



## Your details

Mr

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**Title**

**First name**

Hamish

**Last name**

MacKenzie

## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

Emergency services personnel

**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

**Organisation making the submission (if applicable)**

NSW Rural Fire Service

**Your position in the organisation (if applicable)**

Wherrol Flat Rural Fire Service Captain

**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

As a member of the RFS and living in close proximity to bushland (both NPWS and Forestry Corporation), I am acutely aware of the risks and habits of fire activity in my locale. Given the climatic conditions leading up to the time of the initial fire (the Rumbas Dump fire) in my locality it was clear to me that without adequate controls in place it would escape the Tapin Tops National Park boundary and enter private property.

My comments in my submission all relate to the Rumba Dump/Rumba Complex fire and it's activity in the Caparra/Wherrol Flat area.

I acknowledge the sustained efforts by NPWS and subsequently Forestry personnel in their attempts to contain it.

I was advised there was a Forestry Corporation skidder that would be available to put firebreaks around private assets in the upper Caparra area in the days before the Rumba Dump fire impacted private property (07/11/2020). I provided information however no skidder was sent and it and a second skidder remained in use in Tapin Tops State Forest.

The fire impacted my property on 08/11/2019 and thanks in no small part to the efforts of Wherrol Flat and Krambach RFS brigades and NPWS all structures were saved.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

### 1.2 Preparation and planning

There was a significant effort put into fighting the fire after it was started by lightning strike initially through aerial water bombing using scarce water available in Caparra Creek. I was troubled by the fact the small amount of water in the creek that would potentially be the only easily accessible water supply for RFS vehicles was being depleted. But the efforts didn't halt the fire - perhaps backburning from Tallowood Flat Road earlier than occurred may have been effective in containing it.

I have been told that the night the fire jumped Tallowood Flat Road (the only well formed and useful firebreak between the fire and private property at that time) NPWS personnel left the scene due to OHS factors (hours on the job), leaving the fire unattended. I have no official information to say this was the case.

The fire jumped Tallow Wood Flat Road on 26/11/2019 well over a week before it impacted private property on 07/11/2019, so this should have been adequate time to put in an effective fire break. Repeated attempts were made at this, but none were not effective.

While climatic conditions were not favourable for containing fires for much of the time, the Tuesday the 5th of November was cool (21 deg C) and it struck me it was a good time to put in a backburn along Hardway Creek Road - not a well formed road but with the plant machinery in the area it had been opened up a fire break and I was surprised that no effort was made to burn off it on that day.

In the days leading up to the fire entering private property I was put in contact with a representative of the NPWS who was charged with co-ordinating the response - David (I have not got a record of, and don't recall, his surname). The intention was for him to learn from me what assets would be threatened when the fire came onto private property and put in place measures to protect the assets.

I'm saddened that despite David's clear intention in our frequent communication in the days leading up to the fire impacting private property, to do as much as possible to prevent fire

adversely affecting properties in the closest area of Caparra to the fire, no significant outcome was apparent. I in no way suggest David did not do enough. On the contrary - he was at pains to get information from me and became acutely aware of the assets under threat and the threat posed.

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#### **1.4 Any other matters**

Regarding communication between myself at home as the co-ordination point for my brigade/my area and with Firecom (including the NPWS Incident Controller) :-

Once the fire impacted my property and nearby infrastructure (08/11/2019) I was unable to use power or the telephone, so liaising with David and other controllers at Firecom became very difficult - there is no mobile phone coverage at my property, nor in most of the Caparra valley. I was forced to travel either 4 km in one direction to get unreliable mobile phone reception, or 10km in the other direction to get satisfactory mobile phone reception. All properties in Caparra were without phone and grid-supplied power.

Once I was able to get out safely and co-ordinate brigade response and activity, without mobile phone and power availability, the only avenue available to me to organise crew rosters was by door knocking. Attempts were made by Firecom to organise a satellite phone for me to be able to communicate with Firecom, but that did not come to fruition. My phone line was restored after two weeks, however, other residents in the area (including several in the brigade) were without a land line phone for significantly longer periods of time, which meant door knocking remained the only option for crewing co-ordination for a number of weeks.

Regarding communication between agencies at a fireground level:-

It was not always clear who was controlling a fireground (on the Rumba Complex in the Wherrol Flat area). Communication between agencies on the ground was not always possible because of differing radio systems in use by differing agencies. There must be better inter-agency co-ordination in future for serious fires, and ideally at a controlling level on the fireground it involves personnel who have an intimate knowledge of the ground - some were from out of area who could not be expected to know the location/properties/options.

On the morning the fire came through the area immediately around my property, and after I urged Firecom to send personnel ASAP to the location knowing it was going to impact Hobbits Way and houses would be under threat, I was visited and briefed by Neil Glen of NPWS and provided with a UHF radio with his intention that contact would be maintained with me while he was down Hobbits Way and beyond.

Unfortunately that method was not viable due to distance and topography and I was unable to make contact with him at any point.

Regarding RFS support:-

In very difficult circumstances Midcoast Firecom put in a fantastic effort. Unfortunately I feel let down and feel the community was let down in the capability of the Wherrol Flat RFS Brigade to be able to respond to requests in the days and weeks after the fire came through. The Wherrol Flat 7 firetruck developed a radio problem during the activity which meant communication with Firecom - a vitally important part of any activity - was difficult and

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at times impossible. A brigade funded and supplied portable PMR radio also capable of communicating with Firecom offered very limited capacity. With this lack of communication capability there was a risk to the welfare of the crew and I was not willing to put a crew on a fireground in those circumstances. Firecom was not able to provide an opportunity to get the issue addressed at that time, so the brigade was not able to respond to crewing requests with the frequency I would have liked. Due to the topography (deep valleys and tall hills) in my area clear communication between the firetruck and Firecom is difficult or not possible in many locations in any case with radio system available to us, and mobile phone coverage is poor or non-existent in much of the area also. An effective method of communication really needs to be available at all times to brigades such as mine, to deal with the situation at hand, but particularly so in light of the events of the season witnessed.

Regarding communication of RFS supplied information the the public:-

Accurate, meaningful and relevant information for the public is vital. The updates that ABC radio was reading out, and that were available on the RFS website often contained phrases that were relevant to the situation at the time the fire was impacting an area, but once the fire had passed, such information was not accurate. I acknowledge a threat can remain after a fire has gone through, but after several days in most circumstances the threat has dissipated. By leaving it in place for many days for the radio media to disseminate and for the public to read, it created a false and unnecessary apprehension. Each set of emergency information provided for locations would be better served by accurate analysis of the risk as it evolves and dissipates and amending wording to reflect the risk as it increases and declines.

Regarding maps available to RFS personnel for firefighting purposes:-

As the Rumba Complex got bigger the incident map available to RFS personnel on the myRFS website became increasingly difficult to use. On some occasions it was updated it would be broken into smaller (and useful) components but in later weeks the majority of the time it was of little value at a local level. See attachment that references the Rumba Complex - includes so much information of the midnorth coast region, that it is of little value to a firefighter on the ground. I attempted to draw this issue to the attention of myRFS IT on a number of occasions, but my concerns were not understood.

Other:-

I do not believe increasing the amount of hazard reduction in National Parks is necessarily appropriate. There are many comments on a variety of reasons likely to effectively support this stance, but from my own experience, a fire impacted part of my property 18 property prior to the Rumba Dump fire impacting the same ground and there was no difference intensity with the Rumba Dump fire as it burned that area.

I firmly believe fire trails should be maintained and increased in number. In the months leading up to summer the RFS had been advised the State Government would be reopening firetrails that had not been maintained. Unfortunately none of that had been seen in my area. Had it been done appropriately and effectively, (not at the last minute in the face of the fire) the fire may have been containable at a number of locations.

## Supporting documents or images

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**Attach files**

- Screen Shot 1 - 2020-05-15 at 6.24.27 pm.png
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Identity +

Genre -

Alternative

Blues

Children's

Christian

Classical

Modern Composition

Comedy

Country

Dance

Easy Listening

Electronic / Beats / Industrial

Experimental x

Folk

Garage

Hip Hop

Indie

Indigenous / First Nations

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