



Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Fiona

Last name

Woods

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A member of the general public

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 making this submission on behalf of myself, a totally blind person living in the Lower Blue Mountains. Although I am detailing my own experiences, I am in touch with many other blind and vision impaired residents of NSW and know that my experiences and observations are not unique. I write with an understanding that everyone involved in this Summer's catastrophe worked extremely hard and with the best of intentions, often as volunteers, in rapidly changing circumstances which could not always be predicted accurately. It is foreseeable, however, that such catastrophes may recur. I therefore also write with an understanding of my human rights to be and to feel safe and in reliance on the NSW Disability Inclusion Act 2014, which supports my inclusion in the community and facilitates my access to all mainstream activities.

It is possible that procedures and strategies to assist people with disability to deal with bushfires exist. I have access to technology and the internet and am connected to various disability organisations and groups through social media and email lists. If I have not heard of the processes and strategies, they might as well not exist. Whatever innovations are made, they will need to be supported by well targeted and extensive communication strategies.

I will address two of the terms of reference:

1.2 planning and preparation:

I live with my husband, who has various medical issues, my son, who is a trainee and two high school students. At every community event we have attended for the past several years, we have been handed a glossy "bushfire survival kit". This contains a plan, which is to be completed and kept somewhere safe and lots of information about preparing for bushfires. I have never been told that there is an alternative format of this information.

My bushfire survival plan is to leave, well in advance. Having wandered around the house trying to decide which items are essential, I appreciate the value of a list which could be prepared in a time of low stress, to be relied on in times of high stress. Priority should be given to finding ways to support blind people to complete hard copies of these lists, so they can be accessed at such times. Online lists should also be available, as that would be some people's preference, but these are less reliable, due to the potential unavailability of electricity or the internet. These lists should also be tailored to the needs of blind people. Many of us rely on technology, which would need to be taken with us, along with all necessary chargers and peripherals. Supplies for dog guides or medications may also be required.

Information about how to prepare my house and yard has also been hard to obtain. My children read me the appropriate printed forms, but it is often expressed in diagrams. Most of My knowledge about things like closing internal doors and removing flammable material has come from RFS briefings or social media. It is difficult to decide how much of it is true or genuinely useful.

We live on a well-vegetated block. There is a well-vegetated school and bushland nearby. Our house was rated Bushfire Attack level 29 when assessed for recent renovations. I know people who have lost houses rated at this level. My NDIS plan includes an amount to keep our garden maintained and gutters cleared. I find it impossible to identify the aspects of my garden likely to increase our combustion risk or the likelihood of ember attack. A friend was able to give some suggestions. My six children spent their Christmas break substantially clearing our block. It would be helpful if there was a service which could advise the best ways of preparing particular sites for the bushfire season. A plan of work could be drawn up; obviously property owners would choose which elements they wished to pursue. A small fee could be charged for the service. As it is likely that preparing the yard every year would exhaust all of my NDIS budget, it would also be helpful if there was a program of community assistance to carry out the desired work. This group could also work on clearing communal areas, such as the bush surrounding the school or along the railway line. These considerably increase our risk from ember attack.

I lived in my current house during the 2001 bushfires. Whilst they were some distance from us, the wind and heat of the day convinced me I do not want to expose myself or my family to a bushfire. We usually load our car with possessions and drive away from the mountains. However, my ability to do this depends on my husband or adult children being available to drive. My husband's medical issues make it difficult for him to assess risk or to cope with stress, and we may not always be able to rely on using the car to leave. Trains are often the first thing to stop when there is a bushfire in the Blue Mountains. All advice to leave assumes everyone has a car. Without a car, it is difficult to take possessions with you or to transport pets. Over the Summer, I found myself uncomfortable when at home with no driver present. Although there is much talk about support from neighbours, I have found that, in times of generalised emergency, people concentrate on their own needs and do not necessarily have time or capacity to meet or think about the needs of others.

1.3 response to bushfires

Through-out the Summer, starting from November, I felt my community to be at risk of bushfire. This is the case every year, but was particularly so this year, due to dry conditions, lack of rain and what was happening elsewhere. The risk was partly from the spread of existing fires and partly from the constant possibility of new ignitions. People were constantly required to assess the risk to themselves and their property. I found it impossible to assess the risk myself, based on the information available to me.

I downloaded the Fires Near Me app, as constantly instructed. My children set up my watch zones, as this part of the app was inaccessible to me. I received regular notification of activity in my watch zones. Clicking on these notifications took me only to a map, which tells me nothing. The app includes a List feature. This lists all features, according to their distance. For example, a fire at Mulgoa, across the river and numerous suburbs, but 10km away, would appear as more significant than a fire along the valley at Woodford, which might be 30 km away but a much higher risk. The list feature gives no information which can be used to judge risk and there is no way of getting information about the direction or speed at which fire is travelling.

I listened regularly to ABC radio 702, again as instructed. The fire that posed the greatest risk to me was a part of the Green Wattle Creek fire that crossed the Warragamba Dam. This was burning for many days in inaccessible country. As it posed no threat to property, it was not often mentioned on the radio. When added to the constant sirens and helicopters overhead, I felt that listening to others' heart-rending stories did not contribute to the mental well-being of myself or my children. I did appreciate the comforting presence of well known radio personalities and I thank them and the ABC for their efforts to build community morale by working through their Summer breaks.

The most reliable source of information was Mayor Mark Greenhill's Facebook page, which gave details of local fire activity and also plans for management of outbreaks. While very grateful my children told me to access this page, it is not satisfactory that this was my only source of reliable information.

There was a bushfire information line, but I felt this would be

essential for people experiencing imminent threat or aftermath. It would be helpful if there was a phone number dedicated to the needs of people with disability, similar to that recently established for information on Covid 19. Operators could be trained to interpret map and graphical information in a way that was helpful. The Fires Near Me app could also be modified so that people using screen readers could make sense of it. This would need to go beyond giving text descriptions of graphics and maps, to tailoring information so that its content is meaningfully conveyed.

I have a dim memory of registering with my local fire brigade as a person with a disability. If I have done this, there have been no consequences. If I am mistaken, I know this facility exists. I have not heard of any action or follow-up that has resulted from anyone I know registering in this way. Perhaps there could be a service where people registered and a volunteer was assigned at times of high risk to check in who had registered and to ensure that they have a plan in case of the need to evacuate.

Important things are being retrieved from storage boxes and trees are flourishing in the garden. Soon Summer will return and with it the endless questions of "will we be safe today" and "what would we do if there was a fire?" As a property owner and parent with a disability, I would like to be able to answer these questions with confidence and in a way which reflects my autonomy and independence. Things need to be changed so that I, as a blind person living in NSW, am able to prepare my property and my family for the bushfire season and am able to respond to a bushfire on the basis of accurate, timely and tailored information. These changes should be made in consultation with the body that represents me and other blind and vision impaired Australians, Blind Citizens Australia. The changes should then be communicated far and wide, so that the blind and vision impaired residents of bushfire prone areas of NSW do not again spend their Summers in a state of uncertainty and anxiety.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Bushfire Inquiry Submission FWoods.docx
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