

## **Submission to independent inquiry into the 2019-2020 Victorian fire season**

### **Background**

We own a property in Mallacoota where we spend a good proportion of our time. We were resident there over Christmas 2019 and up to mid-morning of 30 December 2019 when we self-evacuated to other accommodation in Canberra. We were not allowed to return to Mallacoota until 21 January.

### **Terms of reference**

I have been unable to find these specific words in material on line, However on the website <https://www.igem.vic.gov.au/reports-and-publications/publications/independent-inquiry-into-fire-season> the following is offered which I will take to be the ToR:

“The government will provide an additional \$2.55 million to the IGEM to undertake the inquiry, which will consider the following matters:

- Effectiveness of emergency management command and control and Victoria’s operational response
- Effectiveness of the declaration of a state of disaster
- Timeliness and effectiveness of activation of Commonwealth assistance and resource availability
- State evacuation planning and preparedness process and practices
- Preparedness ahead of the 2019-20 fire season
- Effectiveness of immediate relief and recovery work and arrangements, and the creation of Bushfire Recovery Victoria, the National Bushfire Recovery Agency and how they work together”

I shall address the relevant points below where I believe I have something to say.

### **Effectiveness of emergency management command and control and Victoria’s operational response**

As we weren’t here during the fire period we can’t comment on the fire-fighting aspects of this.

Communication to the affected public was very poor and created extra stress.

It was not possible at any stage for a member of the public to identify which agency was responsible for answering specific questions and contact details for agencies which were able to be identified were largely hidden from view.

1. I was able to acquire a phone number for the Incident Control Centre (ICC) in Orbost but on many occasions when I rang the call was not answered. If it was answered I was transferred to the Communications area who either didn't answer the phone or said the topic was the responsibility of the Bairnsdale ICC who when contacted, in turn referred me back to Orbost. (I have heard of others attempting to assist family members who were shuttled around 8 agencies and getting no information.)
2. In the public meetings the female Police spokesperson (who I consider tried very hard to provide information) often said something to the effect that "that decision is being made at the State level".
3. At a very late stage in proceedings (around 17 January) I lobbied the Minister for Police and Emergency Service and her Office arranged for me to speak to someone in the State ICC. They actually knew what was happening and were very helpful. I am not aware of anyone else in Mallacoota that spoke to them.
4. I spoke to the Police at Mallacoota (typically at Sergeant level) several times and they were very helpful: they made enquiries on my behalf and always rang back with updates. However all too often they could not find out who was responsible for issues. When the team who were there initially were rotated out the replacements were nowhere near up to speed.
  - a. As an example the male officer who spoke at a Public Meeting said he "didn't know when mail would be start being delivered to houses" – mail has never been delivered to houses in Mallacoota!
5. There were obvious failures to communicate between agencies. When we left I completed a form on the East Gippsland Shire Council site indicating that we had left home. I assumed that this would be shared with the Red Cross so did not register with them. When speaking to the Police to register for return it emerged that the Red Cross had no record of us having left.
  - a. Fortunately a very helpful Police Officer sorted this out for us (wasting a lot of time on a VERY busy registration line).
  - b. It also appeared – when we got to the road block – that if we were not registered with the Red Cross we may not have been permitted to return. All because of a failure to communicate between agencies.

A major issue was the absolute absence of any formal communication from the official agencies involved (I believe up to 10 Victorian Government Agencies were involved plus the Red Cross and the Shire) other than the updates to the map on the Emergency Services site. Some of the agencies

would send one of the front line workers to the public meetings but there were no formal statements on Agency websites setting out the official view.

The main forum for information transfer – at least for those who had evacuated – among residents (and many others) was the Mallacoota Community News Facebook group. However Agencies refused to contribute to that claiming it was “full of fake news and misinformation”. In the total absence of official statements to rebut rumours it is not surprising that erroneous opinions filled the vacuum.

### **Timeliness and effectiveness of activation of Commonwealth assistance and resource availability**

Once Defence became involved the situation became clearer. Throughout the period until we returned, we contrasted the chaotic situation we were encountering with the extremely effective process we had observed – from Adelaide - during the evacuation of Darwin following Cyclone Tracey. It seemed clear that had the Commonwealth taken charge of the 2019-20 situation in Mallacoota – for example through the extremely competent General Elwood – much of the angst described in this submission would have been avoided.

Defence had:

- the basic physical infrastructure required: boats and aircraft;
- the necessary training and experience in emergency logistics; and
- an appreciation of the need for clear communications with the public – both those in Mallacoota and those who had evacuated.

At a slightly later stage in the Emergency, when the fire had gone across the State border it became necessary to check both the ESV site and the NSW Fires Near Me site to establish the overall situation. It would have been far better had a single site existed. Eventually the NSW site extended to show the full picture of the fire in both States.

### **State evacuation planning and preparedness process and practices**

At the earliest stages of this emergency the websites of the 2 key agencies Emergency Services Victoria (ESV) and Roads Victoria (RV) were inconsistent. ESV was stating that people had to stay in Mallacoota while RV was showing roads open

I first noticed the start of this fire in the afternoon of - I think - 29 December when it appeared as a 30Ha fire on the ESV website. It soon grew to a 300Ha fire apparently heading North. My memory is that the advice from ESV at that

stage was that it was too late to leave Mallacoota. .Possibly the Mallacoota-Genoa Rd was temporarily closed but I don't have records to show that.

By early in the morning of 30 December the fire had in fact burnt South to the Coast thus depicting a long thin fireground on the ESV website. The RV website showed the road frm Mallacoota to Genoa was open and since:

- It was obvious that the fire was well out of control; and
- At a minimum Mallacoota was going to be out of power for some days as when the fire began to move it would cut the powerlines

we decided to leave about 10am. When we got to Genoa I believe the road to Cann River was also open.

#### Return from Evacuation

It seemed that the only means of obtaining information about the return from evacuation was through the public meetings held in the cinema. This was no use for those who had evacuated.

It was not possible for us to ask questions of the speakers at those meetings which were driven by the needs of those attending. While it was good that some efforts were made to webcast the meetings, particularly for the first few days the quality of the webcast was very poor:

- sound interrupted by ambient noise;
- handheld camera – perhaps a smartphone??;
- audience members standing in front of the camera.

The webcasts put out by ADF covering the statements by General Elwood and his colleagues were far better.

Going beyond the quality of the presentation it was extremely frustrating for those of us who had evacuated to be blocked from returning while those who had stayed were allowed to travel in and out to go shopping in Eden. This frustration was amplified by the presenters at the Meetings appearing to be given no clear guidance about the conditions required to allow return.

