



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

The local area consists of 5 villages- Nth Bendalong, Bendalong, Manyana, Cunjurong Point and Berringer Lake with a substantial number of small acreage rural homes within 13kms radius. There is a total permanent population of approximately 600 with tourist season rising to up to 3 000.

Our property is a 2.5 ha rural residential block with mains electricity but no fixed water supply. We have tank water of 52 000 litres capacity when full. We are located 8km from the villages with a single road access to both the Princes Hwy and to the villages. There are 2 small neighbourhood shops in the area with no supermarket, fuel supply or medical facilities.

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

- Climate change is the single most important factor in causing the recent bushfire disaster.
In our area, the annual average rainfall since 2000 was about 1100ml up to 2016.
In 2017, the annual rainfall was 1158ml- but 504ml of that fell in March with an east coast low- and then it stopped raining getting ¼ or 1/3 of monthly rain and sometimes nothing.
In 2018, the annual total was 909ml, but again it was a big dump of rain in November which inflated the total. The natural springs stopped running and haven't restarted. The strong winds started earlier in the year and the summer was getting hotter.
In 2019, the annual total was 635ml. The lowest ever in 20 years of records. Strong winds started in May- no longer the dreaded August winds- and continued on for the rest of the year. The dam was nearly empty and we were doing everything to conserve water. Tanks were half full and we were very worried. There was no subsoil moisture and fuel levels were high in the bush as trees were raining leaves whenever the wind blew. Vegetation was dying all around us.
Temperatures were rising- hotter days more often.
The bushfire disaster was inevitable under these conditions.

- RFS crews had been working for months in the northern part of the state and, from late in 2019, trying to extinguish the Currowan fire in our area. Crews are volunteers and mostly retirees. The hard, physical effort of fighting fires and being on call at all times of the day and night meant they were exhausted. The extent of the active fire zone meant that there would never be enough RFS crews to protect all properties let alone try to extinguish the fires. Much of our surrounding area is inaccessible terrain so crews are forced to wait until fires approach residential areas then engage in property protection.
The situation may have been avoided if NSW had access to more large firefighting aircraft . They need to be available all year as, all around the world, the fire season is extending. These fires have shown that there is a need to use large firefighting aircraft to extinguish lightning strike fires as soon as they are recorded. We simply did not have enough aircraft to cover the eastern seaboard nor enough RFS crews to protect people and property.

- The NSW Government has been underfunding National Parks services for many years. Positions have been lost in fire management and maintenance. Senior fire management positions have been eliminated resulting in a huge loss of expertise and knowledge. These are the people who knew the local area and the way fire acts within the area. There is not enough staff and funding to maintain trails and conduct hazard reductions near residential areas and this must be reinstated.

1.2 Preparation and planning

The Manyana RFB crew is located in Cunjurong Point. Two trucks operate out of the station. While there is an adequate number of members, many of them do not live permanently in the area. The members meet and train regularly and are led by experienced firefighters. Community education has been a focus over many years.
My partner [REDACTED] has been an active member of the brigade for 20 years and is [REDACTED]. Before he retired, he was a Station Officer in the ACT Fire Brigade for 24years. Since we purchased our land in 1999, he has made sure that we are prepared for bushfire events. Our first experience was in 2001 when the bushfire came to within 50m of our block.
Our bushfire plan was to stay and fight the fire, retreat to a

secure, prepared refuge under the house if necessary and, as a last resort, evacuate. In planning for a bushfire event, we had to take into consideration that Bendalong Rd could be blocked by active fire or fallen trees or electricity poles, which is what happened in 2001/2 and 2019/20, meaning evacuation was impossible.

Preparations for the fire included:

- House construction- fibre cement wall cladding, metal roof with no valleys, decking made of hardwood, enclosed eaves- metal fascia
- Block cleared around house 30m to north, 30m to east, 100m to south and 100m to west with some tall trees left intermittently to act as ember traps
- Gardens kept at least 2m from house
- Dam to supply water for firefighting (this was at a very low level due to drought so tanks had to be used)
- 2 petrol fire fighting pumps attached to water tanks
- Firefighting 18mm hoses fitted with wide-spray nozzles connected to tanks
- Sprinkler system on roof of house which recirculated water back into the house tank so it could be reused
- Suitable personal protection clothing including gloves, masks, goggles, hats, boots
- Fallen leaves and debris removed from around structures, tanks and gutters
- Gas barbecue removed from decking and placed away from house
- All fuel containers including ride on mower removed from house and sheds and placed in the middle of the paddock
- Petrol driven generator
- CB radios to communicate with each other
- Refuge under the house is equipped with water containers, radio, materials to block air vents, tie up point for the dogs, 2 exit points
- Reference to RFS fire website and Essential Bushfire Safety Tips by [REDACTED]

1.3 Response to bushfires

The Manyana Rural Fire Brigade had only 10 trained, dependable members available operating out of 2 vehicles on 31st December 2019 when fires first impacted the area. Several other members, including [REDACTED] lived in rural areas and were unable to access the RFS station as the single access road was closed due to the fire. This included 2 of the [REDACTED]. The brigade had been fighting fires in neighbouring areas for months. On New Year's Eve, there were no crews from other areas able to assist as they were all occupied in other active fire zones in the Shoalhaven. The Manyana Brigade worked bravely and tirelessly to defend the villages during that day and over the next week with crews from other areas assisting from the 3rd January. RFS aerial support was given from 2nd January and was an invaluable aid in saving the local villages and homes. For us, the bushfire first impacted our land on 3rd January 2020. The devastating fire storm of 31st January had been heading our way but we had been saved by a sudden wind change. From that day, conditions moderated for a few days and the fire crept through the next valley as a slow burn towards our place, finally reaching the southern edge of our property on the 3rd January. Both on 2nd and 3rd January, helicopters were water bombing neighbouring properties doing property protection. The fire was also burning to the north and west and we were alerted several times by phone of the approaching threat. Fires Near Me was very helpful however internet connection and mobile phone service was intermittent and could not be relied on. Phone landline service and electricity had been lost on the 31st December. We were regularly updated by RFS officers and members, Fire and Rescue and Police who called into the property. On 4th January at 9.00am, the fire hit from the north western

side. Weather conditions were deteriorating with escalating wind speed, shifting direction constantly and temperatures rising sharply (peaked at 48 C). We immediately rang 000 and a well trained, efficient crew from Bawley Point RFB arrived within 20 minutes. Together we fought the blaze, which was burning on 3 sides of the house at the same time, for 4 hours. The fire burnt to within 10 metres of the house and garage. We lost electricity pole, fences and gardens but our house was saved. We have no doubt that this was due to the assistance given by the Bawley Point crew and the preparation we had undertaken before the fire arrived.

After the fire, we attended the Bushfire Recovery Centre at Ulladulla. It was very convenient to have access to a range of services and be alerted about the availability of grants.

We also attended a counselling service arranged by NSW RFS. This was particularly valuable after an exhausting summer fighting fires locally and in various areas of the state and, in particular, after having members of our own brigade being severely burnt trying to defend their home.

Assistance given by corporations and individuals was really appreciated. In particular, Endeavour Energy provided us with a generator in the last couple of days of the 3 ½ weeks we were without power. Our generator had broken down. Individuals arrived at our gate with donations of food and personal items and many donations were received at the local hall.

Throughout the crisis, it was inspiring to have Fire Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons leading the response with excellent communication skills, factual and compassionate. Our local Shoalhaven mayor, Amanda Findley, was another effective leader giving relevant advice and working tirelessly for her community.

1.4 Any other matters

- Lack of communication was our greatest problem before, during and after the fires. We have no access to NBN and rely on a mobile wireless connection which is not dependable at the best of times. Throughout the emergency, connection was very intermittent and we were lucky that the phone worked on 4th January to make that 000 call. It was hard to determine exactly what was going on in our local area.

- National effective leadership was non-existent, at this time. Our Prime Minister had a holiday while the nation was under threat!

- The army should have been mobilised much earlier. They would have been invaluable in support roles such as logistics, medical, transport, mechanical repairs, manning refuelling and water supply stations and catering. Volunteers just cannot do it all.

- After the fire, contacting government agencies, utility and insurance companies was extremely frustrating. Many hours were spent just trying to get through with initial and follow-up calls. Systems which use overseas call centres were the worst as often the people answering the call had no concept of the area or what had happened.

To prepare our state for the next bushfire crisis, which is inevitable, the government needs to

- Immediately fund the purchase of large firefighting aircraft and training of required personnel to permanently have them available for bushfire events. As the bushfire seasons extend each year throughout the world, it is no longer possible to share aircraft- we must have our own!

- Encourage more interaction, such as combined training exercises, between RFS and SES services to support each other in disaster events.

- Help local isolated communities to become more self-sufficient to enable them to cope with disasters. For example, community halls in isolated areas could be equipped with solar power electricity systems, generators and NBN satellite so that they could effectively act as refuges when disasters occur.

- Encourage residents to be proactive in preparing for bushfire events including installation of sprinkler systems, clearing around

the house, maintaining an effective asset protection zone, acquiring suitable firefighting clothing and protection gear, installing firefighting pumps and hoses.

As a nation, our absolute first responsibility must be to start turning climate change around.

Supporting documents or images
