

Your details

Title Ms First name Susan Last name Russell Email [REDACTED] Address [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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 This submission is made by myself, Susan Russell and my partner Greg Hall. It details some of our experiences with the three fires that threatened our village- The Lyrebird Land, Rumba Complex and Doyle's River Complex. The submission covers matters relevant to each of the terms of Reference.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [Bushfire submission GTH&SR.pdf](#)
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Submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry, April 2020

We live in Elands, on the Bulga Plateau, Mid North Coast NSW. Throughout the months of September and October we watched fires devastate parts of the north coast. For a couple of weeks a fire burnt to our west, known as the Rumba Dump fire. On November 8, the Rumba Dump fire got a westerly wind behind it and raced across the landscape through the small communities of Caparra and Bobin. Dozens of homes were lost, including many of our friends.

1) The 'civilian' communications fell apart

As the tragic fire at Bobin escaped up the mountainside towards Elands, numerous of the power poles were burned. The telephone exchange and the mobile phone tower were then reliant on their batteries. In remote rural villages, we are well used to power interruptions, both scheduled and otherwise. Years ago, we could expect approximately three days of battery-powered service from the exchange and the 'old-fashioned' flooded cell battery. Not any more. These new AGM batteries are the standard issue, scheduled for replacement every seven years. They may last that long in suburban service, where they are hardly ever exercised. In our location, power outages are commonplace. Our telecommunications (Telstra tower and local exchange) now cease entirely 6-8 hours after a power outage. So much for 'check this website for further information'!

There were only a few places with a clear view of the coast where there was a phone signal. Many people had to drive tens of kilometres to make a phone call, and if they had data, check their emails etc. We put a white board at the main phone reception location so people could leave each other messages.

It took at least a week for Telstra to send a contractor with small petrol generators to re-power the tower and the exchange. That sole VisionStream contractor struggled to restore communications to over a dozen exchanges and towers in the area, and to make the hazardous mountain road journey between fire outbreaks and falling trees to unlock the equipment cubicles and make the simple switch-over to enable powering of the telecommunications by a portable generator. Unfortunately the small generators only ran for about four hours before they ran out of fuel. We personally experienced the frustration of trying to communicate about an active fire at 3am and found there was no phone signal and one of us had to leave the fire to refuel and restart the generators! On our own initiative we began pre-emptively refuelling the generators to keep the telecommunications alive. After another week or so, the small petrol generators were replaced with larger diesel generators which only needed refuelling twice a day. Again, much of this was done by our informal fire response team.

This critical service should not depend on a sole contractor. Access and instruction should be arranged with a trusted member of the community, perhaps the RFS Captain, so that service can be promptly restored, within the community, should the need arise.

Recommendation 1: Access and instruction should be provided to the local RFS Captain and Deputy on the necessary steps to install a portable generator at phone towers and exchanges, should power outages, particularly in emergency situations, mean telecommunication services fail due to lack of power.

The equipment cubicles of the 'Black Spot' mobile phone towers are made from Styrofoam 'cool-store' panels. Very flammable!

Recommendation 2: The land at least five metres from telecommunications towers should be

kept clear or closely mown. A local contractor should be engaged to do this work.

2) Communications between responders.

The communications between responders were dreadful. The following observations are made in the hope that they may inform processes for improving the collective response to similar events in future.

Our local brigade received very little information of value from the regional incident controller, and was sent on a number of 'Wild Goose Chases' by the radio dispatcher, as were others. We learned this from listening in to the RFS channels. It seems that the quality of reports to '000' is not checked, and the volunteers are sent out on any reported sighting of smoke, however distant. Often locations and directions have not been checked by the dispatcher, resulting in fire trucks driving around and around. Much time and goodwill is wasted by this.

Relatedly, well-meaning firies will respond over the radio 'Copy that' - copy what? Any day, one can overhear mis-hearings of addresses etc, resulting in wasted time at best, and lost opportunities to respond early. As a friend was wont to say 'Send Three and Fourpence, we're going to a dance' (Send reinforcements, we're going to advance).

More modern digital communication technology, as found in every (paid) emergency service vehicle, where messages are displayed on a screen, and vehicle (and persons) location are reported and mapped in real-time, needs be the norm. Many amateur radio operators do this 'Packet Radio' (or APRS) as a matter-of-course, and inexpensively. At present, one of the three RFS volunteers must stay in the truck at all times, just in case there is a radio call! With the significant inflow of funds to the RFS, this communication equipment needs to be in every truck.

Several of the responding agencies (NPWS & Forestry Corp), carried hand-held mapping devices (iPad, tablet), which had the most up-to-date mapping of the actual fire front and other crucial information for making tactical decisions. This data was largely sourced by those agencies from the RFS, but no local brigade we saw had been provided with similar data or equipment.

Recommendation 3) That RFS trucks be fitted with digital communication technology including screen display, and vehicle locations be mapped in real time.

Recommendation 4) That every RFS truck have a hand-held mapping device that has up-to-date mapping of the actual fire front.

3) Interagency communication

Multiple agencies responded to the fire crisis. The lines of communication between them were almost nonexistent on the fireground. While they may have been operating from a fire control centre collectively, in the field, they had no means to communicate with each other. One senior controller had 6 radios in his vehicle, with which to coordinate the effort. He was the only one able to call across the various services attending. Many \$millions were spent on the Government Radio Network (P25). It has capacity for very many channels, and for prompt reconfiguration, but it is inflexibly operated and not responsive to the changing needs of intercommunication. The 'fireground radios' are noisy, analog, have very little range, and are barely usable. Most brigades make more use of citizens' band radio and mobile phones, not least because it allows them some contact and coordination with the local rural community!

I (Greg) made a point of asking each of the responders about their communications. Most were very unhappy about theirs. In contrast, the SA professional firefighters, using modern digital hand-helds,

were very pleased. Their comms were crystal clear, the identity of the caller is displayed, the system logs all messages and the position of the calling device. To provide our first responders with anything less seems negligent.

Recommendation 5) That RFS members on the fireground be provided with modern digital hand-held radios that log messages, display caller ID and log the position of the calling device.

4) Provision of information from the responding agencies to the community.

Broadcast bulletins from the RFS to the community were very general in nature, and the 'Fires Near Me' service is misleading to the point of dangerous. Only the cumulative incident area is shown. There is no location given for the actually active fire front, even where the RFS has air or ground observations of this. The boundary of an incident grows with each update, and then weeks or months after the active fire has ceased, the whole polygon disappears from the record.

The polygon display on the 'Fires Near Me' site was unreliable. On numerous occasions whole fires 'disappeared' and didn't display at all. At other times the fire polygon was some weird shape totally unrelated to the actual fire. After a few days we didn't even bother to look at the 'Fires Near Me' site as the information was useless.

There are numerous satellites returning frequent 'hotspot' data, and these are readily available via web services. The RFS chooses not to rely on this valuable data, nor to represent it in the 'Fires Near Me' app. Rather, users must switch back and forth between webpages and apps to manually integrate the various sources of information.

We read, incredibly, that the 'Fires Near Me' service is 'owned' by a company wishing to restructure, and that the service is now 'up for sale'. It is also reported that a 55 person workforce is required to operate it. How such a large workforce could provide so little useful information should be investigated.

<https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/fires-near-me-bushfire-app-s-manager-is-up-for-sale-20200114-p53rba.html>

The RFS, presumably, operates a modern geographic information system into which all relevant information is gathered. This would include weather and fire forecasts, active fires, the status and location of their responders, hazards, etc. Surely a modern, open system would simply relay the relevant parts of this tactical data to a website and app, rather than requiring 55 persons to reinterpret it into a form of very little relevance to those who need it most.

The 'EM-COP for Situational Awareness and Collaboration' system operated by Justice Vic since the Black Saturday fires is a much better example of this. The online explanatory pages make it clear that many agencies contribute to the overall picture, and that CFA and VICSES volunteers are accepted as users, contributing their on-ground observations. These may then be published directly to the public viewable map at <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/> by appropriately authorised operators. <https://emcop.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/360000951895-Overview-of-EM-COP> In contrast,

<https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Pages/about-us/semc/State-Emergency-Operations-Centre.aspx> shows no such coordinated, integrated system.

Recommendation 6) That the 'Fires Near Me' app be replaced by a system in which the data is drawn directly and automatically from the incident management GIS, to show the actual fire fronts, hotspots and other relevant hazards such as blocked roads.

5) Unresponsiveness of RFS incident controller to community observations.

Experience tells us NOT to call '000' for every incident, as we saw our local brigade ordered away from an important back-burning operation because a neighbour had panicked, reporting a fire some 1/2Km from their farmhouse to '000'. The burn escaped, requiring much effort to get back under control. Had the regional incident control checked with the local brigade they may not have lost a critical hour.

Our experience in reporting non-critical incidents, such as observations of fires threatening to escape unattended containment lines, to the regional incident controller, is also unsatisfactory. Much work by the agencies had been put into an important containment line, the fire workers had returned to their accommodation in the evening, an hour and a half drive distant, and the fire had gained more ground than was expected. We called it in, they were uninterested, the fire escaped, and required a great deal of effort to regain control. Had the controller been receptive to this actual, on-the-ground observation by a community member, much effort could have been saved.

Night after night we were shocked that agency fire-fighting is an 8am-8pm business. Massive back-burns were lit and then it was left to the RFS and our community volunteers to watch through the night to ensure that fires didn't jump containment lines. Sometimes during the day there were dozens of professionals on the job.

It seemed pretty poor practice for everyone to pack up and go home for the night. On a couple of occasions the fires did jump containment lines and hundreds of hectares of forest had to be burnt to create another containment line.

Recommendation 7: That a skeleton crew of professional firefighters is left on the fireground when agencies are conducting burns to put in containment lines.

6) Official discomfort in working with community 'responders'.

As did many other communities, we had equipped over a dozen utes or trailers with water tanks, fire pumps and hoses, 2-way radios, and overhead sprinklers- our Black Swan brigade. These were invaluable in keeping watch and controlling small outbreaks where the local RFS were overstretched. We will of course assist our friends and neighbours in time of need, however, the authorities have great difficulty in relating to these informal community efforts, whereas the contribution ought to be welcomed and integrated into the effort.



Some of the Black Swan brigade.





Black Swans keeping the fire from jumping the road.

7) Community self-organisation to the rescue.

As our village became encircled by fires, we began to provide meals for firefighters, official and unofficial. The first meals were served on November 12, after the day of catastrophic fire conditions, when most of the children, mothers and elderly had left the village. We established a 'community support hub' at the old Elands sawmill. Over the month of November we fed all comers. We estimate we served approximately 1000 meals. Other than a supply run delivered by the local Lions Club, most of our food was paid for from donations raised on a 'GoFundMe' website. We also used donations to equip our 'Black Swan' fire crews with equipment and to buy a comms phone.



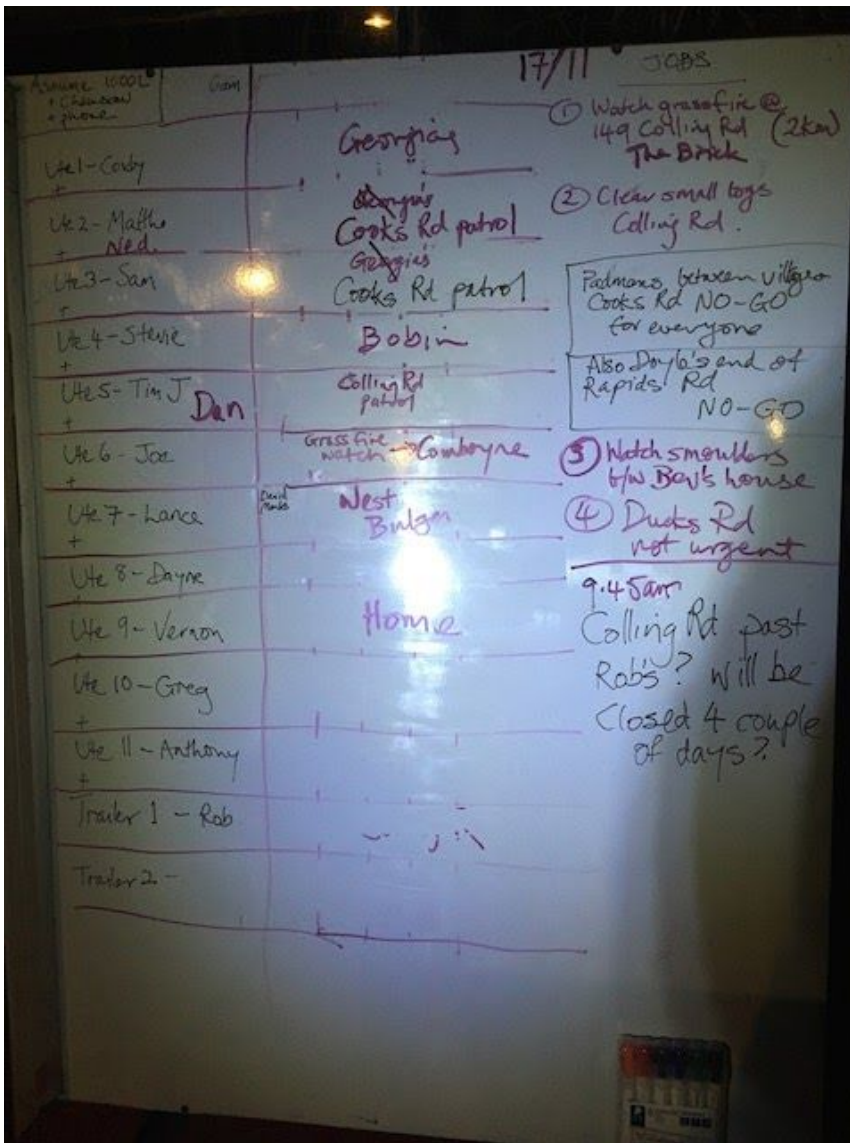
November 12, fire crew dinner at Elands Community Support Hub





Community briefing, November 2019

We operated a 24 hour desk and roster to ensure that people were also able to get a feed and there was someone to respond to any outbreaks or problems encountered while the professionals were back at their motels. We maintained a 24 hour two-way radio and mobile phone watch, these were solar powered as there was no mains electricity. We conducted several community briefings. Later we were provided with a diesel generator by Essential Energy. Showers and laundry facilities were also provided. The Lions and the Bobin community each brought a trailer load of canned food and toiletries which were displayed and available for any community member to help themselves.



Snapshot of roster board. November 17, 2019

After several phone calls to the Wauchope Fire Control Centre, we managed to get some support from Taree Council for fuel. Mostly we had to organise volunteers to bring ute loads of jerry cans up the mountain, which for much of November was dangerous due to falling trees and burning logs. We appreciated the assistance that saw 200L of fuel supplied. Much of it went on fueling the telecommunications tower and exchange. We also provided fuel to the local RFS truck, so it didn't need to leave the fireground for several hours to refuel.

When we asked for assistance with this, the response from Wauchope Fire Command was the truck needed to go and get its own fuel. At the time, the truck was on the fireground almost continuously. We were delivering meals to them and often using community water tankers to take water from the water truck to the firetruck, because even leaving for 20 minutes for a water top-up could have seen the Doyles River Complex fire escape across the plateau and threaten dozens of homes.



One of the Black Swans getting water from the tanker to ferry to the RFS crew.

We were disappointed that no-one from the Wauchope Fire Command bothered to make the 1 hour drive to visit our operational base, despite encouragement from the senior Forestry Corp officer, Mark Drury, that they should do so.

Initially we were told that the RFS would supply their crews with meals. From November 12 to November 30, meals were delivered on possibly two occasions, and packets of sandwiches on another couple of occasions. Our community kitchen provided a hot meal for all comers every evening, bacon and egg rolls every morning and sandwiches for lunches.



Some of the kitchen crew showcasing their wares.

We established a 'situation table' with topographic maps that were manually updated as firefighters came in and were able to provide information about the state of the fires. Forestry Corporation were very cooperative with this process and gave us daily reports (and we gave them hot meals). The RFS said they got better information about what was going on from us than they did either directly from Forestry Corp on the fireground or from the Wauchope Command. On one occasion where some 24 firefighters were being briefed on the day's plan, we were given a copy of the briefing notes. The local RFS said they never received anything like that level of information.



Situation table and briefings



Forestry Corporation doing their morning briefing

8. General Observations about the fire and hazard reduction

We have closely monitored both our own 100ha forested property and State Forests and National Parks in our area. On our own property there has been no fire on most of it for decades. There was very little build up of leaf litter, most of it having been converted to organic matter. Where there was good upper storey canopy, rainforest had begun to develop underneath.

The fire burnt most intensely in the areas of eucalypt regeneration and there were many patches of rainforest understorey that didn't burn, or the burn was less intense. In the oldgrowth forest reserve of the Ellenborough Falls, the fire mostly spread as the large old hollow bearing trees caught fire, sending showers of embers and when they fell spreading fire around them. Nonetheless in several places, the fire stopped at the rainforest.

However the single biggest determinant of areas that burnt and the intensity of the burn was the combination of drought - we had our lowest ever recorded rainfall in 2019- and wind speed. We saw fire race across paddocks that were almost bare earth if it was driven by a hot wind. Alternatively it would positively dawdle through eucalypt forest at night when there was no wind but some moisture content in the air.

Hazard reduction is important around dwellings and important infrastructure, but it clearly doesn't work as a landscape tool. Worse still the relatively arbitrary application of burn quotas, where burns are conducted far from human settlement in order to meet the target.

We contend that logging is a significant contributor to forest flammability. Logging both dries out the forest by removing the canopy and introducing more sunlight. It also leads to rapid regrowth of eucalypts and weeds that in turn suck up available water. It leaves massive piles of debris on the forest floor, and while some of the smaller twigs burn in any post-logging burns, there remains on

the ground large quantities of wood from the branches and trunks as fire fodder.

In northern NSW most eucalypt forest occurs on the ridges with gullies dominated by rainforest species. Despite the drought and the winds, many of these cool rainforest gullies survived. Had they been protected by a buffer from logging and clearing and subsequent post-clearing burns, they would no doubt have been able to play an even greater role in 'fire calming'. We must look to these natural solutions.

Leaving trees to grow old and large, sees a natural reduction in the number of stems, less undergrowth under the canopy, more moisture content in the soil, more rainforest species invasion of eucalypt stands and more water released to creeks and rivers.

Ending the logging of native forests, at least on public land, would provide opportunities for holistic forest management and reforestation, ensuring that the multiple benefits an aging forest provides are looked after. Seeing forests mainly as a source of timber, much of it low-quality for woodchips or low-value products, or as a threat that needs to be constantly burnt, is to perpetuate the problems that have led us to the catastrophic fire conditions we have just experienced.

Other submissions will focus on the devastating loss of so many native animals. More than a billion. It is criminal that instead of taking some form of census of which animal populations have survived, the NSW government has put the logging crews straight back to work. In many places logging the rare patches of forest that did not have bushfires go through them and thus are harbouring what could be remnant populations of forest-dwelling species. Likewise there are hundreds of threatened species of plants that may have been wiped out or at least severely impacted by the fires.

We acknowledge that in our area, Forestry Corporation made an effort to protect habitat trees by clearing around them when they were adjacent to roads that were functioning as containment lines. Unfortunately this is not true of much of the other activity. Many RFS brigades used the fires as an opportunity to cut down hundreds of old trees beside the roads. This happened on the Elands to Bobin Road, after the fire was out, many large old trees that were not hazardous were cut down.

Recommendation 7: There should be no logging adjacent to rainforests. A buffer of at least 20m should be introduced.

Recommendation 8: Logging of native forest on public lands should cease as it increases forest flammability.

Recommendation 9: The NSW Government should invest in a major program of flora and fauna surveys across the forest estate, to determine which animal and plant populations survived and the habitat of those in unburnt forest. These areas then need to be managed for the ongoing viability of those surviving populations.

If we don't begin to practise an earth-honouring culture that recognises nature's need to exist across all species and ecosystems, then we sow the seeds of our own collapse.