

My name is John Cook. I have lived and worked in the bush around Benambra all my life, and have gained vast experience in fire fighting, fire behaviour and protection of the community, during my CFA service. I am a life member of CFA and have served as Captain, Deputy Group officer, Group officer, District Commander and trained as level 3 Incident controller. I am currently the longest serving member of the SES serving as Deputy Controller, Rescue Leader,- leading several search and rescues in difficult mountainous areas,- and a member of the ski and water rescue. I have been awarded an OAM for service to the community.

I have been involved with fire fighting and fire prevention for 60 years, working with the community, the CFA, and forestry.

The fires in 2019-20 have been the most disorganized I have ever been involved in. Here are a few suggestions for improvement along with some examples of the problems.

Fires need to be fought from the fire front and decisions need to be made by those at the front and those with local knowledge, not by those in a distant ICC with no knowledge of the local situation and conditions. Too much time is wasted waiting for these decisions e.g. having permission to put a plane in the air refused because ICC was smoked in and we were quite clear.

Local knowledge was not used and a fire can't be fought successfully without it. E.g. Strike teams sent out from the ICC (an hours drive away) had difficulty finding the fire front. Locals were waiting at the local control room to take teams to the fire but were not used.

In our area it is the volunteers who fight the fires, the paid members should be backing them up and supplying what is needed for fighting and protection.

The CFA needs to trust their local officers, as leaders in their community, to make decisions for the safety of their community. E.g. because of fires elsewhere and equipment shortages we used machines for asset protection etc, which were not on the approved list. We were told to stop using them. If these hadn't been used the fire would have got away and reached other areas within hours. Where's the common sense? (besides which at that stage the roads were closed so how could the approval been given?)

Community meetings should be run by locals who can give the facts to the locals and let them know the plans for their protection, and communication from the hierarchy is imperative if this is to happen. We can be affected by fires in three different shires. Communication between the ICC's was obviously limited as the CFA rep at our local meetings knew nothing about fires that threatened from other areas.

The media dramatized many situations and the information was not always accurate. This put unnecessary panic into the community which made things difficult to handle. A liaison person is needed in the hub of each town to quell rumours and give correct information. Perhaps the media could be encouraged to report the many backburns which saved communities, not just the one that went wrong, and the number of houses which were saved, not just the ones lost.

Re the Royal Commission. Are there enough people who were on the fire front being interviewed? They know the problems first hand and the practical solution to these

A few ideas which could improve efficiency.