



## 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

### MARYSVILLE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION – 6 & 7 APRIL 2009 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

#### BACKGROUND

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission held a community consultation at the Marysville Golf & Bowls Club on Monday, 6 April and Tuesday, 7 April 2009. The community consultation was attended by more than 100 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

- Losses included lives, homes, businesses, friendships, lifestyle, the township, community life and Marysville's history leaving long term financial impacts and concern that normality may never return.
- People experienced emotional scarring and trauma, high levels of anxiety and uncertainty, devastation, stress, anger, distress, sorrow, sadness, loss of identity, survivor guilt, and having to swallow their pride to accept help from others.
- People also experienced loneliness, isolation, displacement, confusion, panic, division, abandonment and emptiness 'we slept with the dead'.
- Positive impacts included the community drawing together, supporting each other and meeting people that you wouldn't otherwise meet, community support from far and wide; .

#### WHAT WORKED WELL

- The internet worked well for some; CFA alerts prior to the fires were helpful; access to the UHF network for those who had it.
- People using walkie-talkies to communicate; people helping one another, local knowledge and communication between friends.
- Local radio kept people informed after the fires.
- CFA training, fireguard groups and CFA information on preparing homes; a good fire plan, roof sprinklers.
- Generator power.
- Deciduous trees around properties, and regular burn-offs where they occurred.
- Firesafe community meetings for those who attended them, including children.
- Construction materials in some homes helped to save them (straw bale and mudbrick constructions on concrete slabs).
- Police warnings and evacuation, especially early evacuation of the retirement home.
- Restoration of services.
- Stay and defend or leave early policy if sensibly applied.
- The SES, CFA and police did a great job on the day given the circumstances.
- Exceptional support and care from the people of Alexandra, the Narbethong pub unofficial; relief centre, the kindness of donations received at the local high school, and the quick response from all levels of government, including the provision of emergency cash through DHS.

## WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

- Official local emergency warnings were inadequate and inconsistent: re-instate a siren system with a range of warnings via automated landline phones, SMS, local phone trees, UHF networks; radio warnings need to be more specific and localised, banners interrupting TV programs, and this should be supported by more localised naming of fires.
- Communications networks and equipment were inadequate: back-up generators and other alternative power supplies should be considered to maintain phone, radio and TV access; more relay stations and towers are needed for mobile phone coverage; the CFA paging system needs to be improved; 000 needs to be better resourced.
- Understanding of fire behaviour and fire protection was inconsistent: CFA training needs to give more insight into the different types of fires and better prepare people to have a number of fire plans in place, some training should be on weekends; better understanding is needed of appropriate fire protection equipment such as diesel pumps; gas tanks and LPG bottles should be stored underground.
- There had been inadequate burning off and backburning: a fuel reduction program with more regular back burns should be put in place; de-forested buffer zones, or buffer zones of deciduous European trees rather than native vegetation, should be put around towns.
- The local disaster plan is not well known and there was a lack of leadership: there should be easily visible signage to identify the local radio frequency for fire information on high fire danger days; a centralised, well-publicised, and well-signed evacuation centre needs to be re-established; there should be a centralised system for logging who is staying and who is going which can be accessed by emergency services agencies and that isn't impeded by privacy legislation; special consideration should be given to the high tourist population.
- Resources and co-ordination amongst the fire fighting agencies was poor: protocols need to be put in place to improve co-operation and co-ordination amongst fire fighting agencies and maintenance of DSE fire trucks needs to improve.
- There is inadequate access to water for sustained fire fighting: water storage and accessibility needs to improve.
- There was duplication and lack of co-ordination of emergency services responses: protocols should be put in place for a centralised co-ordination point and single registration system for all emergency services agencies to access.
- It is not being made easy to rebuild destroyed properties: new building regulations that sensibly address fire protection issues, including materials and siting, should be made available as soon as possible; Australian Standards for bushfire bunkers (39/59) should be enforced, with compliance leading to reduced insurance premiums.
- Roadblocks contributed to causing distress for those who needed to care for livestock: roadblocks should allow flexibility for local residents to be able to care for livestock and access essential supplies such as food, feed, water, fuel and medical assistance.