

Your details

Title

Mr

First name

Michael

Last name

Alsop

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Other

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

I am a retired Local Government Engineer who has had experience in preparing bushfire management plans and was an Environment Manager at my retirement.

I have watched the recent fire devastation with concern that more could have been done to make property, particularly houses more defensible.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.2 Preparation and planning

My submission below relates to preparation and planning

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Bushfire inquiry submission.docx

Submission in regard to improving the 'defendability' of property likely to be threatened by bushfire

It was clear that in the recent fires many properties were in a position that was undefendable by brigades, no matter how experienced the crew were.

Property or houses in locations that have not got adequate fuel free area around their buildings or are without safe access are undefendable in severe fires. Many of those undefendable properties are in this state because the owners want to live in the forest or love the bush location and accordingly they should be responsible for the safety, security, insurance and replacement of their property in the event of severe fire. Brigades often have to assess these properties and are unable to defend them because it is unsafe to do so.

There are also many property owners who would like to have their houses 'defendable' but are stopped from achieving this due to the policies, actions or non-action of others. Many vulnerable properties adjoin bushland and find they do not have an adequate fuel free zone on their property. These are likely to be houses built before modern bushfire controls were applied to subdivisions or new buildings.

I give an example:-

A residential property with a house established 40 years ago adjoins a tract of dense bushland (it could be a Council Reserve, Forestry, National Park etc.). The owners ask an expert about fire protection and are advised that they should have a 55 meter wide radiation zone due to the vegetation, slope and aspect. Their house is 25 meters from their rear bushland boundary. They need a fuel free zone outside their land 30 meters wide. They are advised that the fuel free zone will need to be underscrubbed or mown regularly, sometimes annually, especially before the fire season.

The land owner of the bushland often has hundreds or even thousands of neighbours with similar problems and does not have the resources to reduce individual hazards, especially when fire is threatening.

In this example, if the house owner wishes to maintain the fuel free zone by his own labour or his own expense he is usually prevented from doing it by the bushland land owner. The bushland's owner usually gives the defence that they will manage the hazard reduction (HR) on their land.

National Parks have strongly resisted allowing this type of hazard reduction on the basis of environmental damage to the understory, or the integrity of the bushland or the wildlife. Recent fires have shown how ineffectively HR has been executed by the managers of large bushland areas.

However Clause 63 of the NSW RF Act 1997 clearly makes the bushland owner responsible for taking steps to reduce the spread of fire from their land. Clause 63(5) allows such steps to be included in a BFRMP.

A sensible solution is for the bushland owner to give an HR permit to an adjoining house owner to do specified and detailed work to reduce the hazard in the area detailed in the permit. The bushland owner will only need to address the problem once when issuing the permit. The permit can specify the location, dimensions, what is not allowed (such as tree removal or burning) and include a plan or diagram of the area in which the house owner can reduce the hazard.

The local BFMC could identify the areas where this 'House Owner HR Strategy' is required or is appropriate. The BFRMP could include such a provision.

Once a 'House Owner HR Permit' has been issued and has been actioned by the house owner the property becomes defensible either by the owner (water sprinklers, ember control details etc.) or by the fire brigade as the radiation zone should be adequate.

The argument by the bushland managers that this type of strategy or permit will do damage to their land or wildlife is spurious. The amount of land subject to permits would be small in relation to their land holdings size (in most cases) and the House Owner HR Permit land not only addresses the bushland owner's Clause 63 responsibility but it also may provide a refuge for escaping wildlife.

Recommendation 1

The Inquiry investigate the use HOUSE OWNER HAZARD REDUCTION PERMITS granted by bushland property owners due to their responsibility to under clause 63 to take steps to reduce the spread of fire.

A further matter for discussion and investigation is the provision of planned 'Village Protection Firebreaks'. There are many locations where a village, a group of houses, a subdivision or an industrial area could achieve much better defensibility by a planned firebreak. Such a firebreak can be provided by grazed paddocks, playing fields wide mown areas, road reserves free of fuel, carparks, waterways and lagoons. Bushland may also be used in these strategies by using indigenous hazard reduction methods on a regular planned basis. It is not suggested that a scorched earth or totally denuded area is proposed but rather areas that are easily defensible should wildfires threaten a town.

A severe fire on New Years Eve 2019 at Blue Haven near Doyalson, NSW occurred in Bushland south and west of the Suburb. The existence of Spring Creek, about 20 meters wide, made the houses facing the creek and the bushland defensible and only minor damage occurred.

In one of the severe fires in Southern NSW a property owner put 3000 sheep into a heavily grazed paddock that had very low grass level due to the drought. Many any buildings on the property and on adjoining properties were severely damaged. The area was devastated but the sheep survived.

Fire can be managed and the devastation reduced where the fuel is minimal or can be minimized at short notice. Village Protection Firebreaks don't have to be a swathe of denuded land but should receive the required management attention on a regular basis, most likely annually by mowing, or hazard reducing, low temperature indigenous type burning, or understory raking and disposal where appropriate so that when a fire occurs the village can be defended.

The principles of this suggested strategy are well known and have been applied in many locations but could possibly be more broadly used in BFRMP's.

Recommendation 2

The inquiry consider the value of encouraging the planning and maintenance of VILLAGE PROTECTION FIREBREAKS to improve the defendability of groups of property or industry.
