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<b>I am making this submission as</b>	General public
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<b>Submission type</b>	Personal
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<b>Organisation making the submission (if applicable)</b>	
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<b>Your position in the organisation (if applicable)</b>	
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<b>Consent to make submission public</b>	Public
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<b>Your story</b>	<p>The scale and longevity of the 2019-20 bushfire season was quite scary. News reports regularly painted vast amounts of Australia across various states or territories as red for "catastrophic" conditions. I was concerned as were many Australians for the safety of relatives and friends who were living or travelling near active bushfires. Bushfire smoke also had impacts well beyond the bushfire zone. Sydney and Canberra among other areas were notably blanketed in bushfire smog. Even when I was camping on the southern tip of Victoria in Wilson's Promontory, I still got sore eyes from bushfire smoke coming down from the eastern coast fires. My father was deployed with the Army Reserves in Wangarrata when it had the worst air quality in the world. My extended family (across Victoria and NSW) were planning on having a holiday in the Blue Mountains and Snowy Mountains in November-December 2019. This was called off because of the threat of the bushfires. This speaks to the broader impact that bushfires have on people's</p>
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holiday plans and the tourism economy. Relatives who work in the tourism industry in the Blue Mountains have been particularly affected. The perceived threat of bushfires, even when the Blue Mountains were quite safe, led to a noticeable decline in tourist numbers. It might be several years before we see anything this severe again, which will hopefully give us time to better prepare and adapt. But the Black Summer season does make me very concerned about the destructive potential of Australian bushfires, both in New South Wales and more broadly.

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

There are likely to be several factors that sparked the bushfires and contributed to their intensity. We need to properly examine what contributed to the 2019-20 bushfire season and take appropriate measures. It was disappointing to see some politicians and other members of the commentariat politicise the potential causes of the bushfires.

Climate change was clearly a formative factor to the intensity of the 2019-2020 bushfire season. Firefighters and community members are saying that the bushfire season was nothing like they had ever seen before. This includes incidences of fire tornadoes and bushfire smoke blocking out the sun like the dead of night. Bushfires are also reaching further than they have done before, even in tropical rainforests. If we are having warmer and drier conditions leading to more severe conditions, that is an example of a 'climate change.' The bushfires were occurring in a long period of drought, which led to drier landscapes more prone to burning. The severity of the drought condition may also be affected by climate change. The conditions may fluctuate with greater or lesser severity over time, but they can be placed on trend according to climate science. Climate change is directing Australia towards hotter and drier summers, which will lead to more volatile conditions for bushfires. This has been discussed and predicted in climate change and bushfire reviews going back years, such as the Garnaut Climate Change Review (2008).

The level of fuel loads in the landscape could also have contributed to the scale of the fires. Prescribed burns aim to reduce the amount of flammable fuel in the landscape outside of the bushfire season, thus reducing the amount of fuel available to burn during the fire season. Reduced fuel loads can make the fires easier to manage. Though, it was clear that the weather was already extreme, which can be attributed more so to climate change than prescribed burning practices. Moreover, severe bushfire conditions are not necessarily hindered by prescribed burning. The most intense bushfires can burn quickly through areas even where the fuel load was managed with hazard reduction burns. More prescribed burning is not necessarily the answer to managing bushfires, whether in the 2019-20 season or in the future.

Arson was also touted as a major (even primary) cause of the fires. However, while arson is concerning, this was perhaps overhyped as a distraction from the natural conditions leading to the outbreak and severity of the fires. Many of the fire offences committed related to negligence or ignoring total fire bans, rather than necessarily deliberately lighting fires. Nonetheless, the level of arson in the 2019-20 bushfire season should be carefully examined. There may need to be additional educational or law enforcement activities to reduce the amount of fire offences being committed.

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### **1.2 Preparation and planning**

The scale of the deployment of the Army Reserves and other defence assets in Operation Bushfire Assist was quite unprecedented. The army had participated in various bushfire relief and recovery operations in preceding decades, but not on this scale. The involvement of the army is welcome to give greater manpower and equipment to the bushfire effort. There

should be greater attention to the detail of deploying the army in the future, to better coordinate with the needs of New South Wales and other State governments.

The safety of first responders, as mentioned in the Terms of Reference, is paramount. Firefighters display great courage and sacrifice in volunteering their times for extended periods and putting their lives on the line to protect their families and communities. We even had many emergency service personnel coming from other countries, such as Canada, the United States and several South Pacific countries. Their deployment tragically included the deaths of three US personnel in an air crash. Their deaths, alongside the deaths of several Australian firefighters, emphasise the danger that they place themselves in. We should be sure that we are giving the emergency services our full support to manage the threat of bushfires and other natural disasters, and to do so as safely as they can. This could include research into developing new bushfire technology and equipment to protect firefighters from extreme heat. There are many innovative technologies that are being developed, which should receive every encouragement from the government.

There will need to be a discussion on hazard reduction and how that will be conducted into the future. There has been criticism that there were not enough hazard reduction or prescribed burnings. This could have led to greater fuel for the fires, contributing to their intensity. This line of dialogue is not new, going back at least a couple of decades. There may be places and situations in which there should be greater burning to reduce fuel loads and thus reduce the risk of extreme fire behaviour. Though, there are some limitations to prescribed burning. There are only a certain amount of days in the year, in which prescribed burning can be done safely. Prescribed burning practices will become increasingly under pressure due to climate change. The lengthening of the bushfire season, days becoming hotter on average and other conditions would make it more difficult to implement prescribed burning safely without them getting out of control. Moreover, prescribed burning for protecting human life and property is mainly effective in the immediate vicinity of residences (around 300m-1km). Burning in the wilderness is unnecessary and ineffective in preventing fires from impacting on residences. Prescribed burning, particularly if applied too broadly, can cause damage to the environment. These problems have led to a renewed interest in the use of indigenous land management and burning practices, which I think is very welcome. The cultural knowledge of indigenous practitioners is often well in tune with how best to manage the natural landscape. Having 'cooler,' mosaic style burns can reduce the fuel load with less risk to residences or damaging the natural environment. Prescribed burning is an important tool to managing bushfires, but there should be careful consideration to how it can be done properly and safely.

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### **1.3 Response to bushfires**

I commend the State and Federal Governments for their hard work in managing the 2019-20 bushfire crisis. Given the scale and intensity of the bushfires, the number of casualties could have been much greater than they were. Particularly, Shane Fitzimmons of the NSW Rural Fire Service did a tremendous job both managing the bushfire crisis and clearly informing the community through regular briefings. I am sure there are lessons to be learned about how we can better respond to bushfires in the future, including bushfire seasons of this extreme scale. It would be welcome to see a full timeline of the 2019-20 bushfire season, including when advice was given for certain actions and when those were adopted and implemented by the government. This would help evaluate the effectiveness of the government response.

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#### 1.4 Any other matters

Bushfires present a serious challenge for the environment, the economy and human habitation. While bushfires are a natural part of the Australian landscape, the impact of climate change has worrying implications for the regularity and intensity of extreme bushfire events. There is genuine fear about the future of life in Australia with fire seasons like the one we had this summer (or worse). Even for people outside the bushfire zone (as extensive as that was), there are serious health effects from the terrible air quality from bushfire smoke choking our towns and cities.

I believe we can meet the challenge of bushfires as Australians by coming together and putting the best practice methods in place and properly resourcing our communities and emergency services. We are a prosperous country who can afford to properly resource our dedicated volunteer and career firefighters and other emergency personnel. We have already seen many people inspired by the bushfires who are interested in becoming volunteer firefighters. Every possible resource should be given to equipping our volunteers to handle bushfires safely and adapting communities to become more bushfire safe (including bushfire resistant buildings, for example). There may need to be additional research, including the impact of climate change on bushfire behaviour and the expected threat. The more advance warning we have, the better we can adapt to meet the new conditions. When severe bushfires come again, we should be ready to meet that challenge.

As the latest bushfire season has shown, New South Wales is not alone in this threat, but should partner with the other states and territories in developing a common response. The analysis and recommendations of this Inquiry into the NSW fires should present a welcome addition to the national conversation. This includes other state and federal inquiries, such as the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Management.

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