

## Your details

---

## Submission details

---

**I am making this submission as**

Emergency services personnel

**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

**Organisation making the submission (if applicable)**

N/A - personal submission

**Your position in the organisation (if applicable)**

n/A

**Consent to make submission public**

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

## Share your experience or tell your story

---

**Your story**

While this submission is provided as a private citizen, I have been employed by various land management agencies for 29 years. This includes over 20 years of fire management and fire fighting experience. I was closely involved in the fire fighting effort this last season.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

---

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

### **1.1 Causes and contributing factors**

In my years of fire management, I have observed worrying trends in fire weather and fire behaviour which are consistent with climate change. E.g. It's only recently that the wildfire seasons in the northern and southern hemispheres overlap, since fire seasons are extending. This has implications for available resources. We would traditionally rely locally on fire seasons to start around October and wind up by the end of February/March. In recent years locally we start wildfire response in August and continue till April. The number of days of Extreme and Catastrophic fire danger ratings are increasing, as are the onerously hot and challenging conditions in which fire fighters are struggling. BFMCs are almost invariably now bringing the statutory bushfire season forward and extending it beyond the usual months.

All this means that we're chasing increasingly more intense wildfires for longer in the year and often when resources should instead be focused on hazard reduction burning; with the "window of opportunity" for safe HR burning becoming more narrow.

Sources of ignition need to be examined along with options to detect and respond to these earlier.

Budgets and resourcing including staff for land and fire management agencies need to be determined on fire management and other on-ground needs for responsible land stewardship. The arbitrary "efficiency dividends" – year-on-year funding cuts – imposed by Treasury are a major constraint. The welcome exception has been the investment in NPWS Enhanced Bushfire Management Program which has been a major success in reducing risks on park, and the recent FAFT funding announcement. These are welcomed, but more is needed.

### **1.2 Preparation and planning**

HR burn targets need to be more strategic and risk based, not blunt hectare targets. The current ambitious hectare-based targets create an incentive for burning larger, remote blocks that are often easier to implement but of lesser value than those that are closer to at-risk assets/populations. Targets need to be set on risk mitigation to life and property, while also recognising the environmental risks of burning outside of appropriate ecological thresholds.

However, there is also value in reducing fuels broadly across the landscape, for instance via aerial ignition of drier ridge tops in more remote areas. This will help protect more fire sensitive vegetation, reduce subsequent ignitions from dry lightning events and make rapid response, e.g. by RART teams, more effective – reducing fire intensity and buying time to respond while the remote fire is small enough to attack from the air.

There need to be greater incentives, resources and acceptance/indemnity for agencies to safely conduct burns outside of normally accepted windows. Appetite for risk, including smoke drift, needs to change. We often see "wildfires" burning with an intensity not unlike many HR burns in times of the year when we wouldn't normally have an appetite for lighting fires. This needs to be examined further, particularly the resources required to safely "push the envelope" for the HR burn season and hence conduct more burns, more safely, for longer in the year. The resources needed to do this safely need to consider the needs of land management agencies to continue to run their day-to-day business while meeting more challenging fuel reduction targets. i.e. Required fire management resources need to be assessed not in isolation from broader land management needs. There is value in ensuring that the land manager is empowered to adequately manage their fire issues, and more risk in separating functions and having external parties manage fire without the same level of local knowledge.

Improved training for volunteer fire fighters would benefit, with many volunteers only part-time and relatively inexperienced. The training regime for volunteers in past years was significantly more thorough than more recently. The bar for accreditation needs to be set higher.

While agencies are working more collaboratively than ever, there are still some inconsistencies in approach and communications. A higher level of integration between fire fighting agencies will help, especially regarding radio communications and standardisation of gear.

See also below on the need to enhance the role of local BFMCS.

### **1.3 Response to bushfires**

There is a need for greater capacity to respond rapidly to a higher proportion of ignitions to suppress wildfires while still a manageable size. This needs resourcing and training for more 'RART' crews and aircraft, more ground crews on standby or patrol, more spotter flights etc. A greater level of preparedness is required more often, but this needs funding and personnel.

The funding model for RFS regional operations should be reassessed. The approach to resourcing fire suppression early after ignition appears to vary, with some RFS regions either reluctant or unable to commit enough resources until a 'Section 44' can be declared and the funding floodgate opens. In the last few years, I have seen several reported fires on private property go unattended for days in the lead up to forecast severe to catastrophic fire weather; apparently due to either a lack of budget/resources to get in early, or a reluctance to interfere on private lands. The inevitable escalation to S44 was then inherited with the associated resources called in to deal with massive fires that could have been nipped in the bud. A funding and empowering response model that provides a step before the need for a S44 would help.

Communication to and from IMTs and ground resources needs to improve, especially regarding tactical decision making, where too much still gets 'lost in translation'. This is a two-way street. There are/were too many instances where local landholders and fire fighters have ignored IMT strategy and taken matters into their own hands. On the other hand, IMTs can be slow to take advice from those on the ground with local knowledge. Both scenarios are problematic. Today's centralised IMT and RFS regional model is not helping this. There is no substitute for face-to-face briefings and the S44 boundaries and regions are currently too large to allow for effective two-way communication.

### **1.4 Any other matters**

It's critical that uninformed popular opinion does not unduly influence decision making. To this end, local BFMCS need to have a higher profile and increased role in tenure-blind and objective decision making. Their role currently is strategic and their greater involvement in hazard reduction planning, implementation and fire management/suppression generally should be enhanced. Likewise, the role of the BFMC as a conduit for information to and from the community and stakeholders. This will help raise awareness and understanding of fire management across the landscape, its influences, constraints and outcomes. There is a need to better inform the community and landholders in bushfire prone areas on fire management generally and how 'the system' works. This will reduce a lot of angst on the ground, where firefighters often deal with highly stressed and sometimes aggressive landholders, and undue influence on on-ground tactics.

In response to illegal sources of ignition – typically rural burn offs at the wrong time with no permit – in recent years locally, RFS and Police follow up of these have greatly reduced the incidence. Rural communities are tight and so most landholders are now more reluctant to just light up whenever they please. There needs to be more of this, but also more encouragement for rural landholders to reduce fuels in responsible ways at the right time of year. On the other hand, I have also reported to RFS suspected ignition causes including during total fire bans that were not followed up with an investigation or even contact with the land holder. In one case the landholder responsible admitted lighting the fire to a firefighter present, but there was no follow-up. Every fire with an unknown ignition source should result in some form of enquiry from authorities.

Special consideration should be given to the important role of RFS Group Captains:

These are the most experienced and knowledgeable of the RFS volunteers. They are often the Divisional Commanders on fires which is one of the most important roles for any fire, equally as important as the IC. The Group Captains perform a critical fire role, often putting in more hours/days than all, and also are the ones who tend to resolve brigade issues, and encourage and mentor new recruits. It is not reasonable to expect this vital 'pressure-cooker' role to be performed by volunteers. There should be a means to compensate these exceptional people.

Re; Potential use of military resources:

This should be considered creatively in more than just extreme circumstances. E.g. Aircraft for more spotter flights, and air support generally. Infra-red/Linescan availability was limited this year – use of military hardware and/or data to detect fire spread and hotspots may have been useful. Patrols during total fire bans and public land closures in extreme weather. Train ADF personnel in basic firefighting at least to crew member level and insert them into existing RFS and other agency crews. This would only generally need a four-day training course, PPE and the will to deploy them. More use of ADF heavy plant. Use the ADF as part of RART crews -- it shouldn't be alien territory to them.

Land use planning and management:

There is obviously an uncomfortably high population living in bushfire prone areas with inadequate property preparation and protection. Given the impact of spot fires/ember attack often kilometres from the fire front, this risk is underestimated. There is a need for: tighter building codes, building protection systems, and to place greater emphasis on personal responsibility and tighter planning regulations in broader areas and not just on the bushland fringe. Incentives are needed for landholders to clean up their own backyards.

The added regulations derived from the Victorian 2009 fires have helped and the RFS 'Bushfire Survival Plan' publicity is a good start, but we need to build strongly on this. The RFS Community Hotspots program is also a great initiative but appears under-resourced. The program needs to actively follow up in targeted communities to ensure the program translates into meaningful change on ground and not just general education.

Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems:

No improvements nor adaptations can be made without adequate resources. There were extensive lessons learned and needs identified in the after-action reviews conducted by each agency. These need funding to make any meaningful change. Funding and resources for RFS regions and land management agencies' operations are key.

There is an obvious role for improved hazard reduction including the use of Cultural burning in protecting and maintaining ecological values while reducing other risks. Adaptation and resilience of ecosystems and communities depend ultimately on the initial health of those systems. Again, this all requires adequate land management funding to give our environment and communities the best possible chance.

Public communication and advice systems and strategies:

Public address systems are now a huge improvement to previous years via both the range of mechanisms used and the nature of messaging. Mobile phone range in some rural areas is a limitation that needs to be addressed by improving the network or finding alternate mechanisms in the meantime.

Re; public awareness:

the fire-fighting roles of, and expertise within land management agencies including the NPWS needs to be promoted for the reasons outlined further above. Likewise, the need for improved awareness amongst landholders and community on fire fighting strategies and incident management structures, the role of the IMT/chain of command, and on ground resources, especially the role of Divisional Commanders from any agency. As above, bushfire prone communities and landholders need a higher level of awareness in all things fire. We need to build on the existing public education initiatives so that fire and risk management is proficient across all tenures.

## **Supporting documents or images**

---