

## Your details

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**Title**

Ms

**First name**

Emorfia

**Last name**

Cutler

## Submission details

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**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

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**Your story**

I, along with my family, have lived in my valley my whole life. Three generations of my family have lived here on our properties along Forbes River, Birdwood, NSW. None of us have ever witnessed fires as ferocious as those last November 2019. My uncle, Harry [REDACTED] manages my family 2500 acre beef grazing property "[REDACTED]" on [REDACTED], [REDACTED]. Harry also owns his own 500 acres property, formerly his parents, up the top end of [REDACTED], Birdwood, and leases a forestry block, next door to our home property "[REDACTED]". My sister, Hannah [REDACTED] I and Harry run the three properties together for our beef businesses. We have dealt with bushfires and grassfires all our life, and have often used these to manage our properties, controlling weeds and regrowth and managing the grass to provide fresh 'green pick' for the cattle. 2019 saw us face one of the worst droughts on record. We had come through years of dry conditions and minimal rain. Grass growth was non-existent. We had been feeding all our cattle, approximately 1000 head across the three properties since August. We had lost significant numbers of cattle from the drought - the most ever due to continued dry conditions. Dams were dry, creeks had stopped running and

the river was very very low.

On Thursday 7th November 2019, the Coombes Gap bushfire was burning around Mount Seaview on the Oxley Highway, not far from our home property location on Forbes River. Neighbours on the Oxley Highway Yarras rang Friday 8th November in the morning, and asked if we could help them protect their property from the Coombes Gap bushfire. We said we couldn't as we were watching what the Stockyard Creek fire would do. On Friday 8th November, the anticipated worst case scenario of the fire approaching eventuated, however it was nothing we could have been prepared for or ever predicted. We were first impacted directly by the apocalyptic Stockyard East bushfires. Our neighbours at the top of Forbes River, Birdwood, lost their entire livelihoods, homes and properties. The Stockyard East bushfire exploded from the unmanaged Werrikimbe National Park, sparking 5-10 km late morning to land in our neighbours [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] back paddock. From this spark, it continued to spark and jump 5 km in front through my valley, wherever it landed an instant bushfire broke out. On this day Friday 8th November, there was not a chance of stopping this bushfire. The sparks were unpredictable. The sky turned red and the day turned to night. You could not see anything, you needed lights on vehicles to see and visibility was reduced to 1 - 2 m in front of you. Once the fires broke out we moved our spray gear and tractor to our property that was directly being threatened by Stockyard East. I had to go into Port Macquarie for an x-ray in the morning and had no idea how severe the situation was, as my family were fighting the fire out of mobile service range. I left Port Macquarie as soon as I could. People were panicking in Port Macquarie and Wauchope, roads were being shut and the sky turned orange. I saw neighbours in Wauchope when I stopped for much needed fuel, we discussed the Oxley Highway being shut and no one could get through. I was incredibly stressed and concerned for my family who I knew would be fighting the fire. I told the traffic control officer I lived at Yarras, not near the fires, but I needed to go check my animals were safe. He was not impressed but let me through. I arrived home at 2 pm, I checked my dogs for water and let my horses run free out of the horse paddock near the house. Smoke was billowing to the south from the Coombes Gap fire, I had no idea how close it was. Smoke was billowing North, further up the valley at our other property. There were messages on our answering machine, neighbours asking for help, neighbours in town asking for advice. I got into our ute and drove up the road towards the fire. I met a fire officer along the road who told me the sawmill at [REDACTED] had burnt. Fire was burning near two houses by the road at [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. No one was around. The grass was short and I had no method of stopping the fire. I continued driving and came to [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] property. The smoke was so thick and black I could not see the road. I stopped and called anyone on the UHF. Harry replied and said the fire front had passed, to continue coming. I continued driving on the road. The [REDACTED] stockyards and shed was alight near the road as I went past. The heat was so intense inside the ute and the smoke was so thick I couldn't see but I continued driving. I arrived at our family property. Harry and Hannah had been helping the neighbours, the [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] prepare their properties. Harry and Hannah both tried to save [REDACTED]'s house but were too late. It was up in flames when they arrived, though they still tried to use a fire extinguisher. [REDACTED] lost everything; house, sheds, yards. His place was flattened. The fire trucks were supporting the [REDACTED] property - the fire had went through the whole place, they lost their sawmill but saved all livestock, dogs, horses, sheds, houses and yards. We remained on our property until midnight, protecting the house, sheds and yards, with the help of [REDACTED] (who had lost everything) and neighbours from Yarras [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. We tried to save as much infrastructure as we could. All we could manage was to watch the house/sheds/yards for sparks and put it out. The whole property was burnt out, we lost all fences, the flying fox and any remaining dry matter. We were fortunate to save the house/sheds/yards and without our neighbours we would not have. Everyone was tired, no one had ate. Hannah and I returned to our home property, organised some food for us all and Harry's swag. He slept up at the property to watch for any sparks as the fires were still burning. The whole valley was out of power - power poles had been burnt in the fires.

Neighbours, Hannah and I left at 1 am for home. We went to sleep and were awoken by the phone at 2:30 am. Our neighbour at Yarras said the Coombes Gap fire had jumped the Oxley Highway and was heading to Yarras, fire officers had told her to evacuate unless she could defend her property. She asked if we could go down with our spray gear to help defend her house. We told her our gear was up the river with Harry where our other property was burnt out. Our home property is 5km from the Oxley Highway. We drove down to the Highway to check the fire at 2:30 am. We checked our back paddock near Yarras was unlocked for any emergency fire access. The fire was burning across from the Hastings River, heading for us at Yarras slowly. We went back to find Harry and woke him up at 4 am. We got organised and moved all our spray gear back to our home property to wait for the fire's arrival. On Saturday, the Coombes gap fire sparked across the river to light the Yarras sawmill. We, along with many neighbours fought to stop it and put it out. No firetrucks were around due to resources being stretched so thin.

Tuesday 12 November was predicted to be catastrophic conditions and a state of Emergency had been declared. Fire Authorities were pushing everyone to evacuate and could not guarantee a fire truck. We were told we were on our own. We could not evacuate or leave as there would be no one to protect our property or animals. We prepared our home property as best as we could, waiting for the arrival of the Stockyard East bushfire into the state forest lease property next door. The boundary to this forest block is 200 metres from my house and sheds. Whilst waiting and fighting the fires, we still had cattle to feed, cattle to be rescued from bogs and attempted to help, and cattle to be euthanised and disposed of. On the Tuesday, the conditions were hot, dry and windy. We had been using a water sprinkler to wet the horse paddock and garden the days prior. On Tuesday we flooded the garden, house, sheds, roof from lunch time continually. Our house and one shed are made from timber, which are perfect tinder boxes. At 5 pm the Forestry ignited. We could see the flames leaping from the treetops. Harry went on his motorbike to check if adjoining neighbours north of the forestry needed help. They sent him home to prepare our property. I rang 000 when we first saw the fire in the forestry and requested assistance as the fire was out of control and there are many neighbours impacted, including elderly. We decided, as conditions were cooling in the evening, to put in emergency breaks between us and the forestry. Harry ripped a double fire breaks between the forestry and us, approximately 2 km in length, in the hope the fire could be stopped and contained in the forest. By 7 pm, the fire was close to our boundary. I rang 000 again, and this time said I was concerned as my property was directly impacted. The reply I got was 'ok'. Neighbours arrived as the fire could be seen from a long way away. One neighbour drove his tractor and spray unit down and left it at our place to use. We had 10 - 12 people who stayed with us until 1 am, we managed to keep the fire in the forestry behind the breaks. We saved the stockyards in the forestry and our slab stockyards on our property, which are on the boundary between the forestry and our property. After our neighbours left, we returned and checked on the fences, strainer posts, stays and tried to save as much infrastructure as possible. We got home at 5 am. The next day, after a few hours sleep, cattle needed to be fed, water needed to be monitored and fires watched.

For the next 2 - 3 weeks we continued to watch and put out spot fires and save as much pasture and fencing as possible. Neighbours were the backbone of these operations. The main infrastructure was lost on the Friday 8th November, but without neighbours efforts more houses and infrastructure would be lost. No fire trucks arrived for neighbours of us on the Tuesday 12th November, due to resources being stretched to the limit. During this period we still had cattle to feed, cattle to transport and sell, feed to be organised and cattle to be assisted or put down. The Forbes River stopped running after the fires, due to both the evaporation from the heat and excess water usage attempting to control the fire.

This period of time was gruelling. The impact the bushfires had on my family was horrendous. On top of the drought, we had another issue we had to deal with. I strongly believe these bushfires could have been prevented and the severity reduced. The Werrikimbe National Parks where the Stockyard Creek apocalyptic bushfire originated for us, has not been managed properly for a period of over 20 years. The gross negligence of bushland and National Park has so clearly threatened peoples lives and livelihoods. We were fortunate no lives were lost, but that could easily have not been the case. Seeing our neighbours loose everything was heartbreaking. We were lucky, 2 out of our 3 properly were burnt out, with our 3rd home property loosing 50% of the pastures. We were lucky to save our houses, sheds and yards. We only lost fences and pasture. It is only this year, when we have received rain that we can only reflect on how crazy and horrendous the time was. With cattle to feed we had to keep going until January and not stop.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Lack of management of bushland, National Parks and forestry has caused a significant build up of fuel load for bushfires. If there were organised controlled burns scheduled annually the dry matter, leaves and barks would be reduced. It is naive to think fires can be prevented. The heat from the fires was unbelievable. Trees have been fried, bark has fallen off. Any natural flora and fauna did not stand a chance. The difficulties obtaining fire permits with causes and conditions also restrict farmers from conducting hazard reduction burns. There is a gross misconception in the greater community that all fire is bad, and all smoke and fire must be reported and extinguished. With this

attitude we are letting fuel loads become unmanageable, as demonstrated by these November bushfires that could not be stopped. In the past years, my family and neighbours have been threatened by fire authorities and fire volunteers alike with hefty fines and legal infringements for fires leaving their properties. These fines and threats are a joke in comparison to the events that occurred in November. Why did not fire authorities provide backup to residents in my valley when called? This attitude of threatening landholders for conducting COOL fires on their property stops any amount of fuel load being reduced, which is dangerous to me personally and my community.

The obvious strain these bushfires placed on fire resources reflect the gross lack of mismanagement of hazard reduction burning. Yes, the conditions of the past drought years have not been ideal or easy, however thinking we can prevent a fire by not burning the fuel load in Winter is naive and endangering lives. Where there are trees, there will be bark, leaves and sticks falling. Grass and shrubs will grow if they are not controlled by cattle or mechanical efforts such as slashing. In hot conditions with not decent rain, these will burn and be unstoppable. A fire is better to burn on your terms than it's own terms. Not managing fuel loads makes us all sitting ducks, and endangers many peoples lives in our community.

### **1.2 Preparation and planning**

National Parks need to implement annual hazard reduction burns in controlled sections. Neighbours and parks/forest managers must enter into fire prevention strategies and make efforts to maintain boundary fence access, reduced grass/vegetation that are fire hazards. Farmers should be able to manage their land when and how they see fit - using their skills and common sense. Neighbours need to be notified. If a fire is reported and the fire authorities arrive there should be negotiations with the supervisor of the fire and landowner. If it is under control and supervision the fire should not be extinguished. Fires can be unpredictable, but depending on the seasonal conditions and weather fire can also be predicted. Fire in short, grazed grass will not be raging and causing damage, compared to fire exploding from tree tops in forest and park country. Country that had received previous cool fire reacted differently during these November fires. There was a reduced fuel load, trees were not killed. The fire burnt over the ground and was not as intense as fire in country that had not been burnt in 5-10+ years.

### **1.3 Response to bushfires**

There needs to be greater work reducing the fuel load continually, as bushfires are a part of our life and here to stay.

### **1.4 Any other matters**

I have missed the timeframe to consult face-to-face (online during COVID) date but I still would like to be updated as part of the inquiry, and if possible involved in a face-to-face consult. I strongly believe greater change is needed for our futures managing this land and country. I have attached images in a powerpoint from these fires. I tried to submit this application last night but my service was not working to allow me to upload my powerpoint.

## **Supporting documents or images**

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### **Attach files**

- Nov2019\_Cutler.pptx



# 2019 November Bushfires Forbes River, Birdwood

Emorfia Cutler

Hannah

Harry



# Friday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2019



Attempting to slow the fire



Driving through the fire





Cattle trying to escape fire whilst  
surrounded







Burning into the night



looking up the valley on 8/4/19







This picture, at the time was meant to capture the fire burning late in the night. I didn't intend to capture Harry watching it.

Now, when I look back on pictures, this sums up the moment in time so well. Looking on, not able to stop or prevent the fires, but never giving up or not trying.



# Assessing cattle from the 8/4/19 fire and feeding





# Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2019



Preparing our property







Monitoring the Forestry block igniting





Tractor needing urgent attention – fan belts loose



Neighbours helping contain the fire in the forestry and protecting stock yards





Forestry alight on the boundary





Boundary between forestry and my property - slab stockyards saved



Bark landing at my house/sheds during the bushfires



River dried up after the fires







Fires and smoke persisted for weeks







Trees killed by the intensity of the heat of the fire



Trees affected by the intensity of the heat of the fire





Country not previously burnt – trees killed or growth impacted



Country previously had a cool fire - trees not killed, barely impacted