

# Dr Joe McGirr MP

Independent Member for Wagga Wagga



JM1947

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Mr Dave Owens APM & Professor May O'Kane AC  
Joint Chairs  
NSW Government Bushfire Inquiry

Email: [inquiries@bushfireinquiry.nsw.gov.au](mailto:inquiries@bushfireinquiry.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Mr Owens and Professor O'Kane

Please find enclosed my submission to the NSW Government Bushfire Inquiry.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback about the bushfires that burnt through the Wagga Wagga electorate in January this year.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Joe McGirr'.

Dr Joe McGirr, MP  
**Member for Wagga Wagga**

Attachment

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## Submission to NSW Bushfire Enquiry

## Foreword

From the time the bushfire crisis impacted the Snowy Valleys Council area in January 2020 and for the months following, I was on the ground, speaking with affected residents, services, government representatives, ministers and organisations.

Since then, I have maintained contact with services and have continued to receive feedback from members of the community about the bushfires.

I believe a significant underlying factor in the NSW bushfire crisis was climate change, which over the years has resulted in higher-than-average temperatures and longer summer periods. With that has come a reduced time for fuel reduction through controlled burning, and a prolonged decrease in rainfall across the region.

Outside of this, I am concerned there were a number of issues that may have contributed to the devastation we saw in the bushfires across the Snowy Valleys Council and other adjoining areas.

These included: A build-up of fuel for fire, due to the limited effort and capacity to reduce weeds, especially blackberry; Reduced fire mitigation and observation practices in Forestry and National Parks; And poor communication between official firefighters and spontaneous volunteers who chose to stay in the red zone to protect their homes and communities.

Having taken a number of concerns into consideration, following my extensive touring of the region, I believe there are opportunities to improve our response and recovery operations in the future.

These include: Improved training and recruitment of volunteers and staff for recovery centres; Better coordination of volunteers and donations; A focus on communications for localised recovery efforts and separate to the emergency broadcasts; And improved access and support for spontaneous volunteers.

The suggestions here should not be taken as ingratitude or lack of appreciation and I wish to acknowledge the work of the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), other emergency response agencies and volunteers that saved many lives.

Without their coordinated efforts, the situation could have been much worse. I know many residents across my electorate are immensely grateful.

Nevertheless the concerns I raise in this submission reflect many of the views of those who were affected and for that reason, I believe they deserve consideration.

## Introduction

A lightning strike on December 28, 2020 sparked a blaze that reduced almost half of the Snowy Valleys Local Government Area to ash. This does not include the rural areas across the Wagga Wagga City Council that were also burned by the Dunns Road Fire.

More than 400,000 hectares of forests, parks, farmland, orchards, plantation and infrastructure were destroyed in the 50-day-long bushfire.

Included in the losses were 185 homes, 590 outbuildings and 44 facilities, with many more reported as damaged.

Kilometres of fencing and innumerable stock losses added to the impact across the agriculture sector, with the destruction of more than 30 percent of softwoods plantations and close to one-third of orchards at Batlow, delivering a significant blow to local industry and the economy.

These numbers represent tragic losses for communities across the Wagga Wagga electorate, including those at and near Laurel Hill, Green Hills, Yaven Creek, Wondalga, Adelong, Talbingo, Batlow, Oberne Creek, Kunama, Gilmore Valley

This submission has been set out in reference to the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery phases of the emergency management disaster cycle.

Comments and suggestions listed in subsequent sections are my own and are based on the events I witnessed first-hand and the shared stories of residents.

## Phase 1: Prevention

One of the key issues raised by the community, following the Dunns Road Fire event, was the need to take stronger action to protect property and prevent fires in the future.

This would involve improved service coordination and accountability with regards to fuel reduction.

### Services Accountabilities and Coordination

The Tumut Community Association (TCA) met on November 29, 2019, to discuss the impending fire season.

Among the topics discussed was a request for a green buffer zone or pine exclusion zone around Tumut, similar to those recommended in the 2003 report of the Canberra Bushfire. In addition, the community wanted to hear about proposed hazard mitigation strategies being implemented for their protection. The TCA noted this request had previously been raised in June as 'a crucial issue'.

Following the November meeting, the secretary of the TCA, Christine Webb, said the build up of the environment around the Snowy Valleys towns, including Batlow, Adelong and Tumut, had been noted as a high-risk concern. However, Ms Webb said the reaction from National Parks had been "apathetic", with organisations including Snowy Valleys Council and Crown Lands appearing to engage in a tug-of-war over which agency was accountable for funding and mitigation works.

Farmer and SVC councillor Geoff Pritchard said most fires would likely come from the west of Tumut, and if that was the case, the town would be protected by the golf course.

However, he said if a fire was to start in NSW National Parks or crown land at the Bush Commons to the south, there was nothing to stop it from spreading and there would be no opportunity to back burn, due to insufficient fire trail maintenance.

On December 21, 2020, a bushfire ignited and burned out of control in the north-western part of the Commons. As a result, residents on the southern outskirts of Tumut were advised to follow their bushfire survival plans. While this fire was fortunately contained, I am concerned a lack of mitigation practices contributed to this fire's spread.

I believe this case illustrates the confusion and lack of accountability that currently exists in relations to fire prevention.

### Fuel Reduction

There has been a clear push to increase fuel reduction activities to prevent and mitigate the impact of future fires and it is my view the heavy reliance on volunteer services for this should be reviewed.

I believe there should be consideration given to introducing a stand-alone fire mitigation agency, not connected to the RFS.

This point comes after members and residents identified a constant tension over the service's funding allocations, with the RFS needing to provide funds for its core service as well as fire mitigation activities.

Concerns were consistently raised with me regarding the alleged reduction in Forestry and National Parks personnel, leading to a decrease in the amount of hazzard reduction services across state-owned lands.

Landowners and fire-impacted residents commented on the marked reduction in fire mitigation staff in the past decades, adding to a strong belief that fuel loads and fire protection were not addressed.

Almost every farmer, RFS volunteer and business representative I have spoken to since the Dunns Road Fire broke out said there needed to be fuel reduction through burning and-or grazing in National Parks, forests and road corridors.

I refer to a correspondence I received on February 20, 2020:

*I recently attended a field day where the use of Indigenous youth in Forestry Land Management Teams was highlighted. This initiative has tremendous benefits for our community both in improved land management and employing Indigenous youth.*

The opportunity to embrace cultural burning practices was also raised on a number of occasions.

A Tumut resident wrote to me on February 13, 2020 and said:

*I would like to remind you of the feasible alternative to burning, in the control of unwanted vegetation in State and National Forests and parks ... controlled grazing.*

*Controlled grazing is made easier today with portable yards, loading ramps and extremely portable and efficient solar powered electric fences.*

*[It] is safer, less costly, does not cause carbon emissions and does not hurt the ground dwelling animals such as echidnas, which I have personally seen dead and dying after a controlled torch-off. Grazing animals in a timbered country does no more harm to native plants and grasses than is presently done by kangaroos, deer and horses etc.*

At the very least, fuel reduction and fire mitigation must have a greater focus in the future.

## Phase 2: Preparedness

There were two areas in relation to preparedness I wish to comment on: communication and resourcing.

### Community Meetings and Evacuations

Regular community meetings were effective in distributing bushfire-related information to residents of rural townships across the Snowy Valleys.

For the most part, residents were prepared to either leave their homes or stay to defend themselves and their properties, if and when a fire threatened. The media personnel of the RFS should be particularly commended for their work, particularly in their attendance at meetings and willingness to engage with the many anxious and distressed residents.

However, for those who chose to stay, many complained about a lack of communication or coordination between themselves and official services. This was a particular concern when attempting to coordinate their own responses to the bushfire threat.

### RFS and Emergency Service Resourcing

After speaking with several Rural Fire Service volunteers between December and February, it became clear that resources and capabilities were severely lacking.

Firstly, I was told there was not enough personal protective equipment (PPE) or personal protective clothing (PPC) available for additional distribution among volunteers.

In addition to this, many of the service's vehicle fleet, based in rural brigades, appeared to be not fit for task and lacked protective additions like roll bars and overrun sprinklers.

Many trucks were also sporting Macgyver-style fixes to pumps, hoses, lights and other fittings. As a result, crews were entering one-way backroads and fire trails without the means for self-protection if a fire flashed-over and overran vehicles.

The age and capability of some vehicles in the RFS fleet was another factor, adding to a push for urgent upgrades.

There were also concerns the extent of the fire crisis across the state left many regions depleted of the necessary resources to protect their designated areas.

Volunteers should have access to the best equipment possible.

## Phase 3: Response

Subsequent sections have been set out to address the immediate emergency response to the Dunns Road Fire with specific reference to the firefighting efforts and evacuation centre management.

### Firefighting efforts

#### **Initial response**

A number of constituents have raised concerns about whether the Dunns Road Fire could have been stopped sooner.

In particular, it has come to my attention that there was no surveillance team in place to identify and respond to a fire in that area. As a result, the flames had already taken hold before a crew could attend the site.

This event was compared to last year, when a surveillance team was able to quickly control and extinguish a fire that started in much the same area. There is a concern that team was not in place this year.

As previously mentioned, it appeared that the limited fuel reduction or clearing of environmental waste, including areas with fire breaks, was insufficient in mitigating the risk of fire.

Given this fire grew to more than 330,000 hectares before it joined the megafire, we need to be certain there was no way it could have been brought under control sooner.

I therefore believe any investigation into the Dunn's Road Fire should include a review of the immediate response and coordination.

#### **Service members and non-service volunteers**

There appeared to be a communication gap between the RFS volunteers, paid staff, other emergency services members and non-service volunteers who stayed to fight the fires too.

As the Dunns Road Fire forged a path around Batlow on January 4, 2020, it was the work of firefighters and community members who chose to stay despite advice, that kept the flames from passing through the town.

Firefighters also protected Talbingo, during a fire storm that same day and in Adelong, it was an aviation dump of fire retardant that kept flames from sweeping through the small town.

While I cannot praise emergency services personnel enough, there were additional teams of non-RFS volunteers who stayed and worked together to protect farms when RFS crews were instructed to leave.



For example, in the Kunama valley, near Batlow, a team of 35 residents coordinated their own efforts with mobile phones, protecting significant areas of farmland and a large number of buildings. It was noted there was almost no communication between them and the Fire Control Centre.

I also understand RFS crews they met treated them with disdain, even after the fire had passed through.

While I accept the RFS cannot be held responsible for non-members, we should not ignore the role they played in saving their communities. A better means of communication with them should be developed and I suggest there be some recognition for their contribution during this event. This might include funding for farmers to obtain fire fighting equipment or to engage in training opportunities.

### **Resourcing and support**

Generally speaking, I have heard from numerous sources that volunteer firefighters did not have the support they needed out in the field.

For example, care packages and emergency supplies sent to communities were diminished by the time crews finished a day's shift.

Some volunteers ended up purchasing their own respirators and P2 face masks. In one incident at Talbingo, a volunteer's face was burned when his P2 mask caught alight during a sudden fire storm. These resources were clearly insufficient and inefficient.

Many constituents were very grateful for the support of RFS crews and other volunteers from outside the region. There was concern that some of these crews appeared to struggle with the unfamiliar area.

### **Communication**

According to another constituent, who wrote in to my office, radio communications between interstate-driven trucks were incompatible. As a result, crews were either borrowing local brigade's portable radios - which were scarce due to costing close to \$4000 each - or communicating using their own mobile phones in rural and remote areas of the electorate.

In relation to the Fire Control Centre, I was told there were situations where crews were sent to join a task force, with the commander on-site being unaware the team had joined the task force.

### **Evacuation centres and support services**

The management of evacuation centres across the Snowy Valleys and Wagga Wagga City Council areas was well coordinated for the most part. However, there were several areas where I believe improvements could be made.

### **Staffing**

The evacuation centre in Wagga Wagga was staffed by government workers and volunteers,

all of whom had completed disaster response training. However, it seemed to face significant challenges maintaining adequate staff numbers and I am concerned it could not have functioned for a prolonged period.

Many people put up their hand to assist, but were turned away because they had not completed the training. This included a RAAF chaplain.

There is therefore a need to ensure adequate staffing is available for disasters of longer duration.

I would suggest an active campaign of recruitment and the additional training of staff and volunteers be undertaken for evacuation centres. This would include a program of regular updates and disaster exercise training.

I believe there should be an arm of the emergency response that deals specifically with harnessing the skills and enthusiasm of untrained volunteers, as well as community donations. An emphasis on non-emergency communication would also be pertinent.

### **Communication**

Evacuees were desperate for information about their homes and communities, but were struggling to find any updates. This clearly added to their emotional strain and stress.

While the RFS and the ABC did a marvellous job in regards to information about the immediate fire threats, there was a real gap in communication among evacuees and communities trying to assist in evacuation centres. Local community radio stations were unable to access information that they could distribute to their communities.

To add to this, information sharing between relevant agencies and my electorate office was at times lacking, particularly during the early stages of the bushfires taking hold of my electorate.

This was a cause of much frustration, with constituents contacting my office with expectations their local Member of Parliament would be able to answer their questions and help them with their concerns. Yet my staff often relied on social media to find out what the government was announcing and doing across the electorate. For example, my office found out the Wagga Wagga Evacuation Centre was closed when an evacuee rang my office. My staff later saw a post on Facebook, not from the government or government agency.

Another item of concern was the lack of electricity in rural and regional areas, impacted by the bushfires, leaving residents without basic telephone and internet services.

Telstra's capacity to respond to widespread issues and its lack of contingency plans were also identified as issues. For example, the shutdown of the Telecom facility at Tumut, following a rogue act of violence before Christmas, left the town without service for three days. This situation was magnified in the bushfire crisis.

There must be a continuity plan for telecommunications for rural and remote communities, in the event of a future disaster.

### **Pets**

An unrecognised need arose in relation to pets and the need to accommodate a large number of pets in severe heat. Almost every evacuee arrived with at least one pet. And for many, their pets were an important part of how they coped.

Thankfully, there were a large number of volunteers who were able to assist and did not require disaster training. All those involved did a marvellous job.

However, this area should be examined in the future to ensure the relevant agency has the capacity to meet future demand and has timely access to volunteers.

### **Donated goods**

Outside the evacuation centres, it seemed there were few processes or procedures in place to manage the overwhelming amount of money and goods donated. This came despite not-for-profits and agencies knowing about the impending fire season for some time beforehand.

There was no formalised means to give, accept or distribute gifts for bushfire-impacted residents, which meant the onus was on donors to find a charity or create one. Disappointingly, those who were interested in helping and providing items like baked goods and clothing were turned away.

In addition to the need to harness non-trained volunteers, as previously mentioned, there should also be a dedicated emergency response centre launched with the capacity to coordinate those volunteers and donations. Such an agency might also improve communication between recovery centres and communities.

## Phase 4: Recovery

The key to recovery is making sure communities can get back to their day-to-day lives quickly, with as minimal disruption as possible. I believe this process could have been better coordinated and promptly delivered.

### Returning Home

It took days after the Dunns Road Fire impacted Batlow, Talbingo and Adelong, before the 90 percent of residents who had fled their homes were able to return and none of them knew if they would even have a home in which to return.

Many farmers and residents who stayed to save farms and property, complained bitterly to me of the difficulties they had returning. Those desperate to get home to provide food and water to their animals, but were denied access. This was distressing to say the least.

Police road blocks were also difficult to negotiate. I understand the safety considerations as the recent fires had made many trees unstable. However, for residents who remained with their homes and their families, it should have been possible to have a system that allowed access.

### Clean-up

The coordinated clean up efforts are set to allow for a structured safe approach to the various hazardous tasks and will save costs for those affected.

However it is critical that clean up be completed in a timely fashion.

Delays, like those experienced across the Snowy Valleys Council area, add to the stress and trauma of affected residents, as they are constantly reminded of the chaos that tore their lives apart.

### Communication

Ongoing communication has been very much a 'top-down' approach. Well-meaning government and non-government agencies have been issuing information online, when the internet was not available for many days or weeks.

However, an early on-the-ground presence, capable of coordinating the various agencies and providing a ready point of contact was lacking, which would have benefited those immediately experiencing trauma.

There appeared to be an early response from health services to provide mental health support that included visiting homes and properties. This was very much appreciated in many towns.

### Support Services

When residents were finally permitted to re-enter towns and return to their homes, the support services were not ready.

When they did arrive they were poorly coordinated and communication between agencies and communities was inefficient.

To make matters worse families and individuals that were cut off from telecommunications, power and safe access to water and were expected to go online to get updated information.

### Disaster area declaration

On January 15, 2020, it was revealed Oberne community and residents in the surrounding areas, impacted by bushfire, were unable to claim financial assistance because they lived within the Wagga Wagga City Council boundaries.

Unlike its Snowy Valleys neighbour, this local government area was not declared disaster affected, despite communities like Oberne being among the first impacted by the Dunns Road Fire.

The Deputy Premier on January 24, 2020 identified red-tape in the disaster declaration process was the reason for the delays.

It took until February 1, 2020, for an additional 16 local government areas in NSW, including Wagga City, to be recognised as disaster affected, which granted them access to the joint federal and state government recovery funding.

This process was unnecessarily lengthy and traumatic for the bushfire impacted residents.

### Financial Aid

For many directly affected by the fires, the process of obtaining financial aid was difficult and complicated. There was a clear need for early “on-the-ground” assistance to help those affected.

In our region, many primary producers, who were either small or starting their enterprises, could not access assistance due to the off-farm income rules. This denied residents the much needed financial assistance, which would have also benefited their broader communities, by extension.

The government now appears to be more understanding of the situation and is trying to assess funding assistance opportunities on a case-by-case basis and there are also processes for ensuring that people do not fall through the cracks, which is good. However, the ability for some smaller producers to access much-needed support remains a major issue.

## Conclusion

There is much about the response and recovery to the Dunns Road Bushfire disaster we can be proud of. Lives were undoubtedly saved and there are properties and infrastructure still standing. Evacuees were cared for and supported and the government acted quickly to start recovery efforts.

However there are a number of challenges we can learn from and improve for the future.

I believe better preparedness and planning could have assisted firefighters in controlling the Dunns Road Fire.

Better coordinated and more widespread hazard reduction and mitigation strategies could have given those first-responders a better chance of accessing fires and there would have been less fuel on the ground to burn and increase their spread.

The warnings were there and local residents had added their voices to calls for action before the fire season, but it appeared as though very little was done to minimise the fuel load across the later affected lands.

In addition, I believe the resourcing of RFS brigades needs to be reviewed and improved to ensure the safety of its members. Vehicles and firefighting equipment, PPE and PPC need to be appropriately fit-for-task. I question whether volunteers and community-funded brigades should have to buy their own face masks and eyewear to combat future bushfires.

The coordination of non-service firefighters should also be addressed, with a better focus on communications and recognition.

When it comes to the management of evacuation centres and a community's response to disasters, there is much work to be done.

There were many residents and groups with the capacity to assist others in need; to lend a hand, donate goods or provide services. However, they were turned away. This was an opportunity missed and should be better coordinated and lead in the future.

For example, we need to provide opportunities for training, and spontaneous volunteering and recruitment, before a disaster strikes.

After a bushfire event, access to homes needs to be ensured as soon as possible, with necessary support services coordinated, on the ground and ready to go, as soon as residents start returning.

These services - welfare agencies, organisations, government departments and not-for-profits - should be coordinated from the ground-up, as well as the top-down and not solely from the latter. The placement of coordinators in communities, who can bring the

agency personnel together at a local level and facilitate engagement with residents, would provide better communication and coordination at all levels.

Finally, access to funds for primary producers should be reviewed, as many who have been badly affected by the fires have missed out on much-needed funding.

## Recommendations

I therefore make the following recommendations:

1. A bushfire mitigation review be conducted to determine the best way to reduce on-the-ground fuel load, and to identify which agencies should be responsible for that task.
2. Agencies and government bodies consider local knowledge and expertise of RFS members and landholders, to better understand how a fire might behave and how best to minimise its impact.
3. RFS resourcing be reviewed, including distribution of PPE, PPC, as well as the maintenance and-or upgrading of a task-appropriate fleet.
4. The initial response to the Dunns Road Fire be reviewed.
5. The cooperation and coordination of non-service firefighting be reviewed, with consideration given to the recognition of their role in the Dunns Road Fire.
6. Solutions are sought to improve RFS crews' capacity to join forces with interstate agencies.
7. The practices and processes of evacuation centres be amended to ensure they are:
  - a. Staffed appropriately, taking into consideration the opportunity to further train and additionally recruit disaster welfare staff and-or volunteers
  - b. Able to support evacuees over extended operations
  - c. Capable of meeting the demand of not only the evacuees, but also their pets/animals
  - d. Resourced appropriately for sleeping, eating and mass communication.
8. Standard operating procedures for a whole-of-community response to disaster be developed, including:
  - a. a means of harnessing non-trained volunteers in assisting evacuees and disaster-affected residents
  - b. a dedicated emergency response centre to coordinate volunteers
  - c. an official agency to receive, coordinate and distribute donated goods, services and money, with a standardised process clearly communicated.
9. Alternative communication methods be prepared for regional and rural areas, likely to lose telecommunications in a disaster.
10. Local Members of Parliament be included in information sharing during emergencies, to ensure a standardised messaging throughout the disaster.



11. The processes for evacuees returning home be evaluated and amended to:
  - a. Reduce timeframes for safe access to properties
  - b. Make support services accessible sooner, so evacuees have someone to assist with their wellbeing, as soon as they return home and not several days later
  - c. Improve communication regarding return to home plans, clearly outlining where to seek support and assistance, especially for residents returning to areas without telecommunication services for extended periods.
12. The processes for impacted residents to receive necessary funding be simplified, with an emphasis on better communication about the availability of on-the-ground assistance and available support services.