
**SUBMISSION - ROYAL COMMISSION INTO NATIONAL
NATURAL DISASTER ARRANGEMENTS**

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

The Rosedale Association Inc. represents 177 people who were members of the Association on New Year's Eve 2019 when the Currowan Fire impacted our small community on the NSW South Coast. As a result of this fire, 84 private dwellings were destroyed and 43 were damaged out of a total of 263 dwellings in Rosedale. Fortunately, no one was killed or injured. The damage would have been far greater if residents had not prepared for bushfire, heeded warnings to evacuate and if a southerly wind change had not disrupted the firestorm within about 15 minutes of its arrival.

Activities related to emergency services, which worked well, included:

- Many residents spent months preparing their properties for bushfire. This was based on information from RFS workshops, individual property assessments, a familiarisation review, and hardcopy, electronic and verbal advice provided by the RFS. The Rosedale Association helped members access this information through AGMs and Newsletters.
- As suggested by the RFS, we had prepared bushfire plans and discussed firefighting and evacuation options with family and friends.
- Many residents would have been in danger if they had not heeded SMS and fixed-line messages urging evacuation early in the morning of New Year's Eve.
- Information on the current bushfire situation was available from various sources, including the NSW RFS Fires Near Me App, Facebook and Twitter pages. Fire-spread prediction maps were on the RFS website, but difficult to find prior to New Year's Eve. Other useful information sources included the Bureau of Meteorology's weather radar, Transport for NSW's Livetraffic and local radio stations, including ABC South East 103.5 FM.
- Videos of RFS community meetings in Batemans Bay, Moruya and Long Beach, which were available over the internet, provided detailed information on many aspects of the fires.
- The RFS had previously stated that there was no guarantee that crews would enter Rosedale to defend against a bushfire; residents would be on their own and early evacuation was their best option. After the fire-front had passed, RFS ground crews extinguished house fires (often preventing their spread to neighbouring dwellings) and extinguished pockets of bushfire. Helicopter and fixed-wing water-bombing saved several houses and boatsheds. Over the next few days, water-bombing prevented bushfires developing in nearby forests that had not been burnt.
- Informal networks within the Rosedale community were crucial to those defending properties and dealing with the fire's aftermath. Neighbours shared information, helped each other and looked out for one another's welfare.
- Under extremely difficult circumstances, the Eurobodalla Shire Council, Essential Energy and the SES reconnected services and removed hazards within a fortnight of the bushfire. The Council effectively coordinated those efforts. Rosedale has a reticulated septic system that requires mains power. The Council pumped out many of the septic holding tanks within four or five days of the fire.
- Residents organised night patrols to extinguish flare-ups and smouldering logs, and to watch out for looting. Highly visible police patrols after the bushfire were helpful and reassuring.
- Coordination and information dissemination by the Rosedale Association helped residents to prepare, defend and deal with the aftermath of the bushfire. During the week following the fire, the Association arranged two community meetings, which included crucial updates from representatives of Council, NSW Police, ADF, NSW Health and the Insurance Council of Australia.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

Hazard reduction

Rosedale is wedged between the ocean on one side and vast tracts of private farmland, state forests and forested private holdings. Hazard reduction had been minimal in the heavily forested areas around Rosedale, which provided fuel to the approaching fire. Most of these areas are privately owned, which also made accessing the fire difficult and dangerous for the RFS. Hazard reduction within Rosedale was also inadequate. Within Rosedale there is crown land, marine reserves, heavily forested private blocks and dwellings built among natural forests. Furthermore, Rosedale has a high proportion of rental properties and holiday homes. Fires that emanated from ember attacks on poorly maintained properties presented a danger to neighbours and the wider community.

Loss of communications

Power, internet and mobile coverage were lost several hours before the fire-front arrived. Those who stayed to defend had scant information on the location, direction and intensity of the fire and no communication with other residents. It was often not possible to contact emergency services through triple zero when the fire-front arrived. In subsequent days it was difficult to contact emergency services because of problems with mobile phone coverage. After the fire we could not contact evacuated family members or friends, or access information about further threats.

Most residents were without power for a fortnight after the fire; and some were without internet and mobile coverage for 12 weeks. It is of concern that Optus took 12 weeks to replace a single, damaged mobile phone tower while hundreds of power poles could be replaced within a week or two of severe bushfire damage.

Dangerous evacuation options

A paucity of evacuation options endangered the lives of Rosedale residents. As the fire approached, those who had not left early found it too dangerous to drive through heavily forested areas along George Bass Drive to the nearest evacuation centres (Malua Bay and Tomakin).

Although the RFS had advised against evacuating to beaches, about 100 people sheltered on Rosedale Beach during the fire. Rosedale Beach proved difficult to access once the dunes caught fire. It would have been dangerous, possibly fatal, for the people sheltering there had the westerly driven fire-front continued for another half hour. Temperatures would have become unbearable and the air may have become unbreathable due to low oxygen levels and increased smoke. Emergency services did not check on the welfare of people on the beach until well after the fire-front had passed. Fortunately, there were no injuries, but if there had been, assistance may have arrived too late for them.

Inadequate evacuation centres

Evacuation centres were overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster. They were under-staffed and poorly organised. Some evacuees did not think to take food, bedding or other essentials to evacuation centres. Fire eventually threatened several evacuation centres, including the Batemans Bay Surf Club (Malua Bay) and the Tomakin Sports and Social Club.

Highway closures

Major road links, such as the Kings Highway, Princes Highway and Snowy Mountains Highway, had been closed for weeks or months. Consequently, residents were forced to reconsider their evacuation plans. At several locations the closures created traffic jams that may have endangered lives if bushfires had moved into the area.

No protection of wildlife

Almost all our local wildlife disappeared as a result of the fire. There was no systematic approach to protecting key habitats or rescuing wildlife.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

1. Mandate an organisation to be responsible for hazard reduction

The RFS did a fantastic job in helping us to prepare for the bushfire and in extinguishing fires after the fire-front passed. However, there needs to be a larger, systematic approach to hazard reduction. It encompasses general land management (e.g. the type, size and density of trees in a forest, logging practices and the removal of undergrowth) as well the reduction of fuel loads to suit particular situations, including cold burns, mechanical removal, mosaic and indigenous approaches. Reduction of the fuel load at ground level is particularly important in reducing the severity of fires both on the ground and through the crown.

Fire control agreements should be developed between the RFS, local councils, and private and public landowners. Such agreements would enable the coordination, planning and access to land for the RFS to reduce fuel loads outside of the bushfire season.

We question whether this ongoing program of land management and hazard reduction should be an RFS responsibility or whether another organisation needs to be given this specific mandate. As a voluntary organisation, the RFS would need more resources (people and funding) to progress hazard reduction in addition to their many other responsibilities. Targeted recruitment campaigns to attract younger volunteers are also needed.

2. Establish a capability to rapidly respond to fires in remote location

The Currowan Fire had been burning for four weeks before it reached Rosedale. While conditions on New Year's Eve meant that there was very little that could be done to reduce the fire's impact and devastation, there is frustration that more was not done to control the fire in its early days. This would require the proactive management of forested areas and dedicated units with the necessary equipment, such as helicopters and water-bombing aircraft to extinguish fires in remote locations.

Permanent units of fire fighters, based at regional airports, might need to be established for rapid response to fires in remote locations. During the bushfire season these units would focus on monitoring lightning strikes, arson and controlling fires immediately after ignition. Outside the fire season they might be involved in hazard reduction, maintaining access and identifying water sources.

3. Fire-proof mobile phone towers

Mobile phones and mobile internet now provide essential communication networks for visitors and most people living in Australia's regional communities and remote areas. To prevent the loss of life and to reduce property damage, we need to fire-proof mobile phone towers. An alternative might be the introduction of an emergency backup system (e.g. satellite) for mobile phone and internet access during and immediately after natural disasters.

4. Provide one source of real-time information

We had to cobble together bushfire and weather information from disparate sources. Ideally there should be one integrated source of real-time information on weather conditions, fire locations, direction and fire spread predictions. It would also be useful for the BOM weather

radar to include several more weather observation sites indicating current wind velocity and direction.

5. Improve evacuation options

Careful thought needs to be given to evacuation routes. Ideally, all residents would evacuate well before a fire arrives, but the reality is that this will rarely happen. The work undertaken by Council and Transport for NSW in clearing vegetation near major roads during 2019 need to be continued and expanded with the objective of providing safe routes for those escaping bushfires. Special consideration needs to be given to North and South Rosedale, which have only one road each linking them to George Bass Drive.

The location and safety of existing evacuation centres should be reviewed and improved. New centres may need to be identified or constructed. A more professional approach needs to be applied to organising and staffing evacuation centres.

6. Help to establish community firefighting units

Those residents who were at Rosedale sprang into action soon after the fire-front passed, extinguishing fires on their properties and on neighbouring properties. Many dwellings were saved in this way. However, more dwellings might have been saved if those who stayed had the correct equipment and firefighting training. The Rosedale Association has received many donations for the purchase of fire-fighting equipment, but we need expert guidance on what equipment to purchase, training in how to safely operate the equipment and how to prioritise and coordinate fire-fighting tasks. Other regional communities are likely to have similar needs. At the same time, we are mindful of public liability issues, managing community expectations and not duplicating the operations of emergency services, such as the RFS. The establishment of community firefighting units is analogous to administering first aid immediately after an accident before trained health workers arrive.

7. Build strong communities

Emergency services do not operate in isolation when dealing with disasters and helping individuals. The RFS, for example, does much more than extinguish fires; they help communities to prepare for bushfire, disseminate information and work closely with communities. Individuals need to accept responsibility to inform themselves about threats, and to prepare, make decisions about their own safety and to deal with the aftermath of bushfires and other disasters. Community groups provide a crucial link between emergency services and individuals. In addition to information sharing, such groups also contribute to community resilience, recovery and support. The Commission should consider how diverse and diffuse regional communities can be supported and further developed.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

I would be happy to provide further details on any of the issues raised in this submission. On behalf of our Committee and members of the Rosedale Association Inc., I thank you for the opportunity to lodge this submission to the Royal Commission and look forward to reading your recommendations in due course.



(David Boardman)
President

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