



Royal Commission
into National Natural
Disaster Arrangements

Submission Cover Sheet

This cover sheet has been prepared by the Commission's public contact team to accompany a submission.

Person completing cover sheet

1. **Staff member name** [REDACTED]
2. **Date completed** 30.03.2020
3. **This cover sheet has been completed based on:**
 - details contained in the submission
 - a phone call with the person making the submission
 - an email from the person making the submission
 - Other (provide details) -

Submission details

4. **Full name** Geoff Steel/Cliff Abbott
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7. **Preferred method of contact** Email or phone
8. **Is the submission based on:**
 - primarily based on their personal situation.
 - primarily based on their professional knowledge, qualifications or experience, or on behalf of a group or organisation
9. **If the person is making the submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation:** Bermagui Community Forum

If the submission based on personal experience:

10. **What was their personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? Choose all that apply.**
 - were not living in an area affected by bushfire
 - were in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and didn't suffer personal or financial loss
-

- lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, but didn't suffer personal or financial loss
- lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, and I suffered personal or financial loss
- part of the emergency response as a fire fighter on the ground
- part of the emergency response as an aerial fire fighter
- part of the emergency response as health professional
- part of the emergency response as an Australian Defence Force member
- part of the emergency response as a Commonwealth or State government employee
- assisted the emergency response as a community support volunteer
- assisted the emergency recovery (i.e. after the fire event) as a community support volunteer
- Other Consolidated Community responses

11. Where does the person live:

Local Government Area	Choose an item.
Town name	Bermagui
Post code	2546

If the submission is based on professional experience

12. 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

All submissions

13. Does the person agree to their submission being published?

- Yes, agree to the submission being published in their name
 - Yes, agree to the submission being published anonymously
 - No, does not agree to the submission being published
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BERMAGUI COMMUNITY FORUM

CONSOLIDATED COMMUNITY RESPONSES ON BUSHFIRE RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

Bermagui Community Forum (BCF) is a community group that provides information and comment on local events and developments within Bermagui and seeks community feedback on issues which is then represented to appropriate authorities. BCF has an email list of about 250 residents in the town as well as a strong social media following and solid attendance at its public meetings. This response to the NSW Government independent expert inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfire season is consolidated from community responses on bushfire resilience strategies and local community meetings.

Bermagui is a town of about 2,000 residents on the far south coast of NSW about 380km south of Sydney. The town swells by about 5,000 tourists during the Christmas early New Year period. The bushfires came close to Bermagui on several occasions during the late December and January bushfire period. Fortunately, the town has remained intact, principally thanks to the efforts of the RFS, SES, Council, Police, Red Cross, Surf Club, Country Club, other volunteers and some timely wind shifts.

Bermagui is on the coast in the northern part of the Bega Valley Shire. The Bega Valley Shire runs from Wallaga Lake in the north, 150km south along the coast to the Victorian border and about 50km inland to the Great Divide. It is the largest coastal shire in NSW with the smallest population at 34,000.

1 - Causes and Contributing Factors

1.1 Multiple Government Agencies Responsible for Land and Forest Management

The Bega Valley Shire is principally comprised of forests, some pasture and a handful of small towns, plus the regional centre of Bega. During the recent fires, 60 % of the shire was burnt. 70% of the shire is comprised of state forest and National Parks. The responsibility for this land and forests falls to multiple NSW government agencies including the Environment Protection Authority, Department of Primary Industries, Crown Lands Department, Office of Environment and Heritage, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Corporation, Local Land Services and Aboriginal Affairs.

At a practical level, we understand there is coordination between Forestry, National Parks and RFS as regards hazard reduction and fire season management. The biggest problem is that over the years both Forestry and National Parks have been subject to funding cuts and endless "restructures" which has meant the loss of many experienced professional staff to the point where both organisations are a shadow of their former selves. As a result, land and forest management of state forests and National Parks in NSW has become weakened.

1.2 Bureaucratic Approval Process for Hazard Reduction

Local RFS used retired foresters for advice on certain situations in the recent fires. Local fire access roads were overgrown, and in some cases, locked. The knowledge about what prevention work had been done in certain specific areas in the past was largely lost. Hazard reduction is important, but the bureaucratic process to get permission to burn is very restrictive and slow. It takes a long time to get approval which is very specific, e.g. to burn this area on these days. If conditions are not suitable on these days, you have to re-apply. There needs to be a sensible and streamlined and local approval process.

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1.3 Local Council has Limited Powers

Council has limited capacity to influence activities on this state forest and National Parks land.

The Shire also has many absentee owners and “bush block” owners, and in many cases these properties are not maintained in a “fire safe” manner, although Council has some capacity to direct owners to undertake works.

1.4 Dry Bush and Drought Conditions

The bush was tinder dry due to the drought conditions and there was limited water within private storages (dams and tanks). The main public water storages were also low, however there were no water restrictions in place during the lead-in to the bushfires in late December 2019 and January 2020.

1.5 Limited Road Access Into and Within the Shire

Road access into the Shire and within the Shire is limited. There are three principal roads providing access to the Shire. One road west across the Great Divide to Cooma and Canberra, one road north to Batemans Bay and one road south to Orbost and Bairnsdale. At times during the bushfire crisis there was no way in or out of the Bega Valley, and for several days the only way in or out was via Cooma and Canberra, resulting in significant traffic congestion and delays. These road closures also led to shortages of fuel, food and medicines at critical times for local communities, such as during evacuations of towns.

2 - Preparation and Planning

2.1 Dedicated Body Overseeing Coordinated Planning Approach

As noted above, there is obvious need for Forestry, National Parks and other responsible government agencies, in conjunction with RFS, to examine their long-term land management practices to better prepare for these events. Current scientific thinking needs to be incorporated, avoiding knee-jerk reactions, and possibly re-thinking current practices, while still considering the health of native forests and habitat of native animals.

As a community surrounded on three sides by forest it is essential that the departments responsible for managing these lands, local Council and the RFS have a coordinated approach which will mitigate future fire threats. There should be a dedicated body linking these authorities which should prepare and oversee an overall strategy to manage these lands for disaster preparedness and for hazard reduction. Ideally this dedicated oversight body should have the power to follow a “tenure blind” approach. This strategy needs to provide for on-going works throughout the year. The State Government needs to adequately resource these measures.

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2.2 Local Council Monitor Private Land Holdings

Local Council also needs to ensure that it has the resources to monitor activity on private land holdings where appropriate disaster mitigation practices are being ignored. This should encompass larger rural land holdings where fire could build and take hold and properties within suburban / village areas which have greater potential to ignite and impact adjoining properties.

The lessons of the Tathra fires two years earlier went unheeded, with many private properties in Bermagui, Wallaga Lake and Cuttagee precincts not taking the most elemental precautions, such as cleaning out gutters.

2.3 Community Input into Strategy

The community needs to have an input into this strategy and consideration needs to be given to having the implementation of this strategy managed at a local level, possibly by the RFS, to ensure that decisions to perform works can be made with flexibility to incorporate weather conditions and other local considerations.

Scientists have been predicting with amazing accuracy that we would face unprecedented severity of bush fires during the current fire season, yet our town appeared to be somewhat unprepared. They have also predicted that we will face major issues with the severity of storms, flooding and rising sea levels. Bermagui is especially vulnerable and needs to prepare for these events and for increased frequency of severe events.

The response to these situations will require new policies and approaches from all levels of government and increased awareness and preparation by individuals. Governments, businesses and individuals will need to have detailed plans which take into account the increased occurrence of these events and how they will be managed. The flow-on effect for Bermagui is widespread as the town relies heavily on tourism during the summer months and the fires have severely impacted income from the tourist trade. Many emergency services personnel are volunteers and many businesses have had to function with reduced staff, or close temporarily, as employees (and business owners) were engaged in fire related activities.

Each community which has been affected by the fires will have a unique set of needs and required responses and Bermagui wants to ensure that it is heard as responses are initiated and new policy developed. It is important that the experiences from towns like Bermagui are recognised and utilised in forming policies and programs and that these policies and programs are not imposed as one size fits all. Response plans need to be specific to circumstances, areas, individuals, business etc.

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3 - Response to Bushfires

3.1 - Immediate Management

3.1.1 Emergency Services Overextended

Major fire threats to Bermagui were on New Year's Eve and 4 January when it was anticipated Bermagui would be engulfed by fire, and some emergency services including Police were withdrawn. Several later evacuation warnings were issued through January. The RFS and other emergency services were understandably heavily preoccupied with defending the town from the immediate fire threats. On New Year's Eve there were 4,000 to 5,000 residents and tourists in town and with limited emergency services personnel available. Direction on immediate actions in the town and support to the evacuees fell to a few individuals who assumed control of the situation. The roles of varying emergency services and the surf club during the first hours of the evacuation were not clear – especially to the community. At that time, the local Council had not nominated Bermagui as an evacuation centre. The Council in its submission to the concurrent Royal Commission into the bushfires notes that RFS were overextended and dispersed, and not in the area at appropriate resourcing when the fires escalated in the Bega Valley.

3.1.2 Bermagui Disaster Response Plan

It is suggested that the roles of RFS, SES, Police, Evacuation Centre, Council and other relevant groups be formally defined within a documented disaster response plan and that this plan includes, and is available to, all residents. The role of key people in the town should also be identified within this plan. There should be standard bushfire guidelines developed and promoted as a part of the plan, e.g. precautionary measures in and around your residence, list of priority items to take in an evacuation, location of evacuation centres and services, regular reminders on bushfire preparedness etc.

As the elderly form a significant proportion of the population of Bermagui, they and other residents at risk should be identified and a clear action plan put in place for evacuations. The plan also needs to establish guidelines for those who decide to defend their properties.

The Bermagui Disaster Response Plan also needs to reference the land management plan noted previously to ensure that land is suitably maintained to minimise the risk from disasters and ensure safe passage of residents.

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3.2 Resourcing, Coordination and Deployment

3.2.1 Designated Evacuation Centre

There was no Council designated evacuation centre in Bermagui at the time of the New Year's Eve fire. There were 4,000 to 5,000 residents, tourists and evacuees from other areas in and around the Surf Club and the Country Club during this time and the following days, and these centres did not have adequate facilities to manage this number of people.

There should be a highly visible, appropriately equipped and promoted community evacuation point for Bermagui with the resources and networks to manage an evacuation of the magnitude experienced on New Year's Eve.

Although all citizens were advised to evacuate, a considerable number, up to 25% of the town's population, didn't and had the situation developed as predicted it could have been catastrophic. Education on how communities should respond in these situations is required, including the consequences for individuals and the emergency personnel, as well as improved communication. In particular, that the information is delivered in an honest manner which the community can trust.

3.2.2 Equipping Evacuation Centre

The Bega Valley Shire Council has resolved to identify potential evacuation centres and ensure that they have the electrical capacity to be connected to an emergency generator. Council is also examining alternative solar and back up battery solutions. The evacuation centre should become the source of all information relating to updates of the disaster, support services, meals accommodation etc. The Bermagui evacuation centre will need to be equipped with communications and all other equipment required to fulfil this role. Access to suitable toilets for persons with disabilities should be a consideration.

3.3 Equipment and Communication Systems

3.3.1 No Power, Mobile Phone or Internet Services

During the bushfire emergencies in Bermagui, the electricity supply, mobile phone and internet services all failed at critical times. For several days after New Year's Eve, and during later evacuations, there was no power, mobile phone service or internet access available, so information flow in and out of Bermagui was negligible.

We live in the digital age and these services are crucial for information flow and timely advice, and it has to be a priority that these will be available when there is an immediate threat. This is especially important for residents living outside village areas, managing properties and livestock, requiring timely information to make decisions relating to their safety and livelihood.

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3.3.2 Extending Power Supply

Presently there is only one power supply line into Bermagui from the NSW grid. Consideration should be given to building in redundancy by extending the power supply, potentially up the coast about 25km, as a secondary supply.

Other solutions may also include the use of concrete power poles in fire prone areas, reducing the loss of infrastructure thereby reducing the time required to restore power.

3.3.3 Telephone Exchange Failed

The Bermagui telephone exchange and all fixed line services went out for at least a week in most localities. The exchange was not directly impacted by fire so the cause may have been inadequate battery backup in the exchange, and lack of backup generation.

Even more seriously the mobile network and NBN were out for a similar period. Voice, text, email and internet were unavailable, serving to increase anxiety and fuel uninformed speculation. One possible solution to this problem would be to provide satellite NBN in a point of safety in each community. This would need to be solar powered, battery backed-up and provided with a generator in the case of long outages.

3.3.4 ABC Radio Invaluable

For several days, the only reliable source of information about the position of fire fronts and weather patterns was ABC South East radio via battery operated small radios or car radios. We need to continue to adequately fund this invaluable and professional institution for regional NSW.

3.3.5 Back-up Power for Communications Towers

Communications towers need to be protected from fire and provided with a means of supplying back-up power. These towers have a battery back-up system; however, this is provided for short term power outages only. It is possible to provide switch over systems for generators which could be operated by emergency services personnel and this, or another effective solution, needs to be in place as a very high priority. This back-up power source can be activated as soon as the threat of fire has passed to enable these systems to be restored independently of other, possibly more extensive, infrastructure restoration works.

3.3.6 Upgrade RFS "Fires Near Me" App

The recent fires have demonstrated how difficult it is to get accurate information on the location and status of the actual fire fronts and the shortfalls in the communication measures that RFS has for informing the general public. The RFS "Fires Near Me" app was continually promoted as the go-to source of fire information. Unfortunately, the app could not be relied upon to provide accurate information on the location of the fire threat and could not be accessed at critical times due to internet outages.

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The “Fires Near Me” app shows a large grey area covering the increasing extent of a fire. Our recent events resulted in large areas of grey, however there was no way of identifying the actual fire front and differentiating the front from previously burnt areas. This would assist people to determine the actual location of the fire front in relation to their property and therefore make well informed decisions as to future actions. Also, we noted that the NSW RFS “Fires Near Me” app ceased at the Victorian border, which wasn’t helpful when monitoring the progress of fires progressing up the coast from Mallacoota and from the Victorian alps.

3.3.7 Local RFS Communication

It would have been extremely useful if the local RFS could provide a map indicating local fire activity, where they were addressing the fires, expectations of how fronts would develop locally on high fire danger days. We are aware that such maps were being used by other nearby RFS units at the fire station or other central location as a means of communicating to the community, providing valuable information, easing community concerns and the desire for community members to visit fire areas as well as over-riding incorrect information.

Throughout the bushfire season some locals dropped into the RFS shed for on-going information. While the RFS were always helpful, other locals were reluctant to drop-in fearing that they were adding to pressures on already overburdened personnel. A dedicated community information centre would have been very helpful.

As noted previously, RFS text and internet warnings were not received by those without mobile or internet connections during power and communications outages. This further highlights the need to have these services maintained during a disaster or returned very quickly after the immediate threat has passed.

RFS should use donated funds to upgrade uninterrupted power and basic communications at all RFS sheds. This should be a central RFS cost to install and maintain. Satellite phones, for example, have quite a high monthly cost.

3.3.8 “Air Raid” Sirens

Consideration should be given to a fire siren to alert/wake residents in the case of fire. “Air raid” sirens that can be heard for several kilometres are available and each locality could have one. This idea was used effectively in Lorne, Victoria, and was typically a part of many rural communities in the past. They are used all over the tornado belt in the US, tested at the same time each month and people then know when to seek shelter. Maybe the Shire or even a town could do this independently. They would need back-up power too.

3.3.9 Communication at Evacuation Centres

When a local evacuation point is identified, it needs to be adequately resourced with back-up power systems, public address system and other facilities to ensure that it can cope with the numbers of evacuees expected during future disaster events.

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4 - Any Other Matters

4.1 National Climate Change Strategy

Overall, we need a comprehensive national strategy which addresses the impact of climate change and how these impacts will be addressed at community level. The strategy should define the means of minimising the impacts of climate change and define the roles of each level of government as well as the funding and resourcing to implement the strategy.

4.2 Access to Post Disaster Services

We also need a planned and well-communicated response for communities to be in place following a disaster. Community services, funding and the like have been provided by numerous agencies and not-for-profit organisations. There has been some confusion about how to access these services in some cases, especially as many of these services have evolved during the time since the fires. Notification of these services, the addition of new services and amendments to services needs to be communicated early and in one central location. This should be able to include Federal, State, Local and community support services.

4.3 Review Local Water Restriction Policies

It is also notable that on 10 and 11 February, Bermagui and surrounds had heavy rains which resulted in the local Brogo Dam going from 10% capacity to over-flowing within 24 hours. These rains largely extinguished the remaining fires, but unfortunately the runoff into the dam was over fire burnt ground which resulted in the Bermagui water supply becoming undrinkable and water restrictions being imposed. Bermagui then had to receive its water supply by tanker at great expense to Council. Given Brogo Dam got down to 10% capacity and we had no water restrictions over summer before the rains, local water restriction policies should be reviewed.

4.4 Fire Resistance of Differing Vegetation Types

Of assistance to communities such as ours would be research and availability of information on fire behaviour in differing vegetation types typically found in our region. Comparisons between different vegetation management styles could then be made, such as mature forest, thinned forest, regrowth forest and cleared farmland. Also, of value would be a list of native vegetation types that are less combustive and suitable for town edges and within townships themselves.

4.5 Indigenous Traditional Land Management

The use, benefits and science of indigenous "Traditional Land Management" needs to be adequately examined and funded. This process involves much more than burning and may require significant community input. Resourcing any outcome will be critical and should not rest with RFS volunteers.

BERMAGUI COMMUNITY FORUM**CONSOLIDATED COMMUNITY RESPONSES ON BUSHFIRE RESILIENCE STRATEGIES****4.6 Adverse Impact on Native Wildlife and Habitat**

Less recognised is the huge detriment to ecological systems and animal populations and the fires adverse impacts on wildlife conservation, habitat protection and restoration. Reduced government funding of state agencies and programs protecting habitats and animal populations prior to the fires, and now inadequate funding in the fire aftermath, needs to be properly recognised and addressed.

4.7 Firefighter Insurance Cover

The state government should offer insurance security to firefighters. They should all be covered for personal injury and death with very generous provisions. In addition, if their own property is destroyed or damaged while they are off fighting fires, then they should be generously compensated. These insurances would not be costly but would be immensely re-assuring to the front-line firefighters.

4.8 World Central Kitchen

A World Central Kitchen was set up at one of the restaurants in Bermagui (Eastwoods) and supplied up to 900 meals per day for several weeks to feed firefighters and evacuees up and down the coast. It was principally manned by local volunteers. The skills and lessons learnt here should be recorded and not lost.

Final Comments

Bermagui was effectively isolated for a number of days by the bushfires, with no power, communications and limited firefighting resources. The most critical elements during this ordeal related to reliability of communication systems, property and forest preparedness and evacuation pathways. The damage from these bushfires extends well beyond the burnt forests and homes. In Bermagui and surrounding regions there has been a significant ongoing economic and emotional toll for many farmers, businesses, and individual residents.

We trust you will seriously address the issues raised in this submission by the Bermagui community.

I give my consent for this submission to be made public. A draft of this submission was circulated to our community members for further comment.

Cliff Abbott
Coordinator
Bermagui Community Forum



30 March 2020