

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

The January 2020 fires across Victoria were notable for their intensity and coverage. The rural councils predominantly affected by the fires were Towong, East Gippsland, Alpine and to a lesser extent, Wellington and Mansfield Shires. Smaller fires occurred across many other parts of rural Victoria including Moyne, Glenelg, West Wimmera and Pyrenees Shires.

A representative from East Gippsland Shire described the intensity and breadth of this summer's fires as 'extraordinary in its scale'. The bushfires covered:

- Over 11,000 square kilometres in East Gippsland Shire, just over half (53 per cent) of the Shire's total land area
- Just under 2,500 square kilometres within Towong Shire, or just over a third (36 per cent) of its total land area
- Half (50.8 per cent) of Alpine Shire's 4,788 square kilometre land area.

In East Gippsland, the vast fire-affected area meant seven relief centres were required, as opposed to one or two relief centres in a 'normal' fire emergency. The scale of the fire also meant the relief centres were in operation for much longer timeframes than would have been expected in the past – in East Gippsland relief centres were in operation for 143 days, with more than 100 staff from other councils assisting in the secondary assessment phase of the emergency.

It was noted that the extraordinary fire emergency produced an equally extraordinary response, and the way the various local, state and federal authorities came together to meet the challenge was one element of the bushfire emergency response that worked well. The evacuation, relief and recovery effort required adjoining shires to work together to harness their resources, together with a very significant assistance effort from other councils in Victoria (such as the metropolitan Darebin City Council providing assistance to East Gippsland), State agencies such as the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and the Country Fire Authority, as well as Federal assistance including logistical support from the Australian Defence Force.

The role of local government was critical in the bushfire response this January as it provided essential local knowledge for all the agencies and organisations involved in the emergency response. The response would not have been possible without local councils acting as the key central coordinating agency, as they provide essential local support, local knowledge and networks.

The evacuation, response and recovery experience of the last fire season was summarised in the following terms by East Gippsland Shire's General Manager of Bushfire Recovery:

Local government played a critical role in terms of providing local knowledge. State agencies couldn't have done it without local support. We need to marry the strength of the local knowledge and local networks with the all the resources that the State and Federal governments bring to bear.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

One of the key areas that did not work well over the last bushfire season in some communities was preparedness.

In Victoria, *The Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report* was released by Local Government Victoria on the eve of the bushfire season in December 2019. It showed a varying level of preparedness across councils in terms of their emergency management policies and procedures, and highlighted the problems encountered by rural councils in meeting emergency management obligations under the framework. This is due to a number of constraints including budgets, resourcing and staffing issues.

The experience of the January bushfires demonstrates the state-level emergency management framework currently has a 'one size fits all' model and not all councils have the capacity to meet the staffing and resourcing levels it presumes. Towong Shire, for example, is one of the smallest rural councils in terms of budget and staff resources, and was quickly overrun by the immensity of the emergency with limited staff resources.

Given the scale of the January 2020 bushfires, and the future likelihood of natural disasters and greater intensity bushfires due to climate change, RCV has called for the state-administered \$4.9 million Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP) providing annual funding to councils for emergency management to be increased.

RCV also notes that issues surrounding the unclear and inadequate national and state arrangements for funding for natural disaster mitigation, adequate preparedness and disaster recovery, together with recommendations to address these issues, have been canvassed by various committees and authorities over a number of years.

In 2014, the Productivity Commission released its inquiry report into Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements in which it noted 'Government investment in mitigation is insignificant compared to post-disaster expenditure' and that:

There is a longstanding concern that governments underinvest in mitigation and spend too much on recovery, leading to higher overall costs for the community. Furthermore, government responses to natural disasters can be ad hoc and emotionally and politically charged, resulting in reactive 'policy on the run' and inequitable and unsustainable outcomes.¹

In 2017 the Senate Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Inquiry into the Implications of Climate Change for Australia's National Security noted the need for greater Commonwealth and State co-ordination of emergency management. It also called for the development of 'a dedicated climate security leadership position in the Home Affairs Portfolio

¹ Productivity Commission 2014, *Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements, Inquiry Report no. 74*, Canberra, p.9, 4

to facilitate coordination on climate resilience issues, including disaster risk reduction, infrastructure planning, community health and well-being, and emergency management'.²

We call on the Federal Government to return to the recommendations made in these reports regarding increasing investment and better coordination for mitigation, climate resilience and risk reduction measures, in addition to emergency management. Although we are now currently in the grip of the COVID 19 emergency, the threat posed to our communities by natural disasters such as bushfire remains.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

RCV member councils have identified greater levels of controlled or 'cold' burning and containment of roadside vegetation as one key area that would improve the mitigation of bushfires.

Extended fire seasons due to the impact of climate change are reducing the opportunity for councils and other authorities to undertake fuel reduction measures such as control burns. Rural councils are also finding roadside vegetation management increasingly difficult due to a number of other factors. One of these is multiple and overlapping pieces of legislation governing environment protection and biodiversity. Councils must act in accordance with the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* at a Federal level, as well as the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* at the State level. Councils must also act within planning controls set by the State Government. Under these legislative guidelines, there are significant costs for councils in flora and biodiversity assessments associated with removal.

The current State Government policies are also framed around outcomes that lead to no net loss of vegetation, with little consideration of fire risk. There are also issues surrounding what agencies are responsible for roadside burns – the CFA, for example is risk averse to managing these. Other possible fuel reduction activity such as roadside droving on VicRoads arterial roads is currently prohibited, with councils and other applicants having to undertake costly flora assessments.

The benefits of undertaking 'cool burning' as a fuel reduction measure is described in the following contribution from Hindmarsh Shire in western Victoria. Their representative noted that the cost of cold burns are...

.. far less than with uncontrolled wildfires. No loss of infrastructure, no loss of lives, no excessive pollution, far less environmental damage. The emotional and physical costs, to those living near, would be greatly removed, lowering the cost to society.

Cold burns seldom affect the canopy of trees, and seeds regenerate quickly after rains. Many plants only survive for a few years, waiting for a fire to

² The Senate, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee 2018, *Implications of climate change for Australia's national security* p.95

reinvigorate and complete the cycle once more. Controlled, managed burns allow these cycles to be completed on a regular basis. Many plants, such as some wattles, need a cold fire to “crack” the seed open to allow revegetation.

With both the Little and Big Deserts adjoining Hindmarsh, we are indeed fortunate that cold burns are practised by Parks Victoria.

This gives the area some comfort in knowing that should there be lightning strikes, the resulting fires will most likely burn to a “cold burn area” and burn itself out.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

RCV wishes to bring the impact of climate change, and the associated increased incidence of natural disasters, and the impact of increased incidence of natural disasters on rural communities to the attention of the Royal Commission.

Rural Victoria is directly in the firing line of the impacts of climate change, with rising temperatures and increasing and more intensive extreme weather events including floods, heatwaves and bushfires. These events directly impact on the rural Victorian economies and communities. The major effects include:

- Increased pressure on rural volunteer firefighters due to extended fire seasons and shortened preparation times
- Extreme weather events that impact on the most vulnerable members of the community
- Negative economic impacts on agriculture and tourism, the most important industries to the rural economy
- Inhibiting rural population growth

Extended fire seasons, shorter preparation time leaves volunteer fire fighters under pressure and exhausted

The extended fire season means there is now greater competition for fire-fighting infrastructure and resources around the world. The extended fire seasons across the northern hemisphere means equipment and personnel that could otherwise be deployed in Australia for the southern hemisphere fire season is required elsewhere. The longer season places additional pressure on volunteer fire fighters, who face a prolonged fire-fighting season. The extended season also means there is shortened preparation time for controlled burns, and other preparation activity to contain future fire disasters.

Longer and more frequent heat waves impact on the most vulnerable members of our community

The increase in frequency and intensity of heat waves as a result of climate change poses a major risk to rural Victorian communities, and particularly older rural populations. Extreme

weather events are likely to place extra pressure on hospitals and other health services in rural areas that are already under pressure.

Climate scientists have established that older people are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of extreme weather events, which are more likely to occur as the climate changes.³ In the January 2009 heatwave leading up to Black Saturday, 374 excess deaths were recorded, a 62 per cent increase in mortality compared to what is normally expected at that time of the year. The greatest number of excess deaths occurred in those 75 years or older, while deaths in those 65 years and older more than doubled compared with the same period in 2008.⁴

The population of rural Victoria is older – in 2016, 29 per cent of the rural Victorian population was aged over 60, compared to 18 per cent of metropolitan Melbourne, and 23 per cent of regional cities. The population aged over 60 living in rural Victoria is expected to increase to 34 per cent by 2036 (compared to 21 per cent for Melbourne and 28 per cent in regional cities).

Older people have greater incidence of chronic illness, and heat waves can increase the magnitude of pre-existing chronic conditions. Older people are also more likely to be socially isolated and have less financial resources, which may result in reduced access to health information and services, or they may have diminished ability to evacuate in an emergency.

Direct impact on the key drivers of the rural economy: agriculture and tourism

Agriculture is the mainstay of the rural Victorian economy, comprising 20.5 per cent of employment. Worth \$14.9 billion in GSP and \$14.2 billion in exports. Out of all industries agriculture is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with effects including increased incidence of drought, extreme weather events such as bushfires and flooding, loss of arable land and decreased access to water.⁵

The January bushfires have damaged many dairy, sheep and cattle farms in the East Gippsland, Towong and Wellington Shires. Considerable stock losses have been widely reported and there is real risk that many farmers will walk away from the industry over the longer term. At the very least farmers face a considerable decline in income: research into the economic legacy of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires found that incomes of people who worked in agriculture fell by 31 per cent after the disaster.⁶

Timber workers in East Gippsland were already under labour market and economic pressure with the announcement of the Victorian Forestry Plan in November 2019. There is now a shortened 10-year timeframe for the timber industry to adjust from native timber logging to plantation products.

Tourism is a major industry in rural Victoria and the Christmas/New Year period is the peak holiday/tourist season. The impact of the disaster on one of rural Victoria's key industries is

³ Gabrielle J. Johnson *Effects of climate change on older Australians and chronic disease – are we prepared for the increased burden?* Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 2016 vol. 40 no. 2 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1753-6405.12513>

⁴ VAGO <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-07/20141014-Heatwave-Management.pdf>

⁵ https://www.farmersforclimateaction.org.au/climate_change_and_agriculture

⁶ <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/6628/ajem-201904-02-mehmet-ulubasoglu-et-al-farah-beaini.pdf>

profound. The latest (2017-18) Regional Tourism Satellite account data found the Gippsland and Victoria's High Country were responsible for more than 20 per cent of Regional Victoria's \$8.1 billion tourist industry, employing just under 20,000 people.⁷

Coastal centres such as Lakes Entrance, Metung and Mallacoota, together with towns in Victoria's high country such as Bright are suffering economically as a result of the cancellation of bookings and visits in the 2019-2020 summer holiday season. While many of the RCV member councils were not directly fire-affected this bushfire season, adjoining councils such as Indigo Shire also suffered economically, as local businesses were forced to close down during the emergency, leaving them unable to trade over peak holiday trading season. There was also a flow on to other regional areas due to the perception that all of eastern Australia was affected by bushfires.

The economic recovery of all these communities is now under further pressure due to the COVID-19 emergency.

Rural population and liveability. Bushfire risk and migration

In a Deakin University study into the economic costs to individuals and communities after the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, the authors noted

...the migration effects of the Black Saturday bushfires are substantial. Bushfires are frightening and devastating. We found that the Black Saturday bushfires had permanent effects on an individual's location decisions in terms of moving out and not returning.⁸

Rural migration has been one of the key advocacy goals of RCV, promoting rural Victoria as a place to live and work. Research commissioned by RCV has found that a small workforce increase in a rural town can make a big difference as there is a significantly greater economic impact in smaller townships for jobs created and lost compared with larger towns and regional centres.⁹ Other research into rural migration found people who grow up in regional and rural areas are most likely to return to live and work there later in their lives.¹⁰ We also know that a key drawcard of migration to regional or rural Victoria is 'liveability', represented by factors such as friendly communities, affordable cost of living and good quality education and health services.¹¹ However these elements of liveability are hard for small rural towns to maintain when their populations are declining.

Increased incidence of bushfires and natural disasters as a result of climate change is another threat to population growth in rural Victoria.

⁷ https://www.business.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1855603/Value-of-Tourism-to-Victoria-Summary-updated-January-2020.pdf

⁸ <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/6628/ajem-201904-02-mehmet-ulubasoglu-et-al-farah-beaini.pdf>

⁹ Crowe Horwath for RCV, *Economic Impact Assessment of the Creation and Retention of Rural Jobs* (2019) p.2

¹⁰ Urban Enterprise for RCV, *Population Growth in Rural Victoria: Opportunities and Actions* (2018) p.32

¹¹ Urban Enterprise for RCV, *Services for Rural Liveability: Final Research Report* (2019) p.32