

SHASA Submission to the NSW Government Independent Bushfire Inquiry - The Eurobodalla 2019-2020 bushfire emergency story

Preamble

The Southcoast Health and Sustainability Alliance (SHASA) is an independent alliance of Eurobodalla community members, and is a registered NGO. Formed in 2014, SHASA's key focus is to highlight and support action to mitigate climate change for our region, and to date the organization has facilitated installation of more than 200 rooftop solar systems with a total capacity of more than 1,000 megawatts. SHASA has also funded installation of solar PV systems and air conditioning systems in a variety of community buildings throughout the Eurobodalla, including The Red Door Centre at St Johns Moruya, Montys at Narooma, and soon to be installed systems at the Eurobodalla Women's and Children's Refuge and the Bodalla Local Lands Council.

SHASA has been able to draw upon the combined experiences of its broad array of members to prepare first hand documentation of events during the 2019-2020 bushfire emergency in the Eurobodalla Shire. These experiences have been used to compile a list of recommendations for future actions to be undertaken by Eurobodalla Shire Council, the NSW Rural Fire Service, and the NSW Government. These recommendations can be found at Attachment 1 to this submission.

The submission commences with a brief overview of the designated role of local government in NSW emergency events, as this provides a benchmark by which Council performance can be evaluated. It proceeds to outline how events unfolded during the crisis, including first hand reports from community members, and then provides a list of recommendations for future actions to improve responses to bushfire emergencies in the Eurobodalla.

Local Council role in NSW Emergency Management

The *State Emergency and Rescue Management (SERM) Act 1989* (NSW) requires all councils to prepare for emergencies, with section 29 of this act authorising establishment of Local Emergency Management Committees (or LEMC). The LEMC is made up of 'the General Manager of the council of the relevant local government area, who is to be the Chairperson of the Committee' as well as representatives from all agencies involved in emergency management within the council's area including the Rural Fire Service, police, SES and Ambulance services.

The LEMC is required to prepare and review local emergency management plans. The Committee may 'facilitate local level emergency management capability through inter-agency co-ordination, co-operation and information sharing arrangements'. The SERM Act 1989 also requires Councils to provide 'executive support' to the LEMC and Local Emergency Operations Controller (LEOCON). This role is known as the Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO). Within this planning process, the LEMO is responsible for facilitating and collating local emergency management plans.

While the Eurobodalla Emergency Management Plan was updated in 2019 with newer census and climate data, the plan content dates from 2016. The Eurobodalla Emergency Plan indicates that Fire (Bush or Grass) has a "Likely" likelihood, "Minor" consequence rating, and a "High" risk rating, which all seem unrealistically low in view of recent catastrophic fire events. For example, the neighbouring Bega Valley Emergency Plan indicates that Fire (Bush or Grass) has an "Almost Certain" likelihood, with "Major" consequence, and an "Extreme" risk rating.

The Eurobodalla Bush Fire Risk Management Plan was last updated on 7 September 2011, and was statutorily required to have been updated within 5 years (i.e. by September 2016 at the latest), and so was more than 3 years out of date at the time of the recent bushfire emergency. The communication component of this plan has no mention of Fires Near Me or Live Traffic, which were both invaluable

during the recent emergency, and is oblivious to the existence of social media. In contrast, neighbouring Shoalhaven City and Bega Valley Shire Bush Fire Risk Management Plans were both renewed in 2018, and acknowledge the existence of social media. An important component of the Bush Fire Risk Management Plan is bush fire prone land mapping, which is a designated Council responsibility, and updated Eurobodalla mapping has been left in limbo in draft form since October 2016. As a consequence, the updated mapping has not been used to inform major planning decisions, such as the Eurobodalla Rural Lands Planning Proposal, or other strategic planning, such as the Emergency Plan.

August 2019

With over 60 bushfires already under way on the NSW north coast, on 13 August 2019 Councillor Pat McGinlay put forward to Council the following motion:

THAT:

1. Council acknowledges and consequently declares that we are living in a time of climate emergency that requires focused and strategic actions at the local government level, for the benefit of our whole community, in both the immediate and longer term.
2. Council requires that all future or revised existing plans, strategies and substantive initiatives related to any and all Council business and responsibilities, include and provide the following: Evidence of a consideration and an initial assessment of the potential impact on climate change in the broad sense and particularly environmental, economic and social impacts on our Shire and its community. This is to ensure there are no gaps in our knowledge of activities that could have climate change implications.
3. Council staff, within a reasonable timeframe (3 months from date of the motion), provide Councillors with a range of options for practical, effective ongoing community consultation mechanisms in relation to climate change. The objective would be to develop initiatives for either Council, Community or joint consideration/action to mitigate the process of climate change or adapt to its impacts within our community.

The Council chambers were full and a number of community members, including 11 year old Kaleigh Peard, made formal presentations supporting the motion. The motion was voted down 7 to 2 (Mayor Innes and 6 Councillors). Only Councillors Anthony Mayne and Pat McGinlay supported the motion. Councillor James Thompson voted for the first part of the motion to acknowledge that there is a climate emergency.

November/December 2019

With much of northern NSW already devastated by bushfires throughout August to October, and the advent of the Currowan fire on 26th November leading to extended closures of the Kings Highway, a number of community members made formal presentations at Council meetings asking the Eurobodalla Council to prepare for the upcoming bushfire crisis. A presentation was given on the increased risk that comes with on-going drought and higher temperatures. This was ignored by the Mayor and the majority of Councillors. When LEMO [REDACTED] was asked what preparations were being made his response was that dealing with bushfire response was the responsibility of the Rural Fire Service, not the Eurobodalla Council.

SHASA gave a presentation which included a number of recommendations of what the Council needed to do immediately:

- Get the Council's bushfire maps updated
- Set up bushfire refuges with air conditioners in every town, like the Bega Shire is currently doing

- Amend the Local Environment Plan to restrict future development to the existing town centres.
- Donate \$330,000 immediately to the Rural Fire Service operations in the Eurobodalla – the amount Council recently spent on tourism advertising.
- Extend the hours of operation of the Library so people can seek refuge from the heat and smoke.
- Extend the hours of the pools so people can keep cool into the evenings and open the pool 7 days a week.

Members of the community requested that the Council, as a matter of urgency, update the Eurobodalla Emergency Management Plan and Bush Fire Management Plan (now 8 years old). Nothing was done.

Bushfire crisis explodes in the Eurobodalla late December

Eurobodalla Shire was already experiencing significant impacts from the Currowan Fire in early December, leading to multiple closures of both the Kings Highway and Princes Highway, but things really escalated on December 31st when the fires swept through Mogo and into Catalina, Malua May and Rosedale. Council staff worked very hard but were let down by the lack of strategic planning and preparation by the leadership at Council – Mayor, Councillors and senior management. It was chaotic, communications were inadequate and we had to rely too much on the hard work of volunteers. This has resulted in a huge cost for these people – emotionally and financially.

Communications

The Council's communications were not adequate. There were scant details on the Council's emergency website page and an over-reliance on their Facebook page. Infrastructure like power and telecommunications were adversely impacted by the fires. What was missing were community noticeboards in town centres to get current information to all interested community members. Also we missed the leadership shown by Bega Valley Mayor Kristy McBain, whose regular segments on ABC SE radio along with other emergency services staff helped to inform the residents of the Bega Valley Shire.

Bega Valley Shire Council has been very proactive in going out to many of its towns and holding meetings to listen and learn from the community of the positives and negatives that can be identified to help build a better response 'next time'. All of these meetings have been Facebook live-streamed and also archived on Bega Council's website for those who could not attend, including a widely watched interview with South NSW Recovery Coordinator Dick Adams. Bega's Mayor Kristy McBain has been at the forefront of ensuring her community is included in the conversation and given the opportunity to provide their voice.

It was also unfortunate that, after being requested to evacuate the south coast prior to the high risk weekend of the 4/5th January, tourists were invited back again only a week later on the 11th January by an RFS press release, at odds with Bega Valley Shire's messaging inviting them to return again at Easter when things would have settled down. This meant that many tourists were impacted again when conditions deteriorated significantly in the week of the 23-30 January. This mixed messaging would not have assisted the longer term prospects of the Eurobodalla tourism industry.

Tourists should have been encouraged to leave the Eurobodalla well before 31 December as by then the Currowan fires were out of control and advancing to the south. Fewer tourists would have also ensured more supplies of fuel, food and other necessities to the communities living in the Eurobodalla.

Evacuation Centres

On 31 December many people could not find the Evacuation Centre in Moruya. Council's Evacuation website page only mentioned the Evacuation Centre at Hanging Rock, Batehaven. There were no details of where people should go in Moruya or Narooma. For Moruya it only mentioned that cattle and horses could be housed at the Showground. There were no street signs to direct people, including tourists, to the basketball stadium at the Showgrounds. As a result cars, caravans and tents ended up in various locations – e.g. Riverside Park, Gundry Oval – which are not identified as safer places to go in a bushfire event. Note Blazeaid currently has a number of signs to direct people to the Showground for assistance on Murray St.

Those who did finally locate the Moruya basketball stadium found a site totally unprepared. There were not enough chairs, beds. There were no fans (they came later) or air conditioning so the facility was much hotter than outside. Portaloos were brought in, but they were inadequate in number, capacity and cleanliness, resulting in a gastric outbreak. There was no back up power in the Evacuation Centres. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] observed that generators would be hired in when needed but failed to plan for the possibility of road closures which eventuated during the emergency.

Despite the demographic data in the Eurobodalla Emergency Plan indicating this shire has a disproportionate number of elderly and disadvantaged people, there was also a lack of suitable facilities in the evacuation centres to cope with the many frail, elderly, very young or incapacitated evacuees. At least one frail elderly evacuee died at the Moruya Evacuation Centre.

On the disastrous day of 23 January evacuees found the Narooma Evacuation Centre locked despite the need for refuge from fires closing in on Narooma. The Eurobodalla Council manage the keys to the Evacuation Centres

Whilst the Bodalla Bowling Club had been designated as a “Neighbourhood Safer Place” by the RFS, the current Club management were ignorant of this fact and their requirements. Despite their efforts to help the many that turned up at the Club, this led to confusion and anger as people thought it was an “Evacuation Centre”. Perhaps the management’s ignorance of their status and the difference between the two is contributed to by the RFS not carrying out Annual Inspections as required in their own Service Standard 4.1.1-6. Surely if the Annual Inspections had been carried out, then Club Management would have been aware of their status. Further it would be helpful if the Council did publicise the location and function of Neighbourhood Safer Places along with their Evacuation Centre information.

The lack of operational evacuation centre services in smaller Eurobodalla communities such as Bodalla led to Eurobodalla residents such as Lisa [REDACTED] initiating their own local community service centres with food and essential supplies available at no charge to local community members. Lisa [REDACTED] shared her ideas and lessons learnt from the experience with Eurobodalla Council, only to be met with frosty responses. Lisa’s communications with Council are attached to this submission (Attachment 2).

At no point did the Council open up the Council halls which had air-conditioning, kitchen and toilet facilities for the public to use, e.g. Kyla Park Hall, Bodalla Community Hall, Dr McKay Centre in Moruya, Batemans Bay Community Centre. Some or all of these facilities should be considered as future Evacuation Centres as these smaller communities can very quickly become isolated from the centres in the larger towns.

Green Waste

Throughout the bushfire crisis, most Councils encouraged residents to clean up flammable green waste from around their properties and to facilitate this waived green waste tip fees. By contrast, the Eurobodalla Shire Council kept charging people for green waste, even for those community-minded residents who were helping others to clean up their yards as part of bushfire preparation. For a couple of weeks in late January and early February, in response to many community complaints, the Council increased the green bin pick up to weekly. This was helpful to those with a small amount of garden waste but not for those with larger amounts of green waste or those who wanted this material removed before the bushfires hit. In February exemptions from fees were announced but these are limited to burnt outdoor furniture, not burnt trees or shrubs or other green waste.

Customer Service and Access

Eurobodalla Shire Council offices in Moruya were scheduled to reopen on 3rd January, but Council chose to delay the reopening until 13th January. As a result the community had no access to face to face customer service until 13 January. This added to the heightened stress levels of the community. In contrast, both Shoalhaven and Bega Valley LGAs reopened their offices on schedule just after the New Year break.

Extraordinary Council Meeting

Councillor Pat McGinlay asked for an extraordinary meeting of Council to be held in January, but this was rejected by the Mayor and majority of Councillors. By comparison, Shoalhaven Council ran an extraordinary council meeting on 20th January to facilitate a stronger response to the unfolding crisis, including extensive details of Shoalhaven recovery arrangements. The Eurobodalla Shire Council waited until 11 February 2020 to meet for the first time in 2020.

Overall

There is a general perception by many in the community that the Eurobodalla Council felt that responding to the community needs during the bushfire crisis was not their responsibility but rather that of NSW Government agencies and the Australian Government. This attitude meant that, in many areas they did the barest minimum and had to be pushed to do more – e.g. we had our first community bushfire newsletter on 29 January 2020. The result is that Council staff had to work harder in a more chaotic working environment, community members were more traumatised and many feel very let down by the tier of government that is closest to the people – their local government.

Learning the lessons

At Council's Public Forum on 4 February and the Council meeting on 11 February a number of community representatives spoke about the need for Council to undertake an independent review of the bushfire emergency to identify what worked, what did not work and the lessons learnt so that the Council can do better next time. This was rejected by the Mayor and the majority of Councillors.

The community group SHASA was told if it went ahead with its presentation regarding its concerns with the Council's performance during the emergency then the Council would no longer work with SHASA. SHASA was also told that we should be targeting the NSW and Federal Governments as they had let us down, not the Eurobodalla Council.

Community workshops are being autonomously organised across the Eurobodalla to capture the lessons learnt (so far at Tomakin, South Durras, Moruya and Narooma), but sadly the Eurobodalla Council

leadership are not listening.* The Eurobodalla Council leadership are merely patting themselves on the back to say what a wonderful job they did.

If they will not listen, they are bound to repeat the same mistakes again.

SHASA has distilled key lessons from the 2019-2020 Eurobodalla bushfire emergency into a list of recommendations in Attachment 1 to this submission.

*Footnote: As this submission was being prepared, Eurobodalla Council has announced it will be holding an internal review of Council's bushfire emergency performance, but specific details such as terms of reference are yet to be released apart from the fact that it will be run by Council's GM, meaning it will not be an independent process.

Attachment 1 : Recommendations by SHASA to the NSW Government Bushfire Inquiry

1. Recommendations for measures that need to be undertaken by the Eurobodalla Shire Council

Up to date plans and mapping

- Update the Eurobodalla Emergency Management Plan as quickly as possible.
- Update the Eurobodalla Bushfire Risk Management Plan.
- Update the Council's bushfire prone land mapping.

Suitable Evacuation Centres for all (including elderly and people with disabilities)

- Set up bushfire refuges with air conditioners in every town, like the Bega Shire. For example there was no refuge in Bodalla or Mogo.
- Ensure there is appropriate equipment and supplies at the Evacuation Centres including backup generators. This includes chairs and beds, air conditioning and regularly cleaned toilets.
- Have clear signage directing residents and tourists to the Evacuation Centres.

Communications

- There needs to be a significant improvement in the information provided by the Council including its emergency website page.
- Set up community notice boards in each of the towns and ensure bushfire emergency information is put on these noticeboards. It is not sufficient to have the information only on the ESC website and Facebook page. Many residents do not have access to computers.
- The Mayor needs to follow in the footsteps of the Bega Valley Shire Mayor and ensure the community is kept informed through regular segments on ABC South East as events unfold and regular meetings with the communities across the Eurobodalla.
- Hold extraordinary Council meetings during the bushfire crisis to ensure the Council is quickly dealing with issues that arise.
- Ensure customer service staff are kept operational during bushfires so that people can make contact with the Council.

Green Waste

- During bushfire emergencies provide free green waste drop off at tips to encourage residents to clean up their yards and properties as part of bushfire preparation.

Heatwave options

- Extend the hours of operation at Council Libraries so that people can seek refuge from the heat and smoke during bushfire events.
- Extend the hours of operation of Council pools so that people can keep cool – evenings and weekends.

2. Recommendation for the NSW RFS

- Ensure that Annual Inspections of Neighbourhood Safer Place (NSP) are carried out in accordance with their own Service Standard 4.1.1-6
- Add to the above that a review of the requirements of the NSP be carried out with that establishment.

3. Recommendations for the NSW Government

Reduce logging of native forests.

Australian National University landscape ecology expert Professor David Lindenmayer said multiple academic and forest industry studies showed forest thinning in Australia "makes forests more fire-prone".

The decade's long history of intensive logging in the South Coast region has made our forests more fire-prone. Logging has made the impacts of the fires worse by increasing the number of smaller, younger trees in denser drier forests. It has also hastened climate change by releasing tonnes of carbon stored in these trees into the atmosphere when they're logged.

A moratorium on logging native forests *especially* in bush fire affected areas would maintain the carbon in the trees, assist with the recovery of native wildlife and in the longer term help prevent the extreme wildfires experienced over this "Black Summer" of 2019/2020. There needs to be a moratorium on logging native forests and a permanent transition out of logging native forests into plantation timber with adequate compensation for the workers affected.

Hazard Reduction burns are no panacea

Increasing the rate of prescribed burning is no answer to the current wildfire problem. Case studies from the recent fires illustrate this - most notably the Border fire. It burnt from the Victorian border to Eden in a single day, through some of the most heavily logged forest in Australia, so even though the fuel load in that forest had been reduced, the fire simply swept through anyway.

It may seem counter-intuitive but the longer old-growth forests remain fire-free, the less combustible they become. The thicker canopy creates more shade, the undergrowth becomes thinner and less vigorous - and hence there is less fuel for fires.

Properly fund the National Parks and Wildlife Service

If adequate funding was re-instated for NPWS it would contribute to good land/fire management and pest control practices in our parks - and benefit the tourism industry.

Over the last 9 years NPWS had \$121 million cut from its budget allocation in 2011. In 2017 an additional \$80 million was cut and the number of rangers employed was reduced by approx. 25% (fact checked by The Guardian)

Previously 28 people were in the role of senior rangers. They had responsibility for hazard reduction and pest control. This role was abolished in a restructure in 2017, effectively replacing rangers with office based clerks - presumably on less pay than rangers with university qualifications and 20 to 30 years' experience in the service.

In the Eurobodalla and Bega Shires jobs directly created by forestry represent less than 1% of the total work force. By comparison, this is even less than the amount of people employed in the arts and sports. Many more jobs are dependent on our nature based tourism sector which is heavily reliant on the South Coast's image as an environmentally unspoilt place which is incompatible with logging.

Attachment 2 : Documentation of Lisa [REDACTED] Communications with Council

1) Presentation to Council

I live and work in Bodalla. My trade is production horticulture, with long stints in welfare and employment policy.

I have owned & operated several restaurants, worked with community organisations facilitating labour market programs & training, and been employed by federal, state and local governments across the country.

Since moving to Eurobodalla, our primary business continues as Micro Energy Systems, an electrical contracting company specialising in Renewable Energy. We work hard to retain a local workforce of between 6-10 employees and work closely with the South coast Health & Sustainability Alliance to encourage the uptake of Renewables in our region.

This unique synergy between small business and a not for profit community group has seen very real and very practical on the ground achievements made; this partnership has led the way in securing grant funding for a number of community organisations to reduce their energy use and costs, quite a few of which are tenants of council owned buildings and as such have benefited from our collective efforts.

We have installed in excess of 1.5 megawatts of rooftop solar, implemented recycling of Solar Systems to assist those who cannot afford them, facilitated information and training sessions for residents and business of the community and for the last 4 years worked on a regime of promoting Electric Vehicles and the required Infrastructure for the Eurobodalla ... to which we are still watering the seed.

On the weekends through the growing season I operate a market garden established to promote fresh LOCAL produce using a community cooperative approach. Members volunteer their time in the garden a day a week in return for free produce and Horticulture training.

We collaborate with other market gardeners in the area to sell our wares.

I also facilitate our community's newsletter; the Bodalla Moos to encourage local cohesion and am a proud member of the Bodalla Rural Fire Service.

As I have no doubt you are already aware, the recent bushfire crisis highlighted several issues relating to the local community's ability to deal with, and respond, to crisis situations.

I would like to offer a personal observation; it would appear to me that our collective ethos seems to lack the necessary imperative to develop a clear and fundamental plan to deal with the inevitable results of critical changes in our environment.

It's as if we are reacting to events rather than anticipating and planning accordingly.

And when we do react, it is often evident that the value of our efforts and services are somewhat misplaced...it is like as if no one is 'talking' to each other.

In view of this I am hoping that my personal perspective, both as a resident and business, and as a distillation of my conversations with the local Bodalla community may assist the council in planning and implementing measures for the future.

How many of you are aware of the Food hub that was set up in the Bodalla Community Hall

immediately following the fires that ripped through the area, directly effecting friends and community at Nerrigundah, Cadgee, Belowra, Reedy Creek, Cheese Factory Rd, Waincourt ..and later Ganons point, Horse island and Bumbo Road; fires which took the lives of 3 members of our community.

This was a hub that was set up and run by a dozen or so volunteers from the community, many of which were themselves, directly impacted by the fires.

The hub facilitated emergency response for close to 2 weeks until Council and Government assistance could mobilise. This hub negotiated food, water, clothing, bedding, cooking and medical supplies from private interstate donations using private property, machinery and transport to receive and disperse them. The hub also provided emergency accommodation and access to information and services which later came online.

Our records show this grass roots hub provided immediate assistance to over 500 families, 15 community organisations and 5 fire stations directly after impact of the initial fire crisis.

There is no doubt the events during and post fire threats have traumatised us.

They have made me think about how we do things and more importantly how we could be doing things.

I have been particularly disturbed by the way in which issues raised by the community are being received; specifically, from my own recent experience it would appear that emotion has suppressed the ability to look at these issues raised with objectivity. Appreciating these are trying times for all of us, the last time I checked it is OK to have a personal opinion, it is OK to raise issues for resolution, it is OK for a community to anticipate their local council and governments have strategic planning in place resultant from community collaboration.

The last time I checked it is NOT OK to have these issues met with 'raw, defensive and hostile responses', or overt bullying and intimidation.

So, I have collated concerns from the community in which I live as best as I am able, into the following points.

These are the issues which I feel need to be addressed and those that I am hoping to secure Council assistance with.

1. **Communication;** there was very little.

No power, no phone network, no radio coms meant there was very little to no communication. What was received much later down the track and is still being issued by Council and Government Departments assumes our communities have access to social media, power and phone networks; this has proven a dangerous assumption.

Perhaps we could investigate the feasibility of utilising gsm, satellite-based networks as well as more traditional wireless infrastructure as a backup to existing technologies...although reliance on technology cannot be the only solution.

Perhaps more achievable and more useful, would be for us all, including the Council, to learn how to talk effectively amongst ourselves.

2. **Backup and emergency power facility;** there was none at any of the critical hubs in Bodalla including but not limited to the RFS, Bowling Club, Community Hall or fuel stations.

It took small business like ours to donate the supply & Installation of a backup genset changeover to the Bodalla RFS, the Tuross RFS and the Potato Point RFS; generators had to be loaned by members of the community and yet these are council owned assets.

The Club was initially used as a mustering point for members of our community to take refuge in, however no back up power meant no food, no water, no communications, no lights, no sewerage. A passing tourist trapped by the fires loaned the club a small petrol generator which provided power by extension lead until it ran out of fuel, because no power also meant no fuel.

Rolling out appropriate backup and emergency power facilities is not a difficult proposition, and one which I would like to see funded by Council rather than relying on donations from small business already haemorrhaging financially as a result of the fire crisis.

3. **Water & Fuel supply;** critically we ran out of potable water and water for fighting fires. Extended power failure meant we had no sewage pump out and no fuel. RFS appliances unable to reach Firecom in Moruya had to access fuel from private sources. Surely the use of our own water and gravity fed fuel at emergency depots in or nearby Bodalla is also achievable.

I would also like to propose the investigation of feasibility for back up power to support the sewerage pump out infrastructure; for eg: a battery storage and dedicated inverter back up for each pump out facility that would allow our sewerage infrastructure to maintain operation over extended periods without power.

4. **Evacuation hub & 1st responders' medical station;** There was no 'evacuation centre' for Bodalla or outlying areas. In hindsight this would seem to be a major oversight. When roads are blocked and residents from these small communities unable to evacuate to major hubs

located on the highway, Bodalla naturally becomes a focal point.

Proof of this is evident from recent events where the police, emergency services, RFS and the army have located centralised facilities in Bodalla.

We already have existing council facilities which could be adapted for this purpose. Facilities such as the tennis courts which could accommodate appropriate infrastructure for emergency use with backup power, water & coms. A 1st responders' medical station would also be a welcomed addition in a regional area like ours.

Alternatively, these facilities could be established at existing community hubs such as the Bowling Club, with a Memorandum of Understanding put in place between the Council and the Club for these facilities to initiate and operate during such times.

Again, these are all very much achievable.

I would like to emphasise here the logistics of emergency response requires that we have the appropriate infrastructure and facilities here at Bodalla, not just in the larger centres, which proved to be completely inaccessible to most constituents in the local area.

Lastly, I would like to extend our gratitude to the Council at large for their collective efforts and re-iterate my personal belief that there is no delineation between local government and constituents – we are one and need to face adversity together, constructively.

Having said this I can only hope that my family's fears of reprisals, from representing our community here today, due to executive rancour is unwarranted.

I would ask that the Council take this not as a direct criticism, but as a contribution towards the collective efforts of both the grass roots community and those, elected and in paid employment to serve them.

Our Ref: 4189840

18 February 2020

Lisa [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear Lisa

Thank you for taking the time to present to Public Access session held on 4 February 2020. Contributions to this session are a welcome insight into the views of our local community. We provide the following information on your queries:

Communication

Council worked extremely hard to undertake asset protection works on critical communication infrastructure during November and early December. Unfortunately, the fire breached the containment lines and caused significant damage to the Shire's communications facilities. Work commenced immediately on restoring power to the critical communications infrastructure. Council staff and sub-contractors commenced work on restoring communications as soon as the fire threat was clear.

Essential Energy, the authority responsible for the maintenance of power and powerlines commenced work on restoring power immediately. Significant outages were experienced due to fire damaged poles.

One of Council's roles during the emergency response was to provide communications and public relations support to the Eurobodalla Emergency Operations Centre. This commenced on New Year's Eve and will continue as required.

Communications consisted of regular updates provided by email to media, local community associations, evacuation centres, and posted on Council's Facebook page and website (website from second week in January).

The updates consist of official advice from the Rural Fire Service about fire activity and weather predictions, and advice from other emergency services and police for residents about returning home after relocating, evacuation centres, roads and traffic, power, water, waste, support for livestock.

This information was the basis for local and regional media to keep the community updated and was broadcast on radio and published in print and online. Local and national media interviews were arranged when agency, government and Council representatives were available.

Eurobodalla's local media outlets deserve acknowledgement. Maintaining professional and empathetic emergency coverage over an extended period requires commitment and passion for community – Council congratulates the region's journalists and broadcasters on their efforts.

Power, internet and television outages meant many residents were isolated from information. Attempts were made by the EOC to overcome this by providing twice daily briefings at each evacuation centre, and Council staff delivered hard copies of the updates to communities where access was possible.

A factsheet to help the community better prepare for what RFS call a campaign fire – fires that extend over a long period - was created and distributed on behalf of the Eurobodalla Emergency Operations Centre by Council. It was widely used by local media and neighbouring councils to provide information and strategies to the community in the lead up to recent bad fire days.

To coincide with the opening of the Eurobodalla Recovery Centre on 15 January, Council created Recovery webpages – www.esc.nsw.gov.au/recovery - that collect the range of recovery information in one convenient place for the community. Topics include clean up information, financial assistance, animals and livestock, looking after your mental health, and information about the recovery centre. Resources are updated daily.

Backup and emergency power facility

Council had installed back up power facilities at its water, sewer and waste infrastructure in early December in preparation for significant power outages. However, significant power outages continuing over many days provided additional challenges for Council staff. It should be noted that staff worked significant hours ensuring that generators were fuelled and running the essential water and sewer infrastructure.

Water and Fuel supply

Water supply during the emergency response on 31 December 2019 was maintained to all of Council's reticulated system. Water supply was compromised to Moruya on 4 January 2020; however, Council did ensure that supply was maintained. As a result, a boil water notice was issued for a short period.

Due to power outages, fuel supply was limited. Fuel supply for emergency services vehicles was provided through the Moruya Fire Control Centre. Emergency generators, where the facilities enabled them, were installed at certain petrol stations to ensure supply for private use and some emergency service vehicles.

Evacuation Centres

Evacuation centres are opened and operated by the NSW Government through the arrangements with the relevant welfare agencies and supporting charities. Where practicable, evacuated people are provided with suitable alternate accommodation, either being directed to family and friends, or if required, to temporary accommodation.

The scale of the fire impacts across NSW (and other parts of Australia), resulted in approximately 60 evacuation centres being in operation simultaneously across NSW, up to five times the typical maximum number in any one emergency situation.

Despite this, the three evacuation centres within Eurobodalla registered more than nine thousand people at the peak of the evacuations, with Council, including a number of Councillors, needing to supplement trained welfare agencies with our own resources to assist, due to lack of access into or out of Eurobodalla. This was during a period where the Shire experienced the loss of power, television and telecommunications. Emergency power generation was provided at the three dedicated evacuation centres.

The emergency services agencies will review the outcomes of the operation of the evacuation centres as part of the normal post event processes. Council will participate in this review with input directed into the review process via the Local Emergency Management Officer. Recommended improvements including those needed to make the evacuation centres and community infrastructure more resilient and effective will become the basis of further grant applications to the Office of Emergency Management.

I trust that this clarifies your concerns.

Yours sincerely

Dr Catherine Dale
General Manager

From: [REDACTED]
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Eurobodalla Shire Council
Date: Wednesday, 19 February 2020 10:17:00 AM

Good morning Kylie,

Thank you for forwarding correspondence on behalf of Catherine Dale.

I appreciate the opportunity to present perspective from Bodalla and neighbouring communities to the Council in an effort to identify the main issues that affected us during and post fires, provide potential solutions and access assistance from the ESC.

I also appreciate the effort made by Catherine Dale to address these concerns however it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to further open dialogue to clarify the points raised, so that Council has a clear understanding of the issues and how they can assist.

Communication was and still is of utmost importance and the issues pertaining to this were not solely centred around damaged/offline infrastructure.

What we were attempting to highlight is that there is need for a much more wholistic response from council with regards to the dispersal of information using methods more appropriate to localised areas and audiences. This would also in turn, provide Council with a connection to the Community in order to identify and triage ongoing issues throughout what will be very long recovery process.

For example: Councils updates did and still do, assume that people have access to social media applications such as Facebook, access to phone/internet coverage, access to power and access to transport to attend evacuation/information hubs...they simply do not.

A senior member of ESC staff recently stated: "We would have more Recovery outreach services if people ask for them. The ones run so far have not been well attended". "People can come to Moruya if unable to go to Batemans Bay". A statement like this unfortunately indicates a lack of understanding to the barriers faced by constituents from more remote/isolated areas of the Community. I attended the Community Recovery Meeting at Bodalla and can confirm that the majority of residents desperately needing access to these services were completely unaware that the meeting was being held and or unable to attend due to transport and access issues.

I note Councils recent effort to take the meeting to the people at Nerrigundah and applaud this effort, however I would ask that you do the same for residents on Eurobodalla Road, Waincourt, Cheese factory Rd & Bumbo whom also face challenges both in accessing major hubs and having phone/net coverage.

Of most benefit would be for Council to set up an ongoing roving information site manned

by staff to provide updated communications and information to affected residents and business – with a long term focus.

A suggestion would be to run a **regular** two hour time slot on a **set** day of the week or fortnight at the **same** location i.e.: Bodalla Hall, Belowra RFS, Nerrigundah RFS, Eurobodalla Rd etc. This would allow residents who do not have access to phone networks or transport, to attend and receive essential information and services. This has certainly worked well with other services.

Backup and emergency power facility; the issues I would again like to clarify with Council is that all of the RFS and most major hubs are Council owned assets yet none of them had backup generator facilities – more importantly none of them still do.

Instead members of our community took generators away from their own families use to loan to these hubs [it is important to note that the use of these generators in many of these family homes were prioritised to pumping water for firefighting protection and for livestock, not just lights & appliances].

The Supply & Installation of manual genset change over switches were donated by our small business to these council owned buildings.

This is a particularly obvious, cost effective and easy fix. Will Council be reimbursing for this?

Does Council have plans to invest in the supply and installation of change over switches for essential circuits and reliable diesel gensets at their properties going forward?

Whilst essential water and sewer infrastructure may have been manually maintained by Council during the crisis period, the Pressure Sewerage System that residents were forced to connect to by Council, were not.

These units require localised power [that is power at each site] to maintain operation. As an electrical contractor specialising in remote area power supply, with an intimate knowledge of the units and working relations with PS Solutions we are well placed to

offer a cost effective solution for battery storage and dedicated inverter back up for each pump out facility that would allow operation over **extended** periods without power... an issue [and solution] we raised in the initial design/planning stages and again during roll out of these units.

Water and Fuel: Water supply was compromised out here for a considerable period. As a member of the Bodalla RFS I am well aware of Firecoms fuel supply however the point I would like to clarify here is that we **did not have access to** Moruya and our appliances were forced to refuel from a private source on a number of occasions. That is not a position members should be put in again.

I thank you Catherine Dale and Liz Innes for your time to read this email, and for your consideration, given hopefully a better understanding, to the issues and practical solutions that have been raised.