

Oh where to start....it's been such a long journey but probably best if I start at the beginning. We live in Tonimbuk, West Gippsland, Victoria on 34 hectares and were victims of the Bunyip Complex fires which started with lightning strikes around 3.30pm on Friday March 1st. It was what you would call a little bit breezy on that day but certainly the wind strength was nothing like what we all experienced on Black Saturday. As a consequence the fire was progressing steadily but quite slowly. We received notification via Vic Emergency two hours after the lightning strikes that said, "it is too late to leave".

Unfortunately this notification turned out to be quite premature as our house did not burn until more than two days later.

After receiving this notification, I panicked and, although my husband is very calm in a crisis, with no one on site to assist us, we both felt that we should leave as soon as possible. We left our 1,000 litre tank with fire-fighting pump in the driveway. Our 70,000 litre pool, situated behind our house was accessible and two other tanks totalling over 100,000 litres were also available. However, with no one here to use the water for fire protection, the property remained defenceless against the onslaught that followed.

When we left, we drove each of our cars, took the dog and a change of underwear and went to our daughter's house in Beaconsfield, never thinking that we wouldn't be able to return to set ourselves up more effectively in preparation for the fire. In hindsight, we could have done things very differently. We should have moved machinery and hay out of our shed, moved gas bottles, taken our photos and other priceless momentos and generally have been better prepared than we were. We left our cattle and horses behind and opened gates.

We live in a 'tunnel' road, with a tall tree canopy. There is no exit access at the end of the road, although our property and our house are very clear of vegetation, particularly eucalypts. One of the Royal Commission recommendations following the 2009 fires urged that tunnel roads in Victoria be managed better by being maintained more effectively and frequently to reduce the fuel load. The Bunyip fire travelled along roadside verges which acted as wicks for its transmission. The CFA did not attend the property, nor was it water-bombed, yet it is considered to be one of the most defensible properties in the district.

Early on Saturday morning, my husband tried to return to our property but was refused entry. So began the long wait that resulted in us seeing our destroyed house on Channel 7 News. We were also told that our shed and all machinery, all contents, 3 kms fencing, pasture, all horse equipment and menage were destroyed as well. Our livestock were distressed but had survived. With no fences to contain them a friend came and transported them to his property where they were agisted for 3 months after which they were transported to another friend's property for a further 2 months. We moved from our daughter's house to our friend's house in Warragul, where we stayed for six weeks.

After several more moves we finally settled into a granny flat, offered to us by other very generous friends and which we first renovated to make habitable. We stayed for six months while we converted the only shed empty and left standing on the property to accommodation which would enable us to eventually be on site during our re-build. Dealing with the event is only one aspect of this life-changing experience. The aftermath demands another unprecedented level of energy and resilience. Nothing could prepare us for the challenges and demands of the recovery process. The days and months that followed were dominated by feverishly attempting to clean up, rebuild and build. The glacial pace of the recovery and the government's response to the disaster created significant delays to both our physical and mental recovery.

Out of the thirty one homes destroyed at present only four families have commenced re-building. The additional costs imposed to comply with offset regulations and the extra building requirements have provided a significant source of stress and obstacles to progress for many in our community. Displaced people are living in rental accommodation for which insurance has now expired.

Considerably more fire-affected people are still overwhelmed and paralysed by the enormity of the clean-up task. Our recovery has also been affected by the inequity in assistance that has been offered to us. We were told by politicians that all Australians who suffer from disasters such as this are treated equally. This has not been our truth or reality. Three weeks later we organised two community meetings to navigate a way forward.

Four months after the fires we set up a Community Recovery Committee to advocate on behalf of our community of fire-affected residents.

A significant part of the bushfire recovery process has centred around the community's capacity to self-heal and attend to our mental well-being or, conversely, ignore our own mental health and push forward in a desperate attempt to restore some kind of normality to our lives. While the fire event was horrific for most of us, it has had an unexpected consequence, in that our community has emerged from the disaster as a stronger, more resilient and a more connected group than we were previously. An unfortunate by-product of the pandemic has been an interruption in our opportunity to easily maintain those connections. This has been forced upon us by the cessation of our community dinners and the closure of the local Recovery Centre which was a place of healing through the sharing of similar experiences and the companionship that we discovered there.

After the disaster, we were privileged to meet many kind and generous volunteers who helped and guided us through the ensuing, dreadful time when we were all so traumatized. Our families also played a pivotal role in assisting us to recover. Unfortunately, although many of us are still in the rebuilding and recovery phase, our connections to those support networks have been reduced significantly. However, although the world appears to have moved on as the virus consumes our days, we know we are not alone and hope that our plight, as a fire-affected community, has not been forgotten. We believe that the friendships we have forged over the last twelve months will once again be there when we emerge from the black hole that we, and the rest of the world, find ourselves immersed in.

Vanessa, this is a very shortened version of a very long story. My sincere wish and that of our community is that we learn from the mistakes of the past and don't repeat them in the future. We all need to play a very active role in the prevention process and implement recommendations that will make a difference. A final focus of our Community Recovery Committee is on seeing the practice of Cool Cultural Burns introduced across all vulnerable areas of Victoria and hopefully Australia. We need to take advice from knowledgeable practitioners so that in an increasingly vulnerable future, we may avoid disasters such as this, as opposed to devoting large chunks of our lives and millions of dollars in resources into a lengthy and debilitating recovery process.

You may publish this and our names. We would like to keep in contact.

Kind regards

Sue McMahan



Name: Sue McMahon

Phone: 

My husband David and I lost everything in the South East fires (Bunyip Complex) in March 2019. We would be happy to give feedback at any time.

Regards

Sue

Sent from my iPad