

JOINT SUBMISSION

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Along the border we are dealing with fires that acknowledge no border. Embers can travel many kilometres beyond the fire front and, as with the actual fires themselves, can cross the Murray River and move interstate.

From our perspective, as the local state Members of Parliament on opposite sides of the state border along the Upper Murray River, several themes arising from cross-border firefighting efforts stand out for examination:

- Fuel Load
- Communications
- Evacuation Centres
- Disaster Declarations
- Using local knowledge
- Roadblocks and definition of locals
- Other possible reforms

1. FUEL LOAD

Constituents have been encouraged to write in with their observations on this fire season. A common theme is fuel loads.

Heavy fuel loads along state and local roads acted as wicks for the fire and were described as fuelling fires that came out of farmland and pasture. In the lead up to the fire season there have been constraints in roadside grazing, impacting on the ability to control roadside vegetation.

The clearance from boundary lines is a consistent theme of concern. In any event, the 4m rule in Victoria and 6m rule in NSW appeared insufficient and there is a need to look to a system that allows flexibility for local areas to set clearance buffers guided by the topography and physical realities rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. Cost and practical capacity must also be taken into account if we are to have an effective and workable set of clearance rules.

The Black Saturday Royal Commission in Victoria recommended an annual fuel reduction burn target of 5 per cent of all crown lands – parks and forests. The Victorian Government has moved away from that recommendation to undertake “strategic” planned burns. Landholders say that has proven a complete failure and cited previous wild fires in 2003, 2006 and 2009 that burnt in crown reserves but did little or no damage to pastures and properties.

Solutions:

1. Enable collaboration between landholders, local government and agencies such as Local Land Services to facilitate roadside grazing and other means of controlling roadside vegetation.
2. Enable local flexibility in policy settings for boundary clearance to allow clearance buffers guided by the topography and physical realities rather than a 'one size fits all' approach
3. Forest areas should be broken by fire trails into even more manageable blocks.
4. Ensure that fuel load management is a major priority in strategic considerations for fire prevention.
5. We need more science-based information about the real value of preventative burning programs: how much, how often, how to manage air quality during the year, and so on.

2. COMMUNICATIONS

Even though our region's fire fighters (RFS and CFA) might be working on both sides of the border, it remains the situation that they rely on different radio settings. They cannot all

receive the same communications at the same time in this region. This leaves the crews exposed to unnecessary additional risks. Is it not time that they have the equipment both to talk to crews from neighbouring states, and to know where the various teams are or are heading?

From the residents' perspective, both Victoria and NSW provide helpful fire watch Apps. However, each App essentially only provides critical information up to the state border. Cross over and the App goes blank. Along the border we need to be able to see the complete picture of the area's fires on one screen.

Solutions:

1. Communication systems that allow a level of integration between cross-border agencies.
2. Fire Watch apps that better integrate information and warnings from interstate – this enables border communities to assess their real risks of staying or leaving.
3. Satellite phones are an essential item of equipment in every rural/ remote Fire Station.

3. EVACUATION CENTRES

There was a rapid response from both state governments to establish bushfire evacuation centres on both sides of the border. This was very positive.

But this is what was also happening: a NSW resident might go to their nearest evacuation centre, run by and funded by the Victorian government. They might even go there with friends or neighbours who happened to live in Victoria. At the Victorian evacuation centre they would be met by helpers who could immediately provide support (accommodation, food, cash payments) for the Victorian residents but not for their 'neighbours' from NSW.

Evacuation centres on both sides of the border did not possess information materials about support available to evacuees from the other state. There was an information vacuum. This added a layer of confusion and stress.

An allied issue is that NSW and Victoria provided different kinds, levels and values of support, particularly in the days before large federal funding was announced.

In terms of providing information on support at an electorate office level, there was a layer of added confusion caused by the evolving nature of government support. For a period it seemed like there was a new announcement of a support program every day. In some instances the terms or amounts of money provided under an existing category of support might change over the course of the fire season.

For example, there was confusion between the terms of the NSW loan to small business and primary producers and the terms of the loan from the federal government, both with respect to interest and an interest-free period.

It must be remembered that evacuees are away from their homes, their computers and may have lost their phones or the phone charge. Keeping on top of important information, and ongoing updated programs, seems to add to the stress.

Solutions:

1. Commonwealth and state governments to have an agreed package of disaster support measures that, at the level of the key financial elements, was consistent. This could be substantially designed well before the fire season so that it was ready to roll out when needed. It would mean that any evacuee, wherever they came from, would receive the support they required from any evacuation centre.
2. Announcements on support over an extended period of time to be consolidated, at least for key and critical elements, all in one package at one time. This would not preclude necessary modification or customisation in the light of specific circumstances, but it would save on the confusion and information overload that is ever present in a stressful situation such as fleeing natural disaster.

4. DISASTER DECLARATIONS

The current system of disaster declarations, relying on local government area boundaries, is outdated and far too slow to respond to need. A very blunt instrument.

In our experience this adds terribly to the mental anguish following losses from natural events such as fire, flood, drought or storm. The experience in these fires was that some shires were adversely affected by smoke and fire threat, resulting in massive downturns for small businesses and other businesses reliant on tourism – it took several weeks for government assistance to recognise that impact.

The weeks taken to include Greater Hume Shire within category C relief were a huge issue in the Albury Electorate. Substantial effort from council and DPC staff was required to ‘make the case’ for inclusion of the Shire. At no time was there any dispute that individual properties within the Shire had been burnt out, and their owners in need of government support to repair and reinstate those properties.

It is also time that government found a way to include a property within the official support structure without having to tie this to whether or not the LGA is declared a natural disaster area.

Neighbouring properties, when all are affected by the same event, should be equally eligible irrespective of their LGA.

The current system risks pitting one community or property owner against another, while adding pain to local government staff and officials who cannot deal speedily and compassionately with people experiencing genuine grief and loss.

Solutions:

1. Identification of impacted communities to be streamlined – potentially based on satellite imaging of impacted footprint.

5. USING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Long-term and generational farmers have significant information about fire risk and fire travel across their lands.

It would be prudent to create opportunities to receive this kind of fire understanding at times other than under crisis conditions.

This comment comes from Corryong CFA:

“Local knowledge in fighting the fires was not utilised enough in many circumstances. It would have been better for a local to have been deployed with each Strike Team and for them to have had more input.”

This reform will require greater cross border collaboration outside times of crisis, with an emphasis on modifying operational processes with regard to a sharing of local knowledge.

6. ROADBLOCKS & DEFINITION OF LOCALS

A major complaint was around the fact that if locals were not at their property at the time the fires started, they were blocked from getting back into their properties to defend them. They claim that all properties that were defended by the owners were saved and the ones that were lost were undefended. They state that if the fire fighters couldn't be there due to the size and enormity of the fires, then the land owners should not have been stopped from coming back to their properties to defend it themselves. This was deterring people from leaving in the first place, keeping them in danger.

Road blocks were not allowing medical staff and veterinary response personnel through quickly enough. The community requested that this be streamlined.

Solutions:

1. The definition of 'local resident' should be revised for road block purposes. As an example, people burnt out at Nariel Valley were not allowed into Corryong to try and secure accommodation after the fires as they were not deemed 'locals'.
2. There should be cross border emergency management plans in localities where there is a crossing (bridge) – for example, Walwa -Jingellic, Weleregang-Tintaldra.
3. Consistent messages for cross border policing and police blocks at these crossings.
4. Recovery efforts in cross border communities need to be 'cross border' – for example, the Walwa-Jingellic Recovery Committee – to avoid community divide.

7. OTHER POSSIBLE REFORMS

- There is a clear need for standardised fittings on standpipes. Fittings differ on either side of the Border.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our real theme is that a significant number of cross-border issues remain to be resolved if we are to have a smoother, safer process for managing natural disasters.

The differences add layers of complexity to fire fighting and put lives and property at increased risk.

When the disaster has passed they also create frustration and stress for survivors and for care givers, making government messaging and support confusing.

ENDS