

17th April 2020

Submission to the 2019/20 NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Attention

Dave Owens APM, former Deputy Commissioner of NSW Police, and Professor Mary O’Kane AC, Independent Planning Commission Chair and former NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer

To whom it may concern.

The Clarence Valley LGA is around 10,000 square kilometres and is the southern gateway to the Northern Rivers and the eastern gateway to Australia’s food bowl, the Liverpool Plains.

The ancient Gondwana Heritage Rainforests cocoon the Clarence River Catchment and is also surrounded by five National Parks and multiple State Forests.

The Clarence Valley was officially recorded by the OEM as the worst fire impacted LGA between Port Macquarie and the Tweed Border.

The Clarence Valley recorded the worst agri-food economy impacts (DPI) between Port Macquarie and the Tweed Border.

The Clarence Valley recorded the worst business impacts (NSW Small Business Survey) in Northern NSW and were in the top 5 of the state.

At the time of the summer fires the Clarence Valley had been drought declared for around two years. Annual records also show the Clarence Valley as the highest number of natural disaster declarations in NSW.

At the onset of our fires which raged for six months, many of the creeks and local dams in our region had dried up and the mighty Clarence River had actually stopped flowing.

I make this submission on behalf of myself, as an elected Clarence Valley Councillor, who was elected to her first term of office in September 2016. (I do not speak for any other elected Councillor or Clarence Valley Council staff).

This is my first emergency incident as an elected councillor. However, this would be around my 50th emergency incident I have covered over 25 years as a media professional who has lived and worked in the Clarence Valley.

There are many personal reasons why I am making this submission, and none are greater than being the voice for my community and for those people and villages who were directly impacted by these devastating fires.

As an elected councillor I am directly responsible for my own learning. I note the information folder given to me when I was elected to council made no mention of council’s roles and procedures or chain of command or plans during an emergency.

It was only when I had a conversation with the OEM I discovered a range of Emergency Management Plans existed from local through to state and federal level and all were connected.

These are the 12 plans I discovered and have now read.

1) **COMMONWEALTH DISASTER PLAN (COMDISPLAN) 2017** is the AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DISASTER RESPONSE PLAN.

COMDISPLAN is the plan for the provision of Australian Government non-financial assistance to Australian states and territories in an emergency or disaster.

The Minister with responsibility for emergency management must authorise approval for the provision of Australian Government non- financial assistance.

COMDISPLAN 2014 was endorsed by Director General Emergency Management Australia (DGEMA) and approved by the Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department on 12 January 2014. Director General Emergency Management Australia. AMENDMENTS - Recommendations for amendments or suggestions for improvement may be forwarded to: Director General, Emergency Management Australia Department of Home Affairs PO Box 25 Belconnen ACT 2616

2) **AUSTRALIA DISASTER** Resilience Handbook Collection - Australian Emergency Management Arrangements (2019)

3) **AUSTRALIAN DISASTER PREPAREDNESS FRAMEWORK** A guideline to develop the capabilities required to manage severe to catastrophic disasters - Oct 2018

4) **NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DISASTER RESILIENCE** - Building the resilience of our nation to disasters, National Emergency Management Committee.

5) **NSW GOVERNMENT MINISTER** for Police & Emergency Management - Emergency Risk Management Through The Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework - A Guideline for Local Government & Emergency Managers

6) **NSW GOVERNMENT MINISTER** for Police & Emergency Management - Disaster Assistance Guidelines

7) **NSW DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE** Office of Emergency Management - Emergency Management Committee Information Guide

8) **NSW STATE GOVERNMENT** State Bush Fire Plan - A Sub Plan of the State Emergency Management Plan - Endorsed by the State Emergency Management Committee December 2017

9) **NSW RURAL RFS** Bush Fire Management Plans (All LGA's)

10) **NSW NORTH COAST** Regional -Emergency Management Plan

11) **CLARENCE VALLEY BUSH FIRE** Management Committee Bush Fire Risk Management Plan

12) **CLARELANCE VALLEY LOCAL** Emergency Management Plan October 2015

So it came as a mighty big surprise for me to see so many agencies from local through to federal government running around not knowing what to do, who had the chain of command, what resources were available and what plans they should be referring to.

Some of the issues raised with me during the fires from our community:

- Major logistical and communication errors cost lives, landscape and property.
- Local Government Councils were slow to act during an unfolding emergency
- Local RFS and out of town RFS were argumentative due to lack of knowledge and resources in the region
- No internet or mobile connectivity.
- Water was taken from dams without approval from land holders and was not followed up with any paperwork.
- State Forest Corp overruled local RFS and using up local resources.
- Lack of appropriate Evacuation Centres with basic needs e.g. First Aid Kit and toilets
- Lack of knowledge of where to put livestock in an Evacuation Centre
- Clarence Valley Council not responsive After Hours
- Great confusion around what support council could offer to community
- Slow reaction from Clarence Valley Council around knowledge of waste removal
- Uninformed Clarence Valley Council staff not knowing their region
- RFS Chain of Command crossing from one LGA to another created major issues and knowledge gaps
- Lack of reassurance about the unfolding emergency from civic leaders was disturbing
- Local and State agencies assuming everyone is connected to the internet when just under 25% of residents in the Clarence Valley are not.
- Food / meals not arriving to firefighters on the front line
- Food / meals arriving to firefighters on the front line had spoiled
- Lack of aerial internet boosters for isolated communities
- No response to the cremation of the environment.
- No response to the suffering of injured wildlife.
- Community were fearful of reporting to council for fear of retribution
- Community were fearful of reporting to RFS for fear of retribution.
- Business community impacted by clients not paying their accounts.
- Farmers were having to defend their properties because of fires that had started in National Parks.
- There has been a call for cultural burning practices to be implemented.

In my role as an elected councillor, I would have liked and needed:

- Updates and briefing from the General Manager so that I was kept informed
- Daily briefings about the fires so that when I was asked, I could respond adequately
- I would have liked to have been invited to attend workshops with our community
- Council should have held community briefings to allay their anxiety and fears

What I think needs to happen:

- Immediate review of The Clarence Valley Fire Management and Emergency Management Plans
- Create, develop and train local community, rapid response teams
- Localise Blaze Aid and replicate model for community aid, business, aid landscape aid and wildlife aid.
- Provide assets and infrastructure for the local rapid response teams

Briefly

Clarence Valley agri-food economy pre fire position July 2019:

- 2,230 registered farms
- \$3.5 million CVC annual rates
- 990 registered primary producers
- \$493. million annual GRP
- 1 in 4 businesses is a primary producer
- 3,821 employed in agri-food economy
- 65 commodities
- \$333. million annual exports
- \$57.5 million annual local wages

Clarence Valley agri-food economy impacts post fire 2019/20 season (DPI)

- Total Value damage = \$163.37 million
- 329 livestock lost = \$340,900
- 14,300km fencing = \$142.96 million
- \$1.1 million of infrastructure damage, sheds, pipes, machinery
- 99,114ha of pasture damaged = \$9.91 million
- 1608 holdings impacted
- \$4570 worth of stored fodder lost
- 3,100 ha of private forestry plantations (softwood and hardwood) damaged

Clarence Valley fire impacts from July 2019:

- Two deceased persons
- 1.3 million acres hectares, national parks, state forests and farmlands burned
- Biodiversity of two overlapping eco systems across 5 national parks and state forests cremated.
- 673 homes lost, 128 homes damaged
- 450 lost and damaged outbuildings which include barns, sheds and garages.
- Over 300 displaced people

A Farmers and Primary Producers Fire Recovery Meeting was held in Grafton District Service Club on Friday 31st January 2020

41 people attended including Jason Thompson (Federal MP Kevin Hogan), State MP Chris Gulaptis, CVC Mayor Jim Simmons, CVC Director Planning & Environment Des Schroeder (CVC GM Ashley Lyndsay).

Special Guest Wendy Pannach to talk about burnt fences and state forest.

4 white boards available for attendees to write their IMMEDIATE NEEDS, ISSUES, SOLUTIONS.

The participants own words.

IMMEDIATE NEEDS

- less red tape for grants and loans
- face to face support to apply for grants and loans
- wider containment lines 60-100 metres between farm and forests
- help with fencing between Forestry and private landowners
- put cattle back in national parks
- National Park fences need to be replaced
- fence National Park boundaries to hold cattle
- containment lines that were put in to be fixed with rollovers and proper drainage, so it doesn't run off into dams
- stop fining farmers for straying stock
- native grass seed to be aerial dropped in forest country
- easier approval from National Parks, Forestry and Councils for bee sites that are not inaccessible especially ones that are not burnt
- make grants available for primary producers who have off farm income who have had to go back to mainstream work because of the drought and fires
- fund grants for businesses who are the secondary impact of fires and drought
- funding and support for small farmers
- regenerate areas that are susceptible to soil erosion already extremely intense
- reduce the fuel loads as fire doesn't burn without fuel
- support for primary producers that have off farm income which is most traditional farming families
- change definition of 'asset' protection – not only houses are assets, pastures are to
- water deliveries
- grant assistance – qualifications too limited
- distribute round posts/logs from side of road to farmers who have lost fencing
- review standards of evacuation centres and livestock holding pens

ISSUES

- need fencing ASAP so I can farm
- State Forestry not sharing costs of fencing
- RFS trucks sitting for hours not allowed to assist if it is not affecting structures
- State Government agencies fining and enforcing stock infringements eg LLS, NPWS, Clarence Environment Centre
- ban the non-burning policy
- Armidale Road closed for so long
- current restrictions are being ignored
- before the fires Armidale Road is not fit for the traffic that uses it
- lack of maintenance on fire trails and forestry tracks
- road closures for long periods preventing fodder able to be brought in or cattle out

- clean up bee diseases – get easier approval from councils and other agencies to operate one's business
- waste of money paying staff to man 24-hour roadblocks on the Gwydir Highway
- National Parks need to repair fences and containment tracks on private property
- Council allowing illegal dwellings, buildings where they should never be allowed
- NPWS not maintaining their parks
- RFS protocols
- had to sell stock for under market value at last sales of the year
- water points in state forests for fire control
- make it easier to clear trees on properties
- wider containment lines at NSW and state forests
- Council needs to maintain verges of vegetation
- NPWS need holding to account
- more feed on farm
- land needs people
- co-operative or other for stock feed distribution
- no local knowledge used for fighting fires
- visiting fire fighters are strangers they don't know the area
- fire fighters unable to communicate between each other while on the front
- fire fighters not being fed while on the fire front
- RFS catering units sending out meals but meals are returned
- a lot of wasted resources put into back burns containment lines ect in large areas where there were no houses or infrastructure to protect
- RFS run from Sydney – no local knowledge
- State Gov agencies implementing wrong fire regimes use traditional fire burning
- waste of RFS resources to protect 'wrong' land
- devastation and destruction of bushland and floral resources for beekeeping
- limited production to meet operation costs
- timber mills burnt out no timber production for equipment production
- no 1st Aide kit in the Grafton evacuation centre
- RFS captain protecting drug crops
- unco-ordinated responses

SOLUTIONS – FIRE

- burn off
- put cattle back in National Parks
- more burning off on the roadside and weeds
- hand the right to burn off back to landholders as they couldn't make a bigger mess than council, National Parks, fires or government
- support Aboriginal Cultural burning practice and invite farmers to participate
- clear road verges to help control fires
- fire breaks in National Parks
- give free matches out
- remove red and green tape for property owners in burning off

- use the knowledge scientists have as they have done many trials in many different environments to inform the National Fire Plan
- allow landowners to maintain their own land with controlled burns
- access indigenous knowledge and organise training
- assessment through perhaps RFS on property hazards and appropriate remedies
- training for local community groups so they can build a response team and know what resources neighbours have
- reduce fuel through regular cool burns every couple of years
- weed and lantana management in forests
- prevention – more soil carbon to keep soils cooler
- National Parks funding to keep the fire trails clear
- Traditional indigenous burns
- RFS recruitment for younger volunteers
- dams in National Parks instead of using private property dams for fire fighting
- put more dams on private property to be used for firefighting in National Parks
- fire brakes and back burns should be maintained on private property, National Parks and State Forest.
- Supply farmers with water tankers and fire hoses
- Open access to National Parks and crown lands for apiary activities

In closing

The Prime Minister recently said, “My priority is to keep Australians safe and to do that, we need to learn from the Black Summer bushfires how nationally we can work better with the states and territories to better protect and equip Australians for living in hotter, drier and longer summers”.

The Prime Minister should have also included ‘local councils’.

All tiers of government need to be informed about all the existing plans and stop working in their silo’s.

Warmest Regards

CR Debrah Novak
Clarence Valley Council