



Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Ruth

Last name

Horsfall

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

My story:

Like all of us in the Batemans Bay area, I lived with the bushfires nearby from November 26. Initially the impact was limited to travel changes and restricted movement with the road closures, asthma exacerbation from the air quality, anxiety and sadness over the devastation to the local bushland (I am a regular bushwalker). December 31 saw the direct impact. I was up from 6am after receiving the emergency alert, and spent hours making my place safe and finalising my evacuation gear. My elderly parents live in Catalina, and I had planned to go to them as soon as I had finished the work required at home. By mid to late morning I was no longer able to contact them by phone. I could see there were fires in Catalina (suburb between Batehaven where I live, and Batemans Bay) with the water and retardant bombers active in the area. From the RFS app I could see fires along Beach Road (and in Catalina) between myself and my parents, and from the Live Traffic App I could see the roads were

jammed with traffic on this route. So I knew that I was unable to reach my parents and was unable to tell if they were OK. It was unclear whether I was supposed to have evacuated, and whether we would have any evacuation notice. Internet reception was very patchy so no information was coming through. The evacuation centre was enroute to my parents and I knew it was inaccessible by this stage - or at least unsafe to attempt to get there. The smoke was very thick, so it was unsafe to be outside or consider evacuating to either of the closest beaches. I saw and talked with two of my neighbours and planned to leave when/if they did and also to go to one of their houses if the situation worsened. At about 12pm we lost power, and the weather change came through. This saw a rapid worsening of the smoke, so it was quite dark. However, the temperature dropped and gradually over the next few hours began to clear slightly. I was aware that the wind change could see the fire shift into my immediate area. However, the wind dropped considerably rather than the predicted continuation of strong winds, so the risk actually dropped. By mid/late afternoon, it looked safe to try to get to my parents and so I left home and drove to their place. They were fine, although there were nearby spot fires flaring up on and off, and I stayed at their place while there was immediate risk and no power. I was able to get one message off to family, to let them know we were OK, before losing communications completely. The next few days were spent preparing for the next onslaught, predicted Jan 4. Having been through Dec 31, it was easier to know what was needed (power, light, gas) and re-prepare my house for the potential fire. I spent the night of 3 Jan with my parents to ensure they were safe overnight, and then spent the next day between my place and theirs, trying to manage personal and property safety. The next month was a similar story, with predicted (and actual) flare ups, particularly in my parent's suburb and in the bushland surrounding my suburb; but without the direct, high risk.

I found that I was showing symptoms of trauma, and sought counselling from a practitioner in Sydney, who I have seen previously. I have been lucky that it has eased, and did not develop into PTSD. While in retrospect, I was not in direct risk on Dec 31, I did not know that at the time. There was a point when I realised it was 'too late to leave, and this was horrific. However, I believe I was more traumatised by being unable to look after my parents that day, and being unable to reach them.

For me, the major issue was lack of communications. The radio info was too general - Batemans Bay does not have a radio station, so the info tended to be Bega and Nowra based. The internet info was also sketchy and unreliable. The RFS app couldn't keep up to date and the poor internet (and high volume) meant that it was inaccessible much of the time. And then losing the phone coverage meant there was nothing but radio. The loss of power had more far reaching implications than expected because it meant shops couldn't open, so required supplies were hard to access. Access to petrol was difficult, both with the demand and with the servos trying to run pumps using generators and cash only. It felt like a war zone. It was frightening being in a situation where we potentially couldn't leave because of both roads being cut and too little petrol to leave anyway.

The community spirit was wonderful, and although it/fear did bring out the worst in some, overall people really looked out for each other. Social media was a blessing and a curse. We relied so much on the information on it, and as a way of sharing resources and helping each other. However it also spread fear, panic and misinformation.

The information and tireless work of the local RFS, police and our MP Andrew Constance was terrific in the lead up to Dec 31, and without it, we would have been so much less prepared. The information was clear, direct and pulled no punches. It was consistent, and frequent and meant I was very aware of the

situation as it progressed. The advocacy of Constance afterwards was incredible. I will always be grateful for what he did.

In terms of what is needed - better access to communications and information is key. Maybe agreement between the telco's to immediately provide coverage to other carriers in the event of towers being lost. The NBN relies on power, so this was a big problem for landline users. The army's logistical capability was terrific, but it should have been made available much earlier to assist in distribution of supplies. Access to power is critical, and supply of generators to keep essential services and shops/petrol stations open was needed immediately. Emergency radio communications are needed to provide local areas with accurate info during and immediately after the emergency. Better dissemination of mental health services is needed, maybe less formal services given the stigma, especially for men, in using these. And long term support for those directly impacted is needed. People are still living in tents. People were rumoured to be made to leave temporary motel accommodation as the area reopened to tourists. I talk to people who are still traumatised. We need ongoing support.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

1.3 Response to bushfires

- Roll out logistical support asap to provide power and supplies.
- Look to provide emergency telecommunications coverage when there are tower losses.
- Establish emergency radio communications/stations to provide local info.
- Counselling services are needed, maybe informal to make them more accessible and less stigmatised.
- Ensure that clean up is rolled out asap. There is still rubble everywhere here.
- Remove some of the bureaucracy involved in accessing support. Traumatized people can't deal with all the red tape.

Supporting documents or images
