



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** 10.05.2020
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** James Travers-Murison
5. **Email** [REDACTED]
6. **Telephone** [REDACTED]
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

11. Where does the person live:

Local Government Area

Choose an item.

Town name

Post code

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
-

BUSHFIRE SUBMISSION ROYAL COMMISSION INTO NATIONAL NATURAL DISASTERS 2020

9 June 2020

Dear Royal Commissioners,

I request to submit my submission late. I request submissions be extended as the Northern Rivers meeting NSW Enquiry into the Disaster was only on 4 May and due to various reasons relating to my personal health I have not been able to put keypad to screen till now.

I will submit now my submission. But may need further time as I am dealing with the NSW RFS over this still.

My story –

I was caught in November 7 when the bushfire struck Nymboida. A fire had been burning for some time up in the hills about 30 kms away. It appeared under control. I was monitoring Fires Near Me app every day. No alerts had been given more than usual.

Friday morning at about 10, an RFS truck told me to evacuate as fire was out of control and coming from Dundurrabin area. They said it was too big to defend. But I could stay if I wished.

My house is all wood two storey and has no fire bunker. I followed plan to evacuate when the fire got close. I began bushfire plan with only 4 hours to implement. I immediately began moving the designated items to be saved to car. This took 2 hours. Then I spent two hours hooking up the roof sprinkler system, pumps, cleaning away all debris and burnables from near house, watered down garden round house and sprayed down house with hose. The lawns had been raked already of leaves. This took 2 hours. I evacuated at 2 pm switching on the roof sprinklers. Checking neighbours safety. I had no room to take them but I was told neighbour without car was being dealt with Her name was Justine.

I went to a motel in Grafton and watched on Sentinel and news developments. I saw on Sentinel the fire move into Nymboida about 6 pm. At about 2 am I saw it on my house. I thought that was it. Next day I went to Church and stayed the night with a friend. Then on Sunday went back in the afternoon after checking if trees were cleared with RFS. The area after Coutts looked like a bomb had hit it after I got through the blockade. Black smouldering, still some fire, trees down everywhere. Some half burning across the Armadale Road. Similarly on Glens Creek Road. At my drive I met a police car who told me my orchard had gone but house safe and sheds. I entered the property skirting fallen

trees. Two thirds of my fruit trees were burnt out, most of the mangos from mulch catching fire. Irrigation pipes had burnt. Fire had burnt all reeds round the dam which was near empty. Amazingly the house was untouched. 15,000 litres emptying the top concrete tank had gone over it. Slowly sprayed out over about 14-18 hours which likely saved the house as if it had been a top high power system it would have emptied all the water and run out of fuel in about 2-3 hours, and the fire didn't come till 12 hours after I left and would have been flaring for quite a few hours after that. Nevertheless sheds without sprinklers survived with the bushfire burning within meters. The house is surrounded by trees 25 meters away. The house is on a hill slope. Fortunately a ridge protected from the winds and the fire came down over the ridge so didn't burn up the slope. So this also saved it. A shed up the hill lost some struts. A miracle had occurred. All but one other neighbour burnt down and he lost his shed. All I lost was two thirds of my orchard.

I stayed for two weeks often wearing a mask even at night as I tried to sleep due to the continuing smoke. I cleared up as much as I could to prevent fire restarting and evacuated for 3 weeks. I had to get RFS in to clear the trees so I could get out of here. And I had to cut my way back in through fallen trees when I returned.

I had been 3 years in Nymboida and was a city person from Melbourne without much idea of owning a property in the bush. I was a tax lawyer at Sly & Weigall, E&Y Melbourne and KPMG London, then photojournalist, school teacher and for a bushchange was trying to start up a small yoga retreat here. Due to a nerve damage from a hernia operation I was not fully mobile at the time of the fires.

1. Causes and contributing factors –

- i. **Global Warming** made me aware that this was likely to happen. Winters had been drier and hotter than ever before. I was expecting this. Though locals all told me I was wrong and Victorian style crown fires that moved fast in dry hot conditions didn't happen in the wet subtropic summers.
- ii. 2019 was **third year in a row of very dry hot winter with fires breaking out in July**. The previous year bad fires had broken out nearby on old Glen Innes road and I had been prepared to evacuate. Bad fire was up in the hills for months from July in 2019. It seemed under control by October and no concern in November.
- iii. No alerts were being given and I had stopped my preparations to upgrade the roof sprinkling system. I did not think there was a concern in early November. Not even that day. **CLEARLY RFS HAD FAILED to give ADEQUATE WARNING ABOUT THE RISKS OF A HUGE FIRE COMING** from the hills because they didn't expect it could move that fast. I did hear that they evacuated the local primary school in Nymboida on Wednesday, but I heard nothing about this until after the fire. RFS must have been aware of the dangers. **BUT THEY DID NOT COME ROUND EARLIER and NO ALERTS WERE** given to defend or evacuate. Had this been done I could have removed the

mulch or wetted it round my trees and saved the orchard. ALERTS SHOULD HAVE BEEN GIVEN INCLUDING CALLS a week before given they new the bad weather with very hot dry strong winds coming from the fire towards Nymboida. They didn't do that. NOT EVEN A DAY BEFORE even when they had told the school evacuate. THIS IS VERY BAD by the RFS.

- iv. **HUGE PILES of leaf litter were accumulating from decades of never having had fire ever** in the area of houses in Nymboida. There had been fires in the forests and national parks nearby but not near houses. I had spoken to locals and RFS about the need for hazard reduction burns. Only one neighbour whose house survived, Trever, whose wife is in the RFS did a burn. I knew this was a tinder keg waiting to go off. I wanted to organise a burn for my property but was blocked from joining the Nymboida RFS at a vote due to local politics. I had protested this but was told to back off and let people cool down over some incidents where locals had cheated me in selling me the property and wiring in an electric pump. I was told that I didn't know or understand the area and the fire conditions. It wasn't like Victoria.
- v. This leaf litter when it got going burnt very easily and plumed up to 20 meters causing crown fire in parts. Smaller trees on my property were killed due to this as the entire trees burnt. 50% of trees killed. Only ash was left. The fire smouldered for a month after the fire.
- vi. Fires stopped where the bushfire the previous year had burnt through clearly because it didn't have the fuel to keep going. Hazard reduction works.
- vii. It is clear that the **RFS had failed to fully put out the fires in the hills** and were happy for them to smoulder there as long as they were far away from properties. A very bad strategy that allowed in bad windy hot dry weather a firestorm to be created on that day. Given the long range forecast for a summer without rain, this was a disastrous strategy. And spelt the end of Nymboida. A total failure to consider global warming impact creating dry hot windy summers like down south in Victoria. A failure to consider the long range forecast for that summer of no rain. The two combined were lighting a fuse. November 7 was when it exploded.

2. Preparation and Planning Reform

A. HAZARD REDUCTION

- i. RFS or state government and local councils need to have a thorough **regular planned fire hazard reduction program** for all forests in NSW. That includes forests on private land. More so there as that is where the houses are.
- ii. **It needs to be compulsory to hazard reduce** in you live in the bush in forest.
- iii. These need to be done regularly. Every three years. **Timetabled through all private land**, and also state forest and national parks.
- iv. Need to be **done just after the wet in May as the winters are too dry and hot now to safely burn off.**
- v. **Indigenous culture** needs to be considered as to how they controlled fires on large scale.
- vi. **The one property that had done hazard reduction survived apart from mine on [REDACTED] [REDACTED] It must be compulsory because if only one person does it then the fire can still spread onto other people's property through those that have not bothered to do it. They affect everyone else so it has to be compulsory. If it isn't, then a firestorm will happen through all those that fail to reduce. And almost no one in Nymboida including me had done hazard reduction EVER. They won't do it unless it is mandatory.**

- vii. **Difficulties getting permission to hazard reduce in state forest or National Park needs to be lifted and RFS needs to be involved. State law needs to change to remove blocks on this. We lost 40% of NSW forests in these fires which hazard reduction could have saved biodiversity and wild life by halving or more the destruction. Instead spreading out the burning of the forest over many years in a controlled regulated manner.**
 - viii. **Although I support the Green Movement and Global Warming controls, I disagree strongly as a person living in the fire zone that hazard reduction is not necessary. It is. It was failed to be done. And we reaped the consequences. I do agree that it should be done in consultation with Environmentalists and Scientists to ensure it is done in a sustainable manner that reduces as much harm to the environment and biodiversity as possible.**
 - ix. **Fact is lack of hazard reduction long term resulted in devastation to the bush and its biodiversity!**
- B. ALERTS
- i. Fires Near Me app needs redesigning – **alerts need to be set up that ring the phone so you are made aware of them.**
 - ii. **The APP also doesn't show in real time where fires are often is three or four days out. Now fires are moving much faster this is not good enough. Link it to Sentinel Satellite system which is about 3 hours out.**
 - iii. **The APP needs to show wind speed and direction so one can assess the risks.**
 - iv. **The APP needs to show on MAP AREA OF PREDICTED FIRE COMING in another colour with risk % shown.**
 - v. **Alerts need to be much stronger and sooner.**
 - vi. Failure to alert even when schools were evacuated days before shows RFS was not giving alerts. Why? Fix this.
 - vii. **Mobile calls** need to be made sooner, days before advising to prepare or evacuate.
- C. ROOF SPRINKLERS
- i. Must be **compulsory** in the bush, likely saved my house and would have saved many more but I was one of the very few who had one.
 - ii. **Grants need to be given to encourage installation.**
 - iii. Even my cheap low pressure garden hose set up probably saved the house.
 - iv. Thought needs to go into recycling the water on the roof through tank systems linked to it.
 - v. Consideration is needed for evacuation such that the **sprinkler system doesn't start till the fire or embers come.** No point having a system if one is away and cannot start it or evacuate and water is all gone by time fire gets there. Automatic starts by wifi responding to sentinel or some kind of alert that fire is on house or triggered by heat or flame need to be invented. My low pressure system allowed water to still be there when the fires came.
- D. EMBER MESH on gutters and verandas or other areas needs to be compulsory. I had them all installed. House saved.
- E. CLEARING ROUND HOUSE –
- i. **50 meter rule needs to be compulsory for removing almost all trees unless fire resistant variety. In some circumstances on slopes 75 meters.** At the moment only small shrubs and trees can be removed. It took me two years to get permission to clear round the house, this is not good enough. It wasn't done before the fires and I could have lost the house because bush was 25 meters from house on steep slope. It was lucky the fires didn't come from below but along ridge.
 - ii. **You should be allowed to clear to 100 meters if you wish without any need to get permission.** I was threatened with \$50,000 fine per tree if I chopped them down.

Huge waste of time and three gov departments to get permission in a work around with Land Services.

F. FIRE BUNKERS

- i. To save lives fire bunkers need to be subsidised with grants by government and strongly encouraged. It also will save houses as people stay to defend.
- ii. If houses don't meet new fire standards then bunkers need to be compulsory.

G. GLOBAL WARMING

- i. Although Australia's policy on reducing carbon emissions will have zero effect for decades on the fire situation due to the long term global nature of air pollution.
- ii. It needs consideration that IF THE WORLD does not reduce emissions and 3 C rise in temperatures occurs by end of Century this will be a disaster for Australia's bush and forest.
- iii. That means government needs to enforce carbon reduction policies now to prevent this long term catastrophe far worse than the fires we experienced.
- iv. Although Australia cannot do this alone and our changes will not change the world, if we don't set a better example than everyone else then we can't expect those that are poorer than us to prevent this. The fact we are doing worse than the average western nation to reduce carbon means we are setting a terrible example to the world and in fact encouraging the worst of disasters to befall us sooner because poorer countries won't make those necessary changes if we don't lead them to do so. It makes us utter hypocrites to tell them to reduce emissions when we fail to take adequate steps.
- v. Although the commission isn't audited to look into this it should and it needs to make some comment to make clear how important this is to change even if prevented making recommendations.

H. PREVENT BUSH FIRES SMOULDERING

Fires left half burning in the bush national park or state forest or private land, need to be thoroughly put out. Leaving them allowed a fire a long way away to get out of control and destroy Nymboida even up a range. Due to global warming and the change in weather patterns, NSW is going to have fires like Victoria. Dry, hot and windy that burn fast and furious and cover long distances fast. This means from a slight smouldering fire given the worst of weather conditions, this can ignite a fire storm covering 50 kms in a day. RFS needs to change this policy and put them out totally.

3. Response to fire

- A. Housing in bushfire prone areas needs to be more regulated. Tougher building rules.
- B. Clearing round houses needs to be compulsory to 50m and allowed to 100m easily.
- C. Consideration needs to be given to preventing building in very high bushfire risk areas unless fire bunkers present at property to save lives.
- D. Supply of tank water after fires where water lost defending fire should be supplied free by government. And made clear to people it is available.
- E. Removal of burnt fallen trees on access to house even on private land needs to be supplied by government free. I had terrible trouble even on crown roads getting trees removed. Still issues there 6 months after fire. More help needs to be given to people to remove fallen trees on their property. Blaze Aid did little to help on this saying they only did fences. I still have trees to be removed. Tracks blocked, etc.
- F. RFS lacked equipment. No trucks defended any houses on Glens Creek. More equipment and trained people are needed to defend when conditions are very bad. Or ability to

quickly get it there. Including aircraft. None fought that fire that day. The RFS couldn't even defend Nymboida Village with its crews and many simply evacuated. Again regular hazard reduction burns would have slowed the fire down enormously and allowed containment. Nymboida RFS is undermanned and very old. Not up to fighting these fires and the whole RFS needs to be reformed to make it more a professional paid force. The privilege of Australia having so much forests needs to be paid for by the city taxpayers who enjoy it for tourism and that means paying the people who fight and risk their lives in the country.

- G. Aircraft water bombers. Normally these are used to put out fires nearby quite effectively. On November 7 there were none. Why? Fighting fire elsewhere, too windy? Clearly there is a problem.

4. Other matters

A. RFS NYMBOIDA AND MEMBERSHIP METHOD OF JOINING RFS

- i. Local politics often play a role in the club attitude as it is volunteer locals in it. There is also a lot of marijuana abuse in this area which I have objected to strongly. Because I had a consumer affairs dispute with the shoddy workmanship of some of the local tradies, this was deemed grounds to reject my membership and vilify me in the local community. A sort of tyranny rules in Nymboida where one is not allowed to complain against the work of anyone despite the consumer affairs legislation. The RFS won't investigate why members are rejected even when told and simply say it is none of their business and the free right of their members. This isn't good enough, it may be partially democratic, however it is grossly unjust especially where there are only a few members who have dominated the local small community for years.
- ii. **Voting to decide on accepting a new member is unacceptable.**
- iii. It means bias and often corrupt locals can block new members for the wrong reasons.
- iv. **There must be a valid ground for blocking membership. Not just you don't like the person.**
- v. Nymboida has a problem getting members into the RFS and is very old and needs younger members, but due to local politics blocked me, well educated and younger who could help a lot. I couldn't contribute at all to fighting fires to save my property because of this fault in the RFS.
- vi. After the fire I complained to the fire captain in Nymboida, Paul, about all this including the dismal preparation re hazard reduction by the RFS and he didn't respond to several emails, and later said not to join at all ever nor to contact him again. I am now in a process with RFS to resolve this.
- vii. **Volunteers need to be paid for the time and risking their lives.**

- B. **RFS Nymboida is alleged to have started a back burn** up in the hills that week that got out of control and set the valley alight that day. I believe this was **on Liberation trail** possibly in the national park between Nymboida and Dundurrabin. It was done to reduce the chances of a catastrophic shift of the fire in Dundurrabin reaching Nymboida due to the hot winds later that week predicted. That is the rumour which many people have stated including reputable members of the community. I would like this investigated. Given the fire conditions that day and week this should never have been lit, if it was. It certainly finished Nymboida and 95 houses off that might have been saved had the fire higher up in the range been dealt with by the RFS by putting it out at source rather than lighting dangerous back burns and so not left to come down here.

- C. **Slum Bushdwellers.** Many people live in shacks that are right in the bush in very simple unprotected circumstances. Often illegally without DAs. Many got burnt out and had no insurance. Council does not enforce their regulations and remove these people. They allow bushblocks to be sold where people will do this and smoke dope on the dole. **Regulations need to be enacted and enforced on a state level to STRONGLY prevent this habitation from EVER GETTING A CHANCE TO BUILD WITHOUT Das and should be REGULAR COUNCIL CHECKS OF PROPERTIES ANNUALLY WITHOUT NOTICE TO VERIFY NO BREACHES INCLUDING USE OF ARIAL PHOTOGRAPHS .** Often these people are mentally ill and violent. And it is not good for their health living in these circumstances.
- D. **COMPULSORY INSURANCE.** It needs to be compulsory to insure your house if living in high bushfire areas. Too many people up here didn't bother for reasons in C. And then expect the community to look after them or end up in a terrible state often dumping their disorganisation on others to fix.

I thank the Royal Commission for being able to submit this report and hope very much it is duly considered and acted upon as necessary. If there is any way I can further help the enquiry please contact me and if you need to ask me further questions to clarify or wish me to appear at the enquiry, please do so.

Namaste,



James Travers-Murison

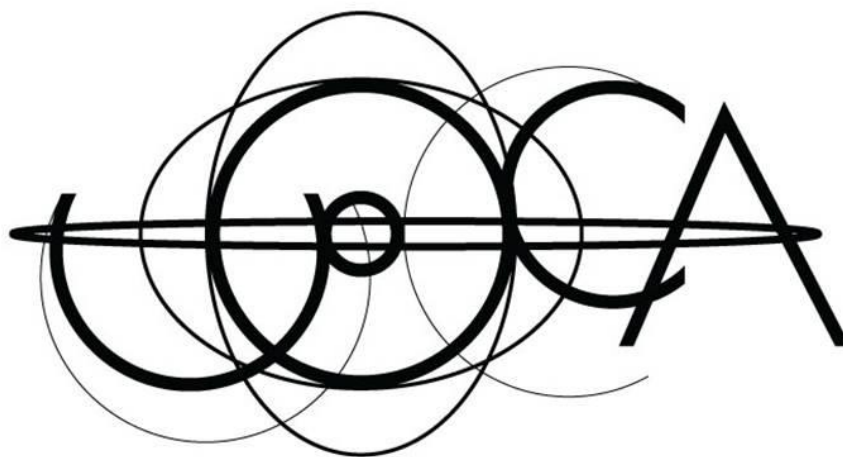
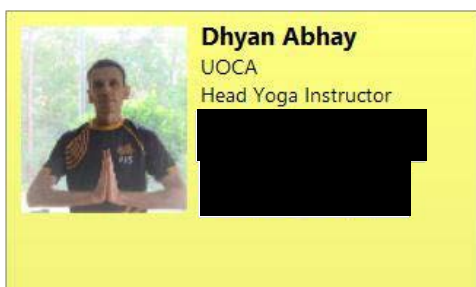
(Dhyan Abhay)

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