

Submission to the 2019-2020 Bushfire Inquiry

Collated by Judith Sykes based on the experiences of the Fires in the Gelantipy area.

For Paul and Judith Sykes: [REDACTED] Gelantipy. (Paul was born in Gelantipy and he has been involved in farming all his life.) Paul and I were married in 1972 and have farmed at Gelantipy, we established a school camp in 1978 and have added to our initial property of 640 acres over the years. We now farm with our daughter [REDACTED] and son-in-law [REDACTED] and their two children.

Preparedness ahead of 2019 – 2020

The challenges faced by farmers in the area prior to the fires were

- *drought conditions – pasture growth was not as plentiful, but what we had was drying off thus it was a fuel source if a fire started
- *lightning strikes -these usually occur in very difficult and inaccessible terrain: as the bush had not been burned as to the amended fire plan-(not what the locals asked for) there was a lot of dry undergrowth providing fuel.
- *roadsides were carrying a huge fuel load made up of bark and fallen timber
- *the locals and the CFA at both Buchan and Gelantipy have been vocal about the need to remove dangerous trees from the roadways but Vic Roads have not been obliging – the red tape that is now involved to remove such trees is ridiculous . We have timber workers in the area that could be used on a seasonal basis and they could utilize the wood that is removed. The amount of valuable timber that has been lost in these recent fires is criminal, not to mention the loss of animal and bird life.
- *Allowing people to cut firewood in some areas has certainly been a positive move and it is something that shires should encourage rather than discourage by having time frames and a licence system.
- *Farmers need to be able to plough firebreaks around their properties this includes outside their boundary fences as well as inside, this has not been assisted by VicRoads at all, the build up of trees and fallen rubbish would not allow a tractor and plough in.
- *Mechanical clearing and mulching are very positive means of cleaning up the roadways, when the fires were threatening some of this type of work was done around Buchan with positive results.
- *Roadside fuel was a huge problem the roads acted like a wick and carried the fires up and down the road. When you have only one major access road this is a big problem.
- *Lack of water due the drought was a big problem and the ongoing problem with the two quick fills at Wulgulmerang and Gelantipy only made things worse. The East Gippsland Shire needs to take responsibility for the maintenance of both bores and their needs to be a designated community person to check on their useage. Locals need to report problems to the person in charge and not just leave it to some other kind soul to fix it. The area of the bore at Gelantipy needs to be made stockproof and a new building needs to house the bore.
- *We had firefighting water and sprinkler systems operating around the assets on our property and this is why the buildings were saved.

*This fire season the Gelantipy Fire Brigade kept control of the Gelantipy Fire truck and it was then available for use when it was needed most. Small remote fire services should not have their trucks and equipment impounded by task forces in the area.

*The work of the local DELWP officers has to be commended. They have listened to the local and they have listed the priorities that should be included in the fire plan. Local know the dry ridges and the areas that should be burned (impromptu burning when the conditions are right should be practised). When the fire plans get to Melbourne they are squashed or modified and thus we don't have a fire plan that takes out the hot spots nor do we have a patchwork of burns that give shelter to birds and animals.

Problems that arose during the fires;

Communication was a huge problem, the telephone towers were powered with generators that only lasted 6 hours once the power went off, in this day and age when we can communicate with people all around the world, I am sure a better system needs to be sourced. Landlines and two way radios went out once the main power supply was cut and this was out for over a fortnight. People in Suggan Buggan have only had their landlines fixed in the last week.

Immediate road closures – when there is only one road in and out of Gelantipy we need the road open, for essential services. The bus service was stopped when it was quite safe to operate. I don't want to put anyone at risk but common sense just didn't prevail.

After the 2003 fires the priorities were

*Communications

*Water access – the bores

*Fuel on the roadsides

*The fact that farmers are very restricted when they can burn off.

Nothing was learnt from the previous fires, we had firefighters in the area and they were called back to Buchan at 4.30 leaving 9 adults and two small children to protect our assets which we did. If we had left we would have nothing.

The same things are seen as the priorities for this fire as was the previous fire, except this fire was on a bigger scale.

DELWP needs to be able to be proactive all year round, rather than reactive when danger is threatening, local knowledge and input must be utilized and not just paid lip service.

We have been severely impacted with these fires on every property, fences have been burnt, cattle have not been burnt this time but we have had to send them away on agistment something we have never done in 40 plus years of farming. Hay sheds, fences and equipment can be replaced but I don't think the small native animals and birds that were burnt in these last fires will regenerate.

The East Gippsland Shire and Vic Roads really need to look at the way they handle fuel build up in the Buchan and Gelantipy area we have had very little assistance since the fires and the piles of burnt trees need to be addressed. We need a 3 metre cleared buffer zone on the outside of our property. Both East Gippsland Shire and Vic Roads have a lot of rules and regulations that they hide behind and stop us from doing positive things but they are very poor neighbours when it comes to being proactive in fire prevention.

On behalf of the Sykes family thank you for the opportunity to put forward a submission about the 2019/2020 fires.