
Your details

Ms

Title

First name

Vanessa

Last name

Keenan

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

On New Year's Eve I sheltered for 3 hours on my parents farm in the Maragle Valley with them (75 and 72 yrs old) and their two dogs as the Dunn's Road firestorm impacted the place. The farm is in the Maragle Valley and is surrounded by the Maragle State Forest, Clarke's Hill Nature Reserve and a private pine plantation as well two neighbouring farms.. There is only one way in/out and it was in the direction the fire was coming from so it was clear from early on that we had no way to escape.

Given the geographic isolation, surrounding environment and ongoing drought the farm was as prepared sit could be prior to the fire. Sprinklers are installed on outbuildings near the house and an irrigation gun was set up to cover the house and garden, supplied by a firefighting dam that has a diesel pump.

This equipment and prior preparation over the last ten years by

my mum's partner was the primary reason we were able to save the house and nearby outbuildings as well as our lives.

Whilst we were taken out by the Dunn's Road fire, we were focussed on the risk of the Jingellic (Green Valley) fire which was jumping across the river. The NSW maps showed such little information about Victoria – where we thought the threat was coming from - that often the RFS mapping did not even show Victoria, particularly on the New Year's Eve fire spread prediction map, in contrast the Victorian maps always show the NSW fires as well as wind direction and many other factors that can help people make informed decisions about whether to stay or go. I received several emergency warning text messages from Victoria but none from NSW. In the end, it was the NSW Dunn's Road fire that took us out and if it wasn't for a family member who worked overnight in the Tumut Command Centre who rang us at 6 am and said the fire was headed straight for us, we wouldn't have known. At no point did the NSW maps or any emergency advice mention Maragle (where we were) in the lead up to the event. The phone advice we received that morning, gave us an extra hour or so that we otherwise wouldn't have had. As there was no mention of our area, after the fire had passed, the ABC also gave no mention of the current situation for us either so we were in the dark for 24 hours.

One of my brothers was in Albury and went to the police because he lost contact with us for 24 hours, ironically a saving grace was that the RFS mapping failed during this time and didn't update for many hours so he wasn't certain that we had been impacted until the next day, even though we had been burnt out within half an hour of him losing contact with us. Albury police were as helpful as they could be to him, with such little information (I have screenshots of both the Victorian maps and NSW maps from the time).

48 hours after the fire I wrote an open letter to Deputy PM Michael McCormack. It ended up being shared around the world and added to the public discourse on the impacts of climate change on our environment. Transcript is below:

Dear Michael McCormack MP

did you have a nice christmas break? I spent mine on the farm with family. Thankfully most of them left though. The kids, ranging in age from 15 to just 18 months were safer elsewhere. You may find it odd but I thought of you a lot and I wanted to let you know.

When I heard from family working in the RFS Command Centre that the Dunn's Road fire was coming straight for us, I thought of you. As I gathered what I could of my mum's precious belongings I thought of you.

When I first saw the flames on the neighbours property and raced back to let the others know it had arrived, I thought of you. I thought of you again when I rang Triple 0, both times, to tell them there were people here and we had no way out.

When we sheltered in the fire bunker and desperately listened to hear if the fire sprinklers were still running I thought of you. As we held our hands against the wall to feel the heat, again, you entered my thoughts.

After the first front passed and we went out and took the chance to refuel the pump that was supplying the fire sprinklers I once again thought about you.

As we raced back to the door of the bunker and watched the

firestorm approach from a different direction, crowning 150 feet above the trees I thought about you.
When we emerged after three hours to an incinerated landscape dotted with injured and dead animals I thought of you.

Now as we scramble to organise emergency fodder and brace for the weekend's weather I think of you.

When I keep filling my water bottle to ease my sore throat and lungs, I think of you. When I hugged my family today who for over 24 hours thought we were lost, I'm thinking of you.

Did you think of us?

Did you think about all the devastated communities that will be impacted by your lack of action or even acknowledgement of climate change?

Will you think of us now? What will it take to get your attention? I have tears in my eyes writing this letter to you. I'm desperate, the whole country is desperate. Now is the time. Please.

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

Climate Change is a significant contributing factor to the Dunn's Road fire. The conditions of the fire at 3 am on 31 Dec were conditions that are expected at 3pm. The fire travelled at an unprecedented rate for that time of the night. Even now 5 months later, much of the land hasn't recovered.

1.2 Preparation and planning

This was unprecedented. There's also been a situation where the government has politicised climate change instead of acknowledging it is evidence based. This is the crux of the lack of preparation at a State and Federal level. Without a holistic approach to tackling and responding to climate change, there was little they were prepared to do.

1.3 Response to bushfires

The RFS were clearly overwhelmed during the event. I rang 000 twice and the operator struggled to get through to the command centre. We knew that there wouldn't be RFS trucks able to get to us given the size and speed of the fire that we could see. The State and Federal government response has been more about platitudes than actual support that is needed for us and our neighbours. Aside from one day of 7 x ADF personnel and provision of 8 small round bales of hay from LLS, the only support we have received has been from BlazeAid, Salvation Army, Snowy Valleys Council and individuals who have donated hay, firewood and vouchers. It was 30 days before we had power restored due to the significant amount of damage in the area. We were amongst the last few households to be restored.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Low Res Bushfire Photos_0.pdf
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