

## Your details

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**Title**

Mr

**First name**

Jason

**Last name**

Mcdermott

**Email**

## 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**

My name is Jason McDermott. Myself, my wife Jodie and our 2 children Taz 9 and Millah 7 live at [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Conjola Park. We have lived in our house for approx. 6.5 years and absolutely loved our little place we called home and have completely fallen in love with our little community where we lived. This was the first house my Jodie and myself had purchased and we both worked very hard for everything we owned. Our world has been completely turned upside down since new years eve as the fires tore through Conjola Park and destroyed our home and took everything we had.

In the lead up to new years eve when the fires started down south and headed towards Bawley Point we had been on high alert. Jodie in particular as she had experienced a bush fire coming into her families property when she was living with her family at Vincentia in 2001. I have also grown up in the Milton-Ulladulla area and both my parents

families are from also the area so I had a lot of family near the fire zone. So we were both constantly watching and checking the fires near me app and looking on the RFS website. A week and a half before new years eve on The Saturday, we experienced a very high danger day. Jodie had packed a bag of cloths and a few things and left home with the kids and headed into Mollymook to stay at my mums house. Conjola experienced a lot of smoke, burnt leaves and sticks falling from the sky but nothing hot. At 3pm the sky went completely dark. A southerly buster hit and cleared the threat by early evening and Jodie and the kids returned home that night. As the days went on we continued to monitor the conditions with the app ,website, news, Facebook post and just personal local knowledge by checking winds etc. From what we were being told the fire threat had moved away from our area and was out towards Nelligen/Braidwood area in the south west and Nowra/Kangaroo Valley area in the north west. The only fires that were in our area were " small controlled backburns".

In the days before new years eve we were told by our close friends and neighbours Michael and Maree [REDACTED] that National Parks had made containment lines and were going to start a back burn on Maree's parents property on [REDACTED] rd. This was particular worrying as there was a catastrophic weather warning for new years eve. They informed us that it was lite the day before new years eve and had been left unattended.

On the morning of new years eve, I was at work as a greenskeeper down at [REDACTED] club setting up the greens for play. Jodie and the kids were at home. The morning had actually looked rather promising as there was not much wind and actually less smoke then what there had been on previous days. It was still very hot (38 degrees at 9:30am). I received a text message of a screen shot from Jodie showing me that she had been sent a notification stating that Conjola Park, Lake Conjola, Manyana, Bendalong and Yatte Yatta fire conditions had eased but some small fire in area and just monitor the conditions. Jodie had felt quite relieved and also had unpacked the suit case she still had packed from previously evacuating. That was until she received a call from her father that he had herd on ABC Radio that the fire had jumped the highway at Myrtle Gully (Approx. 500 meters away straight line) and was heading east. She Also Received a call from Maree asked if she could drop her son to our house as the back burn on her parents property was out of control. When I checked my phone at work, I had several missed calls from Jodie so I called her back. She was panicking, herself and the kids had been pick up from the front of our house in the club courtesy bus driving by the managers partner. He brought them down to me as Jodie was getting too stressed out to drive. I loaded my ute with all the hoses from work and once Jodie and the kids were with me I drove them straight back to the highway to see if it was still open. The highway was blocked to northbound traffic and I asked the police officer if we could still go south. He said he would give us 5 mins/ 10 minutes max. We quickly rushed back home (Approx. 400 meters from highway) and put Jodie and the kids in her car with no time to pack anything. I drove them back to the highway and got them around the corner. I jumped out and kissed Jodie and the kids goodbye. My son was having a panic attack so it was so hard to leave them but promised everything will be ok and it was reassuring know that they were driving away to safety. I took quite a few photo's so I have the exact times when things where happening. All times used in this submission are from my pictures.

I rushed back home at 11:15am and started rushing around packing up anything flammable around the house like our boat cover and shade sail over our deck. I set the hoses up all over the back yard and set the big 50 meter, 1 inch greens hose up over the front yard and hooked it up on the roof. I then went up on the roof with towels and blocked all the down pipes. When I went to turn the hose on, not one single drop came out. We had no water at all. Our house had a northerly outlook across the valley and after realising that we had no water. I looked across towards the smoke and thats when I seen the first flames come through. We can see the phone tower near Myrtle Gulley Bridge across the valley, the tower stands a lot taller then the tree line. The flames came through a lot taller then the tower and travelled along the ridge down towards Lakeside Drive area. The flames travelled at a incredible speed along the tops of the trees and took about 5 to 10 seconds to get from the phone tower down to Lakeside drive area and reached out over the lake and start spotting on the other side. At this time I was calling my mate at Manyana to warn him that the fire was heading that direction very fast because of the very strong westerly wind, not thinking it would travel/spread across the valley south against the wind towards our houses. I recorded video clips of when 2 helicopters came and the first one picked up a bucket from a dam at a property below our place at 11:21am. It was sitting at the height of the tree line behind us while filling up. It only took one bucket from there because the fire then started coming through that area with flames reaching the same height as what the helicopter was sitting as recorded. This was at 11:38am. They dropped around 8 buckets and disappeared once the flames had came near our houses. The last photo I took was when I left our house. This was at 12:42pm. I left with the clothes on my back, laptop, my Dog and my daughters pet rabbit. The fire had travelled up the hill and was hitting the house behind us and was nearly at our back fence. I left home and went to go down to the lake to safety. I knew I couldn't got down Kurrajong crescent as the fire was going through that direction so I kept going along Lake Entrance rd. I got to the 80km/h signs and was cut off by large flames across the road. So I quickly turned around and drove back up past our houses. The Fire was at the back of them and trees where bursting into flames. I was thinking of getting to the

highway but as I went around the last bend about 70 meters from the highway. I got cut off again by large flames, I was trapped. All this time I did not see or pass any fire trucks or emergency services anywhere. I took a picture there and it was 12:49pm. I quickly reversed and turned around and headed back towards my house and found a open spot on the road away from a tree. This was out the front of our neighbors house (Jen and Ron [REDACTED]). This was about 100 meters from my house. As I looked down at my house, the shrubs on the other side of the road were starting to catch fire. I seen Ron running around his house and he came to see what I was doing. I told him I cant go anywhere and I was going to sit it out in my ute. He offered me to come down to his house and jump on a hose as he was on his own and had his own fire fighting equipment set up. Before driving into his driveway I took a photo and called 000 at 12:51pm. The operator asked which property was on fire and I said all of them along Lake Entrance road near my address. She said ok and that was the end of the call. No indication if any help or anything was coming. By the time I parked at Ron's place, it wasn't long until we started to get burning ember attacks and everything started to ignite. I took a picture at 1:08pm just before the first main fire front came roaring through from the west. The flames where double the height of the trees. We both soak ourselves and kept putting flames out from around the house. He had a sprinkler system on the roof which was running off a electric pump. when the front came through we lost power and it shut down. at 1:25pm (next photos) after the main front had went through I quickly ran up to my house. All the houses were engulfed in flames with large explosions constantly going off. Everything from the grass, gardens and trees to power poles were all burning or burnt. I stood out the front of our house for several moments feeling so helpless and watched everything burn, this was at 1:34pm. At this time phone services were starting to go down. I was trying to call my wife to tell her I was ok but everything was gone. I could hear her but she couldn't hear me. my mobile ended up going flat because family and friends were trying call but they couldn't hear me and messages weren't going through, I ran back to Ron's house and jumped back on a hose for a while. During this time a firetruck with crew inside parked in the front of Ron's house. We kept looking up towards them to see if they were going to get out and come and see if we were ok or needed help. They didn't get out of the truck and disappeared after about 15 minutes. On the opposite side of the road there was a property owner defending his property with no water at all.

Once it all settled down and Ron's house was safe we waked up to my house to check it out. I'm guessing this was about 4pm. Most buildings were flattened and smouldering. A lot of things were still burning. After not being able to get through to Jodie all I could think about was how much Jodie, kids and the rest of my family would be worried so I wanted to get back to Mollymook to be with them. As I was leaving approx. 5pm I seen Michael [REDACTED] and his son walking in from the highway. He told me what had happened up at his in laws property and I told him that our houses were gone. I drove them back up to the houses.

When I walked up to the house with Ron earlier at about 4pm, as we walked back along the road another firetruck was attempting to drive in lake Entrance road. We walked past and were going to talk to them but they just waved and didn't even put there windows down. The second occasion after being leaving our houses with Michael and Zac, a highway patrol came down the road. I slowed down in my ute and had my window down to talk to them but they did the same thing. Gave us a wave and didn't even put there window down. I think at this point just a simple "are you guys alright" would have meant the world to us.

I arrived home at about 6pm and we had to go and register at the evacuation center to say we were alive. I know it was no ones fault under the circumstances and timing of the incident, but it was a surreal experience having to walk through the fair/carnival hardly being able to see for burning my eyes with everyone/mostly tourist having fun with no idea what had just happened hours earlier.

I think that there are a few main issues that I feel need to be dealt with. Firstly the main one being why did national parks back burn the day before a catastrophic fire warning had been issued. These weather warnings were issued nearly a week ahead so everyone knew about it. Also why was it left unattended? I have received hotspot and satellite pictures from new years eve. You can clearly see the back burn out of control. The other hotspots in the picture are far to the west of Conjola up on the escarpment of pointer mountain and they are very small compared to the out of control back burn. I have been told that National parks where also advised not to light the back burn, so why did they? who was the one who gave them authority?

The other main issue that really needs to be dealt with is the water situation. At the meeting at Conjola hall, Shoalhaven water were trying to explain why we didn't have any water. Firstly he explained that because everybody down in lake Conjola knew the fire was coming were all using water to hose everything down. I don't know how true this is as a lot of people I have spoken to have said they had no warning the fire was coming. Then later when questioned about the water pressure along lake entrance road in our area, he explained that we are on our own water line from a reservoir located along lake Entrance rd. How can we have no water pressure because everyone down the bottom is using water when we are on a different line? Some neighbours have been living there from upwards of 20 years and its all ways been the same. We couldn't even turn the kitchen tap on if some one was

having a shower as they would lose water in the shower. We have complained several times since we have been there and nothing happens. I really think this needs to be addressed especially before we all start rebuilding possibly bigger homes.

Another issue was the warning system. For the weeks prior to the fire travelling north and around Conjola and joining up with the Tianjara fire. Not once was Conjola mentioned in any of the alerts. And for my wife to receive a alert saying conditions had eased in our area in the morning of new years eve. I remember seeing a post on Facebook from a mate who is a local tree lopper. His family is very local and have a lot of family members who have been farming in the area for a long time. He sent out a warning about 2 to 3 weeks before warning people of North of Milton, Conjola, Fishermans Paradise, Manyana and Bendalong that the only buffer zone between the fire and our area was the Kingingman area which had a fire the year before. He said that everyone should be on high alert because if we get the wind and conditions the fire will get through there and be right at us. This was long before our area was even mentioned in alerts. I was in the area the whole day and the only alert I received on my phone was when phone service came back on I think about 5 days later saying "fire is in Conjola and it to late to leave". Bit of a kick in the guts. I found myself constantly listening to the fire radio app which gave me more of an idea of where the fire was and what it was doing.

I think the fact that such a large amount of firetrucks/crews were sent down south early that morning knowing that there was a uncontrolled fire happening so close to villages need to be questioned.

On several occasions in the weeks prior to new years eve, the highway was closed at Milton because there was a fire threatening the highway towards Nowra. I think there needs to be some way that people in local villages such as Little Forest, Conjola and Fisherman's Paradise should be allowed to pass through road blocks if there is no threat to there village. One occasion we got turned around at Milton after going to the supermarket. We had only passed through 5 minutes earlier. While standing at the top of the Stoney Hill it was clearly visible that there was no smoke or fire anywhere near Conjola. We later found out that the highway was closed because a fire at Fall Creek (45 minutes north) was threatening the highway.

The final issue I would like to mention is about the BAL ratings to rebuild. As mentioned earlier I work at the [REDACTED] club. a lot of the members have been in the area for a very long time. Some have even lived here for 70 plus years or have grown up here. when asked if they have ever seen an fire like this before, everybody says no they haven't. I personally believe it shouldn't have happened. And wouldn't have happened if the back burn had not been lite when it did. So now that all the people have lost our homes from something that should not have happened, when we go to rebuild we are going to be hit with very high BAL ratings. I hardly think this is fair as is seems like we are being penalised for something out of our control. Personally our insurance wasn't enough to cover to rebuild so we have to get another loan and go into a lot more debt. Now on top of that we are going to be hit with very high BAL ratings which means very high cost on top of our rebuilds. So at this point of time we don't even know if we are going to be able to even rebuild. We got told at the meeting at Conjola hall that we lost a lot of houses in Conjola Park from house-to-house fires. If we all have houses rebuilt to very high fire standards, how much difference will it make if we still don't have water to help fight the fire. You cant fight fire without water right? If the BAL ratings are now determined by the distance you are from trees, I think there should be some assistance of some sort for home owners to be able to remove trees/bush inside that area to make it safe. Because lets face it we all want to protect our assets and have the area surround as safe a possible. A lot there is a lot of national park and state forest surround our area. it would be nice to see these maintained more and also go back to back burning in winter when conditions are favourable. Also listening to the traditional owners of the land and take in some of their advice on how to do controlled burns and look after the land.

Thank you for letting me tell my story and taking the time to read my submission.

Jason McDermott

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

## Supporting documents or images

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**Attach files**

- 80844618\_10162727516825623\_1993665360003334144\_o.jpg
- 81304484\_10162727515915623\_7080937225990438912\_o.jpg
- 81507832\_10162727519585623\_127353442548056064\_o.jpg













