

The Southern Villages Group
comprised of representatives from the Community Associations of
Bundanoon, Canyonleigh, Exeter, Penrose, Wingello, Tallong

Submission to NSW Bushfire Enquiry 2020

The Southern Villages Group is located in the NSW Southern Highlands.

To varying degrees all the Southern Villages were affected by the recent Morton Fire. Thousands of hectares were burned and, despite the exceptional efforts of the Rural Fire Brigades, the State Emergency Service and NSW Fire and Rescue, many houses, buildings, fences, and trees were lost in Bundanoon, Exeter, Penrose, Tallong and Wingello.

The following are issues that the Southern Villages Group asks the Enquiry to consider in order to reduce the impact of future fires and to assist residents and the RFS when fires occur.

Given that these villages are currently situated in close proximity to bushland and State Forests, **reduction of fire risk is the highest priority.**

Reduction of fire risk

- Facilitate regular, ie annual to bi annual, aboriginal method cool burns by the RFS and landowners to prevent fuel build up.
- Provide workshops for residents, in conjunction with the local RFS, to guide and train local farmers and landholders on these methods so they can safely maintain their own properties.
- Maintain wide cleared buffer zones and fire trails around the villages and between bushland and settlement.
- Ensure that entry and exit routes to the villages are clear of overhanging and diseased trees which can fall and block roads in a fire emergency.
- Remove flammable vegetation from roadsides and the banks of railway tracks, and remove pine windings and any new eucalypts from roadside verges.
- Encourage and assist residents to clear defunct pine plantations, flammable vegetation and rubbish from their properties.
- Plant more fire retardant trees in and around villages, and trees which provide summer shade.

Fire fighting

- Ensure villages each have a secure and sufficient covered water supply reserved for fire fighting only.
- Ensure the RFS have access to state of the art equipment and technology for their safety and to enable them to most effectively fight the fires.

- Provide the necessary specialist equipment to enable the RFS to access difficult areas such as the Shoalhaven Gorge to prevent fires progressing.
- Ensure National Parks and State Forests have sufficient numbers of trained fire fighting staff and equipment available to fight fires in these areas. This did not appear to be the case in recent fires.

Communication

- Improve mobile coverage in these high fire risk villages. Currently in many parts of the area coverage is very poor.
- Ensure communication is available during power outages. NBN landlines rely on power. Previously older non hands-free phones could be plugged into a phone outlet and would function. This is no longer the case so in a power outage in areas without mobile coverage residents will not be contactable or able to seek help.

Improve provision of up to date local information re state of fires.

- While the briefings by the NSW Fire Commissioner were excellent there was a need for a single source of reliable current **local** information. It was confusing that there were so many avenues for seeking information but none gave the full picture.
- Fires near Me provided very general information which after a while became standardised, out of date and not sufficiently detailed or localised.
- Radio Stations 97.3 and 702 provided some updates from the RFS and from residents.
- Local RFS provided sporadic updates via email, SMS and Facebook when they were not fighting the fires.
- Television provided mostly the human stories of people fighting or fleeing the fires or viewing the devastation. It was not useful for finding out up to date information on the immediate local fire threat. Large scale maps were needed to provide a clear picture of the fire locations and predicted movements.
- Social media and the real and digital grapevine were active with people seeking and relaying information but this was not always reliable
- Broadcastify enabled people to listen in to the firefighters obtaining up to the minute information on the weather, the expected progression of the fires and decisions on the deployment of firefighters and equipment. It provided the most up to date information but unfortunately caused alarm amongst some listeners while reassuring others with the calm competence of the firefighters and the currency of the information.

We hope our concerns and suggestions will be given full consideration and we look forward to being informed about the findings and recommendations of the Enquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Dawn Jonas
Convenor
Southern Villages Group

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