

Your details

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Submission details

I am making this submission as

 

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Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

Consent to make submission public (required)

 

Please note the Inquiry will retain discretion to withhold publishing any information that may be considered personal or defamatory in nature.

We are primary producers, with our property spread over four blocks along ██████████, Reidsdale. Our most western block boundaries the Majors Creek Conservation Area. Our most eastern block (with our main infrastructure and house) is very close to the Monga National Park.

Our properties were under threat from the last weekend of November 2019 through to mid January 2020, when we received substantial rain. We were impacted throughout this time by the Black Range fire and then the Charleys Forest Fire.

We experienced fire on our eastern block on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Both times we were the only ones responsible for putting out the fire burning on our property with our own equipment, plant and assistance from friends and family who we called upon.

Throughout this information we refer to National Parks and the RFS. We are not sure of their actual and correct departmental names, but not doubt the inquiry panel will know.

In the lead up to the Charleys Forest fire, containment lines were placed through private property bordering and near the Monga National Park. There was too much reliance on these lines. These lines should have started within the National Park (Fire trails) and along the national park boundary. The containment lines on private land should have only been used as a last resort. At one stage an RFS crew was overheard on radio requesting to go and investigate smoke. The reply over heard was that 'no, it is on the other side of the containment line'. This particular incident was in fact on the other side of the containment line to where they were parked, but there was no containment line between the flames and the nearest home. Neighbours were called in to extinguish the fire.

Throughout the time when the flames were close to our neighbours grazing lands, the weather conditions were reasonable, meaning the fire was trickling very slowly. We observed crews watch these flames trickle along private land up to the containment lines. We feel that what was burnt on these days was unnecessary, and could have been stopped prior to crossing from National Parks boundary onto private land. Of course, there was also other days with very unfavourable fire conditions that even the containment lines on private property were jumped through both the fire front and ambers causing spot fires.

As primary producers, one of our most valuable assets is pasture. Planning, time, expense, equipment and labour are placed into establishing pasture. We felt that through our observations, too many of these pasture assets were relied on to control the fire fronts, rather than tackling it front on.

There was a real mentality of 'wait until it gets here' that we felt through both the local fire information meeting, information released to the public, as well as discussion with various RFS crews, many of whom were vocal about how they disagreed with how management of the situation was occurring. If we had followed that thought process of wait it out, our house and surrounding infrastructure would not be here. Instead we tackled the fire with our private machinery (severely damaging it in the process) and contained it until the weather conditions changed.

Responsibility for these fires changed numerous times between National Parks and the Rural Fire Service. We witnessed this several times where there were heated discussions between the two authorities, as well as observed people being stood down, left having to watch flames burn that could have very easily been extinguished (and then had to be extinguished by private land holders).

Several times throughout the end of December and early January, the RFS trucks were instructed NOT to assist with controlling the fire spreading across neighbour's paddocks. Instead they were instructed to watch from a distance. National Parks ordered RFS to conserve water, and only protect building assets, although these instructions allowed valuable farmland to burn (pasture, not bush land). Along various sections there was also no containment lines or geographical barriers (e.g. creeks) between these grass fires and houses and farm infrastructure. Instead we and others had to

rely on private individuals own equipment and ability. From what we witnessed over the six weeks, we found more was achieved by individuals taking things upon themselves, which no doubt prevented the situation from becoming worse.

A good example of this is at one stage a national parks unit drove into our neighbours, turned around and drove away. They left without providing any assistance, or checking in with us to ensure we were capable of putting out the grass fire. Once again we were required to call upon more friends and neighbours to assist, as well as private plant and equipment to prevent the paddock burning further towards the neighbours home and farm buildings.

We feel a review of priorities and the handling of dispatching emergency services needs to be taken. We called 000 to get assistance when the flames were approximate 30 – 40 meters from our house. No fire tanker was available to attend. At the time we considered this understandable, as resources would have been very stretched. Several weeks later we found out from a RFS volunteer that they were situated in our area, but were re- deployed to the closet village 10 kms away as there was a sighting from a town resident of smoke – not flames.

In the days after we extinguished the fire that threatened and burnt our property, three separate times different RFS personnel attended and took GPS readings from the area burnt, as in the days after the fire we were still trying to control burning tree trunks. We also requested their help to remove these trees, located in line with our house, putting us again at risk if the wind changed its direction. Each of the three RFS crew agreed they should be felled, but they were unable to get us the assistance needed. We then continued to drench the trees and surrounding area with water as much as we could over the following days, and continued to monitor the area until rains fell in mid-January.

Throughout our experience we also found people were too reliant on the Fires Near Me App. The mapping was not at all accurate. We tested this theory over two weekends, where we found that the app was not updated from the Friday until the Tuesday. At times it was obvious that the mapping was an estimate and covered vast areas of land that either had burnt, or had not burnt. We completely understand the process of needing to get line scans to identify the areas burnt, but our suggestion on this would be to publicise that it is an estimate, and you should not rely on this app as it may place your life in danger.

We have had insight into how National Parks operates in land management prior to this fire event. National Parks oversee the management of the state conservation areas. For over two years we attempted to access funding as per their fencing policy to repair a fence between our private farm land and the Majors Creek Conservation Area. We were repeatedly told that although there was a fencing policy which clearly stated how they would contribute to the boundary, there was not the funding to carry out this policy.

Going into prolonged drought, we fenced the boundary at our own expense and with our own resources, so that we could graze our stock on the remained of our property, as it was the only fodder still available. This included the expense of clearing a fence line, with no assistance from National Parks. Now in the aftermath of the fires, we are extremely disappointed to find that National Parks are assisting with replacing fencing that has burnt, but yet we are still meant to be on a waiting list for assistance with fencing.

Sharing our boundary with the Majors Creek State Conservation Area has also given us insight into the lack of access that is available into the area. There are no maintained trails, roads or access. In the event of the Majors Creek Conservation Area catching alight, the first place to contain the fire would be within our own private land, on areas we are preparing ourselves (with our time and expense) to prevent fire spreading throughout our property, as we are keeping in mind that another fire event is highly likely to occur again in the future.

If the funding has not been available to meet the existing policies, maintain fire trails and access roads, we find it difficult to believe that the lands that they are meant to be managing will be managed any differently in the future, leaving private land holders vulnerable once again to repeat events.

There is also some good feedback that we would like to give with how these fires were managed. The RFS Bulli water tanker, and then then local government water tanker sat in an accessible area for us to access water supplies throughout the weeks our property was under direct threat. The operators were helpful and encouraging with providing us water to use to extinguish fire on properties near us, including our own. During most of this time there was no assistance from either the RFS or NP with extinguishing these fires, so this was most welcome. It also took the pressure of our already stretched water sources that we were preserving for our livestock.

One of the biggest impacts to us that has been overlooked is the lack of awareness of the financial impact of caring for our livestock over these six weeks.

For the duration of this time, our livestock (sheep and cattle) were fed lotted in small contained, dirt and treeless areas, which required the cartage of water to them. None of these costs incurred with keeping our stock safe are eligible for any fire subsidy or assistance. Our livestock were being supplementary feed, but with a small amount of ground cover in the paddocks, they were also able to forage for additional nutrition and fibre. By placing them in small 'safe' dirt areas, many lost weight, some became unwell, and several cattle needed to be destroyed due to infections. We needed to provide more feed sources (which were already scarce to come by), as well as many extra hours per day carting this, as well as water. During this time many of our fences were badly damaged due to the pressure of stock pushing on them. In an attempt to keep them safe and maintain both their welfare as well as our business assets, we now have considerable repairs to undertake. In discussing various fire assistance for fencing repairs for the Local Land Services, we have been found to not be eligible as our property has not been registered on the fire scar line. We imagine that many producers are in the same situation as us, and although are lucky that their livestock are still alive, have to bear considerable costs from implementing these steps to keep them safe over this time.

Although there are lots of other things that we could bring up, recommendations we would like to suggest from our experience include:

National Park roads and fire trails are to be maintained, with a five meter buffer on each side of the road/trail, to provide safe access/exit in the event of emergencies, including turning space. The fire trails in the Monga National Park have not been maintained for at least eight years, possibly longer. The roads are washed away, and many trees, limbs and debris block the roads and trails (one of which is a public road), making them inaccessible.

National Parks to place in a cleared boundary of at least 20 meters on their side of a boundary fence line, to ensure that containment starts there, rather than in the middle of private farmland. This would also prevent the falling of trees/limbs onto fence lines that are maintained and repaired by land holders (at their expense). These trees/limbs also add additional fuel load against boundary fences increasing the intensity of fire moving onto private land.

There should be greater consideration of implementing cultural burns to decrease fuel load. The fire on our property on New Years Day was easily controlled as the fuel load was reduced, meaning the intensity of burn was reduced compared to what had been witnessed at the boundaries to the national park.

Implementation of back burning to reduce fuel load and intensity of burning should also occur through the National Park to reduce the intensity of the fire burning into private landholders.

Overall, it was not that we expected the RFS or National Parks to do all the work to contain these fires. We were happy to help and assist. It is the fact that we feel that if their wait and watch, and guide it through techniques were not used within the first few days after the lightning storms, but rather a more proactive, head on approach, the size of these fires may have been contained to a much smaller area.

As land holders, it is our responsibility to ensure we prepare our own property to protect our homes, infrastructure, assets and livestock from fire. We ask that from reviewing the past Summer's experiences, that National Parks and Forestry both take on the same responsibility toward their lands, and implement buffers and reduce the fuel load, which in turn will reduced the intensity of future fires.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

No recent management of National Park fire trails, access points or public roads through Monga National Park in particular (access road is a long debate between National Parks, Forestry and Council over who maintains the road)
No cleaning of fire breaks along boundaries with private land holders

1.2 Preparation and planning

1.3 Response to bushfires

National Parks and RFS in debate over control of fire, resulting in no clear direction, including when the fire left the National Park onto private land holders property. National Park patrols watched, but did not act