



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

Email or phone is fine. I live in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated and suffered personal and financial loss. I would like to share my real life experiences of the events to help remote communities (like my own) when these fires return.

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	Bega Valley
Town name	Mt Darragh
Post code	2632

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?

What worked well:

1. The web-based information provided by the NSW, VIC RFS and Aust GeoScience on the location and speeds of the fires. This information was critical to know when the fires would hit especially after the phones and power were disconnected 24 hours before the event due to the fires.
2. NBN satellite internet services, these became the only way to communicate using VOIP.
3. A visit from an NSW RFS officer several days prior to the fires to provide a map on the expected progress of the fires and to ascertain if we were ready for them. He also recorded the number of people who would be at the property during the fires and stated that it was unlikely the RFS could support us.
4. Local water carting firms for prioritising properties that would be impacted by fire and ensured we had the water we needed to fight the fires. We have no town water.
5. Internet web based weather forecasting services like BOM to provide predicted wind speeds, location and intensity.

After the fires:

6. The NRMA in providing immediate cash assistance once I was able to notify them of the fires. Our place was insured and the NRMA provided \$6,000 to immediately assist us to survive as we had no power, phone, feed for the animals and very little water left.
7. Local neighbours in helping clear the roads to enable us to get out if needed. Our road remained closed for nearly three weeks until crews cleared and removed the fallen and dangerous trees.
8. NSW Agricultural and Animal Services for helping provide 3 days emergency feed for the animals and a visit from the Vet to assess and deal with any injuries.
9. The Bega Shire Council Bushfire Recovery Centre who provided a friendly, supportive and informative service to talk and record what had been fire impacted and to provide details of all of the support services available. They also registered the property on our behalf for these services.
10. The Red Cross in providing continued assistance.

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

What did not work well:

1. Mount Darragh is in a poor mobile phone area and 24 hours before the fire the landline was destroyed by fire. No-one in our area, which is heavily forested, received any notification of the encroaching fires or which way to escape. Some of these phone lines did not get reconnected for over two months after the fire.

2. Mount Darragh also lost grid power 24 hours before the fires hit our community. As there is no redundant power links provided by Essential Energy, this meant our community had to fight the fires using only locally produced power sources.
3. No NSW RFS, Fire Brigade or aerial fire fighting support at the time of the fires. A community of over 27 households (based on landline connections) were left to fight the fires themselves.
4. 000 calls not responded to. As I was able to use VOIP I lodged a 000 emergency call after fighting the fires for over 30 hours pleading for help as we had nearly run out water, we were exhausted and needed urgent help to continue to fight the spot fires that still threatened our home. No help ever came.

After the fires:

4. A complete breakdown of communications. As there was no phone, no power and the road was closed for nearly three weeks most people in our community did not know what support services, including SES, were available to immediately help them. I wrote a letter to Bega Council pleading for assistance and have included it for submission.
5. The first RFS support arrived nearly three days after the fires and were only assessing the situation. An RFS fire support crew arrived the next day (Day 4) to help put out major spot fires.

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?

1. Mount Darragh is surrounded by the South East National Park and various NSW State forests used to harvest timber. These parks and forests are areas with thick vegetation and native trees and need constant management to help reduce the fuel load. Fire is a very regular event in our forest with long periods of no fires being followed by serious fire damage. A reduced fire load would have enabled the fire to be better managed or even stopped.
2. Mobile phone reception needs to be dramatically improved for all remote communities to provide emergency warnings. These mobile towers also need their own UPS power supply to be able to continue to operate after the grid power is lost. Mount Darragh has a television repeater on it which may have been used for this purpose.
3. Support services need to understand the serious nature of a complete loss of communications after a fire and make co-ordinated personal visits to each property impacted to provide the information and support so badly needed. This will need information and support from Council, Australia Post, Police, RFS and locals to identify everyone impacted. Even though Bega Council provided Town Halls to provide this information and support, we only found out (via facebook) about the closest town hall gathering the day of the meeting and its location was via a closed road. After working with the Red Cross, my partner and I did a personal letter box/front gate dropoff to all properties we could find on the Mt Darragh Rd which resulted in two properties applying for grants just in time before closure.
4. The RFS need to make regular calls to homes in remote forested areas to provide assistance and ensure that fire preparations are completed well before any potential high fire season. Even to provide supervised hazard reduction burns would have greatly assisted our community and reduced the overall fire fuel load.

5. Support services, like the Red Cross, need to actively follow up on the mental health of all people impacted by the fires as PTSD can be a real issue for those, who like myself, stayed to fight the fires and protect their homes and loved ones. Counselling services were disrupted by COVID and therefore not as personal/helpful.

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

Through a series of fortunate events including the low winds and temperatures on the day of the fires, no one was killed on Mount Darragh but this could have very easily not been the case had conditions been just a little worse. Due to the remote location, loss of power and communications, the potential was there for total loss of property and life in our community.

I know from personal experience that people can live in these remote forested communities and with the right home design, land clearing, redundant power, communications and fire fighting training and support we can prevent a catastrophic loss of life.

My letter to the Bega Council, copied to the Mayor Bega Council:

Julie,

CC: Mayor

Thank you for the information provided and all your personal support, its much appreciated but is there any way Council can start getting this information and the NSW services provided, to all of the other people personally up here at Mt Darragh.

From the 31st Jan all of the residents at Mt Darragh lost power and telephone services so that on the 1st Feb, when the fires hit us, none of us had power or any way to receive any emergency communications. We are a fairly resilient bunch who are used to losing power and thus most have generators but the loss of the phone meant we had no idea when it was going to hit and may have forced a few to stay when they should have left. We have little to no mobile phone reception.

We have no RFS, got no fire fighting or army/air support during the fires and we did not see any real support for 2 days (the first being an Essential Energy helicopter checking the lines). The day after the fire very dedicated locals cut the fallen trees and got them off the road for us to get out. The NSW State government was then able to send out a vet to check properties 2 days after the fires and now on the 20th our destroyed buildings have been roped off by State building inspectors until an asbestos investigation is complete.

Given we have no garbage collection, town water to fight fires, and no council provided backup power or communication, I would ask that the council personally come up and talk to locals and help tell them of the huge amount of services available to fire impacted communities. Some don't even know of the SES and are removing dangerous trees themselves. Please remember we only got power 12 days after the fire and the road was only opened last Friday and not everyone has internet so the town halls (which I only heard about last week) are useless and the phone is not expected to be back on till mid March.

We got hit hard by the fires and our beloved forest is blackened and destroyed but we got lucky it was not worse, no-one perished. Now we have the Mt Darragh road to repair, our fences to replace, dangerous trees to fell on our farms, fire damaged house/sheds to remove or repair, our souls to repair and myself and others in my community at Mt Darragh are feeling somewhat angry, very isolated and need your urgent help and support.

I would have no issue with this letter being read out aloud next townhall as I am sure there are other very remote communities feeling the very same.

Micheal Devine

[REDACTED]

Mt Darragh NSW

[REDACTED]

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
