

Full article. Actioning the piecemeal disaster mitigation approaches across Australia John O'Donnell 11 June 2025

Introduction

The author has major concerns about piecemeal disaster mitigation approaches across Australia that are getting us nowhere, over decades. Whole communities, towns and cities have inadequate and unsafe disaster protection, including for floods and bushfires.

Current disaster approaches are doomed to failure

Current disaster management and mitigation foci are doomed to failure because of inadequate approaches to and funding of disaster management and mitigation across Australia, including the following concerns:

1. Inadequate understanding of the scale of disaster problems in towns and cities and opportunities and attempts to understand the scale of disaster problems;
2. Miniscule town and city disaster actioning;
3. Miniscule disaster mitigation funding levels. The Disaster Ready Fund itself, which provides minimal funding and is focussed on recovery;
4. No real attempts to tackle and improve mitigation for whole communities e.g. all the north coast flood affected communities;
5. Discussing disaster vulnerability and exposure is fine, but there is no/ little consideration of whole community, town and city vulnerability and exposure;
6. Inadequate will of feds, state and local government to develop and fund sound disaster mitigation solutions for whole communities;
7. Focus on generic management plans and generic approaches to disaster risk reduction. This is getting worse, refer to recent Bushfire Risk Management plans and compare them to earlier versions;
8. Focus on flood relocation, ignoring mitigation opportunities for the large areas not being relocated e.g. Lismore and many other locations;
9. Not incorporating programs such as room for the river, widely used, except for Australia; and
10. Prescribed burning rates of 0.6 % of NSW forests per year over the last 7 years across NSW, inadequate to protect anything much. Whole towns have little or no mitigation protection, just look at the impacts on communities from the 2019/ 20 bushfires.

Many eastern seaboard communities currently meet most of these inadequacies and disaster will likely follow, just like Lismore, Ballina, Taree, Kempsey, Townsville etc etc, and often repeat disasters.

Inadequate disaster preparation

It is the author's belief that South East Australia continues to be not adequately prepared for upcoming bushfires and to be frank we as a society have learnt very little following 2019/20 and earlier bushfires, especially in regards to inadequate bushfire mitigation. As a consequence, communities, firefighters and the ecosystems are highly exposed over the coming bushfire seasons. Disaster insurance costs are going up every year and will continue to go up with current limited adopted fire mitigation approaches.

Good bushfire preparation and preparedness is important in order to reduce risks to households, communities and firefighters, reduce fuel loads and strata, reduce areas of contiguous fuels across landscapes, reduce bushfire risks, assist in controlling bushfires, reduce bushfire intensity and extent and reduce costs and impacts of bushfires, including rising insurance and levy costs.

The author considers that here are 15 main areas of concern in relation to sound bushfire preparation and preparedness for major bushfires across SE Australia, these concern areas are outlined in the link below.

<https://volunteerfirefighters.org.au/status-of-bushfire-preparation-and-preparedness-for-major-bushfires-across-south-east-australia-during-2024-25>

Other information in relation to inadequate bushfire preparedness is outlined in:

<https://arr.news/2025/01/09/major-concerns-in-relation-to-bushfire-preparedness-across-se-australia-john-odonnell/>

Flood preparedness is at inadequate levels, simply look where floods are occurring, occurring regularly, including on eastern seaboard communities. Repeat disasters and rising rates of insurance ram home the point that flood preparedness is at inadequate levels.

Inadequate levels of bushfire and flood resilience

Resilient safe, healthy landscapes is a critical issue being considered in many countries across the world, including mitigation/ adaptive management work in the US on resilient landscapes in relation to bushfires.

Australian forests landscapes in SE Australia aren't resilient, safe nor healthy landscapes but are full of fuel, dense understories from intense bushfires and dead timber.

Considering dense understories following intense and severe bushfires and the extent of chronic eucalypt decline and in many Australian forests, strategies and actions to address these major issues across forested landscapes and reduce intense bushfire risks are opportune and overdue, using low intensity maintenance burning and mechanical treatment of forests across landscapes.

The safety of fire fighters entering forested areas, particularly where there are high fuel loads, is a critical issue, and is a major risk area and has been for a long time. The same observation applies in relation to the protection of communities, including towns and cities, the safety of communities needs addition mitigation and focussed discussion with communities.

The author's personal belief is that SE Australia is not prepared for upcoming bushfire seasons, as outlined here.

In relation to flood mitigation, flood resilience and sound protection of communities, including towns and cities, there needs additional flood mitigation installed for communities to make them safer.

Assessing the effectiveness of Australian disaster management

The author has taken a look at the effectiveness of disaster management over the last 10 plus years in relation to bushfires:

1. Fire mitigation and resilience. At miniscule levels across NSW, averages 0.6 % prescribed burning of forests mitigation per year over 7 years and most SE Australian states not much better than this;
2. Preparation and preparedness. Totally inadequate, noting the average of 0.6 % prescribed burning of forests mitigation per year over 7 years;
3. Plans. Generic plans;
4. Community safety. Totally inadequate;
5. Fire fighter safety. Fuel loads in forests are high, why do we expect fire fighters to work routinely in high fuel loads?;
6. Risk. Generic risk management;
7. Suppression. OK, but is suppression focussed at the expense of mitigation and highly reliant on moderate effective and expensive plane fleets; and
8. Costs. This is totally out of whack, including suppression, disaster, insurance and levies.

The author has taken a look at the effectiveness of disaster management over the last 10 plus years in relation to floods:

1. Flood mitigation and resilience. Current infrastructure is inadequate to cope with many major floods. Very minor new or upgraded mitigation for towns and cities;
2. Preparation and preparedness. Totally inadequate noting very limited funding for towns and cities for new and upgraded mitigation;

3. Plans. Generic plans;
4. Community safety. Totally inadequate;
5. Flood safety. Why do we expect people to work routinely in flood situations and people die;
6. Risk. Generic risk management;
7. Flood management in floods. OK, and got better, but is rescue and recovery focussed at the expense of flood mitigation; and
8. Costs. Totally out of whack, including disaster, insurance and levies.

The author considers that the above points highlight a very poor picture broadly across bushfire and flood, across the majority of assessed areas.

Consequent huge disaster impacts

The impacts of disasters are huge considered from social, economic and environmental perspectives, including floods, bushfires and other natural disasters. Repeat disasters are even worse.

These issues are quickly forgotten and inadequately considered.

Consequent high and increasing insurance and levy costs to communities, businesses and individuals

Insurance costs have increased rapidly, much due to disasters. And then there are lots of owners not insuring or under insuring.

Emergency service levy costs are also increasing rapidly in some states.

Need for a totally different approach to current disaster management, including mitigation

The author considers that a totally different approach to current disaster management is needed in Australia, including federal, state and local government approaches and directions. These are not going to get Australia on track with disaster management.

In addition, there is a very big need to have people with disaster expertise, particularly in the mitigation area, who understand the full range of issues involved in effectively tackling the current disaster management situation.

Frankly, current approaches, bureaucrats, inadequate action and will, complacency and not seeing the economic efficiencies and opportunities, will never ever get us past the goal posts.

If costs of Australian disasters average around \$35 Billion per year as estimated by the McKell Institute, serious action is critical now. Then, when you consider the costs of repeat disasters, it is a no brainer, dramatically increased action is needed now. Then, considering the costs of insurance and the suffering underway, that should settle the argument. And then considering the cost advantages of disaster mitigation efficiencies as outlined below.

Disaster economic opportunities for NSW

A recent article in On Line Opinion, refer the link below, identifies 10 economic opportunities in relation to disaster management.

<https://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=23439>

There are large economic opportunities that Australia can use.

The author strongly believes that the economic opportunities and efficiencies of expanding disaster mitigation in Australia are huge, it just takes government will, innovation, vision and protecting communities and firefighters and looking out for their interests. Surely good effective governments, oppositions, flood and fire agencies could capture these economic opportunities and obtain all the long term benefits of this.

Disaster economic efficiency and accountability lessons and opportunities available for Australia

The author prepared an important document teasing out the key economic, efficiency and accountability lessons and insights in relation to bushfire disasters. Refer the attached link:

<https://volunteerfirefighters.org.au/identifying-and-actioning-key-bushfire-disaster-economic-efficiency-and-accountability-lessons-and-insights-from-across-australia-john-odonnell-7-february-2025>

The bushfire disaster economic, efficiency and accountability lessons include:

1. Economic reform lessons and insights in relation to current approaches to bushfire funding, mitigation, suppression, land and fire management and community protection (6 lessons and insights);
2. Bushfire efficiency lessons and insights in relation to current approaches to bushfire funding, mitigation, suppression, land and fire management and community protection (9 lessons and insights); and
3. Government and fire agency accountability lessons and insights in relation to current approaches to bushfire funding, mitigation, suppression, land and fire management and community protection (12 lessons and insights).

There are 27 economic, efficiency and accountability lessons and insights captured by the author in this review.

Bushfire efficiency lessons and insights in relation to current approaches to bushfire funding, mitigation, suppression, land and fire management and community protection (9 lessons and insights) are an essential read and very valuable for Treasurer's.

There are similar efficiency issues for flood disasters.

Because of economic, efficiency and accountability problems and failures, the Australian public is being greatly impacted:

1. Huge impact of flood, bushfire and other disasters on Australian communities in financial impacts and lives lost and injuries as well (due to miniscule mitigation underway); and
2. Huge insurance costs and insurance increases; and
3. Large Emergency Services Levy charges.

There are huge opportunities for improving disaster policy across Australia, but, in reality, the author believes that the politicians hasn't been listening as much as they should.

Policy development opportunities for disaster management

The author strongly believes that there needs to be improved government and agency disaster policies for disaster management, including in relation to:

- Identification of natural disaster management failures, including disaster mitigation and funding;
- Addressing inadequate disaster preparedness;
- Inefficient, inequitable and unsustainable disaster funding not tackling mitigation;
- Not identifying nor using the large efficiencies of disaster funding mitigation works;
- Ignoring repeat disasters and associated costs;
- Addressing inadequate risk management;
- Starting to address community impact costs and social issues; and
- Addressing high and increasing business and residence insurance and levy costs.

Benefits an expanded federal/ state and local disaster mitigation program

Benefits of an expanded federal/ state and local disaster mitigation program to tackle disasters over the next 6-9 years across Australia include:

1. Obtaining higher returns on investment than other projects;
2. Reduced individual bushfire disasters and associated costs, budget impacts and community/ firefighter and ecosystem impacts;
3. Reduced ongoing repeat disasters and associated costs, reduced budget impacts and community/ firefighter and ecosystem impacts;
4. Reduced community bushfire deaths and safer firefighting; assisting regional economies;
5. Reducing insurance premiums and uninsurance;
6. Improved preparedness for war and terrorism;
7. Reduced greenhouse gas impacts of intense bushfires; and
8. Reduction in the consequent wetter year impacts post intense bushfires as outlined by Fasullo et al (2023).

Conclusions

There are big opportunities for Australia to be ahead of the pack, lead the game and quickly action disaster mitigation economic opportunities.

There are large benefits of an expanded federal/ state and local disaster mitigation program to tackle disasters over the next 6-9 years across Australia

Suggested ways forward include discussing opportunities and disaster approaches with Premiers, the Treasurers and the Productivity Commissions in each state, the Prime Minister and local government officials.