

SUBMISSION – NSW INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

The Rosedale Association Inc (RAI) represents 177 people, who were members of the Association on New Year's Eve 2019, when bushfire impacted our small community on the NSW South Coast. The building impact for Rosedale was 84 homes out of a total of 263 completely destroyed. Another 43 were damaged, with a further 25 outbuildings destroyed and 10 damaged. The impact was more significant in North Rosedale but homes in every street in South Rosedale were also affected. No-one was killed or injured and the damage would have been far greater if many residents had not prepared for bushfire, heeded warnings to evacuate and if a southerly wind change had not disrupted the fire storm within about 15 minutes of its arrival.

Our Story:

Fires had been raging in Queensland and northern NSW for many months, contributing to the increased level of concern we had in Rosedale. Due to very dry conditions, our fire danger period was brought forward by a few weeks. The fire that struck us was born from the Currowan fire, which started towards the end of November. On Boxing Day, the Currowan fire jumped containment lines across the Kings Highway and gave birth to the Clyde Mountain fire. This is the fire system that engulfed the Rosedale village and continued to threaten our community for weeks afterwards.

At about 5.30am on New Year's Eve mobile phones and landlines rang with messages of imminent danger, advising people to evacuate. This advice was heeded by most, but not all, people in Rosedale, so that most of Rosedale had been evacuated by 7:30am. The electricity supply went down as the fire raged towards Rosedale, Malua Bay and McKenzies Beach. The fire topped the hills and ridges behind Rosedale. It was mid-morning but felt like midnight - dark with only an ominous red-orange glow in the north-west. This glow got brighter, the temperature increased rapidly, an extremely strong gusty wind from the west hit us and by 10.40 am we had glowing embers of leaves and bark raining down on Rosedale. Within minutes the vegetation on main beach was alight, along with virtually all of North Rosedale. Flames were being fanned by the strong westerly wind from the hills behind Rosedale and by what was on fire in Rosedale already. The ember attack continued on the westerly wind, impacting several streets. The predicted southerly change came in around 11.20am and pushed the fire northwards. Had the westerly winds continued, with the southerly delayed until later in the day, our losses would have been much greater. While the change destroyed some homes, much of the Rosedale hamlet was saved by the southerly, as well as properties to the south of us at Guerilla Bay and Tomakin. This southern area towards Guerilla Bay remains unburned and vulnerable and a continued fire threat for Rosedale.

Of the people that remained in Rosedale, some had a 'Stay and Defend' plan but others – mainly owners of holiday homes and visitors – chose to evacuate to the beach, so that over 100 people were on Rosedale Beach as the hot westerly winds blew the fire onto the beach tracks, dunes and boatsheds. Their decision to evacuate to the beach would likely have been fatal, if the southerly did not arrive when it did.

After the fire-front had passed, RFS ground crews arrived and extinguished pockets of bushfire and house fires (preventing their spread to neighbouring dwellings). Water-bombing saved several houses and boatsheds that day and additional water-bombing over subsequent days prevented bushfires developing in nearby forests that had not been burnt.

1.1 Causes and Contributing Factors:

Fuel Loads: Rosedale has always been particularly vulnerable to fires from the West and North Westerly directions and high fuel loads increased the risk. Fuel reduction had been minimal in the forested areas around Rosedale, which played a significant role in the fuel load of the fire as it approached Rosedale. A lot of the wooded areas are privately owned, which exacerbates the problem of the RFS being able to get access to do back burning or other maintenance to reduce the fuel load.

Hazard reduction in and around Rosedale had also been inadequate, due to RFS resourcing, weather conditions and dangers with undertaking controlled burns close to poorly maintained properties. Rosedale has a high proportion of rental properties and holiday homes. Many have historically been poorly maintained and presented a danger to neighbouring properties and the wider community. There tends to be a disconnect between people in the community who place a higher value on fire preparedness versus those who place a higher value on the natural bushland. There are also those who do not have the time, finances or physical ability to maintain their properties. Permanent residents have tended to be more engaged in community education and information pertaining to bushfire preparedness and more likely to take action to reduce fuel loads around their properties. Differing Council and RFS rules and views relating to the cutting down of trees or limbs overhanging properties are also confusing.

Weather: The fire season for the NSW South Coast started early, due to warmer temperatures and reduced rainfall.

1.2 Preparation and Planning:

The Rosedale Association has a long history of informing and educating our members on bushfire risks and preparedness. We have consulted Malua Bay RFS over many years and our members have actively supported their work through annual donations. The Association has routinely invited the RFS to address members at our AGM held on Easter Saturday each year. For example:

- Easter 2018 AGM: Superintendent John Cullen (*Manager, NSW RFS Far South Coast*) and Inspector Kelwyn White (*Community Protection Planning & Neighbourhood Safer Place (NSP) Officer, NSW RFS Batemans Bay*) briefed our members on the Tathra fires and efforts to better tailor bushfire information to individual communities. They referred members to the Bushfire Preparation Maps and urged them to prepare a bushfire plan including contingencies for evacuating and defending.
- 25 August 2018: Inspector Kelwyn White led a half-day “Preparing for Bushfire in Rosedale” workshop with the Rosedale Association’s support. Over 30 members of our community attended and learnt about bushfire behaviour, firefighting techniques, how to prepare and protect our properties, and how to develop household bushfire plans. Inspector White also conducted inspections on individual properties, on request, providing detailed reports and action items. Attendees welcomed Kelwyn’s advice, with many taking action to reduce bushfire risk on their properties.
- Easter 2019 AGM: Rob Geraghty, Deputy Captain of Malua Bay RFS, advised our members that the fire season had extended due to dry conditions and briefed us on the brigade’s fire preparedness work for Rosedale. He said the main risk continued to be from ember attack and highlighted the need for the whole community to be prepared, rather than individual homes. He indicated that RFS ground crews may be unable to enter Rosedale to fight a bushfire and it would be depend on the risk to crews on the day. He noted the absence of alternative escape routes from Rosedale, with north and south Rosedale each only having one road for entry/exit.

On 29 November 2019, we updated the “Bushfire Information for Visitors to Rosedale” document, in consultation with the RFS. We emailed it to members, asking them to share it with their family and display it in their holiday homes.

On 2 December 2019, our President, Secretary and Fire Officer met with the Deputy Captain and crew members at Malua Bay RFS and were briefed on the bushfire situation and the brigade’s inspection and planning for bushfire response in Rosedale, particularly North Rosedale. This

included a field trip to North Rosedale, where they viewed firsthand the concerns that the RFS had with our community's fire preparedness and access. Immediately following this meeting, we reported to Association members by email, highlighting the possible impact of fire events and the necessary defence requirements we all had to take to lessen the impact.

The Association circulated a newsletter to members on 10 December 2019, highlighting the importance of everyone - residents, property owners and visitors - being vigilant and being prepared for bushfires, stressing that bushfire threats could emerge quickly.

Throughout December, we regularly updated our Facebook page and emailed video links to members to encourage them to keep themselves updated on RFS briefings to community meetings in Batemans Bay. The final video link from the community meeting on 29 December 2019 was sent out to our members early on the morning of 30 December 2019 and proved to be a valuable and timely source of information. We urged members to keep themselves and their families updated on the rapidly changing fire situation via the following information sources: RFS 'Fires Near Me' website or app; Bushfire information line; Livetraffic.com; local media including ABC South East 103.5 FM; and NSW RFS Facebook and RFS Twitter pages.

Our commitment to ongoing information sharing and education led to many people – mainly permanent residents but also some others – spending many months preparing their properties for bushfire, sharing information with their friends and neighbours and discussing fire plans. On the day of the fire, many knew exactly what they and their neighbours were going to do and they were able to take immediate action to either evacuate or stay and defend. We were surprised when others made a last minute decision to evacuate to the beach, even though the consistent message over many years had been that the beach was a place of last resort.

Some people were forced to reconsider their evacuation plans, due to concerns about the volume of traffic trying to exit Rosedale and other communities onto George Bass Drive and the closure of major road links. The Kings Highway, Princes Highway and Snowy Mountains Highway were closed for several weeks or months. At several locations the closures created traffic jams and people were fearful of being trapped in their vehicle if a bushfire moved into the area.

1.3 Response to Bushfire:

After the southerly came through, RFS trucks and water bombing aerial support arrived and our community sprung into action. Those that had evacuated to the beach, those who had stayed to defend their homes, and those returning from evacuations were faced with houses and cars alight, burning vegetation, and power and communications out. With good mains water pressure, they used garden hoses and buckets to put out fires and create a wet edge around surviving homes. Unfortunately, we had no definitive list of SWS (Static Water Storages) and fire pumps in Rosedale, despite repeated attempts by the Association and our Fire Officer to gather this information from the community and Council. An up-to-date list of SWS would have helped in the immediate aftermath of the fire front.

Other responses in the days following the bushfire included:

- Two Rosedale full community meetings were arranged, with representatives from Council, NSW Police, ADF, Insurance Council of Australia, NSW Health and our resident clinical psychologist addressing attendees.
- The Association followed up with Council on various issues (septic pump outs, garbage removal and removal of dangerous trees).
- Night patrol rosters were put in place, with volunteers dealing with spot fires and smouldering logs and looking out for fires to the south and looters.
- A firefighting ute owned by a local family was set up, with two more later set up with donations.
- A community noticeboard was installed in the carpark to share information, including critical wind and fire reports.

- Donated UHF radios were assigned strategically around the village, with a car horn system maintained to get attention at night, if needed.
- People worked together to prepare their own and neighbouring properties for subsequent fire threats, checked on neighbours and shared food and donated items.
- Council, RFS, Essential Energy, SES, NSW Police and other services soon arrived and were highly sensitive and responsive to our needs.

It proved difficult to contact emergency services through triple zero when the fire-front struck Rosedale. It was also difficult to contact the RFS via triple zero on subsequent days, due to the lack of mobile phone coverage. In fact, we had major communication problems, with the entire telephone and internet network down for weeks on end. We had no way of knowing what the fire situation was or keeping updated on immediate threats. We also had no communication with family and friends, which continued for an extended period (12 weeks for some Optus customers). We had no electricity or sewerage solution for well over two weeks (some parts of Rosedale for longer) and no rubbish collection as our local Surf Beach tip was on fire. Many were unable to access fuel to power generators and in some cases had not enough fuel in car tanks to evacuate. Without EFTPOS, the few businesses operating were only accepting cash. Much of the road and highway network was either cut intermittently or for long periods, making any communication with the outside world challenging and at times impossible.

In the days following the fire, the generosity of the broader Rosedale community was overwhelming. Those remaining in Rosedale with limited communications were only partially aware of efforts being put in place to secure funds and donations outside. With donations, we soon had 10 x 1000 litre IBC water tanks, two firefighting pumps and tools and fittings needed to run the systems delivered to Rosedale. Some of the first donations were 16 UHF handheld radios and one base station. These were allocated strategically around the community and were extremely useful while spot fires were springing up and during our night patrolling efforts. These communication devices will continue to be of great importance for future emergencies. We also received 10 IBCs and some firefighting equipment, including two firefighter pumps. We are currently developing a plan for the purchase of additional equipment from the remaining donated funds. The aim is to identify suitable equipment and training to boost community firefighting capability, working in close consultation with our local RFS. Even with additional equipment, it will be made clear to the community that the 'Stay and Defend' plan should only be attempted by those who have the physical and mental fitness, knowledge, skills, equipment and fire shelters capable of withstanding the intense heat and smoke. We will continue to strongly recommend early evacuation as the best option, returning only after the immediate fire threat has passed.

1.4 Other Matters:

Other issues and observations from the community perspective:

- Evacuation centre options were poor, with fire eventually threatening some (*for example, the Batemans Bay Surf Club at Malua Bay and the Tomakin Sports and Social Club in Tomakin*). All evacuation centres were overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster. They were under-staffed and poorly organised. Some evacuees did not think to take adequate food, bedding or other essentials to the evacuation centres.
- Almost all our local wildlife disappeared as a result of the fire, with some gradual returns. There was no systematic approach to protecting or rescuing wildlife or key habitats.
- Where owners had cleared debris from yards, roofs and under decks, homes fared better. Even raking back leaves a few metres from the dwelling helped and houses with larger cleared areas and lawn were more defensible.
- We were lucky to have good mains water pressure before, during and immediately after the fire front went through.

1.5 Recommendations relating to Terms of Reference 5 - 11

Appropriate land management and building standards are current issues for our community, as landowners move towards rebuilding. The appropriate selection of housing and landscaping design and materials, along with planning and implementation of ongoing hazard reduction strategies, will

be a priority for us in managing future bushfire risk and protecting our community and ecosystems. Local Councils should have an integral role in guiding fire impacted communities on the way forward, including by engaging specialist consultants to work with communities in a coordinated way. Indigenous land management practices are also of interest to our community.

There needs to be a larger, systematic approach to hazard reduction, including a consistent program of backburning of the forested areas around Rosedale. This is critical to reducing the fuel load of a fire as it approaches Rosedale, which would reduce the ferocity and damage once it took hold in Rosedale itself. Obviously, hazard reduction needs to involve a variety of different techniques to suit particular situations, including cold burns, mechanical removal, mosaic and indigenous approaches. Within and around Rosedale there is Crown land, rural properties, state forests, marine reserves, several large private blocks and dwellings built among natural forests. We query whether the ongoing program of hazard reduction should be an RFS responsibility or whether another organisation needs to be given this specific mandate and appropriate resourcing.

There is a need for clarity around Council and RFS rules relating to clearing trees or trimming limbs overhanging properties. Land owners may be more likely to take action to reduce risk on their properties if they were clear on the rules.

Our relationship with the RFS proved most beneficial in educating us on how to prepare our homes for a bushfire but they need more resources (people and funding) to progress hazard reduction, individual property assessments (including arranging necessary maintenance for recalcitrant owners), education and fire response. On the day of the fire, those that had made the decision to 'stay and defend' in Rosedale were left to their own devices on the ground, with the RFS only arriving after the fire front had passed. As a result, we would welcome training and community workshops run by the RFS for residents to gain knowledge and skills to deal with fires, after a fire front has gone through. There also needs to be a targeted recruitment drive to attract younger volunteers to the RFS.

It would help residents of regional and remote areas, like Rosedale, if the Inquiry resulted in the fire-proofing of mobile phone towers or the introduction of an emergency backup system (e.g. satellite) for mobile phone and internet access during and immediately after natural disasters.

The emergency warning system needs some enhancement. The emergency warning SMS and calls to landlines in Rosedale achieved the desired outcome, as people were quickly alerted to the danger. The message was, however, at odds with RFS advice over many years that the beach was very much a place of last resort. The SMS received in Rosedale read "*NSWRFS EMERGENCY BUSH FIRE WARNING – Mogo – Leave now to the East towards the beach and shelter in place.*" Whether this contributed to the number of people, who evacuated to Rosedale beach is unknown.

We had to cobble together bushfire and weather information from disparate sources. Ideally there should be one integrated source of real-time information on fire locations, wind direction and predictions of areas that will come under threat.

Key utilities and businesses, such as petrol stations, need to have alternative power sources readily available and the means to accept payment.

On behalf of our Committee and members, I thank you for this opportunity to lodge a submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry and look forward to reading your report in due course.



(David Boardman)
President

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