

Australian bushfire report aids government whitewash on climate change and lack of resources

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Late last month, the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements issued a nearly 600-page report into the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire disaster, after hearing 270 witnesses and receiving 1,750 public submissions.

Despite all the evidence presented, the report faithfully follows the instructions of the Liberal-National government, which called the inquiry in February as an exercise in political damage control and cover-up.

On the release of the report, Emergency Management Minister David Littleproud quickly announced the government's agreement with its 80 recommendations. "In terms of the federal recommendations there is nothing there that the federal government is concerned about," he told the media. "I think they are very pragmatic recommendations and ones that we will continue to proceed."

First and foremost, the report holds no one, least of all the government, responsible for the catastrophe. The foreword states: "Although informed by the existing national arrangements, we took a deliberate decision not to find fault, 'point fingers' or attribute blame."

The three commissioners appointed by the government were ex-armed forces chief Mark Binskin, former judge Annabelle Bennett and environmental law professor Andrew Macintosh.

Their report begins by paying lip service to climate change as the driver of bushfire disasters. Based on testimony from witnesses from the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), the official Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and Geoscience Australia, it notes that clear global warming trends have emerged, and that Australia has warmed by approximately 1.4 degrees since 1910.

According to the BoM, further warming over the next two decades is inevitable, with the global climate system continuing to warm in response to the greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere. The CSIRO stated that some

further climate change is "locked in" because of emissions already experienced.

Yet the report advances no recommendations at all for responding to global warming. What is advanced instead is the catchphrase "resilience," which means accepting more extreme weather-related disasters as inevitable, and somehow co-existing with them.

Accordingly, the report proposes that "a more mature understanding of the root causes and effects of disaster risk and, in particular, systemic vulnerability, is needed, so that our efforts to mitigate the risk and build resilience can meet the challenges of the future." This is exactly in line with the terms of reference for the inquiry set out by Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

The report presents the resulting national disasters within the framework of the profit system, citing estimates of economic costs. It quotes Deloitte Access Economics, which in 2017 estimated that, for the previous decade, the national bill for natural disasters was \$18.2 billion annually. The report projects that this amount will blow out to \$39 billion per year by 2050, even without accounting for climate change.

The report takes a similar approach with the lack of civilian resources to combat infernos of the intensity experienced over the past year. It covers up the criminal lack of civilian firefighting resources—aerial capacity, modern trucks, professional firefighters and evacuation infrastructure—revealed by the bushfires.

The inquiry commissioners warn that the "increasing complexity of disaster risks" has "the potential to overwhelm the capabilities of our fire and emergency services." Yet they make no recommendation for the allocation of the necessary billions of dollars to address this threat.

Given the lengthening of bushfire seasons in both northern and southern hemispheres, due to climate change, the hire of aircraft for aerial bushfire fighting from overseas is

becoming increasingly difficult.

The report notes that during the 2019-2020 fires, 66 overseas aircraft were leased for firefighting, but the severity of the fires meant that more were needed at short notice, and could not be obtained.

In Australia, about two-thirds of aerial firefighting aircraft are owned or contracted directly by the states and territories, which meet the costs. The remaining one third (160) are contracted through the National Aerial Firefighting Centre (NAFC), which does not own any aircraft itself.

The report calls for a “modest” national aircraft fleet, ensuring a “sovereign aerial firefighting capability.” What is meant by “modest” is indicated by the mere \$15 million per year that the Morrison government committed to spending on aerial firefighting between 2018 and 2021. This amount was hastily topped up during the 2019-2020 catastrophe by an extra \$31 million, enabling an additional four Large Air Tankers to be procured for the season.

The report deals likewise with the inadequacy of evacuation facilities, with state, territory and local governments merely advised to provide nationally-consistent evacuation centres, Neighbourhood Safer places, places of last resort and natural disaster shelters.

The commissioners admit that during the last bushfire season “people slept on floors with limited to no bedding and others slept in cars or other vehicles.” Desperate people arrived together with their animals, big and small. There were chaotic evacuation scenes at fires such as those at Lake Conjola in New South Wales, Mallacoota in Victoria, and Kangaroo Island in South Australia. Yet the report provides no costing for evacuation centres.

The same attitude is maintained in relation to power outages, which proliferated during the 2019-2020 bushfire season, in some cases lasting for weeks. The insistence by the private power companies that they should not have to put power lines underground, is advanced in the report without any criticism, on the grounds that it would be “significantly more expensive.”

Then the Morrison government is applauded for having allocated \$37 million toward “enhancing telecommunications resilience”—a mere drop in the bucket.

In line with the report’s underlying profit-driven response, it insists that governments cannot protect everyone. “Even the best prepared and resourced governments and fire and emergency services cannot entirely protect the public from the impact of natural disasters,” it states.

“Some bushfires, for example, will be too widespread; some Australians will live too remotely; and there are only so many firefighters, aircraft and trucks that can be deployed at the same time. Furthermore, governments and charities by no means cover the cost of rebuilding uninsured homes and

replacing other property lost in natural disasters.”

Moreover, the report makes clear that the overwhelming volunteer base of the fire service should remain, rejecting calls for more full-time firefighters.

“Australia has a strong culture of volunteerism with over 200,000 volunteer emergency responders nationally,” it states. “Volunteers are willing to give their time to protect their communities, generally seeking no more than support and respect.”

Because of the extraordinary demands on volunteers, and the impact on their employment, the report merely suggests offering them some financial aid. “Volunteers need to be supported and enabled to participate in a way that respects the values of volunteerism, and considers the competing demands on their time.”

Under the heading of “land management,” the report proposes allowing farmers more leeway to clear land of trees, saying it is necessary to “ensure that there is clarity about the requirement and scope for landholders and land managers to undertake bushfire hazard reduction activities; and minimise the time that is necessary to obtain approvals.”

The report estimates that during and after the 2019-2020 bushfires, over \$8 billion was provided for disaster recovery, by all levels of government, non-government organisations, charities and the private sector. This includes \$2 billion from the Morrison’s government’s National Bushfire Recovery Fund, \$1.8 billion from state and territory governments, and \$2.3 billion from insurance.

Much of the proclaimed amount has not been dispensed, leaving many of the disaster’s survivors still in limbo, often in temporary accommodation. Furthermore, this outlay pales into insignificance besides the \$575 billion to be spent over the next decade on the military, including for an expanded domestic role in dealing with social unrest and other “emergencies.”



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