



Your details

Mrs

Title

First name

Helen

Last name

Templeton

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 give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

My property was affected by the Clear Range Fire on 1 February 2020. In the years leading up to this fire we had installed a dedicated fire fighting system along with extra water storage and joined our local RFS brigade. As the outlook for us deteriorated over the summer 2019/20 we joined with several neighbours to better prepare our properties and write/update and share our fire plans. When the Orroral Fire started in Namadgo National Park on 26 January, we knew we would be under direct threat. My husband was away at the time, so along with my nephew, I commenced implementation of our fire plan: to start watering our yard, continue to tidy up, checking pumps and the fire fighting system. We felt prepared but fully aware of the challenge facing us given the very dry conditions and the fire weather conditions forecast for the coming week. On Thursday 30 January a NSW RFS Liaison officer came along the road, advising all residents to leave. On Friday 31 Jan we had a grader come along the road to

put containment lines around houses fence lines or paddocks where requested. The SES also visited to check our plan for staying and defending. When we went to bed on Friday night, the glow of the fire could be seen to the NW. At 4.30am on 1 February the glow had shifted to the SW - a rapid change in 5 hours. Our local fire captain rang us at 5am advising that today would be a big fight for our community. As previously arranged a number of our neighbours met at our place at 9am to finalise the days plans. At 11am we saw the first flames to the west on our property just on our side of our back fence with Namadgi National Park. According to our plan, I then moved our cattle down to the river and turned on our pump to provide water to our fire fighting tanks. We turned on a large sprinkler to the west of our house to saturate the area. A couple of RFS Strike team tankers had arrived at our house while I was moving the cattle and one had laid out hoses to defend our house from to the west. As I returned to the house a spot fire lit up to the east of our house and one tanker then left to deal with that. The fire moved fairly slowly down the ridge lines from the west towards us over then next hour or so. At some point around midday the second tanker left - called to a higher priority. We continued to monitor the fire, until another spot fire started to the east of our house then rapidly moved up the hill towards the house. We managed to keep the fire away from our sheds and house and it roared on up the hill to meet with the fire coming from the west. Sometime around then another fire had come from the river, up a creek line to the north of our house and set fire to our lavender and rosemary crops. This burned fiercely and hot, but still we managed to keep that from spreading. The fire in the creek to the north of the house got into the yard. I was unable to suppress the fire due to a malfunction of our hose. I could see a curtain of embers to the east of the house where my husband was fighting the lavender fire and thought at that moment that our house was under threat. I called for assistance from the RFS but they were unable to help (due to a fire across the road between them and us, as I found out later). I went to tell my husband that the fire was beyond my control and I was going inside to let the fire pass through the house yard. However, he had got the lavender fire under control and I was able to swap jobs with him and he was able to fix the hose and get the fire in the house yard under control. By about 4pm we were satisfied that we were safe - our house and sheds were largely unaffected but nearly all of our paddocks were burnt. At this point we started ringing around our neighbours and checking on their welfare. An RFS truck came by sometime around 4.30pm and from them it became clear that not everyone had fared as well as us. We consider ourselves very fortunate, but also very proud of the work we did in the years leading up to 2020 and the effort we put in on the day. However, we are also keenly aware that the unpredictable nature of a fire of that scale could have ended in a very different story for us.

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

1.4 Any other matters

I have attached a document that outlines some thoughts relating to the terms of reference that I hope will contribute towards planning and better management of fires into the future.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- NSW Bushfire Inquiry.docx
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Submission to NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Public warnings for Clear Range Fire 1 February inadequate

Confusing communication with public:

- Wrong day/date for one map - Friday 1 February. Confusion over whether the map was for Friday 31 January or Saturday 1 February.
- ridiculously, the ACT map did not show predicted spread across the border into NSW.
- NSW RFS liaison officer called into properties in Bumbalong Thursday 30 January. Her advice to me personally was to leave early on January 31st as my property 'is undefendable'. She made this statement with no knowledge of our preparation or our fire plan or our level of ability and training. She seemed panicked and in a rush and the result was that she left me and one other resident she visited both in a distressed state. Absolutely unhelpful.
- On Friday 31st, SES representatives also called by to check on us. They did a quick verbal check of whether we were planning to stay and defend, what our plan was, and if we had a designated safe place to go if we were overrun. While I don't know the qualifications of these men, I would have thought this job would have been better done by the local RFS, instead of sending a stressed and panicky liaison officer around the community frightening people. In contrast to the RFS liaison officer, the SES seemed OK with our plan to stay and defend.

Cross-border issues:

- Fire Spread prediction maps issued for the Orroral Fire (ACT) and Clear Range Fire (NSW) were for different time frames. ACT was showing fire spread for the next 72 hours and NSW showed for the next 24 hours. This is confusing.
- Significant resources at Guises Creek in the ACT attempted to provide support to the NSW Clear Range Fire, but were directed to return to their station before they got to Michelago.
- No attempt by ACT to lay retardant lines along their border in the days leading up to 1 February. Their focus was entirely for the fire spreading (north) into the southern suburbs of Canberra. No concern for their neighbours in NSW under the prevailing NW winds.

Immediate management of Clear Range Fire in the Colinton/Bumbalong area

- Planning by NSW RFS for 1 February focussed on protecting the villages of Michelago and Bredbo. However by 4am 1 Feb it was obvious that the prediction map was wrong and the planning now somewhat out of date. The

area under immediate threat was Colinton and Bumbalong Valley – shown on their prediction map as potentially under ember attack only - but significant resources were kept in both Bredbo and Michelago.

- The map included in the Incident Action Plan (IAP) issued at 4.30am 1 February did not show any dwellings along western side of Murrumbidgee River in Bumbalong. Does this explain the lack of air resources deployed along Clear Range? Is this why strike teams were withdrawn from the western side of the Murrumbidgee and diverted to a “higher priority”? It is highly likely that at least two more properties could have been saved along this road if those strike teams had remained in the area. Ironically, the IAP for 2 Feb showed all the buildings along Upstream and Downstream Road, although many of them weren't there any more....
- It is clear that the priority for fire crews was to prevent the fire crossing the Monaro Highway and travelling further east. However, this seemed to be at the expense of direct requests for assistance from landholders who were actively defending their properties. In one instance several trucks were parked at the entrance to a property, one came a short way into the property to refill from the private dam, then left again, despite calls from that property for assistance. Another local landholder drove past these fire trucks and went to the assistance of the landholder himself. While I understand that there needs to be good control of resources, in the face of a fast moving and dynamic fire, crews must be allowed some autonomy in responding to on-ground situations as they see them, without fear of bureaucratic repercussions.
- The Crew Leader of a tanker deployed in the southern end of Bumbalong Valley had tried, unsuccessfully, to contact the Captain of the local brigade after I called for assistance when under flame attack on multiple fronts. After making the decision to ask for extra support directly from the Fire Command Centre, the Crew Leader was then publicly castigated by the Fire Captain over UHF for not following correct procedure and going through him. This again highlights the rigidity of the chain of command – on-ground crews are not used to maximum effect, particularly when communication systems fail.
- Significant air resources were directed to Bredbo which was not under immediate threat on 1 February. Local RFS leaders state that air support was not able to assist in the Bumbalong area due to heavy smoke. However, many photos of the progress of the fire show clear air between first light and 11am, that would have allowed for laying of retardant lines along the ACT /NSW border at Bumbalong or even along the highway – thereby freeing up a few more trucks for landholder support.

Equipment and Communication systems

- Strike teams from the Central coast were in the area without UHF radios and could not communicate directly with local brigade tankers or local members deployed to defend their own homes.

Skill level not sufficient at local level to manage large scale disasters

- The local brigade showed itself to not have the skill set or command ability to manage a major conflagration such as that which presented on 1 Feb in the Bumbalong Valley. Local brigades are trained for, and good at dealing with small scale localised fires. Serious consideration needs to be given for another level of professional fire fighting capability that can be activated at short notice to oversee major fires – particularly those that cross borders and regional command areas. People with specialised strategic thinking skills need to be in control.

Local brigades need to focus on preparing communities to prevent and manage fires

One of the Colinton RFS deputies has undertaken a concerted effort over the past five or so years to train, educate and prepare the community of Bumbalong. Fifteen residents, representing seven properties were members of the Colinton RFS and/or the Community Fire Unit as of 1 Feb. Residents actively defended six properties during 1 Feb - all of them successfully saving their residences, although incurring significant damage to sheds and equipment on a couple of those properties. Notably, there were no serious injuries although one resident spent a short time in hospital for minor burns and dehydration.

This clearly demonstrates that helping the community to plan and prepare for fire has significant benefits – both in raw dollar terms but also in terms of reduced upheaval and dislocation and stress for residents and communities. Of the ten properties not defended (for various reasons), only four survived with minor damage, due entirely to the vagaries of the firestorm/topography/vegetation. Four of the properties destroyed were permanent homes, the others being weekender/holiday cabins and associated outbuildings.

The local RFS has not supported expanding training initiatives to visit every landholder in their area of responsibility to establish Pre-Incident Plans and support landholders to write Fire Plans and adequately prepare and maintain properties. This activity should not be optional – for either the RFS or rural landholders.