Your details

Title

Submission details

I am making this submission as
Other

Submission type
I am making a personal submission

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)
I am a resident of a bushfire effected area, a member of RFS brigade and I have 42 years experience as a forester involved in management of native forests at various locations along the east coast of NSW including all aspects of

Consent to make submission public
I would like this submission to remain anonymous

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story
During my 42 years working as a professional forest manager I have been involved in all aspects of wildfire management from fire line to incident management team as well as preparation of plans for and implementation of hazard reduction burning.

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 undoubtedly a factor. It seems to be the most popular factor with the media and the greater unwashed out there. Temperatures are getting hotter everywhere which means that we will experience more intense fires more often, and bushfire seasons will be longer. As a manager of extensive areas of forest estate for over 40 years this has been apparent since the mid 2000s. (Has always been a noticeable factor with foresters because bushfire season determines when/whether summer leave from work could be taken with our families.) Since mid 2000s the years in which there have been serious campaign fires have been more frequent.

However, if this is due to climate change, as the scientific evidence seems to indicate, the impacts are going to be increasingly affecting other facets of life to a greater extent than increasing the likelihood of severe bush fire. The impact on bushfire wont either increase every year or even be noticeable every year. In my opinion the emphasis on climate change as a factor contributing to increasing bushfire severity is diverting attention from the more important and more immediate factors. Undoubtedly more needs to be done in the climate change arena but, even if we were to adopt all recommendations the effect on world temperatures is not going to be felt for many years. We would have many fire seasons before any ameliorative effects of climate actions would be experienced.

Specific to the 2019/20 fire season the most significant factor was the drought. The 2019 late summer to autumn north coast rains did not happen, and seasonal rains likewise didn't happen in other regions of the country. For the natural resource managers of the state's production forests and national parks the alarm bells would have started ringing in April-May and rang louder in July when winter rains also didn't happen. From that time, it was just a matter of when and where the lightning would strike in an inaccessible wilderness or when/where a deranged incendiarist would strike on an inevitable day of extreme fire danger. These conditions have happened before. Early 2000s, early 1990s, 1980, 1968, 1952, …. Perhaps not as widespread over the state as on this occasion. Forest managers have always been aware given these conditions of the migration of severe fires from southern Queensland in early spring southward to Victoria after Xmas. To those tasked with strategic preparation for protection of life and property of the increasing interface between rural residential living and high fire risk bushland it should have been pretty clear that a much higher level of preparedness was required. Undoubtedly there was awareness of this and the wally in the street would not know of measures taken, but as it turned out, not adequate in some areas.

The other, and most significant, contributing environmental factor was, and still is, the build-up of flammable fuel over the landscape in general. Aboriginal Australians occupied the more accessible lands of the river valleys and surrounding foothills which became the areas settled for agriculture. To provide suitable habitat for their principal food source, they regularly burnt before moving on. Such fires would regularly have spread to the surrounding less accessible areas now mainly state forests and national park with poorer access. (Evidence of severe fires can be seen in old forests of wilderness area, and reports of early explorers and settlers have plenty of reference to wildfires in "back country"). After European settlement there was gradual reduction in traditional aboriginal burning although early settlers kept up the practice in association with land clearing. I have heard 1920s timber workers relate how they could gallop horses through areas of forest that, in the 1970s, was advanced wet sclerophyll forest with well developed mesic understorey due to the absence of fire. In the south coast of NSW the progression of cool temperate rainforest element from narrow strips along sheltered watercourses up the slopes has been evident for the last 30 years, again due to the absence of fire. So, at the whole of landscape level, fuel loads have been increasing pretty much since the time of early European settlement. This, of course, makes it increasingly difficult to effect "cool" hazard reduction burns without developing into high intensity fires. Compounding this, exclusion of fire promotes the progression from xeric to mesic understorey in the moister and/or more sheltered eucalypt forests. It is very difficult to introduce low intensity fire into mesic understorey – weather and fuel conditions conducive to development of wildfire would be needed. So hazard reduction not possible.

To add to this, since the 1970s there has been a dramatic increase in the planning, documentation and degree of environmental compliance required by legislation to be adhered to by those carrying out planned hazard reduction burning. In the 1970s forest managers planned hazard reduction burns without any formal review of environmental impact. Such burns were planned and controlled with the purpose of protecting a productive resource, especially young regenerating forest. But having made an informed decision regarding where and when to burn, the operator was free to light the match without further administrative requirements. Broad area arial burns were conducted in remote areas with planning by joint agency committees but minimal regulatory or administrative requirements. Fast forward to today, a ten page or more document is required with prior approvals, public notifications and environmental monitoring, with the threat of legal action if correct procedure not followed. Obviously requiring a lot more preparation and hence staffing to maintain an acceptable level of hazard reduction. So, of course, the amount

of hazard reduction burning has reduced since the 1970s. (Note that figures of HR quoted by government agencies, especially NPWS, are often exaggerated so as to avoid criticism. A quoted area of say 500ha for a burn may in practice involve 20 ha of effective burn. This is obvious to those on the ground.)
Other factors, more related to the human involvemet:-
- The demographics of many rural areas has changed markedly since the 1970s in many areas. There are a much greater number of alternate lifestyle and city-based people, many of whom are conscientiously opposed to deliberate introduction of fire. This makes it very difficult for natural resource area managers and land owners to carry out hazard reduction where it must be contained within their boundaries. For example, in the 1970s the forest manager would initiate a hazard reduction burn along a ridgetop so that it would burn downhill at low intensity towards the private property in the valley below. Topography an access would often mean that no boundary trail would be possible between the forest and the private property to prevent the burn from leaving the forest. However the property owner would be thankful for the low intensity fire reducing the summer risk of wildfire. Today the property owner would very likely ring his/her lawyer.
- Health concerns. The days when the weather conditions are most favourable for broad area hazard reduction burning are also the days when smoke will accumulate and hang low often over residential areas
Note that it has been variously reported in the popular media that no amount of low intensity hazard reduction burning would have stopped the fires that wrought so much damage on the worst days of the last bushfire season. True. Of course it would not have on those days. But on the other 200 days of the fire season when conditions were not catastrophic the presence of areas of low fuel load have an undisputed ameliorative effect on fire intensity. The fire that was uncontrollable at 1500hrs under conditions of 80km/hr westerly wind, high temperature and low humidity at 2000hrs with less extreme weather factors would be a much safer prospect for firefighters to tackle if the fuel load is low.

1.2 Preparation and planning
There has been lots of media talk about lack of preparation and, as I have said above, the high likelihood of a severe fire season was very high at least as viewed by people with experience in bush fire management. However the amount of preparation being done would not be apparent to the wally in the street or bush. No amount of preparation would have prevented the devastation that occurred on the worst days of the crisis but there are measures that could be considered to avert similar occurrences next fire season.
- The natural resource management agencies need a boost in staffing at all levels from hazard reduction burning (HRB) plan preparers to the on ground fire lighters/ trail maintainers.
- There has been a big increase in rural fire service volunteers since the last fire season. These people need experience on the actual fire ground. Being involved in hazard reduction burns is a very good way to gain this early experience in a relatively safe situation. The government agencies, National parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Forestry Corporation of NSW (FCNSW) should be urged to use volunteers for such controlled fires. Excellent training which may be needed next fire season.
- Far too little broad area burning is carried out in wilderness area under the control of NPWS and in remote Crown land. NPWS should be urged to reconsider their approach to introduction of fire to wilderness areas
- The prohibitive regulations needed for approval for hazard reduction burning need to be reviewed. Surely in the light of the last disastrous fire season a more balanced approach is needed if we are to get anywhere near an adequate level of hazard reduction completed
- The litigation environment needs to be reviewed both in the area of hazard reduction plan preparation and fire entering adjoining properties. For example many areas of national park, state forest and Crown land have boundaries in locations where prevention of a even a “cool” HRB escaping onto adjoining tenure is just impractical. The responsible agencies need to be empowered to, within reason, include areas of adjoining tenure in HRB plans even if the proprietor does not agree. It isn’t acceptable that f
- In a lot of cases the owners of large tracts of private forest lack the resources and expertise to carry out HRB. In the past they were able to approach there local volunteer rural fire brigade and ask for assistance which would usually readily be given due to the training and experience value mentioned above. In recent times however, although it may not be the case in all areas, the brigades have been advised not to get involved for fear of litigation in the event of something going wrong. So burning doesn’t happen. Needs addressing both by legislation and provision of resources to RFS to carry out whatever planning is required
- Regarding residences in fire prone areas the tree and vegetation removal restrictions imposed by local governments need to be reviewed. Tree removal within a distance of at least one tree length should be allowed, more would be better.

But, overwhelmingly, the best preparation we can perform for the next and future fire seasons is to increase effective, targeted hazard reduction and access improvement.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Warnings. The reliance on social media is regrettable but inevitable when it was obvious that the official information was well behind real time, both in issuing and downgrading warnings. Solution – I doubt that there is one given the complexity and rapidity with which situations develop. I think there could be an improvement if call centres and the people preparing the alerts have local knowledge and have some fire management experience.

Resources. As I have said above, fire management agencies are clearly lacking appropriate staffing numbers to prepare the necessary hazard reduction burning proposals and the on-ground implementation.

In addition, there were too many reports of volunteers spending 12 hours plus on the fire line. These people may be regarded as heroes but there is a risk that their actions may cause injury, or worse, and poor decision making. The professional organisations have strict guidelines to control this. They should be adopted by the volunteer agencies. It is not difficult to maintain a spreadsheet at either brigade or district level.

Regarding equipment, in my experience with a volunteer RFS brigade in the last fire season, there were more volunteers available than there were suitable vehicles to put water on the fires. Given the predictability of the situation this could have been alleviated to some extent. Even just provision of vehicles to replace ones temporarily out of action would have been useful.

Respirators. No one accepts the RFS official line re P2 masks. Full face masks are clearly more effective – we have tried them. It was obviously a position based on cost. Front line firefighters should be provided with cartridge type half face masks with built in eye protection. (A mask is not much use if it causes goggles to fog up. Firefighters need to be able to see where they are walking in the bush.

1.4 Any other matters

Land Use planning.

Increasingly larger areas revoked from state forest and added to national park estate. Results in less maintained access and less hazard reduction burning

Coordination

At the local level there used to be district committees with representatives from the resource management agencies, rural fire service and other organisations who periodically reviewed fire management related issues including strategic level hazard reduction requirements. All agencies could have input into issues such as broad area burning in remote wilderness areas or into private property hazard reduction even if the proprietor of such property not in agreement. If such groups still exist they need to be more active. The government agencies are increasingly strapped for cash. Some urging from the independent source is needed.

"Traditional Burning"

This seems to have been a trendy topic since the summer bushfires. If such interest leads to more hazard reduction, good result. If it leads to some employment for aboriginal people so much the better. But, from what I have read, there is nothing different or special about it. As I have stated above historical records of aboriginal life indicate the widespread use of fire over the thousands of years prior to European settlement. This meant that fuel loads at a whole of landscape level were much lighter. Obviously, under this regime of repeated burning, it was much less likely to have a serious wildfire develop. For reasons I have set out above burning regimes have greatly deviated from this situation, especially since about the 1970s. The likelihood of fire building to dangerous level is much greater because it is more likely to run into heavy fuel loads, and "cool" hazard reduction burns much more difficult to achieve. So, call it traditional burning or responsible hazard reduction, of the kind subject of a plethora of fire management research papers over the last 70 years, in order to keep it cool it needs to be carried out in many locations when the window of opportunity occurs. Due to the general heavy fuel loads, progression of undergrowth from xeric to mesic and likely increasing temperatures this window of opportunity is usually very small – maybe 3 to 6 weeks of the year. So to get back to anything like the field conditions created by the traditional owners we would need a very labour intensive operation, both in the area of planning and of operations, ready to go when the weather conditions allow.

In addition the traditional owners did not have to contend with environmental legislation, potentially litigious

neighbours and the health and NIMBY issues of a sensitive population.

Supporting documents or images