

Your details

Title

Ms

First name

Helen

Last name

Boyton

Email

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

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 support and endorse the submission and recommendations submitted to the Inquiry from the Blue Mountains Conservation Society.

1.2 Preparation and planning

I support and endorse the submission and recommendations submitted to the Inquiry from the Blue Mountains

1.3 Response to bushfires

I wish to focus my comments on:

- (a) the inadequacies of public communication and advice during the fires and
- (b) the inadequacies of evacuation advice and options for evacuation shelters as the fires threatened houses and people in the Upper Blue Mountains (Katoomba, Blackheath, Mt Victoria).

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION & ADVICE.

The Fires Near Me site provided only very generic and often out of date information on fires immediately impacting on us or likely to soon impact us. I acknowledge the challenges here in a rapidly changing environment. However, much more effort/resources needs to be applied to this important issue.

I became aware by mid January that the Blue Mountains RFS had a facebook page with much more accurate and up to date information. BUT there was no link to this from the Fires Near Me site. I only became aware of this site by accident some time after I was directly threatened by the fires approaching Katoomba from the Jamieson Valley between Mt Solitary and Narrowneck Rd. There are many people in this community who don't use facebook and are unfamiliar with how to navigate it.

If Facebook is going to be the primary means of communication with impacted communities then this needs to be well advertised by

- a link from the Fires Near Me site
- a link from any other official site related to the fires
- references to the site on ABC Local Radio, which often did no more than read out the generic information on the Fires Near Me site.

There does not seem to be any designated staff with the role and expertise in community liaison and education. In previous years (pre 2011) we received regular emails from a Community Education Officer in the local RFS, who would regularly update us on local developments via email and remind us/urge us to prepare our properties for the approaching fire season. This role appears to have been abolished.

When eventually a number of community meetings were organised in the first week of January, the only advertising of these was on Facebook. Again I missed out because I was unaware that they were happening. This is **TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE AND LED TO SOME PEOPLE BEING 'IN THE KNOW' AND EVERYBODY ELSE IN THE DARK.**

(B) NO EVACUATION CENTRES

A very distressing issue was the absence of any evacuation centre in the upper Blue Mountains. There were supposedly 'safe places to shelter' listed on the RFS website but most of these were outdoors. The closest to me was the oval at Katoomba Public School. However, this school is surrounded by an 8 ft high metal fence and locked gates. I have reported this fact to the RFS on a number of occasions before the most recent fires but nothing was done to either take this location off the site or explain how and when it would become available.

The other sites were car parks exposed to the elements. Whilst these might be a safe place to shelter for a couple of hours, if forced to evacuate we are needing shelter for a couple of days at a minimum. These locations have no access to drinking water or toilets.

In text message communications with our Mayor, Mark Greenhill, expressing my concern and anxiety, I was informed that it was the local police who are the decision makers about evacuation centres. They were refusing to open up any evacuation facility and/or had made no formal arrangements for an evacuation centre. The police service is not the appropriate agency to be making such decisions.

Local RFS volunteer firefighters, in an attempt to be helpful, were offering informal arrangements such as 'just go up to Coles car park' (which may or may not have been unlocked); or 'just go up to the cultural centre' which is locked up from 5pm to 10am.

Whilst in the end the fires did not reach the Katoomba township, this could very easily and quickly have been

different. Blackheath faced a more imminent threat but, once again, no evacuation centre.

The assumption is that everyone has 'family and friends' that they can reach and stay with. This is simply not the case for many people. A number of our older residents are isolated and without transport and it can't be assumed that everyone has a benevolent neighbour to help them out in the event of direct fire threats. At this stage people have either already left or are necessarily fully consumed with trying to protect their own property and family.

The absence of any Evacuation Centres in an area so well known as an area of bush fire risk is gobsmacking and totally unacceptable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Responsibility for setting up Evacuation Centres should be taken off the police and given to local government with the authority and resources to act.
2. Such Centres should be established at the "Watch and Act" stage and not forcing communities to wait until there is an official Evacuation order issued.
3. Considerably more resources with appropriate expertise needs to be devoted to public communication and advice and community education programs in the lead up to the fire season. This is particularly so in well known bush fire prone areas such as the Blue Mountains.

Supporting documents or images
