

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

While we were not directly impacted, we were on high alert both on the south coast, where we were residing in our holiday house and in the mountains, where our primary residence is located, in property preparation, protection and involvement with neighbour relations, I also wish to make a submission to this inquiry in my professional capacity as a retired fire fighting professional, land manager and current active member of a neighbourhood community fire unit in the Blue Mtns.

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

While there has been much uninformed conjecture, within communities, about the causes of the recent bushfires occurring across much of the Australian landscape this summer, many of the major fires were the result of lightning strikes in remote natural landscapes. Others will provide detailed submissions on this aspect with documentary evidence.

Another major causal factor has been the result of extreme and prolonged drought conditions, which expert evidence points to changing climatic conditions brought about by anthropomorphic factors resulting in extreme weather conditions, prolonged reduction in soil and vegetation moisture (equating to highly volatile fuels available for combustion). Contrary to many commentators, the resulting emergency conditions were not solely the result of the lack of fuel reduction burning across the varying landscapes and tenures of the fire grounds thus affected.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Rapid detection and vigorous initial attack are the first line of defence in fire suppression, and when implemented during the 2019/20 emergency, these strategies worked well. This logic is basic and well understood, but quick response does not always happen, due to escalating fire events, because of the duration of the season and stretched resources and because of the huge firegrounds that eventually developed in the extreme conditions.

Timely communications of fire events to the local community, often disseminated via local volunteer brigades was key in ensuring whether landholders and residents were to stay and defend or leave early. Where this happened, there was good response to the unfolding events. ABC Local radio was a key player to getting vital information to the people who needed it.

Community Fire Units, where deployed and operational, were also key players in ensuring there was good backup support to the emergency first responders and a vital chain in the communication to local residents. This system needs to be extended to rural and regional areas that are outside the jurisdiction of NSW Fire and Rescue, who largely oversee the operation of these units and provide resourcing and training to the community volunteers who are operational members of each unit. Where communities had a strong history of good community fire planning, the response to the critical stages of the fire emergencies was timely, organised and considered.

Air operations in the form of aerial bucketting, fixed wing aerial bombers, performed superbly when weather conditions allowed deployment. With good aerial observation and in benign weather conditions, or where sudden changes in wind direction occurred, excellent work was observed in gaining time and the protection particularly of isolated coastal residential areas.

1.3 Response to bushfires

There was a lack of fire preparedness by individuals and organisations, despite long term predictions by expert individuals and authorities of impending conditions.

The reasons for success or failure need to be critically examined. It is possible that some remote lightning ignitions are simply uncontrollable when the prevailing conditions produce unmanageable fire behaviour. However, it is reasonable to ask whether all lightning fires could be contained if initial attack is both fast enough and large enough.

In many regions, there was slow initial response in scaling up resources, initial attack, taking the advantage of benign weather conditions to allow close containment while fire grounds were small - which of course proved problematic as the extent of the fire emergency escalated over time and from northern regions as the weather conditions deteriorated across south eastern Australia. This deterioration in control is exacerbated with multiple ignitions and escalating incidents.

Lack of resourcing of Incident Management Teams during night shifts in many areas. Night shifts provide extra resources in planning and preparing for the following day shift(s) and also allow for some time to devote to good strategic planning and fire forecasting to look at control options.

There were many failures of recently completed fuel reduction burns due to extreme weather conditions and their

usefulness as a control option reduced by prolonged drought conditions leading up to the emergency period, to reduce fire intensity. This could also be said for traditional use of natural control options such as moist forest gulleys, rainforest margins and river systems which did not hold because of the extreme fire behavior experienced this season.

Throughout the season there was a repetition of the failure of large, uncontained and poorly resourced backburns, leading to escalating fire grounds and uncontained and extreme fire behaviour. Failure of backburning strategies – reliant on historical precedents rather than more accurate summation of forecast weather conditions and patterns; trends in fuel and vegetation moisture levels, moisture extinction rates, FDI and low levels of fuel moisture extinction rates.

This was also often based on the lack of deployment of experienced crew members with good local knowledge of terrain, fuel types and localities, often the result of deployment of out of area crews with limited briefing prior to shift.

It was apparent as the emergency period escalated in both time-frame and geography, resources of appliances, equipment (including retardant) and crews were stretched over such a prolonged period.

Poor mopping up and blacking out of fire edges to a minimum depth to ensure future breaches in containment lines are limited. I have seen examples of poor containment over many fire seasons, resulting in wasted opportunities and escalating fire grounds and fire behaviour, because the time and patience needed to carefully blackout and diligently patrol fire lines is not heeded. It is a painstakingly boring but critical operation required in order to efficiently control a fire.

If suitable crews, aircraft and support are not standing by waiting for the call, it can take some hours to put an operation together. Storms often occur in the afternoon, so a slow response can lead to the first attack being delayed until the following day. The fire first needs to be assessed by a trained observer, strategies decided, helipad/s may need to be prepared and support teams organised back at base. Meanwhile, the fire keeps growing. If several aircraft are available then assessment, insertion and water-bombing can occur together. With only one or two aircraft, these tasks must be done consecutively.

Over-reaction is appropriate for a lightning strike that could grow into a large and damaging fire, and the best way to limit later risk. Energetic attack is essential. Often the opposite occurs, under-reaction. This can be due to flaws in thinking like under-estimation of the risk, a laissez-faire attitude, hopelessness or reluctance to scale up the operation. It can be because resources were not on standby, or there are other fires running and resources are deployed elsewhere. Or there could be chronic resource shortages. Trained and capable RAFT personnel were in short supply right across the 2019-2020 fires. This, combined with a failure to give priority to remote fires, led to numerous ignitions not being attacked at all or attacked inadequately. Many of these became disastrous fires some weeks later. The need to retain a rapid RAFT response even when other fires are going is critical to managing risks.

1.4 Any other matters

When power infrastructure and communications towers were impacted, key communications lines were breached. Our telecommunications system needs to be designed to be far more resilient to all future natural emergencies, including fire. This issue severely impacted the government radio networks in many parts of the south coast of NSW. Other than the ABC and many local RFS brigades and their local communities, most technological communication media, including Fires Near Me, was slow to update to real time, repetitive and lacked detail or relevance, on which decision-making by communities and individuals is critical.

Bush fire Prone Zones do not appear to have been considered in planning or mapping of Bushfire Risk Mgt Planning in the Shoalhaven Local Government Area as there appears to be no DISPLAN (Disaster management Plan) operational in the Shoalhaven Fire Mgt District, (this being the document which outlines SOPs during emergencies, evacuation routes, safe places; lay-bys on the highway for potential Assembly Areas for equipment and strike force teams;

Also as a result, there were no pointers for authorities including police, to manage heavy traffic impact - from tourist

traffic to through traffic and SOPs for Emergency situations providing access and egress for emergency vehicles. In other words this current situation allows for a “free for all” with each separate responding agency to sort every time there is an emergency.

Suggestions for improvement

- Our telecommunications system needs to be designed to be far more resilient to all future natural emergencies, including fire.
- Need for better mapping for communities to adequately implement fireplans in a timely manner. People should not be treated as stupid; they need good information on which to base decisions including “Stay and Defend” or to “Leave” with adequate time to minimize risk with evacuation.
- The dire need for a similar system to the NSW Fire & Rescue Community Fire Units into rural and regional areas to be created under the auspices of the RFS to assist where there is an obvious lack of resources and to enable property holders to be properly trained, prepared and able to assist with property protection when there is a deficit of fire agency support on extensive and campaign emergency periods as we had just experienced.
- The need for better fire preparedness by individuals, organisations and agencies. An example on this point, Bush Fire Prone Zones do not appear to have been considered in planning or mapping of Bushfire Risk Mgt Planning in the Shoalhaven Local Government Area .
- The development of and implementation of a DISPLAN in the Shoalhaven LGA is essential, outlining SOPs for Emergency situations and providing access and egress for emergency vehicles.

Supporting documents or images
