

Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Natalie

Last name

Meyer

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

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 was forced to evacuate from my home on 9th November due to the Mt Nardi bushfire. I self-evacuated mostly because I had wildlife, pets and livestock in my care and I knew it would take a few days to evacuate them all. The wildlife was evacuated to Lismore, my pets to Cecil St in the village (where I also stayed) and my chickens went to the Nimbin Show Grounds. I had to leave my guinea fowl at home and also 3 newly released magpies and so I returned home twice a day to check on them and provide support feed. I was also impacted as the Manager of the Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre which was involved in the community level response to the bushfire emergency.

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

The fire was caused by a lightening strike which was thought to have been extinguished some 3 weeks or so earlier but in fact it had not. The fire trickled around in the Nightcap Forest until it came over to the Nimbin side of the range. The local brigade went to inspect the fire and called for air support to extinguish it ASAP. They were told there were insufficient resources to provide air support and so fought the fire on the ground for about 4 days until it threatened the Mt Nardi communications towers when a plane was sent in to apply fire retardant around the towers to secure them, and then left. This had the effect of pushing the fire around the towers where it became a direct threat to life and properties. The south western flank of the fire (ie the Nimbin flank) was contained only because of the efforts of some 140 non RFS volunteers which joined the fire fighting efforts and scratched out significant fire breaks using leaf blowers and rakes. the Premier kept saying there was no shortage of resources. This was not our experience. We were told the Mt Nardi fire was of low priority compared to other fires where more properties were under threat and that there was insufficient air support available to provide us with that resource. The local brigade says that had they been provided with air support right from the start the fire could have been extinguished but instead it burned through 3/4 of the National park, killing countless animals, some of them highly endangered such as the Eastern Quoll, destroyed irreplaceable Gondwana era rainforest and caused weeks of pain and suffering and anguish for the local community and the loss of several properties.

1.2 Preparation and planning

It is fair to say that our community is a lot more experienced at living with flooding events than with bushfires. In fact a survey conducted of the community in October 2019 revealed that only 51% of 225 respondents said they had a bushfire plan in place. There was no community level response plan in place so the community response was at times chaotic and the roles of the various NGOs etc were unclear and worked out as we went along. Our community is now working on developing a community disaster plan as a result. The NGO I manage has developed a community response plan which identified the roles of the organisation in a disaster situation. This plan was actioned sooner than we expected with the advent of the Covid 19 emergency.

1.3 Response to bushfires

WHAT WORKED WELL:

Our local brigades worked very well together and with the community.

Around 140 non-RFS community volunteers were involved in fighting the fire, managing ember attacks and spot fires, assisting to prepare firebreaks etc. These volunteers, working together with local Brigades enabled the fire to be fought back on the South Eastern flanks, preventing it from travelling to the Channon and through to Lismore itself.

The Nimbin branch of the CWA stepped up and prepared all the meals for the RFS and non RFS firefighting crews.

The local community response was excellent; this included coordinating livestock evacuations, deliveries of essential items to the fire front, coordinating logistics at the 2 main impacted communities (the threatened properties were on two large local land sharing communities involving many residents and large areas of land), coordinating food and other donations. There were some bureaucratic barriers to the community response which in some circumstances limited the community's capacity to

respond as effectively as we could have, which are detailed below. LOCAL COMMUNITIES NEED TO BE PART OF ANY EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN prior to any emergencies occurring, so that any response INCLUDES the community rather than the response 'being done to it', which is disempowering and disorientating in the height of the emergency.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK WELL

FIRES NEAR ME APP: the app is of little value once the bushfire gets going as it does not indicate where the actual fire fronts are, but rather the entire impacted area, which can be hundreds of hectares already burned. When the fire was rated as being at emergency level the RFS Control Centre issued daily newsletters including maps which showed the exact location of the fire fronts (indicated by red dots), plus their advice as the anticipated behaviour of the fire that day. For weeks we were shrouded in heavy smoke and we had no way of knowing where that smoke was coming from. It was impossible to even monitor for nearby ember attacks or spot fires for much of the time, due to the thick smoke. This was truly terrifying. Once the fire was at 'watch and act' level we had to rely on the Hot Spots satellite site and local info posted by RFS on Facebook, when they had time in between shifts, to provide updates, as the FNM app was no longer of any use in monitoring the activity of the Mt Nardi fire. The idea of 'watching and acting' when you are blanketed in thick smoke needs a rethink because IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO WATCH A FIRE YOU CANNOT SEE THROUGH THE SMOKE.

EVACUATION CENTRE - COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY AND LOCAL NGOS: An official NSW Evacuation Centre was established at the Nimbin Show Grounds by DCJ, the Salvos and the Red Cross. For over 40 years Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) has been the primary welfare service provider in Nimbin, and one of its main funders is DCJ, yet no communications were entered into with NNIC or any other local NGO regarding the evacuation centre activities etc. NNIC approached the evacuation centre personnel regarding some food issues that had arisen for the evacuees, many of whom were vegetarians and some of whom required gluten free food, and whose needs were not being met. NNIC offered to provide food for these evacuees but we were told basically to mind our own business. This was disempowering to say the least. NNIC is the NGO with the footprint in the community and is well trusted and the only provider of emergency relief and food relief. There is also a mental health/drug and alcohol Nurse Practitioner on site. It was surprising to us that NNIC was dismissed in such a way. To their credit, the food situation at the Evacuation Centre was eventually remedied by the Salvos to the best of their ability, but we could have helped with this and a lot earlier.

CWA UNABLE TO ACCESS THE RFS FOOD BUDGET: For reasons I do not understand, despite the preparation of all the (very healthy and nutritious) meals for the fire crews, the CWA was unable to access the RFS funds available for this purpose due to something to do with who was contracted to provide or some other bureaucratic reason. The reality is that if the CWA had not stepped up the fireys would not have been adequately fed. The CWA prepared 3 meals a day using food donated from both within and external to the community. The coordination of the food donations was a challenge in itself. The CWA was also able to raise cash donations to cover their food costs. It would have been a lot easier if they could have accessed the RFS food budget, however.

EXTINGUISHING THE FIRE AT THE START: the local brigade suggests that the Mt Nardi fire could have been extinguished

when it first began, had we access to air support and water bombing capacities. The Mt Nardi communication towers were secured with the use of the fire retardant bombing plane, however once the towers were secured we were horrified to learn there would be no further air support due to the fire being of 'low priority'. The NSW Government claims there was no shortage of resources but that was not our local experience. Had there been access to those air resources in the first few days, the huge amount of resources consequently expended in managing this fire, could have been spared. The use of retardant around the tower did spare the towers but had the effect of pushing the fire front around the towers where it soon became an immediate threat to properties.

THE PROTOCOLS FOR DECLARING A FIRE AT AN EMERGENCY LEVEL MUST BE RE-EVALUATED. It is no longer safe to leave fires burning deep in the forest on the grounds they are 'no significant threat' to property. YET!! Within days a tiny fire became an enormous threat and consumed ¾ of the National Park, threatened lives and properties for weeks, destroyed 1/3 of the only stand of Nightcap Oaks in the world, caused unknown loss of wildlife and weeks of terror for the community. It also caused the mass evacuation of thousands of Richmond Birdwing Butterflies from the forest and the full extent of the damage to the local population is as yet unknown. It is possible we witnessed a mass extinction event of the National Park's Richmond Birdwing Butterflies. We MUST appreciate the value of native forests as being worth protecting as wildlife habitat and part of the climate change solution. The Nightcap National Park is World Heritage listed and contains numerous old growth areas and rare endemic Gondwana era rainforest species and yet a bushfire in its bowels was declared to be of low priority. These ancient rainforest species do not regenerate after fire, and because of the extended drought preceding the event, the fire was able to penetrate into areas of the forest which have not burned for an estimated 1000 years due to their usual fire resistant nature and damp conditions.

ONE THIRD OF THE NIGHTCAP OAKS LOST: prior to the fire there were a mere 60 Nightcap Oaks (*Eidothea hardeniana*) standing in a small grove in the Nightcap National Park. These Gondwana era species are as significant as the Wollemi Pines and the only members of the species on the planet, apart for a few in cultivation including in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney. The remaining 40 trees MUST be urgently protected from any future bushfires, similar to the way in which the Wollemi Pines were fortified against the fire that raged through the Blue Mountains, also in 2019.

WILDLIFE RESCUE IMPOSSIBLE: local wildlife groups sought post-fire access to the fire grounds around the region, especially around the Rappville fire grounds where over 140,000 ha of residual koala habitat was destroyed, to search for injured wildlife, including koalas. However it soon emerged that there was no process for facilitating access and access was in general denied. Eventually some small numbers were allowed into some areas of the fire ground but it was a case of too little and too late. Wildlife rescuers are highly skilled and adept at working in challenging environmental conditions and there needs to be new protocols developed to enable safe access to fire grounds as soon as possible to search for injured wildlife. The helplessness felt by wildlife groups was indescribable and the horror of contemplating the massive loss of wildlife and habitat and the suffering creatures we were unable to reach has resulted in significant mental health impacts. Again, we MUST start valuing the natural environment and our wildlife equally with human infrastructure. The wildlife and their habitat cannot be insured or just simply rebuilt or replaced. Indeed, many of our species are

likely to be much closer to extinction as a result of the bushfires of 2019 and 2020 – they were already on the brink even before such a massive loss of habitat and actual animals themselves across the whole of Australia. It will take decades for the habitat to recover, and its chances of doing so are threatened by ongoing logging, continuing climate change impacts and predicted increased bushfire and drought activity and severity. It is becoming increasingly difficult to feel any hope for our wildlife or the environment or indeed our own species. We need strong leadership which is capable of grasping the intrinsic connections between the health and well-being of humans and that of our natural environment.

1.4 Any other matters

As stated above we can longer apply the old rules to bushfires. The practice of leaving fires 'to burn out' in the forest is not only dismissive of the intrinsic value of the forest itself, and the fact that it is home to millions of creatures which have as much right to survival as human beings do, but no longer can we rely on such fires to indeed 'burn themselves out' and not become a major threat to life and property. Our native forests have become so degraded through years of irresponsible logging and destruction that they are have become highly bushfire prone and much less resilient to drought and heat. We all have a responsibility to protect our forests and end the devastation and allow them to regenerate to build greater fire resilience and provide protection for what remains of our dwindling wildlife. It is time for a major rethink and re-evaluation of how we manage fires and our native forests.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Birdwings.docx
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Appendix A

Addendum to Richmond Birdwing Butterfly data – mass sightings reported in early December 2019 during the Mt Nardi bushfire event

We began tracking sightings of the RBB in 2013 and each survey there was little change in the small number of reported sightings at around 20 sightings each time. Since 2013 we have asked community members to report any sightings outside of the survey periods and to send in any pictures. In all those years we have only ever received a couple of reports ever, generally from the same people, a single photo and two dead ones have been brought into NNIC to show us. Indeed the manager of NNIC, who is responsible for overseeing the NNIC RBB project, had never seen a live RBB in her life until December 2019.

On 4th December 2019 the first report came in that several RBBS had been sighted at the Rox Backpackers ...where they had never been reported as being seen before. The next day hundreds of them were seen at Hensen Road and Crofton Road again where they had never been seen before.

On 5th December the Manager of NNIC posted on Nimbin Hookups asking for people to report sightings and send in photos. Within 5 minutes there were about 30 posts. By the end of the day there were almost 70 responses. People began to send in pictures and some of them are attached below. There were thousands of butterflies sighted all around the Nimbin catchment area, including in the village itself, like never before.

Advice from various butterfly experts indicate that the butterflies were most likely forced to flee the forest in search of food and to escape the fire and smoke.

The RBBs mass evacuation event is of considerable concern. The full extent of the impact on the local population is unknown. It is unknown how many of the butterflies many made it back to their vines in the forest to lay their eggs, nor indeed how many of the vines survived the bushfire and drought. Many people reported seeing them mating and laying eggs in various plants (none of which would sustain the larvae which would die upon hatching). The species may require local assistance to recover from the bushfire and drought events of 2019.

The following locations were among the sightings (not everyone who reported a sighting identified their location, unfortunately),

Hetherington Rd Barkersvale
McClellands Rd, Barkersvale
Barkersvale
Blue Knob Rd
Cadell Rd, Mt Burrell
Collins Creek
Crofton Rd
Gabal Rd
Green Pigeon
Gungas Rd
Mountain Top

Mt Burrell
Mt Nardi
Mt Kunghur
Nimbin village – Thorburn St, Cecil St, Cullen St, Alternative Way
Rainbow Ridge School
Sibley St
Sphinx Rocks Café
Stoney Chute
Terania Creek
Wadeville
Websters Creek
Whitney Rd

***See the following page for some of the RBB pics sent in to NNIC between 5th-12th
December 2019***



