

To: New South Wales Independent Inquiry Into the 2019-2020 Bushfire Season  
From: Maria Byrne and Robert Kelly  
Address: [REDACTED]  
Date: 17 April 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

As a family experiencing the stress of the 2019-2020 Bushfire Season and with many friends and colleagues that lost homes and properties and with many friends in the NSW Rural Fire Service we write of our concerns as to the preparation of NSW for similar crises that will undoubtedly occur due to the unrelenting trajectory we are on due to global climate change.

We are concerned about the lack of appreciation the NSW and Commonwealth Governments as to the gravity of our climate emergency, the lack of preparedness on many fronts and the massive loss of our unique biodiversity. We do appreciate that NSW has led the way nationally in fire management practices and that our Rural Fire Service are superb and the best trained. Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons is thanked for his tireless leadership throughout the crisis. We also recognise the dedicated and under appreciated contributions of the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service in their efforts in hazard reduction within their jurisdiction..

We are also very concerned about measures to better safeguard the natural environment of NSW. As a population we benefit greatly from our unique terrestrial biodiversity as a source of prosperity and we depend on the ecosystem services that our natural resources provide from jobs to clean air and water. Action to protect biodiversity lies as the core of our well-being and long-term survival. Sustainable economic development is inextricably linked to biodiversity conservation and ecological sustainability. These concerns also need to be considered as the NSW Government reviews the 2019-2020 Bushfire Season.

We address the terms of reference below.

Yours sincerely



For Maria Byrne and Robert Kelly

**ToR 1: The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.**

The devastating bush fires are a strong demonstration that our planet is in the grips of a climate emergency. The duration of the drought, intense lack of humidity in the bush long before the normal summer bush fire season was unprecedented. The Government, both State and Commonwealth have ignored the increasingly grim warnings of climate scientists. Why were these concerns which are based on unequivocal evidence not listened to? Instead the

media has given voice to climate change deniers. It is clear climate change is a root cause of these massive fires. Last year was the hottest and driest year on record in Australia, and this combination of conditions almost certainly led to the 2019-20 fire season being the worst on record in terms of fire extent, coverage and intensity. This new weather pattern is emerging to become the new norm. To improve long-term prospects for NSW and for generations to come, we must address climate change as the biggest threat to all living systems. We cannot continue on the business as usual trajectory that we are on.

On March 14-15 The Sydney Morning Herald published an exclusive article entitled “NSW leads the way towards net zero by 2050” in a focus on electricity supply. If the NSW Government is serious about the net zero goal we need action on all aspects of greenhouse gas emissions – including roads and transport in addition to energy. The Government must commit to a more effective climate change mitigation strategy,

To the question at hand – the proximate cause of the 2019-20 fires. We watched the Gospers Mountain fire from week 1 October. This fire grew to an immense size (500,000 + hectares) and is one of the biggest fires on record that was started by a single event – a lightning strike. In fact lightning strikes were the primary causes of ignitions during the 2019-2020 season. Frighteningly we saw that such intense fires create their own weather and lightning storms – further propagating the ignition risk. These dry thunderstorms were catastrophic and incredibly perilous for fire fighters.

While there was much media attention that there was insufficient hazard reduction through managed burns, this is just a finger pointing distraction. In vast remote wilderness areas like where the Gospers Mountain and Little L (Yengo) fires raged there are no roads and no mechanisms to reduce the build-up of fuel. Moreover many of the fires this last season were propelled across grassland, dry lawns and grazed paddocks with low to no fuel build up.

With regard to fuel loads in parks as a cause of fire, we need to have a better balanced assessment of the role of the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service and their role in land management and fuel reduction. The criticism that the NPWS received was unwarranted in the effort to find scape goats. This ignored the extensive work of the of NPWS in hazard reduction within their budget provided. According to the Nature Conservancy Council, the NPWS have treated over a million hectares of parkland in protection of 100,000+ properties. On the subject of managing land, I encourage the NSW to consider the slow, cool burning practices of our first nations people as a way to better manage our bush land.

It seems that arson was less of a cause of the 2019-20 fires. There were however some backburn fires that escaped.

**ToR 2: The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect.**

We stress that we fully appreciate that the NSW Rural Fire Service volunteer firefighters are superb and among the best trained in the world. While the media was full of the news of the houses lost we feel that there was not enough emphasis in the number of properties saved. We need to give the RFS the full credit it deserves and celebrate their extraordinary accomplishment in saving 10,000's of homes and properties this summer as an unpaid

volunteer force. In the 2019-20 fires many of the local RFS branches were underresourced to the extent that this placed individual firefighters in grave risk. The lack of firefighting equipment was clear. For example some communities had no equipment. Wallabadah only had a bulldozer.

While the 2019-20 fires were devastating and unprecedented we knew they were coming and it was quite clear that the Government was not prepared and certainly did not listen to the experts both on the ground in the bush, the fire chiefs and the climate scientists. On the ground our local RFS where we have a property in Laguna were voicing alarm for months as to how unusually dry the bush was. The lack of humidity for months was palpable. The RFS and Fire Chiefs expressed their deep concerns and fears in early 2019. Their worries were at emergency levels months before the fires started, but their advice was ignored.

While this ToR is focussed on human life and property we would like to emphasise that biodiversity protection is tantamount and the NSW agencies charged with biodiversity conservation and managing such events were found wanting. This may be through poor resourcing. The millions of individual animals lost in the NSW bushfires as estimated by the experts (Prof Dickman, University of Sydney) is devastatingly tragic. The koala was the poster child of devastation and indeed was badly impacted by the fires but we cannot forget the vast biodiversity that was impacted. For instance the platypus is in big trouble and its habitat would have been impacted by the fires. Beyond iconic listed species, an ecological attribute that needs attention are the organisms living in the soil that are responsible for reducing leaf litter and to recharge the system for regeneration. Given the perilous state of our biodiversity it beggars belief that the NSW Government has continued to allow logging in key habitats. Certainly the request to log trees in burned areas is a very bad idea. Those remaining trees are crucial for regeneration.

It seems that with respect to biodiversity policies and laws, and the multiple agencies that run them, NSW was vastly under-prepared for this major fire season with respect to wildlife conservation. State agencies were far too silent about the biodiversity crisis resulting from the 2019-20 fires. The devastating impacts on the flora and fauna upon which NSW depends on for economic prosperity and quality of life is wake-up call to the need for more substantial research-led management if our native wildlife is to survive in the short to the longer term.

### **ToR 3: Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment.**

The only comment we have here is to stress that most of the major fires started in very remote areas where on the ground fire fighting was not possible such as in Wollemi National Park. If the Gospers Mountain in this region fire could have been controlled earlier through use of aerial bombardment then matters might have been very different. We appreciate that NSW has Remote Area Firefighting Teams (RAFT). These teams need resourcing through purchasing of firefighting aircraft. In the media there was criticism as to a delayed request from NSW for Commonwealth assistance thought the Australian Army. We have no idea if there is any truth behind this, but it seems sensible that Army aircraft be prepared to be fitted out with the gear needed in these circumstances. We appreciate how expensive firefighting aircraft it and we wonder if NSW and the Commonwealth could use available resources in a more strategic way for national protection.

## **Concluding remarks**

Given the likelihood that the new norm for NSW is reduced rainfall and higher temperatures and longer fire seasons, will we be able to cope? Will there be enough of a break between intense fires to allow communities both human and natural systems to recover? These are key considerations with respect to where people will live, to the ability to have water to fight fires and the ability of the bush to regenerate and return to the ecosystem services that we depend on. These questions are crucial for NSW to answer to better manage and plan for the future.