

Emerald for Sustainability (EmFSus) Inc.



“Putting the EMPHASIS on Sustainability”

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2013 – Year of the Emerald Star Bush

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
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SENATE INQUIRY – RECENT TRENDS IN AND PREPAREDNESS FOR EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

Dear Committee Secretary,

I write to you on behalf of Emerald for Sustainability (EmFSus), a not-for-profit, non-politically aligned climate action group. Our focus is for residents, businesses and community groups in Emerald and surrounding districts to reduce their water and energy consumption, minimise waste and increase the biodiversity; with an aim to live a low carbon lifestyle. We have over 140 people on our mailing list and are highly active within our community of about 7,000 residents.

Living in the Dandenong Ranges puts EmFSus in a prime position to comment on the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry. We live in a high risk bushfire area, and have seen first hand, the increase in high risk days, particularly over the last five plus (5+) years. We have no doubt that the increase, and projected intensity, is as a result of climate change.

EmFSus has endeavoured to keep ourselves informed with updated information by inviting guest speakers to our monthly meetings. We have also networked with other like-minded organisations in the Dandenong Ranges doing similar work, hosting events and activities and have also travelled to hear and see prominent people speak, and attend events, rallies and the like.

So what can we contribute to this Inquiry? Well, telling our story of living life in a high risk bushfire area is important, as it, we believe, is a snapshot of what other communities endure when faced with extreme weather events.

Come summertime, we know that the Fire Danger Period will be declared at some stage in the very near future, and that means organising, and reviewing, our bushfire survival plan. We also know that the CFA, through the local fire brigades, will be out and about promoting their community safety message. For most people, they will be keeping a close eye on the CFA website and all other means of staying informed, on days of Total Fire Ban (TFB), and will have left the area when the Fire Danger Rating (FDR) reaches Code Red – Catastrophic. There are a small amount of people who will stay and defend their properties, but since Black Saturday, there is a greater interest in leaving the area and doing so early.

The more days that a TFB is declared, the more people here will be watching and acting in accordance with their bushfire survival plan, and not doing much more.

From my own experience, a TFB day means very little else will get done, as I concentrate on the weather and what is happening outside. Can I smell smoke?, or see smoke rising? Is the wind still blowing in from the north? or has a change come about and now coming from the southwest?

When the FDR is Code Red, most places in the Dandenong Ranges will be closed, schools, kindergartens, childcare centres, libraries and a multitude of businesses. An enormous amount of people will be elsewhere, away from the Dandenong Ranges. Imagine the impact that has on the local economies?, as well as the psychological well being of community members? The routine life as we know it completely changes. Not knowing what will be waiting on return compounds this.

Insurance premiums have increased dramatically over the last few years, due to the increase in extreme weather events. There are people who, as a result of the increase in premiums, are no longer insuring their contents, and for those who are fortunate enough to own their own home, or have a mortgage, are not insuring them either, or are taking out insurance well under what the replacement value of the house is. There are also local stories that some insurance companies will no longer insure homes (and probably contents) due to the communities in the Dandenong Ranges being in a high risk area. Where does that leave people? Those that aren't insured are unable to sell their homes, as part of the selling criteria is to have insurance.

Paying the increased premiums on a monthly, fortnightly or weekly basis, would not come as such a financial shock, however, most insurance companies require interest to be paid when paying this way, which really is outrageous and is an added financial burden on already stretched household budgets.

There are a number of telecommunications black spots here in the Dandenong Ranges, particularly mobile phone coverage. These must be identified and fixed.

Our emergency services are manned mostly with volunteers – CFA & the SES. Our Ambulance and Police are staffed with career people, still, all live in the area. They are all away from their homes and families when an emergency happens. Once again, this compounds the anxiety of what is happening in their lives. We commend, particularly, the volunteers of the CFA & SES, who give up so much of their time to protect and care for our communities.

What can this Inquiry do to alleviate the worst aspects of the climate change projections?
Drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

How?

- Transition to 100% renewable energy to power our nation.
- Prevent the logging of our old growth native forests.
- Protect our marine environments, particularly from over fishing.
- Improving our public transport.

Legislation providing incentives in addressing these is critically important, followed by adequate funding to support the legislation. A percentage of the GDP would be a good start also. We have done so in our history, particularly World War 2, it is time to take on a similar strategy.

A regular discussion point when climate activists gather is that our elected representatives really don't have the political will to make hard decisions to ensure we have a safe climate future. This is an opportunity to prove otherwise.

I leave you with this quote from the Prime Minister when she visited the Dunalley Fires in Tasmania on 8 Jan 2013:-

“And while you would not put any one event down to climate change.....we do know that over time as a result of climate change we are going to see more extreme weather events,”

It is up to all of our elected representatives to take immediate and drastic action to combat the worst projections of climate change.

If you have the opportunity and ability to ensure a safe climate future for all, would you not take it?

That opportunity is here now.

Yours sincerely,

Lee Fuller (Mrs)
Convenor