

NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

Submission

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this commission.

I am a resident of Tomakin in Eurobodalla, on the far South Coast of NSW.

As you are aware, our area was severely impacted by the bushfires from late November 2019 to late January 2020 and I wish to highlight a few issues which were deeply disturbing and, in some cases highly traumatising for many of the local residents and visitors who became trapped in the area.

Like many, we were threatened a few times, and it was tragic to see so many people from surrounding areas flood our street, not knowing what happened to their properties, and in some cases, their animals. We were very fortunate in that we could help a little by supplying food and drinks and taking in a family who lost their home to stay with us. The RFS and SES tried to assist, as did off-duty nursing and paramedic staff, while the local club was outstanding in their efforts to provide support.

I realise these were unprecedented fires, the extent of which could not have been predicted. I believe that the emergency services did an outstanding job, as did State Government, Council and many businesses and individuals. However, there were a number of major infrastructure failures which had a severe impact on the local community, and could easily have resulted in major tragedies. In our case, we were saved each time by a last minute southerly wind change.

Talking to individuals and businesses outside the area, many were aware of the problems, but did not realise the implications, which is why I wish to raise these.

1. We fortunately received an emergency evacuation call on our landline very early on New Year's Eve. It was loud and made you really pay attention. Others, without a landline, received text messages. Like many of us, they didn't read it straight away, as it was very early in the morning.

This is a potential issue – particularly if the fire was not predicted at that time in that area. An alternate warning system could be considered, such as load broadcasts from a helicopter, if this is possible.

2. The power went off quite early, but many of us had battery-operated radios to keep us informed. Our power returned after 9 days while some areas took up to 21 days. Essential Energy did an outstanding job.
3. The mobile phone service rapidly started to fail. Each message took huge amounts of time to send, often using 15% of battery life. Recharging phones in the car took over 4 hours. The ABC then warned us that mobile communications would be shutdown. I believe this may have been to keep communications free for emergency services. Fortunately I heard this and told neighbours, so we could all try to let family and friends know that we were OK but they might not hear from us for some time.

Many of us with landlines had moved to NBN so, even if we had an old phone we could connect, it wouldn't work. The pay phone in the town also did not work.

No communications meant we could not call 000, check "Fires Near Me", "Live Traffic" get updates or contact anyone.

This is a very dangerous situation – Telstra mobile solutions or Cell on Wheels (COW) could be a quick temporary option. Even if it doesn't give everyone a signal at home, it gives people the ability to go to where a signal is available.

4. The local ABC radio station then went off-air. I believe power was cut to the tower and the tower itself was damaged. This meant we had no information on what was happening. The SES came to a reserve every evening to provide information, but told us that they weren't really up-to-date. The radio stations we could get were based in other areas and didn't cover our region, so we were often left in the dark as to issues of importance in our area.

Fires threatened a couple more times and aerial crews were fighting around us. We also received a few more warnings of dangerous conditions. The SES told us we should evacuate as, in the event of an emergency, we could not get an ambulance or any support and I understand one officer and a nurse had a very traumatic incident, trying to keep a gentleman alive for a number of hours, until an ambulance could come.

This was also very dangerous. Even with fires being fought just near us, we could not get information on what was occurring, what roads were open, etc. We knew that all roads around us were seriously impacted several times, but did not know when or if they were safe and open again.

We managed to get an Illawarra ABC station which did not broadcast any information on our area, but heard we could get something on the Bega ABC AM station. Unfortunately, our radio was quite new and only had FM and Medium Wave – no AM.

An alternate, backup temporary emergency ABC radio station network or capability should be set up urgently, to ensure people can access vital information, possibly by utilising another tower or broadcasting from another station on the local wavelength.

5. If we sat in our car and managed to get a radio signal, we were told to visit websites like "Fires Near Me" and "Live Traffic" for full updates, road closures, etc. With no communications and no power, this was not possible.
6. With no fridges and freezers, our food became an issue. We and our neighbours brought much of our frozen food to the local club, to help them support the people who had lost their homes or had been evacuated. The club did this extremely well until they ran out of diesel for their generator – they were told that any diesel was quite reasonably being held over for the use of emergency services.

Locally, after the major danger from the fires passed for the moment, and with no refrigeration, everyone had to go shopping regularly. Once the shops opened, they were cash only, as there was no communications and for some, no power. A lot of people did not have cash. We fortunately had a little, and were able to lend some to our neighbours. We met people who were begging or trying to do small jobs for cash, just so they could buy food – one very positive feature was that people were giving strangers money and without fail it has all been repaid.

No banks were open, nor were any ATM operational so getting cash through this route was not possible.

“Cash only” is a horrendous problem if people don’t have any warning as so few people carry cash now. I don’t know the answer to this, but ask that some sort of solution is seriously considered. All the banks completely shut down so customers could not even withdraw or access their bank accounts for cash – possibly having a number of bank branches open as “emergency support” might be a solution.

There were also serious food shortages. Non-perishable food items disappeared quickly, while milk, bread and meat were impossible to buy. Obviously, there wasn’t any ice. The shoppers were friendly, patient even when waiting for hours, and most were really generous. They were sharing things with others rather than hoarding. Locally we “pooled” what we could get and included trapped visitors in this process.

7. After a few days my husband and I decided to drive to Moruya Evacuation Centre, not knowing if the roads were open or not. We wanted to register and check for a mobile signal. Our intention wasn’t to stay at the centre, just to let people who might be looking for us know that we were at home and OK. We were told that the systems were down and that it might take a couple of weeks for us to be registered.

I do not know what agency was responsible for these systems however, this needs to be addressed. There is absolutely no value in a registration system for emergency incidents that takes two weeks to update.

We were fortunate that we found one working pay phone, albeit with a very long queue. We asked our daughter to please let everyone know we were alright and that we had prepared everything, had a plan in place and were remaining to fight any fire outbreaks.

8. The SES again strongly recommended that residents evacuate, as conditions were worsening. Many residents did not have enough petrol and diesel seemed to be impossible to buy – we understand that the nearest station with diesel was in Cooma. There were very few petrol stations open due to the power cuts, and the two on the way to Brown Mountain were “cash only”.

Many in our community were very traumatised by now and there were many in tears. Much of our community left, people getting together and car-pooling – some taking over 10 hours to travel to Canberra.

Visitors nearby with two small children were crying as they had tried a couple of times to get back to Sydney, only to find the roads closed.

I heard a member of Federal Parliament on the news several days later say that the south coast evacuation went well and was very orderly, which I found upsetting, as this was very far from the truth.

The lack of petrol and “cash only” situation caused enormous problems and added to the trauma. Would urgently transporting generators for some of the petrol stations be an option? And how to get around the “cash only”? Would a bank be able to set up a function automatic teller?

9. My husband and I decided to stay and defend and somehow my daughter got down here to help. Fortunately, my daughter is a paramedic who was able to put her name forward to assist, albeit off-duty.
10. We knew a number of people involved with the Moruya Evacuation Centre. In addition to gastro running rampant through the centre, there was a real problem with food supply. One evening, many people received one sausage each.

Firstly, I strongly believe that the Commonwealth, possibly the Army, could have used transport helicopters to bring in food rations to the Evacuation Centre. They would have been able to land at the Moruya Showground, the nearby Golf Course or Council Carpark. The lack of response is regrettable, particularly as Australia has shown how quickly we can do this in events such as the Tsunami in Indonesia. We also know that many community groups put together food packs to help the area, but were often unable to get them to us.

Secondly, it should be considered that evacuation centre teams approach local businesses for food in future events. Many cafes, restaurants, etc. threw out their food due to the power failures. When I told one business about giving our frozen food to a club assisting evacuees, they informed me they had thrown out countless frozen items which she would have loved to donate, but didn't think about that as an option.

11. The food was also running out for the RFS teams. Instead of nutritious and energy giving snacks and meals, they were down to 3 Mentos and a strawberry each. One team was offered a stew, a lovely thought by the lady who made it, but not practical, as the crew couldn't eat this while they were on the move. As the fires had been burning for 1½ months in our area, everyone was aware of the requirements of the RFS.

There must be a continuous supply of food for the Emergency Workers to assist them. If need be, these should be sent in by helicopter in a timely manner.

Army rations were eventually sent in, by which time, but by this time the area had already received normal food supplies.

One final point I would like to make is that I and other locals were very heartened by the way that the entire community came together in a situation of grave risk and horror, supporting each other and complete strangers. It strengthened my faith in humanity.

Thank you very much for this opportunity

I hope that, should we ever have another event like this, that some of these issues will have been resolved.

Kind regards,

Bettina (Tina) Young

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