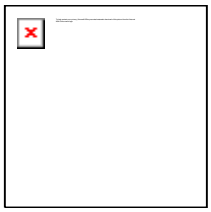

Title	Mr
First name	David
Last name	Darlington
I am making this submission as	Emergency services
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	Thanks for providing this valuable opportunity to make a submission. I am a retired NSW NPWS Regional Manager. I have previously had several appointments as either Section 44 Incident Controller or Deputy Incident Controller. During the 1990s I was a qualified instructor in AAIMS and assisted in this emergency management system being embraced by NSW fire agencies. These days I hold the position of President of Jindabyne Bushfire Fire Brigade. I also hold the position of Team Leader for my local Community Fire Unit which is part of the Jindabyne Bushfire Brigade. In 2018 I assisted the RFS to develop a Community Fire Protection Plan for the rural residential area of which I am a resident covering Lakewood and High Country Estates near Jindabyne. When my local community came under threat of Bushfire in

	January I chaired the liaison meetings which were held between NPWS, our 4 local RF Brigades and the 2 Fire&Rescue Units. Had significant fire impacted our local area we would have been well prepared and well informed.
1.1 Causes and contributing factors	As an RFS volunteer I responded to a number of fires in the Monaro District, in particular in the Shannon's Flat, Peak View, Numeralla and Colinton areas. What struck me was the severity of drought stress and the obvious impact this had on fire behaviour. As a professional fire manager in past years I have worked on many fires throughout widespread areas of NSW, Victoria and ACT but never have I seen living vegetation so extremely stressed and fuels so dry and volatile. It is worth noting that the lighter the fuel loads the dryer was the fuel. Understandably people often perceive that fuel loads are the prime cause of fire behaviour, however what I observed this season was that the quantity of fuel had little influence on how fires behaved. When fire fronts spotted across containment lines we really only had a minute or so to commence suppression action. Any longer and we had little hope of extinguishing spotovers. It was almost as though the ground fuels had been impregnated with petrol. In all my experience I had never seen this situation. In many timbered areas the vegetation was so dry that about 30% of all trees and about 50% of all shrubs appeared dead or dying before they were impacted by fire. What we have witnessed is nature's response to climate change. The soils have been drying out for many years and it will take many years of above average rainfall to return soils to a healthy state again. In regards to the endless debate about fuel loads I would like to share my observations and experiences with you. The example I will give is the western side of Kosciuszko National Park. This year there were a number of fires from Khancoban south to the headwaters of the Murray River. Due to competing demands from other fires most of the burning country in this area received little suppression effort and yet over time these fires largely self extinguished. The fires were burning in areas where fuel loads are naturally high however the soils retained moisture and the vegetation was significantly less drought stressed than many areas. On the days when these fires were expected to take major runs to the SE, in many areas there was relatively little progression. I believe the whole issue of fuel reduction via prescription burning needs a close look at. The combined state totals of areas treated are impressive however the nature of what we experienced this year makes me question our past approach and whether it is relevant for a more fire challenging future. There is no doubt that a 5,000 hectare hazard reduction burn sounds impressive but if wildfire impacts this same area 2 or more years after treatment will it really make a difference ? There is no simple answer to this as every area is different and the structure of native vegetation is very varied. From my observations this summer and thinking back to many previous fires I have been involved with, it is very obvious that we need much more focus on management of fuels in close proximity to built assets. That critical area within 100 metres from an asset really does make the difference on a day of extreme fire behaviour. But the reality is, no fire agency currently has the resources to implement regular fuel reduction programs in asset protection zones. The Human Resources needed to carry out these programs are massive in comparison to the often minimal resources needed to burn vast tracts of forests in remote areas. To give you an example, last autumn I planned and implemented a hazard reduction burn in my local community. The area we burnt was less than 2 hectares however because of the steepness of terrain and close proximity of houses it took more

	than 12 person days to complete this program. To maintain the effectiveness of this fuel reduced area it will most likely be necessary to repeat the exercise in about 4 years. There must be many thousands of strategic areas like this across NSW that require the management of fuels. If we want to give communities the best chance of defending their homes in the future it is these small but strategic areas that need resources allocated to them. How can this be achieved ? It will cost a lot but replacement of assets is also costly. Significant expansion of the Community Fire Unit model is one way. This at least gets asset owners involved. It is also going to require a huge increase in the number of professional fire fighters across RFS, NPWS and Forestry. I would now like to make a few comments on initial attack. Most fires during this season had lightning as their cause. The success of initial attack to keep fires small was compromised this season due to the drought and weather conditions but also the lack of resources for remote area fire fighting. Back in the 1970's the NPWS pioneered the development of remote fire fighting. The techniques have been significantly refined over the last 50 years but the the common elements remain the same, the need for capable, fit and trained fire fighters and adequate helicopters with winches. We need considerably more of each if we are to have any chance of keeping fires small in the future and preventing a reoccurrence of another season with mega fires like we have just seen. My recommendation is that NPWS is resourced to enable remote area fire teams to be established all summer in each of the major fire prone areas, ie Blue Mountains, Upper Hunter, Northern Tablelands, South Coast and Snowy Mountains. A helicopter fitted with a winch would be based with each of these fire teams. I do not believe first response to remote fires should be resourced by the RFS, rather it should be core business of NPWS.
1.2 Preparation and planning	I believe that the current planning work of the fire agencies works quite well. The District Bushfire Management Committee model works well and should be continued. As I have stated above there needs to be a massive increase in resources to enable hazards to be better managed immediately adjacent to assets. This is the best pre-season planning and preparation work work that can give great outcomes
1.3 Response to bushfires	In a season like we have just experienced the response from fire agencies will always attract some criticism. From what I saw I think the response was generally fairly good. The reality was, smoke from almost all directions became a really significant issue for fire responders and the general community. IMTs are always going to struggle when there is just so much fire in the landscape and the fire season has spanned many more months than the norm. Clearly there is a compelling argument for many more professional fire fighters particularly within RFS and NPWS. In particular I would strongly recommend that a greater emphasis is placed on the employment of strategic fire planners. These are people who understand how fire behaves under various conditions and can predict the likely fire paths under extreme weather. There are very few with this capability and we urgently need to enhance this resource. I would also like to touch on the vital role of Divisional Commanders. These positions are field based and have the primary role of implementing the broad fire containment strategies that are developed by the IMT. A good Divisional Commander can successfully implement strategies that have a high risk of failure and can effectively save the day. They need essential skills of leadership and strong fire management experience. The RFS needs to put a much greater emphasis on skill

	development of Divisional Commanders. While for small short duration fires the local Captain or Group Captain may make an ideal Div Com, for large and very complex fires it makes sense to use a professional fire fighter as a Div Com. It is a huge ask to expect a volunteer to fill the Div Com roll on major incidents. A common fire containment strategy entails the use of back burns. This season saw many back burns escape as they were being put in or later on due in part to inadequate mop up. One way to increase the likelihood of back burns being successful is to have better trained fire fighters to lead these tricky operations. There are a lot of lessons that can be learned from successful and unsuccessful back burns this season and clearly this should be viewed as an important opportunity in planning for the future. The equipment that is provided these days is generally very good. I understand that RFS plans to implement a GPS tracking system in each vehicle but this system is yet to be fully rolled out. I saw many examples this year where such a system would have been invaluable for Div Coms and Operations Officers. It is one thing to think you know where your trucks are but the reality is often somewhat different. Such a system should be common to all fire agencies. The system should also be implemented so that portable tracking units can be fitted to plant such as dozers, excavators and water carts.
1.4 Any other matters	How earthmoving plant is deployed at fires needs reviewing. This year I witnessed several areas where the inappropriate use of dozers and excavators resulted in widespread unnecessary tree clearing that actually made the work of fire fighters more difficult. A typical example was the tree pushing that occurred on both sides of the Peak View Road and some minor side roads. I understand in some areas cleared breaks 40 metres wide were pushed through forest for minimal benefit. There are several issues to consider here. Plant is expensive and its deployment needs to be well managed and the work approved and appropriate to the need. Second issue is that the environmental impacts can be huge and post fire restoration very costly. Third issue is when the use of plant actually compromises the ability of fire fighters to contain the fire. Post fire I have seen much costly and unnecessary tree removal taking place on the sides on major roads that were impacted by fire. Clearly there is a need to make areas safe however I have witnessed several areas where the removal of trees is obviously being done for reasons other than to make the area safe. An example is the tree removal that has taken place on the Alpine Way through Kosciuszko National Park from Dead Horse Gap to the area towards Leather Barrel Creek. I understand there are many examples along the Princess Highway along the south coast. Now that we have such a high proportion of the eastern forests burnt in NSW we urgently need to develop strategies to protect these regenerating areas from the impacts of future fires. It is going to be a huge challenge to keep future fires small in these areas. The question of how best to use the ADF needs some serious thought for the future. Clearly they have great potential but the question is what really is their best use.
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