

22 May 2020

SUBMISSION: NSW INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE ENQUIRY

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above NSW Independent Bushfire Enquiry. We are a group of Lane Cove residents who care for bushland and are present community representatives on Lane Cove Council's Bushland Management Advisory Committee.

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry include examination of current laws relating to planning and preparation for bushfires in NSW. We assume that this includes the RFS 10/50 code.

We strongly urge that the operation of the 10/50 code and its impacts should be reviewed separately in this enquiry and distinction be made between bushland occurring in urban areas and that in natural areas.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The RFS should be reinstated to provide advice and approval for hazard reduction. Lessening engagement by the RFS with at-risk communities has reduced the important role it was originally set up to do. Home owners should be encouraged to see RFS help for environmental and bush fire management concerns.

The current strategy and bush fire prevention is not working and needs a similar approach to the sharing of research and information that we have seen develop during the COVID-19 crisis. In a time of Climate Change, different management practices are needed using the latest available research. With the extent of fires this Summer, there also needs to be a greater focus on the regeneration of the extensive burnt areas.

One innovative group working in fire-affected communities is the AABR (Australian Association of Bush Regenerators) who are assisting land managers and volunteers to tackle sites which have been burnt. As these sites regenerate after the fires, they may also have weed problems which can destroy or limit new native plant growth. As the burnt weed masses re-emerge, with proper care they can be removed before they seed.

RFS 10/50 CODE

While it is obviously important to improve bushfire planning and response as far as possible, the terrible fires of last summer should not be used as a rationale for ad hoc changes to the 10/50 code that would unleash more clearing and loss of trees in urban areas. The operation of the 10/50 code and its impacts should be reviewed separately in its own right.

The application of the original 10/50 August 2014 was a 'kneejerk' response to fires in the Blue Mountains in 2013 and proved disastrous, particularly in inner urban areas where the bushfire threat was minimal compared to large areas adjacent to natural areas. Over 300 trees in the small urban LGA of Lane Cove alone were lost. Tree canopy cover was reduced and some habitat connectivity with bushland was lost for the foreseeable future.

The main problem was the self-assessment aspect of 10/50. The bushfire risk in Urban Bushland should be assessed by experts appointed by the Rural Fire Service and not left to self-assessment by the home owner.

Progressive changes to the zones around bushland affected by the code and then a full review resulted in a revised code (September 2015). While still not separately identifying urban bushland and its different, often reduced threat levels, the revised code did address the worst aspects of the original code and, along with appropriate assessment of vegetation types, has operated with far less damage since that time in the Lane Cove LGA but some problems remain including the lack of approval for prescribed/cultural burning.

The mapping tool proved inaccurate for a variety of reasons. At times it may have allowed the removal of trees in error in some areas and in other instances it may have resulted in homeowners being required to include fire rated building materials in their DA. A significant issue was that there was no mechanism for home owners to seek an exemption.

Yours sincerely,

Yvonne Barber, Greenwich
Lynne McLoughlin, Lane Cove
Norma Stuart, Longueville
Maralyn Lawson, Greenwich
Ruth Newman, Lane Cove

NOTE

We agree to this submission being made public as part of general publication processes for submissions but we do not wish our full street addresses included in such publication. These are provided separately below for administrative processes.

Yvonne Barber, [REDACTED]
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