



VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE RECOVERY THREE YEAR REPORT

February 2012



MESSAGE FROM THE DEPUTY PREMIER



Three years since Australia's worst natural disaster, Victoria's bushfire-affected communities are courageously continuing to rebuild their lives, homes, towns and communities through hard work and perseverance.

These individuals and groups have overcome substantial hurdles to undertake the necessary steps to restore their local communities and in doing so have paved the way for others who may face similar tragedies in the future.

As part of our commitment to build on the recovery efforts already underway and ensure that lessons have been learned from the 2009 bushfires, the Victorian Coalition Government undertook to implement all 67 Bushfires Royal Commission recommendations upon forming government in December 2010.

Through working together, much has been achieved in the past 12 months that Victorians can be proud of. Bushfire-affected communities are showing promising signs of economic recovery and business confidence and the government has been proud to provide continued assistance to help businesses get back on their feet.

I have also been honoured to attend the opening of many new and rebuilt community facilities made possible by the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund, private donors, government and the community. Many of these facilities and projects are featured in this report.

All of these important projects represent milestones in the recovery of each community, but the government recognises there is more to be done which is why we continue to support individuals, communities and businesses.

The voluntary Bushfire Buy-Back Scheme is one of the many new initiatives proceeding under this government. This key Bushfires Royal Commission recommendation provides a resettlement option to property owners whose principal places of residence were destroyed by the 2009 bushfires. Public consultation has concluded and applications will open on 1 March 2012.

Over and above rebuilding and recovery efforts, the government is working to reduce the risk of future fires. In January, the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments announced that world-first technology would be put in place for a national location-based telephone emergency warning system by next bushfire season. This will ensure that, in future, alert messages will be sent to mobile phones that are physically in an emergency zone when a disaster strikes.

The government will continue to work hard to assist Victoria's bushfire-affected communities throughout 2012. I'd like to take this opportunity to commend the many community volunteers whose hard work and dedication has contributed to this enormous recovery effort.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Peter Ryan'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Peter Ryan
Deputy Premier
Minister for Bushfire Response

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Three years on, there is still much to do to help communities on the long road to recovery from the devastating February 2009 bushfires.

The past year has been a year of transition, as communities and government services have begun to move their recovery efforts into longer term arrangements. Community Recovery Committees (CRCs), established to guide local recovery in bushfire-affected areas, have transitioned into new or existing community groups with longer term goals.

Meanwhile, the Victorian Government has established a Fire Recovery Unit within Regional Development Victoria (RDV), to provide an ongoing central point of contact for those continuing to need recovery and rebuilding assistance. It follows the closure of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBARRA), which was established immediately after the fires to lead and coordinate the government's response and was subsequently wound down in June 2011.

As part of RDV and the broader Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), the Fire Recovery Unit is able to work with RDV's delivery team to ensure that initiatives for restoring the economic independence of individuals and communities impacted by the bushfires are appropriately targeted.

This arrangement also enables the Fire Recovery Unit to collaborate with DPCD's Mobile Rebuilding Advisory Service and Bushfire Response Planning Unit, both of which are continuing to assist people with rebuilding.

In addition, the Fire Recovery Unit works closely with the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund and other government departments involved in bushfire recovery, including the Department of Human Services, Department of Health, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Department of Justice, to ensure that appropriate services are in place to assist people with their recovery.

Since starting as Chief Executive in October 2011, I have been pleased to witness progress in the recovery of communities and the development of a number of important initiatives. Tourism and business recovery has been a priority for RDV and there are promising signs of business confidence returning as a result of investment in infrastructure, events and tourism.

Throughout 2012, I will continue to chair a cross-agency committee which will help government to address the outstanding needs of fire-affected people and communities in a coordinated way.

Most importantly, support and services will remain in place to help people and communities in 2012 as they continue to rebuild their lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lachlan Bruce'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

Lachlan Bruce
Chief Executive, Regional Development Victoria

INTRODUCTION

The 2009 Victorian bushfires devastated 109 towns and 33 communities across the state, destroyed more than 2,400 properties and damaged around 430,000 hectares of land. Most significantly 173 lives were lost in the fires.

Although comprehensive national and state emergency management arrangements were in place, the damage, dislocation and trauma was far greater than any previous natural disaster and existing arrangements were not sufficient to meet community recovery needs.

In response, the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) was established to coordinate the massive whole-of-government rebuilding and recovery task.

VBRRA oversaw a range of programs and initiatives that were developed in response to the needs of impacted communities, as well as the implementation of the \$193 million *Rebuilding Together Plan*.

Released by the Federal and Victorian Governments in October 2009, the Plan helped to guide the recovery and reconstruction process over the following two years.

Financed with \$117 million from the two governments, \$56 million from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF) and \$20 million in donor contributions, the Plan delivered hundreds of programs and projects identified by communities as key priorities for their recovery.

In addition to the Plan, a number of key government departments provided funding to create new services and programs or enhance existing support services for bushfire-affected people.

As the needs of impacted communities changed over time, VBRRA was progressively wound down and its important work transferred to other government departments, local councils and community organisations. VBRRA operated until 30 June, 2011.

In recognition of the continued need to provide specific ongoing assistance to individuals and communities, the Victorian Government established the Fire Recovery Unit (FRU) within Regional Development Victoria (RDV).

The FRU began operating on 1 July, 2011 and has a key role in continuing to assist fire-affected communities across Victoria, and linking people into the services offered by government.

New initiatives and programs have been developed and existing programs extended to ensure support continues in areas of need. New or extended programs over the past 12 months include:

- Bushfire Communities Support Program;
- Bushfire Buy-Back Scheme;
- Marysville and Triangle Economic Recovery Package;
- Mobile Rebuilding Advisory Service; and
- Skills, Training, Engagement and Practical Support (STEPS) Program.

More information about these programs is contained in this report.



In addition to funding provided by government, VBAF has continued to make a significant contribution to the recovery effort. Established by the Victorian Government in partnership with Red Cross and the Federal Government, VBAF raised in excess of \$400 million (including interest), thanks to the generous support of donors across Victoria, the nation and the world.

Every cent raised has gone towards people and communities impacted by the fires, including more than \$220 million for housing assistance, \$85 million for community recovery, almost \$20 million to support the bereaved and \$26.5 million for psychological support services and programs.

New or continuing VBAF gifts over the past 12 months have included:

- Housing Assistance;
- Medium to Long Term Recovery Support;
- Permanent Impairment Support;
- Psychological and Wellness Vouchers; and
- Support to young people.

This report looks back over the past 12 months of continued support and assistance to bushfire-affected communities. It details the support provided and the progress made in terms of people and communities, housing and reconstruction, local economies and the environment, both on public and private land.

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Cover images:

(Clockwise, L-R) The land regenerates; the Tree of Remembrance – Second Anniversary Memorial Service; a forged leaf from the memorial tree to be installed in Strathewen; visitors enjoy the new flying fox at the refurbished Lake Mountain Alpine Resort; new multi-purpose building which is part of the \$12 million Middle Kinglake Primary School Education and Community Recreation Precinct; Flowerdale Primary School students celebrate the recovery of Macquarie Perch in King Parrot Creek.

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

Three years after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, communities are continuing to rebuild and recover. New homes are being completed, businesses are returning and streetscapes and gardens have been rejuvenated. However, while the physical structures are able to be rebuilt relatively quickly, the emotional impact takes more time.

The government recognises that people's emotional recovery is a complex and individual process. As individuals and communities continue their own personal journeys of recovery, a broad range of services remain available to ensure people have the emotional and practical support they need.

The government has also put additional funding towards existing physical and mental health services to ensure they are meeting the needs of bushfire-affected people and communities.

Health and wellbeing

Bushfire Communities Support Program

The \$2.7 million Bushfire Communities Support Program (BCSP) was established in March 2011 following the closure of the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS), which provided personal support services to individuals impacted by the 2009 fires.

Services funded through the BCSP include:

The Bushfire Community Support Statewide Helpline:

The helpline provides information, referral and advice for a range of issues such as accommodation, personal assistance, counselling, legal and health services.

Community Support Workers: Locally-based workers provide personal support and link people into services, events and community development activities. BCSP workers also help communities recover and develop through activities that build sustainable connections and networks.

Flexible Outreach: Agencies including the Salvation Army provide more intensive support services to bushfire-affected people including advocacy, outreach and links to appropriate services.

Drop-in Centres: Community Service Hubs were initially provided in Alexandra, Buxton, Flowerdale, Hurstbridge, Kinglake, Kinglake West, Marysville, Narbethong, Traralgon and Whittlesea. As communities recovered and demand for the services they provided decreased, some Hubs closed while others were replaced with Drop-in Centres. The remaining Centres in Hurstbridge, Kinglake and Marysville will remain open until June 2012. The government also contributed funding to the 'Our Place' community assistance centre in Eaglehawk.

BCSP clients receiving case work support	366
Number of calls to helpline	669
Number of individual callers to helpline	399
Number of community development activities planned or delivered across bushfire-affected communities	83

Data is for March 2011 – December 2011

Evaluation of the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service

The Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS) operated for two years until March 2011. It helped people to access the significant number of services, grants and information available, strengthened the capacity of traumatised people over time and reduced some of the stresses impacting on their recovery. More than 5,500 households were provided with case management and at the peak of demand, 393 case managers from 78 agencies were working with 4,365 households.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) commissioned an independent evaluation of the service. Key findings included 78 per cent of people being satisfied or very satisfied with the case management service, and 93 per cent of people being very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the level of support from their case manager.

The findings will help to plan service requirements for future emergencies.

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

Mental health support

DHS developed Victoria's Psychosocial Recovery Framework and provided a comprehensive suite of psychosocial supports for bushfire-affected individuals, families and communities, helping put many in the community on the path to recovery.

This included \$1.02 million allocated over three years to Austin Health to provide specialist mental health treatment services to people after the bushfires.

The Austin also played an important role in providing specialist advice and training to staff from the various services working to support people's recovery. While specific funding for the service ended in December 2011, the Austin continues to work with individuals who require ongoing treatment and care.

Recovery advice and information sessions

Since 2009, expert disaster psychologist and advisor to the government, Dr Rob Gordon, has run information sessions to assist communities in their recovery. Dr Gordon provides important insight into the recovery process, with advice and information to individuals and communities on all aspects of recovery.

More than 50 sessions have been held across bushfire-affected communities, including 10 in 2011.

Dr Gordon's sessions with bushfire-affected communities will continue through 2012 and can be organised on request through DHS.

Psychological counselling and wellness vouchers

VBAF has been providing psychological counselling and wellness vouchers, on request, to bushfire-affected individuals. During 2011, these programs were extended for an additional 12 months, with vouchers available until June 2012 for use before the end of August 2012. This extension will enable individuals to continue to access professional counselling and complementary therapies.

VBAF psychological counselling vouchers issued	17,772
VBAF wellness vouchers issued	12,744

Red Cross Recovery Program

Australian Red Cross received \$1.8 million to provide outreach and other support activities in bushfire-affected areas over a three year period. These supports were developed by the Red Cross Victorian Bushfire Recovery Unit following extensive consultation with bushfire-affected communities. They include multimedia resources for 12 to 25 year olds, a guide for parents and carers on how to help their children cope with a crisis, and a *Communicating in Recovery* guide for organisations or individuals communicating with impacted communities after an emergency.

Temporary accommodation support

DHS provided temporary accommodation for 524 households from 2009 to 2012, including donated caravans, public housing and units in the four Temporary Villages established at Kinglake, Flowerdale, Marysville and Whittlesea.

The Temporary Villages have enabled people to live in their communities while they rebuilt or made longer-term living arrangements. At their height, the four villages housed 314 people (164 tenancies) and provided shared amenities such as communal kitchens, laundries, shower blocks and public toilets.

DHS, working with the Rebuilding Advisory Service, has also assisted households with their rebuilding and transition to permanent housing. As residents moved to permanent housing, the Flowerdale and Whittlesea temporary villages were closed in 2011. The Kinglake and Marysville villages are expected to close by mid-2012 as remaining residents move to permanent accommodation. All donated caravans have been returned to their owners and most public housing returned to normal use.

Accommodation Type	Occupancy at Feb 2010	Occupancy at Feb 2011	Occupancy at Jan 2012
Flowerdale village	28	10	0
Kinglake village	64	31	4
Marysville village	66	44	5
Whittlesea village	10	5	0
Caravans	124	20	0
Public Housing	118	17	6
Movable Unit (private land)	4	2	0

Data denotes number of units occupied

Kinglake Medical Centre

The Victorian Government continued to support the provision of medical services in the Kinglake area throughout 2011, including assistance for Mitchell Community Health to operate the temporary Kinglake Ranges Health Centre. A permanent medical centre will be located adjacent to the Murrindindi Shire Council offices in Kinglake, with construction due to begin in early 2012.

Kinglake Ambulance Service

The Kinglake Ambulance Service was initially established as a temporary service soon after the 2009 bushfires. As part of a \$5.2 million package provided by the Department of Health, a new and permanent ambulance services branch is now being established at Kinglake. Land for the new facility has been purchased and construction is expected to be completed in mid-2012.

The funding has also enabled the upgrade of ambulance services at Whittlesea to 24-hour coverage.

Permanent Impairment Gift

In late October 2010, the VBAF Advisory Panel established a new gift supporting those fire-affected people with the most severe permanent physical and psychological impairments and who continue to experience financial hardship.

Permanent Impairment Gifts granted	171
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Support for Young People

Youth support programs

Since 2009, VBAF has provided funding to the Office for Youth to support the recovery of young people in bushfire-affected areas.

Programs have been specifically targeted at young people aged 10 to 26 across 16 local government areas. Services include youth outreach, youth-specific counselling, youth participation activities and a customised mentoring and leadership initiative. These have provided a comprehensive response to the medium and long-term health and wellbeing needs of young people, helping to meet their complex needs at different stages of the recovery process.

To provide extended support, six of these programs have been continued to December 2012 in the most affected local government areas of Murrindindi, Latrobe, Yarra Ranges, Nillumbik, Mitchell and Whittlesea.

A dedicated youth counselling service called 'Tune In', established in 2011 and funded until June 2013, is being delivered by Berry Street. The service operates an outreach model where clinicians are primarily available in the six most affected areas and can also provide statewide support to young people who have relocated.

Young people involved in youth participation activities	19,074
Young people attending mentoring and leadership workshops/sessions	368
Young people participating in youth outreach activities	4,332

KRaFT Youth Alliance

The KRaFT Youth Alliance was formed in 2011 and is a joint initiative of the Wominjeka Youth Group, the Flowerdale Youth Group and the Toolangi Youth Group. The alliance provides programs and events to support the ongoing physical, mental and social health of secondary school students in the Kinglake Ranges, Flowerdale and Toolangi-Castella regions.

The programs aim to prevent young people from becoming disengaged from school, their families and the wider community by providing pathways to education and employment, and connections with the community.

A wide range of skills and activities are offered including basic literacy and numeracy skills, positive psychology education, physically challenging and educational activities in local forests and parks, and art skills such as writing, photography, and printing.

The alliance is auspiced by the Kinglake Ranges Neighbourhood House and Kildonan, with a youth worker coordinating the programs.

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES



Children's Recovery Project

Run by Monash University, this program provided screening of 420 students across 22 bushfire-affected schools for psychological and/or emotional impacts following the fires. Referral to appropriate services and priority referral pathways to services was provided as required. Seven schools elected for follow up workshops conducted by the Monash University team, which were held until the end of the 2011 school year. These workshops assessed local needs and developed sustainable practices that promoted resilience in the school community.

Skills Victoria Study Scholarships

Skills Victoria offered scholarships valued at \$500 to upskill bushfire-affected people and help them take up employment opportunities or participate in rebuilding their local communities. The funds have assisted with training costs towards nationally recognised qualifications.

Skills Victoria study scholarships awarded 168

VBAF Scholarship Program

VBAF established a scholarship program to assist the long-term recovery of young people affected by the fires by awarding scholarships of \$15,000 towards their tertiary or vocational studies.

The \$7 million program was extended to fund a second and third round for eligible students in 2011 and 2012.

Students awarded VBAF scholarships 170

School Holiday Program

YMCA Victoria in partnership with VBAF has provided a range of free programs and activities during school holidays for students and families in 14 bushfire-affected communities.

Teachers provided a supported learning environment which allowed tutoring and VCE subject support in consultation with schools. The program also provided recreational activities including sport, arts and crafts, cooking, performing arts, social activities and excursions to local and regional attractions.

Number of programs and students accessing programs – prep to year 8	94 programs with 28,906 students
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Number of programs and students accessing programs – year 9 to 12	32 programs with 4,481 students
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A further 11 primary programs and 3 secondary programs were provided in the term 4 holidays.

Support for schools

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provided a range of learning and development services to help teachers more effectively support students impacted by the bushfires.

Psychological First Aid for Teachers and Mental Health First Aid for Teachers workshops were run in the Loddon, Hume, Eastern, Northern, Gippsland and Grampians regions. Targeted training has been provided to school and early childhood staff to enable them to gain the skills to effectively support impacted children, young people and their parents.

Teaching and learning resources for bushfire education were developed, based on the recommendations of the Bushfires Royal Commission and integrated as part of Bushfire Safety Policy. These resources are available online and in DVD format to all Victorian schools, and were made available to other schools across Australia in early 2011.

For students, a resiliency program called Bounce Back ran in primary and secondary schools in bushfire-affected communities throughout 2010 and 2011. DEECD has also provided continued psychological support through regional Student Support Services Officers, and has met requests from a number of schools for additional teaching and administrative support. Private psychological support has been provided to schools in addition to these services, on an as-needs basis.

A new resource titled *Here for Each Other* was adapted from the *Sesame Street* resource developed after Hurricane Katrina, to assist families with their recovery.

Staff attending training sessions 260

Community programs and initiatives

Community Projects Initiative

As part of its \$81 million Community Recovery Package, VBAF committed \$43 million towards community-based projects through the Community Projects Initiative. These projects were developed by Community Recovery Committees following extensive local consultation and were included in Community Recovery Plans. Thirty-three plans were developed across fire-affected areas and included a range of regionally-specific recovery priorities, ranging from new or replacement community facilities, rehabilitation of parks and nature reserves, development of fire preparedness plans and support for community events and arts programs. Community-based psychosocial services have also been supported by the program, allowing local service providers to respond to community-specific recovery needs.

VBAF community projects funded	219
VBAF community projects completed	100

VBAF Medium to Long-Term Recovery Package

In April 2011, the VBAF Advisory Panel allocated the \$16 million remaining in the Community Recovery Package to assist with the medium to long-term needs of communities. This amount increased to a total of \$20.5 million when the Advisory Panel decided to include additional interest earned from the fund towards this allocation.

A Community Advisory Committee (CAC), made up of community leaders in several bushfire-affected areas, was appointed to advise the Panel on priorities for funding. The CAC undertook extensive consultation with community members and stakeholders in mid-2011 to determine medium to long-term recovery priorities, as identified by impacted communities.

Outcomes of this process were presented to the Advisory Panel in December 2011, which approved \$7 million for statewide projects. These include a psychosocial support program, a property assistance program, funding for the bereaved community and funding for those who were displaced after the fires.

The remaining \$13.5 million will go towards local community projects identified and prioritised through the CAC consultation process.

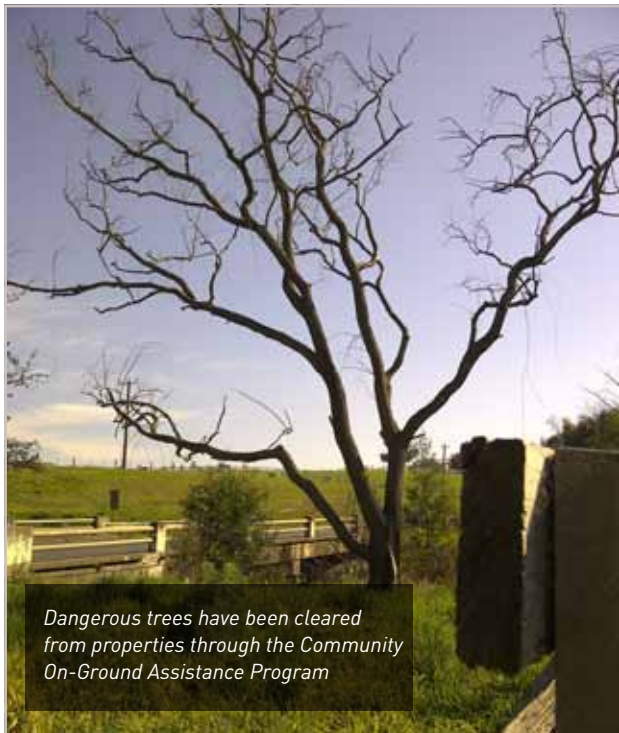
Details of both the statewide projects and the community projects will be finalised in early 2012, with all projects to commence by mid-2012.

Men Building Bridges program

The Men Building Bridges program is assisting men in bushfire-affected areas to reconnect with each other and with their communities through the development of skills, knowledge-building and information-sharing. Funded by VBAF, the program uses community facilities such as men's sheds and neighbourhood houses to run activities that support men's psychological recovery. The program will operate until June 2012.

Individuals participating in the Men Building Bridges program	98
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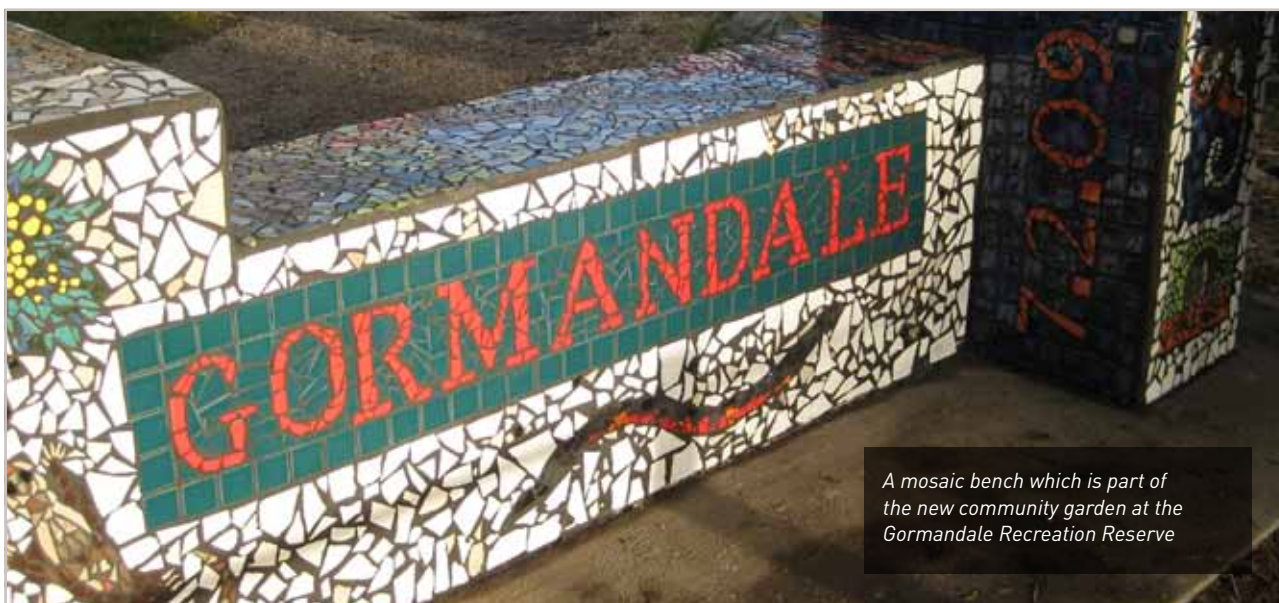
PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES



Dangerous trees have been cleared from properties through the Community On-Ground Assistance Program

Volunteer support for Community On-Ground Assistance Project

Volunteers have played a key role in supporting bushfire-affected residents in Kinglake and surrounds by providing practical on-ground assistance to reduce the stress of clearing and preparing land for rebuilding. Funded by VBAF, the Community On-Ground Assistance Program pairs professional volunteers with residents to repair fences, fell dangerous trees, establish temporary accommodation and perform other tasks that require specialist skills and equipment. The volunteer workforce, made up of local and corporate volunteers, has provided assistance to hundreds of families across the Kinglake Ranges, improving their living conditions and helping them to start the rebuilding process.



A mosaic bench which is part of the new community garden at the Gormandale Recreation Reserve

Gormandale community projects

On Friday 25 March 2011, the Gormandale & District CRC joined with the Gormandale Primary School for a BBQ to welcome the school community to the 2011 year and to launch three bushfire projects: the community garden at the Gormandale Recreation Reserve; the playground adjacent to the garden; and a collage artwork by the students of Gormandale Primary School about their recollections of the 2009 bushfires.

Bush to Beach Retreat

The third Bush to Beach retreat, held in October 2011, provided a weekend away for women from bushfire-affected communities. Held at the Cumberland Resort in Lorne, the getaway provided an opportunity for the women to relax, meet others going through similar experiences and access information on self-care.

The Bush to Beach Retreats were funded by VBAF and organised by bushfire-affected women.

Attendees at the 2011
Bush to Beach Retreat

150

Health and wellbeing for older people

The Office of Senior Victorians received almost \$1.5 million from VBAF for this grants-based program to support the psychosocial recovery of older people by helping them to pursue their interests and build new skills, knowledge, friendships and social networks. Local community organisations and local government are delivering the programs.

Health and wellbeing grants provided

62

Community Recovery Committees (CRCs)

The 33 CRCs that were established after the bushfires each developed Community Recovery Plans, which detailed their community's recovery priorities. The CRCs worked with the broader community, Victorian and Federal Governments, local councils, the philanthropic sector and private donors to address approximately 800 of the 1,100 priority projects identified in the plans. The CRCs were pivotal in driving and directing community rebuilding and recovery, through a focus on the needs and priorities of each individual community.

Throughout 2011, the CRCs wound down their operations or transitioned into more permanent arrangements. Many formed new community committees or merged into existing community groups with a broader focus beyond bushfire recovery. These groups will be critical to the longer term recovery of communities impacted by the 2009 bushfires.

Lessons learned

Early in 2011, when disastrous floods hit Queensland and Victoria, a number of CRCs expressed a desire to assist flood-affected communities by sharing the knowledge they had gained through their recovery. CRC members developed their ideas over two workshops in March and April 2011, resulting in the production of two documents: *Lessons Learned by Community Recovery Committees of the 2009 Bushfires: Advice We Offer to Communities Impacted by Disaster*; and *Lessons Learned by Community Recovery Committees of the 2009 Bushfires: Advice to Government*.

The CRCs have worked in collaboration with Australian Red Cross to develop ways in which the organisation might use the *Advice to Communities* document to complement the work it is doing in supporting community-led recovery in the flood-affected communities of Queensland. The document was also presented at the Fire and Rain: Social Innovation and Community Leadership in Natural Disaster Management and Emergency Services National Conference in Melbourne in August 2011.

In addition, the *Advice to Communities* document was presented to the Deputy Premier, the CEO of Australian Red Cross and the Consul General from Canada on 24 May 2011. It has been made available to authorities in Queensland, New Zealand and Canada in the wake of disasters that have impacted communities in those areas.

The *Advice to Government* document was given to the Deputy Premier and Minister for Bushfire Response in May 2011.

It has been used by the Victorian Government to develop the discussion paper *Towards a More Disaster Resilient and Safer Victoria*, which has been released for public comment and is now being further developed with the aim of introducing major reforms in 2012.

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

Skills, Training, Engagement and Practical Support (STEPS)

The STEPS program, announced in June 2011, is a joint initiative between the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) and DPCD. The two-year program is designed to enhance leadership in bushfire-affected communities, improve the ability of not-for-profit groups to develop and implement recovery projects and ensure community groups avoid volunteer fatigue.

Grants of up to \$30,000 are available for individual projects that promote community leadership; provide training and skill development; strengthen community networks and communication; or provide mentoring and practical human resources support.

Number of approved STEPS grants 21

Community Recovery Fund grants

In February 2009, the Victorian and Federal Governments jointly established a \$10 million Community Recovery Fund (CRF). Administered by DPCD, the CRF operates in line with the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements and is designed to assist in community recovery, aid community development and strengthen community capacity building through four streams of funding. CRF grants will continue to support communities until mid-2012.

- Community sports clubs – 35 projects across 52 sites have received a total of \$3 million towards the reconstruction and/or replacement of sporting facilities and equipment, the re-establishment of outdoor recreation and to build the capacity of sports clubs and organisations. Five of these projects were completed in 2011, bringing the total completed to 24 projects across 40 sites.
- Community Development Officers – \$1.75 million was provided for officers to work with local councils and communities on the delivery of recovery services, community development programs and Community Recovery Plans.
- Memorials and commemorative events – \$2.5 million has been provided for community memorials or commemorative events. A total of 41 projects were in progress during 2011.
- Community grants and local community projects – \$2.75 million has been provided for community information activities, regeneration of community spaces, the recording of bushfire history and activities for young people. To date, 202 projects have been supported.



Members of the gardening program learn new skills as part of a gardening initiative established by the City of Whittlesea

Replanting after the fires – gardening activities

Since April 2011, over 60 people have been involved in a gardening program targeted at people affected by the 2009 bushfires.

Recognising the value that gardens hold for people both for aesthetic pleasure and physical activity, the City of Whittlesea established this program to support people to maintain social connections and begin to rebuild their gardens following the fires.

Workshops covered some basic horticultural principles and techniques as well as propagation and garden design and layout. More than 20 people benefited from a one-on-one session with an experienced horticulturist on their property to assist them with design and plant selection. Another 20 people received a subsidised worm farm, which included a workshop on its care.

The gardening activities will continue beyond bushfire recovery, with participants forming a new group called the Mountain Ranges Country Garden Group. The group will continue to meet, share tips and resources, organise garden tours and collaborate with neighbouring gardening groups established after the fires.

Support for the Bereaved

A number of forums and gatherings have been held to connect those bereaved as a result of the bushfires with support services as well as each other. *Staying in Touch*, a dedicated newsletter providing news, key contacts and links to support services, is regularly produced to help the bereaved community stay informed.

Bereaved Community Advisory Group

The Bereaved Community Advisory Group was formed in December 2009 to provide a supportive environment for those who lost family and friends in the 2009 bushfires and to advocate for the needs of the bereaved. Twelve bushfire-bereaved people are currently members, providing input and advice to government and other organisations on issues that may impact the recovery process. The group meets monthly and is funded by VBAF until June 2013.

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) is funded by VBAF to provide specialist bereavement counselling services to both individuals and families. ACGB also coordinates bereavement support groups for children and adults.

Individuals receiving counselling support	53
Children's bereavement support groups	4
Adult bereavement support groups	6

EACH Social and Community Health

On 1 January 2012, management of community support activities for people bereaved by the bushfires transitioned from ACGB to EACH Social and Community Health.

EACH will continue to provide a range of support services for bereaved people including communication, community activities such as remembrance events and forums, advocacy, capacity building and strategic planning. EACH is also supporting the Bereaved Community Advisory Group.



PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES



Second Anniversary Memorial Service

A multi-faith service with the theme of Remember, Reflect, Hope was held at the Zinc space at Federation Square, to mark the two-year anniversary of the bushfires. The central service was held on Sunday 6 February 2011 in addition to the many local services and events held around Victoria. Led by retired Victoria Police Senior Chaplain Reverend Jim Pilmer PSM, the service was attended by more than 400 people including community representatives, members of the bereaved community, dignitaries and the general public.

The Governor-General, Ms Quentin Bryce AC CVO, recited a moving poem, while people who lost loved ones and properties in the fires spoke and performed at the service.

Members of the bereaved community were invited to place yellow ribbons on a Tree of Remembrance in recognition of those lost in the fires, while community representatives and dignitaries placed ribbons in recognition of the 33 bushfire-affected communities.



Bendigo Memorial

The Black Saturday bushfires came within two kilometres of the Bendigo CBD, claiming one life and destroying 58 homes. The memorial in Albert Richardson Reserve was completed in April 2011 and was jointly funded by VBAF, the Community Recovery Fund and the City of Greater Bendigo.

It was designed by the council's landscape architect Karoline Klein, with references to events before, during and after 7 February 2009. The memorial is a unique sculptural wall which is centred on the themes of destruction, remembering and renewal. A sealed window displays items salvaged after the fire, text, photographs and art tiles. A stand-alone five metre high steel 'Fire Tree' was also designed by local artist Anton Hassell and marks the final statement in the memorial journey.



*Belgrave blacksmith
Chris Vincent forges a leaf*

Blacksmith's Memorial Tree

Organisers of the Tree Project, set up by the Australian Blacksmiths Association, are forging the trunk of what will become a nine-metre-high tree that will hold more than 3,100 steel and copper leaves sent in by blacksmiths from across Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States to commemorate the 2009 bushfires.

Each leaf has been inscribed with messages of hope or the names of those lost in the fires. Branches and thousands of leaves have been sponsored by bereaved and bushfire-affected communities and many more have been sponsored by those wanting to show their support.

The Bendigo Bank Community Enterprise Foundation provided a \$25,000 grant for the stainless steel to be used for the trunk and an enormous number of in-kind contributions were received for design, engineering, site preparation and installation.

The completed tree will be unveiled in Whittlesea for public display before being installed at a site in Strathewen as a permanent Black Saturday memorial.

RECONSTRUCTION

The rebuilding of homes and infrastructure damaged or destroyed continued throughout 2011, with more than 2,600 building permits for houses, sheds and commercial buildings now issued and major community projects completed.

Government services such as the mobile Rebuilding Advisory Service (RAS) have continued to assist individuals with their rebuilding, providing practical advice, information and support. New assistance measures were also introduced to directly target those with complex rebuilding needs.

Individual Rebuilding

Building permits

As families and individuals continue their recovery, more homes and businesses are being rebuilt, with planning and building applications continuing to be sought from local councils.

Almost 2,500 properties were destroyed in the fires – of these, around 1,500 were people’s principal places of residence. According to survey data from early in 2011 some 77 per cent of households had rebuilt, purchased a new home or were in the process of rebuilding, while 4 per cent had decided not to rebuild.

The remaining 19% of households either intended to rebuild but had not yet started or were undecided.

An updated housing survey will be conducted by the Fire Recovery Unit early in 2012.

	Feb 2010	Feb 2011	Feb 2012
Total Building permits approved	1,506	2,373	2,683
Building permits approved for new dwellings, commercial buildings, shops restaurants and accommodation	n/a	764	892

Figures are cumulative

Rebuilding Advisory Service

Significant challenges have been faced by those who lost their homes in the fires, including, for many, the stress of building a home for the first time. In response, the RAS was established to provide people with information, advice and assistance from qualified building professionals, on all aspects of rebuilding.

Consultations provided by the RAS	6,887
RAS clients	1,124

Data covers the period July 2009 to January 2012

Toilets and Showers Program

VBAF introduced a gift in 2009 to ensure that people living in temporary accommodation on their property while rebuilding had access to essential services such as toilets and showers. Originally intended to end in March 2011, this gift was extended for up to 12 months to accommodate the ongoing need for these facilities, as rebuilding activity continues.

Total registrations for toilets and showers	461
Services still in use	76



Rebuilding Advisory Centres in Marysville and Kinglake continue to provide support to residents as they rebuild

Bushfire Buy-Back Scheme

On 24 October 2011, the Victorian Government announced further detail of its commitment to implement the Bushfires Royal Commission’s recommendation for a retreat and resettlement strategy. The commitment will include the voluntary acquisition of land by the government in areas with unacceptably high bushfire risk which were affected by the 2009 bushfires.

The scheme will be non-compulsory; that is, the owners will need to be willing to sell and the government willing to buy.

The Buy-Back Scheme will assist the recovery of property owners who are unable to sell their land privately or face difficulties in rebuilding a new dwelling.

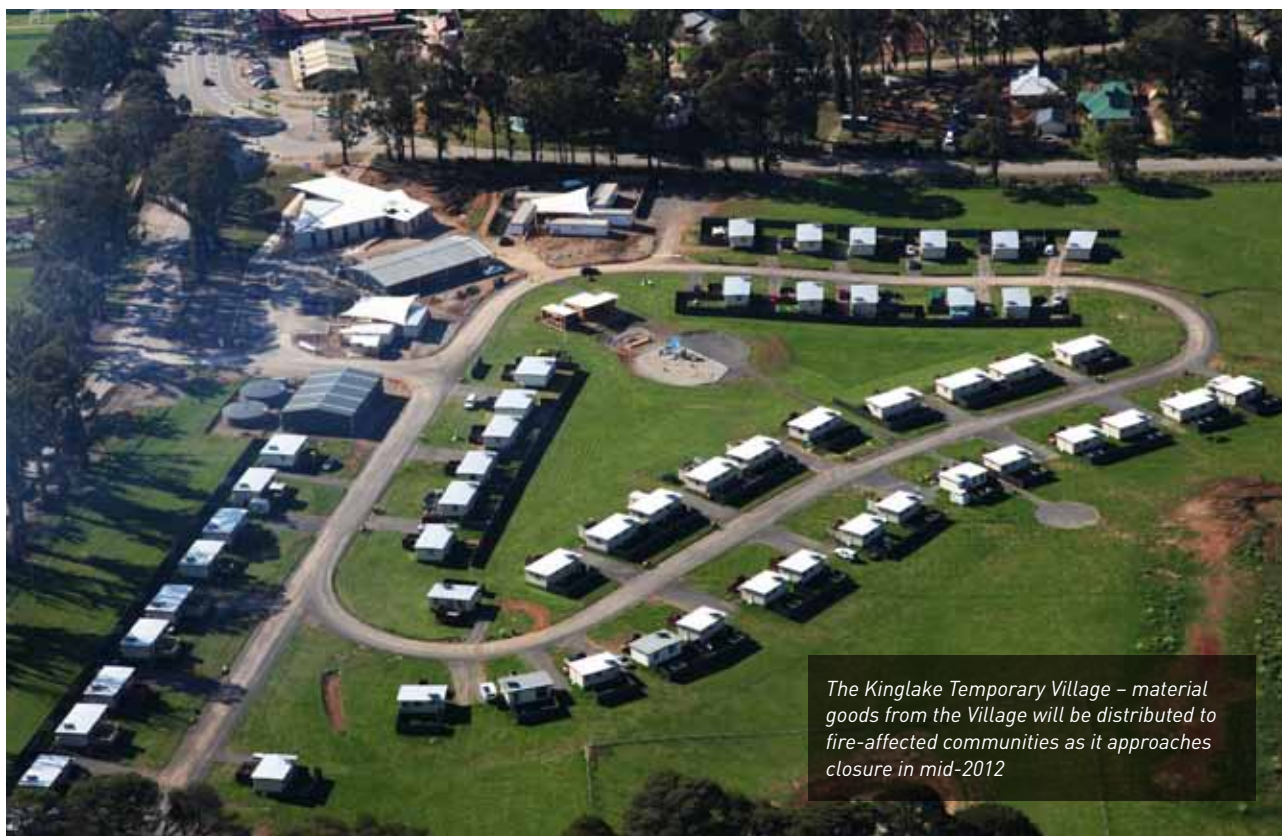
Following the announcement, the Department of Justice held information and consultation sessions in regional locations throughout Victoria to allow community members an opportunity to comment on the scheme before it was finalised.

An application process for the scheme will commence in March 2012.



Buy-Back community consultation in Myrtleford, 28 November 2011

RECONSTRUCTION



The Kinglake Temporary Village – material goods from the Village will be distributed to fire-affected communities as it approaches closure in mid-2012

VBRRR asset disposal process

Over \$3 million of material goods were purchased or donated to assist with the establishment of temporary villages following the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

Prior to its closure on 30 June 2011, VBRRR undertook an asset disposal process to ensure goods no longer needed at the villages or for other ongoing recovery activities were fairly distributed within the fire-affected communities of Murrindindi. Goods included building materials, furniture, kitchen and garden supplies and whitegoods.

An Expression of Interest process was conducted in May 2011, with more than 300 items made available free of charge to individuals and community groups.

Over 250 applications were received, and in assessing successful applicants, VBRRR gave particular consideration to individuals and community groups with outstanding recovery and rebuilding needs.

This unique and innovative process has now been replicated by the Department of Human Services in order to effectively dispose of all remaining material goods as the closure of the Kinglake and Marysville Villages approaches.

VBAF Further Housing Assistance Gift

In September 2011, VBAF made up to \$20,000 available under stage one of the Further Housing Assistance Gift to householders whose principal place of residence was destroyed in the fires, and who remain in temporary accommodation due to outstanding rebuilding needs or financial hardship.

Applicants who complete a financial assessment and eligibility test are referred to a Rebuilding Advisory Service representative, who carries out building assessments to determine what work needs to be completed. Successful applicants are eligible for up to \$20,000 to finalise their housing needs and obtain their occupancy permit.

A second stage of the Further Housing Assistance Gift was announced in December 2011 to provide additional assistance of up to \$50,000 to people in temporary accommodation with more complex needs. The gift uses the expertise of housing associations across Victoria to provide individual support as well as funding to enable applicants to settle in permanent accommodation.

Applications for VBAF Further Housing Assistance Gift

259

Community Rebuilding

Communities have been placed at the centre of the planning and decision making process in relation to the construction of new community and public facilities. Victoria's largest ever reconstruction task passed many milestones in 2011, with the completion of major community projects throughout Victoria.

Marysville Community Centre

The idea of the Marysville Community Centre came out of the Phoenix workshops, a series of major community consultations held in mid-2009. Stage One, which included the Marysville Primary School, kindergarten, playgroup and children's centre, was completed in mid-2010 with Stage Two officially opened by the Governor-General, Ms Quentin Bryce AC CVO, in November 2011.

Stage Two comprises a basketball and recreation centre, multipurpose community room and community health services. The new centre forms an integrated community hub for education, health and recreation, and creates a central focus for community activities and services in the heart of Marysville.

The largest bushfire reconstruction project completed to date, the \$15 million Marysville Community Centre was made possible through a cooperative effort that saw funding provided by VBAF, the Victorian and Federal Governments, and a variety of private and charitable donations.



RECONSTRUCTION

Community facilities

Through VBAF's \$43 million Community Projects Initiative, facilities including halls and recreation centres across fire-affected areas have been rebuilt, refurbished or built for the very first time.

While the majority of these facilities were damaged or destroyed in the fires, others played an integral role in the recovery process, serving as relief centres and later community service hubs.

The initiative recognises the important role community facilities play in the fabric of regional life. Community halls and centres that opened in 2011 after receiving contributions from VBAF include Jeeralang North Hall, Flowerdale Community House, Happy Valley Hall, Marysville Community Centre, Narbethong Hall and Strath Creek Community Hall.

Together, these projects are an ongoing legacy of the generous donations given by so many after the fires. At the same time, they provide a vital space for communities to come together as the recovery process continues.



Governor of Victoria Alex Chernov cuts the ribbon on the new Narbethong Hall



Residents gather to celebrate the opening of Narbethong Hall



The new Flowerdale Community House

Kinglake Ranges Cultural and Community Facility

Identified as a key community recovery project following the 2009 bushfires, work has been progressing to develop the Kinglake Ranges Cultural and Community Facility. It will be developed in partnership with Parks Victoria, who will co-locate a new visitor information centre, depot and offices alongside the community facility.

As the gateway to the Kinglake National Park and the whole of the Kinglake Ranges, this integrated complex will deliver contemporary, purpose-built space for arts, cultural and educational activities as well as new tourist offerings.

The vision is for a flexible, sustainable, multi-purpose group of buildings that include spaces for live performances and other events, combined gallery, exhibition and learning spaces, a community kitchen, offices, public amenities and car parking.

To be built on Gangelhoff Hill, beside the iconic Kinglake National Park and adjacent to the locally significant Frank Thomson Reserve, the Cultural and Community Facility will be designed to complement and blend with the natural surroundings and stunning views.

The project has been allocated \$5.8 million by VBAF as part of its commitment to fund key community recovery projects, while Parks Victoria is investing almost \$2.2 million to fund its component of the complex.

Substantial progress on the project was made during 2011, with the establishment of a Project Control Board (PCB) made up of key stakeholders and a Community Reference Group (CRG) to ensure that the community's voice is at the forefront of planning for the facility. The CRG, comprising 12 community members appointed through a community-wide expression of interest process, will work closely with the design firm Taylor Cullity Lethlean and architect Peter Elliott, in the development of a Master Plan for the facility.

The final Master Plan and design brief will be completed in March 2012 following community consultation.

New School Facilities in Middle Kinglake

The new Middle Kinglake Primary School and Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre were opened at the beginning of the 2011 school year, as part of the new \$12 million Middle Kinglake Primary School Education and Community Recreation Precinct.

The opening was a significant milestone in the community's recovery. Previously, primary school students had been attending school in temporary facilities at the Kinglake Recreational Reserve after their school was completely destroyed in the fires.

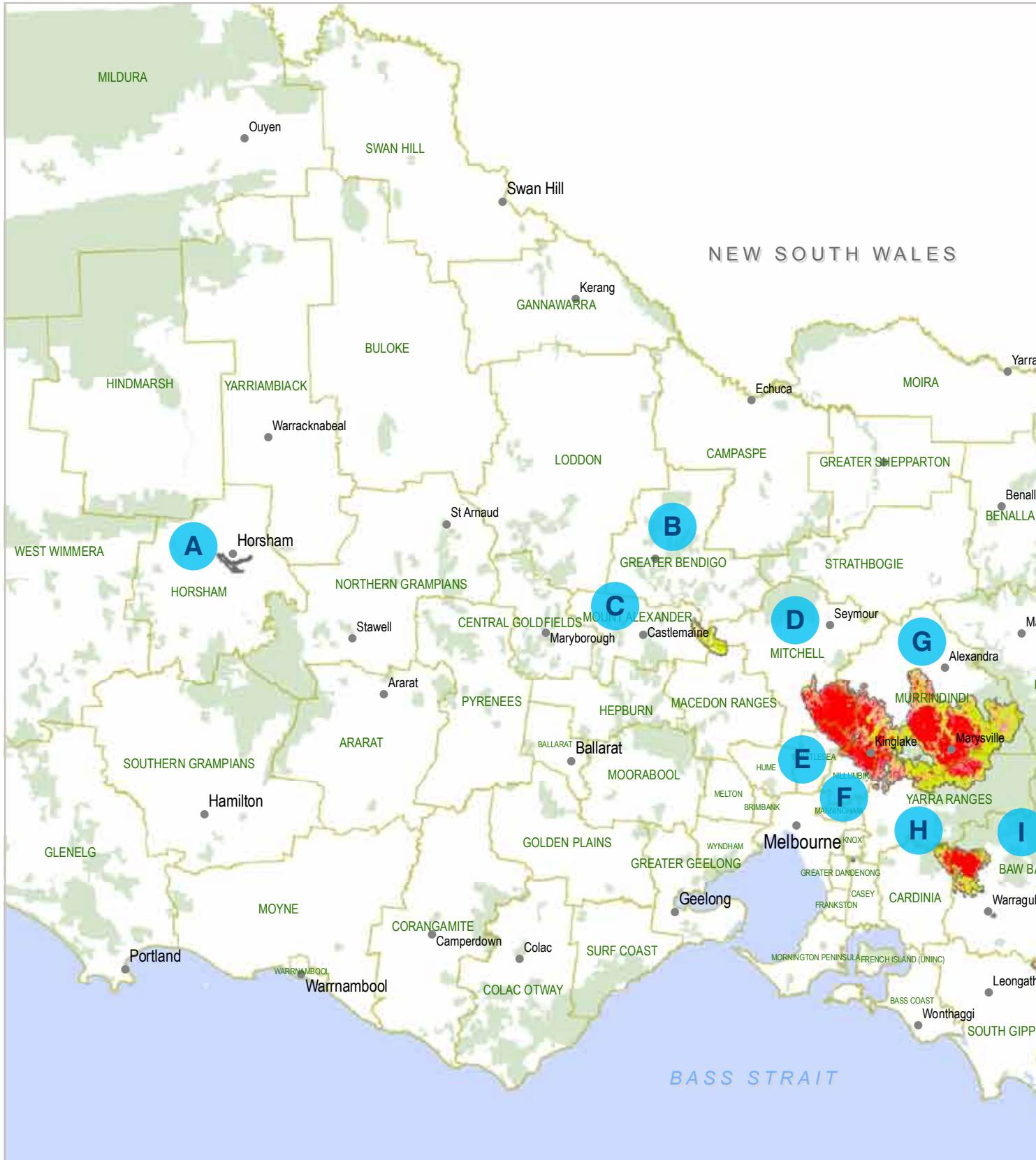
The children's centre accommodates up to 120 children in kindergarten and long day care programs, and also provides maternal and child health services.

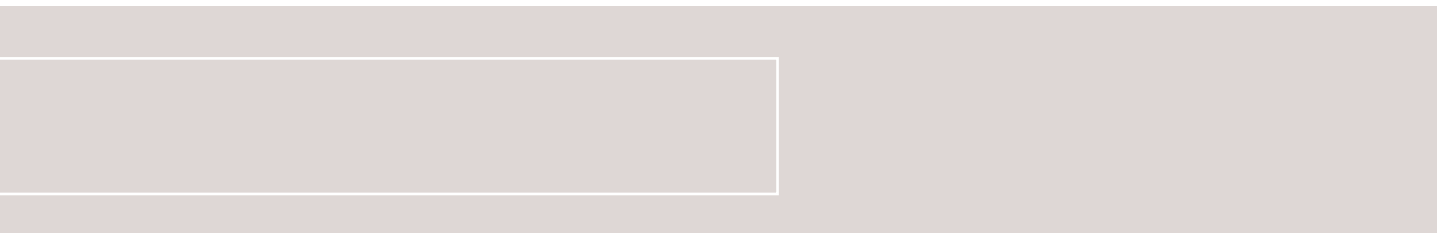
These facilities are complemented by an adjoining multi-purpose building that houses the senior citizens centre, community centre and health facilities.

The community component of the complex has received funding through VBAF and the precinct was built on land generously donated by local farmers Joe and Elaine Exton and their family.

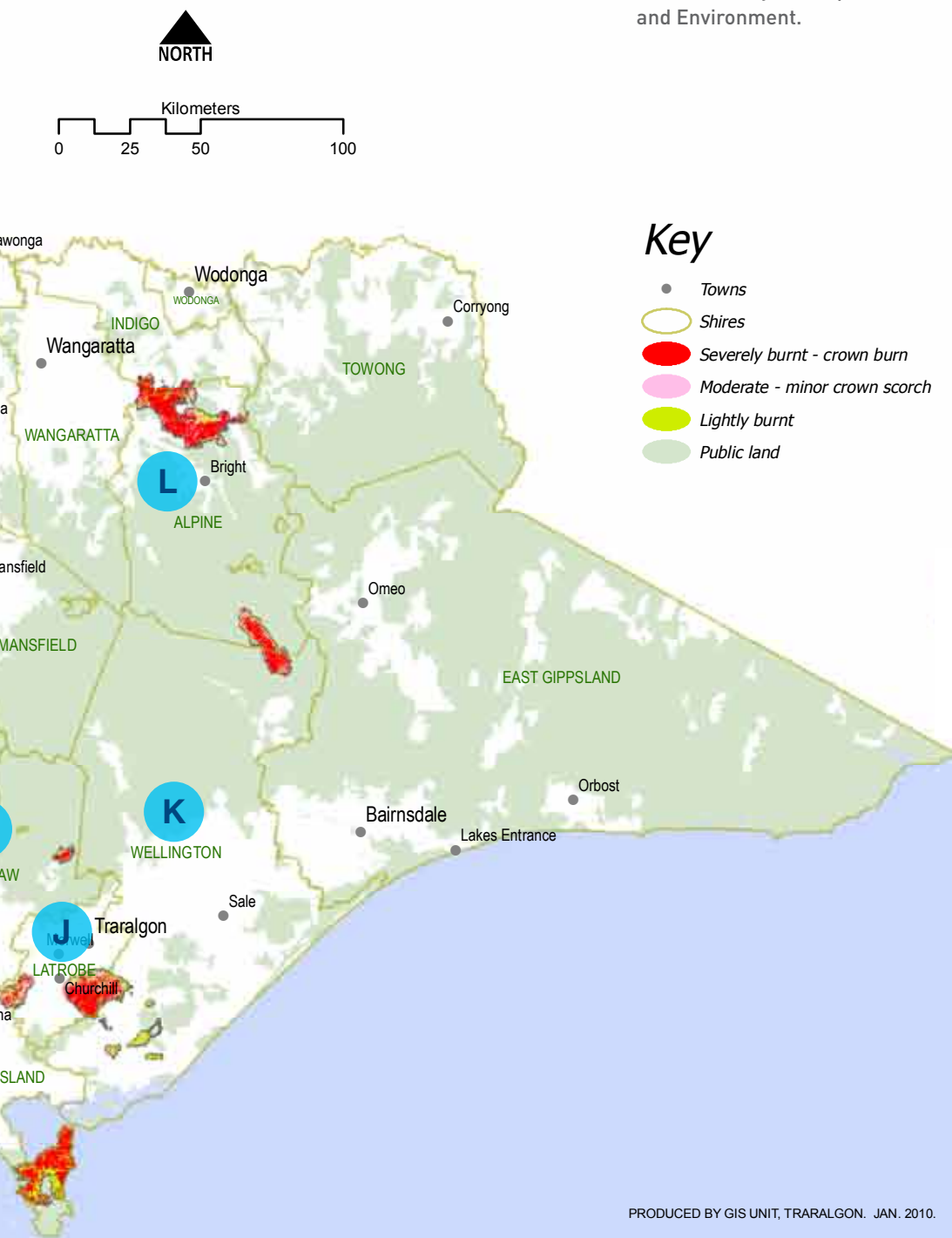


IMPACT OF THE BUSHFIRES





This map shows the bushfire severity and municipalities impacted. The mapping was undertaken by the Department of Sustainability and Environment.



Key

- Towns
- Shires
- Severely burnt - crown burn
- Moderate - minor crown scorch
- Lightly burnt
- Public land

Local Government Areas

- A Horsham
- B Greater Bendigo
- C Mount Alexander
- D Mitchell
- E Whittlesea
- F Nillumbik
- G Murrindindi
- H Yarra Ranges
- I Baw Baw
- J Latrobe
- K Wellington
- L Alpine

PRODUCED BY GIS UNIT, TRARALGON. JAN. 2010.

LOCAL ECONOMIES

The economic recovery of fire-affected communities is crucial to their long-term recovery. Supporting businesses to re-establish and generating local employment has been a priority in fire-affected areas, with a particular focus on small business and tourism.

Small business support

The 2009 fires had a massive impact on local small businesses, with many losing buildings, stock and equipment. After the fires, operators suffered further disruption through loss of trade and the need to focus first on rebuilding their homes and communities. Nowhere was the toll on local businesses more evident than in Marysville, where all but four businesses in the main street were destroyed in the fires.

Through the efforts of their dedicated owners, many small businesses have reopened in fire-affected areas over the past year.

In Marysville, 26 of the 40 main street businesses destroyed by the fires have now reopened. The Victorian Government, along with various private and charitable organisations, has provided much needed assistance to help businesses get back on their feet.

Marysville and Triangle Economic Recovery Package

To support new investment in Marysville and surrounding communities, the Victorian Government announced a \$5.2 million economic recovery package for the area in July 2011.

The centrepiece of the package is a \$4.4 million low-interest loans program aimed at supporting businesses to rebuild and encouraging new businesses to the area.

The loans are available to support businesses with new infrastructure development such as:

- tourism accommodation (such as B&Bs and holiday rentals),
- rental accommodation,
- retail and professional services accommodation,
- restaurants and food premises, and
- light industry.

Applications for the scheme, which is being administered by Rural Finance Corporation of Victoria, are open until 30 June 2012.

The economic recovery package also provides funding for:

- a state-of-the-art interpretative tourism experience that will educate visitors about the area including its history before the bushfires, the story of February 2009 and the rebuilding and recovery effort;
- the further development of year-round tourism activities at the Lake Mountain Alpine Resort;
- the development of a professional prospectus to attract investors and families to establish in the region; and
- support for the Marysville and Triangle Economic Leadership Group, which was formed after the fires to drive business recovery in the region.



Premier Ted Baillieu in Marysville with Rosemary Fiske outside her tea shop Missus Fusspots

Small Business Loans

Low interest loans have been provided to fire-affected small businesses and primary producers through the Rural Finance Corporation of Victoria, with the success of the initiative seeing it extended to 31 December 2011. Loans of up to \$500,000 were made available to small businesses and primary producers who lost property, stock and equipment in the fires.

Non-property secured loans of up to \$50,000 were also available to small businesses with limited security to carry out repairs or purchase items to help restore their operations.

Businesses receiving low interest loans **64**

Additional loan applications are currently being processed

Small Business Mentoring Service (SBMS)

The SBMS is an independent, not-for-profit organisation putting small business owners in touch with experienced business mentors. With Victorian Government support, fire-affected businesses have been accessing free mentoring services through SBMS since just after the fires, including advice on grants and finance applications and assistance with business plans. Last year, these services were extended to businesses indirectly impacted by the fires through loss of trade.

Mentoring services will continue to be available to directly and indirectly fire-affected businesses throughout the first half of 2012.

Businesses accessing mentoring services since 2009 **630**

LOCAL ECONOMIES

Bushfire Skills Broker Program

The Bushfire Skills Broker Program was developed in response to a significant decrease in training enrolments in bushfire-impacted communities, with a focus on individual skills and community development. Funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development through Skills Victoria, it ran over a 12-month period, ending on 31 December 2011.

Operating in Gippsland, Marysville and Kinglake, Bushfire Skills Brokers provided free advisory services, including assisting people to access training in line with local job opportunities and skills shortages.

Brokers also worked with communities, businesses and industry in these areas to help them identify and address their training and skills development needs.

Individuals accessing program	670
Businesses accessing program	17
Councils and community groups accessing program	75

Small Business Support Program

Announced in June 2010, the program is a partnership between the Victorian Government, the Salvation Army and Pandora Jewellery, with \$1.35 million made available to encourage the return of small businesses that were damaged or destroyed in the fires.

Two grants were initially available under the program:

- Small Business Regeneration grants for Marysville and Kinglake; and
- grants for businesses rebuilding in the main street of Marysville.

Grants were provided to 34 businesses under this initial phase of the program.

After feedback from the local business communities in Marysville and Kinglake, the program was refined to incorporate three new initiatives – a traineeship and apprenticeship subsidy, a small business planning initiative and a business development fund.

Under this phase of the program the following assistance was provided:

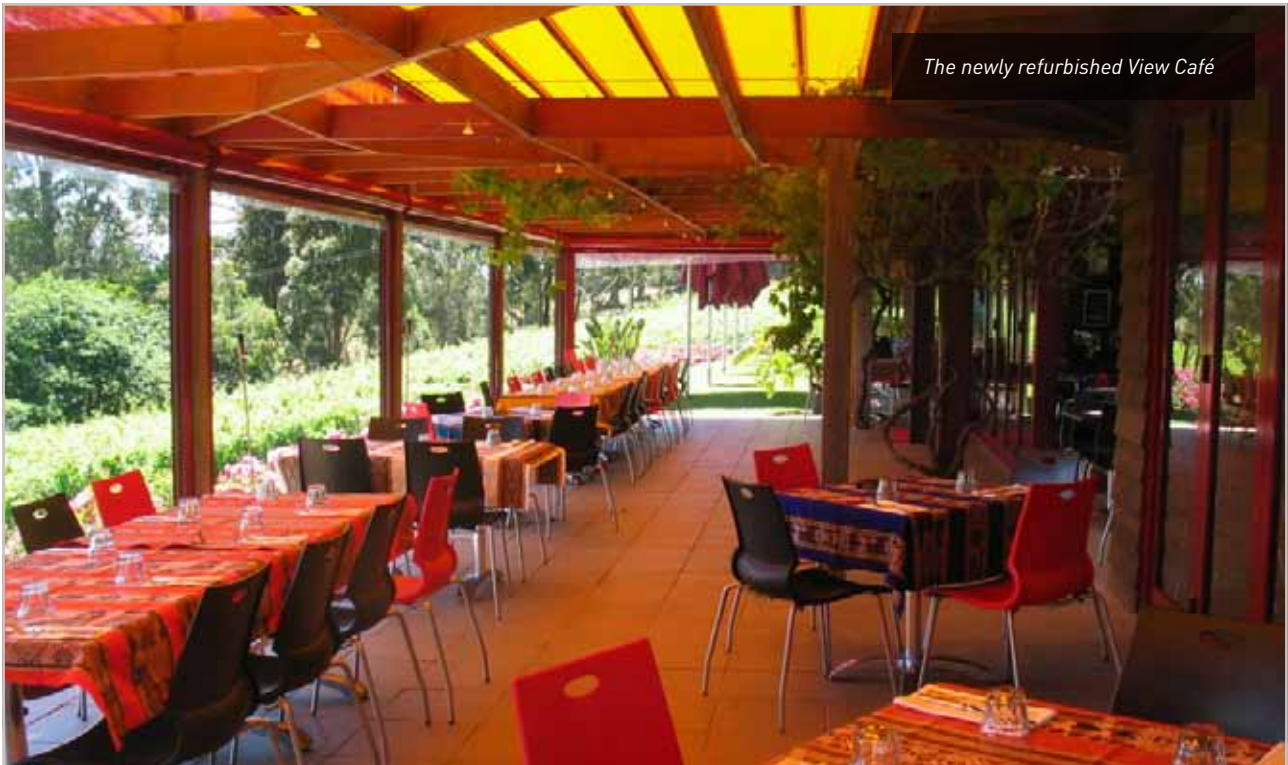
- grants of up to \$15,000 to 30 re-establishing businesses to help with the cost of capital items or marketing;
- subsidies of up to 80% to seven businesses for the cost of employing an apprentice or trainee for one year; and
- training and seed funding for eleven individuals establishing a new business.

Funding has also been made available for local farmers' markets and for customer service training for business owners and their staff.

Bushfire Business Recovery Program

Funding was made available through Regional Development Victoria to councils and other organisations so they could support local businesses in fire-affected areas with business events, recovery and training workshops and 'buy local' initiatives. A total of 20 projects were supported, with each project delivering a range of initiatives and opportunities to local businesses.

The attendance of 40 people representing 18 businesses from across Murrindindi Shire at a series of *Building Stronger Business* workshops in October 2011 shows the reach of the program. The workshops looked at a range of business issues, including ways to reduce costs and improve profitability, the importance of customer care, and how to use customer feedback to build a more sustainable business.



Brandy Creek Wine and View Cafe expansion project

The award-winning Brandy Creek Winery in Drouin East used a grant from the Victorian Bushfire Business Investment Fund to refurbish and extend its facilities following the fires.

As well as revamping the winery, the project involved extending its restaurant, View Café, taking it from a 50-seat to 130-seat venue with an atrium and alfresco dining.

The facility can now cater for large numbers of visitors, as well as functions and seminars, providing a significant boost to the region's economic and tourist offerings.

Functions and seminars held at the winery are expected to inject \$3.2 million into the local economy and provide for four full-time and 12 part-time jobs.

The state-of-the-art building is environmentally sustainable and energy efficient, using solar electricity, a grey water toilet system and treated storm water for all laundry, toilet and cleaning needs.

Local tradespeople were used on the project, exposing them to new skills in environmental sustainability technology which they will be able to use on other construction projects.

This widely acclaimed business has won numerous industry and regional awards, including being twice-named the best tourism winery in Gippsland. It has also been featured in the *Postcards* television series, *Coxy's Big Break* and *Epicure Magazine*.

LOCAL ECONOMIES

Tourism development and events

Tourism Industry Support Package

Before the fires, tourism was a key contributor to the local economy in many of the worst-hit areas. Individuals, communities, councils and governments have been working to restore tourist offerings and encourage people to visit and holiday in these areas.

In March 2009, the Victorian and Federal Governments jointly funded a \$10 million Tourism Industry Support Package for fire-affected regions, with \$3 million for the enhancement and redevelopment of tourism infrastructure, \$1 million to support regional events and \$6 million for marketing of bushfire-affected areas.

As a result of this initiative:

- The economic contribution of domestic tourism to regional Victoria was maintained.
- Negative perceptions of fire-affected regions by consumers were mitigated.
- A larger than anticipated number of businesses from bushfire-affected areas participated in marketing programs.

In 2011, the Victorian Government announced an additional \$1.7 million to further assist with the tourism recovery of Marysville and surrounding townships. The funding will support marketing campaigns and collateral; research into consumer awareness and perceptions of the area; generating positive media and PR; and video and photographic productions to promote the region. The initiative aims to encourage visitation to the region, increase awareness of Marysville & Surrounds as a tourism destination and, in time, rebuild the brand identity of the area.

Support for events is one way to encourage visitation. Through this initiative, support is being provided for 14 local events in 2011-12, including the Marysville Sparkling Wine Festival and the Lake Mountain Granite Grind.

Visitor attractions

A number of key tourist drawcards and accommodation facilities were destroyed in the fires.

Restoration works have been completed or are underway on these facilities including the Grand Ridge Rail Trail in Gippsland, Kinglake Ranges Wilderness Camp, Marysville Caravan Park, Lake Mountain Alpine Resort, Marysville's Steavenson Falls, Bunyip State Park picnic facilities and Mount Disappointment State Forest walking tracks and camping ground.



One of Marysville's key attractions, Bruno's Art and Sculpture Garden, was severely damaged in the fires but has since reopened with many of sculptor and artist Bruno Torf's original works restored

Marysville Conference Centre

In late 2011, the Victorian Government invited expressions of interest for a multi-million dollar hotel and conference centre in Marysville, offering up to \$19 million towards the project. The vision is for an 80 to 120-room hotel with conference facilities for up to 300 people. Expected to cost in excess of \$30 million, the facility will be constructed on a prime development site in Murchison Street, Marysville. The government intends to commence the next phase of the project – the Request for Final Proposal Phase – in March 2012.

Lake Mountain Alpine Resort

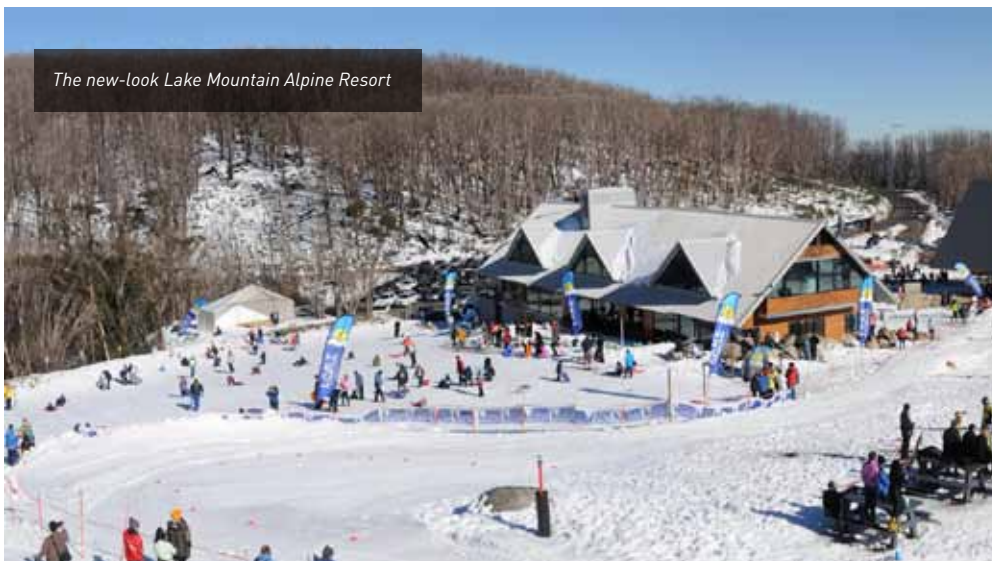
The Lake Mountain Alpine Resort suffered extensive damage during the bushfires with much of the forested area burnt, tracks damaged and almost all buildings and equipment destroyed.

A major tourism drawcard for the Marysville and Triangle region, the Resort was able to open its doors for the 2009 ski season, thanks to the hard work of staff, with support from the community and Victorian Government.

Since then, significant work has gone into restoring and extending this important tourism asset, with the Victorian Government providing a total of \$15 million towards the project.

On 20 November 2011, a new three-storey building, which includes a visitor centre, food and beverage facility, function centre, ski waxing room and staff accommodation, was officially opened.

On the same day, the Resort launched a new summer program, offering mountain biking, laser skirmish, flying foxes and quad bikes. These new activities will help to attract more visitors to the region outside of the snow season, improving the sustainability of the Resort and providing a boost to the local economy.



ENVIRONMENT

Some 430,000 hectares of land were affected by the 2009 bushfires, including 287,000 hectares of public land. The focus of recovery in the first two years was tackling the immediate impacts on forests, waterways, soils, threatened species and heritage sites and re-opening recreation sites.

The past 12 months have seen significant and sustained collaboration between environmental management agencies, researchers, communities and landholders to address rehabilitation and recovery issues that cross private and public land boundaries.

In the third year of recovery, agencies including the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Parks Victoria (PV), the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) have been completing on-ground recovery projects, monitoring and reporting on results and transitioning ongoing activities back to mainstream programs and operations.

Community and the Environment

Communities within and outside the fire-affected areas have been closely watching and supporting the regeneration of the natural environment. The first signs of regeneration of eucalypts, tree ferns and orchids against the backdrop of scorched soils were frequently captured in photographs used to symbolise hope for communities struggling to recover from the impacts of the fires.

The third year of recovery has seen the consolidation of a number of community environmental projects, including restoring habitat for threatened species, weed and feral animal management and erosion control.

Parks and Waterways

Recreation sites

The 70 parks and reserves that suffered damage in the fires have now reopened except for Toorourrong Reservoir Park. Reconstruction works on this park will start after Melbourne Water completes works on the reservoir wall. Of the recreation sites destroyed or damaged in these parks and reserves, some 95 per cent have been repaired or rehabilitated and are now fully open to the public.

The last two major recreation sites to be repaired are in Kinglake National Park – Masons Falls and Jehosaphat Gully. Work at these sites is due to be completed by mid-2012.

Recreation sites reopened

177



Nillumbik Shire Natural Environment Recovery Working Group looks at erosion control work on private property



Nillumbik Shire Natural Environment Recovery Working Group

This group was formed in May 2009 to tackle the multitude of environmental issues in Nillumbik post-fires. Bringing together local government, natural resource management agencies and fire-affected communities, the group has addressed issues across public and private land boundaries, coordinating on-ground works and funding. With support from Nillumbik Shire Council, it has overseen programs to control erosion, feral animals, blackberries and roadside weeds. A series of workshops have been held to help landholders with managing pastures and the regeneration of native vegetation.

Environmental Recovery Action Plans for Strathewen, St Andrews and Christmas Hills are currently being developed in partnership with the community, capturing property, neighbourhood and catchment-wide issues. The plans consider local environmental assets and land uses as well as future bushfire safety.

This cooperative approach to environmental recovery has played an important role in community recovery. The region's Landcare groups have been strengthened, as have the relationships between the Shire's three fire-affected communities.

The group's efforts were recently recognised with a 2011 Victorian Landcare Award for Bushfire Recovery, along with Baw Baw Shire and the Upper Goulburn Landcare Network.

ENVIRONMENT

Steavenson Falls

Made up of five cascades at a total descent of 122 metres, Steavenson Falls just outside of Marysville has long been one of the major natural attractions of the region. Following the destruction of the reserve and visitor facilities in the fires, a \$2.5 million restoration has been completed. This includes new viewing platforms at the base and top of the falls, extensive walking tracks and the construction of new toilet and visitor facilities. The track to the base of the Falls and the new viewing platforms were opened in 2011, with the project completed in January 2012.



New viewing platforms at the base of Steavenson Falls

Roads and tracks

Of the 1,078 roads and tracks that were damaged in parks and forests, the vast majority were reopened within three to six months of the fires. A small number of roads await bridge construction before they can be re-opened and some will remain permanently closed due to the extent of damage sustained.

Roadside vegetation maintenance and drainage works are ongoing and have been incorporated into Parks Victoria and DSE's normal operations.

Protection and restoration of catchments and waterways

In the immediate aftermath of the fires, Melbourne Water and CMAs worked with private landholders, DPI, local government, Landcare groups and volunteers to assess damage to catchments and river health and undertake restoration work.

Water quality monitoring, erosion and sediment control, streamside fencing, weed control and revegetation works have been carried out across the fire-affected areas.

Flooding in many fire-affected areas in 2010 and 2011 presented additional challenges and repair work to some sites is now being addressed by flood recovery programs.

Land stabilisation and rehabilitation of control lines

Emergency stabilisation and rehabilitation works were undertaken immediately after the fires to address threats to life, critical infrastructure, public and private property and natural assets.

Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) teams from the United States worked with land, water and planning management agencies on land stabilisation, recommending rehabilitation strategies. The success of the US BAER teams has resulted in the establishment of Bushfire Rapid Risk Assessment Teams in Victoria and their replication in other states.

In the past twelve months, the stabilisation and rehabilitation work undertaken has withstood the effects of flooding, providing good protection for roads, bridges, visitor facilities and other public assets.

Repair and replacement of 1,500 kilometres of boundary fences between public and private land was completed in 2009, through a partnership between the Victorian Farmers Federation and the Victorian Government. All rehabilitation of control lines on public and private land has been completed.

Natural Values programs

The Natural Values program was launched in October 2009 to address the fire impact on rare and threatened plant and animal populations and fire-sensitive ecological communities, including aquatic habitats through research, monitoring and on-ground projects. A total of 31 projects worth \$4.8 million have been completed.

Projects to manage fire impact on sensitive environments and threatened species

31

Threatened species programs

In the immediate aftermath of the 2009 fires, DSE and Parks Victoria identified threatened plant and animal species requiring protection and habitat restoration works.

The majority of this work was undertaken in the first two years with ongoing monitoring continuing into the third year to report on the status of these populations. The management of these programs will transition back into the normal operations of DSE and its associated research arms during 2012.

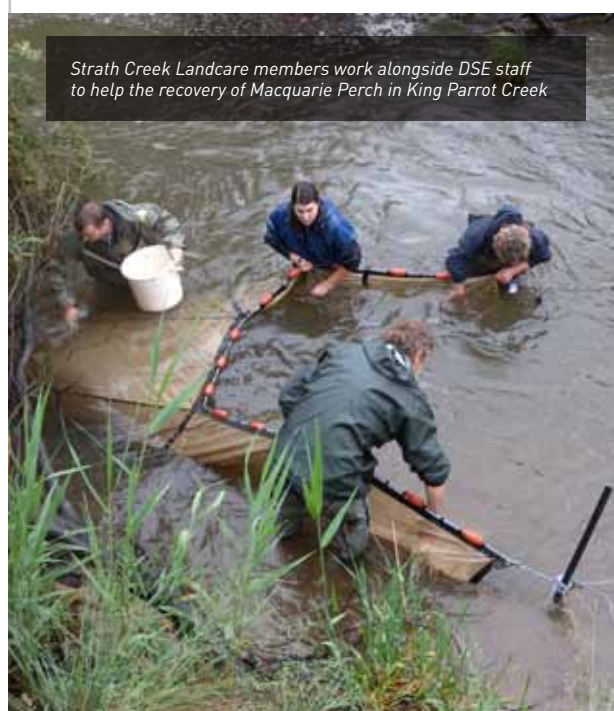
Large areas of habitat of Victoria's faunal emblem, the Leadbeater's possum, was affected by the fires. DSE has completed an analysis of fire extent and severity on habitat. Parks Victoria and Zoos Victoria worked closely with volunteers at Lake Mountain to replace nest boxes and provide winter feeding stations for the only two family groups of possums known to have survived on the mountain. Parks Victoria and Deakin University have trialled remote cameras to monitor how possum populations recover. Long term monitoring work by Australian National University will continue to provide scientific measurement of Leadbeater's possum populations.

Where threatened plant populations have been identified on private land and roadsides, work has been undertaken with landholders and roadside management agencies, such as councils and VicRoads, to ensure they are protected.

Communities help recovery of Macquarie Perch

Native fish species faced degraded water quality and habitats smothered by ash, flooding and sedimentation following the fires. DSE undertook rescue programs to relocate threatened native fish populations, maintaining them in aquariums. They were returned to their natural habitats in 2011, with support from Friends groups, Landcare groups, CMAs and Parks Victoria staff.

In the Strath Creek/Flowerdale area, communities became involved in release and monitoring programs of Macquarie Perch, a nationally listed endangered species from the Upper Goulburn River system. Working alongside researchers and DSE/PV staff gave fire-affected people the chance to learn more about the ecological recovery processes of plants and animals and discuss the changes they were seeing around them. For some people, it was a way of reconnecting with nature and giving back, as well as a positive distraction from the challenges of recovery in their own lives. Surveys carried out in autumn 2010 found the population was healthy, with the discovery of juvenile Macquarie Perch indicating that the population had returned to breeding.



Strath Creek Landcare members work alongside DSE staff to help the recovery of Macquarie Perch in King Parrot Creek

ENVIRONMENT

Weed and feral animal management on public land

Weeds and feral animals present immediate and ongoing threats to vulnerable plant and animal populations following a bushfire, through predation and competition for scarce resources.

Following the fires, Parks Victoria co-ordinated programs addressing feral cat, fox and deer populations while DSE co-ordinated weed management programs on public land with assistance from CMAs and community volunteers.

Following initial control programs, DSE, Parks Victoria, scientists and volunteers have continued to monitor and survey treated areas as well as monitoring regenerating areas for new weed infestations or feral animal population increases. These programs now transition into the normal operations of DSE and Parks Victoria who will continue to work in partnership with other agencies, landholders and community groups in 2012.

Regenerating native forests

In the autumn after the fires, around 4,600 hectares of burnt Mountain and Alpine Ash forests were aerially sowed with 3,500 kilograms of seed – the largest aerial sowing program ever undertaken in Victoria.

Seedling surveys were conducted 18 months after the sowing, with further seed bed treatments and re-sowing undertaken in autumn 2011. An additional 100,000 seedlings were nursery-raised to replant a further 100 hectares in Bunyip and Tarago State Forests and in areas of Murrindindi.

The success of natural and artificial regeneration work has surpassed the expectations of forest managers, with high levels of established seedlings.

Hectares of forest reseeded 4,600

Caring for our Bushfire-affected Country

The Federal Government's Caring for our Country program made \$10.8 million available to landholders, community groups, non-government organisations and local governments for bushfire recovery works through eligible fire-affected CMAs. The five CMAs – Goulburn Broken, Port Phillip Westernport, West Gippsland, North Central and North East – co-ordinated two rounds of funding which resulted in regional packages of recovery work on private and public land which were completed by June 2011. Works included weed and pest animal control, habitat rehabilitation, river health works and Landcare support.

Recycling for Recovery

The Recycling for Recovery program emerged from the massive clean-up of private properties funded by the Victorian Government and delivered by construction company Grocon. Recycled metal from more than 3,000 properties provided \$1.6 million for 27 environmental and Landcare groups to undertake planning and on-ground works in their areas. Projects included holly control works, native seed planting, weed control, vegetation enhancements and fencing as well as projects to reconnect the community with the environment. All projects were completed by the end of 2011.

Recycling for Recovery projects undertaken

27



Farm Land Management

DPI has worked alongside agencies and community groups to support landholders as they re-establish their properties and businesses. DPI, DSE, CMAs, Victorian Farmers Federation, Landcare Networks and volunteer groups have provided technical advice, financial support, co-ordination and volunteer labour to address a range of issues such as pest plants and animals, waterway and soil erosion and pasture re-establishment.

Rabbit and wild dog management

Pest animals can affect the productivity of farmland and threaten native vegetation and fauna species vulnerable to predation and competition.

Following the fires, DPI provided fire-affected landholders with technical and financial assistance for long term rabbit management. This involved working closely with indigenous organisations as well as CMAs to better understand and manage the impacts of on-ground rabbit control works such as warren ripping and baiting on cultural heritage sites and waterways.

Wild dog baiting has been implemented in bushfire-affected areas with 3,500 baits deployed in 308 bait stations. This complements work undertaken by DSE and Parks Victoria on public land.

Prohibited weeds

The hectares of land and kilometres of waterways left barren and exposed by the bushfires provided fertile grounds for weeds to take hold. Significant work has been underway since the fires to bring priority weed species under control in waterways and on public and private land.

A training module was developed to help people working on or near waterways in bushfire-affected areas deal with aquatic weeds listed as State Prohibited Weeds. Some 166 people completed the training. Surveys and treatments were also undertaken to address threats to river health from aquatic weeds.

In collaboration with the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce, two Community Action Groups were established in 2011 to combat woody weeds (blackberry and gorse) in Gippsland. Community-based project officers achieved an 89% uptake of voluntary woody weed management agreements with landholders across more than 3,000 hectares of land.

52 property owners within five kilometres of burnt areas with stands of Regionally Prohibited Weeds were notified to take appropriate action to reduce their spread into bare, burnt areas.

In a collaborative project, over 4,500 hours were spent treating priority weed species along some 3,000 kilometres of roadside in 12 of the 19 bushfire-affected local government areas.

Agricultural community liaison

A communications strategy to ensure landholders receive timely information in the event of a natural disaster or other emergency has been developed by DPI. Emergency information resources provided by DPI have been improved and made easily accessible to the agricultural community.

Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan

During the fires, people risked, and in some cases lost, their lives as they attempted to save their pets and livestock. A Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan has now been developed as part of the government's response to the Bushfires Royal Commission recommendations. The plan sets out the roles and responsibilities of state and local governments, volunteer groups and owners in terms of animal welfare in an emergency. The plan will be maintained by DPI who will support and monitor its implementation through the active engagement of the Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Committee. A new role of State Animal Welfare Coordinator in DPI will provide expert coordination so that appropriate animal welfare measures for pets and livestock can be in place during emergencies.

Under the plan, owners will be encouraged to have an emergency plan in place for their animals. It will also be incorporated into the drafting of Emergency Management Plans across the state.

ENVIRONMENT

Cultural Heritage Management

Following the fires, DSE and Parks Victoria undertook a major cultural heritage assessment for both Aboriginal places and post-settlement sites in fire-affected areas. The absence of normally dense undergrowth made culturally significant sites easy to find and access.

Working with traditional owners and local historical groups, the agencies carried out field surveys to assess fire impacts on existing cultural sites, identify and assess new sites, develop heritage action plans to protect them and where necessary, make them safe for the public.

Altogether 156 heritage sites were assessed in the Bunyip State Park, Walhalla Historic Area, Wilsons Promontory National Park and the Steels Creek mining area in Kinglake National Park, with the majority of work completed by June 2011.

49 of these sites were previously unrecorded or unknown heritage sites, 43 of which were Aboriginal places.

In Wilson's Promontory National Park alone, 45 previously known Aboriginal places were revisited, and a further 37 previously unknown sites were found and recorded – the result of work undertaken by Parks Victoria staff in conjunction with heritage consultants and traditional owners.

Information and data from all cultural heritage assessments was added to the Victorian Heritage Register and the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register. This new knowledge will help DSE and Parks Victoria to manage the sites more effectively in the future.

Existing cultural heritage sites surveyed – Indigenous and post-settlement	107
New cultural heritage sites found	49

A new approach to working with traditional owners

In assessing the areas affected by the Kilmore-Murrindindi fire, DSE and Parks Victoria contracted Taungurung and Wurundjeri traditional owners to project manage the entire survey, assessment and reporting process with guidance from a stakeholder steering group.

There were many benefits to this approach, including the empowerment of traditional owners and the strengthening of their relationships with land management agencies. It allowed DSE and Parks Victoria to access traditional lands in water catchment areas such as Wallaby Creek where public access is normally prohibited. Members of the Taungurung and Wurundjeri gave a joint presentation of their results to a group of project stakeholders in early 2011 at the Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre.



A Parks Victoria heritage assessment team survey an indigenous site at Singapore Peninsula, Wilsons Promontory



A stone chimney from a miner's cottage exposed by the fires at Fear Not Creek, Walhalla

THE FUTURE

Ongoing Support and Services in 2012

Moving into the fourth year since the 2009 bushfires, individuals and communities continue to recover at their own pace. Much progress has been made so far, with many houses and community facilities rebuilt, townships restored and local economies recovering. But for many, the recovery process is ongoing. The Victorian Government will continue to support the changing needs of bushfire-affected people through existing and targeted services.

Rebuilding and recovery support services will continue to be transitioned into mainstream services in 2012 – a process that began with the closure of VBRRRA in June 2011. As part of this transition, government agencies will ensure that the needs of bushfire-affected people and communities are incorporated into their daily work.

At the same time, in recognition of the long path to recovery for individuals and communities affected by the 2009 bushfires, the following targeted rebuilding and recovery services will remain in place in 2012.

Fire Recovery Unit

The Fire Recovery Unit will continue to provide a clear point of contact for information and connection to services within the Victorian Government. It is responsible for monitoring and reporting on rebuilding progress, communicating key information to fire-affected people, and providing advice and support to communities and local government.

Bushfire Communities Support Program

The Bushfire Communities Support Program will continue to provide a combination of individual and community services, including:

- The Bushfire Communities Support Helpline on 1800 050 400, which is a central point of information, advice and referral for fire-affected people;
- Bushfire Communities Support Workers who are employed by community agencies providing locally based support to bushfire-affected people; and
- Drop-in information and advice centres in Hurstbridge, Kinglake and Marysville.

VBAF Programs

Fire-affected individuals and communities will be able to access VBAF-funded programs, including:

- Housing Assistance Gift – Stage One and Two
- Psychological counselling and wellness vouchers
- “Tune In” Youth Counselling Services
- Community projects and programs to be approved under the \$20.5 million medium to long term allocation

THE FUTURE

Skills, Training, Engagement and Practical Support (STEPS) Program

The program will continue to support the ongoing development of communities by building leadership capacity, expanding community relationships and networks, and providing practical support for those involved in community recovery activity. The Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal will continue to administer STEPS in 2012.

Support for the bereaved

Funding and support for the bereaved community will continue through 2012. The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement will continue to provide specialist bereavement counselling services and support groups for adults and children. EACH Social and Community Health will manage community support activities and provide support to the Bereaved Community Advisory Group.

Bushfire Buy-back Scheme

The government has made available \$50 million over its first term of office for the voluntary buy-back of properties destroyed in the 2009 bushfires that have unacceptably high bushfire risk. An application process for the scheme, which is being managed by the Department of Justice, will commence in March 2012.

Small Business Mentoring Service

With Victorian Government support, the Small Business Mentoring Service has been providing a free support service to bushfire-affected businesses. Mentoring services will continue to be available to directly and indirectly fire-affected businesses in 2012.

Marysville and Triangle Economic Recovery Package

The \$5.2 million package will be implemented in 2012, including the centrepiece low interest loans package aimed at helping existing businesses to rebuild or new businesses to set up in the Marysville and Triangle region.



TWELVE MONTH TIMELINE

2011

February	1	Bushfire Communities Support Program announced	August	22	VBAF Further Housing Assistance Gift announced
February	1	New Fire Recovery Unit within Regional Development Victoria announced	September	8	New Building Amendment (Bushfire Construction) Regulations 2011 introduced
February	6	Second Anniversary Memorial Service in Melbourne	September	9	Bushfire-prone mapping system announced
February	7	Second anniversary of 2009 bushfires	September	20	VBRRR Legacy Report published
February	23	New Middle Kinglake Primary School opens	October	19	Small Business Loans extended to 31 December 2011
February	24	Business Start Up program (a component of the Small Business Support Program) announced	October	24	Bushfire Buy-back Scheme announced
April	21	Community Advisory Committee's first meeting to oversee VBAF's \$20.5 million medium to long term recovery package	November	15	VBAF Tertiary and Vocational Scholarship Program extended until 31 January 2012
May	3	First announcement of government's Retreat and Resettlement policy	November	17	New bushfire planning provisions introduced with the aim of better protecting Victorians during bushfires
May	31	Bushfire Royal Commission Implementation Plan tabled in Parliament	November	19	Marysville Community Centre opened
June	19	Skills, Training, Engagement and Practical Support (STEPS) program announced	November	20	Lake Mountain Alpine Resort opened
June	30	Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority closes	December	5	Details of the Marysville and Triangle Economic Recovery Package announced
July	1	Fire Recovery Unit commences	December	29	Stage Two of VBAF Further Housing Assistance Gift announced
July	1	Marysville and Triangle Economic Package announced	2012		
July	18	Fire Ready Communities program announced	January	13	Upgrade to national phone warning system announced
July	25	Applications for the VBAF psychological counselling and wellness voucher programs extended until June 2012	February	5	Third Anniversary Remembrance Event in Melbourne
			February	7	Third Anniversary of 2009 Bushfires

FIRE RECOVERY UNIT ROLE AND OBJECTIVES

This document has been produced by the Fire Recovery Unit, Regional Development Victoria. The Fire Recovery Unit was established by the Victorian Government to assist people and communities affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

The Fire Recovery Unit (FRU) is responsible for monitoring and reporting on rebuilding progress, communicating key information and providing advice and support to communities and local government. It also provides an important interface between the Victorian Government and affected communities regarding bushfire recovery.

FRU sits within Regional Development Victoria (RDV) in the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD). Its presence within RDV complements the work already being done to develop initiatives to restore the economic independence of individuals and communities impacted by the 2009 bushfires. FRU also works closely with the mobile Rebuilding Advisory Service and the Bushfire Response Planning Unit in DPCD, as well as VBAF and other government departments, to respond to medium and longer-term recovery needs.

Specifically, the Fire Recovery Unit:

- Assists with the delivery of community recovery projects;
- Advocates for bushfire-affected people when other departments are involved;
- Assists in the implementation of major infrastructure projects;
- Responds to enquiries from the public;
- Produces a monthly newsletter with information, services and support;
- Maintains a website with up-to-date fire recovery information;
- Monitors and reports on progress of bushfire recovery projects; and
- Provides advice to communities on the VBAF medium-term allocation.

If you would like to receive the monthly Fire Recovery Unit newsletter or a copy of the Useful Contacts Guide please contact the Fire Recovery Unit.



Contacting the Fire Recovery Unit

Phone Number: 1800 055 714

Email: fire.recovery@rdv.vic.gov.au

Website: <http://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/fire-recovery-unit>



Abbreviations and acronyms

ACGB	Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
BCSP	Bushfire Communities Support Program
CAC	Community Advisory Committee
CMA	Catchment Management Authority
CRC	Community Recovery Committee
CRF	Community Recovery Fund
CRP	Community Recovery Plan
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
DH	Department of Health
DHS	Department of Human Services
DOJ	Department of Justice
DPCD	Department of Planning and Community Development
DPI	Department of Primary Industries
DSE	Department of Sustainability and Environment
FRRR	Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal
FRU	Fire Recovery Unit
PV	Parks Victoria
RAS	Rebuilding Advisory Service
RDV	Regional Development Victoria
SBMS	Small Business Mentoring Service
VBAF	Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund
VBCMS	Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service
VBRRA	Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority



ACCESSIBILITY

If you would like this publication in an accessible format, such as large print or audio, please phone 13 22 15 (voice calls) or email rdv@rdv.vic.gov.au.

This document is also available in an accessible format on the internet at www.rdv.vic.gov.au.

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Department of Planning and
Community Development
Level 11, 1 Spring Street
Melbourne 3000