
Your details

Submission details

Share your experience or tell your story

Terms of Reference (optional)

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Supporting documents or images

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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

Your story	My wife and I have owned our property since 1983, which happens to be the year of the "Ash Wednesday" fires. With that event in mind, and
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an eye to our location, we built a strongly fire defensive house, which also made the building very energy effective and comfortable.

On the 19th of December 2019, the electricity to Balmoral was turned off. We stayed in power for the next few days due to solar panels and a large capacity Tesla Powerwall battery.

We were told on the morning of this day that the RFS were withdrawing from this area, and that those of us in the 6 properties out here were being left on our own. This we accepted, having long expected such a situation and knowing that resources were thinly stretched.

The fire arrived on the following morning (December 20th) and came to us from the north, across our neighbours property. It was beaten back on the boundary by the helicopters. During the day, fire also arrived from the west (as was long expected) and stopped at the prepared fire break.

Later in the day, fire also spread between this group of properties and Balmoral, which is to the east.

At the end of the day, apparently to complete things, I stood at our front gate, which is to the south (so there is all four directions). Low intensity flames came from several directions and met at the gate.

The two of us went to bed that night thinking that we were burnt to the fence on all four sides and so would be safe. We have never been more wrong on anything in our lives.

On the 21st of December, the fires came back at about 11 am. The fire front hit our northern boundary at the same time that two vehicles arrived at our gate. The RFS had sent out a large machine to push away debris and so clear Seabrook Road, a driver to operate it and a woman driving a small tanker as support. We were glad of their presence.

Fire arrived at the south of the property soon after, preventing any of us from leaving. Fire soon arrived from the west as well.

In front of the house, helicopters tried

unsuccessfully to beat it back from the same section of our boundary as the previous day. Late in the afternoon, the shed burned. I suspect ember attack, as the fire front had not made direct contact. A little later, the power physically came down when a power pole near the property dam burned completely away.

Later again, the fire came around behind the house, into an area where there was a lot of scrub and tree regrowth. It was burning fiercely when the Southerly hit and the wind gusts drove a fire storm across my vegetable garden and straight at the house.

The fire cracked the bathroom windows and then went straight over the roof of the bedroom area. This area fortunately was constructed partly in ground, with grass growing over the roof, all of which burned. The Hot Water system was destroyed, drain pipes melted and a small window in the garage cracked, allowing a tongue of flame to enter the building.

When the smoke cleared, we were amazed to see the house still standing. The two firefighters put out the flames licking up the garage wall and the house was saved.

Our survival come down to four factors:

1. The arrival of the fire brigade. Even with only two of them, they made all the difference.
2. The helicopters.
3. Solar panels and a battery. We were able to run hoses, put out spot fires, keep the TV and internet running so we knew what was happening, and (most importantly) keep the fire truck's tank supplied with water, right up until when the DC connection from the panels to the inverters was burned off the wall in the firestorm.
4. The house design. Concrete slab, solid masonry, boxed in eaves, gutter guards, fire mesh on windows, the previously described "in ground" construction of key areas, metal roofing on the rest of the building, in-ground concrete water tanks.

As a postscript, the gate that I had leaned on the previous night was totally destroyed on the

second afternoon. Gate, opening mechanism, battery and solar panels. It cost the insurance company almost \$5,000 to replace something hit by a fire that came over already burnt ground.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

This submission is to point out that controlled burning is a useful management strategy, but is ineffective under conditions as severe as were experienced during this crisis. I wish to submit photographic evidence of trees that burned from the crowns down, without any undergrowth to support the fire, and in many cases leaving dry grass unburnt below the trees. I also wish to submit evidence that the fire burned through the same ground on two consecutive days, and was more severe on the second day.

Hazard reduction only works when there is hazard to be reduced. Ground that has burned once is not supposed to burn the following day. On the 20th and 21st December, extreme high temperatures, humidity of almost zero, a moderate wind and vegetation suffering from severe drought took us out of conditions that the experts call "fuel dependent" and into what has been described as "weather dependent" Balmoral burned on those days. No amount of controlled burning earlier in the year would have stopped this under these conditions.

1.2 Preparation and planning

We have 28 acres in a high fire risk area. We have always known the risk. A paddock on the west of the property has long been maintained as a fire break. It has been used in the past, both for controlled burning and for back burns in the face of oncoming fire fronts (during the "Black Christmas" fires). We were prepared for it to be used again this time.

Several days before the fire arrived, fire retardant was dropped from the air in this area. When the fire arrived, this proved to be very effective. The fire from the west stopped on the fence as planned.

Also before the fire, local crews came out to put in a fire break around our property. They did not consult us and the work was half done before I

discovered it was in progress. This control line was a total waste of time and effort that could have been used elsewhere. It was not necessary to push down the bush around an already tried and proven fire break. It was also dangerous. Any crews on the wrong side of the fence when the fire arrived would have been in serious danger. When the fire finally came, it jumped straight over the control line as if it wasn't there, and then stopped as already described on the edge of the existing cleared area.

I include this to make a pleas for better communication with landowners and residents. Some of us have extensive local knowledge. As a former member of Hilltop RFS, and as a resident on this property for 34 years, my input may have been of value.

1.3 Response to bushfires

The RFS volunteers did a magnificent job, above and beyond anything that could have been expected. A bad situation could have been a whole lot worse.

The helicopters were very effective. Any government seeking to quickly "do something" should think about a massive expansion of our firefighting aviation services.

Centralised co-ordination, decentralised location and a full time, paid organisation should also be considered

1.4 Any other matters

There is little doubt that the severity of the weather conditions were the immediate cause of the burning of my home town of Balmoral. There will be many submissions as to the underlying causes of theses severe conditions, and many other submissions seeking to deny underlying causes.

Make what you like of the photographs of re-burned ground, trees burning from the crowns downwards and areas burning where there was no hazard to reduce. I submit them as primary evidence of things happening that are normally considered impossible.

I have many more such photographs taken before, during, and after Green Wattle Creek

Attach files

- Burnt trees, green grass.JPG
 - Tank that burned from top down.JPG
 - Trees burnt, no hazard below.JPG
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