



Your details

Mr

Title

First name

Mark

Last name

McDonnell

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

not applicable

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

not applicable

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 have been residents in Berambing since 2001 and in the Hawkesbury LGA since 1987. The bushfires last Christmas burnt our property causing extensive damage to our garden, grounds and associated facilities, but fortunately our home and related buildings were saved. The fire encroached to within a few meters of our shed. According to long term residents in our area, the 2019 fires were the first time any bushfire has burnt any part of our property.

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

Bushfires recur regularly and follow a somewhat predictable pattern: as previously burnt areas regenerate, and the fuel load increases, conditions for another fire outbreak gradually return. Since the previous major bushfire in our area in 2011, there had been 8 years of re-growth under generally favourable weather conditions for the fuel load to increase significantly, reaching crisis point. For this reason, a 2019 bushfire may have occurred in our area even if weather conditions had been cooler and wetter. However, the intensity and geographic extent of the 2019 fires appears to be related to the drought, with unusually low rainfall and high temperatures in the months immediately preceding the fires being the most proximate cause.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Controlled backburning operations during the cooler months can assist in reducing the fuel load and should be concentrated in areas close to established residential communities. This practice has long been in place and should continue, but as conditions are often not conducive to allow it to be undertaken as extensively as is desired, it should be bolstered by other land use practices as described below.

Property losses in our area (for example in [REDACTED], Mt Tomah) mainly affected the most outlying properties, at the end of the road and in largely "undefendable" locations, in steep terrain not so much at the edge of the bush, but totally surrounded by, or "within" it. Planning controls that limit the spread of housing outside well-defined "defendable" areas (hereafter described as "safe zones") should be considered.

Gazetting or otherwise establishing "safe zones" in bushfire affected areas could be considered. This may require some re-zoning of existing land use. For example, there is not an adequate "buffer zone" in our area between residential properties and heavily timbered forests, which are often under the control of National Parks. The absence of a safe zone at present, occasions both an increase in bushfire risk to nearby residential properties and a reduced capacity to stop or deflect the path of the fire. As our area is generally zoned "rural", it would be prudent to create a new rural zoning, suitable for establishing open fields of pasture for grazing livestock, around existing settled areas, so as to make these communities less vulnerable, sheltering behind suitable "safe zones". The extent of these pastoral protection zones should reflect local conditions, including topography, but in general should be wide enough to allow quick and effective deployment of fire fighters into these zones, and the removal of any livestock situated on this land. These new buffer zones should not allow for new or additional housing (other than shelters for livestock), be cleared of forest growth but have some shade trees for animals, and where feasible, have dams or other water storage facilities both for use by the animals and as a resource for fire fighting when needed. Obviously the point of permitting grazing is to limit fuel load, so that ground cover is predominantly grass or other suitable herbage that can be kept short by the animals living there.

Another important area for reform where the objective is to reduce fuel load near resident homes and related buildings, is to amend the existing 10/50 Vegetation Clearing Scheme to enable

more sensible clearing practices to be followed. The problem with the existing scheme is that the 10 metre limit on tree clearing is arbitrary and often inappropriate. For example, it allows a 7 metre high tree that is situated 9 metres from a house to be felled, but not a 30 metre tree 11 or 12 metres from the house. This is obviously absurd! The rule should be amended such that the zone for permitted clearance should be proportional to the height of the tree, so that if it fell towards the property it would not hit the building or impede access to or from it. So, for example, an amendment that allows clearing any tree that, if it fell towards the house, it would not come closer than, say, 5 to 10 metres of the building, would in my mind be a practical and sensible reform.

If this change was made, special consideration should also be given to trees located on Council managed land, such as nature strips. I have recently removed 21 enormous radiata pines on the nature strip, all of which were a clear and obvious danger - not only in a bushfire emergency, but if any fell due to a lightning strike, high winds or other natural causes (including the tree dying). Hawkesbury Council agreed to the removal, at my cost, but the process was incredibly lengthy and expensive. I initially raised the issue in writing about 5 years ago and permission to remove them was only obtained recently, requiring multiple submissions, several on site investigations and extremely detailed compliance checks. A more streamlined and faster approval process is highly desirable and clearly indicated based on my experience.

1.3 Response to bushfires

The training of and terms of engagement for RFS volunteers appears to be in need of careful re-assessment, given reports in our area of inappropriate practices being undertaken by out of area crews deployed to assist local efforts at containment during the 2019 bushfires in this area. While additional resourcing during the emergency appears sensible on a prima facie basis, the lack of familiarity with local conditions, and poor training of some of those placed into the field, led to counter-productive outcomes and in some cases an exacerbation of fire threats to homes and people in the area. Local RFS volunteers have told me of specific instances of poor practices but as I did not witness them directly I merely mention those reports as worthy of separate and further investigation by your Inquiry.

My own experience is to comment on my dismay at external crews coming to my property and refusing to take any action to put out what was, at the time, a relatively small fire on my grounds, beyond the reach of my hoses, because at that time it was not an immediate threat to my house. After a cursory assessment, they drove away and the result was the fire on my property spread quickly and within an hour a much larger and more serious blaze had to be put out, requiring more people, time and water than would have been needed had the initial fire been extinguished quickly and easily when the opportunity first presented. This is a case where the terms of engagement need redress. I understand that crews must prioritise events and not waste resources, but in this case a lack of simple foresight was in evidence, causing more extensive damage to my property than was necessary, and ultimately precipitating a crisis that could have been avoided. While I am deeply appreciative of RFS assistance in ultimately extinguishing the fire and saving my home, it is appropriate for this Inquiry to consider these aspects of training and terms of engagement as being in need of improvement as part of the bushfire response.

1.4 Any other matters

I am happy to expand on any of the above points if that would help. Please contact me on my email address noted above if further elaboration is needed.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Supporting documents or images
