



Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Jane

Last name

Lawler

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

I live in an area affected by bushfires and was not evacuated – we choose to stay and defend.
However, I suffered personal and financial loss as my family property on the South Coast was totally destroyed by bushfire on 31/12/2019

Family property on South Coast
Property name & address: "Cadgee" [REDACTED]

Near Nerrigundah on the South Coast of NSW.

My family : Mother Catherine Lawler (87), sister Moira & her daughter Bethany were trapped on the South coast property, which had been totally destroyed by fire on the morning of 31/12/2019.

After that, our main aim and purpose became getting them any emergency help we could.
We could not get to them – at that stage every major highway was closed. Princes' / Hume
We had our own emergency here with two fires bearing down on us.
Greenwattle from the North and Morton from the South.
We were glued to the 'Fires Near Me' app. I thought it coped really well considering.

At the time we knew it was not up to date with extent of the fires. Knowing what we do now – there was no way it could have kept up, the fire moved so fast & who could have ever imagined it?

The truth was unbelievable – it still is.

My first call was the local police in Bodalla, then Moruya. No answer and cut off. No option to leave a message.
After that, I called every friend, neighbour and relative that I thought could help and get help to them.
We had very capable friends holidaying in the area that we were able to contact. They had been to Cadgee previously, knew the situation & were prepared.
We knew they could help but they were not allowed through to the property. The RSF stopped them because they weren't locals, even though they explained who they were and where they had to go.
After a series of phone calls, we established that my family were physically ok – luckily they could still get service on a mobile phone and get messages through to us.
They had some food & rainwater, the cottage & tanks had not burnt. They had sheltered in place, had saved their lives, the working dogs and the machinery shed with car, tractor etc.
A remarkable achievement under the most terrifying circumstances. Unbelievable. So brave.
After the power went out, they still had gravity feed water pressure from the water reservoir on the hill. The pressure was enough to work the sprinklers. All worked well till any exposed poly pipe melted.

██████████ from Nerrigundah was the first to cut his way through to Cadgee. It took him hours working with a chainsaw & ute, another neighbour helped with a tractor – he too had lost everything in the Nerrigundah bushfire.
██████████ has worked for us for 20 years. ██████████ & his wife ██████████ had lost his home around midmorning 31/12/2019 in the Nerrigundah bushfire.

The main concern was feeding & watering the cattle (350+ head of cows and calves).

On the 2/1/2020 a cousin from Braidwood with generator, leads, food and 2 bales of hay for cattle, managed to get through, he could not stay because his property was under threat. He had been fighting that fire for weeks. Exhausted.

On the 3/1/2020 ██████████ (a locally owned family business) managed to make their way to Cadgee in a small truck with feed for cattle. Above & beyond
On 6/1/2020 Glenn (my husband) & a good friend got through on the Hume, then down the Brown Mountain & back up the Princes' Hwy. They took poly pipe, fittings, wire, food, ice, another generator etc.
They stayed for several days, fixed the water pipes which had melted and got the pump working and filled the reservoir so the cattle could be watered. Another major issue.
By this stage my mother, sister and niece were exhausted and at breaking point, so to have those fellows stay and 'take the weight' was lifesaving.

We had organised a truck load of hay from Victoria on the 9/1/2019. Finally, we had enough hay for a while and could start to focus on the next thing.

13/5/2020. So much has happened since. So many friends and family have supported us. An unbelievable outpouring of goodwill.

After the fire came the flood. The Tuross River turned black with soot and ash. The river will never be the same again. But the grass has grown and some trees have come back, so many weeds and much erosion. Have seen some bird life and native animals are make a slow appearance.

The cattle have somehow survived and are doing well.

Could our world have changed any more? No body knew what was next ... How could we have imagined that a virus was going to affect us so much. Just when you think things cannot get any worse.

But thankfully we are all well, so we continue to move forward.

We have spent alot of time collecting tin and iron that blew everywhere, have now retrieved most of it and have it on house sites ready for the clean up to happen. Lang O'Rourke have been great. Very professional and understanding.

We have applied for the ' LLS - Suppoting our neighbours public land boundary fencing program' and will hopefully be successful. This will enable us to complete more fencing. So much destroyed.

We continue to work on rebuilding the stock yards. We are making plans to rebuild one of the houses and a new shed.

We have had hay donated, which is great, so we will have feed for winter.

Mum is continuing to live and work on the farm and in the community.

The fires in and around Braidwood continued on after Cadgee burned and this was very sad for us all, but particularly for Mum as she had many friends who lost so much and much family history that was destroyed.

I suppose that will be the untold story in this unprecedented event - apart from the obvious loss, it is the history and the untold affect it will have on every one involved.

Too sad.

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

Drought - No rain - extremely dry - unbelievable, continuous wind.

Insufficient cool burns over many years. Incredible amount of fuel load.

1.2 Preparation and planning

As soon as there is a nature disaster or other state of emergency called there must be a system put in place that will control the supply and distribution of food and essential services.

People should not be allowed to hoard food or supplies. We only go to town and shop, maybe every couple of weeks. When we do go, we bulk buy. Not because we hoard but because we might not get back to town if flooded in or who knows.... !

There must be some system that can be put in place to sort this out!

Holiday makers should not be allowed to go back into these areas until it is safe & they should not be allowed to take all the supplies. I understand that they spend money and make the economy work but this situation was unprecedented and therefore should have been dealt differently.

There will have to be more controlled burns. The bush can not be locked up and not managed.

It has been locked up now for too long, for no purpose and look at the outcome. It has been totally destroyed – never to be the same again. For what?

All the animals and birds are gone. Burned in the most horrific circumstances. No escape for them. They tried to go to the river to survive and they died there.

The bush is silent, you cannot imagine it. It is like a moon scape. No life.

The National Parks have to be staffed by experienced people who have ability and institutional memory. So many of them have been moved on or given redundancies. Good people who knew and understood the country had established relationships with landowners.

Examples of controlled burns:

5/7/2019 : We did a controlled burn at the back of Racecourse paddock. This burn saved a home of our neighbour. Yes, it burned again but it did not burn as hot. It will regenerate and it will be a source of food and shelter for native animals sooner. The surrounding bush was total scorched and the difference between is visible.

Early winter 2019 burn between the Swamp Trail & Nerrigundah Ridge Road was completed and burned slow and cool. Yes, it burned again but not as hot – the trees still had green leaves on them after the fire went through and the understory has already regenerated. It is a totally different story in the bush directly across the road.

October 2019 after the Forestry had completed logging on Belowra Road, Belimbla turn off and Gulph Trig Road, they completed a burn which was successful but flared up a couple of times as the weather was so dry and windy.

We believe this burn saved Nerrigundah from the Big Belimbla Creek fire.

Slow, cool burns are the answer. In will have to be a solution reached between all stake holders and it will have to be in totally cooperation.

No more threats made by individuals to prosecuted government departments if the fire comes onto their private property, that they will see them in court.

If they have shared boundaries to these areas, then there will have to be arrangements made to carry through.

These individuals have now lost their homes and all their property, wouldn't it have been so much better to have carry on with burning these areas that have had historical burns completed over time.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Local Lands Service, were outstanding and we received hay for cattle.

The Army arrived (hooray!!) - they were amazed at the devastation and returned with donated supplies – bottles of water and an incredible amount of food. Some fresh food, a pineapple and oranges. They did all they could – waiting for direction. They just wanted to help. What a gift and so good for the spirit to have them there.

After that and as the weeks went by we continued to travel from the Highlands to the coast to help with whatever we could.

Rural Assistance Authority have been outstanding with advice and help. Applying for the available grant was achievable, very easy to understand and successful! That money will make a big impact in the recovery.

Buy A Bale - Need for Feed - Rapid Relief. All donated fodder

from all over Australia – amazing and much needed. All these volunteer agencies have been absolutely great.

Blaze Aid. Cannot speak highly enough of Blaze Aid and their incredible service. How uplifting to have these people arrive of your property and just get in and work. Happy to be there and help!

Fire and Rescue arrived – about 5 people. One of them was a lady from Eurobodalla Shire. They GPS marked the remains of both Cadgee & Wattlegrove homesteads. Asbestos etc.

(Many weeks later they arrived back and sprayed to two homesteads for asbestos – took photos of everything that had been destroyed – sheds, dog yards, stock yards, etc. This was after flood.) Also gave advice about registering with Red Cross etc at Batemans Bay Disaster Centre.

Very understanding and helpful. Shocked at devastation and lack of assistance.

Essential Energy, crews from all over NSW, did everything they could but Cadgee was without power for 55 days. That was very difficult. So hot and dry – People coming to work and help – trying to get meals and make do.

After that – I applied for help from St Vincent de Pauls, they were very easy to deal with.

They required certain information that was understandable and easy to acquire.

ie: Address of property – ABN – drivers licence – PIC number
The Salvation Army made getting help a big task, it took a lot of time and effort to come to decision that Mum was eligible. I do not think they had any idea of the situation & how bad it was.

Red Cross: Have registered with them in person at Moruya and Batemans Bay and online: to this date they have not contacted any of us.

Have since filled out application for grant to damaged property, which was straight forward, but have not heard back from them yet. Realise they would have a massive amount of applications.

UPDATE: The Red Cross have since contacted me several times and their response has been amazing. They needed more information, which I supplied in the form of reports from Lang O'Rourke - satellite images and in depth reports on damage etc. Long story short, they have given us outstanding support and we will never forget it.

Thank you Red Cross!!

Live Traffic app was really good and helped us with planning our trip back and forth to the coast through the fires.

In general the three questions I was continually asked when asking for help were:

Are you insured?

Are you Aboriginal?

Did you lose your permanent place of residency?

My answers were always: Yes, no & no. But why should it make any difference? We lost everything else as did so many others.

There was no response. No one came near them for weeks, except for family, friends & relations.

They/we were on our own – The entire South Coast of NSW was in devastation.

It was up to your resilience, resourcefulness & perseverance.

To the date, 3 months after – we have not been approached by either local Police or our local RFS.

We understand that they were very busy, but it is still hard to comprehend.

Communication between agencies and all levels of Government Departments needs to improve.

Forestry, Water resources, National Parks/Wilderness etc.

As my mother is not on a pension so the registration for help

became quite a process.

When my mother was finally able to get to a Disaster Recovery Centre and register, we thought that would be all we needed to do. But apparently that centre was "off line" at that particular time and NO details were entered that day or since. When there was no response, we rang to ask what was going on? Only then was the situation explained to us.

To solve all this, Mum had to be taken back to a Service NSW centre to go through the complete process again.

Please understand with all these processes, we were dealing with a damaged phone system, that was working through a radio land line phone diverted to an ancient mobile phone plugged into an aerial on the roof through a window! This is still the case. The phone system still has not be fixed as there was and still is so much damage.

Also through this process as stated above there was NO Power. Most people I spoke to who weren't of a rural mindset, could not understand the situation and it would become really difficult to explain the extent of the devastation.

1.4 Any other matters

There should be more "point persons" who are across all levels of recovery, who are available and approachable.

I'm sure there will be after this.

It would have been so helpful to have one person arrive and listen to our particular situation and then explain and advise as to what was available in all levels of government and other agencies etc. How to approach all the forms and not have to explain the/your situation over and over again.

Everyone was very polite, no one was rude. Most people went above and beyond in their jobs. There are a couple that I will never forget and hopefully will one day, meet.

All of this submission has been sent to the Royal commission.
Thank you.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- photos fire Cadgee for royal commission.docx
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Photo taken Monday 30/12/2019 6.00pm from veranda of Cadgee Cottage.

Fire at: Badja Forest Rd Countegany – this would be the fire that destroys Belowra & Cobargo



Photos taken Tuesday 31/12/2019 3.00am from veranda of Cadgee Cottage [REDACTED]



Photo taken Monday 30/12/2019 6.00pm from veranda of Cadgee Cottage.

Within the next 12 hours this fire would arrive & destroy everything within its path.

By 10.00am the next day the fire front had passed, they were in darkness. Total devastation.

Fire at: Big Belimbla Creek – this would be the fire that destroys Cadgee

Photos also show the amount of open bare ground between bush & farm infrastructure – yards, sheds, homes etc. Open paddocks, no pasture as drought had taken its toll.



Cadgee Homestead (early 1800's)

Destroyed within a couple of hours on 31/12/2019

Photo taken New Years Day 2020