



RE: 2020 NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

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To whom it may concern

Thank you for the opportunity to make submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry.

My name is Jonathan Cassell and I am writing on behalf of the Coffs Harbour Greens who represent a diverse member group concerned about the environmental and social impacts associated with this summers fires.

Submission Introduction

Our submission will argue that not only is anthropogenic global warming impacting bushfire behaviour but current NSW land management policies are also playing a major contributing factor in propagating the highly destructive fires in the Coffs Harbour LGA and across NSW.

In 2008, economist Ross Garnaut predicted, in his Climate Change Review, that without adequate action to combat climate change Australia and its economy would face a more frequent and intense fire season by 2020.¹ Policy failure in Australia from both state and federal governments over the last several decades, we believe, has resulted in the extreme bushfire season we are now seeing as an outcome of anthropogenic global warming.

Coffs Harbour's Local Government Area (LGA) was not spared in the ferocity of this escalation of fire extremes and it is remarkable that our community did not experience greater impacts. The Liberation Trail fire burnt in excesses of 150 000 ha on its path towards the coast from inland west of the township of Nymboida. The fire claimed several properties behind Nana Glen in the Coffs Harbour LGA but fortunately no lives were lost.

On the 12th of November, Coffs Harbour residents were warned of ember attack by Coffs Harbour Council Director [REDACTED] who also served as the Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO). The response from the NSW Rural Fire Service, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Council and the Emergency Operations Centre to implement and manage contingency plans on short notice is to be acknowledged as a remarkable collaborative effort by all departments and volunteers involved.²

The Coffs Harbour LGA was spared from utter catastrophe due to a change in prevailing weather. The efforts of the RFS, however, can not be underestimated and it is understood that the RFS deliberately intervened in the Liberation Trail fire as it crossed Orara Way north of Nana Glen. The efforts by the RFS to extinguish the blaze reduced the fires ability to spread to Sherwood Nature Reserve and Wedding-Bells State Forest which would most likely have

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-08/economic-bushfires-billions-ross-garnaut-climate-change/11848388>

² <https://www.coffiscoastadvocate.com.au/news/trail-liberation/3876623/>

driven the fire in the direction of the townships of Woolgoolga, Corindi, Arrawarra and Red Rock.

The personal and community-wide impacts associated with these fires will live with residents for many years to come. We understand the underlying cause of this Liberation Trail fire is complex, unprecedented and likely an outcome of anthropogenic driven global warming.

Our main concerns about the *causation* of these fires, however, does not simply rest with mapping changes in our climate but applies to NSW land management and budgetary priorities linked to deforestation, land clearing and under resourced frontline services.

The Role of the NSW Forestry Corporation

The Liberation Trail fire on November the 8th spread quickly from Chaelundi State Forest and Marara State Forest, west of Nymboida township and then consumed the township before moving quickly east that same evening. At 3pm on the 8th, RFS Early Warning Network (EWN) recorded the Liberation Trail fire had burnt 7000ha.³

By the 11th of November at 5.52pm, the Liberation Trail fire had joined with 6 separate fire fronts moving from west to east consuming 135, 850ha. The fire front shifted south east from Coutts Crossing in the Clarence LGA towards Glenreagh reaching Coffs Harbour's LGA at Nana Glen with conditions deteriorating on the 12th of November to Catastrophic fire danger.⁴

As mentioned, the townships north of Coffs Harbour were spared by the heroic efforts of the RFS and an expected cool change. But the Liberation Trail fire didn't travel as aggressively as it did on the 8th of November or expected by RFS mapping (see figure). While the vegetation behind Nana Glen is predominately dry sclerophyll, the coastal region has wet sclerophyll and rainforest types which suppress fire behaviour.



⚠️ A potential fire path of the Liberation Trail fire. The modelling does not take into account the impact firefighters could have on the blaze this afternoon under worsening weather conditions.

But is this entirely true?

The impact of the drought had significantly reduced our regions rainfall with the Bureau of Meteorology stating 2019 the hottest and driest year on record in Australia's recorded history. Dorrigo recorded only 923mm instead of 1827mm on average and Kalang Valley received 740mm instead of 1516mm.⁵ Due to this significant reduction in rainfall across Eastern Australia, rainforests and wet sclerophyll forests were still burning from Lamington National

³ <http://www.ewn.com.au/alerts/nsw-bushfire-emergency-warning-440893.weather>

⁴ <http://www.ewn.com.au/alerts/nsw-bushfire-watch-act-liberation-441409.weather>

⁵ <https://www.bellincourier.com.au/story/6572241/our-weather-in-2019-warmest-and-driest-ever/>



Park in Queensland to the Gondwana World Heritage Area of New England National park due to the Anderson's Creek fire.⁶

With the Coffs Harbour hinterland significantly spared from the catastrophic fire conditions on the 12th of November, further research is required to establish why this fire behaviour was seemingly mitigated when it was expected that the Liberation Trail fire could have spread south towards Bonville as the RFS model indicated could happen.

What Coffs Harbour Greens would like specifically researched is what role has the current NSW Forestry Corporation harvest and logging plans played in bushfire behaviour. This is not isolated to the Coffs Harbour LGA but warrants full a State-wide investigation that maps correlations between extreme fire behaviour and native forest management practices.

This correlation has already been argued to exist by ANU Professor David Lindenmayer in his research into Victorian native forest management and fire behaviour. This serves as a credible foundation to base future bushfire research in NSW and how to best manage our native forests.⁷

It is no exaggeration to claim that the Liberation Trail fire literally exploded across the landscape between the 8th of November as it traversed both State Forests and National Park tenure until the fire was influenced by the southerly change late on the 12th of November. The fire behaviour west and south of Nymboida township was extreme, out of control and burning in multiple directions. In this region the State Forests of Clouds Creek SF, Boundary Creek SF, Ellis SF, Sheas Nob SF, Wild Cattle Creek SF, Kangaroo creek SF and Bagawa SF all exist.

Several questions come to mind:

- We need to determine which State Forests had been logged and when?
- What was the logging intensity?
- Does the size of the logging area make a difference?
- Did Forestry Corporation post-burn after logging or did they leave wood residues?
- Was Forestry Corporation harvest plans included in RFS fire modelling and did the fires behave accordingly or did they diverge from the model predictions?
- Do unlogged native forests mitigate bushfire behaviour better than logged native forests or plantations?

Aside from native forest logging, other concerns we have regarding the impacts of the bushfires are:

- Why did the NSW Government 2019-2020 Budget⁸ reduce funding for the RFS by \$49.9M; NSW Fire and Rescue by 28.5M; and NPWS in the 2016-17 budget by \$121M and \$80M in the latest NSW budget. Why? A full investigation is warranted!
- A full investigation into the impact of persistent and dangerous smoke for many weeks on human health;

⁶ <https://www.bellingenecourier.com.au/story/6529565/updated-all-eyes-on-anderson-creek/>

⁷ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6582795/logging-makes-forest-fires-worse-experts/?fbclid=IwAR3snNW79yNk2P8f9dbjPLZVnPc3zSDrq-2ovpA0EvvuK19rtkBq5FkZXXM>

⁸ https://www.budget.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/budget-2019-06/Budget_Paper_2-Infrastructure%20Statement-Budget_201920.pdf



- How are these associated health impacts included in modelling economic costs;
- What modelling has been compiled for monitoring wildlife losses on human health;
- We request an economic review of the losses of biodiversity on NSW economy due to this fire season;
- What role has land clearing in western NSW for broad-acre agriculture had in reducing precipitation over other regions of Australia;
- Why did farms and agricultural assets receive prioritisation over national parks or conservation areas in terms of the implementation of the Army Reserves.

Conclusion

A comprehensive review into Forestry Corporation harvest plans and associated bushfire behaviour is important to us because the township of Woolgoolga and the surrounding towns came as close as it gets to catastrophic fire conditions. Wedding-Bells State Forest was logged to a clear-felling standard in 2019 and exists within a 10km radius of these coastal townships.

The NSW government has a duty of care and a responsibility to protect and serve the NSW community. Research is needed immediately to ascertain the correlation between Forestry NSW harvest plans and bushfire behaviour before the next bushfire season returns.

Since Coffs Harbour's hinterland was spared, it's fair to say that the next major bushfire season the East Coast experiences may in fact place our region in a higher fire danger than if we had experienced greater fire outcomes as a result of the Liberation Trial fire.

If current Victorian logging practices are making bushfires worse as ANU Professor David Lindenmayer states than the NSW government needs to review and reform Forestry NSW practices. We need the NSW government to act in the best interests of its residents and develop policies that properly fund frontline services and do not deplete bushfire mitigation resources.

We need transparent independent research to verify that current industrial logging practices did not make this summer's bushfires more extreme and if they did we need policies that manage a transition away from native forest logging to carbon sequestration and forest restoration in order to mitigate and control future extreme droughts and bushfire events.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment and we again welcome deliberate and courageous climate policy as well as a forensic investigation into a correlation between Forestry NSW logging harvest plans and this summer's horrendous bushfire season.

Yours truly,

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