

Your details

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Other

Submission type

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Cancer Voices NSW

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

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

Cancer Voices NSW has, like most organisations across the state, been disturbed by the extent and impact of the recent bushfires. The length of the bushfire season, from August 2019 to February 2020 (and perhaps longer) and the geographic spread across a significant proportion of the state, is surely unprecedented. This unprecedented nature has raised three issues in particular that Cancer Voices believes requires the close attention of the NSW Government through its capacity to direct research funding, to provide health testing programs for fire fighters, and influence the enforcement of workplace safety.

Cancer Voices NSW (CVN) provides the independent voice of people affected by cancer in NSW, to improve the cancer experience of the more than 48,000 people who, according to official projections, will be diagnosed each year. Established in 2000, we are active in the areas of diagnosis, information, treatment, research, support and care. To achieve this we work in partnership with decision makers and providers of these services, ensuring the patient perspective is heard from planning to delivery.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.2 Preparation and planning

Provision of, and access to, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and Need for health testing of bushfire fighters

Cancer Voices is concerned about the variability across the state in the extent and efficacy of the personal protective equipment (PPE) that firefighters are provided with and, in the most disturbing of cases, have had to provide for themselves. The Government should, through SafeWork NSW, strengthen its inspection and enforcement programs to more strongly ensure that the relevant fire fighting and first responder organisations (whether voluntary or professionally-based) comply with their WHS obligations, in particular as regards the provision of PPE.

The Government should also give serious consideration to implementing a program of health testing of bushfire fighters (whether professional or volunteer) to provide base measures for ongoing health surveillance in the same way as is done for workers exposed to dust disease, through the NSW Lung Bus. CVN believes that the Lung Bus resources should not be diluted, given the urgent need for ongoing testing and surveillance of workers, including those groups who have been exposed to silica in the engineered stone benchtop industry. Rather, for a modest financial investment, the Government should implement a parallel 'lung bus' service that is dedicated to the health monitoring of fire fighters.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Need for research on health effects of bushfires

While some research has been done in relation to the health, and cancer, consequences of prolonged exposure to toxic, potentially carcinogenic, substances (for example following the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks), very little has been carried out in an Australian bushfire fighting context. Further, the unprecedented length of exposure of those fighting bushfires over weeks, and months, has created the urgent need for research to be carried out, drawing on the availability of research subjects who could form a cohort or cohorts (for example based on length of exposure and/or age) for analysis of the immediate and longer-term cancer consequences of their fire fighting activities.

An issue of concern is the statement in the NSW Health media release of 8 January 2020, NSW Health again issues warning on bushfire smoke that states that 'Short-term exposure to bushfire smoke or poor air quality are not known to have any long-term health effects and there is evidence to suggest that even after long-term exposure for many years, people's health improves when their exposure is reduced'.

In order to address the uncertainty in this statement in relation to exposure to carcinogenic substances, and the lack of Australian-specific research on bushfire smoke exposure, CVN recommends that the Cancer Institute of NSW, as a matter of priority, allocates (or reallocates) a significant proportion of its funding programs on a sustained (that is multi-year) basis to research the health and cancer effects of bushfire fighting, and of exposure to bushfire smoke more broadly in the community.

1.4 Any other matters

Extension of provisions of Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Scheme (IPTAAS)

Cancer Voices has congratulated the NSW Government for its health and cancer-related actions during the bushfires, particularly help for rural and regionally-based people with cancer in attending treatment through the broadening of the criteria for accessing subsidies for out-of-pocket costs through the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Scheme (IPTAAS). The Government should consider the continuation of these provisions, and a permanent change in IPTAAS policy, to remove the inequities of access, such as restrictions on travel distances, that still exist in the scheme.

Supporting documents or images
