



Your details

Mrs

Title

First name

Jenny

Last name

Robb

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

We were aware of the Border fire after it impacted Mallacoota in Victoria on 31 Dec 19. We kept updated via ABC radio, Fires near me app and local contacts as well as keeping an eye on the weather forecasts. We knew we had a few days before the fire would impact us so we took all valuables to Eden as (at that stage) it was safer than Kiah. The forecast was for strong southerly winds on Sat 4th Jan 20 so we knew we had to be ready for impact on that day. We cleared everything off our verandah, completely doused the house and yard with water and turned the tap on a 5,000 gal tank above the back of the house as we left after lunch on 4th Jan. It slowly emptied around the house. We also put wet towels across any windows or doors that opened to the outside.

We evacuated to Eden and stayed at the Eden wharf on 4th & 5th January. We knew the fire had heavily impacted Kiah. We learnt on 6th January that our house was still standing but a

neighbour who had stayed called to say our big shed was still on fire and our tractor and other gear was in there. We got out of town, he had moved our tractor the shed was destroyed and still alight. RFS crews attended. We also had a log bridge across a creek that was alight and had re-ignited grasses along its edge. No RFS were available so passing Police Rescue attended. It eventually ran out of fuel as everything around it had already burnt. Our house was saved - just. A window had cracked and the fire burnt to within 1 metre right along the back. The garden, garage/garden/wood shed and our large storage sheds were all destroyed. We had no phone for a week, no power for 3 weeks. 2 close neighbouring houses were also destroyed so we camped in the house because we'd heard there were looters.

We ran a caravan storage business, 2 campsites and a kayak tour business from our property. The storage is currently closed until a new shed can be erected. We can't operate the campsites or kayak tours until the Covid situation settles.

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

Poor land management of publicly owned lands has been a major contributor to the intensity and scale of these fires, together with climate change. With a land that is becoming drier and hotter through climate change, these agencies are behind the times in acknowledging how this would impact the landscape. Instead of increasing staffing to address the issues this raised, we have seen a gradual but comprehensive reduction in staffing of State Govt. agencies such as Forestry and National Parks in regional areas.

LAND CANNOT BE "MANAGED" FROM SYDNEY. That is my strong message. While humans reside in and around Australia's native forests and grasslands, there needs to be a level of management to ensure the safety of people and built assets. This just can't be done when our agencies have little or no presence on the ground in these places. The strain of managing a catastrophic situation like these fires then landed on the shoulders of an already heavily burdened volunteer RFS. My husband and I were active RFS volunteers for about 15 years but resigned due to the extra stress. My husband was self-employed and one of the only licensed truck drivers so was called to absolutely everything. He would work all night as a volunteer, then have to work all day for himself. It's too much.

In a society where many homes are reliant on 2 incomes, finding and retaining volunteers will be a constant challenge. It seems the government has just assumed they could keep fronting up forever.

Wrong. So this is a chance to re-invigorate regional areas by once again locating government agency officers where these people need to be - in the country. Land management requires arms, legs and chainsaws!

I am an avid environmentalist - but there are HUGE areas of forest and National Parks around us where a big fire can just grow bigger. There needs to be a kilometre wide strip where forest / Parks adjoin private property to help protect humans.

There needs to be people here to maintain fire trails and forest

tracks - it does not have to destroy the environment but just "manage" it.

And our Federal Government needs to wake up to the impact of climate change. We will be under constant threat of catastrophic fires into the future unless/until action is taken to help slow the warming process.

1.2 Preparation and planning

See above. We need to STOP being so reliant on volunteers. They will always be there and that's great - they can deal with small outbreaks, control burns etc. But this was something very different and the spread of resources was very thin - especially down on the Far South Coast. We know that areas north of Sydney had a much larger contingent of help than we did. We know that our RFS and Fire & Rescue trucks were pulled back to a bridge only about 5km south of Eden - so the Border Fire was left to build and build and get hotter and hotter simply because there were no resources available to stop it earlier.

PLAN for fire - it will happen again. And put PAID staff in these areas as a permanent fixture so that their sole purpose is to help PREVENT the situation from becoming as big as it did. Volunteers will always be there to help but to rely wholly on them is completely unfair. CREATE REGIONAL JOBS by re-establishing offices in places like Eden where our Forestry and National Parks workforces have been completely decimated.

1.3 Response to bushfires

See above. We know from reliable RFS sources that the areas south of Batemans Bay had less available trucks and volunteers than areas to the north. The Border Fire was HUGE and became bigger and bigger as it moved towards us. There are HUGE areas of unoccupied land there, minimal access into the areas and this enabled this fire to grow, to create its own weather and to be so destructive.

Fires near Me app was nowhere near as accurate or up-to-date than the Vic Emergency app - they should be the SAME! The app showed the fire where it crossed the border as a straight line - how ridiculous!! From 31 Dec to 4 January we had no idea where the fire was - the app did not change for a week. We can't blame RFS - we can blame lack of government planning.

We also know that Eden was to become a sacrificial lamb because of the above - in other words, it was decided that there was not enough resource to protect an entire town so there were constant mixed messages about where people could go for safety.

EVACUATION CENTRES - firstly people were told to go to the Eden Wharf. Then in a ramshackle manner on Sunday 5th Jan, people were told to immediately move to Merimbula. Many locals knew that late in the evening of 4th Jan, the fire had approached Eden from the south and with a wind change, suddenly changed course to move northwest. Merimbula is North of Eden - so people were terrified at the thought of driving TOWARDS where the fire was moving. It was incredibly traumatic and stressful to be told one day "this is where you can be safe" and the next day "we cannot guarantee your safety here".

Also - local Eden AFL club had to cater for 100s of people who evacuated from Mallacoota on 30th/31st Dec as the fire approached there. Many were holiday makers with the thought that once the threat had abated, they would return to holidays in Mallacoota. They arrived en masse at the football oval and suddenly a bunch of local volunteers were feeding 100s of evacuees, offering them showers etc. This is what happens when States "do their own thing" and don't collaborate. It's ridiculous. The BORDER FIRE DID NOT KNOW IT WAS CROSSING A

BORDER!!

Evacuation Centre resourcing needs revisiting and planning. We need a force of trained and skilled people to be available at a moment's notice to deal with this. Some people were evacuated 5 times!

1.4 Any other matters

CLIMATE CHANGE - acknowledge it and plan for it. It's happening now.

PAID STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCY FIRE FIGHTERS - do NOT burden the already overworked RFS.

PAID STATE GOVERNMENT LAND MANAGERS - relocate Forestry and National Parks offices and staff to the regions where they belong.

Supporting documents or images
