



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

STRATHEWEN COMMUNITY CONSULTATION - 8 APRIL 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Arthurs Creek Mechanics Institute on Wednesday, 8 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

- Loss of lives, homes, animals, historical and community landmarks such as the school and hall, and environmental destruction.
- People experienced shock, fear, devastation, and trauma, especially for those local CFA workers who were involved in finding the deceased who were often known to them.
- People also experienced dislocation, survivor guilt, financial strain through the loss of stock and livelihoods, and a general loss of confidence in local and state governments.
- The trauma and dislocation is heightened for children.
- Positive impacts included the generous donations and volunteer support, and the opportunities to strengthen community cohesion, which also has the potential to fragment the community as there is division on some issues.

WHAT WORKED WELL

- Scanners tuned into the CFA were a huge communications advantage.
- Neighbours who cleared land (including some who illegally felled trees).
- Community fireguard meetings were helpful even though attendance dropped over time.
- Years of advice from the CFA provided many opportunities to learn how to be responsible for properties and personal safety.
- Practising fire plans, discussions amongst neighbours of fire prevention strategies, and having contingency plans.
- Having 3 CFA trucks in the district and a new CFA shed which facilitated food preparation after the fires.
- Neighbours who kept contact with one another throughout the day.
- Access to water as a safe refuge, either a dam or a swimming pool.
- Media warnings late in the week were helpful for some people.
- CFA displans were vital links for managing operations on the day.
- 774 ABC was helpful after 7 February.



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WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Roads, roadsides and railway corridors did not serve as adequate fire breaks: roadsides, railway and powerline corridors should be better maintained and cleared of potential fuel loads, including clearing verges of trees that could pose a risk of blocking safe access/exit.
- There had been inadequate burning off and backburning: state and local government regulations regarding vegetation management need to change to reflect human safety as a precedent over conservation principles, to allow fuel reduction around houses and to permit the construction of dams for fire-fighting purposes, and they should be universally applied.
- Public information on the precise fire risk was inadequate: the public needs to be educated in the Fire Danger Index, and the FDI should then be used to publicise differentiated warnings.
- Official local emergency warnings were inadequate and inconsistent: re-instate local siren systems along the lines of a cyclone warning system with graduated warning tones, 774 ABC radio and CFA information needs to be more accurate, more timely and more geographically specific; re-instate spotter towers and a dedicated pager warning system.
- Communications networks and equipment were inadequate: power poles should be built from fire proof materials and powerlines should be underground; essential communications infrastructure such as the Kinglake repeater tower should be fire-protected; CFA, VicFire and 000 need to be better resourced on high fire danger days to cope with the increase traffic/information flow.
- There is a lack of safe community refuges: the Council needs a well developed and well publicised community Displan, with safe central refuges well known and well signposted, and a clear chain of command; Australian Standards for bunkers that can withstand firestorms are needed, especially important for the safe evacuation of school children; every household should have a safe refuge.
- CFA workers had to shoulder too many post-fire responsibilities: the CFA needs to be supported by additional emergency support services with personnel that are appropriately trained and equipped to undertake activities such as house to house searches for survivors.
- 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.
- Fire preparations and fire plans could be more robust: expert independent property assessments and risk analysis could assist the development of improved fire plans, noting that in some instances even good fire plans and good preparation will not guarantee survival; financial assistance for bushfire protection devices would be helpful.
- The roadblocks exacerbated the distress and trauma of residents: roadblocks need to be managed in a flexible and sensible way that does not deny local residents access to essential supplies and equipment.
- Some media coverage was unhelpful and intrusive: media coverage needs to be accurate and mindful of the needs of local communities.