



Your details

Mr

Title

First name

Ian

Last name

Hubbard

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

Your story

I recently retired to the Bermagui and have spent the last 18 months enjoying my retirement renovating an old fisherman's cottage. My family were visiting when the bushfire struck Cabargo on New Years eve. The mayor of Bega requested that all residents evacuate Bermagui because they did not have the resources to defend the town. My wife and children evacuated to Canberra via the Snowy Mountains Hwy the next day with thousands of others. I stayed in Bermagui with my sister as she had livestock on nearby acreage. We had a generator, plenty of food, battery radio and water tanks with pumps in town plus a fire evacuation plan if the town came under ember attack. Although electricity, communication networks and water infrastructure failed we managed reasonably well. Including New Years Eve there were probably three days in the following two weeks when the threat to Bermagui was determined by wind direction as you could see the fire front to the NW. The fires near you app was

useful although it didn't update in a timely manner. We relied on the local RFS and neighbours for accurate information. The ABC was very good although I could only listen every hour or so as the emergency warning noises/sirens effected you after a couple of days. Definitely increased my anxiety.

Things became more manageable by the end of January. In early February the Big Jack Mountain and Creewah fires joined and burned through Rocky Hall destroying a bush cottage that my with and I built and have enjoyed going to for the last 35 years on family holidays. The location bordering the Tantawangalo National Park was not defendable. So if the fire season is dangerous we would stay away. I have gone back to the sight a couple of times in preparation for the clean up and the fire was so hot that it melted plate glass and brass taps. The landscape is completely scorched with the parched remains of various wild animals. Granite boulders have exploded and the bush has been cleared for kilometres. I have a great love for the bush in this region. The buildings were uninsured and not being a primary residence there is no schemes for access to funds. But good times were had with family and friends and everybody is safe. This scenario is the same for eight or nine families who built holiday cabins in the eighties. I have attached my submission below and it goes to some strategic issues around building decentralised infrastructure and the need for better resourced land management. Hope this assists with your inquiry.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- BLACK SUMMER inquiry submission.docx
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2020 BLACK SUMMER

Submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Growing up in Australia we all look forward to our extended beach holiday with family and friends. The topics round the evening BBQ haven't changed in decades swimming, fishing, food and family. The weather is always a popular talking point. Too hot, too cold, rain, not enough, wind, tides and swell. People are sensitive to the levels of fire danger because bushfires are a feature of the Australian summer. There are those great signs with the arrows showing the level of fire danger. Signs with a telephone number that you ring if you see smoke.

Every couple of years when the temperatures soar and rain has been scarce there would be a few days when the north westerlies blow hot and hard producing conditions ripe for large bushfires. These conditions are uncomfortable and you can feel people's anxiety and worry. Many Australians have experienced bushfire. In my lifetime I have been unlucky to have come close to:

- Ash Wednesday 1983
- The 2003 Canberra bushfires, and
- Black Saturday 2009,

As you can see these fires are named after the day when the fire was at its worst and loss was greatest. Even though the fire may have been burning for a few days before or after the big day.

While these and other fires have had tragic consequences they could not match the scale and catastrophic consequences of the Black Summer 2019-20 bushfires. Getting an unusual start during September in southern Queensland and burning down the east coast over four months. (Not forgetting the fires in South Australia.) This was mass destruction to the environment of south eastern Australia. This was a summer holiday ruined for hundreds of thousands of Australians. This was significant damage to already fragile regional economies that will take them decades to recover from, if they can.

A number of experts had warned about about the impending catastrophic bushfire season and the need for extraordinary preparations but this was largely ignored. The 2020 summer should be a wake-up call highlighting the lack of management of the national estate and the fragility of the infrastructure that services regional communities. We really did feel like we were at the end of the line and when the tap was turned on only a drop came out.

There were mass evacuations as towns and villages were sacrificed as 'undefendable'. Whole areas were on a war footing being defended by a small band of courageous volunteers with very limited resources. They took too many risks and worked to exhaustion for months saving lives and property. This responsibility was too big, impossible and unfair. As a country we need to be better prepared. The Black Summer bushfires demonstrated that the country could not be defended in the face of a calamity. Surprisingly, we did not

have the resources ready to avoid our infrastructure and networks collapsing when attacked across a broad geographic area.

It is clear that climate change is increasing the regularity of these events and needs to be addressed as a priority. In this submission I will concentrate on two areas that will support greater resilience and strengthen regional communities in the face of attack whatever form that takes:

- A strategy to provide decentralised military grade energy and communications infrastructure that can be scaled up quickly, and,
- Massively improved management of the national estate being national parks, state forests and other public and private lands.

Robust Energy and Communications Infrastructure

Once the bush fire hit the Cabargo Bermagui Tilba area on New Year's Eve power and communications went down and would not be fully restored for a number of weeks. The immediate impact was that most shops and petrol stations closed immediately. Without power refrigeration stopped and considerable quantities of food spoiled. Payment systems would not work and cash became unavailable. Petrol stations rely on power to pump the fuel. The power infrastructure and communication towers suffered considerable damage. Mobile phones and the internet did not work. Water pumping and filtration relied on power so became undrinkable. Towns and villages in the area became uninhabitable.

Getting Information was patchy and general. Most used radio and the occasional mobile coverage. People sat in their cars listening to the ABC. The ABC did a great job covering a large part of NSW and covering numerous fires. Getting timely local information was really difficult. A lot of information was word of mouth and proved to be inaccurate.

The disaster on the south coast was made worse by the closure of most access roads. The Princes Highway was cut in a number of places between the Victorian border and north of Batemans Bay. The Clyde Mountain Road which is one of the two major routes to the south coast had been closed for weeks due to bushfires. The first time ever mass evacuation of the south coast could have easily failed if the only other escape route had also closed. The journey from Bega to Canberra via Brown Mountain and the Snowy Mountains Highway took thousands of evacuees an anxious 5-10 hours. Thousands slept in their cars at various locations. Luckily people did get out of the area. The situation could have been so much worse.

How can we build infrastructure that provides a high quality service and supports resilience, safety and strengthens regional communities? These regions can be made much safer and more resilient by implementing a strategy where towns and villages had their own decentralised power and communications infrastructure. This is in contrast to current fragile infrastructure stretched over hundreds of kilometres and through highly flammable bush areas. Events such as storms regularly knock out this infrastructure. I would suggest that power and communication nodes be placed every 50 kilometres down the coast and built with a capacity to support 10,000 people or double the local catchment population.

This infrastructure should be high quality, military grade to be able to withstand disaster demand. It should be scalable and capable of supporting small manufacturing. The region would therefore be capable of managing local disaster and potentially support an emergency that effects a major city. If one node fails it could be supported by the nodes on either side while rapid repairs are made.

Australia has the engineering and information skills to design this decentralised infrastructure highly suited to emergency management. It would also support high quality decentralised living. This would also support our transition to renewable energy systems. Experts could provide the comparative cost of long distance infrastructure versus grids of localised nodes. I suspect that there is not much difference once whole of life costs, future proofing and disaster impacts are taken into account.

Talking of well-made plans. After two weeks without power, large generators were trucked in to various towns on the south coast. They were being rationed for greatest effect. One town had a designated petrol station that contained the fuel supplies for emergency vehicles. One of the generators was hooked up to provide power to the pumps. Unfortunately this blew all the switches in the pumps and it was going to be weeks before the parts needed would arrive. It was back to the hand pump. Nothing like a well-tested emergency plan?

Looking After Our Own Backyard

Doesn't matter who you talk to you can't find a person that will say the National Parks and State Forests of the south coast are being well managed. If you raise the topic with locals they are really angry that there seems to be very limited resources going into the management of the bush. At the same time that the land area of Commonwealth and State managed bush has increased the resources available has diminished rapidly. Locals that were once rangers or had roles in maintaining parks and forests were now redundant. People complain of the rubbish and weeds in the bush. The logging that has caused dense regrowth and destroyed ecological values. The increased problem of feral animals that include foxes, cats, dogs, pigs, goats, horses and deer. Native wildlife and their habitat are being decimated. Access and fire trails have not been maintained. It is clear that we are not looking after our own backyard and we are all the poorer for this.

What resources are required to improve the sustainable management and ecological values of the national estate, including National Parks, State Forests, other public land and private property? Is it also possible to manage this property to reduce catastrophic fire risk? Measures of the low priority and lack of care for our bush is the growth in feral numbers, the extinction rates of flora and wildlife, the increased fuel loads and degeneration of ecological values. This is the home to all the things that make Australia unique. This magnificent landscape supports a strong farming community and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors.

It is false economy to only provide massive resources as an emergency response and recovery after an event every couple of years. Australia has the expertise and people committed to improve the management of our Country. While there is a lot of effort and

resources directed to overall management we are not doing enough and it's not coordinated or consistent across the different forms of land management.

There is sense in giving the responsibility for land management to one level of government and they would need to deliver agreed outcomes for the different forms of land ownership. There was a lot of finger pointing regarding responsibility in the aftermath of Black Summer whether it be burning off or the required maintenance of the various forms of land. For the bushfire victims to see this blaming was a poor performance. Many being volunteers showed their commitment to taking responsibility and many actually put their lives on the line. Governments have an obligation to these people to improve the quantity and quality of resources going into the maintenance of the country.

I suggest that the State Government is the appropriate level of government to have this responsibility. Maintaining the country needs to be at the same level and priority as delivering services like health, education, infrastructure and transport. Shared funding arrangements similar to Health and Education between the Commonwealth and States Governments could provide the model. This would also provide the accountability framework for the agreed outcomes.

The health of the bush is really the canary in the coal mine for the general health of our country and it's clearly not good. The outcomes sought for all forms of land would need to be simple and include:

- Strengthening the ecological values, including,
 - Strengthening the habitat for wildlife
 - Monitoring the health of the bush
 - Removal of feral animals
 - Halting habitat destruction
 - Fuel load management
- Strengthening skills and expertise of the people managing the bush, and
- Increase the coordination and resources available to manage the bush
 - Utilising sensing technology to monitor all aspects of bush health
 - Provision of high tech machinery such vehicles, drones etc
 - Maintain access and accommodation
- Engage and educate the whole community in managing the health of the bush

I would like to stress that managing the bush is not the old style approach to agriculture where the land is 'tidied up' with the removal of a large number of trees, laser levelled and fenced. It is closely aligned with the first Australians approach to the management of 'Country' for all its values. I think we have a lot to learn from this approach. It requires a deep knowledge of the bush and its ecological relationships. Acknowledging that this management approach has been successfully implemented in a number of areas across Australia provides great optimism that it would work in south east Australia.

In the model being proposed, the State Government would be responsible for coordinating an interdisciplinary 'Country Health' team that brings together a range of skills and knowledge. They would be responsible for outlining what is required in particular regions to

deliver the outcomes above. This understanding would improve over a number of years and shared across regions. The team would be led by a project manager, an ecologist and a local first nation representative, and include members such as national parks manager, state forest manager, private land owner, wildlife expert, local council engineer, SES/RFS senior manager and admin/technical support. The group members would all have funded positions. The group would also have access to funds to support a number of apprentices that could acquire the skills that support the outcomes. Also funded would be a community development coordinator who would engage with the vast number of groups that have an interest in impacting the outcomes above. An obvious example is Landcare who organise groups of volunteers to do particular projects. The Bega Shire Region would need to be covered by one or two teams because of its relative land size.

A significant proportion of this Region is public land so greater resourcing should come from government. This land is managed by the government on behalf of the public although it doesn't feel like it's being managed for the benefit of the public. We need to do better than that. The Australian and international community expressed their priority in supporting the victims of Black Summer, people and wildlife, through the hundreds of millions donated.

A 'Country Health' team project relevant to this inquiry would be the annual management of fuel load in the local bush. This would include using physical measurement and technology to measure the load in different areas of the bush, then reduce this load taking into account local and first nations cultural burning knowledge and techniques and engaging a range of groups to help and share the knowledge of cool and ecological burning. The intensity of the management would be increased around towns, villages, property, infrastructure and sensitive ecological areas.

The same annual project based approach would be used to achieve the other 'Country Health' outcomes. This is a case of sound risk management where prevention is far better than the cure. South Eastern Australia is going to take decades to recover from the 2020 Black Summer and the cost to people and place has been enormous.

These suggestions are not a solution to preventing bushfire in the Australian landscape which has evolved to need fire to remain healthy. The impact of climate change on the frequency and intensity of disasters has to be acknowledged. The suggestions are aimed at reducing the catastrophic impact of bushfire and helping regional communities be stronger and more resilient in the face of disasters.

Ian Hubbard