



Special Edition -
March 2009

Draft submission for comment by Strathbogie Tableland residents

Following the community meeting held at the Strathbogie Hall on 4th March to discuss our submission to the Royal Commission, Steven Sargona (the consultant employed by the Shire to help us put together our submission) has written a draft for our comments. This draft is reproduced below in this special edition of Tableland Talk.

Everyone is invited to comment on what has been written. Please make your notes in the spaces provided and return them as soon as possible to Helen Peters, STAG secretary, either by leaving them at the store in the box provided, or by mailing to STAG, c/- Strathbogie Post Office, Strathbogie 3666 by 24 April.

DRAFT SUBMISSION FROM THE STRATHBOGIE COMMUNITY TO THE 2009 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES ROYAL COMMISSION

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. As a small rural community which together experienced the severe threat of bushfire on and in the days immediately following Saturday 7 February 2009, we have decided to make this combined submission on behalf of our entire community.

The Strathbogie township and surrounding rural community has a population of around 256 people ('State Suburb' locality at 2006 ABS Census). Strathbogie is located some 175 kilometres north of Melbourne and 30 kilometres north of Alexandra, as shown on the map below:



Note: this map refers to Ruffly, not Strathbogie. It should be relocated to its proper position.

The Strathbogie community submits as follows:

1.0	PREPARATION AND PLANNING BY GOVERNMENTS, EMERGENCY SERVICES, OTHER ENTITIES, THE COMMUNITY AND HOUSEHOLDS
1.1	Measures need to be taken to ensure that evacuation / relief centres are well known (including publicity and signage), well equipped and well protected. Whilst these centres are vital to the response and recovery effort, their location and role must be established and well known long before the immediate threat of bushfire occurs. They must be defensible.
1.2	Local communities must be encouraged and supported in efforts to prepare and plan for bushfires all year round, particularly at times when the threat of bushfire is not immediate. This should include planning at a community-wide level around community asset protection and the use of strategic fire breaks. We submit that the Royal Commission should consider ways in which government may support and encourage communities in this regard.
1.3	Roadside management planning by the various responsible agencies is critical. Measures should be taken to ensure that Vicroads and Council road management plans address stipulated critical issues such as removal of roadside fuel, management of overhanging branches and road construction standards to ensure the accessibility of local roads and strategic routes for both residents and CFA vehicles during emergencies. We also stress the importance of maintaining tracks in the bush so as to provide access during bushfire events. (Please note that section 2.1 below refers in greater detail to the issue of roadside fuel reduction.)
1.4	We make the observation that on days of Total Fire Ban, National Parks are closed yet State Forests are open, meaning they can be used for motorbike riding and the like. We submit that State Forests should be closed on days of Total Fire Ban.
1.5	Currently, camp fires are allowed in the bush at all times except on days of Total Fire Ban. We submit that they should be banned in the bush for the entirety of the fire season.
1.6	We suggest that the use of off road motorbikes should be banned on days of Total Fire Ban.
1.7	We submit that the Royal Commission should consider the appropriateness of applying Total Fire Ban restrictions across the entire fire season / summer months, as opposed to particular days only.
1.8	The Strathbogie community notes that there appears to be less emphasis in present day fire prevention programs on fuel reduction burning than there may have been in the past. The last significant burn in this area was around 1990. We believe that fuel reduction burning should be a more prominent part of fire prevention efforts.
1.9	We note that local councils issue Fire Hazard Notices in township areas to enforce individual property owners' responsibilities for fire prevention (cutting of long dry grass etc). We submit that this process should be enacted all year round, not only in the lead up to the fire season. Further, we suggest the process be broadened to focus not only on immediate fire hazards, but to impending fire hazards such as long grass that is likely to dry in the warmer months.
1.10	The provision of water for local fire fighting is obviously critical to bushfire response. The location and availability of water must be well known and easily found. We suggest that as part of the preparation and planning effort, appropriate signage should be erected to direct CFA trucks to local water supplies / dams etc, including those on private land. This is particularly important for non-local CFA personal.
1.11	We submit that as a general, over-arching principle, a common sense approach should apply to government and environmental regulation. We suggest that political activism from minority groups and a fear of accountability at political and bureaucratic levels has moved the balance away from a pragmatic, common sense approach, to an overly cautious, regulatory and legalistic one. A better balance needs to be struck between environmental preservation and fire safety needs.

Your comments on Section 1

2.0	LAND USE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT
2.1	<p>The issue of fuel on roadsides – particularly dead wood – is one which the community is particularly concerned about. Fallen branches provide much fuel for fire yet the removal of wood on roadsides is unreasonably and inexplicably complicated, including the need to acquire a permit to collect wood on a specific time and day, only after consulting both local and state government (Department of Sustainability and Environment). This process needs to be fully investigated and made simpler. We do wonder why a permit is required at all; that is, in the same way that property owners are responsible for weeds on the nature strip outside their property, perhaps they should be allowed to collect dead wood and thus reduce fuel. Alternately, local councils could be authorised to remove dead wood from the roadside. If a permit system is deemed to be required, we suggest a much simplified system involving only one government agency and greater flexibility in terms of what may be collected and when. Another strategy to reduce roadside fuel loads may be to allow and encourage more stock grazing on roadsides by simplifying these processes. We suggest that roadside clearing efforts focus on fence lines and immediately either side. We also make the point in favour of more roadside controlled burning, given that local habitat survives controlled burns but is destroyed in bushfire. A common sense approach to this issue is at present sadly lacking and much needed.</p>
2.2	<p>In relation to bans on stock grazing in national parks, we suggest that prohibiting grazing does not necessarily serve to preserve these park areas, but instead puts them at greater risk of being destroyed by fire due to larger fuel loads. We submit that the Royal Commission should consider the role of stock grazing in national parks (as well as on rural roadsides) in the fire prevention effort.</p>

Your comments on Section 2

3.0	FIREPROOFING OF HOUSING AND OTHER BUILDINGS
3.1	The restrictions on the removal of mature native vegetation should be eased to allow for greater and more appropriate clearing of trees around houses. Moreover, such clearing should not only be allowed but increased.
Your comments on Section 3	
4.0	PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ADVICE SYSTEMS
4.1	We must be careful not to rely too heavily on the internet and mobile phones. The implications of loss of electricity on landlines and the internet must be considered. We also suggest that more localised communications systems are required and that, where possible, greater emphasis be placed on communications coordination at the local rather than regional level.
4.2	Media processes must be simplified so that the time taken to get an urgent message from emergency service agency to air is reduced.
4.3	More local radio coverage should be provided to focus on smaller local fires in a more comprehensive manner than ABC radio (774) is able to.
4.4	We submit that residents and visitors need to be more aware of the specific level of fire risk in the local area on any given day. A standard, national or state-wide category system which allows for input of local conditions to calculate a more meaningful yet widely understood threat category level would be of benefit.
4.5	Better promotion of Total Fire Ban days is required.
4.6	Strathbogie suffers from poor mobile phone and internet access. Federal and state governments must work to urgently address this problem for all rural communities as it poses a significant obstacle to response efforts and public safety during bushfire events. We submit that until such time as appropriate mobile coverage is available, a subsidy should be offered for the purchase of UHF radios (to access channel 13).
4.7	The only public telephone in Strathbogie is a card-only one. Thus, if the local shop is closed and an intending user does not have a phone card they can not make a phone call. Coin operated public telephones should be provided in small rural communities with limited mobile phone coverage.
Your comments on Section 4	

5.0	TRAINING, INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCING (INCLUDING VOLUNTEERS)
5.1	CFA and SES volunteers require more support in the form of better training, consistent communication, personal counselling after witnessing trauma and acknowledgement / assistance regarding their own financial hardship due to loss of income. Further, the efforts of CFA and SES volunteers must be recognised in ways that are meaningful and relevant to those volunteers. Consideration should be given to the establishment of a body to organise, encourage and co-ordinate the provision of in-kind compensation by community members to volunteers. In this way, volunteers will be acknowledged, cared for and compensated by their fellow citizens.
5.2	We suggest that formal and informal programs to educate and build confidence among the general community in bushfire prevention, preparation and response must be enhanced, appropriately funded and delivered on an ongoing basis.
5.3	The Royal Commission should examine measures to encourage the development and use of community fire bunkers. Guidelines around the use and operation of these should form part of the Royal Commission's interim report.
5.4	The single wire power system is unreliable yet the provision of electricity is an essential service. Measures to encourage alternate forms of power through the take up of solar energy and other technology must be strongly encouraged.

Your comments on Section 5

6.0	PENALTIES FOR ARSONISTS
6.1	The Strathbogie community strongly submits that penalties for arson need to be further reviewed and strengthened. Whilst we acknowledge that this has occurred in recent years, we make the simple point that it appears not to have served as a sufficient deterrent in relation to some of the 2009 bushfires.

Your comments on Section 6

7.0	RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION
7.1	Whilst we understand that the Royal Commission is unable to enforce the adoption of its recommendations by the relevant agencies, we wish to make the strong point to all levels of government, emergency services and other relevant agencies via this submission that the community has a desire to see the Royal Commission's recommendations seriously considered and adopted in full. We would regard as most disappointing any 'picking and choosing' of "easy" recommendations over the more difficult or politically sensitive ones. We would like the Royal Commission to express this concern in its interim and final reports.
Your comments on Section 7	

Any further comments?

Your name (optional)

Please return this draft submission with your comments as soon as possible as indicated on front page.

Thanks.

STAG sub-committee on Submission to Royal Commission