



## 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 **Catherine Ludo McFerran AM**
2. Email **[REDACTED]**
3. Mobile/Telephone **[REDACTED]**
4. What is your preferred method of contact if we want to follow up with you?

Mobile or 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	Choose an item.
Town name	Bermagui
Post code	2546

**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
-

## Input / Comments

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

I struggle to find any positive answers to this question.

I live on a small rural property south of Bermagui and watched with growing alarm last year as the country dried and the water holes dried up. It was clear that as rain was not forecast the fire season would be very bad. Yet there seemed to be no planning at the national, state or local government level for this coming crisis.

I had raised concerns with the local Council about the need for evacuation plans for coastal towns like Bermagui after the Tathra fires. I was particularly concerned about the numbers of older, infirm and immobile residents in these towns who might need evacuating, and about the one lane bridges to the north and south of Bermagui which I thought could present a traffic hazard and needed controlling in an emergency. To the best of my knowledge no forward planning was undertaken at a local level. Consequently, when Bermagui came under fire threat in late December, in what was a worse -case scenario, it was a change of wind that saved the town and rather than any organised response.

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

I was also a volunteer member of the local fire brigade.

I was deployed as part of the local brigade to the Curowan fires in the first week of December. I quickly felt that the response was spread too thin and that operationally the system was not coping. I saw nothing but dedicated work undertaken by other volunteers to restrict the fires but we were clearly overwhelmed. Specifically, I was concerned that we were deployed into the hills to the west of the highway on poor tracks that seemed to have no alternative exit; that there was no air support (as this was now concentrated in the the coastal towns under threat) and that we were pulled out after midnight with no teams following up. As we withdrew down

---

the track the fire had extended along the southern side and looked clear to jump the track overnight.

I had left home at 7.00 am that morning. We drove in convoy to Lake Burrill to the RFS operational centre arriving about 1.00 am. Here we were told there were no motel rooms available and to wait in our trucks. Other fireys were unhappy about this as we waited until 3.00am. I then suggested that we try to get some rest at the Ulladulla evacuation centre. This was agreed but on route motel rooms were found. We were back on duty at 10.00 am next morning. The 12- hour roster was apparently a minimum not a maximum reality. Nor does the roster include travel time. There was a possibility that after a third day of long hours on the front we would be expected to do the long drive home. I observed people becoming tired and poor decisions being made as a result, I believe, of exhaustion.

Two other points from this deployment: other fireys much more experienced than myself complained about the poor food- no hot meals just sandwiches for three days. If armies do march on their stomachs then you expect a lot of fireys. I also found the masks issued by the RFS not fit for purpose- mine quickly lost its shape and rigidity and became ineffective. I coughed for weeks after.

On Tuesday 31 December fire tore through the villages of Cobargo and Quamma to the west of Bermagui. Bermagui found itself surrounded by fire, with 4000 tourists and residents at the Oval by the beach. By now fireys had been the fire frontline for many months. On my return from the Curowan fire I was convinced that the crisis was beyond the capacity of the RFS to manage and the Defence Forces should be mobilised. I rang a number of politicians to express this opinion. I was disgusted that the common response was the defence personnel were not trained to fight fires but could provide backup. I have been assured by others that there are defence personnel that are trained, and if not, then I suggested an intensive course as quickly as possible. Failure to mobilise meant that on 31 December at the start of the day we had two trucks to defend Bermagui- a truck from Tathra did arrive and one from a town north of us (though these fireys were very worried about the threat to their own town). We simply did not have the resources to defend the town and the large numbers of evacuees. Only a wind change saved us.

The town then lost power, telecommunications, and was cut off meaning we had no fuel or food. Tourists were evacuated and I wonder if any will return after a hellish journey south and then up to Canberra to try and escape our part of the coast. From memory we spent the next days with local resources only working on containment lines and fires. On the following Saturday Bermagui again faced threatening winds and we were told to expect conditions even worse than the previous Tuesday. We had door knocked to ask locals to leave town and evacuate to the showground in Bega if necessary. I found the following reasons why people chose to stay and defend: they knew the RFS only had the resources to defend key town assets not homes and groups coalesced around residents with fire- fighting knowledge/experience and/or trades people with the skills, tools and materials to defend. There were also older and sick people who said they chose to die in their beds rather than at the Bega showground.

It was hard to understand how in 2020 a town like Bermagui could be so cut off with no power, fuel, telecommunications or food. Apparently resources such as generators were not supplied

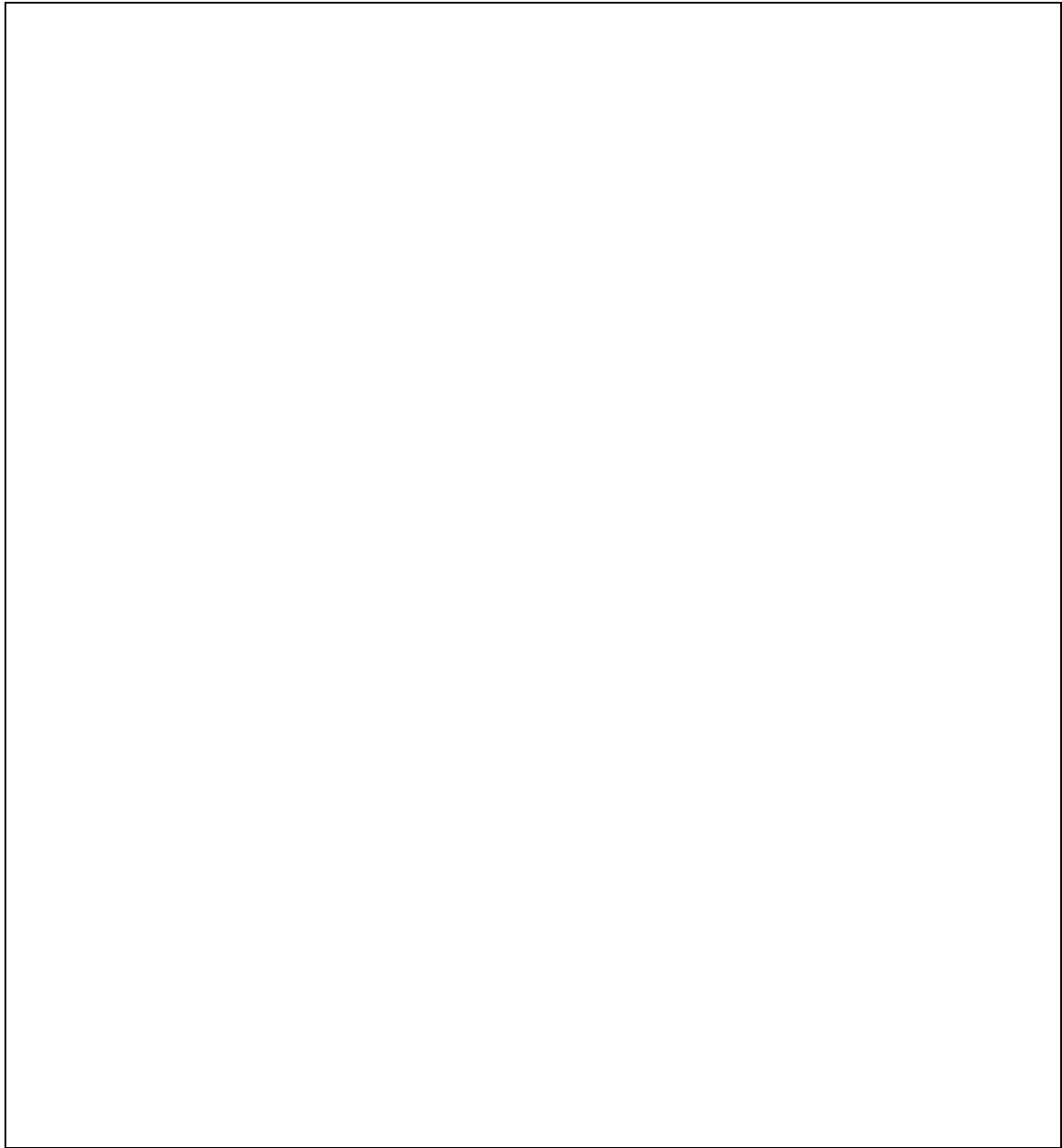
to Bermagui because it was officially 'empty' except for emergency personnel. This was clearly a mistake and future planning must take into account a range of responses by residents to the evacuation strategy.

On the morning of Saturday 4 January we found ourselves alone again with two fire trucks. We were informed that the police would be evacuating. Later that morning five firetrucks did arrive to support the town, but again many were from towns also under threat. Too few, spread too thin. Volunteers of the local brigade were tasked with defending assets- I was assigned to the primary school and the adjoining petrol station with another (less experienced) volunteer. We had four hoses attached to hydrants and three nozzles- and my car. Again only a wind change saved us.

During this period I returned when I could to my own home half an hour away in the bush. I had been told by an RFS professional that the fire would burn to the sea because the RFS did not have the resources to stop it. Any rural property in its path could not be defended. The sense of dread I felt through this period stays with me because ongoing climate change means we are now getting only a respite before it all happens again.

Please note that I have now resigned from the RFS.

---



**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?**

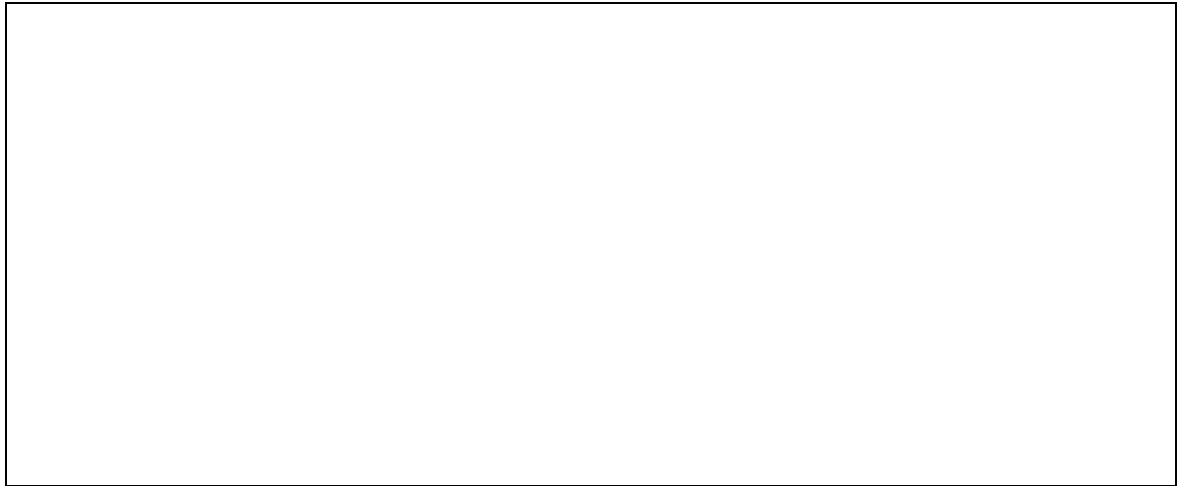
From my observations I believe that Australia can no longer rely on a volunteer agency to be the front line against catastrophic fires. I believe this should be the job of the defence forces, with the support of the local emergency agencies- but that the locals should be compensated for their work. There will always be a role for a local fire service for the numerous small fires and motor vehicle accidents we attend. We need locals to train local residents in being fire prepared and defending. In catastrophic events we need locals who know the country and can co-ordinate with the defence forces. This is a year round job. One consequence of not building this capacity is that we waste local skills and talent. I saw our local Deputy Captain grow into a leadership role over the last six months. She performed brilliantly under tough conditions. When not taking on this demanding and critical role she works behind the counter at the local supermarket. What a waste.

I want to say one last thing- about the ABC local radio. This is arguably the most important source of local information. In the past the ABC has been able to provide accurate and very localised information, but I thought that the coverage this season suffered from the cuts that have been made- information covered huge areas from Gippsland right up to Sydney- it was just too big an area and local detail was lost. THE ABC must be properly funded to provide this critical information (especially when the mobiles and the internet don't work).

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







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.

**10. 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](mailto:rcnda.submissions@royalcommission.gov.au) or print the form and post it to the Royal Commission at:

National Natural Disaster Royal Commission

Locked Bag 2000

Manuka ACT 2603

---