

To the NSW Bushfire Inquiry,

I am writing to express my concern and highlight some of the issues that failed us and the community during the Black Summer fire season, leading to this inevitability.

There is too much emphasis on firefighting during catastrophic conditions and not enough focus on prevention and fuel load management. No number of black hawk helicopters on the hottest, driest day can achieve a better outcome than a much cheaper hazard reduction program conducted in cool conditions. If the window of opportunity for hazard reduction is reducing, more effort needs to be made during the winter months and above targets achieved in suitable years, with the assumption that less may be achieved in future years. There is no excuse for not keeping fire trails and fire breaks maintained. If there is less time for hazard reductions to take place, there should be more time and resources available for other forms of fire mitigation.

There is a real need for locally based hazard reduction burns at appropriate times of the year, at local brigade level. It seems that having lost council based, locally run fire brigades there is now a correlation between the bureaucracy of state based RFS and other conservation departments (Crown Lands, NPWS, etc) and these mega fires, including Black Saturday and Black Summer. Cool burns are safer for the forest, wildlife and community. The accumulation of catastrophic fuel loads, leading to mega fires and economic and environmental disasters is in complete contradiction to the conservation ideology.

More money is not the answer. It just creates inefficiencies, but no one seems to care when it is paid for from the taxpayers' pocket, rather than their own. It is almost like a "jobs for the boys" situation. Contractors and machinery operators have been observed hiding in the bush, while still on the hourly rate, to increase their payments. A coordinated, local and accountable approach is needed, not unlimited amounts of money with everyone scrambling to get their share of it. I observed a helicopter coming to drop water on a small area of flames among rocks on the side of a road. Either the area was so small that the water bucket missed its target or the helicopter operator wanted to have justification to receive payment for another load of water, which soon came. This would have to be the most expensive method possible to deal with this situation. There was unobstructed vehicular access to within 1m of the flames and no risk to ground crews because the fire was so small, as rocks are not known to be a significant fuel source. This does not require an expensive helicopter. Ground crews could have simply squirted some water on it as they passed by. Otherwise they may have chosen to ignore it since it was going to go out anyway when it reached the road and concentrate on more meaningful areas.

If temperatures are increasing, effective prevention strategies need to be put in place. No amount of blaming climate change will actually reduce our fire risk in Australia. We cannot expect the Australian government to reduce the pollution production of the world, but government can support strategies to reduce fuel loads and minimise the impact of fire on these catastrophic days and keep our forests and adjoining agricultural lands healthy. CAT 1 tankers should be used in training exercises to conduct hazard reduction in autumn and winter to prepare for wildfires, not parked idle in sheds across the state until the next Royal Commission!

Tough leadership is needed that considers the entire situation, not just the opinions of vocal minorities and lobby groups. The green movement has changed the landscape to black. The intention may be good, but the outcome is not. People who complained that hazard reduction burning was creating smoke and exacerbating breathing problems for a small percentage of the community were left to experience worse air quality than China and Jakarta, with sporting and outdoor activities cancelled and advice to the entire community to stay indoors. There is a need to revisit the history of Australia's vegetation shaping. Regular fires have been part of the landscape for thousands of years, long before firefighting aircraft and machinery were available.

It has been reported that hazard reduction is not the answer, because more hazard reduction has been done in recent times. Perhaps one needs to look a little deeper and wonder if even more is needed to counteract these megafires. Also, how much has the area of conservation lands increased over this time? The overall quantity of fuel loads and ladder fuels is increasing each year. Some areas have not burnt for 60 years. The ferocity of fires coming out of these areas is so severe that they create their own wind. They are difficult to stop no matter how recently hazard reduction has been conducted on neighbouring lands, since the fire gets straight into the forest canopy. Their argument is also flawed when one considers that other forms of hazard reduction that were previously used have also been reducing, such as grazing, forestry and mechanical fuel reduction or a combination of these methods. It is interesting that the hot and dry conditions that are blamed for causing these fires did not affect the northern territory where it is even hotter and closer to the equator. A large percentage of the Northern Territory is burnt each year to mitigate fire risk. When looking at the Fires Near Me app the fires were concentrated around the conservation areas in green. The old sayings are true - Where there is fuel there is fire and Burn it or it will burn you.

Published reports only quantify hazard reduction on government land. When one considers that there has been a dramatic reduction of hazard reduction on private land due to changes in RFS policy and conservation red tape, the overall amount of hazard reduction was clearly inadequate. This reduction of HR on surrounding lands also made it much harder to control fires before they reached populated areas. Government agencies and RFS policies should support landowners in a coordinated effort to reduce fuel loads, protect the environment and make communities safer, not make it difficult for landowners to conduct hazard reduction due to harassment by authorities and fear of prosecution. Hazard reduction should instead be considered a community service initiative, which also benefits the environment.

Policies are in place that limit land owners from controlling fuel loads and keeping forests healthy, yet in the worst possible conditions, bureaucracy can take over and carry out huge backburns that ultimately create mega, catastrophic fires, which decimate the environment, destroy millions of dollars of property and create life threatening situations. This is not conservation.

The “conservation” land is now a moonscape and the soil loss from these fires is unquantifiable. Rural land now has pockets of remaining wildlife. With over 1 billion animals killed by the fires, farms became the refuge area for animals that were able to escape and will provide the breeding source to repopulate other areas.

There seems to be a developing social culture among some members of the firefighting agencies, who enjoy the hype and elevated social status rather than a strong motivation to suppress the fire. I would not believe it if I had not seen it with my own eyes, but I drove past a group of RFS members drinking beverages next to a small spot-over that had breached the containment line that they had been aiming to hold all day. The next day more crews from 7.5hrs away, more aircraft and more media arrived to attend the out of control situation. There was a lack of motivation among these people to actually suppress the fire, leading to thousands of acres being burnt and kilometres of fencing being destroyed. If it was their house or property nearby their attitudes would most likely have been different.

The firefighting hierarchy are too far removed from actual firefighting and are too busy concentrating on coordinating aircraft to know what is happening on the ground. If fires are to be contained, there needs to be a coordinated effort, with consideration of the entire perimeter around the fire, both day and night. In another “I wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it with my own eyes” situation, I watched RFS crews leave a nearby fire during the mid-afternoon. The fire had reached an area that had burnt the year before and the containment line was a well formed road. Instead of staying to keep the fire within containment lines and having a dedicated night crew, the fire was left to breach containment lines and the next day large bulldozers (at a large cost) arrived to put in another containment line through dense bush. This was soon breached and the process continued over and over again without success until the fire burnt all the way to another community and the highway was closed for around a month. It seems that either putting out the fire was not the objective or there was a total lack of local knowledge applied to the situation by commanders far away. It is obvious that if the fire couldn’t be stopped when burning out of an area that had only burnt 12 months before and onto a fully formed road, it was going to be much more difficult to stop it anywhere else and would be much more costly. Local knowledge needs to be applied to put effort in where it matters and can actually make a difference, not throwing machines, helicopters and unlimited resources at a life threatening, out of control situation when it is too late. The current system of management is costing far too much and is not achieving the best possible outcomes.

When the fire reached the highway and neighbouring community, it seems that their experience was no better. A group of landowners were attempting to contain the fire, when members of the RFS arrived. Initially the landowners were relieved because they thought assistance had arrived. They explained to the RFS that this was the strategic location to attempt to stop the fire, based on their local knowledge of the area. Instead they were told by the RFS that they were there for property protection only and were not available to help put out the fire. If the fire is stopped, that will eliminate the need to protect a vast number of properties from the fire. If only properties (structures) are protected, then the fire will continue to burn, risking damage to more properties. This will continue on and on, in many cases until the fire reaches the great eastern fire break (the ocean!). The RFS trucks drove around issuing evacuation orders, then left. They didn’t even use their water for property protection.

In the same location, it has been reported that water trucks were prohibited by the council from giving any water to landowners by threatening them with \$7000 fines, since it was metered water and was only available for use by the RFS, even though they were putting out the same fire. Water trucks were then observed dumping unused loads of water by the side of the highway to minimise their weight and fuel usage on the trip back to town, all paid for by the taxpayer. Later property owners worked with terrain, their integrated land use systems, their modest equipment and the advantage of nightfall to contain significant flanks of wildfire. There is no greater motivation than a capable landowner defending their own property. The RFS, council and government departments should be supporting landowners, not hindering them.

The people in paid positions, coordinating the firefighting efforts, are financially advantaged the longer the fires continue, through overtime and penalty rates and possibly working in a higher level position. Huge fires justify their positions, create a case for increases in future funding and allow the purchase of new equipment and infrastructure under the insurance system. Surely this is a conflict of interest. Based on the inefficiencies I have seen, I am left to wonder if they actually want to put the fire out.

Most of the fire origins can be traced back to lightening strikes in National Parks and Forestry, which burnt on in heavy fuel loads, with flawed management concepts allowing fires to create catastrophic fire weather systems.

Can we please look after the forests we already have. There seems to be more emphasis on planting a new sapling, than looking after existing forests.

I apologise for my strong language, but my life was on the line for months responding to fires in this predictable situation. As people's complacency increases, so do the fuel loads. We need common sense and achievable outcomes from this Royal Commission to prevent this happening again.

Concerned Resident, Ratepayer, Fire Levy Payer and Taxpayer.