



I am making this submission as	Other
Submission type	Organisation
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	The following submission has been prepared by Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council, addressing the four matters identified for comment.
1.1 Causes and contributing factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The inaccessibility of the country where ignitions started impeded an early assault which allowed the fire fronts to grow on all sides, requiring a greater number of ground resources.• The dry conditions meant that embers resulted in large numbers of spot fires that took hold quickly, including in open areas where fires ran even though there were almost negligible amounts of grass cover.• Water was at a premium because of the drought. Usual water sources were low or non-existent.• Because of the dry conditions, some communities and households were under fire threat up to four times because of unburnt areas of land igniting after initial fire fronts had moved through:

- unburnt canopies falling to ground level and reigniting,
- the number of hot spots across the fire ground,
- the vastness of fire fronts and
- wind changes pushing fires back and forth through burnt areas and those areas re-igniting.
- The number of challenging fire weather days had a significant impact on fuelling the fires and extending the duration of the fire events.

1.2 Preparation and planning

- Advice from some landholders suggested that the location of homes meant that those property owners were priced out of the insurance market or had been refused insurance. This meant those landholders felt that, with the risk of being homeless if they had evacuated, they had no choice but to stay to defend properties that were described by fire authorities as indefensible. These properties were not going to be defended by the RFS because of their location and the action to stay and defend posed a serious risk to the life of those individuals. Miraculously those individuals survived.
- Properly-prepared properties have a greater chance of surviving bush fire events. Greater one-on-one, face-to-face interaction with landholders by fire authorities and supporting checklists or plans around what a prepared property looks like would potentially preserve properties in a bushfire and reduce the consequences of a bushfire.
- Anecdotally, it became apparent that most individuals and communities had chosen to stay and defend. Action around preparing properties and access to resources and/or training around the physical environment during a bushfire i.e. smoke, light, heat, sound, duration, and the psychological impacts, would help to inform those decisions and prevent people fleeing at the last minute when they became too scared.

1.3 Response to bushfires

- The number of fires burning across the State meant local resources were stretched.
- The drought conditions meant that there were water access issues which resulted in top level water restrictions for Braidwood.
- "Mosquito crews" played a significant role in the fire response, particularly in containing spot fires and helping their neighbours. The contribution and potential of these "Mozzie" firefighters should never be underestimated or dismissed.
- The Lake George Incident Management Team (IMT) worked well.
- The fire responses were segmented into a number of divisions and each of those divisions was led by a divisional commander who directed the resources under his command. When the IMT does not have vision of the fire, they are reliant for periods of time on the competency of the divisional commander. Because of the importance of this role, these positions should be appointed on a paid retainer basis similar to some Fire and Rescue NSW stations to ensure a certain level of skill and training.
- Smoke was a significant issue across the whole of the LGA and there was no real-time accurate smoke haze data to assist with decision-making around public health and WHS. QPRC is currently exploring options for obtaining real time data using commercially available hardware, current online resources and citizen scientists.
- Council staff were tasked to push in containment lines and provide water tanker support to firefighting assets. Staff were not trained to operate in firegrounds, and may present some WHS issues.
- Containment lines featured strongly as part of the containment strategy and there has been feedback from landholders that there was no consultation with them in relation to where containment lines were going to be built and their appropriateness or potential effectiveness. Landholders who were on the ground when containment lines were being put in

were ignored when they tried to object or suggest alternate options that they believed would satisfy both the combat agency and themselves. This type of activity was fed to operators through the divisional command from the IMT so again, retained divisional command personnel would be better equipped to manage containment line strategies coming down from the IMT. Subsequent requests by owners to rehabilitate containment lines have been limited by availability of resources or skills.

- Similarly, the rapid and sometimes haphazard movement of fire vehicles and placement of retardant has damaged productive lands and habitat, already under stress from drought and with little means of rehabilitation.

- There was a delay in the Currowan fire being divided and split between the Shoalhaven and Lake George fire districts. This put significant pressure on the resources on the ground who were responding to the part of the fire which had travelled into the Lake George fire district. These local crews were competing for direction and support from the controlling IMT which was also dealing with fires threatening a large number of communities along the coast. This put a lot of pressure on the local divisional command and is another reason why retained divisional commanders are appropriate to ensure a certain level of skill and training.

1.4 Any other matters

WELFARE

- The welfare arrangements are considered too rigid:
 - o There was no option to provide initial outreach support to Nerriga which was cut off for anyone wishing to leave. There was however access to Nerriga for essential services under escort. A large number of people retreated to the Nerriga Hotel and had to be supported informally by other means.

- o There was no option to provide welfare support to the large animal evacuation areas because they were not established under the welfare arrangements, but rather under Local Land Services' arrangements. This meant that there was no formal registration occurring at these centres and there was no psychological support or any of the other welfare services that are available at the 'people' evacuation centres.

- o There would have been benefit in being able to maintain disaster welfare information points. There were many days throughout the bushfire event where people just needed somewhere to go to compose themselves before they moved on and they wanted to do that somewhere around others who were experiencing the same thing. There were also people who just wanted to debrief and catch up on the current fire situation face to face. Disaster welfare information points were ideal for meeting this need, however they are outside the current arrangements. Options for partial operation of an evacuation centre to accommodate small numbers of presentations should be considered under the welfare arrangements.

- A second wave of community grief is anticipated, as delays occur to demolition and clearance of sites; awareness of the limitations of that clearance; process and delays with applications to rebuild – particularly if the former structures may not be lawful (under LEPs or the Exempt and Complying Development Codes), notwithstanding the Temporary Structures SEPP put into place. Many owners may choose to retain occupancy of the temporary shed or container accommodation due to non-insurance or ineligibility to build a permanent dwelling.

UTILITIES

- Telecommunications repairs were slow and areas are still even now without telecommunications services.

- The electricity providers in the local government area were very responsive and worked tirelessly to restore power quickly and continuously. They were sensible in triaging to ensure power was restored as quickly as possible to critical infrastructure such as fire sheds and points of evacuation such as the Nerriga Hotel.

DATA

- Impact assessment data was slow to be verified and be provided to the EOC. The work that the RFS does through the Building Impact Assessment (BIA) teams is invaluable; however there have been suggestions from households coming through the QPRC Recovery Centre that the information captured by the BIA teams is inaccurate and/or incomplete. Having the BIA data provided more quickly and accurately would enable to EOCs to compare the list of properties visited with the list of properties featured in the burn scar. This would enable the identification of those properties which have been missed while the BIA teams are still in the area.
- A single source of truth is crucial – the mix of PWA, EPA, RFS, LLS, SNSW and Council data sets and maps need alignment to ensure all property, owner, damage and risks are ground-truthed, in turn providing confidence for applicants for assistance and agencies processing those requests.

RESOURCES

- Some functional areas struggled to provide resources because of the number of fires burning.
- Relationship and function of neighbourhood safer places and evacuation centres require review.
- Access to the ADF resources to assist removal of debris and temporary infrastructure fixes to enable access to towns and properties, and coordinated storage and distribution of donated goods immediately following the fires, was vital.
- In relation to fire preparation and response, the ability to take advantage of the ANU project to utilise satellites for tracking soil moisture as well as other indicators of fire threat. This technology is needed to assist in accurately mapping where the fire moves when weather and smoke conditions prevent data collection using air support. Better change detection data is required so that changes can be tracked in the landscape between certain dates in terms of how the landscape was impacted throughout an event and also to track how the landscape recovers.
- Opportunities to utilise BlazeAid and Greening Australia resources to rebuild fences and vegetation on public/private lands is enormously beneficial to recovery.

PLANNING

Consideration and review of:

- current laws and practices for dealing with illegal dwellings within bushfire prone land
- current laws that allow for rebuilding dwellings and buildings in high hazard areas
- effectiveness of the application of the NSW Planning for Bushfire Protection and s117 Local Planning Direction 4.4 Planning for Bushfire Protection in the Planning Proposal process to exclude inappropriate development from bushfire prone areas.
- the appropriateness to clear land to achieve asset protection zones versus the environmental impact on native bushland. The 10/50 vegetation clearing scheme applies once the house is constructed. The application of this scheme does not forego the consideration of the Biodiversity Conservation Act.
- if the ecosystem has capacity for ongoing mosaic fuel reduction in State and National Parks.
- the appropriateness of continuing to zone new land for dwellings in bushfire prone areas, particularly lifestyle and hobby farms.
- older buildings do not comply with current BALs. Voluntary upgrading of existing and older building can be encouraged and perhaps there is scope for the state/federal government to establish a funding or grants program to help facilitate upgrading.
- conditions of consent requiring specific construction methods and materials. Conditions may also stipulate the creation and maintenance of Asset Protection Zones (APZ). Once the initial

development is complete, it is essentially the owners' responsibility to ensure continued compliance. There is not resourcing to enable ongoing compliance action where this does not occur

- A review of grazing rights in State and National Parks as a way of reducing overall fuel loads and how that would benefit farmers in drought considerations.
- Review of State and National Parks firewood collection as a means to reducing overall fuel loads.

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