
Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Margaret

Last name

Rasmussen

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Other

Submission type

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Yulunga Reserve Committee Manyana

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

Secretary

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

The local area consists of 5 villages- Nth Bendalong, Bendalong, Manyana, Cunjurong Point and Berringer Lake with a substantial number of small acreage rural homes within 13kms radius. There is a total permanent population of approximately 600 with tourist season rising to up to 3 000. The villages are surrounded by Lake Conjola to the south and Conjola National Park to the west. There is a single access road to the villages (Bendalong RD) and when the fire first hit the area on 31st December 2019, this road was closed and, also, the Princes Highway both to the north and

south. This continued intermittently for about a week. As it was holiday season, the population of the area had swelled from approximately 600 to over 3000. The fire hit with no warning, jumping across Lake Conjola to initially impact on Berringer Lake then spreading to surround all villages within a couple of days. The Yulunga Hall in Manyana is the designated "Place of Last Resort" refuge for the area and the only piece of social infrastructure that has the capacity and potential to be an evacuation/emergency response centre for people displaced by an emergency. The hall is run by a volunteer committee of local residents under the direction of Shoalhaven City Council. Residents from Rustic Caravan Park, forced to flee the fire, arrived at Yulunga Hall on the 31st December and the management committee was directed by Manyana RFB to open the hall as a "Last Resort". Residents from Berringer Lake and Cunjurong Point followed as their villages were impacted. Residents from Bendalong were unable to get to the hall as the connecting road was blocked with fire and fallen trees and power poles. As the nearest Evacuation Centre was in Ulladulla, 30kms away, Yulunga Hall became an unofficial "Emergency Response Centre" because both Bendalong Rd and the Princes Hwy were blocked.

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

- The changing climate and the drought are significant factors contributing to this disaster. Over previous years, annual rainfall was below average with the rainfall in 2019 of 635ml being about half the average. Also, strong winds associated with the end of winter were arriving earlier- last year in May and continuing throughout spring and into summer. There was no subsoil moisture and fuel levels were high in the bush as trees were raining leaves whenever the wind blew. Vegetation was dying. Temperatures were rising- hotter days more often in summer. These conditions were being experienced throughout the state. Bushfires were an inevitable consequence of these conditions.
- Due to the extremely dry and windy conditions, RFS had been unable to complete all the planned hazard reductions. It should be noted that, in places where hazard reductions had been done in the last couple of years, the bushfires pushed by horrific winds still burnt through the area and in cases homes were lost.
- The NSW Government has been underfunding National Parks services for many years. Positions have been lost in fire management and maintenance. Senior fire management positions have been eliminated resulting in a huge loss of expertise and knowledge. These are the people who knew the local area and the way fire acts within the area. There is not enough staff and funding to maintain trails and conduct hazard reductions near residential areas.

1.2 Preparation and planning

The Manyana RFB crew is located in Cunjurong Point. Two trucks operate out of the station. While there is an adequate number of members, many of them do not live permanently in the area. The members meet and train regularly and are led by experienced firefighters. Community education has been a focus over many years trying to prepare residents for fire events.

Hazard reduction operations have been completed regularly around the villages, although, in recent years, some planned hazard reductions have had to be cancelled due to dry, windy conditions.

After inspection of the villages and preparation of a Community Bushfire Protection Plan by Kelwyn White RFS, the Yulunga Hall was designated as a "Place of Last Resort" in times of catastrophic bushfire. The RFS provided recommended that Shoalhaven City Council replace the hall's roof and guttering and provide a water tank.

In recent years, the Yulunga Hall Committee has updated plumbing and emergency exit doors and purchased suitable tables and chairs for use in the hall. Flooring was replaced by Shoalhaven City Council.

As it became apparent that the 2019 Currowan bushfire was likely to impact the area, protocols for opening the hall as a last resort were clarified between Council, RFS and the hall committee. At no time was it considered that the hall would need to be used as a defacto evacuation centre.

1.3 Response to bushfires

*Yulunga Hall was originally opened at the request of the RFS on the 31 December 2019 to cater for a group of displaced residents from the Rustic Caravan Park in the vicinity of the northern end of Lake Berringer. In the following days, residents and visitors to the area from the other villages also accessed the emergency centre. The coordination team that formed at the hall was a volunteer group originally organized by Fire and Rescue NSW Instructors Adam Richards and Andrew McNab. It was fortunate that many of the volunteers had emergency management and planning training/skills.

The hall became a

- a. Coordination Centre for community related activities
- b. Medical Treatment and Triage Centre
- c. Donated supplies distribution Centre
- d. Community information point / Community briefing location
- e. Community Kitchen.

Initially all supplies- medical, food, generators for power and lighting, eskies and fuel, were provided by local residents. There are no shops in the area so supplies ran low quickly. Local residents arranged for supplies to be transported by boat to Bendalong which has the quietest beach (no wharfs in the area). People formed a line into the water and passed the supplies along to the beach.

Local and visiting doctors, nurses and paramedics set up a triage and treatment centre. Medical evacuations were conducted by helicopter with the local soccer field becoming a helicopter landing pad.

Local volunteers worked with the Police to co-ordinate the evacuation operation trying to evacuate holiday visitors and the elderly and infirm over several days.

Many problems were experienced while using the hall as an emergency centre. These included

- a) Lack of communication was our greatest problem before, during and after the fires. From 31st December 2019 the community had no means of communication- landlines, mobile or NBN. It was not possible to communicate with the Shoalhaven Emergency Centre to relay needs or initially with Emergency Services. Over the next couple of days, there was an intermittent mobile service available. The separate villages had no means of communicating with each other to discover who needed help and no way for people to contact family and friends. The only system still operating was RFS radio and this was used to save the lives of residents who had been badly burnt trying to defend their home.
- b) Power was also lost on 31st December. As this power loss continued for the next 9 days, problems arose within the setup of the emergency centre at the hall. There was no refrigeration for

medical supplies, no lighting causing safety concerns and no opportunity to re-power critical equipment such as mobile phones, medical and communication units

c) Within the hall, the doctors required a secure and private workspace for the storage of medicines and drugs and to discuss and address medical issues raised by residents and visitors. Basic medical supplies such as gloves, bandages and sterilisation were donated by residents.

d) The poor acoustics in the hall caused a lot of issues and frustrations for the Emergency Response Team because they had difficulty conveying critical information between their team members due to the volume of noise from hundreds of stressed people gathered inside seeking assistance. There was no secure and private room/area where the Emergency Response Team could meet to discuss issues, evaluate the information supplied by RFS and Emergency Services and then plan strategies for their team and the community for the following day.

The event clearly demonstrated a community that was prepared to support each other and visitors over an extended time of crisis with little assistance from outside agencies at least for the first few days.

*The Manyana Rural Fire Brigade had only 10 trained, dependable members available operating out of 2 vehicles on the day. Several other members lived in rural areas and were unable to access the RFS station as the single access road was closed due to the fire. This included 2 of the deputy captains. The brigade worked constantly to defend the villages during the next week with crews from other areas assisting from the 3rd January. RFS aerial support was given from 2nd January and was an invaluable aid in saving the local villages and homes.

*After the fire, the Bushfire Recovery Centre was based in Ulladulla. It was very convenient to have access to a range of services and be alerted about the availability of grants. A Bushfire Recovery Team held a meeting at Yulunga Hall Manyana which was well attended.

1.4 Any other matters

The management of the community, tourists and residents, evacuation and recovery throughout the 2019 and 2020 Red Head Villages fires worked remarkably well, given the organization was operated by a group of volunteers who had little knowledge of each other or the existing committees in the Red Head Village community. It was fortunate that many of the volunteers had emergency management and planning training/skills. The guidance provided to the community by a cobbled together group of individuals operating the Emergency Response Centre at the hall, helped avert such a situation. These circumstances may not exist the next time there is an emergency and measures need to be put in place to ensure future tragedy is averted.

The team who co-ordinated the emergency response in Yulunga Hall have continued to meet to work towards improving the facilities within and around the hall in consultation with Shoalhaven City Council.

Isolated communities need to be able to function independently in times of crisis. In order for Yulunga Hall to effectively operate as an emergency centre, it needs to be better equipped including

- Installation of NBN Satellite communication system,
 - Installation of Solar Power Generation and battery storage,
 - Provision of large generator,
 - Acoustic panelling installed inside hall,
 - Extension to the hall to provide meeting, storage and consultation rooms with disability access,
 - Installation of a defibrillator,
 - Provision of two way radios for each village for communication during emergency situations,
 - Signage identifying the Helicopter Landing Pad,
 - Provision of an emergency management kit held at the Yulunga Hall.
-

With more frequent climate linked disasters forecast for our future, the establishment of independent emergency centres in isolated communities such as ours, has become a matter of urgency. Our community did very well, considering the constraints surrounding us.

WE WERE LUCKY to have

- the local Manyana RFB, visiting RFS crews and RFS aerial support working bravely and tirelessly to save our villages,
- paramedics, doctors and nurses visiting the area at the time, whose help was invaluable,
- people who had led disaster recovery in other parts of the world who could step up and take control,
- local residents who were generous with their time, energy and initiative.

But we know there will be a next time- bushfire, storm, east coast low, flood- and we want to be prepared but, as a small community, we need financial help to achieve this.

Supporting documents or images
