



Dear Inspector-General of Emergency Management Tony Pearce,

I would like to make a submission to the Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian fire season. My personal details are below:

Name: Niki Smith

Email: 

Gender: Female

Age: 45-54

Privacy preference: I would like the Inspector-General to make my submission publicly available

My personal story of the fires:

I'm an avid bush-walker and conservation volunteer. I am devastated by the ecological damage to, loss of biodiversity in and death of wildlife in our forests caused by the 2020 bush-fires. Ahead of future fire seasons I'd like to see the government take action on climate change, by stopping fossil fuel use and increasing clean energy use, to achieve a shorter and less severe fire season. I feel hopeless about the future, my nieces and nephews and future generations unless the climate crisis is addressed.

My response to term of reference: Consider all challenges and implications for bushfire preparedness arising from increasingly longer and more severe bushfire seasons as a result of climate change:

In Victoria more than 1.2 million hectares of forest was burnt, five people tragically died and over 300 homes were destroyed.

Climate change is exacerbating the extreme drought, dry fuels and soils and record-breaking heat that is increasing bushfire risk and makes it harder to prepare for challenging conditions.

Many credible scientific bodies, including the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology, have previously predicted climate change would increase fire weather risk throughout south-eastern Australia. The unprecedented scale and intensity of these fires have shown those predictions to be accurate.

The biggest single cause of climate change is pollution from burning fossil fuels. To deal with climate change and reduce the risk of future catastrophic fires, all new fossil fuel developments (including coal, oil and gas) must be stopped and existing fossil fuel facilities phased out over the next two decades.

Climate change is also reducing the window of time available for effective and safe hazard reduction burning.

To minimise the impacts of future projections of climate change on bushfire weather, the State Government should commit to more effective climate change mitigation strategies and targets in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement (to keep warming well below two degrees and pursue efforts to keep warming to 1.5 degrees).

My response to term of reference: In considering effectiveness of Victoria's operational response to the 2019-20 fire season, IGEM should particularly consider, "planning and response mechanisms to protect biodiversity threatened by bushfire":

The 2019-20 bushfire season has had an enormous impact on Victoria's biodiversity.

The Victorian government has not prioritised biodiversity conservation in recent years, weakening the starting position of many species now impacted by fires.

Islands of unburnt vegetation within burnt areas must be protected from 'burning out' by fire crews, whenever possible. The burning of these natural refuge areas increases the ecological impacts of wildfire and inhibits the recovery of plants and wildlife.

'Salvage logging' compounds the impacts of both fire and logging, disturbing forests during the critical recovery stage of vegetation. Salvage logging should not be allowed in fire impacted regions.

Given the extraordinary destruction of habitat, native forest logging across the state should be halted until we can assess what habitat remains and how biodiversity can be protected.

Significant biodiversity recovery work is needed, and this could help stimulate regional economies during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.

My response to term of reference: Review of all opportunities and approaches to bushfire preparedness, including different methods of fuel and land management (for example 'cool burning', mechanical slashing, integrated forest management, traditional fire approaches) to protect life and property as well as ecological and cultural values:

Hazard reduction is an important tool for reducing fire risk but it's not enough to protect us from catastrophic fires. It has less effect under severe or extreme fire conditions.

Climate change and the lengthening of the Australian fire season means that the window for hazard reduction burns to take place safely has been severely reduced. There are fewer cool, still days with the right weather.

Between 2003–04 and 2016–17, just over 2 million hectares of native vegetation was burnt in planned fires in Victoria, much of them concentrated in the eastern part of the state. The Gippsland region of Victoria accounted for the largest area of planned burns during the period, with 829,000 hectares or 39% of the total planned-burning area. (Source: 2018 State of the Environment report)

Given the extent of the bushfires that occurred in these areas, there are questions around the effectiveness of planned burns in reducing bushfire risk on days of severe fire danger.

Planned burns and other fuel reduction processes (such as slashing) should be directed to where they are most effective: close to assets such as towns in need of protection.

To reduce the flammability of the landscape, Victoria needs to set targets to protect and promote the growth of older vegetation in those forest types where older growth is historically less flammable than younger post-fire growth.

Broad-scale planned burning can reduce the abundance of critical wildlife habitat features, such as tree hollows and hollows in logs. A strategic planned burning program that minimises ineffective and counterproductive burns is critical for biodiversity protection.

Regarding cultural burning, government should provide ongoing support to the expansion of existing and new Aboriginal groups specialising in a range of fire management activities, planning, preparation, response and recovery activities, on Country.

I would like to add the following: Please take urgent action to conserve and protect the many, beautiful endangered wildlife species that I grew up with for future generations.

Yours sincerely,

Niki Smith

HAWTHORN EAST 3123