



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

FLOWERDALE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION - 20 MARCH 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Flowerdale Hotel on Friday, 20 March 2009. The community consultation was attended by 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

- Loss of lives, property, stock, houses and community infrastructure (halls and schools).
- People experienced an overwhelming sense of being alone and abandoned with no services or fresh water, food and medical help for 2–3 days. The lack of media attention compared to other towns also contributed to the sense of isolation.
- Physical and mental devastation, and feelings of guilt about saving homes when others suffered losses, as well as guilt about not being able to save homes.
- Relationship strain within families, including on-going physical and mental health problems.
- Experience of displacement and dislocation; loss of connections with members of the community spread far and wide.
- Concern about impacts on the CFA and its members, with divergent views about the level of support from the CFA on the day, but overwhelming support for the volunteer contribution overall 'nothing could have countered the ferociousness of the fires on 7 February.'
- Positive impacts included the central support role provided by the Hazeldene store and Flowerdale Hotel after the fire as rallying points and a refuge centre for the local community.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- Warnings throughout the week leading up to February 7.
- Support from friends, family and community.
- Informal phone networks (including friends and family monitoring fires from afar).
- Properties with non-native deciduous trees and properties that were well cleared.
- UHF transmissions from the CFA for those who could receive them, as well as two-way radios and pagers although these were not consistent.
- The CFA door-knocking and letter-drop campaign in 2008 to provide fire plan information, advice and awareness.
- Fire breaks.
- Practical supply supports like the Yea petrol station being able to use their generator to pump petrol once the power was cut and the supply of water from King Parrot Creek after the fire.



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WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Mobile phone coverage, power and free to air TV coverage is inadequate and there is no back-up support in place for general outages. The loss of electricity and phone reception was a critical factor in the lack of communication networks, services (petrol) and fire-fighting equipment: there should be 100 per cent mobile phone coverage, local TV reception, and a reliable power supply supported by generators and battery back-ups.
- There was no official local emergency warning system: re-instate local telephone trees and siren systems that sound different warning sounds, and consider a warning system similar to the hurricane/cyclone warning systems.
- There were too many residents who had done minimal fire preparation: better fire awareness, preparation and planning is needed for permanent and temporary residents.
- There had been inadequate fuel reduction on non-private properties and along roadsides, with roadside guard rails preventing escape once trees had fallen: fuel reduction on all properties should be mandatory, universally applied and enforced; roadsides should be cleared and wider shoulders built to allow for escape/access if trees fall onto the road.
- There were too many properties with combustible fuel loads: regular hard rubbish collections should be done to remove combustible rubbish and reduce fuel loads; residents should be able to maintain their own properties without fear of persecution.
- There was inadequate access to water from King Parrot Creek when it was most needed for fire-fighting: the impact of bore water use and access needs to be investigated given that water levels doubled after the fire once bore water pumps had shut down.
- There was no incident management system in place, no central point for co-ordination and no access to services/supplies and recovery services for 3-4 days after the fire: establish a community bunker as a refuge with water supplies, stock feed, deep cycle batteries, generators, food and first aid supplies for immediate relief.
- Roadblocks were frustrating and hindered the recovery process for local residents who were reluctant to leave in case they could not return: implement a bracelet system to identify locals to allow them access to supplies and support services.
- Media access to fire affected areas in the immediate aftermath should be considered carefully and not take precedence over residents or emergency relief services.
- Recovery systems and support services were inadequate and not co-ordinated with several different agencies door-knocking to collect information: establish a centralised co-ordination system and data collection system that minimises the need for survivors to provide the same information to separate agencies.
- Brick houses and native vegetation seemed to be more vulnerable to combustion from radiant heat: there should be careful consideration to the use/approval of building materials and firebreak plantings.