



Title	Mrs
First name	Katherine
Last name	Mackaway

I am making this submission as	Primary producer
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Submission type	Personal
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Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
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Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
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Consent to make submission public	Public
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Your story	<p>We run a beef cattle property in the normally lush New England. Our property shares almost half its boundary with Riamukka State Forest. Along our boundary are fully mature, extremely flammable, pine trees. November 2019 saw our property devastated by drought and the surrounding forestry the driest it had been in the 22 years we have lived here. Riamukka State Forest is comprised of a combination of pine plantation and native forest. There has been no controlled burning in the native forest in the 22 years we have been here and 15 years ago the forestry crew that maintained access roads, fire breaks and pruned the pines were disbanded. In the last 15 years the roads have become quite overgrown and in most cases are impassable, fire breaks are non-existent and the litter of dead branches under the pines is extraordinary.</p> <p>From early November our local Walcha community was being surrounded by fire Moonbi/Bendemeer to the West, Moona/Carrai to the North, Yarrowitch to the West and</p>
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Nowendoc/Mares Run to the South and for us the Nowendoc and Yarrowitch fires just kept creeping in. By early December both the Yarrowitch and Nowendoc fires had travelled in to the 20km boundary I had set on the Fires Near Me app. At the time we were agisting a section of the pine forest next door for our cattle, we held grave concerns for their safety and so mustered them home.

On the 13th of December I noticed a new mark on Fires Near Me to the South East of us – unusual in that it was just a straight line. Not a point marking a new fire or a shape outlining a fire boundary just a short straight line running parallel to the Mummel Rd – which is not far from home. On Sunday 15th the line was still showing on the app. On return from a trip to Nowendoc we decided to check it out. At the site marked on the map a group of RFS were lighting a back burn. We did not speak to anyone, just turned around and wondered at their timing. We had had a week of mild Westerlies and knew that State Forests had requested to back burn during the previous week's ideal weather to no avail. We also knew the next weeks prediction was for strong Southerlies, which would put the pine forest and then our boundary at even greater risk.

At this point in time State Forest had one bulldozer commissioned in the Riamukka Forest to clear some of the access roads.

Monday 16th saw us rise to strong South Easterly winds and smothered in smoke. We fed our cattle and then my husband decided that we needed to do what we could to put in some fire breaks to protect the pines in order to protect our boundary, our stock and our home. By 1pm our D5 dozer and a wheel tractor with stick rake was out in the pines clearing an old access road around them and starting a fire break on a creek on the pine's East.

Tuesday 17th, the back burn lit on the 15th jumped the Mummel overnight and is heading to the 5km marker surrounding our home on the Fires Near Me app. Of more concern, wind conditions are set to get worse and both the Yarrowitch and Nowendoc fires are set to merge with this backburn creating an enormous front. RFS have not been back on site since lighting the back burn. State Forests have 1 dozer on site and a few work utes with fire fighters on back, most of the equipment they would normally have access to is tasked on clearing the Oxley highway after fires had forced its closure. We have 1 dozer, 1 tractor, and 2 utes with fire fighters and a number of neighbours also with utes with fire fighters. The Yarrowitch fire is now threatening the boundary of the property next door to our neighbour and our dozer is called over to assist.

Wednesday 18, Thursday 19 and Friday 20 - saw 3 days of intensive firefighting by the same small crew. Over these 3 days my husband spent a total of 10 hours in bed, our employees and neighbours spent little more time at rest. While they fought the fire, it was left to myself, with the occasional help of my niece, to feed cattle that the previous months had been tended by 4. Each day the fire edged closer, by the 19th the 3 fires had merged and had entered my 5km boundary mark on the Fires Near Me app. Also, on the 19th State Forests were able to start bringing in more earth moving equipment and by the 21st there were 9 additional dozers, a grader, a water truck and a firetruck working to contain the blaze.

Our wheel tractor was withdrawn on the 20th and our dozer on the 23rd. Our employees and the locals that had come to help also finished up on the 23rd as State Forest crews from multiple external districts came to work the fire front and helicopters started on the 26th.

Thursday the 19th was by far our worst day. The wind was horrendous, and the fire was less than a kilometer from the pines and 3km from our boundary. Resources were few. Our local State Forest crew were absolutely stretched to their limit as they had been fighting fires both around Walcha and in other districts

for months and many of the resources, they required just weren't available. The ultimate frustration came at a suggestion from State Forestry offices in Sydney "to sacrifice the Eastern pines to save the Western pines" without being aware that the 2 blocks are separated by a gravel track over which the Eastern and Western pines touch.

We were also frustrated by the fact that State Forest employees had to knock off and head home for rest each night. While I completely accept that everyone needs rest in order for them to work in an optimum fashion, every night the fire broke containment lines and every morning meant starting again. My husband did not rest on Thursday the 19th and got 4 hours sleep on Friday 20th. He switched between our wheel tractor and dozer for 29 hours trying to stop a fire in a State Forest from getting to the pines that are a major source of employment for our district and in turn our boundary and home. It would be so much more efficient for Forestry staff to work shifts during fires – so that they are never left unattended.

We were ever so lucky that Friday the 20th saw the arrival of so many resources. We were again ever so lucky that a change of wind direction pushed the fire back on itself on the 2nd of January and that rain on the 3rd gave us hope and that although the fire had got within 300m of the pine plantation, we would be OK. I know others who weren't so fortunate.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Years of neglect was the major contributing factor. Constraints and mismanagement by higher authorities in NSW State Forests means that local work forces have been decimated and that basic maintenance is not possible. When we moved here a local grader driver was employed to maintain forestry roads. They were the envy of the district. 15 years has seen roads and firebreaks vanish. So much time was spent cutting in roads during the time of the fire, just so it could be accessed. If all the roads had been maintained access would have been more immediate and early containment more possible. Fuel loads in the native forest was also a massive factor, with drought conditions and so much available fuel the fire burnt fast and hot and was able to light trees and stumps that smoldered for days and kept re-igniting spot fires. The advanced age of the pine trees, lack of removal of dead material and no firebreaks around pine plots heightened the urgency of containing the fire.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Planning was pathetic. State Forests application for back burns at several times took hours to be assessed. If clearance came, it came late afternoon not long before their knock off time. RFS did not communicate the original backburn on the Mummel Rd to State Forests. The local State Forestry crew were stunned that it had even been lit and frustrated that they received no warning and indeed no assistance to fight the fire. At no time did RFS notify any landholders neighbouring the forest of their intent to light a backburn. It is my opinion that no one more than 10km away from a fire should be able to make a decision about that fire. Wind conditions at the sight of the fire were different to those forecast and terrain conditions cannot be assessed from afar, and those making decisions from afar do not wear the consequences of their actions.

1.3 Response to bushfires

While compensation was given to RFS volunteers and money has been donated by the millions, I know of no avenue for primary producers who used their own staff, machinery and fuel at their own cost to claim compensation

1.4 Any other matters

I praise the efforts of the thousands of RFS volunteers. Unfortunately given the size and the severity of the 2019/20 fires there just was not enough of them to go around. Our district is normally blessed with plentiful moisture and even though I am aware of the fire risk that the pines next door are, until last

November I had never actually feared the possibility. There is an RFS shed on our road, about 25km closer to town. It is not manned and has no equipment. Changes over the last 20 to 30 years to RFS have seen many primary producers drop out. Paperwork was becoming exhaustive and an equipment change from ute back and trailer fire fighters to single firefighting trucks is seen as impracticable for the terrain we need to cover and so we all have our own equipment for emergencies. It would be wonderful if primary producers had a greater voice in fulfilling their needs during fire seasons. It would be wonderful if primary producers had a greater voice in the ongoing maintenance of the State Forests and National Parks that they may share boundaries with. It would be wonderful if local government areas had a greater voice in the maintenance of the State Forests and National Parks in their districts as well. It is local knowledge that is best able to preserve ecosystems and all too often local knowledge is completely ignored.

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