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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
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Your story	<p>I've been a landholder in the Drake area for 37 years. Member of Drake Rural Fire Brigade for 10 years. Have worked in various land management jobs for 40 years (Forester, National Park ranger, indigenous land management, locations in NSW, NT, Qld and Vic). In late 2019, as an RFS volunteer, I was much involved in the response to the Long Gully fire (and subsequent Ewingar fire) and the Bangala Ck fire. I was crew leader on the unit that first investigated the smoke sighting (Thu 5 Sept) that later became known as the Long Gully fire. Fire started in remote country on private property. Friday 6 Sept and following days, fire blew out under extreme, near catastrophic conditions and rushed SW, jumped Timbarra R and swung around to burn up Long Gully Rd towards Drake village. The job over these days was mainly assisting with evacuations and protection of property. A very busy time. My own property () was not impacted until nearly 3</p>
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weeks later when conditions were much more benign. Forest was burnt, but no loss of property, and an ample supply of firefighting resources.

In early October, this fire again took off under very extreme conditions in the direction of Ewingar. Again the job was mainly property protection and evacuations. Lives and property were lost in this fire. This part of the fire then jumped the Clarence River and joined up with the Busbys Flat fire which burnt Rappville far to the east and eventually joined other fires and reached the coast south of Evans Head.

On 5 Dec, I was crew leader on Drake 7 despatched to Currawinya, a property near Pretty Gully where a fire had been burning for some days in remote country. Our job was again property protection as the fire approached from the west under extreme conditions.

Again this fire (called Bangala Ck) burned in several directions over the next 2-3 weeks and we were kept very busy with property protection, landholder liaison, backburning and strengthening of containment lines.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Both major fires (Long Gully and Bangala Ck) began in remote country, and appear to have been started by lightning. There was some suspicion that part of the Bangala Ck fire was exacerbated by landholder lighting up (presumably to protect property by backburning as the fire approached). I understand that Police may have followed this up, but I'm not aware of the outcome.

Main factors contributing to this extreme situation:

Drought - the country was VERY dry.

Strong winds and high temperatures - these are not that unusual for that time of year, but combined with extremely dry conditions, the fires were going to burn and be almost impossible to contain or put out until substantial rain fell.

Fuel levels were quite high in many areas, lower in others, but I believe no practical amount of broadscale HR burning would have altered the outcome of huge areas burnt, huge impact on wildlife, many properties lost, over many weeks and months. However, more focused Hazard Reduction in the close vicinity of homes and other assets does make them more defensible (more below).

1.2 Preparation and planning

Property protection:

I witnessed some properties that seemed very well prepared, burn. Some had hectares of cleared land around buildings, water on hand, gutters cleaned etc. One such property was engulfed in a severe ember attack on night of 6 Sept and was lost. Although well cleared around, a nearby hillside with high fuel became a hill of liquid fire and threw embers over the property, forcing the retreat of firefighters.

Many other properties lost were badly prepared, ie they appeared almost abandoned, grass and rubbish close up to the buildings, poor access for fire truck and almost no place for a truck to turn around. Some property owners, for various reasons, just do not take the 'prepare your property' messaging seriously. RFS volunteers 'doorknocked' on morning of Friday 6 Sept to warn residents of impending catastrophic conditions. Several properties were clearly 'undefendable', and were burnt over the following days.

Of course, preparation is essential. More education needed about preparing your home and managing the surrounds:

Clear away rubbish, ensure fire truck has access, and can turn around easily. Have a supply of water for the Brigade to use if necessary.

Also prepare yourself. It was scary to see how many locals and landholders were prepared to stay and defend their homes, but who had not the slightest idea of personal protective equipment (ie wearing thongs, shorts and singlets!)

Hazard Reduction in the bush:

I have often conducted HR burns on my property to reduce fuel

levels and also for ecological reasons. On average, in this sort of country, I burn most areas in a sort of patchwork about every 5-7 years (more frequently around the built assets). These tend to be cooler, winter burns. Under 'normal' conditions, this burning makes me feel quite secure from the threat of wildfire, In late 2019, under the extremely dry and windy conditions, almost no amount of HR burning would have been sufficient to stop such wildfires. Areas burnt only 15 months earlier and with very low fuel levels, BURNT AGAIN in Sept 2019 (although at a lower intensity).

For this reason, I believe it unwarranted and misguided to criticize national parks, forestry or any other landholder/agency for the size and severity of the 2019 fires.

Having said that, I am aware that both agencies (Parks and Forestry) have been severely and continually cut back with funding and staffing over the last decade at least. They need a serious boost to their funding levels to have any chance of doing the fire management required (not to mention the other land management responsibilities they have).

1.3 Response to bushfires

I think RFS responded as well as could be expected under the circumstances. Disasters and emergencies like these fires will always have areas that could be improved... hindsight is a wonderful thing.

Some comments:

The response to the Sept - Dec fires was an improvement on the response to an earlier fire (Bruxner Rd) in Feb 2019.

Communications were better in the latter fire.

The Fires Near Me app worked pretty well and I was impressed with the accuracy and timeliness of the advice.

1.4 Any other matters

Despite this improvement in response over the year, I feel the following could improve Response even further:

There should be a greater preparedness (better planning by the IMT) to keep some resources in reserve for a concerted effort to backburn AT NIGHT. I noticed several times that resources were sufficient, or even over-sufficient in daytime, but the fire containment effort stalled (opportunities lost) when strike teams and units were stood down in the evening (often leaving only a skeleton team to patrol the fireline, but not sufficient to do strategic backburns in the coolest times). Backburning at night should be considered more seriously and resources rested and prepared for night effort.

Also, Strike teams from out-of-region, should be more readily split up. On several occasions I noticed full strike teams, typically 2-4 tankers and 4-5 Cat 1's driving along narrow bush trails, (patrolling or assessing the extent of fire) somewhat aimlessly, when smaller numbers of units would be more appropriate. There seemed to be a reluctance, either from Fire Control IMT or from Strike Team Leaders, to split the teams for a more spread out firefighting effort. In a more general way, strike teams from out-of-region would all benefit from having an experienced local firefighter embedded, so as to improve knowledge of local conditions, geography, assets, comms etc.

Food and catering was pretty good, including when the Army was doing it. Poor communications and teams often moving around presented a challenge to deliver Welfare at an appropriate time (probably unavoidable, but will be improved with satellite tracking of vehicles).

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