
Title

Mr

First name

Greg

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Hale

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

Killabakh had been in the grip an increasing drought from 2016. The lack of water, rain and ground water created thick dry ground cover in previously wet rainforest gullies along with dense mulch on ridges with even the most mature gums dropping the majority of their canopies. Our farm had been hand feeding cattle twice a day since October 2018. We also reduced the number of our herd from 42 to 13 during 2019. Our main creeks had not run since early 2017 and dams one by one dried up. Our large main dam ran dry in October 2019. At this point we were not only buying stock feed but also water to hydrate our remaining herd.

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

The Rumba Dump fire was started in early October 2019 by a dry lightning strike. This fire was managed by National Parks in the first instance. As part of the Killabakh RFS I attended the Rumba Dump fire early in October at a time the fire had jumped containment lines during a back burn procedure. The fire started in inaccessible country close to Tapin Tops at the Western edge of the Manning Valley. I remember clearly discussing my concerns for this fire with the Killabakh RFS Captain on our return journey from Tapin Tops. My concern was that if this fire got away on one of our frequent Westerly weather systems (which were prevalent during the drought) the valley system between the "Rumba Dump Trail" and Killabakh would be gripped in a catastrophic bush fire.

One month later on November the 8th 2019 I received a fire page and responded to an emergency fire call in Killabakh 7 along with 3 other fire fighters. We were tasked to a property at Hillville, south of Taree. At the end of this Job at approximately 2.30 pm we were asked to provide an emergency response to a property in Bobin Creek Rd, Bobin, a woman trapped in a house with fire imminent. The travel to Bobin was very difficult due to the amount of fire on the roads, downed trees and smoke hazard. I remember clearly thinking this fire (The Rumba Dump Fire) will be in Killabakh sooner rather than later, considering the current spread and the weather conditions.

On arrival in Bobin we were re tasked by a group Officer to three houses on the Bobin Road. Two (2) of these houses were fully alight with the other close to ignition. We managed to save the third house and at approximately 6.00 pm we went to fill our water tank at Millers Lane Bobin. While waiting to access the water point we heard over the tuck radio that houses in Killabakh were under threat. We asked the Bobin incident controller to release Killabakh 7 to go back to Killabakh. We also knew through the radio system that Killabakh's other fire truck Killabakh 9 was at Moorall Creek working on the fire ground. This meant there were no fire trucks at Killabakh.

I remember being quite concerned about the fire in Moorall Creek as the western Boundary of our property is in Moorall Creek and my partner and her elderly mother were at the property (184 Yarnold Rd Killabakh) alone.

On our Journey back to Killabakh we passed through Wingham where at approximately 6.50 pm where we saw a strike team of (1) group Officer and several fire trucks heading toward Bobin. I remember saying TOO LATE. On arrival in Killabakh both sides of the road way from Betts Close to Yarnold Road were on fire in some way. We were stopped by Police at the intersection of Mortons and Comboyne Road. They were leading residents in an evacuation convoy. The Police asked if the road was clear. At this point I realised there had been no fire appliances deployed to the fire at Killabakh. This was the first fire in Killabakh in living memory. What concerned me, even at this early stage, was that the Police were asked to do evacuations and there was no fire truck operating in the Killabakh locality to support them.

In the first instance we attended the Killabakh fire shed to refill with water. We then took the decision to attend my property due to the extent of the fire visible on the western ridge.

At this point I made the difficult decision to send the Fire truck on its way without me, as I needed to manage the fire on my farm. My partner and I fought fires in our property and Yarnold Road overall during the next 5 days. We had phone conversations with the Killabakh Fire captain who took up the role of incident controller during the Killabakh Fire. What astounded me most was a visit to our property by Killabakh 9 on Sunday 10th November, who told me they were not firefighting but on property protection, at a time when no properties were under threat. I asked for assistance to put out a fire I could not manage, but was told they could not help as they were instructed to check on property only. This fire which on my estimation could have been extinguished, with the help of Killabakh (9), got away three days later to join with another branch on the fire which destroyed 2 houses, countless kilometers of fencing and hectares of pasture.

The fire burnt approximately 80% of our farm, with fires being managed on a daily basis to keep cattle and other farm animals safe along with outbuildings, yards, sheds, houses and equipment. The worst day for us was Tuesday 12th November when the westerly wind returned, whipping up major blazes, in Killabakh, including on our farm. We had made a clear decision to stay and fight /defend. This was based on our preparation, experience and equipment we had to assist. I fought fires with my tractor at two neighbours' farms from 2.00 pm to approx. 5.30 pm. There was no assistance from the RFS at all. After a short break my partner and I fought fires on our property from 6.30 pm to 3.00am. These blazes destroyed 9 houses and out buildings, nearly claimed the Killabakh Hall and Fire Shed.

As the fire had passed our property by Wednesday 13th November I went back on the fire truck fighting fires in the northern part of our valley for approximately 12 to 15 hours a day until Sunday 17th November. On my return what struck me was that our fire captain had worked constantly for 4 days with little relief or rest. That there had been a lack of support or response from Fire Com to our fire in the valley. My observation when I returned to the fire

ground was that there was minimal assistance from Fire com and a negligible level of support for our fire captain apart from some relief organised through our brigade from two part time residents who have deputy captain status in the Newcastle region who came to assist on Wednesday 13th November.

1.2 Preparation and planning

There are three distinct areas of preparation and response.

1. Preparation and planning of residents and their properties
2. Preparation and Planning of the Killabakh RFS
3. Preparation and Planning by Mid Coast Regional RFS

All three areas preparation and planning was influenced by the drought and worsening weather conditions.

Residents and Properties:

There was a lack of planning and preparedness by residents in our locality. This was mainly due to the fact that residents of Killabakh have never had a catastrophic event such as our Rumba Complex Fire. Although there were clear indicators this summer that it would be a very different fire season many residents were unprepared. Residents did try as hard as they can to clean up and prepare for fires. Some residents had proper firefighting equipment and resources to support firefighting and made a clear decision to stay and defend based on their experience equipment and preparedness. Other residents chose to evacuate and not defend, mostly based on the urgency and quickness of the fire. Our experience was to stay and defend. Although during the experience one questions their decision it was manageable and workable due to the location of the fires on our property the construction of road ways as fire breaks and the distance of fire from important infrastructure. Also in our favour was the change in the weather at a critical point on the evening of 12th November 2019 when the wind calmed at approximately 8.00 pm.

Preparations and Planning of the Killabakh RFS:

Although the RFS is on standby during the Bushfire period there were some issues which influenced preparation and planning. Killabakh this season only had one officer (Fire Captain) which means there are no other personnel in a decision making role. The captain also inherited the role of Incident controller for this fire. The fire was run from our fire shed without proper facilities and a total electrical outage during the event i.e. radio contact with Fire Com being the biggest issue. This was allowed to continue for the full length of the fire with some relief, but not at a sufficient level to allow the Killabakh Captain to rest and recover. This approach would definitely contravene WHS regulations. Killabakh did not receive any assistance in the form of fire prediction maps or other information from fire com to assist in the tracking and planning for firefighting on a daily basis.

Preparations and Planning by Mid Coast Region RFS:

The Strategic Plan that was developed by Mid Coast Region RFS was totally inadequate as a response the Rumba Complex Fire not only in Killabakh but around the Manning Valley. The Plan (See attachment) was to develop a strike team for Catastrophic Fire days to be based in Taree to respond rapidly to incidents. What this plan did not take into account was the extreme nature of a large fire event coupled with a severe weather event moving in a westerly direction over several valleys in one day. My observation here is that the strategic plan did not take into account the worst scenario. Mid Coast fire com did not and or could not respond to calls for extra resources at critical stages of our fire. This compromised the ability to respond to the majority of 000 calls.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Our response to the bush fires was based on experience, level of preparation, competent neighbours and a clear knowledge that we could not rely on the RFS to assist due to a lack of resources and the ability of our local brigade to manage a large incident with minimal assistance. Personally the main dilemma was deciding to stay and defend our farm rather than be on the fire truck during the critical stages of the fire.

1.4 Any other matters

The submission is influenced by my association with the RFS as an active member of the Killabakh Brigade. I have attached the After Action Review for further information of the Inquiry. I was the Brigade officer responsible for the development of the After Action review. The After Action Review is in the process of being finalised and will be submitted to the RFS.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Killabakh After Action Review.docx

After Action Review – Killabakh Fires 8/11/2019 to 17/11/2019

- **What did we set out to do?**

1. We set out to prevent the “Rumba Complex” fire from moving through the Manning Valley by way of our attendance at Tapin Tops, Bobin and Moorah Creek fires, which were all part of the “Rumba Complex” fire. This occurred over a 4 week period up until 8/11/2019.
2. Killabakh RFS set out to PROTECT the Killabakh locality from the Rumba Complex Fire. The fire ran for approximately 10 days in Killabakh with 9 houses lost and significant effect / damage on properties of all description.
3. We set out to support the community in decisions about their safety and property protection.
4. We set out to support each other during this Bushfire Crisis event in Killabakh.
5. We set out to work collaboratively with other regional and interstate RFS units in Killabakh's severest fire in living memory.
6. We set out to work within RFS standard operational and support guidelines.
7. We set out with the expectation that the “RFS” would support our operation / incident.

- **What actually happened?**

1. Killabakh 7 and Killabakh 9 were both deployed to fires on Friday 8/11/2019. The cat 7 was deployed to Hillville and Bobin and the cat 9 was deployed to Moorah Creek. Both these fires were part of the Rumba Dump Complex fires which came to Killabakh in the late afternoon on the same day. Surely this was a dangerous tactic to have no fire trucks at Killabakh when the fire had the potential to reach Killabakh that same day. Therefore in the first instance there was “NO” local RFS response available. There seems to have been a poorly executed strategic plan for intervention on a large scale in the Manning Valley by the RFS. As an example Both Killabakh 7 and Killabakh 9 were deployed elsewhere in the Manning Valley on 8/11/2019 when it was obvious the Rumba Complex Fire would reach Killabakh on that same day. It is ironic that both Killabakh (7) and Killabakh (9) had to ask to be released from their

duties at Bobin and Moorah Creek respectively, after hearing residences at Killabakh were under attack on the PMR radio in truck while on duty. Fire Com did not activate our redeployment.

2. The fire entered Killabakh on 8/11/2019 over a large front from the western ridge between Moorah Creek and Killabakh and ember attack was critical part of the fire spread.
3. The fires ran over 10 days with Tuesday 12th November 2019 being our greatest challenge. The original fire covered the area from Betts Close to Yarnold Rd, along the Comboyne Rd and western ridge.
4. Both Killabakh 7 and Killabakh 9 returned to Killabakh without any information from Fire Com about the fire. Tinonee (1) also attended. At some time before and up to approximately 7.00pm police were evacuating community members. This was in response to 000 calls which were made by the community when the fire approached.
5. On Saturday 9/11/2019 fires were managed by Killabakh 7 & 9 with the assistance of Mt George (7) in the Potts Rd and Yarnold Rd Area. Some areas were managed by residents some of whom were RFS members.
6. On Sunday 10th November a Strike Team from South Australia was tasked to assist in the Killabakh Fire. Their expertise was recognised and they brought with them the first and only "Fire Com" map of our fire. They gave advice and support, as well as fighting fires. At this stage the fires had also reached the Killabakh Creek area, a critical point in the overall outcome for the fire in Killabakh. Residents in the Killabakh Creek area were active in assisting the management of and fighting the fire in their area.
7. On Monday 11th November at a dinner for the South Australian Strike team at the Killabakh Fire Shed we were informed by the South Australian Strike team that they were to be redeployed as of Tuesday 12th November. This news came at a time when "catastrophic fire conditions" were predicted for the following day 12th November. This decision without notice, shocked our brigade and left Killabakh in a very vulnerable position. It was astounding to our brigade that this decision was made without consultation and without any backup plan. This was a decision that influenced the outcome and impact on the Killabakh community. At the time of writing this paper we are yet to be told how or why this decision was made. The community really feels we were

thrown “under the bus” and deemed less important in the scheme of things.

8. There was active support from community members throughout the entirety of the fire in Killabakh. One particular group was named the “Bulky Bin Boys” due to their firefighting rigs, age and enthusiasm. All efforts by community members were appreciated especially from the “Bulky Bin Boys”. Also, a number of farmers and their families in the area provided support and firefighting capability utilising farm equipment to create fire breaks and extinguish fire. Without their efforts Killabakh would have been in a much worse position during and after the fires. They embodied real community spirit and effort during this major fire crisis. The RFS needs to develop a way of integrating this community firefighting resource into a workable fashion. We are led to believe there are instances of this type of community firefighting in NSW.
9. We realise that there was a wide spread fire attack in the Manning Valley during the Killabakh Fire. Notwithstanding that fact, Killabakh felt generally abandoned by the RFS due to the amount of resources available to assist and support the worst fire in living memory. A small village of 285 residents lost a total of 9 houses. Large swathes of farm land, pristine country and kilometres of fencing have been lost. The psychological damage in the region is immense. It is staggering that other brigades have called our fire “The forgotten Fire,” it really does represent how we feel.
10. The RFS allowed an incident to be primarily run from the Killabakh Fire Shed, without proper communication, infrastructure and support for the Captain. At the time of the fire the Killabakh Captain was the only ranked officer in the brigade. There was periodic support in short bursts, which did not allow the Captain to fully rest. Captain and fire crew alike were all subject to a very stressful 10 days. The only fulltime relief came in the form of 2 Deputy Captains from Newcastle who are part time residents in Killabakh. They assisted the coordination of firefighting efforts from Wednesday 13th November to Sunday 17th November 2019.
11. Responses from Fire Com when requesting further assistance at critical points in this operation were very unsupportive and unprofessional. Request for extra units to protect houses were met with “We’re doing the best we can”. “You need to do the best you can with the resources you’ve got” etc.

12. There was no coordinated approach for assistance with water for firefighting by the RFS. This fire came during the worst drought in living memory and it was discovered by a community member that there was bulk water available through Mid Coast Council. Surely Fire Com would have been responsible for this coordination.
13. Communication with the public at large was inadequate. There are some residents who are not connected to the internet. Many residents relied on observations of friends and neighbours to get organised. Some residents were totally unprepared for a fire of this magnitude, which does place added pressure on the RFS and other emergency organisations.
14. On Friday 8th November there were only three fire trucks responding to this major incident in a situation where Police were already issuing evacuation orders. Surely the Police action was organised by Fire Com. The question is, why wasn't there a response organised for RFS Brigades at the same time as Police? We are aware the Police had been alerted and had responded to a triple "0" call. This is seen as a lack of coordination and support which continued throughout the fire.
15. Killabakh Fire brigade has been left to ponder the processes around our fire in November. There has been a lack of support and debriefing from the RFS after such a major event. The Killabakh Community Association did organise RFS attendance at the last community recovery meeting on 19/1/2020 for the residents who lost their homes. There was no contact or information provided to the Killabakh brigade. We have sought advice and support from our Group Officer, which has been helpful, but we are mindful he was in much the same position as our brigade during this event where most of his area was on fire.
16. There was lack of communication with Fire Com as the Killabakh shed is not equipped to run an incident, meaning that messages to and from fire com were inefficient. As the Captain was the incident controller for the majority of the event his position was untenable. When not controlling he was mainly on the fire truck which meant he worked hours way past the RFS standard. This was compounded during the most critical stages of the operation as our whole valley had no communication and power due to the fires. This was eventually and partly solved by Mid Coast Council who provided a generator to the Community Hall precinct after the main event on Tuesday 12/11/2020.

- Why did it happen?

The contributing factors to the Killabakh Fire include;

1. The prolonged drought and prevailing weather conditions.
2. The extent, severity and complex nature of the Rumba Dump Fire.
3. The lack of rigour in the Mid Coast region Strategic planning for a major event.
4. We waited for the fire to come to us and this approach had major consequences in the Killabakh Fire.
5. The lack of coordination, communication and support by and with Mid Coast Region before, during and after the event.
6. The lack of local firefighting resources. The Killabakh Brigade had limited member numbers and only one ranked officer (captain) at the time of the fires. The Captain also became the incident controller for the majority of the event.
7. There was a great community response and support of the Fire brigade both with firefighting efforts from community members including the “Bulky Boys”, farming community and support of brigade members at the fire shed between shifts.
8. Despite the lack of support Killabakh RFS were instrumental in keeping the community safe and protecting many houses, properties, the community hall precinct and the fire shed.
9. Killabakh RFS worked tirelessly in their endeavours, to their own detriment with the help of the community.
10. The lack of support issue is qualified by the following comment. We realise that the majority of the Manning Valley was impacted by fire during the period of the Killabakh Fire which was part of the “Rumba Complex Fire”. It is unfathomable that the RFS (which is a State Government Instrument) is unable to respond to 000 calls, telling residents and brigades “there is no assistance available and to do the best you can”. In no way are we critical of individuals in the RFS. But organisationally we want to raise the issue of a lack of support and planning.

- What are we going to do next time?

1. Having the right equipment to run an incident locally. Fire ground radios in all trucks. PMR radio in the shed and hand held. Support for the shed to be self-sufficient during a disaster / fire. Generator, solar power. etc.
2. Fire com information and predictions about the fire. Mapping etc. Computer facilities to gather and produce maps if isolated.
3. Staffing arrangements that suit the incident. Driver rosters, regular breaks to allow crews to rest (when possible). Out of this incident, Killabakh has gained several new recruits who are currently in training. This addition in numbers will improve our response capability in the future.
4. Shift start, briefings and debriefing at the end of shifts.
5. Air conditioning in the muster room.
6. Proper kitchen facilities.
7. Application of LACES, SMEACS, IMSAFER.
8. Allocation of roles in the truck by the Officer in charge before we get to the incident. A rotation of roles at the incident, where possible to spread the workload.
9. Second uniform for longer incidents. We were not aware of this availability.
10. Ensure that all fire fighters have the correct PPE.
11. Up to date information about the community; difficult areas, isolated residents, vulnerable residents.
12. Acute information about the local roads, tracks and trails. How to access and or get access in a fire and in an emergency.
13. Task allocation at the shed, to share the load during critical operations.
14. Upgrade our recruitment approach.
15. Greater support for the brigade structure, with crew leader applications.
16. A more consistent approach to information gathering and education within our community.
17. An ongoing training program that upskills all current volunteers.

Comment

This AAR has been developed in an endeavour to address those questions that have arisen out of the “Killabakh Forgotten Fire”. We understand this was an extraordinary event. We felt the lack of preparedness, overall support and follow up leaves the organisation vulnerable to criticism and the outcome could have been far worse.

Prepared by

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