

NSW Bush Fire Enquiry

Reviewing the causes of, preparedness for and response to the 2019-20 bushfires.

Submission

5th May 2020

Ross Hitchcock

ph [REDACTED]

Submission as a Primary producer.

Submission type –personal

Share your experience or tell your story.

I am a self-employed primary producer on the Central Coast (Gosford) ranges with an orchard and a large area of native bushland dedicated as a flora and fauna reserve. The effect of manmade climate change has followed the scientific analysis, with my orchard not able to set and retain significant crops due to out of season flowering, temperature variations and dryness. My type of farming involves continuous burning of pruned trees and removed groves with fallen bush and windbreak debris etc. I have committed 50 years as an active member of the Kulnura Rural Fire Brigade. Our brigade provides fire suppression and other emergency involvement from the Hawksbury River in the south to the Hunter River in the north and included within is the central coast water supply catchment, state forest, national park lands and 1st nation special areas.

My involvement in the fires of 2019 began in March 2019 at Glenn Innes in the New England region with a strike team deployment to the area west of Deepwater as a senior officer. From March 2019 to August 2019 I conducted hazard reduction (HR) burns on my property and public lands. These burns in the winter months were very challenging due to dry conditions, wind patterns and no burn days. This year my farm HR programme followed a cultural burn format which left much fuel unburnt, habitat trees intact with on ground logs unburnt and I doubt if this area would have reduced a wild fire progress to any extent. The public land HR was intense but was able to stop the extension of the 3mile fire further into the central coast water catchment. Both required a lot of resources for planning and implementation. Last year like this year had many perfect opportunities for HR programmes but they were during the week or clashed with mother's day etc. Because of climate forecasting I also spent a lot of resources on property preparations including putting power underground, strengthening water supply systems and static water supply facilities etc.

Knowing the dry climatic conditions had not changed in the state I was not surprised by the fire activity developing in the northern tablelands by August/September 2019. Being an officer, heavy vehicle response driver and with operating experience in difficult isolated terrain and with farm work at a minimum I volunteered to be part of 4 deployments to the region. My final 5th deployment was to the South Coast in January 2020 at Moruya. Each deployment was for 5 days.

Share your experience or tell your story.

continued

Between October 2019 and January 2020 fires from Gospers Mnt, 3mile, Wrights creek and Rugby Track began to affect my community and farm at Kulnura. My preparations were extensively utilised and fire was ultimately contained at the property boundary. Number of days for RFS fire ground activities from July to April approximated 60.

Terms of reference.

Causes and contributing factors.

Causes are many and varied, too many to list. More importantly is how they spread. Fuel loads and curing with moisture content which for 2019-20 was very low. The temperature inversion over the Antarctic was reported in August and indicated strong hot winds from September to January. Conservation farming techniques allows more vegetation to build up on fence lines and around infrastructure. Across the board fear of fire reduces the ability to reduce fuel loads. The RFS is very effective in putting out most fires reported.

Preparation and Planning.

Very little private land owner preparation and planning to reduce fire impact on assets is conducted. Participation in preparation open days provided by our brigade for landowners to view or discuss the excellent material provided to the public on how to plan and manage for fire and emergencies is negligible to the point where in reality it is a waste of time. Public lands now lack resources in manpower to be effective. More and more people are buying rural properties and using their resources to make firefighting difficult with fence lines, access and assets in the most inappropriate locations. My involvement in cultural burning leads to the conclusion it makes very little difference in this season, requires a lot of resources of the human kind, and some of the practitioners have no idea of fire behaviour leading to a danger to themselves and possible fire escapes. The RFS has planned and provided up to 2018, equipment best suited to needs, with a control and communication structure most appropriate.

Key elements in landowner preparation from my experience is:

Property address number is visible at night, large enough and from up and down the road.

Entrance drive ways wide enough for a large truck not to be hindered by narrow gates, overhanging trees and wires, water crossings strong enough for large trucks and ability to turn around after access is made.

Fence lines have through boundary gates and back set away from public lands for access to both side for both maintenance and fire damage minimisation.

Put water lines underground

Ability to drive a vehicle close around assets without stopping or reversing.

Response to bushfires.

Given the enormity of the fires, resources available and operating conditions it is hard to find deficiencies. I cannot see how the defence force can quickly assist in emergencies given the dispersed nature of their resources and the dynamic nature of fire grounds. Their resource in equipment etc. is not compatible with the RFS. The ability to “plug in” and support would need a lot of work and involvement in the area of HR work where skills can be learnt in a programmed manner. Community support was very high and usually unconditional.

Any other matters.

The current issue PPC is not fit for purpose as it is too hot, flimsy and subject to deterioration from embers and not Hi Vis in some circumstances. Obsolete PPC of heavy cotton was more comfortable and durable but if not cared for looked dirty. Bulk water is an area where the RFS needs to look at. Current large RFS bulk water trucks are not big enough but need specialised drivers they also have no off road capacity. Contract bulk water has limitations as well for drivers and training.

Technology use was both a hindrance and a help. Small screen viewing and appreciation was lost in the need for big picture imperatives with many variations, compatibilities and competencies in the use of. This led to a lack of adaptability and confusion and an inability to read the full text.

Cultural burning appears to not provide the sustainability for regrowth and biodiversity as proposed and would require more research but is better than clearing with its loss to the environment. I often wonder if every fire started by lightning was let run, as would have been the case once, what the fire mosaic would look like.

Thank you for receiving this submission,

Ross Hitchcock