

Your details

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

NOT APPLICABLE

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

NOT APPLICABLE

Consent to make submission public

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

I left home as usual on Friday 8th November. I was aware of a fire to the west and that in the weeks that it had been burning farmers were watching as it was moving south. In Macksville at 3.30 I saw this frightening and unusual sky and rushed back to work. My husband told me there was a problem with the fire and went to his brigade. He then rang to say get home. I was lucky to make it home, grab a few things, including our cockatoo and as I went to return to Macksville, I noticed the hill to our north was enveloped in smoke and through the smoke there were raging flames. The next morning I returned - a brigade who was extracting water from our dam (I think the Utungun

Brigade), managed to put out the fire as it spotted on our property and stop the spread up the gully towards the south. The next morning when I made it home, I went with my family to inspect our burnt out pump site on our permissive occupancy. I could not believe it, through the ashes, we could see the burning tree roots glowing orange and this was just a few metres from the river. Such had been the dryness of the ground and the lack of moisture. Each morning I wake up now to trees so burnt on the hill, they will never recover. The burnt trees stand like figures in a Pro Hart painting, looking hauntingly over us, a reminder of the damaged land, lost vegetation and the many animals. I would like to make the following points.

1. Responsibility to protect lives – including the lives of fauna – even flora. We must not be ruled by either bureaucracy or those who believe we must preserve everything at all cost and not manage our resources.
2. In 1788 our entire continent was a National Park – but it was managed by the Aboriginal population to provide sustenance in an extraordinarily precious way. Particularly in relation to maintaining grasslands.
3. Fire is part of our ecosystem. A lightning strike is natural. Fire is essential for the maintenance of some plant species that require fire, smoke or ash to reproduce, let alone multiply. But this fire must be cool fire, not the hot burning fires recently experienced here. Here our First Australians are masters at this craft.
4. About February 1982 Greening Australia was formed by the United Nations Association of Australia and the Nursery Industry Association of Australia. Of course, the Nursery Industry were hoping to sell more trees – as is always the case with any United Nations ideals. At the time this may have been a good idea, however, there was no plan for the types of trees or where. Nor was there any thought that establishing trees need water. Since that time there has been a massive focus on planting trees – but no focus on from where the water they consume would be sourced.
5. We now have 870 National Parks in NSW covering 7 million hectares plus 2 million hectares of State Forests. (People are seeking expansion to this.) This is an increase from 328 National Parks in 1994. Farms have been transformed from productive farms to “National Parks”. Weedy, vegetated scrub has grown up where there was once cleared grass lands. Some of the National Parks may have included that precious grasslands which provided firebreaks and protection, whereas now they just add fuel to the ground.
6. When State Forests became National Parks, the precious network of well- maintained fire trails was lost. Some were bulldozed, there were rocks and padlocks placed to stop people travelling on these roads. This was an unnecessary disaster.
7. Even along the Pacific Highway we can see where scrubby growth has grown up – even mid lanes - and become fuel for fire – often resulting in the closure of the highway and facilitating the carriage of the fire to other areas.
8. Water is essential for trees. Due to the lack of rain and the proliferation of trees, rather than preference of or consideration of grasslands, our earth is becoming drier and drier and the fuel on the ground drier and more combustible. Moisture is important for composting of material – there has been no moisture to start that process – hence ground was more combustible. When eucalypts shed their bark – as they were shedding in November, this was additional highly combustible fuel to dry parched earth.
9. The bio-diversity laws on vegetation have been disastrous. There is no encouragement to clear a buffer between properties. In fact, people have been taken to court for such action. The laws encourage scrubby growth – interspersed with flammable weeds.
10. We do have to ask ourselves, do we need a strategic plan for the number of trees which can be supported in our environment, particularly to avoid taking every bit of moisture from the ground during drought years which resulted in the scorched earth we now have. Do we have to develop a mosaic of trees and grassland?
11. We must be good neighbours to one another. We must make sure that there are clear firebreaks. At common law it is said that if you light a fire and allow it escape, you are legally responsible for the consequences. That is also

the case if you light a back burn, but if that should be the case in general for all property owners – public or private – so it should be with bushfires if there has been no real attempt to contain fires. Substantial fire breaks should be established and maintained, not only on private property but in State Forests and National Parks to establish fire breaks.

(Note: Fire burning for weeks prior to 8th November was not extinguished. Note: There were no aircraft dumping fire retardant in those early days. Note: Over vegetated sides of road became vectors to carry the fire further.)

12. This is not the first time a drought has resulted in bushfires –many times it has been said a drought ends in a flood, but while “bush fire survival plans” were heavily promoted – there was no education to the public to say that horrific bushfires were a high possibility. There was no encouragement to assess egress to from your property and access for fire tankers. There was never any suggestion for local communities to make a registrar of those who live in the remote, forested areas of their community. No encouragement to have battery backups for communication. (No encouragement to maintain copper phone landlines.)

13. Roles of responsibility need to be reviewed. RFS need to begin moving with the times and acquire more suitable equipment – not just bigger tankers that do not even fit in sheds, let alone be easily manoeuvrable in long drives with limited turning circles. Communication was totally inadequate and requires vast improvement. Local areas need to be reviewed – combination of Kempsey and Nambucca requires urgent review. Why they were ever combined was never communicated or transparent.

14. Fuel reduction burning is an ideal opportunity to teach the volunteers (who have rarely experienced fires, let alone bush fires) how to actually fight a fire. This also facilitates training locally.

15. Farm dams should be encouraged to have standby water ready on suitable sites in communities such as those in the Nambucca LGA. Plastic tanks should be discouraged and all properties should be required to have one concrete tank.

16. Recognition should be given to the numerous people who had never been members of the RFS, never had any training and who rallied together with their utilities, pumps and whatever equipment they could find. This army of people were the unspoken heroes in many areas, some working for weeks. Some who were alienated, for one reason or another, from the bureaucracy, but who wanted to help their neighbours, their communities. (Sometimes this alienation was due to past bullying.) This is a lesson to RFS. I am aware of people who had completed basic training – albeit years ago, but at the same time as many of the existing RFS members who may never undertaken any further training due to lack of time. One who worked tirelessly on the night of 8th November, yet two days later was ordered off the fire truck! Such is the mentality of some members of the RFS. I am also aware of another firefighter who had done every conceivable course, moved, had a two year break, went to sign up and was told he had to do the basic training first.

17. Rather than the empire building which has been undertaken by RFS, or their keenness to meet their key performance indicators, the real spirit of bush fire brigades has been completely lost. It's not bigger tankers, it is more innovative equipment that is required. It is a pity there is so much emphasis on this training, yet leadership skills take a back seat. When there is no leadership at the top – e.g. local areas – and a long history of lack of co-operation or consideration for the term “volunteer” this is where the focus should be, because at the end of the day as we found in November last year, those who had training did not perform in a more superior manner than those who were capable of relying on their bush craft and country common sense. In our area, people do not have the time to train. Take a dairyman who gave up training because he did not want to waste two hours to and from Kempsey and be that far away from his farm. Most of the property owners in our area have full time jobs - the weekend is spent on their farm - doing what needs to be done - they don't have time for training!

18. Communication – in the time leading up to the 8th November I heard of the “Kian Road” fire. I have a long connection with this area – over sixty years – and have lived in the for almost 45 years. I had never heard of Kian Road. I was aware there was a fire. I left for work in the morning, as usual. I know of another family who had lived on their property for five generations – I saw them enjoying their regular Friday lunch in town. Two hours later, they were told they would not make it home! A very elderly couple, the man suffering from dementia, and they could not make it home. They had no idea when they left home that their home was at risk. There was not one warning that

the “Kian Road” fire was, or could, moving east! There was no communication. I watch the adverts on television about fire plan – you have no time to carry out a fire plan – the fire plan needs to be from those monitoring those fires with warnings given. There were no warnings until after the houses had been burnt to the ground. 64 homes, numerous sheds, etc. etc.

19. Why wasn't this fire water bombed? Why did they wait until the whole place was on fire to bring in aeroplanes and helicopters?

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

Lack of management. Lack of planning. Lack of knowledge by the powers that be. Lack of water bombing early. Lack of vegetation management. Lack of roadside clearing. Lack of moisture in the ground. Massive combustible fuel on the ground. No connection to the drought and the bush fires. Closing up the forests trials. Locking up National Parks. Inadequate and appropriate equipment. Lack of hazard reduction burning.

1.2 Preparation and planning

There was no real preparation and certainly no planning. The Kian Road fire had been burning for weeks - why wasn't every conceivable possibility considered and the community forewarned? The Birds Nest fire had been burning since September - no water bombing?

1.3 Response to bushfires

Difficult. No matter how much is done, at the end of the day there are so many players. The first thing that should be done is that a register is made of each loss with a reference number - available (without private details) to all. I am aware that people who are trying to rebuild have to continually substantiate who they are. Our local Council has tried to make a register, but it is woeful that there is not a clearly designed register. Insurance companies are all different and treat people differently. In the Nambucca LGA, many feel that they are forgotten. There is not even a meeting being held in this LGA - yet there is one being held in Coffs Harbour and I am not sure many houses were lost in that area. Inequitous.

1.4 Any other matters

These fires were not unprecedented. The digitised newspapers highlight instance after instance of fires in the past. But, now we have more and more people living in the middle of the bush - either legally or illegally. The severity of the drought was never acknowledged in our LGA. Always after bushfires there are enquiries and findings. Findings that could have prevented much of what we have seen towards the end of last year and this year. Yet, they are ignored. The Biodiversity Laws have made people scared. It is amazing that satellite imaging is used to monitor land clearing (which substantiates that in NSW there is not wholesale clearing) yet satellite imaging is not used to identify those homes in the midst of bush, with poor access, little water for firefighting. For those fine firefighters who lost their lives, we owe it to them to see that such a horrendous outcome does not happen again. Look at those previous findings/recommendations and start there.

Supporting documents or images
