

INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE GROUP

MEDIA RELEASE

29 July 2020

Time for radical rethink on bush fire fighting in the post climate change era

In the wake of the Black Summer bushfires a group of experienced fire experts, known as the Independent Bushfire Group, has called on the NSW Government to consider some fundamental changes in the way future bushfires are managed.

The group includes 12 fire management veterans and researchers, with more than 400 years of fire experience between them.

The group's proposals were put before the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry and published online today by Emergency Leaders for Climate Action.

ELCA convenor Greg Mullins welcomed the IBG's work, saying "We need this sort of analysis and discussion so we can deal with more dangerous fires. With climate change its not going to get any easier any time soon."

Group spokesman and former incident controller, Geoff Luscombe, said today that while it's clear that these fires were the worst in history there are some very clear lessons that must not be ignored.

"I thought I'd seen some really bad fires but this past season was something else.

"The Independent Bushfire Group has closely analysed the 2019-2020 fires and one thing is absolutely clear, we are now in uncharted territory for future fire seasons. Our previous experience, understandings and approaches to bushfires need to change radically if we are to have any chance of limiting the scale of the damage we saw last summer.

"Climate change is driving a completely new epoch for fire managers of the future. Gone are the days we could rely on our traditional ways of managing fires because the extraordinary conditions we witnessed, driven by climate change, are likely to continue.

"We need to keep fires smaller. That's the best way to limit the damage to communities and environment, the danger to firefighters and overall fire costs.

"After our analysis and discussions with many firefighters we strongly believe that one of the most urgent issues is how to increase our capacity to strike at fires much earlier.

"Every big fire starts as a single small spark, many from lightning. We need to be able to strike at these fires faster and harder.

“Remote area fire fighting is a proven and effective response but the number of crews trained for this specialised work and the number of helicopters are not enough for the task ahead and must be increased,” Mr Luscombe said.

The IBG has also called on the NSW Government and Rural Fire Service to seriously review the practise of backburning for fire suppression.

IBG member and former RFS Group Captain Bill Shields said, “Backburns are an essential tool but under the catastrophic conditions we witnessed may no longer be as useful as they were in the past and can even make fires bigger when they fail or escape. A mix of containment strategies can be better.

“We have such a fantastic volunteer firefighting force, but the time has come to give them more support. Many volunteers worked week after week in highly demanding firefighting roles while looking after their businesses, farms, employers and families.

“More highly competent paid professional firefighters are needed to work shoulder to shoulder with the volunteers. A good start would be to develop more expert Fire Strategists, Aviation Specialists and Divisional Commanders who were in critical short supply.

Another vital area is research. “Predictions of fire behaviour are not good enough to help firefighters, and we don’t know enough about the best ways to put fires out because the work hasn’t been done,” IBG member Denise Allen said.

“No-one even knows if large air tankers are worth the money. We need to learn from past fires through detailed review of what happened on the ground so we can keep getting better at putting fires out.”

“We urge the NSW Government to seriously consider the recommendations we have put forward. We need new thinking to confront the massive and dangerous challenge that has been thrown before the community.”