

Your details

Mr

Title

First name

Michael

Last name

Coulter

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Other

Submission type

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Nambucca Valley Council

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

General Manager

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

In the Nambucca Valley the Kian Road bushfire destroyed 63 homes, damaged 19 homes, destroyed 135 outbuildings, damaged 26 outbuildings and impacted 349 rural properties with destroyed fencing being the most common property damage. The Council had 3 timber bridges which were also destroyed by the bushfire. Tragically there was one bushfire related fatality plus a number of serious burn injuries. It was the largest natural disaster in the history of this local government area.

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

1. The first concern is how the Kian Road bushfire which reached its climax on Friday 8 November 2019 was allowed occur. Notwithstanding the drought and fuel loads in the Nambucca Valley the Kian Road bushfire was allowed to burn for weeks on public land prior to 8 November. Insufficient resources were allocated to the suppression of the fire before the catastrophic weather conditions on 8 November caused the natural disaster.

2. Consideration needs to be given as to whether or not the approval processes for land clearing and hazard reduction burns for the purposes of creating adequate asset protection zones are too onerous.

3. Consideration needs to be given as to whether or not RFS volunteers are adequately supported, noting that the average age of volunteers seems to be increasing with some volunteers expressing frustration with its bureaucracy.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Refer to comments in 1.1

Also the lack of mobile phone reception across much of the rural land impacted by the bushfire was an impediment to emergency evacuation and recovery.

1.3 Response to bushfires

1. In general terms the Nambucca Valley community acknowledges the important and valuable contribution made by the volunteer fire fighters in responding to the bushfire emergency.

2. In the immediate aftermath of the bushfire the NSW Office of Emergency Management capably responded to the staffing of an evacuation centre as well as coordinating NSW and Commonwealth agencies and the Red Cross. Centrelink quickly established a presence in the evacuation centre and provided a professional service. The NSW Office of Emergency Management also provided resources to Nambucca Valley Council to assist in our recovery efforts.

3. The contribution by the ADF was very well received, albeit that for the Mid North and North Coasts it should have occurred at a much earlier time. The ADF were very capable and professional in undertaking the removal of fallen and dangerous trees on road reservations.

4. Our local electricity distributor, Essential Energy capably responded to the natural disaster via the rapid deployment of crews who replaced hundreds of burnt poles and re-established electricity supplies within a relatively short period of time.

5. Council plant and staff integrated easily into RFS operations with Council water trucks, graders and other plant assisting on the fire front. This was well received by the RFS and the community.

6. The NSW RFS property damage assessments were relatively accurate and a good source of truth but were too slow to be undertaken and released. Compared to some other LGA's the scale of the natural disaster in the Nambucca Valley was

significantly under reported in the weeks immediately following the Kian Road bushfire.

7. When so many government assistance programs are premised on internet based information and forms, the lack of mobile phone and internet connectivity has been a major impediment to residents obtaining benefits in a timely way.

8. The slowness of undertaking the coordinated clean-up of properties has been frustrating and the cause of much complaint to Council. There have been changes in policy from uninsured properties only to all properties; there have been changes in agency responsibility from first Public Works to then Service NSW and contractors Laing O'Rourke as well as mixed messages as to what out buildings would or would not be included in the clean-up. And more than 6 months on from the natural disaster there are still properties in the Nambucca Valley which are awaiting clean up.

9. As a general observation the referral network to assist bushfire affected residents is too complex. There are too many agencies; too many changing faces; too many databases; too much peripheral and unimportant information and above all too many media releases. A note to all politicians - please spend more time on policies before issuing media releases.

10. Nambucca Valley Council applied for permission to establish an Australian Natural Disaster Assistance Fund as a tax deductible gift recipient fund. However it took about 6 weeks for this to be approved via a referral arrangement from the responsible NSW Minister to their Federal counterpart. It was only when the Sydney and South Coast bushfires occurred that the application was approved. However by this time a lot of the interest in charitable donations had shifted to other areas.

11. With the bushfire recovery data sharing has been an issue. Wherein multiple agencies and charities collected information for their own purposes and for privacy reasons are often reluctant to share it. This created a significant duplication in resources.

12. The lack of availability of suitable temporary emergency housing.

13. Emergency planning not adequately differentiating between the very different needs of rural -v- urban residents. The Kian Road bushfire affected our rural area and property owners could not be readily accommodated in planned evacuation centres because they often had pets and animals with them. Similarly they sought on-going access to their properties for stock management purposes notwithstanding dangerous trees and other hazards.

1.4 Any other matters

Desirable enhancements for similar future natural disasters are:

1. Increased aerial fire fighting resources to better manage bushfires before they reach catastrophic levels.
 2. Reducing mobile communication blackspots
 3. Having one agency establish a single, comprehensive and shared database for all tenants and property owners who incur a property loss
 4. Appointing a single Government Minister who can make decisions concerning the recovery activities which cut across multiple agencies and Ministries.
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Supporting documents or images
