

**Submission
No 14**

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Name: Andi Mellis
Date Received: 30 April 2024

Partially
Confidential

Dear Alison,

I would like to make a submission re the RFS operations.

Background: I was a RFS member and deputy Captain between the years 1988 and 1996 at Nana Glen west of Coffs Harbour.

This makes me somewhat familiar with the operations within a brigade at ground level.

I am not familiar with the financial arrangements between Councils, State government and the RFS so cannot comment in this area, though at the time the brigade seemed to be well financed with equipment and trucks.

My expertise is more in environmental science and the workings of the brigade regards vehicle, pump, shed and equipment maintenance.

When I was deputy captain my team always considered safety and property as a priority.

While safety appears to be still high on priorities I had experienced several property protection failures from the local brigade in the late 2019 fire period at The Pinnacles.

1. The brigade cut fire breaks about three kilometres from the front along several properties with total disregard for personal property amounting to thousands of dollars to the local residents.

I represented the local residents in an attempt to have the damage repaired to no avail.

Property 1: [REDACTED] had the corner pegs of the property bull dozed over. The surveyors pegs were clearly marked with white painted 1.5 meter posts with reflectors. Surveyors quote was \$1,200.00.

Property 2: [REDACTED] had the northern fence posts bull dozed over on the eastern end. 4 strand barb wire fence. Damage around \$600.00 to repair.

Property 3: [REDACTED] had a fence to the side of a gate, which was wide enough to allow a dozer through cut and dozed over, The gate and gate post on the western side were also damaged. The pensioner could not afford the repairs and with a friend and myself we carried out some repairs to the 4 strand barb wire fence.

Property 4: [REDACTED] The dozer didn't just scrape the trail clear of debris but dug down over 500mm in places. This had to be repaired or severe erosion would have occurred. It was eventually done by the land owner at his expense.

After several attempts of communication with the head officer from Urunga who did come out and inspect the damage was mystified as to how the damage was done and admitted it should have been mitigated at the time. In the end I was rudely told to drop off and let it go.

My input here is that there should be a some responsibility taken to deliberate property damage of this nature especially when it costs people money and was not necessary. The above has left a lot of distrust in the local RFS with many locals.

b) The local brigades have very little training in what constitutes "Fire retardant plants." It appears from talking to other residents in other areas within the Clarence Valley the same applies throughout the Clarence Valley area. Many members did not even know that a list of FRP was available.

I have a Diploma in Environmental Science. This is an area I have dedicated myself to over the years. I am very conversant with Fire retardant plants; especially Australian natives and how they can have a great impact in slowing fire, controlling the direction of fire and retaining moisture levels within the soil for far longer periods.

Experiments I did on my own property showed a significant difference in temperatures in the summer of 2020 over a month. The temperatures varied from ground temperatures in the open at over 60 degrees centigrade down to around 27 degrees in the shade beneath Fire retardant trees and in the mid 30's in the shade of non fire retardant trees. As you would be aware temperature plays a huge part in fire behaviour.

I would be prepared to undertake an in depth recording for the RFS in winter, spring and summer if so desired. Autumn is generally wet as a consequence is not generally regarded as a high fire danger period in this area.

I have also utilised position of plantings heights, foliage types - thickness oil content etc., barks, growth habits, swales, slopes, prevailing winds etc. I have listed these with drawings in my free web book under "Fire Retardant Plants." I have made myself available to the local brigade. To date they have not taken my offer up to educate locals on these plants.

While the RFS has a list of Fire Retardant plants, they have been reluctant, locally at least, to hand it out and instead espouse the use of unfettered clearing with some disastrous consequences. I have witnessed in many cases of increased erosion, escalated wind speed in the opened up areas compared to a few meters away between FRP, drying of the soil

leading to greater fire risks. The clearings espoused by members have never been evaluated in a scientific manner by local members let alone called in experienced personelle.

Some of these problems include:

- 1: Salinity,
- 2: The loss of plant species,
- 3: Local Fauna depletion and extinction,
- 4: Changes to the local micro climate – drying out and increasing temperatures,
- 5: Exasperates climate Change,
- 6: Carbon emissions released by deforestation and clearing in Australia is equivalent to at least half the carbon pollution of all Australian coal power stations,
- 7: Reduces water quality down stream due to siltation and chemical absorption,
- 8: Tree loss actually creates a greater fire danger by increasing highly combustible grasses and short thin vertical growth,
- 9: Pests increase when natural predators are removed like small honeyeaters which require large numbers of small insect for protein &
- 10: Stored carbon is released into the atmosphere and not stored in the soil or vegetative matter.

There is a general movement away from exotics and towards Australian native plants. These should be considered as they are generally more drought tolerant when correctly selected and placed in the scheme of things.

I believe all staff and RFS members should undertake a comprehensive study of Fire Retardant plants with at least one member in each brigade conversant enough to work with the public and to assist land holders in correctly utilising FRP on their property incorporating species already on the property.

If I can be of further assistance please do not hesitate in contacting me further.

Kind Regards

andi Mellis. Diploma in Environmental Science.