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I am making this submission as	Resident
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	<p>We have lived in Wingello for twenty years. Life in the country is good with fresh air and water and a good restful lifestyle.</p> <p>For all that time we have been reminded of the risk of bushfires and provided with plenty of good information from the local Rural Fire Brigade. The history of Wingello reminds us that we have major fires every 20 to 30 years - 1939, 1965, 1998 and smaller ones in between. Historically the risk has come from the West, fanned by hot weather and high winds, racing in from the direction of the Hume Highway. The causes have always been the same, drought and fuel load.</p> <p>This year the risk came from the opposite direction, from across the Shoalhaven Gorge. Normally a Southerly wind brings rain and a cool change, dousing fires and bringing relief. In 2020 the drought of 2019 had removed almost all the moisture so the</p>

Southerly wind brought no such relief. The Currowan fire started as a small dot which we noticed on the Fires Near Me app to which we paid little attention. After all, we don't get threatened by fires from the South. Then it doubled and doubled again in size and quickly grew in our direction. Suddenly we were at risk.

In line with all RFS guidelines we prepared our home and the Wingello Village Store for the approaching fire and gathered equipment and supplies so we could defend against a possible ember attack. The majority of the village did likewise and the village was probably prepared as well as it could be.

On New Year's Eve we had a preview of what we could expect when thick smoke from the fires on the other side of Shoalhaven Gorge blew across Wingello. Fortunately no fires crossed the Gorge but experiencing the debilitating effect that thick smoke had on breathing and seeing made the risk personal.

Pretty - but dangerous

On 4th January the Southerly wind would once again threaten to push the fires across the Gorge and then ignite the State Forest to the East of Wingello. A strong effort was made to ensure all those that weren't physically or mentally ready to face a fire left the village. With the assistance on my father in law, who is an active member of the Wingello RFB, we felt we were ready for the forecast ember attack.

At around 7pm we saw the rising huge Pyro-Cumulus cloud and knew that this was real. Then at 8pm the cloud lit up like the sun was reflecting on it and we all thought it was very pretty. Unknown to us at the time this was the cloud collapsing as the Southerly hit it and effectively vacuumed the fire from across the gorge and slammed it just behind the village with accompanying 80kph winds.

Within 30 minutes thick smoke swept across Wingello and the sky was dark. There was no going out without goggles or masks.

Over the next two hours ash began falling, then larger burnt leaves, bark and even branches and then we were working with our neighbours to extinguish embers and continue watering down everything on ours and our neighbours' properties.

Then at 10:30pm the nearby sky was red and we heard the loud sound like a combination of a heavy freight train and a furnace. My daughter asked my father in law, "That's not a train is it?". "Nope," he replied and we had a quick discussion. We activated our fall back plan and all boarded our family Transit Van and escaped to the shop on the main street of Wingello, abandoning the house before the approaching full force fire reached us.

Over the next hour we defended the Village Store putting out embers on our property and the neighbouring properties.

At just past 11:00pm we saw a tree on the main road explode in fire from embers landing in the canopy. One of my sons came in at 11:40 and told me to look outside. There was fire raging on the property behind us, twice the height of their shed. I looked at the two tall trees at the rear of our property and considered the shop was a wooden building over 100 years old and made the decision to retreat, abandoning the shop.

We all piled into our van and went to the front of the fire shed. We would not immediately leave via Murrumba road, the primary escape route, as its tree canopy is a fire-trap waiting to happen. While waiting to see if the escape route was clear we helped put out a small fire next to the rail line and saw fires on two houses

down Garrett Street on our home street . That view confirmed in our minds that our home would certainly be lost.

We received word that the exit was clear so we left at 11:58pm, seeing burning houses and trees on the way out, the fire brigade frantically fighting the fires to stop it crossing the railway line and we were grateful to be alive.

Later that morning we received the news that the shop had been spared and our house had also somehow survived.

By the time we returned on Monday morning we realised there was the Miracle of Wingello, that although we lost about a dozen houses and many sheds and back yards, no one died or was seriously injured and Wingello would be able to rebuild.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

The primary cause of the fires was a combination of drought and fuel load.

Drought

In 2019 the rainfall in Wingello was 397mm. Normally we get between 800mm and 1000mm. Everything was tinder dry and grass was crunchy. Moisture content of the soil was very low. This was the same situation across NSW.

Fuel Load

Native trees, especially Eucalyptus, drop twigs, branches and dry leaves all year round. In times of drought, they drop even more and often full limbs. As the year progressed, every windy day would see so many branches dropping and the fire brigade was regularly called to clear the roads.

All this tree debris was effectively kindling just waiting for the right spark to start a fire.

Contributing factors

Bushfires are all part and parcel of country life. We have been warned every year to prepare our homes and families in case of fire. The main issue in the 2020 fires was the severity of the fires.

A contributing factor was the inability of residents to complete their preparations due to regulatory hindrances to most of the cleanup. Council policies and deliberate negligence, NSW Forestry and Crown Land negligence allowed the fuel build up to reach catastrophic levels.

1.2 Preparation and planning

The Rural Fire Service and the local Rural Fire Brigades go to great length to make sure we all know what to do to prepare. There are physical and on line resources, Open days and community meetings all aimed at ensuring we are aware of the danger of fire and what we need to do to prepare our homes and families.

Thankfully a number of organisations greatly helped Wingello in its time of need. The railways provided much appreciated water gins that were used continuously through the night topping up the fire trucks. We also had access to a pump on Paddy's River which provided us with water too. So many other fire brigades were here on the night providing essential assistance to our own two trucks. All up the help we had on the night of the fire and following weeks of vigilance and mopping up were excellent.

However, not everyone can share in the praise.

Before I begin my analysis it is important to understand who I am referring to when I use the term "Council". I use the term "Council" to refer to those who are responsible for the decisions - the Councillors and General Manager. The actual Council workers are very much appreciated here - when they visit - and their work is good. The problem we have is with those that don't let them maintain Wingello.

If you look at the drone footage I have provided here you can see how the fires came into the village. Predominantly it raced up the roadside verges that have been unmaintained and unprepared by those responsible - Wingecarribee Shire Council, NSW Forestry and Crown Lands.

Council policy puts the existence of trees above people. Even if the Council did not plant the tree, it will not let you remove it. If that tree falls and destroys property or injures a person, they take no responsibility.

If the tree is on the roadside verges, there is NO maintenance. There is also Council policy that forbids locals from clearing up fallen branches on roadside verges and as the council won't clear the ever growing debris, the fuel load increases every year until we get fires.

Another council policy banned backyard burning for properties under 4000m2. The fortnightly green bins are insufficient to handle the generated garden and tree waste.

Throughout the village are a number of open areas and laneways that are apparently Crown Land. Over time these have been unmaintained and naturally seeded trees have grown large. No-one is allowed to remove these trees and so we now have another fire lane created which villagers are not allowed to touch and no authority will attend to.

Those villagers whose properties border the NSW forestry can attest to the lack of maintenance of the undergrowth in and around the forestry trees.

Looking at the policies in place and deliberate lack of maintenance, the only conclusion we can reasonably gain from these actions and policies is that the Council wants small villages like Wingello to burn.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Fires Near Me and Local Information

The app "Fires Near Me" was useful, but the sheer number of fires and hence the number of people trying to access the app overloaded the resources and meant delays in information. Even so, the ability to determine the broad location of fires was very helpful and allowed us to monitor our situation in relation to the various fires near us.

Getting specific local information was more difficult as our local brigades are all volunteers and do not have the resources to be on line regularly. This meant many were tuning into the fire radio scanners and trying to puzzle what was happening from the often technical or specific messages.

Home Defence

The fire brigade did a glorious effort to save Wingello. But there were also many villagers who stayed to fight and defended not only their homes but their neighbour's homes too. It would be great if there were more resources for the "Home Defence" people. They don't need the same level of training as the fire fighters who charge into the most dangerous of fires with all the

appropriate gear and training. Some more basic fire and ember attack training with access to appropriate equipment could have made these Home Defence volunteers safer and more effective. I am not suggesting gear supplied by anyone, but the information where appropriate equipment and personal protective gear can be purchased would be most beneficial.

Wingecarribee Shire Council

We have about 200 burnt Pine trees in the main part of the village. Burnt Pine trees are dead pine trees. Despite many discussions and promises, these dead trees remain in place 3 months after the fire. As they begin to rot over the next few months they will start falling in strong winds and homes and people will be in danger. The money provided by the State Government has been allocated in many ways, but little actually spent for those directly affected by the fires in Wingello and Balmoral, the two villages hardest hit by the fires. And we see those deadly trees every day knowing whilst we are forbidden from touching them, the council won't do anything until they get the funding from someone else. "We have no money" is the often repeated claim by a council that wastes millions on bypasses and has "emergency" meetings to remove perfectly good trees in Bowral for a bypass few actually want.

Financial and Other Support

We have been greatly supported by the St Vincent De Paul Society, Red Cross, the Lions Club and even the Australian government for direct financial support. Many other organisations, large and small, have stepped in and provided a variety of support both material and with helping hands. And the excellent support by so many to help a fire affected town by visiting and buying goods and services has helped both the village and all those that are financially affected. Much of this has had to be deferred until the Corona Virus restrictions are eased, but the rebuilding was moving ahead very positively until March.

1.4 Any other matters

I would like to propose a number of initiatives to help Wingello and other villages better prepare for future bush fires. None of these requires more money, just a willingness of the Council to consider the lives of those in our villages.

1. Back yard burning in the village

The villagers of Wingello had been conducting back yard burning on our smaller properties in the village for many years with no issues. We are not a suburban style place like Bowral, Mittagong or Moss Vale. We have many trees and bushes which create a lot of debris which need to be removed. The fortnightly green bins are insufficient for the waste generated by our bush village.

2. Allow clearing of fallen branches on roadside verges

The majority of the village uses wood fire heating in Winter. In the past we used to clear up fallen branches and twigs for use in our fires. This not only cleared up the ever growing kindling between the trees, but kept our homes warm in Winter. The claim that the ban (or only allowed with a permit) is for our safety is offset by the impact of a raging bushfire racing into the village.

3. Limit the council ban on removing trees to those the council has planted

If the council does not take responsibility for a tree, it should have no say in the tree's staying or going. Many trees here are planted by the resident. Why can't the resident then remove it and replace it with a new one if he wishes? Responding to the

council's guidelines, a home owner is best to have NO trees, because planting one means that a tree that ages and becomes a danger is very difficult to remove as the council arborists make any removal very difficult. We want to live with trees, but we want to do so responsibly and maintain them.

4. Home Defence training

It would be excellent to offer basic fire training for those that do not have the time or ability to join the fire brigade. Often work or family commitments mean locals cannot be part of the fire brigade but they could benefit greatly from some proper training focussed on the defence of their home and those of their neighbours.

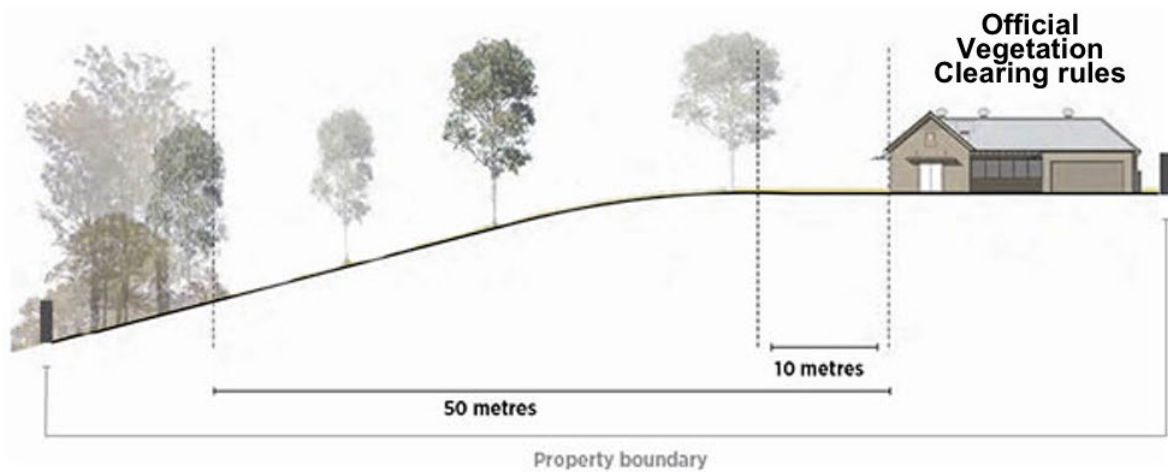
Overall

We were very impressed by our Wingello Rural Fire Brigade for their service before, during and after the fires. We are also thankful for the villagers who stayed to defend their homes and those of their neighbours. Finally we are very grateful for the community of Wingello and their generosity and selflessness exhibited during these fires and the cleanup and rebuilding effort which is still ongoing.

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1050rulegraphic-comparison.png - [Download File](#)
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Can you see where the vegetation clearing rules are not helping?

Locals are forbidden from removing any debris from roadside verges.

