



Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Cathy

Last name

Griff

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

Submission type

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Bega Valley Greens

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

Councillor representing Greens on Bega Valley Shire

Consent to make submission public

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

The attached submission (and media release) tells our story following the terms of reference.
The Greens main concern is for the government to urgently address climate change. The impacts of climate change were dramatically revealed in the fire climate emergency and we are still in drought so there is every reason to fear a repeat fire season. I was evacuated 3 times.

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	Climate change, extreme weather, low humidity, high winds, National Parks have been cut to not resourced for fire management.
1.2 Preparation and planning	Bega Valley quite well prepared due to the experience of Tathra fires in 2018. However the scale and intensity of these fires was such that no amount of preparation could overcome the spread. ADF need to come in at the outset. Massive hazard reduction not the solution.
1.3 Response to bushfires	Collective trauma from fires 3 years in a row Heroic RFS volunteers and local council but no capacity to deal with the catastrophe now or in future. Over 60% of the Bega Valley shire burned. Forest protection - no more logging of mature forests.
1.4 Any other matters	Support for Indigenous cool burning though it cannot alone be the solution, still has shown to be successful if practiced over generations.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- NSW Bushfire Inquiry Greens sub.docx
- Media Release Griff 4 Bega Valley Greens May 2020.docx

NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry
Submission from Cr Cathy Griff and Bega Valley Greens - May 2020

No 1 Causes, contributing factors, frequency, intensity, role of climate change

Bega Valley comprising over 6,200 square kilometres, is the largest NSW local government coastal area with the longest coastline stretching 225 kilometres. Almost 70% of the Shire is National Park, State Forest or public reserve and large areas are used for agriculture.

The natural environment is constantly stated to be our natural advantage underpinning all aspects of life in the Shire. Extensive community engagement reveals the reasons residents choose to live here is connected to the forests, coastline, marine ecosystems, natural harbours and clean air (BVSC Local Strategic Planning Statement 2020)

Our region was one of the most impacted in Australia with over 60% of the Shire burnt, 465 houses lost 1279 holdings burnt, 5,571 kilometres of boundary fencing burnt and vast losses of stock and countless native animals.

In March 2018, our small coastal town of Tathra was consumed by a fire which destroyed 70 homes. In August of the same year fires raged out of control in remote forest surrounding Bemboka for 44 days, burning almost 20,000 hectares of forest, while snow fell only 40 kilometres away.

After three consecutive years of major fires in autumn, winter, and summer the people of my Shire are suffering collective trauma. This is not a subjective view but one cited by South Eastern Primary Health Network in addresses to council and community. Everyone has felt the impact of fires. While Australian bushfires are common, the most frequent description these days is 'unprecedented'.

The experience of the bushfires on the far south coast highlights their increasing intensity due to severe droughts, high temperatures and low humidity, making these fires vast, more protracted and often uncontrollable. This combination is widely acknowledged as climate change. Scientists have long been united in describing and linking extreme weather with climate change. Fossil fuel interests and conservative politicians have long been united in obfuscation of the climate emergency unfolding worldwide.

Academic and broadcaster Waleed Aly described Australia's lack of reasonable climate change debate as 'uniquely dysfunctional' compared to other countries (*Sydney Morning Herald* Nov 2019). Broadcaster Richard Eady said Australia is alone in 'weaponising' climate change, to unseat prime ministers, impede rational debate and stall action (ABC Radio National *Hot Mess* May 2020).

The NSW Inquiry is a critically needed opportunity to bring climate change to the forefront. This would diffuse the criticism of inappropriately raising politics in the face of existential crisis.

No 2. Preparation and planning by agencies and government

Local Government took leadership responsibility throughout the fiery summer. The Bega Valley Shire Council (BVSC) has played a key, constructive, ongoing role in bushfire response and recovery. The Tathra 2018 fires offered a valuable albeit shocking practice run for BVSC. However, the scale of what followed in 2019 was well beyond local government resources and also State government's capacity and preparedness.

National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has suffered government budget cuts and restructuring, substantially impeding its fire prevention role. The NSW Government cut \$121 million from National Parks between 2016-2018, cut \$45 million from the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment in 2019, and a further \$36 million worth of cuts are planned for 2020.

██████████ was employed by the NPWS for 37 years until 2018 as the Fire Management Officer for the Far South Coast Region - responsible for planning and implementation of fire management and hazard reduction. He describes the impact of the cuts whereby NPWS fire management officers were reduced from 37 to 10. Area Managers were halved, Administration Managers were lost and many experienced Rangers and senior field officers also left due to reduced positions, amalgamations and so on. The former Far South Coast Region (amalgamated to South Coast Region - Sydney to the border) lost fire experienced staff in a short period, prior to the biggest bushfire in Australian history.

No 3 Immediate Responses to Bushfires

Communication systems are obviously paramount for communities facing bushfires. Many locations were well served with frequent local updates from Council, ABC radio, Fires Near Me app and of course the RFS, who often reported in at the end of their long days. The police tried door knocking to warn residents to evacuate but many refused to leave. As a Councillor, I was asked by senior staff to seek support of 'influencers' to urge evacuation. In response, many claimed awareness of the danger but felt equipped to defend their homes.

Several regions in the Shire lost all communications for a long period. The town of Bermagui was isolated with roads cut in all directions; around four thousand people gathered on the sports oval without leadership, power or any services. This scenario caused enormous distress to towns people and to their families seeking news of those stranded.

Any natural disaster plan must entail *a central off-grid communication point* for all NSW towns.

The efforts of local RFS volunteers, countless local heroes, as well as the Army and Army Reserve and people from around the country and around the world who sacrificed their time and even their lives, is gratefully acknowledged. They responded courageously to protect life, property and the environment.

No 5 Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats

Tragically Black Summer is no anomaly and there will be further fires endangering lives on the far south coast, which is still in drought. Addressing bushfires in the long term requires all levels of government to develop robust climate change action plans. Our Council has a Clean Energy Plan covering its own operations and will be releasing a Climate Resilience Strategy this winter. Coordination and common renewable energy state targets are essential.

The Climate Council deserves government recognition and resourcing. It has compiled valuable research and action plans relating to bushfires and climate change. Its Cities Power Partnership reflects the efforts of local government in confronting climate change. The *Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre* also needs ongoing funding beyond June 2021. This is precisely the scientific body vital to planning for future threats.

The Australian Defence Forces entered the bushfire catastrophe too late and unsurprisingly there was confusion over lines of responsibility. The ADF comprises young, fit, disciplined, experience teams who could be trained in fire-fighting as a compulsory, additional skill. Agreed protocols with RFS and other agencies would of course be needed. In any case, the ADF are needed early on front lines of bushfires. No matter how brilliant and tough the RFS, volunteers were overwhelmed by the enormity and longevity of the summer fires. Extra resources were much needed and will be again.

Planning for the future calls for major policy shifts:

- reduce greenhouse gasses, which means urgent transition to renewables
- protect forests to sequester carbon, increase rainfall, and to halt decline in insects which both pollinate and feed many wild animals
- fire seasons are longer and 'safe' burning periods are shrinking to such an extent hazard reduction of the past is not achievable, let alone expandable.
- foster a new relationship with our 'wild spaces'

No 6 Land Use Planning and Management including Clearing, Hazard Reduction and Indigenous Practices

The growing impacts of climate change on temperatures, humidity and bushfire fuel moisture levels, are rendering existing strategies for fuel reduction outdated and obsolete. The Greens have always advocated for asset protection clearing (our policies are always on the website and are not invented in quick response to an emergency) but our concern is the impetus for more and unnecessary clearing of bush. Residents feel the bushfires warrant unplanned and illegal felling. Council lacks the compliance staff to monitor and contain excessive vegetation clearing on private and public land. Shane Fitzsimmons, former head of NSW RFS has said hazard reduction is important but not a panacea for bushfire risk, having very little effect at all on the spread of fire in extreme weather.

Advice from RFS and NPWS stressed no amount of burning in remote areas will negate the impact from some bushfires. Experts such as [REDACTED] warn hazard reduction is implemented at a point in time then fuel re-accumulates immediately. Moreover, burns variably remove fuel, and that variability is not predictable nor reliable. The ability to manage and control fires in current conditions is much decreased. The radical increase of fuel management may be counterproductive by drying out and stressing vegetation ecosystems on a broad scale. Hazard reduction is intended to result in lower intensity fires but due to climate change I didn't see or hear any examples where hazard reduction allowed any mitigation or better control.

The severe bushfire intensity, combined with adverse weather conditions, meant Far South Coast fires burnt for prolonged periods and impacted towns and infrastructure that were, in the case of Quaama and Cobargo, surrounded mainly by open farming country. Bemboka was repeatedly fire impacted despite extensive hazard reduction. Old strategies of extensive prescribed burning to reduce fuels and land clearing, are becoming ineffective in reducing bushfires as climate change impacts become more severe.

The 2018 experience of the Tathra bushfire on the other hand, indicates the success of strengthened building codes in protecting property. Of the 70 houses lost, only one dwelling was destroyed that had been built after 2009, the year that bushfire protection measures in building construction were strengthened. This indicates that structural design, more than fuel reduction on a broad-scale, is a key mitigating factor in limiting infrastructure losses during severe bushfire events.

Native vegetation disturbance is also increasingly being shown to increase bushfire severity. In many areas of the Far South Coast we are now seeing large areas of extremely high fuels due to historic land clearing and native forest logging regrowth. This is shown starkly in the Murrah Flora Reserve, where 2000 hectares of extremely dense logging regrowth is difficult to manage and threatens koala population and neighbourhoods.

Disturbances to native forests fosters dense shrub and tree regrowth. This regrowth creates ladder fuels which in severe weather condition can in-turn create prolonged canopy fire in forested area and increase widespread fire spotting. In contrast, many native vegetation communities particularly forests, if left undisturbed, over time develop much clearer understory vegetation with decreased fuel levels.

The above factors suggest where future focus should lie in preparing for severe bushfires:

- support capacity to build or retrofit dwellings and infrastructure to withstand the impacts of ember and flame attack;
- reduce large scale land clearing and cease forestry logging operations that lead to high fuel loads, and reduces carbon sequestration, exacerbating climate change;
- refocus resources away from hectare driven large hazard reduction burns and overzealous land clearing to a strategic approach that includes cultural burning;
- reduce urban edge and remote subdivision approvals in isolated bushland areas, particularly on exposed ridgelines.

Indigenous Practices - Cultural Burning

For tens of thousands of years, the Djiringanj people living in the Bega Valley, came to terms with wildfires. The nature of the relationship between human culture and fire has changed dramatically over that time so now fire is seen as a fearful, uncontrollable force of nature. The culture which was displaced had a far more intimate knowledge of local vegetation systems and the variable impact of fire. The Djiringanj people used fire in their interactions with the environment in a set of cultural practices built up over generations with far healthier ecosystems and a kinder climate than now.

Cultural burning has fortunately reached national attention as a strategy in the wake of catastrophic fires. ABC television has featured the work of Victor Steffensen in programs such as *Australian Story* and *Q&A*. His book of February 2020, *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia* is an in-depth account of Indigenous land practices. Bega Valley has experience with effective, albeit limited, cultural burning projects. Yui man Dan Morgan is with South East Land Services after an early career with National Parks and Wildlife. He is an experienced cultural burning practitioner, drawing on his heritage and working with wildfires, remote area firefighting and hazard reduction.

Morgan is keen to share his skills and is confident of cultural burning as a powerful tool in bushfire management. At the same time, he is realistic about the likely time frame for roll out of a comprehensive program. He speaks of the need to build a foundation, entailing trained individuals working continuously the length of the south coast. To date there have been sporadic projects which gather and train a team for a specific area but obliged to disband when the limited funding fades. The *Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation* is aiming for a national approach to cultural burning.

Cultural burning is time consuming work. Morgan joined Steffensen in a local workshop where strong winds arose. "I was on edge and so was everyone else expecting we'd have to call off the burn. However, Victor was keen to go ahead and did so with good results. The secret is to introduce small amounts of fire and literally walk alongside it." Morgan and his colleagues are skeptical of current bush clearing and hazard reduction practices which entail risks in tinder dry landscapes with fast and scorching blazes.

The Bega Valley Aboriginal Land Council's undertook cool burns in 2017, prior to the Tathra fires and through similar regional examples. Follow-up analysis confirmed the treated areas were successful in slowing the fire. Given adequate funding, a three-year cultural burning project to protect koala habitat is planned in the Murrah Flora Reserve. Morgan explains the traditional techniques promote a healthy landscape, encouraging moisture retentive, grassy regrowth, creating a more fire-resistant environment with less midstory ladder fuels.

There have been media reports of funding promises for widespread cultural burning. Hopefully this is true - our Shire has witnessed politicians promising support for multiple bushfire related crises, but often there was not funding follow-up. Indigenous practices in working with fire definitely merit long term research and funding. However cultural burning alone cannot be expected to solve the massive problem.

No 7 Adaptation to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems

Intentionally, our submission begins under causes and concludes under adaptation with the theme of climate change. No response, collaboration, funding, staffing, land management techniques, will cope with bushfire and other extreme climate threats unless accompanied by urgent comprehensive action at all levels of government to address climate change.

United Nations diplomat Christiana Figueres, at the helm of the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, aired the widespread despair at the current Australian Government: "...still denying climate change and denying the fact that there is a lot that Australia can and should be doing. We now know because of the consequences of the bushfires, that Australia is actually one of the most vulnerable countries to unmitigated climate change." (24 Feb 2020 Triple J)

In the early 1950's severe fires prompted a recognition that individual rights to light fires in summer had to be curtailed, to reduce the risk of wildfire. We must consider what changes are demanded by the recent crisis. This is surely the time for recreating our co-existence with the natural world and developing a fairer, clean energy economy.

A grand opportunity for change is to cease logging of old growth timber in south eastern NSW forests – opposed by the Greens for decades. The bushfires of summer at least partially reflect the price we are paying for fifty years of intensive logging for woodchips. We endorse submissions by the South-East Region Conservation Alliance and the many who have long campaigned to safeguard our forests against the detrimental NSW Regional Forest Agreement, which should not have been renewed in its present form. Victoria has committed to phase out native forest logging. NSW must follow suit.

The engagement with the NSW Bushfire Inquiry and the Royal Commission into National Natural Disasters both demonstrate Australian's passion and knowledge on these themes. People want to speak up and contribute. In the light of the recent climate catastrophe the Bega Valley Greens are calling for the establishment of local community fora, in the form of citizens' juries, to investigate the relationship between community and the environment in given the threats of a warming climate.

A misconstrued perception is reluctance on the part of fire victims to discuss climate change. Those who lost everything have felt the direct consequences of climate change and want to be assured the government is acting on all fronts to reduce the certainty of more bushfires.

Undoubtedly the Commissioners are well equipped with the strong scientific evidence that anthropogenic global warming is causing hotter and drier weather conditions globally (Climate Council Report November 2019, and references therein).

Shorter term factors other than anthropogenic climate change (Indian Ocean Dipole regional weather cycles; fuel loads in local areas; storm weather leading to lightning strike fire ignitions) still play a role in determining when, where and how bushfires start. Yet there can be little doubt longer term warming and drying of our climate is increasing the frequency and duration of catastrophic and uncontrollable fire weather conditions.

A recent international scientific study of the relationship between Australian bushfire risk and anthropogenic climate change (van Oldenborgh *et al* 2020 *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences* journal) found that the extreme fire weather conditions of the 2019/20 Australian summer were *at least* 30% more likely to occur under today's climate conditions than under the climate conditions of the early 1900s. The authors considered this was likely a substantial underestimate of the real increase due to their conservative models. The study also concluded that if global warming continues and reaches 2°C then the occurrence of extreme fire weather conditions will be *at least* four times more likely than in the 1900s.

The implications of this trend are clear. If NSW, Australia and the world do not rapidly and deeply cut greenhouse gas emissions (including phasing out burning/export of fossil fuels), then the frequency and severity of extreme bushfires, will continue to increase. Under this scenario, all attempts to enhance bushfire prevention, preparedness and response programs will ultimately be inadequate to prevent catastrophic bushfires becoming a regular feature in the Australian landscape. We have the solutions at our disposal to tackle climate change: we need to accelerate the transition to renewables and storage technologies, and non-polluting transport, infrastructure, and food production. Now we need federal, state and local governments to show leadership to implement these changes.

Media Release
Addressing climate change key to growing bushfire risk
Cathy Griff - Greens Councillor Bega Valley Shire
May 2020

Our communities are emerging from collective trauma after three consecutive years of major bushfires, floods and virus. Like many deeply concerned local people, the Bega Valley Greens have written submissions to both the NSW Bushfire Inquiry and the Royal Commission into National Natural Disasters.

“Black Summer is no anomaly.” Greens Councillor Cathy Griff warned today. “Rural communities are confronting climate change consequences at close range. Yet we face an impasse on debate and policy. Addressing these problems is a priority for local Greens, alongside climate action groups, and a wide range of official bodies.”

A recent international study is but one of many linking Australian bushfires and anthropogenic climate change (van Oldenborgh *et al* 2020 *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences* journal). Advice from Rural Fire Service (RFS) and National Parks (NPWS) is clear - hazard reduction is no panacea for bushfire risk, having little effect on the spread of fire in extreme weather.

“In a warming climate, traditional means of addressing bushfires are less effective. Multiple solutions will be needed: increased RFS resourcing, community involvement, structural design and regulations, off-grid communications in towns; Indigenous cultural burning and above all, strong climate change action.” Cr Griff went on to say.

The Greens have drawn on abundant scientific evidence demonstrating large scale native vegetation disturbance, such as land clearing and native forest logging, increases fuel loads, dries out ecosystems, and reduces carbon sequestration.

We recommend restoration of funding and staff to NPWS, which has suffered huge budget cuts, substantially impeding its fire prevention role. We also recognise Indigenous cultural burning can be a powerful long-term tool in bushfire management, though practitioners stress it takes time and increased funding to train teams and alter the landscape.

“No funding or land management techniques will overcome increasingly extreme bushfires, without comprehensive government action to address climate change by speeding the transition to renewables.” Cr Griff concluded. At this critical juncture, our region could be at the forefront of restoring a co-existence with the natural world and developing a fairer, clean energy, economy.

Please contact Cathy Griff for comment [REDACTED]
Full submission attached to email