



## Your details

Ms

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**Title**

**First name**

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Freudenstein

## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

Other

**Submission type**

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

**Organisation making the submission (if applicable)**

Eden Community Access Centre (ECAC)

**Your position in the organisation (if applicable)**

Deputy Chairperson of Management Committee

**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

## Share your experience or tell your story

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

### **1.1 Causes and contributing factors**

The Eden Community Access Centre is a not for profit community organisation and in that capacity is not in a position to express factual advice on the impact of weather, climate change and management of fuel loads however we would strongly encourage the inquiry to seek out and note specialist scientific research and opinion of these vexed issues where ideological or economic considerations have been disproportionately influential for too long.

However even as lay people, members of ECAC Management Committee and the broader Eden community could see that with the record intense heat of the summer and the prolonged period of drought, the likelihood of severe fires in the region, and more broadly, was high. Climate experts and others had been warning of the risk of extreme natural disasters, including widespread bushfires, for some time. A well-researched and conducted education program for households and property owners on a regional, state and indeed national basis would assist people be better prepared for the eventuality of fire. This process should be conducted in consultation with regional communities so that the specific issues relating to the community are covered. For instance, the Eden region has substantial forest allotments and a number of National Parks and Nature Reserves. These are important parts of the natural environment and regional economy; through the tourism industry and logging. The outcome of such a consultation and education process take the form of a local/regional Community Fire Plan.

### **1.2 Preparation and planning**

Lack of coordination was a problem, especially matching Victorian info and NSW apps, and other web-based information re the progress of the fire across the Border. Generally information was not updated frequently enough. There isn't a state-wide or community with community education/communication strategy about preparation for/avoidance of and response to fire. This needs to occur within the local and regional community, in the first instance, in a consultative manner taking into account the local situation and specific risks while drawing on current scientific and environmental information, including Indigenous fire practices. Any laws, practices and strategies going forward need to be evidence based, incorporating well-researched scientific advice and evidence based practices.

### **1.3 Response to bushfires**

Local leaders (RFS & others) disempowered  
Coordination of the response from personnel from outside the town or outside the Shire was a problem. New arrivals, who assumed charge of operations, were not necessarily aware of even basic local infrastructure ie location of key roads, significant buildings in town that would have been suitable for evacuation points.  
Mixed messages causing anxiety and confusion  
There was an emphasis on warnings to Eden residents and visitors to evacuate even though it had been previously indicated that Eden was a refuge point. There were many opinions on where the safest places were. Some thought they'd be in their canoes in the bay, others were going to be in the water at the beach, club buildings, churches, the open space at the wharf were all being chosen. Designated refuge points within the town would have been swamped if everyone had moved into these. With the emphasis on evacuation and it often being pushed in a panic tone, there was little support for those who did feel safe to stay as they were adequately resourced and felt physically and psychologically able to defend or retreat to safety. Advice and support to these stayers would have saved lives and property if the fire had come to within Eden. With 4 days of warning that the fire was coming there were still people who stayed who had not cleared around their houses. Some who did go through the fire would have been better prepared with the offer to fill tanks. (This offer was made after the fires).

People south and west of Eden and Eden residents saw Eden as their evacuation point at the Club and the wharf and sports ovals. The lack of a coherent message and timely continuation of communication re safety, services and where to be caused anxiety and anger and resistance from residents and locals, especially as the Border fire approached the town of Eden. The township of Towamba, and other communities in Eden's hinterland lacked an adequate evacuation structure, lost power and communication and, on the back of the drought, lack of water storage on properties. Access to mobile telephone and power was a critical factor during the fire and in the period afterward. The evacuees from Mallacoota who came to Eden in their thousands needed access to fuel to move on to Canberra etc and fuel shortages - especially diesel, and misinformation also caused panic and aggression with some. Obviously the impossibility of return via the Princes Hwy to the South was a huge impact.

#### 1.4 Any other matters

Strategies in response to fire must be timely. Relevant governments, at all levels, must have strategies in place so that in the event of an emergency, such as bushfire, local service providers are immediately able to provide support to those affected. In the recent bushfires relevant measures weren't in place for a couple of weeks, resulting in additional anxiety for individuals and families and a sense of frustration and helplessness in local support services.

##### Recognition and Assistance for Local Community Services Providing Support

Local community service providers, particularly in smaller or more isolated communities, perform a critical and often under-recognised role in emergency situations. These organisations know their communities well and can predict needs and provide a coordination function and targeted support.

ECAC is such an organisation. It fills many rolls in the community, particularly in providing access to information and supporting connection to a range of social services. As the Eden community and surrounding villages, is geographically isolated in NSW and has a number of socio- economic disadvantages; such as a higher than average unemployment level and with 25% of homes without internet coverage (2016 Census), ECAC's computer terminals and volunteer support is the only avenue many families have to seek information and complete forms online.

Immediately after the fires ECAC was inundated with requests for help. The part-time Manager (0.8 FTE) and volunteers worked full time to support people seeking help and advice. Recognition and support for this work in small communities is important. Clear and consistent information is vital – while the Recovery Centres, which were time limited, were managed by Local Government, it was ECAC that was constantly contacted for information. Increased activity levels experienced by the Centre can be illustrated by a 400% increase in demand for Centrelink services and support in January. The Centre serviced more that 100 families and 300 individuals impacted by the fires, providing a safe place to access support and a 'cuppa'. It coordinated service provision, provided referrals for specialist services, such as mental health, emergency housing etc. Details of support provided is attached.

Organisations such as ECAC need financial and practical support during such times of emergency to keep necessary lines of communication open for community members and visitors. This could take the form of:

1. emergency financial aid to engage specialists or fund overtime
2. secondment on knowledgeable/trained personnel

## Supporting documents or images

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### Attach files

- Attachment to ECAC submission.docx
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The Access Centre played an important role acting as an informal recovery centre. In particular, the Centre:

- Serviced in excess of 100 families and more than 300 individuals impacted by the fires, and provided a 'safe place' for people to access support and a cuppa
- Coordinated service provision with organisations including; the Eden Community Pantry, Services NSW, CWA, Anglicare, St Vinnies, RSL Hall and Supply Central, so as to avoid duplication and ensure timely community access to support
- Provided operational space and equipment for organisations including; Southern Area Mental Health, Services NSW and the ADF. The ADF were provided with 24/7 access to the Centre
- Facilitated and supported access to Centrelink crisis payments, Red Cross grant applications, Services NSW registration for clean-up, and Recovery Centre (BVSC) registration
- Provided referrals to Southern Area Mental Health, Housing, Services NSW (reprint Licences, etc.), Anglicare (food vouchers, fuel vouchers and clothes), St Vinnies (food vouchers, fuel vouchers and furniture), CWA (water, food and clothes), Community Pantry (hot meals and groceries)
- Provided advocacy services for anyone affected by the fires, including; listening to how people were affected, providing comfort, making phone calls, submitting documents, and offering JP services, etc.
- Visited all businesses in the main street and provided information about ECAC support and business support offered by government
- Created and maintained a database of clients serviced through the Centre.