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Expert group calls for overhaul of disaster review

After examining the recommendations from the NSW Coronial Inquiry into the 2019/2020 Bushfires, released on 27 March, the Independent Bushfire Group (IBG) is even more disappointed with the outcome.

“Four years is too long to wait for this. And most of the recommendations are about correcting basic procedures. While the emphasis on safety and training is welcome, its concerning that the coroner found it necessary to spend a lot of the inquiry’s time on fundamentals that could have been fixed years ago,” acting convenor of IBG Gregor Manson said.

“The inquiry only examined six specific issues, so how many flawed procedures might continue in areas that still haven’t been independently looked at? The coroner finding so many simple but important problems - more than four years later - proves the need for more timely, continuous and expert disaster review.”

“The recommendations in total will do little to keep fires as small as possible in future disasters. For example, there are no recommended improvements for initial attack, suppression strategies or aircraft mix and effectiveness.”

“Volunteer firefighters and damaged communities deserve nothing less than a complete overhaul of how disasters are reviewed. Neither the NSW Bushfire Inquiry nor the coronial inquiry could do more than scratch the surface of firefighting operations. We need a standing expert body to dig deeper for the fires, storms and floods that are getting worse with climate change.”

“Contrary to what some say, an Inspector General of Emergency Management (IGEM) would not be an additional burden and it would have no role in day-to-day operations. The 2020 Natural Disasters Royal Commission recommended just such an assurance and accountability body for all states.”

“The public needs to have confidence that vital disaster services are being constantly assessed and improved. A well-constructed expert review body should be welcomed by response agencies because it would help deliver better outcomes for their volunteers and communities.”

“An IGEM would remove the need for ad hoc inquiries like the one into NSW Bushfires. It would feed expert advice into coronials, just as the Australian Transport Safety Bureau did

with the 2020 Large Air Tanker crash. Bushfire and flood inquiries demand massive amounts of time and money from agencies that could have been better spent with better results.”

“A IGEM would oversee emergency lessons management and undertake specific reviews as necessary. It would avoid much of the glare of publicity, obstructive legalism and defensiveness of the ineffective processes of the past.”

“We can’t understand why the NSW government is dodging this very sensible way forward. Surely a body that in some ways mirrors the approach of the highly regarded ATSB can and should be applied to major bushfires and floods. Both disasters have repeatedly hit communities hard, yet the government does nothing to improve the way disasters are analysed. It’s time to fix this,” Mr Manson concluded.

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The **Independent Bushfire Group** is a group of non-aligned bushfire practitioners, fire managers, land managers, researchers and ecologists with over 450 years of collective experience across a range of fire landscapes. The IBG advocates for better fire management so we can adapt to our worsening fire climate, with a focus on practical firefighting, science and evidence-based practices.