

*Submission to Senate Standing Committees on Finance and Public Administration Lessons to be Learned in Relation to the Australian Bushfire season 2019–20.*

Dear Senators,

For 46 years, I (Tony Jennings) have been a member of a rural fire brigade in the Bega valley. Here I will be focussing on the mental health impacts on the volunteer firefighters in the Bega valley. The office of Kristie McBane, Member for Eden-Monaro, has asked me to inform you of the difficulties we are still facing one year later, so that solutions can be found. Thank you for your time and patience in considering the matters outlined below.

**A. Heightened anxiety and anger because the operational issues from the 2019-20 fires have not been resolved**

- **Ineffectiveness of the super IMT (Incident Management team) model.** The amalgamation of the Eurobodalla and Bega valley districts (from just south of Nowra to the Victorian Border) meant that the IMT was overwhelmed by the number of fires.
- **Insufficient staff in Bega and Moruya offices to support brigades.** Both offices could not be kept fully functional 24-h a day.
- **Non-existence of “after-action reviews” at the district level.** The normal process of holding discussions and receiving feedback from the fire control centre about critical issues raised by the brigades after a fire in their “after-action reviews” has still not occurred. This delay was originally due to COVID restrictions, but it is essential that it goes ahead so that
  - (a) issues can be resolved and the same mistakes will not be repeated, and
  - (b) the volunteers can move on without the continuing despair, anger, and fear of the next disaster.

**B. Stress and apprehension arising from lack of proactive fire-fighting**

- **Volunteers are only allowed to fight fires in vehicle accessible country** unless they have an arduous firefighting qualification (3/40 people in our brigade).
- Because of this, the firefighters commonly “wait and watch” feeling **frustration and anxiety** when the conditions are benign, the fires are small, and the flame height is <1 metre. Then they suffer the **immense trauma and danger** of fighting the huge fires that come out of the forest under uncontrollable conditions.
- **A possible solution** would be for the captain of the brigade to pick the fittest and the willing to go in under extended benign conditions and put the fire out as we did in the past before the new regulations. This would help mental health as well as save property and forest. Other possible solutions need to be canvassed.

**C. Lack of mental health support from the RFS after the fires**

- **Paid staff have not instigated counselling services** to the volunteers in our district.
- In April/May, I twice sought to have face-to-face counselling in the Bega Valley, but was told this was not possible with COVID.
- In my third attempt at getting help, RFS suggested phone counselling. Some members of our brigade were subjected to such acute trauma in a near-miss experience that it is clear that they should have been automatically provided with counselling. But the RFS didn’t ask the captain for the names of the brigade members that he thought required counselling, and no one has received counselling.
- **Individual and group face-to-face counselling should be provided now** with a COVID-safe plan.
- This may require more counselling staff in the RFS.