



The Report

Introduction

- 1.1 The inquiry commenced on 5 December 2019 following a referral by the then Minister for Water Resources, Drought, Rural Finance, Natural Disaster and Emergency Management, the Hon David Littleproud MP.
- 1.2 The Committee was to inquire into the efficacy of past and current vegetation and land management policy, practice and legislation and their effect on the intensity and frequency of bushfires and subsequent risk to property, life and the environment. The inquiry's full terms of reference are provided in the preliminary pages of this report.

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.3 The Committee opened for submissions on 5 December 2019, initially with a closing date of 28 February 2020. Submissions were invited from a wide range of organisations including national and state government departments and agencies, emergency services, academics, agricultural and environmental groups. Submissions were also open to the public.
- 1.4 Later in December 2019 and into January 2020, the bushfire crisis escalated significantly in several states. On 21 January the Committee extended its submission deadline to 31 March 2020, in recognition that bushfire-affected organisations and individuals needed to direct resources to the immediate tasks of response and recovery.
- 1.5 The Committee received 69 submissions to the inquiry by 26 February 2020. Most were from individuals recounting their experiences and

expressing their views on rules and policies for hazard reduction burning and land clearing. Several submissions were received from academics, local rural fire fighters and community organisations.

- 1.6 A public hearing was held on 12 February 2020 with representatives from CSIRO.
- 1.7 A list of submissions is at Appendix A, and details of the public hearing are at Appendix B.

Announcement of a Royal Commission and decision to conclude the inquiry

- 1.8 On 20 February 2020, the Prime Minister announced a National Royal Commission into the recent Australian bushfires, and published the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission.¹ The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements will be led by ACM Mark Binskin AC (Retd), and is to deliver its final report by the end of August 2020.²
- 1.9 The Committee examined the Royal Commission's terms of reference and assessed that they overlap significantly with its inquiry. The Royal Commission's key areas of inquiry include the core matter before the Committee: vegetation and land management and its impact on the intensity and frequency of bushfires. The timeline given for the Royal Commission also means that it would be taking place simultaneously with the Committee's work.
- 1.10 On 26 February 2020, the Committee therefore resolved not to proceed further with its inquiry, in order to make way for the Royal Commission. Announcing this decision, the Chair noted that the Royal Commission would be a major national exercise, and that the Committee wished to avoid any confusion and prevent duplication of resources and demand.³
- 1.11 The Committee ceased accepting submissions after 26 February 2020.

1 The Hon Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister, 'National Royal Commission into black summer bushfires established', *Media Release*, 20 February 2020; at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-royal-commission-black-summer-bushfires-established>.

2 See <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/about>.

3 Mr Ted O'Brien MP, Chair, 'House bushfire inquiry to give way to Royal Commission', *Media Release*, 26 February 2020.

Concluding remarks

- 1.12 The Committee thanks all of those who took the time to contribute to its inquiry.
- 1.13 The Committee would like to assure all submitters to its inquiry that their contributions were appreciated and valued. The Committee intends to write to the Royal Commission, providing the evidence gathered and published by the Committee during the inquiry, and inviting the Commission to draw upon that evidence in its considerations.
- 1.14 It is the hope of the Committee that the Royal Commission hears from a broad range of individuals and communities affected by the fires, in order to deepen our understanding of bushfire in Australia, and ensure that we take the best possible approach to preventing such terrible events in future and being better equipped to manage them. The Committee encourages those who submitted to its inquiry, and those who may not have had the opportunity to submit, to engage with the Royal Commission.
- 1.15 The Committee wishes the Royal Commission well in its important work, and looks forward to its findings.
- 1.16 Finally, the Committee acknowledges the devastating impact of the fires on many Australians over the past several months. The Committee extends its best wishes to all bushfire-affected people and communities as they embark on the long road to recovery. The Committee also wishes to acknowledge the tireless efforts of all those who assisted in fighting the fires and supporting affected people and wildlife, including paid and volunteer firefighters, other emergency services personnel and first responders. The Committee wishes to place on record its deep gratitude for their work.

Ted O'Brien MP
Chair

4 March 2020

