



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** **Carolyn Anne Waterson (on behalf of Gold Coast Retirees Inc.)**
2. **Email** [REDACTED]
3. **Mobile/Telephone** [REDACTED] Home: [REDACTED]
4. **What is your preferred method of contact if we want to follow up with you?**

Either Email or Mobile Phone

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
Post code

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 very quick response of firefighters both professional and volunteer.
- . The Police and other emergency personnel.
- . The "back up" support groups such as the C.W.A., Lions, Rotary and Salvation army.
- . The quick identification and provision of evacuation centres to provide refuge for evacuees.
- . The vital information and warnings given by the A.B.C. particularly the radio stations was up-to-date and timely.

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

- (1) Not enough personnel and equipment to cope with the extent of the catastrophic fires. In November there were days when every State and Territory in Australia was on fire. Many volunteer firefighters were away from their families and homes for 5 months and more.
- (2) Lack of co-ordination amongst the 3 levels of Government.
- (3) There was a perceived lack of understanding and empathy particularly by the Prime Minister and the Federal level of Government.
- (4) The dispersal of public donations to those affected badly by the fires has been very tardy. The money was not given to have it bound up by red tape and bureaucracy. Many people drastically affected by the bushfires have still not received an amount of money that can let them start re-building their lives which only worsens the effect, emotionally and physically of the bushfire damage they have already suffered.
- (5) Planning to cope with the fires appeared to be very adhoc. At the local level there was good co-ordination by firefighters, emergency personnel, and back-up support, however at the Federal level it seemed at first to be disinterest then just planning on the run.
- (6) The amount of fuel for the fires that had accumulated on the ground allowed the fires to become hotter and greater than if the fuel had been disposed of earlier. There was a lack of man-power to be able to perform hazard reduction burns in the limited time available. Lack of funding, insufficient attention by the state authorities and excessive interference by environmental activists, many of whom don't even live in bushfire prone areas, all contributed to the excessive fuel on the ground.
- (7) The lack of water available to fight the fires hampered the effectiveness of firefighters efforts.

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?

We believe this National catastrophe requires a national approach. We propose that an autonomous authority, a team of the most capable and knowledgeable minds be formed.

These people should have a great understanding of Australia and the changes we are experiencing: Drought, fires, winds, extreme temperatures and floods.

People such as the Fire Chiefs, Aboriginal Elders with their knowledge of mosaic fire hazard reduction techniques, farmers, Police, C.S.I.R.O. and other scientists involved in research pertaining to the limiting of the damage caused by these disasters, Emergency Services, the Defence Forces, Hydrologists, Bureau of Meteorology Climatologists to name some would have vital insights and valuable ideas. Practical solutions to minimize the effects of disasters should be actively sought as different disciplines work together. Possible solutions need to be thoroughly explored and practical ones implemented.

Such a Disaster Prevention and Containment Authority should be properly resourced and have totally bi-partisan support from all politicians. Any political representatives MUST have open minds and be prepared to listen, learn and provide support. They must be able to look further than the next election. This authority should never be treated as a "political football" for politicians to score points against each other. Such an Authority should have the necessary power to implement solutions to lessen and contain disasters.

As a sub-unit to the Disaster Prevention and Containment Authority, we feel it is necessary to establish a National Bushfire Response unit to support state based fire authorities in the event of catastrophic bushfires. This Unit would include aerial water bombers, additional personnel (possibly sourced from the defence force and other support agencies) to assist affected communities. In particular the water bombers could be leased to fire endangered countries during our off-season thereby defraying the cost of the response unit.

We realize that such an Authority and the necessary implementation of its policies and recommendations would come at a cost but surely this would be nowhere near the cost of not being proactive and merely reacting when disasters occur. The cost of doing nothing is unthinkable. We believe that our taxes should be used to benefit the tax payers here in Australia and used to support an independent Authority in devising ways to minimize the effects of catastrophies.

To address the areas we feel did not work well:

- (1)
 - a. More Professional and voluteer firefighters need to be trained and prepared.
 - b. Barriers to volunteering should be minimized e.g. many volunteers were involved in firefighting for 5 months or more which meant their families were without their usual income. Mortgages, bills and other committments still had to be met, food bought and households maintained. Volunteers who are saving lives and properities should receive payments that ensure they and their families do not suffer the consequences of lack of their usual income.
 - c. S.E.S. volunteers and emergency responders should equally have their incomes guaranteed when they too are required to serve their fellow Australians.
 - d. More equipment must be acquired and of sufficient quantities to cope with fires of such widespread and catastrophic dimensions. The equipment needs to be mobile so that it can be dispersed to where it is needed, when it is needed.
 - (2) A plan needs to be devised whereby the Local, State and Federal Governments are all fully aware of their roles, responsibilities and how all levels co-ordinate with each other.
 - (3) Politicians need to be more involved with the people they serve. They need to develop empathy and sympathy so that when faced with such catastrophic conditions people know their country's leaders are involved and more importantly capable of genuinely helping them through the horrific situation they, through no fauly of their own, find themselves in.
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(4) A scheme needs to be devised whereby funds can be dispersed expediently and efficiently and which cuts through bureaucratic red tape. The money was not raised to sit in Government or Government agencies coffers but to be used by those who desperately needed it and in many cases are still waiting for it. It is un-Australian to extend people's suffering by delaying what was given so readily.

(5) Federal, State and Local governments should follow and implement the recommendations of the Disaster Prevention and Containment Authority.

(6) Because the fire season is becoming longer each year, the number of days when controlled hazard burning can be done are becoming less. Therefore we need more people to be trained in acceptable fire hazard reduction and then working on fire hazard reduction so the fuel levels on the ground can be reduced in the limited time frame. The Aboriginals knew how to use fire to fight fire without endangering the animals or humans and did so successfully for thousands of years. We need their expertise in fire reduction. If the fire hazard fuels cannot be burned in the time available, then mechanical means have to be used to remove them.

(7) The most effective element in firefighting is water. Australia is a very dry land, but only 4% of our rainfall is utilized. However, if we are able to "bank" water so that it is available in times of drought or bush fire it would help greatly in fighting fires. Water preservation schemes, such as the Bradford scheme, where the heaviest rainfall in Australia could be captured, redirected and stored instead of just flowing directly into the ocean, would not only make water (a) available for fire-fighting, but (b) could make water available to farmers to alleviate drought and allow them to continue production and hence (c) the country would not be tinder dry and so ready to burst into flames.

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

This submission is being submitted on behalf of the Gold Coast Retirees Inc. We are a non-political organisation. Our club was established in August 2017 and meets on a monthly basis in Broadbeach, Gold Coast. We have a membership of over 260 fully funded and part pensioner retirees who seek and gain benefit from provision of financial, investment and other information, via stimulating meetings and social activities. We are affiliated with The Alliance for a Fairer Retirement.

Our members come from diverse backgrounds and we have a wide range of expertise: Volunteer firefighters, Farmers, Emergency volunteers, wildlife carers and conservationists. We are active in community welfare.

We are grandparents who pray that our grandchildren do not grow up with emphysema from breathing in bush-fire smoke year after year and they can enjoy the benefits of our wonderful country, Australia. We want our children and grandchildren to be able to breathe fresh air.

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:

National Natural Disaster Royal Commission
Locked Bag 2000
Manuka ACT 2603
