

## Your details

Dr

Title

First name

Zoe

Last name

Sofoulis

## 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

I am more concerned with community effects of responses to the fires.

Personal story: I am a resident in the Blue Mountains. I was impacted by fires in November, when there was a catastrophic fire warning, and active fire about 4 kms away from me in Woodford. I had recently had a fall with a mild concussion and a fractured foot in a moonboot and was unable to either prepare for fire or drive out of it. So I took taxis and public transport to Penrith where i stayed in a hotel for 3 nights until the catastrophic fire days passed. It doesn't seem I qualify for any reimbursement of the hundreds of dollars this cost; my house was not particularly badly effected by smoke.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

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### 1.2 Preparation and planning

Most attention to firefighting was on the RFS and it is not clear what role the Community Fire Units (under Fire and Rescue NSW) played.

They were originally formed after the 1994 fires and were well supported by FRNSW for over ten years but were subject to successive funding cuts and a number of unfortunate shifts than have run down their capacity: from training and supervision based in local fire stations to a regional model with no contact with local fires; progressive changes in definition of fire units aimed at redistributing and managing risk. We went from community self-help groups to being unpaid workers answerable to nearly 40 separate bits of policy and procedures; from face-to-face training at fire stations with occasional large outdoor training activities to an (insecure) on-line portal and set of on-line training modules, plus phone apps. A lot of the 60+ aged volunteers were not competent in using computers and lacked or didn't know how to use smart phones so could not access these materials. So overall, a gradual dislocation of the FRNSW goals from the lived realities of life on the urban bushfire interface.

What we need for the future will be community resilience groups for dealing not just with fire but other extreme weather events and emergencies. These need to be supported by local trained people.

I have attached a copy of a letter I wrote in 2011 on behalf of our local CFU to outline and complain about some of these shifts.

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### 1.3 Response to bushfires

Successive cuts in state and federal funding for emergency services, especially in NSW, government refusals to hear or respond to group of current and former fire services leaders calling for extra preparations for a widely predicted bad fire season meant we headed into spring with a good deal of nervousness about the expected failure of government to protect us.

There has been a lot of attention to the damaging psychological and economic effects of the devastating bushfires. It's easy to tell stories about people's personal losses and trauma, but the damage done to our sense of community and trust in government as a result of ineffective 'head-in-the-sand' responses at the highest level of government is harder to squeeze into a human interest story format. An insurance payout won't fix it.

The sense of doom and depression from destructive fires and unbreathable air for weeks on end was made much worse by the ideological resistance of the government (especially Federal; state of NSW was a bit better) to acknowledging the role of climate change in generating increased frequency, earlier onset, and unprecedented severity of fires.

There was an added cringe factor that this denialism continued unabated in the face of scientists and media around the whole world reporting the bushfires as definitive signs that the climate apocalypse is upon us. Not only were we caught in a situation over which we as individuals had no control, we also had absolutely no assurance that the whole of government would be

capable of recognising, let alone be willing to act on, the cause of the fires. After all, the moment the coalition came to power it made massive cuts to climate change research funding, gutting CSIRO by about half a billion dollars, diminishing the ARC (Australian Research Council) funds, demolishing the climate change and national water commissions, and further starving the national broadcaster of funding. All this on top of about 3 decades of neoliberal economics that had seen a shrinkage of policy and research outfits across all sectors of government, so that the country's capacities to develop new climate and energy policies or responses to imminent disasters had already withered to the point of inconspicuousness. Now it wants to use clean energy funds for fossil fuel developments.

In a country where media ownership is inordinately concentrated, the government's commitment to support Murdoch's News Corps and other climate-denying commercial media by further massively reducing the budget allocation to the national broadcaster the ABC, on whose heroic and ubiquitous reporting so many Australians depended for information and support, merely reinforced the sense that for this government, the best interests of Australian citizens were a much lower priority than looking after the bottom line of massive foreign owned corporations--whether media or fossil fuels.

Subsequent developments, including the coronavirus crisis, have only been reinforcing this sense of doom and depression about lack of wisdom, knowledge and respect for (climate and ecosystems) sciences in our so-called leadership. The government's entrenched commitment to fossil fuels and unproven fantasy technologies (like carbon capture and storage) persists, and it is just as determined to ignore the recovery from lockdown as an opportunity to create new jobs in a green, future-focussed economy as it was in the brief interval between crises.

We do not know how different it would have been in helping us all get through the fire traumas had our leaders not pretended it was 'business as usual'.... if they had taken that opportunity to declare a commitment to doing everything possible to minimise and mitigate climate change so as to reduce fire risks for future generations.

At least Commissioner Fitzsimmons was an inspiring voice of sanity throughout all this and the bravery of him and other fire authorities in naming climate change as a factor in the face of massive government denials is highly commended. If only more leaders showed such courage.

This will not get better. I am planning to move out of the Blue Mountains and have already purchased a property in a city suburb in another state, though the recession may prevent me moving there for a while.

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#### **1.4 Any other matters**

The extremes of climate we will experience henceforth require professional dedicated emergency service workers. Volunteers are important and need to be cultivated but it is a crazy situation when people in paid workforces (like coal mining) continue adding to global warming and ever-increasing carbon emissions while volunteers are expected to risk their lives dealing with the effects of those activities.

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### **Supporting documents or images**

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**Attach files**

- Letter to FRNSW May 2011.doc
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Zoë Sofoulis

May 2, 2011

The Commissioner,  
FRNSW

Dear Commissioner,

I am writing as a member of a Community Fire Unit ( [REDACTED] ) to signal discontent with some aspects of recent changes in the administration and management of Community Fire Units.

After years of apparent neglect at the policy level, we have been subject to two contradictory policy directions over the past 12-18 months. On the one hand has been a major risk management exercise in which CFUs were redefined from being volunteers for the NSW Fire Brigade, who would be put onto stand-by or activated at the request of the Brigade, to being neighbourhood 'self-help' groups who decided ourselves when to activate. Having been 'disowned' as part of this risk management strategy, CFUs are on the other hand also being repositioned as basically unpaid members of the FRNSW force and our range of expected activities has extended from what we originally signed up for—that is, a community capacity building exercise to make us more fire aware and skilled up to undertake some degree of practical property protection—to now incorporate a full range of bureaucratic management, including maintenance of two websites related to our CFU, the expectation that we will all download and read 23 separate policy and procedures documents, as well as recent demands on coordinators to re-supply FRNSW with details it already has on its websites etc etc. A question arising is just how many hours of bureaucracy, in addition to the practical training we signed up for, is FRNSW now expecting these volunteers to undertake.

In this flowering of risk management and bureaucratic requirements for CFUs, what is in danger of getting lost is firstly, the community and volunteer aspect of the CFUs, including the social enjoyment of getting together with neighbours to share local concerns. Noone seems to be recognising that this, not bureaucratic procedures, is the fundamental 'glue' that holds CFUs together.

Secondly, local specificity is being submerged. For example, our particular local concerns are the demonstrably inadequate water mains in our street, which have broken several times in the past few years (including through use in fire-fighting), leaving us with no reassurance that there would be mains water to use our equipment with in the event of fire. And of more pressing concern to us than 23 policy and procedures documents is the failure of relevant bodies to identify any kind of 'neighbourhood safer area' for mid-Mountains residents to retreat to in the event of being trapped by fire in both directions of the one escape route (Great Western Highway).

Instead of a systematic approach to either identifying—or what would be even better, actually creating or building safer neighbourhood areas—there is now a demand on us

that seems to be imported directly from rural Victoria by office-dwelling bureaucrats with no sense of how communities function geographically and socially in Sydney's outer metro areas. We are now asked to identify fire-safe houses in our neighbourhood and bail up the neighbours to offer us shelter during fire. Aside from the fact that we were not taught details of AS 3959 in our training is the huge social barrier of intruding upon strangers in this way –especially as a supposedly self-help volunteer group, without any official capacity or support (e.g. a letter from FRNSW authorising such intrusions). This demand is not sound policy but an ad hoc substitute for it that is entirely unconnected from the social realities in which CFUs operate in Sydney.

It seems to me that since the Victorian fires reminded the Service of the existence of CFUs and the need to pay more attention to them, the development of CFU-related policies has proceeded under fire professionals and risk-management consultants, but without adequate input from people with expert knowledge and understanding of how to deal with the community sector and volunteers—not to mention input from the volunteers themselves. Unless such knowledge could be brought to bear to temper the rampant managerialism being imposed on Community Fire Units, and the seemingly arbitrary repositioning of us as administrative functionaries, I fear FRNSW is at risk of alienating community volunteers through its excessive, insensitive and locally inappropriate demands, and its lack of recognition of what 'community capacity building' actually means on the ground.

In making these points, by no means do I want to criticise the operations of our local Lawson Fire Station and personnel, especially Stephen Johnson, who are supportive of our CFU and others in the region, are well organised and have excellent planning in place for the next two years of training activities.

But this letter has raised questions to which your responses would be appreciated:

- Has there been a recent audit of the time commitment expected from individual CFU members to meet the expanded range of activities now required?
- Can a simplified summary of policies and procedures for CFU volunteers be produced?
- What steps are being taken to identify neighbourhood safer areas in the mid-mountains?
- Will the FRNSW service develop a more socially-grounded and geographically sensible alternative to its demand that CFUs prevail upon residents of fire-safe houses to offer us protection?
- Can the FRNSW develop a more coherent approach to website maintenance, and not harass CFU coordinators to waste time providing details of members (including DOB, date of joining etc.) which are already on its websites?
- CFUs are being expected to become bureaucrats; reciprocally, could public servants developing CFUs policies receive some training in the parameters of working with volunteers and the community sector?

Thank you for your attention to these matters,

Zoë Sofoulis