



Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Submission Cover Sheet

This cover sheet has been prepared by the Commission's public contact team to accompany a submission.

Person completing cover sheet

1. **Staff member name** [REDACTED]
2. **Date completed** 11.06.2020
3. **This cover sheet has been completed based on:**
 - details contained in the submission
 - a phone call with the person making the submission
 - an email from the person making the submission
 - Other (provide details) -

Submission details

4. **Full name** Dr Ethlyn Trapp
5. **Email** [REDACTED]
6. **Telephone**
7. **Preferred method of contact** not stated
8. **Is the submission based on:**
 - primarily based on their personal situation.
 - primarily based on their professional knowledge, qualifications or experience, or on behalf of a group or organisation
9. **If the person is making the submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation:**

If the submission based on personal experience:

10. **What was their personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? Choose all that apply.**
 - were not living in an area affected by bushfire
 - were in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and didn't suffer personal or financial loss
 - lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, but didn't suffer personal or financial loss
-

- lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, and I suffered personal or financial loss
- part of the emergency response as a fire fighter on the ground
- part of the emergency response as an aerial fire fighter
- part of the emergency response as health professional
- part of the emergency response as an Australian Defence Force member
- part of the emergency response as a Commonwealth or State government employee
- assisted the emergency response as a community support volunteer
- assisted the emergency recovery (i.e. after the fire event) as a community support volunteer
- Other – stayed to defend property and suffered financial loss

11. Where does the person live:

Local Government Area	Choose an item.
Town name	Kangaroo Valley
Post code	2577

If the submission is based on professional experience

12. 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

All submissions

13. Does the person agree to their submission being published?

- Yes, agree to the submission being published in their name
 - Yes, agree to the submission being published anonymously
 - No, does not agree to the submission being published
-

The fires started in, I think, August 2019 and they were a long way away from us. As the summer passed the fires got closer and closer and by Christmas we knew that at some time they were going to hit us. They had devastated huge tracts of land, millions of hectares.

We had Rebecca and Gatis and the kids (Sienna and Sacha) at the farm for Christmas and then they were going to Jervis Bay for New Year and early January. We were supposed to go with them but declined on the basis that there was far too much preparation to do. We also pleaded with them to go back to Sydney and safety, advice they chose not to take. They ended up being evacuated from Jervis Bay and made it home safely.

The fires were in our vicinity on New Year's Eve, the weather was stinking hot and very windy but we were spared that night. So we used the time to prepare.

Preparations were extensive and thank God we had help from Ashleigh (my niece) and her partner Tony and friends Damien (Damo) and John. They worked like Trojans. We cut down all the trees at the rear of the house except one palm tree I had brought when we moved from Sydney, but I figured it wouldn't burn anyway (and I was right). We cleaned out all the gutters and filled socks with sand to block them so we could fill the gutters with water and Geoff capped the outlets as well. The water tank next to the house was shielded with sheets of tin to prevent it melting. Geoff used the backhoe to dig big holes in the paddock and buried all the explosive/flammable stuff like gas bottles and petrol tanks and all our important papers like the deeds to the property. Also included was my *vast* jewellery collection. I said why? to my darling as I do not have anything of value but he insisted. So a plastic bag full of costume jewellery got buried as well. All the vehicles (cars, utes, tractors etc.) were put in the paddock spaced well apart so they wouldn't set each other alight. Also Geoff put a ladder so we could get up in the roof cavity if needed and placed fire extinguishers up there.

The horses were given a good feed and water and then had halters and fly masks taken off so they wouldn't get burns. Their tails we cut to knee length so that a grass fire couldn't set them alight. We made sure all the internal gates were opened and the external gates firmly locked. The last thing we would need is horses running on the roads in the dark in a panic.

The RFS (Rural Fire Service) and the local ABC radio station kept us up to date. The service was fantastic. We had had a meeting with our local fireys and the fire captain was very blunt. "If you choose to stay and defend, you are on your own, we will not be able to get to you in the middle of the fire storm". Obviously, being on a farm, we are well out of town and there is one road in and out. As it turned out, Geoff and I, our immediate neighbours, Virginia and Steve and Phil down the road were the only people who stayed to fight. Everyone else in Jack's Corner Road evacuated – or so we thought.

We had bought suitable fire resistant shirts and pants and respirators. Richard and Kinga (friends whose property was not defensible) gave us their fire pump and hose. Damien (also indefensible) gave us a pump to go with one mobile water tank and we had another. So, in total, our fire fighting resources were pretty good – a swimming pool next to the house with a fire pump/hose and two mobile water tanks with pumps on trailers hitched up to vehicles. We also had generators for when the fire caused the electricity to fail.

We gave Steve and Virginia CB radios so we could stay in contact and help each other if necessary.

I should point out for those of you who have not seen our property, we have big open paddocks in front of and behind the house. We were quite confident we could defend the house from ember attacks. We were extremely well prepared and getting excellent updates from the RFS website. On January 4 we were informed that the fire would hit us at 20:00 (8pm) EST. They were spot on – it hit at 19:45.

We have some neighbours who phoned, maybe half an hour before the fire was due, and asked what we were doing. We said that we were staying and asked what their preparations were. The answer was none, they didn't even have a garden hose! It seemed to be too late for them to evacuate, so Geoff told them to come to our house where at least they had a chance of survival and could lend a hand.

They arrived dressed in sandals and the lady in question was wearing a synthetic kaftan with bare shoulders. Geoff told them to park their van in the paddock, well away from any other vehicles. I gave said lady my fire resistant shirt and tried to fit a pair of boots on her but that wasn't going to happen with her swollen feet and ankles, so sandals it was. I wore a cotton T-shirt. So said lady was plonked outside the back door with a garden hose and big garbage bins full of water with adjacent buckets. Said man was plonked in the driveway with one of the mobile water tanks and hose with the object being that he would prevent any fire coming up the tree lined driveway. Geoff was manning the big fire hose and I was the roving backup for everyone.

Then the fire hit. I was standing outside the back door of the house next to said lady, with us both armed with garden hoses. The force of the fire front almost knocked me off my feet and the world was a miasma of red filled with flying embers – bits of glowing whatever moving at tremendous speed. Interestingly I don't recall any sensation of heat but have heard on several occasions that these sorts of fire fronts can get up to 2000° C. Said lady and I aimed our hoses at anything that looked like landing on the house and there were some big chunks of burning wood flying around. At one point I looked at the red cloud with the flying bits in it and thought that we wouldn't survive this horror. However, the important thing was to stop embers setting light to the house, so we just kept going. After a period of time – no idea how long – maybe an hour – the fire storm had passed and the world was on fire. Everywhere you looked there were trees, round yards, fences, shit.

Geoff was out the front with the big guns – the real fire hose – and hosing down the garage and the shed as well as the house. The chicken coop was on fire. We'd let the chickens out earlier but had no idea whether or not they survived. Our one cow, very obese, black Tansy was standing on the far side of the shed getting sprayed with water from Geoff. We had no idea how the horses were doing and were particularly worried about Tiny, our miniature horse. He is old, with Cushings disease and the consequent arthritis and not very mobile. I didn't think he would survive.

I'd like to backtrack here a little, when we went to the fire shop to buy the fire resistant clothing, they had very little stock left as the fires had been raging all up and down the east coast and everyone was getting what equipment they could. We got respirators – mine a full face mask and Geoff's was goggles and mouth piece – and clothing. Easy to get stuff to fit the skinny man but I have gained weight with old age and I took what was left, a 3XL men's shirt (I'm not that fat!) and a pair of pants which were a little tight around the waist. As the fire approached on the Saturday we donned our fire resistant clothing. For me the shirt was far too big, but I rolled up the sleeves, so that was fine. The pants on the other hand were

uncomfortable. I could do them up but it wasn't great. I wandered around in these too tight pants for a while and then decided I couldn't stand it and got a pair of scissors and cut the waist band – big mistake! I got an old tie of Geoff's to hold everything together. A belt buckle could cause a burn, so that wasn't an option. What else wasn't an option was underwear because I didn't know if any of my knickers were 100% cotton and synthetics can melt, so I went commando, as they say. Cotton sports bra was fine.

Of course, I came unstuck as the evening progressed. Every time I bent over to pick up a hose or whatever, the cut I had made in the waistband extended somewhat. By the time the fire front had passed, I had a split running right down the back of my leg to just below the knee. This meant that every time I bent down I was exposing a 70 year old butt to the world. I thought it was very funny but when I showed said butt to said lady, she didn't react. Must have been in shock.

For those of you with sensibilities regarding elderly lady's bums, you will be glad to know that after the fire front passed, I went and put on some bamboo track pants – which I figured would be somewhat fire retardant. But by that time, things had settled down, the world was on fire but the fire wasn't moving around us anymore. It was travelling up to Bundanoon and Wingelo where it caused terrible damage.

This gave me the opportunity to go around the front of the house and see how the men were going. .

Early in our planning stage, we agreed that we could not save the barn and the accommodation because we simply didn't have the resources. We decided that we would try to save the house and surrounds but did not have the capacity to do more.

Here we are, in the middle of the fire, mind you things had settled down and everything was burning quietly and there was not the issue with embers, and I go looking for Geoffrey to see if he's alright. I couldn't find him anywhere.

So for the first time since the fire hit, I panicked. I looked down to the barn, about 150 m away, and could see flames licking up the front of the building. "YOU BASTARD" I said as I ran down to the barn calling out for Geoffrey. The minilodges were on fire, the fences were on fire, but not the barn itself at this point. I ran around the complex, calling for him. Finally I heard his voice – he was in the middle of the barn which was going to go up in smoke at any point. For some strange reason I didn't yell at him. I just said I don't want to lose you too, so please come out, you can't save it. He did as I asked, thank god, because not long after the building exploded. The noise was so loud that Steve, next door – and next door is quite far away - called on the CB to see if we were ok. We were but the barn wasn't. The explosions continued through the night. And in it burnt all Geoffrey's tools, about 50 saddles, including my beautiful German Kieffer dressage saddle and a handmade Sid Hill Aussie stock saddle as well as 20 years of horse and accommodation bits and pieces, including a painting Rhett and I had bought as a wedding present from Dad. Sad stuff.

About midnight I put our two neighbours to bed, there was nothing for them to do and they were just worrying about the state of their home. Geoffrey and I took 2 hour shifts monitoring the fires, especially those in the driveway, as that was closest to the house and after all we'd been through, we didn't want the house to catch fire because we were snoozing.

In the morning, when our guests wanted to go see the damage to their home, we took them down the road. What a horrible sight. All black. No animals, no green. I went ahead of the cars and dragged burnt kangaroos off the road. We had to chainsaw a few trees off the road with the help of Steve but got through and found that their home was untouched. The fire had changed direction and missed them entirely. We carried on into town. You know, you don't think that people care that much but nobody knew if we were still alive and the whole bloody town had to give us a hug when they discovered we were alive and unharmed – a bit dirty though.

Not only were we alive and unharmed, the dogs were fine, all the horses were ok – a few cases of bronchitis from smoke inhalation – fat cow was unharmed, Tiny was very sore but ok, and we still had three chickens left.

Over the next few days we had nonstop visitors: people bringing food and water for the animals, food and water for us, veterinarians came to check the animals, police came to check for injured/missing persons and the RFS came to put out smouldering fires – it was unasked for and despite all the pain and difficulty, we found what an amazing community we live in. The support from the community, and especially our friends and family, has been unbelievable and we are so grateful.

Two days after the fire, we were in town and a sudden downpour hit. Intense rain went on for about 15 minutes and then just stopped. We cheered and said that the rain would put out the fires. What we didn't realise is that the volume of water in such a short period would cause landslides. When we got home, we found the top soil and burnt vegetation on the mountains had slid down the hills into the dams, which were now full of black sludge!

Needless to say we are slowly dealing with the messes – the barn and accommodation have been demolished. Blaze Aid (a volunteer group) have replaced all our external fences at no cost to us which is truly amazing and we are slowly replacing the internal fencing. And this means that we are finally getting rid of all the barbed wire – horrible stuff! The trees are getting green and even the Canadian maple survived, along with a pomegranate and a kaffir lime tree. I am constantly amazed at how plants can cope with abuse – my roses look better than ever after being singed.

We've had a tough time these last few months:

- Geoffrey drove over Mable, our 15 year old puppy, which led to a \$5000 vet bill and a hip replacement – astonishingly she came out of it with just a luxated (dislocated) hip which would not stay in place, hence the joint replacement. This happened while he was roaring around prepping for the fire.
- The fire hit, barn etc - gone.
- Landslide hit – no potable water for kilometres, so we had to set up water stations for the animals – wild and domestic.
- Some jerk got hold of Geoff's credit card details and went on a spending spree.
- My gorgeous brother died.

- Went down to Nowra (nearest urban centre) and the ute died.
- Covid19 hit!
- The eagles got the poor chickens that had survived the fire.

All things considered, we think ourselves pretty lucky. We have had so much help from family and friends and our community, it's quite humbling. Geoffrey has been able to replace a lot of his tools. All our animals are safe (bar a few chickens), we are safe and now we have heaps to do in our retirement: build a new barn, improve the gardens, fix fences, clean out the dams..... Its endless but we will get there! Thank you all.

XX

Dr Ethlyn Trapp

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