



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

HORSHAM COMMUNITY CONSULTATION – 7 APRIL 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Haven Memorial Hall on Tuesday, 7 April 2009. The community consultation was attended by almost 50 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 a loss of security and sense of personal safety, peace and control.
- People also experienced isolation, and it was difficult to get information on the day on the direction of the fires, ash and ember attack areas, and on the speed and magnitude of the fires.
- Damage from the fire included extensive damage to fencing and lost homes and shedding and other assets.
- Positive impacts included the great volunteer and community support, excellent emergency services experienced by most people, and the rapid and effective response of the Rural City of Horsham.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- Horsham Council organised a community practise of its disaster plan in December 2008 and provided residents with up to date phone listings.
- The Premier's warnings prior to 7 February were heeded and CFA tankers were strategically deployed in readiness.
- Fuel reduction around houses and homes prior to 7 February 2009.
- CFA availability and responsiveness, and their saving of undefended homes on the day, as well as their availability after the fires, if needed.
- ABC 774 and the local radio station were excellent and kept people informed.
- Firebreaks were effective, even though they weren't able to stop ember attacks.
- Co-operation between neighbours with private water tankers and water supplies that saved approximately 30-40 homes.
- Access to large equipment such as graders and dozers which meant that the recovery and relief activities were operational within 1-2 hours after the fire.



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WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Roadblocks caused distress to residents and hampered fire-fighting activities by blocking access to private tankers which outnumber CFA tankers by 4:1: roadblocks should be managed using common sense and a flexible approach that allows residents to care for livestock and protect their homes from post fire flare-ups, and does not hinder private tanker traffic.
- Fuel reduction was inadequate on some private property and along roadsides: all tiers of government need to address fuel reduction with a focus on community safety ahead of flora protection.
- Communications networks were inadequate: there should be 100 per cent mobile phone coverage.
- Official local emergency warnings were inadequate: re-instate local telephone trees and official warnings via SMS from appropriate authorities.
- The Wimmera River only has one bridge, which impeded CFA trucks and other emergency response vehicles: additional access across the Wimmera River is needed.
- There was a perceived gap in knowledge between local CFA volunteers and ICC: local knowledge and expertise should be used for better deployment of resources.
- There is some concern over whether powerlines may have contributed to the possible cause of fire: all timber power-poles should be replaced with non-flammable poles as a preventative measure.
- It is unclear whether the full implications and consequences of the 'stay and defend, or leave early' policy are clearly understood: individuals should be fully informed to make the decision depending on the differing circumstances that apply in each situation; there should be a system in place that involves easily visible, fire-resistant fence signage that easily identifies whether residents have stayed or gone.