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## Your details

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## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

**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

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**Your story**

The Currowan fire of November 2019 to January 2020 as we experienced it.

The Currowan bushfire started on 26th November 2019 as a small blaze in a logged area of the Currowan State Forest to the east of our property, and I photographed it from our house. The cause was stated to be lightning. At the time of ignition we were in Canberra and drove home on the 26th, photographing the fire from the Kings Highway and from our house (image DSC04191, not attached). The fire showed an intense but fairly small smoke plume at 2.23pm. By 5pm on 26th November the fire had been noted by the RFS website (Fires Near Me) and by 5.44 pm a map had been posted on the Fires Near Me website (image Currowan day 1 Screen Shot 2019-11-26 at 5.44.09 pm). At this stage the fire extent was fairly small and the weather was fine and clear. No aerial fire fighting was observed at any stage on the 26th and

27th November. It is believed that the fire was ignored because in "inaccessible country", even though there were roads and many logging tracks in the area.

The size of the fire increased rapidly on the 27th and 28th November (images Currowan fire at 6.37am 27th Nov 19 copy; and image Screen Shot 2019-11-28 at 4.47.39 pm – these images not attached due to space constraints). Subsequently I recorded many further images from the RFS Fires Near Me website and the GA Hotspots website, recording the maps as 'Screen Shots' showing the spread and timing of the fire. These images are available should the enquiry wish to examine them. The fire spread rapidly north, west and east, impacting our property twice, and the adjacent area around the Kings Highway on one additional occasion. On 5th December 2019 the fire approached from the Budawang National Park and the Currowan State Forest, to the north of us. Around 2nd December the Forestry Corporation had put in "containment lines" along Pig Road and Wallaby Road (image 0102, available), but this had no effect on stopping the fire. The area of state forest immediately to the north of our property along [REDACTED] Road had been the subject of an extensive "controlled burn" in winter 2018, but this had no impact in stopping the fire, and the area burned strongly, including the area that had been previously burned the year before.

On 5th December the RFS appeared and bulldozed a narrow fire break around our house, along an existing track. In the early afternoon, the RFS ordered my husband and the neighbours to our northwest to "get out" as the fire approached. I had left several hours earlier, and my husband who is 85, evacuated in his vehicle, with the RFS following him out of the area down the Western Distributor Rd around 2.30 pm. Fortunately for us, the neighbours stayed, stopped the fire as it burned up to their house, and then drove down into our property and stopped the fire as it burned through our creek, thus saving our house and sheds. Image DSC 0210 shows the neighbours and two friends, their fire-fighting "tanker" (plastic water tanks on a trailer) and a small pump to power a hose. The image was taken by my husband at the neighbours' property on the hill above us at 2.23 pm, just before he left. The neighbours said they fought the fire with "everything", including buckets of water from pre-filled garbage bins, as the fire swept along their cleared hill towards the house. Image DSC 0215 (not attached) was taken at 2.29 pm from our house and shows the fire approaching along the valley. All the forested area to the north and east burned, the hilltops completely including the tree canopies, while in the creek the fire burned the ground layers, the shrub layers and lower parts of some trees, whilst some canopy remained intact.

We evacuated for a week, initially to a motel in Batemans Bay, then to a relative's holiday house at Potato Point. We returned to Currowan on 12th December, surveyed the fire damage, and noted that even short cleared grass had burned. We prepared the property for ongoing fires as best we could, with clearing of all vegetation from around the water tanks, and from the edge of the driveway next to the house.

On 15th December a fire approached from the north (IMG 0473, not attached) and threatened the neighbours' house again, and approached the Kings Highway. The highway (B52) had been designated as the new "containment line" by the RFS. To fight this fire, one helicopter with a bucket was deployed most of that day. It filled the bucket from a waterhole in the Currowan Creek, [REDACTED] (photos available). When the water in the waterhole was getting very low, the helicopter had to fill at Lyons Creek waterhole, which is a couple of kilometres further away. I do not know what ground resources were available to fight the fire at this point.

On two subsequent evenings my husband and I drove up the hill on Western Distributor Rd and watched as the fire had jumped the Kings Highway and burned on the southern side of the

highway, east of Cabbage Tree Creek, and towards Monga National Park. We could not see any fire-fighting in evidence from our position about a km away. There was no aerial fire fighting visible.

On 21st December the Currowan fire flared again in the Currowan Creek valley, below the Kings Highway, and paddocks adjacent to the creek and to Western Distributor Rd caught fire. Our neighbours brought their water tanker on their trailer, and extinguished most of the fire (IMG-0750.jpg, not attached). We checked later and found the fire creeping through grass along Western Distributor Rd, and beat the fire out with spades. Logs in the Currowan Creek continued to burn.

By 30th December the Currowan fire covered an enormous area to the north, west and south of our property, and the closest fire was visible as an enormous plume of smoke to the southeast. On the 31st it burned through Batemans Bay, Surf Beach and Malua Bay, enveloping us in dense smoke as the wind changed.

On 4th January, a very strong southerly wind change stirred up new fires next to the Currowan Creek. We saw smoke appear on adjacent hills in the early afternoon, and smoke began to envelope our property. We rang 000 and were told that "they were aware of the fire" but no-one came to assist us. We drove down Western Distributor Rd to check, found the Creek and the adjacent paddock again on fire with very short grass burning, and discovered that the road (the exit to the Kings Highway) was blocked by a burning tree. Turning around we found that two other neighbouring properties had grass and stockyard fires. We very quickly returned home around 3 pm. There was a very strong southerly wind blowing and the temperature was 47°C just before the start of the fire (Photo available for verification).

Humidity was around 22%. Within less than 10 minutes, there were spot grass fires burning in our property near the house, which spread into the garden and set fire to a woodpile next to a shed. My husband turned on the fire pump hose from the swimming pool and with this and a garden hose we managed to extinguish the fire behind the shed and adjacent to our tractor. He then put out several fires within the garden, including one at the back door of the house near the wooden upright supports for the roof. I fought the fire around the western side of the house, hosing the garden with a garden hose and a limited tank water supply, as the fire travelled up the sloping ridge on which the house stands (image DSC 04386, not attached). The fire reached the water tanks on the hill above us, and the adjacent trees caught fire and burned through. Because the ground around the tanks for several metres had been cleared of every scrap of vegetation, the tanks themselves did not melt, despite fire very close in the trees. The fire continued to burn westward into the neighbours' paddock and burned our adjacent entrance driveway, blocking it with fallen trees. We managed to maintain the limited tank water supply to the hose during the evening.

After 5 pm the fire approached the house on a second fire front, this time from the south as a diagonal line of fire travelling downhill from ■■■ Rd. Because the wind had dropped and the fire was moving down the slope, it travelled slowly at first, eventually moving into the creek gully adjacent to our front driveway, and burning into our neighbours' property to the south (at No ■■■■).

During the evening the fire eventually burned everything in our creek gully and our entrance driveway, including burning some trees to their tops. I wetted the ground adjacent to the house, and monitored the fire below from the southern fence until 2 am. Fortunately the conditions became still during the later evening, and the narrow firebreak held on the southern side. (An image is attached at around 9.20 pm of our driveway entrance: IMAG 0075, from the wildlife camera. The house is in the shadows at the right side of the photo. One of the water tanks is visible at the top of the photo). The fire began to run out of leaf litter and ground fuel around 10 pm, although many trees and logs were still on fire.

The final score: our house and sheds and some of our garden were saved by our firefighting efforts. Our water tanks did not burn on the night of 4th January, although a burning tree fell onto the ground adjacent and melted the buried water pipe early on the 5th January. We lost most of a tank of water before we discovered the underground leak. We also lost fencing and other water pipes, but our material losses were minor. The forest around us on our property was entirely burned, and the almost total loss of wildlife, and of biodiversity and amenity, is difficult to put a price on.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

A large contributing factor is the change in climate that we have noted over the last few years at this location (Currowan NSW). Temperatures have been over 45°C on several occasions last summer, and on the day of the 4th January fire, the temperature was 47°C, and remained above 27°C all evening. The humidity was extremely low, at 22%. These conditions are entirely different from the previous climate of this high rainfall, cool temperate forested hill area. Prolonged drought has also been a factor in creating a layer of leaf litter that did not decompose, due to lack of rainfall and low humidity.

### 1.2 Preparation and planning

Whose preparation and planning? The Forest Corporation had done a "controlled burn" in a large strip of forest along █ Rd, to the north of our boundary, in 2018. This was supposed to form a "containment line" at one point in the evolution of the Currowan fire. However this area on the █ Rd ridge burned as fiercely as any other area and "controlled burning" didn't appear to make any difference to the progress of the fire. Our preparation and planning consisted in having firebreaks around the house area, in clearing all vegetation from around our water tanks, and in having a water pump and hose attached, drawing water from our swimming pool. Due to an ember attack at the start of the 4th January fire, the firebreaks were ineffective, but they helped when the wind died down and the fire later became a ground fire.

### 1.3 Response to bushfires

I believe that if the Currowan fire had been fought with aerial water bombers in its initial two days, it could have been put out. It wasn't fought with any aerial water bombing at that critical point (as we could see from our house). (All the emphasis at that date was on fighting the Tallaganda fire to the south of Braidwood, where aerial water bombing was being used). The Currowan fire started very close to an area that had been logged, and so there was good access via logging tracks and a couple of gravel roads. We heard something on ABC radio about the fire being in "inaccessible areas" and being left to burn. That was a huge mistake because the fire spread very rapidly after 28th November. Had it been effectively tackled in the first couple of days by water bombing, thousands of other people could have avoided disaster.

### 1.4 Any other matters

As people living in forested areas and small rural towns, we need the NSW government to procure and have on standby, large aerial water bombers to fight fires in their EARLY stages. Not when fires are totally out of control and lives are already lost. The conventional methods of back burning, hazard reduction etc didn't work for this fire, and they won't work for future fires when the temperature hits 47°C and the wind is at gale force. RFS

volunteers can't fight these fires with small truck tankers. An early and effective response requires large capacity aircraft for water bombing, not helicopters with small buckets. The suggested solution of wholesale burning of forests to reduce fuel loads just ends up destroying our wildlife and within a few months the leaf litter (from a drying climate) is back at pre-burning levels. I'm not opposed to small scale patch burning on the Aboriginal model, but large-scale burning just increases weed invasion and the overall fuel load as far as I can see.

## Supporting documents or images

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### Attach files

- Currowan day 1Screen Shot 2019-11-26 at 5.44.09 pm.png
  - DSC04191.JPG
  - IMAG0075.JPG
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