

# **INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE GROUP**

## **Opening Statement to the Select Committee Inquiry into Coronial Jurisdiction in NSW**

**by the  
Independent Bushfire Group**

**30 November 2021, Parliament House**

Chair, Deputy Chair and Committee members, thank you for inviting us to appear today.

We note that our submission is the only one that focuses on bushfires, yet they can be a major part of the coronial workload, as shown by the still ongoing inquiry into the Black Summer fires.

The Independent Bushfire Group is a voluntary collaboration of experienced bushfire practitioners with diverse backgrounds. We formed after Black Summer, to advocate for better fire management.

There is no other expert group like IBG, with such depth of on-ground experience, independent of any funding, government agency or political stripe, and with a focus on practical firefighting, science and evidence.

We have worked hard on our advocacy, and we have been influential.

We started with a 180-page report to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry, including analysis of some Black Summer fires. These are still the only such studies that have been published.

We've made other submissions and liaised with fire agencies, media, firefighters, researchers, politicians and community groups. One reform we have argued for is an Inspector General of Emergency Management.

We are now into the second fire season after our worst bushfires in 200 years. Yet there is still no comprehensive review of bushfire operations.

The NSW Bushfire Inquiry requested in-house reviews of just four high-profile fires, which have been kept secret in deference to the coronial.

The current coronial looks like producing nothing definitive until at least 3 fire seasons have gone.

We are facing worse climate-driven fires and a higher coronial workload.

Current mechanisms for bushfire review are helpful but flawed. They do not deliver timely and robust lessons for improvements on the ground.

For the sake of firefighters and communities, we need a more effective review system. It would embody these features:

- Blame-free, non-adversarial and fact-based.
- Independent.
- Resourced.
- Look at successful as well as adverse events.
- Expertise in bushfire operations as well as fire science and investigations.
- Power to compel information.
- Fewer legal impediments.
- Focus on lessons learned to improve bushfire operations.
- Develop accountable action plans to deliver on lessons.
- Produce outcomes before the following fire season.

Bushfire coronials can produce good outcomes but fall short of what is needed. They can also get in the way of best practice, and are slow to deliver. Coronials and other review processes are poorly integrated.

I should say that our group has personal experience of many bushfire investigations and coronials. My two colleagues here have appeared as witnesses at coronial hearings, as officers in charge of emergency-level fires.

In conclusion, we strongly agree with the many submissions that argue for a greater focus on timeliness, prevention and accountability.

We also urge this inquiry to recommend that non-fatal bushfire investigations be given to a new, purpose-built body – an Inspector-General of Emergency Management, as in other states, and with the features already mentioned.

Separating bushfire would also reduce coronial workload and assist timeliness.

Bushfires have enormous impacts, on lives, trauma, community, property, environment and treasury. The Black Summer operations probably cost more than a billion dollars.

More rigorous, inbuilt, timely and transparent processes to improve bushfire outcomes are possible. Indeed they are essential.

Thank you.