

# Bushfire Enquiry 2019 – 2020 Season

## Submission

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

The Bushfire Inquiry will undoubtedly receive many submissions due to the number of people directly or indirectly affected by bushfire, both during the recent traumatic summer and during earlier fire seasons. Many of these submissions will be from experts in fields related to bushfire. As a long term resident living against bush in a highly bushfire prone area (Blue Mountains) I have my own experiences and opinions, but I would not consider myself expert enough to make a substantive submission across the gamut of aspects of bushfire in my region and town.

Consequently I will confine comments to a single aspect, one that seems to be the focus of little if any community commentary over recent months. This aspect is the interface zone.

In one regard this is a simple issue. Whether an urban area consists of 10 residences or 10,000 residences, each community has an interface zone. This zone suffers the most intense effects of bushfire and, at the same time, offers a level of protection to the rest of the settlement.

But what is not a simple issue is how to handle the interface zone. Clearly the zone cannot be removed, for example by deciding against rebuilding or by demolition or surviving dwellings. That would just expose the next layer of residences, converting them into the interface zone. Whatever residences comprise the interface zone, this layer of residences must be properly handled, both in regard to existing buildings and to ones yet to be built. This is what the inquiry must deal with.

I see two aspects of the problem, namely (i) the nature of the building and (ii) bushland beyond the property boundary.

### **Buildings**

For future construction the solution is probably the simplest aspect to resolve, albeit at a cost. Homes would only be approved for construction if they were of a 'fireproof' standard, and this would be a trade-off between level of risk and cost. As we have seen at the recent fire expos, there has been a great focus on building materials and design that present viable solutions and satisfy BAL requirements. I would also like to see fireproof bunkers being considered as a key feature of the most exposed homes. It is certainly worthy of being compulsory for isolated properties beyond the interface zone.

What will be more problematic is to retrofit existing homes, some built up to a century ago. Do we just wait for them to burn down and ensure that the replacement residences meet the standards

alluded to in the preceding paragraph, or is a requirement placed on owners to upgrade their home to a fireproof standard? Factors here include refurbishment cost, probably beyond the means of most homeowners, and increasing difficulty in obtaining insurance cover for at-risk properties. For some properties this could mean virtual demolition and rebuild.

One aspect that I have not heard discussed at all is to equip every home with a roof watering system with independent water supply and power supply. The water and power issues reflect that, as the fire approaches, water pressure typically drops because of high local demand and mains electricity could be interrupted. While such watering systems are proven assets for a potentially fire-threatened home, the key issue is whether such systems are compulsory or optional, both in regard to retro-fitting existing homes and for new builds.

### **Bushland**

The other aspect of the interface zone is the bush itself. This will be most severe on the northwest interface, less so on the southeast where the winds tend to be more moist, weaker, less persistent and cooler.

I am sure that most threatened homeowners would opt for clearance of the nearby bushland. Issues to be dealt with include environmental considerations, responsibility for the initial clearing, responsibility for the maintenance, width of the clearing and who would bear the cost. I have noted many people already clear a zone beyond their property boundary, presumably without council permission. It would be a more complicated matter if the land was national park rather than undeveloped council land.

### **Summary**

Whatever range of decisions come from the inquiry, there is likely to be little substantive progress unless this interface zone is examined and addressed. If it is handled well, this might well remove heat from other discussions like the vexed hazard reduction burning.