



*Friends of
Mallacoota*
Inc.

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Submission to the IGEM Bushfire Enquiry

Friends of Mallacoota has 150 members and we work to protect and enhance the biodiversity and natural environment of Mallacoota and surrounding areas. Our activities include protection of the endangered Hooded Plover, monitoring of flora and fauna, bush weeding of invasive species, Coastcare weeding, rubbish collection and recycling.

We are devastated by the damage to our environment and welcome the opportunity to have input into the bushfire review.

This submission concentrates on issues related to the environment and the importance of action to protect what remains of the bushland, flora and fauna.

Mallacoota Township Bushfire Fuel Management Plan

This group formed in 2019 to address the difficult issue of fuel management in our changing climate and look at strategies to protect the township of Mallacoota. The group has representation from all agencies involved in fuel management and firefighting as well as representatives of the community. Friends of Mallacoota plays an active role in this group. In the second half of 2019 the group met regularly and planned for community consultations and setting a timeframe for implementation of a best-practice fuel reduction plan to protect the town. The timeframe was measured in years because of limitations on resources both funding and staffing.

Fuel management is a major part of preparing for bushfires. Large areas of forest in East Gippsland and elsewhere in Victoria are subject to fuel reduction burning but while it is more difficult, priority should be given to fuel reduction management that protects towns and communities.

Reducing carbon emissions must be a priority of governments. The lack of action on climate change is having a devastating effect on our environment. The changed conditions pose difficulties for bushfire mitigation including fuel-reduction burns, the intensity of fire events, the likelihood of extended fire seasons, the effects of long term drought, more frequent fire events, and the lack of opportunity for fuel reduction burning.

Biodiversity and protection of flora and fauna

Post fire there has been an angry response from some residents about the lack of bushland clearing and fuel reduction burning. People are calling for large scale vegetation removal and are very critical of Parks Victoria and DELWP for not doing more. People need someone to blame.

Many residents live in Mallacoota because of the natural environment and the flora and fauna. Nature-based tourism is an important part of the local community as well.

While our environment is extremely damaged at the moment, it is vitally important that the local biodiversity is protected from wholesale clearing of vegetation and logging. Regulation of hazardous tree removal needs to be introduced. Large numbers of trees are being cleared from roadsides and reserves well beyond the requirements for public safety and protection of assets.

A trip along the Princes Highway between Cann River and Orbost provides evidence of salvage logging coupes and wide stretches of clearing on the roadsides. The remnant forest through East Gippsland needs to be protected from logging under the Regional Forest Agreement at all costs.

There is a need to protect unburned critical habitat in fire ravaged areas as islands for surviving fauna. The issues of post-fire 'burn-out' and salvage logging in the aftermath of the fire need addressing to protect habitat and biodiversity. For example, in the weeks after the main fire front Howe Flat and the Nadgee Wilderness on the Victoria/New South Wales border continued to burn, endangering the habitat of the critically endangered Eastern Bristlebird. It was not until this fire was out of control that water bombing aircraft were concentrated in the area.

Extra resources should be allocated urgently to the restoration of bushland, including addressing invasive weeds and feral predators.

Fire Fighting in Remote Locations

We are concerned that the fire which started at Wingan Inlet was not contained more quickly given the possibility of it burning through difficult to access terrain. Effective aerial control at the point of ignition, particularly in this remote location may well have prevented these disastrous fires. There is a need for increased funding and access to fire-fighting aircraft in remote areas. Questions that need addressing include the criteria for using firefighting aircraft and how decisions are made.

Evacuation Planning

Comprehensive evacuation plans need to be developed at both the state and local government levels. These plans are particularly necessary for isolated and vulnerable communities and for summer holiday periods when thousands of people migrate to fire-prone areas. This was the case in Mallacoota where the lives of thousands of holiday makers were endangered and they were stranded here in the fire aftermath which put extra pressure on limited resources.

Over Christmas and New Year Mallacoota has many thousands of extra people holidaying in town, many of them in the caravan parks which include the very large East Gippsland Shire Foreshore Caravan Park. We understand that at a time when the Victorian government was encouraging all holiday makers in East Gippsland to leave, people were not getting the message in Mallacoota. On the day before the fire we observed most people staying put, continuing their holiday, picnicking at the beach and generally not appearing to be overly concerned with the fire risk. The Shire's Caravan Park was still booking people in. Was there any process in place to warn people and request that they leave while it was safe to do so?

Caravan parks south of Eden were closed and people evacuated to Eden when the fires were progressing up the south coast. Police closed Eden caravan parks on 2nd January and made non-residents leave for Canberra. Do the police in Victoria have the authority to close caravan parks and make people move when they are in danger, such as moving people from the camp park on 29th or

30th January? Did the East Gippsland Shire have a responsibility to close the park in time for people to evacuate safely?

East Gippsland Shire Council responsibilities and lack of preparedness.

Mallacoota is 240 km from Bairnsdale where East Gippsland Shire is based. The Shire has responsibility for managing the township as well as the coastal reserve which is largely coastal heathland and bush. This was almost totally destroyed as the fire swept along the coast towards Mallacoota.

There is a small work crew with a supervisor based in Mallacoota who do maintenance work. Their work largely involves mowing, pruning of trees and bushes and maintenance of the large Shire-owned Foreshore Caravan Park. When clearing bushes and trees from Shire managed coastal reserves and pathways they tend to leave the prunings lying alongside the paths rather than treating them as a fire hazard and removing them.

Prior to the fire their work was not focused on fire preparation and safety issues, but largely cosmetic. In the wake of the fires it is essential that extra resources need to be allocated by the Shire for land management, bush regeneration and weed control.

We appreciate the opportunity to have input to this important enquiry and look forward to changes being made to how Victoria prepares for fire and works to protect our biodiversity.

Rosemary Martin
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