



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

phone or 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

- 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	██████████
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?

The Rural Fire Service fire fighting response, within the severe resource limitations they suffered, worked amazingly well. The NSW RFS's Fires Near Me app, emergency warnings sent to mobile phones, SES and police response in closing roads, evacuating homes, etc all worked very well, given the overwhelming events of New Years Eve and the following weeks. The subsequent mobilisation and coordination of emergency personnel subsequently also appeared to work very well.

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

The lack of preparedness for the scale of the fires we experienced on New Years Day and afterwards was obvious to all of us who lived through this experience. The local RFS did not have enough people or trucks to prevent the huge loss of property that day. They did not appear to be working with professional fire fighters based in nearby urban areas. It was a miracle more lives were not lost given the very late notice many people I know received and lack of fire fighting resources on the ground that day. The volunteers did a magnificent job, but this disaster response should not be left to volunteers alone in future.

Obviously the loss of power and telecommunications early in the morning of New Years Eve was a severe problem for fire fighters and emergency service personnel and subsequently for service stations. We lack an emergency back-up power or telecoms network for such emergencies.

On 31 December and the following days, scores of thousands of people were trapped on the coastal strip of the South Coast without enough fuel to get to safety, and could have been cut off by fires closing all roads. We could have had an humanitarian disaster if the fires had kept burning to the coast on New Years Eve or in the following week or so, as was a real possibility. Only a chance wind change prevented this on 31 December.

**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?**

The RFS needs more financial support to purchase trucks and equipment and to recruit volunteers. This should be funded from a levy on rates, not through donations. Urban fire services are not staffed by volunteers or funded by donations. The RFS needs to coordinate closely with professional firefighters in nearby urban areas. I know that in the years following the 1967 Tasmanian Bushfires, which I also experienced at close hand, the Tasmanian Government unified the command structures, uniforms, equipment and training of the volunteer and professional firefighting services in that State. This has greatly enhanced their capacity to fight major fires. NSW and other states should learn from and follow their experience. Such strengthening of the RFS should be paid for by a permanent increase in rates, just as urban fire services are funded by consolidated State revenue.

Australia needs to establish a parallel emergency power and telecoms network that will continue to operate, at least for emergency responders and essential services, during such disasters. We are expected to have more droughts, fires, storms, floods and tidal surges in coming decades. We need to prepare for these now.

Service stations must be required to hold generators on their premises so they can continue to pump fuel if the power system is damaged. The government should pay for or subsidise these if necessary.

Sea evacuation plans, involving all available local and navy vessels, should be drawn up in the event of future disasters of this magnitude. I know the Secretary of the Bermagui Surf Club, an initial evacuation point, contacted local fishing boats to ready them for a possible sea evacuation on New Years Eve. Fortunately they weren't needed, but such a situation must be planned for in future, not left to proactive volunteers to initiate in an emergency situation. We do not want to see scenes such as occurred in Greece in 2019. This could easily have happened here.

Finally, recovery efforts have also been uncoordinated, inadequate and excessively dependent on dedicated volunteers and charities. Some charities have not released funds in a timely or coordinated manner. Government assistance has been mainly directed at businesses and farms

which lost assets in the fire. It has failed to assist many families who have lost their homes and are uninsured or significantly underinsured. Possibly about half of those who lost their homes or equipment for earning their income appear to have no or inadequate insurance. These families and individuals are the worst affected by the recent fires. Four months on, many families on the South Coast are camping on their land, sometimes living in donated caravans, in the COVID-19 lockdown and with winter approaching. Some have no means of rebuilding, so risk remaining homeless. No government assistance and limited charity aid is assisting this group.

The NSW Government needs to determine how many people are affected in this way and whether it's fiscally possible, perhaps in conjunction with the charities, to give each uninsured family or individual \$150,00 to \$200,000 to build a basic cottage on their land. In the past, many states have provided assistance of this nature after disasters of this magnitude.

To remove the future risk to taxpayers from people opting out of home insurance because of the potential availability of such payments, a compulsory levy should be added to rural property rates for people who do not take out adequate home insurance. This levy should be designed to yield sufficient revenue to provide uninsured ratepayers \$150,000 to \$200,000 if they totally or substantially lose their homes. Those who are adequately insured should not have to pay this levy. This could work in a similar way to the Medicare levy, and the tax rebate given to people who take out private health insurance. It also has a policy parallel with compulsory green slip car insurance, whereby governments have decided it is in the public interest for drivers to be required to take out insurance to pay for health costs due to injuries they cause to other road users.

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

I'm very glad you extended the deadline for submissions. Many people down on the South Coast are too traumatised by the fires followed closely by COVID-19 to have prepared inputs earlier

#### 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

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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](mailto: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

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