

NEW YEAR'S EVE | BUSHFIRE | CHRIS PRICE**[REDACTED] | CONJOLA PARK | NSW**

To whom it may concern,

New Year's Eve is a day that will never ever be erased from my memory. It started out as a 'normal day' despite the difficult circumstances that everyone was facing during those few months, lots of smoke and extremely hot conditions. An element of uncertainty and fear amongst the residents loomed large as it had done for many weeks prior. Conjola Park is home to my parents, [REDACTED]. My wife and I, along with our 14-month-old son, had driven down to Conjola Park that NYE morning to spend the holidays with them. Little did we know that we would very quickly go from feeling relatively safe, to fighting for our lives in a matter of minutes. That Conjola Park, a quiet and tranquil community, was soon to become a raging inferno. Homes would explode, lifelong possessions would be destroyed, people would run for their lives, seeking refuge at the lake and some of our dearest friends, perished as a result. This to our absolute horror, disbelief and disgust, happened without any warning or support.

At approximately 10:45am, my mum and I began wetting down the house as a precaution, as things started to not feel right. During this time, two water-bombing helicopters flew above our house and started extracting water from our neighbour's private dam. This confirmed our heightened angst and our distress at




the situation, however, we took some comfort in the fact that the helicopters were nearby. Very quickly, the helicopter began dumping closer and closer to us, we could now easily see water being released from the buckets even through the treacherous smokey conditions. Anxiety really started to set as we soon realised, we could be in trouble. We continued frantically hosing down the house and wetting as many things as possible. At this point, we had not received any warning to alert us of a fire heading directly towards Conjola Park. Our worst fears were about to become a reality.

My wife saw a grass spot fire behind my parent's shed, about 200m south-west of the house, at around midday. My parents, my wife and I ran frantically over to the shed whilst my brother's girlfriend stayed in the house to look after our 14-month-old baby. We tried to put out the fire with water and towels. However, spot fires continued to appear all around us and the air was thickening with smoke. Breathing was no longer easy. Behind the back of the shed, the fire was now well alight and closing in on our only entry point into this space. My father and I had to duck and almost run through fire to get to safety, otherwise we would have been trapped. Distressingly, a few minutes later, my wife started yelling that she could see "fire at the house." The helicopters above, which we thought would protect us and be our security blanket, had disappeared and were never to be seen again. We left the fire we were fighting and ran towards the house as fast as we could. The ground was very slippery and visibility was extremely poor. We were screaming at one another, whilst trying to manage kinked hoses and navigate



those hoses around difficult terrain. My dad had a fire hose hooked up to our dam and was able to hold off parts of the fire at the front of the house. I ran around the back of the house to check and froze in absolute horror. The next-door neighbour's house to the east of my parent's house was completely on fire, along with their boundary trees that hung over my parent's house. Therefore, the back of mum and dad's home was beginning to ignite. I ran and screamed to alert my parents and my wife and I began frantically pulling up the garden hoses around the back to attend the blaze. Devastatingly, at that moment, we lost all pressure in our hoses, the water cut out, and we had nothing to defend ourselves or the home.

I instructed my wife to get out and take our 1 year old baby to save themselves. She then ran inside and that was the last I saw of her. My Dad instructed me to pull our fire hose around from the front of the house, to the back. I was tripping up the hill, trying to carry this huge fire hose full of water. But I couldn't make it, there was not enough length in the hose. I yelled out "I need more hose" and my parents responded with, "there is no more." It was at that moment that I started to cry. The idea that we might not beat this was starting to become a reality. However, I quickly berated myself and told myself to "stop, you don't have time to cry!" During this time, mum made multiple 000 calls using the Emergency App. Listening to her pleas for help were devastating, especially when she was told there would be no help arriving. My dad ran around to the front of the house to check on it, and in only that short space of time, the front of the house was



engulfed in flames. He came back and screamed at me “We have to get out.” I responded with “are you sure?” as I didn’t want to give up. Looking back now, he was totally right. If we had stayed any longer the outcome could have been very different.


By this time, we had one fire hose that could not reach everything and a blazing inferno that was beginning to surround us. Dad yelled out to mum, telling her that we had to leave while she was in tears and trying desperately to continue contacting the emergency services. She didn’t want to leave as she was in a state of denial. My dad screamed at her and me again that we had to leave and it broke my heart to tell her we had to go. She said “No, we can’t go, that’s our house and everything we own.” Seeing the look of fear and devastation in my parent’s eyes was the hardest thing I have ever experienced. Dad and I both grabbed mum and started making our way around to the front of the house. Seeing how much, and how quickly, everything had gone up in flames by this point, we realised we had stayed too long trying to defend the home. Dad ordered me to run to the lake and they would ride out on the motorbike. I remember running inside the house thinking I needed to can grab things that were important, but I couldn’t process anything. It was like I was looking into a blank space. As I ran out the side door, I noticed a pair of keys on the table and grabbed them without thinking.

As I started to run down the driveway, the house and its surrounds were all ablaze. I somehow saw my parent’s car parked on the road about 20 meters from




the house. I realised I had the keys, so I jumped in and waited for my parents to ride down the driveway on the bike. It felt like an absolute eternity and I was so scared. I couldn't see the house due to the large amount of smoke and orange flames. I wound the window down and sounded the horn to let them know that I had the car. Huge embers immediately flew through the window and inside the car, so I had to wind it up otherwise the inside of the car was going to catch alight. I was scared and crying, as my eyes darted around desperately trying to spot my parents through the smoke. Little did I know that they had fallen off the bike and fell into the burning garage, while trying frantically to turn it around and escape quickly. I started to get out of the car, planning to run back and check on them as I was terrified for their safety. But to my absolute relief, they suddenly appeared through the smoke on the motorbike and sped down the driveway.

As we drove down Valley Drive, we ducked and dodged burning houses and trees on both sides of the road. To our relief, we saw a fire truck was at the end of Valley Drive. My parents stopped in front to tell the fireman that our house was on fire and beg them for help. To their dismay and disgust, the fireman shrugged his shoulders and said no. This was very difficult to stomach and very confronting to deal with, as no empathy or compassion was demonstrated at all by this fireman. He did not even tell us where to go or direct us to safety. We felt isolated, deserted and left to fend for our lives with no help provided at all. We continued to drive to the lake, parked the car and bike on the grass and fled to the end of the jetty. We gazed around in shock as we watched the whole area around us burn



and listened to the sound of huge bomb-like explosions. People were running, screaming and seeking shelter on the boats in the middle of the lake. We were so terrified for our safety while on land, that we ended up boarding a boat banked on the shore and driving it out onto the middle of the lake. There we continued to watch the fire destroy everything in its path. It felt like we were in a war zone. We could hear what we thought were gas bottle explosions, trees collapsing and people screaming. All the while we were suffering scorching temperatures, lack of vision and painful eyes, and difficulty breathing.

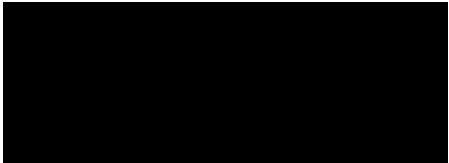
We sat in a state of shock in the boat, devastated and in disbelief of the position we had found ourselves in, in a short space of time. I didn't know where my wife and little baby were. Did they get out? Were they trapped or injured? The fear of the thought that my parent's home and belongings were most likely destroyed. What happened to their farm animals, which included a cat, horses, cows, and chickens? Did they survive on their own? We were all traumatised and felt completely helpless and isolated.

We then received a call from our next-door neighbour, . We told him where we were. He was with a NSW Ambulance officer and asked for our help. The ambulance officer told us there were people that had been reported missing around the various bays of the lake around Conjola Park. There was nothing else we could do, so we wanted to help other people in any way that we could.




Dad and I were briefed by the ambulance officer. We were instructed to go and try and locate the missing people. This was a very daunting experience as we prepared ourselves to face the very real possibility of finding dead bodies. As we travelled around the bays, all we could see was fire and burnt houses. We were screaming out to people but couldn't see anyone. On our way back, we found a single jetty with an elderly person's motorised cart sitting on the end of it. This was very confronting. We were worried we were about to find someone who had jumped out of their cart and into the water as they tried to escape the fire. Dad and I were preparing ourselves to find a body floating in the water. After 15 minutes of searching, another boat arrived and informed us that the elderly man was safe and had been picked up earlier. This was such a relief to hear. Finally, some good news. We headed back to where we had left mum on the shore and began helping people in the neighbourhood near the lake, put out spot fires and save houses.

Throughout this whole experience we saw a total of two fire trucks and one ambulance vehicle. No police officers or any other emergency services came to help or assist those who had lost their homes or were seriously injured. Everyone was suffering from smoke inhalation, dehydration and burn marks all over our bodies.



At approximately 6.00pm, after we had waited a few hours and when the majority of the fire had passed through, we walked up to mum and dad's property, hoping that the house, and the animals, had survived. As we walked up the street everything around us was still burning. It can only be described as pure devastation as far as the eye could see. Mum and dad's house had been burnt to the ground and there was nothing left, except a smouldering pile of rubble. A number of family vehicles had burned and many of the animals perished.

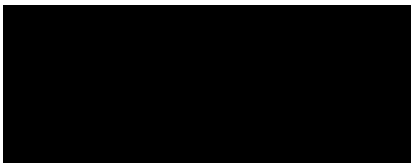
During the couple of days that followed, we still had no assistance from any emergency services. Road blocks were set up and people were not allowed in or out of Conjola. The day after the fire, my dad, brother Tim and I went out to the property. We still had animals out there who had survived and needed tending to, and we also needed to search for my parent's missing cat. We ended up finding her wedged behind a retaining wall, badly injured. Her paws had basically been burnt off. During this day while we were out at the property, my mum was rushed to hospital with an increased heart and smoke inhalation. When we tried to leave Conjola Park with our injured cat and surviving goats in the ute, in a desperate attempt to get to the hospital to see mum, we were met with arrogant and selfish policeman at the Lake Conjola turnoff, who showed no understanding or empathy what so ever. We pleaded with them to please let us through so that we could be with mum and get our cat to the vet who was not in a good way. At this point, we were also still unable to contact my wife and son who had managed to escape to Sussex Inlet, however, they were now trapped there and couldn't get out. After



everything we had experienced in the last 24 hours we were emotional and exhausted, and we were met with smug comments like “go to your neighbour’s house,” or “go to the entrance and get a bite to eat until the road opens back up.” These comments were continuously made by these police officers, even though they knew that we had no water, no clothes, money or wallets as everything was destroyed in the fire. Additionally, all of our neighbours’ houses had also burned to the ground. These people are supposed to be the ones that provide support, protection and safety. Their behaviour, comments and lack of empathy and understanding of the situation was nothing short of a disgrace.

The trauma and the effects from this event will live with me forever. What the residents and visitors of Conjola Park experienced on New Year’s Eve 2019, can only be described as abandonment. To have not been notified or warned that this catastrophic event was about to hit Conjola Park is negligent to the highest degree and as a result, it destroyed people’s lives and also ended others.

A few weeks ago, we all tuned in to hear the NSW Rural Fire Service give a presentation into their findings of the cause of the NYE fire at Conjola Park. Their findings concluded that the back burning which was carried out by National Parks and Wild Life Services was not the cause of the devastation in Conjola Park. Their findings of the fire seemed to be based primarily off 000 calls, weather predictions and a photo captured via an aircraft.



During the presentation, the RFS officers admitted to not having consulted the NSW Fire Brigade who were fighting the fire on the day, National Parks and Wildlife Services who lit the fire and the helicopter pilots who were dumping water, prior to the fire hitting Conjola Park. There is a huge amount of evidence that pin-points that this catastrophe was a result of a back burn misjudged and gone wrong. The presentation was a huge slap in the face to the residents of Conjola Park who have lost everything and some of their dearest friends. The RFS admitted to not having all of the information that many locals have access too, such as satellite images etc. During the presentation, it was clear that the RFS investigation was not at all thorough. It felt like they were trying to cover up the cause of the fire and play the residents of the area for fools. It wasn't until the survivors began questioning them, that it became evident that they had not done enough research and were unable to adequately answer many of the questions and concerns raised by the survivors. Their level of inquiry was sub-par and it was embarrassing that the locals were able to provide seemingly more accurate and detailed evidence that contradicted the RFS's findings. This investigation and the lack of research was an absolute insult to the survivors of the NYE fire.

I would like the following questions to be answered:

- Why was there no emergency support provided during and after this horrific event?
- Why was there no warning to the people of Conjola Park that a fire was approaching their specific area? The weekend before, we received a

message saying 'Conjola Park - Seek shelter as the fire arrives', and it never did. The day that it arrived, there was no message for Conjola Park.

- Why did the commander in charge of this presentation feel that there was 'a greater need' (as he said in his presentation) further south (Bateman's Bay) on that day?
- Why did the water run out and leave residents with nothing to defend ourselves?
- Why were locals who lost their homes, who had no water, food or clothes not provided with any assistance? We were trapped and were not allowed to go and visit family members who were in hospital.

I look forward to receiving a letter of response.

Chris Price.