



Coastwatchers

Eurobodalla's voice for nature

Coastwatchers Submission to the NSW Bushfire Enquiry

30 March 2020

Dear Sir/ Madam,

The Coastwatchers Association is the leading community environmental and conservation group serving the South Coast of NSW, principally in the Shire of Eurobodalla between Narooma and South Durras.

Coastwatchers welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the NSW Government's Bushfire Enquiry.

Your Terms of Reference: Clause 1.1

"The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity."

Recommendation: As native forest logging increases bushfires and their intensity Coastwatchers calls on the NSW government to cease logging native forests and complete the transition out of native forest logging to plantations with adequate retraining for affected workers.

Australian National University landscape ecology expert Professor David Lindenmayer¹ advises multiple academic and forest industry studies showed forest thinning in Australia "makes forests more fire prone"

Thus the decades long history of intensive logging in the South Coast region has made our forests more fire prone. Logging has made the impacts of the fires worse by increasing the number of smaller, younger trees in denser drier forests. It has also hastened climate change by releasing millions of tonnes of carbon stored in these trees into the atmosphere when they're logged.

In the Eurobodalla and Bega Shires jobs directly created by forestry represent less than 1% of the total work force. By comparison, this is even less than the amount

¹ 29 Jan 2020 [Post-bushfire logging makes a bad situation even worse, but the industry is ignoring the science](#) David Lindenmayer

of people employed in the arts and sports sector. Many more jobs are dependent on our nature based tourism sector which is heavily reliant on the South Coast's image as an environmentally unspoilt place which is incompatible with logging. The loss making native forest logging sector is directly subsidised by the profitable softwood sector. In addition the government systematically underwrites this industry with fuel subsidies and other measures². The total Australian forestry and logging employment figures estimate is ³ 6,500 in 2019 with 77% in plantation sector jobs in Victoria. Stopping native forest logging, using a conservative figure of 50% would affect 3,250 workers across Australia.

The cessation of government sector handouts to the controversial native forest logging sector would fund the transition of native forest workers to fire and conservation management⁴ work.

Cessation of logging native forests *especially* in bush fire affected areas would maintain tree carbon, assist the recovery of native wildlife and in the longer term help prevent the extreme climate change induced weather than lead to wildfires experienced over this "Black Summer" of 2019 /2020.

Recommendation:

- Plan strategic controlled mosaic burns that focus on asset protection zones around residential areas rather than meeting remote area burn quotas.
- Incorporate landcare manual removal of dry fuel load such as sticks in tree forks, piles of sticks around trees and weeds as well as slashing and brushcutting rather than burning which can escape.
- Controlled burns to incorporate mosaic burning that leaves unburnt patches that wildlife can retreat to and allow flora that is not fire resistant to survive.

Case studies from the recent fires illustrate this - most notably the Border fire. It burnt from the Victorian border to Eden in a single day, through some of the most heavily logged forest in Australia, so even though the fuel load in that forest had been reduced, the fire simply swept through anyway.

It may seem counter-intuitive but the longer old-growth forests remain fire- free, the less combustible they become. The thicker canopy creates more shade, the undergrowth becomes thinner and less vigorous and holds more moisture - and hence there is less fuel for fires.

² 23 Mar 2020 [Forestry Corp to get \\$46m for recovery](#)

³ Feb 2020 [The opportunity for Australia's native forests](#) The Australia Institute, page 2.

⁴ Feb 2020 [The opportunity for Australia's native forests](#) The Australia Institute

Recommendation:
The National Parks and Wildlife Service to be adequately funded.

If adequate funding was re- instated for NPWS it would contribute to good land / fire management and pest control practices in our parks - and benefit the tourism industry.

Over the last 9 years NPWS had \$121 million cut from it's budget in 2011, In 2017 an additional \$80 million was cut and the number of rangers employed was reduced by approx 25% (Fact checked by The Guardian).

Previously 28 people were in the role of senior ranger. They had responsibility for hazard reduction and pest control. This role was abolished in a restructure in 2017, effectively replacing rangers with office based clerks - presumably on less pay than rangers with university qualifications and 20 to 30 years experience in the service.

Your Terms of Reference: Clause 1.3
Responses to bushfires “equipment and communication systems.”

Recommendation: It's imperative that the ABC is properly funded so it can build capacity so the organisation can seamlessly “step up a notch” in times of crisis.

Many rural and remote areas in Australia don't have adequate mobile phone coverage so access to the internet is unreliable. The ABC was *the* life line for us during this crisis.

A trusted source of information, their role as the nation's emergency broadcaster was never more imporant. They provided timely critical information for potential life and death decisions - when to evacuate, when to shelter in place.

Your Terms of Reference: Clause 7 “Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems.”

We need to listen to our scientists and the fire experts and act on their recommendations. The short term political cycle of 3 to 4 years needs to be de coupled from the longer term scientific cycle.

If we want to decrease wildfires one of the steps we have take *now* is to stop adding carbon to the atmosphere and start drawing it down out of the atmosphere.

Recommendation: Coastwatchers calls for an urgent transition from carbon emitting fossil fuels to renewable energy.

Recommendation: The following practical measures focussing on asset protection would assist:

- 1 Councils to allow residents free access to organic waste tips during key fire times. And/or councils to collect green bins more regularly - once a week - during spring and summer.
- 2 Fund RFS Facilitation Officers to provide free home audits to assist people to properly prepare for fire season. The audits would provide information about practical issues like
 - not stocking up on firewood over summer
 - not storing firewood near the house
 - making sure gutters are clear of leaves
 - retrofitting buildings to make them more able to withstand ember attack - ie: information about the installation of metal flyscreens etc.
- 3 Fund fire prevention services and fire fighting aircraft and equipment within the defence budget as fires remain a real and present danger to regional Australians. Aerial firefighting to focus on early intervention to put out fires fast.

Yours sincerely

Reina Hill
President
The Coastwatchers Association Inc

PO Box 521 Batemans Bay NSW 2536
contact@coastwatchers.org.au

www.coastwatchers.org.au

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The Association aims to protect the local environment and preserve the integrity of the ecological systems of the South Coast of NSW. It opposes the unnecessary destruction and degradation of natural systems, unbalanced development and pollution and opposes threats to the survival of plant and animal species and communities.