



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** **Geof Nanto**
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
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- 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	Clarence Valley
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?

I live on a 30 ha mostly forested property on [REDACTED] Nymboida NSW, a location that was devastated by the Liberation Trail bushfire on the evening and night of 8 November 2019. I chose to stay and defend my property and managed to save my house. Of the 14 houses on [REDACTED], 9 were destroyed and a total of 85 houses were lost in the Nymboida area.

The RFS considered the area where I live to be too dangerous to try and defend. Two fire trucks and a supervisor in a car came past my property about an hour before the fire front hit but pulled out almost immediately. I was under no illusions at the time that they would be able to help me and consequently didn't even bother to call the RFS. I knew I'd be on my own and was well prepared with 2 firefighter pumps, several fire hoses and plenty of tank water. I could see the approaching fire was too massive for them to devote resources to scattered dwellings in forest settings such as my place. I found out later that there was a fleet of RFS fire trucks in the vicinity and they concentrated around defending the small village of Nymboida about 7 kilometres away. What worked well is that they saved the school, the community hall and most of the dozen or so dwellings that constitute the village. Given the extreme circumstances, I think they generally made good decisions. Hence, I have nothing but praise for the on-the-ground effort of the RFS even though they were unable to do anything for me.

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

Slow updating of the rapid progress and increasing severity of the Liberation Trail fire on the 'Fires Near Me' website mapping on 8 November led many Nymboida residents to think the fire danger was still far off and of less intensity than it was. People were evacuating with flames around their house along roads with the forest ablaze on both sides. It was a miracle no one was killed here.

The speed of the fire and its ferocity seemed to catch the RFS organisers by surprise.

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?

What I've written so far, although important, is mostly for background information. I imagine those aspects will be comprehensively dealt with in other submissions. My aim in making this submission is to highlight an aspect of the complex problem of bushfire mitigation that I have firsthand experience with—a problem that I suspect is not uncommon in NSW. It's the problem of dealing with neighbouring properties, in rural residential areas such as where I live, presenting a fire hazard to adjacent houses through neglect on the part of the owners. There are laws addressing this, but they are ineffective in practice. Although the general build-up of fire hazard material on multiple properties in the Nymboida area was one of a number of contributing factors to so much property loss and needs to be addressed, I'm keeping my focus

in this submission on the need for hazard reduction near houses. It's important to note here that I greatly value living within a forest setting. I manage my land as a private wildlife sanctuary and have spent my 22 years living here undertaking forest regeneration work. While I don't support excessive burning, I certainly advocate for environmentally sensitive reduction management with special attention to zones near houses.

In my own case, I had [REDACTED], the RFS Clarence Valley District Officer, visit in July 2019 to assess what I and many other local people, including experienced RFS volunteers, considered a dangerous build-up of fuel, presenting an obvious fire hazard on my neighbour's property. The overgrowth was across a number of acres and extended right up to the boundary fence with my property within 30 metres downslope from my house. I told the neighbours of my concern and asked them to clear it up but met with a strong refusal. They did not think it was a problem and wanted their land that way. If I'd been given permission I was prepared to undertake the work myself.

While I have nothing but praise for [REDACTED] professionalism, especially in the diplomatic way he dealt with the situation by friendly discussion with the neighbour, the outcome was less than satisfactory for me in that the hazard remained with only a small, token effort on the part of the neighbours to clear it up. He advised me that in the absence of the owner dealing with the problem, all the RFS could do is to come in and burn it. However, he said that this overgrown area would not burn in conditions when it was safe for them to control burn it, yet in the dry conditions that concerned me, it certainly would. He officially assessed the area as not a 'significant threat at this time'. However, what I experienced at the time of the Liberation Trail fire was something far more dangerous than [REDACTED] implied. The area in question went up like a firebomb. It resulted in massive amounts of radiant heat and intensive ember showers on my house that I had to deal with. (The neighbours in question lost their house to the fire.)

Although the fire has dealt with the problem in the short term, my concern now is that the situation will repeat itself in the coming years. While I understand the RFS has legally enforceable powers to come in and clear a hazard on private land, including by mechanical means and billing the landowner for the expense, my impression is that they are very reluctant to go down that path because of the animosity it creates. They much prefer diplomatic persuasion as it's in all our interests for them to maintain a friendly and helpful profile within rural communities. However, after years of ever-increasing fire hazard, this approach has been shown to be severely deficient. A better approach is critically needed. What I would hope in the aftermath of these recent devastating fires is that people take more individual responsibility towards fire hazard reduction on their properties and that the RFS adopt a harsher approach towards overseeing it in the interests of community fire safety. It is tragic enough for anyone to lose their house, even if their own neglect to undertake fire hazard reduction is a contributing factor—but even more terrible when this neglect endangers neighbouring houses.

To help cushion a harsher approach, a further suggestion is that resources are allocated to fund on-site person-to-person teaching to help people in bushfire-prone areas set themselves up, so they are able to defend their own property against fire. Such education would include a comprehensive assessment of bushfire risk, identification of hazard reduction zones that need to be maintained and, importantly, advice on the setting up of appropriate firefighting equipment. These measures are already requirements for newly built houses, but not for existing dwellings.

We people who live on acreages within this rural environment like the freedom to manage our land in the way we like. For some, that means allowing the bush to grow freely. I'm sympathetic towards that approach, but only in so far as it doesn't endanger houses.

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

I was disappointed that staying and defending was not listed as an option in section 1a. I would think the experience of those of us who stayed and defended would be highly pertinent to the Royal Commission. The closest option I found was: 'I lived in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and didn't suffer personal or financial loss'. However, that option is a very poor fit for describing the situation of someone like me who chose to stay and spent the whole night of November 8 fighting flames and embers. And I did suffer financial loss. Although I managed to save my house and outbuildings, I lost other infrastructure not covered by insurance that I'm still in the process of replacing. Further, the clean-up effort of removal of fire damaged and fallen trees near my house has already cost me several thousand dollars plus much labour, and is not complete.

Compared to other people in the area, these losses are minimal. However, the forested sections of my property have been devastated (along with most of Nymboida and, obviously, huge tracts of East Coast bushland). I'm deeply saddened by the massive destruction of native flora and fauna, and have had years of forest regeneration work destroyed. While I accept that there will always be a level of bushfire risk where I live, I certainly never again want to experience a fire of the intensity of this one. Although the complex and controversial broader issues of large scale bushfire mitigation are outside the scope of my submission, I'm hoping that this inquiry leads to a more widespread application of environmentally sensitive patch burning on both private and public forested land.

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
