

Rural Councils Victoria (RCV) believes that liveable, sustainable and prosperous rural communities are fundamental to the ongoing success of Victoria. The bushfire season over the last summer was disastrous for rural Victorian communities in East Gippsland, Towong, Alpine and Wellington Shires, with the cost of the season exceeding the \$4.4 billion in damage resulting from the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.<sup>1</sup>

This submission focusses on the following elements of this inquiry's terms of reference:

- Preparedness of rural councils for the 2019-20 fire season, including the constraints on smaller rural councils in meeting existing Victorian Government emergency management frameworks
- The impact of longer and more severe bushfire seasons on rural communities as a result of climate change,
- The impact of the fires on businesses in locations that were bushfire-affected over the Victorian peak holiday season
- The currently limited capacity of rural councils to undertake fuel and land management practices and the benefits of this, such as 'cool burning' and traditional fire approaches in preparation for the upcoming fire season

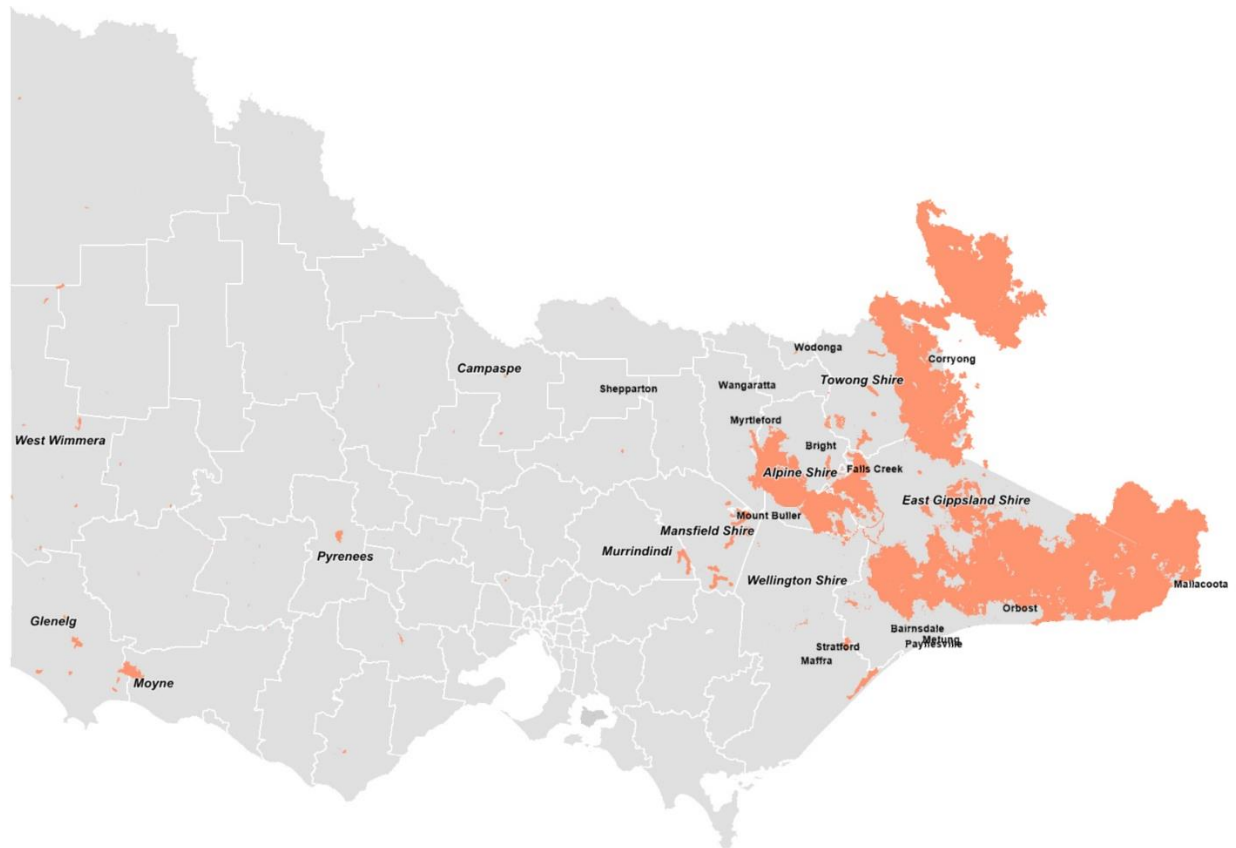
In this submission, RCV contends that

- The bushfire evacuation, response, relief and recovery effort co-ordinated by the relevant rural councils was extraordinary, and demonstrated that local government is ideally placed to lead and co-ordinate the emergency effort due to their local knowledge and networks.
- The current emergency management framework and funding model is a one-size-fits-all approach that does not take into account the differences in geographical size, budgetary resourcing and staffing across rural, regional city and metropolitan councils.
- Given the scale of the January 2020 bushfires, and the future likelihood of natural disasters and greater intensity bushfires due to climate change, resourcing available to councils for emergency management purposes needs to be increased.
- Rural communities are particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change, with rising temperatures and increasing intensive extreme weather events such as fires, heatwaves and floods directly impacting their residents and economies. The major impacts 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 and negative economic impacts on agriculture and tourism, the most important industries to the rural economy.
- The current system regarding fuel reduction is problematic due to longer fire seasons, unclear and overlapping legislative oversight and funding shortfalls.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/08/economic-impact-of-australias-bushfires-set-to-exceed-44bn-cost-of-black-saturday>

## Impact of the 2019-20 fire season on rural Victoria

### Map 1. 2019-20 Fire Season Fire Scars, as at 1 April 2020



Source: Forest Fire Management Victoria

The January 2020 fires across Victoria were notable for their intensity and coverage. The rural councils predominantly effected 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, Gleneilg, 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 map above gives some indication of the vast geographic area affected by the fires across Victoria's north east, Alpine and Gippsland areas. 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 times than they would expected to be in the past – in East Gippsland they were in operation for 143 days, with over 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, as 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 government bring to bear.*

### **Preparedness of rural councils for the 2019-20 fire season**

RCV believes the experience of the 2019-20 fire season provides necessary and important lessons for both State and local government regarding Victoria's current emergency management framework and approach, and resourcing of councils to meet their emergency management obligations.

The *Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report* was released by Local Government Victoria (LGV) 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 LGV report measured the maturity levels on a scale of 1 to 5 across 13 core capability areas concerning emergency management preparedness.<sup>2</sup> The report found that large and small

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<sup>2</sup> 'A council at level 1 aims to undertake its emergency management responsibilities and activities to a basic level only, completing all legislative requirements and other responsibilities only as their limited resources allow. A council at level 5 aims to undertake its emergency management responsibilities and activities to a best-practice level, completing all legislative requirements and other responsibilities.'

shires scored 1 to 3 for the level of maturity in meeting their emergency risk, while scoring highly in terms of their risk profile. The report found:

*Large Shire councils identified target maturities of 2, 3 or 4, with the majority identifying a target maturity of 3. **Large Shire councils had relative need levels of 1 to 3 and emergency risk levels from 2 to 4, reflecting that these councils generally have limited resourcing but higher risk.***

*All but one Small Shire council identified target maturities of 2, 3 or 4 with the remaining council identifying a target maturity of 1. **These councils are smaller organisations, so they had lower target maturities despite in many cases facing a high or extreme emergency risk level.***<sup>3</sup>

The report later noted some of the constraints facing geographically large shires such as East Gippsland and shires with a small rate paying base such as Towong in establishing and resourcing emergency management capability adequately:

*[C]ouncils with large geographic areas reported that the size of their municipalities made it harder to undertake their emergency management responsibilities. Barriers they identified were the distances to travel to local communities, having to deal with a large area for hazard planning and undertaking relief and recovery functions in multiple geographic areas. This issue is amplified in geographically larger municipalities which can have smaller rate bases, have a large amount of assets and have less available council resources.*<sup>4</sup>

Other issues encountered by smaller councils in term of emergency management preparedness identified in the report included:

- Lack of adequate staffing for emergency management. This includes having one or only a few staff in an emergency management role, often undertaken in addition to their substantive position. This impacts on their availability to undertake relevant training, develop procedures for relief and recovery and engage in community planning, amongst other things. Staff turnover is also an issue, as loss of staff with experience in emergencies can reduce the organisation's capability.<sup>5</sup>
- Difficulty integrating emergency management roles with community engagement roles, including a lack of knowledge of, or training in, community engagement practices.<sup>6</sup>

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(Local Government Victoria, *Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report*, December 2019, p6)

<sup>3</sup> Local Government Victoria, *Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report*, December 2019, p.24

<sup>4</sup> Local Government Victoria, *Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report*, December 2019, p.66

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.29, p.48

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.30

- Budgetary constraints. Residents of rural councils have a comparatively low socio-economic position compared to their regional city and metropolitan counterparts, limiting the revenue councils can raise via rating and other measures. RCV outlined the wide range of services rural councils increasingly provide to their communities with a limited revenue base in last year's submission to the Victorian Government's rates review.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of the January bushfires demonstrates the 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 (80 FTE), 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 calls for the \$4.9 million Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP) which provides annual funding to councils for emergency management to be increased.

### **The impact of increasingly longer and more severe bushfire seasons as a result of climate change**

Rural Victorian communities are 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. In 2019-20 the bushfire season extended from August 2019 starting in New South Wales through to February 2020 in other parts of south eastern Australia.

As we have seen over the last summer, the major effects of an extended fire season, hotter climactic conditions, greater incidence of natural disasters and greater intensity bushfires 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

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.

<sup>7</sup> The submission can be found [here](#) on the RCV website.

Other climate change effects include increases 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 place extra pressure on hospitals and other health services in rural areas that are already under pressure.

Increasing risk of bushfires have a direct impact on agriculture and tourism, which are key drivers of the rural economy. 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.<sup>8</sup>

The January bushfires damaged many dairy, sheep and cattle farms in the East Gippsland, Towong, Alpine and Wellington Shires. Considerable stock losses were 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.<sup>9</sup>

Timber workers in East Gippsland were already under labour market and economic pressure with the announcement of the Victorian Forestry Plan in November 2019, which set out a ten 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 profound. The latest (2017-18) Regional Tourism Satellite account data found the Gippsland and Victoria's High Country areas were responsible for over 20 per cent of Regional Victoria's \$8.1 billion tourist industry, employing just under 20,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

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.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.farmersforclimateaction.org.au/climate\\_change\\_and\\_agriculture](https://www.farmersforclimateaction.org.au/climate_change_and_agriculture)

<sup>9</sup> <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/6628/ajem-201904-02-mehmet-ulubasoglu-et-al-farah-beaini.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.business.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/1855603/Value-of-Tourism-to-Victoria-Summary-updated-January-2020.pdf](https://www.business.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1855603/Value-of-Tourism-to-Victoria-Summary-updated-January-2020.pdf)



While RCV recognises the economic recovery will take many years, the *Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report* found that economic recovery had the highest percentage of councils (77 per cent) with below target maturity.<sup>11</sup>

Last summer's fires are also likely to impact on the efforts to promote population attraction and liveability in the bushfire-affected councils. 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.*<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> However these elements of liveability are hard for small rural towns to maintain when their populations are declining.

The increased incidence of bushfires and natural disasters as a result of climate change will be another impediment to population attraction to rural Victoria.

### **The current system regarding fuel reduction**

RCV member councils who were not directly affected by this year's bushfires wish to use this opportunity to inform the Inspector-General of their concerns regarding the importance of cold burns and containment of roadside vegetation.

As discussed earlier, extended fire seasons 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*

<sup>11</sup> Local Government Victoria, *Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report*, December 2019, p.64

<sup>12</sup> <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/6628/ajem-201904-02-mehmet-ulubasoglu-et-al-farah-beaini.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Crowe Horwath for RCV, *Economic Impact Assessment of the Creation and Retention of Rural Jobs* (2019) p.2

<sup>14</sup> Urban Enterprise for RCV, *Population Growth in Rural Victoria: Opportunities and Actions* (2018) p.32

<sup>15</sup> Urban Enterprise for RCV, *Services for Rural Liveability: Final Research Report* (2019) p.32

*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 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.*

### **Key messages and lessons from RCV regarding the 2019-20 fire season**

The intensity and breadth of this summer's fires was extraordinary in its scale and the corresponding evacuation, response, relief and recovery effort was equally extraordinary. Local governments are best equipped to co-ordinate the fire emergency response, due to their local knowledge and networks.

Incidence of bushfires on the vast scale seen over the 2019-20 season are likely to increase due to climate change. This means councils must be adequately resourced to prepare for, and manage, these events.

The economic impacts to bushfire-affected communities and businesses will need to be closely monitored and addressed over the coming months and years.





There are opportunities for greater fuel reduction measures to be undertaken by councils, but current legislative and regulatory frameworks relating to roadside vegetation would need to be reviewed before this could be fully effective.