



Australian Parents
for Climate Action

Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

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About Australian Parents for Climate Action

Australian Parents for Climate Action (AP4CA) is an, incorporated group of over 6,000 parents from around Australia who are campaigning for a safe climate for our children's future.

We are focused on pushing Australian governments and business to take urgent action to cut Australia's carbon emissions to net zero as quickly as possible.

We encourage Australia to take a leadership role on the world stage, leading by example and calling for other nations to take the necessary action to protect our children's futures.

For more information, visit AP4CA.org.

Scope of Submission

AP4CA thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. Our submission is focused on the aspect of the Commission's Terms of Reference related to "mitigating and adapting to extreme weather (driven by climate change)."

Our submission contains experiences and requirements of families and children in terms of government action to:

1. Reduce the likelihood and/or intensity of future climate-related natural disasters; and
2. Ensure that appropriate measures are in place to minimise the impacts of future climate-related natural disasters, particularly with regard to the physical and mental health of families and children affected by such disasters.

Recommendations¹

AP4CA recommends that the Commission:

1. Clearly acknowledge that the 2019/20 bushfires were the worst in Australia's history, and that **the combination of unprecedented drought, extreme heat and other factors that made them possible was unequivocally driven by anthropogenic climate change** (caused primarily by consumption of fossil fuels and other human activities that lead to greenhouse gas emissions as defined by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change²).
2. Clearly acknowledge that **without strong, urgent global and local action to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, it is highly likely that climate-related natural disasters in Australia will become more frequent and/or intense**, with significant repercussions for our economy and our population's physical and mental health.
3. Clearly recommend **strong, urgent government action to reduce Australia's anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions in line with science-based targets** that have been recommended by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in order to limit average global warming to 1.5 degrees C and, therefore, limit the frequency and intensity of future climate-related natural disasters.
4. Acknowledge that **current and past emissions within Australia and from our fossil-fuel products exported abroad contributed to the global climatic changes that made the unprecedented 2019/20 bushfire season possible**. Climate change is a borderless issue, and while Australia remains one of the top per-capita emitters³ and a significant exporter of fossil fuels (currently estimated to be the third largest in the world⁴), we cannot claim to be taking strong action on climate change or holding other countries to account. Policies must be enacted that lead to a rapid decrease in domestic consumption of fossil fuels and which halt development of new export supply.
5. Acknowledge that anthropogenic climate change and the extreme weather and related natural disasters it is creating (including both the recent drought and bushfires, but also the rapid collapse of ecosystems such as the Great Barrier Reef), is having a **deleterious impact on the mental health of both adults and children**, who will be living with the consequences for far longer. Australian children have experienced emotions of grief, anger, anxiety,

¹ Note: source references supporting these recommendations are included in the Summary section of this document to avoid duplication, unless not used elsewhere.

²https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/conveng.pdf

³<http://climatecollege.unimelb.edu.au/facts4paris-australias-capita-emissions-remain-highest-among-its-key-trading-partners>

⁴<https://www.tai.org.au/content/new-analysis-australia-ranks-third-fossil-fuel-export>

hopelessness and fear. Some are experiencing symptoms of clinical depression as they have watched the Australian government over many years belligerently ignore strident and repeated warnings by climate scientists, and fail to take meaningful, science-aligned action on emissions reduction.

6. Clearly recommend that **resilience measures implemented to reduce the impacts of natural disasters include consideration for the physical and mental health, safety and welfare needs of children.** This should include measures to ensure that children in the care of institutions (including schools and pre-schools) are kept safe and healthy.
7. Recognise that **solutions to climate change may also contribute positively to improved natural disaster resilience for communities,** such as distributed community renewable energy.
8. **Build back better: ensure rebuilding efforts following natural disasters and indeed all future development is equipped to accommodate the broad range of emerging climate change risks** over the expected lifetime of infrastructure and buildings. This is particularly imperative as the deployment of COVID-19 stimulus funding is assessed.
9. **Ensure the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is adequately funded** to ensure it can continue to provide and enhance its vital, trusted emergency broadcasting services.

Summary

The 2019/20 bushfire season was the most intense and destructive on record,⁵ and came amidst the worst drought in the history of European settlement of Australia.⁶ In early 2020 it became apparent that the Great Barrier Reef was suffering its third mass coral bleaching event in the past five years due to high sea surface temperatures.⁷ We are living in an era of unprecedented destructive climatic events.

In 2019 average land and ocean temperatures, globally, were 0.88 degrees C above the long term average, contributing to the third hottest year in 140 years of records.⁸ The top 10 hottest years (since modern record-keeping began in the late 1800s) have all occurred since 2005.⁹ Australia was 1.52 degrees C above average in 2019, recording its warmest year on record.¹⁰

The current global heating is unequivocally caused by human activities, primarily the consumption of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas).¹¹ Climate science is clear that hotter land and ocean temperatures are contributing to more frequent and/or more intense extreme weather events.¹²

The fact that we are seeing such unprecedented impacts with only around one degree of global heating should in itself be of grave concern to Australia and its citizens. Indeed climate change was identified as a “critical threat” by 64% of Australian adults in a 2019 Lowy Institute poll (taken before the 2019/20 bushfire season), topping the list of concerns that included international terrorism and cyber attacks.¹³

However, the government’s 2030 emissions reduction target, which is unlegislated, falls far short of the recommended science-based target to limit global heating to ideally no more than 1.5 degrees, as the government agreed to as part of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement (article 2, para 1. (a)).¹⁴ The science

⁵ <https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Extreme-Events/Bushfire/preparing-for-climate-change/2019-20-bushfires-explainer>

⁶ <https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/6281386/drought-now-officially-our-worst-on-record/>

⁷ <http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/the-reef/reef-health/coral-bleaching-101>. It is acknowledged that coral bleaching does not necessarily in and of itself kill the coral, but frequent bleaching, such as is being currently experienced, reduces the resilience of the corals to recover from such events. For example: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/06/coral-reef-bleaching-global-warming-unesco-sites/>

⁸ <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/201901>

⁹ <https://www.climatecentral.org/gallery/graphics/the-10-hottest-global-years-on-record>

¹⁰ <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/annual/aus/>

¹¹ https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/AR5_SYR_FINAL_SPM.pdf

¹² https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/03/SREX-Chap3_FINAL-1.pdf

¹³ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/media-release-2019-lowy-institute-poll-australian-attitudes-climate-change>

¹⁴ https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf

recommends global emissions reductions currently in the order of 7.6% per annum (from current levels) between 2020 and 2030 and net zero by 2050.¹⁵

In summary, we live in a country that is already beset by well-predicted, anthropogenic climate-change-exacerbated natural disasters that will only get worse as global heating intensifies,¹⁶ yet Australia's climate policy has not responded to the urgency of this threat and the environmental, economic and social toll that unabated climate change will wreak on Australia.

This juxtaposition is already causing significant mental health issues amongst its children, as evidenced by a recent UNICEF investigation into the impacts of the drought. Children interviewed said that being caught up in "the natural disaster has meant they have had to prematurely 'grow up', facing difficulty in balancing increased farm work with their education, as well as experiencing escalating levels of stress and other adverse psychological outcomes."¹⁷

Similarly, the 2019/20 bushfire season and the emotions felt upon hearing about mass reef bleaching (which itself should be treated as a natural disaster) are having a profound impact on how children and their parents feel about their future. Eco-anxiety has been identified as an emerging mental health issue, with 87% of Australian 'tweens' identifying climate change as something to be worried about in a 2018 study.¹⁸

While we note that the Australian government announced funding to deliver mental health support to bushfire affected people and communities, a lack of strong and urgent action on emissions reduction (and a failure to provide strong protections to our unique fauna and flora due to weak environmental protection legislation and a current developer-friendly policy to reduce green tape¹⁹) is manifestly contributing to Australian children's and citizens' suffering of eco-anxiety.²⁰

In preparing this submission, AP4CA sought stories from its members who were directly and indirectly affected by the 2019/2020 bushfire crisis. These are included in full in the remainder of this document, with a summary of key quotes provided.

¹⁵ <https://www.unenvironment.org/interactive/emissions-gap-report/2019/>

¹⁶ The 2008 Garnaut Climate Change Review clearly "predicted that without adequate action, the nation would face a more frequent and intense fire season by 2020."
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-08/economic-bushfires-billions-ross-garnaut-climate-change/11848388>

¹⁷ <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Documents/Drought-Report-2019-Media-Release.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.hcf.com.au/health-agenda/body-mind/mental-health/eco-anxiety-children>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/apr/23/coalition-is-aiming-to-change-australias-environment-laws-before-review-is-finished>

²⁰ <https://theconversation.com/youre-not-the-only-one-feeling-helpless-eco-anxiety-can-reach-far-beyond-bushfire-communities-129453>

We also observed that Australia's educational institutional responses to the bushfires fell far short of what might be considered desirable or responsible for a wealthy nation such as Australia. For example:

- While short term health effects of exposure to bushfire smoke is known to be harmful, particularly to those with pre-existing respiratory conditions,²¹ there is a lack of scientific consensus on medium to long term effects of exposure to bushfire smoke due to a lack of research.²² Australian children both within and remote from the fires themselves were subjected to hazardous levels of small particulate matter (PM2.5), up to 26 times the Air Quality Index (AQI) level deemed hazardous, for months on end in some areas.²³
- As parents we observed confusion, inconsistency and sometimes ignorance from our pre-schools, schools, education departments and relevant ministers in terms of at what specific levels certain activities at schools (such as sports) should be curtailed. For example, an information page provided by the NSW Education Department provided for school principals and staff was extremely vague, with no reference to specific AQI levels (or acknowledgement of the differing measurements within the AQI system (e.g. the differences between poor visibility levels and high PM2.5 levels).²⁴ Similarly, the NSW Health Department's "guidance" for pre-schools was of poor quality.²⁵
- School buildings are generally not designed to provide protection from poor outdoor air quality. For example, photos were posted on social media of school presentation assemblies where the smoke was so thick in hall buildings that it was difficult to see across the room. There is little in the way of smoke management (such as double door airlocks and positively pressurized buildings) and ventilation and air conditioning systems in school buildings seldom includes air filtration at a level that would effectively exclude smoke particles.
- In the absence of effective indoor and outdoor smoke management, educational institutions should also have had a clear policy regarding the use of P2/N95 masks. It is very difficult to obtain child or infant sized P2 masks, and younger children may find it distressing to wear a mask, even if one can be found that fits. The Federal Health Department's advice for people who could not wear a mask was to "reduce exposure to the smoke":²⁶ somewhat

²¹ <https://www.hri.org.au/health/your-health/lifestyle/bushfire-smoke-affects-our-health>

²² <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2020/212/8/bushfire-smoke-urgent-need-national-health-protection-strategy>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2020/feb/20/the-toxic-air-we-breathe-the-health-crisis-from-australias-bushfires>

²⁴ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/inside-the-department/health-and-safety/media/documents/Factsheet-Air-quality-considerations-during-bushfire-V2.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/air/Pages/child-care-centres.aspx>

²⁶ <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/01/statement-from-the-acting-chief-medical-officer-and-state-and-territory-chief-health-officers-advice-on-the-use-of-masks-for-those-exposed-to-bushfire-smoke.pdf>

impractical for children in the care of schools, pre-schools or other institutions given the foregoing.

- As such, Australian education institutions may unwittingly have either exacerbated existing respiratory issues in the short term amongst the children in their care, and potentially - subject to further research - exposed children to irreparable long term health damage, which may, like asbestos or respirable crystalline silica related diseases, only become evident in middle adulthood.

Of course, smoke exposure applies to private and commercial buildings as well, and it is important that construction codes are modified to adequately address the emerging risk of prolonged indoor exposure to bushfire smoke.

In another example, Save the Children has noted that the needs of children were “systematically overlooked” during the bushfires, with affected communities lacking necessary services to avoid deleterious mental health and other welfare outcomes for children.²⁷ This echoes the issues highlighted by the UNICEF report on drought impacts on children, potentially exposing a common weakness in Australia’s response to natural disasters.

Action to reduce greenhouse emissions can make a positive contribution to natural disaster resilience beyond simply reducing the underlying extreme weather risk. For example, implementation of distributed renewable electricity generation (both rooftop and community-scale systems and in conjunction with battery or other storage) could help overcome several issues experienced by towns suffering bushfire damage, including:²⁸

- Power outages due to damage to transmission networks.²⁹
- Widespread deployment of electric vehicles, which could alleviate fuel shortages hit by regional and remote communities during the bushfires.³⁰

Rebuilding after natural disasters should take into account the increasing likelihood and impact of particular disasters based on the best future regional climate projection models, including expectations for temperature, rainfall, wind speed, evapotranspiration, etc.; and in turn implications for bushfires, droughts, heat waves, cyclones and other major storms, and of course sea level rise and its impact on coastal storm surges. This may mean that government support or approval for rebuilding is limited unless emerging climate risks are adequately addressed in planned repairs or redevelopments and may need to consider the relocation of structures or even entire communities to less risky areas. Review of construction codes, State environmental planning instruments and development

²⁷ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/rights-group-says-children-were-systematically-overlooked-during-australian-bushfires>

²⁸ <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy17osti/68296.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-23/power-prices-rise-blackouts-increase-bushfire-season-intensifies/11890646>

³⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-06/fire-cuts-food-supplies-to-nsw-south-coast-towns-and-families/11842382>

control plans is also recommended to ensure all future development is “climate ready”.

Our members reported on the vital importance of the ABC as a reliable, accurate and *trustworthy* emergency broadcasting service and lamented the government’s progressive defunding.³¹

This submission does not specifically seek to address other issues of natural disaster emergency management, hazard reduction, authority coordination or other matters that are being explored by the Royal Commission, beyond a recommendation to consider the establishment of a Civil Defence force.³²

As citizens, taxpayers and parents of a wealthy nation, we have a right to expect that our government is acting responsibly on our and our children’s behalf in this regard. That Australia has failed to adequately anticipate and plan for such events despite numerous expert warnings (from those of the 2008 Garnaut report to those of respected former fire chiefs such as Greg Mullins in early 2019³³) - as was amply demonstrated by the lack of adequate preparations, shortages of firefighting equipment, and late government responses to support stretched volunteer brigades during the 2019/20 bushfire season - is extremely concerning.

In terms of improving Australia’s resilience to climate-related natural disasters, *prevention*, through climate action focused first on greenhouse emissions reduction, should be the government’s top priority. The steps that Australia needs to take, including policy and expenditure, are well-researched and set out in the following, among other leading reports:³⁴

1. Ross Garnaut’s book, *Superpower*³⁵
2. PWC, *The Future of Energy Report*³⁶
3. ClimateWorks, *Decarbonisation Futures*³⁷ report

³¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/mar/03/bushfires-add-3m-to-abc-emergency-broadcasting-costs-as-coalition-cuts-funding>

³² Refer to the contribution herein from AP4CA member Yolanda Dasgupta, a disaster management professional.

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/09/former-fire-chiefs-warn-australia-unprepared-for-escalating-climate-threat>

³⁴ Ursula Hogben, contribution to AP4CA’s Submission to the NNDA Royal Commission.

³⁵ <https://www.blackincbooks.com.au/books/superpower>

³⁶ <https://www.pwc.com.au/power-and-utilities/future-of-energy-australian-energy-outlook-report.html>

³⁷ <https://www.climateworksaustralia.org/resource/decarbonisation-futures-solutions-actions-and-benchmarks-for-a-net-zero-emissions-australia/>

AP4CA Members' Stories

The following pages contain 27 stories submitted by members of Australian Parents for Climate Action across all Australian States and Territories. Contributors include parents from a range of professions and family types. Our request for stories was made with short notice to members (due to the impacts on parents of the COVID-19 crisis) and the quantity is not indicative of the number of individuals who were concerned with or directly affected by the recent bushfires.

Some stories concentrate on direct experiences and feelings of the fires, others offer specific recommendations of relevance to the Commission's Terms of Reference. A selection of quotes drawn from the stories is included below (these extracts are highlighted in the full stories):

Fires in our region resulted in loss of lives, homes, prolonged periods of evacuation for families in locations at threat, and severe smoke pollution leading to school closures. As the weeks turned into months, my five year old began showing signs of increased anxiety.

"If we see a fire mum, you slow down and I'll pull the koalas in through the window to rescue them". My two year old piped up beside him "and me the kangaroos"

A lack of clear advice during this period resulted in children being unnecessarily exposed to air pollution. Children were regularly allowed to play outside even when the AQI was in the hazardous range.

Climate change science needs to be a cornerstone of all policy decisions going forward, such that the risks to our community are not ignored, and that adequate preparations can be made for ongoing threats. These bushfires are unprecedented but not unexpected, climate scientists, and bushfire experts have been warning our community about these risks for years.

Mental health first aid training [is needed].

Communication mechanisms need to be developed to facilitate the sharing of important information in crisis situations. Over-reliance on the internet by government bodies resulted in those most affected by the fires being unable to access the information they needed to make safe decisions

Our built environment needs to be managed with a regulatory framework that accounts for the changing and increasing risks due to global heating.

Daily exposure to smoke meant we could not enjoy our usual summer exploits

the flames consuming our precious landscape... the animals... it was just horrendous. I worried and grieved for our wildlife.

I want our governments to take genuine action on climate change. I want them to step up and stop with the jobs for the boys. I want the corruption to end, and the perceived corruption to end. I want brave, bold action that makes me and my community, my immediate community and my larger community of Australians feel valued and honoured - in that we are heard and we are acted for in a decisive manner.

Our house was uninhabitable during the 40+ degree days when we couldn't open the windows to let in a cool breeze at night due to the suffocating smoke.

Instead of taking our new baby home we spent his first three nights in a hotel, taking refuge in the air conditioning to protect our tiny baby's lungs from the smoke. On his 2nd night the thickest smoke yet rolled in from the coast & the hotel's fire alarms were triggered. This was not the joyful home coming or introduction to the world that we wanted for our son.

We are renters in an old workers cottage in Sydney which due to age is impossible to seal off. This meant we were living with smoke haze in the house for weeks.

My husband and I felt (and feel) an incredible sense of grief, which was magnified by the denial of climate science by parts of the government and the delay in taking national and decisive action in response to the bushfires.

Never in my life do I recall children having to stay inside during their lunch and recess breaks due to hazardous smoke.

I remember bunkering down in my room as a 9 year old, fearful because burnt leaves were falling at my front door step. For my children, this happened so frequently over the summer, they are no longer fearful of it. Is this the kind of future they have to look forward to? Where fire and smoke and ash falling from the sky is a normal experience of summer? Without action on climate change, my fear is that it is

Is there something to be said for indigenous methods of burning the bush? Probably. Could we reduce the ability of local politicians to cancel planned HR's for political advantage? Perhaps. Could we put more money and resources into local brigades? Absolutely. Could we also, as a nation, decide that the change in climate poses the greater risk, and has an even more obvious solution? Definitely.

After weeks of burning to the north of us, it finally skipping the highway and sent its ferocious all consuming fire tendrils out our way in the early hours of Friday morning, the 31st of December. We were woken to an RFS phone call urging us to evacuate. Thinking back to this time, is like reflecting on a living nightmare. The nightmare didn't end there...it continued for weeks. Over the course of this summer period, we were evacuated three times.

I saw countless patients suffering the impacts of smoke exposure. Some which have not yet recovered now 4 months down the tract. I saw countless patients suffering from psychological trauma, anxiety, panic attack and/or grief from the loss of their homes or

businesses or from the stressful impact of the emergency itself. Many too have not recovered and need much more support. Many children have been traumatised. There is very little mental health support available for them.

my 7-year-old daughter said, "I just want it to be normal again." I replied that I did too. Moments later, she was still looking pensively into the distance, her food going cold on her plate. I asked her what she was thinking. She replied: "I'm just imagining the future. Everything is dead and brown. There is no food. There is mountains of plastic and the air is filled with pollution."

I don't want things to go back to normal. Normal wasn't working. Normal was destroying our environment and our health. We need to build back a better normal. A normal where we prioritise having clean air, clean water and a livable climate. These basic needs underpin our very survival.

My daughter developed a cough in January, which is not going away despite increased preventer medication and investigation. While I cannot prove that the smoke is to blame, I believe the prolonged exposure was a factor.

The communication by governments on the effect of air quality was also poor and lacked clarity as many went on their normal daily routines despite hazardous air quality.

As a family we suffered from anxiety and bad sleep, we experienced grief at the loss of lives, livelihoods, the devastation brought onto our unique flora and fauna and places we cherish.

The lack of preparedness by both State and Federal governments however is hard to comprehend given the warnings they had received.

Governments of all levels must listen to the science. Scientists are telling us bushfires will become increasingly common in the decades to come due to the climate emergency. Not only must we prepare our communities for these, increase our resilience but we must also cut our reliance on fossil fuels and move towards a low-carbon future as a matter of urgency. I don't accept the summer we just had as "the new normal", this would mean we give up and we don't fight for a safe future for our children and I'm certainly not doing that.

Some mornings when my brother opened his front door, his smoke alarms went off because of how thick the bushfire smoke was. He has three boisterous primary school age children and after many weeks of living with constantly smokey air they continued to play outside as normal, despite the risk to their health. It was impossible to keep them indoors all the time with windows shut.

My heart broke to think that we grown ups are NOT doing what we can to keep future generations safe.

Governments have let our children down by ignoring the facts about our environment. As a parent I feel absolute terror for my children.

It's not that we are unable to change. Australia's response to the COVID19 outbreak has

shown me that we have the ability to change radically if the government shows strong leadership, provides clear guidelines and necessary support.

I would dearly love to be able to say to my children that we grown ups and the powers that be are doing EVERYTHING we can to reverse climate change, to fight the dangers that threaten to annihilate life on earth as we know it and to make bushfires like the ones we have just been through a thing of the past rather than the new normal.

The animals we saw were desperately hungry and the earth was parched. It was distressing.

Many people we know have similar, or worse stories. We join with thousands of others in asking the government to urgently address the climate crisis, to prevent repeats of the summer and worse.

I could not protect my child as these masks can't safely or effectively be worn by toddlers.

I watched with heartbreak as friends and strangers had property threatened with fire, some losing their homes, their animals, their family. I watched as the body toll of native wildlife climbed to a staggering 480 million and will likely never recover, with irreparable damage to our biodiversity. I mourn these losses for our community and the future of our children.

Australia could have been much better prepared and the effects would likely not have been as disastrous; lives, property, forests and wildlife could have been saved.

An education campaign [should] occur about the dangers of this smoke inhalation, should a similar situation arise in future. The government was advised how dangerous the smoke was but did little to educate or protect the general public.

The government should acknowledge climate change as a key factor in the precipitation of these unprecedented but not unpredicted fires. I request they make a policy that all government decisions must document how they will contribute to climate change. If the effects are negative, permissions and funding should be reviewed.

The government should fund renewable energy systems and new technologies that support this. They should facilitate and fund workers in non-renewable industries to move to more sustainable jobs. They should cease financial subsidies that prop up an unsustainable coal industry.

Looking back, I think I was in shock for days, and couldn't bring myself to read or engage with normal activities.

My fear was exacerbated hugely by the fact that I think this is only the beginning of the impacts of climate change, and we are not taking sufficient steps to prevent summers like this becoming normal. The weight of grief for my children's futures was huge.

We spent days after the fires hearing what so many of our friends went through with their

children along with so many other families and it was distressing and unimaginable. They feared for their lives and the long-lasting impact of this is truly concerning.

One of the first things she said to me when she returned was the wildlife had gone, she could no longer hear the birds, frogs, or animals moving in the bushes, it was silent. The impact this has had on the environment and flora and fauna is heartbreaking.

We cannot allow this to become Australia's "new normal" and risk a future of even more severe bushfires and drought This would lead to more loss of human life and ecosystems, severe food shortages, much of Australia being unliveable and our children being put in these traumatic situations that they should never have to experience.

We would have spent a couple thousands dollars on vacation supporting local businesses, but we ended up staying in Sydney and have not spent as much as usual. We also had to limit our time outside the apartment (limiting spending in cafes, restaurants, museums) when air quality was bad.

Child care where my daughter was going was not sure when they should not allow children to go outside and how often they should check during the day.

Because there was no power, we also had no internet for updates. We were able to use our mobile internet, until that went out too. So that left us with only the radio... When the news radio stations also went out, I was very scared. I had no idea if the fire was close or coming, if I should stay inside or evacuate with my kids.

The drive was scary with dark orange sky looming west of Bodalla... My 7 year old was too scared to fall asleep. It was windy, and every time she heard the wind or a twig fall etc she cried out and asked if we were safe. I assured her we were safe, but in all honesty, I didn't know if we were.

My 7 year old daughter had a friend over a couple of weeks after school went back in February, and I heard them playing 'evacuation'. They were collecting some toys and tying them together so they wouldn't get 'left behind and be burned'. They 'evacuated' to the cubby house outside and 'seeked shelter'. It was upsetting to hear.

I want the government to have a better plan for the future. I want them to work with the indigenous people who live here and come up with a management plan. I want them to listen to the people, like experienced firefighters, and work with them to come up with a plan. I want them to have systems in place to keep people safe and informed on a real time basis if things go wrong again.

I want our local council to listen to the people who live here and hear their concerns and address them appropriately. I know the issue was raised about their bush fire plan being out of date before all this happened, and I can't help but wonder what would have happened differently if they had listened and addressed it before it was too late.

We used to have wet patches on the farm (natural springs) but they petered out 15 years ago

and have never returned. Our dams don't fill over winter any more, and the ground is as hard as cement virtually all year round.

Ancient Gum trees, many hundreds of years old - probably over 1000 - are withering and dying in hard, dry ground. Turtles used to breed in the soft dam banks but these and now high and dry - and rock hard.

Bird sounds have diminished, frog sounds are decimated. The pain of feeling the natural life retreating from around us - not just here but across the region - is depressing.

We cannot continue like this. The whole world's actions are contributing to Australia's loss of health. We will all suffer for this. We need to stand up and act, and ask that the rest of the world acts. Making money is only one part of the equation delivering sustainable life. The equation doesn't add up any more.

Bertie is 6 months old; in his short life they've lived through unprecedented bushfires, an epic dust storm, months of being stuck inside because of the smoke, and now because of Covid19. This was far from the world and life I imagined for them

Why was it so dark outside? It was 7 in the morning. Why was it so dark?" It was summer, it was 7am; it shouldn't look like the dead of night.

The water in Bermagui was contaminated, the filtration plant was fire damaged, the power went and then the signal, the supermarket was out of bottled water. We had no way of contacting people or finding out what was happening, we just had to wait

Our hearts broke when our 6 year old said "This is the worst day of my life" (ours too), all she wanted for 2020 was for there to be no more fires.

Facemasks can't be used on children because it can cause more harm to their developing respiratory functions; there was short supply anyway in Canberra and the mail was cancelled because it was too dangerous for posties to do their job

The Federal government came across as uncaring, unsupportive, disinterested and irresponsible. A government that was happy to spread misinformation about hazard reduction and back burning and dismiss any discussion on climate change action

We're seeing now with Covid19 that we can shut the world down just like that. We can see the impact that it has on the environment and how it's improving the living conditions outside of our homes. It can be done.

Eighty percent of our shire – a favoured holiday destination for Canberrans, known for its beautiful beaches and laid-back living – was burnt, and irreversibly altered. Birdsong has stopped, wildlife has vanished. Those areas of the forest where we used to look for bounding kangaroos are still, black and silent. In our shire alone, three people lost their lives, more than 500 homes were destroyed and almost 300 damaged.

I still weep as I drive through our blackened forests, but not just for our present. I weep with

a crushing fear for my daughters' future.

I have personally experienced mental health impacts in the form of anxiety and depression. My youngest daughter (aged 4) developed extreme separation anxiety and has struggled emotionally, her mental state mirroring my own. She developed a severe chest infection during February, and our doctor's assessment was that smoke inhalation likely played a part.

the greatest mental strain has come from the obfuscation around climate issues from all levels of government (local, state and particularly, federal). At every turn, our leaders have downplayed, minimised or outright denied the role climate change has played in this disaster – leading to insufficient crisis planning, an insufficient crisis response and a wholly insufficient approach to mitigating climate change. Our leaders, and particularly Mr Morrison, have gaslighted the Australian public, and continue to do so. For those of us who have seen communities destroyed by fire, and who are anxious about the future safety of our children, this has severely impacted our mental health.

Governments of all levels should put in place policy measures to urgently implement the emissions reductions solutions already available:

- *Transition to renewable energy and improve energy efficiency*
- *Shift transport systems to shared and electric vehicles*
- *Prioritise a fair transition for those impacted by the climate crisis (including fossil fuel communities and Indigenous communities)*
- *Commence rapid drawdown of emissions using natural climate solutions*
- *Develop and implement programs to end food waste*
- *Undertake crisis/disaster planning under the guidance of experts.*

Those of us in bushfire-affected communities have relied on the ABC for information that was literally life-saving. Our national broadcaster and its staff must be protected.

Trying to explain this situation to a toddler was heartbreaking. Naturally, he couldn't understand why he couldn't go outside, why his father was wearing a mask every time he went to clear debris in the gutters and garden, why we had bags packed by the door, that he wasn't allowed to touch, why he was kept home from daycare and his friends on really smoky or high danger days, or why we all had to sleep in the one room with the air purifier through so much of January.

I feel a great deal of anger towards past and current governments that have consistently ignored advice and evidence from national and global experts on extreme weather, emergency services requirements and the worsening climate crisis.

I want to see our political leaders listening to evidence and experts, and supporting affected communities and citizens not just with emergency relief, but with policies that will reduce the likelihood of these fires reoccurring again and again.

We were also severely affected by smoke, with one of my children vomiting once because the smoke was so bad, and we had to cancel many outings and stay home over most of our holidays.

Trees play an important role in increasing water security and therefore reducing fire risk. Trees store and recycle rainfall, retaining water when it is most abundant and gradually releasing it back into the atmosphere during times of scarcity.

More funding to the ABC. They are the most trusted media in Australia and have to provide hundreds more emergency broadcasts during crises, and with more devastating bushfires to come ABC will need increased funding in order to keep the public safe and informed.

Include smoke ratings with all emergency warning broadcasts. The public need to be educated on the risks of smoke inhalation and how to mitigate those risks - especially for vulnerable populations including daycares.

I thought that the fires might represent a turning point in our response to climate change, an opportunity to come up with a bi-partisan approach to phasing our fossil fuels and transitioning to renewables. I am disappointed that the government hasn't taken this opportunity to take this path.

The last bushfire season was absolutely devastating and scary for myself and my family. I have a one year old son and this is not what I want his future to look like.

We know climate change is happening; scientists have also made it quite clear. It is time to use the solutions that are readily available to us. My son's future depends on it.

Considering the predictions of an increase of emissions by up to 67% because of the bushfires, we need to put a stop to Adani, fracking in the NT, and prevent any new fossil fuel projects from happening.

My friend's workplace burnt down, rendering her and 80 others instantly - and still - unemployed.

The only pictures their pre-school children drew for months afterwards were drawings of burning homes. Their conversations with playmates were dominated by clear indicators of stress and lost innocence - "so, did your house burn down last night?" Some of my friends' children suffered nightmares and bedwetting for months.

I expect our governments to fully acknowledge the science, and to acknowledge their responsibilities to protect Australians from these bushfires becoming the new normal. We must not merely adapt to this hellish new summer scenario.

"I am very worried about my future and the future of our planet. This summer I've been very worried about people and animals affected by bushfires and climate change. It was really scary when people had to hide indoors when the air was poisonous and I couldn't go outside and play. I would like the government to get rid of coal and fossil fuels and introduce more renewable energy. I want them to act before it's too late." Evan O'Connor, 11

The bushfire crisis of 2019/2020 scarred Australia's national psyche and affected my family directly, despite us being well removed geographically from where the fires occurred.

My family and I travelled to Launceston to spend a lovely Christmas with our family there

and were housebound on two occasions as a result of the overwhelming smoke from mainland fires, which engulfed the city when the wind conditions favoured such an occurrence. My daughter suffers from Asthma which has resulted in several hospital admissions, including a stint in ICU

We live in Far North Queensland, an area that relies heavily on tourism to our precious Great Barrier Reef. It was evident to me, from the contacts I received from far-flung acquaintances, that people believed the whole of Australia was on fire. This, along with their absolute disbelief in our Government's dogged unwillingness to acknowledge the relationship between Climate Change and the fires has tarnished Australia's international brand.

Solutions such as ceasing all new fossil fuel projects, a rapid transition to renewable energy, ecosystem renewal, regenerative farming practices, sustainable urban design etc etc should be implemented immediately as a method of reducing the possibility of a recurrence of this year's bushfire season. The immediate, practical response to such an emergency will be much less onerous if we get to the root cause of the problem, which is Climate Change.

It is unfathomable to me, that in the face of such blatant and unequivocal real-life evidence of the effects of Climate Change, as a society, we persist in pursuing business as usual, unending economic growth and, particularly, fossil fuels. We owe it to our children to take whatever action is required to provide them with a liveable future.

The smoke affected people who work outside and children's ability to play outside and do sport. it affected people's ability to earn their livelihood, and it affected our physical and mental health.

Rebuild property in a more resilient way. This includes where buildings and infrastructure are located, what they are made from, and how these are built. We need more fire-resilient buildings, and we need localised water, food and energy sources.

The steps that Australia needs to take, including policy and expenditure, are well-researched and set out in the following, among other leading reports:

- 1. Ross Garnaut's book, Superpower*
- 2. PWC, The Future of Energy Report*
- 3. ClimateWorks, Decarbonisation Futures report*

I want the Territory and Federal Government to put in place a Climate Change Act to make sure that any activity that takes place in Australia has to take Climate Change into account and not add to its effects. This will begin the work to reducing mega-fires in the future. Protecting all remnant native forests to provide safe places for endemic flora and fauna, and working with Indigenous land managers to use their knowledge to best protect people and places.

As a disaster management professional I know that mitigation and preparedness will only get us a little way and without curbing warming, by significantly reducing emissions, this will be the new normal.

I want all levels of Government to treat Climate Change as the existential thread that the science shows it to be. I want governments to invest in transforming the economy to a low-emissions powerhouse like that described by Prof Ross Garnaut. I want indigenous people to

benefit from being paid for the carbon they would capture in their soil by applying their cultural knowledge of land management. I do not want my children to be left behind in the green industrial revolution that MUST come. I want government to bring people along with them in this transition, and show the leadership, informed by experts they have during the Covid19 outbreak. I also want Australia to have a Civil Defence force that can be deployed to supercharge mitigation, preparedness and recovery efforts.

Full stories are included overleaf with attribution:

Sarah Graham
Sancrox NSW 2446
Children 4 and 2 at time of the fires

The closest fire to our house, the Lindfield Park Road fire burned for 210 days, from 18th July 2019, causing prolonged periods of hazardous air pollution in our town, and risk to property as well as frequent road closures. Our child's early education lessons were moved due to the location being at direct threat from the fire. Other fires in our region resulted in loss of lives, homes, prolonged periods of evacuation for families in locations at threat, and severe smoke pollution leading to school closures.

As the weeks turned into months, my five year old began showing signs of increased anxiety. This started as we made urgent preparations to our home should the fires come closer. Though it made monitoring conditions difficult, we turned off the radio to reduce his distress. Both he and my 2yo showed increasing reluctance to separate from me. As we passed burnt out patches of bushland on our drive into town we repeatedly talked through a 'social story' about the fire fighters who stood to protect us, and the steps we could take to protect ourselves. Like many in our community, we opened our home to another family who were unable to return to theirs due to fire damage. While having another family staying in our house was fun at times, sharing space unexpectedly with a large family was also difficult for the children, particularly as the unpredictability of available emergency accommodation for our friends made it difficult to prepare the kids for arrivals and departures. The children were clearly distressed by reports of injured animals. One day, caught out driving through a roundabout when a story about burned koalas came on the radio and unable to mute it in time, he declared that "If we see a fire mum, you slow down and I'll pull the koalas in through the window to rescue them". My two year old piped up beside him "and me the kangaroos". The mental health impact on our children is not insignificant. Despite my family not being directly affected by the fires, his concern for the animals has persisted. Just today (22/4/20) driving home from town past our local zoo we saw flames behind the property from a hazard reduction burn. I was caught unawares by the sense of threat I felt personally when seeing the smoke and flames, I wasn't surprised at all that the first thing he expressed was worry for the animals in the zoo only a short distance away.

A lack of clear advice during this period resulted in children being unnecessarily exposed to air pollution. My experience as a parent of 2 children, attending 2 different early childhood centres in Port Macquarie, NSW, was that the centres either did not have a policy to guide educators decision making, or where a policy had been developed, it did not adequately take into account the risks from elevated air pollution levels. Children were regularly allowed to play outside even when the AQI was in the hazardous range. I recall dropping my children to day care one morning when the smoke was visible, and I had myself experienced minor symptoms from exposure in the car on the way to the centre, and being surprised to see that babies were being cared for outdoors. After discussing my concerns with the educators, they quickly responded by bringing the children indoors, however during this conversation it became clear that the educators had received no formal guidance about how to respond to this situation. After raising my concerns, the centre undertook to develop a policy for addressing an air pollution hazard, however this was hindered by a lack of clear information from reputable sources. In fact, guidance to schools and early education centres regarding air pollution was delayed until such a time that larger population centres in Sydney and the Central Coast were affected by hazardous pollution levels. Even now, information on the NSW Health website lacks specific clear advice to educators regarding when to keep children indoors, and under what circumstances centres should be closed. The webpage "[Bushfire smoke information for childcare centres](#)" fails to clearly identify the

heightened risks for infants exposed to bushfire smoke, and would be improved by specifying clearly the types of behavioural and care modifications that should be undertaken by educators at each level on of Air Quality Index or where smoke is visible or able to be smelled.

Moving forwards, there are clearly lessons to be learned. The simplest and most important lesson is that climate change science needs to be a cornerstone of all policy decisions going forward, such that the risks to our community are not ignored, and that adequate preparations can be made for ongoing threats. These bushfires are unprecedented but not unexpected, climate scientists, and bushfire experts have been warning our community about these risks for years.

With respect to moderating the impacts of future bushfires, preparations need to start with a baseline reckoning of the risks that honestly takes into account the scientific evidence. This needs to be done at all levels of government, and a framework needs to be developed for businesses and community organisations to do the same.

Communities need to be supported with resources to help them plan for and respond to these risks proactively, rather than waiting until the fire is at our door to respond. The types of resources required could include

- Guidelines for managing air pollution risks in a range of work, educational and community settings
- Guidelines for managing extreme heat risks, noting that extreme heat events often occur simultaneously with periods of elevated bushfire risk
- Mental health first aid training
- Adequate funding for volunteer training and PPE for the RFS
- Planning and funding for safe evacuation zones
- Training for parents around how to support the mental health of children in emergency situations
- Rating of bushfire prone areas needs to be updated regularly as global heating continues, so that new areas of risk can be identified and assisted to prepare
- Communication mechanisms need to be developed to facilitate the sharing of important information in crisis situations. Over-reliance on the internet by government bodies resulted in those most affected by the fires being unable to access the information they needed to make safe decisions.

Our built environment needs to be managed with a regulatory framework that accounts for the changing and increasing risks due to global heating. With respect to fire, building standards should consider the physical risk of fire but also risks from poor air quality. It was evident during the crisis that variation in building methods resulted in a more or less well sealed building and therefore more or less capacity to manage air pollution hazards. Changing regulation to require buildings to be able to provide safe shelter from the new threats we are facing is important for residential housing, and essential for public spaces such as hospitals, schools and childcare centres.

Most importantly, mitigating the impacts of natural disasters without addressing the underlying drivers of human production of greenhouse gases is wholly inadequate. The reason for this is that measures to increase resilience and facilitate adaptation are limited in their capacity to respond to disaster events, which by their very nature are characterised by extreme risks and unpredictability. Urgent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is critical to stop these fires becoming more severe and frequent over the coming decades.

Gretchen Miller
Erskineville 2043
Son: 15.

My immediate family consists of two adults and a 15 year old boy. The summer of 2019/20 was a horrendous shock for us. Daily exposure to smoke meant we could not enjoy our usual summer exploits - sailing, walking, swimming. One day I went down to the water to try snorkelling, imagining that while it was hell above, I could at least encounter the fish below and gain some psychological relief. It was a nightmare. The water in Sydney was speckled with ash. The smoke was so low as to be breathed in by my snorkel - there was just no escape. The effect on us all was ultimately deeply depressing as we heard about the stories of fellow Australians losing homes, fleeing for their lives, the flames consuming our precious landscape... the animals... it was just horrendous. I worried and grieved for our wildlife.

I want our governments to take genuine action on climate change. I want them to step up and stop with the jobs for the boys. I want the corruption to end, and the perceived corruption to end. I want brave, bold action that makes me and my community, my immediate community and my larger community of Australians feel valued and honoured - in that we are heard and we are acted for in a decisive manner.

I want to stop feeling like I'm being ripped off and abused for the sake of a few mining magnates and jobs for the boys. I want community councils supported in their frontline action against climate change. I want forests protected and Reefs protected. I want water for environment to be guaranteed above the profits of cotton companies and big irrigators. I want real action, I want bipartisan action and I want it now.

Elizabeth Cowan
Kingston, in Canberra.

My son was born on 2 January at Canberra Hospital. This was during the peak of the bushfires & Canberra was shrouded in thick smoke. We were living in a townhouse at the time with no AC or air purifiers. Our house was uninhabitable during the 40+ degree days when we couldn't open the windows to let in a cool breeze at night due to the suffocating smoke.

We were discharged from hospital on 3 January - one of the worst weekends of the bushfires season. Instead of taking our new baby home we spent his first three nights in a hotel, taking refuge in the air conditioning to protect our tiny baby's lungs from the smoke. On his 2nd night the thickest smoke yet rolled in from the coast & the hotel's fire alarms were triggered. This kept happening throughout the night, until we eventually decided to head to our own house to try to get some sleep. Driving through inner Canberra felt like driving through the apocalypse. We couldn't see more than 5m or so in front of the car. We arrived home with our infant in a state of high stress, my partner & I both in tears of despair at the state of the world that we had brought our baby into. This was not the joyful home coming or introduction to the world that we wanted for our son. We spent that night on a mattress on our kitchen floor - the coolest room in the house - our bedroom being too hot to inhabit with the windows closed against the smoke.

Claire Cahalan
Darlinghurst, Sydney

We had our first child, a son, in February 2019, and he was 9 - 11 months old when the first major fires hit.

We spent the majority of summer in a state of anxiety - about his exposure to the smoke and what it was doing for his lungs, and his general health. We are renters in an old workers cottage in Sydney which due to age is impossible to seal off. This meant we were living with smoke haze in the house for weeks. Our portable aircon unit works by drawing in air from the outside and circulating it back in which meant that we had to make the choice between cooling the house on extreme heat days and inhaling smoke. Whilst we could wear masks if needed, there are no P2 masks available that would fit a baby, and regardless, he would have become agitated and pulled it off anyway.

We felt helpless, with no means of protecting our son from the smoke. This was magnified by our feelings of powerlessness, knowing that the predictions are that we will face more and more extreme climate events, and a deterioration of the quality of living for ourselves and our son if no immediate and urgent action is taken for climate change. I found my wellbeing was suffering - I was crying almost every day and felt this impacted on my last months off work with my son before returning from maternity leave. My husband and I felt (and feel) an incredible sense of grief, which was magnified by the denial of climate science by parts of the government and the delay in taking national and decisive action in response to the bushfires.

Anneliese Alexander
Holsworthy, 2173

It has been 4 months now since the worst of the bushfire season affected my family. Prior to that, we had two months of affects, including hazardous levels of smoke, risk of asthma, and children who were unable to play outside. Spring and early Summer is often the peak of fun for families, enjoying the sunshine, running around the playground in their summer uniforms at school, walking to swimming lessons and riding to the local shops. But we were unable to do any of this due to the smoke. **Never in my life do I recall children having to stay inside during their lunch and recess breaks due to hazardous smoke.** It was certainly nothing like my husband nor I had experienced growing up, but now, our children have experienced weeks of it.

We are no strangers to fire. We live in Holsworthy which was affected by a large fire through the Army base and the Royal National Park in 2018. Our children fled to their grandparent's house that night while my husband and I stayed behind. As a member of the RFS, he wanted to protect his property if it came to that. But this summer, there was no escaping the smoke. It was in our clothes. It was in our house. It seeped into the cracks and crevices of windows and doors. There was no avoiding it when you went outside. It was in our lungs. Our eyes stung all the time. Ash blew out of our nose. At times, it felt like it was in your blood. Research tells us, it probably was.

We had a trip planned this summer, a road trip to Tasmania which required us to drive down to Melbourne. We avoided the coast and went via Golbourn and Wangaratta. As we drove, the visibility was so poor that as we passed the wind turbines, we didn't see them until they were right in front of us. The heat and the smoke remained until we were at Melbourne, but we had blessed relief over the Christmas and New Year period in Tasmania. We did experience one day in Tasmania where fire flared up during an intense, but short lived storm, and once again, we were blanketed in smoke.

Unfortunately, our plan to return via the coast was abandoned and we once again went through the centre of both Victoria and NSW, where we experienced unsettling winds and temperatures of 46 degrees. Fire affected children and their families were stationed in the holiday parks we stayed at. Our experience was across three states in NSW, but we know that no state was unscathed by this bushfire season.

Our family is aware of the effect that climate change is having on the risk of fire. This summer was unlike any summer I have experienced, and I have many memories of bush fire growing up. **I remember bunkering down in my room as a 9 year old, fearful because burnt leaves were falling at my front door step. For my children, this happened so frequently over the summer, they are no longer fearful of it. Is this the kind of future they have to look forward to? Where fire and smoke and ash falling from the sky is a normal experience of summer? Without action on climate change, my fear is that it is.**

The climate is changing, we are all aware of that. As a member of the RFS, my husband tells me that the window in which they are able to perform hazard reductions is shrinking. Planned HR's don't go ahead a lot of the time due to unfavourable conditions, be it wind, rain, or an unstable atmosphere.

Is there something to be said for indigenous methods of burning the bush? Probably. Could we reduce the ability of local politicians to cancel planned HR's for political advantage? Perhaps. Could we put more money and resources into local brigades? Absolutely.

Could we also, as a nation, decide that the change in climate poses the greater risk, and has an even more obvious solution? Definitely. Without meaningful reductions in our burning of fossil fuels, we will continue to see the dangerous conditions we saw this summer, regardless of any other “solutions” discussed in this royal commission. Incentives for solar, greater uptake of wind and battery storage, investment into green hydrogen, and an electrification of the transport industry in the long run, will not only make the Summer of 2020 an unrepeated piece of Australia history, but will mark Australia as leaders in the transition to a cleaner and safer future for our children.

Dr Michelle Hamrosi
Eurobodalla

In the latter part of Spring 2019, I watched with disbelief as the Currowan fire gathered momentum to the north of my Shire (Eurobodalla). After weeks of burning to the north of us, it finally skipping the highway and sent its ferocious all consuming fire tendrils out our way in the early hours of Friday morning, the 31st of December. We were woken to an RFS phone call urging us to evacuate. Thinking back to this time, is like reflecting on a living nightmare. The nightmare didn't end there...it continued for weeks. Over the course of this summer period, we were evacuated three times. I have three young children and a husband who was an on call GP/anaesthetist for the local hospital during 2 of the state emergency periods. We evacuated while he went to sleep at the hospital. Needless to say, when we returned home from being evacuated each time we were grateful to find our home still standing and the kids grateful to be reunited with their Dad. Our property, up along the Deua River, however, was not so lucky. It was burnt through twice in different parts. Despite the rain, regeneration is slow. They say our bush is adapted to fires, but I'm not so sure the bush that remains, after 200 of colonisation degrading and plundering it, is that adaptable, especially to the type of fire we had - intensive, extremely hot, fires that produced their own storms and weather systems. Along many parts where native bush was present, only weeds have shot up, quickly filling what once was native grasses. We have a long road ahead to regeneration.

I work as a General Practitioner in our rural community. After the fires, we were closed for a week. We opened our practice on Monday 6th Jan 2020, still without power, phones or internet and operated a walk in clinic. I saw countless patients suffering the impacts of smoke exposure. Some which have not yet recovered now 4 months down the tract. I saw countless patients suffering from psychological trauma, anxiety, panic attack and/or grief from the loss of their homes or businesses or from the stressful impact of the emergency itself. Many too have not recovered and need much more support. Many children have been traumatised. There is very little mental health support available for them.

After the first time we returned home from evacuating, that night, around the dinner table, my 7-year-old daughter said, "I just want it to be normal again." I replied that I did too. Moments later, she was still looking pensively into the distance, her food going cold on her plate. I asked her what she was thinking. She replied: "I'm just imagining the future. Everything is dead and brown. There is no food. There is mountains of plastic and the air is filled with pollution."

I think about what she said. This was not our future, this was our current reality. A vast part of our shire's forests were black and smoldering, along with it hundreds of homes and properties. We had food shortages and half of our shires water was unsafe to drink. The beaches were unsafe to swim in. Our air was thick with hazardous pollutants from the fires. Months down the track, yes the smoke has gone and the beaches are finally clean again, we certainly have not returned to 'normal'. I don't want things to go back to normal. Normal wasn't working. Normal was destroying our environment and our health. We need to build back a better normal. A normal where we prioritise having clean air, clean water and a livable climate. These basic needs underpin our very survival.

As for me personally, I feel I am suffering a form of Pre Traumatic Stress Disorder - an underlying anxiety and fear for what is coming next. At times I feel deeply depressed. At other times I need to avoid reading any further bad news because my coping systems

are overwhelmed, my empathy running empty; the feeling of helplessness all consuming. Worrying about my children's future, for them living in a time of climate breakdown would see their hopes and dreams never to be realised, led to a period of insomnia. I think about the coming summer with trepidation. I check the weather and with no signs of rain for a week I feel despondent. I fear the bushfires are just the beginning. What we have just lived through has solidified a theoretical risk into a lived reality. It is a wake up call, if ever we had one. And 80% of Australians were directly or indirectly involved in the bushfire crisis. We are some of Australia's newest victims of climate change. And we want to see our leaders, who so far have ignored expert advice, decade after decade, acknowledge they have failed their duty of care to the Australia people. They must show a new resolve to never make that mistake again. Australia's future depends on it. We cannot afford to have another bushfire crisis like this again. For the majority of Australians who want to see climate action, for the growing number of people suffering eco-anxiety, seeing our leader act on the science would give us hope. Australia's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown us that our leaders can listen to the scientists and act in the best interests of all Australians; so we must do the same when it comes to the greatest public health crisis of the 21st century - the climate crisis.

A quote Poppy told a friend who also took this photo and shared her story in the Guardian...



“When the fires came I felt really scared of what might happen, I was really worried about Lulu (Poppy's little sister), I thought ash would come down and catch her clothes on fire. I decided if there is another fire we pack Lulu first and meet at the letterbox.”

Estelle Dollfus-Gates
Hornsby 2077
Family of 4 – children aged 9 (year 4) and 12 (year 7)

The dreadful 2019-2020 bushfire season affected my family in many ways. While our home was never in the path of the fire, we live in a bushfire prone area in the North-West of Sydney and the Gospers Mountain mega fire was not very far, as the crow flies. We suffered day after day of very poor air quality, from early November until the end of January.

For my children aged 9 and 12, it meant missing out on planned end of year school excursions (including a year 6 surfing day, which had been booked six months ahead), staying inside at school, missing out on regular sports (swimming training for example), not going out for walks in the neighbourhood, not playing outside.

Both my children suffer from asthma and while their asthma is well controlled, this summer meant they had to stay on their preventer medication rather than come off it for the summer season, which is what we normally do.

My daughter developed a cough in January, which is not going away despite increased preventer medication and investigation. While I cannot prove that the smoke is to blame, I believe the prolonged exposure was a factor.

The downplaying of the effect of the smoke on people's health by the Prime Minister in early December was very troubling. When checking the air quality daily online, I realised that the air quality monitoring in the Sydney basin could be improved greatly with more stations. The communication by governments on the effect of air quality was also poor and lacked clarity as many went on their normal daily routines despite hazardous air quality.

As a family we suffered from anxiety and bad sleep, we experienced grief at the loss of lives, livelihoods, the devastation brought onto our unique flora and fauna and places we cherish. We also wondered whether we could keep living here or whether we should move to a safer place.

I knew well before the fire season started in earnest that it would be a bad fire season (although what happened was well beyond my fears), I had read about it and was aware of how dry the landscape was, exacerbated by years of drought and higher than average temperatures. I am not an expert, simply an informed citizen.

The lack of preparedness by both State and Federal governments however is hard to comprehend given the warnings they had received - the reliance on volunteers for weeks on end, the fact that volunteers didn't have proper equipment at times (including protective breathing equipment, working trucks), the lack of air fire-fighting capabilities.

The Prime Minister repeatedly refused to meet with the ex-fire chiefs, who had warned from April 2019 of the coming danger and advocated for the purchase or lease of additional waterbombing aircraft. I would like to know what could have been saved if we had been better prepared, maybe the Gospers Mountain fire wouldn't have become the mega fire it became, maybe our unique Gondwana rainforests would have been saved?

We are forever grateful to the firefighters for the immense work they put in this summer and for their selfless courage, and I must mention how Commissioner Fitzsimmons was a steady shining light in these difficult times.

My final observation is that governments of all levels must listen to the science. Scientists are telling us bushfires will become increasingly common in the decades to come due to the climate emergency. Not only must we prepare our communities for these, increase our resilience but we must also cut our reliance on fossil fuels and move towards a low-carbon future as a matter of urgency.

I don't accept the summer we just had as "the new normal", this would mean we give up and we don't fight for a safe future for our children and I'm certainly not doing that.

Noël Skrzypczak
Greensborough, VIC, 3088

I am a mother of two boys - 4.5 years old and 3 years old. We, along with their father, spent 2 weeks in thick smoke when we visited family in Canberra over the Christmas break. Some mornings when my brother opened his front door, his smoke alarms went off because of how thick the bushfire smoke was. He has three boisterous primary school age children and after many weeks of living with constantly smokey air they continued to play outside as normal, despite the risk to their health. It was impossible to keep them indoors all the time with windows shut. For us arriving from Melbourne it was shocking to think they had had to put up with this terrible air quality for so long - I myself had trouble breathing for the first several hours when we arrived.

More recently, when I explained the changes we were going to have to make to our lives due to the COVID19 outbreak, my older son asked: "After the bushfires are over and Coronavirus is over will there be any more dangers?" From his completely innocent, trusting tone I knew that he felt that whatever dangers there were, we grown ups would do whatever we could to resolve them and to keep him, the child, safe. As I started to explain that there was an even bigger danger - climate change - my heart broke to think that we grown ups are NOT doing what we can to keep future generations safe.

The powers that be, that is the governments of the world and in particular our own successive governments, have let our children down by ignoring the facts about our environment. As a parent I feel absolute terror for my children. The level of intensity and extent of the recent bushfires were a result of an ever-warming climate, so there will be more fires like this and worse! The helplessness I feel is so deeply affecting that I can no longer find any justification for engaging in my life's work as a professional visual artist. I can't see any point in anything other than caring for my family and doing whatever I can to fight against further climate change.

For me the bush fires were a striking warning to all of us that if we don't dramatically change our priorities as a society nature will force us to change them anyway. It's not that we are unable to change. Australia's response to the COVID19 outbreak has shown me that we have the ability to change radically if the government shows strong leadership, provides clear guidelines and necessary support.

To discuss protective health measures such as providing respiratory equipment in schools, etc, seems irrelevant to me. We must address the root cause of our environmental imbalance. I would dearly love to be able to say to my children that we grown ups and the powers that be are doing EVERYTHING we can to reverse climate change, to fight the dangers that threaten to annihilate life on earth as we know it and to make bushfires like the ones we have just been through a thing of the past rather than the new normal.

Dr Meredith Levi
Northcote, 3070

In December, we headed to the far south coast of NSW for several weeks of camping and Airbnb stays in the area we had discovered and fallen in love with the year before. We were aware of the fires much further up the coast, but at that point it seemed very safe to travel. When we arrived at our campground, the effects of the drought were immediately obvious. The animals we saw were desperately hungry and the earth was parched. It was distressing.

A week later, we were forced to evacuate the house we were staying at near Tathra. We have two young children, then and 3 and the four of us ended up camping in our friend's apartment - 8 people in 2 bedrooms for New Years Eve. We were all seeking shelter in Merimbula where the sky was orange and the air was thick with smoke. The air quality was hazardous to say the least. We travelled through 600km of smoke to get back to Melbourne, via Canberra, The experience was deeply distressing for us all and we began 2020 feeling drained and exhausted.

Many people we know have similar, or worse stories. We join with thousands of others in asking the government to urgently address the climate crisis, to prevent repeats of the summer and worse.

Dr. Liisa Donald
Forestville, Sydney 2087

I live with my husband and my now 23 month old son. I wanted to write to let the government know how the bushfires affected our family.

Over the past months of the most recent bushfire season, checking the air quality index became part of our daily life. On the worst days, we woke up not needing to check it, with a headache and burning in our eyes and throat from the visible smoke outside our house, seeping in through every crevice. At times when we had no choice but to leave the house in these conditions, wearing a P2 mask became the norm, just to try and prevent the worst of these symptoms. I could not protect my child as these masks can't safely or effectively be worn by toddlers.

On the worst day of smoke, even with all our doors and windows shut with towels sealing the crevices, it was still uncomfortable to breathe. We held our breath as we ran to the car and drove 40 minutes to Macquarie Centre, the nearest indoor shopping centre, in the hope it would help protect us. The centre was only slightly better, with smoke still visible in the air and the smoke alarms eventually being triggered due to the hazardous conditions. It was after this day that our family made the decision to buy a \$700 air purifier, an extreme privilege, and one I know that many families with more limited financial means could not afford. When did breathing clean air become a privilege and not a right? Will we become like some other countries where this smoke is our new normal and the health of the population doesn't matter as long as business is booming?

We spent half the summer indoors, too worried about the effects of smoke on my child's developing lungs, to risk taking him outside. We won't fully understand the effect of this horrific exposure for years but smoking what was some days the equivalent of 16 cigarettes a day is already shown to be terrible for anyone's health, let alone a toddler. I watched family and friends, with poorer understanding of how dangerous the smoke was, continuing to take their children outside on these days. I watched childcare centers and schools let their kids run around and do heavy exercise outdoors in the smoke, even on the most hazardous days, because of the lack of direction and leadership from government to properly warn and educate centers and the public about the dangers of this smoke. I worried as friends and family with jobs outdoors had no choice but to face these health hazards every day or risk financial penalties and job loss.

I watched with heartbreak as friends and strangers had property threatened with fire, some losing their homes, their animals, their family. I watched as the body toll of native wildlife climbed to a staggering 480 million and will likely never recover, with irreparable damage to our biodiversity. I mourn these losses for our community and the future of our children.

The government was warned by former Fire and Rescue Commissioner NSW Greg Mullins about the huge risks of this bushfire season. Australia could have been much better prepared and the effects would likely not have been as disastrous; lives, property, forests and wildlife could have been saved. The government should be held responsible and should issue an apology.

I request that:

- an education campaign occurs about the dangers of this smoke inhalation, should a similar situation arise in future. The government was advised how dangerous the smoke was but did little to educate or protect the general public.

- government bodies give clear directives to educational institutions and workplaces about how to safely continue to operate and what activities should be ceased for the health and safety of their children, students and employees. These decisions should prioritize human safety, not economic interests.
- the protections on our forests be strengthened and the new government endorsed logging of these areas be ceased immediately to facilitate recovery of wildlife populations. Environmental protections from industrial concerns should be strengthened, not delayed, as is the governments current plan.
- the government listens to scientific consensus, not industrial concerns, to guide policy making around bushfire prevention in future.
- the government should acknowledge climate change as a key factor in the precipitation of these unprecedented but not unpredicted fires. I request they make a policy that all government decisions must document how they will contribute to climate change. If the effects are negative, permissions and funding should be reviewed.
- the government should fund renewable energy systems and new technologies that support this. They should facilitate and fund workers in non-renewable industries to move to more sustainable jobs. They should cease financial subsidies that prop up an unsustainable coal industry.
- those affected with loss of property or the lives of family members should receive ongoing government support until recovered
- firefighting funding should be significantly boosted and ongoing funding should be guaranteed to departments
- volunteer firefighters should receive adequate compensation in the case of service that lasts more than 3 days, with fewer exemptions to qualify for this compensation. They are risking their income, jobs and lives to provide a service to Australia.

All these actions should be taken as a matter of urgency before the next bushfire season.

Catriona Marie Patrick
Coromandel Valley, 5051

Ages of children at the time of the bushfires: 17yo, 6yo, 3yo (now 18, 6, 3)

We live in a bushy area, on a ridge top. It's opposite a bushfire refuge, so we are usually not too bothered by bushfires, but at a time with huge unprecedented fires, we were very unsettled. On each catastrophic day, we packed up our box and evacuated the area for the day. This is particularly hard with young kids, and late notice (not usually finding out until 4pm the day before). We have no family in Adelaide and lots of our friends live locally in the hills, so it feels awkward to invite ourselves and our kids to other people's houses - especially when everything is shut and it is too hot to be outside!

Over the Christmas period, I was watching the news closely as I have friends whose kids were in Mallacoota on a youth mission. Looking back, I think I was in shock for days, and couldn't bring myself to read or engage with normal activities. The only thing that came close to connecting with my experience then, and the only thing I could bring myself to read other than news reports, was the book of Lamentations in the Bible, where the prophet grieves over the destroyed city of Jerusalem.

My fear was exacerbated hugely by the fact that I think this is only the beginning of the impacts of climate change, and we are not taking sufficient steps to prevent summers like this becoming normal. The weight of grief for my children's futures was huge.

What is needed? Urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, taking climate change seriously, listening to science, wholesale changes to our current economic system in order to achieve these.

Anthea Griffiths
Ocean Grove, Victoria

I am writing this as a deeply concerned parent and a Paediatric Occupational Therapist. Not only did these fires impact us directly I was also able to observe the detrimental impact these fires had on my own child and other children's "occupations" as well as their health and wellbeing.

Firstly, as a parent to a 3 year who recently witnessed the terrifying experience of fleeing fires in Mallacoota. My husband is from this beautiful town and we were visiting for Christmas. When we arrived, we had spent the days before the fires hit the town enjoying its beauty, we listened and watched the abundance of wildlife all from my mother in laws backyard. We were so excited to see koalas, birds, kangaroos, frogs we even rescued a sugar glider and spent the afternoon at the wildlife shelter.

Everything happened so quickly from when we heard the fires were approaching Mallacoota. Fortunately, we were able to evacuate before the fires hit the town. Our experience was still awful and what no child should ever have to go through. After we left Mallacoota, we spent days confined to a motel room in Merimbula because the air was so thick with smoke it was too dangerous to go outside. We were also on high alert hearing how the town and how friends were coping along with monitoring how close the fires were to us and if we would have to evacuate again. We spent days after the fires hearing what so many of our friends went through with their children along with so many other families and it was distressing and unimaginable. They feared for their lives and the long-lasting impact of this is truly concerning.

Once it was safe, we then spent days on the road attempting to get back to our home in Ocean Grove, Victoria. My mother in-law spent a month with us while she waited to hear when it was safe for her to return to her home. She was one of the lucky ones as her home was saved but since seeing the devastation on her street and the rest of the town it has been extremely difficult for her. One of the first things she said to me when she returned was the wildlife had gone, she could no longer hear the birds, frogs, or animals moving in the bushes, it was silent. The impact this has had on the environment and flora and fauna is heartbreaking.

As an OT, I also witnessed firsthand the impact the fires had on my own child's occupations. My son was restricted to a small room or the car for days on end so the only thing he could do was use technology. He was barely able to play and at no times was he able to play outside. Upon returning home we were still unable to escape it as our hometown was also filled with smoke from the fires, so for days it was still too dangerous for my child to play or go outside. He started to cough frequently, and his eyes were red. What I witnessed was on such a small scale compared to so many other families but the impact that these fires have had on so many children's occupations, their mental and physical health was significant.

We cannot allow this to become Australia's "new normal" and risk a future of even more severe bushfires and drought This would lead to more loss of human life and ecosystems, severe food shortages, much of Australia being unliveable and our children being put in these traumatic situations that they should never have to experience. What I am asking the government to do to ensure our children and future generations are healthy and safe is:

- Listen to the science and act on the current climate crisis we are in.

- Commit Australia to net zero and 100% renewable energy by 2030.
- Allow no new fossil fuel projects.
- Prioritise a smooth and fair transitions for all workers and communities impacted by the climate crisis.
- Commence a program to rapidly drawdown carbon emissions using natural climate solutions including tree planting, regenerative agriculture, kelp forest regeneration and 'blue carbon'.



Jakub Dworniczak
Naremburn NSW 2065

My family is living in metropolitan Sydney, but despite not leaving very near directly affected areas we were impacted by the 2019-2020 bushfire season. We had my parents-in-law visiting us from Poland, with one person suffering (mild) asthma.

One of the first things we did after they arrived was to install an air quality monitoring application and inform them to check it every time before leaving home and during the day to reduce risks.

We planned to go for a short trip and vacation during Christmas - New Year break, we wanted to go to NSW South Coast, but we decided not to go when the situation deteriorated there.

We would have spent a couple thousands dollars on vacation supporting local businesses, but we ended up staying in Sydney and have not spent as much as usual. We also had to limit our time outside the apartment (limiting spending in cafes, restaurants, museums) when air quality was bad.

My pregnant wife got unwell a couple of times when air quality was bad, she has not visited the doctor, but had to rest - this impacted her productivity at work as well as forced us to return early from paradoxically an event organised by Polish migrant community to gather funds for bushfire victims!

Child care where my daughter was going was not sure when they should not allow children to go outside and how often they should check during the day.

NSW environment website was crashing during days with bad air quality - possibly because of too much load it could not handle.

So far as it was more inconvenience, productivity loss, some health risks, issues with accessing information about air quality - but it was financial loss for businesses we could not support as well as redirection of our charity donations to emergency funds instead of usual giving recipients.

In regards to potential recommendations I think it could be useful to have a fleet of large firefighting aircraft on the national level (despite firefighting being a state responsibility) and possibly using military C130 aircrafts with MAFFS (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modular_Airborne_FireFighting_System) as additional firefighting capability.

It would be better to provide accurate and up to date information about the air quality risks to child care providers.

Melissa Harrington
Moruya, NSW, 2537

I live in Moruya with my two young daughters, age (just turned) 8 and 3. In September last year, my husband and I separated, so the children and I were looking forward to having a big happy Christmas with my parents, siblings and nieces and nephew. This unfortunately was unable to happen, as they all live in Canberra and were unable to come down to visit with us. My daughter was very upset that our Christmas was mostly just us three, as we had been so looking forward to having a day full of family. It was sad for all of us, because it was not what we had planned, and Christmas is one of our favourite holidays.

Happily for us, my parents decided to come down a few days after Christmas to spend New Years with us and in their house they had just bought in Moruya. On New Years Eve, that happiness was quickly replaced with fear, when we heard the news of the fires coming down through Mogo and then the power went out. We had not planned for the fires to be a risk to us, as they were not close to us at all the previous day. **Because there was no power, we also had no internet for updates. We were able to use our mobile internet, until that went out too. So that left us with only the radio.** We packed as much of our precious things as we could into our car just in case we needed to evacuate. My daughter, 7 at the time, had a large duffle bag and was walking around the house packing all of her things into it that she couldn't bear losing. She was stressed and upset, thinking about what things she would need to leave behind because it would not fit in the car. I was also stressed and upset, and as the fire was just over the bridge, I didn't know if I should be staying in my home or going to the evacuation centre. There were reports on the radio that the evacuation centres were very full, so we stayed at home, but not knowing if we were safe.

When the news radio stations also went out, I was very scared. I had no idea if the fire was close or coming, if I should stay inside or evacuate with my kids. The only thing I cared about was keeping my children safe, but I didn't know how to do that with no information and with no way to even contact anybody. We went to my parents' house to spend the night, so at least we were together. We stayed up to see the New Year in, but with no tv to watch the fireworks, no way to ring or text our family and friends, and not even a countdown on the one radio station we were able to tune into, it was a pretty sad affair. After my children went to sleep, I went outside into the dark, and saw the orange glow in the distance. I could see a line of fire near the horizon and hoped with everything I had that it didn't come closer overnight.

The next day, I decided to take my kids to Canberra so we could stay at my parents' house. It took us 9 hours to get from Moruya to Belconnen. The air quality in Canberra was so bad we couldn't go outside, but at least we weren't at risk of being burnt down anymore. I heard on the news that the following weekend was predicted to be even worse than the day before, and then again the weekend after, so we stayed in Canberra for a week and a half, hoping we would have a home to come back to.

When we came back home, our house was okay. We still had to drive the long way home, but without all the extra traffic on the road, it wasn't as bad. I tried to get some normal back into the kids lives, and so we planned to go camping at Narooma. We had booked two nights, and the first night was awesome, even though it was incredibly windy! The next day it was still windy, and the sky began getting an orange tinge to it. I tried to remain calm and keep informed, I checked the Fires Near Me app regularly. The fire danger rating was severe, but the fire seemed to be up north of Moruya so I figured we were safe. We swam in the pool and then ice cream truck came. While we were eating

our ice creams, I got a phone call from the kids dad saying we should leave right now because the fire is coming. He came past and helped us quickly pack up our tent. I asked for a refund for the second night, but the park refused because I was choosing to leave, I hadn't been told to. We drove back to Tuross Head, where the kids Dad lives. **The drive was scary with dark orange sky looming west of Bodalla.** I was scared we would get stopped on the road and made to turn back, or worse, get stuck. After a stressful trip, we arrived at the Tuross Country Club. There were a few other families there who has evacuated also. My mum and sister were in Moruya, and they were thinking about staying to protect the property. Someone near me had the scanner app on their phone and were updating me with what was happening. I was worried about my mum and sister and trying to keep my kids calm and entertained. My mum eventually decided to leave, and the 15 minutes between her telling me she was leaving, and them arriving at Tuross Head Country Club were the scariest 15 minutes of my life! The sky was dark and orange, I couldn't tell where the fire was. I was worried they were going to get caught on the road. I was relieved when I saw their car pull into the carpark. The sky remained dark and I heard that the road just past Tuross Head turnoff had been closed because there was a fire at the highway at Turlinjah. We stayed the night at Tuross Head at my kids Dad's house. **My 7 year old was too scared to fall asleep. It was windy, and every time she heard the wind or a twig fall etc she cried out and asked if we were safe. I assured her we were safe, but in all honesty, I didn't know if we were.**

The next day we went home and our home was fine. The fire had come into my Mums backyard though, and we were told the fires had been there and had protected her home. Everything was covered in a layer of ash. At our home, everything was also covered in a layer of ash. The fires had come to the hill behind us, about 500m away.

When school went back, we heard that the first weekend was going to be bad again. I packed the car and went to my parents holiday house with the kids in Bawley Point. My 7 year old daughter was sad and didn't want to go, but I was scared. Both girls were upset over the weekend and wanted to go home. We came back after the danger had passed, and again our home was okay.

This Summer was the worst of my life, even though our house was always okay and so were we. The emotional stress I was under, being responsible for two young children on my own, and not knowing what I should do or if we were safe, was intense. **My 7 year old daughter had a friend over a couple of weeks after school went back in February, and I heard them playing 'evacuation'. They were collecting some toys and tying them together so they wouldn't get 'left behind and be burned'. They 'evacuated' to the cubby house outside and 'seeked shelter'. It was upsetting to hear.**

It is hard to explain the feeling of closing the door to your home, and not knowing if it will be there on your return. Deciding which things you can live without or can be replaced if they get burnt down. The eerie feeling of dread when the sky is orange and you don't know if you're safe. Or if your friends are safe. And you can't reach anyone to find out.

I want the government to have a better plan for the future. I want them to work with the indigenous people who live here and come up with a management plan. I want them to listen to the people, like experienced firefighters, and work with them to come up with a plan. I want them to have systems in place to keep people safe and informed on a real time basis if things go wrong again. I didn't use an evacuation centre, but I did hear that they weren't run incredibly well and the local council said it had nothing to do with them. I want our local council to be involved in that sort of emergency service to the public, and be held accountable to the people they are meant to be representing and

looking after. I want our local council to listen to the people who live here and hear their concerns and address them appropriately. I know the issue was raised about their bush fire plan being out of date before all this happened, and I can't help but wonder what would have happened differently if they had listened and addressed it before it was too late.

Kammy Cordner Hunt
Mansfield, Victoria

Thank you for the opportunity to tell our story.

We were not affected on this occasion, but the significant thing about this summer's bushfire season is how we came to realise that life is no longer the same - and feels unlikely to return to "normal".

We live in Mansfield, North East Victoria. Summertime for decades has meant a trip to the beach to sample Australia's other iconic delights. Since 2009 (Black Saturday - and following on from the High Country fires of Summer 06-07) we have continued the tradition but on tenterhooks, feeling nervous and unable to relax on holiday and often cutting it short.

During Dec 2019 to Jan 2020 these fears were heightened to a new level. Everyone I know was operating in a state of heightened anxiety as we viewed our homes and landscapes as dangerous enemies. We worked very hard and at considerable expense to add new sprinkler systems and other fire fighting arrangements to our infrastructure at home. We devised alternative arrangements for family members and pets, and even packed up treasures and shipped them off the farm.

The sprinklers are a valuable addition for future summers, but it is interesting that after living here for nearly 30 years, we find that now we fully expect a fire to happen, and that it will be catastrophic. Once we felt we might stay and fight, but Victoria's experience in February 2009 showed this is no longer viable - and you can feel it.

We used to have wet patches on the farm (natural springs) but they petered out 15 years ago and have never returned. Our dams don't fill over winter any more, and the ground is as hard as cement virtually all year round.

Ancient Gum trees, many hundreds of years old - probably over 1000 - are withering and dying in hard, dry ground. Turtles used to breed in the soft dam banks but these are now high and dry - and rock hard.

A neighbouring hill top had two feature trees on it, unusual for their altitude but fed by a secret underground source. First one died 3 years ago, then the other recently. Today I noticed their skeletons have fallen over, obliterating the local landmark forever.

Bird sounds have diminished, frog sounds are decimated. The pain of feeling the natural life retreating from around us - not just here but across the region - is depressing. It makes me feel guilty on behalf of us all, for what we have done to this land's fragile balance. The land was able to nurture us before - it has little to give now.

Most of all, the sense that this iconic, enduring Australian Landscape is now certainly at risk of severe firestorms - as are those of us who live in it - was almost overwhelming during the summer fire season.

We weren't hit this year, but we will be - it cannot be avoided, it will happen at some point. It makes you wonder if it is worth staying. Why not move to somewhere where we don't have to spend 3 to 4 months of the year in fear for our safety?

We cannot continue like this. The whole world's actions are contributing to Australia's loss of health. We will all suffer for this. We need to stand up and act, and ask that the

rest of the world acts. Making money is only one part of the equation delivering sustainable life. The equation doesn't add up any more.

Thank you for reading my story.

Amy, Danny, Evie (now 6 years) and Bertie (now 6 months) Jowers Blain
Canberra, ACT, Ainslie, 2602

Bertie is 6 months old; in his short life they've lived through unprecedented bushfires, an epic dust storm, months of being stuck inside because of the smoke, and now because of Covid19. This was far from the world and life I imagined for them. Only the global response to Covid19 has given me a glimmer of hope there is a brighter future.

Evie, my 6 year old took two months to be ok with going into a room, or going downstairs by herself, and as long to be ok in her own bed without us. That's because of the fires and then the smoke that kept her inside for months. We slept all together in our clothes on New Year's Eve because we needed to be prepared for the sirens and a slow convoy to Narooma from Bermagui. And then we all needed to sleep in the same room when we got back to Canberra because we only had one air purifier to manage the toxic smoke that still seeped into our sealed home.

2020 has been filled with unimaginable horror, full of pressing anxiety for us as parents and trying to minimise the very real disasters that our children are living through.

New Year's Eve 2020 should have been a beautiful day for our family down at the coast. We go every year. This year changed that.

Why was it so dark outside? It was 7 in the morning. Why was it so dark?" It was summer, it was 7am; it shouldn't look like the dead of night.

Fires travelled fast overnight and were headed our way. We didn't have a plan. We'd never needed one before. The road back to Canberra was shut.

The sky brightened and we we're relieved, except then it was bright red and we could hear thunder. It was hard to stay calm. What did we need for a 6 year old and 10-week-old when we evacuate? How long would it take for the fires to reach us? How close would they get? When would they burn out? How could we keep our kids safe? We had no way of knowing what was going to happen.

And then it went pitch black again. It was 9am. The fires were close enough that ash was falling from the black sky, we evacuated to the beach. It felt post-apocalyptic. We were terrified. We could see the glow of fire and it wasn't far enough away. But it was still cool, so we weren't in danger. The wind picked up, ash was blowing everywhere and then it was suddenly daylight and our relief was palpable.

The water in Bermagui was contaminated, the filtration plant was fire damaged, the power went and then the signal, the supermarket was out of bottled water. We had no way of contacting people or finding out what was happening, we just had to wait. We packed up the car ready to leave as soon as we could. We bought disposable nappies because we couldn't properly wash and dry modern cloth ones and took a bottle of water. We were struck by how futile our individual action and commitment to save the planet looked in the face of devastating bush fires.

Our hearts broke when our 6 year old said "This is the worst day of my life" (ours too), all she wanted for 2020 was for there to be no more fires.

New Year's Day 2020: We abandon our 10-day coast holiday and head back to Canberra as soon as the road opened. We drove on a busy road back through smoke-filled coastline. There was nowhere without smoke in a 300km stretch, there was a fire crew

putting out fires on recently burnt land. Cooma was choking on smoke; it was so thick it was an impenetrable fog.

Canberra started 2020 with the worst air quality in the world. The air we were breathing was hazardous; well above dangerous levels. Back home in Canberra our 6 year old had to get ash out of her eye and we cleaned ash from our newborn's ears.

Our 6 year old's bedroom was smoky. We were quarantined in the house for the first time this year.

The new year started with masking taping the house, smoke-proofing our home and how we'd live with the smoke predicted to last for months. **Facemasks can't be used on children because it can cause more harm to their developing respiratory functions; there was short supply anyway in Canberra and the mail was cancelled because it was too dangerous for posties to do their job.** We wanted to escape the smoke but galleries and activities for kids were closed because of the smoke too. We escaped to Sydney because their air quality was dangerous, not hazardous and we wanted to get an air purifier and Canberra stores had extensive waiting lists. We attempted another holiday, escaping in a campervan and drove away from the fires but still encountered an epic dust storm, but luckily missed the damaging hailstorm back in Canberra.

The ACT declared a state of alert; so we made our fire plan and got ready. We prepared for fires hitting and losing power, losing connection, coping without services and supplies. My midnight pre-bed and early morning routine included checking the latest alerts on Emergency Services ACT social media and Air Quality data to see if we'd be able to go out. Australia was a country on its knees. If it wasn't burning, it was smoke-filled. Schools were advised to make judgements on the air quality based on what they could see and smell – and still let children out and held assemblies outside when you could see and smell smoke. And those of us lucky enough to have air purifiers know that the air can be hazardous even when you can't see and smell the smoke and keeping the smoke out is really difficult, virtually impossible in a school setting. So we worried about sending our 6 year old to school and whether they'd be playing outside and how much damage it would cause her longer term.

The ACT Government communications, Chief Minister Andrew Barr and Emergency Commissioner Georgeina Wheelan, were incredible, keeping the community informed and reassured throughout the state of alert and state of emergency. The ACT has also declared a climate change emergency and is actively working towards emission reductions. A stark contrast to the Federal government and Prime Minister constantly denying the impact of climate change on the bushfires, and talking about the cricket. The Prime Minister's physical absence from the country was poor leadership, which barely improved on his return with insensitive handling of people who had experienced trauma. **The Federal government came across as uncaring, unsupportive, disinterested and irresponsible. A government that was happy to spread misinformation about hazard reduction and back burning and dismiss any discussion on climate change action.** We're trying to keep our children safe and making choices between a rock and a hard place. We saw nothing compared to those that hunkered down on beaches who felt the fire's heat on their faces. We weren't in boats on the water escaping the flames. We didn't stare fire in the face. And we were horrified. The trauma that Australians experienced will run deep; it has run deep. Our 6 year old always has a hint of panic in her voice, "Is that fire?" if she even sees a picture with a flame. She says she hates red, orange and yellow, because they're the colour of fire.

As parents we feel hopelessly powerless. 2020 was when we felt our country on fire,

when we felt scared. It was hell on earth. We can't bear that we might not do enough, soon enough, to protect our children's future.

We don't know how we build 'resilience' in our children if this becomes their new normal. We'll teach them how to shelter from fire and that they need an N95 facemask to protect them from smoke, how to seal their house and how to purify the air. But we can't reassure them that they will be safe, that their future will be habitable and that breaks our heart. We're seeing now with Covid19 that we can shut the world down just like that. We can see the impact that it has on the environment and how it's improving the living conditions outside of our homes. It can be done. When we emerge from this third crisis for 2020, hoping it's the last disaster we have to face this year, we need to look at how we build a better future than the one we were heading for. Because it was a living nightmare, just as, if not more terrifying, as Covid19.

Kathryn McCarthy
Broulee, NSW 2537 (Far South Coast)
I have two daughters, aged 4 and 7

For folks on the NSW Far South Coast, 2020 can be summed up in one phrase: *living in a state of emergency*.

COVID-19 has moved the conversation on from our horrific black summer of bushfires, but in the Eurobodalla Shire, we have not forgotten the most devastating bushfire season in Australia's history. We cannot shake the memories of the menacing blazes that bore down upon our villages. We have not forgotten fearing for our safety; for the lives of our loved ones.

Eighty percent of our shire – a favoured holiday destination for Canberrans, known for its beautiful beaches and laid-back living – was burnt, and irreversibly altered. Birdsong has stopped, wildlife has vanished. Those areas of the forest where we used to look for bounding kangaroos are still, black and silent. In our shire alone, three people lost their lives, more than 500 homes were destroyed and almost 300 damaged.

But the changes brought by the fires go far beyond the devastating loss of our forests, animals and property. We've had months of living in either grim anticipation (while inhaling bushfire smoke for several weeks); life-threatening emergency; service-scarce recovery; or a traumatic recall of all of the aforementioned. This has taken a significant toll on the mental health of our community members, who have now been shunted into the next emergency: the threat of Coronavirus (and associated lockdowns).

I still weep as I drive through our blackened forests, but not just for our present. I weep with a crushing fear for my daughters' future. Relentless fires, blackened forests, bone-dry land and villages destroyed were stuff of nightmares that existed inside my head, but early in 2020, they could be seen, smelt and touched. This reality – our reality – is a symptom of a warming planet.

My husband, my daughters and I weren't at home when the fire front approached our village on New Year's Eve – we'd left for Victoria a few days earlier and once fire engulfed the region, we couldn't return. On that heartbreaking final day of 2019, our friends and family watched the sky turn red as the Currowan fire bore down on our village. We anxiously awaited news that our loved ones were safe; that our home was still standing. A last-minute change in wind direction saved most of our village that day, but the surrounding villages were not so lucky. Fire ripped through nearby Mogo, Rosedale and through several areas of Batemans Bay, including my sister-in-law's suburb.

After a brief reprieve, fire conditions again worsened. My husband returned to support his family and defend our home, and theirs. As our friends and family went for days without power or communications, with food and fuel supplies cut, my daughters and I awaited news as the fires once again approached our village (that was intermittently without a water supply and blanketed in smoke).

We returned home to a new reality. To a community still on high alert as fires blazed to the west. To our loved ones recalling the trauma of fire threatening their families' lives. To news of children suffering from nightmares of fire approaching. To distraught local growers who lost everything. To a tourism trade destroyed; beaches covered in ash; air thick with smoke. In the weeks that followed we had two more days of severe fire threat,

one of which resulted in more loss of life and property in nearby Moruya. Our terrified friends again fled for their lives.

As a family, we're grateful that our home's intact and our loved ones are safe. And the crisis has brought out the best in humanity – the love and support shown by locals, and folks concerned from afar, has been truly incredible. But our collective psyche is yet to recover.

In the wake of the fires, I have personally experienced mental health impacts in the form of anxiety and depression. Many of my friends have dealt with similar challenges. My youngest daughter (aged 4) developed extreme separation anxiety and has struggled emotionally, her mental state mirroring my own. She developed a severe chest infection during February, and our doctor's assessment was that smoke inhalation likely played a part. In the weeks following the fires, community members greeted each other with tears and stories of trauma. Whether at the local farmers' markets, at community events or at the school gate, we held each other through tearful recollections of fleeing from the flames.

Scientists agree that 1.1 degree of warming (global average) contributed to Australia's worst ever drought, and that the drought created the conditions for the unprecedented fires. Emergency experts warned Prime Minister Scott Morrison of the impending disaster, but he refused to meet with them and would not listen. As fires raged up and down the East Coast, and approached our communities, Mr Morrison insisted they were 'normal' and would run their course. He himself, and senior members of his government, lashed out at those suggesting it was important to discuss the role that climate change had played.

After months minimising the bushfire emergency, Mr Morrison was – in the face of irrefutable expert assessment – compelled to talk about the accepted links between climate change, the drought and the fires. So he pivoted his messaging, urging communities like ours to accept that the 2019/20 bushfire season will be our new normal. He signalled the need to 'prepare practically' for 'longer, hotter, drier summers'. He flagged 'resilience and adaptation' as top priorities, over the need for stronger mitigation measures.

The mental anguish in relation to the fires is multifaceted, but I can honestly say that the greatest mental strain has come from the obfuscation around climate issues from all levels of government (local, state and particularly, federal). At every turn, our leaders have downplayed, minimised or outright denied the role climate change has played in this disaster – leading to insufficient crisis planning, an insufficient crisis response and a wholly insufficient approach to mitigating climate change. Our leaders, and particularly Mr Morrison, have gaslighted the Australian public, and continue to do so. For those of us who have seen communities destroyed by fire, and who are anxious about the future safety of our children, this has severely impacted our mental health.

Australia's (so far) successful COVID-19 response has been underpinned by an apolitical approach, and one closely aligned to the recommendations of scientists. The risks of the virus have been appropriately acknowledged by (most) leaders and the global shutdown has shown that swift, widespread social and economic change – for the good of public health and safety – is possible. Experts agree that a similar approach to mitigating climate change must be taken. This is our best chance of reducing the likelihood of catastrophic bushfire seasons in the future.

Our elected representatives have a duty to protect the physical and mental wellbeing of their constituents, by reducing the risk of catastrophic fire seasons and appropriately planning to minimise impacts. I'd like to see this happen in the following ways:

1. Implementation of urgent emissions reductions measures in line with scientific recommendations:

- [The Australian Academy of Science recommended](#) a holistic response to the bushfire crisis, highlighting the need to strengthen Australia's climate ambition.
- The UN Environment Program [has confirmed](#) that global emissions must reduce by 7.6 percent every year for a decade to keep warming to safe levels (below 1.5C).
- The federal government continues to insist Australia is 'doing its bit' , yet assessments show [we won't hit our 2020 emissions reduction target until 2030](#). And [analysis](#) of the government's own projections show the Department of Environment currently expects no emissions reduction progress this coming decade. As a result, Australia's climate policies were [ranked last among 57 nations](#).
- Despite this, the federal government's approach to COVID-19 recovery appears to rebuke the idea of a green recovery – it includes the expansion of Australia's gas sector (despite evidence that the contribution to warming from gas as industrial fuel [has been underestimated](#)) and relaxing regulations in the oil sector, including already weak fuel standards.
- Governments of all levels should put in place policy measures to urgently implement the emissions reductions solutions already available:
 - a. Transition to renewable energy and improve energy efficiency
 - b. Shift transport systems to shared and electric vehicles
 - c. Prioritise a fair transition for those impacted by the climate crisis (including fossil fuel communities and Indigenous communities)
 - d. Commence rapid drawdown of emissions using natural climate solutions
 - e. Develop and implement programs to end food waste

2. Undertaking crisis/disaster planning under the guidance of experts:

- Governments of all levels should undertake strategic crisis planning with emergency experts to develop plans for catastrophic fire seasons. This could include:
 - Military deployment plans;
 - Expansion of firefighting aircraft capabilities;
 - Plans for better national coordination;
 - Appropriate funding of fire services (including the RFS) and National Parks.
- State and territory governments should develop bushfire preparedness/ response plans for schools, to ensure a consistent response. This could include:
 - Planning for proactive communication to parents;
 - Development of smoke management strategies, including clarity on safe AQI levels for school activities;
 - Planning for mental health support for families during community crises.
- Federal, state and local governments should coordinate to develop policy measures to support more self-sufficient communities. This could include:
 - Contingency planning/heatwave planning for vulnerable community members (continuity planning re access to health and other services);
 - Support for widespread uptake of renewable energy systems and electric vehicles (would ensure continuity of energy supply and transport when fossil fuel-based energy infrastructure and fuel supplies are impacted by bushfires);

- Measures to support the development of local food economies (would ensure continuity of food supply when transport routes are cut due to bushfires).

3. Appropriate funding of our national broadcaster:

- During the Far South Coast fires, power and internet access was cut or unreliable for long periods (weeks). At times, our only source of emergency information was ABC Emergency (sometimes via battery-powered transistor radio).
- Yet, our federal government has systematically cut funding to the ABC and continues to undermine its vital role as Australia's national broadcaster, via inquiries/reviews, proposed changes to the ABC's charter, complaints and other measures. In 2018, the Liberal Federal Council also voted to privatise the ABC.
- Those of us in bushfire-affected communities have relied on the ABC for information that was literally life-saving. Our national broadcaster and its staff must be protected.

Thank you for considering my story and submission.

Nathalie Swainston
Moss Vale NSW 2577

I - along with my husband and our two young children - am a resident of Moss Vale in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. Like so many others, we had a traumatic and challenging summer, having to navigate toxic smoke, extreme heat and the threat of fires to our North (the Green Wattle Creek fire) and South (The Morton and Currawon fires).

Trying to explain this situation to a toddler was heartbreaking. Naturally, he couldn't understand why he couldn't go outside, why his father was wearing a mask every time he went to clear debris in the gutters and garden, why we had bags packed by the door, that he wasn't allowed to touch, why he was kept home from daycare and his friends on really smoky or high danger days, or why we all had to sleep in the one room with the air purifier through so much of January. The evening of the fourth of January was particularly harrowing, with erratic winds and extreme heat bringing embers all around our house. My husband and I were glued to ABC radio and the RFS sites waiting for notification that we should evacuate, incredulous that our relatively suburban area of the Highlands was even at risk. Luckily, we were spared. But friends, and many others in our community were not. Their pain is real; it is ongoing; and fear for the summers to come has become a permanent fixture.

To be honest, it is unacceptable to me that the summer we just lived through should be the standard he my three-year old expects from the coming Summers of his childhood - and I do not accept that we should settle for this as normal. I feel a great deal of anger towards past and current governments that have consistently ignored advice and evidence from national and global experts on extreme weather, emergency services requirements and the worsening climate crisis. As the bushfires unfolded, the effect of politicians dismissing or downplaying the links between climate change and the bushfires, ignoring the advice of experts, and belittling the very real concerns of countless young people and their parents who were terrified and crying out for real action of climate change in order to prevent more and more summers like this was truly damaging - both to the mental health of the community and on people's trust in our political leaders. Were it not for the (embarrassingly underfunded) emergency services and their leadership,

Unfortunately, we know that even if we are to dramatically reduce our emissions and implement aggressive climate policies, there are still likely to be more horrific Summers ahead - as a certain amount of climate change is already baked in from our past actions. However, in an effort to turn things around as quickly as possible and ensure that our children have at least some summers that resemble the ones we were lucky enough to have, I want to see our political leaders listening to evidence and experts, and supporting affected communities and citizens not just with emergency relief, but with policies that will reduce the likelihood of these fires reoccurring again and again. I want to see our emergency services properly funded and resourced. And I want to see our political leaders respond to affected communities with empathy, and action. Not political spin.

Julia Jones
North Fremantle, 6159
Ages of children 3, 7 and 10.

We missed Christmas with our family due to road closures. We were driving from Perth to Melbourne for Christmas and to catch up for lost time we drove over 1000km on Christmas day to arrive that night, and missed the family celebrations. We were also severely affected by smoke, with one of my children vomiting once because the smoke was so bad, and we had to cancel many outings and stay home over most of our holidays.

Trees play an important role in increasing water security and therefore reducing fire risk. Trees store and recycle rainfall, retaining water when it is most abundant and gradually releasing it back into the atmosphere during times of scarcity. Trees are an integral part of water retention in the landscape, stabilising the extremes of both floods and droughts, influencing overall rainfall patterns to be more steady, consistent and extend further inland.

New forests will help to steady rainfall and extend it further inland. For our most drought stricken and fire prone areas, an increase in surrounding tree cover will help to ease these burdens. These new forests, if maintained through routine burns in accordance with indigenous customs, will help to stabilise the climate, both locally and globally for generations to come.

Minimise the impacts of future bushfires to you and your children (e.g. improve resilience / health & safety measures / climate action (i.e. emissions reduction) / etc.)?

More funding to the ABC. They are the most trusted media in Australia and have to provide hundreds more emergency broadcasts during crises, and with more devastating bushfires to come ABC will need increased funding in order to keep the public safe and informed.

Please include smoke ratings with all emergency warning broadcasts. The public need to be educated on the risks of smoke inhalation and how to mitigate those risks - especially for vulnerable populations including daycares. We should also keep enough masks for coming emergencies so Australians can easily access these masks when needed. We used the private app "Air Tracker" once we understood the risks of smoke inhalation but there were no warnings on the ABC or government websites telling us about smoke levels. Smoke level predictions and warnings should form part of our official alert system.

Eve White
Blackmans Bay, Tasmania

As a Hobart resident I was lucky not to be personally impacted by the 2019 bushfires, but seeing the devastation in other states and having experienced similar terrifying conditions in Tasmania the previous summer makes me incredibly anxious about the future for my children (aged 8 and 5) in worsening fire conditions.

I thought that the fires might represent a turning point in our response to climate change, an opportunity to come up with a bi-partisan approach to phasing our fossil fuels and transitioning to renewables. I am disappointed that the government hasn't taken this opportunity to take this path.

Hannah Green
Nightcliff, Northern Territory, 0810

The last bushfire season was absolutely devastating and scary for myself and my family. I have a one year old son and this is not what I want his future to look like. Although the Northern Territory where we live was not catastrophically affected like Victoria and NSW, there were areas that experienced fires that residents had never seen before, and had to evacuate. For example, places such as Dundee and Gunn point.

Fires are a very normal part of dry season here in the Territory. They are less likely in wet season, and it was very uncommon to see fires of that extent in wet season. This alone is concerning enough. However, my hometown is Portland Victoria and I was deeply concerned about the fire activity around that area. My brother in law is a fire fighter down there, he can tell you from first hand experience those fires were not normal. He was unable to spend Christmas with the family and his children due to fighting fires.

The firsthand knowledge of fire fighters needs to be taken seriously, including that of ex fire chief Greg Mullins and others. It is offensive to them and all others serving to protect our country to ignore their advice and downplay the seriousness of the unprecedented bushfire crisis which was fuelled by climate change. We know climate change is happening; scientists have also made it quite clear. It is time to use the solutions that are readily available to us. My son's future depends on it.

Australia must commit to net zero emissions and 100% renewable energy by 2030. In the current coronavirus/ economical crisis this would also be beneficial as it makes power more cost effective for all involved. It would also provide a new industry for employment, which is much more safer for its workers, the environment, and community.

Considering the predictions of an increase of emissions by up to 67% because of the bushfires, we need to put a stop to Adani, fracking in the NT, and prevent any new fossil fuel projects from happening. Fracking in the NT has been predicted to produce the equivalent of Australia's total emissions for a whole year. There is nothing in place to offset these emissions. This cannot go ahead if we are to reduce our emissions and prevent warming which would be even more catastrophic for future fire seasons.

The time to act for our children and future generations is now.

Marie Carvolth
Currumbin, QLD 4223
Mother of 6yo boy.

The bushfire summer of 2019-2020 was an extremely distressing period for our family, despite us being 30km from the nearest fire. My home on the Gold Coast was shrouded in smoke throughout September 2019, and again across the Christmas/ New Year period. Some days, visibility was reduced to under 5km; our eyes stung and chests hurt, and we had to keep all windows closed even on very hot days. Everything in our home became covered with a film of ash.

The emotional turmoil was intense - everyone knew someone who was affected by the fires. My friend's workplace burnt down, rendering her and 80 others instantly - and still - unemployed. Her home in Lower Beechmont was evacuated twice, with the fires reaching their back fence on one occasion. We were on standby for their family of two parents, two young children and two grandparents to take refuge at our house in the middle of the night. The only pictures their pre-school children drew for months afterwards were drawings of burning homes. Their conversations with playmates were dominated by clear indicators of stress and lost innocence - "so, did your house burn down last night?" My son's kindergarten teachers tried to help the children process the bushfires through drawings and stories. We all tried to reassure our children that it would be OK, but they could see and breathe the smoke and feel the stress and grief all around them. Some of my friends' children suffered nightmares and bedwetting for months. I felt shrouded in grief and anger for the entire summer; bushfires and the government's lack of response dominated the conversations of everyone I spoke to from near and far, and I dread what next summer will bring.

These bushfires were unprecedented. Climate and firefighting experts agree that they were fuelled by climate change. I expect our governments to fully acknowledge the science, and to acknowledge their responsibilities to protect Australians from these bushfires becoming the new normal. We must not merely adapt to this hellish new summer scenario. These hellish situations are avoidable if our governments genuinely and conscientiously commit to reducing climate change. Our governments should be rapidly implementing all available solutions, including a rapid and fair transition to renewable energy and electric vehicles, drawdown of carbon through tree planting, blue carbon and stopping land clearing, and refusing approval to any projects that do not meet the Paris Agreement goals of staying below 1.5 degrees C.

My son and every Australian deserves a safe climate future, and I expect my government to put the interests of its citizens before their own interests and those of vested corporations.

Lucy Paplinska
Preston, Vic 3072

My 11 year old son Evan O'Connor had the following words to say to be added to the bushfire royal commission

"I am very worried about my future and the future of our planet. This summer I've been very worried about people and animals affected by bushfires and climate change. It was really scary when people had to hide indoors when the air was poisonous and I couldn't go outside and play.

"I would like the government to get rid of coal and fossil fuels and introduce more renewable energy. I want them to act before it's too late."

My name is Lucy and Evan is one of two of my kids - my second son is 4 and is named Kasper.

Eve Elliott-Smith
Qld 4870
Two daughters aged 2 and 4

The bushfire crisis of 2019/2020 scarred Australia's national psyche and affected my family directly, despite us being well removed geographically from where the fires occurred.

Watching the suffering unfolding through social and mainstream media caused significant emotional harm. Friends of mine lost sleep, were extremely teary and felt very stressed during this time, not just as a result of the awful effects of the fires themselves but due to what their occurrence predicts for the future and the unwillingness of our Government to take immediate action on Climate Change.

My family and I travelled to Launceston to spend a lovely Christmas with our family there and were housebound on two occasions as a result of the overwhelming smoke from mainland fires, which engulfed the city when the wind conditions favoured such an occurrence. My daughter suffers from Asthma which has resulted in several hospital admissions, including a stint in ICU. It is easy to imagine the angst surrounding a concern that air quality into the future could be anything like what we experienced in Launceston around Christmas time.

We live in Far North Queensland, an area that relies heavily on tourism to our precious Great Barrier Reef. It was evident to me, from the contacts I received from far-flung acquaintances, that people believed the whole of Australia was on fire. This, along with their absolute disbelief in our Government's dogged unwillingness to acknowledge the relationship between Climate Change and the fires has tarnished Australia's international brand. I believe, that notwithstanding the Covid-19 Crisis, Australia would have experienced a significant drop in Tourism in the summer of 2021/22 as a direct result of the international perception that Australia could be ablaze again at any moment and that we are not playing our role in the international community to curb the effects of Climate Change. This would effect the FNQ economy and therefore my family directly.

The magnitude of these bushfires should not be considered a surprise. Our region is suffering a current, severe though less visible disaster as I write this; the third mass coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef in five years. The significance of this absolutely can not be underestimated. Climate Scientists have predicted that such frequent bleaching would not occur until circa 2050. This, along with the bushfires, which have been predicted by Climate Scientists as becoming a regular occurrence in the absence of "rapid, far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure and industrial systems" indicate unequivocally that the Australian Government needs to take immediate and drastic action to adjust policy in order to move towards a safe future for our children. Solutions such as ceasing all new fossil fuel projects, a rapid transition to renewable energy, ecosystem renewal, regenerative farming practices, sustainable urban design etc etc should be implemented immediately as a method of reducing the possibility of a recurrence of this year's bushfire season. The immediate, practical response to such an emergency will be much less onerous if we get to the root cause of the problem, which is Climate Change.

It is unfathomable to me, that in the face of such blatant and unequivocal real-life evidence of the effects of Climate Change, as a society, we persist in pursuing business as usual, unending economic growth and, particularly, fossil fuels. We owe it to our children to take whatever action is required to provide them with a liveable future.

Ursula Hogben
Mosman 2088
Primary school aged children

My family lives in Sydney, we often travel to the South Coast in school holidays, we were not able to go, and we understand that the South Coast was badly affected by loss of tourism revenue. We have friends who live and work in the South Coast, and who suffered greatly in the fires. They felt very under-prepared for the speed and ferocity of the fires. Several friends' houses were in the path of fires, and were saved by firefighters putting out or diverting those fires. All of them suffered sleeplessness and anxiety for some time after the fires.

Like many people across Australia, we were directly affected by the smoke from the fires. In Sydney, there were 28 days where the air quality was hazardous, 21 where it was very poor, and 32 where it was poor. This is 81 days in total in 2019. This is nearly 3 months, or one-quarter of the year. This is nearly 5 times the effects compared to 2018 where there were 18 days in total (hazardous, very poor and poor) (Source: NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment). **The smoke affected people who work outside and children's ability to play outside and do sport. it affected people's ability to earn their livelihood, and it affected our physical and mental health.** Being at risk if we are outside for work, or doing outdoor sport or play is mentally and physically debilitating. Harmful smoke affects the economy, and affects physical and mental well-being.

I ask the government to please do the following for the economy and biosphere - human, animal and plant life in Australia:

1. Listen to and work with land management, fire and health experts to (i) reduce the risk of catastrophic fires affecting Australia in the future and (ii) manage the fires better once they start, to keep them contained, and put them out quicker.
2. **Rebuild property in a more resilient way. This includes where buildings and infrastructure are located, what they are made from, and how these are built. We need more fire-resilient buildings, and we need localised water, food and energy sources.**
3. Most importantly, the fires were exacerbated by climate change and we need to urgently reduce the causes of climate change, including urgently reduce Australia's fossil-fuel emissions (in Australia and from exported coal). We need a net zero emissions target, we need plans on how we will achieve this, and we need action. We need to swiftly transition from mining and burning and/or exporting fossil-fuels, to use our abundant renewable resources for renewable energy production. We have abundant land, wind, sun, coastline and internal water, for renewable energy including solar, wind and wave energy and pumped hydro storage. We also have high-quality education and expertise including in science, innovation and commercialization. Australia has the renewable resources we need, and we have the technology we need, to reach net zero emissions. Australia has the potential to be a leader in developing renewable energy, and an economic superpower as the world transitions to renewable energy.

The steps that Australia needs to take, including policy and expenditure, are well-researched and set out in the following, among other leading reports:

1. Ross Garnaut's book, Superpower
2. PWC, The Future of Energy Report
3. ClimateWorks, Decarbonisation Futures report

Elliat Rich
East Side, Alice Springs
Mother to three children; 10, 6 and 3.

We left Alice Springs for our summer school holidays, two days later we saw the smoke haze on the horizon, we were near Hay in Western NSW. Once we'd entered the smoke it only got thicker, moving from something seen to something we could smell, then feel in our lungs, then it embedded in our hair, clothes and skin. When we got to Bathurst to stay with family we began checking in with relatives who were on the South coast. It was terrifying to hear the news and correlate that with where people were. The end of 2019 was terrifying; to think about people we loved being in danger, sorrowful; to think of the bush and animals being burnt, and despairing; to know the fire was made so much worse due to Climate Change. The despair cut deeply because at both a Territory and Federal level our representatives are not doing all they can to reduce and prepare for the effects of Climate Change.

I want the Territory and Federal Government to put in place a Climate Change Act to make sure that any activity that takes place in Australia has to take Climate Change into account and not add to its effects. This will begin the work to reducing mega-fires in the future. Protecting all remnant native forests to provide safe places for endemic flora and fauna, and working with Indigenous land managers to use their knowledge to best protect people and places.

I am more than happy to talk more about this issue. Our family lost their holiday home in the fires, we felt unsafe and vulnerable when travelling within NSW and feel increasingly let down by a Government not willing to take the necessary actions to work towards a safe future.

Yolanda Dasgupta
Buderim, Qld
Children: 11 months, 3 years

In 2019 we watched the sky darken with smoke from the bushfires first at Peregian and then at Noosa. We had to close all our windows and put the AC on which we wouldn't normally have had on. We couldn't enjoy all the reasons we chose to live where we live- the outside, the beach, nature. The hyper-vigilance of watching the fire trackers. The uneasy feeling of having trees around us that used to give us peace and energy. This was also frustrating. This was the new reality my children will grow up in, their dangerous inheritance. As a disaster management professional I know that mitigation and preparedness will only get us a little way and without curbing warming, by significantly reducing emissions, this will be the new normal. I love Australia. Ive lived in ten countries. I was desperate to come back to give my children the ideal Australian childhood.

I want all levels of Government to treat Climate Change as the existential threat that the science shows it to be. I want governments to invest in transforming the economy to a low-emissions powerhouse like that described by Prof Ross Garnaut. I want indigenous people to benefit from being paid for the carbon they would capture in their soil by applying their cultural knowledge of land management. I do not want my children to be left behind in the green industrial revolution that MUST come. I want government to bring people along with them in this transition, and show the leadership, informed by experts they have during the Covid19 outbreak. I also want Australia to have a Civil Defence force that can be deployed to supercharge mitigation, preparedness and recovery efforts.

Appendix: Royal Commission Terms of Reference

ToR Theme	Details
<p>Coordination & resource sharing between fed, state and local govt.</p>	<p>the responsibilities of, and coordination between, the Commonwealth and State, Territory and local Governments relating to preparedness for, response to, resilience to, and recovery from, natural disasters, and what should be done to improve these arrangements, including with respect to resource sharing</p> <hr/> <p>Ways in which Australia could achieve greater national coordination and accountability — through common national standards, rule-making, reporting and data-sharing — with respect to key preparedness and resilience responsibilities, including for the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. land management, including hazard reduction measures; 2. wildlife management and species conservation, including biodiversity, habitat protection and restoration; 3. land-use planning, zoning and development approval (including building standards), urban safety, construction of public infrastructure, and the incorporation of natural disaster considerations;
<p>Mitigating and adapting to extreme weather (driven by climate change)</p>	<p>Australia's arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions, what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters, and whether accountability for natural disaster risk management, preparedness, resilience and recovery should be enhanced, including through a nationally consistent accountability and reporting framework and national standards;</p>
<p>Changing the law which shapes how the Fed Govt. responds to national emergencies</p>	<p>whether changes are needed to Australia's legal framework for the involvement of the Commonwealth in responding to national emergencies, including in relation to the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. thresholds for, and any obstacles to, State or Territory requests for Commonwealth assistance; 2. whether the Commonwealth Government should have the power to declare a state of national emergency; 3. how any such national declaration would interact with State and Territory emergency management frameworks; 4. whether, in the circumstances of such a national declaration, the Commonwealth Government should have clearer authority to take action (including, but without limitation, through the deployment of the Australian Defence Force) in the national interest; 5. any relevant matter reasonably incidental to a matter referred to in paragraphs (a) to (c). 6. Consider the findings and recommendations (including any assessment of the adequacy and extent of their implementation) of other reports and inquiries that you consider relevant
<p>Traditional land management practices</p>	<p>any ways in which the traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians could improve Australia's resilience to natural disasters</p>