

Inquiry into lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20
Public Hearing Program
Wednesday, 28 April 2021

Stephen Brown –

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- Past President Macdonald Valley Association FY 2017-2020 through the fires and until late 2020
- Volunteer firefighter NSW Rural Fire Service, St Albans Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade. Formerly on the brigade executive team and training officer (2019-2020)

Macdonald Valley – The communities of Macdonald Valley and village of St Albans, are located along the Macdonald River, Webbs Creek, Wrights Creek and Mogo Creek and stretches over valley areas of approximately 35km x 10km and surrounded by National Parks. The valley is located 1.5 hours / 73 km from Richmond (this meeting place) by main road and ferry or gravel road. This is a historic and remote rural community of the Hawkesbury and Greater Sydney. The village is St Albans RFS fire shed, School of Arts Hall, church, a pub and some residential properties. The 2016 census summary below provides a snapshot, however does not illustrate the material proportion of residents who are non-permanent:

- | | | | |
|--------------|------|-------------------------|--------------|
| • People | 596 | • All private dwellings | 349 |
| • Median Age | 50.5 | • People per household | -1~2.5 range |
| • Families | 140 | | |

2019 / 2020 Fires (and more)

The 2019/20 fire season was one amongst number of events that have cumulatively impacted the wellbeing and resilience of the community - ongoing drought, Gospers Mountain Fire, significant floods in February 2020 and March 2021 and Covid isolation, isolation from services, recurrent phone and electricity outages and car ferry out of service. Collectively these events justify the extension of funded wellbeing and recovery programs to embed change benefits.

The community has been generally aware that a fire event was due, the ongoing drought, fuel loads, weather conditions and time elapsed since the last major fires all directed community attention to when, rather than if.

Our community coexisted with the fires from early November 2019 until mid-January 2020, as an RFS firefighter the duty period for me and many of our community was in the order of 8 weeks. The Macdonald River was the focus for a containment line fire break, as the eastern boundary of the Gospers Mountain fire, preventing progress to the Central Coast. Our crews put in a tactical backburns of possibly 120-150km over many weeks as the fire situation evolved. As we progressed we also had to cope with the evolving confluence of additional fires at Three Mile Creek, Wrights Creek, Thompsons Run and Little L Complex.

The Committees particular interest, that I've been advised of, are addressed later in this commentary. The following key issues, that I and other community voices want to highlight, provide the Committee to understanding of action required on a number of issues that will support and sustain an even more resilient community, better able to flex with situations:

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- 1. Communications Infrastructure Failure – ACTION: comprehensive overhaul and investment**
- 2. Emergency Plan and Safer Places – ACTION: develop and implement**
- 3. Fire Information Communication – ACTION: improve and refine**
- 4. Response & Recovery – ACTION: develop and sustain**

1. Communications Infrastructure Failure – ACTION: comprehensive overhaul and investment

Failures are impacting life safety and the community's resilience. Ongoing landline phone failures through floods, fires and day-to-day and lack of mobile phone coverage were a point of feedback in the Macdonald Valley Association Wellbeing Survey 2020, highlighting impacts on wellbeing.

- **Landline** – The community has a failing and unreliable landline service. Telstra, in the experience of the community, is failing its Universal Service Obligation (USO) and not delivering their obligation for 'giving customers access to a reliable telephone service that has good voice reception and ensures connections and faults associated with this service are undertaken and repaired within a reasonable time.' Consumer safeguards
- **Black Spot Mobile** – Optus has failed to deliver on Round 2 Optus funded project (MBSP2-NSW-028) announced 2017, meaning that for multiple fire seasons and flood events the community's isolation has continued, contrary to the Minister's and programs promises.
- **Fire Vehicle Communications (PMR)** – Inadequate coverage / range of RFS' private (government) radio network resulted in crews fireground safety being compromised on an ongoing basis.
- **UHF (CB) Radio** – An initiative by community is to create a backbone of a UHF (CB) radio network networking of isolated residents. UHF is limited in range and requires relay infrastructure to support coverage which we'll be seeking funding for.

2. Emergency Plan and Safer Places – ACTION: develop and implement

Hawkesbury's lack of a communicated, scalable EMPLAN is evident in how emergencies are managed in an ad-hoc way in small communities such as ours. Top down emergency management arrangements need to be in place to ensure that agencies and community work together and are effectively coordinated before, during and after an emergency.

- **Community Emergency Response Plan** – As a community we can take greater responsibility to participate in building a safer and more resilient community and to establish a localised program to enable our community, emergency management agencies, Council and other partners to work together as part of the community before, during and after emergencies. For greatest success this should fall under an umbrella of local EMPLAN funded program.
- **Community safer place** – Identifying and establishment of community safer place or place of refuge is vital for use in fire and floods, depending on levels of property isolation in different circumstances. By default, the fire shed is the go-to location but its limited resources are not sufficient or appropriate for dual operational and refuge purposes. Typically, a community or church hall or school premises might be capable of improvement in facilities and services to provide this function.

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- **Property (fire / flood) safety plan**– As an adjunct to a Community plan, a pro forma guided template for use by residences, businesses, farming operations, including safe places, animal safety / welfare, helicopter landing places etc, assessment of how safe a property is using guides such as land clearance etc.
- **Prevention** – see separate comments on HR's and Aerial suppression
- **Preparation** –A finding of Macdonald Valley Association Wellbeing Survey 2020 is that *'Services that people asked for included: preparation for the fire season (52%) 'of the 107 respondents, noting that "Almost 80% of responses came from residents aged 51 to 80 years of age ".* RFS has an annual Get Ready campaign, which does generate community awareness, however the ability to undertake the scope and scale of preparations is sometimes beyond community members, and this sometimes evident out on the fireground.

3. Fire Information Communication - ACTION: improve and refine

- **Fires Near Me** – RFS' App provides macro level information but failed with the scale and fire fronts of Gospers Mountain. Community members regularly sought briefings in our fire shed based on RFS Common Operating Picture (COP) and linescan updates for the fire front. Access to localised status information, differentiating active / fire front and burnt / blacked out areas is more informative and of greater use to residents and business operators.
- **Local versus Central Information & Briefings** – Local community briefings were occasionally provided and regular brigade updates were provided on social media and email channels. These updates did however differ from centralised media briefings, in the detail and localised content, a greater benefit to on the ground community members.
- **Emergency Broadcasts** – As emergency broadcaster ABC fulfilled a function that was challenged by the scale of the Gospers Mountain fire, the various fire fronts and evolving conditions at a local level. For this reason, its value in delivering critical information was sometimes diminished.
- **RFS / LGA boundary issues** – Being on the boundary of Hawkesbury, Central Coast and Cessnock LGA's we experienced evident gaps in communications and responsibilities. This was particularly evident in incident management of Three Mile and Wrights Creek with Central Coast stepping in without proper engagement or communications locally.
- **Apps and tools** – Community members were so keen for localised information that they sought out alternate apps to listen in to Emergency Broadcasts and access linescan fireground imagery, highlighting the shortfall in localised communication.

4. Response and Recovery - ACTION: develop and sustain

- **Response** – Macdonald River was a containment line for the easterly front of the fire and for some weeks, St Albans RFS Station was a 24/7 staging area. The focus for firefighters was to create a containment line by backburning perhaps 120km-150km around properties, along roads and connecting containment alongside valleys and gullies to stop the approaching fire fronts. Firefighting resources were scaled to meet the needs and competing demands. Over the two months regular volunteer firefighter provided some 110 crewed shifts, supported by

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ad-hoc station operations volunteers. The emergency response was overall well regarded, albeit gaps and lessons learned did evolve.

- **Recovery** – Whilst the fires impacted the community, they did not cause the extent of a destruction and loss as experiences in other communities. However, the compounding effect of multiple experiences of many is summarised in the finding of Macdonald Valley Association Wellbeing Survey 2020 *“There is no doubt 2020 has been a tough year for the community of Macdonald Valley. The results show that this community was greatly affected by droughts, fires, smoke, floods and COVID-19. Over 40% of the population report that they are still feeling the effects of these challenging events. Unexpected stress has been a problem for more than a third of the respondents (including serious illness, drop in income and death of a loved one).”*
- **Service Provider networks** – In retrospect the historic lack of connectedness of service providers and agencies appears to be an impact on success of the programs. Recovery was from a standing start rather than building on a base of local knowledge and networks.
- **Equitable access** – There are instances of inequitable access to funds and programs from recovery programs. Some property owners required to personally draw off insurance and pay excesses for repairs and other residents with access to grant or donation funding, sometimes this may be differentiated on the basis of a property not being a principle residence.
- **Animals and wildlife** – The proper planning for the phases of emergency that also affect farm, domestic and wildlife were somewhat disjointed. Improved community and resident level planning will facilitate better management for domestic and farm animals. For wildlife a program of awareness training, resourcing and fireground safety training may facilitate opportunities for better response and care.

In relation to the Committee’s particular areas of interest the following comment is offered:

Hazard reduction – including existing hazard reduction practices (the possibilities for future hazard reduction regimes) and indigenous burning practices and their efficacy. **Comment** –

- The Macdonald Valley has a slow but evolving program for Hazard Reduction (HRs) addressing the interface of properties, asset (structures) protection and the NPWS / Crown lands.
- Anecdotally the conduct of HRs in the prior 2-5 years did not appear to influence a reduced fire performance / impact and afford mitigation as the fuel loads had re-developed.
- Historically farmers conducted very regular lower intensity winter burns from the valley floor into the hills (National Parks), to manage fuel load and provide winter grazing, somewhat more akin to indigenous practices.
- There is no transparent and accessible program for HRs and fire mitigation for the vast footprints of the National Parks / Crown lands encircling the region.
- A more ambitious NPWS agency/department resourced and RFS locally consulted planning and execution framework could deliver greater mitigation preparation. If combined with encouragement and facilitation of local land owner small HRs, the combined efforts may lead to greater levels of preparedness.

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The 2019-20 bushfire season – *and the level of recovery one year on (including the progress and status of recovery efforts).* **Comment –**

- Undoubtedly the fires impacted wellbeing, financially, and community. The Macdonald Valley Associations community survey identified a number of underlying issues, albeit that may reflect the confluence of a number of contributing factors).
- The 2019/20 fire season was a just one amongst number of events that have cumulatively impacted the wellbeing of community - ongoing drought, Gospers Mountain Fire, February 2020 floods, Covid isolation, March 2021 floods. Collectively they call for the extension of funded programs to embed change benefits.

Mitigation infrastructure and land-use planning – *including an assessment of the types (and costs) of mitigation infrastructure that would effectively reduce risk in fire-prone areas.* **Comment –**

- From local experience the network of local fire trails, providing access within National Park areas and opportunity for potential control lines, do not appear to undergo regular maintenance where they are susceptible to erosion and deterioration. Improving fire trails would potentially support containment in the National Park. However operationally this too needs consideration, for safe movement and escape by crews, a situation I've experienced where a decision was made to halt a planned fire trail backburn during the Gospers Mountain fire due to accessibility and safe escape path for multiple vehicles.
- Tactical clearing was undertaken by bulldozer, to create fire breaks to protect assets, rather than pre-emptively as a strategy for mitigation by control lines. This approach, when remote, necessitates attendant crewed fire vehicle resources as operational oversight, at a critical time.
- Remote mitigation, utilizing fire requires both dry firefighting and establishment of water supply points potentially with aerial support.

Insurance issues – the effects of fires on insurance premiums in fire affected regions (one year on from the 2019-20 fire season). **Comment –**

- No awareness of an impact / increase in premiums.

Aerial firefighting – including the establishment of a sovereign aerial firefighting fleet, the use of aerial resources and early suppression. **Comment –**

- If Gospers Mountain fire had been able to be attended to immediately it started we would have been in a better position. In contrast, in late October 2019 St Albans RFS + other ground and aerial resources attended the very remote Boree Track fires for a couple of days to extinguish it and stop it growing into a bigger issue. Experience tells us aerial support is a necessary requirement for suppression in hill / inaccessible country and access to on-standby aerial firefighting resources will undoubtedly support prompt management and containment, with support of other firefighting resources.