



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

WANDONG COMMUNITY CONSULTATION - 27 MARCH 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Magpie and Stump Hotel on Friday, 27 March 2009. The community consultation was attended by more than 120 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

- Shattered at the loss of family members, friends, homes, livelihoods, livestock and land devastation.
- People experienced trauma, devastation, stress, grief, shock, anxiety, hurt and bewilderment at not knowing how to help.
- People also experienced distress, isolation, anger and frustration at the poor communications and the roadblocks that separated people and meant that people didn't know how neighbours and friends had fared.
- The community is fractured and people who lost homes are displaced; local small businesses are experiencing economic impacts through lost business.
- Positive impacts have been resilience and bonding, the sense of unity in shared grief, and people reaching out to support one another.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- CFA fireguard meetings for those who attended, CFA membership and access to the CFA pager, which gave out the Fire Danger Index the day before.
- The early warnings of extreme fire danger days.
- Localised phone trees in some places and friends helping friends.
- Access to the CFA scanner.
- The CFA and SES worked well on the day; police communications after the fires.
- Fire-fighting helicopters.
- Cold burns in the few places they had occurred, long years of preparing and making properties fire ready.
- Self responsibility.

WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- General fire awareness and preparation was inconsistent and inadequate: community education should be available on a continuous basis, especially for new people moving in to fire-prone areas, and every person should understand the Fire Danger Index; all households should have fire plans which are checked annually; and access to CFA scanners should be subsidised.
- Community understanding and approach to the 'stay and defend, or leave early' policy is inconsistent: all residents should be fully aware of the implications of the 'stay and defend, or leave early' policy, and individual clearance and fuel reduction programs should be universally applied and enforced.
- There is a lack of understanding of building standards: there should be more advice and guidance on construction of fire-resistant homes and materials, including careful consideration of the use of shutters and bunker construction that don't create traps; more research is needed on trees that are fire tolerant/resistant.
- Responses to emergency calls were inadequate: emergency services need to be better resourced to respond to local calls and act on local knowledge; fire levies should be rates based.
- There had been inadequate burning off and backburning: fuel reduction and controlled burns should be a higher priority for private individuals and on Crown land.
- Roads and tracks did not serve as safe access/exit routes or as fire breaks: roads, tracks and firebreaks should be better maintained and cleared of potential fuel loads and more control lines should be placed around Crown land.
- Communications systems and networks were inadequate: back-up or underground power supplies are needed to maintain electricity and phone lines during fires; a mobile phone early warning system and siren system should be implemented.
- Official emergency information was inadequate and inconsistent; CFA website was not updated regularly enough and information was misleading: better systems are needed to manage the amount and currency of information to keep people up to date; maps should be accurate so that emergency services are aware of safe access and exit routes; accurate data on who lives where should be made available to emergency services personnel; central refuges/safe places should be re-instated
- Roadblocks denied local residents access to care for livestock and fire fighting, but allowed media access: roadblocks need to be better managed to serve the needs of local residents in accessing essential supplies and for fire-fighting.
- There was a lack of co-ordination amongst emergency relief services: an electronic central registration system that can be accessed by all relevant agencies and used to better align donations with those who most need them should be established.
- Access to emergency first aid was inadequate: all CFA stations should be fully equipped, adequately resourced and audited to provide immediate/emergency first aid for burns victims.