

Your details

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Emergency services personnel

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

I am a volunteer fire fighter in a brigade within the Southern Highlands team in Region East. Our brigade assisted with the Green Wattle Creek fire and later the Morton Fire from late November 2019 until January 2020.

-On 19/12/2019 our brigade was to join a strike team and be staged at 1900 hours, instead we were paged at around 1500 hours to respond to Buxton. Initially we 'staged' at Tahmoor Inn to await further tasking with the presumption we would join a strike team. Instead we were tasked on our own to Buxton and told to pick any house we thought we could save. This resulted in us responding to Exeter Road, Buxton, an area we were unfamiliar with. On arrival we realised we had driven straight into the fire at the end of a cul-de-sac. Attempts to save two houses at the end of this road were unsuccessful as we were almost over run by fire. We retreated further up the street and managed to save one home. Throughout the rest of this shift we remained on our own and not part of a strike team. At times it felt like no one was aware of where we actually were and we went without welfare the entire time.

-During back burning operations in the Warragamba catchment area it was evident that there was little to no supervision of less experienced brigades and their lighting patterns. This led to a number of breaches of

containment lines. When issues were raised with the people in charge of the sector there seemed to be little concern.

-On a number of occasions our brigade were well in excess of 16 hours on the fire ground. When these concerns were brought up, given the length of time it would take to actually get out of the fire ground and the mental capacity it took to navigate the dangerous drive out, our concerns were shrugged off and were told to "bring it up with the RFS if you aren't happy" by people who were members of the RFS.

-On two occasions we were paged to respond to areas of the southern highlands (Avoca and Exeter) in the middle of the night, only to arrive and be stood down. On one of these occasions we did join a strike team and set up for property protection on Meryla Road, Manchester Square and were soon told to stand down and to return to station. On both of these occasions it was evident by listening to the scanner that resources were needed much earlier in the evening. It was also evident other brigades were listening to radio communications and self-responding. On both occasions our brigade were required back in the southern highlands for a planned strike team shift. On one of these occasions the crew had approximately 2 hours sleep before heading back out to the fire ground.

-It was evident that many brigades from other districts had little to no experience in the terrains we were working in which hindered efforts to contain spot overs given their reluctance to navigate certain terrains on foot.

-Many times throughout both the Green Wattle Creek and Morton fires radio communication was poor and at times unreadable especially when working great distances away from other brigades in the strike team.

-On several occasions our trucks were taken from our station and either used by other brigades or left unused in different locations when we were able to get crews together to man these trucks ourselves.

-At times I did not have confidence in the sector leaders we were working under. They seemed to have very little knowledge of the task at hand and had little regard for crew safety.

-On a 40 degree day we were asked to cut a hand trail down a steep embankment which we were later told was not needed.

-Our station was open to the public on a number of days to hand out bush fire survival plans and preparedness information however when asked about information relevant to the Green Wattle Creek fire we felt that we were unable to answer their questions confidently as we were unaware of what was happening.

-It was evident that the maintenance of fire trails is not occurring throughout the entire campaign. Trails were completely worn away, collapsed and threatened by falling trees. On a number of occasions we came across trails that were completely blocked by fallen trees or boulders.

-It was evident that fuel loads in several locations were extremely dense contributing to the severity of the fires.

-I found the P2 masks to be insufficient when facing the intensity of the smoke and heat during this fire season. At times I felt like someone was standing on my chest and I was unable to breathe at all. I attended my local hospital on two occasions for suspected smoke inhalation.

-I feel like the messaging to the community in relation to preparedness needs to change. I found many residents still felt like they could stay and defend their properties however until the fire was at their door step they didn't realise the intensity of the fire. Possibly a different approach could be taken rather than a gentle politically correct stance. Interestingly we did see an increase in attendance at our Get Ready Weekend event, with residents sharing concerns about the lack of water available and how cured the grass and bush was at the time. We did share the message with them about leaving early and not staying and defending should a fire start in our local area.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

Supporting documents or images
