

Submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

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

It is a personal submission.

I request that this submission remain anonymous but I consent to it being made public.

In summary, I have two main concerns:

1. Who made the decision to light a backburn on Seabrook Road on the 18th December?
2. It is time to consider a professional rural fire brigade. It is only with paid employees that a disciplined organisation can exist.

My story:

My husband, [REDACTED], our son and myself have been residents of Balmoral since 2001. We have experienced a number of fires in that time – Christmas 2001, and the Hall Street fire in 2013 are two stand outs. However, nothing compared to the intensity of the fires we experienced in December 2019. Anecdotally, these fires destroyed any prior knowledge of fire behaviour.

Prior to this past summer, we had experienced over two years of very low rainfall. The surrounding bushland was dry with many trees dying and the understorey becoming almost non-existent. It was in a sorry state leading into Spring 2019. As a result, my husband and I had become obsessive followers of the weather and the Fires Near Me app. We became aware of the Green Wattle Creek fire towards the end of November. We started to take actions to review our bushfire plan and collect and move off-site important documents. We knew that any fire in this area had the potential to result in a catastrophic outcome.

We constantly were checking the location of the Green Wattle Creek fire. At night we could clearly see the glow from the fire from our yard. At 9pm we were still able to see the fire flaring up at times. This was either the 16th or 17th December.

On the evening of the 18th December, I went outside at about 10.00pm to check on the fire. It was still quite warm outside and again I could see the fire flaring up. At this point in time, I calculated the main fire was still between fifteen and seventeen kilometres away. At midnight this same evening, I again went outside to check on the fire. The Green Wattle Creek fire, to our north-west had died down to a point it was just a glow on the horizon. However, to our south-west, there appeared to be another fire. I now know that this second fire was a backburn that had been lit by the Rural Fire Service at 10.00pm on the 18th. I do not know if this fire was authorised. Lighting this fire would potentially protect villages to our south, but put Balmoral at a high risk of fire damage.

On the 19th December, the forecast for that day was for forty two degrees with a south west wind. Humidity was less than 10%. Significantly, that morning, we had observed no RFS aerial support at all. A helicopter did not appear until after the first front had moved through our street.

At approximately 11.00am, we made the decision to leave. The fire to our south-west had flared up, and with the weather conditions was heading in our direction. We stopped at the local fire shed at approximately

11.10am to advise them we were leaving. However, even in that short space of time, the fire had built up so quickly it was safer for us to take shelter there. We stayed there most of the day and assisted by providing food and water to the many RFS volunteers who stopped in at the station throughout the day. For most of the day we felt reasonably safe and we were able to know exactly what was happening in Balmoral. We knew if we left we would lose that communication.

Through the day the fire fronts moved through our street, [REDACTED], a total of five times. On more than one occasion, we truly believed our house had burnt. It was a numbing feeling. Each time, we would get word back that the house was, in fact, all right. As the fourth front built up, we decided it was no longer safe and we drove about five kilometres to our south. We returned to check on our house, again the house was untouched. After this we chose to evacuate properly from Balmoral. This was a difficult decision. We knew it was not safe to stay, however, we also knew by leaving we would be losing any source of information on our house and other Balmoral residents who we knew had stayed.

On the 21st December, weather conditions had deteriorated further. We were saddened to hear that a number of our neighbours had returned home on the 20th, being allowed to enter through the road blocks either to our south or north. These people were still at home on the 21st. At the worst of the fires on this day, they had to seek shelter at the RFS station. I believe these people had not been made aware of the potential severity of the fires and the inadequacy of the fire shed to provide safe shelter. Fortunately, these people all survived. Our property was attacked by spot fires. Any of our five acres that hadn't burnt on the 19th was burnt on the 21st.

On the evening of the 22nd, we were able to return home. It was nothing short of devastating. Many houses had been lost. Our property and gardens were a blackened wasteland. I was angry as I knew this was caused not by the fire we had been watching but by a poor decision to light a fire on the evening before a day that should have been declared a catastrophic fire danger. This should not have happened. We are slowly rebuilding. We have spent many hours cleaning up our yard. I've noticed a change in the birdlife and animals in our area. I look out at trees now that are struggling to survive, many have succumbed. I have personally sought counselling and have flash backs when I see fire or helicopters. I don't sleep properly anymore. It has impacted on how I connect with other people. I find all this distressing.

Many people will say that there was a build-up of fuel load in the National Park and this was the cause of the fire. I disagree that hazard reduction should have been carried out. Without burning all of Nattai National Park, I believe it would have had little effect on the outcome. Fires are destructive, whether they are naturally occurring or man-made. I have seen too many hazard reductions in twenty years get out of control.

Human intervention was the cause of the fires in Balmoral. If the back burn had not been lit on Seabrook Road, we may never have been impacted by the main fire front. I also question why there was no aerial support on the morning of the 19th December, although there had been constant water bombing operations occurring from the 14th until late on the 18th December after Buxton RFS lit a backburn on the 14th December which had quickly become out of control.

I truly believe that we have moved beyond having a volunteer rural fire brigade. It is time to make change and have the people who deal with bushfires paid employees. It is only with a professional organisation that proper supervision and control can occur. There are too many people making their own decisions who cannot be touched because they are volunteers.

I would like to see an investigation into why the fire on Seabrook Road was lit. Why was this fire lit on an evening before catastrophic conditions? Who was responsible for making this decision? Why was there a lack of aerial support the following morning? We are struggling to find answers to these questions. I would appreciate an apology from that person for making a wrong decision. Twenty homes in Balmoral lost and two people died indicates a wrong decision. Without a thorough investigation of this action it will occur again.