



Your details

Mrs

Title

First name

Leah

Last name

Price

Submission details

I am making this submission as

Other

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

New Year's Eve 2019 ... a day that will be scorched in my memory for the rest of my life. It is full of "if only's" and "what if's".

My husband, Chris, our 14-month-old son Jesse, and I, drove down to visit Chris's parents' house at Conjola Park from Wollongong that morning. Chris's parents are Karen & Craig Price. We were planning to spend a couple of weeks down the coast and had the car packed to the brim. As we drove south down the freeway, a few kilometres outside of Fisherman's Paradise turnoff, we noticed the sky to the west was very smoky with an orange haze. However, conditions had not been good for weeks in the area, so we didn't think too much of it. We arrived into Conjola Park at 10am.

Instead of driving straight to Chris's parent's house at [REDACTED], Conjola Park, we continued to drive down

Lakeside Drive and stopped just at the bend where the road veers west by the trees, and parked looking east onto the lake. We were having a disagreement so we decided to discuss it further before arriving at his parents' house. If only we had veered west and driven to the end of that road that morning, we may have seen more and been able to head back to the house and provide warning.

At 10:30am we arrived at Karen and Craig's house and unpacked the car. Upon arrival, Karen mentioned that outside was looking a bit concerning. Chris decided to go straight outside and start watering gutters down. This had been done numerous times before as a precaution in the weeks leading up to this day, and deep down, I thought again, that this is all it would be. About 10:37am Karen received a phone call from her sister in Milton checking in on us.

Karen then decided to go outside and help Chris. I stayed inside to unpack our gear and mind Jesse. My brother in law's girlfriend, Siobhan Fountain, was also at the house. The level of smoke was increasing outside. Sometime not long after 11am, Siobhan offered to feed and mind Jesse so I could go outside and help Chris and Karen. I took a hose from Karen and kept watering down the gutters.

We were watching the water bomber helicopters fly very close to our house, from the direction of the lake and heading west. We could see them dropping their water and the smoke was getting thicker. I have 5 short video clips of the water bombers flying overhead and dumping the water from 11:26am through to 11:34am. I have another photo at 11:53am facing north west, the sky was a deeper orange colour and starting to look a lot darker. During this time, I was filling garbage bins with water at the front of the house.

Not long after this, Craig, Karen, Chris and I were out the front discussing our next move. Craig instructed me to keep watch on the western side of the house on the deck, looking out towards the west where the helicopters were and also keep an eye on their paddocks, south west of the house. I distinctly remember Craig saying if a fire is going to start, it will start out at the paddock by the barn.

He was right.

I had only just arrived at the deck to take my post and I saw it. A grass fire had started in the paddock, behind the barn, south west of the house. I yelled out to the others at the front, "fire behind the barn!!" They didn't hear. I ran back to the front and screamed louder "fire behind the barn!!!" All four of us fled the house with Jesse and Siobhan still inside. We ran up to the paddock, about a 200m distance, carrying and dragging hoses with us. I felt so scared, it was like one of the horrible dreams where you are being chased and needing to run fast, but instead, you feel like you are running on the spot. The adrenalin was pumping, but I felt like it was slowing me down rather than giving me wings. The smoke was so thick, it was so hard to run and breathe, my eyes were stinging, and I was so worried about the house with Jesse still inside. I was waiting for the water bomber helicopters to drop water on us, but they never did. We did not see them at all throughout the whole experience, little bemoans to us, it seemed that they had left the area. I would love to know where those water bombers went? Why did they leave? Why couldn't they help us? If only they had stayed. All questions which we still don't have answers too.

At the barn, I was given the job of hooking the hoses up to the connections, hooking them to each other, and ensuring the kinks

stayed out of the hose and did not get caught, as the hose had to run through the barn. This was so stressful and a job that I did not feel I did well at. Fumbling fingers, heightened emotions, limited vision and incredible fear created an emotion and feeling that I hope I never experience again. We were not containing the fire's spread as the hot conditions and the wind created more ambers and sparked even more spot fires nearby.

After about roughly 10 minutes (although it felt like an eternity), Chris screamed at me to leave and run back to the house to get Jesse out of the house. I screamed back at him that we should all be leaving and they needed to come too, but they stayed. I started running back to the house (again feeling like I was running on the spot). After about 100m, as I approached the paddock gate, I looked to the west towards the neighbours' property (Scott & Kris Brennan) and to my horror, I saw clear, bright orange flames in the yard. I felt like they were as tall as me and were bearing down on us. I looked ahead and saw trees that stood on the boundary between my in-law's and this neighbours' property, alight as well. I turned back towards the hill and screamed at the top of my lungs to Chris and his parents that there was now "fire at the house!!!" They then also left the grass fire behind the barn, still burning bright, and fled towards the house.

I ran inside the house and yelled at Siobhan that we were leaving. I tried to pack some things but was achieving nothing and could not think straight. The air in the house was also starting to thicken with smoke. Chris yelled out to me from outside, so I ran back out and he was standing down near the boundary trees that were alight with Craig, trying to throw a hose up to the elevated deck. I grabbed the hose and dragged it towards the connection, regularly getting it caught in the furniture. I screamed back that I did not have enough hose. This went on for a couple of minutes, wasting valuable, precious time. I eventually got it connected and ran back inside. Chris yelled at me to find his work laptop before I left and take it.

I spent a couple of minutes trying to find Chris's laptop but to no avail. I found myself often running in circles, not knowing what to grab. I clearly remember standing in a bedroom, looking around at all of our belongings and thinking, I don't know what to take! I don't know where I am going and how much time I have to pack! So, I left everything. I only grabbed Jesse's nappy bag, my handbag and my laptop. Siobhan, Jesse and I were about to head out the door when I remembered their dog, Willow. I ran back to find the dog and grab a lead. I yelled out to Chris that we had the dog, tears in my eyes with the reality that we were being separated.

I honestly did not know if I would see him again, and I did not get to say goodbye. The intense turmoil I felt was something I have never experienced. I wanted so badly to stay and help my husband and his parents, but I also needed to get my son to safety. We fled down the driveway towards the car. I am unsure of the exact time, but I would estimate it was 5-10 minutes after 12:16pm, as there is photographic evidence of my car still at the property at this time.

Siobhan, Jesse, Willow (dog) and myself piled in the car, pulled away from the curb in Coolibah Ave and head down Valley Drive. At that point I saw a Fire & Rescue ute pulled up next door, so I naively thought help had arrived as I pulled away. Little did I know, no help was to arrive that day, or the next, or any day following for that matter. I had too much faith in the emergency services at that time, which would very soon be crushed. There were spot fires blazing in the front yards along the side of the road as we drove down Valley drive. I turned right onto

Kurrajong Crescent and pulled over after about 50m, wound down our window, and told a man standing in his front yard that there was fire around the corner and to get out. I drove off, turned left down Windemere Drive and left again, into the dead-end street next to the lake, Hoylake Grove.

By this time, I had called my brother in law, Josh, who was up in Wollongong, hysterical. I told him what happened and he was trying to calm me down and talk me through where to go. He was encouraging me to get out of the car and go into the lake. But all I could see was trees on the banks of the lake on fire. The smoke was intense and I was worried Jesse would not be able to breathe properly. I turned left onto Windemere Drive out of Hoylake Grove, and left again into Cottee Close, another dead-end street. I turned right back onto Windemere Drive again, panicking and desperately wanting to go back and help Chris and his parents at the house. I found myself in Hoylake Grove again.

Josh encouraged me to head east towards the entrance. So, I headed left back up Windemere Drive and veered left into Stewart St, aiming to turn right up Havilland Street and get onto Lake Conjola Entrance Rd, to head east towards the ocean. However, once I turned up Stewart Street I saw spot fires in front yards to my left and the bush ablaze to my right. I was stricken with fear at the thought of fire ahead of me up on Lake Entrance Rd, the possibility of falling trees and becoming trapped. I hit the brakes and did a U-turn, and headed back to Hoylake Grove.

There I sat, crying, not knowing what to do to get all of us, especially my baby, to safety. He was screaming, the air was thick with dark smoke and the wind was terrifying. Josh finally encouraged me to head west, towards the highway, to try and get out of Conjola Park. I was terrified of heading in that direction, that was where the fire had come from! I had no choice. I hit the pedal and sped up Kurrajong Crescent. I dodged a kangaroo and falling fire covered sticks and leaves from the trees overhanging the road. There were fires in front yards and I could feel the intense heat through the car window. I cried the whole way out as I left my husband, and his parents, not knowing what had become of them.

I followed a car in front of me as I drove towards the highway. Once we got to the intersection, the car in front stopped and edged left, obviously not sure where to go or what to do. At that point a police car pulled over on the opposite side of the highway and motioned for us to head north. We turned north and very quickly, the car in front of me disappeared into the smoke as the visibility was extremely poor. Fire was everywhere, to the left and right of me as I drove north. I was so scared I would hit something in front of me, a car, a tree? And just as scared that the embers that were landing on the car would spark and make the car catch fire. The whole experience was the stuff nightmares are made of.

I finally reached an area that had clearer air and no visible fire. Other cars had pulled over to the shoulder as well. At that point, my husband called me on his father's phone. What a relief. They had made it to the lake and were injured and shaken, but alive. But they were certain the house was gone, and weren't sure of the fate of the animals. They stressed for me to continue heading north and get out of there. I got all the way to the Sussex Inlet turnoff, where I stopped behind a bank up of cars, watching a fire directly ahead, right across the road from the turnoff. There was fire behind us, and now fire ahead of us! We waited anxiously in our car for about 10 minutes, before emergency services directed us right, into the Sussex Inlet Road turnoff.

Once arriving at Sussex Inlet, I did not know what to do or where

to go. We had a baby and a dog. I ended up walking into the IGA for supplies while Siobhan stayed with the car with Jesse and Willow. In shock, covered in smoke and soot, coughing, sobbing and dazed I wandered the aisles, searching for nappies, food etc. I lined up to pay, and at that moment, a checkout assistance received a warning text from the NSWRFSS. I received the same text which read: "NSWRFS EMERGENCY BUSH FIRE WARNING – People Nth of Ulladulla & in Bay & Basin & Nowra areas – seek shelter as fire arrives." The fire had already well and truly hit areas north of Ulladulla! This was received at 1:55pm. At that point I also only just realised I had an earlier text from the NSWRFSS received at 10:28am stating: "NSWRFS EMERGENCY BUSH FIRE WARNING – Fisherman's Paradise, Yatte Yattah, Cunjurong Pt Surrounds – Seek shelter as fire arrives." Where was the warning for Conjola Park? Previous warning texts throughout the earlier weeks had specifically stated Conjola Park, so why not this time?

The check-out assistance made a joking comment about the text, and at that point I broke down. I told her I had just escaped Conjola. At that moment, the power went off in Sussex, the shop went dark and panic struck customers. Everyone pushed and shoved past me to buy their items, I stood motionless and sobbing with no more fight left in me.

A kind couple helped me to the counter, paid for my groceries with the little cash I had left in my wallet, and walked me to the car. Thank God for them. They offered for us to stay at the holiday house they were in. That is where we stayed for 2 nights, with just the clothes on our backs, no power, no hot water, little to no phone reception and a small amount of cash. We ended up being allowed to leave Sussex Inlet on the morning of Thursday the 2nd of January, after lining up in the car for 5 hours. We drove south, straight to Milton hospital where we were reunited with family. My mother in law, Karen, had been hospitalised with an enlarged heart and extremely high blood pressure. My husband had damage to his eye and both him and his father Craig had slight burns to different parts of their body. Their house had burnt to the ground, with everything they owned inside. They escaped with the clothes on their back and managed to save a couple of vehicles. Thank God the animals had all survived, however, the cows and their pet cat were badly injured.

From then on we stayed in Milton with Karen's sister. Saturday the 4th of January was another stressful day, as extreme temperatures soared and fires started again in the area. Craig, Chris and Josh, who had driven down from Wollongong since NYE, went out to the property at Conjola Park to try and protect the shed that managed to survive the NYE fire, the animals, and also Scott and Kris Brennan's house. They spent their afternoon putting out spot fires that continued to appear in the paddocks, terrified they were going to experience everything all over again. They dodged falling trees and anxiously kept watch over the area, running buckets and hoses to put out the fires that sparked.

During this time, no emergency personnel appeared to help. It was so terrifying knowing they were out there doing it all again, and they had no one helping them. We were scared back in Ulladulla as spot fires were starting out the back of Milton, very close to the house we were staying in. Myself and other members of Chris's family, regularly patrolled the paddocks (they had a 5-acre property) and kept watch for flying embers. Thankfully, the day ended with no more buildings being lost.

However, the tragedy of what we had experienced was only just starting to sink in. My in-laws house had burnt to the ground, they did not manage to take anything with them and they, along with my husband, barely escaped with their lives. Siobhan, Jesse and

myself were also extremely lucky to be alive. Even to this day, I have nightmares about the fire, making wrong turns while driving, not being able to protect Jesse and losing Chris in the fire. Chris and I sought counselling after this event. We still find it difficult to think about, hard to talk about, and for me, it was particularly hard going back to Conjola, as it brought all of the horrific memories of that day rushing back. We also lost approximately \$25,000 worth of belongings in the fire that day.

The trauma and the effects from this event will live with me forever. What the residents and visitors of Conjola Park experienced on New Year's Eve 2019, can only be described as abandonment. To have not been notified or warned that this catastrophic event was about to hit Conjola Park is negligent to the highest degree and as a result, it destroyed people's lives and also ended others.

A few weeks ago, we all tuned in to hear the NSW Rural Fire Service give a presentation into their findings of the cause of the NYE fire at Conjola Park. Their findings concluded that the back burning which was carried out by National Parks and Wild Life Services was not the cause of the devastation in Conjola Park. Their findings of the fire seemed to be based primarily off 000 calls, weather predictions and a photo captured via an aircraft.

During the presentation, the RFS officers admitted to not having consulted the NSW Fire Brigade who were fighting the fire that day, National Parks and Wildlife Services who lit the fire and the water bomber helicopter pilots who were dumping water, prior to the fire hitting Conjola Park. There is a huge amount of evidence that pin-points that this catastrophe was a result of a back burn misjudged and gone wrong. The presentation was a huge slap in the face to the residents of Conjola Park who have lost everything and some of their dearest friends. The RFS admitted to not having all of the information that many locals have access too, such as satellite images etc. During the presentation, it was clear that the RFS investigation was not at all thorough. It felt like they were trying to cover up the cause of the fire and play the residents of the area for fools. It wasn't until the survivors began questioning them, that it became evident that they had not done enough research and were unable to adequately answer many of the questions and concerns raised by the survivors.

I asked a specific question about why the helicopters left, and I received a very short and patronising response. Firstly, the RFS officer responding back questioned whether or not we actually saw water bombing helicopters, as it could have been other ariel surveillance that was being taken place. I have video footage of these helicopters dropping water, do not question what I saw. Secondly, he said that (summing) pilots have to adjust to the weather conditions and if it was getting too dangerous they would need to abort. We understand that and would never have expected those pilots to risk their own lives to save property. However, it was very clear that the responding RFS officers actually had NO IDEA where the helicopter pilots disappeared too. They had not even bothered to interview them. Their level of inquiry was sub-par and it was embarrassing that the locals were able to provide seemingly more accurate and detailed evidence that contradicted the RFS's findings. This investigation and the lack of research was an absolute insult to the survivors of the NYE fire.

So many things need to be improved and lessons learnt from this whole experience.

- The warnings were not specific enough, they were too late and no follow up check in on residents were carried out.
- No help arrived that day. Chris told me he saw 2 firetrucks that

offered no support and did not even direct people to safety. There was also just 1 ambulance that arrived.

- The water cut out, but there was a massive body of water in Lake Conjola that could have been used. Forgive my naivety, but can fire trucks not use water nearby that is not in mains? And if that is the case, isn't it a smart idea to build the fire trucks with pumps so they have that capacity? A village burnt to the ground right beside a lake, and that huge body of water was useless in helping combat the fire! It seems absurd!! It was only lucky that water was there for so many people to get to safety. I would hate to think what would have happened if the whole area was bush.

I would like the following questions to be answered:

- Why was there no emergency support provided during and after this horrific event?
- Why was there no warning to the people of Conjola Park that a fire was approaching their specific area? The weekend before, we received a message saying 'Conjola Park - Seek shelter as the fire arrives', and it never did. The day that it arrived, there was no message for Conjola Park.
- Why did the commander in charge of this presentation feel that there was 'a greater need' (as he said in his presentation) further south (Bateman's Bay) on that day?
- Why did the water run out and leave residents with nothing to defend ourselves?
- The water bombers – what happened to them? Where did they go?
- Can the fire trucks be fitted with the capacity to access bodies of water close by?
- Why were locals who lost their homes, who had no water, food or clothes not provided with any assistance?

I fear I will continue for the rest of my life have so many more questions, that will never be answered.

I look forward to receiving a written response.

Leah Price.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- New Year's Eve 2019 .docx
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New Year's Eve 2019 ... a day that will be scorched in my memory for the rest of my life. It is full of "if only's" and "what if's".

My husband, Chris, our 14-month-old son Jesse, and I, drove down to visit Chris's parents' house at Conjola Park from Wollongong that morning. Chris's parents are Karen & Craig Price. We were planning to spend a couple of weeks down the coast and had the car packed to the brim. As we drove south down the freeway, a few kilometres outside of Fisherman's Paradise turnoff, we noticed the sky to the west was very smoky with an orange haze. However, conditions had not been good for weeks in the area, so we didn't think too much of it. We arrived into Conjola Park at 10am.

Instead of driving straight to Chris's parent's house at [REDACTED], we continued to drive down Lakeside Drive and stopped just at the bend where the road veers west by the trees, and parked looking east onto the lake. We were having a disagreement so we decided to discuss it further before arriving at his parents' house. If only we had veered west and driven to the end of that road that morning, we may have seen more and been able to head back to the house and provide warning.

At 10:30am we arrived at Karen and Craig's house and unpacked the car. Upon arrival, Karen mentioned that outside was looking a bit concerning. Chris decided to go straight outside and start watering gutters down. This had been done numerous times before as a precaution in the weeks leading up this day, and deep down, I thought again, that this is all it would be. About 10:37am Karen received a phone call from her sister in Milton checking in on us.

Karen then decided to go outside and help Chris. I stayed inside to unpack our gear and mind Jesse. My brother in law's girlfriend, Siobhan Fountain, was also at the house. The level of smoke was increasing outside. Sometime not long after 11am, Siobhan offered to feed and mind Jesse so I could go outside and help Chris and Karen. I took a hose from Karen and kept watering down the gutters.

We were watching the water bomber helicopters fly very close to our house, from the direction of the lake and heading west. We could see them dropping their water and the smoke was getting thicker. I have 5 short video clips of the water bombers flying overhead and dumping the water from 11:26am through to 11:34am. I have another photo at 11:53am facing north west, the sky was a deeper orange colour and starting to look a lot darker. During this time, I was filling garbage bins with water at the front of the house.

Not long after this, Craig, Karen, Chris and I were out the front discussing our next move. Craig instructed me to keep watch on the western side of the house on the deck, looking out towards the west where the helicopters were and also keep an eye on their paddocks, south west of the house. I distinctly remember Craig saying if a fire is going to start, it will start out at the paddock by the barn.

He was right.

I had only just arrived at the deck to take my post and I saw it. A grass fire had started in the paddock, behind the barn, south west of the house. I yelled out to the others at the front, "fire behind the barn!!" They didn't hear. I ran back to the front and screamed louder "fire behind the barn!!!" All four of us fled the house with Jesse and Siobhan still inside. We ran up to the paddock, about a 200m distance, carrying and dragging hoses with us. I felt so scared, it was like one of the horrible dreams where you are being chased and needing to run fast, but instead, you feel like you are running on the spot. The adrenalin was pumping, but I felt like it was slowing me down rather than giving me wings. The smoke was so thick, it was so hard to run and breathe, my eyes were stinging, and I was so worried about the house with Jesse still inside. I was waiting for the water bomber helicopters to drop water on us, but they never did. We did not see them at all throughout the whole experience, little bemoans to us, it seemed that they had left the area. I would love to know where those water bombers went? Why did they leave? Why couldn't they help us? If only they had stayed. All questions which we still don't have answers too.

At the barn, I was given the job of hooking the hoses up to the connections, hooking them to each other, and ensuring the kinks stayed out of the hose and did not get caught, as the hose had to run through the barn. This was so stressful and a job that I did not feel I did well at. Fumbling fingers, heightened emotions, limited vision and incredible fear created an emotion and feeling that I hope I never experience again. We were not containing the fire's spread as the hot conditions and the wind created more ambers and sparked even more spot fires nearby.

After about roughly 10 minutes (although it felt like an eternity), Chris screamed at me to leave and run back to the house to get Jesse out of the house. I screamed back at him that we should all be leaving and they needed to come too, but they stayed. I started running back to the house (again feeling like I was running on the spot). After about 100m, as I approached the paddock gate, I looked to the west towards the neighbours' property (Scott & Kris Brennan) and to my horror, I saw clear, bright orange flames in the yard. I felt like they were as tall as me and were bearing down on us. I looked ahead and saw trees that stood on the boundary between my in-law's and this neighbours' property, alight as well. I turned back towards the hill and screamed at the top of my lungs to Chris and his parents that there was now "fire at the house!!!" They then also left the grass fire behind the barn, still burning bright, and fled towards the house.

I ran inside the house and yelled at Siobhan that we were leaving. I tried to pack some things but was achieving nothing and could not think straight. The air in the house was also starting to thicken with smoke. Chris yelled out to me from outside, so I ran back out and he was standing down near the boundary trees that were alight with Craig, trying to throw a hose up to the elevated deck. I grabbed the hose and dragged it towards the connection, regularly getting it caught in the furniture. I screamed back that I did not have enough hose. This went on for a couple of minutes, wasting valuable, precious time. I eventually got it connected and ran back inside. Chris yelled at me to find his work laptop before I left and take it.

I spent a couple of minutes trying to find Chris's laptop but to no avail. I found myself often running in circles, not knowing what to grab. I clearly remember standing in a bedroom, looking around at all of our belongings and thinking, I don't know what to take! I don't know where I am going and how much time I have to pack! So, I left everything. I only grabbed Jesse's nappy bag, my handbag and my laptop. Siobhan, Jesse and I were about to head out the door when I remembered their dog, Willow. I ran back to find the dog and grab a lead. I yelled out to Chris that we had the dog, tears in my eyes with the reality that we were being separated.

I honestly did not know if I would see him again, and I did not get to say goodbye. The intense turmoil I felt was something I have never experienced. I wanted so badly to stay and help my husband and his parents, but I also needed to get my son to safety. We fled down the driveway towards the car. I am unsure of the exact time, but I would estimate it was 5-10 minutes after 12:16pm, as there is photographic evidence of my car still at the property at this time.

Siobhan, Jesse, Willow (dog) and myself piled in the car, pulled away from the curb in Coolibah Ave and head down Valley Drive. At that point I saw a Fire & Rescue ute pulled up next door, so I naively thought help had arrived as I pulled away. Little did I know, no help was to arrive that day, or the next, or any day following for that matter. I had too much faith in the emergency services at that time, which would very soon be crushed. There were spot fires blazing in the front yards along the side of the road as we drove down Valley drive. I turned right onto Kuurajong Crescent and pulled over after about 50m, wound down our window, and told a man standing in his front yard that there was fire around the corner and to get out. I drove off, turned left down Windemere Drive and left again, into the dead-end street next to the lake, Hoylake Grove.

By this time, I had called my brother in law, Josh, who was up in Wollongong, hysterical. I told him what happened and he was trying to calm me down and talk me through where to go. He was encouraging me to get out of the car and go into the lake. But all I could see was trees on the banks of the lake on fire. The smoke was intense and I was worried Jesse would not be able to breathe properly. I turned left onto Windemere Drive out of Hoylake Grove, and left again into Cottee Close, another dead-end street. I turned right back onto Windemere Drive again, panicking and desperately wanting to go back and help Chris and his parents at the house. I found myself in Hoylake Grove again.

Josh encouraged me to head east towards the entrance. So, I headed left back up Windemere Drive and veered left into Stewart St, aiming to turn right up Havilland Street and get onto Lake Conjola Entrance Rd, to head east towards the ocean. However, once I turned up Stewart Street I saw spot fires in front yards to my left and the bush ablaze to my right. I was stricken with fear at the thought of fire ahead of me up on Lake Entrance Rd, the possibility of falling trees and becoming trapped. I hit the brakes and did a U-turn, and headed back to Hoylake Grove.

There I sat, crying, not knowing what to do to get all of us, especially my baby, to safety. He was screaming, the air was thick with dark smoke and the wind was terrifying. Josh finally

encouraged me to head west, towards the highway, to try and get out of Conjola Park. I was terrified of heading in that direction, that was where the fire had come from! I had no choice. I hit the pedal and sped up Kurrajong Crescent. I dodged a kangaroo and falling fire covered sticks and leaves from the trees overhanging the road. There were fires in front yards and I could feel the intense heat through the car window. I cried the whole way out as I left my husband, and his parents, not knowing what had become of them.

I followed a car in front of me as I drove towards the highway. Once we got to the intersection, the car in front stopped and edged left, obviously not sure where to go or what to do. At that point a police car pulled over on the opposite side of the highway and motioned for us to head north. We turned north and very quickly, the car in front of me disappeared into the smoke as the visibility was extremely poor. Fire was everywhere, to the left and right of me as I drove north. I was so scared I would hit something in front of me, a car, a tree? And just as scared that the embers that were landing on the car would spark and make the car catch fire. The whole experience was the stuff nightmares are made of.

I finally reached an area that had clearer air and no visible fire. Other cars had pulled over to the shoulder as well. At that point, my husband called me on his father's phone. What a relief. They had made it to the lake and were injured and shaken, but alive. But they were certain the house was gone, and weren't sure of the fate of the animals. They stressed for me to continue heading north and get out of there. I got all the way to the Sussex Inlet turnoff, where I stopped behind a bank up of cars, watching a fire directly ahead, right across the road from the turnoff. There was fire behind us, and now fire ahead of us! We waited anxiously in our car for about 10 minutes, before emergency services directed us right, into the Sussex Inlet Road turnoff.

Once arriving at Sussex Inlet, I did not know what to do or where to go. We had a baby and a dog. I ended up walking into the IGA for supplies while Siobhan stayed with the car with Jesse and Willow. In shock, covered in smoke and soot, coughing, sobbing and dazed I wandered the aisles, searching for nappies, food etc. I lined up to pay, and at that moment, a checkout assistance received a warning text from the NSWRFs. I received the same text which read: "NSWRFS EMERGENCY BUSH FIRE WARNING – People Nth of Ulladulla & in Bay & Basin & Nowra areas – seek shelter as fire arrives." The fire had already well and truly hit areas north of Ulladulla! This was received at 1:55pm. At that point I also only just realised I had an earlier text from the NSWRFs received at 10:28am stating: "NSWRFS EMERGENCY BUSH FIRE WARNING – Fisherman's Paradise, Yatte Yattah, Cunjurong Pt Surrounds – Seek shelter as fire arrives." Where was the warning for Conjola Park? Previous warning texts throughout the earlier weeks had specifically stated Conjola Park, so why not this time?

The check-out assistance made a joking comment about the text, and at that point I broke down. I told her I had just escaped Conjola. At that moment, the power went off in Sussex, the shop went dark and panic struck customers. Everyone pushed and shoved past me to buy their items, I stood motionless and sobbing with no more fight left in me.

A kind couple helped me to the counter, paid for my groceries with the little cash I had left in my wallet, and walked me to the car. Thank God for them. They offered for us to stay at the holiday house they were in. That is where we stayed for 2 nights, with just the clothes on our backs, no power, no hot water, little to no phone reception and a small amount of cash. We ended up being allowed to leave Sussex Inlet on the morning of Thursday the 2nd of January, after lining up in the car for 5 hours. We drove south, straight to Milton hospital where we were reunited with family. My mother in law, Karen, had been hospitalised with an enlarged heart and extremely high blood pressure. My husband had damage to his eye and both him and his father Craig had slight burns to different parts of their body. Their house had burnt to the ground, with everything they owned inside. They escaped with the clothes on their back and managed to save a couple of vehicles. Thank God the animals had all survived, however, the cows and their pet cat were badly injured.

From then on we stayed in Milton with Karen's sister. Saturday the 4th of January was another stressful day, as extreme temperatures soared and fires started again in the area. Craig, Chris and Josh, who had driven down from Wollongong since NYE, went out to the property at Conjola Park to try and protect the shed that managed to survive the NYE fire, the animals, and also Scott and Kris Brennan's house. They spent their afternoon putting out spot fires that continued to appear in the paddocks, terrified they were going to experience everything all over again. They dodged falling trees and anxiously kept watch over the area, running buckets and hoses to put out the fires that sparked.

During this time, no emergency personnel appeared to help. It was so terrifying knowing they were out there doing it all again, and they had no one helping them. We were scared back in Ulladulla as spot fires were starting out the back of Milton, very close to the house we were staying in. Myself and other members of Chris's family, regularly patrolled the paddocks (they had a 5-acre property) and kept watch for flying embers. Thankfully, the day ended with no more buildings being lost.

However, the tragedy of what we had experienced was only just starting to sink in. My in-laws house had burnt to the ground, they did not manage to take anything with them and they, along with my husband, barely escaped with their lives. Siobhan, Jesse and myself were also extremely lucky to be alive. Even to this day, I have nightmares about the fire, making wrong turns while driving, not being able to protect Jesse and losing Chris in the fire. Chris and I sought counselling after this event. We still find it difficult to think about, hard to talk about, and for me, it was particularly hard going back to Conjola, as it brought all of the horrific memories of that day rushing back. We also lost approximately \$25,000 worth of belongings in the fire that day.

The trauma and the effects from this event will live with me forever. What the residents and visitors of Conjola Park experienced on New Year's Eve 2019, can only be described as abandonment. To have not been notified or warned that this catastrophic event was about to hit Conjola Park is negligent to the highest degree and as a result, it destroyed people's lives and also ended others.

A few weeks ago, we all tuned in to hear the NSW Rural Fire Service give a presentation into their findings of the cause of the NYE fire at Conjola Park. Their findings concluded that the back burning which was carried out by National Parks and Wild Life Services was not the cause of the devastation in Conjola Park. Their findings of the fire seemed to be based primarily off 000 calls, weather predictions and a photo captured via an aircraft.

During the presentation, the RFS officers admitted to not having consulted the NSW Fire Brigade who were fighting the fire that day, National Parks and Wildlife Services who lit the fire and the water bomber helicopter pilots who were dumping water, prior to the fire hitting Conjola Park. There is a huge amount of evidence that pin-points that this catastrophe was a result of a back burn misjudged and gone wrong. The presentation was a huge slap in the face to the residents of Conjola Park who have lost everything and some of their dearest friends. The RFS admitted to not having all of the information that many locals have access too, such as satellite images etc. During the presentation, it was clear that the RFS investigation was not at all thorough. It felt like they were trying to cover up the cause of the fire and play the residents of the area for fools. It wasn't until the survivors began questioning them, that it became evident that they had not done enough research and were unable to adequately answer many of the questions and concerns raised by the survivors.

I asked a specific question about why the helicopters left, and I received a very short and patronising response. Firstly, the RFS officer responding back questioned whether or not we actually saw water bombing helicopters, as it could have been other ariel surveillance that was being taken place. I have video footage of these helicopters dropping water, do not question what I saw. Secondly, he said that (sumimating) pilots have to adjust to the weather conditions and if it was getting too dangerous they would need to abort. We understand that and would never have expected those pilots to risk their own lives to save property. However, it was very clear that the responding RFS officers actually had NO IDEA where the helicopter pilots disappeared too. They had not even bothered to interview them. Their level of inquiry was sub-par and it was embarrassing that the locals were able to provide seemingly more accurate and detailed evidence that contradicted the RFS's findings. This investigation and the lack of research was an absolute insult to the survivors of the NYE fire.

So many things need to be improved and lessons learnt from this whole experience.

- The warnings were not specific enough, they were too late and no follow up check in on residents were carried out.
- No help arrived that day. Chris told me he saw 2 firetrucks that offered no support and did not even direct people to safety. There was also just 1 ambulance that arrived.
- The water cut out, but there was a massive body of water in Lake Conjola that could have been used. Forgive my naivety, but can fire trucks not use water nearby that is not in mains? And if that is the case, isn't it a smart idea to build the fire trucks with pumps so they have that capacity? A village burnt to the ground right beside a lake, and that huge body of water was useless in helping combat the fire! It seems

absurd!! It was only lucky that water was there for so many people to get to safety. I would hate to think what would have happened if the whole area was bush.

I would like the following questions to be answered:

- Why was there no emergency support provided during and after this horrific event?
- Why was there no warning to the people of Conjola Park that a fire was approaching their specific area? The weekend before, we received a message saying 'Conjola Park - Seek shelter as the fire arrives', and it never did. The day that it arrived, there was no message for Conjola Park.
- Why did the commander in charge of this presentation feel that there was 'a greater need' (as he said in his presentation) further south (Bateman's Bay) on that day?
- Why did the water run out and leave residents with nothing to defend ourselves?
- The water bombers – what happened to them? Where did they go?
- Can the fire trucks be fitted with the capacity to access bodies of water close by?
- Why were locals who lost their homes, who had no water, food or clothes not provided with any assistance?

I fear I will continue for the rest of my life have so many more questions, that will never be answered.

I look forward to receiving a written response.

Leah Price.