

Your details

Title

Mr

First name

Peter

Last name

Verhoeven

Submission details

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

During the 2019/2020 bushfire season I was deployed to a number of fires as a member of the RFS in particular numerous rotations within the Blue Mountains IMT as a Planning Officer. I was also deployed as part of the Building Impact Assessment team to Casino.

I have been a Volunteer since 1979, and held rank through to Deputy Group Captain.

I was part of the Sydney Catchment Authority Seasonal Fire Team program from 2000 to 2006.

I have worked for the NPWS from 2002 to 2012

I have been working for the RFS since 2012.

I hope my background gives me a broader understanding of how all the organisations work.

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

1. While there were constant references to Climate change and Unprecedented fire behaviour, I feel the most significant contributing factor to the intensity and inability to control and extinguish many of the fires was that the State was in its first significant DROUGHT for almost 20 years since the Millennium drought. Many of our Fire Managers and Fire fighters from all agencies had not fought fires in these extreme conditions before and did not adjust their firefighting strategies and operations to meet the conditions.
2. All agencies have relied far too heavily on Air operations over many years now. While they are a key resource when used properly and have been very effective in milder conditions, the warnings about their limitations were evident already in the 2018/19 Bushfire season where fires in many Districts were almost impossible to control and contain as drought conditions started to worsen.

1.2 Preparation and planning

1. Poor Urban planning and development over the last 20yrs has seen extensive residential development introduced in known historical fire paths, particularly along the Dividing Range and NSW Coastal regions. Places where fires devastated bushland during the 2001- 2003 fires and the 1994 fires this summer burnt through the same areas that were now no longer bushland but large residential areas with little protection and as a result whole communities were devastated.
2. Poor Hazard Reduction (HR's) planning in particular the focus on quantity ahead of quality has left many communities exposed to the threat of fire. The inquiry into the 2009 Victorian fires found that the critical preparation and planning needed to occur between 80 and 400 metres of the Urban interface. Despite this finding, in NSW we have since then seen our Hazard reduction focus through the National Parks in particular aimed at Broad Acreage burning in the middle of the Park kilometres from the urban interface. While these types of HR's are easy to conduct and enable us to produce statistics to say we are burning large hectares of land across the state to protect the community, the last two summers in particular have shown that many of these HR's have proved ineffective in the face of a running fire. The few that had any effect were HR's like the Mt Solitary one in the Blue Mountains which at the time of the HR became an out of control fire itself which took roughly 10 days to bring under control and was both very costly and arguably environmentally damaging. I believe this has been money poorly spent over many years and the focus needs to be directed back to Asset Protection Zones surrounding the urban interface to create a defensible space and not in the middle of the National Parks.
3. The removal of the word fire from the Local Gov't act and the role of Councils to enforce land owners within the urban interface to manage their land needs to be re-instated. The RFS act only allows the service to manage clearing for bushfire protection at the urban / bushland interface. It was the Local Gov't act that ensured all land owners public and private reduced their bushfire risk prior to the softening of the act. Councils no longer having the capacity or willingness to enforce clearing of land for fire protection has seen large parcels of land within the urban interface and City limits become overgrown over the last 10 yrs. This has enabled bushfires to travel right through the heart of residential communities with devastating effect over the summer. The Blue Mountains in particular has seen significant vegetation build up in parks and reserves as well as overgrown private land which will have potentially catastrophic consequences if fire impacts the Blue Mountains City area as it did in Winmalee during 2013. This has occurred as a result of ceasing with its once diligent issuing of fuel reduction clearing notices between 2005 – 2010.

1.3 Response to bushfires

1. The response to Remote Area fires over recent years has become less effective in recent times, and many of these fires were allowed to take hold and have devastating effects across whole communities and cost hundreds of millions of dollars like the Gospers Mountain fire did this year. The issue with remote firefighting is that it needs to have a concentrated attack at the start or we are wasting our time, particularly once we pass October and in dry summers like the last couple. For remote firefighting to be truly effective the initial attack must be 24hr attack. The current practise of only having crews on the fire ground during the day, (and often not getting on to the fire ground until 10 or 11 o'clock when at the least they should be there at 6 am), has shown itself to be ineffectual on many occasions over recent summers as many of these fires have continued to grow like Gospers Mountain. If crews had remained on the fire ground overnight these fire a very likely to have been contained to a couple of hectares and extinguished in 72hrs. The problem with leaving the fire ground overnight and not returning until late the next morning is that any gains made on the first day have simply re-ignited by the time you get back and you are starting again each day until you get a bad fire weather day and the fire is lost. The flow on effect is that what could have

been a minimal resourced fire extinguished over 3 to 4 days and nights becomes a major operation over possibly months with catastrophic losses and cost. The 8am to 5pm management of these fires particularly under the control of the NPWS needs urgent review, as this summer has shown. Up until the early 2000's it was common practice to conduct remote area fire operations overnight.

2. The strategy of using " soft containment " lines such as creeks, rocky escarpments, cliffs and HR areas up to 3 or 4 years old and areas of low vegetation also proved to be a poor one. While they have had success in milder conditions, historically these strategies have consistently failed during drought periods and very high fire danger weather, particularly without intense resources both air and manpower to support them. As we saw over the last summer many soft containment options that were considered out re-ignited sometimes days and weeks later. The drought conditions required greater urgency for hard containment with emphasis on dozer and grader lines to strengthen containment and even pulling back to major roads and breaks and conducting strategic back burns earlier in favourable conditions, rather than waiting and attempting those burns under less favourable conditions and in many cases losing the burn.

3. Prioritising of resources became a major issue as the summer wore on and the inability to control and extinguish fires saw resources stretched and as a result in- effective response to new outbreaks which should have been controlled, themselves turn into large uncontrolled fires putting more strain on the already stretched system. I feel that as the summer continued priority should have shifted to extinguishing all new fires and resources prioritised to these, rather than the minimal approach that saw many fires unnecessarily become major fires themselves. The over reliance on aircraft, that was becoming increasingly stretched, for close containment rather than fall back to hard containment early on or construct dozer lines for containment also resulted in many fires being lost in these drought conditions.

4. The reliance and use of the Lat's needs further review, particularly the use of retardant drops as a containment strategy in heavy woodland / forest vegetation. While the retardant drops may be effective in open grassland and sparse timbered areas, its effectiveness is very limited in areas with heavy canopy as the retardant does not penetrate the canopy. The push to use retardant drops meant pulling ground crews off fire lines for up to hours at a time to drop the retardant. While the red lines on aerial photos give the Impression of containment lines, in many cases the fire burnt under the retardant and was lost. The use of Gel in the area's was much more effective and should be pushed as a preference in the future.

5. It is my understanding that the contract of the Sky Crane was deferred for the month of October in preference for the large fixed wing as a cost saving measure. If this is true, I feel it was a poorly conceived idea considering how the summer was progressing by then and a lack of appreciation of the conditions. The Cranes are one of the few heavy rotary aircraft that can fly in high winds, and amongst the more effective aircrafts in conducting knock down of running fire and property protection, both isolated and at the urban interface. There were many areas that suffered significant property losses during October, so I would hope that such a valuable resource as the Sky Crane was not sitting on the ground at Bankstown like I was led to believe.

6. There was a reluctance to use heavy plant to construct hard containment lines around small fires when they began, particularly in the National Park, but rather rely on air attack. Many of these fires escaped and went on to cause wholesale devastation. I feel we need to look at the use of plant as an early response resource to enable hard line close containment were ever practical. The argument is constantly brought up that it causes unnecessary damage to the bush, but keeping a fire under 50 hectares with dozer lines is much less damage than what was caused by fires such as Gaspers Mountain did last summer.

7. I was part of the Blue Mountains IMT over the summer, and we were heavily impacted by the Gaspers Mountain fire and Green Wattle fire entering the Blue Mountains. In both cases we offered advice and assistance but were unable to take control of aspects of those fires that were going to directly affect us. The two neighbouring IMT's had many issues to deal with, and I feel a review of the policy / procedure is necessary to allow the neighbouring IMT to possibly take control of a section of their fire that is of less a priority to them, a significant priority to us, and we were certainly better positioned to deal with the issues. I am aware that this happened in many parts of the state and we should look at IMT's sharing some responsibilities were practical.

1.4 Any other matters

8. I would just like to say that I am happy to discuss and add background to any or all of the issues I have raised above, so feel free to contact me.

9. While I don't want to cast judgement on the actions that people have taken over the summer and I am sure

everyone has endeavoured to act with the best of intentions, I do feel that the Gospers Mountain fire does warrant serious review. This fire started in similar circumstances and same location to the disastrous Girribung Creek fire of 2013. It appears that exactly the same mistakes have been made in the early stages of this fire as the one in 2013 and the 695 fire which is concerning if we are not learning from our mistakes.

Supporting documents or images
