
Your details

Mrs

Title

First name

Liz

Last name

Tooley

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

Submission type

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Vincentia Matters Inc

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

Secretary

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

Although Vincentia was not directly fire-affected, there were two very frightening days – Tuesday, December 31 and Saturday, January 4. Many people chose to evacuate for the second day after briefings from the RFS the previous day. It was frightening on both days and the lack of information as to where the fire was, and in which direction it was travelling, added to the fear and anxiety. When the world around you changes from the familiar to being totally alien with smoke, embers and darkness, it is truly distressing. The need for current and accurate information is

vital. Also, there was total confusion as to where the Evacuation Centre for Vincentia is, or even if there is one. Any comments in this submission are in no way a criticism of the RFS and the incredible work their members did over so many months. We are in awe of them all, and thank them most sincerely.

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

Vincentia was fortunate to be only threatened by fire but it is generally accepted that the fires around us were caused by the severe and long-lasting drought and the horrendous weather conditions at the time.

1.2 Preparation and planning

The Briefing sessions from the RFS which were region specific were excellent and available online in real time. The information provided ahead of the two major days which affected Vincentia was detailed and precise enough for people to make informed decisions as to whether to Stay or Leave ahead of the predicted bad days.

There was no information given about an Evacuation Centre for Vincentia and, in fact, we still do not know if there was one, and if so, where it was. People were left guessing – The Country Club at Sanctuary Point (which would have meant going towards the fire), the Huskisson RSL (which was never a designated centre) or Plantation Point Reserve which has bush between the open reserve and the water. No one knew then, and no one knows now.

An Evacuation Centre for Vincentia, along with all the other villages in Shoalhaven, needs to be established as a matter of urgency. It is imperative, especially in a tourist area, that the Evacuation Centre is clearly identified on the ground in the locality and that the information is prominently displayed in public areas, accommodation places, schools, churches and shopping centres. It is also important to use the terminology “Evacuation Centre” which is known to everyone, rather than a “Neighbourhood Safe Place” which could mean anything from being dog-free to being safe from stranger-danger. People understand “Evacuation Centre” as it states exactly what it is, and that would be what they would be looking for in an emergency. To assume everybody has visited the RFS website is presumptuous in times of stress of impending danger. Many times, in fact the internet was unavailable.

1.3 Response to bushfires

On the two critical days in Vincentia, when the fire fortunately did not reach our village, many people have expressed frustration with disappointment with the Fire Near Me App. The community was asked to download the App and to use it as the information source. Perhaps the role of the App was misunderstood and hence was too heavily relied upon for to make informed decisions. After the event, we now understand that the App should have been seen as only a tool for making decisions and that it was never intended to be live in its information dissemination. However, at the time of the fires, the community were relying on the App and looked to it to provide up to date information on the progress of the fire – where it was, the direction it was travelling, the wind velocity and anticipated path of the fire and the timeframe. This was the intelligence which people needed when they were frightened and panicked and when they were making life-dependent decisions. Instead, all they had from the App was “it is too late to leave” which was the

message for many hours. We would suggest that IT is an area which could be vastly improved for future emergencies and which would benefit, and possibly, save whole communities. As some people are unable to download the App, they are reliant on radio and television which, in turn, I assume are using the App. So it is vital that the App is providing essential information for dissemination across the media. Confusion is the greatest enemy of safety in an emergency.

1.4 Any other matters

We would like to place on record our appreciation to the RFS, especially the volunteer firefighters. They made us all proud to be Australian. Also, we would like to express our gratitude to the State Government for commissioning this Inquiry, and for the community involvement in the online Inquiry sessions and we wish the two Commissioners well in making their report. We would be happy to assist in the communication of the location of the Evacuation Centre locations when this matter has been addressed and a determination put in place.

Supporting documents or images
