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| I am making this submission as | Resident |
| Submission type | Personal |
| Organisation making the submission (if applicable) | |
| Your position in the organisation (if applicable) | |
| Consent to make submission public | Public |
| Your story | <p>NSW Bush Fire Inquiry Submission Situation My wife and I live at [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (LVW) is a small enclosed valley at the lower end of Little Forest. It is rural area and is home to five families, living and working farms on plots of land ranging from about 6 to 180 acres. The land around LVW is a mixture of open pasture and hundreds of acres of privately owned native forest, which had not been burned for many years prior to New Year's Eve 2019. New Year's Eve Fire December 31 2020 was forecast to be a catastrophic fire day. We had about a dozen family members, many from overseas, staying with us for the Christmas week. The weather that morning was clear, bright, and sunny and, in our valley, was</p> |

initially very still.

As was our usual practise when catastrophic fire days were forecast, we evacuated all family members early that morning. As they were leaving my daughter noticed that the neighbours pasture next to our property was burning. We began to hose down the fire. Calls were made to triple 000 to report the fire, which only later spread to surrounding fields and then into the forest area.

The pasture in the paddocks almost seemed to self-ignite at different times and in different places. In our valley itself we could initially see no embers and there was little or no evidence of wind borne ash or smoke. This changed as the fire took hold later on. Satellite images show a north westerly plume of smoke coming from fires in the adjoining Pointer Mountain/Yatte Yattah area. Our main focus was on containing the fire and keeping its perimeter away from our main buildings. LVW is a rural area and does not have access to a town main water supply. While our principal residence was able to be kept wet with a petrol powered water pump drawing supply from our concrete tanks, the out buildings relied for their protection on garden hoses powered by electric pumps. At about midday all electric power to the farm was cut off and we had to rely on gravity fed tank water to fill buckets and watering cans to tip over the spreading fire approaching in the pasture.

My son-in-law and brother-in-law stayed with me to help fight the fire, which we did for the next twelve hours (and for weeks after that addressing sporadic flare ups). We were able to save our main residence and out buildings, but lost fencing, gates, cattle yard and orchards. Similar damage was sustained by our LVW neighbours, who had banded together where possible to help each other.

There was no RFS response nor presence that day (or subsequently.). Five nearby neighbours further up LVW had their houses burnt to the ground. We ended up totally isolated. We had to cut down fallen trees and clear local roads ourselves. We had no electric power or running water for the next two weeks and no landline for a month. Mobile phone technology worked at best intermittently.

Events leading up to fire day

The Currowan fire was reportedly started by lightning in November in the Currowan State Forest. It burnt for several weeks, gradually approaching the Little Forest area after burning through the Little Forest plateau region. During most of December it gradually burnt its way down the valley. With RFS oversight it seemed to be contained south of Little Forest road and west of Cedar Hills Road.

We seemed to be on constant fire watch during most of December. During this period we were twice visited by RFS crew to check out our preparedness and to construct a containment road around the edge of the forest area. There were a number of very bad fire days during this period, interspersed with benign days. A late wind changes change saved our property from a large fire front overrunning us, on at least one occasion.

We took the opportunity to prepare our property as best we could, including topping up our water reserves, installing and testing our fire pump, clearing all dry leaf material away from the buildings, keeping our ground cover well mown, moving any inflammable material well away from buildings etc.

Role of RFS

The RFS volunteers have been rightly commended on their actions during the past fire season. However, in many cases the RFS was simply unable to provide any service at all, and it is now clear that the basic model upon which the RFS operates needs to be re-examined.

- In fact, in our case, it may have worsened the local situation. Given their previous presence in the area, we were expecting that some form of RFS assistance would be forthcoming. An early intervention would certainly have helped to contain the fire

to the pasture area and away from the native forest.

- An early and effective extinguishment of the fire may well have prevented the fire storming up Little Valley Way and would have saved the neighbouring houses which were destroyed as a result. It became obvious however, as soon as the fire reached the forested area that no outside help could thereafter reach us. We were on our own.

Aps like "Fires Near Me NSW" were also misleading and erratic in their coverage of the situation. In the weeks leading up to the New Year's Eve fire, it seldom carried much information on the developing situation in Little Forest, while small outbreaks elsewhere were immediately highlighted.

- I recall consulting "Fires Near Me" at the height of our New Year's Eve LVW fire storm, only to be told that the nearest fire to me was 37 km away!

Cause of the Little Forest Fire?

Residents who lost their homes in Yatte Yattah have reported that the local RFS incident control command in Nowra gave permission for local RFS and NPWS members to light a five kilometre back burn at about 10.00pm in the evening of 30 December 2019.

- This was two hours prior to a catastrophic fire danger day forecast for the next day, New Year's Eve. Why the RFS gave such approval under the circumstances is unclear, but it seems grossly negligent on the face of it.

- Skeleton fire crews were left to oversee the back burn, the balance of the brigade was called down south to deal with fires there. The remaining few fire crews left the next morning. No significant fire fighting capability was left to handle the back burn, which subsequently burnt out of control and went on to destroy much of Yatte Yattah and Lake Conjola and took several lives.

- It seems most likely that it was embers from this fire which led to the Little Forest inferno, rather than it arising from the local Currowan fire. There was no local fresh burning activity that day, apart from that fire at Yatte Yattah, to explain the causation. The attached satellite images clearly show plumes of smoke and fire activity drifting down from the North West and over our property to Little Forest. These smoke plumes are not from the existing Currowan fire in Little Forest.

Observations

While bush fires are a fact of life in Australia, what happened at Little Forest on New Year's Eve was I believe entirely preventable. The following points are made:

1. The decision by the local RFS incident command to authorise the Yatte Yattah back burn indicates a need for a better trained and more professional level of control, able to take into account local knowledge and to perform situational analysis by applying best practise fire control techniques to evolving situations on the ground.

2. The practise of hazard reduction by back burning has a place in helping to reduce the incidence and nature of bush fires, but it is not always appropriate. Back burns shortly prior to predicted adverse weather fire conditions should not be allowed to take place, or if in emergency situations they are judged necessary, should only take place if adequate back up resources are in place to properly control and extinguish the resulting fire.

3. RFS volunteers were overwhelmed by the scale and nature of the fires. While they worked long hours under extreme conditions, many were unprepared for the job at hand and most units needed additional trained resources. Local incident control seemed to be out of touch with the events in Little Forest. Some thoughts:

- a. In the same way that the State's ambulance system is professionally paid, trained and equipped, the RFS crews need to be better trained and paid for their time in service.

- b. It is no longer appropriate for the RFS to be funded as is presently the case, with local volunteers largely dependent on community donations. This is the State passing the financial buck

to others for a critical service which it should be funding itself. Funding a professional NSW wide RFS is far more important than rebuilding existing sports stadia in Sydney.

c. If nothing is done to alter the current situation, then communities such as mine will simply need to accept that in future we will have to entirely rely upon ourselves in fire situations and the RFS cannot be relied upon to assist.

d. Calls to 000 on the day resulted in no assistance at the time of a life threatening situation and there was no subsequent follow up from any organisation. This needs to be addressed.

e. Finally, Apps such as "Fires Near Me" are very useful but need to be credibly maintained or risk becoming a liability by providing inaccurate and out of date information which cannot always be relied upon.

4. Property owners need to assume greater responsibility for the ongoing safety of their property. Fire risks cannot be eliminated but they can be better managed. Some thoughts:

a. It should be compulsory for all house owners to maintain their homes in a fire safe manner by regularly clearing gutters and keeping a clear perimeter around their property. Periodic Council inspections should be under taken to ensure this happens; once a fire starts it is too late. Owners must assume responsibly.

b. Home owners should be required to adequately insure their property at least against fire and flood, in the same way car owners are required to carry third party insurance.

5. We need to beware of knee jerk reactions to the fires. Calls have been made for dramatic increases in the size of "hazard reduction" cleared area around houses and nature parkland to prevent future fire spread. In our case, even a 5 kilometre wide cleared zone would not have stopped the fire ignition, which came from fires burning many kilometres away. Some thoughts:

a. A communications program to highlight that broad scale land clearing and continued logging is not the answer –instead see 2 above. (Indeed for areas such as the Shoalhaven, which depends for its economic viability on the attractions of its natural landscape, it is a sure way to destroy its current and long term economic tourism potential).

b. There seem to be some sections of the community who wish to lay blame for the ignition of the fires at the door of organisations such the National Parks and Wildlife Service, nature based bodies, arsonists and the like. We know that the vast majority of the recent major fires arose in remote wilderness areas, often due to lightning strikes. It is important that any Inquiry into these fires clearly stick to the facts and the science of their causation and that these are made clear to the whole community.

c. It is of the utmost importance to protect our natural environment and nature based infrastructure, for economic reasons as well as for the protection of our natural infrastructure and the wild life still remaining. This means addressing the role of climate change as a factor causing more frequent and more severe future fire events. The current Covid 19 crisis emphasises that we cannot operate a successful economy unless we have a healthy environment. The same constraints apply to the broader climate changes now occurring.

Thank you.

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| 1.1 Causes and contributing factors | Refer attached submission |
| 1.2 Preparation and planning | Refer attached submission |
| 1.3 Response to bushfires | Refer attached submission |
| 1.4 Any other matters | Refer attached submission |

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