

EXCLUSIVE NATIONAL NSW BUSHFIRES

## 'Unbelievable what's happening': Fire inquiry reviews 1000 submissions

By [Peter Hannam](#) and [Laura Chung](#)

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When the giant Currowan fire jumped the Shoalhaven River on the NSW south coast and roared into the Kangaroo Valley in early January, it trapped four fire crews in a so-called Dead Man's Zone of danger.

A wind change on the evening of January 4 had forced the mix of a dozen or so volunteer and paid firefighters to abandon their battle against the suddenly extended flank of flames on Tallowa Dam Road.



Mike Gorman, deputy captain of the Kangaroo Valley Rural Fire Service unit, said his crew was in a "near-miss incident" during a big fire in January. LOUISE KENNERLEY

The last of the convoy, a Landcruiser run by the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), hit a fallen tree and was destroyed by fire. Its crew of two survived by

jumping into a farmer's dam. A second vehicle also got stuck and its team would have to wait at least six hours to be rescued.

“Our brigade came very close to losing all three trucks and crews that evening,” Mike Gorman, deputy captain of the local Rural Fire Service unit who was in one of the vehicles, writes in his submission to the NSW bushfire inquiry. “It is the most serious near-miss that I am aware of in the history of the Kangaroo Valley Brigade.”



The NPWS firefighting Landcruiser that got burned out on Tallowa Dam Rd after crashing into a fallen tree. WOLTER PEETERS

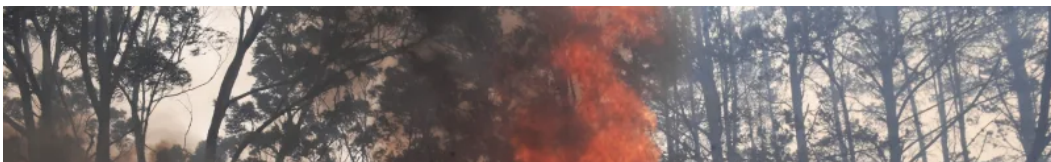
Mr Gorman says the incident “was not discussed” in two subsequent so-called after action reviews. Similar reviews elsewhere should be made public so that lessons can quickly be shared, he says, among his 29 recommendations.

The missive by the RFS veteran with two decades of service is one of as many as 1000 submissions the [NSW bushfire inquiry](#) expects to consider after Friday's deadline.

“The inquiry's findings will allow NSW to learn from the recent bushfire season,” Mary O’Kane, the state's former chief scientist who is heading up the inquiry, told the *Herald*.

“We are still working to complete a comprehensive and robust bushfire inquiry despite the challenges COVID-19 has presented,” Professor O’Kane said, adding the inquiry will need to resort to a “virtual format” to allow community input to be included by the July 31 deadline for reporting.

A federal Royal Commission began on Thursday and will accept submissions until April 28.





The Rural Fire Service will not lodge a submission of its own to the Bushfire Inquiry. NICK MOIR

While the RFS itself won't make a submission, the NPWS is among the agencies that have. Leading fire researchers, such as Ross Bradstock from the University of Wollongong, have been recruited to aid the inquiry and won't make separate reports.

NSW Transport Minister and Bega MP Andrew Constance, who almost lost his Malua Bay home in the fires, has provided a verbal submission to the inquiry.

The Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, led by former NSW fire chiefs Greg Mullins and Phil Koperberg, was among prominent groups who have submitted lengthy reports.

Mr Mullins, who has been outspoken about the role climate change has played in worsening fire weather, said "we can't just take the same approaches".



Bushfires destroyed thousands of buildings across eastern Australia and claimed about three dozen lives. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

“It’s unbelievable what is happening,” Mr Mullins said. “It is beyond anyone’s experience.”

Among his group’s 28 recommendations were to overhaul building and planning regulations and standards even though many date from the Victorian Black Saturday fires just a decade ago.

The government also needs to consider paying seasonal firefighters to bolster the ranks of Fire & Rescue NSW and NPWS, and fund more research into cultural and prescribed burning.

Increased controlled burning to reduce fuel loads was also the dominant call in the Volunteer Fire Fighters Association’s submission.

"Land management plays a major role in a fire season because with less fuel, there is less fire," association president Mick Holton said.

“We have a choice, we can have fire in a controlled manner and in a manner that is good for the country, or we lock it up and have fire when we don’t want it and it will cause damage.”

The Kangaroo Valley Community Bushfire Committee, of which Mr Gorman is a member, said in a separate submission that the Currowan destroyed 130 significant buildings in the valley including 60 dwellings.

Priorities should include giving local groups greater autonomy to prepare for fires, identifying key assets to be protected - such as the historic Hampden Bridge - and making public how recommendations from previous inquiries were implemented.

For its part, the RFS said it had tallied 1,043 injuries between July last year and the end of March.

"Some of these incidents have been formally reviewed, depending on the severity, and some reviews are still underway," a spokesman said, adding that the RFS would not be commenting on individual submissions.



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