



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

ST ANDREWS COMMUNITY CONSULTATION - 29 MARCH 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the St Andrews Reserve Hall on Sunday, 29 March 2009. The community consultation was attended by more than 80 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 are shattered by the loss of life – of friends, neighbours and family – the loss of property and livestock; the emotional impact is extreme within the community even for those who have not experienced any personal loss.
- People are also experiencing multiple impacts across a wide spectrum making it difficult to communicate about the different losses.
- Some polarisation in the community on issues as broad as media interest, environmental policies and building regulations.
- There is greater awareness of fire risks, of the perils of being ill-prepared, and of the consequences of choosing to live in fire-prone bushland areas, as well as the consequences and implications of the 'stay and defend, or leave early' policy.
- Positive impacts included the way the community worked together immediately after and since the fires.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- Some purpose built homes worked well, but some didn't.
- The early warnings of extreme fire danger days, and the Bureau of Meteorology and CFA website information was useful leading up to the fires.
- CFA scanners for those who had access to them.
- Some individual fire plans worked well, especially where people had back up plans, along with the appropriate equipment, the physical strength and the ability to stay calm.
- Fireguard teams and CFA training prepared people well, even if they couldn't be maintained during the fires.
- Deciduous, non-native gardens.
- Fuel reduction, where it had occurred.
- Nillumbik Council's emergency response was quickly activated.
- Community involvement in food preparation prior to the Army deployment was a great community building activity.



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WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Official local emergency warnings were inadequate and inconsistent: re-instate local telephone trees and siren systems, establish aerial surveillance for fire spotting; educate the community and use the Fire Danger Index to rank high fire danger days, and provide more resources to support 000, the CFA Hotline and Channel 61.
- Information received on fires was not always accurate: radio broadcasters need to be up to speed with information and have better geographical knowledge; better use should be made of on-the-ground CFA intelligence to update radio and internet information.
- Fire awareness training is inadequate: community education on fire awareness should include different types of fires and fire behaviour in different topographies and it should be available on a continuous basis, especially for new people moving in to fire-prone areas.
- Fire preparation and information is inadequate: residents should be encouraged to use diesel pumps and have back-up generators; local fire maps with clearly marked safe access/exit routes (no through roads should be marked) should be provided to all residents; the CFA should be indemnified to visit individual properties and provide advice about fire preparedness; regulations for clearance on private land should be changed to make it easier for property owners to reduce fuel loads.
- Roads and tracks did not serve as safe access/exit routes or as fire breaks: roads and tracks should be better maintained and cleared of potential fuel loads; road verges should be wider.
- The 'stay and defend, or leave early' policy is complex: insurance incentives should be used to encourage residents to develop fire plans and undertake fire training, and to encourage universal fuel reduction; consideration should be given to compulsory bunkers for those exercising the option to stay.
- Roadblocks denied local residents, their family and friends access, but allowed media access: roadblocks need to be better managed so that local residents can access essential supplies and fight the fires, with the assistance of families and friends where appropriate.
- There was a lack of co-ordination amongst emergency relief and recovery services: a database of locals that can readily be accessed to track locals and synchronise lists of missing persons should be established; the database should also be able to co-ordinate and track access to services and grants.
- Access to emergency first aid was inadequate: all CFA stations should be adequately resourced and members trained in first aid to provide emergency first aid for burns victims.
- Not enough information is available for people to start preparing for the next fire season: planning and design criteria and standards for the construction of fire bunkers are urgently needed.
- Localised evacuations were very difficult: centralised safe evacuation or refuge centres need to be established in multiple locations and broadly publicised.
- Communications with the Coroner's Office proved very difficult for some families: more regular and considerate communications should be directed towards family members of victims.