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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>My family and I have now been through two bushfires that have affected our property, in February 2017 and November 2019. Both times we have been fortunate not to lose our home and sheds, but both times sustained significant fencing and pasture losses along with some other cattle yards and tanks in 2017. We were barely getting through the jobs and rebuilds from the first fires (no cattle yards rebuilt yet though) when the second one came through our area.</p> <p>In 2017 the fire was catastrophic, but over within days. In 2019, the fire was not deemed catastrophic (in our region) but for us the requirement to be prepared and on high alert lasted over two weeks. It was physically, emotionally and mentally exhausting. Our children were home with us the whole time, as schools were closed in the area for nearly two weeks. We had to keep them with us even though we were physically fighting fires on some of those days. Our children have been exposed to significant trauma, in addition to our own.</p> |

As small business owners, and primary producers, we have had to deal with the loss of time and income from work (at high alert for fire on your property AND having children at home for two weeks does not allow for leaving to attend on site work) and as Primary Producers who do not meet some of the criteria for support (because under drought conditions, we have had to earn money off farm) we are struggling to recover financially - as well as psychologically - from this time.

In 2017 a friend and I coordinated the community recovery for our area - as our LGA was not deemed part of a Natural Disaster at that time and were therefore ineligible for government support. In 2019, we hoped that - being a declared Natural Disaster area - we wouldn't be required to do this work. Unfortunately, we are not finding this to be the case. Our LGA does not have appropriate community recovery plans in place and the resources are simply not known amongst the community. This time though, my friend and I are exhausted. We both fought fires on our properties, we both put thousands of hours into community recovery last time and we both know that we physically, emotionally and financially can't do this again – and yet feel torn because we know that our community needs us. Others have not stepped up. Our Council is nowhere to be seen. Media coverage of the damage sustained in our area is non-existent. People here feel abandoned.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Causes

In 2019, fuel loads may have been high in some places, but the part of our property that burnt has had hazard reduction burns every year for the last 4 years. AND IT BURNT AGAIN... Hazard reductions will not STOP fires, and most especially not in drought conditions. They may minimise damage but they are not the only answer.

1.2 Preparation and planning

From fire authorities etc, they have done the best they can with the budgets they are given. From a Local Government perspective - only one word for it - Laughable. In 2017 my friend and I who coordinated our community recovery spoke with our Council about Emergency Management Plans. We could only find one that was dated 2014. It was related to water based disasters (floods, tsunamis etc). There was no plan for any other type of natural disaster, and no way to deal with the situation in 2017. I have since tried to find our Council's updated Emergency Management plan, and it would seem that there either isn't one, it isn't publicly available or (as I suspect) they (still) don't have one. They are as unprepared this time as they were in 2017 and doing an only slightly improved job this time, but this is likely to come down to state government involvement in community communications.

1.3 Response to bushfires

The RFS were amazing, but clearly under resourced in terms of vehicles and people. We were fighting our own fire in difficult to reach terrain because there was no access to equipment that could work in those areas. Our only method was to stand on the edge of the fires and hope we could stop it coming further onto our land and pastures.

The state government response to the Bushfires was very good. Gladys Berajiklian was both empathetic and knew when to get out of the way and let emergency services do their jobs. The RFS headed by Shane Fitzsimmons cannot be faulted for their approach and communications.

The Fires Near Me App needs an overhaul to be more responsive and immediate, or alternatively don't send people to it looking for minute by minute updates. The radio scanners were what people could use to get up to date information, and I don't believe this was good information to be in the public arena. I heard some very unpleasant and stressful information on the scanners and this information should be limited to trained responders.

The ABC (and particularly ABC Radio) should be commended for

its coverage and information regarding the bushfires. We had our local ABC Radio on all the time. It was often much more up to date listening to it than paying any attention to the RFS Fires Near Me App.

Once again, my main point of negative feedback is about our Council. If they are doing anything, then they are certainly not communicating about it well. No one in our LGA knows what is going on with fires, it's like they have just moved on to the next thing and don't understand the long recovery that is involved in this kind of trauma.

In the early stages after the fires, emails about Community Recovery meetings went to some people and not others - I heard about the first recovery meeting two days before it was on, and only through a friend who had received it by email. I had not received it by email, despite knowing that Council has my email address. There was no Facebook information to be shared, and the notice for people to attend was terrible. The community recovery session(s) that Council have organised so far were a long way from where fire affected people are located, and were organised for times that made it difficult for people to attend. The nature of going through this kind of trauma also means it's often difficult emotionally to face this kind of information barrage. When questioned on why our Local Council did not have a local recovery coordinator their response was that one was not needed because the Office of Emergency Management took care of that. An attendee at that meeting who had lost her home had rung Councils offices to ask about discounts/vouchers for free waste collection, the person on the main reception number had no idea (or compassion) for the woman calling in and told her that normal fees would apply. This was several weeks after the bushfire impacts and therefore I would have expected that Council staff would have been made aware of these things that were put in place.

1.4 Any other matters

Recommendations:

1) that all residents who move onto rural properties in NSW (and definitely in fire prone areas) receive education or training on appropriate methods to a) manage fuel loads, b) prepare for fire seasons and c) respond to an immediate fire threat.

2) that defence force personnel receive training in bushfire fighting and support so that local RFS crews are able to rest and take appropriate health and safety breaks without feeling guilty and as if they shouldn't stop

3) That vehicle capacity at local RFS brigades be adapted as these crews grow. Volunteering for the RFS will become more necessary as time goes on and crews will need more equipment. Let's get that \$51million of Celeste Barber's fundraising efforts to the Brigades and crews where it belongs. At \$600,000 per vehicle (approximately) we've got enough to purchase quite a few and equip our volunteers much better than we currently do.

4) Spend more money on long term recovery and mental health. With our mental health looked after, our communities can achieve great things. If it isn't, our communities will suffer in years to come.

5) First responders need mental health directed towards them without having to approach it themselves. This should be provided as part of an arrangement with the RFS for support services to attend brigades who have been in these extreme situations.

6) Recovery needs to be taken to the people, not expect that people are able - either mentally or physically - to come to it.

7) RFS Fires Near Me App needs significant updating in order to be able to cope with the kind of conditions that we experienced this summer. Every TV and radio news outlet was directing people to the FNM app, and yet new information was not going on there in a manner and at a speed that people were needing the information.

Upload files
