



THE Rosedale

ASSOCIATION INC

BUSHFIRE REPORT, FEBRUARY 2020 MICHAEL SKIPPER, FIRE OFFICER

For years I have been reporting at the Easter AGM that we have been lucky enough to escape the previous seasons fire threat. I have always known we were going to have a bushfire in the Rosedale vicinity at some stage. What I didn't expect was the speed and ferocity of the fire that shattered our little piece of paradise on the morning of 31 December 2019.

The 2019-2020 fire season

Fires had been raging in Queensland and northern NSW for many months, contributing to the increased level of concern we had down here. It is generally accepted that any fire threat for our south coast area is around six to eight weeks after the central area of NSW is impacted by fire. Due to the very dry conditions, this six to eight-week period was cut much shorter. Our fire danger period was brought forward by a few weeks, almost matching the Blue Mountains, the Hunter and Southern Highlands areas, all of which had fire ignition at a similar time.

The fire that struck us at Rosedale was essentially born from a lightning strike towards the end of November in the National Park west of Ulladulla and north-east of Braidwood. For several weeks the fire continued to grow, in virtually inaccessible forested areas of the Shoalhaven shire defying RFS attempts to control by helicopter and fixed wing aerial bombing. This fire was known as the Currowan fire. By the time it was under control some 75 days later, it had burned close to 500,000 hectares, from the mountains to the sea, taking out large tracts of towns like Lake Conjola, North Durras. It was getting uncomfortably close to North Batemans Bay, Nelligen and Ulladulla.

The Rosedale Association had been regularly consulting the Malua Bay RFS, following their address to our AGM at Easter 2019. In early December, David Boardman, Vicki Smith and I met with members of their crew at their fire shed. We discussed the current fire situation and received a briefing on their inspection and planning for bushfire response in Rosedale, particularly their familiarisation review of North Rosedale. We accompanied them on a field trip to North Rosedale, where we inspected Yowani Road and Rose Court, viewing firsthand their concerns with our community's fire preparedness. Immediately following this meeting, we reported to Association members by email, including the possible impact of fire events and the defence requirements to lessen the effect.

On Boxing Day, the ever growing 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 on 31 December and continued to threaten us for some four weeks afterwards, burning another 100,000 hectares. On the evening of 30 December, it raged down the mountain through the foothills

west of Buckenbowra and overnight ran through the Buckenbowra area into and around Runnyford and then towards Mogo.

New Year's Eve

At about 5.30am mobile phones and landlines area rang with messages of imminent danger, advising people to evacuate. This advice was generally heeded and by 7.30am most of Rosedale had been evacuated. Where roads were open, many chose to return to their permanent homes in Sydney, Canberra or elsewhere. Some used evacuation centres in Batehaven and Moruya, others evacuated to Malua Bay and Tomakin.

Burned and blackened leaves had been falling all night and could be seen everywhere. The electricity supply went down as the fire raged towards Rosedale, Malua and McKenzies. The fire topped the hills and ridges behind us on Dunns Creek Road and Ridge Road. Time seemed to stand still for many of us. It was 8.30 in the morning but felt like midnight - iso dark with only an ominous red-orange glow in the north-west. This glow got brighter, the temperature increased rapidly, an extremely strong wind from the west hit us and by 10.40 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 North Rosedale. Flames were being fanned by the strong westerly wind from the hills behind us and by what was on fire in Rosedale already. The ember attack continued on the westerly wind and impacted Rosedale Parade, George Bass Drive, then onto Tranquil Bay, Paul St, Knowlman Rd and the eastern point of Cooks Cres. At this stage all the country between Rosedale and around to McKenzie's beach and to the very end of Pretty Point was also alight and burning freely.

The predicted southerly change came in around 11.20am and pushed the fire northwards. This change destroyed some homes but saved much of the hamlet, particularly in our south towards Guerilla Bay and Tomakin. I have no doubt that had the westerly winds continued with the southerly delayed until later in the day, our losses would have been much, much greater. This southern area toward Guerilla Bay remains unburned and vulnerable.

The sad tally for Rosedale was 84 homes destroyed, 13 in the south, 70 in North Rosedale and one in Roseby Drive. Thirty-five outbuildings and 12 boatsheds were incinerated. Every street has lost at least one home. In this dreadful saga, thankfully there were no fatalities.

The aftermath

We were faced with major communication problems. The entire telephone and internet network was down for weeks on end. We had no electricity or sewerage solution for well over two weeks (all North Rosedale and parts of South Rosedale for longer) and no rubbish collection as the Surf Beach tip was on fire. Many of us were unable to access fuel to power generators and in some cases had not enough fuel in car tanks to evacuate. Much of the road and highway network was either cut intermittently or for long periods, making any communication with the outside world very challenging and at times impossible.

The generosity of the community and outsiders has been overwhelming. Those of us remaining in Rosedale with limited communications were only partially aware of efforts being put in place to secure funds and donations. We have now in place 10 x 1000 litre IBC water tanks, two firefighting pumps and the tools and fittings needed to run the systems. We are considering how to strategically manage this equipment going forward, including establishing correct procedures and training. We are also planning how best to use the remaining funds.

One of the first donations was a number of UHF handheld radios, hugely useful while spot fires were springing up and during the night patrolling efforts. These communication devices will continue to be of great importance for any future emergency.

During the initial fire event, a few of us followed our Stay and Defend fire plan. We were able to man and defend most streets after the primary attack (we had no less than four fire threats after New Year's Eve). We fought to extinguish spot fires, embers and recurring log/stump ignitions at all hours for days and weeks afterwards. We monitored the wellbeing and health of neighbours and patrolled on foot and by vehicle through the night not only for fire but for possible burglary. The threats kept us hyper vigilant and needless to say tired and drained. We continue to monitor and in fact a tree root was only noticed and attended to in the second week of February.

We are extremely sad we couldn't do more to save some homes. However I have very little doubt that without the efforts of individuals within Rosedale, the loss of houses and structures would easily top 100.

I hope never to witness an event like this again, but if I do, I know that brave and determined people can be counted on to come to the fore.

Lessons learned

We are now collecting your stories to form the backbone of a strategic document for future emergencies.

My first thoughts:

- Where owners had cleared 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 very lucky to have mains water pressure during the entire ordeal – but many garden hoses were not long enough, had no sprayer fittings or were invisible. Where hoses were at the ready, we were able to extinguish spot fires, embers and hot spots.
- We had no definitive list of SWS (Static Water Storages) and fire pumps - this would have helped in the immediate aftermath of the fire front.
- It is vital to make and stick to a fire plan – and **leave early**. Too many people made decisions late on the run on what they were to do or which location to evacuate to.
- The beach has always been classed as a 'place of last resort'. Many did evacuate to the beach. I am convinced that if the westerly wind had blown another half hour on that fateful morning, the result would have been very different and possibly fatal. The temperature undoubtedly would have been much higher and it is highly likely that the air would have been unbreathable due to less oxygen and increased smoke.
- Stay and Defend should only be attempted by those who have the knowledge, skills and (importantly) fire shelters capable of withstanding the intense heat and smoke. There are very few addresses in our hamlet that have this facility. We still recommend early evacuation as the best option, returning only if physically and mentally fit after the immediate threat has passed.