



Title

First name

Last name

Address

I am making this submission as Resident

Submission type Personal

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

Consent to make submission public Public

Your story

1.1 Causes and contributing factors Climate change - and the lack of acknowledgement or any action of this fact from either Federal or State governments. Resulting in hotter than average summer and previous dry winter with drought conditions all through the surrounding bush and National Parks.

1.2 Preparation and planning Personally, having been through the bushfires that swept through Canberra in 2003, myself and my husband were perhaps better prepared than most for the fires that hit Conjola area on New Year's Eve. But that was personal preparation – with the necessary hoses laid out, fire retardant clothes ready and bags packed for a quick exit. We had an exit strategy – three actually, lucky as A or B were not feasible in the end.

As far as community preparation – we saw none. We had loaded

Fires Near Me on our phones and had bought new batteries for our old transistor radio. However, there was no information put forward from Shoalhaven Council or RFS or NSW Govt, about potential evacuation centres or safe exit routes. Our town has only one road in and that comes through 7 kms of forest on both sides. It was to be a potential death trap for residents. At the time the lake was closed to the ocean so no boats could enter or leave. As it turned out, our 'safe place' was the Lake Conjola Community hall, hardly appropriate as the hall was locked, the only fire hose was inside and the outside tank which was meant to be for emergencies, did not have the right connections for the hose. Residents needed to break into the hall to reach the hose.

1.3 Response to bushfires

New Year's Eve 2019

We awoke to an extremely hot day with high level fire alerts being issued by the RFS. However, at no time were we ever advised to leave! We noticed a huge fire ball over Conjola Park at about 11am and then stayed to defend our house as that fire came closer and closer. By 11.45am it was evident that the huge fire from the west was coming closer and closer with the strong winds, we were hosing out embers that were by then, landing on our garden and house. By 12 noon thick red clouds were moving over our house, then at 12.24pm a to bring another fire front from the south over the top of us. Rather scary. Then to add to our troubles, fire erupted from the northern shore and onto the little island at the back of our house.

We attempted to leave by boat (as we live on the canal which opens to the lake) which we had ready, however, the winds were so strong, my husband could not turn the boat to escape. But 12.51 with fires coming over our heads and house, little visibility and unable to breathe properly we needed to leave. Our only option was by car towards the sea and beach. This road was already packed with cars and scared people. The caravan park had approximately 2500 visitors all whom had rushed to safety onto the beach beside the lake. As cars were randomly driving onto the sand, it was a dangerous situation as many were quite unaware of activity around them. It was only luck that it did not lead to injury and possible death.

The only reason the little village of Lake Conjola survived was that two water helicopters arrived to drop water from the lake onto Conley Ave and Spinks Ave late in the afternoon. There were no 'on the ground' tankers or firefighters until around 11pm that night when they arrived to watch over a controlled burn to ensure Sandgroper Rd did not burn. This was the last fringe of the town untouched.

The fire burnt 89 homes, made another 30 uninhabitable and killed 3 people in Conjola Park. The place looked like a war zone. Our town was then cut off from the outside world for 8 days without power, or telecommunications. Campers & tourists had been evacuated and only residents with a roof over their heads remained. The road to the highway was closed by fallen burning trees and power lines. How sad to learn after the fact, that the media had managed to be escorted into the area and take loads of footage well before residents could even access ice or food! Our initial emergency food came in over the beach by good hearted souls at their own expense. We had rubbish uncollected and rotting in the streets and our sewerage system needed pumping out by generators to ensure it did not overflow our toilets.

A team of residents formed together and began the long road to recovery by offering skills needed. A report is included below.

1.4 Any other matters

WHO is and WHAT did the CONJOLA RECOVERY TEAM do?
Activities over the past 3 months - January to March 2020
After coming together at a hastily called meeting early in January

(after the horrid New Year's Eve bushfire and another hot scary day on Sat 4 January), the Recovery Team formed with an array of skills and loads of enthusiasm. The volunteer team of around 15 has worked tirelessly ever since to provide support and assistance to all those affected by the fires. This volunteer team has many talents and experience - disaster recovery, organisational, social media, physical & mental health, nursing, finance & auditing, building, planning, liaison & managerial just to name a few!

Our first task was to register our Conjola fire affected residents and provide initial emergency relief, including mental health support where requested. As the bushfires also impacted and burnt out homes in the surrounding area of Yatte Yattah, all of those residents have now been included in our recovery work. Disaster NSW set up mid-January, so then we could link residents into their additional services and help them apply for the many grants on offer from Red Cross and other not-for-profit organisations.

Additionally, efforts were focused on receiving, sorting and distributing the massive amount of donated goods including clothing and food. A wonderful team of extra helpers came forward into the Centre to help with this enormous sorting task. Also feed arrived for the struggling wildlife and a group of volunteers took over the role and became Conjola Critter Care. After power was restored, communication working again (with extra help from NBN for our Centre) and roads open, more donors came forward to offer their assistance because we were there every day 7 days a week for very long hours in the Community hall. In lieu of goods, as there was no more room to take them, we began to ask for vouchers from local businesses, both to assist the bushfire affected residents and to help the struggling businesses. These continued to arrive over the next two months and have enabled us to provide \$200 to each home which was either destroyed or made uninhabitable. This of course built on all the other grants made available for fire affected residents.

In order to be able to communicate with both dispersed residents and donors we set up our Conjola Recovery Facebook. The Facebook page has been instrumental in enabling our group to reach out to the broader Australian and global community as we communicate our needs and link donors to those that need help. To ensure all residents were informed of the help that was available at the Community Centre, an initial 'newsletter' was hand delivered to every standing letter box in Conjola Park. Later this developed into a four-page coloured Newsletter delivered weekly to all residents of Conjola Park & Lake Conjola as well as being available at local stores & Milton Library. This Newsletter now continues fortnightly to update residents and although no longer delivered is available on our Facebook page & website, at all local stores and is emailed to those who have provided us with their address. It continues to be an asset with Coronavirus social distancing and isolation rules.

Through January we facilitated a convoy of tradesmen (Convoy of Hope) as well as numerous other keen helpers from far and wide, to match residents' immediate recovery needs with tree removal, damaged infrastructure and clearing of debris. Donations continued to be offered, with a number of community groups offering food, clothing, equipment, medical supplies, tools and vouchers. Some of these clothing donations were 'paid forward' to help the residents of Mogo as help had been slow to reach them. This additional amount swamped our storage in the Community Centre so we organised two shipping containers to be given on a loan basis, to fill this vacuum. One group provided shelving to allow us to better organise and store goods off the

floor, as it turned out, very lucky with the flood that arrived on the 10th February. This was not something this community needed as it too required a huge clean-up effort for many of those inundated with water. Some of our fire displaced residents were now under water and required another relocation.

Various events have been arranged for the community including:

- 12 January 2020, a community BBQ for residents with Lebanese food provided by the Merciful Group. This event aimed to bring residents together to be able to chat and catch up with their neighbours and enjoy a relaxing afternoon with fun provided for the children.
- Football teams visited: GWS GIANTS (26 January 2020) and ST GEORGE DRAGONS (28 January 2020) to see the families with children and other supporters.
- the Hindu community of Sydney (SWAMINARAYAN Hindu Temple in Blacktown) brought food and clothing (9 February 2020). Unfortunately, it was such a pouring wet day not as many residents as expected ventured out to join in.
- Patty Mills, NBA Basketball player brought his team of supporters donating gifts, tools, water, food and clothing (16 February 2020).
- Football team SYDNEY SWANS (18 February 2020) visited to cheer up their supporters and families.
- A Building Workshop held on 29 February 2020 aimed to explain the steps of the rebuilding process with presentations from architects, bushfire consultants and planners.
- Quest for Life provided massages, deep relaxation and counselling services. Despite the popularity of these services, the Coronavirus onset stopped the planned future visits. During their visit a hairdresser also offered her expertise to provide haircuts for all. Many residents left feeling just a little happier and a lot more relaxed.
- Frangipani Day (15 March 2020) a hugely successful event including free plants to all bushfire affected residents and provision of a curry lunch from our wonderful friends from the Blacktown Hindu community.

Music events

- Concert for Conjola was held on 1 March 2020 organised by Holiday Haven Caravan Park with donations going to the Conjola Recovery Fund.
- The Royal Military Army Band played at the local cafe Tilly & Mo, the Community Hall and a rock concert at the Lake Conjola Bowling Club on 8 March 2020.

We opened 7 days a week, long hours, as a drop in support centre during January & February, then we reduced our hours and closed on Wednesdays, both as the need had started to slow and also so our volunteers could have some well earned rest.

We have also been provided with support for our community from both the Lions Club of Milton/Ulladulla and Rotary Clubs. The Rotary Club of Hervey Bay adopted Conjola and is planning much needed financial support for couples and families (in progress); organised the donation of a caravan (Rotary Caravan of Hope) to be located on a property and cars (all of which have been allocated to residents, serviced and roadworthy). Another caravan was organised by Caringbah Rotary for a homeless resident.

We have now formally structured the team by becoming an incorporated not-for-profit association – the Conjola Community Recovery Association Inc with elected office bearers. We operate with integrity and accountability and have accountants and auditors providing pro-bono guidance. The Association is still busy meeting individual needs, however, now is beginning to focus on the long-term recovery of the community infrastructure.

Unfortunately, with the onset of Covid 19, the team has been required to close its face to face operations at the Community Centre and cancel our planned events and workshops. Despite this, the team continues to keep in contact with residents via FaceBook, email, texts and phone calls. They are also busy applying for various grants and speaking to large companies about financial support going forward. Significant donations for our future infrastructure requirements have already been received from the Hellenic Disaster Relief Association and Nextgen and a Masterplan is being developed to present to the community and Council.

The aim is to have a more resilient and connected community than before the fires.

Upload files

BUSHFIRES-LAKE-CONJOLA-Enquiry-input.docx - [Download File](#)



BUSHFIRES LAKE CONJOLA AND SURROUNDS - NEW YEAR EVE 2019

Our little town of Conjola was hit badly by the New Year's Eve bushfires with 3 lives lost, 89 homes totally destroyed (another 30 deemed uninhabitable and many more sustaining major damage), all our forests burnt out & a countless number of wildlife destroyed. It was a terrifying experience with fire fronts from three directions hitting our area. The one from the west arrived so fast and so hot that no tankers were on hand to help & no water bombing helicopters could reach Conjola Park. Helicopters arrived just in time to save the town of Lake Conjola as the fire burnt on all three sides.



After the fires impacted the Conjola area, emergency relief supplies, some of which came in over the beach, were collected and distributed by a small group of volunteers who worked until they almost dropped from the Lake Conjola Community Hall. This included ice and immediate food supplies. The one road into the town from the highway was blocked by fallen burnt trees and power lines. The highway also continued to be closed in both directions as fires continued to burn in the surrounding areas.

For eight days we had no power nor any telecommunications, (only news of the 'outside' world was via old transistors if you were lucky enough to own one) garbage bins uncollected grew smelly in the streets and our sewerage system was at over-flowing stage. Being completely cut off from outside help, those residents of Conjola Lake and Conjola Park who remained because they had a roof over their heads, realised that they needed to organise themselves in order to survive and begin moving forward.

At a hastily gathered group of concerned residents, Peter Dunn (Major General Rtd) and his wife Lindy were identified as possible leaders of this recovery process. Peter had previously been involved with disaster management and Emergency Services and Lindy had co-ordination, management and people skills. It was the start of our Conjola Recovery Team formation. Community volunteers appeared with an array of skills and the recovery process began. This hard-working volunteer Recovery Team of approximately 15 is committed to remain in place until they are no longer needed by the Conjola community – this may be measured in years, not months. Additional volunteers assist us when time permits.

For the first six weeks our volunteer centre opened everyday, all day, long days, for people to drop in and register, be provided with someone to talk with, a shoulder to cry on as well as basic goods, help with finding temporary housing and access to all available government support services. Amongst other things we provided many free hugs! In the early stages, there was no support organised from Government, or Council, however, by mid January, a Disaster NSW centre was established in Ulladulla offering a range of formal assistance services. By this stage we had already tapped into counselling services as many of our fire effected residents were struggling to cope after the fires. By the end of February we tried to close the centre one day a week to allow rest for our volunteers.



As the weeks past one of our biggest challenges continued to be, coordination of the huge influx of donations from across the country to ensure they reach appropriate families. Our community hall was overflowing with clothing, toiletries, children’s toys, linen, kitchen goods & food. Donations continued to pour in, and additional volunteers helped sort these donations as the task was enormous. If asked what people could do, we began asking for donations of vouchers for local businesses, we saw this as a win/win situation as the residents would be able to use them locally and help struggling businesses.

As time moved on, we have had groups of young & not so young people arriving for weekends to help with the clean-up. Tasks might include tree removal, cleaning up of yards, making driveways safe, carting rubbish to the tip and general sorting of donated goods. Donations have included cars, caravans & even short term accommodation houses! We endeavour to match donations to appropriate residents and tasks required with those that have offered their services. When torrential rain arrived on the 10th February and the lower areas of the town flooded it was almost too much for most to handle – we had to ask if the locusts were to be next! That required another clean-up effort – not fun after all the residents had already had to deal with recently.



However, it has been amazing to see the generosity of Australians and especially from young Australians. The number of feel good stories help balance the heartbreaking ones. The needs of affected residents continues to change, at this point many mental health issues are being attended to as people are helped deal with their losses. Other residents are being relocated for a longer period and so need help with sourcing furniture & household goods.

Workshops have been delivered on the rebuilding processes, while social activities including community BBQs and visits from sporting stars help with the recovery and bring some sort of normality. Others

planned on starting gardens after fires and financial management needed to be put on hold as the impact of the Coronavirus took effect.

The Recovery Team is busy working on plans for infrastructure to build resilience and ensure the community is enhanced following this disaster. Projects include parks with covered areas in the worst affected areas, a shared footpath to join the two communities of Conjola Park & Lake Conjola together and create an incentive to bring tourists back to the area.

Our community recovery process will go on for quite some time as needs change & rebuilding begins. Every day we were at the centre we knew why we are doing so – it is unfortunate that due to Coronavirus, the Recovery team has needed to change how we operate. All the workshops and gatherings that we planned have been put on hold for the future. Shoalhaven Council has closed all community halls due to the social distancing rules and hence we can no longer continue to work from the Centre.

We are however, still working, now from home, with a phone roster for the week. Registration files have been split between the team so we can continue to keep in touch. We make use of Facebook, our website, emails and texts to provide help or advice. Facebook is our 'go to' for current information & is kept up to date by our social media guru with help from the team.

It is a testing time, one which our community certainly didn't need after all that has happened in the last three months - however, let's hope that as we are a better connected community we can support one another and especially look out for vulnerable residents amongst us.

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