

Your details

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A member of the general public

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

Although I lodge this submission as a member of the public I have over 30 years experience in a firefighting organisation responding to bushfires across NSW. The 19/20 season was exceptional, preceded by extremely dry conditions that began in 2018 and continued on the east coast until late January 2020. Overall, despite the ferocity of the season's impact on forested land, wildlife and property, loss of life was minimised, which is a testament to the efforts and skills of the firefighting response agencies. The effect of climate change on weather patterns and extreme events is irrefutable. A result of changing climate is more frequent , severe bushfires. The NSW government must acknowledge the growing impact of climate change on our environment and employ their best efforts to contribute to mitigating its effects, through policy and leading relevant action across the state. Adapting to climate change includes better planning and response to bushfires. This will require more funding than is currently available. The whole community benefits from bushfire risk management and response. It is a cost that should be borne by the whole community in an equitable system of contribution.

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

The 2019/20 bushfire season's extent and severity was caused by the drier than normal conditions along eastern Australia which commenced in 2018 and intensified during 2019. There were many localities where rainfall records were lowest on record (over periods exceeding 120 years of data) during 2019. The Bureau of Meteorology records very clearly show the extreme drought conditions that lead to the severe 19/20 bushfire season. The BoM's records also demonstrate the influence of climate change on annual data for temperature and rainfall year on year, with the majority of the frontrunners for hottest and driest years being in the last two decades. The 19/20 season was not caused by a buildup of fuel loads. There will always be fuel available to burn on farmland and in forests. The difference in the 19/20 year was extreme dryness, resulting in very large fires with capacity to spot ahead many kilometres, where the landscape was so dry that no natural control lines that usually offer control advantages, such as wet gullies, creek lines and even rivers, would enable fires to be held. Bushfires began occurring during winter 2019 along the eastern rangelands in Queensland and northern NSW. Control strategies under such dry conditions had to rely on bare earth trails, major roads, large amounts of aircraft water bombing effort and fire fighting ground crews to contain fires. Even with these control strategies, fires were frequently lost over containment lines because of the extreme dryness and lack of resources available to maintain control. The extreme dryness continued to develop until February 2020, which resulted in the huge extent of burnt area in forested areas on the tablelands and coastal parts of NSW.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Fire fighting agencies need to be more strategically aligned to the developing weather patterns than they have been to date. If fire agencies can respond more rapidly to forecast developing dry weather patterns, hazard reduction burning can be implemented when suitable weather windows appear, and as the conditions transition to bushfire conditions (even when they start in winter) resources need to be available to deploy earlier with suitable strategies. For example, in a dry winter, it is not appropriate to leave a bushfire to burn unchecked and unmanaged, if it will not readily extinguish in natural control lines such as wet gullies, if they are dry and offer no control advantage. Fire fighting hardware, such as aircraft and heavy plant, need to be available to fire fighting agencies to deploy when the season has developed, whether this is in winter spring or summer. Weather patterns will dictate this, not the month or season of the year. The BKDI soil dryness index, is the best guide for onset of the bushfire season and should be used more strategically to plan and prepare. Rather than relying on hazard reduction burning of large areas of bushland each year with ever-narrowing windows of opportunity due to effects of climate change, more use of mechanical and manual vegetation fuel management should be considered. This strategy is reliable -it can be carried out annually except in the wettest of years.

1.3 Response to bushfires

The use of aircraft, heavy plant and fire crews was effective in combating fires during the 19/20 season, however the severity and extent of the fires across NSW (and other states simultaneously) meant there were not enough of all these resources to effectively combat fires. This should be tactically addressed by government through: Investment in key assets, such as water-bombing aircraft (e.g. Fireboss aircraft) being stationed in fire districts available for rapid deployment throughout the fire season to ensure fires are kept as small as possible; Heavy plant contractors who can be paid a "retainer" to rapidly deploy to fires within 1-2 hours; Increasing funding to train and equip firefighters across all fire agencies; Greater investment in remote firefighting teams to ensure fires can be kept small as possible; train and equip multi agency IMT personnel to support pre-emptive operations throughout the fire season when weather trigger points are reached; Invest in common management systems e.g computer software and radio networks, that support joint agency response.

1.4 Any other matters

Burning more bushland in an attempt to mitigate impact of bushfires is not the solution for seasons such as the 2019/20 season. There were many instances where fires burnt through recently burnt forest areas during this season. During extreme conditions, recently burnt areas do not offer a reliable control barrier. More intensively treated asset protection zones where vegetation can be manually or mechanically removed will be more reliable.

These should be considered as a better alternative to more fuel hazard reduction burning. There is also merit in trialling cultural burning practices where widespread low intensity small patch burns can be applied to break up fire paths.

Supporting documents or images
