

# Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee

## Inquiry into 'Lessons to be learnt in relation to Australian bushfire season 2019-20'

Latrobe City Council Submission

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## Introduction

Latrobe City Council welcomes the opportunity to provide its response to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Inquiry into *'Lessons to be Learnt in relation to Australian Bushfire Season 2019-20'*.

Latrobe City is one of Victoria's four major Regional Cities, located 135 km east of Melbourne. It is the primary service and cultural centre for the Gippsland region, and hosts regional headquarters for government, private and education entities.

Latrobe City covers land area of about 1400 square kilometres and has a population of approximately 74,000. The municipality comprises several major urban centres, and has a diverse environment ranging from rich agricultural land to the rain forested hills of the Strzelecki Ranges.

Latrobe City is located in the East Central bushfire risk landscape that has 31% of Victoria's total bushfire risk. Over half of the bushfire fatalities in Victoria since European settlement have occurred in this landscape.<sup>1</sup>

In the lead up to each bushfire season, Latrobe City, like other bush-fire prone municipalities play an integral role in bushfire preparation, mitigation, response and recovery. For Latrobe City, this includes supporting the community through local law infringements and enforcement for mitigation purposes, and community based emergency planning, response and recovery.

Rural shires, which are mostly impacted by bushfires, are required to resource the continuum of bushfire activities from prevention to recovery. This is both a financial and social burden that is not well recognised by the State and Federal decision-makers. Funding to support the collaborative approaches undertaken by neighbouring rural shires is also not commensurate with the actual costs of the work.

Council also believes that the importance of local government and its intimate knowledge of the community was overlooked by State and Federal agencies before, during and after the 2019/20 bushfires.

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[http://www.delwp.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/318849/DELWP0016F\\_BMP15\\_EastCentral\\_web\\_v2.pdf](http://www.delwp.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/318849/DELWP0016F_BMP15_EastCentral_web_v2.pdf)

## Submission

This submission addresses only the sections of the Terms of Reference for which Latrobe City Council has particular expertise and experience in relation to the bushfire season 2019/20. Where relevant, information has also been included in relation to Yinnar South bushfires that occurred in March 2019.

### **TOR (b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;**

#### *Bushfire planning and mitigation*

In Victoria, bushfire safety is a shared responsibility between the fire services, the Victorian Government and local government, communities and individuals.

The onus is on individual owners and occupiers of land to ensure their properties are free of fire hazards, and local government plays a significant role in enforcing this. Municipalities are responsible for creating Planning Scheme policies and land use planning controls on properties. Since the introduction of the Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO) after the 2009 Bushfires, Planning Permits with appropriate conditions that have been prepared in consultation with the CFA are in place for many properties. Local government is responsible for ensuring ongoing compliance with these permit conditions.

Latrobe City Council is currently undertaking a Municipal Bushfire Risk Assessment to assist in informing a rural rezoning Planning Scheme Amendment. This project will see the identification shire-wide of areas that are considered to have 'extreme', 'significant' and 'lower' bushfire risk. This work will provide an opportunity to review the current bushfire planning controls, and any additional available tools that may be utilised to improve bushfire safety in Latrobe City.

The Municipal Bushfire Risk Assessment is a new tool to assist in bushfire management planning. Municipal councils need resourcing assistance to be able to undertake these assessments and implement them effectively.

#### *Emergency management*

Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) is leading Victorian reforms in accordance with The *Emergency Management Legislation Amendment Act 2018* (EMLA Act).

The key deliverables by 1 December 2020 include:

- State emergency management planning guidelines
- State emergency management plan

- Regional emergency management planning guidelines
- Regional emergency management plans
- Draft municipal emergency management planning guidelines (to be issued once the municipal phase takes effect).

In relation to this reform process, the lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities was evident during the 2019/20 bushfire season.

‘Safer Together’ is a new response originating from the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission into the 2009 bushfires. This approach addresses the importance of ‘integrated fire management planning’ by combining the efforts of land and fire agencies to manage fuel hazards on private and public land, based on where and how we can most effectively reduce risk. ‘Safer Together’ requires land and fire agencies to plan and deliver bushfire management activities across public and private land. ‘Safer Together’ is to be coordinated by a range of agencies and stakeholders with varying responsibilities, obligations, expectations and capacities for bushfire risk reduction.

While Latrobe City Council supports this approach, it is concerned that its implementation may not recognise the current activities in place to achieve these objectives, and therefore there is the potential that the key stakeholders may be disenfranchised.

#### *2019/20 Bushfire Response*

The 2019/20 bushfires exemplified a collaborative approach to bushfire response between Gippsland councils.

Latrobe City:

- activated an Emergency Relief Centre in Morwell for seven days following the mass evacuation of residents and visitors from the East Gippsland region. Approx. 156 cases (353 people) accessed the services provided at the Morwell Relief Centre. Evacuees primarily accessed the State Government grants.
- deployed Emergency Management and the Building Services teams to work alongside colleagues from East Gippsland Shire Council to undertake and coordinate both first impact assessments of effected properties and emergency management works.
- supported Wellington and East Gippsland Shires under the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) Municipal Resource Sharing Protocol to assist in providing bedding and relief centre support materials for both Sale and Bairnsdale Relief Centres.



- collaborated with the impacted Councils to provide a range of supports, including managing staff support rosters in the early stages of the event to enable the East Gippsland Shire to concentrate on supporting its community.
- provided mentoring to East Gippsland Shire staff members that had not previously been involved in emergency activations.
- provided staff to represent the East Gippsland Shire Council as Emergency Management Liaison Officers (EMLOs) in both Bairnsdale and Orbost Incident Control Centres (ICCs) throughout this event.
- deployed Council staff (Environmental Health Officers and Building Surveyors) to undertake secondary impact assessments over a number of weeks after the fires had passed in East Gippsland.

In general, the collaboration and the relationships between the various agencies at a local level were and continue to be strong and constructive. However, it is our experience that when centralised directions come from the State and Federal Government, there is often limited understanding of the impacts of this direction on the ground.

After the Yinnar South fires, Latrobe City had to field a large number of requests for information in relation to the amount/extent of the number of trees that were dropped during and immediately. Fire-fighting agencies (CFA, HVP and DELWP) dropped trees that were fire damaged/on fire in the weeks of the fires (the fires were not completely under control for approximately six weeks). Council contractors were also involved in removing trees that were damaged along Council roads.

There were concerns from the residents in the area that the volume of trees dropped were excessive and not necessarily needed i.e. there were questions as to whether the trees were damaged by the fires and therefore not needing to be cut down. The lack of records as to how trees were assessed as requiring removal, where these trees were located, which contractor or agency undertook the works etc. further exacerbated the concerns around tree removal. Tree removal became a significant issue for Council and agencies involved as it was elevated to the State Government, and required various agencies and Latrobe City Council to respond to Ministerial enquiries.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Staff training needs to be supported and encouraged across all levels of government and only trained staff should be utilised.

- A joined up communications approach across the relief and response activities is required. Prioritisation of mobile network establishment and maintenance should occur.
- All response requests need to be approved by the Municipal Emergency Recovery Committee for cost recovery.
- Delegated authority needs to be clarified for staff so it is clear which local decisions can be made in a timely and responsive manner.
- Support and resourcing assistance for municipal councils is required to undertake Municipal Bushfire Risk Assessments and implement them effectively.

#### *Bushfire recovery*

There are well established plans with clear jurisdictional roles of government agencies that largely work well in the response to bushfires. This often fails in the recovery phase and during the 2019/20 bushfires the following issues were experienced:

- Challenges related to managing the receipt, storage and equitable distribution of extensive government funding and community donations.
- Organisations and other service providers who were not included in the agreed service provision plans set up services in the bushfire affected area. As a result, people engaged with many agencies in an uncoordinated manner, which created confusion in both the short and longer term.
- Different methods of collecting personal information across agencies led to confusion and frustration in affected people. This could be addressed through a database that is made available to the designated agencies to offer support to eligible individuals. Given that recovery can be a long term process, access to the information needs to remain current – both for the individual and the service providers.
- The role of Environmental Health Officers (EHO) was poorly articulated and understood in the recovery phase, and this led to delays in recovery. For small, rural councils, in particular, this is a scarce resource, and experience has shown that EHOs who come from non-rural areas are ill equipped to manage this role in bushfire affected rural areas.

### **Recommendations:**

- The roles of the new state and national recovery agencies need to reflect long term agreed local plans and provide support to these. There needs to be a focus on the affected individuals and communities in a structured manner from bushfire prevention to response and recovery so that individuals and communities are not “bounced” between agencies and departments.
- The role of local government and the associated financial impost (often over many years), both for depleted revenue and expenses associated with assisting residents to recover and rebuild must be recognised and supported by State and Federal agencies.
- People affected by bushfires often have an existing disadvantage. Data is clear on the disadvantages in some rural communities in relation to low income and access to health services. The role of caravan parks in recovery is often overlooked, as these caravan parks often provide permanent residence for individuals who then struggle with the influx of fire affected people. This results in localised conflict that caravan park operators and recovery personnel are unable to deal with. It must be considered that the short and medium term housing options for fire affected people should not further disadvantage others.
- Asset management systems used to determine damage and rectification requirements need updating to include photographic evidence that assists with determining the actual costs of infrastructure recovery.
- Services agreements with Contractors need to stipulate that photographs of all recovery works are included for verification of the amount and quality of work undertaken.
- Recovery Funding needs to be immediate and ongoing for a number of years.
- The Municipal Recovery Manager needs to be engaged at all levels of the recovery process.
- Recovery funding should include revegetation and restoration opportunities rather than having a focus on events and retreats alone.

**TOR (c) the Federal Government's response to recommendations from previous bushfire Royal Commissions and inquiries;**

Latrobe City Council believes that the issues identified previously indicate previous recommendations have been inadequately adopted.

In particular:

- In relation to a large scale clean-up of contaminated matter, the need to treat any burnt structures as contaminated (usually with asbestos) is not well understood. This leads to people undertaking their own unsafe clean-up operations as they have to wait for lengthy periods for the EHO assessment.

Previous recommendations have identified this as a matter of priority. Despite this there continues to be insufficient:

- licenced contractors able to deal with contamination;
- local points for the contaminated matter to be disposed of;
- planning to support the upskilling and use of local contractors to support a recovery economy.

The local economic benefits of recovery often go to large providers who are contracted for clean up operations and major works without quotas of sub-contracting locally.

Managing donations also continues to be an issue. Donations of goods and services effectively reduce the revenue of local providers. In 2019 local government areas affected were inundated with donated goods and struggled to find capacity to both store and distribute these. Many of the donated goods were available through local businesses, and therefore the donations reduced their business.

The message of "donate money" rather than goods was promulgated, however, a systematic approach to donation refusal is required.

Similarly, the dissemination of donation funding continues to be inadequate and resulting in negative publicity and lack of trust in the organisations designated to disburse the funds.

**Recommendations:**

- A centralised system and potentially a central warehouse in each region or local government area is required to ensure that donations are provided where there are no alternative options and waste, food handling risks, and management of expectations with the community are addressed.
- Greater transparency relating to how financial support will be provided is required including the timelines associated with this. Public education is required to ensure



that people are aware that the donations they make will be dispersed over a number of years and for specific identified reasons.

**TOR (d) the adequacy of the Federal Government's existing measures and policies to reduce future bushfire risk, including in relation to assessing, mitigating and adapting to expected climate change impacts, land use planning and management, hazard reduction, Indigenous fire practices, support for firefighters and other disaster mitigation measures;**

Given the individuality of each region and its own specific risks and needs, the role of the Federal Government is most effective as an overarching policy setter, funding provider and emergency assistance provider (i.e. provider of financial relief for those affected by bushfire). However, this needs to acknowledge and support the role of local government.

**TOR (h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts; and**

Uncoordinated recovery efforts are not in the best interest of the affected people, and their physical or mental health outcomes.

In terms of physical health, short term local medical providers working with no connection to local GPs and hospitals provides disjointed care, poor management of chronic conditions and utilisation of available Medicare options for access to support.

History has shown that a generalist mental health professional requires ongoing training and supervision to work with complex trauma, grief and loss, given that trauma can manifest differently in different individuals over a period of many years. A well supported local workforce contributes to a community resource, and keeps the revenue from these services local which supports the local economy.

There are numerous methodologies that are available to undertake this work and they should be applied to all bushfire relief and recovery efforts.

#### **Recommendations:**

- A focus on upskilling local providers to be grief, loss and trauma proficient should be a priority, or alternatively a long term commitment made by visiting providers. Additionally providers should be involved in regular care management meetings to ensure integrated care.
- Children need to be a focus in relief and recovery to ensure that they are able to feel safe and connected to adults and care givers who may be unavailable due to their own trauma.

**TOR (i) any related matters.**

Latrobe City Council believes that there is room for improvement in relation to consistent messaging for communications across emergency services.

The reliance on electronic means i.e. social media, apps and website are not beneficial to rural communities that are of low socio-economic background, have inability to use the systems or are located in areas where reception is poor. Additionally in an emergency these devices drain battery life quickly.

It is also important to ensure that Council, through the Emergency Management Structure within Incident Control Centres, has access to public communication. This allows for key messages and updates to be provided via Council's communication channels. Many in the community will look to Council, as a trusted source of information, for additional advice beyond the information provided by Emergency Service Providers.

In the recovery phase, immediate incident recovery, along with in the period of time post the event, organisations such as Council will be seen as a primary point of contact with affected communities. How the community continues to be engaged and communicated with needs to be both considered and planned.

**Recommendations:**

- Local radio stations as official emergency broadcasters of emergency bushfire information such as warnings, evacuation alerts for regional/rural locations must continue to be supported.
- Councils' access to public communication through the Emergency Management Structure within Incident Control Centres needs to be secured.