

Your details

Title

Mr

First name

Ian

Last name

Stewart

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 live at Yatteyattah, next to where the disastrous RFS, NPWS, F&R 5 km uncontrolled 'backburn' was lit on 30.12.19. I was not evacuated and suffered personal and financial loss. Our home was destroyed and our property was devastated.

In my view there was absolutely nothing about this particular emergency response that worked well. The lighting of this backburn was reckless and we were left unsupported to manage its disastrous consequences.

Following this disaster the Ulladulla Disaster Recovery Centre provided the focal point for a range of assistance and support that was greatly appreciated. Our local Conjola Disaster Recovery Centre was quickly established and

provided and continues to provide valuable and necessary support, assistance and advice to our devastated and traumatised community.

Reliable and trustworthy ABC news and bushfire bulletins were absolutely critical to maintaining situational awareness. Their ongoing ability to provide this crucial community service should be maintained as a high priority of federal, state and local governments.

The RFS Fires Near Me app had the potential to be very helpful but it was not capable of providing accurate and trustworthy real time information and advice and was frequently dangerously wrong.

The local leadership provided by Shoalhaven Mayor Amanda Findley and Conjola Disaster Recovery Centre coordinator Peter Dunn was very important in stabilising this crisis situation and supporting our deeply traumatised community.

This was deeply flawed RFS / NPWS / F&R doctrine, strategy, planning and implementation that generated a dangerous, catastrophic firestorm and left us and others in the Yatteyattah, Pointer Mountain, Conjola area to deal with this and the aftermath ourselves without their support.

It was clear to us during the lead up to this devastating event that there was a disjoint between the different elements of capability themselves (RFS / NPWS / F&R) operating on the ground and with the central command and control leadership and senior managers. This was evident in frequent confusion, lack of clarity, poor communications and variable understanding of what was being done and the implications as well as an inability to provide back up the chain of command an informed and intelligent situational awareness.

Local Disaster Recovery services and facilities were inundated for some time by stranded tourists who, in my opinion, should not have been encouraged by local and state governments, local businesses and tourism operators to come to and remain in what was already a disaster area. This presence had to be managed by what were scarce on the ground capabilities and diverted their attention and efforts from what should have been the main focus. This presence also significantly impacted our ability to access essential local resources and services and travel safely and easily, especially on the main highway.

Leadership from government and agency 'leaders', other than Shoalhaven Mayor Amanda Findley and Conjola Disaster Recovery Centre co-ordinator Peter Dunn, was conspicuously missing when it was most needed.

The Conjola / Yatteyattah catastrophic firestorm provides an important case study in what was not done well and what should be changed and improved in the future. This relates to a broad range of well established principles and priorities for doctrine, capability planning, preparedness, management and deployment in the context of joint operations and interoperability both within and between the different agencies and levels of government.

Given the escalating problems and challenges associated with climate change and the associated drying and warming conditions that have such a direct bearing on fire potentials and probabilities in the Australian landscape, there should be a major revision of all capability development, management and operating procedures, including command and control arrangements, information, intelligence, knowledge and communications management, situational awareness and analysis, resource acquisition and deployment and interoperability protocols and procedures. This is not a new concept of operations and operating model and should have been in place well before this extended and catastrophic recent fire season. This failure to have a mature operating model capable of quickly and effectively responding to and managing dangerous, unfolding disasters is a failure of governments at all levels to take seriously the professional advice that has been provided or offered over a long period of time.

This backburn was planned over several days and was lit less than 24 hours before what was known and expected to be a catastrophic fire day. Only two small RFS units - Conjola and Depot Beach - and one NPWS landcruiser were present in our area to monitor and manage this fire front they had created along Porters Creek Dam Road and out to Bloodwood Road / Princes Highway the night before.

We went to bed at around 11.00pm on 30 December watching this blaze from our bedroom window. We were woken at around 4.00am on 31 December by the predicted strong and already hot NW wind. Embers were already arriving at the house at that time. My wife Fiona and I decided to leave because we were alarmed at the already

dangerous conditions and we went to support the firefighting effort at a neighbours house - the Bakers - nearby on Porters Creek Dam Road. Our son James, who was formerly a member of the NSW State Mitigation Service and Remote Area Firefighting Team, stayed to fight the fire at our property. The alarming conditions continued to build until around 10.00am. From that time the backburn fire erupted from the area at the back of our property, heading in a NW>SE direction, as had been forecasted.

We fought the ground fire, witnessed a spot fire which erupted on Skye Farm and, as the fire storm erupted to the north of Round Hill, fought and only just saved the nearby Baker house and property. Our fire preparations were working well and the fire had passed our house until a huge fire storm happened on the western, rainforest side of our property. Our son, who remained in the house, lost the fight at our property due to an ember attack on the roof ridge and was very lucky to escape in extremely dangerous, life threatening conditions. Four calls to 000 from us, and many from others from neighbours, received no response and there was no follow up after the event. The last we saw of any support was at 10.15am when a group of NPWS landcruisers met briefly near Currowar Lane on the Porters Creek Dam Road. They quickly disappeared and were not seen again. Tabourie RFS visited our home around 8.30am and stated that they would be around all day but that intention didn't eventuate. No F&R services were present that morning as far as we are aware. Yatteyattah west of the highway remained unvisited and unsupported for about week after this disaster, despite a number of 000 calls for assistance.

We fought and survived this extraordinarily dangerous situation without any regard or assistance from the Fire Authorities. We have provided evidence to the investigating detectives for the Coronial Inquiry and have time critical photographs of this induced catastrophic firestorm incident. We have nurtured and protected our land for 35 years and it was a designated Land for Wildlife site. The forest and native species on it are devastated and many are unlikely to return. Since this event our lives have been completely disrupted and impacted by the ongoing wide range of challenges, demands and requirements associated with the recovery and rebuilding of our lives and property. It is an unfolding nightmare that at no stage has been acknowledged or supported by those authorities responsible for perpetrating this destruction and devastation. My expectation is that they will be required to face the consequences of their deeply flawed doctrine, strategy, planning and implementation and be held accountable for the dangerous, catastrophic firestorm that they recklessly generated and left us and others in the Yatteyattah, Pointer Mountain, Conjola area to deal with ourselves without their support.

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

- 9D1DC330-437F-450E-B4B3-794ACA3A2624.jpeg
- F8D97006-FFD1-4132-A517-4F97DC68BE6C.jpeg
- BC3176EC-C395-43D6-9558-3E1D5DD650F1.jpeg



