

Submission

I own and operate a livestock and cropping property east of Coonabarabran in north western NSW. I have been a member of my local Bushfire Brigade and then RFS all my working life. Have held positions of Brigade Captain, Group Captain and more lately NSW Farmers Association representative on the BFMC (Bush Fire Management Committee) for the RFS [REDACTED] which consists of the Local Government areas of [REDACTED].

Our area suffered a major fire in 2013 when a fire that originated in the Warrumbungle national Park burnt out 95% of the park area and a significant area of private land surrounding the Park.

Over 50 homes, farm infrastructure, fencing and livestock were destroyed. The fire was referred to as the Wambelong fire.

Prior to that fire our [REDACTED] BFMC would meet twice a year, listen to reports from various agencies, including NPWS, Forestry, RFS and Local Government and then all go back home. it was basically ineffective in stopping any future fire especially the Wambelong fire.

After the fire I realised our BFMC had basically failed in its duty of care. After some discussion we established what is known as our Sub Committee which deals with firetrails and hazard reduction in an advisory role to our BFMC. It basically consists of reps from RFS, Local Government (Chair) RFS Volunteers, NSW Farmers, NPWS, Forestry and Crown Lands.

It has developed into a practical and cooperative body. It has mapped firetrails and tracks used during the Wambelong fire and other fires since, and hopefully in the future will lead to a more comprehensive and effective firetrail network plus hazard reduction throughout our area of responsibility.

I recommend to the Royal Commission that it consider advising BFMC's to establishing similar advisory body.

Our area since mid 2017 has been through an unprecedented drought period which left our paddocks bare. 600mm is considered our annual average rainfall. In 2018 we recorded 293mm followed by 316mm in 2019. Since mid January 2020 until April 10th we have recorded over 420mm. such climate variability can cause a huge fire hazard.

Our district was bare basically long fallowed. The rain since mid January has created a huge growth of summer weeds and grass. By rotational grazing with big numbers of livestock I am attempting to reduce a future fire hazard. Areas ungrazed such as our Shire roadsides, public land, national parks etc will become a major fire hazard in twelve to eighteen months' time.

This brings me to the subject of hazard reduction and species conservation on our public land. The vast majority of the area devastated by bushfire this summer was along the Great Dividing Range corridor from Queensland through NSW and into Victoria. What needs to be taken into account is that prior to the establishment of this huge national park network the majority of this country used to be grazed. Not only was it grazed, areas of it were often cool burnt by the leaseholders. They would still sometimes have fires but not the devastating events we have witnessed this summer.

The devastation to our wildlife on public land in particular must run into the millions killed of various species. The NSW State Government has come out with a Koala SEPP designed to protect Koalas on private land.

The loss of human life, homes and livelihoods is tragic. What has to be realised by this Royal Commission is the money raising music festivals, charity donations and Koala SEPPs are only treating the symptom **We have to fix the problem.**

I believe in many areas of our national park estate the combination of grazing and cool burning could greatly reduce the ferocity and intensity of wildfire, it could have many native species incapable of escaping the flames of wildfire.

What had been the Pilliga State Forest is to the west of Coonabarabran. Prior to the majority of the Pilliga becoming a National Park, Forestry carried out a survey of the Koala population. They stopped counting at 30,000. Since then national parks have had a series of hot fires go through their new areas of responsibility and thousands of Koalas have perished. This Royal Commission must not allow the loss of human life, homes, livelihoods and native species driven to the point of extinction to continue.

There are excellent examples of land management and hazard reduction to be analysed. One is the HI Fire Project at Snowy Plains on the eastern side of Kosciuszko National Park. These combinations of burning and grazing procedures have proved to be most effective.

The Blue Mountains area west of Sydney is notorious for houses being lost in bushfires. I know a RFS Captain at [REDACTED] who has been heavily involved in a community hazard reduction plan, which has been in operation for 68 years. In that time only 1 house has been lost, and not by fault of the brigade.

The areas were being hazard reduced on a 7 to 8 year cycle, but has now been forced out to a 12 year time frame by interference from the environmentalists within the RFS. One block of country has not been burnt for 19 years as RFS will not give permission on "environmental" grounds. Brigades are being manipulated not to burn.

Another issue relevant to the Blue Mountains area is the practise of placing fire trucks on "property protection". In that area there are 30,000 houses within 100 metres of scrub so the practise of "property protection" is feasible in such a situation.

However the practice must change out in rural areas. RFS and NPWS must be made to realise the value of private land infrastructure, machinery, livestock and what it means to the livelihood of farmers, the retention of their asset base. The main aim must be to pull up the fire.

The conduct of the WAMBELONG FIRE BOUGHT OUT A NUMBER OF ISSUES. Residents in peri urban areas were given very short notice to get out of the path of the fire. Farmers need time to muster livestock out of inaccessible country and establish fire breaks around farm infrastructure. A "Livestock and Property Alert" needs to be issued to property owners who potentially may be in the path of the fire.

On the afternoon the Wambelong fire started the water bombing aircraft had run out of fuel, the fire was not contained and landowners adjacent to the Park were not alerted. Had they been alerted they

could have been on bike or horseback in their high country next to the Park by daybreak the next morning and a lot of livestock that perished could have been saved.

On a lot of our public land in NSW there is a definite shortage of suitable firetrails. A Group Captain [REDACTED] stressed the need for better firetrails after having major problems in the Goobang National Park.

As a result of his effort to lobby for better firetrails a system of firetrail specifications and a mosaic hazard reduction program was supposedly rolled out across the State as part of Risk Management Plans in each RFS Zone. However to my knowledge very little has progressed. This needs to be pursued as without adequate firetrails hazard reduction programs cannot be conducted efficiently and safely.

In the case of the Warrumbungle National Park due to the rugged nature of the park, some of the firetrails have to be on neighbouring private land.

In this case the taxpayer should pay for both the construction and maintenance of the firetrail, particularly where it is of strategic value protecting other farming and grazing enterprises, hobby farms, villages, towns and public infrastructure beyond the firetrail.

There are substantial areas of land that are not NPWS or Forestry, but are government instituted land areas that can still pose a major fire hazard. Government must be responsible for these lands which includes Water NSW, Military, Mining Companies and Environmental Carbon Credit areas.

The managers of these lands need to be made responsible for their fuel load management and be capable of putting firefighting staff and equipment onto a fire ground.

In the case of a wild fire RFS would still take control of the fire, as is the current procedure.

If our State continue to have big fires like this last summer they cannot depend entirely on volunteers to fight all the fires.

This is where deployment of defence forces could be employed. Many of the trucks used to carry troops and supplies could be easily fitted with slip on tanks and pumps.

Climate variability we can live with but without sensible network of firetrails and hazard reduction by grazing and burning, we cannot control management of our public land.

Regards

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]