



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

email to [REDACTED] or phone [REDACTED]

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 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 – not our expertise but we do respect indigenous practices and the Aboriginal people need to be involved.

Input / Comments

**6. In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?**

Our groups reported a fast response with water bombers at Warwick bushland and at the Lowlands property. See details below.  
But the cause of the fire by arson at Warwick needs much better attention – see other questions.  
Also the cause of the fire that reached Lowlands needs investigation. See below.

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

**1. Fire at Yanchep National Park WA**

The fire initially was started when a Lemon Scented Gum hit power lines. The National Park staff acted to extinguish the fire which was restricted to an area about 5 metres wide adjacent to a fire break.

But there was no mopping up, monitoring or watching the area for a flare-up even though weather was dry, windy. Then the fire flared up and became a huge fire and spread out of control through most of the National Park all the way north to Guilderton.

**This failure to stay on site and monitor the area was a significant failure.** In addition, it was not clear which authority was responsible for monitoring and fighting the fire – DFES, Parks & Wildlife, Main Roads.

**2. Fires in Forrestdale Lake Nature Reserve deliberately lit**

Over the last couple of years there have been fires lit in this conservation reserve including with toxic smoke emitted by people burning off plastic on copper wire to retrieve the copper and then sell it. This activity has been done at night and escaped fires have burned for some time before being seen and reported. This time delay and the lack of surveillance and cameras to detect these fires in this high conservation value bushland/wetland results in unacceptable, destructive fires.

Despite evidence being given to police by local residents and the Friends group, police and arson squad detectives have not properly investigated and intervened to stop and prosecute these unauthorised vehicle entries and illegal activities. Police have admitted that **they do not have enough officers and resources to do this work.** The conservation land manager (DBCA), local fire brigade, City of Armadale, DFES and police have not collaborated to properly and adequately investigate or address and stop this pollution and destructive bush fires. This is unacceptable.

***Greatly increased funding by these State Government agencies for more officers and resources is urgently needed.***

### **3. Stolen cars dumped and set alight in bushland.**

This is a recurring problem in many Local Government Areas including the City of Armadale and which has not been adequately addressed and stopped by the local fire brigade, City of Armadale and/or police.

This also occurs in other locations such as the Gnangara Pine Plantations.

**The lack of police capacity to do the work to address this problem needs to be rectified with more police employed and more State Government rangers employed to boost the ranger presence at reserves.** This would also help stop illegal rubbish dumping, unauthorised vehicle entry and bush bashing.

### **4. Fires from accidental roadside ignition Forrestdale**

There was an accidental fire started in 2019 in the Tonkin Highway roadside after a motorist towing a boat trailer pulled onto the roadside when the trailer had a burst tyre. The dry grassy weeds ignited and fire spread along the roadside and then into bushland. If the roadside grassy weeds had been cut or removed, this fire would not have ignited and spread as it did.

At the **Anstey-Keane Damplands**, the City of Armadale has failed to mow and control the tall dry grassy weeds along the Keane Road and other verges despite requests from the Friends of Forrestdale and the land manager DBCA Swan Region.

**Control and mowing grassy weeds of roadsides by Local Government Authorities and Main Roads WA should be a mandatory requirement which is enforced before the summer fire risk season begins.**

### **5. Repeated Juvenile ARSON at Warwick Bushland, Bush Forever Site 202**

Warwick Senior High School is located adjacent to the Warwick Open Space Conservation Area, Bush Forever Site 202. There is a history of arson by juveniles and others at this site since housing surrounded the site. Arson is neither being prevented nor controlled.

In 2019 as in earlier years, students were involved in arson in the bushland. Such events now trigger a fast response with air water bombers to extinguish the fire.

There needs to be an education program for all the High School students about fire, its dangers, how it behaves and its impacts on nature and community. The effective JAFFA (Juvenile And Family Fire Awareness) program designed and implemented by the former State Fire and Emergency Services (now DFES <https://www.dfes.wa.gov.au/schooleducation/childrenandfamilies/Pages/jaffaprogram.aspx>) needs to be adapted for delivery through primary and secondary schools and introduced at this school and nearby primary schools.

This adapted JAFFA program should then be introduced to all schools (public and private) starting with any schools within 1km of bushland or wetland.

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**6. Fires in Lowlands Bushland Western Block Hymus Swamp Bush Forever Site 372, and Lowlands Bushland Eastern Block BF Site 368, Shire of Serpentine-Jarrahdale**

Hymus Swamp (133.6 ha) was unfortunately burned in summer 2020 in a major fire which spread to it from further south west. Being a wetland area in excellent condition, it should never be burned. The response to extinguish this fire with fast attack and air water bombers before it spread and became large did not occur. Faster and stronger attack could have prevented the fire reaching Hymus Swamp.

In a separate fire, the Lowlands Eastern Block was burnt from the south. The fire did not start in Lowlands. This very high conservation value heritage site is 1034.1 ha and was long unburnt. There was a strong attack with water bombers and this prevented the fire from crossing the Serpentine River which runs through Lowlands. The heritage homestead and farm buildings fortunately were not burnt.

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**In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?**

**PREPARATION: For the Swan Coastal Plain area of the south west of WA there are at least four key issues that need to be addressed by all relevant authorities and land holders for fire prevention:**

**A. Grassy weed control** in and adjacent to bushland/wetland areas, and along roadsides. See below.

**B. No prescribed burns** as it kills and dislocates fauna, and burning promotes the growth and spread of flammable weeds and then *increases* the fire hazard by adding to the intensity of fires. **Thus prescribed burns actually increase fire risk.** This has been well recognised for many years.

As stated on page 23 of the WA EPA's Discussion Paper June 2004, '*CALM advises that it does not carry out burns in metropolitan area reserves due to the high proportions of weeds and exotic grasses*'.

In 2019, the City of Wanneroo conducted a prescribed burn in the **Landsdale Bush Forever** site which is a threatened ecological community and is isolated from other bushland. There was no consultation with the Friends group and citizen scientists. Now the whole reserve has been burned and there is no refugia from which all the invertebrates and small fauna can recolonise. This is unacceptable.

**C. Arson watch and control: Many fires are started by arson.** Based on the past 10-year average, 58 per cent of wildfires are caused by people: 13% accidental, 5% escapes from prescribed burns, and 40% arson. Another 25% are caused by lightning, and 17% have other or unknown causes (which could involve people). (*Reference: Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, 2018-19 Annual Report, p. 90*)

There needs to be a major education program for all High School and Primary students and families about fire, its dangers, how it behaves. Interest in fire is a basic human instinct. The JAFFA (Juvenile And Family Fire Awareness) program by the former State Fire and Emergency Services (now DFES) needs to be adapted and introduced for high school students and primary school students and their families.

Adult arson is also a major problem in WA. The capacity of arson squad police needs to be greatly increased

**D. Power Lines adjacent to or in bushland:** As explained in the Yanchep fire under Question 7, fire has started in many cases from trees hitting power lines or from dust accumulation and shortages or from falling power poles during storm events. In our Perth region and south west WA, power lines should be underground or located away from bushland areas, and should be well maintained especially after long dry periods.

There was another case in suburban Perth (Floreat) in the **Underwood Avenue Bush**

**Forever Site 119** some years ago where a destructive fire started from an electric power pole fault on the edge of the bushland. This power line should have been put underground.

#### **A. Preparation: fire risk prevention by control of grassy weeds adjacent to bushland**

**This is a very significant issue which needs major improvements especially on the WA Swan Coastal Plain including the Perth region. Control and mowing grassy weeds of roadsides by Local Government Authorities and Main Roads WA should be a mandatory requirement which is enforced before the summer fire risk season begins.** Mowing of tall dry grass weeds adjoining bushland areas should also be carried out. Examples of wild fires started 2019 or 2020 where dry grassy weeds were not cut or controlled in addition to those described under question 7 above include:

**Lots 1 & 2 Gay St Dianella bushland:** This is the former Channel 9 site to be added to (being adjacent to) the Cottonwood Crescent **Bush Forever Site 43** comprising very high conservation value Banksia woodland Threatened Ecological Community (TEC). In the area adjacent to the bushland where the former Channel 9 buildings had been demolished, long dry grassy and other weeds flourished. On 24<sup>th</sup> January 2020 a fire was deliberately lit in this area and spread to the bushland with the wind and hot, dry conditions. The City of Stirling should have required that the dry grass and other weeds were cut/removed before the summer fire season. Also the bushland conservation areas should have been properly set up as conservation reserves, by being fenced, with signage, cameras and surveillance etc to prevent rubbish dumping and hoon behaviour.

#### **FIRE RESPONSE**

**The capacity for fast response to fire needs a very major increase with local fire fighting groups given more capacity for on-ground fast response AND for water-bombers to be locally available in the fire risk season for each area.** Funding should come from State, federal and local governments for this.

Military forces should be transferred for training and action to greatly assist in this work.

#### **RECOVERY: POST FIRE RESPONSE**

**Post fire response also needs a major increase in funding for weed control, fauna rescue, feral animal control, and vegetation restoration so that this work takes place immediately and collaboratively post fire by land managers, LGAs and community volunteers.**

This should be done collaboratively with the respective Friends groups where these exist.

**SOUTH WEST FOREST REGION OF WA**

The annual prescribed burn target of 200,000 hectares in the 2.25 million hectares of the south-west forest regions managed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions must be abandoned, and instead indicators developed that relate directly to the achievement of risk mitigation. The target is not evidence based.

Instead:

- A. Concentrate on protection close to assets.
- B. Protect and increase amount of long unburnt forest.
- C. Provide greatly increased resources on detection and attack to extinguish fires quickly.

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

The above comments are made by me as the Chairperson of the Urban Bushland Council WA Inc. The Council is an association of 76 member groups and 80+ individual supporters with a common interest in the conservation and protection of bushland in or associated with urban areas in WA. Most are Friends groups which help care for their patches of bushland. On-ground activities on public lands especially weeding (and fire risk reduction) and restoration are key activities, as are guided walks, awareness raising and advocacy of our unique, species rich biodiverse woodlands and wetlands. Collaboration with conservation land managers is critical.

**EXCESSIVE FIRE ISSUES IN URBAN BUSHLAND**

Excessive fire has long been an issue in the south west of WA including the Swan Coastal Plain and south west forests. With the increasing incidence of unplanned fires, in **August 1995**, the Urban Bushland Council held a very successful two day Conference '**Burning our Bushland**' which was officially opened by the Hon. John Day MLA representing the State Minister for the Environment, The Hon Peter Foss MLC. Many community groups and government agencies including fire authorities participated. Arson was the subject of a session. The proceedings were published by the Urban Bushland Council WA Inc. 1995.

As a result of the Conference where all parties were brought together for the first time, many good collaborative initiatives to prevent fires developed. Initiatives lead by Mr Richard Robertson of FESA were much appreciated in the following years.

A follow up **Burning Issues workshop** with the support of FESA was presented by the Urban Bushland Council on **8<sup>th</sup> November 2002** with proceedings published. Collaborative initiatives by FESA and Friends groups and others had developed, but it was recognised more work is still needed.

In the last 30 years, climate change has progressed. Now the south west of WA is at a 'tipping point' as temperatures have already increased by an estimated 1.6 degrees centigrade, and average rainfall has decreased by ~25- 30%, with much more variable weather. In 2019, Perth's rainfall was 100mm less than average.

The increased fire risk from spread of dry grassy weeds on the Swan Coastal Plain and the inadequate control of arson are key issues which require much more government attention – with substantially increased funding. **Note that prescribed or planned burning is not the answer.**

#### **BIODIVERSITY LOSS IN SOUTH WEST GLOBAL HOTSPOT**

We wish to emphasise to the Royal Commission that our WA South West biodiversity hotspot is already under increased threat from climate change and increased fire as well as continued clearing and other pressures.

Further, we submit to the Royal Commission that this requires a substantial shift by the Commonwealth Government to adequately fund (including via joint Federal-State sharing arrangements) the active conservation of our BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT by:

- Altering the paradigm such that Australian natural areas are understood and appreciated for their intrinsic values as well as environmental services.
- Upskilling of land managers (public and private) in best practice land management that holds healthy and vigorous nature as key (eg to mitigating climate change, to population wellbeing)
- Extension of knowledge and understanding of natural areas and their values and contribution to the wider community (children, families, community, businesses, visitors).

Proper, sustained management of bushland and wetland areas and their public promotion will be a huge benefit not only for nature but for the people of WA and visitors alike.

The Australian Government's leadership in this area is critical to the long term survival of healthy, self replicating areas of natural bushland and wetland. Australia needs them.

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Do you intend to provide supporting material?

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.

**9. Do you agree to your submission being published? (Mandatory)**

Yes, I agree to my submission being published in my name

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:

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