NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

This is a personal submission by Michael Parker of [redacted].

My contact details are;

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I give my consent to making my submission public.

I wish to comment on following terms of reference;

1. The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.

2. The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect.

6. Land use planning and management and building standards, including appropriate clearing and other hazard reduction, zoning, and any appropriate use of indigenous practices.

11. Public communication and advice systems and strategies.

Causes of Fires – terms of reference 1

This issue needs careful consideration as the impact from each cause of fire can be significantly different.

While the media may report fires based on the area burnt or raw numbers based on the type of fire it is really the impact that is most important in loss of life, loss of property and economic impact.

The main cause of fire I wish to address is bush fires caused by overhead power lines.

While in raw numbers they may be small, the impact they have is very significant in regard to loss of life, loss of property, personal, community and economic impact.

The reason that overhead power lines are a major problem is that power lines are close to residential areas in bushland. Thus, when the conditions are at an extreme level for bushfires including low humidity and strong winds, power lines are also exposed to these conditions that causing powerlines to fail. The strong winds cause trees and branches to fall on powerlines and conductors to clash and spark and thus causing the start of a bushfire.

As these fires are close to residential bushland areas and thus the fires quickly grow and become an immediate threat to the local residential area before the authorities can mount a response.

Examples include;

Marysville Fire, Victoria, 7th February 2009, 173 people killed, 2029 properties lost.

Winmalee Fire, NSW, 17th October 2013, 203 properties lost.

Tathra Bushfire, NSW, 18th March 2018, 69 properties lost.

Appin Fire, NSW, 25th December 2001, 10 homes lost.

Adelaide Hills, 20th December 2019, one person killed.

These fires have been confirmed to have started by overhead powerlines. There are many other fires over the years that are suspected by the community to have been started by overhead power lines but have been listed as starting by other means.

If powerlines were not overhead then there would not be a risk of bushfires being started by them.

I have been a long time advocate for the undergrounding of powerlines in Australia. However, this is a complex issue.

The power distribution system in Australia is geared around an old and antiquated overhead power distribution system. Many workers and engineers in the industry prefer an overhead power distribution system for a multitude of reasons including, capital cost to install, easier to see faults and fix lines and other reasons including constant maintenance.

In addition, if an underground power distribution system is not well designed it can be costly to fix, cause longer outages and subject to damage in bushfire areas.

The industry is trying to do everything it can so as not to be forced to undertake the outcome that is required and that is to design and install a safe, reliable and robust underground power distribution system in bushfire prone areas. The system will need to be designed so bushfires have minimal impact on the distribution system and its associated equipment and is fault tolerant so any single line or piece of equipment does not cause an outage. It is not as simple as just undergrounding the above ground system but will require proper planning.

In South Australia and in other parts of the world, on extreme days power cuts are mandated thus shutting down the power distribution system. This is to mitigate the risk of a bushfire being started by these overhead power lines. This is just not acceptable in this day and age as a solution to an out-of-date and antiquated power distribution system.

The attitude in the Australian power distribution industry needs to change to match world best practice and underground all power lines.

Bushfires caused by overhead power lines are only one of a significant number of problems caused by power poles and overhead power lines. Yes, there are significant costs in undergrounding power lines but if done correctly there are significant long term savings over the life of the distribution system including better reliability, lower maintenance costs and a safer environment for all.

Clearing and other hazard reduction and laws – terms of reference 2 and 6

In the past residents where able to hazard reduce the fuel load on there property during the off-season by getting a permit on the day and calling up fire control to notify when they started a burn and then calling up to confirm the fire was out.

Over the years more red tape was added until it is now not permissible for me to perform my own hazard reduction burn on my property.

Now there has to be a balance as some residents have been past or current members of a bush fire brigade or are very experienced with fire and other residents have no experience at all. It is fine for

experience residents to perform their own burns but there is great danger in letting inexperienced residents start their own fires.

In addition, as more city folk move to the Mountains and have no experience the first smell of smoke causes panic.

As the mix of residents has changed and increased in density it is reasonable to put in place rules and regulations which will benefit all. So if I am not allowed to hazard reduce my block of land on my own then there need to be a plan to reduce the fuel load at the residential/bushland interface.

In the past, there is a lot of red tape that bushfire brigades need to go through to get individual permission from land owners. I am very happy that the gully on Meeks Crescent was hazard reduced about 7 years ago. However, there is a need to hazard reduce this area again soon and I am fearful that the amount of red tape will be too much and the bushfire brigades will concentrate in performing larger burns in the Grose Valley and focus on not letting the fire reach the residential interface during a bushfire crisis. Unfortunately, I fear that this will result in the loss of life and significant loss of property in the future.

A possible solution is to designate a residential/bushland interface and give the bushfire brigades/traditional experienced operators permanent permission the perform hazard reduction burns at any time (in the off-season). My real preference for the burns would be the low level traditional type.

Public communication and advice systems and strategies – terms of reference 11

The Fires Near Me App is an excellent resource but it has a significant number of weaknesses that should be addressed to help improve the information.

During the fires there where a number or resources that were accessed for the public to keep informed on the progress of the fires and these included Geo Science Australia, Facebook, another fire app, live radio feeds, the RFS website and other resources.

I would like to suggest the following enhancements to the Fires Near Me App.

1. Show where the active fire front is by integrating the Geo Science Australia hotspot information
2. Show Wind Direction and Speed
3. Include an overlay showing the predicted extent of the fire over the next 24 hours

4. Show location of resources similar to Flight Radar 24, Helicopters, Aircraft and vehicles on an overlay.
5. Allow the App to operate in portrait mode.
6. Show the burnt areas in different colours/gray scale for each 24 hours i.e. red for current going to black 5 days or more.

In addition to the App it would be good if the RFS could provide live feeds from the control room including maps and displays. Of course some channels and information need to be restricted for privacy and security reasons but a majority of the information should be made public.

Best regards,

Michael Parker

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