

Submission to the Fire Inquiry

To the Commissioner

Dear Mr Pearce,

My name is Wendy Nicholas and I live in Tangambalanga and work as a Community Mental Health Nurse in Albury. I was born in Corryong and spend many weekends at my brother's property (formerly my parents) and had done so for over forty years to visit my parents when they were still alive.

The first I knew of the fires was on the night of the 30<sup>th</sup> December 2020 when I was in the Albury Hospital Emergency Department (ED) working a mental health emergency care shift. At approximately 2000 hours the ED went into lock down as a result of a truck accident at the fire site near Jingellic.

This fire had started in Burrowye State Park, a lightning strike I was told which had occurred in the afternoon. After the fires I have heard that authorities were notified of the lightning strike, the people who notified gave the exact location and had advised the authorities they would need to send in the helicopters as inaccessible to other forms of transport. The story goes, these farming people waited for three hours, no sign of any helicopters and then the fire took off.

On leaving the hospital at approximately 2210 hours I was listening to the radio and became aware of the evacuation of Cudgewa, my niece and her family live in the township along with several friends. Also my cousins and other friends live on farms in the area. At this time I was unable to contact any of the family in the Cudgewa, Corryong, Biggara areas so had no idea who was affected or safe. From this time on for two weeks it was a guessing game, the Emergency App was about two days behind what was actually happening. I was able to gather snippets of information from people who were able to contact family via face book. With no phone coverage for two weeks I had no contact with one of my brothers, as he relies on his landline, for that time.

The Vic Emergency app kept saying to evacuate but gave no indication where to. I was having dinner with my cousin in Albury on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2020 and we both received a text stating we needed to evacuate, nowhere in this message did it indicate to where or for what reason other than a fire in the area. I note, in my diary that we both thought it was a hoax text but then when I arrived at work the next day realised it probably wasn't as my colleagues stated they too had received the text. This belies a trigger happy service which had the possibility to distress and confuse people when in fact the need to remain calm was the ideal message. Yes, by all means be alert but to evacuate!

This call to evacuate was also given for towns they were saying were being abandoned. There were messages for Corryong, on or around the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, one message said Corryong is being abandoned, all personnel are leaving then in the next message, "if you

are in these areas please go to the evacuation centre in Corryong?" One of the most disturbing snippets was on the night of the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, the Biggara fire truck had been taken back to Corryong to protect the township despite my knowledge that nearly all the Biggara residents were still there. It was returned to the Biggara fire brigade later that night; I understand this information had gone onto Face book, strange that it was then returned following this public knowledge! It is lucky so many of the farmers had their own water tanks (slip-ons) on the back of their vehicles which made the difference between saving the Biggara and Bunroy valleys and letting them burn totally. This may well have resulted in loss of human life, houses and cattle but due to the huge efforts of the locals they saved all these. If these farmers and families had evacuated like the authorities had insisted then there would have been nothing left in the valleys, this is a repeat scenario across all the valleys in the Upper Murray.

The stories I've heard about the paid services is disturbing, quoting this new stance of watch and act as opposed to act and watch which was how my brothers, my father and his generation and my grandfather and his generation managed fires. Whilst I acknowledge this was an unprecedeted event, not convinced it was dealt with in an efficient and timely manner, with these services watching, not helping put fires out because they weren't allowed to do that, not allowed off the road. I have heard this from numerous people, including my cousin from Ensay as well as locally in the Upper Murray. One story was a request to control burn, the request was put into the authorities in the cool of the morning, it was responded to with a "no" at approximately 1400 hours by which time it was definitely too late to do. This reeks of people not being really aware of what was happening on the ground whereas the local fire brigades would have dealt with it in an appropriate and timely fashion with a different outcome.

The photos I have of areas that had been cold burnt, reduction burnt by NSW authorities show the advantage of this practice. All around is brown and black trees and then there is a patch of green trees, this was where the reduction burn had occurred. People tell me what saved heir homes was the green, of grass or trees and being there to put out any spot fires that were occurring. It causes me a great deal of distress to think of all the animals that may well have survived if they had an area to escape to. The ensuing pain and suffering of the animals, domesticated or wild that has been a direct result of these fires is beyond belief. Weeks later animals have been found, badly burnt and obviously suffering since the fires and these are just the few that people have found.

I remember days when the grass on the side of the roads and highways was managed by either mowing, grazing or reduction burns. As this is no longer the practice or so it seems, driving to Wodonga following the devastating fires in the Upper Murray I was and am still reminded every day that the grass is so long and dry, a veritable wind tunnel if ever this area was to have a fire. I noted the damage when driving to Corryong where the grass was long, a much hotter burn than the burns in paddocks that were eaten out by cattle and reasonably bare. This lack of responsibility by either councils or road management needs to be rectified and the re-implementation of cool weather burns as well as regular mowing or grazing needs so be reinstated.

Following the fires the Corryong township and surrounding district had no electricity as a direct result of the wooden electricity poles being burnt, my brother noted the cement poles were still standing; people had to rely on generators to ensure they kept freezers going. The use of generators was also the means for dairy farmers to keep milking their cows. My question is why these farming people and any others, who have numerous solar panels, are not allowed to have a system whereby they can go off the grid and use their own electricity? Would certainly have made life much easier for these people already devastated by the fires if they could have had the means to ensure their freezers did not thaw and their basic needs were met, such as daily showering, cooking, lights and communication via television.

The impact of these fires on the local Upper Murray communities is worrying, especially as a mental health nurse who sees the impact on peoples' mental health.

This has affected me personally as my immediate family, extended family and numerous friends have all been impacted by these fires, whether directly as fire fighters or for having their properties and animals burnt. Their livelihoods destroyed and I welcome this inquiry as the outcome needs to be better management of the bush and getting back to how it was in my grandfather and father's days. Despite having none of the modern technologies they managed to fight fires and had a pattern of management in place such as cool, reduction burns in autumn, seasonal grazing of the roadside and the high country. Local fire brigades, with local knowledge need to be in charge of the fire units, directing the other units that come in. The paid workers that come in need to assist rather than watch and by all accounts did not always help due to policies that hinder this.