

Inspector-General for Emergency Management  
GPO Box 4356  
Melbourne VIC 3000

Dear Inspector-General

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to write a Submission to the Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires. I have given a brief outline of our history in this area so you have an idea of our experience and knowledge of the comment and suggestions we have made in our Submission.

Once again thank you for this opportunity.

Yours sincerely

Jeff Tomlinson & Kim Liebscher.

30<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2020

Submission Into  
the  
2019-20 Bushfires

By  
J. Tomlinson  
&  
K. Liebscher

## **A Brief History**

Kim and myself have lived here in Bendoc since 1983 when we first purchased our block which is about 4 km south of the town. During this time we have built a house and established a small farm holding, as well as raising two daughters who did their schooling locally, all be it in NSW.

I have had many occupations in the time I have lived here, ranging from farm work (all aspects i.e. livestock, fencing, maintenance etc..) to building and home handyman. I also spent many years in the 80's and 90's working on the local 'Summer crew' as it was known back then, with what ever the agency was called at the time 'Forestry Commission', 'Dept. of NRE', now 'DELWP' I think!

Kim has also had vast local experience working as the 'Home Help' Supervisor for the North Riding of the Orbost Shire for many years, then as a teachers aid for a disabled student first at pre-school, then at primary school in Delegate over the border from us.

We have also been active members of the surrounding community area, myself being President of Bombala Basketball Association for 6 years, (Bombala was our nearest sporting activity complex) as well as an active member of the Bendoc CFA for more than 15 years. Kim has been on the Delegate Pre-school Committee and was a volunteer with the 'Friends of Errinundra' working group.

During this time we have experienced many events from being snow-bound, local flooding, extreme weather events like storm force winds and of course the regular threat from bushfires.

## **Preparedness**

Every year we know that during the winter months and early spring there are certain things that we do before summer to try and make our place as safe as we can. This may include things like removing all the debris that falls from the forest that is directly behind our house. This has been a ritual for us for many years, as we see it as something that needs to be done if we choose to live in this beautiful area.

We are also mindful of how important the 'green zone' we have around our house area is and the importance that plays in giving us a safer zone in the event of a fire. That's why it's important, we think, to try and keep that area as green as we can through the summer, not mow it too short, so that it gets burnt off, and constantly move sprinklers

to keep it fresh. It was noted by a friend, who was impacted by the 2014 bushfires that the fire burnt to the green zone around his house.

We have also made shutters for all of the windows in our house, as we believe that the windows are a weak point in the event of fire, what with radiant heat and the projectiles that can be blown along with the winds that come with some of these fires. Our shutters are only made of timber but we've covered them with insulation to withstand the heat. We know there are far better materials that could be used but these are out of our price range.

I don't know for sure how the various agencies (CFA, the Dept., Vic Forests) prepared for the 2019-20 Fire Season but from all the anecdotal stories we've heard this summer season it sounds like there was no attempt at all from any of the agencies to ramp up their preparations.

I'll health has made it difficult to be on the CFA any longer but I keep informed from other local members as to what is going on within the CFA. At the beginning of summer when the fires from over the Snowy River were starting to impact on our side of the river, the CFA tanker could not be crewed as we had to have some-one with a Certificate to assess dangerous trees and that the CFA required all members be cleared to work with children, none of which anyone had within the small brigade we have.

During late spring to early summer, there were numerous warnings from all different sources in the scientific world, as well as a group of ex-government Dept. heads warning us of a pending disaster waiting to happen this season, but the Dept. which is meant to be the responsible agency to protect and manage our forests did nothing! Even with all this warning they showed no urgency in their preparations. When the fires started in late November they still had their 'Summer Crew' off doing training so the only crew they had was their permanent staff.

I know that the Dept. tries to employ young fit people for the Summer Crew but there seems to be too much reliance on this and not on local people with local knowledge. They seem to have abandoned track clearing, which during my time working with them, was essential to be able to break up areas into smaller more manageable areas for the very purpose of fire suppression. Of their own admission the Dept. said that when machinery was sent down to the Snowy they first had to clear the tracks as to have a suitable fire break to try and defend from.

## **Response to Fires**

When the fires started over in the 'Buchan' valley area in late November, Australia was recording it's hottest November Day ever. There had been extreme temperatures leading up to this point, everywhere was parched, drought was effecting everyone and everything and the 'Bureau of Meteorology' (BOM) were predicting dry storms to

impact East Gippsland. I kept a watch on the events occurring through the BOM radar sight at Bairnsdale and through the 'Vic Emergency' web site.

My first concern was whether these dry storms would reach our area as they have in the past. The 'Vic Emergency' site showed various fires had started in the Buchan Valley area and that the Dept. were responding to them, but no sightings were made within the Bendoc Operations area.

So with all this information available to me, only via the Internet, I assumed that the Dept. would have the situation under control. I could not believe to see a few days later that most, if not all, of these fires were now 'out of control' and of a size that had made them unstoppable. When I looked closely at the fire that was just over the Snowy River it had grown to 10,000ha but had 1 vehicle attending!

When I was on the Summer Crew in 1988 we were called to a fire on Mount Rosendale near Tubbut. I was in a slip-on vehicle with one other crew member and we arrived just after the CFA, so we consolidated one edge of the fire working along side them. Within 10 minutes the fire, which was about 0.5ha, grew to 200 ha straight up the side of the mountain. We spent the whole night on top of Mt. Rosendale waiting for the approval from someone in Melbourne to back burn down to the fires edge. It came too late, the ground was damp so we were unable to do the burn.

But by the end of the next day there were 100 plus fire personal based at the hall in Tubbut, along with all the infrastructure to feed, shower and accommodate them. This was all of the agency's own equipment and supply that was ready and available when needed. Some of it was from local stores and some came in from nearby areas.

Along with this came a whole army of supplies and equipment from an organisation called 'National Safety Council of Australia' (NSCA). They had helicopters which were used to ferry crews in and out of the fire zone and made water available to some of the inaccessible areas of the fire. They were also responsible for saving 2 forest officers who were caught in an oncoming fire, by dropping water on them.

So, with all the fires now beyond the capabilities of any of the agencies, we knew that we would have to spend the rest of summer waiting and hoping that these fires would not eventually arrive at our door. We implemented our fire plan early in December, put shutters up that covered most of our windows, left some easy ones uncovered to still let a bit of natural light into the house, and only put them down on extreme weather days or when we were Ordered to Evacuated on 2 occasions. We also maintained a watering of the area around our house, constantly moving sprinklers to maintain that 'green zone'. Another part of our plan is we switch our water system to include our house so we can run a sprinkler in the centre of the roof. We have an octagonal roof line which allows water to cascade down all sides of the house after we plug the down pipes with rubber balls.

During the fire period the Dept. in Bendoc were instrumental in having fire breaks put around properties and later with offering various machines if people needed them. We took the offer of a machine to clear our bush area further than what we manage to by hand. We were extremely grateful to have that offered to us.

On more than one occasion Dept. people told me that they weren't allowed to do anything in relation to the fire unless they had approval from the Dept. in Orbost or from Melbourne. Every time there is a fire in this area people from elsewhere seem to think that they know what is best to do or they don't trust the people who live here. They even send people in to manage the fires who don't have any idea of the local terrain or even consult with the local people for information.

This was noticeable when for almost 3 weeks there were 11 CFA tankers and 2 CFA vehicles, from various parts of Victoria, parked at the airport in Delegate over the border doing nothing. Yet as the fire progressively moved through our region whenever it heated up or the wind picked up or both, and people moving around found running edge fire that was still burning with not a Dept. person in sight, these CFA tankers sat idle over the border doing nothing while the fire threat continued unabated. The Dept. must have got sick of people asking why these tankers were sitting there doing nothing, as they moved them into Bendoc and parked them beside the Depot (out of sight).

There was also a lot of false information being given out by different sources with regards to the extent of the fires at various times through the campaign. Some of this was due to the inability of aircraft to see the extent of areas burnt because of smoke cover. There was a panic at one point to find a fire in Bendoc that didn't exist because of the smoke cover, but local knowledge told us it was remnant smoke caught under a cloud cover that came with a cool change, we'd seen this before. But because the source of this panic talked to Kim first she was convinced there was a fire in the area so she packed up and left into Delegate, which put extra burden on myself to keep our fire plan going to protect our place from the real fire. There were also some fires which appeared on the Vic Emergency site in our area that didn't exist but were not removed till weeks later even though they were proven to be false.

Our final days of the fire were our most fearful when the fire, which had started over near the Snowy River, in late November, had travelled south through Goongerah then gone on to Combienbar and Club Terrace almost to Cann River, then turned north to the border and beyond into NSW before coming back at us from the east on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020 when it put up a huge thunder head that we were sure would get to us at some point. Two days later we had the same fire blow up from the south through the 'Gap Reserve', an area we thought would never burn, with a similar thunder head that came at us 2 days earlier. We were very worried after dark as we had no information as to where the fire was and there was an approaching wind change. At about 9 o'clock a vehicle turned up with 2 Canadian fire fighters who, with great reassuring words gave us pretty good information as to what was happening with the fire and

that the coming wind change (which arrived as we were speaking) wasn't going to cause us too much trouble. I cannot express how reassuring these two Canadians made us feel when the Dept. had not been seen throughout this whole threatening period.

Fortunately, a few days later the heavens gave us a break and rained enough to take the threat of fire away, at least for this summer.

## **Conclusion**

All fires start small !

The strategies and approach that the Dept. take to fire fighting now seem to go directly against all common reasoning of how you deal with a situation that could be controlled with a quick response to 'nip it in the bud' rather than waiting until it is beyond any human capability to control. It seems that nothing has been learnt from the 2014 fires which burnt the same areas as this fire. It is extremely frustrating to us having worked so hard in the past, to protect these important areas from the ravishes of fire, to see it go up in flames through nothing other than inaction and incompetence of the very Dept. which is given the responsibility to protect these areas.

We find it so heart breaking to think that all this devastation of our forests, our flora and fauna (some of which may never recover), the loss of human life and property, the loss of our way of life and how we live in the future could have been avoided if the people with that responsibility had been more prepared. Maybe if they had been more aware of the situation at the time we wouldn't be here writing this submission.

They say that the 'mega' fire is what we deal with today but we wonder how many of these fires would not end up like this if they were prepared to attack them. Fires have been with us for a long time and yes, some are hard to control, particularly when left to their own devices or what the conditions dictate .

But I can't help think that if all the resources were not tied up trying to fight an impossible fight against an uncontrollable beast, that the fires that threatened Mallacoota and others areas later in the season, might have had a different outcome had there been the resources available.

We would like to conclude with a few points that we think are worth consideration:

- **Attack! Attack! Attack!** In the past first response has always been the best way to keep these fires in check. Whatever means are needed to do this, be it water from aircraft, or heli-tac crews (drove to a fire in the Rodger wilderness area and got there the same time as heli-tac crew, we all put a rake hoe trail

around it) or even walking in, this is how it was stopped, not monitoring the situation.

- **New Agency** The government should look at starting or resurrecting the NSCA as I think they were an invaluable body to assist in bushfire management and with flood or disaster recovery.
- **Start the summer crew earlier** than at present. Don't wait till it's too late! There was always a policy not to put Summer crew on till there was a fire. As we've seen this season, it's too late then. If the Dept. spent maybe a quarter of the money that this fire season has cost the government, at the beginning of the season, they might have had the ability to deal with these fires promptly rather than the disaster we had.
- **Improve the alert system.** Too many times we were given text messages that gave too little information. We were told to Evacuate on several occasions which was contrary to other sources. It was only our local knowledge that we had a handle on the actual situation. The messages with little information only seemed to make us worry more that maybe there was something that we didn't know. 'Evacuate East Gippsland' made us quite concerned but ABC news clarified the reason.
- **Give more responsibility to local area fire agencies;** For too long now the Dept. based in Bendoc has not been able to have any control over fires within their Ops. Area as Orbost and even further away have always called the shots, even though they have no idea of the area or the terrain that these fires start in. The people that work in Bendoc know the area, they know the people, they can work with the community, they know who to contact for supplies or equipment and they could actually work with the CFA rather than wasting their resources.
- **Clear the tracks;** Don't get caught out again. Make funding available to clear these tracks so that we may have a chance to contain fires in smaller areas.

Thank you once again for giving us this opportunity to make our comment on what we consider was a summer to forget.

Kind Regards

Jeff Tomlinson & Kim Liebscher

