

Australian bushfire royal commission: Survivors expose “stay or go” policy

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Testimony during the first two and half weeks of the Victorian royal commission investigation into the February 7 bushfires has revealed that the tragically high death toll was caused by grossly inadequate emergency services, lack of fire warnings and the absence of any centralised evacuation plan. The Black Saturday fires killed 173 people, destroyed over 2,000 houses, and rendered more than 7,500 people in 78 communities homeless.

Several fire survivors, including one who lost his entire family, have presented damning testimony about blocked roads and non-existent warnings and fire shelters. Their experiences constitute a devastating exposure of the state’s “stay or go” policy. Under “stay or go” individual homeowners determine their own response to approaching bushfires: they can either evacuate the area before the fires arrive, or stay and implement their own fire-fighting plans. In either case, the state government is absolved of any responsibility for providing a fully professional, technologically advanced emergency fire service for all citizens.

Testimony from Country Fire Authority (CFA) chief Russell Rees and Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin has attempted to justify the policy while suggesting that some fire victims failed to “read” warning signals. Most of those killed were given no emergency warnings or were given them too late.

Rees, who heads the state’s largest fire-fighting service, testified on May 11, the first day of official hearings. He works at the CFA headquarters and the Integrated Emergency Control Centre (IECC) in Melbourne and from there directs the Incident Control Centres (ICCs) throughout the state. The CFA has about 59,000 volunteers but only 400 professional firefighters.

While “stay or go” depends on accurate and timely emergency warnings, Rees told the commission that the CFA was under no legal obligation to provide official fire warnings to householders in fire-prone areas. Its role, he said, was to send information to the various regional headquarters for the service’s volunteers to respond. When asked why various ICCs had no knowledge of where the fire was, he pleaded ignorance, declaring: “I couldn’t make that judgement, I wasn’t there. I cannot say that they didn’t know where the fire was.”

Rees admitted that he was unaware that Melbourne University forestry and fire modelling scientist Dr Kevin Tolhurst and two other mapping experts were working in the IECC building on February 7.

IECC fire-modelling maps are generally hand-drawn and based on information sent in from ICCs throughout the state.

Tolhurst and a team of two other fire-modelling mappers had been called in to assist the IECC and at 2 p.m. were asked to produce a map for the blaze that would eventually sweep the Kinglake, Strathewen, St Andrews and Flowerdale townships.

A hand-drawn map was completed by about 4.50 p.m., but not digitalised and emailed to local ICCs until 6.17 p.m., well after the fire had destroyed most of the communities in its path. Tolhurst and his mapping team were not told that an infrared aerial scan of the fire had already been carried out.

At 3.30 p.m., the mapping team was asked to predict the path of the Murrindindi fire, which would wipe out the towns of Marysville and Narbethong. They were unable to produce a map until 5.45 p.m. and the electronic version was not distributed until 9.17 p.m., more than two hours after the fire hit Marysville.

Tolhurst told the royal commission on May 24 that the IECC gave low priority to fire modelling maps. “We’re seen as a bit of an add-on,” he said, and “considered secondary”. He warned that if the Black Saturday fires were repeated, the state’s emergency services would still be unable to provide adequate and timely fire warnings. “We are still exposed to that risk,” he said.

In fact, the emergency services control centre information was so inadequate on February 7 that Strathewen and Marysville were still being officially acknowledged as “safe”, a day after fires had incinerated the towns. Strathewen did not receive its first official alert until an hour after the town was completely ravaged. It suffered the greatest ratio of deaths on February 7—27 out of 200 town residents killed.

Situation reports on Marysville issued at 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. on February 8, a day after the fire, stated: “We understand everyone in Marysville is safe and are assembled in Gallipoli Park.” Marysville recorded the largest absolute number of deaths for any location—a total of 34.

CFA chief Rees placed the blame on the fire victims during his testimony. Asked why Strathewen was not given any official warning before the fire hit or even mentioned on the CFA’s fire map, Rees said it was up to fire-prone communities to “obtain as much

information (as possible) and make judgments". When asked to explain where residents could get this information, Rees arrogantly declared: "There was smoke in the sky, there was a whole lot of things happening."

In the aftermath of Black Saturday scores of fire survivors said that the CFA fire-station sirens could have been used to warn local residents. Rees told the commission that these sirens were currently used to summon volunteers and not as a warning system.

Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin has testified twice and on both occasions downplayed the lack of warnings, insisting that state authorities had responded as best they could under unprecedented circumstances.

Esplin rejected suggestions that there should be a mass evacuation policy and attempted to counter evidence that this policy had saved hundreds of lives in California during wildfire seasons. He told the commission that California's freeway system was unable to cope with mass evacuation during wildfires and that there had been fatalities. He failed to point out, however, that California's wildfire death toll has never reached the catastrophic levels seen in Victoria on February 7.

Esplin admitted that an emergency warning signal that can interrupt radio and television broadcasts was not activated on Black Saturday because authorities didn't want to "desensitise" people to it. "It's a balance between not overusing the ... sound and therefore desensitising the community to its importance," he said.

Damning testimony from survivors

Veteran CFA firefighter and Strathewen survivor Dennis Spooner, whose wife and son were killed, told the commission that the state authorities had failed to properly warn residents.

Spooner explained that his family had prepared their house according to the "stay or go" policy and constantly watched the horizon for any sign of fire, listened to the radio, and monitored the CFA's bushfire web site. But there were no warnings, he said, and his house virtually exploded in flames when the bushfire hit the area.

Government counsel Neil Clelland aggressively cross-examined Spooner as if he were a defence witness in a criminal case. Clelland demanded to know why Spooner had not been better prepared and to explain why he was vague about when the fire incidents occurred. Spooner said there had been no warnings until the fire was a few metres away and that he did not wear a watch.

Damning testimony from Joan Davey highlighted the disastrous results of the state's "stay or go" policy. Davey lost her 36-year-old son Rob, his wife and their two infant daughters, who died sheltering from the fire in the bathroom of their Kinglake home in Bald Spur Road.

Davey said that her son previously believed evacuation was the best fire emergency response. This changed, she said, after he attended a CFA Community Fireguard meeting. Community Fireguard is a key component of the state's "stay or go" policy.

Davey said that her son's house was built of cedar timber. "It was like having a house in a fireplace. Yet they were encouraged to establish a fireguard group," she said. "Somebody should have recognised that Bald Spur Road was indefensible, totally indefensible, and the activity of that fire group [should have been] to establish evacuation or warning systems that would get people out of that street. People on Bald Spur Road had an expectation of survival that was beyond reality."

Bald Spur Road residents, she continued, had been given "false confidence either in their own ability, in the ability of the CFA, or a combination of both" to fight any approaching bushfire. Fifteen of the 23 families that attended the Bald Spur Community Fireguard meeting died in the bushfire.

Last week the inquiry was told that many of those who survived Black Saturday did so because they were warned and then evacuated by police in contravention of the state's Emergency Management Manual and despite government opposition to mandatory evacuation.

In four instances police alerted residents or led them in convoys out of bushfire threatened towns. Three police led 200 residents in a convoy of cars and caravans out of Marysville before it was incinerated. Two police led 100 Pheasant Creek residents, near Kinglake, to safety, whilst another used his police siren to alert Kilmore East residents of an approaching fire.

The royal commission has received more than 300 written submissions and will continue its hearings until August. What has already been decisively exposed, however, is that the state was completely ill-equipped to fight the Black Saturday fires, let alone protect its residents.

While the first block of testimony is from operational staff and fire survivors, there is no indication that the Victorian minister for emergency services or any other state government politician will be called. The bitter reality is that the royal commission has been convened to divert attention from the fact that the tragic loss of life on February 7 was a direct result of decades of government cost-cutting in emergency services and manpower.



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