

## Your details

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## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

Other

**Submission type**

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

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

Hawkesbury City Council

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

Director Infrastructure Services

**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**

This submission to the NSW Inquiry is restricted in its intent to matters associated with the Gospers Mountain Fire in NSW and its relevance to the Hawkesbury City Council area. It is also limited to broad issues affecting the community and Council in its ability to manage the emergency and its outcomes. Specific responses from other combat and response agencies are considered to be principally addressed by those bodies where detailed

knowledge of issues outside of Council's expertise is held.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Whilst the cause of the fire is attributable to a single source lightning strike, the behaviour was considered to be highly influenced by the extreme weather conditions of low moisture, high temperatures and wind shifts.

These factors combined with geography in a manner which saw the fire expand onto multiple fronts which in turn meant that the fire was expanding regardless of wind directions i.e. favourable conditions on one front meant unfavourable conditions elsewhere.

### 1.2 Preparation and planning

Significant and targeted hazard reduction has occurred in accordance with the Bushfire Risk Management Plan over a number of years. Whilst implementation of planned burns has, in part, been partly limited in some recent years due to adverse conditions in winter months, the effects of completed hazard reduction activities in protecting properties in this fire has been demonstrated within the Hawkesbury Fire Control District.

This is not to say that further planning and preparation is not warranted.

Increased State funding for maintenance of fire trails on an annual, prioritised basis would enable critical planning and resourcing to be applied to other critical priorities rather than resourcing and mobilising heavy plant to establish degraded routes in the face of fire activity.

Whilst brigades have water storage capability at their stations, as well as at key fire containment points, funding to provide enhanced storage at stations as well as potentially on key fire trails would be highly advantageous in reducing resupply chain times.

As a result of the prevailing drought conditions many property owners sought to refill their own bulk containers (IBCs) at a limited number of filling points, often long distances from their property. Improved access/rapid refill should be considered should these circumstances combine again. This should be weighed against the utility and desirability of encouraging property owners to effectively combat catastrophic fire conditions. Establishment of dedicated filling points for RFS bulk water tankers (for use in emergencies only) would address conflict and priority.

There was a clear need demonstrated during the event that the Hawkesbury Fire Control Centre requires a new purpose built facility to enable it to combat and coordinate future firefighting most effectively. The current inadequate facility required the installation of demountable buildings to accommodate the additional logistical and planning support teams. This involved the annexation of the adjoining public school playground for over three months. It is highly desirable that a future facility incorporate an Emergency Operations Centre on site, but operating semi autonomously from the Incident Management Team. This would reduce the demand on Liaison Officer provision as well as provide enhanced intelligence and data sharing for supporting emergency responses.

### 1.3 Response to bushfires

Whilst the scale and duration of this fire was by any measure extreme, it must be stated that despite hundreds of

thousands of hectares of bushland being burnt, the RFS' ability to defend many dwellings must be considered a major success and achievement.

In achieving this the local knowledge of brigade personnel was instrumental, along with the out of area resourcing made available.

Improved coordination of road closures was identified as a matter for review. The increased reliance on private traffic control contractors combined with often limited mobile phone communications in remote areas and changing fire ground activity meant that access was, at times uncoordinated, with local resident access being denied for longer than necessary.

Improved protocols for the use of Live Traffic as the principal source of up to date traffic closures (and reopenings) should be developed and be agnostic to whether a road is a Local or State road.

Telecommunications has been a longstanding issue within the Hawkesbury Local Government Area and affects the emergency response capacity. Due to size and terrain mobile phone coverage is limited in many areas. During the fire event landlines were also affected by fire and tree damage to overhead cabling. Difficulties were also experienced with telephone exchange power supply.

Enhanced line maintenance and clearance by the telecommunication providers would improve the communications as would expansion of the mobile phone network. This would provide a sound basis for future GPS vehicle location and tracking systems.

The variable nature of bush fire impacts as well as other emergency situations such that improved facility capability to manage community needs and support.

Enhancements to existing community centres such as the North Richmond Community Centre would enable the rapid establishment of Disaster Welfare points where initial triage/assessment of needs can be undertaken.

Similarly funding to establish appropriate infrastructure to manage the relocation of housing of large animals, particularly horses, is highly desirable.

The use of Hawkesbury Showground, which provided this capability during the fire event, highlighted the need to have suitable accommodation, security and animal welfare response at an early stage of a fire event.

In relation to the Recovery Phase, there have been delays in providing clean up actions and resources.

Whilst it is understandable that damage assessment capacity was stretched across the State, and that there is a need to ensure the accountability for public expenditure under the Commonwealth / State funding arrangements, more timely and closer engagement with Council would address a number of aspects.

This includes the need to ensure that the scope of cleanup and dangerous tree removal is resolved early.

Many property owners have only just been advised of approval / rejection of clean up eligibility. Early advice on scope / eligibility would have enabled early entry by Council to remove tree hazards not ultimately covered by the restricted clean up scope.

A key focus for the future must be on developing resilience through planning, infrastructure provision and ongoing training and continuity planning for emergency and other agency personnel.

There is a need for enhanced and ongoing resilience and planning campaigns within the community for emergency response in general, with the goal of having an informed community able to respond to and adapt to the circumstances of any particular event.

## Supporting documents or images

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