

Your details

Title

Mr

First name

Stephen

Last name

Dovey

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

I worked for National Parks (NSW) from 1980 to 2018 in various roles including Fire Officer, Ranger and more recently Area Manager. I designed and undertook many prescribed burning programs and managed NPWS bushfire response fire for this area (SE NSW). I was awarded a National Medal.

I worked cooperatively with other fire fighting agencies as part of the Bega Valley District Fire Committee. Currently I am part of the newly formed Pambula Beach Fire Protection Committee.

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

I have observed drought cycles for SE NSW for 45 years noting how fire behaviour is changing. The landscape is experiencing drier periods, the opportunity to implement Prescribed burning programs are reducing. It is obvious that this seasons bush fires were due to extensive drying, accelerating ignitions across the landscape. The number of catastrophic days over the past few fire seasons. have been unprecedented and on these days any fires in the landscape spread quickly defying intensive suppression efforts. These fires were wind driven regardless of terrain and forest fuel levels.

Lack of hazard reduction over the broad landscape was not the cause of these fires.

Lack of hazard reduction except at the property/forest interface landscape did not cause loss of property or loss of life.

I also note that in the National Park areas I managed, none of the prescribed burning programs that NPWS implemented were opposed by Green groups.

I was instrumental in fire management for the following NPWS Reserves and Parks:

Bournda NP, Ben Boyd NP, Nadgee NR, SEF NP, Mt Imlay NP. Bell Bird Creek NR and Yurrammie Conservation Area. These and other areas cover about a third lands within Bega Valley Shire.

1.2 Preparation and planning

RFS legislation requires Bushfire Risk Plans. Fire agencies define assets at risk and then design areas for treatment for implementation by all agencies and the community. The risk plan and its implementation is subject to audit.

These fires spread through all vegetated areas REGARDLESS of hazard reduction history. Prescribed burning, to reduce fuels, in all tenures including National Parks was irrelevant in these dry conditions.

Levels of hazard reduction, to reduce fuels, became especially irrelevant on days of very high to extreme fire weather with bushfires impossible to contain regardless of fuel levels.

I observed fire spread daily (Border, Werri Berri, Big Jack, and other fires), noting fires spread quickly at maximum intensity regardless of recent hazard reduction programs, even forested areas that had been treated by planned burns in the past 3 years were of limited use to mitigate the spread of these fires.

During the season I looked at fire maps and compared them with areas that had been burnt to reduce fuel levels. I have extensive knowledge of which areas had been treated as well as an advanced understanding of fire behaviour. I also worked in Bega Fire Control as a planner, assisting as RFS resources were overtaxed.

Control of bushfires was successful at the interface between property and bushland. Hazard reduction burns, covering many hectares, in broad areas away from this interface, did not assist in mitigating fire spread.

This fact was not appreciated during the fire season, with some media commentators and some political statements blaming the damage on life and property on high fuel levels. At various times a generalised statements blamed high fuel levels specifically in National Parks.

Objective analysis of the fire spread maps and history of fire mitigation does not support these statements.

1.3 Response to bushfires

The efforts of fire fighters from all agencies to suppress these fires were heroic.

In the SE of NSW lives were saved due to 2 key decisions made by Incident Controllers at Eurobodalla and Bega.

1. Decision to evacuate tourists from the coast. The implementation of this was extremely difficult , had significant impact upon local economies as well as causing trauma for over-stretched staff from response agencies.

2. Control strategies avoided the use of back burning as a control method. Back-burns implemented in other parts of the state were impossible to control and accelerated fire spread closer to life and property. Back-burning in periods of extreme dryness are hard to control, exceed limited fire fighting resources, require at least of 5 - 8 days of settled (calm) weather to consolidate otherwise a back burn will and increase overall risk.

1.4 Any other matters

My position was made redundant in 2018. I do not resent this change personally, however at that time a number of key staff with extensive fire experience were also made redundant.

They were not fully replaced (NPWS field positions were significantly reduced), and fire experience was not a key requirement for a smaller group of managers.

The local NPWS Fire Management position was deleted and duties transferred to a reduced number of specialists located away from the local area (in this case Nowra).

This reduced level of resourcing together with a significant loss of fire experience/knowledge was a key reason that there was not enough staff to maintain IMT at Bega Fire Control.

The workload for NPWS staff is too high and caused significant trauma and risk to them and others.

It also impacted on the ability of fire agencies to respond.

Future fire mitigation by NPWS will be affected by these reduced resources.

Supporting documents or images
