

Jann Gilbert



To: Inspector-General for Emergency Management (Victoria)
Re: IGEM Bushfire Inquiry submission (Phase 1 – Preparedness)

Local level

East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC):

- Failed to provide any warnings to people with bookings at the camp park despite the state government issuing warnings (at the beginning of December) regarding cancelling all non-essential travel to East Gippsland.
- Failed to notify visitors at the camp park, in the week prior to the fire on 31 December 2019, of the catastrophic fire risk or the community meeting to discuss it. This meant the advice to leave came way too late (30 December 2019) and most people were unable to leave at such short notice (or simply underestimated the level of the risk). A colleague who was staying at the camp park at that time (with her 3-year-old child) said they were unaware of the danger until they saw other campers packing up. I have heard similar stories from other people staying at the camp park. Likewise, workers at the camp park office were not advised of the community meeting or the catastrophic fire danger, so they could not inform campers. For those who could leave, the mass exodus of ~2000 people blocked roads and put everyone at risk, given the spread of the fire. Restrictions on the amount of fuel that could be purchased by those leaving, and closing of the highway towards Melbourne also meant that all evacuees were funneled in the same direction (north towards Eden/Merimbula, NSW), where many were subsequently evacuated from due to the fires.
- Failed to provide adequate or safe shelter for residents and visitors. Only two places were provided as 'safe shelter' for around 5000 people – Mallacoota Wharf and lakeside, and Big Hall (the cinema). Big Hall has capacity for ~1000 people and was reserved for the elderly and very young (as it should be). However, due to a lack of maintenance by EGSC, the building was far from safe, with rotting timber windows and guttering filled with leaves. The remaining ~4000 people were on the wharf and around the lakeside with no cover or respite from the smoke, ash and embers. At one stage, the fire came within 200 m of the wharf.
- Failed to provide an adequate 'place of last resort'. EGSC's advice for a place of last resort was to 'go jump in the lake', which was even more terrifying than the fire given there would have been ~ 5000 people attempting to 'go jump in the lake' at the same time. In the event this course of action was necessary, I have no doubt that people would have died as a result of the ensuing panic.
- Failed to provide any staff at the camp park to hose-down structures or empty bins at the wharf or in the camp park during the fires. This is despite the fact that more police and emergency services personnel and vehicles were able to make it into Mallacoota. Campers and residents took to hosing down the amenity blocks and other structures to protect them

from ember attack; meanwhile rubbish bins overflowed, with a constant stream of litter being blown into the lake or in danger of catching alight from embers. Ten days after the fires the Manager of the camp park left his job and left town, for reasons we can only imagine. No Councillors even bothered to visit Mallacoota until at least 4-6 weeks after the fire, despite the fact they could have arrived by plane.

- Failed to carry out hazard reduction in and around Mallacoota. Council is particularly well-known for leaving discards from tree lopping/trimming in-situ, which created more fuel for the fire around the town.
- Failed the residents of Mallacoota by putting profit from the camp park before the safety of the residents. The camp park has over 700 sites, all of which are full at Christmas and Easter, and most of the time in-between. The recent bushfires make it very clear that EGSC is unable to manage this level of occupancy and, indeed, will sacrifice the safety of the community in favour of tourism. For many years EGSC have used the camp park as a 'cash cow' with very little of the profit coming back to the community. In fact, maintenance of community assets is ignored in favour of additions to or maintenance of the camp park and tourist amenities. The 'white-elephant' ocean-access boat ramp is a particularly good example. EGSC ignored scientific and engineering advice regarding building of the rockwall and, as consequence, the boat ramp requires constant dredging, which is paid for by ratepayers, not tourists. (NB: during the evacuation of people, post-fire, even the RAN and merchant navy vessels complained about the dangerous conditions at the boat ramp, and a much-needed delivery of fuel for the town was unable to be brought ashore due to the dangerous conditions.)

As a result of [redacted] negligence, residents' homes were destroyed because all available resources were concentrated around the main shopping area in town, the camp park, the wharf and Big Hall. Fire crews were told they were 'not permitted to go beyond Bastion Point Road'. As a result, the fire coming up from the airport was not contained and subsequently destroyed many houses (including mine) in this area.

State level

Victorian Government:

- Failed to act on climate change warnings despite >20 years of data predicting the type of fires and fire seasons we are now experiencing. As a result of this inaction, climate change is not something that will happen in the future, it is happening now.
- Failed to adequately fund fire and emergency services including the CFA, SES, Parks Victoria and Forestry Fire Management. In the case of the two latter organisations, the reduction in funding has meant that fewer people are expected to cover a larger area. As a result, resources were too inadequate to stop the fire at Wingan River, which ultimately burned out of control and destroyed the bush and wilderness (and wildlife) for hundreds of kilometres along the coast.
- Failed to prevent logging of old growth forests. There is ample scientific evidence to show the effects of fire in logged and unlogged forests and, likewise, the effects of deforestation on weather and climate.
- Failed to implement statewide Aboriginal hazard reduction regimes, which are proven as effective in Australian conditions.
- Failed to fund adequate wildlife shelters or have an emergency plan for wildlife in the event of a disaster such as the recent fires.

Federal level

Australian Government:

- Failed abysmally to heed international warnings of climate-change impacts or take any action to reduce the associated risks. Instead, the [REDACTED] under its many Prime Ministers, has presided over some of the worst environmental degradation witnessed in this country.
- Failed to adequately fund 'heavy-duty' fire and emergency services resources such as water/chemical bombers. A lack of these resources allowed the Wangan River and others to burn out of control.
- Failed to provide adequate leadership with a Prime Minister who took a holiday in the middle of one of the largest crises that Australia has faced and, in his former position, made a mockery of climate science and the impacts of fossil fuels when he walked into the Australian Parliament with a lump of coal and proceeded to make light of the real and present danger of climate change impacts.
- Failed to take responsibility for nationwide preparedness for catastrophic bushfires and, instead, participated in a 'blame-game' with state governments.
- Failed to provide local leadership from federal members. Our so-called federal representative [REDACTED] failed to materialise until some weeks after the fire and, even then, seemed only interested in the impacts on business rather than the catastrophic consequences of his party's denial of climate change and its obsession with fossil fuels.

All levels of government failed to take appropriate action on the recommendations of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission (Black Saturday fires), particularly Recommendation 1. They also failed to listen to the advice of scientists regarding climate change and the increasing risk of catastrophic bushfires, or the advice of highly-experienced former fire chiefs regarding preparedness for the 2019–20 fire season. As a result, the fires destroyed millions of hectares of bush and wilderness, up to a billion animals, thousands of homes, and resulted in multiple deaths of citizens or fire and emergency services personnel. The lack of action to address these failures amounts to incompetence and negligence.

I consent to having my submission uploaded on IGEM's website.

Kind regards,



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