

Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Inquiry into the recent Bushfires in the 2019/20 Fire Season.

Lessons to be learned .

Causes of Bushfires in the 2019/20 Season.

Whilst some bushfires were ignited by negligent practices such as careless welding and grinding, etc., most were started by lightning strikes and "burn-offs" and hazard reductions that got away.

The false claim by some media and some politicians that MOST were started by arsonists is not true.

There is no doubt that the then current and previous dry conditions and drought were exacerbated by climate change.

Drier winters and springs resulted in clearer skies, frostier and more drying days and nights, less winter and fewer Spring rains.

Ever hotter summers continued.

There was a significant increase in evaporation/dessication.

a. There is ample evidence available from reports and inaction that the Advice to both Federal and State Governments in relation to the impending dangers of the then impending 2019 fire season were largely ignored by governments. It is possible however, that for example the NSW RFS did not adequately stress the dire situation for fear that its resources would be further reduced in the future.

Despite very many pleas earlier on last year, from professional fire fighters, scientists and other professionals in appropriate related fields, for more action to be immediately undertaken by State and Federal Governments so that fire fighting units could be more adequately resourced, the Federal Government particularly refused and stated that units were adequately resourced already. This was either a series of lies or a display of total ignorance, neither forgivable.

i. It is generally acknowledged that the still current drought has been exacerbated by the Indian Ocean Dipole whilst the "El Nino" effect has been minimal over the last year. Had the 2 coincided, conditions would have been worse. In most years Australia is affected by at least one of these phases.

ii. It is generally acknowledged that the changing weather patterns have precluded burning off or hazard reduction burns at times of the year that previously would have safely permitted such burns. As a result, often attempts at burning off have been made by authorities or individuals at inappropriate and unsafe times. Often these "burn offs" have been rushed (As earlier planned burn offs have become too dangerous) and are often carried out on massive scales, often using incendiary bombs. Frequently the result is scorched or killed trees that later in the season drop yet more litter on the forest floor, providing an even worse scenario. Small localised trickle burn offs as practised by some aboriginal

communities in the past with adequate staffing levels at times that suit a particular location, are much better, safer and more efficient. Conversely, burn off applications by individual landholders sited at appropriate locations and in favourable conditions are sometimes refused by paid personnel sitting in an office in an area that has completely different atmospheric and ground conditions to the applicant's circumstances.

iii. National Parks have been given ever more territory to look after but with ever decreasing resources. Consequently responses by National Parks staff to fire outbreaks are often too little too late.

iv. The paid, "professional" and "volunteer" bush fire fighting Services have been given ever more duties (such as attendance at road accidents) in recent years but reduced resources (money). The results being resources once again overstretched.

v. The very substantial unpaid voluntary portions of the fire fighting services have become alienated by the bureaucracy. CONTRARY to what some in government officials and politicians claim, most volunteers volunteer only to protect life and property, not for any "thrill". Some payment to volunteers is now to be made, but does not apply to all and in no way adequately compensates. Too often the volunteers are required to work well beyond exhaustion levels, something that would not be tolerated by public servants, politicians and work place regulations. Adequate water and food is often not available for the prolonged working conditions. The disparity of nourishment available to volunteers on the front to that provided to professionals in supervisory capacities needs to be investigated and corrected.

vi. The centrally run bureaucratic system (as compared to the small, efficient, independent agile local brigades that worked very well in the past) has proven to be a disaster. Intentionally or otherwise, the "mushroom" effect is counterproductive.

a. Communications are slow and complicated. (One fire captain has informed me that his unit was asked to "stand up" and then had to wait over half an hour for communications to be established to advise where to go. In the meantime 5 houses were lost not far away.)

b. The use of the recently mandated 000 regime is almost totally a disaster. Even if a brigade knows of a fire nearby it has to await advice from 000. Even if the brigade itself knows of a fire, it cannot act until it itself has advised 000, then tasked. That 000 facility may often be on the other side of the country. 000 will first ask for a "nearest cross street". Absolutely ridiculous in the countryside. Getting an unfamiliar and sometimes rude 000 operator to understand a particular circumstance is often a very long and exhausting, sometimes futile exercise.

c. Communications generally.

Previously, and particularly recently the RFS website for example was often as much as 24 hours behind actual conditions. As a result, the public that should be receiving warnings is not adequately informed.

The nomenclature used on signage, and in the media, etc., is misleading, and does not precisely describe the situation.

Advice to the public of a true situation is of vital importance.

For example "Under control" does not mean what most people understand that phrase to mean. "Watch and Act", needs to be explained more clearly.

Use of different names for fires when a particular fire crosses for example a State border is confusing and potentially additionally dangerous.

Whilst the recent rollout of mobile phone services in SOME areas is of benefit to a proportion of mostly city subscribers, undue reliance on this somewhat limited facility is confusing and dangerous UNLESS substantial improvements are made.

c. The Federal Government's response to recommendations from previous inquiries seem to be substantially inadequate.

d. (In) Adequacy of existing Federal Government mitigation measures.

There appears to be little in the way of planning or implementation of adequate assessment and adaption of adequate measures as outlined in the terms of reference for this inquiry. Please see additional notes below.

e. ,f.,g., and h. This respondent has little knowledge of such models, structures, etc., so no comment is made.

i. Related matters and further comments.

i.1 With reference to a. iii, iv, and v, above, much earlier attention is required to possible dangerous fire situations. Requesting that only one or two units attend a fire and then much later calling for back up requiring perhaps many hours delay for remote locations is negligent.

i.2.. With the climate changing rapidly, and increasing use of (particularly exotic pine) plantations and with the disasters with those plantations in recent years, very significant re-thinking of forest policies is required.

Some aspects of planted forests that require a re-think are...

Size of plantations.

Proximity to other planted and native forests.

Species planted.

Adequate access and fire break trails.

Re-think policies of locking off fire trails within forests and National Parks.

Re think policies of poisoning of native animals such as wallabies, koalas and possums and many other species. Should the health of exotic species take prominence over natives? If so, why are exotic weeds such as St John's Wort and Blackberry which contribute to fuel loads be allowed to proliferate unchecked?

i.3.

The community will not tolerate further personal assaults particularly upon individuals, which for anyone else would result in at least a fine or jail term, from people such as our Prime Minister.

i.4. The Defence Forces should if necessary be brought in earlier but properly trained so that they themselves do not cause more fires and other problems as occurred in this last period.

i.5. Whilst in emergency situations things can be sometimes neglected, plastic and other litter should not be left by fire fighters to further de-stabilise our already fragile ecosystems.

i.6. Our reporting systems should be upgraded to adequately disclose not only the loss of human lives and houses, but destruction and loss of life to domestic and natural life forms.

i.7. In relation to adequate nourishment for fire-front fighters, consideration should be given to three additional compartments on trucks that already (rightly) have many compartments for storage. All such vehicles should additionally have a (stocked) compartment for energy bars, etc.. Another compartment (stainless steel) for bulk drinking water (in addition to individual personal vessels) and another for rubbish.