

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

I live in a town in the Orara Valley, where fires burned in our area of Nana Glen and Glenreagh in November 2019. We experienced drought conditions for over a year leading up to these bushfire events. For months we watched as our Orara river receded lower and lower and as our smaller creek tributaries ran dry in many places, including our own five-acre property. The smoke haze from the Bees Nest fire west of us and local fires that popped up from lightning strikes (East Bank Road/Karangie Fire) filled the air and our lungs for well over a month. We were lucky that our property did not burn. However, on November 12th the threat of the Liberation Trail fire was high and the Extreme Level of danger was implemented for our neighbourhood. Our local fire brigades recommended we take ultimate precautions. Therefore we self-evacuated, leaving our home and beautiful mature bush property full of diverse flora and fauna to chance for the sake of our own safety and the safety of those that would attempt to protect us. We were grateful to return on Nov 13th after the danger level had dropped and our RFS achieved containment. We were lucky to still have our home, some in our nearby towns were not so lucky.

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

Reductions in biodiversity, increased deforestation, loss of habitat. Increased logging activity and lack of biodiversity in forestry managed areas. I observed drought conditions causing more branches and leaves to drop, a decrease in fungal decomposition, decrease in insect populations (i.e. dung beetles) and increases in high temperature days. It wasn't a surprise then, when our East Bank Road bushfire started from a lightning strike.

I am of the belief that if we work from the soil up and actually increase biodiversity in our forests, we will see more rain and a decrease in bushfires. Plant more trees and encourage more diverse ecosystems instead of the conventional forestry planning which encourages fire prone plants (eucalypts) to proliferate. I believe our number one contributing factor to bushfire crisis, is due to not enough protection of our forest ecosystems, not enough regenerative practices, and too much clearing for conventional cattle farming.

1.2 Preparation and planning

With all due respect, it felt like the federal government completely let us down with lack of long-term planning and urgent action. We were in drought conditions for over a year, plans should have been in place for additional resources and more strict penalties and patrolling against human-caused fires. These fires were predictable, preparation in the form of RFS volunteer incentives, fire fighting equipment, community engagement and communications resources should have been planned months in advance of September 2019 (when fires began in the Clarence Valley).

Once the drought set in no amount of back burning or fuel reduction was going to help anyone. From my perspective, prevention of fires being lit and resources for putting fires out should have been highest priority for the short-term.

I believe long-term bushfire prevention planning and preparation should include drought reduction measures as top priority. Biodiversity and healthy forest ecosystems bring more rain and water vapour via the biotic pump*. More water vapour within our forests leads to more fungal activity breaking down fuel loads and increased populations of insect and micro-organism decomposers. Soil regeneration, mycoremediation, preservation and empowerment of healthy diverse flora and fauna populations must be key in our planning for less bushfire risk and lessening the effects of our changing climate. Engage our Landcare, Forestry, Aboriginal and Scientific communities to lead these efforts.

*Sources:

Makarieva A.M., Gorshkov V.G. (2010) The Biotic Pump: Condensation, atmospheric dynamics and climate. *International Journal of Water*, 5(4), 365-385.

Makarieva A.M., Gorshkov V.G., Li B.-L. (2009) Precipitation on land versus distance from the ocean: Evidence for a forest pump of atmospheric moisture. *Ecological Complexity*, 6, 302-307.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Really appreciated communication from Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons our local RFS Captains at the Nana Glen Fire Brigade and the Mid North Coast Branch. I believe it would have been in the public's best interest if the most experienced of current and former fire commissioners, including Greg Mullins, were involved in the planning and preparation for this fire season. I was disappointed to see that their warnings were not taken seriously.

Coffs Harbour Council's warning and preparation for our most threatening day of November 12th, were well covered across media streams. One consideration for improvement would be that there was difficulty in understanding how far away the fire actually was. The area under threat was so vast, many folks didn't know where to go to feel safe. Also, neighbourhood safe places or evacuation centres were not clearly announced.

The 'Fires Near Me' app could be improved by including the active fire front so that the public is aware of highest threat, rather than the large area that it featured without indication of the active fire front. Many people used the ARCGIS map as a secondary reference because it showed the active fire front, but credibility was questionable as it was not clearly recommended by the fire service. Truly appreciate the app, otherwise. Text messages were also helpful in alerting us when the fire front was near and warning levels had increased.

Local fire brigades could have used more communication support as updates from them were most credible, but (understandably) sparse. As anxiety and uncertainty of worsening conditions increased, the public was in need of up to date information, some media outlets took advantage of this and therefore, inaccurate information was being shared in some cases.

I cannot speak for our local RFS members, but I do know that they were stretched to their limits. Several that I know took time off work to complete their duties, missing out on pay. This seems a simple ask for RFS volunteers to be reimbursed for missed income while fighting fires?

I am also concerned that in response to the bushfires, during 'clean-up' procedures in fire impacted areas further clearing of trees and animal habitat caused more detriment. These crews should be informed of the need to empower fauna habitat and allow space (no public access, to reduce safety concerns) for nature to take its course and heal.

1.4 Any other matters

I just want to extend my appreciation for your efforts. These are unprecedented times and I believe that we can continue to do better, by refocusing our efforts on less monetary driven ends and more on environmental regeneration, which in turn empowers healthy communities. If this is not your expertise, please bring those that have this expertise to the table. Let's make this a great collaboration to solve this crisis, by utilising the diverse wealth of knowledge we have in our Australian and global communities. Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts.

Supporting documents or images
