

COUNCILLOR PETER MARSHALL
QUEANBEYAN-PALERANG REGIONAL COUNCIL

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Mailing Address:

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16 April 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

I am a councillor on Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council (QPRC).

I have been an active volunteer firefighter in the NSW Rural Fire Service since 2003, and hold the qualifications of Advanced Firefighter and Village Firefighter. I am a former Deputy Captain of the Captains Flat Rural Fire Brigade, and former Training Officer for the brigade (as well as former Treasurer).

I am the only QPRC councillor who is a volunteer firefighter.

I am aware that my Council has made a submission to the Inquiry, and I am embarrassed and ashamed that the submission was changed by vote of a majority of QPRC councillors to promote grazing and firewooding in National Parks.

Grazing and firewooding in National Parks have zero relevance to the bushfires. There is little to no grassland in the National Parks in the QPRC local government area, and I have yet to come across cattle or sheep which will eat bark, leaf litter or undergrowth. Opening up National Parks to firewooding would undermine their primary purpose – conservation – and would also introduce new risks from the increased use of chainsaws and motor vehicles in the National Parks.

I helped fight the fires in the QPRC area. In addition about 95% of my property at Jerangle in the Snowy-Monaro Regional Council area was burnt out. I warrant that I am far more familiar with these fires, and the issues surrounding them, than any other QPRC councillor. Sadly, councillors were not consulted in the development of the Council submission, and the only input councillors had was when the absurd ideas of grazing and firewooding in National Parks were inserted by the council's majority bloc, none of whom had any direct experience of these fires.

Below I address the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

The Inquiry is to consider, and report to the Premier on, the following matters.

1. *The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.*

Bushfires are a natural part of the Australian environment. However, their frequency, intensity and timing are clearly increasing as a result of anthropogenic climate change, sometimes through the intermediary of drought (as was the case this season). Burning fossil



fuels for power and transport, land clearing and population increase are clear drivers of climate change in Australia.

Cuts and restructuring to the National Parks and Wildlife Service appear to have had an impact on the conduct of hazard reduction activities, maintenance of fire trails, and the NPWS' ability to respond to fires. With climate change, NPWS resourcing should be being dramatically *increased*, not decreased nor simply keeping pace with inflation.

I personally believe that with the increasing risk, the Rural Fire Service needs at least a core of paid, professional firefighters, on-call and with regular paid training in the same model as retained staff of Fire and Rescue NSW. These firefighters could be supported by, and contribute to the training of, the balance unpaid volunteer firefighters.

2. *The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect.*

Cuts and restructuring of NPWS clearly impacted on their preparation for and ability to respond to fires.

RFS volunteers mostly have other jobs, and are not a replacement for adequate firefighting resources in NPWS, and also Forests NSW. I overheard a Forests NSW employee thank us for responding to a fire in their plantation, saying they couldn't operate without us. I did not join the RFS to provide free labour, and lose pay, so as to prop up an uneconomic forestry industry. NPWS and Forests NSW should be resourced to undertake their own hazard reduction activity, with support from RFS being a backup, not a primary capability. Paid RFS firefighters could perform that service to NPWS and Forests NSW.

3. *Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment, including:*
 - *immediate management, including the issuing of public warnings*
 - *resourcing, coordination and deployment*
 - *equipment and communication systems.*

Mobile phone networks in rural and regional areas are already inadequate even before being impacted by fire. The NSW and Australian Governments have been funding blackspot programmes, but these are uncoordinated and unplanned. Funding Optus to provide a tower in one location, then funding Telstra in an adjacent one has an obvious flaw – unless and until domestic roaming is mandated, a phone service that works in the first area will not in the second (except for emergency calls, which does not help urgent and important but non-emergency communications). Backup power for mobile phones is abysmal. In my own town, the Telstra mobile phone tower switches off with the electricity – if there is backup power (as there is supposed to be) it routinely fails to kick in. Wireless NBN internet fails when the electricity stops. Television repeaters fail when the electricity stops. In my town, and in much of the QPRC local government area, there is no radio reception for terrestrial radio (e.g. ABC

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Canberra or ABC South East NSW). I have been trying to get this fixed for years, but still with no result.

I do not believe RFS resources were used to their greatest effectiveness, and conversely at times towns were left without any resources as their trucks were elsewhere or broken down.

4. *Any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to bushfires.*

And to make recommendations arising from the Inquiry as considered appropriate, including on:

5. *Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks.*
6. *Land use planning and management and building standards, including appropriate clearing and other hazard reduction, zoning, and any appropriate use of indigenous practices.*

When houses and other infrastructure are built, Asset Protection Zones are mandated. However, there is no ongoing requirement to maintain them. A system similar to councils' oversight of on-site sewage management systems could be created, funded by annual inspection fees.

There also appear to be numerous unapproved dwellings, and structures used as dwellings without having gone through appropriate bushfire risk assessment and mitigation. There may be scope for improving enforcement of existing planning and building regulations, with a more proactive approach than a complaint-driven approach.

7. *Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems.*
8. *Emergency responses to bushfires, including overall human and capital resourcing.*

See above on RFS staffing.

9. *Coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Australian Government, other state and territory governments and local governments.*
10. *Safety of first responders.*

As a RFS volunteer I was not overly concerned about the equipment issued to us. I was more concerned about the standards of training and experience of firefighters and their leaders. This is a direct result of the volunteer status, with attendance at RFS training, both informal at brigade level and formal courses and qualifications, essentially being optional. Conversely, excessive effort is put into frequent requalification on some skills (chainsaw, First Aid), whereas basic firefighting skills are never reassessed. It astounds me how ignorant of basic science many firefighters are, with climate change denialism being evidence of this. Firefighting is science-driven, and rejection of science is unacceptable in firefighters. Such

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people put themselves, their colleagues and the community at risk. Basic science understanding should be a core and non-negotiable expectation of firefighters.

11. Public communication and advice systems and strategies.

See above comments on ABC and other communications.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

Peter Marshall
[unsigned as submitted electronically]