



The Chairperson

NSW Government Independent Inquiry into the 2019-20  
Bushfire Season

Please find attached my submission to this inquiry from the  
perspective of the catastrophic fire that Kiah experienced on  
the night of 4 January 2020.

Yours sincerely

Monic McMahon

~~Emailed on 17/4/20~~ no - note to Sceneburnak.  
Unfortunately I spent some time editing  
this + when I went to email it to  
you today (Monday 19/4) you'd pulled  
the plug. I am now posting it &  
hope you will accept it, a few days late.

If you need an electronic  
copy pls let me know

<sup>Duplicate</sup>  
NSW Independent Inquiry

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**SUBMISSION TO THE NSW GOVERNMENT'S  
INDEPENDENT EXPERT INQUIRY INTO THE 2019-20  
BUSHFIRES**

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**SUBMISSION TYPE** Personal experience

**THE KIAH BUSHFIRE THAT WAS HIT FROM THE SOUTH  
ON THE NIGHT OF 4 JANUARY 2020**

**BACKGROUND**

Before I provide comment on the above I want to provide some personal background to hopefully give some credence to the comments which follow.

I am a 4<sup>th</sup> generation Kiah-ite if you count my Irish great grandparents, maternal and paternal who settled on Kiah between the 1840s and the 1860s. My grandparents, parents and I were born and raised here and so I have oral history of here as well as personal experience of the place.

Kiah is located along the Towamba river and consists of rich river flats surrounded by dry sclerophyll forest. Up until Britain joined the Common Market in the 1973

The valley was intensively farmed and was very productive – dairying, pigs and crops. When Britain joined Europe the preferred markets disappeared and so the farmers turned to beef production or subdivided their properties and sold up.

From the earliest time there was some beef production here using the bush for grazing. Several farmers took out leases, paying the State Government for the privilege of using the bush in this way.- This was principally to the south east of Kiah towards the coast. They would muster them once a year to brand the new generation, to sell some off, bell some and then turn them out again to grow on for another year. I suppose this practice was stopped when the State Government allowed the establishment of the Chip Mill on the shores of Twofold Bay south of Eden. That Mill exported its first shipment of woodchips to Japan in 1970.

When I was growing up in the 1940s and 50s the McMahon 'estate' of – I am not sure – about 700 acres – consisted of my Grandfather and his three children and their families (18 children) living here. When he died in 1952 the property was divided between my father and his brother. My Uncle, whose half bordered

the Snake Track, subdivided his farm and sold it in the late 1970s and there now exists there 5 houses instead of the existing 2. One of these is my property at 303 the Snake Track. It went out of the family for some years and I bought it back in 2000 when I retired from the workforce. My father's property, across the river from me, stayed in the family and now belongs to my sister Clare McMahon.

My father (born in 1905) and mother (1908) were great oral historian and so passed on knowledge about times past in this region including about fires, floods and droughts.

I attended the one teacher (one room) school at Kiah. There was no opportunity to do any secondary education and so I left at age 14 with no qualifications that might assist employment (not that there was much in this area at the time). I worked on the farm for 6 years and then went to Sydney to find work with two of my sisters. My first job was on the factory floor but I did a typing course at night tech and gradually got better jobs as a result. When the **Chip Mill** kicked off at Eden I came back and worked in the company's office on Twofold Bay for a couple of years and so witnessed the development of that industry. I left

there to work in the private sector in Canberra and eventually saw If wanted to work in the Commonwealth Public Service I needed to get my HSC and so enrolled in 1973 in 3 subjects at night school. Fortuitously that was the year that Gough Whitlam introduced free university, adult matriculation and student income support and so having matriculated in this way I went fulltime to the Australian National University, graduating with honours at the end of 1977.

I then joined the Commonwealth Public Service. My first job was in the International Section of the **Energy Policy** Division of the Department of National Development. There I became shockingly aware of the predictions by scientists of the danger to the planet of continuing burning at the current pacer of fossil fuels. Governments everywhere in the world were being briefed of the dangers. 42 years on I am continuously astonished that almost nothing I hear about climate change today is news to me. In fact a lot of the predictions from back then, including the likely ferocity in the future of bushfires are now fact not science fiction.

I moved from that Department after 2 years to pursue my interest in **social policy** and worked in several line

departments to this end inc. Social Security, Employment, Education and Training, and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Parliament (the Department of the Senate - - in the Committee system.

I retired in 1999 after 20 years in the public service and bought a piece of the old family property – the 13 hectares containing bush and river flats and the old slab family homestead. I reconstructed one part (the old kitchen block) for modern living (re-inserting the slabs) and did some restoration work on the rest – a four room building on wooden blocks built in the late 1800s.

Over the ensuing years I worked on reducing the build-up of bark, sticks and leaves in about half of my bushland – the closest of which to my homestead is some 100 metres. This was relatively easy given there is little scrubby undergrowth. Each year I raked up piles and in mid-winter, when it was dampish, I would light it in late afternoon and burn it taking care it did not escape into the adjoining forest. This way I was able to keep quite a large area fairly clean. I have not been able to burn in my bush for the past three years due to the drought and the very likelihood it would

tear off into the forest and thus put me in danger of being sued by the Forestry Commission.

In recent years hazard reduction burns have been difficult for all sectors because of the recent drought – private property, Forestry Commission and National Parks – but it has been clear for some years that other reasons for this have emerged.

Historically I am not sure just how much hazard reduction was “officially” undertaken. Certainly local farmers/property owners would have carried it out, and prior to the forest being managed as a significant economic resource, were probably not too concerned about Winter set fires trickling beyond their boundaries. Certainly those people running cattle in the bush dropped matches in the safe periods to provide the animals some green pick (much like the Indigenous population has done for thousands of years).

The higher than average rainfall in this area in the 1940s and 50s is one explanation for the approach locals took to reducing hazardous material on the ground. In that period there were numerous floods in the river – small ones that filled the river bed and

sometimes popped over the banks and flooded briefly the river flats. These little floods were a regular occurrence but they are rare now. We had two whoppers in the past 20 years but hardly any that even filled the riverbed. That fact, I think, cannot be explained easily.

In recent years, the forest, particularly post Chip Mill, not just locally, but well beyond here, has become a significant source of income for State Governments. Money trees which, I suspect, need protection from fire wherever possible. The constraints on National Parks are different but no less important; the protection of flora and fauna. Both are of course tasked with control burns but are both clearly under resourced for such work and are in recent years faced with smaller and smaller windows of opportunity to undertake such burns safely.

It is difficult, using this experience of this area (the micro of the macrocosm) to ignore the possibility that climate change and the consequent remarkable weather fluctuations have an impact on how fire is, or could be managed well.



For example, my father, who died in 1993 at age 88 only saw the river here stop actually flowing a few times in his long life – I recall him saying this during the drought in the 1980s – from memory I think he said 3 times. Contrast that with my observations since being here since retirement in 2000. The river stopped flowing three times in 20 years. The first in the ‘millennium drought’ in 2007/8 and the current one 2017-20. Add to that the contrast between his experience of huge floods here. There was a major one in 1919 (a level that has not been beaten to date) and 1971 which came close to the record breaking one. In the last 20 years two significant ones, close to the size of the 1971 flood) occurred. The first in 2011 and 2016 from significant dumps of rain in the catchment. He would have experienced some periods of drought over his life but in terms of large damaging bushfires not so many. There was one in 1926 that had some impact on and close to Kiah. It burnt the local Catholic Church and relative’s homesteads at the Nullica north of Kiah and Narrababa to the south of here. Then there was another large one in 1952 Kiah had a lucky escape thanks to a late wind change and only one homestead was lost. The bush to the north of Kiah and

to the south was, like it is now, burnt black. Houses were burnt in to the north and south of here and several homes in the township of Eden.

So comparing his experiences on Kiah of drought, flood and fire spanning 88 years with mine of just the past 20 years you would have to conclude, given the compression of events in time, that something unusual seems to be happening.

### **THE FIRES THAT HIT KIAH THIS SUMMER**

Every Summer, people living near the bush are alert to the possibility of fire burning them out and most people prepare as best as they can for such an event.

The ferocity of this fire came as no surprise given the tinder dry state of the bush after three years of drought. The experience of those up the coast and in Victoria before and during Xmas put us on even more notice to be on the alert and to prepare our properties for such an event. The State's RFS provided continual and valuable advice on the status of these fires on their website. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2 fires from the south, most particularly the 'border fire', but also one burning a bit inland, were both fanned by a high south-west wind which brought them with great ferocity to Kiah.

We had known for days that that this was highly likely to happen and most people had clear ideas of what they would do in such an event. Knowing that the wind might change and take it away before it got here one strategy was to stay and deal with embers with an escape plan – go to town if it wasn't too late or escape to the river. It became pretty clear to most by late afternoon when the smoke got thick and the RFS sent urgent warnings to landline and mobile phones that the safest option was to head away from Kiah. Most of Kiah residents bailed out and left their houses to fend for themselves. A few stood their ground. Not all successfully saving their homes. By all accounts it was pretty horrific.

It hit Kiah well after dark and by all accounts the smoke was so thick it was hard to see. My neighbour, whose homestead is between my place and my sister's property, saved his house and said when he saw what was hitting our places he would be telling us in the morning our houses were gone. Thankfully, and to his amazement, they were still standing though the fire came very close. We were very very lucky unlike a great many residents who are now homeless. Some

half of the houses on Kiah were lost as well as the Kiah Church and our community hall although the fire came close to our houses.

Everyone experienced some damage ranging from road access, sheds, farm machinery and equipment, fences, water systems, livestock, and power and telephones were out for a very long period.

Everyone experienced shock and awe and anger at the awful devastation. This morphed into more directed anger, blaming in particular the lack of hazard reduction undertaken in recent years, not just by the authorities but also because they were prevented by the same to undertake burn-offs on their own properties. At post fire meetings, and in the street, I was struck by many people's desire for one simple answer. For example, hazard reduction burns despite the 3 year drought as well as other obvious and less obvious constraints to bush management. They would talk about what was done 'in the old days', totally missing the point that those days are long gone. People would say to me 'your family knew what to do'. My (unpopular) response is that they would not do that now. They would quite rightly assess now that it is not safe to do that.

Causation discussions inevitably lead into the issue of climate change being a contributing factor and I have been surprised to observe how angrily this idea is currently rejected by many people. They firmly believe that we are in some natural planet cycle which will pass as similar phases have done in the past.

Of course, angry passion aside, most people probably perceive there are a myriad of factors which led us to this awful fire season. What everyone does feel deeply is the terrible damage that has been done to the bush itself and the wildlife here. Except for the strip along each side of the river there is little sign of birds or native animals. The bush and the ground are black and it is truly awful to think what has been wiped out.

A few weeks after the fire I penned a poem, entitled *Kiah Conflagration* for a small poetry group I belong to. This is attached (with apologies for the swearing).

Support post the fire has been impressive given the scale of the damage up and down the coast. This began the next day with road clearing so that people, particularly those with animals to see to, could get back to their properties. Governments at all three levels were there to assist as were Australian Defence Force personnel. Electricity and telephone companies

pulled out all the stops to get us connected as soon as they could (a huge task) and insurance companies got on board quickly. Community support in the way of donated hay, food and other goods also helped Kiah through the initial impact shock.

Kiah however will not recover fully from the horror night of 4 January 2020 back. It will be a long road back for those that have lost everything. Many will probably not even try and will move on. The Kiah environment may never fully recover.

## **Conclusion/summary**

When I began this submission my intention was to tell my particular story about the fire, flag some of what I consider to be nonsense talked in the aftermath and which no doubt will be put to the Committee, put some of my own views forward based on long life experience, as well as offering some possible solutions to fires into the future.

I soon became overwhelmed by the task I had set myself because it is pretty clear that there may be no workable solutions to the problems facing us in the future.

Given likely worsening fire weather into the future (and I am aware that many people do not believe that – that there are many people in this country who do not believe, at any level, in climate change)-I cannot see that there is much that can be done. There are three seemingly insurmountable barriers.

1. The Australian bush burns. It always has and it always will.
2. Governments need revenue and so they will exploit what resources are to hand to fund the range of service they must provide. They always have and they always will. The forest is one such source.
3. People want and expect to get what modern life has to offer, they want to live comfortably and many want to live close to nature and the bush. They will resist any regulations imposed on them. They always have and they always will.

## **Climate change**

Whether or not there is agreement on the cause it is an undisputed fact that the planet has heated up and that it is likely to continue. We have seen over the past 50 years or so that these effects are real. Predictions of even another degree has scary implication for the management of bushfires.

Although there is much discussion about hazard reduction burns being the solution it has been clear in recent years that the period when this can be undertaken has narrowed considerably. In a drought period it is not an option at all and so the fuel on the ground becomes dangerous. That is what happened here on the coast and what made the fires, fanned by wild wind, so catastrophic.

In 'normal' seasonal times though there are attempts to reduce fuel loads, by the Forestry Commission, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. It is not nearly enough though. Why? Lack of



resources. Until Governments (read the *tax payer*) are prepared to fund the provision of many more people to deal with some of the problems, and I don't mean just volunteers as is the case with the RFS, that won't change.

Our local Kiah RFS undertake such work and they also, pretty much over the whole year, are called on to put out fires and they do a great job. Of course they, and other local brigades, stood no chance in the face of the border fire. The predictions were so dire that the attempt to protect Eden was abandoned days before the fire came. The only reason Eden was not impacted is that the wind dropped and the fire stopped just short of the town.

I consider the reliance on the volunteer part of the RFS to be gobsmackingly exploitative. We should be paying people to undertake a lot of the work this body of people do throughout each year, especially the labour-intensive work that has to be done in advance of control burns.

This body of people would provide much needed support to the Forestry Commission teams, National Park teams and the RFS..

Such an approach would have an additional benefit of providing much needed employment opportunities in rural areas. The cost would be high but offsets can be seen in reduction to income support to the unemployed as well as all of the benefits that come with having a job.. To begin such an approach might be to draw on the experience of Labour Market Programs that exists for the unemployed.

Unless in crisis situations I do not think we should be calling generally on the Australian Defence Force.

### **Government revenue**

It is just a perception of mine but I wonder if there is an over reliance on the bush as a source of revenue to the budget and that policies fed down to those managing the forest cause a

reluctance to control burn. Even in wet times there has not been a lot of burns in this area in recent years and anecdotally a lot of aggression from the Forestry Commission to any private property owners undertaking same on their properties without significant work to prevent fires escaping into the forest. This kind of pressure is no doubt felt by state and local RFS management as well.

This is worth exploring I think. Are public servants so constrained by economic considerations that they are obliged to operate risk management approaches to fire risk?

Given the cost implications of wild fire is this income dependence on forest resources economically rational?

### **The people/the public**

I think the general public needs some force feeding of the realities the damage done by bushfires. I am always annoyed by the news reporting of fires which always focus on homes

lost as if that is all that matters. It is not just news reporters who do this but our RFS managements, police and government ministers.

I would like to see it mandated for officials that they do much broader coverage when facing the media. Cover the range of impact including the not pretty pictures of livestock and wildlife that have been burnt. The public needs to be confronted with the awful damage. They need to be shocked continually, not protected in their loungerooms where they murmur to one another about how fine and brave the 'fieries' are and then continue on with their lives. They might donate some money to the cause and then forget all about it. Well they might remember what happened to koalas somewhere.

If confronted with the realities they might be more supportive of Governments trying to do something about a range of preventions; most of which involve unwelcome regulations as well

as costs to government and citizen budgets. Too many people deny or cannot seem to grasp that protection of the environment is hard but it is in everyone's interests. Both sides of the political spectrum in Australia have learnt that lesson. If they want to be in government they had better not inflict too much pain on the general population.

### **One proposal for Committee consideration**

This inquiry has a difficult task in front of it and I hope its members receive submission from the broadest possible range to assist it to not only flag policy options for the Government to consider but also to make some firm recommendations for change into the future.

I am sure there will be some form of scientific investigation of the fires this season. The Kiah experience of the night of 4 January offers a unique opportunity I think for such a study. Its size, location, the level of damage, and the fact

that some relatively large areas on Kiah and to the south were recently intensively logged for pulp would provide the opportunity to test some theories about fire behaviour.

I looked at some of these areas in recent days and would have expected that it would be clear that they would have slowed the ferocity of the fire in those areas but it appears, to the untrained eye, not to be the case. I thought they may have contributed to the reason some homes were not torched but again to the untrained eye it appears not. Of course the fire conditions were impossible but it does highlight the point that clearing and hazard reduction is not the solution in every case of fire.

Thank you for the opportunity to put my views and best wishes to you in your deliberations.

I propose to forward a copy of this submission to the Royal Commission which is undertaking a similar study.

Monica McMahon 17 April 2020.

## ATTACHMENT

**KIAH CONFLAGRATION** BY Monica McMahon February 2020

Scanning the sky for fire  
In the lead up to Christmas on Kiah  
We thought if it gets any drier  
Then there's gonna be fire and ire  
Serious conflagration  
So we got scared and we got prepared  
Well as best as we could surrounded by trees made of wood.

When Mallacoota was gored badly by the bloody red steer  
Around Xmas  
We knew it was just a matter of time before it came after us  
here.

So have ya got a fire plan haveya?  
Yeh/no depends whats comin at us I suppose  
Got the fire pump, got a big hose  
Hopin for the best, expectin the worst  
Leave or stay?  
Fight or flight?  
Shit  
Yeh.  
Eden declared undefendable so what hope Kiah

Well on the 4<sup>th</sup> the mongrel headed for us.  
Well mongrels - two of them.  
High heat and high wind;  
One the border fire, the other a bit inland

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Initially dense smoke and Rural Fire Service Texts “take cover”

Other messages 2 fires 2 hours away bearing down on Kiah.  
Few stayed to defend. Most fled. Better fled than dead.  
Whacked Kiah hard –“its hit Mt Imlay now and we are copping it”.

Errol’s place gone, Annette’s gone, Kiah Hall gone, Kiah  
Church gone – on and on gone gone gone  
Mick, we hoped was safe in his bunker  
Built by himself for somewhere to hunker  
When the worst hit

Plenty lit but by being there saved his house  
Emerging from safety to mop up, to douse  
The majority of Kiah residents though, fled full of dread  
Left their houses to fend for themselves  
Home alone  
Many did not know for days whether homeless  
Trees over roads, highway closed,

As it raced through Kiah, the wind, the fire  
Spared some but not others  
More than 30 homes obliterated  
Sheds too leaving men grieving for lost tools (their jewels)  
Shock and awe and numbness to the core  
Then

White hot anger  
For homes scorched; for wildlife torched  
Fault, blame, who/what caused this flame?  
Global warming?



Lack of hazard reduction?

Economic driven forest management?

Governments asleep at the wheel?

Bloody greenies?

Whatever the cause

Strip it back and what have you got?

Self interest plus the budget bottom line

Exploitative **homo sapiens**

Bastards

Or if Barnaby is right

God

Bastard