

Submission to the Inspector-General for Emergency Management Inquiry into the 2019-2020 Victorian Fire Season- Phase One

We live in Lake Tyers Beach, near Lakes Entrance, and we followed Emergency Services advice from 21 November, when the first smoke column became visible from our place.

We wish to applaud the planning and implementation of the measures which almost certainly saved the most populated areas of East Gippsland from disaster in December/January. There were some lucky wind changes, but the establishment of strong containment lines along the Great Alpine Road and the Bruthen-Nowa Nowa Road provided a shield for us which held for the most part in what was a sustained and prolonged emergency, and we are thankful for the strategic thinking behind the placement of assets day by day and hour by hour as situations unfolded. We are not able, as older residents, to consider defending our house and garden (700m²), and greatly appreciate the efforts of those personnel who were prepared to do so.

We would like to offer the following observations / suggestions to your enquiry:

- VicEmergency Watch and Acts should include the words “make sure someone in your residence is able to monitor the situation overnight by staying awake and checking VicEmergency“. The Marthavale fire in mid-December travelled 20 kilometres towards the Lakes Entrance area in four hours between midnight and 4.00am before a wind change diverted this dangerous blaze. We were potentially looking at an emergency evacuation before first light.
- Not everyone in East Gippsland can pick up the emergency broadcaster (ABC Gippsland). We have to stream it via the internet, which is dependent in turn on continuity of supply of electricity. Perhaps, as well as a battery radio, residents could be advised to purchase a powerbank for recharging mobile phones, and thus continue to be able to check VicEmergency and stream the ABC in the event that power is lost.
- We found that, apart from ABC Gippsland, BOM and VicEmergency, we were constantly checking the local Lake Tyers Beach website which has a weather page in it and updates itself in real time. Thus we were able to monitor wind speed and direction in our location, which is critical where there is so much variation from coast to ranges and within microclimates in this Shire. This type of locality-specific weather information is invaluable. Perhaps the local CFA stations could be equipped with them and have them uploading to the CFA website.
- Lake Tyers Beach township has no Safety and Evacuation point. Different views were expressed by folk in our community about heading for the Lake/Beach /Pub in the event that the Lake Tyers Beach Road and/or Princes Highway became impacted by fire. Sheltering in place is a risky option in a community consisting chiefly of dwellings made from Hardieplank. A public meeting at the local Toorloo Arm CFA

station in early November attracted only about 15 residents, and focussed more on community issues with fuel reduction burns, which overshadowed the important warnings the CFA personnel were trying to impart about the coming fire season. We recommend that the local CFA should be funded to the level where they are able to make contact with all householders and residents and talk them through fire and evacuation plans.

- The main highway through East Gippsland (the Princes Highway) is, because of the inland route it follows, inherently dangerous in a bushfire, with long stretches through forests on both sides. Before 1913, there existed a coastal route from Lakes Entrance to Orbost, and from Orbost almost to Mallacoota. This road was the Cobb and Co. coach route in the 1800s, and still exists as a track or road reservation, sometimes still called the “Old Coach Road”. It looks like it might be sensible to upgrade this route for use in emergencies, so that coastal hamlets could be connected with an alternative exit route rather than having to head north hoping to reach the Princes Highway and a safe haven somewhere like Cann River or Cabbage Tree Creek. In turn, residents of the highway towns might have a southerly escape route.
- We noticed that the program by Rural Roads Victoria to upgrade the safety of the Princes and Monaro Highways to their respective crossings of the NSW border had some unintended consequences. While the creation of emergency stopping lanes and increased visibility around corners is welcome, the manner of these works involved pruning or bulldozing roadside vegetation into the bush on either side of the roads, where it then dried out into piles of fuel owing to the lack of rain in the Shire area. This is one example of where simultaneous fuel reduction as part of these works would have been universally welcomed.

Thanks for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry, and thank-you again to the Emergency Services personnel who did such a great job.

Sincerely

