



2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

BENDIGO COMMUNITY CONSULTATION - 25 MARCH 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Eaglehawk Senior Citizens' Centre on Wednesday, 25 March 2009. The community consultation was attended by more than 60 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, terror, frustration, grief, guilt, sleepless nights, vagueness and forgetfulness, trauma, and a general loss of confidence in feeling secure and protected.
- People also experienced isolation, short term and long term dislocation, lives being put on hold with events delayed or cancelled and powerlessness because bushfires are expected to be in the bush, not in towns.
- Damage from the fire included houses and possessions destroyed and damaged, and businesses lost, resulting in financial concerns exacerbated by dealings with insurance companies and Centrelink, and difficulties in securing rental properties.
- The well-being of farmers and rural families is seriously impaired by economic, emotional and physical pressures from the loss of stock and income, costs of fence repairs, carting feed and caring for surviving stock.
- Positive impacts included the support received from community groups such as Rotary and the camaraderie and nurturing that brought the community together .

WHAT WORKED WELL

- The early warnings of extreme fire danger days were appreciated.
- 774 ABC radio worked well for some people, even though reports were not up to date; DSE worked well for others.
- Well trained CFA who kept locals informed, and those with their own four wheel drives and tankers for fire fighting.
- An earlier fuel reduction burn in Deans Road.
- Community cohesion after the fire.
- Very little worked well – nothing prepared us for such ferocious fires.



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WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Communications networks and equipment failed: there should be back-up for landlines and radio, and local diverts for 000, with consideration to using 112 as the emergency number for mobile phones.
- Official local emergency warnings were inadequate and inconsistent: re-instate siren and alarm systems that can be heard above the roar of the fire (investigate the Spectrum alarm system for local brigades and blinking lights like fog lights).
- Fuel reduction on private property and along roadsides was inadequate: roadsides should be better maintained and cleared of potential fuel loads to ensure safe access and exit routes; there should be better management of fuel reduction on private property, and on-going fuel reduction on Crown land.
- Fire fighting resources were insufficient: the fire levy should be rate based to raise revenue for more CFA resources and equipment so that there are manned fire stations with more than one vehicle; to improve the existing CFA pager system, invest in accurate mapping resources and more thermal imaging cameras to be deployed to identify burning roots and human remains.
- Fire fighting and emergency services responses were inadequate: better planning is required for a sufficient and accessible water supply for filling and re-filling tankers, and back-up power supplies for operating pumps; there should be better co-ordination for emergency responses between police, ambulance and fire-fighting vehicles; there should be well known community assembly points or refuge centres; and there should be an emergency response logging service to clear fallen trees from roads.
- Overall general community fire preparation was poor: there should be broader circulation of CFA fire preparation and education materials and stronger community education; incentive rebates should be implemented for the purchase of fire fighting equipment and pumps, appropriate clothing and metal tanks to store water for fire fighting purposes.
- There was poor co-ordination between agencies immediately after the fires: there should be protocols for better co-ordination between agencies, and improved post-fire support and management of people with a single point of registration for access by all relevant agencies and a process for a quick ID procedure to identify locals such as a bracelet system or on-the-spot photo ID system; more counselling services are needed to proactively support people who need assistance.