the 2019-20 'Black Summer' bushfires.

Personal and Background Information

1. **Full Name** Allan Porter
2. **Email** [REDACTED]
3. **Mobile/Telephone** [REDACTED]
4. **What is your preferred method of contact if we want to follow up with you?**

Email

5. **The Commission would like to understand the views of community groups based on their respective experiences and background.**

- a. Please select Option 1 if you are providing input and comments primarily based on your personal situation.
- b. Please select Option 2 if you are providing input and comments primarily based on your professional knowledge, qualifications or experience, or on behalf of a group or organisation

Option 1: Based on your personal situation, please complete the following.

- a. What was your personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? Please choose all that apply.
 - I was not living in an area affected by bushfire
 - I lived in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and didn't suffer personal or financial loss
 - I lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, but didn't suffer personal or financial loss
 - I lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, and I suffered personal or financial loss
 - I was part of the emergency response as a fire fighter on the ground
 - I was part of the emergency response as an aerial fire fighter

- I was part of the emergency response as health professional
- I was part of the emergency response as an Australian Defence Force member
- I was part of the emergency response as a Commonwealth or State government employee
- I assisted the emergency response as a community support volunteer
- I assisted the emergency recovery (i.e. after the fire event) as a community support volunteer
- Other

b. Where do you live? Please provide your Local Government Area, town name and post code.

Local Government Area	Mid-Western Regional
Town name	Ilford
Post code	2850

Option 2: Based on your knowledge, qualifications or experience, or your role representing a group or organisation, what is your area of expertise? Please choose all that apply.

- Emergency/disaster response and/or management
 - Environment/land management
 - Land use, planning, building standards
 - Impacts of changes in climatic conditions
 - Wildlife conservation
 - Traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians
 - Community welfare
 - Other
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Input / Comments

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

The Palmer Oaky Fire of 17,000 hectares threatening towns and communities, getting into the ranges of Cherry Tree and Razorback. Cause:

A prolonged drought creating tinder dry fuel, an over-abundance of fuel arising from policies that have allowed fuel to accumulate by way of being too environmentally conscious, high temperatures and strong hot NW winds. Ignition caused by – the negligence of someone using tools producing sparks in such conditions and in the case of the nearby 500,000 hectare Gosper Mountain fire, a lightning strike.

The 500,000 hectare Gosper Mountain fire burning since October was a threat that both fires might join up.

Response to the Palmer Oaky fire was immediate from a brigade and community structure well prepared. Warnings issues by local fire control and community were frequent. All advisories passed through the community very well. Resourcing, co-ordination and deployment through a well-prepared local brigade and community structure was excellent.

Marvellous community spirit. Good ol' country. Glad to be part of it. Everybody toughing out the hot days – many over the 40 Celsius mark with unforgiving hot NW winds. No complaints. Confident. Just getting on and doing it with great support from all.

Preparation & Planning

All firefighting in highly prepared readiness. Local brigades, volunteer firefighters, residents and property owners on stand-by for signs of an outbreak. Immediate calls to arms when outbreak detected. Command structure of brigades excellent, highly competent individual senior ranks and crews all first class. Support crews in supply and catering all similarly prepared and first class. Community help made immediately available, local businesses immediate offer of supply of essential items, no charge. Fire HQ prepared with additional manpower and resources from adjoining areas.

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

Who's best to make the decision? – when the fire is raging and you've got a local combat plan worked with all the essential retreats in mind for safe action and you've got excellent leadership and fully competent crews on the job, it just doesn't make sense to be ordered to cease firefighting by someone at a fire HQ some 60k away. Opportunities were lost when this happened and we saw a fire rage on to become a bigger problem when it need not have happened.

This is an issue that begs the true question – who's best equipped to make the decision for action? The leader in the field or the one in HQ? I would go with the leader in the field. He is a local. Knows every part of his patch and the winds and eddies that can fan a blaze and talks the language of tracks, fields, fences and gates and all the dip-holes in the fields to avoid. He's in the best position to make the call taking everything into account.

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

Problem is when times are good, meaning there's no fires around, communities that are populated by people who've sought a 'tree change', become over confident that nothing will happen. But what might happen will happen. There's the problem! No one so far seems to be able to come to terms with the tough decisions that need to be made to order people to be sensible.

But who has the regulatory clout to ensure tough future fire precautionary regulations are maintained? The local bushfire brigades make clear recommendations, repeated regularly which is all the clout they have after development has occurred.

This is the area where I think a regulatory body has to have the clout to ensure fire safety from the worst case scenario that might occur, is maintained at all times and a state map developed and maintained showing the level of fire hazard accordingly. And that this becomes a public document. And there are penalties for developers and owners for not complying.

Working properties with stock - the drought reduced fuel on the ground substantially and the stock chewed the few stalks that were left. But it was the spot fires caused by embers in the strong winds from the forest fires that were the real danger in areas where there was fuel.

Years ago after severe fires in the metro area, what became known as the 10/50 regulations were introduced. But they were introduced a long time after review processes had been completed and community feeling was back with the trees, not with fire. And the regs got watered down. We really need strong regs and this time I hope someone has got the bottle to see that's achieved.

I've got to say when you're out in the fields, you rehearse in your mind what might happen and you get mentally prepared. But it was the experience of the vast volume of fuel that shocked me and others. Too many wrong decisions had allowed the increase in the build-up of fuel.

Years ago the clearing of rural land on slopes even with a minor gradient was prevented in the interests of preventing erosion. A good policy perhaps even though it took a long time for property owners to accept it as it reduced their productive area but it was never thought through sufficiently to consider the downside – the build-up of fuel above and on the ground.

You can't fight fires with idealism. It's realism that prevents them and eventually stops them!

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

The drought was as severe as the '83 drought. Some of the ol' timers said it was as bad as the '68 drought. I remember the '83 drought.

The voluntary spirit is supreme – there is nothing like a full-on emergency that bonds country people together. Country folk are used to hardships, the resilience, self-reliance and confidence that results bonds them together. The voluntary spirit is at a premium. Commitment and dedication to succeed never wavers and it's all done with a smile. Your dedication to succeed is enshrined in the community support for those at the sharp end of the firefighting job. To suggest changing the current structure of volunteerism is anathema to all, the volunteers, the brigades, the community, including others who come from further afield to enjoy the

camaraderie of helping in the all-out effort to achieve a good result. We should proudly support the existing structure and praise its structure to all communities in providing practical and social benefits.

Privately owned firefighting vehicles

Property owners in the business of primary production have their own vehicles ready to attack a fire when it occurs on their own place or others. Vehicles are commonly a ute with a large tray-body capable of carrying a tank with 600 to 1000 litres of water, firefighter pump and one or two hoses, some with auto electronic recoil. They are fast and mobile and are an integral part of the overall firefighting operated by people who know the area and every part of it. Without them fires would be more severe. But the private vehicle owners need to be better recognised for the valuable role they play as part of the firefighting team and the recognition should provide some benefits. In many situations there can be an equal number of privately owned vehicles in a fire area to the RFS trucks. In community efforts to suppress fire, the owners of the vehicles are all part of the combined fleet of fire suppression vehicles. Their role should be acknowledged and rewarded.

An observation of the mainstream media. Coverage of the fires was an absolute shocker!! All sensational, emotional and inspiring people to think that all was lost. I was able to avoid the main media. I was too busy. But the sensationalisation of stories can have the effect in some communities of damaging the spirit to want to get together, fight the fires, to save themselves and others.

10. Do you intend to provide supporting material?

Yes

No

If you are providing any supporting material, please include it with your Submission if possible. If you need to send it separately (e.g. if you make a Submission over the phone), please ensure supporting material can be clearly identified as relating to your Submission by including your name or other identifier so that it can be considered with your Submission.

11. Do you agree to your submission being published? (Mandatory)

Yes, I agree to my submission being published in my name

Yes I agree to my submission being published anonymously

No I don't agree to my submission being published

Once you have completed this form, email it to rcnda.submissions@royalcommission.gov.au or print the form and post it to the Royal Commission at:

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