

to: NSW Bushfire Enquiry.

[REDACTED]

I am making this submission as a resident in a bushfire affected area.

I am making a personal submission.

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

My Story

I was evacuated 4 times during the summer fires. First time on 31st January 2020, with black skies and dense smoke all day, no power very little communication and really not knowing what had happened or how people were faring.

I live close to a mountain, rugged terrain and the fires at one stage came within 1km of my property.

At times evacuating required driving through burnt out, totally devastated terrain. Many people that I knew lost homes and/or had structure and livestock destroyed.

Where I live is part of what is know as the Triangle area: Bermagui, Cobargo, Quaama and Central Tilba. While we all live in separate villages we are very connected to the other towns through social networks and activities. So their loss is my loss.

During the fires I slept poorly, when any wind started in the night-time, I would get up to check which direction it was coming from, sometimes hard to tell and I would just stay up till it calmed down. I was always at serious threat from fire coming from the NW or SW direction.

Once the fires were declared out, I started to sleep better. I really didn't unpack the car till then and took quite some time to get the property back in order.

I knew people who died during and because of the fires, attending their funerals while fire was still active.

I needed help to recover, after nearly two months of the fire season and all that it entailed.

The virus lock-down which has disrupted lives, has also given a lot of us, including myself a chance to slow down and recover.

1.1 Causes and Contributing factors.

- * drought/dry for 2019 winter, spring summer.
- * continuing strong/gale force winds for the same period.
- * 4-5 years of lurching from substantial rainfall, drought, rainfall. With dams never filling up and ground not holding moisture.
- * our weather conditions having changed dramatically over the last 20 years in this area.
- * all the above the effects of climate change.

1.2 Preparation and Planning:

- * nothing could have stopped these fires.
- * Our town had two RFS meetings in November and December to inform on how to prepare properties, what was entailed if you stay and defended a property and to have a bush fire plan. It was excellent information and the hall was packed.
- * People prepped properties to the best of their abilities.

1.3 Response to Bushfires:

- * Communication, absolutely required during active fire....without power, landlines, mobiles, internet didn't work so only source was via a battery operated radio listening to regional ABC Bega. Unfortunately their main transmission tower was burnt so reception was patchy or non-existent. I could pick up ABC Illawarra, but their emergency information seemed to stop at Batemans Bay, and there was no way of letting anyone know we weren't getting information. Work on the tower is still not complete.
- * our local RFS was fabulous, giving fire updates via daily morning meetings when required.
- * all RFS crews were great.
- * Recovery centres and support for those affected by fires, soon got more organised as time went on. At the beginning it was just chaos but eventually communities started getting what was needed.
- * NSW Fires Near Me; could have more detailed information and be updated more often. However, it was by far the best fire map compared to Victoria, as I had to check that map for fire activity south near the border.
- * the army should have been called in sooner.
- * part of the army to train in fighting bushfires and being able to help with central communication.
- * more RFS equipment is required.
- * Landowners need to take more responsibility for fire management on their properties. Maybe some govt. assistance could be forthcoming to help with this matter. The current RFS Mitigation Programme which is a once only event, possible to extend this to yearly or bi-annually and to allow a further extension of work undertaken.

1.4 Any other matters:

- * Hazard Reduction via winter burning:
The wild fires for a number of years now, have been like these summer fires. While previous years the fire numbers were less than 2019/2020, the ferocity has been as devastating. The whole management of trying to reduce fire impact by HR needs to be assessed. No amount of HR by fire would have stopped these summer fires. i.e. in late 2018 the Yankee Gap fire (Bemboka) burnt 110,000 hectares, 15 months later it burnt again and further....
- * Improvement to the the NSW Fires near me app.
- * More firefighting equipment as these are now the type of fires we will continue to have.
- * After support and counseling to the RFS crews, where required.
- * Use of defence infrastructure where it can be helpful during firefighting.
- * Calling tourists to come back to the area on Jan 12th was far too soon and inconsiderate. People were homeless, the community was shell shocked, the fires were still active and we had just moved all the tourists out.. As it was 10 days later the fires again flared up and the only road out of the area was via Brown Mountain. Thankfully most tourists stayed away. I would have thought the only safe way to have tourists back was when the fires were out.

Thanks:

- * that so many people worked so hard, both voluntary and paid, during this time.
- * that after chaos in the beginning, things got sorted.
- * that all the tourists were cleared out of the area by Jan 03.

- * Bega Valley council were terrific in getting information out.
- * I knew where to go for evacuation.
- * ABC emergency broadcasts were invaluable.
- *the NSW premier and Shane Fitzsimons gave great press conferences keeping us informed.
- *It was great to see Defense personal and extra police in the area, as it felt like we were finally getting extra help and not so isolated.
- * It was great to see the Essential Energy trucks everywhere trying to restore power.
- * It was great to see Fire Trucks of RFS crews from all over the state.
- * All in all I am so grateful for the response.
- * I was well aware that my village, if it was to be hit by fire was probably on its own....but that was just the nature of the overwhelm of the summer fires and where priorities had to lay.