



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

By phone  
Emails when in town

**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 | Richmond Valley |
| Town name             | Rappville       |
| Post code             | 2469            |

**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?

Education about fire

Community liasion worked well, this is my role as a volunteer, in facilitating community support and streamlining services as they came in, so community members can access services.

Networking

Linking people to charities and donations

Matching needs of community members to donations

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

When the disaster recovery team came in, they were here for three weeks.

While the service they provide is very good, the way they did it could be better and three weeks wasn't enough.

With drought and fire, across a massive area, there are lot of needs, some people lost vehicles and could not travel. There were a lot of blocks to accessing services for those three weeks. A good strategy would have been outreach, some people could not get to the areas where the recovery staff were, because there was no outreach, they couldn't connect to the recovery.

There were no telecommunications for nearly four months, it was a struggle to stay connected.

Internet has huge laspses in it, phones drop out, internet is intermittent. It does usually work in the village, in the outlying areas internet services are not working well.

The assessors should have assessed each household. They were set up in the school and people came to them. If people didn't come in they were not seen or helped.

If someone was on the grid, they had services within days. If they were off the grid, in a disaster those people are so much worse off. 6 months later and some people are still without water and power. I have spoken to council, MPs, Disaster Recovery staff, there should be a one-stop disaster shop, and that should be the place where you go if you need a pump, solar battery, generator etc. at low rate loans to get people back on their feet sooner.

Regarding water and power supplies, people were told to order water tanks, which they did, then 4 to 6 weeks later when the tank arrived, they tried to follow up on the offer of filling the tank with water and they were then told, 'no that offer has closed'. So people paid for the tank and were then told there was no water. When that happened, I networked to get the tanks filled for those families.

Three weeks is not enough with a compound disater, which is what we faced; drought then fire. This has compounded peoples' trauma, weeks later when they could not get the help they had been promised.

With a village like ours, Rappville, behind the village there are farmers everywhere - the focus is on the village and the wellbeing of the residents there - donations come in to there. This needs

extension to the farmers, they weren't reached. Council focusses on the village. The whole community needs to feel safe and cared about.

I live 5 kms from the vilage, I am between the village and the farmers. I see it both ways. This has built up resentment, people from the outlying areas feel they aren't being listened to or helped in the same way.

Grant application forms need to be simplified. One I saw required that you spend \$15,000 first before you can access \$15,000 in grant money. Other grants you need your accountant and five years of records before you can fill it out. It's the same for diaster payments, every single resident has been impacted in some way, but without damage inside your house, you could not access payments. Elderly people getting dates wrong on the form are missing out on payments, so we had to go in and amend it. For example, if they got the date 8/10/2019 wrong, they chop them off. I had to escalate to the MP to get it fixed. It should have been easier, the applicant should have been able to put in the postcode 2469 and then it's done, it wasn't easy. They also asked for photo proof, which is overwhelming to someone already suffering trauma. This has left people stranded and unable to get access to payments. It's very stressful without telecommunications working, how are you supposed to provide the evidence needed? Elderly people in particular have really suffered.

Two weeks ago an elderly lady asked me for the contact details for the recovery agency, this was 5 months after fire. An assessor for each house would have saved a lot of trauma and expense for the government. It would have also stopped fraud, I know of one case where someone stated they were a resident in a house that burnt down when they weren't, the grant can be up to \$20,000 from Red Cross.

The council were not thorough, they have not looked at where the burn was, they don't know which areas have burnt. They haven't checked on residents with a 4 wheel drive, they have looked out of a helicopter. There have been complaints that no-one has come to see them. Council makes an assumption that they are okay and don't investigate to check what I have said. Rappville also lost its hall, so there is no central place for donations, no central place for water.

Some community members have to drive up to 45 minutes to access drinking water.

Some evacuees had to drive 45 minutes to access the evacuation point.

The school was open by default, it wasn't a designated evacuation point.

There is a need to spend some money for a proper evacuation point, so they don't put traumatised people behind the wheel for 45 minutes on a highway to get to evacuation point.

#### **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?**

A community faciliator in each town to help with information sharing and community connections for 140 people. In larger towns there would need to be more staff to co ordinate. The liaison person needs to have knowledge of the area and the resources in it. They also need to know what the donations are and how to get them to the affected people.

There needs to be a centre for people to have a shower and have a hot meal. There were meals available for those first three weeks during the day only, at the school. It was closed at night.

There needs to be more than that, there needs to be a place where meals can be prepared and cooked.

The support services around mental health are for about two hours in town (Rappville). While I've been facilitating community networks, I've supported four people who have had suicidal thoughts, there have not been any suicides. I encourage them to call in and I ask questions. They are more likely to share with a friend, they can be afraid to tell a stranger. When they reach out, they need acceptance. The community liaison people need to have Mental Health training. Community members need to know the pathways, the services, they need to know what they are in for. For example, I had a farmer I spoke to for three days. For three days in a row he was in tears and then on the fourth day he was happy, he said he was, "great". I kept him with me for a few hours and asked him and asked him until he opened up about having a gun. I asked him about suicide and because of my training I know how to ask those questions and get him support.

The grant approval process needs shorter timeframes, being told four to six weeks later, "no sorry" can break people. The grants need less criteria, these can take weeks. They need better, faster communication back from the agency. They need to understand people are rebuilding their farms, fixing fences to keep their cattle off the road.

There are grants for primary producers who have stock. One lady I spoke to had horses that were burnt, her finances were in tatters. She applied for a grant and was told that she couldn't be supplied with feed because the criteria were not met. She was not a primary producer. All animals need to be fed and watered, there should be access for all.

Rubicon were out here within 48 hours of the fire. They provide a really good service but because of the red tape they couldn't clean up the asbestos, they couldn't cut down trees that council hadn't inspected. As a result, we missed out on a valuable resource. They spent their time doing paperwork and talking to people, they couldn't do the jobs that people wanted them to do, they had to walk away without being able to help. There was also a cost to the community too, as we had to pay for their food and provide accommodation.

A similar thing happened with the Good Samaritans. They faced a lot of red tape and couldn't remove asbestos. So they had to wait. One person who was hospitalised came back to their property and all those services had gone. The timeframes need extending, 12 months as a minimum to access services. Every property needs a thorough inspection. After the inspection, the information needs to be relayed.

I was working 20 hour days for four months with only a short break during those four months.

I am now working 30-40 hours a week. I am only able to do that because there is no work at the school.

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

My comments relate to the fire that came through Rappville on 8/10/2019.

We were evacuated and spent nine days in displacement.

We had no power, no water. At home, we lost all our food supplies. There were ash and embers all over our house, we lost our fridges and freezers. The garden and yard were all burnt, right up to the house. Things melted inside the house but the house itself did not burn.

There are two fire fighters in our family, one was on the fire ground the whole time. One was in support until the fire came in. My 17 year-old son fought the fire.

I work at [REDACTED] in Rappsville. I worked up until Christmas, I haven't worked since the fire. Because of the poor internet, I have missed emails about personal development that I need to catch up at the [REDACTED]. My husband has lost all his holidays he's also taken long service leave to repair fencing and save the animals from the influx of snakes on the property.

When we came back two days after the fire, the disaster recovery team asked me to take on this community liaison role as a volunteer. I was the [REDACTED] facilitator and had experience building friendship networks because people can be isolated at times. I assisted with people accessing the services that are available; donations, meals, charities, providing information to people and saving them time. Also elderly residents who don't have the internet or a computer. They might have a mobile, so I send out texts and make calls. I email some people. This keeps them informed, connected. I also research, I do a lot of reading and share this information.

I have educated the community about fire and alleviated anxiety. Some people have been really angry, they feel threatened and can get abusive. They do come back and apologise.

I have also held a morning tea for a service club who wanted to fundraise. I brought in farmers and residents and they could explain in their own words what was needed. For the service club, it was beneficial for them to hear from the people who were directly affected.

I have networked across a large area, the number of people I was connecting to doubled in the first couple of weeks.

The Royal Commission needs to know that the emergency alert from RFS wasn't possible because the alert was by internet. No siren sounded for people to move and get to a safe spot.

Internet was burnt early on in the fire, we didn't receive an alert until we were in town.

People further out didn't get an alert at all, we need to get more than an internet alert. They need to find out how they did that 30 years ago. There was no back stop to the internet, it's not sufficient to say that we are in a digital age, there needs to be another way to alert people.

I also have victim impact statements from farmers who want to share their story with the royal commission. [Email address and postal address provided for this purpose].

**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](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

