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I am making this submission as	Other
Submission type	Organisation
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	Nimbin Disaster Recovery Committee
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	member
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	<p>The bushfire in the Nightcap National Park began by lightning strike on Friday 8th November 2019. Control lines were created on Sat 9th but the fire quickly outran these. With hot, dry and changing winds and very difficult terrain, the fire spread to surrounding areas and valleys. It took until Sunday 16th November to declare it contained. However the threat remained a concern with burning logs etc, until mid January 2020 when rains were sufficient to thoroughly wet everything. For the duration, until January, local volunteers, with the guidance and support of RFB (Rural Fire Brigade) monitored containment lines established throughout the area, the RFB being called in when logs etc, reignited.</p> <p>This fire was not deemed a priority area due to the widespread threat to lives and property elsewhere in NSW, consequently the local RFS Brigades had extremely limited resources to respond to this fire.</p>

The area around the Mt Nardi Communications tower was sprayed with fire retardant early on - a critical factor as mobile phone contact was crucial throughout the whole operation. There was also some initial aerial water support but again this was very limited as the need was greater elsewhere in terms of protecting property.

From Sunday 10th Nov the community Defenders began to assist. These included local property owners, local volunteers and volunteers who came from elsewhere to assist that were not part of the RFS and hereafter referred to as 'Defenders'. The Defenders were an important part of establishing containment lines ahead of the firefront. They were given regular planning and safety briefings by the local RFBs throughout the operation. A volunteer interrupter system was quickly established at each of the headquarters within the three hubs established to organise operations. The volunteer interrupter system was similar to that set up after the 2017 Lismore floods during clean up. The volunteers were oriented regarding safety, supplied with PPE (donated) if needed and organised regarding their skills, where they were sent to and what they did.

Shortly after the fires the local community set up the Nimbin Disaster Recovery Committee, which with funding from the local Council, commissioned someone to compile a report from this event, capturing a cross section of experiences with the aim of using this to inform a local Disaster Management Plan. This report has not yet been completed but will be available as a valuable document for this inquiry in the near future. (please contact me)

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Climate change resulting in an extended dry period in an area used to high rainfall and occasional dry periods. Due to the drought and early, unusually hot Spring, deep layers of humus and leaves in the rainforest dried out and turned into a 2-3 foot fuel load. Fire restrictions were also in place much earlier than usual, preventing burn offs.

National Parks & Wildlife have long been unable to maintain firetrails through the NightCap National Park. There were a number of places (Mount Nardi, Wallace Rd, Nicholson's Track) where precious hours were spent clearing firetrails that had long been neglected - chainsawing fallen trees, moving old logs, moving landslides with tractors and bulldozers. This was needed to;

1. Create containment lines
2. Create access to parts of the forest where the fire was
3. Create an escape route. This was critical as parts of the forest were not safe for the RFS to fire fight on foot due to not having a clear path to run away in the event of quickly changing conditions
4. Despite clearing roads and firetrails there remained the 2-3 foot deep fuel load on either side of the track/road

1.2 Preparation and planning

NSW National Parks & Wildlife Services need adequate funding to ensure firetrails and access roads are well maintained. Support for the development of community level emergency management plans to ensure resilience and coordinated action between community organisations and businesses.

Many local businesses were significantly impacted by the fire, with owners and staff directly involved in fighting fires and/or protecting property, and donations of food and supplies such as first aid and PPE equipment, money and services. See attached Fire Recovery Survey of Nimbin businesses conducted by the Nimbin Chamber of Commerce.

Community voluntary response was critical to protecting property and stopping the spread of the fires. Future planning needs to acknowledge the need for first responders, property owners, Defenders and community volunteers to fill the gap in the state emergency services response. Due to climate change the increasing scale of disasters will require a coordination between

state services and community. While community input is not currently included in Disaster and Emergency response protocols, the reality of the NSW bushfires clearly indicated that state services were overwhelmed – in terms of preparation (National Parks), resourcing and response. In many areas of NSW community members were in fact involved in response to the fires on the ground

Resources and funding are needed for communities to develop community level emergency management plans.

1.3 Response to bushfires

From Sunday 10th Nov the community Defenders began to assist. These included local property owners, local volunteers and volunteers who came from elsewhere to assist that were not part of the RFS, all of which are hereafter referred to as 'Defenders'. The Defenders were an important part of establishing containment lines ahead of the firefront. They were given regular planning and safety briefings by the local RFBs throughout the operation. A volunteer interrupter system was quickly established at each of the headquarters within the three hubs established to organise operations. The volunteer interrupter system was similar to that set up after the 2017 Lismore floods during clean up. The volunteers were oriented regarding safety, supplied with PPE (donated) if needed and organised regarding their skills, where they were sent to and what they did.

The Defenders played a critical role in supporting RFS in protecting the immediate threat to housing on rural land sharing communities including over 60 houses on Tuntable, and approx. 20 houses on Siddha and stopping the fires at the Rainbow Community and other private properties close to the fireground, as well as protecting the forest in the Nightcap National Park. At least 160 volunteers were involved in either assisting with establishing and monitoring containment lines; managing the headquarters set up early on in the Tuntable Falls Community, Siddha Farm Community, and the Terania Valley; delivering, fetching, transporting, clearing containment lines; managing social media information sites (ensuring verified information only); monitoring and managing vehicle movement into and within the communities; monitoring Defenders whereabouts; establishing an independent power supply for phone and communication.

Local heavy machinery was necessary to create containment lines during the event and this was organised by rural land sharing communities.

An Evacuation Centre, established at the Nimbin Showgrounds, was set up on Saturday 9th Nov, operating for 10 days. Tuntable Community was evacuated on the 9th, with some members going each day to assist with fire protection activities throughout the week. A good number of households surrounding the fire grounds but not under immediate threat, also evacuated to other places.

RFS resources were also stretched in terms providing timely provision of food for RFS, coming from the RFS headquarters at Casino some 60 km away. The Nimbin Branch of the CWA stepped up to provide food for RFS and volunteers from (From Monday 11th Nov to Wednesday the 21st Nov, feeding from 15 to 257 people 2 meals per day, also providing snacks and drinking water.) This operation was greatly assisted by over 200 volunteers and food and drinking water donations. The food was delivered to the firefront by a highly organised relay system. On the last few days it was backpacked up steep terrain (an hours' trek).

Throughout the 10 days an impressive and highly organised community operation evolved, calling on the different skills of many and involving 100s of volunteers. It was a very dynamic situation, highly dependent on regular communication between the different hubs of activity, and the sharing of skills. The RFS,

working very long shifts, relied heavily on local knowledge and support.

1.4 Any other matters

1. Protecting the forest during the NSW bushfire emergency was/is not a priority. National Parks need adequate resourcing to maintain firetrails and access roads which can be used as containment lines and escape routes and can potentially stop the fire before it threatens property and lives.
2. The terrain of the Nightcap National Park and private properties – steep terrain has specific risk factors such as boulder rolling and huge trees falling and shooting down steep slopes, some areas completely inaccessible on foot – not safe
3. Early fire retardant aerial spraying to protect the communications tower on Mt Nardi was essential
4. There was very limited aerial spraying capacity at the early stages of the fire and throughout as the need for aircraft was of higher priority elsewhere.
5. Containment of the fire was beyond the capacity of the local RFBs – Nimbin, the Channon not deemed a priority area compared to simultaneous huge threats in other areas.
6. Over 60 houses successfully defended on Tumble Falls Community by the cooperative effort between local Rural Fire Brigades, property owners, and volunteers.
7. Establishing Evacuation Centre at the Nimbin A&I Showgrounds: it was not adequately communicated to the A&I what this means. While they were happy to be of service a brief outline of the possible requirements could have been communicated to the A&I and Evacuees which would have reduced any confusion.

The external organisations managing the Evacuation centre at the Showground did not follow the State Emergency Management Plan: Evacuation Management Guidelines, specifically Section 7.3 Community Engagement & Liaison (pp.15-16) of the outline why community engagement is important. This would have reduced animosity and confusion between external agencies and community.

8. Defenders monitored/patrolled for spot fires and containment lines up until early-mid January.

- National Parks should have been monitoring containment lines in National Parks rather than volunteers.

9. RFS volunteers: Would have been good to know up front what type of reimbursement could be sought to know if you can afford to take time off work – employers could have engaged someone else to fill their role. As it was the RFS were involved for the 10 days and then in some cases members needed to go elsewhere. This had a huge impact on small businesses in the area. (see attached Chamber of Commerce Survey

Of key importance are the following

- Increased staffing of National Parks and Wildlife Service so that National Parks have the capacity to maintain tracks and fire trails
- The ability to respond rapidly to fires initially with an all out effort with airbound water spraying etc
- Volunteer Fire Fighters and Defenders reimbursed any lost wages, or use of holiday or other leave entitlements. The need for reimbursement to be ensured early on so that businesses can employ casual staff to replace the volunteer firefighters whilst they are actively fighting fires
- Adequate equipment for local RFS.
- Liability for injury arranged for volunteers - volunteers were not only active on private property but had to go onto National Park lands to contain the fire
- Resources and funding are needed to maintain fire trails on private properties in a similar manner to maintaining powerlines and phone lines to enable RFS to respond to fires on private properties rather than having to create containment lines in heavy forest during a crisis

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Fire Recovery Survey Report

Introduction

The Nimbin Bushfire Emergency ran for several weeks in December, with serious fires in the nearby Tuntable Creek Community. Most of the surrounding area was on official alert, with the Rural Fire Brigade worried about fires running along the ridges, and spotting into the many forested and inhabited Nimbin valleys.

Meetings were held in the Nimbin Town Hall, and unofficially on many communities. The Nimbin community reaction was swift and effective, both in fighting the fires, and in supporting the fire fighters and evacuees. The CWA co-ordinated the relief effort from Nimbin Town Hall, and the Showground was the evacuee centre.

Nimbin almost closed during those weeks, with many local businesses affected by staff protecting their own homes, or the community. The smoke made breathing difficult, and many tourists stayed away. As Nimbin relies heavily on the tourist trade, this was seen to have a significant effect on the town. Thankfully the predicted winds did not eventuate, and we were spared the destruction that faced many rural communities in NSW, at least for this Summer.

Cherie Pugh, a former researcher for both the Commonwealth Institute of Health, Sydney; and the Department of Community Medicine, London, was asked to compile and collate the Fire Recovery Survey, and write a report on the results.

Results

The responses rate of 14% (21 of approximately 150 Nimbin businesses) means that we can regard our results as representing the opinions of the Nimbin business community with some accuracy.

Q1. Was your business involved in the bushfire emergency?

20/21 businesses, or 95% of those who replied, reported involvement with the bushfire emergency. There may be a bias in favour of those who were involved reporting more than those who weren't involved, but nevertheless, such a very high figure implies an over-whelming involvement of the Nimbin business community in the fire emergency.

9/21 businesses, or 43% of those who responded, had owners or staff directly involved in fire-fighting or defending properties. This implies a very high level of commitment on behalf of a significant proportion of Nimbin businesses, especially as they all also made donations to their community.

Q2. What donations did your business make?

20/21 businesses, or 95% of those who responded to the survey, gave donations of either money, food, or services, or in some cases, all three. This seemed to be the pattern reported on television and the internet for small rural towns in NSW during the fire emergency. Where everyone is interconnected through family, work, school or church, people help each other as much as they can.

Q3. What was the financial impact on your business?

17/21, or 81% of the businesses who completed the survey, reported that the fire had a negative impact on their businesses. 12/21 businesses, or 57%, reported a severe financial impact. If this is considered alongside the extent of the donations they have also made, it must be seen as probable that many businesses may have over-reached themselves in an effort to help as much as possible.

Q4. Are there other long-term effects of the 2019 bushfire event on your business?

6/21 businesses claimed to still be suffering financially, or only just starting to recover. 71% thought they had recovered well. This is a strong finding, and very positive for Nimbin.

Yet there is an interesting point raised by four respondents, who mentioned problems both before and after the fires in December. There was a long summer drought before the fires, and the corona virus outbreak afterwards. Indeed, this adds up to a continuous pressure on Nimbin businesses over the last six months, with no end to the current crisis in sight.

Q5. Does your business have a disaster business continuity plan?

Only 5 of the 21 businesses had a disaster plan for their business. That is 76% of the businesses in Nimbin are likely to have no provision for further disasters.

Conclusions

It must be of concern that the continuing downward pressure on Nimbin businesses, both before and after the December 2019 fire emergency, due to a constant series of crises that deter tourists, could lead to even more financial pressure, at a time when Nimbin businesses have already been stretched. The reliance of some businesses on the tourist dollar makes Nimbin businesses particularly vulnerable to such events as the corona virus outbreak, which is not over yet. Further crises could be critical if there is a constant downward turn in numbers coming to Nimbin. The effect of loss of businesses on a small town with little full-time employment, particularly for the young, could be significantly negative.

“There was a definite negative impact on my business. My takings for the 3 week period after our fires started were 1/3 of what they were the previous year and my sales are on an increase each year so it was VERY obvious to me. Following our fires came the rest of the fires which impacted my Xmas sales. I have spent the last 3 mths trying so hard to make up that loss and now we have the virus.”

Kylie Cain, The Green Bank

Although most businesses felt that they had recovered well after the fire, their optimism may be founded on the traditional reliance on the tourist trade and Mardi Grass in May, which has now been canceled. A continual downturn may have a seriously negative impact, especially as most Nimbin businesses do not have a disaster plan, and a significant number are concerned already about increasing prices of insurance.

There seems to be a potential problem for many businesses that should be further monitored with regard to the corona virus, and any further crises. Perhaps financial and insurance advice could be offered, free of charge, to help with realistic long term disaster plans for Nimbin businesses.

Appendix 1 - Survey

Nimbin Disaster Recovery Committee – Fire Recovery Survey

The Nimbin Disaster Recovery Committee would deeply appreciate local business people taking the time to complete this survey about the impact of the December 2019 bushfire event on your business. If you have more than one business you would like to discuss, please fill out a separate survey for each.

Surveys can be completed anonymously and no names will be forwarded or used in the final report.

1. How was your business involved in the bushfire emergency?

Did you release staff, provide resources, close for the duration?

2. What donations did your business make?

Financial, material, or other? Please give details.

3. What was the financial impact on your business? Was it positive or negative? If negative, can you indicate approximately how much you lost? Approximately how long it will take you to make that back? (Please remember these surveys are anonymous)

4. How long will it take your business to recover from the December 2019 bushfire event?

Are there other long-term effects of the December 2019 bushfire event on your business? Have you lost staff? Trade? Customers? How long do you think this will effect your business?

5. Does your business have a disaster business continuity plan?

This might cover income protection, insurance, stock management, security of premises.

Thank you for completing this survey.

The results will be forwarded to the current bushfire inquiry, and will also used to develop a Nimbin Community Disaster Plan.

Appendix 2 – Collated answers.

(N.B. : Business identified have been so only with the permission of the business owner.)

Q1. Was your business involved in the bushfire emergency?

1. Yes - I am a volunteer RFS firefighter and spent a week or more on various fire fronts locally and out of area.
2. Yes – assisted to coordinate the community response
3. NEC -Yes - Some of our volunteer staff were not able to come in due to evacuation or defender duties. Other volunteers stepped in and kept the shop open so evacuees could access the internet early during the emergency.
4. Jane Mari for Armonica Café. Yes, staff were released to fight fires. Support given to both local fire fighters, people needing to clear their properties and evacuees.
5. Pixie Nut & Co. Yes. I am a one woman business, it was a very difficult time for me as the fires were during the Christmas period, I had to evacuate my house but luckily my office is in town. I was unable to work full time as I spent time volunteering with the fires.
6. Ralph. Yes. Two of our staff fought the local bushfires and were absent from work while being paid for some time.
7. Summerland Credit Union had to close twice to allow staff to return safely to their properties and prepare to evacuate.
8. Rose Beaton, FantAsia. Yes. Donated food to hall.
9. Nimbin Sourdough. Yes. We didn't open a couple of days as we had lost staff to fire relief.
10. Yes. Dropped off some plates.
11. No.
12. Yes. Donations.
13. Yes. Provided donations for use of firefighters.
14. Yes. All of the above : release staff, provide resources, close for the duration, open extended hours, provide support for firefighters or evacuees.
15. Yes. Provided food donations to firefighters and evacuees.
16. Yes.
17. Yes. Provided goods for firefighters, evacuees and animals.
18. Nimbin Village Pharmacy. Yes. One staff member was released from work to fight fire on his property.
19. Yes. We were involved with a lot of stress all round. Trade well down. But no losses of staff or other problems.
20. Kylie Cain – The Green Bank. Yes. I closed for the first 3 days of the fire to prepare our house as we are one valley over from where it was. As far as the crow flies or embers it's not far at all. I prepared food for the fires daily and delivered it to the CWA in the hall. I attended the CWA meetings. And supported my friends who were driving the communications centre at Tunttable.
21. Hemp Embassy. Yes. We released staff and provided resources and support. ie. donations and some of our staff helped at showground and in the hall.

Q2. What donations did your business make?

1. My car was used to travel to Casino and to local fires otherwise no donations were given beyond financial support. I also spent 2 days selling raffle tickets to raise funds for the local effort.
2. Use of phone, office, transport.
3. NEC- We donated some bags of rice to the CWA and later financial donations to three local RFS brigades. We also let people use the computer and internet for free.
4. Jane Mari for Armonica Café. Donations of food and drink.
5. Pixie Nut & Co. I fundraised \$1504 for the RFS through selling art prints.
6. Ralph. Plumbing equipment, time of staff on leave, money, vehicles to transport equipment, food, etc
7. Summerland Credit Union (Nimbin branch) collected baskets of non-perishable items, including electrolytes, lip balms and other items for the Rural Firefighters. Jenny LeNeveu (team leader) baked 100 mini quiches for the Nimbin CWA. Jenny and Sarah collected household items, clothing, and baked 200 cupcakes and 100 mini quiches for the Kunghur rural fire garage sale. We also received a donation from head office of \$250 and along with customer donations, raised more than \$2000 towards rural fire fundraising for both Kunghur and Nimbin brigades. Jenny also donated accommodation at her Air BnB to the Nimbin rural fire brigade.
8. Rose Beaton, FantAsia. Food (material)
9. Nimbin Sourdough. Material – we run a bakery, donated bread. We also donated our time as our main baker is a firefighter, so we shut down for a couple of days.
10. Dropped off some plates.
11. None.
12. Food items.
13. Money/financial
14. Provide water from our dam.
15. Food donations.
16. Loan to person responsible for storing gear during evacuation.
17. Cooking utensils and food.
18. Nimbin Village Pharmacy. We provided rehydration solution and eye drops and saline for firefighters.
19. We donated 12 machetes to the local RFS. Value \$420.
20. Kylie Cain – The Green Bank. I donated a box of toilet paper to the evacuees at the show grounds and I donated my time and went to the centre at Tuntabule and set up a massage chair and gave 15-20 seated massages to any fires that came in for lunch I did this for 3.5 hrs one day and then put my hand up to help out massaging at the gym and for my name to go on the vouchers that were offered to the fires afterwards.
21. Hemp Embassy. Money and food and medicine - \$1000.

Q3. What was the financial impact on your business?

1. Negative. During this time my business did not operate and most people I work with as a builder were not available. 2 weeks of no income which equates to approx. \$1000 after tax. That money will not be made back. Also, trade was affected by the fires and then we moved into the Xmas period which is always a slow time for builders.
2. Negative. There was no trading for 2 weeks – approx 50% loss.
3. NEC- Not sure. Trading was little bit reduced. Not many people out shopping and we were closed a couple of days later in the week.
4. Jane Mari for Armonica Café. Negative impact – town was dead. 30-50% down.
5. Pixie Nut & Co. Negative. I closed my online store whilst I was evacuated but in the end I don't think there was much financial impact, I just lost a lot of time and had to catch up on wholesale orders.
6. Ralph. Negative. We are a building material business. We made do with skeletal staff. Not much construction was going on while the emergency was going on. Hard to say what the actual costs were.
7. Summerland Credit Union -Yes. On days when we had to close.
8. Rose Beaton, FantAsia. I don't recall being negatively affected.
9. Nimbin Sourdough. Negative, we run a farmers market stall in Nimbin and Lismore. Nimbin particularly dropped off. We may have done 60% of our usual income.
10. More the drought for me. Very hot and dry spring. The creek stopped running.
11. Negative. Approx 60% of business. Maybe 70%. I don't think I will make it back considering current situation.
12. Negative. Sales down 30%.
13. Negative. Loss of income - \$15-20,000.
14. Negative. 6 months.
15. Negative due to a drop in business since the fires.
16. Many months of activity lost completely.
17. It was donations and on accounts (this will not be paid back). We won't make it back. It has gone.
18. Nimbin Village Pharmacy. No negative impact. We were busy with people stocking up on medical supplies.
19. Business was down 40% more or less. I have no idea how long it will take to recuperate the funds.
20. Kylie Cain – The Green Bank. There was a definite negative impact on my business. My takings for the 3 week period after our fires started were 1/3 of what they were the previous year and my sales are on an increase each year so it was VERY obvious to me. Following our fires came the rest of the fires which impacted my Xmas sales. I have spent the last 3 mths trying so hard to make up that loss and now we have the virus.
21. Hemp Embassy. Town was quieter for a bit but no big deal.

Q4. Are there other long-term effects of the 2019 bushfire event on your business?

1. No long term effects specifically as I mostly work in property maintenance and renovations and I'm winding back my business as I head to retirement
2. No
3. NEC-Not particularly noticeable.
4. Jane Mari for Armonica Café. Unsure – time will tell. We didn't lose any staff.
5. Pixie Nut & Co. N/A
6. Ralph. No. We are recovering. Staff is back and business is as it was.
7. Summerland Credit Union -Unsure.
8. Rose Beaton, FantAsia. No
9. Nimbin Sourdough. Yes. It was not one week, it has been every week since fires began. Stopped people's shopping rhythm. Only seeing it come back now 4 months later. Customers starting to return.
10. Yes. The market has been a bit quiet.
11. Yes. The trade is still low. With the corona virus much longer.
12. ?
13. Yes. Loss of product.
14. Nil.
15. Yes. Restriction in trade.
16. Hopefully not.
17. Too many other factors to single out the fire.
18. Nimbin Village Pharmacy. No long term effect.
19. No.
20. Kylie Cain – The Green Bank. Yes I have lost trade and income from the fires, I'm not sure I will bounce back now.
21. Hemp Embassy. Some.

Q5. Does your business have a disaster business continuity plan?

1. No – which became a problem as one of my roles is to maintain and protect the community centre in nimbin. At the same time I was fighting fires and working on protecting my own home. This needs to be better managed into the future
2. No.
3. NEC-No. Though we have volunteer and business insurance.
4. Jane Mari for Armonica Café. We have security as required by the Alcohol Licensing Board. Can't afford extra insurance- already too high.
5. Pixie Nut & Co. As I have an office in town I feel like my stock is fairly safe there, I generally try to avoid insurances etc.
6. Ralph. Yes.
7. Summerland Credit Union- Yes.
8. Rose Beaton, FantAsia. No
9. Nimbin Sourdough. No.
10. No.
11. No.
12. No.
13. No.
14. Yes.
15. No.
16. No.
17. No.
18. Yes.
19. No.
20. Kylie Cain – The Green Bank. No. I have insurance but no income protection and I didn't fit in any category for the relief packages.
21. Hemp Embassy – Yes. A little – (insurance, security of premises underlined by respondent)