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First name	Sara
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I am making this submission as	Resident
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	<p>This was our family's first experience of bushfire, which I think is relevant in terms of our lack of experience and suitable planning. We have lived at our place for 7 years but we are not country people and we don't have a strong network of friends and community where we live and we have always felt quite isolated socially where we live. This I think contributed to our risky decision to evacuate through fire at 11.40am in NYE at Conjola, NSW.</p> <p>On NYE our 25 acre property was impacted by bushfire on NYE 2019, with the first sight of fire approaching our property from the north west at 10.05am. Before that we had burnt leaves falling (but not live embers) and there were water bombing helicopters passing over head (I assume attending properties up golden flats lane at approx 9.45am to 10.30am). At this stage from 8.45am-10.15am we were watering down the house and blocking and filling the gutters. We soaked the eaves, verandah and grass around the house and packed valuables into the car and trailer.</p>

With the first sight of fire in the bush across our neighbours paddock to the north west at 10.08am it wasn't until 11.16am that the first spot fire occurred on our western fence line. We attended with a water cube and fire hose but were ineffective because the fire was moving/dancing from north and west and the wind was blowing the water sideways. We did not have enough control and at 11.20am made the decision to leave when the fire got into our western boundary tree line. We were aware that there was no help available in terms of fire trucks, etc and we didn't have the right equipment or resources to fight (we needed more hoses and bigger hoses and a bigger mobile water supply with a bigger pump). We knew it would be ineffective to call 000. We felt alone but resourceful as a family unit and I'm very glad that we were all home together as a family to face this situation. I dread to think what would have happened if my 15 year old son had been at home on his own to face this situation, if say my husband and I had nipped in to town to get more hoses, etc. one of the biggest learnings from this experience is to stay together at all times (on extreme or catastrophic days) if that is your plan. I have learnt that you have to enact your plan on these days and stick with it, even if conditions seem benign as they did at our place on NYE from dawn until approx 9am when the wind came and the birds started behaving strangely. In the morning of NYE I was in contact with our neighbours to the south of us and called them twice between 9am and 10am to check conditions & seek reassurance. In future I would use this resource of neighbour knowledge/info/contact much more and believe that a what's app group would be very useful to provide specific, local info. During the fire, the fires near me app is not specific enough and we innately disregarded it. Before the fire and after the fire however fires near me app was very useful.

On NYE we evacuated at 11.36am and there were grass fires coming up the slope of our property from the north. We evacuated with 2 cars via our drive which exits on the Prince's highway. I drove out first with my 15 yo son who ran back to house when we were halfway down the drive to check on my husband. I experienced 'freeze' fearing that I would lose both my husband and my son as I watched my son run back to the house. My husband had difficulty getting out due to flames in the grass but he managed to stamp on them and then drive through. My son ran back to me in the car running over/around the grassfire. Immense relief and sense of family survival - strong, primal feelings. I had difficulty driving because I wasn't thinking straight and realised I was driving with the handbrake on. We both remained calm and quiet. I felt focused and beyond fear. When we reached the exit on the Prince's highway there were flames the height of the trees on both sides of the highway coming from the north. We turned right out of our drive to head south down the highway (towards Milton & Ulladulla). I was very concerned for my husband behind us but was focused on survival. There were flames in the top of trees on both sides of the bridge at Myrtle Gully and the whole gully was alight by 11.40/11.45am I think the time was that we were driving through. Branches were shattering embers across the bonnet but once we got to porters creek road the road widened and we felt that the main threat had eased. There was a fire truck parked at porters creek road and I stopped there so relieved to see another person, but we continued on north up the highway. Passing the junction with lake Conjola entrance road at 11.45am approx we saw a big crowd of people and cars. I felt bad that we didn't stop to warn them to flee but we drove on determined to get to Milton. Once in Milton we were extremely fortunate to bump into our neighbour who invited us in to his business premises in Milton. We were shocked, shaken and very concerned for our neighbours wife who had remained at their property on her own to defend. We had a very tense wait with him, his 2 children. I thought the worst for her but after 2 hours we got the call to say she had survived after sheltering in her pool with scuba gear. Our neighbours then invited us to stay

in their family holiday house at Racecourse Beach. Staying with friends was a godsend. That afternoon I registered with Red Cross find, unite and went to Civic Centre but didn't need to go as it was at that stage managing displaced tourists. We stayed in Racecourse beach for 5 nights and were fortunate to be able to walk to town and shops and purchase petrol when required. Because we had a car and car phone charger we were able to charge phones in the car. The aftermath of the bushfire experience with power loss, highway closure, loss of telecommunications and then once home 2 weeks without power whilst waiting for level 2 electrician to fix our private pole and power box was in our case as traumatic and disorientating as the fire itself. We were fortunate that our home survived but the loss of animal, bird and plant life has been devastating. Returning home on Jan 3 felt like nuclear winter. It was the end of the world as we knew it. So many homes have been destroyed within a 10km radius of us, let alone in Australia as a whole, 2 lives were lost in our immediate area and we are all keenly aware that our emergency services and RFS have been stretched way beyond capacity. What we need to see is resource building and survival training in schools and community centres. Bushfire planning needs to be more real, more practical and we need to go further in resourcing individuals, communities, properties, etc to be able to protect themselves. We were all on our own in this fire. Communities have come together in the aftermath and we need to build on this. Recovery is complex. In the recent heavy rains on Feb 9th 2020 we experienced a flood in our home directly attributable to bushfire impacts. As a result of our power box being replaced in stressful circumstances 2 weeks after NYE the electrical conduit pipe was not properly waterproofed and as a result we had rainwater pouring into the house through this pipe, into a cavity wall and soaking into and under the floor in our kitchen, living room, bedroom and office. Our home life is upside down. Our water pump is not working since the bushfire and remains unfixable. We have water, but not running water. 5 of our friends have lost their houses, but the emerging problem now is business impacts. We are broke with all the costs associated with fire damage and flood. We have lost approx \$20,000 of equipment in the bushfire and potentially another \$10-15,000 due to flood damage. Grants from Vinnies (\$3000) and Salvos (\$2750) have been a huge help. The recovery centre in Ulladulla has been an excellent resource and support and was the thing that enabled me to engage, seek support and really feel supported in a civic and community sense. Once I received the financial support I started to feel that life could get back to normal, that recovery is a thing, a real thing, that is made possible by community on every level, grass roots, local, state, federal. I have been fortunate to be able to get back to work since Jan 6th and that has really helped me stabilise and hold on to normality. I believe it took me about 6 weeks to get over the shock and trauma of NYE not just for us but for our community. The events of Jan 4th and the floods at Conjola are almost too much to process on top of this. I haven't yet sought counseling but I will. Like many others I had personal tragedy to deal with before the bushfires. Once we recover from the shock and trauma we can put it all in context and begin to deal with it all.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Global warming, Drought, fuel load, rfs backburn in our area in dangerous conditions, rfs lack of funding and resources, hot and windy conditions

1.2 Preparation and planning

Bushfire safety education helped us prepare the house before fire impacted. Having our house recently renovated to current bushfire safety rating standards helped house withstand fire which got up to the verandah and in to trees within 5 metres of house and burnt out our kitchen garden, destroying sheds containing equipment and machinery. Before the fire my husband and I had never been able to agree on a plan. When the threat

was real however, animal instinct took over and our family of 3 acted as a unit, calmly and efficiently. Our 15 year old son was proactive, resourceful and cooperative in a way that we don't usually experience. He was up in the roof filling the gutters and did everything he could to protect our home and keep us all safe

1.3 Response to bushfires

Initially it brought our immediate community in Myrtle Gully, Conjola much closer than ever. With the bush all burnt out we could actually see our neighbours for the first time and it brought us closer together. 6 weeks later though, we're all struggling, embroiled in our own battles. In the immediate aftermath, after evacuating the fire on NYE I experienced euphoria. In the week after, I experienced anger, tempered by my understanding of the scale of the bushfire crisis, that there were not more fire trucks and fire fighting resources available to protect our communities. I was angry that it took so long to call the army in after the onslaught when help was so desperately needed. The assistance from the army and disaster relief centres and personnel and all the donations, love and support that has flooded in to fire affected communities has been really life-affirming. We need to build on this climate conscious compassion and the energy and dynamic actions of people and communities who had to survive this disaster. We need to influence government policy to speed up positive change to give us all half a chance of survival. Experiencing NYE fire and its aftermath on South Coast NSW gave us all a taste of system collapse. It is terrifying, dumbing, apocalyptic.

1.4 Any other matters

Politics must radically change to meet the will and compassion of the people - as per Hamish McDonald's approach on the new Q and A. People must reduce consumption on every level, every day of the week. Politicians must do everything within their power to reduce carbon emissions and transition to renewables. Children and adults must be educated into disaster management. Watching the TV drama Years & Years really helped give me some points of reference to deal with this crisis.

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