



# TRISH DOYLE MP

STATE MEMBER FOR THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

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Professor Mary O'Kane AC & Dave Owens APM  
NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry  
GPO Box 5341  
Sydney NSW 2001

*Mary + Dave*

Dear Professor O'Kane and Mr Owens

## NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

### Introduction

I would firstly like to thank you for your time and commitment to ensuring an accurate, transparent and thorough review of the recent bushfire season, and encourage you to be honest and fearless in the recommendations you put forward to Government.

I write this letter within the scope of my responsibilities as the Shadow Minister for Emergency Services and the Member for the Blue Mountains.

It is the view of myself, and the State Parliamentary Labor Party that we entered the 2019/2020 bushfire season under-resourced and under-prepared, despite being well aware that the season ahead of us posed unprecedented dangers.

The response to the fires by our firefighting and emergency service agencies was as good as it could be with the resources that they had. The real downfall, was a lack of forward-planning, and a lack of resourcing of our emergency services by the NSW Government in the lead up to this season.

Coordinated, comprehensive and effective emergency management costs time and money, neither of which were afforded adequately to our firefighting or supporting agencies.

The \$217 million emergency communications system that was announced after the worst bushfires in our State's history, was something that we should have had before these fires.

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We know that summers are getting longer, drier and hotter – why are we not equipping our emergency services adequately to deal with the consequences of that?

I will group my comments into threads/themes as I have heard (directly from emergency service personnel and their communities) and noted throughout my travels around NSW over the past 8 months, in my capacity as Shadow Minister and also a local Member in one of the most bush-fire prone areas in the world.

Before I delve into themes that, in the main, mirror the Terms of Reference for the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry, I will note for the record that I have heard from and consulted with people (Firefighters, SES personnel and their communities) in the following areas of NSW:

Taree, Wingham, Tinonee, Drake, Lismore, Tenterfield, Rappville, Wagga, Tumbarumba, Tumut, Maragle, Balmoral, Mogo, Bateman's Bay, Moruya, Nowra, Blue Mountains, Lithgow and Capertee.

Furthermore, over the past 10 months, I have liaised regularly with the Fire Brigades Employees Union (FBEU), the Rural Fire Service Association (RFSA), the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association (VFFA), the SES Volunteers Association and the Firefighters CANCER Coalition (Coalition Aiming for National Carcinogen Exposure Reduction). I acknowledge and appreciate the work these entities do to protect and represent their members, in difficult circumstances, and thank them.

Finally, I thank the tireless efforts, bravery and commitment to protecting life, homes and the environment that our firefighters and emergency services demonstrated for days and nights over endless weeks and months.

Mere words, and a mere submission, cannot convey the very deep respect and gratitude I feel that our front-line 'Fireys' deserve. I know that this sentiment is echoed by many millions of people, not just in NSW, but internationally.

On behalf of the NSW Labor Party, we express our heart-felt thanks, our humility and pay tribute to the incredible work undertaken in the midst of a phenomenal disaster.

## Themes relevant to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference

### Causes of and factors contributing to the bushfires

- Global warming, climate change, drier and warmer summers;
- excessive land clearing, drought, heat, fuel loads;
- unusually high wind velocity;
- human activity;
- Inadequate preparation / resourcing of our emergency service personnel.

### Preparation and Planning

- Grossly inadequate planning occurred by NSW Government. Going into the 2019-2020 fire season our Fire agencies (RFS, FRNSW and NPWS predominately) were under-resourced. Each of those agencies had less staff and equipment than they needed. There were calls for increased resources in the post-budget months of 2019, given the predictions for a bad fire season.
- Going into a fire season the RFS began a significant restructure: as at September 2019, approximately 170 positions were vacant
- RFS staff were fundamentally frustrated with vacancies; staff have been fearful of the future; people looking at exit strategies; a lack of staff had a direct impact on requests from volunteers; a culture of angst & significant fatigue exists
- RFS staff in regions and districts are agitated by a lack of consultation between the office of Commissioner and the ranks. They fear for their jobs.

- In early October 2019 RFS staff across the State of NSW said to me –  
*“we are short of people and the organisation has determined that a restructure is necessary for the purpose of Government imposed productivity savings AND we are looking down the barrel of catastrophe”*; and  
*“..to continue to lose corporate knowledge, goodwill and volunteer trust - places communities at risk in fire season.”*
- Fires started in earnest in August / September 2019. One Brigade I met with stated:  
*“The ADF was rolled out in January. We watched on telly the 4WD water tankers coming on board after the South Coast disaster... If we had them back in September, we wouldn't have been over-run and almost died... Such a pathetic, slow response to the impending disaster...What was the RFS thinking?”*

**Comment:**

An urgent review of RFS management, classification of staff and frontline planning needs must occur as a matter of urgent priority. This should include advice and feedback from the ‘boots on the ground’ Firefighters, as to what they actually need.

### Fit-for-purpose appliances & equipment; Care and maintenance of firetrucks

- Extra aircraft were and are required. Aerial firefighting is addressed in many expert submissions (example: The Bushfire Alliance) as a stand-alone point. It is ludicrous that the state failed to prepare and provide this - as a strategic and necessary tool.
- GPS tracking on RFS vehicles is almost non-existent. This must change immediately. Where such features existed, the Fire Control Centres don't have the software to read where the vehicles are. This is particularly the case out in the country-side – those fighting the Dunn's Rd fire, in the Southern Riverina region, suffered this problem.
- When bushfire tankers were needed, often urban pumpers were sent to incidents. They did not have adequate safety fittings like a 'halo' sprinkler system around the truck. If our firefighting agencies were truly well resourced, this would be a feature of ALL appliances
- It is a common view that 'the model is broken' with provision & maintenance of appliances. I am told relentlessly by RFS firefighters, particularly, that protection in trucks is paramount – wheel arch sprinklers and the halo system must be retro-fitted to every vehicle.
- Many firefighters on the ground have reported to me that the movement of trucks from Sydney metropolitan area out to the bush interface and remote off-road areas, highlighted how much the Blue Mountains and anything West of us have missed out on decent appliances with good equipment.
- Many appliances were deployed to areas across NSW for out-of-area task forces. Some of those appliances were not returned or returned many months after they were sent, devastatingly damaged. Local fire threats ensued and protection of local communities were compromised, as a result.

- Some FR stations and RFS brigades were limited to one appliance as other appliances were tasked to out-of-town strike teams and not replaced. An example: when 5 Firefighters answered the call to an incident at one NSWFR station up north, only 4 could be seated in the one appliance available. This must be addressed. Urban pumpers were often sent out into terrain not suitable to the vehicle's capacity. This must also be addressed.
- For townships and localities relying on tank or bore water and having no town water supply, the RFS organisation MUST not disadvantage Brigades by expecting them to wait for Cat1 water tankers to arrive from elsewhere before they can respond to a crisis. Provide them with the appliances and equipment that they need!

**Comment:**

- All current firefighting vehicles/appliances need to be retro-fitted with rollover cabin protection, 'halo' sprinkler systems, drop-down fire blankets and Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) systems.
- It is clear that NSW needs a larger fleet of fit-for-purpose fire appliances - ready and available to provide surge capability.
- The NSW Government should investigate and acquire chinook night-flying water bomber capability for the next bushfire season.
- The NSW Government should pledge appliances and equipment to those RFS Brigades who need the very basic firefighting gear in order to protect their localities, particularly where access to water is limited. The 'boots on the ground' should have a say in what their brigades and sheds need, as a necessary and urgent post-fire audit.

## Respiratory protection

- I note the excellent awareness–raising work of firefighters who formed the NSW Firefighter CANCER Coalition, and the overwhelming response from the public (purchasing masks) to the fact that firefighters suffered throughout the fire catastrophe due to inadequate respiratory protection.
- No firefighter should be exposed to increased cancer risks needlessly while serving the people of New South Wales.
- Bushfire smoke contains many cancer causing chemicals. Air quality conditions in Sydney and Social Media posts throughout the prolonged bushfire emergency have shown metropolitan residents what it is like to experience a small sample of what firefighters experience on the fire front day in, day out.
- Fire Service agencies, at this stage, do not provide adequate and practical respiratory protection suitable for the task of fighting bushfires. This causes firefighters, volunteers and paid alike, to purchase their own equipment just to stay safe while protecting the people of New South Wales.
- P2 masks that are provided are grossly inadequate for the mitigation of the hazards that bushfire smoke causes. Where self-contained breathing apparatus is available it provides only a limited short term working time-frame that doesn't align with the protracted nature of large bushfire incidents.
- Appropriate, higher level respiratory protection needs to be funded and supplied to firefighters immediately. There are several suitable alternatives available on the market currently.
- Insufficient respiratory protection resulted in an immediate health impact – firefighters talked to me of a persistent cough, a general feeling of unwellness and, as we all know, the air quality in much of the state was so poor, breathing was compared to 'smoking 37 cigarettes a day'

**Comment:**

Provide adequate and practical respiratory protection for ALL Firefighters immediately, as an absolute priority.

**Communications**

- It is common knowledge that RFS communications are haphazard; Radio coverage is poor in many areas, communications systems in and between fire agencies do not speak to one another.
- Often those on the ground were not able to - or did not receive - communication from the Fire Control Centres; and, often that advice was late or ignored local knowledge / crews on the ground with information literally at their feet.
- On the worst bushfire days, despite recent 'upgrades' of digital radios across fire agencies, communication became virtually impossible as smoke and flames disrupt transmission, radio towers are lost and the amount of 'traffic' over the systems is not manageable.
- The '*Fires Near Me*' application – a great tool but a blunt instrument – crashed on every major fire day, precisely when needed. It was considered useless if the fires were indeed 'nearby'.

**Comment:**

- A review of digital and analogue communications systems, including the use of mobile data terminals is required.
- A review and building of capacity for the *Fires Near Me* application is required.



### Fatigue management: volunteer and paid firefighter workforce

- Many RFS, FRNSW and NPWS firefighters spoke with me at length about fatigue, about PTSD, about managing home/family/work/volunteer work balances (or lack of) as there exists a high rate of burnout.
- A significant workplace, health and safety risk to firefighters (particularly those volunteers) was operating in adverse conditions, for increasingly long shifts – especially when this involved transporting replacement crews out into the field. A heavy physical and mental toll was taken by RFS Brigade members, particularly. It is fortunate that this did not result in more serious injuries or death. The RFS must undertake a fatigue management plan when the 'boots on the ground', in number, are significantly less than the numbers signed up.
- The mental health / well-being and recovery of our firefighters is a slow-burning issue (pardon the pun). The sporadic 'checking' on Firefighters - instead of a considered plan to assist Firefighters involved in near-death incidents - is negligent behaviour on part of the Government.
- I am aware that a comprehensive expert trauma- informed counselling package was carefully created, particularly for Firefighters and their families. It was offered to the Government last year (in preparation for post-fire PTSD) but not adopted.

### **Comment:**

Provide - as a matter of urgency and priority - mental health support to Firefighters. This support should be via a dedicated package that includes trauma-informed counsellors, by phone or on-the ground, if needed. Such support should be proactively offered to firefighters and their family members.

## Emergency Responses to bushfires; and decision making

- Notwithstanding that there are too many incidents to focus on here, I will use just a couple of examples to highlight the need for transparent and honest reviews which include feedback from both Incident Management Teams and Firefighters on the ground/ at the fire front:

**Hames Rd, Nowra** - this incident involved the near death of 8 FRNSW firefighters, and two vehicles which burnt to the ground.

Who made the decision to send this Strike Team into an inferno? Why?

**Balmoral** – as has been documented publicly, a serious review into decisions made around back-burning, refusal to use local knowledge, no access to water, and perceived 'abandonment of this township' must occur. As one Brigade member stated unequivocally:

*"It was a complete clusterf\*\*k. I am furious with the RFS higher-ups who have no local knowledge and don't respect those on the ground that do! I'm both frustrated and furious by this. So much unnecessary loss...."*

- FRNSW, RFS and NPWS firefighters have all raised significant concerns they have with communications and decision making in/between agencies.

As was explained to me by senior FR Officers:

*"Once Section 44 is invoked then everything goes to RFS. Their Divisional Commander is in charge. To become a Div. Comm, one needs only to be popular rather than have any experience or qualifications or a level head. My view – one held for decades by many experienced firefighters – is that NSW Fire + Rescue should be in charge of their division under the scope of the Section 44. It is ludicrous that 000 calls are forwarded to the RFS centre. They then decide which unit goes. We have the equipment and training and far superior comms set-up. We should respond in our area. We desperately need district revisions".*

and

*“The common-sense approach would be that the Fire suppression agency for an area should take command and control; that the FRNSW Commander be appointed, rather than an unprepared, unqualified Acting RFS Div. Comm volunteer. There was no unity of command on the field. Some of the horrors experienced were NOT the fault of RFS volunteers on the ground. However, a review of the Acts of both Fire Services (and the State Bush Fire Plan) is necessary. When a professional service with modern state-of-the-art technology and Incident command training, with appropriate equipment and expert fire-suppression training - is unable to take the lead and respond in its own fire districts, we have a conundrum...”*

- Frustration with decision making has also been explained to me this way by an experienced and well-respected RFS veteran in the Central West:

*“The RFS machine is the dead hand of bureaucracy – they’re set up on a military scale for guerrilla warfare; bureaucrats usurp the knowledgeable and long-standing authority of the farmer / firefighters on the ground.”*

**Comment:**

- FRNSW must remain in charge of fires within their gazetted fire districts at all times, therefore amendments to the Rural Fires Act 1997 must be enacted.
- To highlight ongoing issues at bush fires and associated safety concerns around response decision-making, the command and control of Incidents is critical and **MUST** be reviewed. There needs to be a restructuring of co-operative firefighting arrangements, and improved co-ordination between FRNSW and RFS, during a crisis.
- Increase Retained Fire Fighters to supplement the professional Permanent firefighting resources.
- The RFS should investigate centralised, expedited training for Basic Firefighters, RFS Drivers and Crew Leaders; consideration should be given to adopting the comprehensive FRNSW expert model of training.

Acknowledgements:

I acknowledge and support those submissions (and commentary) that have been forwarded to me and the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry leaders, from:

- Katoomba/Leura RFS Brigade
- Drake RFS Brigade
- Blackheath RFS Brigade
- Balmoral RFS Brigade
- Firefighter Darren Rodrigo – personal submission
- The Bushfire Alliance  
(Firefighters John Travers, Don Nott and Graham Swain)
- Mr Rich Marschall
- The FBEU
- The Firefighters CANCER Coalition;

and, not least...

- The many hundreds of excellent firefighters from Brigades, Station crews and Strike teams, who cannot be named for fear of reprisal - brave Fireys from NPWS, NSW Fire + Rescue; the NSW Rural Fire Service, and the NSW Forestry Corporation.

It was an honour, though often tormenting, to hear of your experiences and your stories and your views. Many of you asked that I be your voice through this submission process. I hope, in some small way, I have done you justice.

In conclusion, it is incumbent upon me to give voice to a viewpoint expressed by so many people across the State: there have been many inquiries around bushfires - more recently Tathra – where a range of recommendations were made and not acted upon.

100's of recommendations have been ignored by Governments. People feel, rightly, demoralized and cynical about anything ever changing.

To save lives in the next fire season, the Government must make changes to our firefighting agencies that essentially provide them with the capacity they need and ask for. Doing nothing is not an option. This Inquiry is an opportunity to provide that respect and gratitude we owe our Firefighters, especially given we will need them again in the not-so-distant future.

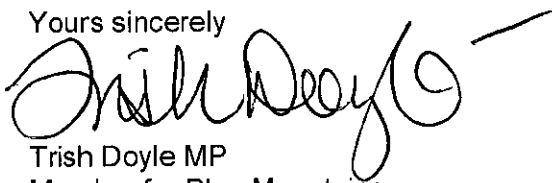
The narrative around our firefighting agencies being 'better resourced than they ever have been' is false, and dangerous. It creates a false sense of security, and shrugs off vital and deserved criticism. Unprecedented weather and conditions, must be matched with unprecedented investment.

Funding in the emergency services portfolio must be proactive. The Government's reactive approach is dangerous and ill-advised.

**I believe that out of this Inquiry the 'comments' noted under each section must be actioned by Government.**

Our firefighters need better equipment, better protections, better training, better appliances, better inter-agency integration, and there need to be many more of them. To fail to invest in every aspect, would be to fail to prepare once again. Let us learn from the Black Summer that was 2019/2020, particularly as a salute to those that lost their lives - and the many who almost did and lived to tell the harrowing tale. They deserve change.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trish Doyle', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Trish Doyle MP  
Member for Blue Mountains  
Shadow Minister for Emergency Services