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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	An article at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%9320_Australian_bushfire_season suggests that upwards of 18.7 million hectares burned across Australia during the 2019-2020 fire season to January 2020, including 10 million hectares in the south-eastern States (with more than 5 million hectares in New South Wales alone). As I write [in February] and notwithstanding media reports that fires are 'finally out', bushfires continue to ignore borders between New South

Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria and rainfall deficiencies continue in many of these parts of New South Wales.

The fact that the 2019/20 fires have been no respecters of borders while we mostly focus on what's happening in our local areas suggest that we need nationally co-ordinated as well as more locally effective State responses to bushfires. While the scale of this season's fires nationally may not be unprecedented the impacts on Australia have been unprecedented. We need now to be thinking about how to avoid (and not just how to respond to) any repetition of these devastating impacts (almost certain to increase in the face of rapidly changing climates across most parts of our country).

In this regard perhaps our leaders might now listen to experts on bushfire management. To me as a casual observer of arguments about hazard reduction burning it appears that too much attention is being paid currently to the voices of vested interests including by some politicians for whom more hazard reduction burning seems to be an easy trick, regardless of ecological consequences and regardless of the fact that most of the huge fires that have burned recently in New South Wales started in locations where hazard reduction burning wasn't possible and spread to burn at their margins with a ferocity that had no regard for whether fuel loads had been reduced there.

I am not qualified to comment on the land management practices of indigenous Australians but, as indigenous use of fire as a management tool also has been the subject of widespread comment, I observe that significant geographical variation in indigenous management practices across Australia is likely and little if anything has been documented on practices in the eastern parts of New South Wales where indigenous cultures were trashed early during European settlement. It is probable that practices elsewhere in Australia may have limited relevance to land management in New South Wales.

As a planner I would add that a lot of the impacts of the recent fires appears to stem from the way in which development has been allowed in non-urban areas by a complaisant planning system. I note that the Planning Institute of Australia has been arguing for decades for restrictions on subdivisions and built development in bushfire-prone areas, particularly as to matters such as emergency egress and building standards. While the latest guidelines on Planning for Bushfire Protection (2019) from the Rural Fire Service (RFS) are worthy they are no more than guidelines, without the legal force of environmental planning instruments and with no provision for retrofitting or for resuming properties which date from before effective planning control.

On the bushfires of 2019/20, I wish particularly to comment on inadequacies in the communication both of advice on planning for bushfires and of information about day-to-day changes on the fire-grounds. While I cannot fault the performance of the Rural Fire Service (RFS) on the fire-grounds over the past months I suggest that the RFS has neglected the needs and concerns of many who, while not greatly at risk of fires directly, had little reliable information on what threats they may have been facing at a time when feverish reporting by the ABC and commercial media (particularly on television) served only to magnify the sense of threat and the accompanying stress and failed to provide urban-specific planning advice.

By way of background I live in the Southern Highlands SUA (significant urban area) which extends from Colo Vale and Mittagong to Bowral and Moss Vale in Wingecarribee Shire. It reported 37,777 residents at the 2016 census. This SUA is on an elevated plateau separated from Goulburn, the Illawarra and urban Sydney by around fifty kilometres of often bush-clad and fire-prone escarpments. It might be thought that this SUA was not at great risk of bushfires but by New Year's Eve the Nattai part of the vast Green Wattle Creek fire ground had reached (according to RFS maps on <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/fire-information/fires-near-me>) 10 kilometres to our north, with the RFS predicting potential ember attacks on us. Four days later the Morton part of the similarly vast Currowan fire ground reached 15 kilometres to our south and ash was falling on us!

The urban landscape of the Southern Highlands SUA is very similar to that of

Duffy in the ACT which, as documented in the Coroner's report on the ACT fires of 2003, had exploded catastrophically then. Not unreasonably, when expecting very hot temperatures and winds from both south and north, Southern Highlands' residents felt themselves to be faced with existential threats. The feeling was not helped by the knowledge that people were being evacuated from areas immediately to both the north and the south of the SUA, periodic closures of the Hume Highway to both north and south and uncertainties as to whether the single Main Road that connects up the SUA could be relied on for evacuations.

Commercial media did nothing to allay our feelings or to provide comprehensive and reliable information as to where fire fronts and other fires were locally but, under a pall of toxic smoke haze from mid-December with visibility down to under 300 metres on many days it was impossible to see fires or fire-clouds and make our own assessments of where fire fronts and other fires were locally. We needed reliable local information and it wasn't available. Unlike the ACT where more recently western Canberra suburbs considerably further from the threatening Namadji National Park ('Orroral') fire than us in the Southern Highlands were door-knocked we were on our own. So far as I am aware advice wasn't given even to managers of residential complexes such as the one I live in.

Reliable local information on fires simply wasn't available from official sources. RFS Fire-near-me mapping didn't offer access to the kind of local detail available from eg Emergency Management Victoria (<https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/?=&bbox=144.85885620117188,-37.96964338215498,145.2056121826172,-37.80001858607363&tm=1547003719344>) and mapping of current potential fire spread/ember attack mapping wasn't always on the RFS website. 'Major updates' in which advice given on the vast Green Wattle Creek fire stated 'a fire has started. There is no immediate danger. Stay up to date...' (12 January) was almost contemptuous. Satellite imagery from Geoscience Australia (<https://hotspots.dea.ga.gov.au/>) was simply not adequate for near-real-time monitoring of fire fronts and other fires. Bureau of Meteorology radar imagery wasn't at a sufficiently local resolution. Data on air quality simply didn't exist for the Southern Highlands and information and forecasts for Bargo or Goulburn data on <https://aqicn.org/map/australia/> often had no relation to what was happening in the Southern Highlands.

It is little wonder that locals are reported to have turned to scanners and social media – at the risk of seriously misleading themselves – to help them assess threats. Even the RFS webmaster was advising (eg 31 December) to turn to social media! When I did turn to Facebook I did indeed find more detailed maps of Nattai and Morton fire-grounds posted by the Shoalhaven RFS and updated daily (<https://cloud.rfsshualhaven.com.au/index.php/s/phs5pogC1rtl4zk>) though these seldom showed actual fire fronts or other fires. I also found RFS Facebook pages which, while not telling much about current situations, did offer more coherent advice on planning for bushfires than what's on the RFS website. However, even on its Facebook pages the RFS didn't offer anything comparable to the succinct but comprehensive bushfire survival plan posted on the ACT Emergency Services website (<https://esa.act.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-12/Bushfire%20Survival%20Plan%202018.pdf>) and offered no specific advice for people in suburbs comparable with the advice at (<https://esa.act.gov.au/cbr-be-emergency-ready/bushfires>).

In short, while I acknowledge problems of resources, there appears to be no authority in New South Wales capable of coordinating real-time information on bushfires and related emergencies in a detail that is helpful for planning and action. Other States jurisdictions do things better but their public information stops at borders. I acknowledge that the RFS at the time was hugely invested in addressing fires on the ground but if as suggested by the RFS webmaster (31 December) 'our first priority is to get text information out via the app, website, NSW RFS social media channels and through the media' then the job of informing people who might soon be facing actual threats needs to be handed to a body resourced to do just this. Social media, commercial media and even Google (<https://google.org/crisismap/australia>) may be helpful in

disseminating information in a random manner but official information needs to be accessible to everybody from the source

**1.1 Causes
and
contributing
factors**

**1.2
Preparation
and
planning**

**1.3
Response to
bushfires**

**1.4 Any
other
matters**

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