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## Your details

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**Title**

Ms

**First name**

Jo

**Last name**

Dodds

**Email****Address**

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## Submission details

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**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)**

Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action

**Your position in the organisation (if applicable)**

President

**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

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## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action stories

Lies Paijmans

My name is Liesbeth Paijmans and I live in Tathra NSW, where I have lived for 18 years. I am a Tafe NSW casual teacher and have worked at the Bega Tafe since 2004.

Previous bushfire experience:

My son and I lost our house in the Tathra bushfire of March 2018, when temperatures and winds never before experienced at that time of year turned a grass fire into a massive fire front that no one expected or had time to prepare for. Sixty-nine houses were destroyed in that fire, and 2 years later there are still people/families who have been unable to re-establish their own homes, and/or are still suffering post-traumatic stress.

Like so many other people who lost homes then and in the recent bushfires of 2019 and 2020, I was traumatised by the sudden and shocking loss of everything that represented my life, my history, my memories, my family. I was also deeply disturbed by the implications of this fire, that it was the result of weather conditions previously not experienced, and yet the warnings and predictions that gave foreknowledge of such an event were not heeded. Just as it was ignored in the portentous climate conditions leading to the terrible bushfires of last Summer, which burnt 19.4million hectares of land across Australia, 5.4 million hectares in NSW, and killed over a billion animals and 35 people.

These climate conditions, combined with the reduction of experienced fire management staff through budget cuts, the funding and staff cuts to NSW National parks and Wildlife, and a general unwillingness by both State and Federal governments to acknowledge and respond to the Climate Crisis, led to the catastrophe of last Summer. The bushfire season started unseasonably early, and fires that behaved in unimaginable ways first destroyed large areas of Northern NSW.

Experience of 2019/20 Fires

Scientists and Fire Chiefs warned that worse was to come, and they were right.

I was again personally affected by the bushfires, when a family property on the Tuross River, where we have been going for 35 years, was completely devastated by the Badja State Forest Fire. We lost 3 houses, all our neighbours lost their houses, and the forests were burnt beyond recognition by a fire that burnt with a ferocity none of us could have imagined.

So many people, like my family and friends, are having to live with deep trauma and sadness. There is now an eerie silence where once there were hundreds of birds, and distant burnt ridge lines and valleys can now be seen through the blackened remains of what were once tall, leafy trees. I feel deeply saddened and sickened by what has been lost, and angry that it could have been averted.

When the fire started on the Northern edge of the Badja State forest weeks before it suddenly took off, we waited anxiously for something to be done to reduce the fire. But there were insufficient resources and firefighters to tend to it, and the Government had refused to support the purchase of large air tankers, which could have extinguished or at least slowed down the fire before it roared across the entire Badja State Forest and into the coastal villages, destroying houses and lives.

There were more than enough warnings that this catastrophic fire season was coming - increasing temperatures, increasing drought, below average rainfall, and the warnings about the impact of climate change made more than 10 years ago by the CSIRO, and the Garnaut report. Yet these warnings have been largely ignored, and the State and Federal Governments are still refusing to acknowledge the link between bushfires and climate change. The response to the bush fires was altogether too little too late.

The future looks grim indeed if the climate crisis is not tackled with the urgency it needs, and I am filled with dread to think how much worse it will get, even if we were to aim for zero emissions right now. It will take at least 500 years to get back to the 'normal' levels of CO2 of 20 years ago. The effects of the climate crisis are inevitable, but governments could be doing huge amounts more to lessen them and to facilitate a transition to a 'new world' where we will have to deal with an even hotter, more variable climate.

This includes:

- \* bringing an end to all coal mining, fossil fuel production
- \* transitioning/upgrading to renewable sources of energy, electric vehicles, renewable fuel aeroplanes
- \* setting State-wide standards for renewable energy production
- \* setting building codes to adapt to severe weather events, and that incorporate principles of energy efficiency
- \* adopting an economic model that supports local/community self-sufficiency and equitable wealth distribution through eg social wage
- \* putting a ceiling on living standards, increasing taxes on luxury goods
- \* generating global awareness of the limits of the earth's resources using clear, researched information and targeting all communities
- \* establishing a Carbon Tax, ensuring that big businesses in particular are taxed according to Carbon output
- \* education and promotion of the principles of ecologically sound farming practices eg regenerative farming, growing forests, sequestering carbon, maximum water retention
- \* stopping land clearing and preserving forests
- \* increasing private land conservation
- \* re-establishing and fully supporting Fire-management expertise and research, including indigenous methods of controlled burning
- \* increasing National Parks environmental conservation funding and expansion of protected areas, and employing more skilled rangers

Jo Dodds and Tony Dean

Previous bushfire experience:

We live on a 50 acre bush property just outside Tathra, NSW. In March 2018 we experienced a day of extraordinary weather, including extreme winds and highly unusual temperatures.

Despite it having been a green summer it only took a failure in an electricity supply line to ignite a grass and then forest fire. The fire took off towards Tathra and our home in the forest.

Within a few hours the fire had grown to an inferno, jumped the Bega River, and devastated the small coastal town of Tathra. On the way to Tathra it destroyed homes and properties in Reedy Swamp and Vimy Ridge (where we live). With help from a wind change, emergency services and aerial water bombers, our home was saved. But in total 69 homes were lost, more were damaged, and my community was in utter devastation.

From that day on, the threat of bushfire was no longer a theoretical risk but a concrete reality to us. And we started advocating for action on bushfire preparedness and resources for emergency services. We also started advocating for urgent action on climate damage,

to reduce the escalating threat of hotter, drier weather driving more frequent and devastating bushfires.

Experience of the 2019/2020 fires:

As the drought deepened throughout 2018 and 2019 we watched bushfire conditions in our region become more and more dangerous. The low humidity and frequent, unseasonal and unpredictable winds made it impossible to do any hazard reduction burning at our location.

When fires began in QLD in late 2019 we experienced a sense of dread as we knew the dangerous weather was expected to continue and worsen. Leaving my partner home on his own I drove to Melbourne to visit family. I was then unable to return home due to the fires, for several weeks. My partner was joined by his brother and sister in law and their 7 year old son, who were evacuated from their home near Lakes Entrance.

In late December 2019 fires began at locations across the Bega Valley Shire, to our north, west and east. This meant that we were under threat whichever way the wind blew other than from the east. My partner and his brother prepared our property as best they could then the brother and his family moved to another location in Bega, to avoid risk of smoke, fire and trauma to their son. My partner stayed on alone in our house.

By NYE we learned that the small town of Cobargo had been directly impacted by fire, destroying heritage buildings in the main streets and surrounding area, and lives had been lost. We also understood that our home was likely to come under direct attack as embers had been traveling great distances, even overnight in apparently windless conditions. RFS and other fire workers remarked that this behaviour was unprecedented.

In Melbourne I spent the day extremely worried for my partner and my home. I felt guilty that I wasn't there to help or to rescue my most precious possessions and I didn't feel that I could ask my partner to both prepare our home AND remove my possessions. I limited my phone calls to him because I knew he was very busy and didn't need interruptions. I called only to make sure he was safe at the end of the day. I was extremely worried for his safety.

When we spoke in the afternoon he described the day as completely dark due to smoke. It was impossible to be outside without a proper particulate mask and sealed goggles. He placed wet towels under all doors and windows to provide some relief in the house. He was alone in that darkness all day. I hoped that telecommunications wouldn't fail as he couldn't see any advancing fire from our home and was relying on aps and news from other people. If his phone went dead there was absolutely nothing I could have done but wait.

We spent our 20th anniversary in darkness, smoke and fear, 600 kilometres apart.

About 5 days later the coastal town of Bermagui came under threat again. While in a supermarket I received a phone call from a staff member working with emergency services. This was in my capacity as a local government Councillor. The staffer informed me that she had been advised that people who didn't leave Bermagui immediately were likely to die. Although many had evacuated there were still a huge number of people determined to stay, who were refusing police orders to leave.

The staff member asked me if I knew anyone in Bermagui who was a community leader whom others might be most likely to trust if they suggested they leave. She asked me to write a text that police would then take to Bermagui by car, as there were no telecoms or electricity. I desperately rang friends who had evacuated so I could identify who may have

stayed and address them directly. I wrote the text but then added a video of myself asking people to trust emergency services and leave immediately. I did this all while standing in the carpark outside the supermarket, in tears, and extremely distressed. I felt helpless yet responsible for the lives of so many community members, many of them friends.

Sheer luck meant the fire did not reach Bermagui that night and no lives or properties in town were lost. The town police officer later described it as the worst day of his life. He stated “I’ve been shot at and hit and had someone come at me with a weapon but nothing was as frightening as that day”.

Now I live with the knowledge that if I don’t lose my home, someone else is losing theirs. I feel completely safe only when it’s raining. As I move about my home I imagine it on fire. I remember the utter destruction I’ve witnessed of my friend’s and neighbours homes. I look at my possessions and note how few, if any, would be recognisable after the fire. My partner and I discuss whether we should spend money on repairs or improvements to our single biggest asset – our home – because we have had to admit how likely it is that we will lose it. We wonder how long we will be able to keep insuring it as conditions worsen and premiums rise.

But nothing is as horrifying for us as the stories we have heard from other survivors, of dairy cattle bellowing in pain as they burned alive and koalas screaming in pain as they died. They sounded, according to witnesses, like children.

## **Terms of Reference (optional)**

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

### **1.1 Causes and contributing factors**

We are not fire and emergency experts. So we look to those who are expert in these matters. We trust the decades of science behind our current knowledge of fire behaviour and its causes.

The mining and use of fossil fuels is causing a rise in greenhouse gas emissions that in turn is causing increasingly dangerous changes in climate. The changes to climate, in southeast Australia, include an increase in hotter, drier conditions. This, in turn has led to bushfires that are hotter, faster, bigger, more destructive, and more frequent.

This destruction is supported by the failure of governments, globally, to take the necessary actions to reduce the impacts of increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

Contributing factors are the efforts of the big emitters to stymie a swift transition to non-polluting energy and materials, and governments failing to put a price on emissions. In Australia the weakening of our democratic system by the concentration of media ownership, and unchecked political donations, further enable the ongoing support by a few for increasing emissions.

The second biggest cause and contributing factor to the ferocity of the 2019/20 fires was the large areas of unmanaged forestry land. Dense, low-height, single age re-growth lined the Princes Highway for many kilometres both north and south of the NSW/VIC border. This sort of mono-level regrowth encourages hotter fires and drove the Gippsland fires

through Wonboyn towards Eden.

Logging of old and diverse growth/age forest also increases bushfire risk as the older trees assist in keeping landscapes more hydrated, suppress understory growth, protect from winds, absorb greenhouse gases, and don't burn as readily as smaller, lower vegetation.

The loss of many NPWS staff with deep local knowledge and connections to community has robbed us of experience, wisdom and leadership. Similarly, successful locally based Indigenous burning training programs were defunded before the latest fires and the knowledge and relationships that were being created were lost. This move also increased cynicism in local Indigenous communities about government's will to take their involvement in landscape protection seriously.

Ignitions – clearly there were diverse sources of ignition. The primary ones, according to emergency services, were dry lightning. A smaller number were caused by humans, a much smaller number again by arsonists. The misrepresentation of these facts by government and media commentators is dangerous and puts people's lives at risk because pressure comes to bear to 'blame' the wrong causes and not address the real risks.

Fires - The 2019/20 fires all shared similar features once ignited. Chief among these was the ferocity, speed and unpredictability of the fires.

RFS members in the Bega Valley Shire stated they'd never seen fires move as some of these did. Overnight, in near windless conditions, two fires in this shire moved great distances in straight, narrow lines. Fires behaving in unusual ways caught people by surprise, as happened in much of Cobargo. It was mere luck that more people weren't killed there.

The Bemboka fire in 2018 burned for 7 weeks while there was snow on the mountains above. There were up to 16 helicopters, 35 NPWS and other vehicles, and many personnel fighting that fire the entire time it burned but it could not be suppressed and took 3 houses – during WINTER. Fire seasons can now last for 9 months of the year.

Fire services staff also remarked on the size and heat of the fires, saying they were of unprecedented destructive force. Residents in the Bega Valley were told that in many if not most instances there was little that fire crews could do other than evacuate people early then get out of the way as the fires were too hot and too fast to fight.

All of these newly observed fire behaviours and factors come down to an unavoidable truth, also backed by a mountain of scientific research and evidence: that climate change is making bushfires hotter, faster, more frequent and more unpredictable.

These changes in the climate are driven by greenhouse gas emissions. This is also beyond question. And our current emissions rate will see us reach way beyond the 1.5C limit, which it has been suggested is the upper safe level of increase. Indeed, the recent fires came in a climate warmed to only 1.1C increase.

Every tenth of a degree warmer will see thousands more homes, businesses, lives, and species lost. The recent conditions, of drought, heat, fires and smoke are almost intolerable, particularly for regional and rural communities who thus far are feeling the brunt of the impacts. But these same impacts will eventually hit highly populated areas too – cities with suburbs like Warrandyte and Eltham, much of western Sydney, Hobart. And the loss of lives will be unprecedented.

The science directs us squarely to climate damage as the single biggest threat to bushfire-prone areas. The 2019/20 fires occurred and behaved as the science predicted.

## **1.2 Preparation and planning**

We were told to prepare but there is no way in which Australian communities could prepare for the 2019/20 fires. There is no way to adapt to firestorms that wipe out millions of acres of forest and farmland over months of the year. No amount of hazard reduction, property maintenance, RFS resourcing, aircraft or land-based machinery would have been adequate to protect the majority of communities from these fires.

Nevertheless, there could possibly have been more properties saved if we had had better communications from RFS, and better resources available to the RFS and other emergency services.

Many community members have requested installation of mechanical alarms in town centres, as per the traditional bells or sirens. While this approach doesn't allow for details to be shared it does alert everyone within hearing to a warning. These people will then share information with others beyond the town centres. This is on top of improved digital communications.

Rural public halls and other safer places need to be designed to accommodate community needs during extended periods of disasters. Communities were cut off, some for weeks, from power and delivery of food and other necessities. Halls should have stand-alone power sources to enable the charging of communication devices.

Mobile signal should be improved to remote and regional locations as a matter of urgency.

Communities should be encouraged and supported to build self-sufficiency and resilience.

The notion of being able to adapt to these new fires is naïve. Mitigation is the only way for us to be safe. It **MUST** be appropriate to the threat – we **MUST** urgently reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

## **1.3 Response to bushfires**

THANK YOU!!!

Firstly Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action wants to say a huge thank you to all emergency and other services workers, who battled these fires for weeks on end. We know that families missed their loved ones over the holiday period. We know that volunteers went without paid work for extended periods. We know that emergency workers worked seemingly endless shifts until exhaustion overcame them. We know that employers supported their staff as they left to fight fires.

And we know that some of these extraordinary people did not return home to friends and family. We mourn their loss and are grateful for their terrible sacrifice.

There were, however, some problems with the bushfire responses:

The Fires Near Me app proved very ineffective in both the 2018 and 2019/20 fires. Updates were too slow, warnings came hours too late, push notifications didn't happen, and there was rarely enough detail to make the information useful. The Victorian Vic

Emergency app is much more detailed, covers a range of hazards, offers more flexibility, and is updated more frequently.

The failure to 'overlap' information for those living on or near the border meant that people in the south of the Bega Valley Shire couldn't see threats to the south, coming from Victoria.

#### **1.4 Any other matters**

Two things are going to make a huge difference to the communities suffering the frontline impacts of bushfires: 1. having our concerns heard and taken seriously - we are talking about our lives. 2. Seeing REAL action to reduce our risks - starting by reducing emissions.

### **Supporting documents or images**

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#### **Attach files**

- IMG\_0534 2.JPG
- KVNUE0028.JPG
- IMG\_6599.JPG









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