



Submission details

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 would like this submission to remain anonymous

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

In regards to the Bushfire that effected Wollemni National Park and Blue Mountains National Park, in particular the area around Mt Wilson, Mt Tomah, Berambing, Bilpin and the Blue Mountains LGA :

This fire was a direct result of RFS backburning activity in the Mt Wilson area on the weekend of the 13/14th Dec 2019.

The Gospers Fire had been burning some 15km north of Bells Line of Road for approximately 8 weeks. I believe it started at the end of September or beginning of October. Our area was not in any direct threat from this fire. Winds during Spring and Summer are predominately westerly winds and this was causing the Gospers Fire to spread East towards the area of Colo and onwards towards the Central Coast.

The RFS brigades in our area started backburning on the northern side of Bells Line of Road in November. They were concerned the Gospers fire would slowly spread south towards

our area and potentially threaten residential properties in the area. They started with backburning around the suburb of Mt Lagoon and along both sides of Mt Lagoon Rd towards Bilpin. Then the spread to the west and started backburning towards Mt Tootie Rd. Due to some damp weather on the weekend they proposed backburning along the northern side of Bells Line of Road from Mt Tootie west towards Mt Tomah they could not undertake this controlled burn, and so there was no backburn in place through this section to protect properties on the western end of Bells Line of Road through the areas of Berambing or Mt Tomah.

Mt Wilson brigade scheduled their backburn for around their suburb for the following weekend (dec 13/14). Bilpin brigade I believe asked them to postpone their burn.

I am also of the understanding there was numerous ex RFS volunteers from the area advise Hawkesbury RFS Command centre that the backburning proposed for Mt Wilson should not go ahead. This was due to the extreme fire conditions , the degree of dry fuel load on the ground, the ongoing drought which lead to the bush being so much drier than normal. All the risks for a "controlled burn " getting out of control were paramount. However Hawkesbury District RFS took no heed and went ahead with their backburn on the saturday 13th Dec.

This backburn on the saturday broke containment lines and they needed to call in aerial support to get it back under control in the afternoon. Conditions were extremely risky to be starting any type of fire. There was a total fire ban in place and despite the fact it got out of control on the saturday they went ahead and continued to backburn on the sunday 14th Dec. This type of reckless behaviour is inexcusable. This backburn again got out of control, the wind was a strong NorthWesterly and it tore through the Heritage Listed Blue Mountains NP, from Mt Wilson to Mt Tomah. It reached Mt Tomah and Berambing in only a matter of 2 hours. Hawkesbury RFS sent out no emergency warnings to residents that their backburn had got out of control and for residents to take precautionary measures and prepare for the ensuing firefront. There was no mobile messages. There was nothing.

This fire should never have been started. The bush in this area contained many threatened species, including the Greater Sydney Glider, and sugar gliders, and was one of only 2 populations of koalas that were chlamydia free. I have head the koala population in our area was the most genetically diverse population within Australia. The intensity of the bushfire that spread through BMNP left nothing in its wake. No animals survived this fire, and the once dense rainforest bush was purely black poles. This fire jumped Bells Line of Road at Mt Tomah and went on to burn thousands of hectares of bush in the Grose Valley. We lost many homes and businesses and other structures, fencing etc in Mt Tomah and Bilpin. I feel very strongly the RFS is responsible. And should be accountable for their actions.

The other issues I would like to raise in regards to bushfires in Australia in general :

Our native bush is extremely prone to bushfire. This has been the case for millions of years. However due to climate change I feel our natural environment in Australia is becoming more vulnerable in regards to bushfire.

Bushfire damages our native bush in a number of ways -

- many species are not bushfire tolerant and do not regenerate, especially if the intensity of the fire is extreme. Epicormic growth may occur with eucalypts but the new growth can never replace the strength and majesty of a gum that is over a hundred years old

- the scalping of the undergrowth by fire allows opportunistic weeds to flourish

- banksia take over 8 years to mature into specimens able to produce seed. So if a fire goes through an area in less than this time the new plants that have grown since the last fire went through have not generated seed for any replacement banksia, ie they essentially are wiped out of that area.

Bushfire also clearly kills native fauna that have their habitat in, and rely on food source within our native bush.

For these reasons I can not comprehend the mentality of the NSW RFS that bushfires that start in our national parks (either from lightning strike or some other ignition) should be left to burn until they threaten property. RFS are very much of the opinion that a bushfire is a "good thing" as it reduces fuel load for future events and is a hazard reduction. The fire is the hazard!!!! And letting any bushfire grow and simply be on "advice" level or "Watch and Act" level is ridiculous in my opinion. Our national parks are there to serve as an environment that protects native flora and fauna. How is letting a bushfire run rampage through any part of it protecting our native flora and fauna? However this is very much the standpoint of the RFS. They take no action to control a fire that is in national parks unless that fire is approaching a residential area.

National parks are the homes of our wildlife and we have a responsibility to put any fire out that threatens their existence. I believe all fires that are within native bush and / or national parks should be actively controlled and put out with all and any means available.

Also , when a fire first starts by nature it is only small. Leaving it to spread will only mean it is much harder to contain and try to put out when it does reach a residential area. If you have available all the support and crews and resources to control and contain a bushfire once it reaches such enormity why did you not use those resources in the first place when the fire first started from the lightning strike ? For example , when this bushfire threatened the Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains urban areas we were inundated with fire crews and planes and choppers all dropping water from the sky, we had spotter planes to pick up flareups after the main firefront passed through, we had about 6 choppers dropping water every 3 minutes on active fireground, we had big bombers with massive loads of retardant from Richmond RAAF Base. Why were these resources not employed when Gospers Fire first started back in the end of September when it was so small and manageable ? Only a small number of these resources would have been required. The financial outlay would have been negligible and the property loss non-existent. Why do RFS or any other government area think it is a good idea to leave a bushfire to burn through native bushland so long as it is not near a residential area? Once it threatens a residential area it will be a much larger task to control and contain it. This is not done in other countries. And we are more at risk of fire than any other continent, as we are the driest continent on earth and our native bush is very vulnerable to fire. If the RFS do not change their ingrained mentality that a bushfire is a good thing then I fear it will be no time and our national parks will not be able to recover and even before that time we will have wiped out all our native animals.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

Supporting documents or images
