



## Your details

Mr

Title

First name

Guy

Last name

Sim

## 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

My wife and I reside on a rural property of 40 hectares at Running Stream. I also look after my elderly mother on the adjoining property. My brother has another adjoining property. Total area is 110 hectares.

My wife and I are retired, we are not primary producers, but allow a neighbor to adjust his cattle on our properties to ensure that the grass is eaten to reduce fuel loads.

On the 21st December 2019 our property was totally burnt by the Palmer's Oakey/Upper Turon bushfire. In total we lost 4 sheds and my mother's house sustained minor damage. The entire property was burnt.

The fire came within 3 metres of our house and sheds as even closer to my brothers house and shed. Miraculously my mother's

house was not destroyed. Her garden was totally destroyed. The RFS did not initially consider her house able to be defended and relocated to another property. It was not until well after the fire front had passed that they realised the house was not burnt and controlled the fires in her garden surrounding the house.

Due to the prolonged drought water was extremely limited on our properties. Low pressure (Wobble T) sprinklers were placed around her house on the 21st and it was their larger coverage that stopped her house from burning. The lack of water restricted their use to her house only.

Of the 110 ha every tree, fence, pine plantation, blade of grass was burnt. Machinery, including a tractor, trailers, caravans were burnt as well.

Since the bushfire we have had to purchase a new tractor, replace all fences, accept a vastly reduced price for our burnt pine plantation (\$1.20 per metric tonne). Prior to the fire we purchased a 1000 litre fire fighting unit and trailer to suit. This was used to fight fires on our property as well as adjoining properties.

My wife was devastated by the damage to our 9 acre English style garden. We had had to remove 87 burnt trees and shrubs since the fires.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

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### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

The prolonged drought (over 3 years) was the major contributing factor in my opinion. The prolonged summer heat of 2019 and low humidity preceding the fire compounded this.

The vast amount of fuel available within the surrounds also compounded the devastating effects of the fire.

The Black Scrub, a 2000 ha area of virgin forest, that has not burnt in living memory provided ample fuel, geographies, topographies and a pathway to Running Stream from the origin of the fire.

Local pine plantations were another factor in the spread of the fire. Note: In times of less heat and drought pine plantations can be an asset in fire management.

Despite the drought and heat, the existing grasslands also provided fuel and transport for the fire. Spot fires from embers were amazing to view, not only their distance from the fire front but also how quickly they became fire fronts in their own right.

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### 1.2 Preparation and planning

State-wide, as well as locally, there was little evidence of controlled burning in the local area. One area, on the western side of Cherry Tree Hill was accomplished in 2019. This may have stopped one residence being impacted by the fire.

This controlled burn clearly demonstrated the bureaucracy, litigation proofing and hesitancy of conducting such burns by the RFS.

It is clear that there are insufficient non-voluntary personnel to conduct such burns safely and in a timely fashion. This is also

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reflected in the recent and ongoing staff cuts within the public service, including NPWS and the Forestry Corporation. Even the name, Forestry Corporation, reflects the profit driven and cost reductions so sought by the existing state government. This hampers existing staff's ability to undertake hazard reduction burning.

A review of the Forestry Corporations Fire Management Policy quickly reveals that there is no concrete requirements to conduct controlled burnings. By not have specific targets to be burnt each year it is not possible to provide a need for specific staff to be employed for this role.

Their main priorities are fire prevention and rapid response to fires. While this is necessary it only increases fuel levels for future fires. Similar strategies are listed in the fire management programs for NPWS.

Since the bush fire a high percentage of old growth trees have dropped limbs and all gum trees have shed leaves and bark as part of their coping mechanisms to fire. Even now there is a dangerous amount of fuel within the fire effected areas.

The amount of gum trees and other vegetation along main and minor roads negatively effected their use as a firebreak.

The ongoing media campaign for all properties to have a fire plan I feel was and is effective. It does make people focus on fire prevention and managing their property, livelihood and safety in the event of a fire.

Our main issue with planning and preparation was the lack of water on our properties.

Issues noted after inspecting residences and buildings destroyed highlighted the fact that the actual location of the residences do not assist their survival in a bush fire. Building on top of forest covered ridges or in forested gullies greatly increase the chance of the buildings being destroyed.

Councils should be able to mandate that eucalyptus trees are not permitted within 100 metres of a primary residence. People need to be aware of the volatility of these native trees. Indeed people need to be encouraged to plant deciduous trees near their properties to bushfire proof them. This will also reduce heating and cooling costs for those houses. A simple drive around Lithgow or Mt Wilson will highlight the ability of deciduous trees to prevent fire damage to properties. A trip to Dargan will highlight the destructiveness of gum trees.

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### **1.3 Response to bushfires**

The response to the fires by the local RFS brigades was of the highest order. The public were kept up to date with the progress of the fires and what was being done to prevent escalation of them.

The lack of approval from regional office in Mudgee for the local brigade to conduct back burning operations in the evenings (An easterly breeze at night was always present) was an issue that may have lead to greater property damage on the 21st December.

It was also noted that the brigades fighting the initial Palmer's Oakey fire also did not undertake any back burning, but rather waited until the fire burnt to them. This then allowed it to cross the Turon River into the Black Scrub, see above.

In areas of high fuel loads, topographic extremes and high wind areas there may be to much reliance of containment lines which

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often prove ineffective due to embers and spot fires.

The lack of approved back burning appears to be linked to the non-mandated off season controlled burning. This probably a reflection on the risk adverse nature of today's society and the blame laid on public authorities when some does go wrong.

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#### **1.4 Any other matters**

The local fire brigade and residents did a fantastic job during the fires. Their efforts were Herculean and ongoing as was the catering efforts.

The council has assisted where has been able to and has sought community input into the spending of the Federal Government's Bush Fire Recovery funds.

The council has cleared burnt trees from the Castlereagh Highway and minor roads within Running Stream which will reduce the amount of fuel available for future fires and enhance the utilisation of those roads as containment lines in future fires as well.

The only sour point here is that the Mid Western Regional Council spent \$250,000 of the original \$1 million on water tanks in localities that weren't effected by the bush fires and were to be used primarily by the council for future road works etc. The funds were to be allocated to the communities impacted by the fires for the purposes of recovery, re-building and replanting. The residents of the local communities of Running Stream and Olinda/Nullo Mountain were disgusted with this allocation of funding. The funds were approved at an extraordinary council meeting and did not have any local input into the decision. The council further compounded this by stating that the RFS recommended the purchase of the tanks, when in fact they did not.

Laing O'Rourke have commenced cleaning up of destroyed building in Running Stream and are doing a fantastic job.

### **Supporting documents or images**

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