Your details

Title Mr

First name Peter

Last name Dunn

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 was present in Lake Conjola on 31 December when the disastrous bushfires struck. My wife and I defenced our house until it became unsafe to remain when we evacuated to the beach. Fortunately our house survived and we were not injured.

Approximately one week after the fires I accepted a community request to coordinate the recovery from the disaster. The Conjola area was the worst hit area within the Shoalhaven Shire.

The uploaded file contains my submission based on my experience on the day and the subsequent four months of community led recovery efforts.

The NYE 2019 fires devastated our area and demonstrated the need for drastic changes in many areas as the

extreme weather conditions driven by climate change must be addressed.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its Terms of Reference.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors As per attached Submission

1.2 Preparation and planning As per attached Submission

1.3 Response to bushfires As per attached Submission

1.4 Any other matters As per attached Submission

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

• 200414 Submission to NSW Bushfire Inquiry.docx

Submission to NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Written by: Major General Peter Dunn, AO (Retd) Position: Vice President Conjola Community Recovery Association

Natural Disasters at Conjola NYE 2019 - Introduction

On New Year's Eve 2019 the Conjola area was impacted by ferocious bushfires. The resultant losses and damage were 3 lives lost, a number of other injuries to residents, 121 houses destroyed and 10 other homes deemed uninhabitable. The surrounding bushland was completely burnt out and a very large number of native animals were incinerated (there are no native animals being treated for injuries in the Conjola area – it is presumed that they nearly all died).

Lake Conjola, which is the central natural asset in the area, was exposed to major environmental damage as a result of the possibility of a severe rain event washing ash, nutrients and eroded topsoil into the lake after the fires. Such a rain event occurred on 9/10 February 2020 and pollution of the lake resulted. The village of Lake Conjola was extensively flooded causing infrastructure damage and loss and severe discomfort to many residents and holiday makers. The lake was mechanically opened to the sea at the peak of the rain event and hopefully much of the pollution will have by now been flushed into the ocean. Only time will tell if this is the case or not.



Destruction in Conjola Park NYE 2019

Preparedness

Warnings

There was little or no warning of the fires that impacted the Conjola area on 31 December 2019. The Currowan Fire had been burning for several weeks before Conjola was impacted but the NSW RFS Fire Spread Prediction Map published on 31 December 2019 showed that the fire was not predicted to spread east across the Pacific Highway and into the Yatte Yattah/Conjola areas.

The fire spread predictions issued for New Year's Eve 2019 do not appear to take account of the major backburn that was initiated in the afternoon of 30 December in the Porters Creek Road/Bloodwood Road area of Yatte Yattah. As there were strong Westerly winds forecast for the following day it is reasonable to assume that this backburn would have generated an expectation of fire spread a considerable distance to the east of the Princes Highway.

A warning of fire and therefore ember spread east of the Princes Highway for 31 December would have generated a very much heightened level of awareness and preparedness in the nearby coastal communities of Conjola Park, Lake Conjola and Fisherman's Paradise. This would have given time for final preparation for those that had chosen to 'stay and defend' or for the safe self-evacuation of those residents who chose to leave. No warnings were received by the Conjola community from the NSW RFS Fires Near Me App. Well after the fire front passed through, a message was received (by those who still had mobile phone communications) that it was "Too late to leave – take shelter".

It must be noted, however, that there was absolutely no warning able to be given to residents who were living on the Western side of the highway of the disastrous situation that they possibly would (and, in the event, did) face after a major backburn was introduced into the landscape in which they lived.

No other form of warning was available to residents in the Conjola area other than the information that was issued by the NSW RFS via the Fires Near Me App. The community was not alerted to the rapid and unexpected appearance of a fire coming from a West North West direction. A warning could have been given if remote sensing was available with a direct communications link to local communities. It is difficult to imagine that the data on the Fires Near Me App could have been updated and issued faster than a local link. Small settlements that are likely to be at risk during a bushfire or other natural disaster should have their safety improved by the installation of remote sensors linked to a community centre that can rapidly alert people to an emerging threat. On receipt of a local warning (or if a more generalised warning has been issued) a low technology warning device such as a siren or bell could be activated to warn the local community.

A suitable central point for remote sensors to be connected to could be the local NSW RFS brigade or SES Unit if one was established. Another alternative is to consider the creation of a system of 'local emergency wardens'. Volunteers would be needed to fill such a role. Given the increasing recruitment and retention difficulties all volunteer organisations are currently experiencing an incentive could be offered such as a reduction in Council Rates or other government charges while a person is effectively filling the position.



NSW RFS Fire Spread Prediction Map for 31 December 2019

Residents were not complacent to the threat but were not in the highest state of preparedness for what was about to happen to their communities. A NSW wide 'state of emergency' had been declared but it appeared from official predictions that the Conjola area had been lucky. Residents were not given sufficient incentive or encouragement to clean up around their homes in the face of a potentially very serious threat and therefore the bushfire preparations of some were not as thorough as they should have been. An intensive and incentivised awareness campaign should be conducted by each LGA before known disaster risk seasons begin.

In the period leading up to the Conjola bushfire disaster residents had also been closely following the fires around the Victorian border. As the Victorian CFA use a different warning App it was extremely difficult to marry fire spread information across the state borders. This was important as many Conjola residents have family in the far South Coast or were planning to travel south for holidays.

Flood Warnings

There were no local warnings preceding the flooding that occurred during the early hours of 10 February 2020. The Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) had predicted localised flooding as a consequence of the formation of a severe east coast low pressure system forming. The State Emergency Service (SES) had predicted the need for sandbagging and other preparations in case of flooding from this intense system. The SES warning proved to be accurate (as, of course, was the BoM forecast). But this warning was not widely acknowledged or used.

When the flood warning was issued by the local SES unit along with advice that sandbags were available for collection, a check was made with the LGA Recovery Coordinator. The response was that the warning should be ignored and that it would be removed from the SES website. Residents of Lake Conjola were woken at around 4.30 am with directions to evacuate as major flooding was occurring. Lake Conjola had broken its banks in the town area as the lake outlet into the sea had been blocked with a build-up of sand.



Flooding in Lake Conjola 10 February 2020

Residents had been asking the Shoalhaven City Council to open the lake to the sea for a period prior to a low-pressure system forming of the East coast of Australia. The Council did not respond to these repeated requests and did not issue any warning of the flood that eventuated. The result was significant damage to personal property and infrastructure. An authoritative source of flood warnings similar to that for bushfires needs to be established. An App similar to the Fire Near Me App used by the NSW RFS is required. LGAs must be required to adhere to the advice provided through this App. The SES should manage these warnings under the direction of their State Headquarters.

Community Infrastructure

Community infrastructure can be used to make communities more defendable in the event of a major bushfire or other natural disaster. Placing facilities such as parks, sporting fields and, for example, skateboard parks on the perimeter of isolated communities can provide very effective buffers during a threatening event. A petition is currently being circulated requesting that a skateboard park be established at Lake Conjola. Such a facility, were it to be built, would make a big contribution to the safety of the Lake Conjola community if it is sited on the perimeter of the village.

Preparation for Evacuations

The disaster that followed the fires crossing the highway revealed many shortcomings in local area preparedness. For example, there were no published evacuation plans for residents. Despite attempts to find reference to LGA bushfire evacuation plans none were evident. No evacuation routes appeared to be designated and no one was appointed to exercise any degree of control over an evacuation should it be warranted.

The evacuation during the bushfire attack was shambolic and dangerous. Residents rightly ignored the designated Safer Place (the Lake Conjola Community Centre and adjacent park) and headed for the beach. The direct route took them through the centre of a full caravan/camping ground putting many holiday makers at serious risk of injury or even death. Luckily, some off duty firefighters and a retired police officer took some control and forced panicking residents to abandon their vehicles at the caravan park entrance and

walk/run to the beach. This was essential for safety but proved very difficult for residents with a disability.

Many Conjola Park residents evacuated using the lake as an easterly evacuation route. This was partially successful albeit with difficulty for many very young, wheelchair bound or older residents as the only available jetty proved difficult for them to use to board boats. Also, there is no designated assembly point for the residents of Conjola Park to gather at to obtain information, direction and comfort. Conjola Park and other isolated villages in the Lake Conjola area urgently need local assembly/evacuation points and accessible jetties. Evacuation plans must also be developed. The Emergency Warden suggested above could be required to organise and brief residents gathering at the assembly point to prepare for an evacuation. The assembly/evacuation points would need to be constructed in a manner that would them to become a key element in any subsequent relief and recovery efforts.

The boats used for evacuation were provided by residents and holiday makers using their initiative as they were not a part of any evacuation plan. Residents from Conjola Park evacuated by boat as best they could. Many subsequently found that, as the mouth of the lake had been allowed to fill with sand, they became dangerously stranded in the middle of the lake with fires raging on all sides. Again, very young children and people with disabilities were at risk when trying to reach the beach safely. The recognition of coastal waterways as evacuation routes requires them to be properly maintained by dredging and other means to ensure that navigable channels and beach access points are always available in case an evacuation becomes necessary.

The only link between the various villages surrounding Lake Conjola is a tenuous road network. Once this is cut then residents are isolated or required to use boats to move around. Before significant property development occurred around the lake edge a large number of foot and cycle tracks were used by residents to connect with each other. Shared use tracks should be reconstructed around Lake Conjola to follow the lake's edge wherever possible thereby increasing the connectedness of the whole area and providing another option for evacuation in the event of a disaster.



Evacuees on Lake Conjola Beach

Most evacuees had considered what important things they needed to take with them in the event of an evacuation being necessary. Items such as family heirlooms, portable valuables, photographs and financial documents were common selections. Generally, these items were loaded into a car ready leave if an evacuation was necessary.

Evacuees had paid less attention to having a personal backpack filled with essential items for survival for one to two days in the event that they were not able to reach a designated evacuation centre quickly. Evacuees spent many hours on the beach at Lake Conjola before they were able to return to their caravans/tents or homes (if still standing). Many of these people were very cold after a strong Southerly change moved in, hungry, thirsty and tired.

Advice to the community regarding evacuation planning needs to emphasise the need for every individual to be able to survive for 24 to 48 hours without assistance in the event of a major disaster. A list of essential survival items should be prepared and made available to communities. An 'Emergency Survival Backpack' should be developed and distributed to communities in rural and remote areas vulnerable to natural disasters.

The evacuation of holiday makers on the day after the bushfire passed through the Conjola area was equally disorganised. The road from Lake Conjola to the Princes Highway (approximately 6 km) was still unsafe due to active fire, fallen trees and downed power lines. Holidaymakers and some residents quickly packed up and joined a very long and slow moving queue. On average it took between 5-6 hours to reach the Princes Highway. Once at the Highway traffic merged with an almost stationary queue of evacuees attempting to flee north from southern areas. The Princes Highway was frequently blocked by active fire and response operations. No return was allowed back into the Conjola area. This meant that many evacuees were then redirected south again to seek refuge in the Ulladulla Evacuation Centre or, as happened in some instances, they were directed even further south to Bateman's Bay.

The overall impact of this evacuation process was to seal residents of Conjola Park and Lake Conjola in their homes for days. They were unable to travel to seek emergency supplies as they were highly likely to be prevented from returning to their homes, families, pets, etc. or blocked by road closures. This situation was extremely distressing and dangerous. Mass evacuation plans need to be developed and tested for areas vulnerable to natural disasters.



Holidaymakers Evacuating from Lake Conjola (5-6 hours to travel 6km)

Safer Places

The only local 'Safer Place' was, and still is, designated as the Lake Conjola Community Centre. This Centre is in a treed park area and the park was covered in thick layers of leaf litter. There is no close water supply readily available to protect residents using the designated Safer Place.

When the fires struck the leaf litter covering the Safer Place area caught alight threatening residents. The fires were extinguished after the Community Centre was forcibly entered and internal fire appliances removed to fight the external fire. It was later found that many elements of the Community Hall failed to meet even basic WHS standards and it was not a suitable building or area to be used as a Safer Place.

Several weeks after the disaster a NSW RFS Inspector conducted an inspection of the Community Hall. It was agreed that the area had not been properly prepared for the oncoming fire season.

Safer Places must be regularly assessed to ensure that they are appropriately maintained. Further, as it was clearly demonstrated that the Lake Conjola designated Safer Place was unsuitable for use in both flood and fire disasters, a new series of Safer Places be established and maintained in the Conjola area.

LGA Requirements When a State of Emergency is Declared

When a state of emergency is declared a 'Controller' is appointed at state or territory government level. The same should possibly occur at LGA level. The training, experience and selection of such Controllers would need to be both appropriate and thorough. A person appointed as an LGA Controller would need to be of sufficient seniority and standing to be able to direct LGA operations during an emergency. This does not mean personally directing response operations but ensuring that they occur without hinderance and, importantly, to start recovery planning even while response actions are still occurring.

Frequently, local senior police officers are appointed as the Local Emergency Management Officer within LGAs. These officers are not necessarily trained to undertake the recovery tasks that follow a natural disaster. Given the nature of the tasks an LGA Controller would be required to undertake during and after a natural disaster, it is possible that they would need to have experience in one of the emergency services or the Australian Defence Force. However, it should not be assumed that persons with such a background are automatically qualified to undertake this task. Careful definition of the duties of an LGA Controller is required should this position be created.

Utilities Disaster Preparation Planning

Water Supply



Fully opened garden tap Conjola Park approximately 10.30 am 31 December 2019

At 10.30 am on 31 December 2019 many residents of Conjola Park discovered that their mains water supply had ceased. The pressure, that was poor at best, had dropped to almost zero. When the firestorm struck these residents were unable to properly defend their properties.

Shoalhaven Water had known about the poor water pressure in many parts of Conjola Park for many years as this has been a source of regular complaints. When the fires impacted the Conjola area Shoalhaven Water was forced to move to manual operations as their automated

systems failed. Clearly, preparations for impact on the water supply system by a major fire were inadequate as the changeover to manual systems did not improve the water supply at Conjola Park.

Electricity Supply

As the firestorm moved West all electricity supplies were lost. It was some 8 days before the power supply to Conjola Park and Lake Conjola was reconnected. The loss of power isolated the area completely as there were no telecommunications or internet connectivity. This forced residents to rely entirely on ABC or commercial radio for information.

Additionally, the loss of power for this extended period meant that there was no refrigeration or sewerage system available. The loss of both of these facilities posed a potentially serious health risk to the affected communities.



Power Supply Restoration at Conjola 7 January 2020

Communities that are exposed to the loss of power supply during a major natural disaster require an independent source of power to be immediately available if there is an extended disruption to normal mains power supply. The establishment of 'micro-grids', preferably using renewable energy supplies and battery storage that, under normal operating conditions, remain idle or supplemental to mains power is required. At a minimum, generators could be pre-positioned in vulnerable communities. The ability to quickly replace power supply is one of the most critical foundations of community resilience in this electronic age.

Recommendations

- 1. Small settlements that are likely to be at risk during a bushfire or other natural disaster should have their safety improved by the installation of remote sensors linked to a community centre that can rapidly alert people to an emerging threat using sirens, bells or suchlike.
- 2. A system of 'emergency wardens' be established to activate local community warning systems.
- 3. That a standardised, national system of providing natural disaster warnings and fire spread prediction information to the public via an App be implemented.
- 4. An App be developed for flood warnings. LGAs must be required to adhere to the advice provided through this App.
- 5. Nationally, the month preceding the usual period for natural hazards to impact, LGAs be required to offer free green and household waste disposal at their waste management centres and that this be coupled with an intense advertising campaign to encourage all residents to prepare thoroughly for relevant natural hazards.
- That nationally, all LGAs be required to develop, test and be prepared to implement evacuation plans for people threatened by a natural disaster in that LGA.
- 7. Consideration be given to the creation of a position of LGA Controller with appropriate authority when a State of Emergency is declared.

- 8. Conjola Park and other isolated villages in the Lake Conjola area be urgently provided with assembly/evacuation points and accessible jetties. The assembly/evacuation points should be capable of use in subsequent relief and recovery efforts after a natural disaster.
- 9. Evacuation Plans be developed for all communities in the Conjola area.
- 10. Shared use tracks be reconstructed around Lake Conjola to follow the lake's edge wherever possible to increase the connectedness of the whole area and provide another option for evacuation in the event of a disaster.
- 11. Coastal inlets, lakes and waterways be considered as evacuation routes and prepared and maintained accordingly.
- 12. That trained personnel be designated in all communities to take charge and implement evacuation plans appropriate to the area and natural hazard.
- 13. Mass evacuation plans be developed and tested for areas vulnerable to natural disasters.
- 14. That the Safer Places program be re-energised to ensure that locations designated as Safer Places are suitable and maintained to meet their role. Additional Safer Places require designation for Conjola Park and other areas surrounding Lake Conjola.
- 15. That LGAs be required to report to a national body (through State governments) that they have completed all required preparations for relevant natural hazards at designated times.
- 16. That LGAs have on staff an Emergency Manager who is appropriately trained, particularly in preparation and recovery from a natural disaster.
- 17. That water utilities establish systems and procedures to ensure that communities threatened by bushfires are provided with adequate and continuous water supplies prior to and during a bushfire emergency.
- 18. Micro-grids, preferably using renewable energy supplies and battery storage, be provided to rural and remote communities vulnerable to natural disasters.
- 19. Advice to the community regarding evacuation planning needs to emphasise the need for every individual to be able to survive for 24 to 48 hours without assistance in the event of a major disaster.
- 20. An Emergency Survival Backpack should be developed and distributed to communities in rural and remote areas vulnerable to natural disasters.

Response

The Importance of Local Knowledge

Insufficient fire-fighting assets exist in any state to deal with the extreme fires that have been experienced in 2019. This year is not the first time that this observation has been made as it was the case in 2003 (Canberra fires), 2009 (Victorian fires) and other extreme fire events. To combat extreme bushfires it has now become common practice for rural firefighting resources to be moved around state and territory regions. Wider interstate (out of area) deployments are commonplace.

In extreme fire events out-of-area resources are used extensively. While adding much needed capacity they are resources that are unable to bring with them local knowledge.

One of the strongest capabilities of volunteer rural fire fighting brigades historically has been this local knowledge and it is essential. It is therefore desirable to keep as many local resources in their area of origin looking after local communities and properties as possible.

The intensity of bushfires has increased exponentially as more and more catastrophic fire days are recorded. As a consequence, NSW RFS assets are regularly deployed on out-of-area tasks. In order to retain local firefighters in the areas that they know best the NSW RFS needs to increase in size. As volunteer numbers are already difficult to maintain additional seasonal paid firefighters must be added to existing brigades.

Bushfire Fighting Strategies

The current approach to combatting mega-bushfires in catastrophic fire conditions is flawed and must be reviewed and then changed. The drying of the bush as a result of climate change creates a set of conditions that even small fires (such as from a lightning strike) cannot be allowed to remain. Rapid and heavy attack is required immediately to ensure that any ignition is extinguished. Aerial attack is needed and this must be followed up by the insertion of Remote Area Fire Teams (RAFT) if the ignition point is in difficult terrain. If the ignition point is easily accessible, then ground assets can be deployed.

Standard responses to bushfires include the use of backburning. In an environment that is tinder dry and experiencing very high and unpredictable winds the risk of a backburn becoming an uncontrolled bushfire is very high. Any backburn ignited in catastrophic fire conditions is an extremely hazardous operation. It requires a large number of firefighting assets to be deployed to ensure containment and even then, it poses an extreme risk to life, rural assets and livestock and residential properties.

As stated above a major backburn was initiated on the afternoon of 30 December in the Porters Creek Rd/Bloodwood Roads area of Yatte Yattah. As there were strong Westerly winds forecast for the following day the decision to use backburning in what were catastrophic fire conditions is hard to understand and the use of this tool at that time requires further investigation.

Fire should not be introduced into the landscape on catastrophic fire days. A review of the use of back burning on extreme and catastrophic fire days is required with a view to placing tighter constraints on its use to combat bushfires in these conditions.

The Impact of Climate Change

Forecasts of more extreme weather events occurring more frequently as a result of climate change have proven to be correct. This fact requires a rethink of the strategies and tactics that are used by Australian response and recovery agencies. Even if the efforts to reduce emissions from the burning of fossil fuels are increased by Australian governments extreme weather events will continue for decades to come. As the "extremes become more extreme" new strategies and tactics are required to combat the impacts of these events.

Agencies such as the NSW RFS, other rural fire services, land managers and the SES must not continue to rely on traditional methods to respond to natural hazards. The "extremes are now more extreme". LGAs need to be more aware of the increased impacts of natural disasters and ensure that their ratepayers are adequately prepared and that infrastructure is survivable.

The impact of climate change on extreme weather events must be clearly acknowledged by all levels of government. If this acknowledgement is not clear, then response agencies will be severely hampered in reshaping themselves and their techniques to meet the new natural hazard threats.

High Readiness Rapid Response

The extreme weather events that are driven by a changed climate require early intervention to stop local crises becoming major disasters. In the climate we now live in it is proving to be a dangerous practice to, for example, allow fire to remain burning in the landscape or for a severe weather event to occur, without extensive response preparation and rapid action. A high readiness rapid response force is required.

Such a response force may be required to operate anywhere in Australia at any time. So as to prevent constitutional issues delaying deployment the Commonwealth should fund and have a standing authority to deploy the force immediately a dangerous event occurs. Once deployed, the response force could be placed under the control of the relevant state or territory for a specific period of time to carry out specific tasks.

A nationally controlled and equipped high readiness rapid response force would be able to conduct initial response and to allow local volunteer resources to remain in their area of origin. This force could be made up of fulltime responders positioned within state or territory emergency response agencies. A national coordinating headquarters would be required when two or more states or territories require simultaneous deployments to be coordinated.

A high readiness rapid response force would allow the Commonwealth to respond in the very early stages of a crisis developing or even to respond pre-emptively. Early or pre-emptive response tasks might include the establishment of communications to isolated settlements, provision of relief supplies, medical assistance preparation and route clearance.

Any nationally controlled, high readiness response force must have the capability to communicate with local response agencies before commencing operations in order to gain the benefit of their local knowledge.

Defence Aid to the Civil Community (DACC)

Elements of the ADF deployed to undertake DACC tasks in the recent bushfire disaster were not always appropriately equipped or tasked. The urgent need at the community level is usually debris removal and making roads safe by removing trees. This requires people, trucks, some mechanical handling equipment (MHE) and chainsaw capability. ADF personnel equipped with armoured vehicles or untrained in the use of chainsaws are of limited use in disaster response and especially in the recovery phase. DACC elements need to be structured for the tasks that they are most likely to be required to perform.



ADF DACC Support at Lake Conjola Personnel and trucks were invaluable support

Communities in need must be able to easily request ADF assistance when it is available. In the recovery phase of the recent NSW bushfire disaster communities found it extremely difficult to request ADF assistance and even harder to have any ADF personnel sent to respond. It is fair to say that ADF DACC resources were controlled at a very high level and very few were deployed into communities for any length of time.

Even when the ADF DACC elements were tasked on 'Community Engagement' tasks they were not deployed for a fixed period that allowed communities to understand what they could do and to plan appropriate tasks. ADF elements deployed into the Conjola area, twice began assisting the community and were then suddenly redeployed leaving the area with agreed tasks uncompleted and the communities scrambling to find alternative resources to complete planned tasks. The ADF should ensure that elements deployed on DACC community engagement tasks are deployed with clear task instructions and for a specific time period.

Recommendations

- 21. Rural fire brigades need to be able to ensure that they are always able to provide local knowledge in their area.
- 22. Rural fire brigades be increased in size by the addition of seasonal, paid firefighters.
- 23. Current strategies for combatting mega-bushfires in extreme and catastrophic fire conditions be reviewed with a view to change.
- 24. The use of back burning on extreme and catastrophic fire days be reviewed with a view to placing tighter constraints on its use in those conditions.
- 25. The backburn that was initiated between Porters Creek and Bloodwood Roads in the Yatte Yattah/Conjola area on 30 December 2019 requires investigation to

establish its contribution to the massive damage that occurred on 31 December 2019 in that area.

- 26. LGAs increase their awareness of the impacts of natural disasters due to climate change and ensure that their ratepayers are adequately prepared and that infrastructure is survivable.
- 27. The impact of climate change on extreme weather events be clearly acknowledged by all levels of government to ensure that response agencies are not hampered in reshaping themselves and their techniques to meet the new natural hazard threats that are being generated.
- 28. A high readiness rapid response force be formed and equipped by the Commonwealth to allow rapid (including pre-emptive) response to natural disasters.
- 29. ADF DACC elements need to be carefully structured for the tasks that they are most likely to be required to perform.
- 30. Communities in need be able to more easily request ADF assistance when it is available.
- 31. The ADF should ensure that elements deployed on DACC community engagement tasks are deployed with clear task instructions and for a specific time period.

Recovery

Community Led Recovery and Collaboration with the LGA

Major natural disasters frequently generate community led recovery groups. These can be an excellent source of connection with communities. These groups should be supported by government agencies with recovery responsibilities. And this is a pillar of the recovery doctrine published by the Federally funded Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience (AIDR). However, it appears that community-led recovery does not feature in NSW state recovery plans and hence do not receive a mention in the subordinate LGA recovery plans. State and LGA recovery plans should be revised to ensure that they include actions to reach out and support community-led recovery groups when these emerge.

The failure of the Shoalhaven City Council Recovery Action Plan to recognise community led recovery efforts caused unnecessary friction. Local community volunteers were required to resolve numerous disputes with Council. Paramount among these was the direction received by the Conjola volunteer recovery team to "vacate the Lake Conjola Community Centre to allow it to be returned to community use". As the Centre was being used by almost the entire local community at that time, the Council direction was somewhat difficult to understand.

The Council position that the volunteer operations in the Community Centre should cease as the NSW Government Recovery Centre had opened in Ulladulla has persisted throughout the period. A compromise was eventually reached and the volunteer recovery efforts are continuing. Over 200 residents of the Conjola area are still accessing and receiving support from the volunteer recovery effort.

Further difficulties arose when the community led recovery team discovered that there were many parts of the Community Centre that, for WHS reasons, required urgent repairs. It became clear that routine maintenance of the facility had been less than what was required to ensure that the Centre could be hired and used safely by community groups. As the broad community was using the facility on a 7 day/week basis these faults were brought into sharp relief. Eventually, the maintenance issues were resolved.

Council officers who worked directly with the volunteers were responsive, supportive and professional. Unfortunately, the omission of community led recovery from the Shoalhaven City Council Action Plan led to senior management at Council restricting access to Council staff and insisting that all communications be conducted through the senior levels of Council as a control measure. This prevented any true collaboration with Council on the recovery effort in what was the most severely damaged area of the Shoalhaven Shire.

The major function of community led recovery groups is the provision of community support. When community led recovery groups emerge they become the centre of gravity for community wellbeing and the point to which external support can be directed. Support to the Conjola community came from a wide variety of sources. Volunteers assisting the community led recovery effort also arranged many activities and events to assist in improving community wellbeing and provided advocacy services. Examples of what community led recovery comprises are attached at Annex A. The types of activities that can be delivered by community led recovery teams need to be recognised in Federal, State and LGA recovery training and publications.

The community led recovery effort in the Conjola area is continuing even under COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. The methods of operation have, of necessity, changed but the intensity of activity remains high even though other agencies previously involved in the recovery process have had to cease their operations.

Registrations and Privacy of Personal Data

On Tuesday 7 January 2020 volunteers from the Conjola area commenced recovery efforts operating out of the Lake Conjola Community Centre. The Centre had opened immediately after the bushfires struck and was operating as an emergency relief centre run by local volunteers. The local community led recovery effort quickly gained momentum and structure and a registration system was implemented for individuals seeking support.

The Conjola residents who evacuated to the Ulladulla Evacuation Centre were required to 'register' on arrival. Later, when the disaster management focus moved to recovery, residents who accessed the services of the now Ulladulla Recovery Centre (established by the NSW Government), were required to register again.

As various Federal and State agencies ramped up their involvement people who needed to access their services were required to register again with those agencies. It is hard to give a precise count of the number of registrations an individual had to make to gain the support they required on average, approximately five to six separate registrations were required.

Each registration required the individual to recount their (often harrowing) story to agency representatives forcing the individuals to relive their traumas.

Privacy laws are currently the obstacle to transferring personal registration data between agencies and recovery centres thereby forcing the constant retelling of personal data and experiences. The current restrictions on information exchange have a serious impact on the mental health of already traumatised individuals. A system of transferring personal registration data between organisation and agencies is required to minimise harm to individuals and to speed approval processes for benefits after a disaster. The use of a microchipped plastic card or an 'opt in' system should be implemented urgently.

Disaster Relief Grants

The various disaster relief grants that were made available to bushfire affected residents in NSW were greatly appreciated by eligible community members. However, the application processes for the available grants were, at times, difficult to navigate. Traumatised community members frequently needed support to move through these application processes.

Advocacy became a major task for the volunteer members of the Conjola recovery effort. Many agencies, at first, did not recognise the importance of advocates assisting applicants through the grant process. This essential support mechanism needs to be formally recognised within future recovery frameworks.

Mental Health Support

All residents in the Conjola area who were present during the firestorm on New Year's Eve 2019 suffered a degree of trauma. A very large percentage of these people suffered a high level of trauma. Mental Health First Aid quickly became an essential service and was initiated by local mental health practitioners and social workers. Very quickly NSW Health deployed mental health outreach teams.

A system quickly evolved in which replacement mental health teams were given a local 'induction'. They gained an understanding of what happened when the bushfire struck, some local street names and geography. They were taken on an escorted tour of the main fire impact areas (local escorts were necessary as those residents who remained living amongst the rubble were extremely sensitive to any outsiders visiting). This meant that the new team quickly became effective and trusted members of the recovery team and the wider community.

The NSW Mental Health Teams were very successful in managing the high level of community trauma in the Conjola area. They are to be commended for their work.

Clearance of Destroyed Homes and Asbestos

Very soon after the magnitude of the bushfire disaster facing many states in Australia became apparent the Federal Government partnered with the other affected jurisdictions to fund the clearance of razed homes. This assistance has been welcomed.

Given the scale of the disaster in NSW (approximately 2 million tonnes of waste to be removed – a large percentage of which was contaminated with asbestos) it is understandable that a huge amount of planning and sub-contracting was required before the actual clean-up began. As this was the first time that governments had funded such a clean-up operation the delays in commencement are understandable. However, it was extremely frustrating to those whose homes had been razed and also to those whose homes had survived and who were now living amongst the ruins.

The presence of asbestos in much of the debris became an ongoing concern for residents living nearby to these sites. It was extremely difficult to find any organisation willing to take full responsibility for building and maintaining community confidence that it was safe for residents of undamaged homes to remain living near heavily damaged areas. The EPA, NSW Public Works and Council were all asked repeatedly to verify that there was no ongoing risk from exposed asbestos to residents in the Conjola Park precinct. Questions still remain on this issue. Where public health concerns are raised as a result of damage caused by a disaster such as a bushfire, measures must be put in place to gain and maintain community confidence that it is safe to remain in the area. This is especially so where a potential danger to public health from exposed asbestos is known to exist.

The site clearance process has suffered from lack of clear definition as to exactly what damaged material the contractors are required to remove. In several instances on-site discussions between the owners and the clearance contractors have seen agreement reached and Deeds of Agreement signed which have later been contested. Clear guidelines on what damaged material will be removed from sites by Government engaged contractors must be published before clearance of debris commences.

Post Disaster Communications

As a result of the impact of the bushfires all mobile and landline telephone communications and internet connections were lost. Consequently, Conjola area residents were unable to receive any warnings or advice from 'Fires Near Me' or 'Traffic Live'. As these were the authoritative sources of critical information that was needed after the fire front moved through residents were left to rely solely on radio broadcasts. Residents were also unable to contact family and friends to check on their status and advise them of their own welfare.

While residents were able to listen to radio broadcasts in their motor vehicle they were very reluctant to do so as this depleted batteries or, if they ran their vehicle engines, depleted precious fuel that could not be replaced (as roads out were closed and no payments could be made even if fuel pumps were operating). Siphoned fuel became essential for refuelling generators so running vehicle engines for lengthy periods to power car radios was not

viable. Battery powered radios became a critical item during this period of approximately 8 days. Not all residents had access to these low technology devices.

ABC (Illawarra) quickly moved into emergency broadcast mode. They are to be commended for the excellent way they fulfilled their role as the emergency broadcaster. Commercial radio stations also made extensive efforts to broadcast emergency information.

Well before the major telecommunications retailers were able to restore communications the NBN Co deployed their mobile 'Muster Truck' to the Lake Conjola Community Centre to provide the local recovery team and the community with internet access via their SkyMuster satellite service. Their service and commitment to assisting the community in the Conjola area was outstanding. NBN Co moved quickly to install a satellite connection to the Community Centre and to provide Wi-Fi access to the service for the recovery team and the wider community. A VOIP phone link was also available. This installation was quickly added to with the provision of an emergency power supply (ESP). NBN Co are to be commended for their outstanding service to the people of the Conjola area by providing such effective emergency communications so quickly.



NBN Co. Muster Truck

Once the satellite installation was completed (roof top dish, cabling and two routers) the Muster Truck moved throughout the Conjola area providing residents with the opportunity to connect via the internet over the mobile satellite connection. This was greatly appreciated.

The only other satellite connected internet and telephone service that was seen in the Conjola area over the initial recovery period was the mobile satellite terminal that Centrelink brought with them when they deployed into Lake Conjola to provide residents of the area with the ability to register and claim immediate disaster relief benefits. Service NSW does not have a similar capability.

The communications installation provided by the NBN Co in the Lake Conjola Community Centre should be recognised as the benchmark of the type of facility needed by communities vulnerable to major disruptions to normal communications. NBN Co should be tasked to provide an emergency communications plan for all at risk communities and then directed to implement that plan urgently. Normal mobile phone connectivity took far too long to be restored. Mobile phone towers were severely damaged during the bushfires indicating that they had not been 'hardened' sufficiently during construction. Mobile phone towers in high risk areas should be hardened to withstand the impact of bushfires and other natural disasters.

Once internet connectivity was achieved it was possible for one of the volunteers working with the local recovery team to open a Facebook page titled 'Conjola Recovery'. This action proved to be one of the most beneficial steps taken early in the recovery effort in the Conjola area. Social media quickly became the most effective means of communication around most affected residents. Another group started a WhatsApp group to keep them in contact in the early stages of the recovery process. A printed newsletter was still required as some residents did not have internet connections. Social media skills should be recognised as an essential ingredient of community led recovery efforts.

Management of Donations

The Australian public has been remarkably generous in their support to bushfire affected communities over the 2019/2020 bushfire disaster period. The flood of donations of material goods helped many families survive for a considerable period of time. Management of so many donated goods did, however, create some problems in sorting, storage and distribution. Milton Showground was established by Shoalhaven City Council as a centralised donation delivery and distribution location. This was a very successful and well managed operation and excellent support was provided to the Conjola community. Notwithstanding the opening of the Showground as a donation management centre, a near constant stream of donors still arrived at the Lake Conjola Community Centre.



Donation Sorting and Distribution at the Lake Conjola Community Centre

At the Community Centre efforts were made to guide donors as to what items were most needed. Frequently, donors would contact the volunteers working at the Centre (usually by Facebook) to arrange delivery and describe what they were intending to donate. Donors routinely asked: "Is there anything else that is needed?" A response could then be sent directing donors to what items were needed and donors always responded by saying that they would change focus and endeavour to meet the request. Donations then became more targeted and very welcome.

Donations were being given to people who had lost all or most of their possessions. It was important to ensure that they were given good quality items to lift their morale rather than items 'from the bottom of the cupboard'. Donors were routinely advised to give a few new items rather than a quantity of old items. One new outfit of clothes was far more valuable than three bags of old clothing. This message needs to become standard for those wishing to assist communities affected by future disasters.

Wildlife Care

The bushfires that struck the Conjola area were extremely hot and travelled very quickly. The fires totally destroyed the surrounding bush thereby removing all feed for native wildlife. The fires also cremated the vast majority of the animals and reptiles in the bush. The wildlife that survived needed urgent help to remain alive.



Wildlife had no chance to escape this extremely hot bushfire. All feed was destroyed.

A group of residents involved in the recovery effort banded together to organise water stations and food drops for the remaining wildlife. They formed the Conjola Critter Care group. Looking after precious wildlife became a point of positive focus for the broader community. This assisted many bushfire affected families in moving forward as they were doing something that was essential and that they could see results for their efforts.

At times there was debate with other outside groups over what was the best way to look after the remnant wildlife in the area. The Conjola Critter Care group sought advice and have continued to be very successful. During and after a natural disaster a single organisation should be designated as the source of authoritative advice to groups such as Conjola Critter Care so that they can continue their work without the distraction of less informed interest groups pressing their cases. The designated organisation should also be capable of directing donations for wildlife care to appropriate community groups. This organisation should also be capable of organising the deployment of people trained to conduct euthanasia of very seriously injured wildlife.



Wildlife feed and water station at Conjola

Community Resilience Officers

Many of the points raised in this submission require a full time focus by a dedicated person skilled in ensuring that communities are connected and resilient. Connectedness is a key component of preparation, response and recovery. Currently, most communities rely on volunteers to undertake some of these roles. Some roles are simply ignored. The extreme weather conditions that are now recognised as a part of life in Australia mean that natural disasters are expected to occur more frequently and at a greater intensity than in previous periods. Relying on volunteers to fill these now critical roles is not a successful strategy.

As a part of the development of the recently announced new NSW Resilience organisation Community Resilience Officers should be deployed into NSW communities that are deemed large enough to have Community Consultative Bodies (CCBs). Similar criteria can be applied in the other states and territories. Community Resilience Officers would have a direct role in community emergency management matters as well as a community development role.

A Community Resilience Officer would best be employed by the state or territory governments as this would allow proper training and career progression to occur. If they were employed by LGAs they would not have the ability to grow professionally and contribute over a career instead of a one-off job.

Recommendations

32. State and LGA recovery plans must include actions to reach out and support community-led recovery groups when these emerge to ensure effective collaboration between affected communities and their LGA.

- 33. LGAs should facilitate the use of community facilities by community led recovery groups.
- 34. The types of activities that can be delivered by community led recovery teams need to be recognised in Federal, State and LGA recovery training and publications.
- 35. A system of transferring personal registration data between organisation and agencies is required to minimise harm to individuals and to speed approval processes for benefits after a disaster. The use of a microchipped plastic card or an 'opt in' personal data exchange system should be implemented urgently.
- 36. Volunteer advocacy needs to be formally recognised by all agencies managing disaster relief grants as an important element of the application process.
- 37. NSW Health Mental Health Teams were very successful in managing the high level of community trauma in the Conjola area. They are to be commended for their work.
- 38. Where public health concerns are raised as a result of damage caused by a disaster such as a bushfire, measures must be put in place to gain and maintain community confidence that it is safe to remain in the area. This is essential when a potential danger from exposed asbestos is known to exist.
- 39. Clear guidelines on what damaged material will be removed from sites by Government engaged contractors must be published before clearance of debris commences.
- 40. The need for low technology battery powered radios with spare batteries to be available to receive emergency information in a disaster situation be emphasised as a part of all future preparedness campaigns.
- 41. ABC (Illawarra) be commended for the excellent way they fulfilled their role as the emergency broadcaster during the 2019/2020 bushfire crisis.
- 42. NBN Co are be commended for their outstanding service to the people of the Conjola area by providing such effective emergency communications.
- 43. NBN Co be tasked to provide an emergency communications plan for all 'at risk' communities and then directed to implement that plan urgently.
- 44. Mobile phone towers in high risk areas should be hardened to withstand the impact of bushfires and other natural disasters.
- 45. Social media skills be recognised as an essential ingredient of community led recovery efforts.
- 46. People wishing to donate to communities affected by natural disasters be advised that small amounts of new or near new items benefit recipients far more than large quantities of well used items as this will lift morale as well as meet material needs.
- 47. A single organisation should be designated as the source of authoritative advice to community wildlife care groups, to direct wildlife care donations and to provide contacts for the conduct of euthanasia of severely injured wildlife.
- 48. Community Resilience Officers should be deployed into communities that are deemed large enough to have Community Consultative Bodies or similar groups. They should be employed by state or territory governments, not LGAs.