



**SUBMISSION
TO THE
NSW INDEPENDENT BUSHFIRE INQUIRY**

17 APRIL 2020

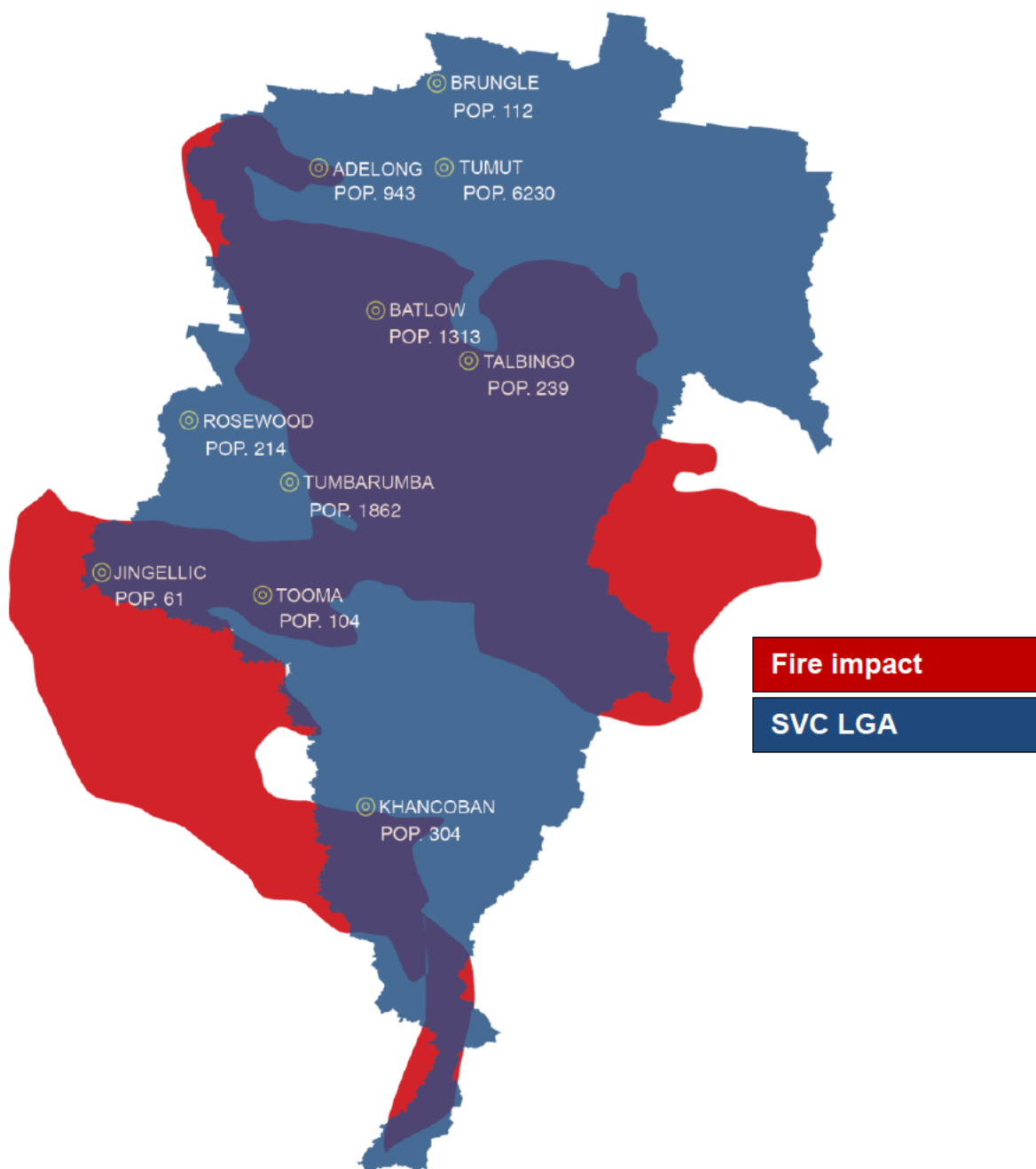
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Overview

Snowy Valleys Council is located on the South West Slopes of the Riverina in NSW and was heavily impacted from fire during the summer of 2019-2020.

The Dunn's Road Fire and The Green's Valley Fire joined to create one 'mega' fire. The fire burnt through 402,650ha of land over 50 days, or the equivalent of 45% of the LGA.



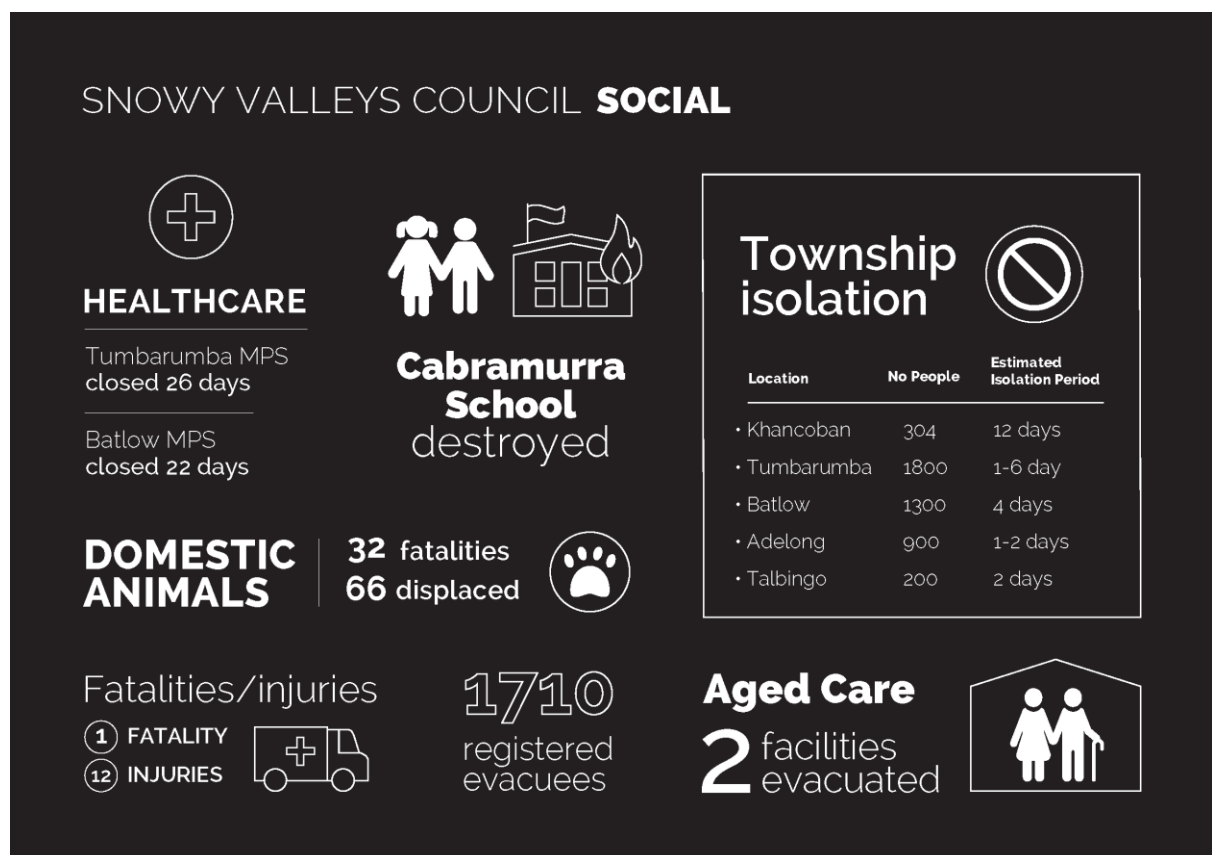
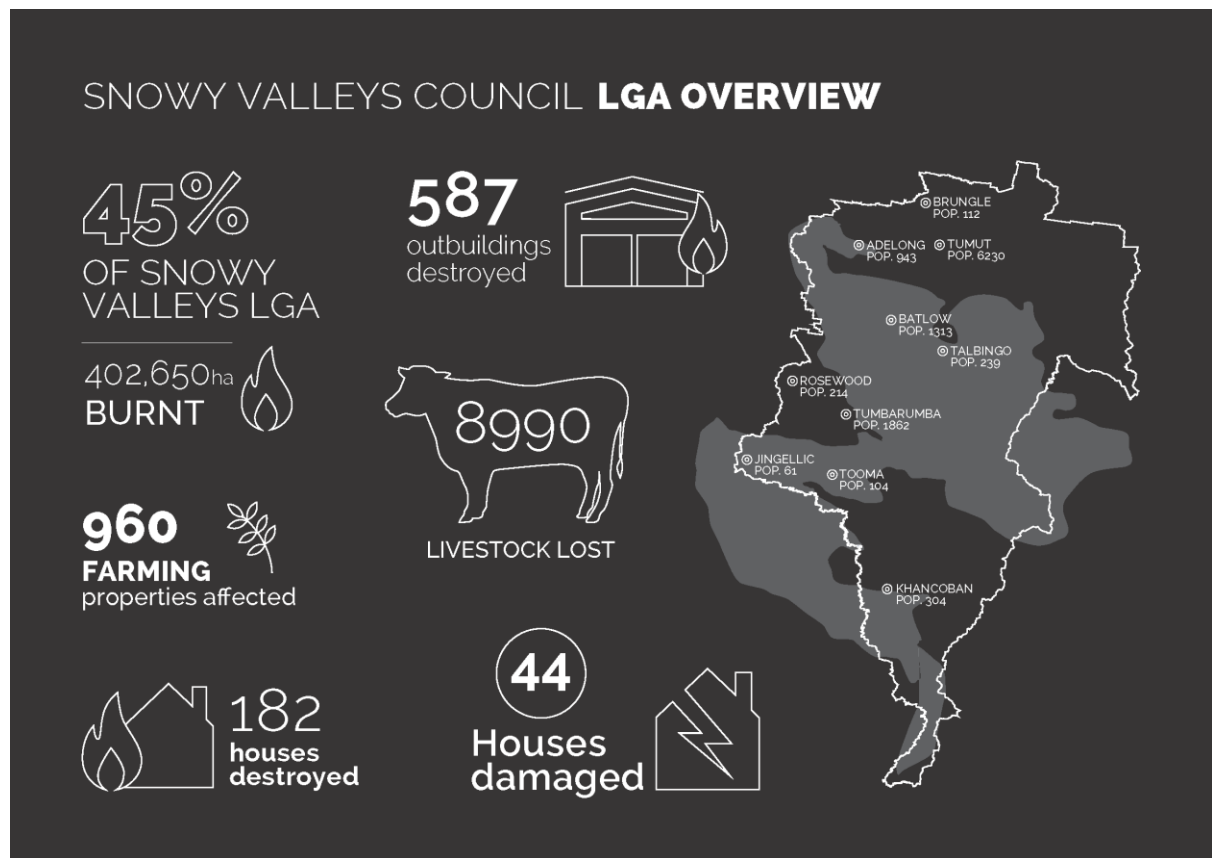
Snowy Valleys – Snapshot of Impact

193 Houses Destroyed
49 Houses Damaged
35 Facilities Destroyed
15 Facilities Damaged
612 Outbuildings Destroyed
186 Outbuildings Damaged
749 Impacted Rural Landholders
1 Fatality
12 Injuries (three serious and nine minor)



Image Credit: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-06/nsw-fires-in-batlow-residents-return-home-to-damage/11845072>

Fire Impact in the Snowy Valleys LGA



SNOWY VALLEYS COUNCIL **BUILT**

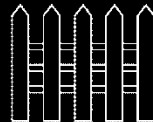


Businesses
2 DESTROYED

587
Outbuildings
destroyed



46 facilities
destroyed



FENCES
APPROX.
10,000KM



182
houses
destroyed



44 houses
damaged

COMMUNITY
ASSETS
DESTROYED



BATLOW
CANNERY



OURIE
COMMUNITY
HALL



PADDY'S FALL
TOILET BLOCK



UNION JACK
HALL

SNOWY VALLEYS COUNCIL **ECONOMIC**

AGRICULTURE
100,000ha
destroyed

- Apples **\$150,000** per ha to replant
- Minimum 7 years recovery time



- State Forests and Private plantations 42,500ha - **\$425million**
- Forestry Re-plant **\$1,700** to **\$3,000** per hectare

2739
TONNE
FODDER
PROVIDED



525kl
water
provided



960
FARMING
properties affected



\$9M
loss to local
vignerons



8990
LIVESTOCK
FATALITIES

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS
AFFECTED



Sugar Pine Forest



Hume & Hovell
Walking Track



Mt Selwyn Ski
Resort destroyed



13 National
Park huts

FORESTRY
6-8 YEAR
replanting timeframe



SNOWY VALLEYS COUNCIL **ENVIRONMENT**



**NATIVE
ANIMALS**
SEVERE IMPACT

Kosciusko
National Park



110,000 ha
affected

**WATER SUPPLY
COMPROMISED**



**IMPACTED
Waterways**



Kunama Dam • Mannus Lake
Talbingo Dam • Jounama Pondage
Blowering Dam • Khancoban Pondage

Land and Fuel Management

Strategic Hazard Reduction

Of the 8960 square kilometres that comprise the Snowy Valleys LGA, 5898 square kilometres, or 66% is unrateable. This unrateable area includes national parks, state forests and reserves, of which a large portion is forested and prone to bushfire.

Hazard reduction burning is a key fire management strategy for managing fire risk on public land, decreasing fuel loads and reducing the potential spread and intensity of bushfires. This strategy also helps protect the flora and fauna of an area.

Data from the NPWS and NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment indicate that hazard reduction burning has approximately doubled within NSW in the last decade (2010-2019) relative to the one preceding it (2001-2009).

Snowy Valleys also acknowledges that controlled burning can be risky and resource intensive. The opportunity to undertake hazard reduction burning is often only available in limited timeframes, is difficult to achieve in periods of drought and can temporarily have adverse effects on local communities, residents and visitors through reduced air quality and other impacts.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- makes a commitment to fund a long-term program of prescribed burning with a key focus on facilitating strategic hazard reduction programming for the management of fuel loads around critical infrastructure, key assets and towns and villages in partnership with other government agencies and landowners
- identifies priority sites for hazard reduction, not only by temperature, wind speed, humidity and drought as in the Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI), but by their proximity to towns and villages and critical infrastructure, and asset protection zones/buffers established

Roadside Management

Councils are responsible for bushfire prevention, mitigation and biodiversity management along local and some arterial roads. In the Snowy Valleys LGA, NPWS, Forestry Corporation and private landowners including private plantation owners, have responsibility for the appropriate management of significant transport networks that facilitate access and economic activity.

Managing fuel load reduction through clearing or prescribed burning along roadsides is challenging. In some cases these roadsides contain the only remnant native vegetation in an area and offer important wildlife corridors and shelter. Effective road management is hindered by competing objectives, legislation and controlling agencies for road safety, biodiversity protection and bushfire prevention.

As an example, areas of the LGA impacted by drought have seen an increase in the number of requests for roadside grazing, which assists in the reduction of fuel load. However in the Snowy Valleys LGA, there is inconsistency between the Local Lands Service clusters and their approach to permissible roadside grazing.

The fires of 2019-2020 have seen situations across the LGA where roads and roadsides became important fire breaks. Roads are also essential for people seeking to escape fires and for emergency services seeking access to fires.

It is worth noting that post-fire recovery works within the LGA to fall hazardous trees in order to 'make safe' the local road network has created a potential future fire risk that will need to be addressed before the next fire season.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- identifies high risk roads utilising a systematic and consistent assessment process and establish a hazard reduction program in conjunction with road managers to reduce future fuel load risk

- identify legislative complexities relating to roadside management, review and amend to facilitate a range of works on roadsides to reduce bushfire risk
- provides consistent guidance to Councils and other road managers to help resolve competing environmental and fuel load objectives for roadside managers
- appropriately fund Councils to undertake preparedness work on roadsides to reduce fuel levels in preparation for each fire season

Plantation Management

The current plantation estate in the Snowy Valleys comprises some 125,000 ha (14% of the LGA) and has the largest socioeconomic presence of any softwood region in Australia, providing employment in excess of 5,375 direct and flow-on jobs and a gross economic contribution of more than \$2 billion per annum.

During the fires of 2019-2020, the industry lost 42,500 ha of both public (Forestry Corporation NSW) and private plantation, representing more than \$425M loss of resource.

The Dunns Road fire ignition point was within a private plantation located at Ellerslie in the north west of the LGA.

Softwood plantations have different fuel structures and fire behaviour characteristics compared to traditional rural environments (grass and scrub). Visibility and access into plantations is less obvious than in grasslands and fire behaviour considerations are more complex.

Weed growth within the plantations contributed significant fuel source that exacerbated the intensity and spread of the 2019-20 fires.

There exists considerable concern from adjoining property owners as to the ongoing fire management planning of plantations.



Recommendation

That a review be undertaken into the current fire management practices of plantations in NSW and appropriate legislative amendments made to facilitate:

- The establishment and maintenance of fuel-reduced areas and substantial firebreak buffers between plantations, adjoining properties, residences and critical infrastructure
- The ongoing monitoring and reduction of fuel loads in and around plantations (aside from the trees themselves)
- working with other landowners and asset owners to reduce fuels and ensure that assets are defensible in the event of a fire
- ensuring that private plantations have adequate fire management response and planning capabilities

Critical Infrastructure

Roads

During the fire event, the Snowy Valleys LGA transport network was severely impacted with road closures along state highways (Snowy Mountains Highway), regional arterial roads (Batlow and Jingellic Roads) and numerous local roads.

Impacts included:

- community, resident and township/village isolation
- inability for supplies to reach townships
- essential service unable to reach towns and villages
- delay in repairs to major infrastructure e.g. reconnecting water, electricity and telecommunication services.
- Inhibiting access in some parts for emergency services to access fire affected areas.



Photo Credit: Image: Twitter/Kelly_J_Small.

Recommendation

Refer to Roadside Management – Recommendation.

- That the State and Federal Government recognise the importance of the transport network within the LGA's and initiate a program of roadside vegetation management to ensure that these vital links are not restricted or hampered due to burning and falling trees in a fire event.

Electricity

A large component of Snowy Hydro's electricity generation capability is located in the Snowy Valleys LGA. Snowy Hydro is an integral part of the State's infrastructure to supply 32% of renewable energy to the eastern mainland grid of Australia¹. During the fires, significant planning and effort by emergency services and supporting agencies was undertaken to preserve and minimise the fire damage to the Snowy Hydro assets at Khancoban and Talbingo to ensure uninterrupted electricity supply to the eastern seaboard.

¹ Snowy Hydro Website: <https://www.snowyhydro.com.au/our-energy/hydro/the-scheme/>

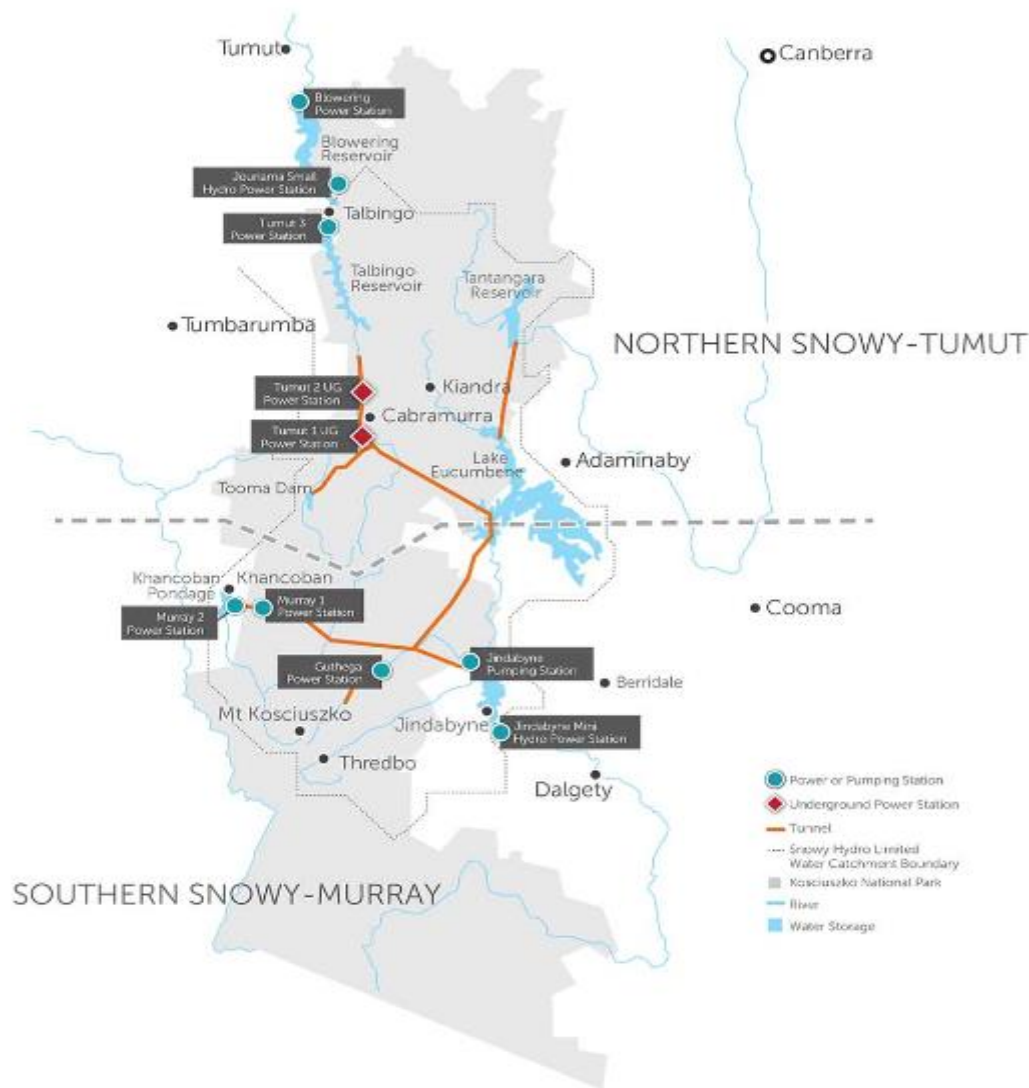


Image Credit: <https://www.snowyhydro.com.au/our-energy/hydro/the-scheme/>

Between 28 December 2019 and 7 February 2020 the Dunns Road and Green Valley bushfires caused extensive damage to Essential Energy's network. Essential Energy is the key electricity distributor for the Snowy Valleys LGA.

Damage to poles, pole mounted substations sites, and hundreds of kilometres of overhead high voltage powerlines, resulted in around 3,600 customers without power for an extended period in the LGA.

Supply was progressively restored to all affected customers over a six week period, with Essential Energy crews replacing 406 power poles and over 900 hazardous trees identified for remediation to protect the network and our communities².

² <https://www.essentialenergy.com.au/our-network/bushfires/bushfire-updates>

Many communication systems rely on electricity to function i.e. telephones, radio transmitters and internet. During the fire event and ensuing electricity failures, the region experienced a shortage of generators with capability of powering transmitters and essential services e.g. Hospitals.

Refuelling and accessing transmitter towers in remote locations that had been impacted by the fires were logistically challenging. The resources and the logistics required to source equipment from other regions and have them installed meant communities were left stranded for days or even weeks in some remote locations without communication facilities such as radio, telephone or internet providing vital updates and information relating to the fire and possible impact on a specific area of the region.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- prioritise the funding and availability of alternate and back-up energy supply such as generators at all essential facilities such as hospitals, medical centres, evacuation shelters, major food suppliers and critical infrastructure including utilities and telecommunication providers.
- apply the 'build back better' principle to energy distribution networks, with steel power poles prioritised over timber for pole replacement
- invest in incentives for alternative standalone power generation technologies for commercial and residential properties to future proof communities

Telecommunications

Snowy Valleys Council would like to take the opportunity to thank Sounds of the Mountain and Radio Upper Murray for their tireless efforts in keeping the community updated with alerts, safety notifications, evacuation information and support service information during the fire emergency of 2019-2020.

Broadcasts were informative, up-to-date and frequent, keeping the region well informed of the situation at hand. Information was delivered by local emergency services personnel and community leaders which gave the community confidence the information was from a trusted source that was current and reliable.

The Snowy Valleys region has significant issues with mobile phone and internet coverage particularly in our rural villages and remote farming communities. During the fire event this proved to be an issue not just for residents but also emergency services. Radio 'black spots' meant that reception was poor or non-existent in some areas. These problems were exacerbated when fire damaged or destroyed radio and telecommunications infrastructure. This hindered the fire-fighting efforts as it required resources of man power to sit at high points and act as relays to communicate between field teams and sector support. This reduced the number of resources that could be used on the fire line.

During the fire event entire towns were isolated due to both fire impacts on the road network and active fire. The townships of Batlow, Tumbarumba, Talbingo and Khancoban along with the villages of Tooma and Jingellic were cut off from the rest of the region as fires destroyed access roads for supplies and essential goods.

In addition, fire impacted power and telecommunication networks exacerbated the isolation and vital communication relating to the active fire status to these communities was impeded. The risk that residents were not given sufficient information or notice to enact their fire protection plans was high.

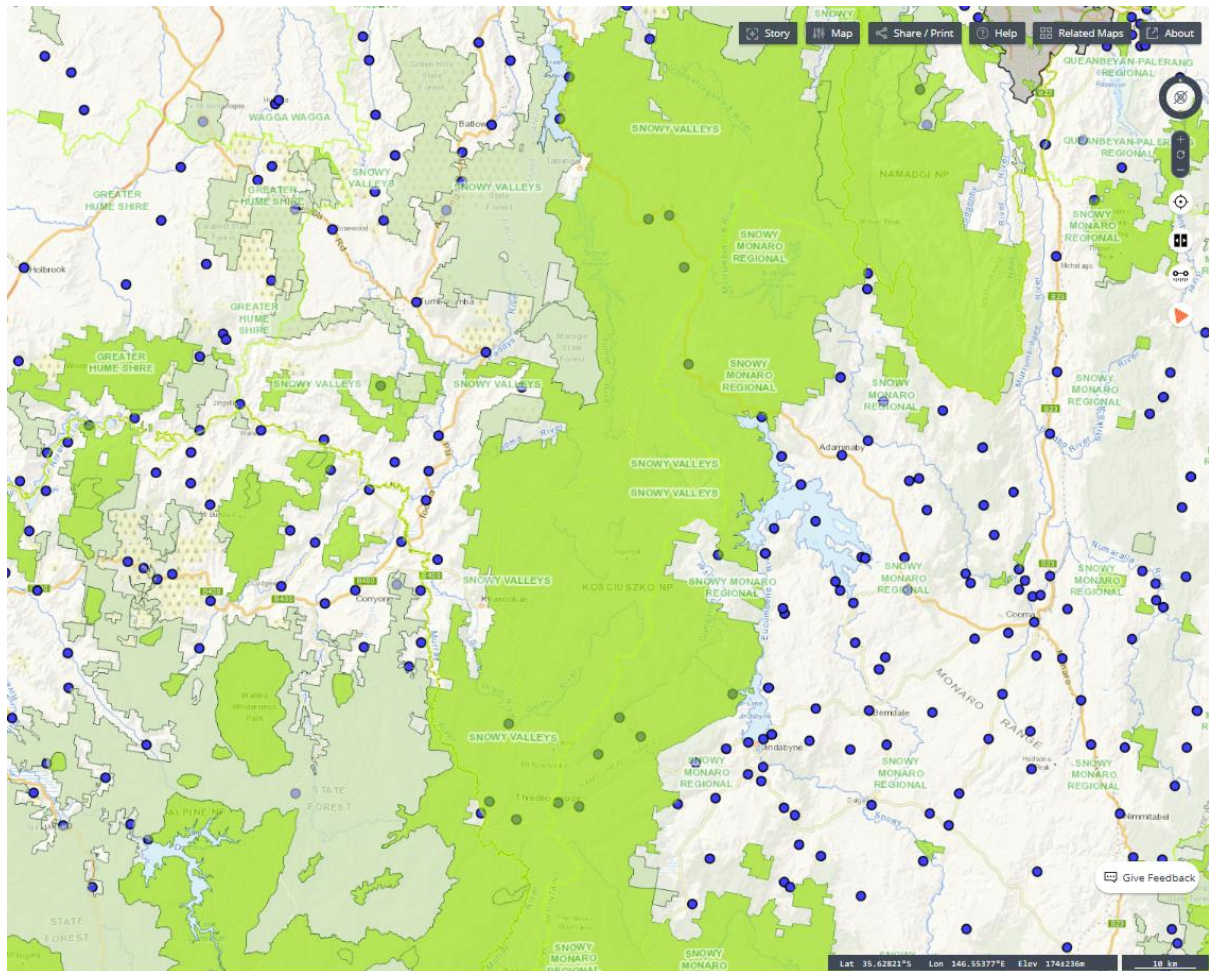
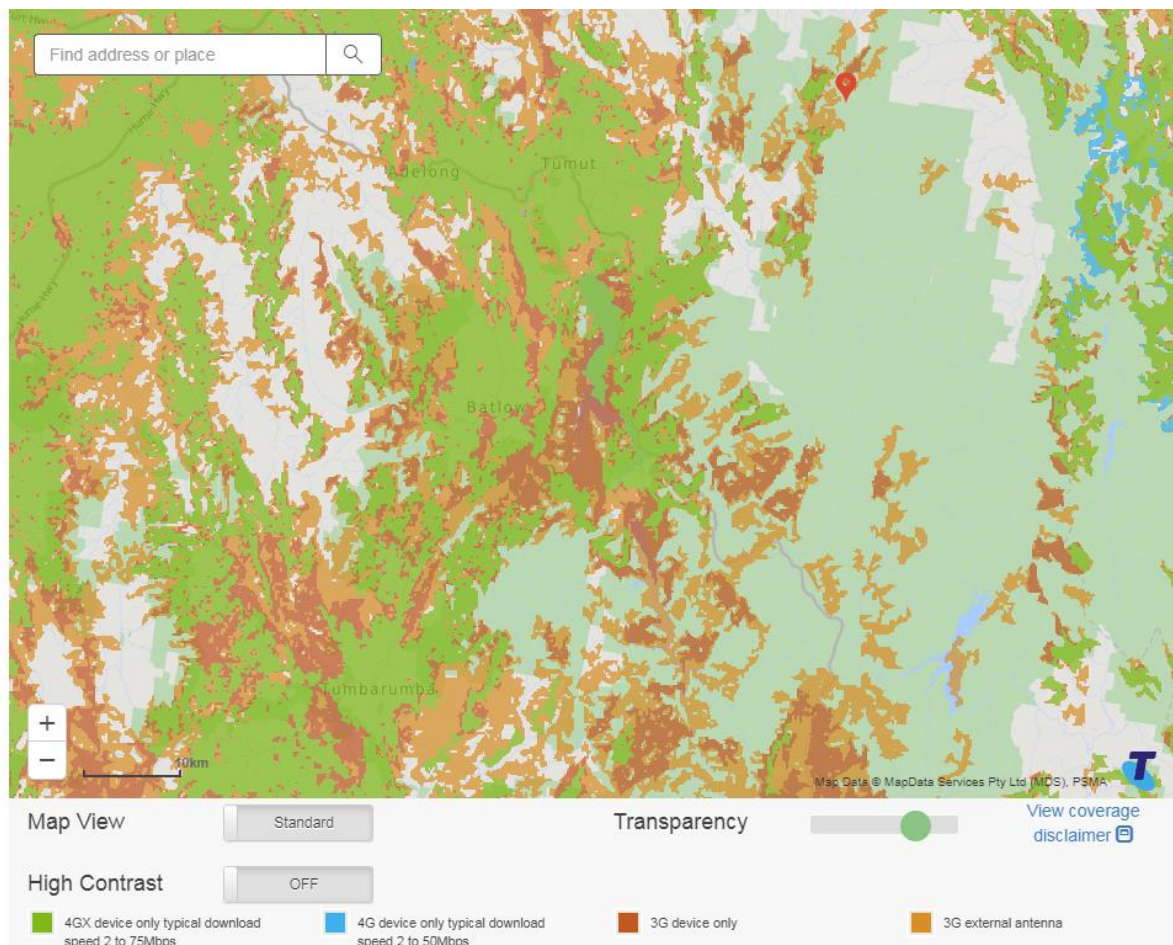


Image Credit: <https://nationalmap.gov.au/#share=s-4Q5PgIhdRcxpz0LQblen2RryHNx>



Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- continue to improve its existing communications system, including by resolving coverage deficiencies by:
- provides funding installation and commissioning of mobile towers to improve connectivity in remote areas where there are known black spots and identified risk areas
- provides funding the installation of radio transmission infrastructure in locations which are remote, don't currently receive radio or television signals
- provides better communications equipment to emergency services to enable them to focus on their primary response role
- provides funding for satellite telephones to be located for emergency service providers such as Police Stations; Council Offices, Hospitals, Ambulance Stations, Fire Stations, RFS sheds
- Ensures telecommunications carriers are meeting their obligations to provide accessible, affordable and reliable service to rural, remote and regional customers
- Ensures telecommunications carriers have appropriate disaster recovery plans in place to ensure continuity of service in times of natural disaster and emergency

Meeting Community Need

Accounting for seasonal and situational population increases

The actual number of people in the region can fluctuate in response to economic activity such as:

- Tourism
- Seasonal Workers e.g. fruit pickers
- FIFO/DIDO workers i.e. Snowy Hydro, Visy
- Contract workers for major industry e.g. Forestry, Agriculture

In the event of emergency of a scale like that seen during the fire event of 2019-2020, the fluctuating itinerant population provides challenges for emergency services and essential services to gauge and predict the immediate needs of the current population to ensure all persons are accounted for and that basic and essential needs are met. It poses an issue to those who have been displaced and require alternate accommodation in the area.

There is an immediate need for accommodation for seasonal workers in Batlow and Tumbarumba to enable the 2020 and future harvest of berries, grapes and apples with a 100-bed backpacker facility heavily utilised for orchard workers in Batlow destroyed in the fire event.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- provides funding support for the rebuild and potential expansion of accommodation facilities for displaced persons, workers, contractors and emergency workers
- provides future emergency management planning to consider population fluctuations relevant to the region due to tourism, seasonal workers, localised projects and industry needs.

Communication

One Source of Truth – Mixed Messages

With the introduction of various media mediums such as Facebook, Twitter, Internet-based news outlets, there was an enormous amount of information circulating in the community. In the height of the fire emergency, amidst tension and anxiety, community members found it difficult to decipher if the information they were receiving was:

- Correct
- Up-to-date
- Reliable/credible
- Useful / Relevant
- Timely

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- Works with each LGA to identify and communicate the designated official channels of communication to be utilised during times of disaster. E.g. Local radio, Local Council & Emergency Services Website / Facebook page, local noticeboard for regular updates.
- Provides under Section 44 provisions additional funding to be given to Local Council, Emergency Services and Media outlets (i.e. Local Radio Station) to appropriately resource regular updates as the situation develops through the official communication channels ensuring information is widely dispersed to the community in a timely manner.

Council Impacts

Roads

Fire impacted Councils in NSW have suffered significant damage to transport infrastructure.

In the Snowy Valleys LGA 350km of the local road network has been damaged. Damage to roads has occurred as a direct result of the fire, but also through firefighting efforts. Larger vehicles, excavators and other equipment were used in the firefighting effort and driven on roads that are not suitable and have suffered damage as a result.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

Expand the eligibility guidelines in existing funding packages, such as the NSW Fixing Country Roads and NSW Fixing Regional Roads, to include repairs to bushfire damaged roads and that this funding is fast tracked to provide economic stimulus to the region.

Sustainability and Financial Capacity to Fund Response and Recovery

During the emergency phase of the fires strict guidelines are in place that dictates the costs Council is able to claim under the S44 emergency declaration and subsequently the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. These restrictions are a major financial impost on Council.

Snowy Valleys Council also received Commonwealth funding of \$1.275M to provide immediate assistance to rebuild infrastructure, employ staff for recovery efforts and strengthen community resilience.

Of major concern for Council is the shortfall in cost burden that Council has incurred during response and recovery that is not currently claimable under any known government funding stream.

Council has expensed or committed in excess of \$3.6M for the bushfire response and recovery. The received funding of \$1.275M only covers approx. 35% of these expenses. It is expected that Council will incur further expenses as time goes on and issues arise. Foregone income will be accounted for as expenditure as it arises.

While Council has accepted funding and support from various levels of government relating to the running of the recovery centres, event planning and volunteer initiatives, there is currently no further general funding available from the State or Federal Governments to cover the above costs.

In addition to transport infrastructure, Council has experienced damage to a broad range of public infrastructure as a result of the fires

Several asset classes for Councils have been fire impacted and are not clearly eligible for the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

Additionally the recent fire emergency has highlighted a number of opportunities to improve infrastructure resilience which in turn will increase community resilience in times of disaster.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government provide:

- a funding stream to support replacement/repair of key public infrastructure such as community halls, toilet blocks, parks and garden public amenities etc. that are not eligible under Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements
- targeted funding programs to support more resilient essential public infrastructure through betterment
- a funding program to upgrade existing critical infrastructure to become more resilient and effective during times of emergency e.g. upgrade the Tumut Aerodrome to support emergency services
- an additional funding program to support the development of new infrastructure that enhances community resilience and emergency response e.g. new basketball stadium and evacuation centre for Tumut.

Post Fire Emergency, Initial Response and Recovery

Acknowledgement

Snowy Valleys Council would like to acknowledge the work of the Government and its various agencies, the Emergency Services, the various Support Services, volunteers and the general community for uniting to assist one another during this disaster.

We also extend our thanks to our neighbouring Councils of Hume Shire Council for their leadership and support during the Green Valley and Talmalmo fires with our southern communities and Wagga Wagga City Council for their assistance with extra resources during this disaster.

Donated Goods

While donated goods were gratefully received (and very much appreciated at the time) during the fire emergency and initial recovery phase, it soon became apparent that the logistics, management and distribution required a workforce of its own to ensure goods were distributed fairly and equitably.

The donations began to impede on the recovery of local businesses and economies when they were able to return to 'business as usual'. The community were overstocked on essential items and it meant local businesses had to wait a further 1-2 weeks before customers were returning to replenish essential items. This was a further setback for businesses who were trying to recover from the down turn in trade experienced the previous 2-3 weeks during the fire emergency.

Spontaneous and unsolicited donations from afar became problematic with loads of donated goods often arriving without prior notification. This required sorting, management and distribution by a large number of volunteers.

The disposal of unwanted and unsuitable donated goods such as clothing and whitegoods in poor condition became problematic when the donations centres closed down.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- initiate funding of local Chambers of Commerce for local spending initiatives where gift cards can be purchased in lieu of donating goods. These cards can be spent at local stores for essential items such as food, clothes, building materials in the LGA (including major chains such as Target, Coles, IGA etc.) to provide the opportunity for local businesses to gain an economic boost post the fires.
- establish a state-wide portal for all donated goods and services to be registered and distributed. This will allow townships to request items and services specific to their needs.

One Source of Data for all Agencies

It has been identified throughout the recovery process there are many different data sets across various government departments that have attempted to identify persons or properties that have been impacted by the bushfires including the Business Impact Assessment (BIA) and Recovery Access Point Registration forms.

The registration process in relief and recovery assistance centres saw many recovery agencies separately collecting personal information from bushfire-affected people, adding to their trauma and slowing the agencies' ability to respond.

Comparisons of these data sets indicate identified gaps meaning people or properties have been missed. The dataset being compiled by Service NSW for the clean-up has not been made available to Recovery Agencies to cross-check. The time and resources used to collate and match the data have diverted resources that could have provided vital recovery services to the community.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- implement a model for recovery where information and data gathered in relation to the bushfires is collated under the control of a single leading agency, ensuring consistency and minimising duplication of work across multiple agencies including council.

Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing

The Snowy Valleys region is made up of diverse communities of people with various demographics, racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Each person's recovery journey is individual and unique. However as a community there is a negative stigma to seek help for our mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Resourcing long term strategies to assist our community to reconnect after a disaster may not be well. Many members of the community have been left feeling isolated during the time between accessing and registering for recovery services and waiting for clean up and rebuilding to occur. These impacts are exacerbated by the current isolation requirements placed on all members in the community due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation

That the State and Federal Government:

- provides funding to resource medium to long term mental health and emotional wellbeing programs including 1:1 services to assist in re-establishing social connections and promotion of positive emotional wellbeing.
- provides funding and resourcing for medium to long term recovery support services to continue to provide recovery services after the funded Council-led Mobile and 'soft touch' Case Management initiatives cease
- commit to the provision of accessible mental health support in community beyond the short term