

**MATTER OF URGENCY REPORT TO ORDINARY MEETING OF
GREATER HUME COUNCIL TO BE HELD AT
COMMUNITY MEETING ROOM, LIBRARY COMPLEX, LIBRARY LANE, HOLBROOK
ON WEDNESDAY, 20 MAY 2020**

OFFICER'S REPORT – PART A – FOR DETERMINATION

PART A – FOR DETERMINATION

GOVERNANCE

1. BUSHFIRE NSW INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE INQUIRY – CONSIDERATION OF DRAFT SUBMISSION

Report prepared by General Manager – Steven Pinnuck

REASON FOR REPORT

For Councillors to consider the draft submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry.

REFERENCE TO DELIVERY PLAN ACTIONS

Nil

DISCUSSION

As Councillors are aware, the Green Valley/Talmalmo fire commenced from a lightning strike on Sunday, 29 December 2019. By the time it was declared contained on 23 January 2020 it burnt 32,173 ha (approximately 6% of the Greater Hume local government area). A number of homes and outbuilding were destroyed or damaged, along with livestock losses, destroyed fencing and burnt pastures.

The NSW State Government has commissioned an independent expert inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfire season to provide input to NSW ahead of the next bushfire season.

Dave Owens APM, former Deputy Commissioner of NSW Police, Professor Mary O'Kane AC, Independent Planning Commission Chair and former NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer, are leading the six-month inquiry, which is reviewing the causes of, preparation for and response to the 2019-20 bushfires.

The Inquiry is to consider, and report to the Premier on, the following matters.

- 1. The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.*
- 2. The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect.*
- 3. Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment, including:*
 - o immediate management, including the issuing of public warnings*
 - o resourcing, coordination and deployment*

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SUBMISSION**

- *equipment and communication systems.*
- 4. *Any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to bushfires.*

*And to make recommendations arising from the Inquiry as considered appropriate,
including on:*
- 5. *Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks.*
- 6. *Land use planning and management and building standards, including appropriate
clearing and other hazard reduction, zoning, and any appropriate use of indigenous
practices.*
- 7. *Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems.*
- 8. *Emergency responses to bushfires, including overall human and capital resourcing.*
- 9. *Coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Australian
Government, other state and territory governments and local governments.*
- 10. *Safety of first responders.*
- 11. *Public communication and advice systems and strategies.*

Councillors participated in a workshop on Wednesday, 15 May 2020 to consider issues pertinent to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

The draft submission is included for consideration at **ANNEXURE 1**.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

No budget implications at this time.

CONCLUSION

The NSW State Government has commissioned an independent expert inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfire season to provide input to NSW ahead of the next bushfire season. Councillors participated in a workshop on Wednesday, 15 May 2020 to consider issues pertinent to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

RECOMMENDATION

That the draft Submission as detailed in **ANNEXURE 1** be adopted and be forwarded to the NSW NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry.



Greater
Hume
Council

Submission to NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry



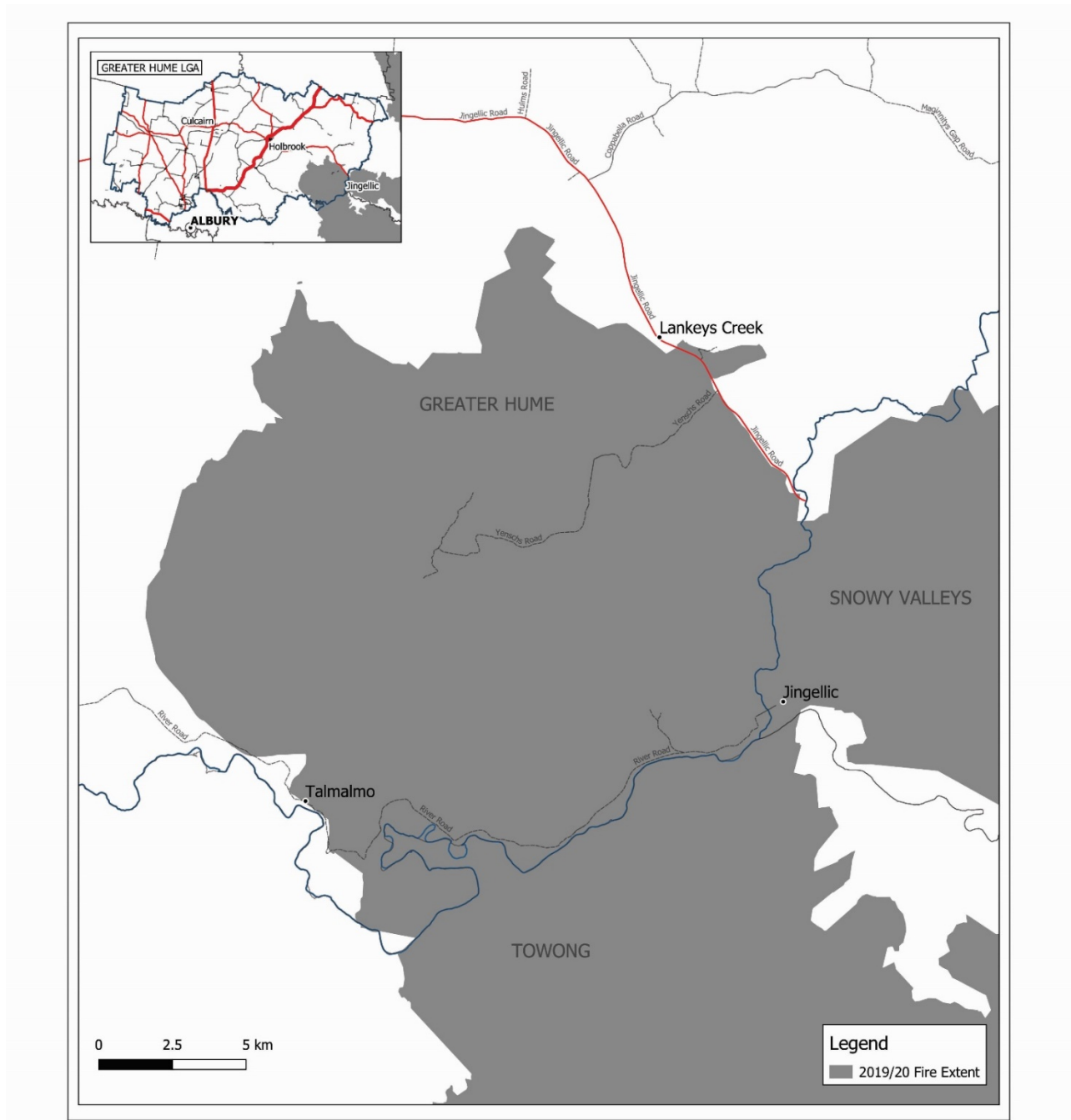
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Overview of LGA

Greater Hume Council is situated in the Eastern Riverina area of New South Wales and was significantly impacted by the Green Valley/Talmalmo fire (the Green Valley Fire) during the summer of 2019/2020.

The fire started from a lightning strike on Sunday 30 December and continued until it was declared contained on 23 January 2020.

The fire burnt approximately 32,173 ha which is approximately 6% of the Greater Hume local government area (LGA).



(NSW Rural Fire Service et al., 2020)

Snapshot of impact

Impact	Number
Houses destroyed	8
Houses damaged	4
Outbuildings destroyed	22
Outbuildings damaged	7
Impacted rural rating assessments	114
Fatality (RFS Volunteer)	1
Injuries (RFS Volunteers)	5

LGA Overview

Impact	Number
Area of Council area burnt	32,173 ha (6%)
Houses destroyed	8
Houses damaged	4
Outbuildings destroyed	22
Outbuildings damaged	7
Impacted holdings	92
Livestock lost	26
Rural assessments impacted	114
Fencing	758 km
Agriculture	16,898 ha

Terms of Reference

In addressing the Terms of Reference some comments relate directly to the Green Valley Fire and other comments are more general in nature.

1. **The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.**

Hazard reduction – National Parks and State Forests

The Green Valley Fire burnt through 32,173 ha of the south east corner of the Greater Hume Council area towards the Snowy Valleys Council and the Victorian border at the Murray River. The fire joined with the Dunns Road Fire to create one 'mega-fire'.

Lightning strikes are the main sources of fires in this region and therefore hazard reduction burning and other control measures are essential to limit the rapid spread of fires, particularly during periods of drought and with the increasing impacts of climate change on the environment.

It is acknowledged that hazard reduction burning does come with risks of:

- Escapes of burns
- Environmental impacts on flora and fauna
- Potential health impacts on residents in the locality
- Impacts on other industries (e.g. wine industry through smoke taint).

Hazard reduction – roadsides

The build-up of fuel along roadsides is often raised with local councils as a potential fire hazard. Councils have the same land management responsibilities as other levels of government and private land managers in relation to bushfire prevention, mitigation and biodiversity management, although there are often conflicts with these objectives.

Under the existing Australian and State Government funding arrangements, local government does not have the capacity to reduce fuel loads on the roadsides of all roads across their council area. Council is of the view that strategically undertaken hazard reduction on selected Council roads can assist in providing fire breaks north/south and east/west.

Consideration needs to be given to providing funding for strategic hazard reduction on roadsides on an ongoing basis as a preventative measure, rather than providing funding in a reactionary manner for natural disasters including bushfires.

This philosophy should also extend to natural disasters caused by floods and storms.

Hazard reduction – Plantation forest management

Plantation forest management particularly in relation to control of noxious weeds and animals has been an ongoing concern to council and adjoining landowners.

The sheer nature of plantation forests is that they are high risk which is exacerbated, in many instances, by poor weed control (e.g. blackberries) which significantly adds to the fuel load and fire spread.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Australian and NSW State Government commit to funding a strategic long term program of hazard reduction burns.
2. Review current legislation to identify and eliminate conflicts between Rural Fires Act 1997 and the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 to ensure strategic hazard reduction works can be undertaken on public and private lands
3. That funding be provided for hazard reduction on roadsides to create strategic fire breaks on an ongoing basis as a preventative measure rather than the providing funding in a reactionary manner.
4. That the State Government review current legislation to ensure that plantation forestry has adequate fire management practices in place including fire-fighting capabilities and implementation of fire hazard reduction plans.

2. The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect.

Preparation and planning

As stated in 1 above it will take a 'whole of government' approach to implement proactive fire hazard reduction to ensure proper preparation for future bushfire events.

In relation to planning, a number of matters should be under consideration.

Protection and enhancement of critical infrastructure, particularly roads, electrical supply and telecommunications

Roads

The Green Valley Fire had three main road access points - Jingellic Road a regional road (part MR 331) and two local roads, Yenches Road and River Road, both have a gravel surface.

Jingellic Road is a main thoroughfare from the Hume Freeway and Albury to the south eastern part of Greater Hume LGA and to the Upper Murray region of north east Victoria. Jingellic Road was the main route for emergency service vehicles, fuel transport vehicles and for the provision of food and other supplies to the Emergency Welfare Centre/Staging Point established at Jingellic in the neighbouring Snowy Valleys Council area.

Jingellic Road is 45.12km in length and whilst a regional road, 8.82 km only meets Council's standard for a regional road of a minimum sealed width of 8 m. In addition, 19% of traffic on Jingellic Road is heavy vehicular traffic.

During the first few days of the fire when combined with passenger and emergency service vehicles and poor visibility, it made for a very unsafe road environment.

The road was eventually closed to all traffic with the exception of emergency service vehicles which created access issues to the Emergency Welfare Centre/Staging Point at Jingellic which was now isolated.

It is recommended that the Australian and State Governments give an increased weighting to road upgrades in high risk bushfire prone areas.

Electrical Supply

Essential Energy is the network provider for the Greater Hume Council area and electricity supply was first interrupted by the Green Valley Fire at 17:40 on Monday 30 December 2019.

The following information was provided by Essential Energy:

- *Initially 181 customers were affected by the supply interruption and power was restored to supply to approximately 120 of these customers within 24 hours.*
- *The remaining approximately 60 customers remained without supply until 16.20 Sunday 12 January 2020 with a remaining few restored by 16.35 Wednesday 15 January 2020.*
- *In addition to the initial fire front on Monday 30 December 2019, a second fire front passed through the electricity network on Saturday 4 January 2020 causing additional network damage and a further supply interruption to the 120 customers restored shortly after the first fire front. Supply was restored within 16 hours of the second impact for the majority of those approx. 120 customers*
- *Total restoration work included replacement of 55 power poles along with a further 27 miscellaneous tasks associated with damaged equipment. In addition, 17 hazard trees were identified and removed in order to ensure a safe and reliable supply of electricity after restoration.*
- *Essential Energy expended approximately 1,980 labour hours restoring supply to the Jingellic district.*

This was all achieved whilst an active fire was still burning in the area.

Essential Energy is to be commended for the speed of their response working long hours in hot, dusty, dirty and smoky conditions.

It is recommended however that consideration be given to use of steel or concrete electrical poles in high risk bushfire areas rather than the standard timber pole.

Telecommunications

Telecommunications in the Greater Hume Council area, east of the Hume Highway are poor with many mobile phone blackspots and a poor fixed line service. Coincidentally, this part of the Greater Hume Council area has significant areas of National Park, State Forest and plantation forestry resulting in it being a high risk bushfire area.

The following information was provided by Telstra

The Jingellic mobile base station outage began on 31 December. That outage was restored on 3 February 2020; however coverage is still reduced due to bushfire impacts.

A portable generator was connected to the base station on 2 January however the site was severely damaged by fire on 5 January, destroying the temporary generator in the process.

A portable mobile tower (Satellite Cell on Wheels, Sat COW) was operational at Walwa from 8 January, providing some coverage in Walwa but not Jingellic. An interim small cell was then installed at Walwa on 24 January and the SatCow relocated to Jingellic and made operational there on 25 January.

Fixed Line

There were outages on several fixed infrastructure facilities in the Walwa/Jingellic area, with the first outage beginning on 30 December and the last outage restoration on 17 January.

It is recognised that Telstra were unable to restore fixed line telephones until electricity was restored to Exchanges however this left the community very vulnerable. No electricity, no fixed or mobile phones, internet connectivity and very limited radio coverage.

The community was disappointed with the response times from Telstra and whilst a key mobile phone base station has been rebuilt it is providing a significantly reduced service and coverage four months after the fire was contained.

Communications were such an issue on Friday 3 January (a catastrophic fire day), a Council staff member drove from Culcairn to Melbourne to purchase four satellite phones and 20 Spotgen GPS units for communications with and to ensure the safety of Council staff assisting on the fire ground.

It is recommended that the Australian and State Government:

1. Increase funding to eliminate mobile phone black spots, particularly in high risk bushfire prone areas even though population numbers may be low.
2. Provide funding to local councils to purchase and maintain satellite phones for emergency response purposes.
3. Ensure telecommunications carriers have rigorous business continuity plans in place that can be implemented during emergency/natural disaster events to ensure continuity of service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. That the Australian and State Governments give an increased weighting to road upgrades in high risk bushfire prone areas.
6. That consideration be given to use of steel or concrete electrical poles in high risk bushfire areas rather than the standard timber pole.
7. Increase funding to eliminate mobile phone black spots, particularly in high risk bushfire prone areas even though population numbers may be low.
8. Provide funding to local councils to purchase and maintain satellite phones for emergency response purposes.
9. Ensure telecommunications carriers have rigorous business continuity plans in place that can be implemented during emergency/natural disaster events to ensure continuity of service.

3. **Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment, including:**
- **immediate management, including the issuing of public warnings**
 - **resourcing, coordination and deployment**
 - **equipment and communication systems.**

Concerns have been raised with regard to this fire and suppression of fires generally in that the adequacy of the initial response is paramount to the success of the fire-fighting effort. It is possible that if additional resources (particularly aerial resources) had been provided in the early stages of the fire, it may have been contained much earlier.

In rugged terrain, as was the Green Valley Fire, immediate aerial support is essential for containment to enable other support such as tankers and heavy plant (i.e. dozers, graders, etc.) to get to the fire ground. Again, in rugged terrain larger tanker units are slow and consideration should be given to more appropriate equipment for the terrain. In the case of the Green Valley Fire Cat 9 support (e.g. slip on tanks for four wheel drives) can get to the fire front much quicker than larger tankers and have the capacity to hold the fire until additional resources arrive, particularly in the absence of aerial support.

It is recommended that RFS comprehensively engage with RFS brigade members as to the appropriateness of the equipment for each brigade area.

It was certainly the view of local RFS Volunteers engaged in the Green Valley Fire that insufficient credence was given to advice from the fire ground as to the best method of containment. In many instances this advice is being provided by volunteers who have lived in the area for long periods of time and have the benefit of observing previous fire behaviour in the locality.

It is recommended that the Officer In Charge of the fire ground have increased authority in relation to how active fires are managed.

Local government is often called upon to provide heavy plant and equipment to assist in the fire-fighting effort, as was the case with the Green Valley Fire, however with no mobile phone communication and no access to the RFS radio network. Council staff operating heavy plant were exposed to vulnerable and dangerous situations.

Sometimes what's needed is a 'back to the future' approach to find a solution.

In this case in the 1980's and 90's most Council plant contained a bushfire radio which was used for Council and RFS communications. In more recent times, however, this was dispensed with, certainly to the detriment of fire-fighting during major events. As a result, and as mentioned earlier, Council purchased satellite phones and Spotgen GPS units to provide support to Council staff engaged in a massive fire-fighting effort.

It is recommended that the RFS consider funding radios compatible with the RFS system for installation in selected Council plant.

It is of further concern to local government is that Council is the first agency called to lend support to the RFS. In the case of the Green Valley Fire, Council had over 30 staff working 24 hours per day on two 12 hours shifts, providing heavy plant and equipment, mechanical services, traffic control, refuelling of RFS tankers, etc. It is still unclear to what extent these costs will be reimbursed. This is an untenable situation particularly for declared Section 44 events.

It is recommended that the funding arrangements with local government of declared Section 44 fire events under the Rural Fires Act 1997 be reviewed.

The Green Valley fire started in the south east corner of the Greater Hume Council area and burnt in a south easterly direction towards Snowy Valley Council and the Victorian Border; crossing the border.

Currently the radio systems of the NSW RFS and the Victorian CFA are not compatible (*this issue is also likely to occur at boundaries of other jurisdictions*) which was a significant impediment in the timely exchange of information cross border which may have impeded the fire suppression effort.

It is recommended that the NSW RFS and liaise with fire authorities of other jurisdictions to ensure protocols are put in place to ensure the timely exchange of information for potentially cross border fire events.

At the time of the Green Valley Fire, weather conditions were very hot with temperatures in the high 30's and several days in excess 40. This led to very oppressive, hot, dusty, dirty and smoky conditions. Reports suggest that googles and masks were in short supply from the RFS district headquarters exacerbating conditions for fire fighters.

Given that there had been significant fire activity in other parts of the State, it was foreseeable that a significant fire event could occur and sufficient stocks of personal protective equipment, including googles and masks should have been held.

It is recommended that sufficient stocks of personal protective equipment, including googles and masks are held at District Offices prior to the commencement of each fire season.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

10. the NSW RFS comprehensively engage with RFS brigade members as to the appropriateness of the equipment for the brigade area.
11. the Officer in charge of the fire ground has increased authority in relation to how active fires are managed.
12. the NSW RFS consider funding radios compatible with the RFS system for installation in selected Council plant.
13. funding arrangements with local government of declared section 44 fire events under the Rural Fires Act, 1997 be reviewed.
14. the NSW RFS liaise with Fire Authorities of other jurisdictions to ensure protocols are put in place to ensure the timely exchange of information for potentially cross border fire events.
15. sufficient stocks of personal protective equipment, including googles and masks are held at District Offices prior to the commencement of each fire season.

4. **Any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to bushfires.**

And to make recommendations arising from the Inquiry as considered appropriate, including on:

5. **Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks.**

Essential elements to putting a bushfire out are access to equipment and reliable water supplies close to the fire activity. Timely access to water was an issue for the Green Valley Fire. Council is of the view that the establishment of water sources in remote high risk areas is critical to the fire-fighting response. Water sources (e.g. dams) could be established within national parks, plantation forestry or other private and public land that then can be accessed for fire-fighting purposes.

It is recommended that water sources be established in remote high risk areas to assist in the fire-fighting response.

As mentioned in ToR 3 above, the appropriateness of the equipment to the brigade area is critical. It is considered in rough terrain that consideration should be given to supplying Cat 9 appliances with a 200 metre remote reel. In circumstances where fire fighters are required to move into a valley as well as quick response water supply, the remote reels on these units can assist fire fighters moving up embankments to a safer area in the event of an emergency.

That matter is covered by recommendation 10 above.

Similarly, again as discussed in ToR 3, initial aerial support is critical to suppressing fires in their infancy to ensure ground crews can provide assistance.

It is recommended that the NSW RFS investigate ways of providing additional aerial support to remote high risk fire regions in the NSW.

Complimentary to the initiative above, fire trails are essential to a rapid response in rugged terrain and not only need to be established but maintained before each fire season ensuring that the trails are free of fallen trees and other debris that may inhibit access to the fire ground by fire appliances.

It is recommended that funding be allocated to the further establishment and maintenance of an adequate fire trail network.

The Australian Government mobilised Defence Forces to assist in the fire-fighting effort but mainly in the recovery phase, providing drinking water or fodder for stock. Council is of the view that the Defence Forces have the resources and capability to take a much more active role in fighting the actual fire provided basic fire-fighting training forms part of their professional development.

If this was to occur then there are substantial resources such as earthmoving equipment, water tankers etc. that could be deployed to the major fire events particularly in a year where an extreme fire season was foreseeable.

It is recommended that the NSW State Government enter into negotiations with the Australian Government to investigate how the Defence Forces can be used in more substantial way in future emergency events.

Other issues for consideration include liaison with indigenous leaders with the view of increasing 'cool burning' as a hazard reduction measure. Whilst 'cool burning' has continued to be used in northern Australian it is a very little used technique in southern States and is certainly worthy of review.

As a result of catastrophic fires events of late 2019 and early 2020, together with national and international media coverage, the time is right to implement a recruiting drive to recruit younger members to brigades particularly in rural NSW. A broad ranging recruitment drive, however, will need to be carefully planned and implemented if there is little or no fire activity. In these circumstances programs will need to be put in place to ensure that new volunteers remain engaged with their brigade and motivated to the cause.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

16. water sources be established in remote high risk areas to assist in the fire-fighting response.
17. the NSW RFS investigate ways of providing additional aerial support to remote high fire risk regions of the NSW.
18. funding be allocated to the further establishment and maintenance of an adequate fire trail network.
19. the NSW State Government enter into negotiations with the Australian Government to investigate how the Defence Forces can be used in a more substantial way in future emergency events.
20. the NSW State Government investigate the effectiveness and cost of increasing 'cool burns' particularly in remote high fire risk areas of the State.
21. the NSW RFS implement a well planned and coordinated recruitment drive ensuring that programs are in place to ensure that new volunteers remain engaged with the Brigade and motivated in periods of low fire activity.

6. Land use planning and management and building standards, including appropriate clearing and other hazard reduction, zoning, and any appropriate use of indigenous practices.

Whilst the location of the Green Valley Fire does not have any significant planning implication, based on the experience of council's on the south coast of NSW, future events could be severely impacted by the both the Biodiversity Act and Koala SEPP as detailed below.

Within south east NSW 1,621 homes were destroyed by the bushfires. Many homes that have been lost to the bushfires were constructed before current biodiversity and bushfire management standards were introduced. These councils have been advocating since January for the biodiversity legislation to be switched off to facilitate the rebuilding process.

The intention of councils is to facilitate the most efficient process possible to enable the rebuilding of homes lost to fires and to do so in a manner whereby the homes are compliant with current standards for asset protection zones (APZ), making them safer and more resilient.

In many cases this will require the clearing of land around the replacement dwelling to achieve an appropriate APZ and access.

As examples of the scale of the problem, it is estimated that Bega Shire Council has approximately 115 rebuilt homes and Eurobodalla Shire Council has up to 277 rebuilt homes that may be required to undertake detailed assessments under the Biodiversity Conservation Act to enable the clearing to achieve compliance with bushfire management standards. Given that houses already existed in these locations and the councils are trying to facilitate the rebuilding of these homes in a compliant, safer and more resilient form, the councils have been advocating that the NSW Government switch off the requirements of the Biodiversity Conservation Act in these cases. This will save significant time and tens of thousands of dollars in the rebuild process through not having to undertake the required assessments and potential offsets for clearing.

The recent introduction of the Koala SEPP adds another hurdle for the rebuilding process where vegetation is required to be removed to enable the home to be rebuilt in compliance with current bushfire management standards.

Councils respect the environment and the need for its appropriate protection and management, and for the assessment of impacts of development.

The focus here really needs to be on facilitating the rebuild process in accordance with NSW Rural Fire Service requirements, not the potential delays and added costs which are likely to be of consequence.

The councils and communities are calling for the Biodiversity Conservation Act and Koala SEPP to be switched off to facilitate the rebuilding of homes to meet current bushfire management standards.

RECOMMENDATION

That:

22. the Biodiversity Conservation Act and Koala SEPP to be switched off to facilitate the rebuilding of homes to meet current bushfire management standards.

7. Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems.

In remote high fire risk areas, hazard reduction is crucial to limiting the intensity and spread of fire. Action needs to be taken to reduce the build-up of vegetative fuel on the ground in National Parks, State Forests and Plantation forestry.

Council is firmly of the view that there needs to be a balance between the protection of life and property and the environment and hazard reduction needs to be considered in this context. As has been observed through this catastrophic fire season, the impact on native flora and fauna has been devastating. Not addressing this imbalance will result in further loss of life, destruction of property and devastation of native flora and fauna.

It is recognised that hazard reduction burning is risky and can have adverse impacts on local communities and residents through reduced air quality and other impacts on industry such as the grape/wine industry through smoke taint; timing and consultation will be the key to the success of hazard reduction initiatives.

As mentioned in ToR1 and Recommendation 2 there are conflicts between the Biodiversity Conservation Act and maintaining sufficient Asset Protection Zones (APZ) around homes.

It is important that once APZ are established they are maintained by the property owner for their safety and the safety of emergency services personnel.

Controlled and measured Initiatives that must be considered are:

- Hazard reduction burns and particularly cool burns, and
- Reintroduction of grazing at suitable times to reduce fuel loads.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

23. following community consultation the NSW State Government implement increased hazard reduction measures that may include:
 - Hazard reduction burns and particularly cool burns and
 - Reintroduction of grazing at suitable times to reduce fuel loads
24. That the NSW State Government investigate powers to ensure that once asset protection zones are established they are maintained by property owners.

8. Emergency responses to bushfires, including overall human and capital resourcing.

On day two of the Green Valley Fire, an Emergency Welfare/RFS Staging Point was established at Jingellic on Monday 30 December to provide welfare for RFS volunteers and a staging and changeover point for ground crews.

Whilst the Jingellic and district community were outstanding in providing welfare for RFS volunteers, other emergency service personnel and initial evacuees, the small close knit community required support from further afield to sustain their operations.

For a number of reasons it was determined to relocate the primary RFS Staging Point to Holbrook on Sunday 5 January predominately as Jingellic had been isolated through road closures and the Holbrook Sporting Complex provided a larger area to provide welfare for RFS volunteers. Other emergency services personnel, Council staff engaged in fire-fighting activities and later evacuees that had arrived in Holbrook were unable or unwilling to travel to evacuation/registration centres in Albury and Wagga Wagga.

The Holbrook Staging Point provided up to 300 meals three times per day in less than satisfactory facilities. The Emergency Welfare Centre at Jingellic continued to operate for the majority of the fire in a reduced capacity.

Council has applied for funding to the Australian Government and the NSW State Government to establish facilities at Holbrook that will serve a very active and engaged sporting community but also act, when required, as an Emergency Welfare/Evacuation Centre. Despite a number of applications being lodged funding for the much needed project is yet to be approved.

Whilst it is acknowledged that that level of fire activity across the State of NSW created logistical and human resources issues, Council was disappointed that evacuation centres were established in Albury and Wagga Wagga and an evacuation centre was not established in Holbrook.

Greater Hume Council residents evacuating from the Green Valley Fire and Snowy Valleys Council residents evacuating from the Dunns Road Fire (particularly from Tumbarumba and Batlow) arriving in Holbrook were expecting to be able to access information and support in Holbrook, rather than travelling on 67 km to Albury or 82 km to Wagga Wagga in an unfamiliar setting. Many were elderly and other vulnerable people mentally or emotionally fatigued who were unable or unwilling to travel further in the thick smoke that blanketed the Riverina at that time.

These residents were staying with family or friends, in motels, hotels and the caravan park and found it very difficult to access information and register for support. It is very disappointing Council was not contacted at any stage to ascertain our ability to support an evacuation/registration centre at Holbrook.

It is recommended that infrastructure funding programs be developed to increase community resilience and by funding multi-purpose buildings that can be used for community purposes and emergency response (e.g. Holbrook Sporting Complex Amenities Building).

Donated goods were gratefully received and assisted in providing welfare to Emergency Services personnel and later evacuees for the entirety of the active fire. However, it soon became logistically challenging with many spontaneous and unsolicited donations arriving without prior notification. Managing perishable items and clothing and household items of inadequate quality was particularly challenging.

If it wasn't for the outstanding coordination and distribution activities undertaken by the Lavington Rural Fire Brigade then it would have been a challenge indeed to manage this aspect locally.

The relocation of excess goods after the event was also challenging.

It is recommended that the NSW State Government investigate and implement methods for receiving and distributing donated good for emergency events including the management of excess goods after the event has been curtailed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

25. infrastructure funding programs be developed to increase community resilience and by funding a multi purpose building that can be used for community purposes and emergency response (e.g. Holbrook Sporting Complex Amenities Building).
26. the NSW State Government investigate and implement methods for receiving and distributing donated good for emergency events including the management of excess goods after the event has been curtailed.

9. Coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Australian Government, other state and territory governments and local governments.

The sheer scale of the disaster across the eastern seaboard has required an all of government approach and generally both the Australian and State Governments have provided a range of assistance to impacted property owners, residents and local government.

It should be noted, however, that Greater Hume Council was not one of thirty three NSW councils to receive the \$1 million grant from the Australian Government.

Greater Hume Council did receive and welcomed \$100,000 from the State Government under the Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Program. Council was very pleased with the ease and speed of the application process and as a result these projects are now being rolled out to impacted landowners.

Moving forward it is very important that different levels of Government and Not for Profit Organisations (NGO's) are not duplicating services and are working to ensure there are no gaps in required services.

For example, currently there are a lot of opportunities in the mental health/wellness space and whilst vitally important now will be just as important in 6, 12 months or even longer. It is important that providers continue to be funded longer term to provide these services for however long as is necessary.

Council welcomes the establishment of Resilience NSW to oversee and coordinate emergency management policy, service delivery and all aspects of disaster recovery at a state, national and international level.

Unfortunately Greater Hume Council has suffered a large number of natural disaster events over the past 10 years including bushfires, floods and storms. The major issue Council has found is that there is a continuance of determining eligibility on *local government areas* and not those directly impacted by the disaster event. In the past this has resulted in landholders within Greater Hume missing out on assistance when landowners in an adjacent LGA have been eligible even though they have both been impacted by the same disaster event.

Despite changes to the Disaster Funding arrangements in 2018 to determine eligibility on the disaster event, there are still significant issues to be overcome. For the Green Valley Fire landowners in Snowy Valley Council were eligible for Category C assistance weeks earlier than landowners in the Greater Hume Council area - even though the bushfire started in Greater Hume and then travelled into the Snowy Valleys LGA and across the Murray River into north east Victoria. In some cases landholders on one side of a road were eligible, whilst landholders on the other were not; just ridiculous.

Guideline 3 of the Category C assessment framework clearly states that a State may request Category C assistance measures for a **community, region or sector, however defined, provided that the requisite impact can be demonstrated.**

Therefore Greater Hume Council is extremely disappointed that needless hours of precious staff time and that of the Mayor was expended lobbying State bureaucrats and Australian and NSW Government parliamentarians to ensure that landowners and residents in Greater Hume were deemed eligible, rather than assisting the recovery effort. This needlessly added significantly to the mental anguish of those impacted and must be resolved for future disaster events.

RECOMMENDATION

27. That the Australian Government and the NSW State Government review existing disaster funding arrangements to ensure that eligibility is determined on those directly impacted by the disaster event rather than LGA.

10. Safety of first responders.

Council is of the view that this adequately represented in ToR 2.

11. Public communication and advice systems and strategies.

As stated previously in Council's submission, the eastern part of the Greater Hume Council area is a high risk bushfire prone area and this area is also characterised by very poor communications - poor mobile phone coverage, poor landline infrastructure, poor internet connectivity and once power is lost, no access to NBN and little or no coverage from our national broadcaster the ABC.

In the early stages of the Green Valley fire no information was available in relation to which direction residents should evacuate, resulting in one family evacuating from Jingellic to Walwa and eventually to Corryong which culminated in this family continually evacuating in front of the fire.

There needs to be once source of truth that can provide correct, up to date, reliable and timely advice to residents.

RECOMMENDATION

28. That the Australian Government and the NSW State Government work with each Local Government Authority to identify and communicate the official channels of communication to be utilised during times of disaster events.

Acknowledgements

- Albury City Council for the provision of plant and personnel for both RFS Headquarters in Albury and the RFS Staging point at Jingellic.
- Snowy Valleys Council for their cooperation and support fire-fighting efforts for the Green Valley Fire; particularly when at a time when large areas of their Council area were being razed by the Dunns Road Fire.
- Lavington Rural Fire Brigade for the coordination and distribution of donated goods.
- The countless businesses and individuals from the Greater Hume Council area, Albury-Wodonga, Corowa and further afield that donated goods to support the RFS Volunteers and evacuees.
- Greater Hume and other Southern Border RFS Volunteers that worked in oppressive conditions for many days to ensure the fire was first contained and then controlled.
- Out of area RFS Volunteers particularly the Western Australian Strike Team and crews from the Mid Murray, Bland-Temora and Region North Zones.
- Residents of Snowy Valleys and Greater Hume Councils and beyond (i.e. volunteers came from as far as Deniliquin) that volunteered astonishing hours to ensure the Emergency Welfare Centre/Staging Point could support the fire-fighting effort.

References

Cover image – courtesy The Border Mail

Map - National Indicative Aggregated Fire Extent Dataset v20200428. CC - Attribution (CC BY)

This dataset is available under the CC-BY data licencing model and users are required to acknowledge the each of the data providers. NSW Rural Fire Service, Northern Australian Fire Information (NAFI), QLD Fire and Emergency Service, QLD Department of Environment and Science, SA Country Fire Service, SA Department for Environment and Water, Tasmanian Fire Service, TAS Department of Primary Industry, Parks, Water and Environment, VIC Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning, WA Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

<http://www.environment.gov.au/fed/catalog/search/resource/details.page?uuid=%7B9ACDCB09-0364-4FE8-9459-2A56C792C743%7D>