

Submission to NSW Bushfire Inquiry

My name is Ben Elliott, I am a thirty seven year old shearer and agricultural worker. I reside part of my time on my family's farm due west of Braidwood and part of my time in Moruya NSW with my partner. My family/ancestors have lived in the Braidwood and Batemans Bay areas for the better part of 200 years and as a keen outdoorsman and local worker I am extremely familiar with not only the agricultural country but also the national parks and state forests the fires started in.

Over the summer of 2019/20 I saw and fought numerous fires. The Black Range Fire was stopped on my family's property due west of Braidwood the night it threatened Braidwood. I then proceeded along with other members of my family, neighbours and locals to fight that fire (assisting the RFS) for the following two weeks defending neighbouring properties and livestock as it gradually spread north past Warri and up to Mulloon. Then as the Currawong fire spread over the mountain and headed east towards Mongarlowe, Nerriga and Braidwood becoming the Charley's Forest Fire I once again helped right up until Christmas. At Christmas time I took my firefighting equipment to Mogo to my mother-in-laws place while we celebrated the Christmas break as I thought I may have to race back to Braidwood if there was a flare up. It soon became apparent they were going to get impacted so we spent days preparing their property and then on New Year's Eve my sister-in-law and myself successfully defended that property by ourselves while listening to neighbouring properties explode. Then in January I had to make another mad dash to my partners place at Moruya as another fire came to within a few hundred meters of her house.

Causes and Factors

- The fires were caused by a combination of drought and extreme dryness, along with hot and windy conditions – this created the perfect climate for a bad season.
- It was the third year of drought: forests were bone dry with no wet areas which would normally act as a buffer.
- All fires were started by lightning except for one which was started by an illegal burn-off
- National Parks were in a poor state with high fuel loads and poor access
- Many of these national parks were state forests not that long ago and seemed to be managed differently.
- Much of the private land west of Braidwood was previously yellow box country, but due to clearing and the lack of burning a monoculture of oily shrubs now exist.
- The areas that are now under national parks management are very different to how I remember them when I was a child. They are now choked with weeds with the understorey covered in bark and leaves with little or no grass growing. This is contrary to my memories and from what some of the older folk told me you used to be able to muster cattle on horseback in there once upon a time.
- Overall the fires were caused by poor public land management combined with hot and dry weather conditions and several years of drought.

Preparation and Planning

- People were told repeatedly in the media to only “stay and defend if you are physically and mentally prepared” however people seemed clueless as to how to do this. A comprehensive guide or even educational videos would be helpful in these regards.
- I saw houses that were relatively well prepared damaged or lost due to an unforeseen weakness (eg: an exposed poly fitting, flammable material next to a poly tank or weep holes on the house uncovered) once again some sought of checklist would be helpful.

- People need to take personal responsibility for their properties and have them clean and defensible. It is not fair on the RFS volunteers to expect them to defend a property you wouldn't be willing to defend yourself.

Response

- Many of the people who I have spoken to who attended fires in their early stages expressed that that more could have been done to put them out. They have mentioned a combination of bureaucracy and disregard for the consequences as being the major contributing factors.
- Braidwood response:
 - Fire was initially managed by National Parks before being handed to the NSW RFS.
 - Once management was handed over to the RFS the fire was well and truly out of control.
 - We felt there was an attitude that we didn't have anything to worry about initially however we started preparing the day the fire was first reported.
 - We already had one firefighting trailer and put together a second. We mustered all the sheep on the property and crash grazed around the yards and sheds to help protect them.
 - On the day the fire hit us (29/11/2019) we were able to secure a bulldozer thanks to our neighbour which enabled us to put in breaks. This dozer was on "standby" and was never requested by any of the managing agencies.
 - The fire hit the flats and exposed the problem with non-locals managing the fire we were told it would slow down and pass to the south west of us but the locals knew it would move quickly – travelled 7km in 1 ½ hours.
 - 3 neighbours called 000 but got no response – my neighbour was a local RFS Captain's daughter and the dozer operator his son and it was their phone calls directly to their father which alerted the RFS trucks to our plight.
 - As trucks arrived so did the graders. The first grader was a local who arrived of his own accord and his own expense the second was provided by council. Locals with vehicles were putting out the spot fires behind the firebreak while the RFS trucks handled the main fire.
 - RFS volunteers were great, but initial management of the fire was terrible. There seemed to be a problem with bureaucracy between agencies. The RFS also went into property protection mode and seemed to miss several opportunities to aggressively attack the fire in the days following.
- The effectiveness of heavy machinery can not be understated. While all the other equipment was useful the heavy machinery was probably the most cost effective equipment on the firefront.
- The RFS used to have small trucks with 600L tanks, but they no longer seem to have any. This means they've lost the ability to quickly put out spot fires. This was highlighted by the rise of the "Mosquito Brigades" around Braidwood which the RFS captains unofficially used as an additional resource to handle spot fires and smaller outbreaks. A mosquito vehicle was nothing more than a 1000 litre water tank and fire fighting pump on the back of a ute or trailer.
- South Coast:
 - Didn't learn from the other fires – there was one firebreak placed up the powerlines to the east of Batemans Bay and Mogo. This had hardwood forest on either side and it should have been clear from previous experience elsewhere in the state earlier in the fire season that this was never going to work. Firebreaks were more effective when placed in the open country or adjacent to infrastructure.

- As the South Coast isn't as agricultural they had way less equipment readily available and easily accessible on the fire front.
- Didn't have the level of knowledge at the local level to be prepared, they thought they had more time and people didn't want to create panic. In reality, fires are so unpredictable so you need to be prepared as soon as possible.
- The public didn't seem to appreciate what was coming. People were relying on garden hoses. Even though the message was to only stay if you're mentally and physically prepared, people had no idea what they were in for. For example, people were relying on electricity and had no back-up power, as they were never told it was going to go out.
- Many people had combustibles around their house and need better education about property preparation.
- I saw someone prepare and successfully defend their property with 40 buckets of water. Their property was well-prepared, neat and tidy with no combustibles around it and it survived despite the surrounding bush being engulfed in ten meter high flames. Their son was a Navy firefighter and it's clear his knowledge was the difference whereas many of the houses around them burnt to the ground.
- No amount of manpower or fire trucks could have stopped those fires despite the calls for more trucks and equipment. I doubt it would have made much of a difference by that stage.
- The newer builds on the South Coast seemed to fare a lot better than 40-50 year old houses, as well as the cleaner properties (e.g. no trees or shrubs up against the house and no combustible material nearby).
- Two fires I saw that were really well-handled by RFS captains were the Charley's Forest Fire (led by the Mongarlowe Brigade Captain) and the Jinden Fire (led by the Krawarree Captain)
- Backburning:
 - Backburning was generally very effective. Successful backburns were done quickly when the conditions were right.
 - I saw quite a few backburns take place on various scales and it was clear that if a backburn was to be successful it needed to be applied as soon as the conditions were right.
 - If a backburn was delayed and then applied the burn would often be "doughy" and wouldn't take properly. These backburns would often become dangerous in the following days as they hadn't burnt out the country they were supposed to and would often smoulder before reigniting under less than favourable conditions.
 - It often took too long backburns to get approved, and the RFS couldn't get it lit by the time it was approved because the window had gone.
 - In areas where backburns weren't allowed the country burnt anyway.
 - We need more local control to enable effective backburning and management of the fires.
- The commitment required from the RFS to be a volunteer is too heavy, they'd get more people to sign up if it was less time-consuming.

There were a lot of positives that came out of the fires. Communities pulled together in ways they haven't done in modern times and the hardship often brought out the best in people. Unfortunately we do need to look back though and analyse the summers events and as a result this submission may seem a little negative. I would just like to point out though that we are permanently indebted to the volunteers who stepped forward throughout the summer to fight fires, provide logistics or help the victims.

Thankyou

Sincerely,

Ben Elliott