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## Your details

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**Title**

Ms

**First name**

Helen

**Last name**

Webb

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## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

A member of the general public

**Submission type**

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

**Organisation making the submission (if applicable)**

Sustainable Living Armidale

**Your position in the organisation (if applicable)**

Climate Action Group convenor

**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

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## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

My story was to experience, while living in Armidale the unprecedented dry conditions and water shortage with level 5 water restrictions in place, and to see dams and water holes that I had never before seen dry disappear. Our count down until the community ran out of water was, in December 2019, approximately 12 months, extended because of Armidale

Regional Council's pro-active approach to reducing water usage in the community. The attached images show the back of numerous trees at Armidale Pine Forest and nearby Mount Duval due to the extreme dry conditions. Also illustrated is a dam on a property near the pine forest which had been the best source of water on the property but which dried up totally over a period of two years with no significant runoff.

We called the dry hot gusty winds that further denuded bare paddocks apocalyptic well before those in the bushfire zones experienced far worse conditions.

Armidale Regional Council responded appropriately to the science underlying the climate conditions and the widespread community concern by declaring a climate emergency and resolving to act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, find ways to adapt to adverse climate impacts and drawdown atmospheric carbon.

I referred to the NSW Government Guide to Climate Change Risk Assessment for NSW Local Government and noticed that many communities experienced outcomes that could easily have reached the catastrophic rating, as per the example consequence scale:

Public safety-Large numbers of serious injuries or loss of lives

Local economy and growth-Regional decline leading to widespread business failure, loss of employment and hardship

Community and lifestyle-Region would be seen as very unattractive, moribund and unable to support its community

Environment and sustainability-Major widespread loss of environmental amenity and progressive irrecoverable environmental damage

Public administration-Public administration would fall into decay and cease to be effective

I also recognised that if the water shortage had continued in the Armidale area, we too could have reached the catastrophic outcomes listed above.

Friends with houses near Glen Innes lost their homes and some were lucky not to lose their lives. Having had bushfires burn up to their doorstep in the previous weeks, they thought that fuel loads were sufficiently reduced and that they would not be at risk in the immediate future. They felt angry that people were blaming the bushfires on insufficient hazard reduction burns in the past when that was clearly not the case in their experience.

I experienced cancellation of activities due to high air pollution index for smoke in our area (a minor inconvenience in the context of what others were experiencing).

Others I knew experienced exacerbation of respiratory illnesses due to the prolonged particulate emissions associated with the bushfires.

Large areas of national parks, which provide habitat for a huge diversity of plant and animal species and attract many visitors to our area, were burnt through and will take years to recover.

I worried about family and friends and relatives who were in the bushfire zone and heard stories of loss of livelihood and loss of life amongst friends of others. I also felt gravely concerned for those in the direct path of the terrifying and dangerous bushfire conditions and those who worked so hard and gave up so much of their time to help bring them under control. It was an extremely worrying time and highlighted for me the importance and urgency of the need for effective local, regional, national and global action to transition to renewable energy, bring down greenhouse emissions and return to a safe climate.

I am highly appreciative of the expertise and skilled decision making of NSW fire commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons and the committed efforts of bushfire fighters who saved hundreds of homes and were of assistance to so many people.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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

### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Information that I had been reading from the IPCC report, Bureau of Meteorology and AdaptNSW Climate change predictions indicated to me that the changes we were experiencing and the bushfires that followed were consistent with predictions for climate change such as hotter and drier summers, bushfire periods starting earlier, lasting longer and bushfires being more intense and unpredictable.

Unprecedented dry hot conditions related to one of the strongest positive Indian Ocean Dipole events on record superimposed upon a background of clearly established climate change were undoubtedly contributing factors.

I read the reports from the Bureau of meteorology and news reports such as the following: "Sydney Morning Herald

Australia posts hottest January-June for days as big dry rolls on

By Peter Hannam July 2, 2019

Australia's hottest start to any year extended to a sixth month for day-time temperatures even as conditions moderated in June, while rainfall continued to be very much below average for large parts of the country.

Average maximum temperatures for the first half of 2019 were 1.78 degrees above the 1961-90 baseline used by the Bureau of Meteorology. That pipped the previous record set in 2005 in data that goes back more than a century, said Blair Trewin, senior climatologist at the bureau.

The unusual heat was widespread, with states such as Victoria posting its warmest January-June for both mean and maximum temperatures.

In NSW, mean temperatures - which track day- and night-time readings - were 2.14 degrees above the 1961-90 yardstick, beating the previous record set a year earlier by more than 0.3 degrees. Minimum temperatures set a record too, while maximum temperatures were second-warmest."

The Bureau of Meteorology Annual Climate Statement summary was as follows:

"Australia's climate in 2019

Australia's warmest year on record, with the annual national mean temperature 1.52 °C above average

Both mean annual maximum and minimum temperatures above average for all States and the Northern Territory

Annual national mean maximum temperature warmest on record (2.09 °C above average)

Widespread warmth throughout the year; January, February, March, April, July, October, and December all amongst the ten warmest on record for Australian mean temperature for their respective months

Significant heatwaves in January and in December

Australia's driest year on record

Nationally-averaged rainfall 40% below average for the year at 277.6 mm

Rainfall below average for most of Australia

Rainfall above average for parts of Queensland's northwest and northern tropics

Much of Australia affected by drought, which was especially severe in New South Wales and southern Queensland

Widespread severe fire weather throughout the year; national annual accumulated Forest Fire Danger Index highest since 1950, when national records began

One of the strongest positive Indian Ocean Dipole events on record; El Niño–Southern Oscillation neutral throughout the year"

## **1.2 Preparation and planning**

I was concerned that as bushfires progressed during the summer houses in Armidale were not immune to bushfire risk. I swept up the leaves around our house, cleaned gutters and we bought an additional rainwater tank hoping that it would provide options to help put out spot fires if rain eventually filled the tanks (which it now has).

## **1.3 Response to bushfires**

The government was slow to recognise the seriousness of the bushfire crisis and to respond effectively. The government relied heavily on volunteers to carry this load and there was evidence that the government had not paid heed to the earlier concern raised by those across our country who are experienced in bushfire control.

See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-14/nsw-fires-death-toll-rises-after-fourth-body-found/11703328>

The NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) issued emergency warnings for 17 separate blazes at the peak of the crisis on Friday.

'If not now, when?'

In the wake of the devastating bushfires taking grip of eastern Australia, a coalition of fire and emergency service leaders across the country have called on the Federal Government to take national action on climate change.

The 23 former fire chiefs and commissioners said the bushfire crisis in NSW and QLD is unprecedented and an immediate response was needed.

"We're calling on the government to take urgent action on the fundamental problem that's leading to these catastrophic fires and that's climate change," former NSW Fire and Rescue commissioner, Greg Mullins said.

## **1.4 Any other matters**

Based on the available evidence I consider it to be very important that all of us, but particularly our leaders, pay heed to the evidence that even with the current level of warming, our climate is not safe and that Australia in particular is highly vulnerable to the risks climate change brings. We have been given a reprieve from the severe conditions that were catastrophic for some. Our government needs to act urgently and decisively to reduce the risk by leading in the area of global reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and focused action to reduce the likelihood of catastrophic risks.

The need to revitalise our economy in the wake of coronavirus as well as drought and bushfires brings opportunities to invest in renewable energy and a low emissions future.

## **Supporting documents or images**

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### **Attach files**

- pineforeststress.JPG
- mtduvaldieback.JPG
- 2019\_12 Aurora dam empty.JPG



