The world reacts to the Australian bushfires

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Welcome to our special Bushfire Edition of Update. These fires have been described by British natural historian David Attenborough as ‘a major international catastrophe.’ We bring you some gripping personal accounts of bushfire experiences, comments from our National President Margaret Reynolds and Vice-President Ed Davis, selected articles from journalists, reports from the ABC, and the observations of many ordinary Australians on the role of the ABC as our Emergency Broadcaster throughout this extraordinary summer in Australia.

We dedicate this Update to those who have given their lives in defending their communities, and the thousands of volunteers and professionals who have given so much of themselves in the fight to protect the lives and properties of others, and our native flora and fauna.

Our focus, of course, is on the vital role played by the ABC as the Emergency Broadcaster, and so often, when all other communication failed in extreme conditions, it was the ABC which was the source of the information which enabled people in desperate circumstances to make decisions which would keep them and their families safe.

We acknowledge the contribution of hundreds of ABC staff, many returning early from leave and working in extreme conditions to bring you the stories, the pictures, the sound and the essential emergency information. It is ironic that amongst those ABC staff there will be some facing redundancy as a result of the recent $83.7million budget cuts inflicted on the ABC by the Morrison government, on top of the $250m in cuts since 2014.

Rest assured that ABC Friends will be in Canberra when parliament resumes to demand the restoration of funds so that the ABC can continue to provide all of the services that the Australian public have the right to expect from their publicly funded broadcaster.

May I thank on behalf of all ABC Friends my valued colleagues Dr Diana Wyndham, Angela Williamson and Paul Martens, who have worked very hard to bring you this special Bushfire Edition of Update.

Mal Hewitt OAM
ABC Friends
On 4 January, The Guardian in London led with an article about the Australian bushfires with a striking picture of a kangaroo fleeing a wall of flames. Australian fires keep dominating international news. More than 1,772 people Tweeted about the 4 January article and these are some of them:

Hilary Clinton: With Australia on fire and the Arctic in meltdown, it’s clear we’re in a climate emergency.

Al Gore: Among the risks of the climate crisis is a normalization of its horrific and deadly consequences. The bushfires in Australia represent a startling climate catastrophe unfolding before us.

Bernie Sanders: What is happening in Australia today will become increasingly common around the world if we do not aggressively combat climate change and transform our energy system away from fossil fuels. The future of the planet is at stake. We must act. “I say to those who are delaying action on climate change: Look at the blood-red sky and unbreathable air in Australia because of raging forest fires”.

Elizabeth Warren: The catastrophic scenes from Australia’s wildfires should alarm all of us. Climate change is driving even more dangerous and destructive fires across the world, from California to New South Wales—and we must fight together to defeat this crisis.

A prominent member of Boris Johnson’s cabinet says the nation is “heartbroken” by the devastation caused in Australia by the bushfire crisis. The devastation prompted condolences messages from the Queen and other members of the Royal Family.

Prince Charles has delivered a heartfelt video message to Australia, saying he and his wife have been in despair watching the “appalling horror” of the country’s bushfire crisis.

Australian Tweets included:

Gaven Morris (ABC Director News, Analysis and Investigations): For all the laws Australia’s governments have changed and the billions of dollars spent to protect us from terrorism, this is what terror in Australia looks like. Many innocent lives, thousands of properties and millions of animals lost.

Simon Chapman, AO – The ABC’s coverage of this fire disaster has been utterly first class. Without them the national would be in the dark. A reminder this is our iconic Northern Suburbs of Sydney Branch (NSoS) MEDIA RELEASE

The world reacts... continued from page 1
We are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction and the extinction rate is up to 10,000 times faster than what is considered normal, with up to 200 species becoming extinct every single day. Erosion of fertile topsoil. Deforestation of our great forests. Toxic air pollution. Loss of insects and wildlife. The acidification of our oceans. This is Greta Thunberg, teenage Swedish schoolgirl, climate warrior and Time magazine Person of the Year in 2019. Greta was addressing the European Parliament in Strasbourg last April. Australia is now experiencing exactly the disasters that she predicted and that climate scientists have warned about for decades. Australia has borne a heavy toll. By mid-January, the calamitous bush fires have burnt approximately 18.6 million hectares (46 million acres) and destroyed over 6000 buildings, including 2800 homes. 34 people have been listed as dead and this number will surely climb. In NSW, the Berejiklian government assessed that a third of NSW national parks had been burnt, more than half of the state’s heathlands, more than 40% of the sclerophyll forests and more than a third of the rain forests. The impact on Australia’s extraordinary flora and fauna has been starkly tragic. Experts have estimated that more than a billion animals have been killed in the fires and this does not include bats, frogs and insects. The World Wildlife Fund has said that koala numbers have fallen from around 10 million in 1788 to no more than 200,000 before the fires. There are real fears that this much-loved emblem of Australia is being pushed to extinction. A similar fate awaits the platypus as scorching drought dries up rivers and creeks. At the start of the bushfires, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was striving to reassure us that Australia had always suffered fires and these fires were nothing to worry about. Indeed, the PM must have convinced himself on this score as he took his family off to Hawaii. The data is now being assembled which demonstrate the extent to which these fires have been unprecedented. A good example was supplied by the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment last week: Sydney experienced 81 days of hazardous air quality in 2019, more than the combined total for the previous ten years. Other capital cities also suffered days of choking smoke. It is no surprise that there has been a sharp spike in asthma-related presentations at hospitals across Australia. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians has reported that Australia is now in uncharted territory in assessment of the long-term health impact of the fires. The Australian government paid no heed to the warnings of climate scientists and other experts who predicted that a catastrophic fire season awaited at the end of 2019. Indeed, the Morrison government built on the inertia of previous governments which had abolished the Climate Council in 2013 and reduced funding for climate-related research. In April 2019, the PM refused to meet with the Emergency Leaders for Climate Change, led by former Commissioner for NSW Fire and Rescue, Greg Mullins. Morrison did not wish to discuss their assertion that extreme and dangerous weather events lay ahead; he did not listen to their pleas for urgent preparation. In early November, with the fires already wreaking havoc, Deputy PM, Michael McCormack described people linking the impact of bushfires and climate change as, ‘pure, enlightened and woke capital-city greenies’ and ‘inner-city raving lunatics.’
The PM and government appear to have shifted their rhetoric in recent days, pointing to their belated and inadequate measures to engage Defence personnel and reservists and provide some assistance to affected communities and the extraordinary volunteer fire fighters who have been the front line. According to the PM, Australia can combat the threat of climate change without any change to government policy, as he attested in an ABC interview with David Speers in mid-January.

This puts him at odds with a very wide spectrum of organisations, from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Bank for International Settlements (BIS, bringing together sixty central banks), through to Prince Charles, who delivered a stirring speech at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, calling for a rapid shift to a new economic model which ended ‘perverse subsidies’ to fossil fuels, priced carbon and encouraged ‘green’ investment. Add to this list, the very solid consensus of climate-science based organisations, the wonderful David Attenborough and the irrepressible Greta Thunberg.

Media Reporting

The Australian media’s reporting on the bushfires has followed a well-worn path. Most obviously, the ABC and Fairfax mastheads have accepted the scientists’ consensus on climate change as they reported on the appalling impact of the fires and on the grim warnings of the experts. In both TV clips and photography, they have reflected the extraordinary scale of the threat to life, homes, bush and wildlife. Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, comprising 70% of Australian newspapers, Sky TV, has continued its pattern of negative reporting of climate science. Indeed, in early January, with the fires at their most terrifying, stories about picnic races pushed reporting of the fires off page 1 of The Australian. The familiar troupe of columnists was let loose to pour scorn on climate science.

It is not hard to join the dots. The Murdoch Empire has favoured coal and the political party most wedded to coal. Their campaign is designed to stave off threats to fossil fuels and keep their party in power. Costs to News Corp include global derision for this approach, the exit of many of their most respected journalists and Board Member James Murdoch’s widely reported criticism of climate denialism within the Empire. Meanwhile, the ABC has received overwhelming praise for its efforts to report accurately and fearlessly on the fires and their impact. The courage and resilience of the reporters and their crews have been breathtaking. On top of that, ABC Emergency Broadcasts have brought vital information to people desperate to know about the dangers facing them and their communities. Emails to the ABC and letters to local and city newspapers tell the story.

The sorry tale of this fire season has underlined the essential role of the ABC. And, the absolute imperative that it is independent and properly funded.

How much does it cost the ABC to cover a bushfire crisis?

Justine Landis-Hanley
Crikey, 15 January 2020

The ABC will blow out its allotted $1 million for emergency reporting, with the broadcaster telling Crikey its bushfire crisis coverage expected to cost “well into the millions of dollars”. It’s not surprising: an ABC spokesperson told Nine last week that there have already been 670 emergency broadcast events for the 2019-20 financial year, compared to 371 in total for the 2018-2019 financial year.

And the cost of that coverage is “only going to create headaches for management”, according to veteran television producer and host of podcast TV Blackbox Robert McKnight. McKnight told Crikey the national broadcaster is calling staff back early from holidays and asking them to work rostered days off to keep up with the bushfire crisis. McKnight also understands the ABC is providing living allowances to staff working away from home, and handing out cab charges to workers who usually catch public transport when they’ve done a long shift. “When news breaks everyone just works harder and longer knowing they are doing something important, but that isn’t sustainable,” McKnight said. “As time goes on people need time off and need to be replaced. That’s when costs start to rise as you employ freelancers and pay airfares to get those workers into the fire zones.”

The ABC is six months into a three-year freeze on any increase in its $1 billion annual budget, a move expected to shave around $85 million off what the broadcaster had previously expected over that period. The ABC’s board and management met in December last year to consider a five-year cost-cutting strategy that is expected to include 200 jobs axed in March. “No-one at the ABC would ever suggest they stop their coverage so the newsroom will get whatever funds it needs but it will come at a cost to other sections of the broadcaster,” McKnight said. “There isn’t an endless supply of cash for news coverage any more. Those in charge will most likely have to make it work within their current budget and that means something will have to give later on.”

The ABC hinted at future talks with the Coalition over its budget freeze, telling Crikey in a statement that “at the appropriate time we will discuss our current funding circumstances with the government”.

Image: ABC News
The ABC’s extensive coverage of bushfires ravaging the country threatens to push the taxpayer-funded news organisation into more budget strife with emergency broadcasting events on track to double in 2020. There have been 670 emergency broadcasting events for the 2019-20 financial year so far, an ABC spokesman said, compared to 371 for the full 2018-19 financial year. In 2017-18 there were 256 events, a figure that had been surpassed by mid-September 2019. The ABC’s coverage of the bushfires and emergency broadcasts have been extensive. These national emergency broadcasts are not part of the ABC’s charter requirements, though are considered to be of significant public benefit by the government and communities across the country, and come out of the existing $1 billion-a-year budget. 

The public broadcaster has been faced with the prospect of cutting about 200 staff among other cost savings plans as it grapples with an indexation freeze imposed by the government that was forecast in the 2018 Federal Budget to eventually shave $84 million a year off expected funding. As the inflation rate has been lower since the federal budget this impact may be reduced but this has not stopped management discussions at the ABC about the need for substantial cuts to handle the decrease in taxpayer funds.

“The cost of the ABC’s emergency broadcasting coverage come out of base funding – there is no specific government funding for this coverage,” the ABC spokesman said in a statement. “These costs are growing,” he said. “We will always prioritise coverage of emergency information and will continue to speak with government to ensure that we are adequately funded to serve the Australian public.” Sources with knowledge of the sensitive funding discussions said there historically hadn’t been a huge interest from the ABC for an extra budget allocation specifically directed to emergency services but instead for an increase in overall funding.

A spokeswoman for Communications Minister Paul Fletcher said the ABC was doing an “excellent job” providing emergency information. “No request has been made by the ABC for additional funding to support their emergency broadcasting services,” the spokeswoman said. “Should such a request be made, the government will quickly consider it as part of a broader relief package.” The ABC spokesman declined to comment on the amount of additional funding that might be needed or the form it would take, saying the “focus at the moment is to deliver vital information to the communities affected by the fires”. The ABC has indicated an interest in more funding for broader regional services, particularly as private media companies struggle to keep newsrooms open in rural Australia amid declining audiences and advertising revenue heading online. ABC Managing Director David Anderson told staff on Friday that the coverage had been a “whole-of-ABC effort. This has included extensive rolling emergency and news broadcasts for days on end and unprecedented and impressive digital story production,” he said, adding that the New Year’s Eve coverage reached 3.5 million people and raised $2.8 million for the Red Cross.

Labor Communications spokeswoman Michelle Rowland said in a statement that the ABC team had been doing an “extraordinary job during this crisis” and when other forms of communication weren’t available often the broadcaster was the only means of information. “Labor has been calling for a national response to these bushfires, and given its important role, this must include the national broadcaster,” she said.
Urgent Call for Federal Government to Restore Funding that Guarantees Infrastructure and Transmission that is Vital for Emergency Services Broadcasting.

ABC Radio and TV networks have suffered considerable damage during the bushfire crisis. Damage to a transmission tower in Batemans Bay, with a reach to 58,000 people, restricted emergency broadcasts in the area for several days. There were similar outages in other bush fire-affected communities.

To date the ABC has received overwhelming praise for its efforts to keep local communities informed about fire warnings and road closures. But there are obviously areas that urgently need attention, either to repair or install essential communications infrastructure. Minister Paul Fletcher is to be commended for his recognition of the ABC and it would be good to hear from other Federal parliamentarians who understand the role of the national broadcaster at such devastating times of national disaster.

Local communities are being urged to contact ABC Friends to provide their input into the survey over the next two weeks. Results will form an Urgent Restore ABC Funding Submission to the Prime Minister and to the ABC Friends Parliamentary Group. It would seem from initial feedback that the ABC has done a wonderful job despite the difficult conditions on the ground and the impact of continual funding cuts.

Along with the stories praising the ABC’s magnificent work, we are hearing other stories of service interruption, no coverage, and accessibility issues. To better understand these issues, ABC Friends will survey fire-affected communities to determine priorities and serve as a guide to what essential work is required now and in the future.

The events of this summer underscore the vital, life-saving role the ABC plays in times of natural disaster. Scientists are telling us that the frequency of such events will increase in time due to climate change, which means the Federal Government needs to ensure that the emergency broadcaster, the ABC, is well funded and has adequate infrastructure.

Margaret Reynolds, President
president@abcfriends.org.au
Letters

Letters poured into the Sydney Morning Herald – the first one appeared on 1 January 2020:

ABC is a lifeline - Many Coalition politicians regard the ABC as “the enemy”. But out here in fire country, the ABC is our lifeline. On Tuesday, as fire consumed some of our neighbouring towns, and when we received a warning text from the RFS, we tuned into our local ABC to stay updated on what was happening around us. On Wednesday the fires were less threatening but between Nowra and Batemans Bay many have lost road access, power, access to fuel, internet and phone communication. Through their battery operated radios, tuned to the ABC, residents and tourists at places like Milton are finding out where they can get food and shelter. This is just the sort of service the ABC provides in other disasters in our land of “droughts and flooding rains”. To our politicians, I recommend that you supplement the ABC’s budget immediately so that it can continue to carry out its role as an emergency service provider. - Mike Reddy, Vincentia

Followed by a flood of letters on 4 and 5 January:

Despite budget cuts, our ABC is on the money - Mr Prime Minister, please restore immediately the money you have taken, while in power, from the ABC – then double it for all future payments. With no other form of leadership obvious during this catastrophic time of fatal fires, the ABC has provided constant, clear, correct information to all affected and involved. - Robin Henze, Balgownie

I think accolades also should go to the ABC for the brilliant coverage they have given us through the bushfires. Could they be thanked by having their budget increased? - Christine Stewart, Glebe

When power and communications fail, the ABC is our lifeline - The importance of the ABC in times of crisis is never more evident than during these catastrophic bushfires. One of the reporters said it best, that when mobile coverage went out, people relied the ABC emergency radio for their latest information. Those behind the scenes have done the same as the on-screen people. We need the ABC at times like this more than ever, yet because of budget cuts we are going to lose at least 200 of these great people. What is the federal government thinking? - Chris Moe, Bensville

I hope that those Coalition MPs who have difficulty differentiating between price and value have watched ABC’s Channel 24. - John Torpy, Dural

Can I say how good has the local ABC Illawarra radio been during this fire emergency? So grateful. - Stephen Buzacott, Browns Mountain

The ABC coverage of the fire risks to people and property has been excellent. The additional costs involved should be covered by supplementary federal government funding. I have written an email to my local MP (Joel Fitzgibbon) suggesting extra ABC funding should be ALP Policy. - John Turner, Carey Bay

If there is one positive thing that could come out of the horrible events of the last couple of months, it surely is that the ABC has become untouchable. Day after day, reporters provide up to date, insightful and often very moving reports from places all over the country. More than merely reporting, they are providing a valuable community service, helping people to find help and quite often giving life-saving advice. Way beyond the expectations of a national broadcaster, and it would have been so nice to hear the Prime Minister acknowledge that. One can only hope that this will at last shut up the anti-ABC campaigners. - Bernd Fichtner, Mataville

I hope that the late stage largesse from the federal government to support the firefighters will also extend to the ABC. Despite constraints imposed by successive Coalition budget cuts, ABC radio and television have done, and continue to do, a brilliant job of providing invaluable information to those under threat as well as the broader community. - Ann Morrison, Leura

Top marks to the ABC and the reporters who are bringing regular reports on the fire situation. I hope that this will make Australians realise how important our national broadcaster is, and I hope there will be a rethink on the cutting of funds to this wonderful organisation. It is very likely we will be needing their services for many years. - Judy Mitchell, Cabarita

And on 22 January. Vincent Matthews, Warriewood wrote:

ABC lesson for PM - When will Scott Morrison refund the ABC some of the money he took off the broadcaster for political reasons? He needs to demonstrate his admiration at the way some of the money he took off the broadcaster for political reasons? He needs to demonstrate his admiration at the way ABC kept the nation fully informed about the bushfire crisis. He’s throwing money around for other just causes, why not the ABC?

The Sun Herald published these letters on 12 and 19 January:

Lack of funding is bad news. Fires had ravaged the country for weeks before the Prime Minister sent in the army and put more boots on the ground, planes in the sky and ships at sea (“PM calls up reservists to fight the fires”, January 5). The ABC has been reporting on the crisis from day one. If the ABC’s savagely reduced budget is further depleted by its coverage of this emergency, the government should allocate special funds to the ABC so it can continue providing this life-saving news and information service. Diana Wyndham, North Sydney

Back to the cricket - No need to worry if the cuts to ABC funding forces it to finally shut its doors, Diana Wyndham (Letters, January 12). I’m sure Sky News and Fox News will pick up the slack on emergency reporting of bushfires and the like. It will be so simple - out of sight, out of mind. “Nothing to see here, move along. Now, back to the cricket.” - Maggie Ramsay, Woolloomooloo
And Barry Swan, Balgownie wrote in the Illawarra Mercury on 14 January:

“How good is our ABC? Well, if the important role played by the ABC during this national emergency with firestorms engulfing most states and territories of our national can be used as a yardstick, it is irreplaceable. The ABC has been the communication source millions of Australians have trusted since 1932, when the national broadcaster started transmitting. Across those decades, the ABC unlike some commercial radio and TV stations has never resorted to sensationalism of news or, the use of motor-mouthed commentators to maintain the audiences. The ABC simply maintained a principled approach of presenting issues impartially and more importantly, free of political spin.

“How good is the ABC?” Far too good for we Australians to allow conservative politicians, vested interests i.e. Murdoch Media and its camp following minions to destroy.

‘Life and death’: ABC battles to restore damaged networks during bushfires

Zoe Samios and Fergus Hunter
Sun-Herald, 11 Jan 2020

The ABC’s radio and TV networks have sustained heavy damage from the bushfire crisis across NSW and Victoria, forcing the national broadcaster to call on the military, commercial media rivals and members of the public to maintain emergency broadcasting. With a range of radio and TV services knocked out in parts of the country, the broadcaster has been mobilising to restore local radio stations as the priority because of their critical role in providing information to communities during disasters. Broadcast towers remain the “weakest link” during emergency broadcasts, the ABC’s head of content management Rebecca Matthews warned, because the infrastructure is vulnerable to fires.

The hardest hit areas during this catastrophic bushfire season have been Batemans Bay in NSW and East Gippsland in Victoria. “At any one time, we didn’t lose any major services for any large amounts of time without being able to come up with an interim service. It is going to take many months to repair some of our transmitter equipment but during this whole period, it has been absolute minimal downtime, particularly around local radio,” said Ms Matthews. A tower in Batemans Bay, transmitting to 58,000 people in the region, was badly damaged on New Year’s Eve. Regional Radio Company Grant Broadcasters subsequently allowed the ABC to transmit from their nearby antenna as an interim solution and the Australian Defence Force has helped to repair the tower by clearing debris. “We couldn’t get anywhere near it and it’s not just a matter of getting a generator out there, it’s a substantially damaged service,” said Ms Matthews.

“We’d lost Radio National and News Radio, we just focused on local radio to get that moving. We were the only service that was able to give that breadth of information immediately. And it really comes down to life and death. The fire was still raging, people needed to know where to go, where was safe, what roads were blocked and not blocked.” While the tower remains offline, local radio was restored by January 3. Radio National, News Radio and TV were back up by January 9 thanks to the interim measures, although services are still not at full capacity.

TV and radio transmissions in Mallacoota were knocked out on New Year’s Day. Services in nearby Genoa and Cann River lost power and technicians have been unable to access the facilities because of 150 kilometres of road being carpeted with burnt trees. The military has been working to clear the debris. As the ABC and ADF co-operated to restore the Mallacoota outage, a local man with technical experience volunteered to help install an interim satellite dish. Fighting fires in the area, he came forward to say he would be able to connect the dish that had been delivered by the ADF. During the emergencies, the ABC has worked closely with BAI Communications, which owns the broadcast towers and charges the ABC to use them under a longstanding commercial arrangement.

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher praised the ABC, military and Grant Broadcasters for their efforts during the crisis. “Many people have worked tirelessly – in extremely hazardous conditions – to keep the ABC and the local commercial broadcasters on air during the bushfires and I thank them,” he said. Mr Fletcher said the ABC was doing an “excellent job” providing accurate emergency information.
First All-Indigenous NSW firefighting crews protecting sacred sites, remote communities

For the first time in the state’s history, the NSW Rural Fire Service has created two all-Indigenous firefighting crews to protect sacred sites, remote communities. Eight men, from Bourke and Brewarrina in far western New South Wales, have been handpicked by their elders to care for their country. The crews, called Indigenous Mitigation Crews, are charged with protecting sacred sites, caring for kin on reserves, and fighting remote fires. The opportunity has given Dale Barker a platform to change lives. “I just love helping the community out and seeing some of the younger Aboriginal kids watching us work and maybe thinking, oh yeah, I want to do that one day,” he said. Mr Barker used to be a shearer. The work was hard, the shifts sporadic, and the pay patchy. The chance to lead Bourke’s Indigenous Mitigation Crew has enabled him to take better care of himself and his family.

“The hours we work are 8am until 4pm so the majority of the time I’m home to get dinner started, so that’s a big plus for my wife and two kids,” he said. Ngemba traditional owner Grace Gordon said some of the eight firefighters recruited had never held a steady job prior to their employment with the RFS. The program’s impact had been immediate. “Their lives have changed. They’ve got more meaning to life now,” she said. In Bourke, indigenous people make up one third of the population; in Brewarrina it is two thirds. Ms Gordon said jobs were few and far between, and when there were jobs, often Indigenous applicants missed out. Government schemes aimed at stemming unemployment in the towns are also not always successful. “Most of the jobs that come to us are pilot projects that run for six to 12 months,” Ms Gordon said. “That amount of time doesn’t allow for them to plan around their finances and career paths.” But she said this program was already making a difference. “They have an income now where they can plan around future aspirations for themselves, like buying a house or buying a car,” she said. “A few years ago, that would have been just a dream.”

In time, the recruits will be tasked with performing cultural burns to better manage the region’s fuel load, but for now they are focused on building trust with the community. That is something important to Chris “Burra” McHughes. “From one First Nations person to another, it’s easy to build trust,” he said. “We call each other brother, sister, uncle, aunt; we’ve got something to connect with.” The crews regularly visit local schools to discuss the dangers of arson and the importance of staying fit, strong, and ready for the workforce. They also reduce bushfire hazards around Indigenous settlements like the Alice Edwards Village near Bourke. Home to 100 residents, few have smoke-alarms fitted, nor bushfire survival plans in place. “We clean the gutters out, lop trees and remove rubbish [so] that’s one less risk they have to worry about when bushfires come,” Mr McHughes said.

Indigenous elder Jason Ford from Brewarrina would like to see NSW RFS Indigenous Mitigation Crews established elsewhere. “If this type of model was rolled out right across NSW it would contribute greatly to closing the gap,” he said. In NSW, more than 740 homes have been destroyed by fire since November. Mr Ford wants Indigenous people to have a greater say about the way the Australian landscape is managed. “Aboriginal people have been excluded from the fire management space for a long time and it’s well overdue that we get back in on those discussions,” he said. He said sharing ancient knowledge about fire was one way his people could help build a better, safer country. “For years we’ve been perceived as not contributing to the welfare of this country, but we do so in a number of different ways and this is one way we could project that to the broader community,” he said.

The RFS has no immediate plans to establish more all-Indigenous crew.

Jessie Davies
ABC Western Plains
13 Jan 2020
Media late to the game on ‘unprecedented’ fires

The Australian media has settled on the tag for this summer’s fires: they’re “unprecedented”. But it’s been slower to recognise the unprecedented demands this places on the job the media needs to be doing. It’s taken a couple of months, but the climate crisis is now centred in the public’s understanding of the fires. Yet the media has been slow to centre this in its reporting of the disaster; to pair the coverage of the daily drama with an analysis of the underlying climate trend. Because of its charter imperative to cover stories whether they occur in a commercially viable market or not, the ABC grasped more quickly than others the scale of the crisis and had the resources to respond accordingly.

For the power of right now, for example, here’s Hamish Macdonald’s empathetic interview with Bateman Bay resident Margaret Brus on being caught in the middle of it all. If you haven’t seen it yet, watch it right to the end. Or look beyond NSW and Victoria to South Australia where, the ABC says, 23 journalists and camera crew have been covering the fires for months ranging from Kangaroo Island, the Adelaide Hills and the Eyre and Yorke Peninsulas, reporting back through editors and producers in head office. The ABC dominates the reporting because, alone among Australian media, it can still scale — throw resources at a challenge — with cross-country coverage across radio, television and online, through its news and its role as emergency broadcaster. It’s forced the prime minister to abandon his usual reluctance to be interviewed one on one (particularly by the ABC), submitting to both Michael Rowland and David Speers.

But there’s a catch: the ABC is already under financial pressure due to the funding cuts from July 1. It’s likely that its bushfire coverage won’t win it many points with the government, who have publicly admired but privately denigrated the national broadcaster for its reporting on the climate impact and close questioning of the PM. Worse for the ABC, the costs of news coverage and emergency broadcasting is eating away at its resources. Although there’s no estimate of impact, it’s likely to mean further cuts. As funding reduces over the forward estimates, will the ABC be equipped to respond on this scale to the next “unprecedented” disaster?

The fires have accompanied a slow-moving political disaster for the Morrison government. Both Newspoll and Essential poll this week show that Morrison has achieved the, umm, “unprecedented”: a sitting government losing confidence during a national crisis. Political media was not much quicker than the government. Take coverage of Morrison’s December Hawaii hide-away: while the Twitter echo-system was blowing up with anger, the political echo-system was tut-tutting about the right to a holiday. Turns out Twitter had a closer reading of the real world.

Christopher Warren
Crikey, 15 Jan 2020

The destroyed Western Districts Memorial Community Sports Centre at Gosse. Image: ABC News

Fire approaches Vivonne Bay on Kangaroo Island about 5:45pm on Thursday. Image: ABC News

The fires have lit up the weaknesses of old media. Nine has been a bit lead-footed, perhaps missing the regional reporting resources it sold off last year. The AFR has been an exception with its focus on business and government responses, and the powerful column by political editor Phil Coorey about the chaos on the NSW south coast. News Corp, of course, has been focused more on self-protection, gas lighting over its climate change denialism. Just ask James Murdoch. The reporting has demonstrated the importance of new players too, with Guardian Australia’s use of live-blogging and expert commentators on the climate crisis, Junkee’s focus on millennial impact and views, or Michael West’s reporting on long-term cuts to fire-fighting resources.

Australian journalists have historically done an outstanding job of reporting the drama and the pathos of bushfires. In 2003, Nine camera operator Richard Moran won the Gold Walkley for his footage of the Canberra bushfires. In 2009, The Australian’s Gary Hughes won for his moving story of survival after losing his house and possessions in the Black Saturday fires. Back in 1983, radio reporter Murray Nicoll was recognised for his live reporting over two-way radio as the Adelaide Hills fire swept over his own home. Expect similar in the 2020 award season. But the test now is not how best to capture the drama of the moment. It’s how to best help Australians understand the future.
The ABC has received overwhelming praise for its ‘vital’ emergency reporting, despite ongoing scorn from Murdoch-owned media

Amanda Meade
The Guardian, 4 Jan 2020

Since Boxing Day, as bushfires raged across Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia, the ABC has handled more than 100 emergency broadcasts in a single week, receiving widespread praise for the practical, life-saving information and the professionalism on display. The number of ABC emergency broadcasts for the first half of the 2019-20 financial year is already close to double that of the entire previous year.

Despite the dramatic rise in the need for emergency broadcasts – from 256 in 2017-18 to 371 in 2018-19 to 673 to date this year – there will be no additional funding to cover the resources which have been poured into the effort, according to the ABC’s director of local and regional, Judith Whelan. And then there’s the small matter of the $14.6m Coalition budget cut to manage this year. “We have a budget and what we do is reorganise,” Whelan told Guardian Australia. Despite the overwhelming praise for local radio in regions such as Gippsland and the Illawarra, News Corp papers have continued to publish articles critical of the ABC, a decision which has been jarring for many who are relying on the national broadcaster in a time of crisis.

The Australian has run opinion pieces critical of ABC programming and confected news stories blaming the ABC. Familiar ABC critics, including the former ABC Chairman Maurice Newman and the Liberal senator Eric Abetz, were lined up to pour scorn on the ABC, even as its news reporters put in long hours to cover the disaster. “There’s no way we are going to economise on emergency broadcasting. That is our number one priority. And so, we do have to make some choices about what we might do or not.”

ABC coverage of the Australian bushfires

Public Media Alliance
10 Jan 2020

ABC's extensive emergency coverage of the bushfires in Australia across television, radio and online services is in no doubt lifesaving, with staff working tirelessly to provide accurate, reliable and rolling coverage under incredible pressure and in precarious conditions.

Since the bushfires began in early September last year, the scale of the crisis has been unprecedented. More than 20 people have been killed, close to 2000 homes have been destroyed and wildlife and livestock have been majorly affected across the country. Conditions are predicted to worsen. As of 3 January, the ABC had already provided over 670 emergency broadcasts within this financial year, nearly double that of the previous year. According to the Guardian Australia, the ABC delivered over 100 emergency broadcasts in just one week since Boxing Day. When the organisation’s emergency broadcasting policy was created in 2011, the emergency division ran for six months of the year – now it runs for the entire year. ABC staff have gone above and beyond to deliver much-needed information about the bushfires. Last month, an ABC team in Canberra resorted to hosting an “impromptu outdoor broadcast” for its 7pm News programme due to bushfire smoke triggering the studio’s smoke alarm. The crew had to evacuate the studios moments before broadcast. Judith Whelan, Director of ABC Regional and Local was quoted in a press release as saying:

“Thanks, too, to the ABC broadcasters, reporters, presenters, producers, staff and crew who continue to deliver emergency broadcasting services to communities under threat. People turn to the ABC at such times and we are proud of our role in helping to keep them informed and safe.”

But these additional recovery broadcasts do not receive any extra funding, despite the life-saving impact they can have. As an ABC spokesperson explained:

“The cost of the ABC’s emergency broadcasting coverage come out of base funding – there is no specific government funding for this coverage… We will always prioritise coverage of emergency information and will continue to speak with government to ensure that we are adequately funded to serve the Australian public.”

ABC accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have been crucial in delivering this coverage, while the ABC’s extensive digital platform has been heavily utilised to disseminate critical information. The Australian Red Cross has partnered with the ABC to deliver emergency updates and advice. This includes ABC Emergency’s Twitter account, which compiles information from emergency services. ABC accounts on Facebook also provide specific local and regional updates and advice. This demonstrates the important opportunity there is for public media to collaborate with and utilise social media networks and other multi-platform services to provide fact-checked and reliable content for the public.
On New Year’s Eve, while much of the country was tuned into the annual fireworks displays, my parents and I had front row seats to a horror show that was unfolding across the lake from our recently purchased beach house at Manyana, three hours south of Sydney on the NSW south coast. My sons were, thankfully, safely in Sydney that week as they were working through the break and my husband was supposed to join us in Manyana after work the following evening but the roads were cut. So, I was alone with my parents, both aged in their seventies. There had been fires on the south coast for months, the roads had been closed near Manyana previously due to back-burning and spot fires, and we knew that the weather conditions on New Year’s Eve would be extreme heat and wind, but we were not prepared in any way, especially emotionally, for those fires.

These images captured our attention on NYE in the tiny coastal town of Manyana on the NSW South Coast. I have never seen anything like this in my life. The fire was ferocious, unpredictable, and fast and we were to learn the following day that we had witnessed Conjola and Yatte Yattah burning with 2 lives and at least 90 houses lost. And we were told that Saturday would be worse and that we needed to be ready to leave as soon as was possible. In a couple of the photos of Manyana, I can see my home in both pictures with the smoke billowing behind. That would have been terrifying for those who stayed. We were unable to leave due to road closures and we were without power. The community pulled together in the most beautiful way that showed the very best of human spirit: sharing food, sharing fuel, sharing homes and sharing the little bits of information gathered from ABC Illawarra radio and the local fires. People power swung into action whenever there was a need. I got to really know the neighbourhood. Mark from the corner house on The Citadel had a generator and generously gave our phones a bit of charge so we could communicate with family, as well as fresh milk and potatoes. Chris and Ellie, regular Christmas and New Year week renters of the house next door, gave us a spare BBQ to use as ours was still unpacked in the garage and the electric roller door wouldn’t open due to lack of power.

A group of young men, of a generation much-maligned, didn’t hesitate to try to help when my mother’s car wouldn’t start. We discovered this on Thursday night after we were given new hope, via the radio, that we might get out the next day. We had hoped to drive the car into the exit line that had begun to snake around Curver’s Drive at the very edge of the town. Instead we had flattened the battery listening to the car radio while trying to conserve fuel, stationary. Panicked, my mother started flagging down cars as people drove around the small town late at night in an attempt to charge their phones while listening to ABC Illawarra. Another young man drove me to the community centre at 7am for further help when her car still wouldn’t start. The community of residents and holidaymakers pulled together as one to ensure that no one would be left behind. As one man said to me before sunrise on Friday morning, as he was finally able to start the engine: “we have to work together to make sure that everyone gets home safely”.

I love this little part of the world and our home there. The people there are the very best examples of humanity. No doubt that is the case in all of those little coastal towns that have been burning for the past month. None of us would be safe without the extraordinary efforts of our local branches of the nswrf who worked through the night with so very little sleep and very few resources (only two fire trucks to fight this fire that made its way dangerously closer to our homes on Saturday). Please give generously to help communities in need via The Red Cross. That’s the best thing that any of us can do to help right now.
Although Sydney has been home for the past 13 years, I grew up near Wollongong and spent every summer holiday in the vicinity of Ulladulla and this summer we'd chosen pretty, laid-back Kioloa – 25 mins north of Batemans Bay – for our annual family pilgrimage. Nine adults, three children and three dogs gathered on 27 December at my parent’s home in Wollongong to determine if we would go or call the trip off. Staff at our holiday village encouraged us to come, but a sixth sense made me reluctant. In the end, swayed by the fact that the fire front had passed through the area weeks earlier leaving little that was flammable, we set off down the Princes Highway shortly after the roads were reopened.

Our first few days should have been idyllic. The weather was cooler, making outdoor living pleasant. Phone signal was patchy, so devices were put away and games and books brought out. But it was far from idyllic. Kioloa’s white sands were sprinkled with ash and most of the bushland surrounding the village was blackened, still and eerily silent. Dozens of handmade ‘Thank You Firies’ signs were propped on fences. Sorrow for what had been lost so far and a heightened awareness of the ongoing threat had us on edge. When we received a flicker of phone signal, we all rushed to check the relevant apps before it vanished again. Live updates on the ABC News app revealed the broader picture while the RFS app – appropriately flame red – told with stark icons that the fires were now surrounding us.

New Year’s Eve felt different from the moment we woke up. The temperature had almost doubled overnight, and the phone signal had completely disappeared. The wind was strong enough to blow a child over, changing direction every minute. Cut off from the outside world via the usual sources, we began a new ritual of switching on our car radios each hour, to hear the news bulletin from the ABC South Coast.

A few hours later, I gazed south at the headland which formed the northern boundary of Kioloa Beach. A thick pall of smoke crawled towards us, rapidly obscuring the headland. Inland, a separate plume of grey smoke appeared, shooting into the sky. The wind whipped crazily, whirling sand and ash in our faces as we hustled to the car and drove nervously back. We arrived to find the power had gone out completely, and the water ceased to run from all but one tap in the park.

“Today riding in the Adelaide Hills, around Cudlee Creek there was so much horrific scenery, I chose not to photograph. Instead I photographed just two moving, pertinent and significant residents responses.”

ABC Friend Lauren Hamilton writes about her family’s experience of the fires

ABC Friends National Update, February 2020, Vol 28, No 1
With no TV or phones, we continued monitoring the fires via the car radio that afternoon. At some point, we realised that the ABC had switched to rolling coverage. We ventured out to an RFS fundraising event and, driving back, listened in silence as the newsreader discussed the dangerous, fast-moving Clyde Mountain fire just 27km away. The most emotionally charged reports were those phoned in by listeners in areas where it was too late to leave. We sat in the dark and sipped a few warm beers, limiting ourselves in case we needed to drive suddenly. For the first time in memory, we went to bed at 9 pm after packing the car with food, water and essentials.

In the morning, the extent of the devastation was hinted at by the opaque smoke which hung low to the ground throughout the campsite. The shared BBQ, 15 metres from our cabin door, was barely visible. While my husband worked out what to feed the kids for breakfast after packing the car with food, water and essentials.

Now, over two weeks later, I look back on those few days and wish many things had played out differently. Aside from wishing there had been no fires in the first place (obviously), I certainly wish we hadn’t decided to travel south that week. My children had nightmares for days afterwards and are still affected. I feel guilty to think that we needlessly added another car to the incredible 30 km long traffic jam trying to get north of Nowra on 2 January and increased pressure on local fuel, power, water and telecommunication resources.

And, I wish that we had heard from our country’s leader with a message of hope and strength on the radio during those dark two days. Not just thoughts and prayers, either; a plan of action for evacuating those trapped and a message of gratitude for those working around the clock to reconnect services, to feed and shelter those trapped, and to defend lives and property.

Some will question the difference that would have made. I can only say that to me, it would have helped and seemed like a small ask to know that we weren’t forgotten, that we’d get back to safety soon, and that the scale and horror of the South Coast bushfires was being acknowledged. To see the opposite on our screens – the cocktail party, the cricketing banter, the downplaying of the trauma - only added to the stress and uncertainty of the experience for me, and reveals a lack of leadership which will be hard to forget.

"Now, over two weeks later, I look back on those few days and wish many things had played out differently."
Kylie’s Bushfire story

When Melbourne resident Kylie, her husband and two children aged 14 and 16 headed off on 28 December for a beach holiday at the NSW coastal township of Dalmeny, she had no idea of what lay ahead. They were going to spend a few weeks with four other families in a rented house for a fun-filled time. Her sister, who had been at the town’s caravan park since Boxing Day, had reported some smoke in the air, but nothing to worry about.

However, over the next couple of days the smoke haze increased and ash started falling on the beach. When Kylie awoke on New Year’s Eve, the skies had turned black and blood red and Kylie began to be alarmed, however a friend with them was a member of the CFA, and he was keeping well abreast of the fire news. Despite the bad day with dark skies the families played beach cricket, cooled down in the coastal waters, and shopped for supplies.

But then suddenly later that morning the town’s power failed, then the mobile and telephone networks failed and communications were closed down.

Everyone in the town sat in their cars listening to good old ABC radio to hear what was going on, and suddenly realised the extent of the fires around them as the ABC regional updates replaced regular programming.

The NSW fire services people, who were providing morning and evening reports at the caravan park, indicated that Dalmeny would be an evacuation point for the area, and lots of other residents and tourists would be arriving as nearby towns were evacuated. Even though it seemed that Dalmeny itself would be safe, locals though started watering down their houses.

The next day, New Year’s Day, Kylie’s CFA friend said there was ‘a window of opportunity’ to leave the region as the road was still open to Canberra, and he was leaving. The next morning Kylie and her family left Dalmeny, travelling bumper-to-bumper on a convoluted, route to Canberra, through Cobargo and Cooma, a scary 400 km trip that took 15 hours, avoiding much of the devastation and road closures, guided all the way by the ABC on-going updates.

As they drove Kylie’s sister rang in (the mobile network had been restored that day) to say that fire services advice was now for everyone to evacuate and she was also on the way to Canberra.

This experience is burned into Kylie’s consciousness. She said “Living in the city we are all so blinkered to what happens out there. Being so isolated by the power and communications failures, having no idea what was happening around us, each day ‘humming and hawing’ whether to stay or go, in a situation where minute-by-minute the status was changing, was quite terrifying.

If it wasn’t for the ABC radio coverage that so constantly provided the updates that we, and so many others, desperately relied upon, so that we could make informed decisions and know about the road closures, I don’t know how we could have managed. The ABC coverage was a great comfort, we really felt that someone had our backs covered.”

Thankfully Kylie’s family and her friends all made it out safely, thanks in a large part to the emergency services the ABC provides. Others have not been so fortunate, right across Australia.
The Federal Government has agreed to bring in military aircraft and naval ships at the request of the Victorian Government. At Sarsfield, north-east of Bairnsdale, local police officer Graham Shenton told ABC Gippsland of his dramatic escape from his property after everything in the valley near his home “just lit up in five minutes”.

When a massive ember storm went over the top of his house, he thought the fire had skipped over him, but he was wrong. Sergeant Shenton, a police officer for 19 years, had a plan to defend his property. But that plan was useless when at least 15 spot fires began burning on his property. He said he made the wrong decision, despite knowing the devastation fires could cause. “But when the water goes off and then the power goes off, and then you’ve got spot fires starting all around you, you can’t do anything about it,” he said. “The sky dropped down, it was like fire falling out of the sky and it lit up everything between me and the river, and everything burned.” Sergeant Shenton described driving through “8 kilometres of inferno” as he tried to make his way out on local roads “with 30 metres of flames on both sides of me. It was just a very poor decision to stay and I would never stay again. It was just a stupid decision. “Everything you think you know about fire, when it comes, it just makes its own mind up.”

As India and Shaun MacDonell worked frantically to save their family home at Goongerah in eastern Victoria they were quickly surrounded by flames. Shaun MacDonell described what happened when the fire took off. “Spot fires were coming from the west, landing to the east [of the house] and then burning back towards us,” said Mr MacDonell. “All the fires were going up the top of the hill where the house was.” Mr MacDonell and his daughter, India, 19, were reasonably well prepared with pumps, water and an underground fire shelter. But the fire came as close to the house as it could without destroying it. They lost other buildings on the 40-hectare property. After the fire passed, Mr MacDonell said his property looked like “the surface of the moon”. But the danger was not over yet. Ms MacDonell said her mum and two younger sisters left their home for nearby Orbost three days before the fire hit. Now that fire is headed toward Orbost and Mr MacDonell can’t get there to help. Yesterday he and his daughter drove 10 kilometres south, clearing trees as they went. They turned around when there were too many trees to remove. Now they are isolated on their property, though luckily they still have water and food.

One man in Mallacoota posted a public message on Facebook asking people to send their addresses so he could check if their properties were still standing. While many were told their homes had been spared, others were not so lucky. One house in Mirrabooka Road was reduced to rubble. He evacuated from his home at 4:00am because “the skyline was on fire”. At 6:00am there was a bit of daylight, but by 7:00am it was completely dark again.

“Going into town ... I couldn’t see from one side of the street to the other. It was quite mind boggling,” he said. “There’s no way out and it’s been a rather horrific day.” Somehow his house survived but Mr Parker’s friend’s caravan, which was parked on his property, was destroyed. His three siblings, who also live in Mallacoota, lost their homes. “I can’t believe it — my next door neighbour’s standing on the verandah having a smoke,” he said.

Graham Clark lives at Club Terrace, north of the Princes Freeway, between Orbost and Mallacoota. He said there was total devastation in his town. He fought with a neighbour to defend against an ember attack, the likes of which he has never seen before despite being a former CFA officer. “We put the embers out as they hit the ground and we beat them all, thank God,” Mr Clark said. He could not quite believe his home was still standing, such was the devastation of the blaze. “The fire swept through with incredible intensity and burnt everything in its path,” he said. Despite the immediate crisis being over, Mr Clark will be sitting tight for the next week or so, with the town cut off after huge trees fell down over the road. The power is out and he cannot travel anywhere to get food. “So I’ve got to sit it out for five days. I have water that I can get from a stream,” he said. “But I don’t have any food in my cupboards, so you know my neighbour will probably invite me over for a meal at night time with their generator and, you know, you just battle on.”

As told to the ABC, stories of survival are emerging after intense bushfires swept across Victoria, destroying at least 43 properties and burning hundreds of thousands of hectares of land, mainly in the state’s east.
Residents of the north-eastern side of Blackheath were on alert from the moment the Gospers Mountain Fire entered the Grose Valley in the early hours of December 16th, and not just for their homes but for the iconic wilderness and the animals who live there. On 22nd December the fire hit the eastern edges of the town. After a number of close calls, and many sleepless nights, with us gasping for breath in the smoke, the fire finally hit my property on New Year’s Eve. It was terrifying, but at the same time my family was feeling frustrated, angry and deeply saddened for the scale of the loss of the bushland we love. People I spoke to were literally crying for the bush. Everyone felt helpless.

Then we started thinking about the best things we could do to help.

An easy quick first step was to install watering stations: lots of people established extra water supplies in their yards and in the bush. Feeding wildlife also seemed like a good idea but there is a real risk in doing so while animals are vulnerable and desperate. NB: Wildlife Health Australia and WIRES both warn about these risks.

My family is in a lucky position. I have a big woodworking workshop where my daughter makes harps. That made it easy to quickly set up and invite other ladies with a bit of woodworking nous to make shelters and nesting boxes to replace burnt habitat. It’s becoming quite a production line! We’re also hooked in with local WIRES members for distribution and installation.

We are making lots of boxes of differing shapes and sizes from tiny pygmy possum to big brushtails, from antechinus to owls. There are lots of good plans on the net if you want to make your own.

Esther, my daughter, is the shed boss. She’s on the right in one photo with friend Lyndal on the left.

Di Shanks
ABC Friends member in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney

Top: View of the fire fighting efforts from Di’s back garden. Top right: If it wasn’t so awful it would a Fred Williams painting. Right: A new home in the bush. Below: Lyndal and Esther making habitat boxes.
Bushfire Report from Mid North Coast Branch

In 2019 we had less than one third of our average rainfall and the result is dried up creeks, gardens half dead, dry rain forest, desperate wild life. In Lake Cathie alone, more than 350 koalas died. The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital is in the news and with crowd funding, it’s able to make and distribute watering stations, all over Australia. However it needs millions more dollars to buy land so the koalas (and other creatures) will have a guaranteed habitat.

Our area was one of the first to endure these catastrophic times. A peat fire near the Port Macquarie airport kicked off in August and may only have been quenched with the January rains. This gave us the worst air quality in the world in November and we had 38 days of awful air quality starting from early November. (Not a good look for an area which is dependent on tourism!)

Friday 8 November was Red Friday i.e. the sky turned red at about 2 pm. It was so dark the street lights came on. From Port Macquarie Bunnings carpark one could see giant flames threatening the suburbs. People were evacuated, sometimes two or three times, in several areas – Lake Cathie, Dunbogan and Thrumster to name three, and many roads were closed including the Pacific and Oxley highways. When my friend cut himself slipping on the roof, clearing the gutters, both roads to the hospital were closed and he was dependent on his wife’s nursing skills. Other friends, inland from Taree, battled fires for several days. Everyone has similar stories. I can assure you, we were all listening to local ABC radio to hear where the fires were burning.

Our branch, shown here meeting Matt Peacock, has sent a thank you card to the local ABC studio to thank them for their good work updating the fire danger news around the clock. It’s raining now but we need much more, otherwise these conditions will return, possibly before the end of the summer.

Drusi Megget
Convenor,
ABC Friends Mid North Coast

Fires and Floods on the North Coast of NSW

Each morning over the past months, we tuned into the local ABC radio based in Lismore. The bushfire season started on the North Coast NSW in August 2019 with drought and fires devastating communities from Tenterfield to the Dorrigo Plateau and the Clarence Valley, culminating in the tragedy that once was the town of Rappville.

While our local National Party representative, Kevin Hogan issued press releases (seemingly relying on the Murdoch media) blaming arsonists for more than 50% of the fires, the ABC stuck to the facts and made an occasional reference to climate change. All is quiet on the bushfire front here in Tintenbar. Last week we were contemplating another tanker load of water and the proximity of trees to the house. Now one of our members is on flood watch on the Tweed River (where the ABC coverage probably saved lives in 2018) and we can flush our loo guilt free.

Peter Dickson
President, ABC Friends Northern Rivers
As most of our members will be aware, I commissioned a survey with respect to the Bushfire Crisis that has enveloped Australian residents in these last several weeks, even months, particularly in relation to the prompt accurate and detailed information in each of the local areas of the multiple fires impact.

Our National Administrator emailed our members and we have had an overwhelming response to the questions posed.

Elsewhere in this special issue of Update, you will see many of the sorts of comments we received in our survey. I include only three to give you a flavour:

- Juliet from NSW said that when they were in “Narooma, we lost radio service for a little while and it was acutely felt by me and my family. I do not know what caused the outage. The power was also out for a while, the shops were closed, the internet was off, so we really relied on the calm and professional announcers on the [ABC] radio to keep us informed and let us know we were not alone.”

- Geraldine from Leura in the Blue Mountains said that they “can’t receive ABC radio broadcasts” as there is “no signal”. They depended on the Fires Near Me app which they “found to be inaccurate / not updated.”

- And as one respondent put it, it is essential that everybody has access to good communication, “telling people to get a battery radio just doesn’t cut it.”

Suffice it to say that:

When asked if there was a need for a national plan of additional essential communications infrastructure, 95% of respondents said “yes”.

One respondent said that any review should be led by the ABC, and many respondents said the ABC should receive increased funding from the government.

Several people noted that there seemed to be information flow blockages causing vital information not to get through in what was described as “life or death” situations. One respondent suggested that a central body be formed linking emergency services, radio broadcasting, and community to ensure clear lines of communication and information sharing.

Some of the other priority areas suggested were:

- Regional radio and communications infrastructure upgrades
  - Fix any radio reception blackspots in regions for emergency radio broadcasts
  - Fireproofing transmission towers
  - Commitments to maintaining the vital AM network
  - Dedicated radio spectrum
  - Mirrored ABC and emergency websites in case of problems
  - Battery powered portable radio and WiFi towers available to be deployed if infrastructure is lost
  - Communications infrastructure put underground such as landlines and internet access
  - Satellite driven radio, mobile phone and internet
  - Battery powered mobile reception and WiFi hotspots linked to satellites
  - National WiFi coverage
  - Better mobile phone towers not reliant on mains power

Regional ABC centres
- More regional ABC offices staffed with local journalists
- More funding for regional ABC offices

Extending ABC emergency broadcasts to commercial network frequencies was also suggested.

91.1% of those surveyed said that the ABC local emergency broadcasts were important to them during the crisis.

96.1% of those surveyed said that ABC staff with local knowledge was important to them.

98.5% of those surveyed said that it was important to them that their local ABC outlet remain open and well-staffed.

Finally, I urge you to please respond to the survey, if you haven’t already, as the results will form part of our argument to the Government for reversal of the cuts announced in the budget, and in fact, an increase in the ABC’s budget for its unique role as the National Emergency broadcaster. As we are unlikely to see a diminution of extreme weather events in the foreseeable future, the ABC’s ability to respond with sufficient equipment and reporters, at a moment’s notice is imperative.

And a warm ‘thank you’, to those members who have contributed already to this survey.
Overview

- As at 17 January, the ABC has covered 825 Emergency Broadcasting (EB) events since 1 July 2019. The figures for previous years were: 2017-18 = 256 EB events, 2018-19 = 371 EB events. An EB event is one in which emergency broadcasting is required. This generally occurs for Watch & Act warnings, moderate flood warnings, cyclone warnings and Detailed Severe Weather/Thunderstorm warnings.
- The ABC provides rolling coverage (reporting from the field, interviews with public, authorities) during extreme emergency situations.
- The ABC’s extensive radio network, covering 99% of the population via its terrestrial network, and 100% of the continent via satellite, along with its 48 regional studios enables best reach to the country’s residents, as many bushfire areas lose power and mobile phone coverage, with residents & visitors reliant on car or battery-powered radios for ABC’s EB.

Dedicated emergency resources within the ABC

- The ABC has a small dedicated team especially for emergency broadcasting. They generally work four days a week, often over weekends. This recent emergency has seen NSW/ACT coordinators working in rotation seven days a week.
- During the peak fire periods from November-January, other staff are regularly redeployed to supplement the Emergency team.
- Many other ABC roles are also involved in EB, especially ABC Local Radio on-air staff and support staff and technical staff for transmission/content distribution. During the current fires more than 120 ABC News staff have been sent into the field to cover events.
- The ABC provides all support possible to staff to ensure employee wellbeing, health and safety.

Snapshot 31 December 2019 to 14 January 2020

- Three peak fire days escalated emergencies for NSW/Vic/SA, two cyclones developed near WA & NT, other fires occurred in WA and Tas. (Peak days = New Years Eve, Sat 4 Jan, Fri 10 Jan).
- ABC South East NSW audiences heard rolling emergency coverage around the clock for 13 days from Monday 30 December to Saturday 11 January. Personnel returned early from annual leave, some of the EB staff live in affected areas and had to prepare their properties and be evacuated, and some are also RFS volunteers.
- During this time, ABC teams in other states also produced rolling/continuous fire coverage:
  - ABC Gippsland 134hrs
  - ABC Melbourne 83.5hrs
  - ABC Adelaide 14.5hrs
  - ABC Tasmania 6.25hrs
  - ABC Perth 2hrs

ABC partnerships with emergency agencies

- The ABC works in partnership with the emergency sector to better help the community prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters: Australian Fire and Emergency Services Council, as well as the Bushfire Natural Hazards Research Centre. In regional areas, the ABC has representatives on local and regional Emergency Management Committees.
- Emergency sector Commissioners/Chief Officers actively encourage the community to tune to ABC Local Radio for emergency information.
- In some States & both Territories, ABC managers are part of the State operation centre during major events.
- The ABC chairs AFAC’s Bushfire Media Accreditation and Training Group, in developing a nationally-consistent approach for media training and accreditation for work on fire grounds.

Audience response

The public en masse has turned to the ABC for vital information during these events. Across the country, either streamed or live, ABC has been the ‘go to’ source for vital information, along with ABC/Aust Red Cross appeal which raised $13.3mil by 7 January. The ABC also ran public service announcements around donated goods and smoke awareness.

Costs

The ABC does not have an estimate yet of the additional impact on the budget for the recent bushfire coverage, but it is expected to be well into the $Millions. Provision of emergency broadcasting is becoming more resource intensive and requires people and money to be reallocated from other areas of activity.

In recent years the ABC has increased prioritisation of investment in regional services through the Connecting Communities initiative, adding $15 million per annum to regional expenditure. This funding has been reallocated through internal savings measures – is this a euphemism for further staff cut-backs?

However, having to find additional savings to meet the Morrison government’s indexation cuts of $83.7 million over three years means there’s increasingly less capacity for internal savings to cover the stretched regional services, including EB functions, without impacting other important content areas.

Additional funding to bolster regional and local services would enable the ABC to enhance and support emergency broadcasting coverage. The provision of this funding aligns with good public policy outcomes, taking into consideration the continuing contraction of regional commercial media, the ABC being best placed to deliver emergency broadcasting coverage, and independent assessments of regional and local media such as by the ACCC and the Centre for Media Transition.

The above document is derived from information made available to ABC Friends by the ABC in mid January 2020.
ABC Emergency Broadcasts

Appreciative comments directed to the ABC either via tweets or on their website – a sampling from hundreds of similar accolades received by the ABC.

Selected by Angela Williamson

So impressed with the brave journalists who have covered the bush fires, we appreciate being kept informed, and really wanted to thank you for showing the human touch rather than just showing politicians all the time. Please keep us informed, biggest disaster ever. Need a royal commission, we need good footage and I love the ABC for the human touch more than anything.

Just wanted to thank all the young ABC reporters who are covering the fires around Australia.

Great to see young people doing such a great job in challenging conditions. They are all fantastic and we are immensely grateful for their professionalism, pronunciation and diction. Go the ABC.

Hi ABC, just wanted to say your coverage of the fires is exceptional. So many reporters on the ground speaking to local people and letting their stories be heard. Thank you to your many staff who have cut short their own family holidays to bring us top coverage. I’m in the Wimmera in Victoria and I noticed our own local ABC presenter, Rebekah Lowe, has gone to present in Gippsland while the fire crisis is on. Thank you!

Dear Craig Many thanks to you - and to all ABC reporters - for your compassionate and insightful coverage of terrible bushfires on the NSW South Coast and elsewhere. Very sorry for all affected, but bravo ABC Canberra.

My family would like to say how very grateful we are for the way in which ABC has covered the bushfires. We cannot speak too highly of the accuracy and empathy of your reporters. ABC is a national treasure.

Hamish MacDonald, Appreciate your updates and commentary from Bega very much. One of my family lives in the bush there so your updates are faster than the “Fires Near Me” app because of the network of ABC journos. Big thank you.

Congratulations and sincere thanks again for the level of presentation of the current bushfires. The level of dedication, the around the clock coverage in difficult circumstances, the clarity, dealing in facts while in action makes me so thankful and appreciative of the high standard you provide that I have grown up with all my life. I want to thank all of those presenters. Their delivery knows no bounds.

I am in a watch and act zone in Victoria. I’d like to recognise and congratulate the ABC News Channel team for their extraordinary coverage of the current fires across the nation. ALL of your reporters speak significantly well and in particular I’d like to note that the genuine showing of empathy through tone and body language of reporters and news readers goes a long way for viewers and is something other news channels appear to lack. As devastating as these fires are, it’s been a pleasure for my family to stay informed by ABC News. Thank you for your tireless work.

Listening to radio and watching TV on the devastating bushfires, am struck by the professionalism of journalists, but particularly the job the ABC is doing all over the country. Magnificent coverage as usual in disasters. We owe a huge debt to the ABC – they save lives. Tony

During our two days of blackout in Broulee, ABC South East was our lifeline. I’d wake up in the morning and eat breakfast in the car so I could listen to the radio and figure out what was going on, who had petrol, which roads were open, etc. Thank you, thank you ABC. Evie

Illawarra ABC team has been indefatigable in providing updates & information on the bushfire crisis. Special thanks to one and all. Gino

Just emerged from days of hell on Sth coast, cannot believe attacks on ABC. It is the ONLY reliable source of info, everyone is tuned in, its real time broadcasting is saving lives, property and helping us understand our situation re fire threats, roads, petrol, food, etc. Phillip

I’ve been on the south coast for the past month. It’s been a fire disaster roller-coaster. The ABC hs been my light on the hill. Melinda James in particular has given a faultless & sensitive rolling broadcast. Bless #MyABC. Janet

Thank you ABC! Your coverage is wonderful! Hamish is so professional and gives great assessments. All the reports from the field are so helpful! Especially when you are worried about relatives in fire areas. Patricia

The ABC’s coverage of this fire disaster has been utterly first class. Without them the nation would be in the dark. Imagine the anxiety & panic. A reminder that this is our iconic institution that the Coalition & their puppet masters at Murdoch want extinct. Simon Chapman AO

Thanks to Nicole Chvastek on ABC Ballarat. Knowledgeable and compassionate coverage, hard-hitting when necessary. Veeteejay

When we were evacuated to Narooma the other day we listened to the ABC emergency info. When we were finally allowed to try to get back to Canberra we listened to the ABC emergency broadcast the whole way. No one else provided that service. Invaluable. Sharon
I want to commend the ABC for its commitment, at considerable financial cost, to keep citizens up to date with developments in the bushfire period. I also want to commend the many reporters, sent by the ABC to so many diverse places, perhaps returning from family holidays to do so, for their fortitude, hard work and clarity and humanity of reporting from sites full of painful emotionality and complexity. I would like you to pass on my thanks to those responsible in management decision making and to the relevant reporters.

I'm writing on behalf of a friend in Wallaga Lake Heights. She and all her neighbours are so so thankful for the extraordinary work you have been doing during the fires. They are down on the shores of the estuary listening intently to you their only source of information and are eternally grateful. Many thanks.

I would like to commend the ABC for its coverage of the bush fires in Australia. Your reporters, journalists and presenters have done and are still doing a wonderful job across Australia reporting and advising on the fires. This is Television and Radio at its best. I am amazed that every location was covered by a reporter and from the youngest and newest to the most seasoned the reporting has been very professional. Well done ABC. It is so important that Australia retains and funds your excellent service. I want more of my tax dollars spent on the ABC.

The sensitive reports showing people coping with the crisis aftermath of fire. The reporter stayed out of the way and allowed these raw and dazed individuals express their emotions. There was no hint of 'star journalist' telling the story on their behalf, and the impact was all the more powerful for this subtlety. Congratulations to all ABC staff in bringing the unfolding event to us and for posterity. The quality of the work is exceptional. Bravo!

Nevertheless, we had remained vigilant, we had taken heed of reminders by the ABC that we needed batteries for a portable radio, and, reluctantly moved from Radio National to local radio. On the TV news on 30 December there was an optimistic broadcast that a 12km firebreak was in place to protect Mogo and Batemans Bay but by 7am we had a SMS to evacuate Mogo and knew to move to the beach.

We can’t tell you when the ABC coverage stopped being reliably available, but for both the twelve hours on the beach and for the two days following, we could only reliably get a local commercial radio station (2EC). At one stage we were directed to ABC News Radio but reception was just as patchy. The young 2EC broadcasters did a valiant job but news was sketchy and the task seemed well above their pay rate! We were grateful for what we had heard as there was no internet and, without electricity, mobile phone batteries didn’t last long enough to get access to apps. We dared not waste fuel to try to recharge phones or get radio coverage elsewhere. There were incessant ads for local shops that we couldn’t believe were still standing.

We made the uninformed decision to head back to Canberra and by the time that we reached Bega we were picking up local ABC coverage. But we did need more information than we could get about whether to risk the climb up Brown Mountain. There were clear messages that we were being asked to leave and needed adequate fuel but the state of the traffic, on this one lane country road, and the proximity of fires was not clear.
Join the ABC Friends

There is strength in numbers, and every membership counts at this time of unprecedented attacks on ‘Our ABC’.

To join go to www.abcfriends.org.au or phone your local contact below.

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Victorian Groups

Like to join a local group or be on their mailing list in Victoria?
We have many local groups. To find out more about one in your area: ➞

Not in these areas?
Contact Marcus May
0416 009 339 as we are setting up new groups.

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