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## Your details

Mr

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**Title**

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**First name**

Ashley

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**Last name**

Scott

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## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

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**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

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**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

We live on a property in Balmoral of which two thirds is bushland and connects to crown land providing a nature corridor. Many endemic species of trees, shrubs and grasses are found here and as a consequence many of the native birds, mammals and insects that feed on them. This is an important link. The low shrubs provide food and allow protection for smaller birds and mammals to forage while the higher canopy provides food resources for the larger birds and mammals. It is a unique habitat and ecosystem and one that brings wonder and joy to our lives. It is why we live here.

Despite the drought much of the tree canopy and understory were still green. The native trees and shrubs support each other in the heat and dry, and therefore they also support the wildlife. We started our fire preparations in November clearing as much dry ground debris as possible around the house and surrounds. We focused on the west of our property leading to the house where the vegetation is purposely sparser in recognition of fires

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coming from the west. An important point to make here, and something that we will pick up below, is the amount of dry debris that we needed to clear also needed somewhere to go. In these instances we are not talking quantities in relation to an urban green bin (despite the fact we do not have council access to one). We are talking ute loads and at least eight. Small burn-offs due to the climate conditions in the past years have made this mode of disposal impossible. Our solution was to create large berms (long mounds) compacting branch, stick and leaf litter under a cover of dirt. This is a time consuming process and could only have happened by taking a week off work. Other measures taken were removal of flammable items on the verandah and plugging and filling the gutters with water. When the fire hit our village we evacuated not having adequate means to defend in relation to our water supply and for health reasons. It was highly emotional and all we could do was hope our preparations counted for something. Unfortunately we were in the line of fire to the south of the village that took the brunt on Saturday 21st of September. Despite every square metre of the property sustaining significant fire damage and the loss of our work and storage sheds our house miraculously survived. Surrounding houses were not so lucky. Recovery is slow and we are still dealing with the loss of trees and the need for some trees to be removed. However, we are also aware of the fragility of the habitats at this time. Our approach has been to remove initial fallen and dangerous debris, disturb the ash floor as little as possible, and watch and wait. Five months on we have seen the forest floor start to repair itself as many seedlings and epicormic shoots emerge where we have not interfered with the ground. The process is slow, and requires patience, rather than hasty decisions. The value in this is that it allows us to make adjustments for how to manage the property efficiently in collaboration with the endemic natural ecologies as well as prepare for future fire events.

Our wilderness, national parks, crown lands and parks provide humans with essential connections to nature, wildlife and our unique habitats and environments. They are places of respite and of wonder and they are the places we often gravitate to in order to reflect, find solace or relax. They teach us that we are a part of a complex system. Now more than ever we cannot afford to allow the erosion of what remains and we must act to build resilient strategies that ensure these places have the best possible chance of survival. To do this we must listen to those that have been observing closely.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

### **1.1 Causes and contributing factors**

We urge the inquiry to heed the legitimate science and data sets that have been predicting such catastrophic fire events this century.

We urge the inquiry to take a wholistic approach and not separate recent fire events from evidence-based research that takes into account the ongoing effects of increases in global temperatures and the drying of environments.

We urge the inquiry to heed the legitimate science and cease logging in old growth forests that by their nature encourage damper environments and biodiversity and better chances of regeneration and survival from wildfire than younger forests.

We urge the inquiry to work toward zero forest logging and move toward the more economically viable and risk-managed plantations.

We urge the inquiry to cease all salvage logging in burnt forests as a matter of urgency in terms of the increased fire risk this activity presents in the future and the increased loss of vulnerable habitats in already compromised areas. We urge the inquiry to take into account the risk of logging forests next to wilderness areas without any buffer zone. Logged forests are drier and there is evidence of fires starting in these areas and moving into national parks and wilderness.

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## **1.2 Preparation and planning**

We urge the inquiry to take a focused rather than generalist approach to hazard reduction burns. When burns are being planned factors to be considered are: the positive effects for the protection of communities in the vicinity; the history and frequency of burns in the past; the knowledge of local individuals and the longstanding local Rural Fire Service members in terms of past events and the topography; the weather patterns eg. drought that may change the qualities of the forest.

We urge the inquiry to undertake targeted and quality hazard reduction burns rather than burns that are serving a quantity target eg. percentage or number of hectares. Taking into account the small windows of opportunity such operations have each year this is both expedient and a good use of resources. Multiple studies and findings from previous bushfire inquiries have revealed there is no point undertaking hazard reduction burns in places that will have no significant effect in a bushfire season just to meet set targets, this is a waste of time, money and resources. There can be no one-size fits all approach to hazard reduction burns as the types of forest and wilderness vary significantly across the state (from wet to dry to rainforest) and each requires a tailored and sensitive approach in terms of sustainability (frequency of hazard reduction burns) and the biodiversity unique to each area.

We recommend that the NSW state government assist councils to take active roles in fire risk management in relation to villages that are located in bushfire prone areas. These roles go beyond the administrative in terms of land use and building standards to more practical on the ground resources. Risk management activities that can be more actively undertaken by councils are maintenance and fuel load clearing of road verges and public land within village perimeters especially in villages that are nestled between wilderness, national park and crown lands and have only one access road; water reservoirs for vulnerable villages; access to additional green waste removal (branch, stick and leaf litter) for residents in vulnerable villages in the lead up to each bushfire season. An example could be the provision of a large skip centrally located in the village for a couple of months each year, delivered and removed by council as a fire preparation service to the community; Accessible information documents based on valid research to increase the understanding of the types of vegetation and associations to fire risk. This can help manage and reduce anxiety and fear around trees and provide information on the differing qualities and resilience of tree species. In turn it can help residents make informed choices around tree removal and mitigates the unnecessary removal of older and more resilient tree species in fire grounds.

There is evidence that correct house alignment, selection of building materials, design of house, layout of the property and the types of vegetation immediately surrounding the house influence the survival of a house in wildfire. These factors can be

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implemented without compromising the bush ecologies on large acreage property. Using our house as an example: the property runs lengthways west to east. Entrance to the property is from the west. The house is set back in a central position at the back of the first third of the property. The house is a simple rectangular settler style (wrap around deep verandah) on a concrete slab with galvanized steel frame and roof and non-flammable walls. The narrow sides of the house face east and west and the west side has no windows or doors. Two concrete water tanks create a buffer on the southwest corner of the house. The western area leading to the house is sparsely vegetated and populated with a small number of old gums. The rest is open field/garden beds. The bush line travels down the south and north perimeters into the main bush area (two thirds of the property) to the east of the house. The grounds surrounding our house are relatively clear (20-30 metres) with sporadic ground cover. Immediate vegetation butting up to the house verandah is chosen for its succulent qualities. In our context the probability of the fire coming from the west is highest. In the recent fires this was true initially but was complicated by the unpredictable wind changes. The fire came up the ridge, entered our property and followed the bush line or fuel load and proceeded down the eastern ridge. It parted around the cleared area leading up to and around the house. The compact design, deep verandah, water filled gutters, and succulent plants may have been factors that helped protect the house. There was no other support at the time as the fire happened so quickly. It could be said we were just lucky and this certainly played a part but we believe that the combination of our preparations and the nature of the structure also played a significant role.

## **Supporting documents or images**

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