

Your details

Mr

Title

First name

Peter

Last name

Farleigh

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

On the night of the 4th of January our 120ha property at [REDACTED], was hit by an ember attack that originated with a firestorm raging near Nowra and blowing across Morton National Park and across the Shoalhaven gorge which borders our property.
This is the same ember attack that hit the villages of Wingello and Bundanoon that night.
No one was there at this time as all residents at the eastern end of Caoura Road had evacuated several days before.
Our house and sheds were entirely obliterated. The grass fires spread across all the fields.

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

Ignitions:
Initially, the fire in Morton National Park was caused, I am led to believe, by a dry lightning attack.
The buildings on our property, though separated from the forest by large fields, caught alight due to flying embers.
Conditions:
A prolonged dry period of many years creating a build-up of dry load in the forests.
Soils that have hardened over the years, meaning that when it did rain it didn't soak into the ground enough and instead runs off.
A planned hazard reduction that had yet to be carried out.

1.2 Preparation and planning

We did all of the required things in order to secure the house and sheds. The Tallong RFS chief later told me that he had checked our property just before the fires hit and said we had a good job in keeping the areas around the buildings clear, but that nothing really could have stopped this ember attack. I agreed.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Conditions are as important as ignitions. We need to start looking at how we change our practices so that we can have less run-off of rains and more absorption in our soils. Unfortunately having long ago caused the extinction of many species of smaller marsupials that burrowed in the forest floors, keeping the soils soft and water-absorbent, I am aware it is hard to see how we can return to having wetter forests, or wetter loads. We need to change the public perception that while rains have always come and go, we need to direct our attention as to how soils have become increasingly drier and harder, so the water increasingly runs away.
We need to have much more serious look at indigenous burning practices, as they are 'cooler' and don't dry the land out as much. I believe that smaller, cooler, mosaic burns, made more often, would be more acceptable to people who live on the edge of the forests and who (rightfully) worry that planned hazard reductions can get out-of-hand, becoming a threat to the very properties that they were meant to protect. (See 14. below)

1.4 Any other matters

The issue of why the hazard reduction by the NSWPWS was not done near our property even though it was planned in 2017, I believe is for two crucial reasons---and two reasons why I do not blame the NSWPWS for this as it is beyond their control.
The first is that the window of opportunity to carry out a hazard reduction effort as large as this one was, is becoming more and more narrow due to the fact that the climate is becoming hotter and drier. Summers are becoming longer, winters shorter.
The second reason and probably the major reason, in this case, is due to people selling their properties. This is the main point I want to make to the commission. Two of our neighbours were selling their properties and I believe both had court orders that stopped any hazard reduction operations until after their properties were sold. One property, in fact, was being sold on behalf of the owner by the tax department! Rural properties take a long time to sell and in these two cases, both properties were finally sold just before this fire season, after being on the market for quite some time.
I imagine this is a more common issue for stopping hazard reductions than is widely known. I do not work for the NSWPWS or have any connection with them, but I think they do a good job. The hazard reductions programs are very complex and very expensive so I hope the Service is adequately staffed and funded. If not, they need to be.

Supporting documents or images
