



Your details

Mrs

Title

First name

Catherine

Last name

Winfield Johnston

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

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

In February 2017 we were affected by an unprecedented 'extreme rated' bushfire which started only a few kilometres from our house, destroyed about 6 residences in our local area and came within close range of our home and most residences in the lower part of the Pappinbarra valley whilst also threatening the nearby township/village of Beechwood. Luckily we were more prepared and able to defend our property than many others with bushfire hoses and fittings as well as the ability to pump water from the river. We managed to wet down an area around our pump in the path of the coming fire which managed to halt its progress towards our house although a spot fire started behind us which we luckily spotted in time to also put out. However we saw the fire jump the river on to our neighbour's property and travel more severely to other neighbouring properties across the road. Unfortunately we were in no position to offer our neighbours assistance and the RFS was only able to go directly to some threatened properties to defend them leaving many

property owners to fend for themselves because of the speed and intensity of the fire and the stretched nature of RFS resources.

Our response to this catastrophic bushfire experience was to work towards better being able to defend ourselves from bushfire threat in the future by putting a sprinkler system on our house with another pump to keep the water supply up to it from a large rainwater tank dedicated for bushfire fighting purposes which we had in place ready for the following bushfire season of 2017/2018. We were also very appreciative, having been through an extreme bushfire event, to be given the opportunity to take part in a RFS Hot Spots Program, which we did in February 2019, to learn about managing fire on our property, how and when to conduct a hazard reduction burn and how to prepare a fire management plan for our property. Following this program we put in a hazard reduction 'cool burn' of an area on our property between where the 2017 fire had come to and our residence which we had subsequently determined was required in May 2019.

In winter, August 2019, a bushfire took off again in an area where the fire of February 2017 had raced through bush with a high fuel load across the road from our property. It was believed to have started by fallen powerlines from an extreme wind storm event. Unfortunately we were not home at the time to defend our property but this alerted us to the need to have our fire plan and mitigation practices clearly outlined for someone else to follow even in Winter which is traditionally not regarded as bushfire season time.

Following the cold dry winter came an extremely dry spring in 2019. We became distinctly aware of this when we travelled through the Hunter Valley and New England area which, normally lush and green, was bone dry and dusty. This was another indicator that the bushfire season would start early. On a bike ride back down the mountain from the New England area we passed a fire alongside the highway just past Gingers Creek that was being controlled by back-burning, however this fire later got away into inaccessible bushland and became part of the mega fire which threatened us in Pappinbarra in November. In October a family camping trip in the Forestry area back behind Kempsey was adjusted to ensure we established our campsite in an open area where we could keep an eye out for bushfire threat. In a National Park nearby fires had already started and were being control burnt. However this fire also eventually got out of control and became part of another mega fire between Kempsey and Ebor which we later learnt burnt out the area we had camped in. On November 8th 2019 the bushfire season came in earnest for us when the sky turned orange to red, tinted with black ash from spot fires until it turned black in the middle of the day. It was ember attack from the mega fire that was predicted to form from fires burning out of control in bushland between Walcha and Pappinbarra on the Mid North Coast. We had heard of this worst case scenario prediction but couldn't quite believe it could come true although it appeared it had. Although our plan was to stay and defend, as I was minding my baby grandson at the time, I decided to evacuate to Lorne, his parents place. However on the drive into Wauchope I was confronted by a continuing orange red thick smoke filled sky. I soon realised there was more than just a fire behind me, fires appeared to be burning not too far away all around me! A bushfire, which had started in the unusually dry peat swamps around Port Macquarie in July that the RFS attempted to tackle by flooding it with reclaimed water in September, had taken off and was blocking the road into Port Macquarie threatening nearby homes as well. Other fires were heading towards the nearby towns of Laurieton, the Camden Haven area, as well as Taree. My daughter and her husband, upon realising the escalating severity of the fire situation in our area, returned home as soon as they could. However they had to return via a 'back road' after the Pacific highway was closed

south of Taree because of the raging catastrophic bushfire, only just getting back before the road they were travelling on was also closed. The RFS predictions of devastating bushfires and mega fires developing was becoming very real. Soon after this the Prime Minister and the Premier of NSW came to our area to assess the situation and a State of Emergency was issued as recommended by the RFS Commissioner for the following week. It was encouraging to know that some additional support resources were on hand but we were warned that at the time of most risk we were likely to be 'on our own', yet again, as resources would be stretched and likely to be needed elsewhere. So we prepared our home further with all necessary equipment on hand to stay and defend whilst remaining on high alert to the ever present threat of the huge bushfire making its way through the bush along a ridgeline in the Pappinbarra valley. Luckily for us the wind conditions had eased and it took a week for the fire to come through to the mountains behind us but we were on high alert all this time. We were even more heavily affected by smoke from the fires at this time especially when back-burning on an access road up to the ridgeline not far from our home was conducted.

Smoke had been hanging in the air in the valley and surrounding areas for weeks but it was becoming even thicker and drastically affecting our health. I was prescribed a puffer from my local Dr because of a consistent dry cough attributed to the dry conditions and as the smoke levels increased this worsened so I was also prescribed a preventer puffer to help deal with breathing in the conditions. My husband has a compromised immune system, having previously received chemotherapy and immunotherapy treatment for cancer, and early in November he was hospitalised for a week with a delayed reaction to his treatment accompanied by pneumonia. This was just prior to the mega fires developing around us although the peat swamp fire around Port Macquarie had already begun to flare up along the road leading into the hospital at the time. So my husband returned home, recovering from pneumonia, to an increasingly smoke filled area with an imminent severe bushfire risk ready to stay and defend with the help of myself and his adult son and granddaughter. However just before the fire reached the ridgeline in the mountains behind our house my husband was again admitted to hospital with deteriorating health, obviously exacerbated by the increasing severity of the smoke situation.

The severe, extreme, verging on catastrophic bushfire event was ever present in our area throughout November and December with smoke ever present in the air. By early January the Pappinbarra River had dried up to mere puddles and many other water courses in the area had either stopped flowing or dried up completely. I understand this has not occurred before in living memory and is likely a result of climate change. The deep pools in the river we pump from for our water supply were no longer accessible and even though we have three 22,500 litre and one 100,000 litre capacity water tanks we decided to purchase a tank load of water so we could at least retain the 100,000 litre tank for fire-fighting purposes and to feed the sprinkler system on the house as it looked like we would no longer be able to draw on the river to help us in firefighting endeavours.

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

I believe the fire that started only a few kilometres from our house in February 2017 and took off across the road from our home, in

an area believed to be crown land, with particular intensity and severity, did so because of the high fuel load in the bush which had not been able to be safely 'hazard reduction burnt'. There is now a reduced 'window of opportunity' time available for hazard reduction burns to occur because of changed weather conditions as a result of climate change. I believe there is ample evidence that our climate has changed as scientists have predicted. For example, we now have extended dry summer periods that were previously characterised as humid with wet summer thunder storms on the Mid North Coast. We also now have stronger, severe wind activity more often throughout the year. There are now bushfires starting in winter and spring rather than just throughout summer. The fire that flared up across the road from us in winter, August 2019, took off again in an area where the fire of February 2017 had raced through the bush because there was still a high fuel load of dead trees left standing or fallen along with dropped leaves and branches because of the unseasonably dry conditions. This fire was believed to have started by fallen powerlines from an extreme 'freak' wind storm event which is another example of what scientists have predicted, climate change is likely to be characterised by more intense localised storms. Indeed, as we have lost power to our home from more regular intense storm activity in the past few years, we have determined it necessary to purchase a standby generator to run power to our house to cater for likely, future, unfortunate, rarely before seen, events that could affect our power supply.

1.2 Preparation and planning

One thing I would like to see with regard to ongoing preparation and planning for our now extended intense bushfire seasons is more education, explanation and advertisement of the need for hazard reduction 'cool' burns to be given to the general public. As our country and its flora and fauna has evolved over an extensive period of time in response to indigenous land management burning practices it is worth considering to what extent such practices could be used in future land management. I believe we could learn from these indigenous practices how fire can be used, at the right time of the year, under the right conditions, in the right area, as a tool rather than a threat.

I have lived and worked as a teacher for over 20 years in both Central Australian and North East Arnhemland Indigenous communities from 1980 to 2014 and have observed how aboriginal people have successfully, successively, used fire to manage and maintain 'country'. This has probably given me more understanding and openness to the idea of using fire as a management tool around a home on acreage than others. My husband and I were very thankful to be given the opportunity to take part in a RFS Hot Spots Program to learn about how and when to conduct a 'cool' hazard reduction burn and how to prepare a fire management plan for our property. This helped us prepare for and understand the threats we were likely to face in bushfire seasons and I believe it assisted us greatly to reduce our risks just before the most recent catastrophic fires went through. We would like to see this opportunity given to more property owners, not just after they have been through an extreme fire event, but to any small or large acre property owners, to help them avoid having to go through an extreme fire event. I would also like to see some of the information presented in the RFS Hot Spots program publicised more widely as education to the general public on recommended bushfire management protocols and practices. With a changing climate of longer, hotter, drier conditions, interspersed with extreme wind or dry storm events, many more of us will need to know and understand when where and how to manage the bush regularly and safely with fire, or appreciate why and how others are doing so, in order for fire to be seen as a tool not an enemy and to help avoid bushfires getting out of control as they did in this last horrific bushfire season.

It was very encouraging, at the Hot Spots Program we were

involved in, to see National Parks and Forestry working closely together sharing their respective skills and knowledge of fire management practices to protect the land and its resources of flora, fauna and timber under their protection. It was equally encouraging to see how indigenous land management practices that utilised fire as a resource was respected and acknowledged by them and how they worked together under the leadership and direction of the RFS. I believe it would be highly valuable and beneficial for both Forestry and National Parks to be compelled to continue to work together under the oversight of the RFS in a similar way to prepare for, utilise and respond to fire taking into account its potential for use in all current, ongoing and future land management and protection practices. I believe this would ensure consistency in current and future practices. It would also facilitate the sharing of resources and personnel in ongoing planning for and dealing with fire not just when an extreme bushfire event occurs. However, I believe more funding for personnel and firefighting resources needs to be given to these authorities at peak times of the year to safely carry out hazard reduction burns as there is now an increased need for these to occur because of climate change. Support in terms of education also needs to be given to private landholders on how and when they can safely do hazard reduction burns not just pile burns as many property owners do. Education to the general public need to occur too about why, where and when hazard reduction burns are occurring during the year.

I saw an example of the heightened risk and need for hazard reduction burning with the bush opposite our property which 'took off' in unplanned burns in both 2017 and 2019 that the RFS knew needed burning. We were told the RFS was unable to muster enough resources or personnel to safely do a hazard reduction burn before these times as there was a reduced 'window of opportunity' of time available for them to do so safely. We have also been told of similar incidents where Forestry knew they needed to do hazard reduction burns but again were unable to because of the shorter 'safe' time frame available to them. This must mean that all these areas are being 'Triaged' to determine which area has the highest need. However this also means that many areas are dangerously being left unburnt when a 'cool' burn could have gone through which then allows time for the understory fuel load in them to build up and make them more vulnerable to intense bushfires. In the recent catastrophic bushfires many 'back burns' were needed to control fires that raced through the bush in both National Parks and Forestry as well as on private properties. Fires also raced through rainforest areas not normally susceptible to burning, but from what I have seen with the changing climate, many of these areas were and are more likely to be unseasonably drier and susceptible to fire than usual. I also believe that many of the fires which started in surrounding bush areas would have benefited from a 'cool' burn at the right time of the year, to reduce 'fuel load' of dead, dry material available to burn and encourage more native species to propagate and germinate with less susceptible new green growth. However these areas of bush were often in inaccessible country that has been left for many years without burning because of limited time, personnel and resources to do so. When these fires did inevitably burn they were therefore much hotter, burned much faster and were far more destructive spreading with ease to surrounding areas as they were fanned by stronger winds also attributable to climate change.

1.3 Response to bushfires

In my experience with bushfires in both 2017 and 2019 I found the RFS 'Fires near me' app a very useful resource for both warning of imminent bushfire threat and in updating information about the progress and extent of fires in my area. However I am not able to rely on this as my main means of warning of an imminent bushfire threat because I can only access this

information from my house when I am in range of my satellite internet wifi signal if we still have power. We have found it best to keep a look out for any sign of fires and to be aware of weather conditions especially wind strength and direction during the bushfire season and what this could mean for us if a fire breaks out. With the 2019 bushfires we continued to monitor the bushfires in our area using the fires near me app but found there was quite a bit of lag time in the updating of information about how big the bushfires had become and where they had spread to although we do understand that this was probably because so many fires were being monitored and updated at the same time. I did not find telephone warning messages sent to our landline phone about the 2017 fire threat advising to seek shelter useful because by the time we received this message the fire had already gone through. In the 2019 bushfires I received messages about bushfire threats on my mobile phone and not on our landline phone but these messages were too generalised and misleading. I discovered the same message was going out to people over a wide area with quite different conditions within it. I also only get mobile phone messages if I am in range, usually only when going into town. It would be helpful for us and many other people living in rural settings who are at most risk of bushfires to have better mobile phone coverage.

I found the ABC regional radio broadcasts that came out when our region was under imminent bushfire threat useful, but much of the information presented about what to do in preparation for the coming bushfire would have been more useful to have had prior to the time of imminent threat. I believe the information about what to do if your home is under threat from a fire could be usefully provided by public advertisements throughout the season however I did find it very calming and reassuring to receive this advice over the radio at the time of imminent threat. I believe it would be very beneficial to have public warnings and advice prior to the bushfire season as well as throughout the season. This education and advice is currently done by the RFS on a voluntary basis, often by way of information displays and public stands, which only people who show interest in receiving the information get, but this is information that everyone needs to know. People living on rural properties are more likely to avail themselves of the information but many people living in rural towns and even city centres are now just as much at risk of bushfires and also need to be made aware of the likely threats they face and how to respond. I have found that many people I know who live in rural towns have never considered they would ever be at risk of an approaching bushfire and therefore have not familiarised themselves with the bush fire alert levels and what they mean believing their main risk of fire would come from house or property fires which their local fire brigade would be able to deal with.

I would like to see public warnings and advice come out just prior to the bushfire season and throughout the season similar to those that are broadcast in the Top End at Cyclone season where they receive warnings about the coming threat of cyclones and what needs to be done in preparation before the cyclone season and what needs to be done if a cyclone warning is in place.

I would like to see public bushfire advice warnings advertised and broadcast to

1. Advise people when and where hazard reduction burning is occurring and why this is important and that information and assistance is available for people to do hazard reduction burns if they live on a rural property.
2. Advise what people need to do to prepare their properties and residences for bushfire season if they live in a rural setting regardless of whether they live in a regional town or on a rural property and regardless of whether they plan to leave early or stay and defend their property.
3. Advise people of what the bush fire alert levels are throughout

the bushfire season and what this means regardless of whether they live in a regional town or on a rural property.

4. Advise people of bushfire danger ratings in and what they mean in the event of a bush fire especially if the alert levels are severe, extreme or catastrophic and what this means for people who choose to stay and defend a bushfire on their property.

When the bushfires came in earnest for us in Pappinbarra in November 2019, and the worst case scenario predictions of a mega fire began to materialise so we appreciated the initial attention the disaster was given by Prime Minister and the Premier of NSW who then decided to declare a State of Emergency. However the response felt a bit like a 'Band-Aid', mopping up solution after most of the devastation had occurred for us in our area. Then when the additional support resources were taken away, because they were needed elsewhere, it felt like a 'Band-Aid' was being ripped off before a wound was healed leaving our condition more open to damage and deterioration. The fact that we were told that the extra resources provided were going to be needed elsewhere at a time when we were to be at most risk I think must be an indicator that the emergency resources available were obviously not enough for the catastrophe that was beginning to unfold. I don't believe it was good enough for the NSW government or the RFS to say they didn't need any extra support from the Commonwealth government or for the Prime Minister to accept their humble response when it was obvious that a bushfire crisis was unfolding in more States than one crossing borders and becoming a National responsibility requiring National intervention and support. This horrific bushfire season had been forewarned by scientists with climate change predictions but regrettably these warnings had fallen on deaf ears in government. As we have seen, when fuel loads build up in the bush and areas are left unprepared for fire, more intense bushfires are the result. So too, the longer the problem of climate change is left unaddressed the worse the climate will change and the greater the problems that will create.

I believe it is imperative that the issue of climate change is addressed as a matter of urgency especially in relation to how it is rendering our country more prone to burning more destructively more often.

Finally the Prime Minister stepped in to deploy the services of the armed forces to help with the bushfire fight and recovery effort. Once again support only came after it was almost too late when the bushfire crisis on the South Coast escalated early in 2020. I believe it would have been useful to call on the services of the armed forces to assist in the bushfire effort much earlier and it could be useful to utilise their support routinely in future emergency responses to bushfires.

With so many different agencies working together in response to a significant national crisis, like the bushfires, it is imperative that effective coordination and collaboration occurs between governments. It has been encouraging to see how well the States and Commonwealth governments have worked together with their combined National Council of Australian Government's Crisis Cabinet meetings in response to the Covid 19 Pandemic. It would be great, and not inconceivable, to see them work together in a similar capacity to plan and prepare for, as well as respond to, future bushfire risks. Such a combined National and State Crisis Cabinet could also work together to determine how our country will address the Climate change crisis which would also help with future plans for addressing bushfire risks and threats. One thing we discovered with our 2017 and 2019 bushfire experiences was how debilitating excessive exposure to smoke from fires can be. We know of at least one of the members of our local RFS that was bravely fighting the 2017 bushfires who had to leave the firefighting effort to receive medical attention for excessive smoke inhalation, this was probably because best quality safety masks were not routinely available to all members

at the time. Our experience in 2017 made us more aware of the need for masks when preparing for the bushfires of 2019 however we were not prepared for the ongoing smoke hanging in the air in our valley and throughout our local area for weeks, months even. We unfortunately discovered how much the constant dangerously high levels of smoke in the air could drastically affect our health as we were living in an increasingly smoke filled area which was making it more difficult for us to stay in to defend our property against the ever present bushfire threat. We were even more heavily affected by smoke from the fires at the time back-burning on an access road up to the ridgeline not far from our home was conducted while we waited for mega fire that had burnt out Upper Pappinbarra to come through. However there was really nowhere that we could go that we would be out of a smoke filled area because our closest towns, Wauchope and Port Macquarie were also covered with smoke. Everyone was experiencing the devastating effects of the bushfires, the smoke from our area soon affected people living in Sydney. Previously people in Sydney had been concerned about the smoke from preparatory hazard reduction burning wanting it to cease because of how much it was affecting people's health but the smoke from the bushfires was much worse and was having an even more debilitating effect on people's health. This highlights again the importance of doing regular ongoing preparatory hazard reduction burns and the importance of public explanation about why and how important it is to do these burns at the right time of the year.

Supporting documents or images
