



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

YARRA GLEN COMMUNITY CONSULTATION - 30 MARCH 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Yarra Glen Racetrack on Monday, 30 March 2009. The community consultation was attended by more than 100 local people. The following summary reports key themes and issues that were raised by community members during the consultation discussions. This summary reports on what was stated and does not attribute views to any or all community members.

IMPACTS

- People experienced trauma, insomnia, depression, and exhaustion at being on a state of alert for more than three weeks and anger at the lack of communication.
- People also experienced displacement, loneliness, and feelings of isolation; Chum Creek residents felt overlooked as there was no mention of Chum Creek during or after the fires – like living in the twilight zone.
- Damage from the fire included grape crops destroyed and damaged, houses destroyed and damaged, stock losses, assets and infrastructure destroyed, environmental damage, and economic impacts through loss of income and local businesses.
- Positive impacts included the strengthened goodwill and bonding amongst the community, and reduced complacency.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- Individual preparation and appropriate equipment such as paved areas around houses, stand-alone solar power for pumps, private water carts, generators, sprinklers, misters under the eaves, gutter plugs and advance fuel clearance.
- Localised phone trees in some places, fireguards and neighbours communication with each other in a vacuum of official information.
- The early warnings of extreme fire danger days, although they did not predict the ferocity or potential full impact.
- 774 ABC radio , CFA messages, and the DSE and CFA websites prior to the fires.
- CFA training, community meetings and fireguard groups, although not enough people are committed to these initiatives.
- Elvis.



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WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Communications networks and equipment were inadequate: there should be 100 per cent mobile phone coverage and CFA radio reception should be better; power-poles should be constructed of a non-flammable material or put underground; radio broadcasters need to be more specific and provide localised advice; broadcasters and emergency services personnel need to be geographically literate.
- General fire preparedness and awareness was poor: accredited fire training should be introduced, attendance should be compulsory, and encouraged with discounted insurance; local government should make it easier and encourage the planting of fire resistant/fire tolerant plants that aren't native.
- Community understanding of the 'stay and defend or leave early' policy is generally poor: individual properties should be independently assessed for fire preparedness by professionals, and the decision to stay or go made on the basis of the assessment of the fire plan and defendability of the property.
- Fire fighting resources and equipment were inadequate: there should be standardised fittings for fire hoses that can withstand heat without melting; people should be encouraged to use diesel pumps; the North-South pipeline should be re-directed to go through the National Park as a secondary water source for fire-fighting purposes; the fire levy should be rates-based and the revenue raised re-directed to the CFA to purchase equipment at the local level, and increase membership.
- There had been inadequate burning off: fuel reduction and controlled burns should occur more often earlier in the season, and local government regulations need to change to make it easier for individuals to burn off their own properties.
- Roads and tracks did not serve as adequate fire breaks: roadsides, tracks and firebreaks should be better maintained and cleared of potential fuel loads.
- Roadblocks were a major aggravation: roadblocks should be manned by experienced people with good local knowledge and the authority to make sound decisions at the local level so that residents can access essential supplies, fire fighting/protection can continue, and essential services such as medical and veterinary are available. Consideration should be given to an emergency ID system for locals, such as photo ID emergency passes – this might help to deter looters.
- Immediate emergency services supports were inadequate and not well supported: more resources for better responsiveness from 000 and to keep the CFA website up to date; more localised and accurate naming of fires; better co-ordination of emergency services and more co-operation between the CFA and MMFB to work together as a single fire-fighting agency; emergency fencing for stock containment should be more easily obtainable.
- Post fire emergency services were not well established: a system is needed for emergency services personnel (either police or CFA) to be able to check properties and identify whether access to medical assistance, food, fuel, water etc is needed; official evacuation plans need to take responsibility for people who don't have transport and their animals; centralised safe evacuation centres or bunkers that are well known and well sign-posted need to be re-established.