



Title	Mr
First name	Stuart
Last name	Bell
I am making this submission as	Primary producer
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	<p>I live in the Wylie Creek/Cullendore area. Since January 2014 we have experienced over 30 suspicious fires in our district. Many of these fires have been reported in the media due to their size. The area affected is about 12 kilometres in diameter. A number of these fires have been investigated and determined to be arson. These fires have been lit on various private properties and the Maryland National Park. Some have required the perpetrator to walk kilometres into heavily forested areas to ignite the fires. It was felt by locals and investigators that local knowledge was needed to access these areas. All fires were ignited during dangerous weather conditions, designed to create the greatest damage. A number of these fires damaged large sections of the</p>

district, with huge commitments made by RFS ground crews, RFS funded helicopters and local property owners. These fires would never have been contained without the professional and co-ordinated efforts of our local RFS brigades. We owe them much.

Some, but not all victims of these attacks, have been interviewed by RFS investigators and police (forensic investigators, local officers and Rural Crimes Officers). Victim Statements, as well as conversations commenced by victims to Police and RFS, have indicated clear suspicions of the likely perpetrator. While there have been investigations of the arson, there has been no clear, formalised response from Police or RFS personnel regarding the arsonist. To the knowledge of our community, no formal interviews of suspects has taken place. It was expected that after over thirty suspicious fires one would have been conducted. This would have at the very least provided a base for future investigations. This is after years and years of arson attacks, millions of dollars expended in fighting fires, lost income from burnt pasture and repairs to damaged property.

I have sent letters to The Premier of NSW, The Minister of Police and Emergency Services, The RFS Commissioner, The Police Commissioner and Hon. Janelle Saffin MP regarding our arson problem in this community. These letters were sent at the outset of the 2019-20 bushfire season. They explained the potentially disastrous season ahead and the extra threat in our district posed by arson. I received a reply from The Deputy Commissioner of the Rural Fire Service on the 19th October 2019 stating that they were aware of the arson problem in our district and investigations were being conducted. I have heard nothing more from RFS on these investigations. We have, however, had NSW Police Detectives visit our area to look into crime, including arson. I was informed that they conducted 'general discussions' with local residents. It seems that no formal interviews were conducted regarding whereabouts of suspects on the dates of these 30 fires.

Our district has been in constant contact with authorities for years on this issue and we are no closer to locking up the perpetrator now than when we started. We have had multiple visits from RFS and Police Forensic Investigators who have been focussed on the cause of the fires and the ignition points. However, when it has come to the perpetrator there has been no follow-through, that we are aware of. Clearly, after six years of unrelenting arson attacks, no suspect has been charged.

From my experience in this matter, there seems to be no clear lines of communication between RFS local units and RFS investigators. Additionally, there also doesn't seem to be a clear and formalised line of communication between RFS Investigators and Police investigators. Every time we had visits from various investigators, they expressed to us that they had no knowledge of the issue, this being after 30 fires.

It seems to me that illegal fires lit without permits or due notification in certain parts of NSW is just seen as a normal state of affairs. In our case the system seemed unable to respond when an area renowned for dubious 'management fires' had metamorphosed into full-blown and vexatious arson. It also seemed evident from conversations with RFS personnel that the system has become reluctant to pursue cases to court unless a positive outcome is assured. If however no in-depth investigations are pursued, most cases will not succeed in court. At this stage we have an arsonist in our area that has not been formally pursued and probably feels empowered by this.

As an additional issue regarding this area it has been reported to me by both NSW National Parks personnel and RFS volunteers that threats have been made to them while fighting fires. A number of these threats have included verbal threats about firearms use (threats to shoot National Parks Officers in the back if they draw water from a dam, threats to shoot down the RFS helicopter if it drew water from a dam, threats made to RFS

personnel to leave a public road with firearms visible in the vehicle). The information I was given was second-hand and passed onto police as such. At this stage it seems that no charges have been laid. I am unsure as to what investigations have been undertaken. I feel confident that such threats made to other emergency service personnel (ambulance, police) would have resulted in an outcome.

Copy of a letter sent to Hon. David Elliott - September 2019

Hon. David Elliot (Minister for Police and Emergency Services)

COPY

Hon. Gladys Berejiklian (Premier of NSW)

Hon. Janelle Saffin (Member for Lismore)

Michael Fuller (Commissioner for Police)

Shane Fitzsimmons (Commissioner for RFS)

Dear David,

I am writing regarding a letter sent to you on the 8th August which outlined the specific threats faced by the Cullendore District in relation to ongoing arson. A copy of this letter was sent to both the Commissioner for Police and the Commissioner for RFS. In this letter I outlined the extent of the damage caused by these arson attacks in previous seasons (at that stage there had been at least 30 separate incidents since 2014). I explained that the severity and frequency of these fires had increased in recent times. I also outlined to you the expense in money and man-hours that have been committed to fighting these fires as well as repairing the damage caused by them. It was clearly pointed out that the risk we face in the coming fire season was compounded by these arson attacks. I expressed my concerns that the RFS Units that are constantly called to deal with these fires, many of which are both uncontained and dangerous, need support in stopping the arson in this district. It was explained in my letter that the evidence strongly supports the belief that this arsonist is local and lives amongst us. It is clear that this individual has a problem and is willing to destroy our district to feed this problem. The only safe place for this person is jail.

It needs to be understood that as well as the relentless arson attacks waged against our district, a large percentage of properties in the area have been damaged by inappropriate 'management fires'. These fires were lit without following due process and resulted in the fires escaping onto neighbouring properties.

I am writing to you to confirm that since you received my initial correspondence, we have experienced the 31st arson attack within our district. This was lit in the same period that Tenterfield, Legume, Drake and Stanthorpe were struggling with massive blazes, all within a short distance from Cullendore. This was an horrendous day for fires. It is my understanding that a local unit was called from the Legume fire to attend this arson attack. The owner of the property attacked was in this unit fighting the Legume fire on behalf of our community. While this fire was put out, due to the vigilance of locals, it could potentially have been a disaster. This fire was ignited in what can only be described as the Cullendore 'Hot Zone', an area well known to police, fire fighters and fire investigators.

It is my understanding that this incident was accompanied by threats made to a volunteer firefighter. This is no surprise as this would be the fifth such incident reported, some of these apparently involving firearms threats.

Our district has also had to live with stock theft, with well over one hundred cattle reported stolen in the Cullendore district in recent years. In addition, there have been ongoing incidents of property theft, damage to property, trespass, threats made to local residents and breaches of the Biosecurity Act. We need the proactive assistance of all relevant government agencies in the matter of the varied criminal activity in our district. These

agencies need the support and resources that can only be instigated by decisions made by your office or the Commissioner for Police or the Commissioner for RFS. We are victims of ongoing major crime that is showing no signs of abating. I am again asking for your assistance in this matter as I believe that we deserve better.

It is important to emphasise that the RFS volunteers have done a wonderful job in protecting our district from this ongoing threat. Likewise, the volunteer RFS investigators have worked well with our community in trying to find the culprit. Local police and Rural Crimes Officers have all done everything within their time constraints to put an end to this crime wave. Clearly though these investigators are stretched to the point where they are finding it hard to put enough resources into our district to stop this crime wave. We have Rural Crimes Officers that are working from south of Armidale to the Queensland border, in an era when rural crime in the shape of arson is becoming headline news. These officers are being called off their jobs to attend other unrelated issues while their rural crime workload just continues to rise. Please don't tell me you are giving these officers the resources and respect to properly protect our district....because that is clearly not the case.

We are a small community with a huge problem. Surely both the Police Service and RFS can be given the resources to apply both covert and overt methods to closing these problems down. Somewhere within the fifteen or so families that reside in this district lies the problem. Much of the evidence already seems to exist, all we need is your resources to put this problem to bed. Keep in mind that across the border Queensland authorities have thrown the necessary resources at a taskforce dedicated to arson. The result reported in media is that 8 of the 10 suspicious fires in that state have been solved. In discussions with police and arson investigators in Queensland they informed me that they are aware of the arson problems in the Cullendore district as the fires have affected their side of the border. They are looking closely at a suspect and want to put a permanent camera at the Cullendore Border Gate. I believe that this and another camera at the junction of the Cullendore Road and the Mount Lindesay Road as well as one at the entry into the Maryland National Park would be worth considering.

In my last letter I asked for a meeting with you or a member of your office to discuss in greater depth our issues. I am aware that Janelle Saffin MP (our local member) met with you to outline our issues and advocate for us. We still have heard nothing from you or your representatives. The crime in our area must be stopped. It is clear that NSW is facing unprecedented circumstances regarding fires, which require unprecedented responses. Please show leadership on this issue. If a suburb of Sydney was facing years of arson, costing millions of dollars to fight and hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage something would have been done long before now. We would have had you and everyone else in front of the media telling us about all the resources you would be throwing at the problem. Yet out here, no one has even deigned to respond to us. This is serious crime which threatens lives and businesses, the type that is gaining greater media interest.

You have been handed the enormous privilege of having oversight to the safety of the people of NSW. With that comes the responsibility to listen and respond to citizens who feel they are living in patently unsafe circumstances whether they be in your electorate, in your capital city or out in the boondocks. Enough is clearly enough, please respond to our pleas.

Regards,
Stuart Bell ([REDACTED])

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

While it has been contentious as to how many fires were caused by arson, it is unquestionable that some of the fires of the 2019-

20 bushfire season were due to arson. Our experience with the system's response to arson shows that a more co-ordinated system is required. The experience of our district also demonstrates that a focus on catching culprits via a systematic investigative process is needed to fix this problem.

1.2 Preparation and planning

1.3 Response to bushfires

1.4 Any other matters

Upload files

Response-to-Mr-Sturart-Bell-re-Cullendore-161019.pdf - [Download File](#)



NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Mr Stuart Bell



16 OCT 2019

Dear Mr Bell

Thank you for your correspondence via our NSW Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS) Hazard Complaint register in August and September 2019, regarding your concerns about the Fire Season and its potential impact on the Cullendore area. The Commissioner has asked me to respond on his behalf.

You may be interested to know that between 2013 and 2019, numerous incidents occurred in and around Cullendore where '*Arson or Suspicious*' was recorded as the cause of fire; all of which were marked for Fire Investigation. Once the investigations are carried out, the findings are provided to NSW Police Force (NSWPF) for further investigation and/or action.

The NSW Rural Fire Service is currently working in conjunction with Queensland Fire and Emergency Services with respect to incidents and trends crossing the state border as well as a NSWPF Detective Senior Constable from the Rural Crime Prevention Team in relation to potential arson trends in the Cullendore area. Over the coming weeks, a comprehensive investigation into fires over a number of years will be analysed.

In reference to the incident you detailed where a volunteer member was called from Legume to investigate the cause, I can advise that further investigation has occurred and findings have subsequently been passed on to NSWPF for action.

I appreciate your praise for our hardworking volunteers and the incredible work they do to contain fires.

Thank you for your interest in this matter.

Yours sincerely



Rob Rogers AFSM
Deputy Commissioner
Executive Director Operations

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