

Your details

Title

Mrs

First name

EMMA

Last name

WALSH

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

On 31st December 2019 our home at Conjola Park was severely impacted by several fire fronts.

We own a two-storey brick veneer house on 9 acres of forest & grazing land, we are on a private road off [REDACTED], approximately 400m from the Princes Highway.

It was around 11am, I was on my way home, when I received a 'Too Late to leave' warning from the RFS Fires Near Me App. I was not overly concerned as I had received a few of these in the previous few months as I work between Shoalhaven Heads and Bawley Point, and they had never really amounted to much. We had also been advised that Conjola Park was to expect 'Ember Attack' only as per the RFS Fire Spread Map. We had also seen and heard all the RFS trucks heading south, so we had a false sense of security that the danger was somewhere else that day.

I arrived home to find my husband, Steve, preparing the house. We thought we were adequately prepared. We had a petrol driven fire pump in the pool close to the house, with fire hoses attached. We had a soaker hoses around all the house veranda, connected to town water. We had removed anything flammable from around the house, removed furniture from the veranda & my husband had spent many months removing leaves & cutting back trees

around the property.

At approx. 11.30am, a water bombing helicopter took water from our dam, after dumping water it reappeared quickly, we realised that the fire must be very close.

We rang our neighbours at [REDACTED], who advised that they were surrounded by fire & to 'pray for them'.

At around this time town water ceased to flow & soaker hoses on our veranda no longer functioned

We could see the red glow & smoke coming from the north. Then a multitude of spot fires appeared in our paddocks, within seconds our entire dam was surrounded by fire and trees to the south end of our home were on fire.

The fire rapidly started moving west towards the house. The speed of it terrified us, we weren't mentally prepared for what we saw.

We grabbed our dog and raced to the car. We were afraid that even with all our preparation, we were not prepared enough.

We drove up our private road to [REDACTED] and towards the highway. The highway was closed, the people in the car behind us advised us that [REDACTED] to the east, past our private road, was blocked by fire, therefore we could not get to the lake or beach. We decided to head home rather than be caught in our car.

We were away from our home no longer than 5-7 minutes. As we approached our driveway, we could see trees alight around our property, thick smoke and flames prevented us from entering the driveway.

Our neighbours house 47B is close to the top of our driveway. Karen & John, our neighbours, had their fire hoses up & running. They had a similar pool / fire pump system to us with 2 fire hoses.

Karen screamed at us to get into their house. This was at approx. 12pm.

I ran in with my dog. Steve manned one hose with Karen, on the North & West sides of their house. John manned the hose and started to protect the house to the South & East. I stayed inside the house with 4 dogs, monitoring the situation from inside. Screaming to each of them where fires were flaring. I spent 1 ½ hours running between the 3 floors of the house checking for fires externally & internally.

I rang Triple zero 3 times and each time I was put on hold for many minutes, it seemed like eternity, I was told to stay calm and or try to leave the house if it was safe. At no time was it safe. I was told each time that were one our own and that there were no resources to help us.

We originally got hit with a fire front from the north / east and later from the south/ west. We were surrounded by fire with no way of escaping.

I thought we were all going to die when the ceiling in the kitchen caught fire. It was a cathedral ceiling so there was no way I could put it out, I screamed to Steve & Karen who brought in the fire hose and sprayed the ceiling until it went out. A short while later the ceiling in the upstairs bedroom & study caught fire and were put out the same way.

All this time we had no idea if our house was still standing, or the houses of our direct neighbours.

At 2pm, the fire fronts seemed to have eased. We returned home. Our house was surrounded by spot fires, we checked the ceiling space for fires and were all clear. The veranda was on fire, along with the shed, many trees, gardens & structures were still alight. We started our fire pump and spent the next 3 hours putting out fires. After that we felt we could relax a bit, but we stayed up with our neighbours from 47B & 47D until 3am putting out spot fires and flareups.

That whole day & night we received no assistance from any emergency service, RFS, SES.

The RFS drove down our private road at 10pm to enquire if we had lost any assets.

No one enquired about us. We had no electricity, no communication channels, no water & eventually little food as our fridge / freezers were off.

The following morning, we witnessed the devastation of Conjola Park, nearly all the houses on the [REDACTED] had been destroyed along with all of those directly adjoining our paddocks.

The only houses around us to survive were those with alternative water sources to town water.

The following days were a blur. We received no assistance from outside our community. Our surviving neighbours pulled together and assisted each other. I wish I could recall more about the days that followed, but I was in deep shock as to what had happened to us. Unfortunately, I didn't realise that at the time and no emergency response teams came to our assistance. It seemed that the only people that wanted to talk to us were the media, who had no issues accessing Conjola Park. where other more beneficial response teams would have been more appropriate.

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

Backburn lit by National Parks under advise from RFS, near Myrtle Gully , was the cause of one fire front.

Lack of support from RFS , as all trucks and aerial support had been sent to Batemans Bay.

Only 4 RFS trucks available for the whole Conjola area.

After the water bombing helicopter assisted Egan Farm at 11.30am , we never saw any other aerial assistance.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Lack of hazard reduction burns.

Disregard of aboriginal people who understand the land.

Irresponsibly decision to light a backburn which was not monitored by NP and RFS.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Terrible response to the devastation at Conjola Park & surrounding areas...

News crews were allowed in but no mental health / health support. We were all in a massive amount of shock .

We had no electricity , therefore ...no way of communication .

We had no town water, therefore no drinking water . Minimal food .

Supporting documents or images
