

Your details

Title

Ms

First name

Clarissa

Last name

Watson

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

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.2 Preparation and planning

I am attaching 3 documents relating to preparation and planning by government and community

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Communication system in bushfire.docx
- Community preparation submission.docx
- Livestock safety planning.docx

PLANNING FOR BUSHFIRE

Effective Communication Technology for Bush Fire

During and after the extensive destruction by the Currowan fire throughout the Shoalhaven, the technologies which proved reliable were the copper wire landline telephones and wireless transistor radios. All other technologies, being reliant on electricity and mobile phone towers, failed whenever the electricity and mobile phone transmission infrastructure was damaged.

In the fire impacted areas of Kangaroo Valley the copper wire telephone service stopped briefly when the fire arrived, then resumed operation for the duration of the event.

When cut off from access by fire, a number of Shoalhaven towns became reliant on the few remaining copper wire telephones. The roll out of the NBN and the widespread adoption of mobile phones had seen many copper wire connected landlines disconnected before the bushfire season.

Battery operated transistor wireless radios became the means by which those towns received information.

It would be valuable for the Inquiry members to listen to the recordings of calls to the ABC Illawarra radio station during New Years Eve. A number of callers described their situation as having no electricity, no internet, no mobile phone reception, and that their call was by copper wire landline phone which was the only communication method available to them. They wanted the ABC Illawarra to find out information including the location of the fire, the forecast wind directions for that day and the next, prospects of road openings, location of the fire services, and to broadcast the answers to their questions on their radio station because the trapped residents were listening on a battery operated radio.

The copper wire telephone service is being progressively removed in the roll out of the National Broadband Network (NBN) and replaced with a Voice Over the Internet (VOIP) telephone service which is dependent upon electricity supply and internet reception, and which will therefore fail when similar circumstances arise in future bushfires.

In many areas in Kangaroo Valley the copper wire telephone service remains the only reliable service even during normal times. In addition, not all Kangaroo valley residents have access to, or technological skills, to use the internet communication systems.

Removing the remaining copper wire telephone service will deprive communities of their most reliable communication technology in future fires.

A few neighbourhoods have invested in walkie talkie radios to provide communication in the event of failure of the electricity, internet and mobile phone communication during bushfire emergencies. However walkie talkies have a limited geographical communication range and limited uptake at the household level. They also need electricity to recharge their batteries, so would not last for many days without electricity.

Copper wire landline phones continue to work during a power outage because power is sent independently to the phones through the copper wire phone line infrastructure. That infrastructure is mostly located underground and is therefore protected during bush fires.

It takes very little power to operate a copper wire telephone. A phone will work as long as it is getting between 6 and 12 volts at about 30 milliamps. So it is the ideal emergency phone, and other technology is not as reliable.

It would be a loss to our communities and our bush fire preparedness if we were to lose the very reliable copper wire telephone service. It exists now, the infrastructure is in place and should not be undone.

Recommendation

- That the copper wire telephone service is retained until a future technology achieves the same reliability and independence from the electricity, internet and mobile phone infrastructure

PREPARATION FOR BUSHFIRE

Provision of safe destination when community is advised to leave home

On Catastrophic, Extreme and Severe fire weather days, government agencies advise the community to leave early.

But where to?

Until a fire ignites in an area there are no evacuation centres declared and operating. Evacuation centres are often located in clubs or buildings used for other purposes, and cannot be accessed to shelter from fire weather if there is no fire already in an area.

During November and December 2019 there were weekly warnings of extreme fire weather danger days, a catastrophic fire danger day and a number of severe fire weather days.

These days were very hot.

Some people went to sit out the day in concrete shopping malls, libraries or cinemas, all of which have air conditioning and seem to be built of fire resistant materials.

Some people left the area to stay with friends or family in less endangered areas. With successive weeks with fire danger days their welcome there became less easy.

However many other people cannot go to any of those places for the day.

- People with special medical needs cannot sit in a shopping mall all day.
- People with pets or wildlife in care are not allowed entry.

On days of over 40 degrees, sitting in a hot car all day with animals in a safer region is not a solution.

As a result, many people with pets or wildlife in their care feel forced to remain at home despite the warnings to leave.

On days that the community are warned that the only safe option is to leave home, a safe destination must be made available to all of the community who have no access to a safe destination. At a minimum the destination should:

- be fire resistant,
- have air conditioning, access to drinking water and a toilet,
- be a place for community members to sit out the fire danger days with suitably restrained pets or wildlife in care,
- have privacy and facilities for vulnerable people in the community.

The community members could return home when the danger has passed, which is usually by the end of the day.

Otherwise, with increasing numbers of dangerous days due to climate change, and with nowhere safe and local to go, many people will be forced to stay in their homes and the results will be tragic.

There is no government provision of such community facilities yet, and there are many ways in which it could be achieved. For instance:

- such buildings could be constructed simultaneously with other major public construction work like highways,
- dual use structures such as underground car parks could be built and used as community fire bunkers on those days,
- public buildings could be designated as places to go on such days when there are no evacuation centres declared. Local buildings that come to mind are the Shoalhaven Council building and the Entertainment Centre in Nowra.
- large developments such as shopping malls and multiple housing projects could be obliged to include a safe bunker type of building suitable to spend a day in, and occasionally nights, for the local residents and their pets.

With the increasing frequency of severe to catastrophic fire weather days this is an urgent issue.

Recommendation

That the inquiry recommends options for construction or allocation of destinations for people with pets/wildlife in their care and for vulnerable people which they can access on days when severe, extreme or catastrophic fire danger weather is forecast and evacuation centres have not been declared.

PREPARATION FOR BUSHFIRE

Provision of information and facilities for livestock safety options during fire

During the recent bushfires a neighbor was overseas and asked if I could find out options to keep her livestock safe.

It was a public holiday.

I rang a number of authorities. Some had no telephone information. A couple with recorded messages directed me to the same particular telephone number to talk to a person. However ringing that number arrived at a recorded message saying to check the number, ie it was a wrong number. It took over an hour of ringing lots of numbers before I made contact with someone in an authority who could provide information.

I understand that on the day that the fire arrived in Kangaroo Valley, a lot of livestock and their owners arrived unannounced at the Berry Showground where, for some hours, the manager had no assistance from authorities and had to improvise to find suitable containment for the livestock. Most of the infrastructure had no air conditioning and the outdoor temperatures were above 40 degrees. Some buildings were too hot and resulted in fatal overheating of some chooks.

When staff from government authorities eventually arrived at the Berry Showground they were very efficient and helpful.

Recommendation

Regional planning options for livestock safety in the event of fire should be detailed and up to date. Information about the options should be provided to all local livestock holders. Where transport and facilities will be needed they should be appropriate and easily accessed.

On public holidays during days of severe or higher danger fire weather, the livestock related government authorities should have adequate staff on duty to meet the anticipated needs of the community in a timely manner.