

After the flames – Community Reflections

Voices from the 2019/2020
bushfire season

Ken Lay AO APM

Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land. BRV also acknowledges and pays respect to the Elders, past, present and emerging and is committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the bushfire rebuild and recovery.

Acknowledgments

Ken Lay would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of the members of bushfire impacted communities, local governments and State Government departments in the development of this community summary.

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**“One of the
most important
things we have
is the power of
community.”**

Sarsfield resident

Message to the Premier

Dear Premier

It is an honour to present to you a summary that represents what we heard between January and March, from the Victorian community who were affected by the devastating impacts of the 2019–20 bushfire season.

This document preserves experiences and stories from those who were impacted by Victoria's most devastating bushfire season in more than a decade.

The 2019–20 fire season caused much devastation and loss across many towns and its deep impacts will be felt by individuals, communities and businesses for years to come.

I would like to acknowledge the exceptional efforts by people who dedicated many days and weeks to fighting, containing and managing the bushfires. Were it not for their concerted efforts, the damage and loss would have been far greater.

In appointing me as Chair of the newly established and permanent agency, Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV), you asked me to engage with fire impacted individuals, businesses and communities to understand their experiences and needs, including impacts on their daily life, health, economy, environment and infrastructure.

I have travelled 7216 kilometres across the state, visited 32 fire impacted communities and spoke with more than 300 people.

From Milawa and Myrtleford in the north, to Mallacoota in the far east, every community had a unique and exceptional experience of the 2019–20 fire season.

I would like to acknowledge the people who let me in to their lounge rooms, their community halls, and into their lives to share their deeply personal stories. These stories had a profound and lasting impact on me.

“Collectively, these stories tell of fear and fragility, through to enormous strength and power that connected communities create.”

How communities have come together in the early stages of recovery gives hope that they will continue to respond to the aftermath in six months, three years and 10 years' time.

Much of this engagement occurred when the state was still under active threat from fires. The immediate impacts were very real, and very raw. As a result, most of the issues we heard related to initial response, relief and recovery efforts.

This summary aims to document these issues at the immediate point in time after the fires. It represents the voices of community members who we engaged with, but is not representative of every individual's experience.

The establishment of BRV as a permanent agency will enhance the state's capacity to provide expert and timely support to Victorians impacted by future bushfires.

The summary reflects the immediate steps taken to support individuals and communities and I look forward to BRV's continued and concerted efforts to address the issues that the community have said are important to their recovery process.

I would like to acknowledge the work of BRV in its establishment. The team has responded with agility, dedication and focus. This is testament to the leadership of newly appointed CEO, Lee Mieziš, and his executive team.

I would also like to highlight the work of regionally based teams who play a critical role on the ground to ensure the local voice is at the centre of recovery and the support I received from my small team which allowed me to achieve an ambitious engagement agenda.

“Recovery is best achieved with the input of the affected community.”

There were many messages in the collective voice as to how we could be more responsive, communicate more clearly, engage more effectively, and target future investment.

The strongest message I heard time and time again links directly to the National Principles for Disaster Recovery –

“The approach to long-term recovery lies within these communities. I am encouraged that BRV’s operating model is intentionally focused on supporting community-led recovery.”

The enormity of the recovery process ahead is evident. Sadly, we can expect a significant compounding impact for bushfire communities as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

I’m heartened by your often stated commitment to maintain ongoing support for these communities in their recovery journey.

While many will measure progress and success by the number of homes rebuilt, kilometres of fencing re-installed, or scale of habitat restored, I believe we should not be so limited.

The level of connection and vitality restored in communities, the ability for people to live full and healthy lives and our collective skill in applying the lessons that the 2019–20 bushfire season has taught us all, will be just as important.

The greatest tragedy of these fires was the loss of life.

I would like to acknowledge the five people who lost their lives in this disaster, and the families and friends who grieve for them.

Our work, and the efforts ahead, must honour them.

Ken Lay AO APM



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Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the role of the Chair

Establishment of a permanent agency

Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) was established on 6 January 2020 as a new, permanent and dedicated agency to work with bushfire impacted communities to recover.

BRV's role includes coordination and ensuring community voices are a driving force in recovery.

The agency links bushfire impacted Victorians and communities to vital services, including financial assistance, counselling, property clean-up and fencing programs. This is done through collaboration with impacted communities, local governments, state agencies including Emergency Management Victoria, the Commonwealth Government, private donors, charitable organisations and the Victorian Bushfire Appeal.

BRV was set-up as a permanent body in recognition of recovery being a long-term process requiring deliberate and coordinated community-led planning. Also, the increased risk the state faces due to longer and hotter bushfire seasons.

BRV's role includes enhancing the state's capacity to provide expert and timely support to Victorians impacted by future bushfires.

BRV's Terms of Reference are provided in **Appendix B**.

Its establishment came at a challenging time. Setting up a recovery agency, while the state and communities were dealing with the active threat of bushfires, presented some challenges with prioritisation of effort and areas of focus.

Five lines of recovery have been identified by BRV as critical to the success of disaster recovery. BRV is guided by these five lines, which represent best practice recovery learnings to ensure an outcomes-driven approach and put the community at the centre of the recovery process.

*Image right: Aerial firefighting
Image courtesy of Emergency
Management Victoria.*



Recovery outcomes

	Individuals and families	Community outcomes	Population outcomes
People and wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victorians are safe and secure Victorians are healthy and well Victorian communities are cohesive and people connected 		
Business and economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victorian industry and businesses recover and are stronger Victorians have access to employment opportunities Victorian communities are resilient Victoria's regional infrastructure is strategically developed 		
Buildings and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victoria's utilities are restored and resilient Victoria has quality public infrastructure Victoria's residential and commercial infrastructure is restored and improved 		
Environment and biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victoria has a healthy, resilient and biodiverse natural environment Victoria's natural environment has high levels of amenity Victoria has productive and accessible natural environments 		
Aboriginal culture and healing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal culture is prioritised Trauma and support for Aboriginal people addresses healing Aboriginal cultural safety is promoted Aboriginal participation and ownership is promoted 		

Role of the Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair

Ken Lay AO APM was appointed as the BRV Chair on 6 January 2020, for an initial three-month period.

There were two key aspects to the role:

1. Chair the Premier's Special Advisory Council
2. Public face of the Victorian Government recovery efforts.

See **Appendix A** for the BRV Chair's Terms of Reference.

1. Chair of the Premier's Special Advisory Council

The Premier's Special Advisory Council is responsible for, through the Chair, providing strategic independent advice to the Premier on:

- BRV's bushfire recovery policy and programs
- BRV's forward work program to identify gaps and opportunities across the five recovery lines
- BRV's approach to consultation with community, business and local government
- strategies to build community resilience in recovery.

See **Appendix C** for the Premier's Special Advisory Council Terms of Reference.

The Council members are experts from a range of fields:

- Dr Jennifer Gray, CEO of Zoos Victoria
- Kerry Thompson, CEO of Municipal Association of Victoria

- Mark Stone AM, Board Director of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Stephen Sheppard, CEO of Victorian Farmers Federation
- The Hon. Pat McNamara, Chair of the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Advisory Panel
- Jamie Williamson, CEO of Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative
- Dr Rob Gordon, Clinical Psychologist
- Andrew Crisp APM, Emergency Management Commissioner
- Chris Eccles AO, Secretary of Department of Premier and Cabinet
- Kym Peake, Secretary of Department of Health and Human Services.

The Council meets monthly. In its first two meetings, members considered response and recovery efforts and provided advice on the Recovery Framework developed by BRV.

2. Public face of the Victorian Government's recovery efforts

The BRV Chair was responsible for advising the Premier and BRV on the recovery needs of communities and informing communities of BRV's recovery efforts.

Image right: A koala
clings to a burnt tree.
Image courtesy
of the Department
of Defence.



Our engagement approach

Between January and March 2020, the BRV Chair met with individuals, communities and businesses impacted by the fires. The BRV Chair also met with experts, local governments, Members of Parliament, State Government Ministers and the Commonwealth Government through the National Bushfire Recovery Agency.

A list of meetings held by the BRV Chair is provided in **Appendix D**. Profiles of the places visited is provided in **Appendix E**.

The engagement approach was informed by lessons from previous disaster recovery efforts and best practice from the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) Guide to Engaging in Disaster Recovery.

Efforts were made to consult broadly and adopt a community responsive format, ensuring that local voices were at the centre.

Consideration was given to:

- connecting with existing community structures and local networks via local leaders and influencers
- visiting a diverse range of communities to gain a broad insight into the recovery experience
- engaging with community members who needed extra support or found it difficult to receive, understand, or act on information during or after the bushfires
- visiting both flame impacted and non-flame impacted communities

- ensuring meeting attendees were reflective of the area's demographics including gender diversity, cultural diversity, age profile, marital status and occupations
- ensuring meetings provided the opportunity for complex issues to be discussed in detail and for every attendee to share their unique personal experience and provide direct feedback.

To assist with planning, advice was obtained from Regional Development Victoria and local governments when selecting which towns to visit as priority, demographic data was sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, meetings generally had no more than 10 attendees and were two hours duration.

During meetings with individuals and communities, the BRV Chair sought the following information:

- the aspirations and values of the community
- individual and community experiences of the bushfires
- what was working in the response and recovery efforts, areas for improvement and whether there was consistency between different communities
- the targeted support people needed to get back on their feet
- recovery needs.

While it was not possible to visit every impacted town or place, the adopted engagement strategy offered diverse insights from small communities through to key regional hubs.

The BRV Chair was conscious that disasters could be highly traumatic for children and youth and that they were not always able to express complex feelings in the same way as adults. Some children may have been separated from their parents during evacuation, lost their home and personal belongings or their school.

As the impact of the fires was still so raw, the conscious decision was made for the BRV Chair to not undertake specific engagement with children and youth in the first three months following the fires, as to not create secondary trauma. BRV will undertake consultation with children and youth as the community moves through the stages of recovery.

The BRV Chair had an active Twitter account, which was used to regularly highlight immediate support available and what he was hearing from communities.

Advising the Premier, BRV and Government

The BRV Chair shared what was heard from individuals, communities and stakeholders through daily reports to the Premier, BRV, other relevant Ministers and the Commonwealth. BRV shared these reports with relevant government departments through the Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce and the issues raised were tracked and actioned.

What the BRV Chair heard

The next sections of this summary outline what the Chair heard during his engagement between January and March 2020 and his observations. The issues are grouped in themes according to BRV's five lines of recovery, noting that recovery is not linear, some issues do not fit neatly within these themes and could be relevant to multiple lines of recovery.

As the engagement period was immediately after the bushfires, communities were still grappling with the response to the fires. Some of the issues raised related to fire management and response and were outside the remit of the Chair's role.

These issues are likely to remain key areas of focus for communities into the future, with expectations that they will be addressed during recovery to be better prepared before the next fire season.

Issues raised have also been included as they could be relevant points of reference to help inform the independent investigation by the Inspector General of Emergency Management into the 2019–20 bushfire season and the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

The Chair was often the first government representative that communities and individuals had seen since the fires. He heard of the importance in the early recovery phases of a trusted leader engaging with local communities to understand their issues.

In total, 590 separate issues were captured through his three-month engagement. This summary aims to highlight prominent concerns and recovery needs.

The issues raised included:

- people and wellbeing
 - 34 per cent
- business and economy
 - 25 per cent
- buildings and infrastructure
 - 20 per cent
- environment and biodiversity
 - 14 per cent
- Aboriginal culture and healing
 - 4 per cent
- other 3 per cent

Exploration of good practice in recovery and of lessons learnt revealed that many of the experiences raised were consistent with early recovery priorities identified in previous events, including the 2002–03 Victorian bushfires (impacting the Alpine and East Gippsland areas), 2009 Victorian bushfires, 2015 Lancefield-Cobaw fires, 2015 Wye River and Separation Creek fires and the 2018 South West fires.

While the experience of the bushfires was to some extent a predictable and shared experience, no two people have experienced this bushfire event in the same way and there were many varied and differing views.

"It was apparent that every fire impacted community has its own history, identity, values and dynamics and their needs are unique. As a result, this summary is not intended to be representative of all bushfire impacted communities and all voices."

Observations

The observations outlined in the following sections are based on reflections of what we heard from communities, businesses, stakeholders and experts in the three-month engagement period.

It was out of scope for the Chair to undertake a research-based assessment to test issues raised against current, or future, policy positions. Other formal reviews that have been commissioned by both the state and federal governments are better positioned to present an evidence-based position.

*Picture right: The BRV
Chair meeting with Buchan
community members.*



**“The individuals
we spoke with said
learnings from this
season’s bushfires could
help inform the way we
respond to, and recover
from, future bushfires.”**

**Ken Lay AO APM – Bushfire Recovery
Victoria Chair**

Section 1

People and wellbeing

The impact on Victoria

Individuals, families and communities who experienced the fires, have lived through, and continue to experience, significant levels of distress and anguish.

Key impacts from the 2019–20 fire season:

- five fatalities
- more than 120 communities directly impacted
- approximately 4,000 people forced to shelter on the Mallacoota foreshore as fire threatened the town
- over the next two days almost 2000 of these people were evacuated by air and sea
- more than 60,000 people estimated to have evacuated East Gippsland as a result of the Victorian Government's State of Disaster declaration.

"Beyond the statistics, what we know is that many people will have been deeply traumatised and will be suffering from a range of physical and psychological effects because of these bushfires."

Rob Gordon – Clinical Psychologist and member of the Premier's Special Advisory Council

Image right: A group of primary producers, overlooking burnt land. Image courtesy of the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.



“The research tells us that how we support people and communities in these moments is critical to their long-term wellbeing and recovery.”

Rob Gordon – Clinical Psychologist and
member of the Premier’s Special Advisory Council

The recovery needs

Individuals and communities identified four emerging themes relating to recovery for people and their wellbeing.

1. Accessing services and grants

Initial assistance was welcome through relief centres and offers of support and donations from the broader community, non-government organisations and governments (at all levels). We heard that relief centres successfully connected individuals with the support they needed.

We heard that face-to-face support was the strong preference for most individuals. To fill gaps in the support available, some community members took on volunteer leadership roles, serving as a central point of contact to help people understand what support and financial assistance was available. We heard that many of these individuals went above and beyond to connect with isolated community members, and that their leadership was valued.

Key concerns we heard included:

- difficulty with the 1800 560 760 support line, due to lengthy wait-times, being unable to obtain a case manager, or the relevant information they sought
- difficulty accessing the 1800 support line due to poor phone service
- lack of willingness to access support through the 1800 number as people preferred face-to-face support
- some people were not ready to access support, as they needed more time to come to terms with what had happened before making decisions

- reluctance to access services and grants, for many people, asking for help or a 'hand-out' felt uncomfortable and they perceived that there were people worse off than them
- complexity and number of grants and forms, including applications and insurance claim processes. People were feeling overwhelmed as each grant had different eligibility and evidence requirements.

These concerns were consistent with those raised over many years following previous bushfires, and research tells us that many activities were challenging because people experiencing trauma remained in a survival or 'fight-or-flight' mode for some time. In very real terms, this results in a diminished capacity for undertaking otherwise simple tasks and making decisions.

In the aftermath of the 2009 bushfires, communities came to refer to this as 'bushfire brain', which reflected the impact of stress on changed brain functions towards actions and emotions and away from language and thinking.

Experts told us that people's ability to complete administrative tasks needed to be considered in relation to the stress state of those applying. They said the application process needed to consider helping people get into a state of mind where they could perform the task. The three states that were reported to interfere with the grant application process were general stress, continuing trauma responses and distress from grief.

"The support is there for people, but the paperwork is too hard. Some people don't understand it and some people are not yet ready for assistance as they are not in the right frame of mind – it's all still so raw."

Bruthen resident

Image right: The BRV Chair and Regional Recovery Manager meeting with Cobungra community members.



**“The forms frighten you—
we don’t have the head
space to work through it
now. You just don’t feel up
to it as you are trying to
get back on your feet.”**

Clifton Creek resident

**“Our chance
to make up
for some of
the loss
is to rebuild
our farm
and rebuild
our lives.”**

Milusa and Kevin



Case Study:

Wildflower farmers to bloom again

Milusa and Kevin are East Gippsland wildflower farmers who lost everything when the bushfire burnt through their house and farm on the night of 30 December 2019.

For 15 years they had put their heart and soul into building the farm, planting over 14,000 flowers and supplying to many Melbourne markets. Their whole life changed overnight.

The hardest part for them in early days was dealing with the trauma of their loss. They just weren't ready to talk about their circumstances and did not want to talk to someone over the phone. They hoped to get face-to-face support, but this was not available.

Accessing support was made more difficult by the requirements to supply taxation statements from their business, most of which had been burnt in the fire. They described the process of accessing grants as a full-time job, which was made all the harder by the strains of their trauma.

In response, and to assist Milusa and Kevin get back on their feet, BRV organised a case manager to help them navigate financial assistance and grants, organised clean-up of their property and arranged two 22,000 litre water tanks and a pump to be delivered to their property free of charge.

Milusa and Kevin received a \$75,000 Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grant which they will use to pay for a new shed, fencing and a tractor. They are currently applying for the \$50,000 Small Business Bushfire Recovery Grant and the \$10,000 Small Business Bushfire Support Grant.

The couple said they were very grateful for the support they had been provided.

In response to the support from Government and the support of their community, Milusa and Kevin have made the decision to rebuild their wildflower farm.

While it will take some time for new flowers to be planted and grow, the couple is committed to new growth out of the dark moments.

The wildflower farm was not just their crop, it was their passion.

Image left: Milusa and Kevin standing in front of their destroyed house.

2. Wellbeing support critical to recovery

There was open acknowledgment in many discussions about the significant levels of fatigue and stress as a result of the fires and the risk of increased prevalence of family violence.

Increased prevalence of family violence is repeatedly found in post-disaster situations. Research following the 2009 bushfires showed that increased violence resulted from frustration, anger, grief and bereavement leading to family conflict and impacting on family relationships. This impact was studied by Women's Health Goulburn North East, which found that relationship violence may be unrecognised and unrecorded during and in the aftermath of a disaster, as many women sacrifice their own needs.

We heard that based on the experience from previous disasters, men and women often defaulted to rigid traditional stereotypes during recovery – men as strong and masculine and women as nurturing and protective. This is as a result of both genders attempting to cope with long-term cumulative trauma and disintegration of normal community connections.

Other key concerns we heard included:

- some people were already tired from a difficult year from drought and other stresses when the fires started. Dealing with the bushfires required a huge expenditure of energy
- many people who did not live in the impacted areas had also been affected by this event. Holidaymakers and others who evacuated could be traumatised and dispersed across Victoria and beyond, with potentially unknown psychosocial impacts.

- some people did not know where to go to access support, and when they did, they found long waiting periods. There was a lack of capacity within local services to support the growing needs of their communities
- frustration and anxiety from some people having to tell their story several times to various services including telecommunication, power, water and insurance companies. These calls could last many hours and involved multiple transfers, having detrimental impacts on individual wellbeing
- the mental health impacts will be felt for years. Concerns were raised that this may result in an increase in self harm.

We heard that individuals sought wellbeing support from known and trusted sources such as neighbours, friends and local health professionals. There was acknowledgment of positive support, including counselling, in schools through the Department of Education and Training.

Experts told us that many people did not recognise formal mental health services as the answer to their problems, but there was a great need for communities to have the reassurance and information from mental health professionals available.

Community members were grateful for volunteers who came to the area to provide support and lift their spirits.

"Their attitude was top of the range – they made you feel as if you weren't alone but were part of a huge community. This really lifted our spirits."

Clifton Creek resident

We heard there was an important link between individual health and wellbeing, and community recovery. We know from previous bushfire events that isolation is a risk after disasters and this causes loss of energy and confidence in the future. Feelings of isolation by bushfire impacted individuals may be compounded by coronavirus.

The Beyond Bushfires research, led by the University of Melbourne, undertaken with 2009 bushfire impacted communities, showed that being part of a group reduced the likelihood of poor mental health. Communities who had experienced disasters, such as the people of Wye River and Separation Creek, reflected that their recovery was stronger because they worked together and drew on local skills. Experts advised that social contact through groups organised around common needs and tasks created energy and confidence.



Image right: A Buchan community member shows the BRV Chair a photo on her phone, showing the impact of the fires on her property.

Case study

A local sawmill in north eastern Victoria employing more than 20 staff was significantly threatened by bushfire. Many staff actively defended their own homes and the homes of others in their community, and sadly, a number of homes were lost. We heard that in the weeks post the bushfires, the sawmill had between three and six people on sick leave each day. Managers were concerned that staff were not able to access adequate face-to-face mental health support and also the unknown increased risks of trauma on workplace safety.

“People are at the end of the tether – we are seeing lots of people with mental health challenges. Suicides are going to become a big issue into the future.”

Cobungra resident

3. Importance of community empowerment and community-led recovery

The need for community-led recovery was emphasised at almost every community meeting.

We were told that all voices needed to be heard as part of the community-led recovery process (not just the loudest voices), and that local leadership was best placed to support community members, both informally and via Community Recovery Committees.

“In a disaster, the social fabric and connection within a community is badly disrupted or damaged. Although we may not appreciate it before a disaster, these connections are very important to our personal identity. It is critical that communities be supported to re-establish that social fabric and connection, not as a ‘nice to do’ but as essential psychosocial recovery. Community connections support the sense of identity, restore the ability to think, plan and make decisions and create positive emotions. Community action is the means for individuals to recover their effectiveness.”

Rob Gordon, Clinical Psychologist and member of the Premier’s Special Advisory Council

4. Continued focus on support for bushfire recovery

Some individuals and communities expressed gratitude for the range of support from government and non-government agencies.

Others expressed concern about being overlooked, or forgotten. Experts said that communication about support to people was as important as the actual support itself.

Key concerns we heard included:

- supports were based on direct flame impact and loss rather than on indirect impacts
- generous donations from public fundraising efforts were not being distributed to directly impacted individuals and communities
- ensuring no expiration of grants and that individuals and communities had the time, at their pace and when they were ready, to apply for the necessary supports
- ensuring that bushfire recovery remained a focus, regardless of other emerging priorities or issues, including the coronavirus response.

“The recovery process needs to be done with care, with the widest possible community engagement and voice, and within the local context, building on local structures and systems.”

Cann River resident

Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair observations

Structured support for emotional wellbeing

- In every community, people openly displayed their immense grief and stress in the aftermath of the fires. In most conversations, there would be someone who was emotionally distressed and visibly upset.
- Many individuals had not yet sought support for their mental health as they said they did not feel they were ready to do so, or that it was their immediate priority. This indicated a challenge in encouraging and supporting individuals (at their pace, according to their need) to proactively seek and accept support.
- The Government funding packages relating specifically to mental health supports were welcomed by communities. We heard support for local leaders, frontline workers and teachers identifying vulnerabilities and understanding the pathways for psychosocial support was crucial. With the added impacts of coronavirus, the emotional wellbeing of individuals and communities will be critical during what is now likely to be an extended recovery period. Tailoring support and outreach to individual needs will be critical.

Tailoring support and outreach to individual needs

- Some individuals (particularly primary producers) shared that they were not used to seeking help and support. We heard proactive support – offered through an outreach model – would allow trusted relationships to be built and provide a foundation for more intensive and personalised care.
- The experience and lessons from previous disasters, such as the Millennium Drought, showed that proactive outreach could result in positive recovery outcomes. The 2009 bushfire recovery program included targeted programs to support groups through a variety of activities (often recreational) to connect communities in ways that best-suited their wellbeing needs.

Identification of safety and wellbeing risk

- Research of previous disasters indicates that family violence, relationship breakdowns and self-harm are increased risks in communities that have experienced disasters. Advocacy groups said this was of critical concern following these bushfires, particularly given the existing levels of family violence in some impacted communities.
- We heard that proactive, evidence-based design of recovery supports and interventions was critical. This included understanding the relationship between gender and disaster, particularly the increased risk of violence against women.

Bushfire Recovery Victoria focus

- Establishing Community Recovery Hubs in fire affected areas to provide a one-stop shop for affected individuals, families, farmers and businesses to receive integrated, timely and tailored information and services. These hubs will also provide a visiting service (mobile hubs) to affected communities in their local area. They will also feed vital local information into recovery planning at local, regional and state levels.
- Delivery of a case support program, through the Department of Health and Human Services, to assist people undertake recovery and navigate the service system, including helping people complete forms and manage insurance claims.
- Delivery of a central call-centre, through the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, supported by a toll free 1800 number (1800 560 760) to provide information about the agency, support and assistance and to direct people to further support, including registering for case support. This contact centre has the professional capability to take a high volume of calls, reducing wait times.
- Working to leverage the generosity of corporate and private donors to ensure their contributions are coordinated and have optimal impact for bushfire impacted individuals and communities. This includes working with the Salvation Army and GIVIT to distribute donated goods and offers of assistance.
- Communication through BRV's website, social media channels, paid media, hard copy communication materials and other channels to ensure that bushfire affected communities have information about the full range of support and assistance available, regular updates on the work of the agency and progress of recovery efforts.

Government supports available

State Government funding and support included case management support and mental health supports. Commonwealth Government funding and support included emergency relief assistance payments and emergency re-establishment payments.

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal fund provided funding support to families of people who tragically died and those who experienced loss of, or damage to their primary residence.

For a comprehensive list of supports available for individuals and wellbeing see **Appendix F**.



Image right: The BRV Chair, Regional Recovery Manager and East Gippsland Shire Council Strategic Projects Planner meeting with Wairewa and Nowa Nowa community members.

“The reactions were not only about fear and loss, but the impact on their communities and an uncertainty about the future. The willingness to share pain indicated how far communities had come in their acceptance of talking about their emotional needs and vulnerabilities.”

Ken Lay AO APM – Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair

Section 2

Business and economy

The impact on Victoria

The economic impacts of the 2019–20 bushfires were significant and will be long-lasting. There was an estimated:

- 13–23 per cent reduction in economic output in the three most affected local government areas (Alpine, East Gippsland and Towong)
- an estimated 3–7 per cent reduction in economic output in the five adjacent local government areas (Indigo, Mansfield, Wangaratta, Wellington and Wodonga).

These economic impacts are particularly concentrated in tourism, retail, agriculture and forestry.

“We’ve had to sell a lot of stock – we’re going to feel the impact for a while. It’s going to take 2–3 years to rebuild back to the same levels. I’m not going to have any income for the next few years.”

Cobungra primary producer

Image right: The BRV Chair meeting with Jo and Peter (Bushware Café) in Cabbage Tree Creek.





Coffee's

- appuccino
- ATTE
- LAT WHITE
- ONG BLACK
- hort BLACK
- locha
- MOND / SOY / Norm / Milk

Retirement

PUSHBUBS

national






“Tourism is incredibly important in the Alpine Shire and has grown significantly over the last few years. The recent bushfires have devastated our economy and the communities it supports.”

Alpine Shire Council

Image left: The BRV Chair meeting with Alpine Council, Alpine Resorts and Tourism North East.



**“We have to
think outside
the square
for ways we
can rebuild
and recover.”**

Charles – Mallacoota Abalone Limited

Case study: Mallacoota Abalone Limited

Clean-up and rebuilding was essential to getting Mallacoota Abalone Limited back up and running. The business had a turnover of about \$15 million and employed eight full time staff and 40 casuals, making it the town's largest employer.

With the factory destroyed and jobs at risk, we heard that it was important that the rebuild occurred as soon as possible.

Regional Development Victoria worked with the business to identify the necessary planning, fisheries and export approvals required to refit its single remaining shed, to be suitable to receive and handle abalone.

The company welcomed the State Government funding to assist in rebuild efforts.

The business also looked at the fire impact as an opportunity to improve the rebuild of their business in new and innovative ways.

Image left: BRV Chair meeting with Charles from Mallacoota Abalone Limited.

"Mallacoota is heavily reliant on both Abalone and tourism. If there is a way the two can come together in a new and exciting way for the good of Mallacoota, we will certainly support that as an initiative."

Charles –
Mallacoota Abalone Limited

Case study: Kennedy Trailers

Established in 1986, Kennedy Trailers revolutionised the haulage industry with the manufacture of folding logging trailers.

The Bairnsdale business employed about 70 people full time and built around 250 trailers per year. In 2019 they paid over \$5 million in wages and superannuation to local employees and spent \$4 million with local suppliers.

The bushfires decimated timber plantations along the east coast of Australia and orders for Kennedy Trailers had immediately ceased. The business made the hard decision in the first two weeks of 2020 to retrench many of its workers, which they said had a significant flow on impact to the broader Bairnsdale economy.

In the last five years, the business had innovated to create new long-term opportunities in the renewables industry, with the transport of wind towers. These development projects were now at risk and the business' economic viability uncertain.

Regional Development Victoria is working with the business on their diversification plans and assisting impacted staff through employment programs and worker transition services.

“The immediate loss of bees from smoke and heat is a big impact, but the worst is yet to come.”

Ben – Tambo Valley Honey owner

Image below: The BRV Chair and the East Gippsland Collaborative.



Case study: Tambo Valley Honey

Tambo Valley Honey is a small business based in East Gippsland. Young entrepreneur, Ben owns the business. Ben has a young family and lost hundreds of beehives during the bushfires. The smoke and heat from the fires killed many bees and he was deeply concerned about the impact of destroyed bee populations.

Beekeepers are highly reliant on flowering trees producing pollen and nectar for bees to feed on. With millions of hectares of these trees destroyed and an estimated recovery time of five to 20 years for many species, beekeepers were concerned about their ability to rebuild and sustain bee populations and the subsequent economic impact.

To help his business remain economically viable Ben innovated and teamed up with three other East Gippsland producers (Gippsland Jersey, Forge Creek Free Range and Seasalt Bakery) to create the East Gippsland Collaborative Staples Box – a care package for families impacted by bushfire. This collaboration shows collective strength and spirit.

Ben was concerned about the future viability of his business, after taking over its reins 18 months ago and building its brand.

Case study: The Pumpkin Seed Company

The Pumpkin Seed Company is a unique primary producer as Australia's first and only pumpkin seed grower. They employ up to 20 people, have a large supply chain and their product is in high demand.

They told us that they were unsure whether their pumpkin crop had been impacted by smoke blocking the natural light and that this would not be able to be determined until the pumpkins were opened at harvest, but that the seeds were looking flat.

Due to the bespoke nature of the business there was no existing research to help the company understand the potential smoke haze impacts. As a result, the business, those involved in the supply chain and their employees face a high level of uncertainty regarding the quality of the crop and their income.

The business experienced challenges navigating and accessing financial support as they were not directly flame impacted. The business found it complex to navigate the grant process, including understanding what they were eligible for. They received a \$75,000 government grant after working their way through what they described as a "frustrating and complex process."

"Government assistance is just frustrating. We've grown this business through our own hard work, we've never had a hand-out."

The Pumpkin Seed Company, Ovens

2. Ensuring financial security for businesses

Prior to the bushfires local businesses, tourism operators and primary producers were already vulnerable, having faced financial instability from the effects of drought and the decline of the forestry industry. The subsequent impacts of coronavirus are creating additional pressures and made it more difficult for these businesses to recover.

Key concerns we heard included:

- businesses indirectly impacted by the fire (due to reduced tourism or disruption to supply chains) were not eligible for the \$50,000 Small Business Recovery Grants
- the \$10,000 Small Business Bushfire Support Grants needed to be extended beyond the three initial local government areas (Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland) to include other municipalities that were impacted, such as Mansfield
- there was a gap between some funding announcements and business owners being able to apply and access the funds, creating frustration
- primary producer grant eligibility was too limited, particularly in relation to the requirement that they must receive more than 50 per cent of their income from the farm. This appeared to be particularly problematic in East Gippsland as many primary producers supplement their incomes.

“The way the support for businesses is geared, we would have been better off smoldering to the ground.”

Marlo business owner

Government supports available

Victorian and Commonwealth Government funding and supports included \$10 million Bushfire Tourism and Business Fund, Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grants of up to \$75,000, Small Business Bushfire Recovery Grants of up to \$50,000, Small Business Bushfire Support Grants of \$10,000 and Concessional loans of up to \$500,000 for small businesses and primary producers.

Grants have been provided to bushfire affected Regional Tourism Boards (\$200,000 to both Tourism North East and Destination Gippsland) to assist with their immediate recovery efforts and to coordinate marketing and campaign activities. Grants of up to \$20,000 have also been provided for events in fire affected area through a dedicated Bushfire Recovery Round of the Regional Events Fund worth \$300,000.

Visit Victoria had a \$2 million marketing and advertising campaign under the slogan ‘A short stay goes a long way’ to encourage Victorians to travel to all parts of the state and a \$5 million campaign to attract international tourists. However, coronavirus caused a suspension of these campaigns.

Small Business Victoria business recovery advisers provided support to affected small businesses, connecting them to services and providing administrative support where needed.

For a comprehensive list of supports available see **Appendix F**.



Image above: The BRV Chair meeting with Aaron, Manager of the Dartmouth Pub.

"The concessional loan is not attractive, we can't afford the risk of taking on additional debt."

Dartmouth business owner

Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair observations

Long-term business viability

- The impact of coronavirus on bushfire affected businesses and local economies will need to be strongly considered in recovery.
- The \$10,000 Small Business Bushfire Support Grants were received positively by small businesses, particularly those who were not directly flame impacted and did not, in the early stages, think support would be available.

- Distressed individuals and communities told us about the huge impact on businesses and local economies. There were strong concerns about their ability to keep their businesses operating and the ripple effect on the community if they had to let employees go. The support from governments at all levels was welcomed, however we heard it needed to be better targeted to meet the long-term needs of those directly and indirectly affected by the bushfires.

Impact and stress on primary producers

Many primary producers explained the compounding issues of drought and bushfires. We heard from some a determination to pick up and rebuild their businesses, while others said they were uncertain about rebuilding. The stress and exhaustion shown from several primary producers was palpable. Proactive, face-to-face and holistic supports that addressed their economic and health needs would support their recovery.

Bushfire Recovery Victoria focus

- Digital platforms and e-commerce initiatives to help businesses maintain connectivity, following reduced visitation as a result of coronavirus, are being explored.
- Increasing the promotion of supports available to businesses and primary producers, including the Commonwealth Government's \$10,000 Small Business Bushfire Support Grant. This includes contacting other grant applicants to encourage them to apply, improving communications about eligibility and connecting small businesses with Business Victoria.

Section 3

Buildings and infrastructure

The impact on Victoria

The bushfires have had a significant impact on buildings and infrastructure, including the following:

- At least 347 residential dwellings destroyed (and 41 dwellings damaged) based on initial impact assessments*
- 700 non-residential structured destroyed including one school and one kindergarten
- 6346km of fencing destroyed
- 1300km of arterial roads impacted, with the road surfaces severely damaged, retaining walls and bridges compromised and signs and line marking destroyed
- 1,024 items of park assets and infrastructure potentially impacted (not all confirmed as some remote areas remain inaccessible)
- More than \$15 million damage confirmed to date, including assets such as BBQs, signage, shelters, walkways, bridges, crossings.

*Note: initial impact data is preliminary in nature and is indicative only. Secondary impact assessments are currently being undertaken, to provide a more detailed assessment of properties.

Image right: A landslide on the Great Alpine Road following bushfires. Image courtesy of the Department of Defence.



**"It's like a war zone.
You don't want to
see that every day."**

Cobungra farmer

The recovery needs

Individuals, businesses and communities identified six emerging themes relating to buildings and infrastructure.

1. Coordinating the clean-up

The Bushfire Clean-Up Program announced in mid-January 2020, was free of charge and covered the demolition and disposal of all buildings destroyed or damaged beyond repair by this season's bushfires. Grocon was contracted to conduct the clean-up on behalf of the Victorian Government.

We heard mixed views on the coordination of the clean-up. Key concerns we heard in the initial stages of community engagement included:

- some individuals had undertaken clean-up themselves, or through use of contractors who lacked the appropriate qualifications, creating health and safety concerns
- some people did not want the clean-up to be rushed and wanted to take some time (to reflect and collect any items of value or sentiment)
- for others delays to clean-up efforts caused frustration. The constant visible reminder of the bushfire and its devastation and the wait for clean-up was distressing for some people.

In the later stages of community engagement, we heard that clean-up was progressing well and local government was complimentary of efforts.

Image right: The BRV Chair meeting with BlazeAid volunteers, Bruthen.

2. Repairing and replacing fencing

Landholders expressed serious concerns about the extensive damage and destruction to boundary and internal fences.

Key concerns we heard included:

- delays in replacing fencing created immediate risks to containing livestock
- complexities when navigating recovery supports around fencing – levels and availability of supports differed according to whether the fence was on the boundary of public land, private land, roads or water/river systems
- damaged fencing materials had not yet been collected by government
- fencing was time-consuming, costly hard work and there was significant work ahead. Many primary producers had limited capacity to undertake this work themselves due to competing priorities
- the cost and limited availability of arborists to remove dead/damaged trees added to challenges and often prevented non-profit organisations from providing fencing support
- non-profit organisations were challenged to meet demand for fencing support.

"We try to build rapport with the farmers to find out what support they need... It's much more than physical fencing – it's 40 per cent fencing and 60 per cent caring."

BlazeAid volunteer, Bruthen



"Farmers will only invest in quality fencing if they can clear back from the fence further than the current regulation on public land, otherwise deadfall will damage it."

Genoa Farmer

Case study: Department of Environment Land Water and Planning

Given the scale of fire impacts on national parks, state parks and state forests boundary fencing the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning (DELWP) developed a mobile application that streamlined information collection and simplified the payment processes to landowners.

This app allowed DELWP staff to undertake assessments quicker by capturing all information on a single visit to landholder's property and reduced the paperwork burden on landholders by integrating seven paper-based forms into a single online form.

We heard from several primary producers that this process worked well, that they appreciated the face-to-face engagement and it resulted in them receiving timely payments so that they could start erecting new fencing.

3. Accessing closed roads

Road closures were the most pressing and problematic issue raised. It was the issue that caused the most angst during the engagement period due to its impacts on community connectedness, the distress caused by people's inability to reach their animals and stock and major economic impacts for businesses.

We heard the closure of the Princes Highway (for a six-week period) caused severe impacts to individuals, businesses and communities. Many people seriously questioned how one of the country's main arterial roads could be closed for such an extended period.

Key concerns we heard included::

- road closures restricted movement with many people feeling isolated, frustrated, angry and stressed by the length of the closures
- there had been considerable and long-lasting economic impacts on businesses that relied on arterial roads for tourism or transportation of goods/services
- impacts of roadside vegetation management (specifically relating to clearing land on side of highway) and the need for strategies to manage different risks
- some time (to reflect and collect any items of value or sentiment)
- importance of working with local communities to ensure that any potential future road closures were not as extensive and impactful
- government websites had conflicting information on road closures and many navigational tools showed roads as closed, when they had reopened
- a lack of targeted and timely information regarding road closures and the length of time roads would be closed for, resulting in significant frustration. We heard that electricity suppliers provided timely and clear information regarding power supply and that community members expected the same from road management authorities.
- for others delays to clean-up efforts caused frustration. The constant visible reminder of the bushfire and its devastation and the wait for clean-up was distressing for some people.

Some people spoke positively about the permit system implemented by Incident Control Centres and how well it worked in enabling residents to access private property. Others spoke about receiving mixed messages from the Incident Control Centre and government, which caused confusion.

"The Princes Highway is our main vein – when the highway shuts, we're dead!"

Cabbage Tree Creek business owner

Image right: Workers clearing a fallen tree next to a major road. Image courtesy of the Department of Defence.

"We are getting no information about how long the highway will be closed. There is a need for deep engagement with the business and farming community – as we are the ones so heavily impacted by this."

Bairnsdale business owner

Case study: Highway closure causes major impact on businesses

One of Eastern Victoria's largest vegetable production and logistics companies spoke of the unprecedented impact of losing 'hundreds of thousands' of dollars a week from the closure of the Princes Highway and the inability to transport produce on the East Coast. The company had trucks lined up ready to transport goods and had to find longer alternative routes (adding up to 1000km) to Sydney to keep a level of business operational. Deep levels of frustration were expressed about the lack of information being provided directly to the business community relating to the highway closure and when it would likely be reopened.

The business sought updates through the Incident Control Centre but said there was no proactive communication providing updates and information on when the highway would be reopened.





4. Securing power supply and telecommunications

With power supply and telecommunications being cut in many communities, we heard about the impacts and lack of preparedness for this scenario.

Outages to telecommunication systems and networks affected landlines, internet and mobile phone services. Outages to power impacted many businesses, including supermarkets and primary producers.

Key concerns we heard included:

- lack of planning for power outages during major incidents and inadequate back-up power supply sources, such as generators
- some communities on the border of NSW and Victoria have a single source (one line) of power and the need to secure a more adequate supply to bolster future preparedness
- some community members were unable to receive or access emergency alerts, public information, warnings, road closure details and community information, or contact others via phone when under the threat of fire. This resulted in a high level of fear and anxiety for bushfire impacted communities.

5. Finding temporary housing and rebuilding homes

We heard that many people who had lost their homes were uncertain about what rebuilding would look like, the trauma was still so raw, and they were still considering whether to rebuild.

Key concerns we heard included:

- some people felt pressure to make quick decisions regarding rebuilding and insurance payouts – primary producers felt this more acutely due to business considerations
- expense of rebuilding in a bushfire prone area to meet the current government bushfire regulations and requirements may mean that some people would be unable to afford to rebuild
- lack of temporary rental accommodation in some places such as Mallacoota. Concern for more permanent temporary housing arrangements into the autumn-winter period.

Image left: a house destroyed in East Gippsland by bushfire.

After the flames – Community Reflections



Case study: Walwa Bush Nursing Centre

With no communication of any sort, the Bush Nursing Centre relied upon the one satellite phone in town (belonging to the Walwa Community Emergency Response Team) to access vital supplies and emergency care for community members.

Many community members, Country Fire Authority and Department of Environment Land Water and Planning workers slept on site, as did the nursing staff to make sure there was an emergency response available in the case of accident or illness. The centre made in excess of 600 meals over the period to feed both community and emergency services. In this way, it became a one stop shop for locals and visiting services.

The centre was reliant on a single generator and for 10 days during the fires the town was entirely without power. This generator unfortunately broke down. Surrounded by bushfire and with the community looking to them for support, the nursing staff called on their farming skills, using a pair of stockings to repair the generator. This kept it running until they were able to have the appropriate repairs made and not only kept the lights on but maintained the effectiveness of critical medical equipment and the temperature-controlled drug room where medication and intravenous fluids are kept.

The Walwa Bush Nursing Centre became a central point for the Walwa community and had an open-door policy for more than three weeks during the bushfires.

Image top left: The BRV Chair meeting with Melinda from the Walwa Bush Nursing Centre.

Case study: Gipsy Point

Gipsy Point is located at the head of the Mallacoota Inlet and has a population of 19. Residents describe their town as peaceful, remote and idyllic. The median age of the town is 69 and many residents have lived in the town for many years. There is only one road in and out and residents live daily life without mobile phone reception.

As fires approached, the town was cut off by road, landline telephone phone lines were burnt out and there was no radio reception. This meant that they were isolated and unable to receive any bushfire updates. Residents were left feeling highly vulnerable and at risk as they faced flames and fought for their homes.

In the absence of telecommunications, the community united to organise rostered shifts to monitor fire activity and attend face-to-face meetings to share information.

Image bottom left: The BRV Chair meeting with Gipsy Point community members.

6. Replacing local infrastructure

Impacts to local infrastructure were raised as an issue, however it did not appear as pressing as many other issues raised.

We heard that the bushfires had destroyed some locally significant infrastructure, including in national parks. This infrastructure played an important role in town history, identity, wellbeing, local tourism and economic income.

Key concerns we heard included:

- delays in opening local infrastructure, including in national parks, would have economic impacts
- unclear communication from government about the process of repairing local infrastructure (i.e. timelines, reasons for delay).

In some cases, planning experts advised that rebuilding some infrastructure would be cost prohibitive and complex.

Many communities told us that recovery presented a positive opportunity to build better local infrastructure to help diversify their economies.

Ideas we heard included:

- developing new infrastructure to attract mountain bike riders to the Gippsland area, particularly in Mallacoota

- upgrading the Dargo High Plains Road so that it could be used year-round
- developing the Falls Creek to Mount Hotham Alpine Crossing walking experience, a five-day, four-night hike that traverses the Great Dividing Range.

Image top right: The Genoa River Bridge during the bushfire.

Image bottom right: Cape Conran Coastal Park damaged by fire.

Government supports available

Victorian and Commonwealth Government funding and support for building and infrastructure included a \$75 million clean-up program, financial assistance to help cover half the cost to repair, replace or upgrade bushfire damaged fencing bordering national parks, state parks and forests and emergency re-establishment assistance payments.

For a comprehensive list of supports available see **Appendix F**.

Case study: Cape Conran Coastal Park

Cape Conran Coastal Park (significantly impacted during the bushfires) was important to the tourism economy in the region, particularly for the nearby community of Marlo. Marlo community members told us that restoring access to the beach needed to be a priority to bring tourists back to the area. This would also enable locals to relax, de-stress and enjoy their local amenities.





Case study: Genoa River Bridge

The heritage listed Genoa River Bridge was historically and architecturally significant, as it was one of only five timber truss bridges left in Victoria. The footbridge was destroyed in the bushfires.

The community said the bridge was an important connection point for the town as well as a significant part of the town's identity and culture. The community expressed a desire to rebuild the footbridge to allow connection with parks on one end and houses at the other. Genoa residents said the rebuild would pay homage to the town's history.



Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair observations

Isolation and economic impacts from road closures

Road closures were raised as a priority issue in every community we engaged with. We heard the closures, in particular of the Princes Highway for a six-week period, caused devastating economic impacts in the region and resulted in anger and stress. The closures prevented businesses from trading, separated families and stopped primary producers from accessing their stock.

While people understood the need for closures to support critical operations and manage road safety risk, many were angered by the lack of communication. Many communities were critical of the lack of leadership and engagement from decision makers.

They expressed a need for accurate and timely information from trusted sources – even if it was information that wouldn't be received positively.

The importance of clear and consistent messaging is consistent with nationally adopted principles for public information provision, which reference the significance of trusted information to enable decision-making.

Critical infrastructure for community connection

Many communities lost telecommunications and power for protracted periods during and after the fires. We heard that some communities were ill-prepared for the isolation that cut-off essential supports and supplies during the emergency. For some, this increased their vulnerability during the bushfire event.

Communities have an expectation that recovery plans prior to the next bushfire season would focus on the delivery of responsive and reliable telecommunication and power services.

Community-led infrastructure rebuild

Communities spoke about the restoration of critical infrastructure such as roads, power, and community assets being a priority from both a structural and wellbeing viewpoint. We heard that in many cases, people needed time to think through the rebuild of their homes and make informed decisions during this process. This is an experience consistent with that of many who have been through major bushfires. Timing of rebuild and other considerations from both an individual and community perspective, should be taken into consideration when looking at recovery processes and timelines.

Bushfire Recovery Victoria focus

- Administering the statewide Clean-Up Program, with works making strong and steady progress. The project was one-third complete in May, with hundreds of properties cleaned up across East Gippsland and Victoria's North East and tens of thousands of tonnes of bushfire waste removed. Works are on track to be completed by the end of August. Timelines may change in the event of variables such as prolonged inclement weather and further COVID-19 restrictions.
- Undertaking preliminary bushfire hazard assessments and other environmental assessments for affected properties. These assessments measure the severity of a building's potential exposure to different forms of bushfire attack. These assessments are required when residents seek

to rebuild permanently. They normally cost up to \$3000, but the Government is covering this cost. The start-to-end process for all assessments will likely be completed by June 2020.

- Once the preliminary assessments are completed, a report is made available for each fire affected property. This report details the bushfire planning and building controls that apply to the property. Residents and business owners can directly use this information to inform their planning and building permit application. Bushfire Recovery Victoria is providing these reports to affected property owners.
- People considering and preparing for rebuilding will be able to access a planning concierge service in person to help them navigate the planning and rebuilding process.

The free service will be provided face-to-face by planning and building specialists in the Community Recovery Hubs.

- Coordinating temporary accommodation, with the Department of Health and Human Services, by identifying a range of alternative options for medium term accommodation as people rebuild, including temporary accommodation on people's land. BRV is supporting this initiative.
- Supporting fence reconstruction on crown land and private property boundaries through dedicated regional fencing coordinators.



**“While people understood
the need for closures to
support critical operations
and manage road safety risk,
many were angered by the
lack of communication.”**

Ken Lay AO APM – Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair

Section 4

Environment and biodiversity

The impact on Victoria

The 2019–20 bushfires had an immediate and long-term impact on the state’s environmental landscape.

This was particularly significant as Eastern Victoria is renowned, locally and internationally, for its wildlife and plant diversity. Key impacts include:

- estimates that at least 250 million native mammals (excluding bats), birds and reptiles may have been killed*
- at least 50 per cent of modelled statewide habitat for more than 185 species of plants and animals, 173 of which are rare or threatened species, were burnt
- significant impact on critical strongholds for the long-footed potoroo, native fish species, unique burrowing crayfish, glossy black cockatoos, eastern bristlebirds and the ground parrot
- 7000 stock lost
- over 1.25 million hectares of habitat across Victoria has burnt multiple times since 2000 and the 2019–20 fires have extended the area of native forest burnt twice since 2003 to approximately one million hectares
- more than 20 per cent the state-wide extent of four ecological vegetation classes, including rainforests, montane grasslands, shrublands or woodlands, wet or damp forests and lowland forests were burnt

- at least 60 per cent of more than 50 National Parks and Nature Conservation Reserves in Victoria
- more than 83 per cent of the state-wide extent of Gallery Rainforest, and 70 per cent of Victoria’s Warm Temperate Rainforest were burnt
- more than \$200 million of assets within forests and parks destroyed (according to early assessments).

* This estimate assumes animals within the fire extent were impacted either directly by the fire, or by threats immediately post-fire (e.g. dehydration, starvation, predation). It is likely to be conservative, as the calculation does not include bats, invertebrates, amphibians or freshwater species.

The fires have also significantly impacted Victoria’s waterways, water supplies and water management structures. Impacts include:

- 1.27 million hectares comprising 86 per cent of catchments in the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (CMA) area and 46 per cent North East CMA area
- rivers, creeks and streams flow into town water supplies and affect water used for stock and domestic purposes.

- significant loss or damage to vegetation, fencing and instream erosion control structures
- ash, sediment and debris washed over roads, into rivers and estuaries following rainfall
- poor water quality and risks to native fish.

The widespread and extensive destruction to wildlife and the environment has had a deep impact on individuals and communities, including the loss of local environment which plays an important role in people’s identity and everyday life.

We heard concerns that the state’s environmental landscape was changing with the advent of climate change and that fire would be the new normal.

“We need a climate change policy to prevent these fires getting worse.”

Milawa winery owner

Image right: A wombat walking on burnt ground. Image courtesy of Emergency Management Victoria.

A photograph of a wallaby in a burnt bush landscape. The wallaby is brown and is positioned in the lower right foreground, looking towards the left. The ground is covered in dark, charred wood and some green moss. In the background, there are more burnt branches and some green foliage. A large green diagonal shape is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**“The impact on
wildlife has been huge.
It’s a deathly silence
in the bush as all the
animals are gone.”**

Cobungra Resident

The recovery needs

Individuals, communities, experts and government agencies identified four emerging themes relating to environmental and biodiversity recovery.

1. Early relief and recovery of biodiversity

Amidst the devastation of the bushfires, communities praised the extraordinary efforts of land managers, organisations, experts, government and non-government agencies to:

- respond to the fires to protect areas of significant (biodiversity) importance
- extract high priority species for protection
- provide supplementary feeding via food drops to surviving wildlife and to care for injured wildlife and fauna.

We also heard praise for the Department of Agriculture veterinarians who responded swiftly to assess livestock for injury and disease.

We heard via the Premier's Special Advisory Council that the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has outlined a four-phased plan for the recovery of biodiversity that extends beyond the next three years.

The current phase (phase one) focuses on:

- continuing assessment and treatment of wildlife and partnering with wildlife welfare organisations to develop a more cohesive response in future
- continuing extraction of species to prevent further deaths or as insurance against (e.g. seed collection from at risk plants) or as a response to environmental degradation (e.g. poor water quality due to sediment run off from burnt catchment areas)
- ongoing study of impacts on biodiversity
- sustained management of threats including large herbivores and predators.

"It is critical to ensure momentum and focus on environmental recovery is maintained over this long-term period – without this some species and broader biodiversity of the regions are not likely to recover."

Jenny Gray, CEO, Zoos Victoria and member of the Premier's Special Advisory Council



Image below: Forest Fire Management assisting an injured koala. Image courtesy of the Department of Defence.





Case study: Eastern bristlebird population

The only Eastern bristlebird population in the state (located at Cape Howe in far East Gippsland) was in grave danger of being burnt during the fires. A one of a kind joint operation involving the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Zoos Victoria, Parks Victoria, the Victorian Fisheries Authority, the University of Wollongong, Monash University and the Singapore Defence Force (among others) was quickly coordinated.

Fifteen of the 180 birds were extracted as insurance against the threat of oncoming fires and flown to temporary specialist care at Zoos Victoria. Had the Cape Howe fire not been brought under control, these 15 birds may have been the only surviving members of their population and crucial to the conservation of their species. Thankfully, with their habitat no longer under immediate threat from the fire, a number of the birds have already been safely released back into the wild at Cape Howe.

*Image left: Bristlebirds being evacuated.
Image courtesy of Parks Victoria.*

2. Restoring water quality and supply

We heard that water quality was significant for several reasons – for agricultural productivity, for recreation and wellbeing, to attract tourism, to mitigate flood risk (i.e. with the debris damaging infrastructure like bridges and contaminating the river systems) and the health of aquatic species.

Key concerns we heard included:

- significant contamination of the water sources through smoke, debris, asbestos, fire retardant and river run-off presents health risks for stock and wildlife accessing the water and to fish and other aquatic creatures
- the depletion of water supplies due to fire-fighting efforts created anxiety regarding water security for household use. Primary producers were also worried they would not be able to resume farming including irrigating crops.

3. Improving fuel and land management

We heard that planned burning was one of the main methods used for fuel management on public land and while it could not prevent bushfire, it aimed to decrease fuel loads and reduced the spread and intensity of bushfires.

Key concerns we heard included:

- inadequate levels of planned burns through the years and particularly in the lead up to summer 2019–20 (including roadside burns)
- inadequacy of resources dedicated to planned burning activities
- lack of local involvement in planned burning decisions, and strong feelings that the decisions were city-centric
- Views were raised that there was a need to learn from historical and Aboriginal practice in forest and park management to inform the timing and intensity of planned burns. There were some differing opinions voiced relating to these practices.

We heard that there was unresolved tension between mitigation of bushfire risk and environmental conservation. Some people said that reducing the spread and intensity of bushfires helped protect flora and fauna. Others said that planned burning had significant detrimental effects on biodiversity.

These concerns were consistent with those raised over many years following previous bushfires, including from the Inquiry into the 2002–03 Alpine and East Gippsland Fires through to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission and subsequent work of the Inspector-General for Emergency Management.

“You can’t burn the bush – we need to consider that this is the home of our native animals”

Mallacoota resident

“There is also a need to consider the timing of the burns (i.e. Autumn or Spring burns), and the intensity of the burns reflecting on lessons learnt from history and Aboriginal communities.”

Cann River resident

*Image right: Planned burning.
Image courtesy of Emergency
Management Victoria.*

**“If we don’t do fuel
reduction burning it
will leave communities
vulnerable.”**

Cobungra resident



HOTEL.CUDGEWA



Case study: Cudgewa

The North East Victorian town of Cudgewa was significantly impacted by black water in the aftermath of the fires.

Within weeks of the bushfire, they experienced a large amount of rainfall which washed debris and sludge from the burnt ground into water catchments.

Many primary producers had dams contaminated and Cudgewa Creek became undrinkable. This impacted not just agriculture and livestock, but also wildlife dependent on the creek as a water source.

This proved to be a further challenge when water was trucked into the community.

The people of Cudgewa were deeply grateful for the critical clean water provided, but many primary producers were unable to unload this water into their catchments due to the contamination.

*"Cudgewa Creek is full of black water and dead fish.
Our cattle can't drink from it."*

Cudgewa resident

*Image left: The BRV Chair meeting with
Cudgewa community members.*

Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair observations

Environmental recovery links to wellbeing

Communities rallied to support the recovery of the natural environment, including through large-scale donations to wildlife funds. There was growing expectation by some that long-term commitments would be made to supporting the recovery of wildlife and the natural environment. Many have expressed the importance of environmental recovery.

What was evident in both previous bushfire events and in our early engagement, was that recovery of the natural environment would directly support economic recovery and improve people's health and wellbeing.

Local knowledge to inform land management practices

Communities shared widespread concern about land management practices and planned burning strategies. Some communities believed there had been a failure to strike a good balance of actions and that this had ultimately led to destruction of what that fuel management strategies sought to protect. Local people wanted local knowledge and expertise to be better integrated into land management. Both communities and experts said that informed and scientifically based decision-making needed to accompany the development of prescribed-burning regimes.

This included consideration of conservation objectives and accommodating bushfire safety considerations.

We understand the inherent challenges in these concerns, and the significant attention they have had over many years, including from the Inquiry into the 2002/03 Alpine and East Gippsland Fires through to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. We also note the Inspector-General for Emergency Management's Terms of Reference consider a range of matters relating to fuel management and risk and observe that this will be a point of importance for communities.

Bushfire Recovery Victoria focus


- Supporting the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Parks Victoria in the delivery of the \$17.5m rescue package to support bushfire impacted wildlife and biodiversity, including:
 - immediate reconnaissance of critical fauna, flora and habitat
 - wildlife welfare
 - emergency extraction to prevent extinction and limit species decline
 - intensified and sustained management of threats
 - maximise long term resilience
 - knowledge, data and program management.
- BRV supported the Tank Flush and Fill Program to replace water in rainwater tanks impacted by fire ash and debris.

Image right: A building is all that remains in the middle of burnt landscape. Image courtesy of Emergency Management Victoria.

Government supports available

Victorian Government funding included a \$17.5 million rescue package to support Victoria's bushfire impacted wildlife and biodiversity. Commonwealth Government funding included \$50 million to support immediate survival and rescue of wildlife. Of this, approximately \$3.4 million has been directly provided to Victoria to assist with biodiversity response and recovery actions.

For a comprehensive list of supports available see **Appendix F**.

An aerial photograph of a forest landscape. A small, light-colored house with a dark roof is situated on a hillside in the lower-left quadrant. The surrounding area is covered in dense, dark green trees. A large, dark green triangular graphic element is positioned in the upper-left corner, partially overlapping the forest. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**“We have very
little say in how to
protect ourselves,
on our land –
decisions made
are city centric
and are made to
tick a box.”**

Marlo resident

Section 5

Aboriginal culture and healing

The impact on Victoria

Aboriginal people are disproportionately affected by the impact of bushfires due to:

- the higher proportion of Aboriginal people living in bushfire affected areas than elsewhere in the state
- existing structural and financial inequalities
- a backdrop of historical and intergenerational trauma
- the significant impacts that bushfires and bushfire protection have on Country and cultural heritage.

These bushfires have had a devastating impact on Country and community, with immeasurable impacts to cultural landscapes across the State.

**“Local Aboriginal
organisations have
been outstanding in
supporting community
through the bushfires.
the Aboriginal
reference group
supports this energy
in a coordinated way.”**

**Roger Fenwick – CEO, Gunaikurnai Land
and Waters Aboriginal Corporation**

The recovery needs

For Aboriginal people relationships to Country, culture and community are not only interconnected, they are intrinsically linked to one's identity. This means that when one of these foundations is impacted by a disaster, Aboriginal Victorians experience unique pain and loss.

Elders and members of impacted Aboriginal communities identified two emerging themes relating to recovery for culture and healing.

1. Importance of Aboriginal community-led recovery

Consistent with the principles of self-determination, the Aboriginal community has established processes to lead their recovery from the bushfires.

In January 2020, the Bushfire Recovery Aboriginal Reference Group (the Reference Group) was established and is focused on ensuring Aboriginal communities across the state are adequately and sustainably resourced to recover.

The Reference Group consists of 13 members across Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, Registered Aboriginal Parties, Traditional Owner groups and local Aboriginal communities. See **Appendix G** for a list of members.

The Reference Group has met six times and has welcomed the Recovery Framework developed by BRV for appropriately focusing on 'Culture and Healing' as one of its five recovery lines. This recovery line recognises the impact felt by Aboriginal Victorians in times of disaster and ensures Aboriginal culture is prioritised, culture and safety is promoted, and ownership in and participation by Aboriginal Victorians is central to the recovery

process. The 'Aboriginal Culture and Healing' recovery line is the first of its kind in disaster recovery.

We heard that it had been complex to ensure that all impacted communities were involved in decision-making on the recovery process. There were no appointed Registered Aboriginal Parties in the far east of Gippsland and parts of the North East beyond Mt Buffalo and Bright.

We heard that Aboriginal Victoria and the Reference Group would continue to engage and work through ways to ensure the involvement of all impacted communities in the recovery process.

Key concerns we heard from members of the Aboriginal community and support agencies included:

- loss of stories and sites of cultural significance
- there was no flexibility in the funding model and it does not suit the way Aboriginal people wish to be engaged

- confusion about types of supports, eligibility and how to access it
- reluctance of Aboriginal people to access the 1800 number given perceptions that it was 'very government'
- the 1800 number was not referring people to Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency (VACCA) or Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative (GEGAC), particularly in the early days as they did not ask callers their identity
- experiences of racism prevent community members from identifying as Aboriginal and from reaching out for support from community services.

2. Protection of cultural sites

We heard that fire-fighting efforts were well informed about the location of cultural sites and took appropriate action.

We heard that it was important to ensure that the recovery and rebuilding efforts were jointly undertaken with Traditional Owners and informed by cultural assessments.

We heard there were some concerns from the community relating to the time it took to undertake some heritage assessments and the delays this was perceived to cause in local infrastructure being restored. Parks Victoria acknowledged that it needed to

strengthen community engagement to address these concerns and help the community understand the process and importance of heritage assessments.

We heard that the Upper Murray region was one of the least archaeologically understood areas across the state and that the recovery process presented a valuable opportunity to undertake comprehensive archaeological field work to better understand the land's history.

“Traditional Owners have a strong desire to get out into fire impacted areas and visit sites which have been impacted. On Country visits with big groups, to help healing. However, the timing of this must be right so as to not create further trauma.”

Wangaratta resident

“We are concerned about cultural places being lost in the clean-up/recovery process – particularly with heavy machinery being brought into what was previous green fields.”

Jamie Williamson – Chief Executive Officer, Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative Ltd and member of the Premier's Special Advisory Council

Government supports available

Victorian Government funding included the delivery of case support (\$2.79 million through Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency) and establishment of emotional and wellbeing programs (\$3 million).

Commonwealth government funding and support included \$3.5 million to develop culturally accessible financial packages (which will be developed with the Bushfire Recovery Aboriginal Reference Group).

For a comprehensive list of supports available see **Appendix F**.

Image below: The BRV Chair hears from Aunty Aileen in Cann River.



Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair observations

Aboriginal self-determination and representation

We heard how Aboriginal community-led recovery was an evolving aspect of this bushfire recovery season. Complexities needed to be worked through, particularly in areas where there were no registered Traditional Owners or Aboriginal controlled organisations to guide the process.

Cultural significance in decision-making

Coordination and collaboration between Aboriginal communities and Government agencies, such as Parks Victoria was important to ensure recovery decisions were informed by cultural needs and cultural assessments.

"We've spent time with local Elders to better appreciate the work ahead in restoring Country and protecting areas of cultural significance."

Ken Lay – Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair

Bushfire Recovery Victoria focus

- Working with the Bushfire Aboriginal Reference Group to explore options for Aboriginal expertise in landscape management planning. This will help to inform built and natural environment recovery investment and activities. BRV is providing secretariat support for the Reference Group.
- Working closely with Grocon and local Aboriginal groups to ensure appropriate land management practices are being followed as part of the Clean-Up. Grocon is using a state-based labour hire group that looks to recruit Aboriginal labour for the clean-up operations.
- Recruiting a Director, Aboriginal Culture and Healing. This role will be responsible for supporting the Bushfire Aboriginal Reference Group, in addition to a broader remit to drive the design, commissioning, delivery and coordination of recovery programs aligned with the Aboriginal culture and healing line of recovery. The Executive Director of Aboriginal Victoria will be on the selection panel for this position.
- Ensuring representation on Community Recovery Committees from all Aboriginal communities affected by the bushfires to enable their contribution to the identification of local recovery priorities.
- In the North East, working with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) to provide case support to local community members in a flexible way. VACCA is providing surge capacity to support the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative (GEGAC) with referrals for case support.

Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair general observations

In addition to the observations in the above sections, the Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair makes the following observations.

All levels of government to coordinate and collaborate

With the multiple levels of government and non-government agencies involved in the bushfire response and recovery, we heard there was confusion about role clarity and responsibility. With the establishment of BRV as a permanent agency, there is an opportunity to reduce 'red-tape' and enable easy access to relevant supports. It is important BRV has the relevant clarity of role purpose and legislative remit to deliver direct services and support individuals and communities.

Communities raised broad, intersecting and multi-jurisdictional issues. This underscored the importance of collaboration and coordination between all levels of government – local, state and federal Government – in recovery. We heard that individuals and communities wanted support to be well coordinated, with their needs at the centre. Navigating multiple processes and systems to access support and funding added to distress during this difficult time.

Local decisions lead local recovery

Communities expressed concern about what they perceived to be some city-centric decision-making, without a good understanding of local knowledge and local needs. It is important that BRV's regionally based teams (comprising local people with local knowledge) are enabled to connect local information into recovery planning.

Partnering to support local government

Local government were critical partners in response and recovery and the scale of these fires has required them to increase or supplement their capacity and capability. For example, Towong Shire Council said their staffing profile was vastly inadequate to support long-term recovery efforts. Supports offered by some of the larger local governments (i.e. Melbourne and Darebin) was crucial. Additional support models for smaller regional councils should form part of permanent recovery practices.

Feedback from local government on the establishment of BRV was positive, noting that BRV was quick to establish and had been responsive to issues.

Data intelligence to drive decision making

The BRV Chair's Terms of Reference focused on informing the community of the broader government recovery efforts. It was difficult for the Chair to provide the community with a coherent picture of efforts. Comprehensive data across the five lines of recovery was collated by various government departments and BRV faced challenges centralising this information into a single source of truth.

The establishment of a permanent recovery agency provides an opportunity to develop standard frameworks, requirements for data collection and cross-government information sharing at the earliest stage of response and recovery in future fire events.

“Transparent decision-making in community-led recovery and strong two-way communication is critical for maintaining community confidence.”

Ken Lay AO APM – Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair

Consistency and clarity at our borders

Some communities impacted by the fires were on the border between Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) and there were specific issues raised relating to response coordination. Communities and some Aboriginal Elders highlighted that the border was an artificial line that was often crossed to access services. We heard NSW residents were turned away from Victorian response centres and there was a need for better coordination and collaboration across states.

There were mixed opinions regarding the VicEmergency app. Criticism was raised of the speed of which it updated during the fires. In communities on the NSW border, there was frustration of needing to check multiple warning apps. While some further improvements were required, we heard of positive progress in digital communication as an engagement method since previous fire events.

Timely and easy access to grants

In the aftermath of the bushfires, a rapid and wide range of decisions and government announcements were made to fund and support communities in relief and recovery. While appreciated, the pace and coordination of this activity created some confusion in many communities. Questions around timeframes, eligibility and the processes to apply quickly arose.

It was important that grants could be accessed as soon as they were announced and that applications were processed to allow funds to flow quickly.

Donated funds directed to need

Generous donations from the broader community were welcomed by impacted individuals and communities. The large-scale public fundraising efforts created community expectation that funding would flow directly and immediately to impacted individuals and communities. There was a community expectation that government played a hands-on coordination role to oversee charitable donations and distribution of funds and a sense of anger as some had not seen any of this funding and did not understand where, or how, it was being distributed. We heard there was a need for improved communication from charitable organisations to help alleviate some of this frustration.

Leadership, communication and engagement

We heard that leadership at all levels of government was critical for information provision and to give confidence to communities that issues were being acted on and managed. We heard how local leaders were engaged in the issues, including Commonwealth and State local Members of Parliament.

They were active in making representations on behalf of their community. There was some positive feedback about engagement from local government, particularly in how they were planning for recovery.

We can expect a significant compounding impact for bushfire communities, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Ongoing communication and engagement with bushfire impacted individuals, communities and businesses is of high importance, to ensure that recovery remains a critical focus.

Focus of future recovery for Bushfire Recovery Victoria

Supporting impacted communities to recover, rehabilitate and increase their resilience is the key focus for Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

The objectives for the initial stage of the recovery are:

- Provide people, communities, businesses, local governments and other stakeholders affected by the 2019–20 Victorian Bushfires with the information, support and services needed to pursue their recovery.
- Plan for, and deliver, a coordinated range of recovery services, consistent with the National Principles for Disaster Recovery.
- Mitigate known and potential risks resulting from the fires and the recovery process. These risks include that our understanding of the needs is unfolding and not all needs are known, many bushfire affected regions already experience high levels of social and economic disadvantage which will be compounded as a result of the fires, and complex governance arrangements – all of which can make recovery more challenging to achieve.
- Empower communities to lead and drive their own recovery processes, and to make decisions about their community's short, medium and longer-term recovery priorities.
- Inform recovery processes to optimise recovery outcomes for this and future emergencies.

Recovery from this season's bushfires must address both the intensive needs arising in the immediate period of response following the fires, the transition from relief to early recovery, medium term and the years of long-term recovery that follow.

In addition to actions against the five lines of recovery, BRV's focus is on the following.

Planning

The State Recovery and Community Recovery Frameworks developed by BRV, outline the agency's proposed approach to recovery, with community voices at the centre of the approach.

The feedback received from the Chair's engagement and other community feedback mechanisms are being used by BRV to inform its operations and forward planning.

Issues outside the scope of BRV's Terms of Reference have been passed onto responsible government agencies for action.

Where a Community Reference Committee (CRC) is established, that group leads the planning process, with support and guidance from local government and BRV.

Community Recovery Committees will ensure local know-how and expertise are front and centre in longer-term recovery planning and give a voice to the broad views and recovery goals of communities. In some cases, Community Recovery Committees have evolved from existing community groups. In other cases, Community Recovery Committees are being stood up as new, purpose-built community groups. Every community's recovery journey will be different.

Where no CRC or community recovery group is established, BRV is working in partnership with local government to ensure that the recovery needs and priorities of community members impacted by the disaster, are captured and considered.

BRV is working with local government to support the development of municipal recovery plans. Developed by each council, these plans will address the specific recovery needs, opportunities and challenges within council boundaries. BRV is providing guidance and assisting in connecting initiatives with recovery services and possible state and federal funding sources, where appropriate.

Development of a State Recovery Plan by BRV and Emergency Management Victoria that will coordinate all state level department efforts across the five lines of recovery and identify actions, accountabilities, timeframes and outcomes for each line of recovery. In year one, the focus will be to deliver immediate priorities and support communities to identify investments. In year two, an updated plan will centre on actioning these investments.

BRV is supporting the Commonwealth Government's recovery planning, through supporting the National Bushfire Recovery Agency engagement with fire affected jurisdictions and communities.

Data management

BRV is developing an Enterprise Information Management (EMI) system, incorporating data quality tools (such as performance dashboards and insights reports), data storage and access processes (including appropriate data governance policies and processes). This will enable effective data sharing between agencies and deliver responsive data reporting to assist with recovery efforts.

Coronavirus

BRV recognises that coronavirus has added a level of complexity to planning and is making appropriate adjustments to ensure both planning and recovery work can continue to take place amid the coronavirus crisis.

Importantly, the agency retains its singular focus on supporting community recovery in bushfire affected regions. BRV will ensure that fire impacted communities are not forgotten over the coming months, despite public attention shifting towards the global crisis.

The agency is committed to working directly with local communities to listen, help and deliver what they need to recover. This means supporting communities to identify their recovery priorities and develop their own plans for achieving these. BRV is working with communities to develop local community recovery plans.

Final reflections

On the 28 February, after 98 long days, the ravaging bushfires were declared as contained. The road to recovery is long and has only just begun.

The natural landscape is beginning to heal as green shoots of life have emerged and people have begun to pick up the pieces of their lives and start the process of rebuild and recovery.

We understand that recovery is a long-term process that requires deliberate and coordinated community-led planning to be successful.

The rapid establishment of BRV as a permanent agency and its work in coordinating and collaborating with departments, local government and the Commonwealth shows a commitment to supporting the long-term recovery of impacted communities.

Past experience and research shows that for every individual, the recovery path ahead will be different. Many of the experiences and challenges we have heard mirror those of other disaster events.

As BRV Chair, strategic advice to government will continue to be provided with the following areas of focus:

- BRV's bushfire recovery policy and programs
- BRV's forward work program, identifying gaps and opportunities across the five recovery lines
- BRV's approach to consultation with community, business and local government
- strategies to build community resilience in recovery.

"It has been an honour to witness the initial stages of rebuilding and recovery, and to feel the quiet strength and spirit of people during times of crisis.

As efforts continue, we could learn from those who have been before us, listen to the wisdom of local voices, help people to create their own next chapter and build a strong future for their communities."

Ken Lay AO APM – Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair



Images right: Regrowth following the bushfires. Image courtesy of Emergency Management Victoria.

Appendixes

Appendix A

Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair Terms of Reference

Key function	Roles and duties
Public face of the Victorian Government's recovery efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Represent Bushfire Recovery Victoria's recovery efforts within the broader community.• Engage with individuals, businesses and communities who have been impacted by the fires to understand their experiences and needs, including impacts on their daily life, health, economy, environment and infrastructure.• Report outcomes of engagement to BRV.• Respond to the communities by connecting them to BRV's recovery mechanisms.• Inform the community on the activities and achievements of Bushfire Recovery Victoria, and broader recovery efforts across the Victorian Government and the Commonwealth (for example, the National Bushfire Recovery Agency as lead and coordinated by BRV).
Chair, Special Advisory Council	<p>Provide advice to the Premier via Council's expert strategic advice on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bushfire Recovery Victoria's bushfire recovery policy and programs.• BRV's forward work program, identifying gaps and opportunities across social, economic, natural and built environments.• BRV's approach to consultation with community, business and local government.• Advise on strategies to build community resilience in recovery.

Appendix B

Bushfire Recovery Victoria Terms of Reference

1. Advise government, coordinate efforts, and develop an overarching plan for the restoration and recovery of regions, towns and communities within the 2 January 2020 State of Disaster declaration that have been impacted. If needed in the future, the Government will consider advice from the Emergency Management Commissioner on including additional communities.
2. Immediate action to analyse, and advise government on and in consultation with Emergency Management Victoria, the impact of bushfires on the communities, economy, infrastructure and environment in affected areas, based on necessary impact assessments.
3. Work closely with the community and community recovery committees in the process of rebuilding and recovery, and ensure that individuals and communities are consulted closely, with such consultations to be transparent and sensitive to local needs.
4. Establish advisory groups to inform the agency about coordinating activities across the Victorian government and the work of relevant organisations to help regions, towns and individuals re-establish their communities once it is safe to do so, in a way that is respectful of individual and community needs.
5. Take a lead to ensure that services to people affected are easily available and coordinated across all levels of government and community organisations, in consultation with the Bushfire Response and Recovery Taskforce.
6. Work with communities and community recovery committees to develop coordinated plans to deal with the effects of the disaster on local economies, communities, infrastructure and the environment. These plans should cover the medium and long-term recovery requirements, reconstruction advice and support for public and private assets, and supporting longer term development of communities. Ensure that individuals and communities are consulted closely, with such consultations to be transparent and sensitive to local needs.
7. Work in collaboration with the Commonwealth, including being the link to the national disaster recovery agency, to ensure streamlined processes for supporting impacted individuals, communities and businesses.
8. Work with local government, LGV and MAV, ensuring the interests of impacted individuals and communities are put first and smaller rural councils are appropriately supported.
9. Work closely with funding sources, charitable organisations and the Victorian Bushfire Appeal, to ensure effective and coordinated expenditure of funds.
10. Report to the Premier of Victoria, and report on progress to government, impacted communities and the wider Victorian community.

Appendix C

Premier's Special Advisory Council Terms of Reference

Purpose

The Special Advisory Council on Bushfire Recovery (the Special Advisory Council) has been established by the Premier to provide expert strategic advice to the Victorian Government on the planning and delivery of recovery activities following the devastating bushfires of 2019–20.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Special Advisory Council will:

- Provide strategic advice on Victorian Government bushfire recovery policy and programs
- Consider BRV's forward work program and identify gaps and opportunities across the social, economic, natural and built environments
- Play a critical role in developing Bushfire Recovery Victoria's approach to consultation with community, business and local government
- Advise on strategies to build community resilience in recovery.

The Special Advisory Council will not have the power to make policy or funding decisions on behalf of the Victorian Government. Ultimate responsibility for BRV's work plan and implementation lies with the organisation.

Code of Conduct

Members are required to abide by the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities.

Meetings

Meetings will be held monthly or as required. Teleconferencing facilities will be made available if members cannot attend in person.

Reporting

The Special Advisory Council will report via its Chair to the Premier.

Management of conflicts of interest

Members, wherever possible, will avoid any real, potential or perceived conflicts of interests. At each meeting, they will declare that any interests that relate to particular agenda items.

Members who are appointed as nominees or representatives of industry groups, other government agencies or stakeholders act in the best interests of the Advisory Council.

Secretariat

BRV will provide secretariat support including distributing meeting invites, preparing agendas and minutes, and circulating papers. BRV will also provide appropriate advice and support to assist the Special Advisory Council in meeting its responsibilities.

Term

This Terms of Reference is effective from the Special Advisory Council's first meeting and continues until 31 December 2020.

Amendment, Modification or Variation

This Terms of Reference may be amended, varied or modified in writing after consultation and agreement by Special Advisory Council members, and approval by the Premier.

Appendix D

BRV Chair engagement

The below table provides a list of the key meetings held by the BRV Chair during the first three months following the 2019–2020 summer bushfires.

15/01/2020	Buchan	Impacted residents and business
15/01/2020	Orbost	Impacted residents and businesses
16/01/2020	Bairnsdale	Head of National Bushfire Recovery Agency; and John White, Mayor, East Gippsland Shire Council
16/01/2020	Lakes Entrance	Member for Gippsland East
16/01/2020	Lakes Entrance	Federal Member for Gippsland
16/01/2020	Sarsfield	Impacted residents
20/01/2020	Melbourne	Grocon CEO
20/01/2020	Melbourne	Former Chair of Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority
21/01/2020	Corryong	Impacted residents, impacted businesses, Upper Murray Business Inc, The Man from Snowy River Festival and Corryong Recreation Reserve Committee
21/01/2020	Cudgewa	Impacted business and residents
21/01/2020	Milawa	Impacted businesses – wine industry roundtable
21/01/2020	Walwa	Impacted residents and the Bush Nursing Centre
22/01/2020	Bright	Impacted business community hosted by Alpine Shire Council
22/01/2020	Tallangatta	Impacted business
22/01/2020	Tallangatta	Towong Shire Council
28/01/2020	Melbourne	WesTrac CEO
29/01/2020	Bairnsdale	East Gippsland Council CEO
29/01/2020	Bairnsdale	Member for Gippsland East
29/01/2020	Buchan	Impacted business
30/01/2020	Bairnsdale	GLaWAC CEO
30/01/2020	Bairnsdale	Business and Tourism East Gippsland, Lakes Entrance Action and Development Association, Paynesville Business and Tourism Association, East Gippsland Marketing Inc., Bairnsdale Chamber of Commerce, Metung Tourism and East Gippsland Shire Council
4/02/2020	Genoa	Impacted residents and businesses
4/02/2020	Mallacoota	Impacted business
4/02/2020	Mallacoota	Impacted school
5/02/2020	Gipsy Point	Impacted residents
5/02/2020	Mallacoota	Impacted residents and businesses

6/02/2020	Melbourne	Premier's Special Advisory Council meeting
18/02/2020	Cann River	Aboriginal community members
18/02/2020	Cann River	Impacted residents and businesses
19/02/2020	Bemm River	Impacted residents and businesses
19/02/2020	Cabbage Tree Creek	Impacted businesses
19/02/2020	Lakes Entrance	Impacted businesses
19/02/2020	Marlo	Impacted residents and businesses
20/02/2020	Bairnsdale	Impacted business
20/02/2020	Newmeralla	Impacted school
23/02/2020	Beechworth	Dr Rob Gordon
23/02/2020	Beechworth	Member for Indi
23/02/2020	Beechworth	Presentation – Bushfire Forum
24/02/2020	Beechworth	Cross Border Commissioner
24/02/2020	Dartmouth	Impacted residents and businesses
24/02/2020	Mitta Mitta	Impacted residents and businesses
24/02/2020	Ovens	Impacted business
25/02/2020	Bright	Council, Alpine Resorts and North East Tourism
25/02/2020	Harrietville	Impacted business
25/02/2020	Wangaratta	Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency
4/03/2020	Bruthen	Blaze Aid
4/03/2020	Bruthen	Impacted business
4/03/2020	Clifton Creek	Impacted residents
4/03/2020	Dinner Plain	Impacted business
5/03/2020	Bairnsdale	DELWP, Parks Vic, Catchment Management Authority, Landcare, East Gippsland Council, EPA, Agriculture Victoria



5/03/2020	Bairnsdale	East Gippsland Shire CEO
5/03/2020	Cobungra	Impacted residents
10/03/2020	Club Terrace/ Combienbar	Impacted residents
10/03/2020	Nowa Nowa/Waiwera	Impacted residents
11/03/2020	Bairnsdale	Gippsland Lakes Complete Health CEO
11/03/2020	Marlo	Impacted business
11/03/2020	Tambo Crossing	Impacted residents
12/03/2020	Melbourne	Premier's Special Advisory Council meeting
16/03/2020	Video conference	Minister for Local Government and Minister for Small Business
16/03/2020	Video conference	Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Water
18/03/2020	Video conference	Secretary – Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions
18/03/2020	Video conference	Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Equality and Minister for Creative Industries
18/03/2020	Video conference	Secretary – Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
18/03/2020	Video conference	Secretary – Department of Health and Human Services.
19/03/2020	Video conference	Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Water
26/03/2020	Video conference	Alpine Shire Council CEO
26/03/2020	Video conference	Towong Shire Council CEO
27/03/2020	Video conference	Governor of Victoria
31/03/2020	Video conference	East Gippsland Shire Council CEO
31/03/2020	Video conference	Mansfield Shire Council
1/04/2020	Video conference	Gender Equity Victoria
6/04/2020	Video conference	Member for Eastern Victoria

Appendix E

Community Profiles

The following section provides a short overview of each of the 32 communities the BRV Chair engaged with and the key themes and issues that emerged from these meetings.



Bairnsdale

“We need to have deep engagement with farmers and businesses.”

Bairnsdale is a town of 14,728 people that is a business and educational hub for East Gippsland. Many Bairnsdale businesses were impacted and the strong ripple effect of job losses in the town is being felt. Significant resources were coordinated out of Bairnsdale during the bushfires, including an Incident Control Centre, a Relief and Recovery Centre and a food distribution point.

Fire impact – mainly economic, due to decreased tourism and road closures.

Engagement activity – meeting on 16 January with business owners and farmers. Meeting on 5 March with environmental stakeholders. Multiple meetings with individual business owners over the engagement period.

Recovery issues – impact of road closures on farmers and large businesses, timeliness of clean-up, access to support and emotional wellbeing.



Bemm River

"We were shut off at our busiest time of the year."

Bemm River is a small fishing town of approximately 60 residents located in East Gippsland. They are an established community who suffered significant indirect impacts from the bushfires through loss of tourism.

Fire impact – bushfire came to border of the town. Indirect impact of the closure of the Princes Highway and poor air quality.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 19 February.

Recovery issues – road closures, support for indirectly impacted businesses, reduced tourism and local input on land management.



Bright

"If the tourists don't come, small businesses will start closing."

Bright is a town of 2,406 people located in Victoria's alpine region. The town is heavily reliant on tourism and is well connected through leadership in the local government and alpine resorts. They have coordinated to engage with Tourism North East address the economic impact of the bushfires.

Fire impact – Bright was evacuated twice during the bushfires. The town was narrowly missed by the Abbeyard fire and the alpine resorts were surrounded by bushfire, forced to evacuate their visitors and under Watch and Act on multiple occasions.

Engagement activity – meeting on 22 January with representatives from Alpine Shire Council, Indigo Shire Council, alpine resorts, tourism and timber. Meeting held on 25 February with Alpine Shire Council, alpine resorts, tourism.

Recovery issues – reduced tourism, economic impact, emotional wellbeing support for indirectly impacted, businesses and destruction of timber plantations.

After the flames – Community Reflections



Bruthen

“Trauma triggers things and this has been a trauma for most of us.”

Bruthen is a town of 814 residents that was indirectly impacted by the bushfires. The town is closely connected and provided a point for many communities to come together during the bushfires.

Fire impact – indirect, mainly due to the closure of the Princes Highway.

Engagement activity – two meetings held on 4 March, one with local cafe and one with BlazeAid.

Recovery issues – local businesses were feeling the impact of reduced tourism, closure of the Princes Highway, fencing replacement delayed due to hazardous trees and many people needing emotional wellbeing support.



Buchan

“Look to the strengths of what you have in town to support recovery.”

Buchan is a town of 236 people and is best known for the Buchan Caves. The town is characterised by strong community leadership who coordinated response and relief efforts after the bushfires. Many beef cattle farmers were impacted by fencing losses.

Fire impact – local resident Mick Roberts died while defending his property. 24 homes were destroyed and significant fencing losses.

Engagement activity – two community meetings held on 15 and 29 January

Recovery issues – fencing, access to support, emotional wellbeing support and economic recovery.



Cabbage Tree Creek

"Governments shouldn't make small businesses suffer, because they don't want to set a precedent with giving us support."

Cabbage Tree Creek is a town of approximately 43 residents located in East Gippsland. The strength of the town is their close connection and supporting tourism on the Princes Highway.

Fire impact – indirect, mainly economic due to closure of the Princes Highway.

Engagement activity – one meeting with local businesses held on 19 February.

Recovery issues – support for indirectly impacted business, road closures and reduced tourism.



Cann River

"The bushfire didn't kill us, but the recovery process might."

Cann River is a town of 194 people which is characterised by diversity and strong community leadership. This was evident when the fire front came through and leaders helped to coordinate the response and relief efforts.

Fire impact – surrounded by bushfire and very lucky not to be burnt out. Was cut off for weeks due to closure of the Princes Highway.

Engagement activity – three meetings on 18 January, one with four community members, one with an Aboriginal leader and one with a farmer.

Recovery issues – accessing grants and support, support for bush nurses, using Aboriginal knowledge in land management and decreased tourism.

Club Terrace and Combienbar

"We were the first towns burnt, but we feel like we are the last to get support."

Club Terrace and Combienbar are neighboring towns located 20km apart in East Gippsland. They both experienced significant impacts from the bushfires. The communities have come together to address the needs of those most affected.

Fire impact – both towns significantly impacted with homes, structures and fencing destroyed.

Engagement activity – one community meeting on 10 March with both towns represented.

Recovery issues – frustration at length of time to start clean-up, difficulty accessing financial support, fuel reduction burns, road closures and concerns about ability to rebuild due to financial and planning considerations.

Corryong

"We will feel the mental health impacts of this fire for many years to come."

Corryong is a town of 1,348 people located in North Eastern Victoria. A central hub for the region, the town was impacted by power outages and cross border issues which exacerbate the difficulties of recovering from bushfire.

Fire impact – homes and buildings destroyed, many power outages.

Engagement activity – meeting held on 21 January with representatives from community, business, healthcare, energy, timber and tourism.

Recovery issues – cross border issues, unstable power grid, emotional wellbeing and chronic disease, impact to business and staff and workplace OH&S concerns.



Clifton Creek

"The volunteers really lifted our spirits."

Clifton Creek is a town of 237 residents that was directly impacted by the bushfires. The town has strong leadership from volunteers within the community who came forward during the crisis to help residents' access much needed support.

Fire impact – five homes and the local primary school destroyed.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 4 March.

Recovery issues – clean-up, issues accessing mental health support, fencing, communication about support available, fuel reduction burns, water contamination.



Cobungra

"Lost farming land is lost income and livelihoods."

Cobungra is a small area of 53 residents located in East Gippsland, at the foothills of Mount Hotham. They have a strong CFA brigade and their main economic income is farming.

Fire impact – structures and fencing destroyed. The farming community has been particularly impacted by these fires.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 5 March.

Recovery issues – replacement of fencing was a critical concern for farmers, clean-up needed to happen quickly, face-to-face support for emotional wellbeing, access to funding and fuel reduction burns.



Cudgewa

"Farmers are exhausted and they don't have the time to seek help."

Cudgewa is a town of 261 people located in North Eastern Victoria. The town came together to support each other, and community leaders engaged in social media campaigns to gain wider support. Almost half the population work in the beef and dairy industries and were significantly impacted by the bushfires.

Fire impact – homes, buildings and vehicles destroyed, water catchments contaminated, loss of power and phone services for three weeks.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 21 January.

Recovery issues – contamination of water catchments, fish deaths, access to support, fencing, emotional wellbeing of isolated farmers.

After the flames – Community Reflections



Dartmouth

"The community spirit was amazing."

Dartmouth is a town of 104 people located in North Eastern Victoria. It is a resilient and close-knit community who suffered indirect impacts from the bushfires.

Fire impact – indirect, particularly economic impact of reduced tourism.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 24 February.

Recovery issues – support for indirectly impacted businesses, use of local contractors, marketing support for businesses and reduced tourism.



Genoa

"Use local knowledge and local ideas to drive the recovery."

Genoa is a town of 55 residents located near the NSW border. There are many farmers in the area who coordinated during and after the bushfire. The strength of the town lies in the small, close-knit community.

Fire impact – homes, fencing and structures destroyed, including historic Genoa Bridge. Road closures obstructed residents returning for weeks.

Engagement activity – community meeting held on 4 February.

Recovery issues – replacement of fencing, road closures impeded farmers from accessing their properties, clean-up and land management practices.



Gipsy Point

"We are reliant on tourists and this is our peak time of year."

Gipsy Point is a town of approximately 46 residents located in East Gippsland, near the NSW border. There had established contingency plans but were cut off from all telecommunications in the fires.

Fire impact – one home was lost in Gipsy Point which belonged to a CFA volunteer who was defending other houses in the community.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 5 February.

Recovery issues – no local phone tower means no mobile phone reception which impedes emergency communication, road closures, tourism and support for directly impacted tourism businesses.



Harrietville

"In a way, I wish I had a flame in the front yard, so we can get some support."

Harrietville is a town of 338 people located in North Eastern Victoria. It suffered significant indirect impacts from the bushfires.

Fire impact – indirect, mainly economic impact of reduced tourism and power outages.

Engagement activity – one meeting held on 25 February with a large fish farm.

Recovery issues – power outages, reduced tourism, reduced markets for local produce, support for indirectly impacted business and impacts to water supply.

Dinner Plain

Dinner Plain is an alpine village of 230 residents. The village is highly reliant on tourism, including during the summer.

Fire impact – evacuated during the bushfires with the fire front coming within 300 metres of the village before a wind change.

Engagement activity – informal meeting held on 4 March with a local business.

Recovery issues – reduced tourism, support for indirectly impacted business, lengthy and frustrating processes to access support.

Lakes Entrance

Lakes Entrance is a popular tourist destination of 4,810 people located in East Gippsland. It suffered significant indirect impacts from the bushfires, particularly in relation to decreased tourism.

Fire impact – indirect, mainly economic due to reduced tourism.

Engagement activity – one meeting held on 30 January with Aboriginal representatives and one meeting on 19 February with impacted business owners.

Recovery issues – reduced tourism, local markets have decreased, impact to cultural sites of significance, impact to Country and concerns for Aboriginals health.

Milawa

Milawa is a town of 587 people located in North Eastern Victoria. The town is well known for its wineries who are closely connected and have worked well together.

Fire impact – indirect, significant economic impacts particularly felt by wineries due to decreased tourism. Potential for smoke taint on grapes.

Engagement activity – meeting on 22 January with wineries.

Recovery issues – reduced tourism, reduced casual work, smoke taint on grapes and cost to test, impact to international reputation of wineries and exports.



Mallacoota

"We want a hand-up, not a hand-out."

Mallacoota is a popular tourist destination with 1,063 permanent residents. The town has strong leadership which advocated for support in the aftermath of the fires. Residents have come together in the face of adversity.

Fire impact – over 100 homes and structures destroyed. Thousands of tourists and residents fled to the beach and were evacuated by the Australian Defence Force. Road closures for many weeks at the busiest time on the tourism calendar.

Engagement activity – three meetings on 4 and 5 February, one with Mallacoota Abalone Factory, one with Mallacoota P-12 School, one with business and community members.

Recovery issues – clean-up, reduced tourism, access to grant payments, impact of road closures on business and farmers and diversification of tourism activities.



Marlo

"We're not just hurting now – it's years from now we are worried about."

Marlo is a town of approximately 564 residents located in East Gippsland. The community has come together in the face of adversity and there is strong leadership.

Fire impact – indirect impacts, particularly through the closure of the Princes Highway and closure of the Cape Conran Coastal Park which is a local drawcard for tourists.

Engagement activity – one community meeting on 19 February.

Recovery issues – closure of the Princes Highway, reduced tourism, support for indirectly impacted business, mental health support for children, ripple effects such as stress, unemployment and potential incidents of family violence.



Mitta Mitta

"Businesses geared up for a busy summer, with stock and then the customers didn't come. January trade carries us through the Winter period."

Mitta Mitta is a town of 151 people located in North Eastern Victoria. It is nestled in the hamlet of the Mitta Valley, is an epicenter for tourism and thousands attend the annual Mighty Mitta Muster.

Fire impact – indirect, particularly through the closure of the Omeo Highway and the economic impact of reduced tourism.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 24 February.

Recovery issues – closure of the Omeo Highway, Broader Victorian tourism campaign to include smaller towns, support for indirectly impacted business and emotional wellbeing.



Nowa Nowa And Wairewa

"It's frustrating to have to explain your story over and over again."

Nowa Nowa and Wairewa are neighbouring towns in East Gippsland. The two towns are well connected and have come together to address the needs of those most affected.

Fire impact – homes, structures and fencing destroyed in both towns.

Engagement activity – one community meeting on 10 March with both towns.

Recovery issues – communication about support available, face-to-face support required, long-term emotional wellbeing support, road closures, length of time for clean-up to start, support for indirectly impacted businesses and fuel reduction.



Orbost

"It's not just the loss of homes, it's the loss of our stories."

Orbost is a town of 2,227, threatened by bushfires for many weeks during December 2019 and January 2020. The Orbost economy has a strong reliance on tourism and the smoke impacts and road closures meant tourist numbers were significantly. The town has strong Aboriginal leadership and there has been the loss of culturally significant sites.

Fire impact – Incident Control Centre established and became an evacuation point for smaller towns. 400 people evacuated to the local oval.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 15 January.

Recovery issues – cultural impacts, small business impacts and closure of shops and access to support.

Newmerella

Newmerella is a town of approximately 389 residents located in East Gippsland. A key hub for the community, the local school's teachers form an essential part of the community's leadership.

Fire impact – indirect impacts from the bushfires, particularly through the closure of the Princes Highway. The town was already struggling with drought, closure of Coringal Gas and declining timber industry.

Engagement activity – two meetings on 20 February, one with local primary school and one with a large transport business.

Recovery issues – mental health support for children and parents, use of local contractors in clean-up, inclusion of smaller towns in tourism advertising, closure of Princes Highway, support for businesses which are indirectly impacted, support for unemployed individuals and business redundancies.

Ovens

"We grew this business through hard work, we've never had a hand-out."

Ovens is a town of 219 people located in North Eastern Victoria.

Fire impact – indirect impacts from the bushfires, particularly through road closures and the economic impact of reduced tourism.

Engagement activity – one meeting on 24 February with large pumpkin farm.

Recovery issues – road closures impeded business from transporting their product to market, water contamination, support for businesses which are indirectly impacted, crop testing for smoke impacts.



Sarsfield

"The most important thing we have is the power of community."

Sarsfield is a farming district located 13km north-east of Bairnsdale. The town has strong leadership from volunteers within the community and has come together to help those impacted by the bushfires. The Sarsfield Recreation Reserve was the central meeting point for the community and the Reserve's Committee has been instrumental in coordinating relief and recovery efforts.

Fire impact – Fire destroyed 19 buildings including homes and sheds, and many farms suffered vehicle and equipment.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 16 January

Recovery issues – clean-up, future planning and rebuild concerns, access to support and emotional wellbeing.



Tallangatta

"This disaster is bigger than we've ever experienced before."

Tallangatta is a town of 1,082 people located in North Eastern Victoria. The town is the location of Towong Shire Council and many were resources coordinated from there during the bushfires and in the relief stages. In recovery, the leadership of the local government has provided support to Tallangatta and the greater Towong region.

Fire impact – Tallangatta was not directly impacted by the fire but became a staging point for many resources to coordinate from.

Engagement activity – meeting on 22 January with Towong Shire Council.

Recovery issues – clean-up, fencing, support for local government to deliver services, community access to support and the need for a permanent community hub.



Tambo Crossing

"If we didn't man our place, we wouldn't have anything."

Tambo Crossing is a farming community which was surrounded by bushfire. The town is well connected with leadership from volunteers in the community.

Fire impact – surrounded by fire and indirectly impacted by road closures and reduced tourism.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 11 March.

Recovery issues – road closures impeding farmers from accessing properties, destruction of fencing significant impact on farmers, debris washed down creek and contaminating water.



Walwa

"We need a better power supply for the town to rely on."

Walwa is a town of 177 people located in North Eastern Victoria. They are a tight-knit community with strong leadership through the Bush Nursing Centre, which acted as a community hub during the bushfires. The Bush Nursing Centre raised concerns about continuous power supply to the town during times of crisis.

Fire impact – surrounded by bushfire, lost one home and several buildings.

Engagement activity – one community meeting held on 21 January.

Recovery issues – power supply, need for back-up generators, support for isolated farmers and the need for face-to-face support.

Appendix F

Supports available for individuals and communities

Individuals and Families

Emergency Relief Assistance Payments are designed to provide immediate financial help for eligible Victorians experiencing extreme financial hardship due to the current bushfire emergency. Payments of up to \$560 per adult and \$280 per child (up to a maximum of \$1960 per eligible household) are available.

Emergency Re-Establishment Payments are available if your home is uninhabitable for more than seven days because of an emergency and you are experiencing financial hardship. Payments of up to \$42,250 per eligible household are available.

Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment: \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child, for people who have been seriously injured, lost their homes or whose homes were directly damaged, or are the immediate family members of a person who has died as a direct result of the bushfires.

Disaster Recovery Allowance: Up to 13 weeks income support for those who have lost income as a direct result of the bushfires.

Emergency relief payments: Funding of up to \$4 million will support residents in bushfire affected areas who have experienced loss of, or damage to, their primary residence. Funding from \$1,000 to \$4,500 will cover temporary accommodation costs, such as hotel bills

Red Cross Emergency Grants: People who have lost homes can apply to Australian Red Cross for an emergency grant of \$20,000.

Bereavement: Immediate payments of \$50,000 will be made to each of the families of people who have tragically died during Victoria's bushfires

Mental Health Support: the Victorian Government has committed an additional \$23.4 million to mental health support for those affected by bushfires, including:

- \$8.75 million to expand mental health services, provide specialist early intervention mental health advice to GPs and community health clinicians, and provide post-disaster treatment and advisory services through leading research centres.
- \$6.6 million for practical mental health support programs such as:
 - Training local groups like football clubs to recognise when teammates are developing mental illness
 - Providing advice and training to parents to support their children through the long-term process of recovery
 - Peer outreach programs for farmers, foresters and small business owners
 - Health and wellbeing meet-ups such as local exercise groups, social events, and camps for young people
 - \$3 million for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations to establish social and emotional wellbeing programs.

Business and Organisations

Small Business Bushfire Recovery Grant:

Grants of up to \$50,000 are available to eligible Victorian small businesses directly affected by the recent bushfires.

Small Business Bushfire Support Grant:

Grants of \$10,000 are available to directly or indirectly impacted businesses and primary producers to assist with the costs including salaries, rents and utilities, seeking financial advice and making the adjustments required to continue after the bushfires. These grants are available to businesses within the three most affected local government areas (East Gippsland, Towong and Alpine).

Concessional Loans: Concessional loans of up to \$500,000 are available for eligible small businesses (including farmers, fishers and foresters) and non-profit organisations who have suffered significant asset loss or significant loss to revenue.

Business Recovery Advisors: Small Business Victoria is providing Business Recovery Advisors to engage with impacted businesses at local recovery centres. The Advisors are assisting affected local business owners to connect to the right services, navigate local, state, federal and other relevant resources along with providing administrative support where needed.

Primary producers

Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grants of up to \$75,000 per business are available to assist primary producers directly affected by this season's bushfires. Eligible activities include disposing of dead stock and rebuilding or replacing damaged or destroyed on-farm infrastructure, including fencing.

Emergency Farm Transport: This subsidy for primary producers, including apiarists, will cover up to 50 per cent of total freight costs, to a maximum of \$15,000 excluding GST per farm business.

Farm Household Allowance: This is a Commonwealth Government program that provides assistance to farming families experiencing financial hardship, including:

- a fortnightly payment for up to 4 years in each specific 10-year period
- supplementary allowances such as rent assistance, telephone and pharmaceutical allowances and a Health Care Card
- individual case support with a Farm Household Case Officer (FHCO)
- a financial assessment of the farm enterprise worth up to \$1500
- a \$4000 activity supplement that gives farmers an opportunity to develop skills.

Fencing replacement and upgrade: The Victorian Government will help landholders in bushfire affected communities repair damaged or destroyed fences between private land and National Parks, State Parks and State forests. Farmers will have the flexibility to not just replace their boundary fences with a standard fence – as per the existing Government program – but to upgrade them, making them fire-resistant with concrete posts and better able to exclude pests such as wild dogs. The Government will pay half the cost of the materials for boundary fencing repairs and upgrades, up to \$5,000 per kilometre.

Fencing support: The Victorian Bushfire Appeal has provided \$1 million provided to BlazeAid, to assist farmers in replacing fences destroyed by the bushfires on their private property.

Wine Grape Testing Rebate – provides up to \$1,200 to assist Victorian wine grape growers establish the extent and impact of smoke exposure from the 2019–20 bushfires on the 2020 vintage.

Rural financial counsellors: The Australian Government has provided \$15 million to fund 60 additional rural financial counsellors and support workers to assist primary producers amid the bushfire and drought crisis.

General Information

Case Support Program: Individuals can access the Victorian Bushfires Case Support program free of charge by calling 1800 560 760. Support coordinators will be a single point of contact, working with local residents to link them directly with vital support, such as information and advice, mental health support or financial counselling. They will also provide practical support such as filling out paperwork, accessing grants and financial claims, and navigating services available through the local, state and federal governments.

Clean-Up: The 2020 Clean-Up Program covers the demolition and disposal of all buildings destroyed or damaged beyond repair by this seasons' bushfires (including residential homes and sheds, commercial and public buildings, and other out-buildings). This may include the removal of fencing, trees and vehicles but only where it is necessary for the safe clean-up of destroyed buildings. The program is free of charge for all property owners, regardless of whether you are insured. The Victoria and Commonwealth Governments will jointly provide up to \$75 million for the program.

Planning Assistance and Exemption: People who lost their property in the 2019–20 Victorian Bushfires can occupy temporary buildings to continue a business without a planning permit, subject to certain safety requirements. Victorians impacted by bushfires are eligible to receive access to the land titles register to reclaim essential land and property information destroyed by bushfire – free of charge.

Community Recovery Hubs will provide a safe, central place for community members and a one-stop-shop for recovery services and programs.

The Victorian Government will conduct preliminary Bushfire Hazard Site Assessments and other environmental assessments on behalf of Victorians wishing to rebuild after bushfire. Once the preliminary assessments are completed, a report will be made available for each fire affected property. This report will detail the bushfire planning and building controls that apply to your property. Residents and business owners can directly use this information to inform their planning and building permit application. These assessments would ordinarily cost up to \$3000, but the Government is covering this cost.

After the flames – Community Reflections

Community Recovery and Resilience Grants: \$35 million is being provided for locally led programs for community connection, engagement and resilience.

Immediate Reconstruction and Rebuilding Program: \$20 million is being provided for temporary housing for those displaced by bushfires and funding to repair and replace critical water infrastructure.

Community and Emergency Services Health: \$10 million is being provided to boost some existing mental health services and support kids returning to school.

School: The Victorian Government is providing:

- \$5 million to extend the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund to all eligible primary and secondary school students
- \$4 million to boost mental health support or government and non-government schools, including additional psychologists and social workers
- \$3.8 million to establish a Trauma Recovery Team to provide the trauma response support to affected schools and kindergarten services
- \$2.5 million to help school students from bushfire affected areas with the cost of items such as uniforms, books and stationery.

Tax Relief and Savings: The Victorian Government is providing regional payroll tax relief in State of Disaster areas, so that regional employers only pay 25 per cent of the metropolitan rate, and 50 per cent concession on stamp duty for eligible properties. This allows businesses to relocate, expand or move into the fire affected areas – sending a clear signal that these destinations are open for business. Other relief and savings include:

- Businesses, families, and individuals whose properties have been destroyed or substantially damaged by bushfires will receive relief for their 2020 land tax assessment. Land tax will be also be waived on eligible properties being used to provide free accommodation for people in need
- For people who decide not to rebuild in their local community, the Government will provide up to \$55,000 in stamp duty relief if they buy a home elsewhere
- For people who lost motor vehicles due to bushfires, they can receive up to \$2,100 in ex-gratia relief from the duty on up to two replacement vehicles
- The State Revenue Office has suspended land tax assessments in affected areas, and will continue to support businesses in fire affected areas
- Water rates will be waived for 12 months for all homes or businesses destroyed or significantly damaged by fire, and providing rebates for customers affected by interruptions

Tourism: Tourism North East and Destination Gippsland have each received a \$200,000 grant to assist with their immediate recovery efforts and coordinate marketing and campaign activities.

Visit Victoria had a \$2 million marketing and advertising campaign under the slogan “A short stay goes a long way” to encourage Victorians to travel to all parts of the state, and a \$5 million campaign to attract international tourists. However, coronavirus has caused a temporary suspension of these campaigns.

Events: Grants of up to \$20,000 for events in fire affected area through a dedicated Bushfire Recovery Round of the Regional Events Fund worth \$300,000. Individual events and activities that have already been funded/supported are being managed in line with coronavirus restrictions, with some events and activities being cancelled or postponed.

Wildlife: The Victorian Government is providing a \$17.5 million initial rescue package to support Victoria’s bushfire impacted wildlife and biodiversity. This is in addition to grants of up to \$1,000 available to shelters and foster careers helping to care and rehabilitate native wildlife impacted by the fires.

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal is allocating:

- Immediate payments of \$50,000 to each of the families of people who have tragically died during Victoria’s bushfires.
- Housing Assistance Payments of \$25,000 will be made to owner/occupiers and renters whose principal place of residence was either destroyed or severely damaged by bushfire.
- \$1 million, provided through BlazeAid, to help farmers replace boundary fences destroyed by bushfires on their property.
- Funding of up to \$4 million to support residents in bushfire affected areas who have experienced loss of, or damage to, their primary residence. From \$1,000 to \$4,500 to cover temporary accommodation costs, such as hotel bills.
- The Community Enterprise Foundation, based on the recommendation of the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Advisory Panel, has recommended the remaining funds be used for medium to long-term community-led recovery initiatives. The distribution of this funding will be assisted by a community consultation process. The consultation will help the Advisory Panel to identify community recovery priorities that are eligible for funding.

Business and Sport for Bushfire Recovery: This Victorian Government Program encourages businesses and major organisations to hold multi-day stays in bushfire affected areas, so to provide immediate and practical support for local businesses and people in fire affected communities.

Council Assistance Fund: The Victorian Government has established a \$10 million Council Assistance Fund for local governments in State of Disaster areas to access funding for people who have damaged or destroyed property, support businesses subject to annual charges or permits, or to waive other fees or charges.

Visit Victoria had a \$2 million marketing and advertising campaign under the slogan “A short stay goes a long way” to encourage Victorians to travel to all parts of the state.

Community Recovery Committees will assist local governments and communities to help shape recovery, grants and support programs that reflect the community’s needs. Community Recovery Committees will be made up of representatives from communities within bushfire affected areas. Each community committee will be established once the community is ready by Bushfire Recovery Victoria and local government.

Community Recovery Hubs will provide a safe, central place for community members and a one-stop-shop for recovery services and programs. If you’re in a remote area and unable to attend a Hub, mobile recovery support units will also be available. These Community Recovery Hubs will be established by Bushfire Recovery Victoria in partnership with local government.

Appendix G

Aboriginal Reference Group members

Matthew Burns

Taungurung Land and Waters Council – Chair

Grattan Mullet

Gunaikurnai Land and Waters
Aboriginal Corporation

Aunty Eileen Blackburn

Far East Gippsland Representative

Jamie Williamson

Gippsland and East Gippsland
Aboriginal Cooperative

Daphne Yarram

Yoowinna Wurnalung Aboriginal Healing Service

Tammy Bundle

Moogji Aboriginal Council East Gippsland Inc

Paula Morgan

Lakes Entrance Aboriginal Health Association

Suzie Squires

Lake Tyers Health and Children’s Service

Jemma Owen

Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust

Mark Munnich

Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation

Leanne Miller (interim)

First Peoples Assembly

Shantelle Gormly

Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation

David Noonan

Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service

*To find information about any of these initiatives,
please contact Bushfire Recovery Victoria on
1800 560 760 or visit our website at www.br.vic.gov.au.*

