



COMPENDIUM OF  
SUBMISSIONS TO THE NSW  
INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE  
INQUIRY

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## Introduction

There have been many terms used to describe the 2019/2020 fire season, unprecedented being the most common, but I find it hard to ignore the intrigue of so many “black swans” that seemed to keep popping up across the state of NSW. Wikipedia describes a black swan event as:

The **black swan theory** or **theory of black swan events** is a metaphor that describes an event that comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is often inappropriately rationalised after the fact with the benefit of hindsight.

The inappropriate rationalisation of the fire season has already started, with some of the opening words at the first RFS After Action Review I attended: “this was a one in hundred-year event”. By the time, I went to my second After Action Review the same commentary was now down to a “one in twenty-year event”, at least we were heading in the right direction.

While the length of the fire season was a surprise, as rain normally arrives at some stage and finally puts out the fires that man alone struggles to achieve, the dryness of the fuel and the intensity of the fires had been talked about and discussed for the last couple of years. NSW had also experienced major fires in 2017 and 2018, without significant rain it would have been a surprise, possibly a “black swan”, if major fires had not occurred in 2019.

When the Currowan fire started in late November in the Shoalhaven region no one should have been surprised by what occurred given the large fires that had already devastated much of the north coast and the major fires that were in their early stages just to the north and west of Sydney.

The Shoalhaven was given plenty of forewarning and had ample opportunity to plan and prepare for the Currowan fire and yet my own experience and the reports from other volunteers that helped with the early response was a story of disarray and disorganisation, it was as though this was the first major fire that the Shoalhaven RFS had ever experienced.

The other striking thing about the Currowan fire was the forlorn and despondent look on the group officers’ faces, the senior volunteers charged with running the fire ground. Contrary to our Prime Minister’s belief, it appeared that these volunteers did not want to be there. When matters of backburning and containment strategies were raised the reply often received was “that will be for the next shift to decide”.

Another standout point from the Currowan fire, that has been discussed at length at the After Action Reviews, was the inability of the Shoalhaven RFS crews to successfully blacken out a containment edge. The discussion ended with aspersions being loaded upon the volunteers and disbelief that they could be so incompetent. I suspect that the underlining issues were much complex. Kangaroo Valley’s pre-Christmas Mt Scanzi road fire highlighted that in the extreme dryness well over 30,000 litres of water was required to successfully blacken out a small, one hectare fire, particularly when catastrophic conditions had been forecasted for the next 24 hours. Kangaroo Valley used two private bulk water carriers to suppress a small fire, thousands of bulk water carrier loads would have been needed to successfully blacken out the hundreds of kilometres of containment edges around the

Currowan fire. Maybe the RFS volunteers were being asked to do the impossible, perhaps that explains the look upon their faces.

I believe that for this NSW Independent Inquiry to even come close to understanding the complex nature of what the RFS volunteers and the community experienced, those charged with undertaking the forensic investigation required, need to speak at length with the senior volunteers that had the job of managing the fire ground. Therein lies a fundamental issue for the inquiry: RFS volunteers are not normally prepared to speak up and voice their wisdom, at least in public. The RFS has a culture of managing and containing volunteer's opinion, keeping it suppressed. This is no better demonstrated than by the fact that the RFS and the RFSA have made no attempt to acknowledge or inform the volunteers of the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry or the federal Bushfires Royal Commission. This is in spite of the NSW Government explicitly requesting the community including volunteers to have their say.

The NSW RFS, by its own definition, is a community based fire agency, quite unlike NSW Fire & Rescue. With the RFS the volunteer's opinion counts, particularly if the state wants the volunteers to continue to show up. What NSW has experience over the 2019/2020 fire season should not ever happen again. For this to have any hope of being achieved, everyone within in the state, that has an active interest, should be encouraged to contribute.

Item 1 & Item 6

## RFS Priorities and Fuel Load Management

I believe there were two major contributing factors to the intensity of the 2019/2020 fires: the amount of fuel and how dry the fuel had become. The extreme dryness of the fuel meant that ecosystems such as rain forests and wet gullies that would normally not burn, burnt with incredible intensity. While little can be done about major droughts without action on climate change, something can be done about the amount of fuel.

I believe that the RFS places too low a priority on the management of fuel loads on land for which it has primary responsibility, that is bushfire prone land that does not belong to National Parks, State Forests or WaterNSW. I also believe that in the 23 years since the RFS came into being in 1997 the RFS's focus has drifted away from fuel load management to other tasks.

The Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade is a very active brigade that does undertake hazard reductions most years. We also at times assist with other RFS hazard reductions or hazard reductions run by either the National Parks or WaterNSW.

Even so, in a good year our brigade spends less than 2% of its time on its own hazard reductions. Some years no hazards reductions are attempted or if are attempted they are unsuccessful due to the unfavourable conditions.

My calculations also reveal that, prior to the Currowan fire, the RFS in Kangaroo Valley had reduced the fuel load on less than 20 hectares of land, due to RFS initiated hazard reductions that had been undertaken over the last 10 years. The RFS has primary responsibility for approximately 20,000 hectares of land in Kangaroo Valley.

The National Parks hazard reduction conducted along Tallowa Dam Road in early 2019 between the Kangaroo River fire trail and Tallowa Dam clearly demonstrates the ability of a well conducted hazard reduction to reduce or limit the advance of a major bushfire. When the Currowan fire entered Kangaroo Valley it was a '10 out of 10' in terms of its intensity and yet for this section along Tallowa Dam Road, where the fuel loads had been removed by a well conducted hazard reduction, the fire was effectively stopped without the use of aircraft or active firefighting.

Prior to the RFS, the old bushfire brigade's main focus was on the protection of the local community through managing the local fuel loads. The RFS brigade today has many competing responsibilities that in effect means there is little time left for fuel load management. As the size of the RFS bureaucracy has grown the volunteers available time for hazard reduction has been reduced as administration, training and maintenance responsibilities have grown.

The RFS bureaucracy has been incredibly successful at creating an ever-increasing amount of red tape paper work for the volunteers to complete. Some of this paper work has even lead to a direct increase in fuel loads through the reduction in the amount of assistance that brigades provide to the community in conducting piles burns and other small hazard reductions. I believe that some brigades have now chosen not to assist their local community at least in part due to the amount of paper work. In my experience assisting the local community to reduce fuel loads is a very effective way to conduct community engagement, increase the volunteer's local knowledge and conduct training.

Our own brigade's regular callouts have also doubled since the RFS moved the dispatch system from the local district to a centralized dispatch system in Sydney. Every time the RFS increases the work load on the volunteers, for whatever well intentioned reason, the available time for hazard reductions is reduced.

There is no doubt that the RFS has become good at many things: structural firefighting, the use of chainsaws, riding trail bikes, jumping out of helicopters, climbing on roofs to name some of what it can do. But these achievements have come at the cost of fuel management.

While the RFS Annual Report provides information on hazard reduction outcomes it makes no effort to separately identify what resources the RFS has allocated to hazard reductions and what outcomes the RFS itself has achieved.

The NSW parliament, general public and local communities need to be better informed on how both volunteers' time is used and how the RFS spends its budget. I believe that the NSW Government needs to better manage how the RFS uses its limited resources and consider whether rural communities would not be better protected if the RFS's focus was to return to fuel load management.

In the case of the Currowan fire it became so large that no amount of aircraft and fire trucks were ever going to make much difference. The amount of destruction caused was largely due to mother nature on the day and the amount of fuel on the ground. Spending more money on aircraft, fire trucks, auxiliary equipment, training and many other things will make no difference to future outcomes if the fuel loads are not managed and reduced.

### **Recommendations**

1. That RFS priorities are changed to make fuel management its most important task.
2. RFS District Offices be required to publish an ongoing 5-year rolling program for hazard reductions at a LGA level.
3. That the transparency of how RFS resources are used in relation to fuel management is significantly increased by:
  - a. RFS District Offices be required to annually report on the status of fuel loads at the community/brigade level.
  - b. RFS District Offices be required to issue warnings to effected communities when fuel loads reach a predetermined level.
  - c. RFS District Offices be required to annually report on the outcomes of the 5-year rolling hazard reduction program, including the number of hectares burnt at the community/brigade level.
  - d. RFS District Offices be required to annually report on the percentage of the RFS resources being used to managing fuel loads at the community/brigade level.
4. That the RFS annual report to the NSW parliament be modified so that the RFS resources allocated to fuel load management and the outcomes achieved are shown separately to the other agencies. This reporting should include the number of hectares burnt by RFS hazard reductions and a detailed breakdown of the resources allocated to fuel management.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020

[REDACTED]

Item 2 & Item 8

## RFS Community Engagement

In the weeks leading up to the Currowan Fire impacting on Kangaroo Valley, on top of my regular volunteer firefighting commitments, I also spent considerable time helping the community prepare for the impact of a bushfire. This preparation included property visits, community meetings at different localities in Kangaroo Valley, answering many telephone and email inquiries, assisting community members prepare their own bushfire survival plans and attending community bushfire planning meetings.

The Currowan fire impact on the Kangaroo Valley community was devastating, with over 130 significant structures being destroyed including just over 60 dwellings. Following the fire, a number of residents stated that this community work I undertook helped saved either their life or their house or both.

Whilst undertaking most of this community engagement work I needed to use my own resources. This included my own vehicle and fuel and my own mobile phone and data. This was at a time when, as a self-employed contractor, I was largely not earning an income.

Throughout the last 18 months of helping the Kangaroo Valley community prepare for a major bushfire I have found the RFS staff in the Shoalhaven district office and RFS culture in general to be very unsupportive of the community work. These are some examples of what has been said:

“Community engagement is not core business”.

When explaining the community plan “that would be a lot of work and why would you bother?”

“Kangaroo Valley does not need a bushfire plan”.

When asking for use of an RFS vehicle, “Good luck with that”.

I was also told, when I was the Brigade Captain, that I had a “conflict of interest” in working with a local community bushfire committee. I have since stepped down as the Brigade Captain in part due to the anti-community attitudes prevalent within the RFS.

In my over twenty years of experience with the RFS I have found that it does not resource or place any real importance on helping communities *prepare* for bushfires. The RFS is primarily a response agency that puts very little effort into community planning and preparation for bushfires.

Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia all run neighbourhood bushfire groups to help with community bushfire preparedness. University research has shown that these neighbourhood groups lead to substantially better outcomes when impacted by bushfire. Not only has the NSW RFS not implement neighbourhood groups in the case of Kangaroo Valley it actively worked against the Kangaroo Valley community implementing neighbourhood groups.

### Recommendations

1. That community engagement, including planning and preparation, be resourced independently of the RFS response function.
2. That specialist personnel be employed who have significant expertise and qualifications in disaster resilience planning and education.

3. Consideration be given to moving bushfire planning away from the RFS to a new agency that would address all emergency planning leaving the RFS as purely a response organisation.

Mike Gorman  
Deputy Captain and Community Engagement Officer  
Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade  
April, 2020





Item 3 & Item 8

## Early Days of the Currowan Fire

From my experience of attending the Currowan fire, particularly in the first two weeks, the Shoalhaven RFS was very disorganised. This included:

1. A staging area that didn't exist
2. No briefing of incoming crews
3. No maps were provided to crews
4. No communication plan was provided to crews
5. Poor communication between RFS, NPWS & State Forest
6. No plan for what was trying to be achieved and hence a lack of tasking for the incoming crews

There was ample time to contain the Currowan fire before it jumped the Clyde River to the east, the Western Distributor fire trail to the west and the various fire trails to the north and south.

I believe the Shoalhaven RFS now has less capability than at any time in the last 20 years. This reduced capability was reflected in the inability of the Shoalhaven RFS district office/fire control centre to come up with plan to contain the Currowan fire while it was still relatively small.

From my observations, the senior volunteers on the fire ground are no longer able to run or manage a fire due to micro-managing from the Shoalhaven fire control centre. This has led to a slow response when decisions need to be made and days of inaction. This in turn has allowed fires to grow in size, waiting for a bad weather day when the fire jumps poor containment lines and makes a run into previously unburnt country.

### Recommendations

1. That the management of fires on the fire ground be better resourced and the balance of responsibility be shifted from the fire control centres back to the fire ground allowing the senior volunteers to do their job.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020

[REDACTED]

Item 3 & Item 8

## Final Days of the Currowan Fire

The Shoalhaven RFS made no attempt to stop the Currowan fire entering Kangaroo Valley. There was no attempt to back burn along Duffy's Lane even though the conditions were suitable for at least 2 days before the 4<sup>th</sup> of January. Duffy's Lane was previously called the Budgong fire trail and had been built for the purpose of controlling bushfires.

More than once the question of why the RFS were not back burning was asked and the only answer provided was that "the RFS will not put fire on the ground north of the Shoalhaven River". This, in reality, seemed to be an expression of surrender rather than a logical explanation. It appeared that the Shoalhaven RFS had, in effect given up, and had run out of ideas of what to do.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> January no aircraft were used to slow the spread of the fire into Kangaroo Valley and, other than Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Brigade's own three trucks, no additional resources were provided until after the fire front had passed through Kangaroo Valley and headed towards Bundanoon.

The Shoalhaven RFS made no effort to protect the Kangaroo Valley community from the Currowan fire until after the fire front had passed through Kangaroo Valley and all of the serious damage had been done.

In the Kangaroo Valley community over 130 significant structures were lost, of which more than 60 were dwellings. The destruction from the Currowan fire to the Kangaroo Valley community was greater than all the previous big fires 1939, 1965, 1968 and 1983 fires put together.

In my view if the Shoalhaven RFS is not able to provide protection for a community like Kangaroo Valley and, by its own decision making, stops local volunteers from acting pre-emptively to protect their own communities through actions such as backburning, then it is not fit for purpose.

In spite of all the modern mapping technology, all the resources, the aircraft and all the media attention, the RFS in relation to Kangaroo Valley, has in one fire, seen a worse outcome, than achieved by a bunch of local volunteers with little or no training and very basic equipment across the 4 previous major fires put together. In my view all the money, resources, fancy uniforms with medals and a big corporate image is no substitute for a detailed knowledge on how to manage fuel loads and how and when to backburn. With 82% of the Shoalhaven burnt, hundreds of buildings lost and massive destruction to the flora and fauna the NSW RFS clearly does not understand fuel load management and how to contain fires successfully.

On Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> December, the Shoalhaven RFS district office took one of the Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade fire trucks out of Kangaroo Valley, without notifying the local community or the brigade volunteers, including the Captain. The brigade had already been sending one, and sometimes two, fire trucks south each day to assist with the Currowan fire. This left the Kangaroo Valley community in an extremely vulnerable position, with only one fire truck available if a local fire was to start. A few days earlier the brigade had, in fact, needed to respond to a new fire in Kangaroo Valley on Mt Scanzi Road, during the afternoon before a declared catastrophic fire day.

The local community has donated well over \$200,000 to the local brigade in last few years, greatly enhancing the capability of the RFS in Kangaroo Valley. The local community would hope for a

certain level of service and protection in return for this investment. I believe that this incident of a truck being taken without consultation demonstrates that the Shoalhaven RFS district office has a fundamental lack of respect for both communities and RFS volunteers. Furthermore, this incident occurred at a time when the NSW Government and the RFS management were claiming publicly that they did not need additional resources.

I believe that whilst ever the NSW Government relies on a volunteer work force and significant financial support from communities to protect that same community, the removal or reduction of that protection should only occur with consultation and notification of that community. During major fires and dangerous fire conditions local communities need to be notified of any reduced levels of capability and protection so that members of that community can evacuate or take other appropriate action if they feel it is required. The primary reason the Mt Scanzi Road fire was brought under control quickly was due to strong community assistance, including the provision of two private bulk water carriers. This community augmentation of local brigade resources would function much more effectively if the local brigade and the local community were notified of any intention on behalf of the RFS district office to reduce the level of local protection. During a fire callout, there is little point in twenty or more volunteers charging down to the fire station to discover a truck has gone missing.

### **Recommendations**

1. That the RFS operational model of centralized control be reviewed with the aim of returning control and decision making for the protection of communities back to local volunteers. The RFS staff role, be it in Sydney or a district office, should return to one of support rather than micro-management.
2. That whilst ever the RFS remains a *community base fire service* the Rural Fires Act be modified to acknowledge that local brigade resources “belong” to the community they have been put there to protect and that those resources should only be significantly reduced following consultation with the local brigade and notification to the local community.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020

[REDACTED]

Item 3 & Item 8

## RFS's Relationship with Private Firefighting Resources

The NSW RFS has for many year had a prickly relationship with private firefighting resources such as the farm ute with a 1000 litre tank. This difficult relationship was highlighted in the 2019 ABC Landline TV show called "Firestorm" where farmers complained about the RFS crews being unwilling to put water in their utes, even though the farmers were the ones doing the firefighting while the RFS crews watched on.

The 2019/2020 fire season demonstrated that the RFS, even with help from Fire & Rescue NSW and interstate agencies, did not have the capacity alone to deal with the fires. This was clearly demonstrated with the well documented story in the media on how the staff, with limited resources, saved Mogo Zoo. Mogo Zoo is a major tourist attraction for the NSW South Coast but the RFS had no plans and no capacity to defend it.

The Mogo Zoo story, of locals being left to defend themselves, was repeated many times over the 2019/2020 fire season from the Queensland border down to the Victorian border.

The reasons why the RFS has such difficulty working with the NSW community and private firefighting resources should be the subject of a corporate psychology research project, but what should be acknowledged is that there is far more water carrying capacity and firefighting capacity in the private fleet than there is in the Government provided RFS and Fire & Rescue NSW combined fleet. In the case of Kangaroo Valley, the private firefighting water capacity is at least 10 times the local Brigade's capacity.

Given that we are all in this together it would seem to make sense for the NSW Government to mandate that the RFS should work with the NSW community and its very large private fighting capacity to achieve the common goal of protecting NSW communities. The need to work with communities and their private firefighting resources and the importance of informing communities about the withdrawal of RFS resources was evident with the defence, or lack thereof, of the Conjola community when the Currowan fire impacted Conjola.

The Kangaroo Valley dairy farms are in a very similar situation to Mogo Zoo in the sense that it is just not feasible to evacuate large dairy herds that need to be milked. The Shoalhaven RFS had no plans in place and had made no arrangements to defend these farms. Local Land Services (LLS) had been approached in late 2018 to participate in the development of Bushfire Management Plans for these dairy farms but had declined to help as they stated that the Shoalhaven RFS would not support the project. No one is saying that the RFS can or will have the resources to protect every farm but the NSW Government, through the RFS & LLS, do have the resources to plan, coordinate and assist with the utilization of private firefighting resources to protect these dairy farms.

In the same way that the Mick Keelty report into the Bega Valley Fires in 2018 made many recommendations on the improvements needed for a better working relationship between the NSW RFS and Fire & Rescue NSW, this NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry should make similar recommendations to the changes needed to facilitate an improvement in the relationship between the NSW RFS and the significant private firefighting resources currently available but underutilised in NSW.

**Recommendations**

1. That the Rural Fires Act 1997 be enhanced to mandate the requirement for the NSW RFS to work with the states private firefighting resources and in particular the farmers of NSW.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020

[REDACTED]

Item 3 & Item 10

## RFS Handling of Serious Safety Issues at the Currowan Fire

On Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> January 2020, the Currowan fire jumped the Shoalhaven River and entered Kangaroo Valley. During the late afternoon and early evening our Brigade, along with the NSW National Parks, were operating on Tallowa Dam Road to the north of the Shoalhaven River.

As the fire moved over Mt Scanzi and into Kangaroo Valley the Brigade's Cat 1 fire truck became trapped by the fire and was isolated out on Tallowa Dam Road till 3am. A National Parks Cat 9 truck was also subsequently burnt out by the fire after hitting a fallen tree on Tallowa Dam Road. The crew survived by seeking shelter in a nearby dam. Kangaroo Valley's Two Cat 7 trucks and a private bulk water carrier also narrowly escaped as they left just in front of the National Parks Cat 9 and got out just as trees were starting to be blown over from the impact of the fire front.

Both the RFS and the National Parks were operating on the northern side of a very large fire front with an expected southerly change. This is known as the "dead man zone". Our Brigade came very close to losing all three trucks and crews that evening. It is the most serious near miss that I am aware of in the history of the Kangaroo Valley Brigade.

At the two RFS After Action Reviews (AAR) that I subsequently attended for the Currowan fire this safety issue was not discussed, with only one slight reference being made to what happened at the first meeting. Our RFS district office is aware of the incident and our district manager was present at both meetings.

I subsequently raised my concerns in our Brigade meeting in February 2020 as a work place health and safety issue.

I feel that this safety issue should have been investigated by the RFS. I also feel that the RFS district office should have been ensuring that time was allocated to the frank and open discussion of serious safety issues at the AARs.

From my experience of this and other AARs that I have attended the RFS has a culture of covering up safety and other concerns of the volunteers.

### Recommendations

1. That this particular incident be independently investigated.
2. That an independent audit be undertaken into other serious near misses that may have taken place during the Currowan fire.
3. That a register of near miss reports and subsequent actions be maintained within an RFS district and that the information is made readily available to the volunteers.
4. That the RFS AAR process be reviewed against safety practices from other industries.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020

Item 3 & Item 10

## RFS Management of Volunteer Fatigue

During the early stages of the Currowan fire my Brigade was regularly doing firefighting shifts of approximately 17hrs. This consisted of 12hrs on the fire ground, 2 hrs travel each way and half an hour at either end for travelling to or from the station and truck preparation or clean up. Whilst on the fire ground shifts sometimes went for more than 12 hours.

I am not raising this issue in relation to those fire days when properties are under threat and lives are threatened, when I fully understand that sometimes volunteers need to go beyond what would be considered normal practise. My concerns relate to the standard fire day when fires are not fast moving and no one's life is at risk other than through poor management of fatigue.

The RFS Divisional Commanders that I spoke to during the Currowan fire insisted that the Shoalhaven district's shifts were 12 hours on the fire ground irrespective of how long the drive was to and from the fire ground.

While these very long hours are often discussed by senior volunteers and RFS staff, nothing seems to change and the management of crew fatigue is left up to the volunteers to manage.

I feel that the management of volunteers' safety cannot solely be put back onto the volunteer. RFS staff are fully aware of the issue but would appear to do very little to put processes in place to reduce the possibility of fatigue occurring.

There would also appear to be no consistency in the management of fatigue across RFS districts.


### Recommendations

1. That RFS fatigue management practises be brought into line with other industries such as the mining industry.
2. That a consistent approach be adopted to fatigue management across all RFS districts.
3. That a technology solution be looked at where a "phone app" could be used to record volunteers' time and flags raised when predetermined limits are reached.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020



Item 3 & Item 10

## RFS After Action Review Transparency

Currently the RFS holds After Action Reviews (AAR) for most significant incidents.

This process allows volunteers to provide feedback, either verbally or in writing, at a brigade, group or district level. Minutes of the AAR are sometimes produced and may be made available to the local volunteers.

In my district when these AAR inputs are collated and sent to either the RFS regional or head office the volunteer no longer has access to what information was passed on, even when matters of safety have been raised.

This lack of transparency has led to a lack in confidence in the AAR process. By way of example, for the 2017 Sir Ivan Fire and number of members of a Shoalhaven strike team called "South 19" made written submissions to the AAR process. South 19 was the first outside help to arrive on the fireground at the Sir Ivan Fire just as the fire was breaking containment lines. Many of the volunteers and local community were very effected by the events of the catastrophic day. When RFS presented its record of events for the Coroners Inquiry, South 19 had been deleted from the records and no material prepared by the volunteers associated with the strike team were presented to the Coroner.


### Recommendations

1. That AAR minutes for major fires held across an RFS district be made available to all volunteers within that district.
2. That AAR district office submissions to the regional or head office be made available to all volunteers within the district.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020





Item 3 & Item 10

## RFS Volunteers Undertaking Very High Risk Activities

Over the last few years there has been a significant increase in the number of RFS volunteers undertaking very high risk fire related activities, such as fire line tree felling and remote area firefighting.

As the number of volunteers undertaking these activities has increased the number of paid NSW Government employees undertaking these same activities in the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Corporation of NSW and WaterNSW has decreased.

The level of training required to maintain the necessary skills and qualifications in both fire line tree felling and remote area firefighting is very significant. This has placed an extra work load on the RFS volunteer which ultimate reduces their availability for regular fighting activities within their own brigade.

During the Currowan fire my own brigade was regularly sending a second truck away, out of our brigade area, solely for the purpose of fire line tree felling. This meant that the fire coverage for our own local community was greatly reduced.

I do not believe that my local community should be put at a greater risk as a result of RFS volunteers making up for staff cut backs in various NSW Government agencies. These agencies should be responsible for managing their own lands without relying on assistance from a volunteer work force. The use of volunteers to undertake fire line tree felling when the work could be done by dedicated forest tree harvesters no longer make sense from a work place health and safety prospective.

I also believe that the first responders for remote area fire operation should be paid staff of the various land managers and not volunteers.

### Recommendations

1. That the relevant land managers in NSW, including NSW NPWS, FC of NSW, WaterNSW, RMS and Councils be required to be responsible for managing trees on their land.
2. That fire line tree felling be undertaken by tree harvesting machines rather than by hand.
3. That remote area firefighting primarily be undertaken by land managers paid staff or by contractors.
4. That the major land managers of forests in NSW join forces to create a paid remote area fighting force or a contractor remote area firefighting force that is available to respond to remote fires without the need to rely on volunteers.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020

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Item 2 & Item 11

## RFS Fire Permit System and Process for Reporting of Fires

The RFS permit system to light a fire during the bushfire danger period has remained unchanged for over 65 years (our brigade has an old permit book, very similar to today's, that was last filled in 1955).

The RFS has been unable to deliver a modern electronic or app based permit system in spite of requests from volunteers in recent years. As the volunteers' time and private vehicle comes for free there is very little financial incentive to make efficiency improvements that would help reduce the volunteers' workload and personal costs associated with issuing a permit.

In my brigade the vast majority of fire calls are false alarms or time wasters. These false alarms are often associated with a fire that has a permit during the bushfire danger period or a notified fire during the remainder of the year. A simple app program along the lines of "Snap Send & Solve" could easily be developed that would address most, if not all, of the short comings of the current paper system being used to issue permits. The app, which could be called MyFire, would contain relevant details of the person requesting the permit along with a photo or photos of what they would like to burn. Smart phone technology would be used to provide a grid location. Once the fire has been approved the person to whom the permit has been issued could post a notification when the fire is lit. This fire could then appear as a 'permitted and lit' fire on Fires Near Me.

The same app and smart phone technology could be used for reporting fires. A photo with a grid reference and bearing automatically generated by the smart phone is more useful than a verbal description. Two or more reports of the same fire would then result in an accurate location of the fire being obtained by the cross bearings.

From my experience of being a permit officer the antiquated system currently being used is a disincentive to landholders to clean up around their properties during the fire season. Making it harder for property owners to clean up leads to worse outcomes when fires do arrive.


### Recommendations

1. That an app based fire permit system called MyFire be introduced utilising existing smart technology.
2. That MyFire be linked into a map layer on Fires Near Me thus informing the public of permitted fires in their area.
3. That fires be reported by an app based system called ReportAFire utilising existing smart phone technology.
4. That the fires reported by 'Report A Fire' be crossed checked automatically against known fires thus helping to reduce the number of false alarms currently being experienced by volunteers.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020



Item 3 & Item 11

## RFS Fires Near Me Status Updates

The status of a fire on the RFS Fires Near Me app: Out of Control, Being Controlled and Under Control, are often slow to be updated.

Two local examples of this are the Mt Scanzi Road fire in December 2019 and the Wattamolla Road fire in August 2018. In both cases the fires were extinguished within minutes of the local brigade arriving on scene.

In both cases a brigade senior officer, who was the incident OIC, reported on the status of the fire and made requests that the fire status on Fires Near Me be updated to reflect that the fire was not Out of Control. These requests were made as there was a significant level of panic in the local community due to the forecast fire danger.

The Wattamolla road fire took most of the day to be updated while the more recent Mt Scanzi road fire took approximately two hours to be updated.

The slow updating of the status of fires has the following effects:

1. A distrust by the public of the official communications advice system and a reliance by the public on social media for more accurate information.
2. Extra work for the volunteers as the local community unsurprisingly starts to contact local brigade members to get the real status on the fire.
3. Unnecessary evacuations and time wasting in the community including impacting on local business.

This issue has been raised previously at RFS After Actions Reviews.

### Recommendations

1. That the RFS update the status of fires within minutes of a fire status report being provided by the Incident OIC.

Mike Gorman

Deputy Captain of Kangaroo Valley Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

April, 2020

[Redacted Signature]