

ACT Legislative Assembly

Review of ACT emergency services responses to the 2019-20 bushfire season

Submission – 30 June 2020

Last summer was very tough for all those directly and indirectly affected by bushfires. I live in Canberra, but was in Mallacoota with my family during the New Years Eve 2019 bushfire. It was harrowing, however we consider ourselves lucky. With good preparation, hard work and helpful neighbours, we saved our family home (the back fence, tool shed and some of the garden was burnt). Many around us were not so lucky (approx. 40 homes in the four streets surrounding us burnt down).

After being evacuated in early January by air via Melbourne, my family (myself, my partner and children aged nine and 12) returned to our home on the western edge of Cook (a bushfire prone area). We then spent the next several weeks preparing our property and closely monitoring the fires in the ACT and over the border in NSW. Thankfully we were spared from another direct threat.

The ACT ESA, ACT RFS and NSW RFS did a great job keeping the ACT and some neighbouring communities informed and safe.

Commissioner Whelan in particular was outstanding. Her strong, empathic leadership was a stark contrast to January 2003, for those of us that remember it all too well.

In early January this year (2020) it was not clear that the ACT Government was adequately prepared for an intense bushfire threat.

The Beard fire in mid January appeared to be a wake up call.

Thankfully the ACT responded, with Commissioner Whelan at the helm.

The stress and anxiety in the Canberra community when the Orroral Valley Fire started was palpable. Commissioner Whelan responded with decisiveness, calm and clarity of purpose. The positive change in the tone of community feedback between the start and end of the Orroral Valley Fire clearly illustrate the community's appreciation of her leadership and responsiveness, as well as the organisational learning she instituted.

The ESA messages discouraging 'disaster tourism' etc were highly regarded by communities dealing with ongoing threats.

The ABC's Emergency reporting was also an invaluable source of information throughout the summer.

The ACT and NSW responses to the Bumbalong/Colinton fires on 1 February 2020 were disappointing. The ACT seemed all too happy to wash their hands of responsibility in this area, and NSW appeared unprepared for the predicted threats. Lack of coordination seems to have been an issue.

Some reflections and suggestions for the ACT's future bushfire operational response are provided below for your consideration.

I would be happy to discuss or elaborate on any of these points, should you wish.

Some things I learnt from my experiences this summer:

- Months of planning, preparation and effort by my family in the lead-up to summer meant that we had the resources and information to make sensible and safe decisions, and ultimately to save our home.

- It is difficult to be fully prepared near a State/Territory border, when one has to monitor several State/Territory-based apps and websites etc with different warning systems and terminology etc.
- Conflicting advice and messages on State/Territory communication platforms (eg in relation to evacuations and road closures) resulted in community confusion, delay and distrust.
- Allowing residents to stay and defend their homes and/or return to their properties soon after the fire front had passed, saved homes.
- The terrifying sight and sound of a house burning down is something I never wish to experience again. I saw four homes burn down on NYE and will forever regret that we were unable to save them (as we were defending our own home).
- Simple planning and preparatory steps by our neighbours (eg reducing fuel loads around their house, pre-filled bins and buckets of water, hoses that extended to every corner of their property, etc) meant we were able to save some neighbours homes, even in their absence.
- Wooden fences allow fires to ‘creep’ through urban areas and set homes alight long after the fire front has passed.
- Larger rubbish and recycling bins pre-filled with water were an invaluable resource, particularly when the water pressure dropped.
- Incorrect handling and placement of gas cylinders meant homes ignited well after the fire front had passed.
- Wide cleared fire breaks at the urban edge provided houses with some protection from the fire front.
- The VicEmergency app appears to be better than the NSW Fires Near Me app for a number of reasons, including because it allows for a bigger watch zone and identifies a visual warning zone.
- It would be useful if there were current maps available online showing active fire areas, rather than just burn areas. The fire prediction maps provided on some days went some way towards addressing this.
- It would be helpful to have current time series maps available online showing the direction, growth and speed etc of fires.
- ‘Extinguished’ fires should be left on apps and website maps until the end of the bushfire season. Burnt areas provide useful information for those preparing and monitoring ongoing fire threats.
- ABC Emergency and local community radio reporting was life saving, particularly when there was no electricity or Internet connection.
- Telstra was more reliable than Optus in terms of coverage and signal, in some regional areas.
- Long before the bushfire threat was over, some advice warnings in NSW stated 'there are many areas that are now safe for people to visit'. This was shown to be incorrect and irresponsible when conditions deteriorated and communities were threatened again (sometimes multiple times).
- Strong messaging from the ACT government discouraging 'disaster tourism' etc was appreciated by communities dealing with ongoing bushfire threats.

- The leadership shown by ACT ESA Commissioner Whelan and NSW RFS Commissioner Fitzsimmons was exemplary – they are examples for many.

Some general suggestions for consideration:

- We need a nationally consistent approach for bushfire warnings, terminology and advice etc.
- There needs to be a consistent and timely approach for updating information across State and Territory communications – eg apps, websites, and Facebook pages etc.
- It would be helpful to have a national app with consistent terminology, advice and time series maps showing active and burnt fire areas.
- In the lead-up to the bushfire season, communities need to be more actively encouraged to prepare themselves and their homes, particularly those in bushfire prone areas. Warnings and fines should be considered where properties have not been adequately prepared.
- There needs to be an increased emphasis on shared responsibility and ensuring safety and survival if an emergency develops. Communities need to be aware that even if they don't plan to stay and defend, there is a shared responsibility to keep people safe - eg for neighbours who are staying, and for firefighters defending property, etc.
- There needs to be a review of the emphasis on having a 'fire survival plan' (which is often understood to essentially mean an 'evacuation plan'). Instead communities should be encouraged to thoroughly plan in advance, prepare their properties, remain well informed, *and* have an evacuation plan.
- More specific and detailed information about the equipment and safety gear required, and how to use it when staying to defend a property should be available on emergency websites etc.
- Detailed information on what to do with gas bottles and larger gas cylinders needs to be available on emergency websites etc, particularly for tourist regions and homes in rural and remote communities that rely on larger gas cylinders. This is currently lacking.

Some suggestions specifically for the ACT:

- A more consistent and timely approach is required when updating information across communication platforms – eg the ACT ESA website, ACT ESA Facebook page, and NSW Fires Near Me app. Different and/or delayed information on these platforms reduced the helpfulness of communications.
- On the ESA ACT website and Facebook pages, more regular updates on active NSW fires near the ACT border are required.
- The NSW Fires Near Me app needs to have a 'More Information' link for fires in the ACT, or at least provide a link to the ACT ESA website alert information. Having nothing on the app suggests a lack of coordination between NSW and the ACT.
- The NSW Fires Near Me app should ensure the ACT is consistently provided with notifications for ACT Total Fire Bans. This has been ad hoc to date.
- On the NSW Fires Near Me app, a more consistent approach is required regarding notifications for fires that start outside and then spread into an ACT watch zone, when the alert level increases for a fire in the ACT, and/or when information about a fire in the ACT is updated. (During January this year I only received notifications when a fire

started in my watch zone, but NOT when a fire spread into my watch zone, when a fire's alert level increased, or when information about a fire was updated. To illustrate, the Mary's Hill fire started outside my watch zone, and then crossed into my watch zone, however I did not receive an alert when it crossed into my watch zone. Nor did I receive alerts when information about this fire changed or was updated.)

- The NSW Fires Near Me app should consider allowing a bigger watch zone and adding a visual warning area, like the VicEmergency app.
- The ACT should consider developing an ACTEmergency app, or even better, support development of a national bushfire app based on nationally consistent warnings, terminology and advice etc, and including time series maps showing active and burnt fire areas.
- Both the ACT RFS and ESA websites require a lot more detailed information (particularly for those living in bushfire prone areas) about how to prepare before a fire season and in the lead-up to an emergency, the equipment and safety gear required (and how to use it), how to actively defend a property, what to do if you're caught in a car in a bushfire, backup plans and what to do if it's not possible to leave, etc. For comparison I draw your attention to the detailed information on the Fires Near Me and VicEmergency apps and the following websites:
 - <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare>
 - <https://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/plan-prepare/your-bushfire-plan>
 - <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/prepare/#fire>