

Submission to NSW Bushfire Inquiry

By the Mount Irvine Progress Association (MIPA) on behalf of the community of Mount Irvine

22 May 2020

Mount Irvine is an isolated community within the Blue Mountains with approximately fifty properties. Properties range from less than one hectare to about one hundred hectares. Mount Irvine was first settled by Europeans in 1897 and is significant from an ecological perspective, being one of the few basalt capped mountains with remnant sub- equatorial rainforest.

The mountain itself lies in the LGA of Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC). Part of a former access road (to Bilpin via Bowens Creek – discussed further below) falls in the LGA of Hawkesbury City Council (HCC). The mountain is surrounded by the Blue Mountains National Park, which itself abuts the Wollemi National Park.

Mount Irvine, including and in particular the rainforest on the mountain, as well as private properties on the mountains, was severely impacted by the recent fires and as a result the community has come together to plan for future bushfire threats and risks to ensure its wellbeing and that of the surrounding environment.

Our community is serviced by one road in and out (we had two previously but one of those is now inaccessible following the abandonment of the road by the Hawkesbury City Council), electricity supply is unreliable, and telecommunications in both landline and mobile networks are severely limited, however Telstra has failed to take any requested rectification activities.

Fundamental to our submission is the recognition that there are some things that we can control and act upon but that there are also many others that we cannot, and any actions need to be undertaken in concert with others. Our planning therefore must take this into account to achieve the desired result. We see the NSW Bushfire Inquiry as a fundamental component of this and appreciate the opportunity to contribute.

Our approach to-date has been to identify the risks associated with living in a remote community with only one access road and the potential for the community to have to be totally self-reliant and to operate autonomously for extended periods.

As a remote and potentially isolated community, Mount Irvine faces several significant risks associated with bush fires.

1. Risks arising from a lack of road access
2. Risks arising from the failure of Telstra to provide reliable communications services
3. Risks arising from the lack of reliable electricity supply services
4. Risks arising from a lack of fuel management in particular by the NP&WS
5. Risks arising from inadequate fuel reduction and management
6. Risks arising from issues in RFS operations

As a community we must plan for the likelihood that we will be isolated for periods of time and that critical services will fail. We need to work with others to mitigate these risks and strive to eliminate these risks where possible. In every case of risk listed, this cannot be done without the cooperation of others including Federal and State Government, Local Government and State Government Authorities.

To achieve a safer environment there needs to be significant change in approach by each of these bodies and a willingness to work with residents to build resilient communities.

In relationship to the recent fire event that has devastated large areas of NSW, we believe that it is self-evident that there has been significant failure to pre-plan and prepare, and inadequate operational planning and execution. The establishment of the Inquiry into these fires testifies to this. We as a small community do not have all the answers but can make headway in terms of those things that fall within our capability and authority.

Modestly we suggest that the residents of Mount Irvine can assist in the development of plans and strategies that will go a long way to ensure that communities, that can potentially become totally isolated, have a fighting chance to win through.

Discussion of the risks above.

1. Risks arising from a lack of road access:

A major risk to Mount Irvine lies in the ongoing loss of road access via Bowens Creek to Bells Line of Road some 13kms away while there exists vulnerability (and potential for loss) of the sole remaining alternative via Mount Wilson.

Mount Irvine, from the 1930's until recently had access to Bells Line of Road via two alternative routes: the first being via Mount Wilson (the only current access) and a second route directly to Bilpin via the road across Bowens Creek. Due to the inappropriate use of the road over Bowens Creek by heavy tourist vehicles (which were permitted by Hawkesbury City Council) and the total lack of maintenance by that same council, this road fell into disrepair and is now impassable, leaving Mount Irvine reliant on a single route via Mount Wilson, a route which is itself vulnerable, and thus the safety of the community is now vulnerable

Mount Irvine residents believe that the road over Bowens Creek should be repaired and reopened as a public road for the benefit of residents of Mount Irvine and Mount Wilson, emergency services and others with a legitimate reason to use the road. This might include the general public with appropriate restrictions on the type and weight of vehicle that can use it. Reopening this road would go a long way to alleviating many of the issues we now face.

It should be noted that during the recent fires and the period following, our only remaining access route – the road via Mount Wilson - has on numerous occasions been impassable. This route has many hazards including falling trees, land slips and land falls and fire and storm events. Recently for example we were deprived of the use of this road from 7:30 am until 4:00 pm each day for three weeks to allow contractors to remove dangerous trees damaged by the recent fire.

Furthermore, during bushfire events the route through Mount Wilson can become completely blocked by fire leading to a situation in which fire crews from Mount Wilson or elsewhere are unable to reach Mount Irvine, and fire crews or residents on Mount Irvine can become trapped while the mountain is surrounded by fire. This alone can increase the potential for a loss of life.

The restoration of the former route over Bowens Creek to Bilpin, as well as the upgrading of the sole existing route via Mount Wilson are in our view of very high priority. The desired result – of two alternative access routes – meets with modern community planning standards.

Restoration of the road over Bowens Creek has met with local Government resistance: the Hawkesbury City Council has refused to consider the views of affected residents (being residents of Mount Irvine), because, in the words of the former Mayor Mr Kim Ford on 11 December 2014 “I don’t have any ratepayers at Mount Irvine”.

The restoration of the road requires the involvement of the Federal and NSW Governments, as reliance on the Council(s) themselves is inappropriate given the importance of the road and the jurisdictional issues between HCC and BMCC for the two halves of the road.

Further, a study was commissioned by the NSW Government, funded by the Commonwealth, into the potential for restoration of the road. Strangely, this study has been withheld from the affected communities including Mount Irvine. This report should be made public immediately.

2. Risks arising from the failure of Telstra to provide reliable communications services:

Mount Irvine is currently poorly served by telecommunications, and bushfires exacerbate that risk, as telecoms services are critical for community (and fire brigade) safety.

2.1. Landline services:

Being some 14 kms from the local Telstra fixed line Exchange – which itself is poorly maintained - means that under normal circumstances the quality of communications via the fixed line network are marginal. For the majority of our community there is no ADSL service available (due to inadequacies in the Telstra line) and thus no access to the Internet via landline during events when the RFS is relying on internet as a means of keeping the community informed and safe.

Outages of over a month in duration are not uncommon. The response by Telstra has been to transfer landline calls to the mobile network, however (as set out below) this is frequently futile as the mobile network itself is poor and unreliable.

We acknowledge that the continuation of a landline service might not fit with the long-term plans for the NBN, which favours a combination of satellite and mobile services. Notwithstanding that, it is only reasonable to expect that the landline service is given proper maintenance during the period it exists and during which it continues to be relied

on. This leads to the next issue, which involves shortcomings by Telstra in responding to failures of the existing network, in particular at times when it forms a critical component of community safety in the period prior and during a bushfire event.

2.2. Tardiness of Telstra in dealing with landline outages:

During the recent bushfire, the Fire Brigade established a forward facility at the Mount Irvine Public Hall as a staging post for the brigade crews and also as a refuge for the community. However, the landline service to that facility was broken early in the life of the fire event, at a time when the Gaspers Mountain Fire had commenced and was clearly a threat, but yet over a month prior to the fire striking Mount Irvine. The break in the line occurred when the overhead cable parted literally directly outside the public hall.

Despite many calls to Telstra, no action was taken to repair the line outside the public hall prior to the fire arriving, and the line remained broken until well after the fire event had passed. A task that required no more than a few hours, and was critical at the time for reasons of community safety, took months to be carried out.

2.3. Mobile services:

The primary means of communication during bushfires at Mount Irvine is via mobile phone, with the sole local tower being at Bilpin about 5km away by direct line and within line of sight. In a major fire event, excellent mobile communications are essential.

That this level of communication is critical in bushfire events is reflected in the reliance of the RFS on the mobile network to communicate warnings or other advice to members of the community who are under threat, and reliance by the RFS on receiving messages from the community as to emerging fires or other breakouts. However, our current service does not meet the standard required.

The mobile tower servicing Mount Irvine at Bilpin has sectors on only two sides instead of the normal three, (the missing sectors are on the north side of the tower) and thus the tower cannot provide consistent, strong, or reliable coverage of Mount Irvine and other communities north of the tower. It means that during a bushfire event it can be difficult or impossible for communication to take place within the community, and between the RFS and the community, and the communication shortfall can be life-critical.

The capital cost of rectifying this deficiency is (according to Telstra engineers) very low. The benefit of adding the missing sectors is high. There is little justification for the work not being undertaken.

2.4. Refusal of Telstra to improve mobile services to Mount Irvine:

This mobile telephony situation has been brought to the attention of Telstra on a number of occasions over many years and in every instance the context of community risk in bushfire events was highlighted.

- A submission by MIPA was put to the then Area GM of Telstra Country Wide, Mr Andrew Bogg, on 28 August 2015, but no formal response was received by us from Telstra. During a meeting at Mount Tomah on 22 September 2015, Telstra's Mr Bogg commented verbally that "I'm not interested in throwing money at upgrades that are not of themselves strongly commercial, and the safety of the community is not one of our decision criteria".
- More recently, on 3 October 2019 (shortly prior to the recent fire event commencing) a letter was sent to Mr Michael Maron, head of "Team Telstra" for Northern NSW. The latter letter was followed up by further correspondence from MIPA on January 3, 2020. None of the correspondence was formally responded to by Telstra, although its receipt was acknowledged on 8 January 2020.
- The only verbal response in 2020 from Telstra was – like that from Mr Bogg in 2015 - dismissive. Telstra's Mr Marom (during a follow up call placed by MIPA to Mr Marom in mid-January 2020 - after the fire) said that if the residents needed telephony, they should purchase satellite phones, and he said that the fire brigade did not need mobile service as they used fireground radio.
- This 2020 response is patently absurd and naive: it ignores the need for viable and useful telephonic and Internet communication throughout the community and between the community and the Fire Brigade during a fire event.

Telstra has previously committed (via the then Minister for Communications Turnbull via his then Parliamentary Secretary Fletcher on 22 September 2015) to build a tower on Mount Tomah. However, a tower on Mount Tomah will not provide coverage to Mount Irvine, and in any case in the more than five years since the Minister's commitment was made, nothing has been provided. Once again, all that has been delivered by Telstra has been empty rhetoric.

An alternative path forward for Telstra could be the creation of a micro-cell at Mt Irvine, servicing the local community. Like the upgrading of the Bipin tower, this would be a low-cost solution and would deliver a reliable quality mobile service.

As a result of the foregoing, the community frustration continues, and Telstra's continued failure to deliver a necessary service is placing our community and the Brigade at risk.

3. Risks arising from the lack of reliable electricity supply services:

Electricity failures are a frequent feature of life at Mount Irvine, and there is no triangulated backup network as a safeguard: we are literally "at the end of the line".

In the recent fires it was compounded for us by the difficulty in obtaining fuel for generators. Of significance is that many of the community also rely on electricity for the operation of their water supply in circumstances in which gravity water feeds are not available. Thus, a reliable electricity supply is critical for health and safety reasons as well as for fire-fighting.

During the recent fires one outage lasted for eight days. This presented great challenges in keeping generators operational and fridges cooled – in particular at the Brigade’s forward staging post at Mt Irvine.

4. Risks arising from a lack of fuel management in particular by the NP&WS, and compromised NP&WS objectivity

The Gaspers Mountain fire started as a single point of ignition and was recognised within hours of its ignition. However, the fire grew to such an extent that it devoured about half a million hectares before it was finally brought under control. The community naturally wonder why it was allowed to get out of control to such an extent and why it could not have been extinguished earlier, before it became tragically devastating.

Because Mount Irvine is surrounded by National Park the safety of our community can be a function of the level of safe management of the National Park, and Mount Irvine is vulnerable to and captive of any actions or inactions which originate from the management of the neighbouring National Park. This also raises the principle of Duty of Care that a person or entity (such as NP&WS) has a responsibility for their actions or inactions which have an effect on those contemplated to be neighbours (such as Mt Irvine).

Notwithstanding the above, it was a concern held by the Mount Irvine community that there were unmanaged high fuel loads in the Wollemi and Blue Mountains National Park and thus there was a high vulnerability to fire emanating from the National Parks. This concern was, in our view, validated by the Gaspers Mountain Fire. Further, fire trails within National Parks were few and the few that existed had not been maintained by NP&WS.

Despite the excessive fuel levels and deficiencies in trails in the National Parks, any attempts to assist in fuel reduction or trail maintenance by other than the NP&WS (including by members of our community) were rejected: a jurisdictional and ideological barrier or “turf war” stood between safety on the one hand, and unfettered fires and danger on the other.

In relation to the early life of the Gaspers Mountain Fire, we understand from NP&WS media statements that the early focus and resources of the NP&WS were dedicated to constructing a sophisticated irrigation system around the stand of the original Wollemi Pines.

While this might appear laudable, it would seem that during that early period of the fire, the construction of that irrigation system took priority ahead of a more fundamental objective of putting the fire out while it was still at a manageable stage. As a result of this, while the stand of Pines was being saved, the fire got out of control at a time when strong and early intervention was paramount.

Put another way, it appears that NP&WS moved to “Plan B” (saving the stand of Pines) before addressing “Plan A” (saving everything by putting the fire out with assistance from other services such as the RFS), and by the time NP&WS moved to “Plan A” the fire had grown to such an extent it was out of control. This raises a fundamental question of objectivity of NP&WS in planning and decision-making.

It also raises the question of the level of cooperation and coordination between the various authorities: NP&WS, RFS, as well as F&RS and SES. We suspect there was little cooperation and coordination at critical times – in particular in the early days of the fire.

5. Risks arising from inadequate local fuel reduction and management

There is an absence of, or inadequate preparation of, non-residential land that affords an acceptable degree of fire protection around Mount Irvine without the need to undertake emergency “back burning” operations.

One of our greatest challenges at Mount Irvine is the preparation of non-residential land to provide an effective fire break around our mountain and our community. Following the 2013 fires that impacted Mount Irvine, we have by legislation been unable to undertake (through the local Brigade) any hazard reduction burns. We are also prevented by National Parks from doing any clearing on their land.

The result is that when burns are carried out, they take place at the worst possible time – in summer when conditions favour the spread of fire and with the imminent danger presented by an approaching fire front - and they are undertaken as emergency back burns (often in hazardous conditions due to the circumstances at the time, or with excessive intensity) instead of managed and well controlled, low intensity hazard reductions.

We believe that the NSW Government needs to reconsider its current position and allow residents, working with the appropriate authorities, to develop strategies that will protect the whole of the community rather than individual assets and personnel.

We propose that the concept of the Community Protection Zone (CPZ) be adopted. This would see a fire “break” consisting of natural features, cleared open woodland, clear farmland and the natural rainforest, which is a feature of the mountain, being established around communities such as Mount Irvine.

6. Risks arising from issues in RFS operations:

The RFS is meant to be a risk-mitigation body, but it should never be a risk creation body.

While this submission is presented on behalf of the Mt Irvine community, not on behalf of the Fire Brigade, many of our community members are also members of the RFS. We are therefore in a position in which we can make useful observations of RFS operations and activities as they affect us.

6.1. RFS training: Limitations resulting from “intellectualism” of training

Our local brigade undertakes regular training; however, courses necessary for promotion to higher levels (beyond the basic BF course) are run by the RFS Blue Mountains Region and due to availability, gaining the necessary qualifications can take many years.

Over a period, the RFS has increased the level of theoretical input into training when in fact firefighting is very much a practical endeavour: it is hands-on labouring under extremes of psychological pressure and it can be brutal. The requisite physical and innate psychological skills are frequently held by people who cannot obtain the qualifications as they are not as strong on the theoretical aspects.

As a result, those with greatest ability to assist in firefighting activities are often precluded from obtaining the necessary RFS qualifications, and the potential for their assistance as highly valuable team members can be lost. Further, those with qualifications and thus becoming team members are not necessarily as capable under real fire event pressure.

This, coupled with the lack of opportunity to practice basic skills in a situation involving actual fire (i.e. the inability of brigades to undertake hazard reduction burns for example due to environmental concerns) has the potential to result in team leaders having the theoretical qualifications but lacking the practical experience.

6.2. Shortage of trained personnel & “professional positions”

The above situation has resulted in a critical shortage of adequately trained personnel at critical levels such as Crew Leader. On the fire ground there is no one more important to the wellbeing of crew members and the achievement of the set task than this person.

We believe that the person in the position of Crew Leader or above needs to be a true “professional” and undergo appropriate training. Because of the level of training that is potentially involved, perhaps the individual should be paid an allowance for undertaking such training, similarly to a member of the Army Reserve. For those in employment, perhaps the employer continues to pay the individual and the employer is compensated.

6.3. Dedicated facilities and appliances at Mount Irvine

There has been a lack of commitment by the RFS to locate appliances at Mount Irvine that would guarantee that trained members of the Mount Irvine community could continue to operate if isolated and so continue to provide Fire Cover and Clinical Volunteer Ambulance First Responder assistance to residents in the event of complete isolation;

Due to the high potential of being isolated, we believe that the RFS needs to commit resources specifically for the benefit of Mount Irvine. We desire one firefighting appliance (a Cat 7 in RFS terms) and a Personnel Carrier (PC) for the Clinical Volunteer equipment. These vehicles are in addition to the vehicles required by the local brigade to undertake

its activities. These are really an “insurance” cost. The provision of such vehicles also means that we have access to the RFS radio network.

6.4. RFS and the Community: Whole of Mount Irvine Emergency Plan

There appears to be a shortfall in adequate advance planning by the RFS as to how a major fire incident that has the potential to impact Mount Irvine will be managed and the communication of that plan to residents.

There also appears to be a lack of an overall Emergency Plan for Mount Irvine that is communicated to and agreed with the residents and all appropriate authorities and agencies.

We need to plan for different types of emergencies and put together a more comprehensive emergency plan that covers many aspects that are in addition to the emergency plan related to a fire event. We see this plan being initiated by the community itself but having input from numerous authorities.

We believe that there has to be “high level” commitment to the development of such a plan so that when the next emergency occurs there is prior agreement and commitment on responsibilities and roles and what we want to achieve and the resources that we can realistically draw upon.

This approved plan would also authorise the RFS and community to undertake certain actions without the need to seek such approval during the emergency.

6.5. RFS and the Community: Local knowledge and input

There appears to be an unwillingness of the RFS to seek or accept advice from locals either before or during a fire event. Evidence of this lies in, among other things, the unnecessary burning of rainforest against the advice of local residents, when groves of rainforest represent natural fire-breaks and additionally often will not regenerate.

One of the most disappointing aspects of the events of the recent fires, is exhibited by comments by some of the brigade leaders that local input is not only not required, but is in fact seen as a hindrance. (“We don’t want the locals telling us what to do or getting in our way”).

Local input should become a valued, standard input, into any future planning as the goal is a shared goal. Locals build up knowledge over the years from personal observation and experience, or from the experience gained by others. There is no justification for this knowledge and experience being discounted by others for seemingly spurious reasons.

The Brigade and the Community should be a partnership, not competing interests. The Brigade should be working with and for the community, not riding roughshod over it.

Changing this attitude can only happen through the systemic change of culture within the various responsible organisations.

6.6. RFS and the Community: Communication with the community

We acknowledge that incident management is challenging. During the recent fires, the RFS understandably relied on the existence and resilience of communication services to keep affected communities informed as to what was going on and what was planned, and threats to the community. Secondly, the RFS (presumably) hoped for advice from the community when threats from new fire outbreaks emerged. This communication relationship is meant to be a two-way relationship.

However, at a local level this was seriously inhibited by two factors:

- Telecommunications services were either poor at the best of times, or failed;
- Content of Brigade information (to the extent that it existed) was generally ex post facto rather than being future oriented.

Our local Brigade established a network of residents to provide a distribution system for Brigade advice and to provide the Brigade with advice as to which residents were on the mountain at any time.

However as the advice to the community was retrospective it was of little value: residents were less concerned with the “PR side” – of what deeds or progress the Brigade had done the night before – and were more concerned with advice as to what was happening or intended in the near term if it affected them, and how.

For example, if a backburn was intended to take place near a residence or on private land, it is only reasonable that the resident should be advised in advance so that there was no cause for alarm when fires were lapping the resident’s property in the middle of the night. That desired advice to the community was absent.

Brigades, while essential and valuable, cannot act in a vacuum.

6.7. RFS and respect for landowners: The RFS should never start bushfires

Unfortunately, there seems to be a view within Brigades at crew leader level and above that local private land is “open slather” for the Brigade crews to do whatever they wished in a cavalier fashion regardless of the circumstances at the time.

On more than one occasion, crews started fires under the guise of either hazard reduction or backburns at a time when there was no imminent threat or necessity. However, these fires were not small, well-managed hazard reduction burns, but major blazes which then caused considerable unnecessary damage on private land (such damage not being covered by any recovery funds or insurance).

Moreover, this activity was done without any advice to or consultation with the affected landowners, and in at least one case on Mt Irvine the blaze went unsupervised or unmanaged until barely capable of control.

The RFS should never be in the business of creating bushfires: HR burns should always be kept low key and well-managed, and backburns should never be started in circumstances that do not genuinely require them or justify them.

Fire brigades are intended for risk mitigation, not a source of risk.

6.8. RFS and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)

Many of our community are RFS members and active fire-fighters. They report that some PPE provided by the RFS for use by firefighters is simply not suitable for purpose. The current generation of P2 masks, worn to filter fine particles from the air cannot be worn comfortably for an extended period and need to be removed periodically to enable one to breath properly.

Similarly, there are other shortfalls reported by our community members in helmets (don't work with head torches properly), boots (too heavy in comparison to earlier styles), and yellows (too cumbersome and restrictive) in comparison to earlier RFS PPE.

In summary, the earlier generations of PPE may be superior to the current, and certainly more conducive to better performance by the wearer.

Conclusion

We welcome this opportunity to briefly put forward some ideas the Mount Irvine community has that might lead to greater safety and less damage to people, property, wildlife and the natural environment in the future.

We look forward to working with others to make this happen.

Allen Hyde
President, Mount Irvine Progress Association

On behalf of the Community of Mount Irvine NSW