

**Submission  
No 1**

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH IMPACTS OF EXPOSURE TO  
POOR LEVELS OF AIR QUALITY RESULTING FROM  
BUSHFIRES AND DROUGHT**

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I am not qualified to comment on the physical health impacts of exposure to poor levels of air quality resulting from bushfires and drought on: at-risk groups including children, pregnant women, people with asthma and other respiratory-related illnesses, the elderly and other high risk groups as well as vulnerable companion animals; or on people who are exposed to poor outdoor air quality in the workplace. However, the views of experts on the impacts of toxins and fine particulates reported in the media should be alarming to us all.

I do urge the committee to consider psychological as well as physical health impacts. In the Southern Highlands facing threats of ember attacks from what were (from <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/fire-information/fires-near-me>) huge fires alarmingly near to our north and our south, and with constant smoke haze for more than a month with visibility reduced to under 300 metres at times, it was quite impossible to visually assess scanty local information on the RFS website or the graphic details that were being portrayed by both commercial and social media. I'd expect a quiet epidemic of suicide and other unfortunate social outcomes to come out of this information deficit.

As to the effectiveness of the NSW Government to plan for and improve air quality I make the general observation that I have seen no advice to the general public or to at-risk groups such as 'the elderly' to ensure our health, or information to them as to the provision of various protective materials including face masks and air purifiers. If such advice or protective materials were actually provided to managers of communities such as in retirement villages and seniors' living (other than Residential Aged Care facilities), then they did not filter down to individuals living independently in these communities.

On the matters of measurement, reporting and public awareness of poor levels of air quality resulting from bushfires and drought, these were not matters to which I gave much thought before the middle of December 2019. For the next month however, as the so-called Green Wattle Creek/Nattai fire ground advanced towards the towns of the Southern Highlands from the north (reaching ten kilometres away) and the so-called Currowan/Morton fire ground advanced from the south (reaching fifteen kilometres away) I was looking constantly for information on the fire fronts, spot fires and related air quality. I found little in sufficient detail as to help my planning.

Obviously, air quality was but one of my concerns. However on that, there appears to be no monitoring of air quality directly relevant to the Southern Highlands, whose somewhat basin-like but elevated terrain is different to the areas around either Bargo or Goulburn for which air quality reporting and prediction has been available on <https://aqicn.org/map/australia/> . If results from these two monitoring stations are any guide Sydney got off lightly as to days with very unhealthy and hazardous air quality on the days for which their data were published online!

On my own observations in the Southern Highlands I do wonder just how accurate was the reporting and how reliable were the predictions offered for Bargo and Goulburn: even after these stations began to use hourly data for PM2.5 and PM10 from the NSW Environment Department the data based on visibility certainly didn't match what could be seen from our north-facing kitchen window towards known reference points (eg a golf course flag 300 metres away and hills 1.5 and 2 kilometres away).

In the end, with a little knowledge of meteorology and fire behaviour I had to rely on what I could see, coupled with Bureau of Meteorology forecasts of wind speed and direction and what little information about fire fronts and spotting I could glean from <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/fire-information/fires-near-me>) and the somewhat more detailed

information on <https://cloud.rfsshoalhaven.com.au/index.php/s/phs5pogC1rtl4zk> (discovered later). I do not know how accurate air quality (and other) warnings are from the Victorian Emergency agency (<https://emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/>).

At least the Victorians are making an effort.