

Fires burned through the Clarence Valley from July 2019 to January 2020.
169 Homes were Destroyed and 57 Homes were Damaged.
Over 600 Outbuildings were destroyed or damaged.
Over 1,500 Landholders were negatively impacted and the
Small village of Nymboida lost over 90 Homes.

On top of the above has been the long-term drought and subsequent water restrictions, followed by some local flooding.

The physical and mental health impacts for local People has been significant.

The Clarence Forum is a social media group in the Clarence Valley LGA with a membership of over 2,400 People. Like most areas, towns, and regions the Clarence is home to a wide range of opinions and ideas. Some days I'm reminded of an unkind comment about Economists:
"Ask 2 Economists and You will get at least 3 Answers".

The following is set out across 3 main areas:
Events leading up to the fires,
Actions during the fires,
And What We Have Learned.

EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE FIRES

While Not Unanimous:

There was overwhelming agreement that we need to look after the land better.
There was also general agreement that the droughts are getting worse and we need to protect and respect local fresh water supplies more along with habitat and wildlife.
On balance, anthropogenic climate change was considered a primary cause but many People thought otherwise.

ACTIONS DURING THE FIRES

There was general agreement that the 'Fires Near me' app was Not up to date
And neither were most (all?) of the official sites.
This added to local anxiety and uncertainty.
On more than 1 occasion:
Social Media was supplying more up to date & accurate information.

The number of homes lost is testament to the inadequate supply of firefighting appliances. That is Not, in any way, a negative comment about the magnificent efforts local, and out of area, RFS volunteers provided.

Some authorities such as Essential Energy were able to work together with the RFS during and immediately after the fires with rebuilding pole and wire connections etc. which resulted in fantastic outcomes in some areas.
Other authorities were Not able to work with the RFS.
One particular example being the large number of huge excavators and water carrying appliances within close proximity to a number of the fires that were employed during the fires for the current Pacific Highway Upgrades in the Clarence. Those professional operators could have been used to construct containment lines around homes, towns, and villages in a very short time frame but the local State MP

advised they were prohibited from doing so because they had Not completed RFS training (even though there was no intent to use these machines or their operators 'in' the fires just containment lines 'around' the fire boundaries).

There were reports of People in outlying areas having NO communication facilities during some of the fires and some being completely isolated by inaccessible roads and burned out bridges.

For many months, visibility was below 100 metres due to smoke haze and The EPA's air monitoring showed total suspended particles of over 800 on 1 hour averages. Fine particulate matter monitoring, with 1 hour averages, showed results for fine particles of less than 2.5 micrometres (0.0025 mm) or smaller with scores of 600 to 700. Levels that high, with particle sizes that small, represents significant health hazards that were not addressed.

Several local People requested the provision of P2 masks for protection from the smoke from the NSW Health Department.

The Ministerial Advisor I spoke with claimed rural people would Not use the masks correctly. Personally, I found his comment insulting.

As a result, Not 1 of the millions of P2 masks promised by the Federal Government appears to have made its way to the Clarence Valley.

Our local demographic is heavily skewed towards older people and if longer and more significant fires are the 'new normal', P2 masks should be stored at both Maclean and Grafton Hospitals in advance of future fire seasons.

Wildlife carers did a fantastic job during the fires but were swamped by the magnitude of the disaster. The scale of the environmental disaster has yet to be calculated nor has there been implementation of large scale plans to reduce future negative impacts.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

There is overwhelming support for implementation of 1st Nations fire management practices.

As mentioned: Up to date information with regard to the size, location, and direction of fires is an essential ingredient in protecting lives and property.

Greater interagency cooperation between the RFS and other Organisations would increase response times and their effectiveness plus accelerate recovery times.

Deaths during the fires appear to have been logged as the underlying causes.

It is entirely possible that some of those people would still be living if it had not been for the smoke that filled their lungs for many months.

Greater adoption of the NSW North Coast Regional Plan with its emphasis on dedicated areas for: residential, business, environment, agricultural, etc. would make provision of infrastructure more cost effective and reduce the number of people in extreme danger.

Creation of a permanent, paid, rural fire fighting force was suggested by a number of people. This would not replace the existing RFS but act to expedite response times across boundaries. There was also mention of RFS volunteers who missed out on income while fighting fires.

Increased studies on the impact of firefighting chemicals and burnt materials, which make their way into the rivers and water supply, would be appreciated as would a proper filtration system. The Clarence Valley water supply does not have a filtration system and has only recently acquired an antibacterial lighting system.

Many thanks,

John Hagger
The Clarence Forum