

Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Dianne

Last name

Williams

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

Your story

Dianne Williams and Brad Hammond,



Our Story.

For the last 20 years we've lived on 120 acres at the northern boundary of Biamanga NP on partially cleared bushland adjoining farmland to the north. Since the Black Saturday 2009 fires in Victoria we have been aware of the fire threat and doing what we could to prepare. There have been a couple of fires near us over the years but the fire in September 2018 across the valley certainly focused us. Our preparations took on an urgency particularly with the heat, winds and drought. Because of our location we knew we were on our own. There is one gravel road in and out so we didn't expect any help.

We had decided to stay and defend after much deliberation. Our house is solid, predominately stone, and we believed defensible.

We had the resources and were, as much as possible, physically and mentally prepared. In addition, the escape routes available in any fire were a far more dangerous option. We told our neighbours and the local RFS captain of our intention.

Our house is set into a north facing ridge that wraps around to the west meaning we are protected from the southerly and south westerly winds. The strong, generally warm, north westerlies hit us hard and it was from this direction we assumed any fire would approach. We prepared the house and surrounds, worked out our fire plan. We had petrol pumps, fire hoses, water available. A sprinkler system we installed, while made of poly it was designed to buy us time to do other stuff, as it's just the 2 of us here. Our house is stone but it has a timber deck and sunroom with banks of windows to the north and east. So the sprinklers were to flood the deck, windows and roof. We had goggles gloves heat shield masks... we felt we were getting ready.

When the fire started in Wadbillaga NP we knew it was going to be a threat.

The morning of the 31st December, we awoke at 4am to an alert on our mobile phones. The fire was at McLeod's Hill to the south west of us. From our bedroom window, fire could also be clearly seen to the north having passed through Cobargo. Checking the Fires Near Me app we saw what looked like 2 fingers stretching to the coast, we were between them.

We enacted our plan. Starting with electric pumps we activated the sprinkler system. The power went off at 5. We had generators to provide backup power. The sun didn't really come up but in the grey light the smoke was so thick you could no longer see where the fire was. So we waited. Using the petrol pumps with the sprinkler system we wet the house down every 30mins or so. The ABC local radio was our only source of information. They were basically just relaying alerts from the RFS which at that stage we had access to, but importantly they became a bush telegraph. People were phoning the ABC with current information, from them we learnt the fire was on the Bermagui Cobargo Rd. I phoned our neighbour to check in, he was fighting fires in his paddocks, so it was close.

The first flames we saw were to the northwest, then on the ridge behind us to the west. It didn't look too intense at that point. There were very few embers, just blackened leaves falling.

While the sprinklers were wetting down the house I was using a fire hose to wet down the surrounding garden. Brad was starting the pump at the tank 20 m in front of the house. A couple of small spotfires had started in the garden near the back door, I was hosing them when to the south east of us high above the ridge behind us a towering column of intense black and red smoke appeared and grew. Brad ran up shouting to get inside. He said later he felt the ground shaking. I dropped the hose and got inside.

What happened next was surreal. It was as if the air was burning. Nothing was alight then everything was. It was as if a massive fireball had just dropped on us. Brad stayed downstairs checking, I went upstairs checking windows roof cavities. I stood at the window looking out at an orange hurricane and the sprinklers were still going! I was waiting for the windows to explode. Then the sprinklers stopped. That meant the header tank was gone... burned.

It lasted maybe 15-20 minutes. All around us was burning, I imagined our ducks and chooks had perished. At first it was impossible to go outside but a few minutes later, with masks and heat shields we were able to get outside again to extinguish the spot fires.

The house and immediate surrounds had survived, including miraculously the duck and hen houses. All around us was black and silent, except for the crash of trees falling. The falling trees carried on continuously throughout the night.

The fire had hit us from what we thought was the least likely direction, the south east.

We were able to save our house through preparation , luck and that we stayed to defend.
 We had lost our header tank and external water infrastructure, our gardens and a small shed.
 Our drinking water was tainted by the ash.
 A week after the fire 2 Fire and Rescue officers came up to do an Impact Assessment, they were very surprised and happy to find someone here. We were very pleased to see them, we were beginning to feel very isolated.
 We didn't expect the RFS and we didn't see them until a truck from Mullimbimby appeared on our place the second week of January to clear a fallen tree. This was serendipitous as we had just noticed that day a whisp of smoke to the west of our neighbour's property. We were expecting another hot, windy day soon so they were able to check it out and deal with it.
 We relied so much on the ABC.
 We had no power for 11 days. Which also meant no running water.
 No internet and intermittent mobile.
 We were lucky.
 Friends and neighbours lost everything.
 As a footnote, 3 weeks after the fire we had a storm. 27mm in 15 minutes. While rain is always welcome, because the fire had burnt all the grass this downpour washed all the topsoil, ash and debris down the hills into our garden and driveway, into the gullies, into our dam. It was devastating, on top of everything else we now had a driveway, garden and dam filled with mud.

Now, the fires are out, COVID 19 has taken over the news bulletins and all our lives. It feels a lot like the caravan has moved on and the fires and smoke will be forgotten until next summer when potentially we will go through it all over again...

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Causes
 There hadn't been a bushfire through here since the 70s
 We were in drought. The bush was so dry, we had started losing large, established gum trees in the gullies around the property through lack of water.
 My concern is that as climate change intensifies, the opportunities for the required hazard reduction burns will be reduced further. In fact I'm not convinced any more the conventional hazard reduction technique possible now due the reduced burn windows available.
 From my limited understanding of cultural burning they are small, cool and almost opportunistic, you burn when the ecosystem is ready and time is right. Local Indigenous communities could drive this with the support of landholders, local government, the RFS and National Parks. It must be guaranteed funding for an ongoing long term program of cultural burning.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Preparation
 The land around us since the burn is, in some parts regenerating. Other areas where the fire burnt very hot are dead. What we have now is clear but more manageable country. The big trees are coming back as is the grass (weeds also unfortunately). We want to look after our property but in such a way to reduce the fire threat in the future.
 Right now we are preparing for the next fire season. Cutting, burning the trees that we lost, replanting with fire retardant

plants, removing plants that are a possible threat in the future. It is a massive task for 2 people and unfortunately the help from volunteer organisations and friends that was promised dried up with the Covid-19 outbreak.

Sadly, I think fires like this are going to be much more intense and more frequent with the effects of climate change. I strongly believe the knowledge of Indigenous Australians around the use of fire in looking after the land is essential to preventing wild fires in the future.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Response

There was definitely frustration with the RFS Fires Near Me app not being updated regularly. When you can't see for the smoke, but you know the fire is still burning that app is your only source of information. Sometimes the fire image on the map would disappear. The RFS needs a dedicated, well resourced, IT component to maintain and update the app constantly, the volunteers can't be expected to do it, but someone has to.

The importance of ABC emergency broadcasts can't be overestimated. Without the radio we would have been completely isolated. The ABC South East team were calm, professional and reassuring. They were a conduit for getting information into and out of the firegrounds.

The government needs to start funding the ABC adequately, generously in fact.

When I was a child my local town had a fire siren. In small regional towns we believe a siren to alert people to an impending emergency could be useful. Not everyone has a mobile phone or internet. Reception can also be a problem. We had slept through the 2 messages left on our landline, only discovering them days later.

1.4 Any other matters

In summary

We believe, in most instances a well prepared property can be defended or at the very least provide shelter during a fire. Indigenous Cultural Burning practices would not only help mitigate the threat of wildfires in the future but also restore the bush to a sustainable environment for native plants, wildlife and people.

A well-funded ABC providing emergency broadcasts is critical, without the ABC we would have been completely isolated.

Fire sirens in small towns maybe useful as phone alerts are not always effective.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

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