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I am making this submission as	Emergency services
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	<p>HISTORY</p> <p>I am (20 years) a Rural Firefighter in the Central area of Qld. In the 2018/19 season our area suffered very serious fires - especially south and north of Mackay and in the various Eungella hinterland rainforest areas. Serious - and yes the word catastrophic was used here too. To observe the BOM maps which I did in hindsight...it was easy to see that Mackay would be spared for 2019/20 season. BUT our brigade is trying to upgrade facilities to cope with what might be thrown at us next.</p> <p>In the main - our fires - though thoroughly exhausting with little rest between — were not catastrophic like (some of QLD)/NSW/VIC fires in the dreadful 2019/20 season.</p>
1.1 Causes and contributing factors	<p>Causes - my opinion only....science rules!</p> <p>Possible causes from this firefighter's point of view:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ross Garnaut's Climate Change Review released in 2008

predicted "without adequate action, the nation would face a more frequent and intense fire season by 2020." Disregarded.

In 2009 CSIRO predicted catastrophic weather by 2020. Disregarded.

March 2018 National Aerial Firefighting Centre - presented a business plan to federal government for a dedicated national water-bombing fleet. The plan was ignored until 2 years later - 4th Jan 2020 - IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CATASTROPHE.

Ex-NSW Fire Commissioner Greg Mullins and his group knew the fires would not be able to be stopped this year without our own firefighting tanker support. (Aircraft from USA not readily available due to their extended fire season - and our fire season starting so early in August /September.). This group had more vital information to share but no opportunity. Disregarded.

Bureau of Meteorology records clearly show climate changing.... clarifying information from their website - please will you locate these?

1. 110 years of Australian temperatures
2. 120 years of Australian rainfall
3. Australia's warmest year on record; marked by severe, protracted drought. (These 2 maps show how lucky Mackay was during this recent 2019/2020 fire season.)
4. 2019 monthly and annual rainfall, temperature and sea surface temperature deciles and maps

Sea surface temperatures prove to be important too:

- Interestingly - El Niño / La Niña remained neutral during 2019
- However the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) which acts like a seesaw between South Africa and Australia was strongest on record in 2019 - and persisted into 2020. Lots to study here.

And so everything came together to make Australia a tinder box. No amount of hazard reduction burns (although always considered a vital activity by all firefighters) would make a difference in the conditions of the worst hit areas. These were savage and terrifying in the extreme - fires like we have never seen before and fighting them must be undertaken in a completely different way.

No advice listened to by Govt and suggestions continued that "it was the States' responsibilities" - additionally - "they had not asked for help". This lengthy delay in decision making from the top resulted in inaction - particularly in procurement of heavy tanker aerial support. This clearly would have saved towns by knocking the huge fires back to the point where firefighters could have approached to back burn. Instead citizens were told to flee ahead of unstoppable fires....causing loss of towns, infrastructure, homes, livelihoods, animals and tragically so many lives - some trapped and unable to flee.

Government could have had a role here to ASSIST states to coordinate with each other - taking the reins to help only with coordinating and listening - instead of refusing involvement.

Even the army/navy - too late!! There's so much the armed forces could have done and I'm sure Commissioner Fitzsimmons could have used them....road blocks, door-to-door notifications, food stations, transporting deployed firefighters, making safer places for those who cannot leave their town, rescues. No one is asking them to fight a fire. The airforce have C130s - can they be retro-fitted as air tankers? And foolishly, the forces were called in without coordinating with the NSW Fire Commissioner Fitzsimmons - what was our Prime Minister thinking?

Loss of lives Including those of our volunteer firefighters who had never before seen such firestorms, tornados, suffering tragedy not imagined. Obviously they were sent into harms way by those who could not even imagine the conditions on the firegrounds. Under the multi-layered Tactical Command and Incident Management systems....final decision-makers MUST be at the firefront.

Plenty were there who tried to help but were turned away. And so it turned out that everything came too late - so much already lost.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Preparation:

We must take into consideration that Governments are not experts here. If they won't take EXPERT OPINION - they cannot be expected to make the right decisions. They have many other matters to consider - as we can see with the all-encompassing Coronavirus...there is no time here to prepare for the next fire season. WE MUST NOT LEAVE THIS DECISION MAKING TO THEM. It must be your job to ensure that only those with SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND APPROACH can plan this impending fire season.

Hazard reduction burning

All firefighters know this is important. However, with the tiny window of opportunity now available for hazard reduction burning.....I am unsure how this can be undertaken throughout the millions of hectares of the wild forested areas. Maybe in times long gone by - no doubt Aborigines have mosaic burned these areas - but never with such high temperatures coupled with lack of rain and long droughts - as shown by the historic BOM mapping. Note: Greg Mullins (ex-NSW Fire Commissioner speaks clearly on this.)

I do not believe that we can be certain - under the climatic circumstances we now have - that the areas already burned, will not burn again.

Under these new climatic conditions - PROPER AIR SUPPORT is now VITAL and must be available and prompt - especially around populated areas.

Certainly many fires are started by arsonists (noted also in our Mackay area too in the previous fire season). What can be done? This is a CRIMINAL activity. Do we name them on TV? Should they be fitted with tracking ankle bracelets? This is a perplexing issue. Certainly very real fines / difficult community service such as working on cleanups after fire. Kids too (along with a parent?). Police Liaison visiting their schools.

Proper preparation of brigades.

I am very troubled by seeing firefighters at the fire fronts - some with no masks. Even P2 paper masks and ski-type goggles are inadequate at hectic fire fronts. As I am Equipment Officer - I have always begged for better from higher authorities with no action. Finally, after observing an Auxiliary firefighter at a filthy ongoing fire some years ago, wearing a P3 negative pressure Scott Safety mask - I asked again - we were refused these from the higher authority. I undertook a personal search for them - and I and my First Officer undertook to purchase them - our brigade was trained in the wearing and maintenance. Our trucks now have 3 in each of our 2 trucks and many individual firefighters in our brigade purchased their own. We find them indispensable when in dirt and smoke ...protecting eyes as well.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Future: on the firefront:

I have personally been sent into fire areas where I have felt

unsafe....trusting a First Officer to have seen a bigger picture than I could see. Wanting to be totally reliable as part of the team to stop a fire spread - needing to follow instructions which include the safety of others in my crew. It's a big trust - and so I understand how firefighters end up in places where they perhaps should not be. They are made of the stuff that gives them courage they perhaps should not have. And so tears roll down my face as I see on the TV news - the loss of their precious, young lives. The forgotten firefighter Neville Smith with 30yrs experience - from Tenterfield...the instant wind change (witnessed by another firey) - that burnt his clothes from his body and melted his fire truck. He's forgotten now - but his burns and injuries were terrible - his recovery is so slow - and his life can never be the same.

Crew Leaders in deployed trucks MUST be clearly enabled to instruct turn-back from life-threatening situations. Obviously firefighters cannot be deployed as they have been previously.

What do we do next?

As a firefighter - I trust the men who have dealt with it at a higher level...the Fire Commissioners - the unfailing Shane Fitzsimmons, Greg Mullins and his Commissioners — and the climate scientists - certainly Ross Garnaut and our CSIRO.

Air observation and bombing with water / retardant ..dangerous in itself. Close and micro monitoring of weather - forecast wind changes, terrifying fireground winds developing into tornadoes / firestorms / spotovers etc - and so localised that most could not predict.

We cannot allow Government to make smooth, reassuring statements to news reporters or the public. Government must only stand behind those whose proven experience are passing up-to-date and knowledgeable information. LET US BE CLEAR ON THIS!

1.4 Any other matters

I'm sure there are many...
I wish your whole team success in this most vital endeavour.
Keep well and safe in these strange times.
Kindest regards - Maxine Godley

Upload files
