

Your details

Title

Mr

First name

Sean

Last name

McLoughlin

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Emergency services personnel

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

I am currently a Deputy Group Captain (volunteer) with the NSW Rural Fire Service. I am the 3rd most senior volunteer, elected by 16 Brigades, in the Northern Beaches Rural Fire District of the NSW RFS. I joined the Ingleside Rural Fire Brigade on 3 March 1991. I have held field officer operational positions at Ingleside Brigade of Deputy Captain 1995-2000, Senior Deputy Captain 2000-2005, 2017, Captain 2005-2017, along with being elected to a District position of Deputy Group Captain rank 2009-2011, 2013-2016 and from 2018 to the current.

I have been involved and responded to numerous incidents and bushfires over the last 29 years, including being one of the most experienced in the Northern Beaches RFS District at conducting and running Hazard Reduction burns and operating at bush fires, both small and large for the last 25 years. I have conducted training to Group Leader Certification and Prescribed Burning, along with numerous other RFS courses in wildfire operations.

Between the 11 November 2019 and 2 February 2020, I was conducting operations with the RFS and as a Strike Team Leader, leading up to seven fire fighting vehicles and 40 fire fighting volunteer personnel on bushfire operations. I attended to nine different bush fire emergencies, declared under Section 44 of the Rural Fires Act on

29 individual occasions across NSW including at the following bush fire emergencies; Rumba Dump, Gospers Mountain, Seven Mile Creek, Green Wattle Creek, Currowan 2, Good Good, Rockton, Adaminaby Complex and Badja Forest Road Countegany S44 Fires.

I consider myself to be an experienced bush fire fighter, both on the hose line, but more so in the 'in the field' bush fire management operations as Divisional Commander or Strike Team Leader roles.

My current elected position is voted on by 16 volunteer Brigades, in competition with my peers for the position I currently hold on a yearly or bi yearly basis. I am not trying to 'blow my own trumpet' here, but to give the NSW Bushfire Inquiry an understanding of my background, my involvement in bush fire operations and leadership and experience working with and at bush fire in the Australian landscape.

Overall, the NSW RFS is an effective NSW State Government lead organisation, full of professional volunteer fire fighters, with years of bush fire fighting experience that can only be gained on the 'fire ground' and not always from reading text to gain those skills. The organisation certainly has its problems, many that could be rectified, but the involvement of volunteers across NSW shows that overall, it is an effective professional organisation, there for one reason to protect our Australian community.

Having attended to nine different Bush Fire emergencies on consecutive and sometimes multiple days over the 2019/2020 bushfire season, I will aim to address a number of issues, that I believed were fundamental in preventing effective bushfire management, caused issues on the fire ground that should not have occurred, prevented the saving of more properties and people's homes and were mismanaged ending up not providing effective use of RFS volunteers, fire fighting appliances and resources to assist in containing the bush fire response. I will also provide thoughts on the unprecedented bush fire area burnt across NSW. I hope my submission will assist the inquiry to make recommendations to ensure the RFS and the response systems are improved into the future.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Australia has had bush fires for thousands of years. We now have more people than ever in Australia, more resources, better technology for detecting and suppressing bush fires, better planning and execution of Hazard Reduction Burns and certainly a significant increase in detection of bushfires starting via the use of aircraft. For the past 20 years, this increase in detection of bush fires, started by lightning, or maliciously has increased to the point, where within seconds we know of lightning strike locations, we know of potential fires starting from these and can put up an aircraft to do a fly over and identify. From there, within minutes or hours, we deploy fire fighters by aircraft, insert them onto the fire ground to contain particularly remote fires. We deploy aircraft to water bomb fire in inaccessible areas.

What are we doing? We are putting those fires out the best we can.

10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago, this never happened, or when a bush fire was detected, it was via a smoke plume or other days later and by that stage, the fire was generally larger, was inaccessible due to no trained fire fighters being inserted to control them. That led to the spread of those fires, burning out larger areas of the bush. On hot, windy days, this led to fire running into populated areas, burning out large areas of bush until it was managed via roads, fire trails or rain. Fire would burn uncontained in remote areas on cooler days, burning out large areas of bush until the rain put it out, or it got to a roadway.

What were we doing then? We were waiting until we could attack the fire, which was often days later.

We have changed what we are doing in 2019/2020 to what we did 10+ years ago. We constantly put fires out. This leads to natural (lightning) bushfires not burning out large areas and naturally hazard reducing the fuel loads in the Australian bush. Over the past 10 years, this is what the RFS has done in many areas. Rather than naturally have a mosaic burnt pattern that provides reduced ground fuel, we have been allowing it to build up. We are efficient at putting them out, but when we get drought, dry winds, hot weather, those built up fuel loads ensure the fire burns stronger and harder than if the ground fuel had been hazard reduced naturally, or even on occasions, maliciously. On such a large scale, like we saw in 2019/20, it is no longer able to be contained on such a large scale.

In saying the above, some areas would have had fires anyway, some would never have been stopped, but I have a firm belief that we have assisted in causing these fires to be larger and more uncontrolled by our efficient and effective current efforts of actually putting them out.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Bush fire Fighting Experience verse qualifications on paper

I qualified in RFS Group Leader training in 2002 known as 'Group Leader 2003'. This training enabled myself to lead and direct over 100 personnel, taught me about incident management techniques. On top of this, I have been incident controller, Operations Officer, Divisional Commander and Sector Leader at numerous bushfires. I have a large amount of bushfire fighting exposure on the fire ground and working within Incident Management Teams. On 22 November 2019, the RFS office of the Northern Beaches District on behalf of the RFS requested assistance with Incident Management Team personnel, in particular for the Gaspers Mountain Fire in the Hawkesbury area. These were for positions of Safety Officer and Deputy Operations Officer as part of the Incident Management Team, something of which have previous experience with. Due to having an old qualification, I was never informed that I was required to upgrade my Group Leader 2003 to Group Leader 2014. In fact, in other areas of the state, holding Group Leader 2014 was not a requirement, but rather, they also request 'or suitable experience'. Effectively, our District Office allowed a newly trained GL2014 qualified person with the certificate over someone that has operational experience over many years, including the older GL2003 qualification. I requested what was required for upgrade, but was told by the Acting District Manager I had every opportunity to do GL2014 course and that I was attacking RFS staff by requesting an answer.

The RFS does not appear to recognise experience or older qualification, but rather wants newly qualified people to only be part of the Incident Management Team. In my District the four elected Group Captain/Deputy Group Captains have over 120 years of experience between us, yet, none of us were provided opportunity to upgrade to the newer qualification, nor were told that it was a requirements. The RFS is really missing out on experienced volunteers in some of these roles, the same volunteer that have years of experience working in management of fire, but someone that has 5-10 years experience is put into the role because they have a bit of paper. The RFS needs to recognised the role of the volunteer in fire management, give respect and control of the operations of bush fires to those experienced, not just on paper, to effectively manage the fires. Putting people with little operational experience into Incident Management Teams or Divisional Commander type roles is likely the cause of bush fires getting out of hand rather than being contained.

Community Fire Units

About 2012, the RFS set up Community Fire Units (CFU) in Rural Fire Service areas. These were effectively able to be community volunteers, protecting their homes and their neighbours homes fro bushfires and after the fire front has passed. They were able to be trained in the basic management and safety around Bush Fires. The RFS has a Service Standard for operation of these CFU teams, but there have been a number of issues in relation to the implementation of those CFU volunteers into Brigades and districts, including how they effectively deploy and are deployed at times of an approaching Bushfire. Many submissions have been made to the RFS to seek assistance in making the Service Standards workable, particularly in areas where they cannot see their neighbours, but these representations have fallen on deaf ears. CFU teams are required to activate with a minimum of 3 members. But the difficulty is, that on a 2 hectare block of land, you might not see your neighbour, but you are looking after your own house as a CFU team. The RFS has not reviewed, or assisted to review the Service standard changing the activation from 3 to 2 CFU members and continual liaison with the RFS has never provided a solution, or provided comments to the concerns of volunteers, including myself. The CFU volunteers, is one area that provides good community engagement, provides educations to residents in rural areas, assists the RFS Brigades in the area at times of fire, from chasing the fire front, rather than mopping up small areas that can be done by CFU teams. The CFU concept does not work in all NSW areas, but is an effective means to prepare the community in certain areas.

1.3 Response to bushfires

I attended to numerous bush fire emergencies over the Summer of 2019/20. There were four particular days, that I was the Strike Team Leader for at least 5 fire fighting appliances, where we were involved in bush fire fighting, that was not only life threatening to volunteers, but to the community and resulted in the loss of houses due to bush fire in the immediate area we were working. These areas were;

Green Wattle Creek Fire – Thursday 19 December 2019 (Bargo/Buxton area)

Gaspers Mountain Fire – Saturday 21 December 2019 (Blackheath/Mt Victoria area)

Currowan 2 Fire – Tuesday 31 December 2019 (Surf Beach, Sunshine Bay, Catalina areas)

Currowan 2 Fire – Saturday 4 January 2020 (Bendalong, Manyana areas)

Below I have listed a number of areas where the RFS needs to improve in particular areas including: Improvement of the Collector App for real time fire management and information; Providing access to Hardware including updating hardware with the required software when requested; Improved communications systems that work; improved

mapping software that is available not just when data is available, but available at all times off line; coloured aerial picture maps that are georeferenced for realtime location mapping and information data; Automatic vehicle locating to best place RFS assets on the fire ground and available to fire managers and Strike Team Leaders.

I will address each component then later provide examples where these improvements would have helped in saving homes and properties. This list is not exhaustive, I could write for hours, but I am submitting the areas that are vital to improve to assist the RFS to get better at what they do and not put up barriers to improvements.

Collector – RFS approved App used to get up to date information on a fire

The RFS supplied Collector 'App' provides information on the current location of the Bush fires. I have never been trained in this RFS supplied app, although regularly requested training in 2019 via my Fire Control Centre districts Senior Management Team for all Officers in the District and only one session was provided to a limited group. This app allows Fire Fighters on the ground access to real time positioning of the fire front and location via aircraft line fire scans, updated intelligence from fire fighters on the ground, from the Incident Management Team and provides good data to understand risks, hydrants and assets. The problem with Collector, is that it is clunky, slow, requires ongoing Data to be available to be updated. Unless field intelligence and fire plotting is approved by management, then it never shows up for those Fire fighters on the ground. If you lose the data connection, then you lose all information. You cannot update the system offline, then bring it online easily when in connection with data again. Collector provides access to some mapping options, but you generally need data to access these and the app is slow to operate.

IPads/iPhones

The Northern Beaches District provide Apple iPads for use within Strike Team Leader vehicles and iphones for use. These items have not been updated with the latest software for over 500 days. In 2019, in September and October, I requested that the Northern Beaches District Acting Manager provide updates and passwords for the iTunes account, so basic applications could be downloaded such as, Avenza (Mapping app providing location references), Collector App, Fire Tool apps for use in calculating fire spread with weather predictions, Google Maps for basic navigation and aerial bushland reference for seeing a 'satellite' type picture of bushland areas. The District Manager indicated that this would be obtained access provided. This was never given and still has not been updated. As such, the iPads were useless in the field.

Radios and Radio Channels

The RFS operates a Motorola Radio providing generally either GRN (Duplex) or PMR (Simplex) radio channel for Vehicle to Fire Communication Centres. A smaller powered Field (or Fire) Ground radio (Simplex) system is used for truck to truck communications. GNR or PMR generally works well and communications are easily heard. This should be available for general use by on the ground Brigade Truck to Truck. The smaller Field Ground Radios are only good for short distances, are affected by smoke, landscape (hills) and other obstacles. During the fire season, deployments of Strike teams were accessing a RFS Region East Radio channel eG034 to talk to FireComm and each other deploying all over the NSW coastal regions. This was not the actual fire radio channel, but a state level channel used for logistics.

Mapping

The RFS, outside of Collector, provides no hardware or software for Brigades and volunteers to use in the Northern Beaches district to access appropriate mapping, or location information. Grid References on Topographic Maps are generally in 6 figure references numbers, which needs to be converted to Latitude/Longitude, or Degrees Minutes Seconds depending on what is required. I was required to pay for Avenza Mapping App, then download my own NSW Government Topographic maps. I was required to use 10 different phone applications over the 2019/2020 bushfire season just to lead the Strike Teams at Bushfire safely and effectively. Mapping, particularly access to offline mapping is fundamental to working in Bush Fire situations. During my deployment on 29 occasions during 2019/20, I would have received maps on maybe 10 occasions and generally they were out of date or 1:60000 scale that were useless to work out where you were or fine detail.

Coloured aerial Picture Maps of NSW with Georeferencing.

Most volunteers use Google or Apple Maps to navigate the fire truck to bush fires. I use Google Maps. They provide a feature where a picture is available via data of the immediate area you are in, showing houses, cleared land, bushland, roads and the like. They are easily updated when data is available, but the quality of these pictures is poorer in regional areas with less detail. The RFS needs to provide clear, high quality updated and available offline satellite style pictures for frontline Brigades to access. During bushfires this provides intelligence and allows a Strike Team Leader on the fire ground to predict what is at risk, whether a driveway is safe to drive up in the truck or not, what assets are there or are not there. If you are not from the area, the data is generally poor during bushfires, then really, you are blind without any local knowledge.

Vehicle Locating Technology

The RFS is in the early stages of Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) technology. Fire & Rescue NSW have been tracking their vehicles for years. Whilst the technology is new, as a Strike Team Leader, placement of fire fighting appliances at bushfire incident scene would be greatly improved by this technology and this needs to be rolled out faster than it currently is. AVL is crucial in locating fire tankers last known location, or where data is available their current location when that tanker is stuck or the crew are under an emergency and life threatening situation and need assistance.

Thursday 19 December 2019 - Green Wattle Creek fire.

I responded into the area of Yarran Road, Bargo arriving about 330pm leading a strike team of RFS fire tankers. I was provided a radio channel via the Motorola Radios GRN to talk to a Divisional Commander. I tried on numerous occasions to get fire fighting directions, but could not get a response from any person in charge. I took it upon myself to leave Yarran Road, after deploying my crew at numerous house fires and fires impacting house once I deemed it safe. I responded to Buxton. During this time, I was able to talk to my Strike Team of 5 trucks on the Region East GRN radio channel EG034, which was a designated travel channel with other Brigades from other areas on, but not really controlled. This was outside of the formal radio channel provided at the Green Wattle Creek Fire. About 4.15pm, I deployed the Cottage Point Brigade Tanker and my other team to the Buxton area. At this time, Cottage Point crew tried to save a house from the approaching bushfire, but were overrun by this fire. They called Emergency on the Region East Travel Channel. This was not monitored locally in Buxton, but by a Fire Control centre listening in in the Northern Beaches District. I struggled to find their location. With my offside, at great personal risk, I managed to find the Cottage Point Tanker up a driveway in Peak Road, Buxton. Vehicle locating technologies would have assisted in finding this truck. Up to date fire information would have provide more warning to the crews and myself about what I was deploying into. Mapping location was not easily provided by the crew to me, as data was limited in the area. Fire Ground radios were not effective until within 1-2km of the crew.

Tuesday 31 December 2019 – Currowan 2 Fire: RFS Strike Team E19/860

I responded about 5am from Sydney to the Surf Beach, Batemans Bay area arriving 0910. I met with Eurobodalla (Euro) Group North 3, a female Group Captain in Highlands Avenue, Surf Beach. I was directed to be under her control as the Divisional Commander, using Fire Ground 15 or UHF 20. The fire was impacting the area, houses were burning all around the area of Surf Beach on the Western side of George Bass Drive. Eurobodalla (Euro) Group North 3 directed me to look at the Surf Beach area and deploy my team of 5 Category 1 tankers to assist. This was the last time I spoke to her. I tried numerous times to contact her via FG Radio 15 and UHF20 without luck. I was not provided a local working channel. The Fire Ground Radios were mostly useless and I was talking to my team of 5 trucks on the RFS region east channel eG034, not a local channel. I have no doubt, houses were lost in this area, due to lack of Communications and information being available about the location of the fire and where it was. Data was none existent. I could not access Collector on my phone, I could not access collector on the RFS supplied ipads as they were not updated. I could not see an overhead shot of the land to determine areas that were safe to put trucks due to no data. I required assistance and there was no radio channel to do this. I ended up using eG034 (travel channel) to call in other trucks to assist. Unless close to another vehicle, FG15 or UHF20 was useless. Vehicle locating would have assisted. We lost a lot of houses that day, save many more. Most of the work was in the Surf Beach area, then Sunshine Bay, the later in the afternoon Catalina. I had not intelligence or information provided about where the fire was. A number of houses were lost in nearby Malua Bay, only one suburb away from where I was. But I didn't know what was being impacted and had the only option to search for fire that I could do something about.

I have no doubt that due to lack of information being available, many more homes were lost that could have been saved by my team or another.

Currowan 2 Fire – Saturday 4 January 2020

Deployed out of Nowra all the way to Ulladulla area, then full on fire impact in the Bendalong and Manyana suburbs near Lake Conjola. About 3pm my Strike Team of five RFS tankers ended up in the Western area of Bendalong. Just after 4pm, I took 3 of my strike team tankers and 3 from the other Northern Beaches Strike team into Bendalong and Manyana. This area was heavily impacted by bushfire, gardens were on fire, decks, some houses/sheds caught fire in Manyana. The Northern Beaches Strike team has 8 tankers in the area operating on Fire Ground Radio. Fire Ground radio coverage was poor and only available in the immediate areas of Bendalong or Manyana. It did not work further than 1-2km. I also had set up an offline 'Simplex' radio channel to talk to my tankers using the Motorola radio, although it left them off line from Fire communications. Again issues were mapping not available easily, not overhead picture of the area, Collector did not work, Data was poor in the area and vehicle locating was not available. We would have been better prepared if basic systems were able to work and have been accessed. I was required to download topographic maps and instruct volunteers how to use the Avenza Mapping app as the RFS did not supply such stuff, but we were expected to work off 6 figure grid references etc.

Good Good Fire - Monday 13 January: Strike Team E19/977

I lead my strike team of six RFS fire trucks to the Numerella area bushfire called Good Good Fire. There was hard copy maps provided of the fire and options to use QR codes to get updated maps from the latest incident action plan (IAP). The maps were generally out of day and collector did not work easily, was not able to connect or data was poor. Mapping apps were downloaded by volunteers, not supplied by the RFS so that basic 6 figure grid references could be provided to work off Topographic Maps. The Collector app would have assisted if intelligence of the location of the fire was updated. After 4pm, a number of my crew were required to respond to Peak View Road, Numeralla in the vicinity of Lat/Long -36.1542217,149.3658244. The Fire crossed the roadway and all RFS Brigade were ordered to return to the Numeralla RFS Fire Station by Numeralla DivComm due to being unsafe to remain in the area. Whilst the fire had crossed the roadway, a number of properties at the flank of the fire were still at risk. I decline this order and kept 3 of my trucks in the area to patrol the properties and put out fire around properties, not doubt saving same. We were able to continue to put out smouldering fires and fire approaching along Peak View Road properties at: -36.1542217,149.3658244; -36.1349629,149.3850285; -36.1333083,149.3833916. If mapping and Collector type application were available, along with local knowledge, the fire might have been able to have been stopped, but without access to updated fire information, this was hopeless and obviously not known to the local crews in the management positions. This same type of incident occurred on Friday 10 January 2019 when I was Strike Team leader for E19/954 at the Adaminaby Complex Fire at Shannons Flat operating under Shannons Flat Divisional Commander about 4pm. Poor radio coverage and lack of fire information hampered fire efforts.

Badja Forest Road, Countegany Fire – Thursday 30 January 2020, Friday 31 January 2020, Saturday 1 February 2020

Operating out of Bermagui/Narooma area, I was sent as the Strike Team Leader to the Badja Forest Road, Countegany Fire with 3 RFS fire vehicles for the first day, then 4 for the second day. I was directed to work under Forestry NSW Officer Sam [REDACTED] who was the Moruya Divisional Commander and Forestry Officer Andrew [REDACTED] (Bay 901) along with Forestry Officer Dave (Bay902) and Forestry Officer John [REDACTED] (Bay912). I was task on the Western Boundary Road, Bodalla to patrol an approaching Bushfire to a trail Cpt3244/17 Rd and Western Boundary Road at GR -36.0399796,150.058092. Weather the follow day of 31 January 2020 was predicted to be severe with high wind and high temperatures. There was a real risk of the slow moving bush fire breaching the fire trail without putting in a Backburn on the trail. At 330pm on 30.1.20 I requested Bay901 via Radio Channel GL5 to put a back burn in in front of the bushfire. Bay901 advise he would speak to Operations. A backburn was not put in and my crew worked to contact the fire edge by cutting a trail, but this was not an effective strategy and needed a hard edge such as a backburn. I put this information into the Collector system. A back burn was denied.

On 31 January 2020, I was deployed to the same area to continue to monitor the fire movement. Bay912 indicated that the fire weather was going to be bad and that no back burn would assist, but would be a real risk. I disagreed with his prediction and I believe he has very limited bush fire experience. At 1115am 31.1.20 I requested to put a back burn in at 350072 to 351072 to 349071 to Forestry Officer P [REDACTED]. He denied my request. At 1215, I requested Forestry Officer Bay913 to burn 353075 to 357078. He indicated there would be no burning. At 1700, Forestry Officer Sam [REDACTED] advised no burning would be done even though I indicated it was a real risk not having a fire edge secure. Whilst the fire weather never presented itself, the fire management experience I found by operating under Forestry control was dangerous and it appeared they were scared to use back burning as a fire fighting technique. Operating under persons who have no fire management experience, or some person in Operations being scared to conduct a backburn when conditions on the fire ground are more than suitable puts the community at risk. There was lack of knowledge or direction from Forest NSW officers on the fire ground. Poor management of fire. This same day, operations, responded 5 vehicles from Clarence Valley Strike Team from my fire ground at Bodalla all the way Michaelago area, by passing 10 tankers sitting at Narooma Showground about 330pm. This holding back of RFS vehicles is poor as properties were being impacted and lost due to bushfires, but there were 10 trucks available from the Blue Mountains Strike Team available 30mins closer. AVL for vehicles would have a far better option to improve the response of the appropriate vehicle to the fire. This plus constantly reviewing Data submitted in Collector will give a better picture of Bush Fires and improve the operational capability of containment of fires on the ground.

Supporting documents or images
