



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

LABERTOUCHE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION – 2 APRIL 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Labertouche Public Hall on Thursday, 2 April 2009. The community consultation was attended by more than 70 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 shock, horror, trauma, devastation at the sheer spread of the fire, and a general loss of confidence in safety being under prolonged ember attack.
- People also experienced an assault on their senses through the smell and the constant visual reminder, and a sense of being stunned by their unpreparedness at the ferocity of the fire.
- Damage from the fire included the destruction and loss of houses, farm sheds, fodder, fences, water supplies, and longer term impacts through loss of income and lost quality of life.
- Positive impacts are that it brought the community closer together.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- Attendance at the Fire Ready Vic program helped prepare those who attended and helped them to cope better.
- The early warnings of extreme fire danger days were helpful.
- 774 ABC radio worked well if you had a battery operated radio.
- The community meeting on the Friday before was especially helpful to those who hadn't attended the Fire Ready Vic training, and precipitated the early evacuation of women, children and stock which probably contributed to no lives being lost.
- Localised fire trees worked in small groups within communities.
- The fact that the fire had started in the week before helped some people prepare better.

WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- There had been inadequate burning off and backburning of Crown land: fuel reduction and controlled burns should be a higher priority for DSE with better maintenance of fire tracks; fire tracks should be maintained and kept open.
- Roads did not serve as adequate fire breaks: roadsides should be better maintained and cleared of potential fuel loads.
- There was inadequate clearing of vegetation on private property: clearing around houses and on private property should be permitted and universally applied and enforced.



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- There is a lack of co-ordination between the various authorities and how they should work together: protocols are needed for DSE, CFA and Parks Victoria to communicate better between agencies and with the general community; the CFA and Victoria Police should collaborate more and use more local knowledge and expertise.
- Communications networks were inadequate: there should be 100 per cent mobile phone coverage, improved radio reception from Sale is needed, or more localised weather warnings from major broadcasters.
- Official local emergency warnings were inadequate and inconsistent: re-instate siren warning systems.
- Fencing is a critical issue for farming communities: a national fencing policy for times of natural disaster is needed to support immediate fencing replacement for stock containment; DSE should contribute to the cost of replacing and repairing fences that border Crown land; there should be increased financial assistance and better co-ordination/use of volunteers to support farmers with the replacement of fencing.
- Farmers experience significant financial impact through loss of shedding, fencing, stock and fodder: more financial support is needed more quickly to assist farmers to replace their lost assets and support small businesses that have lost income.
- General community awareness of the full implications and consequences of the 'stay and defend, or leave early' policy is inadequate: better education on the 'stay or go' options is needed, as is a registration system to track people.
- CFA resources are inadequate: the CFA should have access to more resources and more technology (GPS), funded through increased revenue created by basing the fire levy on council rates rather than insurance; nearby RAAF personnel and equipment could have supported the CFA with suppression activities.
- There were inconsistent and inadequate fire plans for individual households and communities: every household should have an adequate fire plan in place, supported by safe, central refuges, and rebates for the purchase of fire pumps.
- Roads and roadblocks were not well managed: non-residents should be excluded from travelling into fire prone areas on high fire danger days to reduce unnecessary road congestion; roadblocks need to be managed in a flexible and sensible way that does not deny local residents access to essential supplies and equipment, or the ability to care for stock.
- Post disaster management plans are inadequate: emergency accommodation should be provided closer to maintain community contacts; emergency relief should have been localised and available outside of 9am-4pm Mon-Fri; a better system is needed to co-ordinate and use volunteer support in recovery and relief; the Army should have been deployed sooner.
- There is considerable risk of further environmental damage and contamination caused by rain: greater consideration needs to be given to preventative measures in the case of contamination, erosion and landslides caused by rain and flooding in fire affected areas.