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First name	Elizabeth
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I am making this submission as	Resident
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	I have included portions of our story in the submission I wrote and will upload below.
1.1 Causes and contributing factors	
1.2 Preparation and planning	
1.3 Response to bushfires	
1.4 Any other matters	
Upload files	bushfire-submission-2020.pdf - Download File

Submission for Inquiry into the Bushfires of 2019/2020

So it is almost the deadline for submissions; I have done a fair amount of research and reading with every intention of creating a well thought out essay. I have spent pockets of time writing and editing, but it is not what I intended it to be as a completed paper. As a mother of four young boys (aged between 5 and 12), owning and maintaining a large rural property on the mid north coast of NSW with my husband and also being in the process currently of owner-building our house, life is pretty full already. There simply aren't enough hours in each day.

I will submit what I have written thus far; but I just wanted to add this preface because to be honest I feel that even if I were to have completed the submission to a standard I was happy with, the truth is I don't have a huge amount of confidence in these processes. I appreciate the fact that the general public are given the opportunity to feel they are contributing to parliamentary inquiries, however from everything I have read I am not certain my voice will be given any weight. Many of the submissions I have read from the Victorian bushfires and Black Saturday all carry the same theme and state many of the same facts. However we have seen over the past decade that the recommendations made in terms of hazard reduction burn targets have not been fulfilled by a long shot. In fact there has been little change overall, and in some respects the push has gone the other way entirely.

Whatever force is driving the decision to avoid these burns is obviously a very strong one, because it seems to only gain momentum and the reasonings behind not burning are becoming more and more convincing to those who have absolutely zero personal experience in living in rural areas (and of course those people make up the majority of our population). Personally I feel that regardless of what I have to say, those voices shouting that lowering carbon emissions will solve our problems are going to be louder than my own. That my personal experience with a raging bushfire and nearly losing my home and life will be put down simply to climate change and any arguments I may have that there are other very important factors will be drowned out. My husband and I, and many others in our region have dealt with bushfires before. When you live in a rural area that is part of reality at least every few years. The fact that the amount of hazard reduction burning being done on public land has drastically reduced in recent decades contributed massively to the intensity of the bushfire we had to deal with in November of 2019. You simply cannot ignore the fact that fuel loads building up on the ground over many years can only intensify a bushfire in the hot season; in fact I am confident (and most definitely not alone) in saying this is the leading cause of these "firestorms" and "catastrophic events" that have been discussed at length in recent months. I am not disputing that global temperatures have risen and continue to rise, I do not dispute that we are causing all kinds of irreparable damage to our planet and that we absolutely need to make changes to prevent the damage from continuing. But there are also some very simple facts surrounding bushfires; not just what causes them but more importantly what makes them impossible to fight.

On the 9th of November we knew that a bushfire which had been burning for weeks already was headed our way, and we made all the necessary preparations on the day we expected to be hit. That day did not go as planned for us, or for many others nearby. We had one of our children home with us as he had a broken leg at the time and wasn't able to attend swimming lessons with his school. He is 7 years old. Our fire fighting pump and portable water tanks were ready, but when the gale force winds pushed the fire around the mountain, we were engulfed in a firestorm so intense that a fire fighter hose had no hope whatsoever of making any difference, the water evaporated before it could even come out of the hose. We had no choice but to shelter in a cutting in the earth with a wool blanket until the initial blaze passed over and we could deal with things. Had we chose to leave, we would have lost everything. We lost nearly all of our animals just due to radiant heat, as well as things like down pipes which melted, a generator which exploded, as well as many other building materials and things stored outside of the house and shed. If we didn't stick to our plan and attempted to leave as so many neighbours were urging us to do in that last hour, we would have died that day with our little boy, and our other three children would have been left alone. We know what caused this, and it is incredibly frustrating to listen to 'experts' who live nowhere near the bush and have no hands on experience with bushfires or the maintenance of land which is incredibly necessary to avoid events this intense. It is incredibly frustrating to feel that the decisions are left to these people who do not understand the land, whose interests are global and perhaps more interested in how Australia is perceived on a global scale as far as carbon emissions than they are in actually taking responsibility and helping to prevent future catastrophic bushfire events like the one our country just endured.

When you look at the history of natural disasters of all types around the world, especially those which result in mass loss of life and property, there is a resounding commonality—that is, we cannot expect to foresee or prevent every possible situation, and there will always be times when we must make decisions without a great deal of time to think because in those times, we need to be reliant on our base instincts. It would be arrogant to believe we have the ability to control every outcome when we are facing the powers of the natural world.

In saying that, however, there are things we must learn each time we are faced with a natural disaster. Or in the case of the Australian bushfire season of 2019/2020, we must re-learn a great deal. The knowledge regarding responsible land management already exists, it has been there for thousands of years. There is a huge amount of historical evidence which describes the methods used by indigenous Australians to manage the land using fire in the cooler months. Even now, there are individuals and groups trying to educate and offer their skills to bring this necessary tradition back into practise.

It must be also noted that beyond the traditions of the Aboriginal people, the next group who have the most hands on knowledge and a vested interest in preserving the land's integrity and understand the importance of caring for it, are our farmers. I speak of individual farmers, and multi generational farmers, those whose very lives depend on the land. Not the large scale corporation farms or agricultural sectors whose management are far removed from the land and whose interests lie in profits. Not the foreign owned investment farms and stations, although there are many station managers and farm hands who should be appreciated and respected for their knowledge and efforts.

One thing that has been said repeatedly by numerous officials is that there are fewer opportunities to burn each year. Whilst I have heard this said many times now, I have yet to see any research which shows historical weather data cross referenced directly with historical hazard reduction burning events (or planned events) to actually back up the claim. I do not believe it to be completely untrue, but I do not believe that the opportunities have been reduced to the point of not being able to do anything at all, and I find it insane to have the attitude that we should just scrap all plans to conduct hazard reduction burns because it's all just too hard. It is certainly a very convincing and convenient argument however, and is easily believed by a large number of people even without clear data to prove it, simply because it falls under the climate change umbrella. It also draws attention away from the other issues, which is helpful for those who would prefer to avoid the task altogether. There are not many people putting their hand up for the job. I am well aware that this is a difficult thing to measure, there is no clear or simple way to measure the effects of hazard reduction burning and its benefits, as there are so many variables like terrain, types of trees and scrub, and proximity to urban areas. There is also a certain element of risk, however if you look at countless examples of bushland which did not burn fiercely or at all due to having been burnt prior to the hot season, the benefit so clearly outweighs that risk. Any firefighter who has had experience with bushfires in the hot season will tell you unequivocally that the intensity of a fire is increased exponentially when dealing with bush which is heavily loaded with ground fuel. And protecting properties can, as we've seen in hundreds of cases now, be nearly impossible in these conditions. When it comes to wildlife, well, we have seen what happens there too. They simply cannot escape, and the results have been devastating.

On the topic of climate change and those who will argue its case as the leading cause of the most recent bushfire event, I am very curious as to the long term plan as far as what level emissions need to be reduced to specifically in order to prevent future catastrophic bushfires, and how many years it will take realistically in order to reach that target. And during that period of time, because I imagine it will take a number of years to achieve, what measures will be taken to reduce the yearly risk of bushfires? Will there be detailed weather studies done over that time period to show the marked improvement in the number of opportunities fire services have to do controlled burns so that future plans can be made to reduce fuel loads?

I have also read about targeted burning; this sounds great when explained as a way to get maximum results with minimal burning. However I am dubious as to the criteria for deciding the best 'target locations'. If I were to guess, I imagine one of the larger deciding factors would be proximity of bushland to large cities or towns, since saving the largest number of properties and keeping cities safe is a priority. The next would likely be the ease with which the bushland is accessed. Using this method, there is no way you can effectively protect remote or regional areas. Put simply, those small towns will be on their own as has been the trend already for some time now. Our regional areas are filled with farmers, many of whom have already been struggling with drought and other factors which make it so difficult to profit—many have been operating on a loss for many years. This country's agricultural sector cannot afford to lose more farmers, and these recent bushfires have already seen people driven off the land.

Lack of funding and resources is the next reason given almost as often; this is certainly more believable on the basis that we have seen government over the years cut funding to a wide range of departments, and fire services have not gone untouched. This absolutely needs to be addressed and rectified if we are to move forward from this disaster and make better choices. This is not a difficult problem to solve, unlike the climate change argument. We need to take it seriously as a nation who has seen more major bushfires over the past century resulting in huge loss of life and properties than anywhere else on earth.

All of those reasons however, redirect attention from the fact that very few people want the responsibility of planning or undertaking large scale controlled burns, which is also something I have heard and read many times. In an article published 7 February 2019 by the ABC website, a former Victorian fire chief Ewan Waller states that fuel loads in some parts of Victoria were at the level they were on Black Saturday.

Perhaps looking to Western Australia as an example in reaching targets with hazard reduction burning would be a good idea for NSW and Victoria, they seem to have a much better handle and appear confident in attempting to reduce fuel loads in an organised and efficient way.

Below is a submission written by Roger Underwood and published on the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association website on March 10 2019. Roger has a lifetime of experience in the area of bushfires (you need only google his name) and is a respected member of the National Fire Experts Group (NFEg), a group whose knowledge and expertise has been regularly ignored by the RFS for years.

*The Hon Melissa Price
Federal Minister for the Environment
Canberra, ACT*

Dear Minister

I noted your comment in the media that the recent Victorian bushfires are the "result of climate change".

It is regrettable that you should make this statement, because not only is it incorrect, it excuses the Victorian government and parks bureaucracy for serious mismanagement. People who know about bushfires have been saying for the last 5 years that Victoria is headed for another Black Saturday, and not because the world's mean annual temperature has gone up a degree or two. It is, above all, due to inattention to escalating fuel levels in the bush.

A further problem in blaming climate change is that this does not provide a short-term answer for an existing threat.

I draw your attention to the attached article, published recently at Quadrant On Line. This dismisses the claim that current bushfires are the result of climate change and points out the futility of trying to fix the bushfire problem by fixing the climate.

Coming from Western Australia you are in a perfect position to provide leadership in the matter of bushfire management. We are the leading jurisdiction in Australia, and are the envy of bushfire experts around the country. The least helpful thing you can do is to adopt the "greenie" line on bushfires. This has never worked and can never work. On the contrary, as Environment Minister you should be promoting:

- 1. The key importance of effective bushfire management in combatting environmental damage such as incineration of wildlife, soil erosion, loss of landscape beauty, destruction of heritage and recreation facilities;*
- 2. The need to address the bushfire threat now, not wait 30 years for the climate to be fixed.*
- 3. The cost/benefit of fuel reduction burning as a means of minimising bushfire damage at optimum cost to the community;*
- 4. The critical need to reduce the risk of death and injury from fires, especially to firefighters; and*
- 5. The need to implement the findings of bushfire inquiries, including the Black Saturday Royal Commission, and the House of Representatives and the Senate Inquiries into bushfires, all of which put the case for more pre-emptive management (including fuels management) rather than relying on suppression. If you have not studied the report of the Senate Inquiry you need urgently to do so, as it was a comprehensive and intelligent work.*

I would welcome an invitation to discuss these issues with you. I am prepared to travel to Merredin to meet you in your electoral office. If this is not suitable, perhaps you would like to talk to Chris Back, a former Senator with a profound understanding of bushfire issues.

In the meantime, I implore you to withdraw your comments blaming the recent bushfires on climate change. They are unhelpful to Australian firefighters and disrespectful to Australian bushfire scientists and managers ... the very people who are putting their lives on the line to protect the Australian environment and communities.

Yours sincerely

*Roger Underwood AM
Chairman, The Bushfire Front of WA Inc*

I don't believe I can add any more to what he has stated, and I can only hope that the federal and state governments start looking at this through the lens of reality. History will continue to repeat itself if we do not make changes and continue into the future with recent events in mind.