

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

Consent to make submission public

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

On 30 January 2019 I received notice on Facebook that burnt leaves were falling in Cobargo from the Badja fire. I checked the location the fire on Fires Near Me (FNM)- it was about 40 km away. Early to mid afternoon burnt leaves started falling at our home. We continued to monitor the fire on FNM about every half hour. I had a warning alarm set at a 25km radius on FNM. We prepared our firefighting equipment and mowed the perimeter.

We went to bed around 11.30 pm with the fire registering as being some 35 or so km away.

At 1.20 am a message went off on my phone advising those in "Upper Brogo, Yowrie and Verona [to] Seek shelter as the fire arrives". I checked the FNM for location - it was showing the fire at Yowrie but not near Verona.

I phoned our neighbours and advised them of the message. One had received it and was preparing to evacuate. Three others were asleep. Two woke to the call. The third was woken by another neighbour who went to his home.

I decided to listen to the RFS local radio in the hope of getting a better idea of where the fire was relative to us. I cannot recall what time it was but I heard one of the local units advise they were getting out of Gilberts Rd in Verona. That was very useful information as it let me know exactly how close the fire was to us.

I continued to monitor the fire by the RFS local radio as we prepared to defend. By around 3am we could see flame on McCleods Hill and a spot fire to the south west of our home. I called the latter spot fire in.

We received no further text messages about the location of the fire. I am aware that further messages were sent as they appeared on my phone several days after the fire.

I knew from the radio there was a powerline down across Cobargo Bermagui Rd (our escape route to the north) at some stage and that the fire had crossed the highway at McLeod's Hill (our escape route to the south). We could see flame there. The FNM app was updated at some stage to show the spot fire behind our home and later that the fire had extended to Cobargo and Coolagalite.

It was very difficult to get a bearing on where the fire was relative to us. The comms for the RFS were the most useful information we had access to. But we lost access to them in the early hours of the morning.

We received no information about how hot the fire was burning - had we heard of how hot it had come through Yowrie we may have chosen to evacuate.

Our house is mudbrick and well cleared around it so we had made a decision ahead of time to stay and defend. We spent considerable time making this decision. We had a significant volume of water (around 90,000 litres) a fire fighting pump plus gravity fed water, several fire hoses and appropriate clothing.

We laid down as much water as we could around the house and shed.

The fire hit us from the west about 7.30 am. Although it came over grass the flames were 5 to 10m high with fire tornadoes. We went inside the house as the front passed over leaving hoses creating a rain curtain over the house then came out and started putting out flames. We lost the header tanks almost instantly (plastic tank completely full burst and set the gal tank on fire). Thankfully we still had a concrete tank which sourced the fire fighting pump.

At around 9 am the wind turned and the fire came back on us from the bush in the east by way of a three hour ember attack. The two of us ran for hours putting out fires started by embers - as we had lost the header tanks this made the job more difficult as we only had water to half the property.

The fire remained in the bush near our home (we live near state forest and national park) for many weeks. A pocket of bush to the south of our home (along Dry River) did not burn and we remained at significant risk of the fire returning (most likely in the canopy) for a few weeks.

For a considerable period of time after 31 January I had no reception with Telstra. My partner with Vodafone also had no reception for many days. Those days were nerve wrecking as we had very limited means of knowing where the fire was relative to us. The only way we could get information was for one of us to drive out about 20 km to where there was Vodafone reception and phone my father in Tasmania who would give us an update. We would check the FNM app and gather as much information as quickly as we could so as to return home. Our fear was the fire would return while one of us was out leaving the other trapped at home.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.3 Response to bushfires

I would like to specifically address the issue of communication of information during bushfires. Timely warnings and constant information about the location of fires will be what saves lives and property. From local information it is clear this fire was known to be advancing at a very quick pace well before 1.20 am when the text warning went out. That text message was extremely useful for us. It is what woke us and gave us time to prepare. It gave us time to wake our neighbours. Given the speed the fire was progressing it should however have been sent earlier.

I ask that consideration be given to making real time communication from the RFS a priority. Perhaps specific resources can be allocated to each RFS for the purposes of real time communication. This is not a criticism of the local RFS - they did an amazing job but were completely under resourced.

The FNM app is of limited use in the "heat of the moment". If we had relied on that we would not have known the fire was as close as it was.

The most useful information for us was the RFS local radio. It gave us real time info on what was happening. I understand there is a push to remove public access to this. Please do not do this. If there is a concern about liability it can be dealt with by appropriate legislation.

The other issue is ensuring ongoing phone reception. Can there please be a focus on having telecommunication companies protect their towers from fire and have appropriate back up plans in place for if a tower is lost. Those days surrounded by fire without connection to the outside world were bleak and scary.

Supporting documents or images
