



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

KINGLAKE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION - 23 MARCH 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Kinglake National Park Hotel on Monday, 23 March 2009. The community consultation was attended by more than 160 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 loss of lives, earnings, livelihoods, property, wildlife, public spaces, a picturesque landscape, basic amenities such as fuel, and a general loss of confidence in established practices.
- People also experienced shock and disbelief at the speed and ferocity of the fires, dislocation and population depletion, disruption to schooling and childcare, devastation and upheaval at every level and severe impacts on the mental health of residents including shock and trauma, depression, anger, fear and confusion.
- Other impacts included frustration at the lack of services and red tape making it difficult to get answers to fundamental questions, resentment and divisions in relation to the distribution of public funds, and confusion due to four local government authorities handling recovery issues differently.
- Positive impacts included strengthened relationships with neighbours despite the loss of communications systems during and after the fires.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- Fireguard groups and training that helped people to prepare their properties with sprinkler systems, good quality hoses and appropriate fire fighting equipment, and psychologically equipped people to handle the fires.
- Prior CFA education on fire plans was generally helpful.
- The early warnings of extreme fire danger days and radio information on the day, especially 774 ABC radio.
- Community action by individuals, as well as families and neighbours working as teams to save homes.
- Exotic trees and hedges that acted as ember barriers, and earlier back-burning (Mt Slide Road), which helped to retard the fires.
- CFA information for those who had access to scanners.
- Immediate responses from police, DHS, the Army, Red Cross and other services.
- The generosity of local businesses.



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WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Official warning systems did not work – sirens did not sound, 000 was overloaded and failed, ABC 774 and the CFA website information and messages were not consistent or accurate: the co-ordination of alert systems needs to improve; the Bureau of Meteorology and SES should liaise, using BOM satellite technology; cameras should be placed in (unmanned) fire towers to assist with better monitoring, CFA and 000 should be better resourced on high fire danger days.
- Communications networks and equipment were inadequate: there should be provision of alternative power supplies (above ground/below ground) and phone reception/coverage.
- There is poor communication and co-ordination between different emergency services authorities: the CFA and MMFB need to work to the same objectives and roadblocks need to be manned by people authorised and equipped to make decisions at the local level.
- There had been inadequate fuel reduction and inadequate firebreaks in place: roadside burns and cool burns should be increased, native vegetation needs better management using common sense; there should be an amnesty for burning and removing fallen trees.
- There are too many single entry/exit roads: a thorough investigation of access/exit issues is needed, including a review of building regulations and consultation with town planners to address road access.
- There was inadequate clearing and removal of green waste and hard rubbish: green waste clean-ups and hard rubbish collections need to be increased and supported by incentives such as insurance discounts and tighter monitoring and regulation (enforcement) of private properties; fire levies should be rates based rather than insurance based.
- The immediate emergency service response was inadequate and unco-ordinated: the Army should have been deployed sooner and retained longer; rates rolls or electoral rolls should be used as a central source of information managed by a single agency for access by all relevant agencies to avoid the need for multiple registrations; the government should consider the use of paid employees to avoid the itinerant nature of volunteers, albeit the volunteers were great.
- The 'stay and defend, or leave early' policy is not well understood: residents need more education on the 'stay or go' policy and other fire prevention/protection measures, more residents should join local fireguard groups to become more fire aware; some consideration should be given to a 'Fire Clean Up Day' similar to the National Clean Up Day.
- Few people were aware of the location of safe refuge centres: designated safe refuge centres need to be established and well publicised across the community; bunkers for the safe evacuation and protection of school children should also be considered.