

Submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry

From: Allan Porter

Comments relate mainly from experience with the Palmer Oaky Fire, MidWest Council area.

Submitted in the capacity of a combined primary producer, resident and emergency services worker.

The following comments are drawn from the responses I have made to enquiries received from friends about the 2019/20 bushfires and my own property in the midst of them and during which time I spent three weeks actively combatting the fires.

The following is as best as possible laid out with comments at the end as per the Terms of Reference.

Cause of fire: Accident through use of tool producing sparks in tinder dry grass and fire eventually getting into the ranges – Cherry Tree and Razorback and covering an area of approx. 17,000 hectares.

The 500,000 hectare Gosper Mountain fire burning since October was a threat that both fires might join up. The Gosper fire was the result of a lightning strike in built-up fuel.

Marvellous community spirit. Good ol' country. Glad to be part of it. Everybody toughing out the hot days – many over the 40 Celsius mark with unforgiving hot NW winds. No complaints. Confident. Just getting on and doing it with great support from all.

We were concerned about outbreaks by accident in tinder dry areas where there's scrubby fuel. But a lot of grading has been done to open wide tracks to stop the spread of grass fires and units were always ready to handle spot fires.

We tamed the beast. Using the wind changes that were frequent, back burning got underway and reduced the threat to smaller areas that were handled by mopping up brigades.

An observation of the mainstream media. Coverage of all fires was an absolute shocker!! All sensational, emotional and inspiring people to think that all was lost. We were able to avoid the main media. We were too busy.

The drought was as severe as the '83 drought. Some of the ol' timers said, as bad as the '68 drought. I remember the '83 drought.

Problem is when times are good, meaning there's no fires around, communities that are populated by people who've sought a 'tree change', become over confident. And as we all know – what might happen will happen. There's the problem! No one so far seems to be able to come to terms with the tough decisions that need to be made to order people to be sensible.

But who has the regulatory clout to ensure tough future fire precautionary regulations are maintained? The local bushfire brigades make clear recommendations, repeated regularly which is all the clout they have after development has occurred.

This is the area where I think a regulatory body has to have the clout to ensure fire safety from the worst case scenario that might occur, is maintained at all times and a state map developed and maintained showing the level of fire hazard accordingly. And that this becomes a public document. And there are penalties for not complying.

Working properties, cattle, sheep - the drought reduced fuel on the ground substantially and the stock chewed the few stalks that were left. But it was the spot fires caused by embers in the strong winds from the forest fires that were the real danger.

Years ago after severe fires in the metro area, what became known as the 10/50 regulations were introduced. But they were introduced a long time after review processes had been completed and community feeling was back with the trees, not with fire. And the regs got watered down. We really need strong regs and this time I hope someone has got the bottle to see that's achieved.

I've got to say, you can feel relaxed about fighting a fire that you knew was going to happen as when you're out in the fields, you rehearse in your mind what might happen and you get mentally prepared. Country folk are like that. But it was the experience of the vast volume of fuel that shocked me and others – seasoned fire fighters who are cattle-men, realistic about what nature dishes out, who had to get into the ranges and stop the fires coming down into communities. There was a lot of very direct, passionate appeals put to Scomo, our Prime minister, when he swung by. And it was justified – that too many decisions supporting environmentalists in the past had allowed the increase in the build-up of fuel. These were guys, my pals, putting the harsh realistic facts to him and they did so with lot of energy.

Years ago the clearing of rural land on slopes even with a minor gradient was prevented in the interests of preventing erosion. A good policy perhaps even though it took a long time for property owners to accept it as it reduced their productive area but it was never thought through sufficiently to consider the downside – the build-up of fuel above and on the ground.

You can't fight fires with idealism. It's realism that prevents them and eventually stops them!

Much burnt pasture will have to be sowed as the roots of grasses have been burned out.

Who's best to make the decision? – when the fire is raging and you've got a local combat plan worked with all the essential retreats in mind for safe action and you've got fully competent crews on the job, it just doesn't make sense to be ordered to cease firefighting by someone at a fire HQ some 60k away who's in front of a computer monitor. Opportunities were lost when this happened and we saw a fire rage on to become a bigger problem when it need not have happened.

This is an issue that begs the true question – who's best equipped to make the decision for action? The leader in the field or the one in HQ? I would go with the leader in the field. He is a local. Knows every part of his patch and the winds and eddies that can fan a blaze and talks the language of tracks, fields, fences and gates and all the dip-holes in the fields to avoid. He's in the best position to make the call taking everything into account.

The voluntary spirit is supreme – there is nothing like a full-on emergency that bonds country people together. Country folk are used to hardships, the resilience, self-reliance and confidence that results bonds them together. The voluntary spirit is at a premium. Commitment and dedication to succeed never wavers and it's all done with a smile. Your dedication to succeed is enshrined in the community support for those at the sharp end of the firefighting job. To suggest changing the current structure of volunteerism is anathema to all, the volunteers, the brigades, the community, including others who come from further afield to enjoy the camaraderie of helping in the all-out effort to achieve a good result. We should proudly support the existing structure and praise its structure to all communities in providing practical and social benefits.

Causes & Contributing Factors

A prolonged drought creating tinder dry fuel, an over-abundance of fuel arising from policies that have allowed fuel to accumulate by way of being too environmentally conscious, high temperatures and strong hot NW winds. Ignition caused by – the negligence of someone using tools producing sparks in such conditions and in the case of the Gosper fire, a lightning strike.

Preparation & Planning

All firefighting in highly prepared readiness. Local brigades, volunteer firefighters, residents and property owners on stand-by for signs of an outbreak. Immediate calls to arms when outbreak detected. Command structure of brigades excellent, highly competent individual senior ranks and crews all first class. Support crews in supply and catering all similarly prepared and first class. Community help made immediately available, local businesses immediate offer of supply of essential items, all no charge. Fire HQ prepared with additional manpower and resources from adjoining areas.

Following copied from the main body of text –

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Response to Bushfires

Response was immediate from a brigade and community structure well prepared. Warnings issues by local fire control were frequent. All advisories passed through the community very well. Resourcing, co-ordination and deployment through a well-prepared local brigade and community structure was excellent. So too all communication via field systems.

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Any other matters

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Privately owned firefighting vehicles

Property owners in the business of primary production have their own vehicles ready to attack a fire when it occurs. Vehicles are commonly a ute with a large tray-body capable of carrying a tank with 600 to 1000 litres of water, firefighter pump and one or two hoses, some with auto electronic recoil. They are fast and mobile and are an integral part of the overall firefighting operated by people who know the area and every part of it. Without them fires would be more severe. But they need to be better recognised for the

valuable role they play as part of the firefighting team and the recognition should provide some benefits. In many situations there can be an equal number of privately owned vehicles in a fire area to the RFS trucks. In community efforts to suppress fire, the owners of the vehicles are all part of the combined fleet of fire suppression vehicles. Their role should be acknowledged and rewarded.

Thank you.

Submission permitted to be made public

Allan Porter

