



Please Quote: C017.9 JC:NC  
Enquiries: J Costello

Submission No.285

Thursday, 8 May 2003

Ms Sophie Panopoulos MP  
Federal Member for Indi  
117 Murphy Street  
WANGARATTA VIC 3677

Dear Sophie

**HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES**

I attach herewith a Submission for the Committee to consider.

As you are aware, Indigo Shire was affected in the recent bushfires and we are only too happy to provide evidence of our experiences and the issues that have arisen.

Please note that the community and Council contributed an enormous amount of effort in both fighting the fires and since then in the recovery phase of this emergency situation.

I would also point out that this Submission is written on behalf of the Council as an organisation involved in the firefighting and recovery, and not as a Council submission advocating on behalf of the Community.

We have encouraged individual members of the community and organisations to make their own submissions directly to the Inquiry.

I would be pleased to speak with you to clarify any issues in the Submission, and would be only too happy to appear before the Committee if it so wishes.

Yours faithfully

**John P Costello**  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

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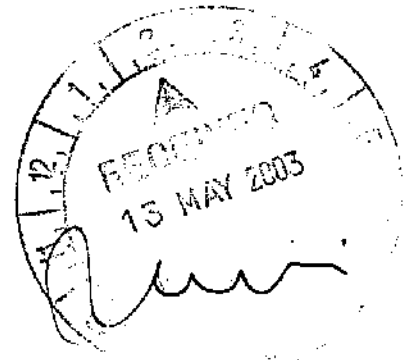
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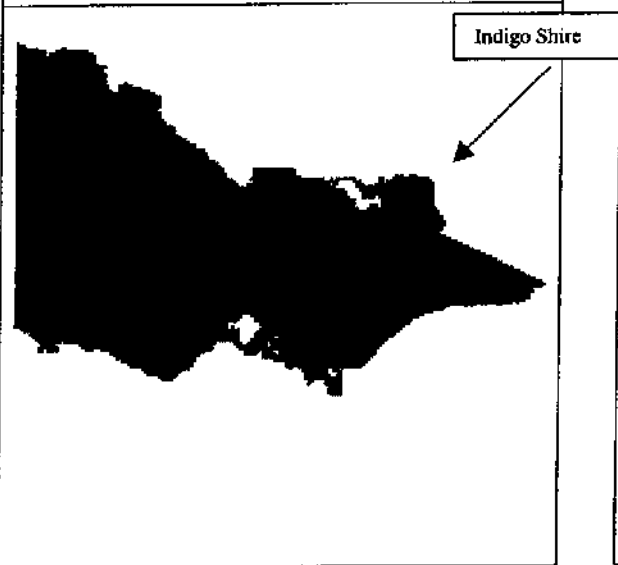
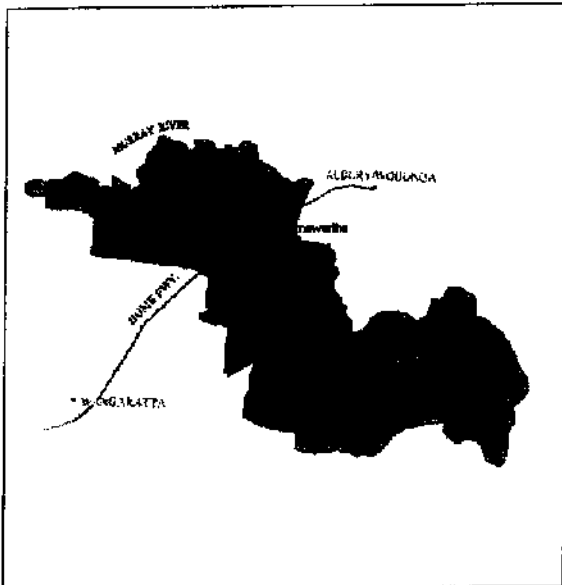
# INDIGO SHIRE

# SUBMISSION TO THE FEDERAL INQUIRY INTO VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES 2003

Prepared by:

INDIGO SHIRE COUNCIL  
07 May 2003

# SHIRE AT A GLANCE



**Location:** 270 km north-east of Melbourne, bordering the Murray River, Australian Alps and the municipalities of Wodonga, Wangaratta, Towong, Alpine and Moira.

**Area:** 2,016 sq. km

**Population:** 14,536

**Shire Office:** Beechworth

**Service Centres:** Chiltern, Rutherglen, Yackandandah

**Budget Total:** \$20.562M

**Rate Revenue:** \$5.214M

**Organisational Structure:** Employs 39 staff (effective full time) in client services and 93 in provider services (IWS - Indigo Way Services). IWS is the Shire's business arm. It had a turnover of \$10.447M for 2001/02 which included \$5.781M of works and services outside of Council's standard operations.

**Industry:** Rural in nature with supporting services in small towns. The economy is based on farming (beef, sheep, dairy, fruit and viticulture) and processing of local primary produce and the provision of services, including tourism.

**Major Attractions:** The Rutherglen area is world renowned for wine production.

The historic towns of Beechworth, Chiltern and Yackandandah attract thousands of visitors each year to view their historic character and natural beauty.

**Key Statistics 2001/02**

Planning Permits No	329	Value	\$ 4,276,594
Building Permits No	313	Value	\$ 3,882,348
Properties (total) No.	7,951	Value	\$964,346,314
Property Rateable No.	7,250	Value	\$943,201,688

# **INDIGO SHIRE COUNCIL**

## **FEDERAL INQUIRY INTO VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES 2003**

### **PREAMBLE**

The views expressed and information provided in this submission are those of Indigo Shire Council from its own operational perspective. It is not a compilation of the Indigo Shire community and judgement on same. Council has left it to individual members of the community or groups to provide their own views, experiences and issues.

### **THE HISTORY AND EXTENT OF THE FIRES AS THEY AFFECTED INDIGO SHIRE**

Two major bushfires started in the region on Tuesday 21 January 2003. The first of these started at Eldorado in the Rural City of Wangaratta and burnt in a north easterly direction through bushland, burning out much of the Mt Pilot range before being stopped to the west of Indigo Creek Road.

The second fire started in the Buckland Gap area of Murrumbidgee before burning through natural bushland towards Stanley. It ultimately jumped the Beechworth/Stanley Road in the vicinity of the Stanley cemetery and then burnt out large areas of pine plantations and natural bushland before being stopped to the west of Service Basin Road and Bells Flat Road at Yackandandah. A spot fire also started in the vicinity of Bells Flat Road crossing Back Creek Road and Robinson Lane stopping fifty metres before Dederang Road.

The southern sector of the Stanley fire did burn towards the Silver Creek area of Beechworth, but was stopped prior to reaching the Beechworth/Stanley Road. A small fire of about five hectares in area also broke out in the Flat Rock Road area of Beechworth.

The efforts of the Emergency Services, especially the CFA and its support crews cannot be underestimated. In addition, other Emergency Services such as the Police and SES played a major role in combating the fires and providing support to the CFA.

In the background of the major combating authorities, enormous effort was provided by the Red Cross and other support agencies such as Salvation Army and the Department of Human Services.

Council played a major role in operating the Emergency Management Centre in Beechworth which provided major logistical resource to various agencies. Council was also responsible for the co-ordination and manning of Relief centres and the supply of information to the community. Indigo Way Services staff also actively participated in fighting the fire, working side by side with the CFA in the areas of supply of water and fuels to equipment on the fire front, as well as providing equipment and manpower for road closures, fire break construction and remedial works.

All in all there was an enormous effort by many of the regular Emergency Services and other organised service groups. However, in the background of this was the enormous volunteer effort of the community in general.

## **FIRE DAMAGE/IMPACT**

Contrary to national media reporting, the majority of assets in Indigo Shire are still intact. The fire in fact, has been limited to mainly national parks, state forest, private plantations and a small amount of private property.

### **Physical Damage - Natural Environment**

A large portion of the Mt Pilot National Park has been burnt out, along with surrounding state forest. Also state forest in the Stanley area, together with private plantations owned by Hancocks and others have been burnt out.

In both areas small amounts of private property have been affected by, both the fire and in providing backburning and containment lines.

Council is extremely concerned at the environmental damage. This needs to be carefully monitored and a strategy developed to limit further damage and encourage regrowth/restoration. Water supply run off from the forest areas into stock and domestic supplies will be contaminated, and therefore erosion and pollution control measures need to be immediately undertaken.

The State Government has provided funds for a lot of reinstatement works in public land areas. Council will not be providing comment on the suitability of these works as it is outside Council's area of responsibility.

The State Government has provided some funds for containment line reinstatement works but this was mainly on the Crown Land areas rather than repairing lines on private property. Some works have now been instigated in cooperation with the Council, State Government and landowners but this action was far too slow in being approved.

### **Roads**

A number of constructed sealed roads have been damaged by unusual traffic utilising the firefighting exercise. For example, dozers have ripped up roads where they have been loaded and unloaded to access the bush areas. Heavier than usual traffic including water tankers and fire tankers have damaged edges of roads. Fallen trees have also damaged sealed surfaces.

Gravel roads have been severely affected in some areas by the very heavy traffic and the type of traffic. Roads will require resheeting, especially in the Eldorado/Woolshed area.

Roads in national parks/state forests also need to be repaired.

Damage to roads and roadsides by the fires was in the form of;

- Trees burnt, leaving dangerous remains that had potential to fall across private property and the road pavement.
- Burnt guideposts and other road furniture such as warning advisory signs and steel name plates.
- Burnt out wooden and plastic drainage culverts.
- Damaged timber bridge stringers and timber decking by overloaded vehicles carting water and fire suppression equipment such as bulldozers.

- Council was fortunate that fire fighters controlled fires that were burning bridges so that scorching of timber was the only effect.
- Damage to the road pavement, both gravel and sealed by tracked bulldozers travelling to and from worksites.

The estimated cost to re-instate the network to a safe and usable condition is estimated at;

- Local roads \$87,230.00.
- Main roads \$ 20,390.00

VicRoads have verbally indicated that all costs associated with restoration of Main Roads will be met.

In regard to Local Roads, VicRoads, the co-ordinator of disaster funding has considered the assessment lodged by Council of \$87,000 and allocated \$50,000 towards rehabilitation works.

### **Bridges**

Whilst no bridges have been destroyed, two timber bridges have suffered collapsed damage because of the heavier loads eg. water tankers utilising those bridges. Estimated repair cost \$58,000.

In relation to roads and bridges preliminary assessments have been provided to VicRoads for damage in its areas of control.

### **Fencing**

A major issue has arisen with the loss of fencing along these national park and state forest areas where they are adjoining with private property. State Government assistance was requested by the way of minimum half cost fencing restoration with the private landowners in Indigo Shire but has not been provided. Some other areas have been funded for "dog fencing".

### **Private Property**

An amount of private farm property in the way of housing, outbuildings, grazing land and farm fencing has been destroyed. Firebreaks and containment lines are being repaired.

*Council suggested the following possible solutions to physical damage*

Funds need to be directed into the National Parks and State Parks to:-

- Protect the revegetation areas, repair tracks and signposting (refer unemployment scheme suggestion later).
- Firewood collection - with the proclamation of the National Park there has also been the side issue of a lack of firewood for the Beechworth area. Possibly some scheme could be put forward where professional firewood collectors could be employed under DSE supervision to recover suitable firewood that is not required for environmental recovery. This could be disposed of at a special "fire sale" cost which would assist both recovery and provide firewood for the next twelve months.
- Fencing - plans to at least replace burnt perimeter fencing adjacent to the parklands and plantations would be very advantageous as an economic stimulator and to correct the

physical damage. Again, VFF and/or Community Employment Scheme labour could be utilised to erect fencing.

- VicRoads needs to apply additional maintenance funding immediately to repair main roads.
- Additional State Government funding to resheet damaged gravel roads and repair local roads and signage would be appropriate.
- Two damaged bridges have been assessed at requiring \$58,000 expenditure.

#### **OUTCOME IN RELATION TO SUGGESTIONS:**

- Large amount of funds provided into Crown land areas but only limited funds into private land areas.
- Limited action on fire wood collection issues
- No funds provided to assist farmers other than very minor stock containment grants [Maximum \$2000]. Some other municipal areas have been funded for "dog fencing" adjacent to National Parks.
- A verbal commitment from VicRoads has provided \$20,390.00 to restore the Main Roads network. No further assistance to Council as yet for Local Roads.
- Announcement of \$80,000 for bridge works across the Shires of Indigo, Towong and Alpine but no action as yet as it appears the funds are for bridge assessment and not repairs.

#### **SOCIAL DAMAGE**

##### **Mental Trauma and Fatigue**

Many people in our community are still living in fear of further fire outbreaks. There is still plenty left to burn and there is a fear that with thunderstorm activity and extremely dry conditions, that there will be further outbreaks. Fire restrictions have also been lifted and there will be further burning off by both government and private groups/individuals.

There is also a strong suspicion of arson/firebugs being involved in recent fires and that this could reoccur.

There is also general stress and fatigue in the community having experienced the fires in very close proximity to the built up areas and farm holdings. There is no doubt that the efforts made to protect dwellings and property was remarkably effective however in many instances the fight was literally at people's doorstep. Individual efforts to protect property, combined with the high probability of failure, has resulted in very high levels of residual stress.

Another compounding factor to the high residual stress was the alarming sense of isolation experienced by the residents of Stanley caused by the rapid spread of the fire towards the township and the limited fire fighting resources available because of the number of fires in the area.

There is evidence in the community also of a loss of confidence and/or a sense of disillusionment in choosing to live in a rural community. Many people feel disadvantaged compared to urban dwellers in terms of access to services and support.

Stress and frustration has also been expressed by land owners at a perceived lack of redress or compensation available to them for the actions undertaken by their neighbours [in this

instance the government] to contain fires on Crown land, resulting in damage to land and loss of productivity, assets and lifestyle.

Many individuals were required to engage in levels of leadership and responsibility outside the previous experience and preparedness. This has resulted in very high levels of post traumatic stress. This combined with the affect of severe drought has placed a very high demand on a variety of counselling services.

**Advice provided by the major counselling service provider in this area, Upper Hume Community Health Service indicates a 200% increase in demand for counselling and personal support services for fire and drought effected communities.**

Council staff continues to deal with an enormous requirement for information and assistance to residents because of the combined affect of the bushfires and drought. This work is made difficult for staff because of a high level of hostility directed towards government institutions in general. This hostility is generally a result of prolonged uncertainty in regard to the restoration of fencing and land disfigured to create fire containment lines as well as the short timelines for application for drought funding and the restrictive nature of the funding.

The financial impact of the fires will continue to impact on rural landholders for the next three to five years. Ongoing financial assistance, counselling and support is required for this sector.

There is also general stress as many members in our community have been actively involved in fire fighting throughout the region through their employment with DSE/DPI or via the volunteerism in the CFA and other emergency services.

*Council suggested the following possible solutions to social damage*

A number of fire recovery activities have been undertaken at a local level and several others are planned from a regional level. These activities have received enormous support from the local communities and have helped in the emotional recovery. Continuing efforts by Government, private organisers, eg. the ABC Recovery Concert at Myrtleford, will assist. Perhaps funding into existing aged care, youth services and Education Department/Private Schools programs could assist.

#### **OUTCOME IN RELATION TO SUGGESTIONS:**

- Funds provided by the State Government to run events to thank the community. Also specific events to thank various combating authorities.
- Additional funds provided for counselling and fire recovery management eg appointment of recovery officers in each of the affected shires.
- Funds provided by State Government for volunteer services, in particular financial counselling.



## **ECONOMIC DAMAGE**

### *"Three Strikes and You're Out"*

Economic damage in the area has not just been brought about by the recent fires. The prolonged drought and the storms in the Stanley Orchard areas of 26 November 2002 and now followed by the fire has wreaked havoc in the local and regional economy.

The fourth strike would be floods and whilst we are praying for rain, we have set criteria on how much can fall at any instant.

### **OUTCOME IN RELATION TO SUGGESTIONS:**

No outcomes as yet.

#### **General Drought Conditions**

The drought had not severely affected Indigo Shire until January of this year. We have now seen streams and springs dry up that have never dried up before and destocking and general crop failures have been experienced. Irrigation and pump specialists in the region have advised of the large increase in bore depths required to assess potable water.

The January declaration of the Shire as a drought area came too late to supply appropriate water supply points and other activities. Whilst State Government funds have recently been allocated for drought relief purposes in our area we believe these have come too late and are too little. This as well as the short timelines for making applications for funding has all added to increased social trauma in the area.

There will be little evidence of drought funding relief in our municipality, as many of the affected landholders do not meet the stringent eligibility criteria.

The nature of our community and the lifestyle it offers has seen a much needed increase in the number of small specialty farms. These farm although small in size contribute significantly to the diversity and culture of our community and therefore to the tourism industry on which we rely. By nature many of these farms operate on very small financial margins and are often supplemented by off farm incomes. This situation results in many farmers becoming ineligible for drought relief funds.

The demand on existing water for fire fighting has compounded the effect of water shortages. Many farms have now run out of water for stock and domestic purposes and are forced to pay for daily water supplies

#### *Solution*

Additional drought recovery funds need to be allocated to such areas as Indigo Shire to assist with the construction of further water supply points, water transport and fodder transport/suppliers and to assist in social recovery. There has been a significant demand for fodder following the bushfires and little rain to encourage regrowth.

## **OUTCOME IN RELATION TO SUGGESTIONS:**

A large amount of hay has been made available to the area through the VFF. This was allocated by a ballot system. Farmers had to apply and pay \$100 per tonne for freight. This supply was quickly utilized with those missing out reimbursed. Government assistance of \$1000 per farmer to feed and water stock in containment paddocks.

Hay was also provided following the fires however this was used very quickly. As there is very little hay left to procure an offer of pellets has been made to farmers at \$300 per tonne, plus freight.

### **Severe Storm Damage - Stanley**

Some \$12M of direct and indirect economic loss has been incurred because of the severe hail damage to orchards in the Stanley area on 26 November 2002. There was an enormous direct impact of this as much of these funds are spent locally by the orchardists themselves and the itinerant labour.

A separate report has been prepared via the North East Victorian Regional Apple Producers and Alpine and Indigo Shires outlining this problem in detail. It is important to note that the impact of this will not be just for the current season, but over the next three to five years as it will take that long for orchards to recover. The report was submitted to the State Government in March but has not been replied to in any official manner.

### *Solution*

Direct assistance to the area via Employment Creation Schemes will provide income for directly affected producers and itinerant labour.

## **OUTCOME IN RELATION TO SUGGESTIONS:**

**No outcomes as yet.**

### **Fire Damage 2003**

#### **\* Tourism/Industry Related**

Major economic damage has been caused by the fire, there has been a severe downturn in tourism activity across the whole North East. This is not limited to Indigo Shire and the areas where the fires were directly, but also to outlying areas such as Rutherglen which is also contained in Indigo Shire. Wider regional impacts have been evident in Wangaratta, Wodonga and the more severely fire effected areas in Towong and Alpine Shires.

The major issue has been that the public perception is that the whole of the North East is burnt out and unsafe to visit.

In summary, there has been a huge downturn in all tourism related business activities. However, this has had a major flow on to all the support industry and services.

This has seen the lay off of part time and casual and part time staff and potential severe income loss for proprietors.

### *Solution*

The whole North East needs to be involved in a publicity campaign that clearly advises of the services and facilities that are available to tourists. Whilst some areas in the National Parks may be unsafe to visit, there is an enormous range of other activities that the tourist can enjoy.

Already the local Chambers of Commerce, etc are offering incentives for tourists to return and we are seeing some take up of those initiatives.

The offer of the Federal Government via Tourism Minister Joe Hockey to provide recovery funding should be pursued via matching grants from the State Government and from the Councils/local businesses. A major regional campaign can then be embarked upon to attract the visitors back to our region.

Other direct assistance could be provided by the way of employment creation projects, funding projects earmarked for the region/shire, or by bringing forward other programs.

### **OUTCOME IN RELATION TO SUGGESTIONS:**

The State Government has provided \$1.9 million to the North East in general for a publicity campaign, etc to attract visitors back to the fire ravaged areas. The only specific amount paid to Indigo Council was \$5000 for the Golden Horseshoes Festival. If Easter is any indication this has been a very successful campaign.

It is extremely disappointing that promises made by Federal Minister for Small Business & Tourism, Joe Hockey, during his visit to Beechworth on Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> February have not been honoured. His promises at Beechworth of matching funding similar to the Blue Mountains funding and campaigns gave a lot of hope to the area. This promises have not been fulfilled and have left a lot of people disillusioned. It has also given ammunition to the State Government to criticise the Federal Government.

#### \* Agriculture Related

An amount of private property in the way of housing, outbuildings, grazing land and farm fencing has been destroyed. Firebreaks and contaminated lines need to be repaired.

The following figures relate to the effect on farm properties in Indigo Shire:

- 87 farm properties were affected with 2,870 ha being burnt
- 1 farm house and 46 significant other buildings were burnt.
- Fencing lost – Crown 181 kilometres, Private 122 kilometres

- Stock losses – Cattle 21, Sheep 14, Other (including goats and alpacas) 90
- Feed losses - Hay (square bale equivalent) 12,160
- Crop losses – field 31ha, Horticulture 20ha

The biggest issue for farmers has been having fencing and containment lines repaired or replaced. This has been severely affected by the lack of farmers resources due to the poor cash flows and additional expenditure caused by the drought.

### *Solutions*

As mentioned previously direct assistance to farmers for fencing along boundaries with Crown land would be an enormous support. It would also create employment for those now out of work for the drought, storm damage or other fire related consequences.

### **OUTCOME IN RELATION TO SUGGESTIONS:**

The State Government has been supportive in providing very limited funds for stock containment fencing.

Funding and arrangements via the State Government and the VFF has assisted in providing stock feed, burying dead stock, etc.

No funds have been provided for shared cost fencing on Crown Land boundaries other than for some “dog proof” fencing on other Shire areas. The Government refuses to recognise any responsibility for funding of fencing reconstruction or repairs on boundaries abutting Crown Land. Council believes a case for special circumstances should be recognised for these boundary fences. Farmers could then probably manage repairs/reconstruction of internal fences.

### **RECOVERY ACTIVITIES**

Recovery needs to take place in the short term, medium term and long term.

#### **Short Term**

##### **\* Immediate Restoration of Assets**

1. Funds need to be allocated for the immediate restoration of assets such as roads, bridges, fences, signage, etc.
2. Immediate publicity needs to be undertaken to encourage people to visit the area and make bookings for the March long weekend and Easter periods.
3. Direct assistance needs to be provided to the Councils to employ additional staff to undertake the additional work created by the fire scene and now the recovery activities. Note this has already happened with the provision of support in the tourism/marketing area and community development officers.

## **Medium Term**

- \* Funding of Projects Required or already Approved, Scheduled for Grant Applications
1. Projects that already have government approval such as the Beechworth Prison and Beechworth Hospital need to be fast tracked for immediate commencement of construction activities. This will provide an immediate economic stimulator within the Shire and region.
  2. Approvals for other projects that have been submitted for Government funding will also stimulate the economy and build up community morale. In Indigo Shire such projects as the Rail Trail extension from Wahgunyah to Rutherglen, the Rutherglen Wine Experience, further restoration of buildings in the Beechworth Historic Precinct and funding of Pride of Place works for town development programs in Chiltern, Rutherglen, Kiewa / Tangambalanga would be appropriate.
  3. Funding of works at Yackandandah to facilitate the establishment of the Yackandandah Community Fuel Outlet would be a major boost to that community.
  4. Bringing forward of Better Pool Funding Program for Yackandandah and Beechworth would also be of great assistance.
  5. Other Government Departments also have programs in the wind such as Education Department maintenance programs at their schools, as well as development programs to provide new assets could be brought forward.
  6. From a social aspect further funding could be provided to undertake social interaction programs. Of particular benefit would be a program to attract more volunteers into existing voluntary agencies such as the CFA, Red Cross, service clubs, hospital auxiliaries, etc. Emphasis on Youth programs, leading youth to become involved in these activities would also be very beneficial both for now and the longer term. Therefore, endorsement of future funding for Youth Services Officers in the Indigo Shire would be greatly appreciated, and could have immediate impact.
  7. Federal funding for employment creation schemes (including fencing schemes and restoration of National Parks), environmental works in the region via the North East Catchment Management Authority and for Heritage and other Environmental and Community Building projects in the region would also provide the required economic and social stimulus.

## **Long Term**

Longer-term assistance for capital and maintenance programs throughout the Shire would all assist in economic development and recovery.

Assistance in development of industrial estates strategies and redevelopment of the Beechworth Prison and current Beechworth Hospital site, could be funded. Long-term opportunities for both those sites need to be clearly evaluated and opportunities marketed, as potentially there is a three to five year lead-time in redevelopment of those facilities.

Commonwealth Government assistance could be via existing programs, such as continuation of the Roads to Recovery program, and ongoing assistance through employment creation programs.

The demand for both financial and general counselling is only now beginning to be realised. Affected people, particularly the farmers, are just beginning to realise the impact. This is a short, medium and long term issue as the effect of the bushfires, which is compounded by the drought, will continue to affect the business of farming for the next 3-5 years.

## **SUMMARY**

Indigo Shire is alive and well, although it has suffered a real belting, especially from an economic point of view. The community has shown in recent weeks that it has the potential to respond and get back on its feet. State and Federal Government assistance will help that recovery enormously.

We are very mindful that not just Indigo Shire, but the whole North East region has suffered as a result of the recent fires and therefore the whole area needs to pull together in a major marketing campaigns and recovery activities.

A lot more work needs to be done in identifying the extent of damage and therefore the appropriate recovery programs.

## **CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE FIRES**

From the Council's perspective the severe drought and the extent of our natural bushland, parks systems and weather conditions all contributed to the severity of the fire.

Whilst it is suggested that the State and Federal Government should take a much more active role in fire mitigation and risk management in the natural environment areas Council believes that the fire would still have been a very major issue in our area. Controlled backburning might have reduced the severity and speed but would not have contained the fire.

Our region experiences climatic conditions that are conducive to bush fires – frequent electrical storms in summer months coupled with the type of vegetation and natural environment. Therefore a greater level of precaution needs to be taken.

## **HAZARD REDUCTION AND OTHER STRATEGIES**

The State Government has made commitments to provide better Park Management when recently gazetting the expanded Chiltern Mount Pilot National Park. It certainly needs to be better than what has occurred in the past including the following:

- Better maintenance of access tracks
- Better and more frequent fuel reduction burns
- Better weed control
- Clearing of fence lines
- Provision and maintenance of fire breaks at strategic locations

The Federal Government needs to also provide a higher level of funds to protect the natural heritage in our region, either via the State Government or via direct grants to Catchment Management Authorities, Councils, Landcare Groups or other appropriate organisations.

Council is dedicated to preserving our natural environment, managing it effectively and has received awards for its environmental projects.

Council, since the fires, has received criticism that it should not be trying to protect roadside vegetation and that roads should be used as a defined firebreak area. It would be contrary to Councils "Roadside Management Plan" to use all roadsides as firebreaks.

Remnant vegetation and habitat on roadsides are the last linkages between major areas of high value remnants and in many areas the last stronghold of native trees, grasses and habitat and are required to protect our biodiversity. If roadsides were cleared, in many areas there would be no remnant vegetation and habitat and consequently native flora and fauna would disappear entirely from these areas.

Councils Roadside Management Plan was developed with long and detailed community consultation and there was substantial input from Country Fire Authority representatives. The plan allows for strategic firebreaks and general firebreaks in certain areas. There are no restrictions on roadsides of low conservation value.

During the preparation of the Indigo Fire Prevention Strategy under guidance from the CFA [local brigades etc] the Fire Management Plan was considered and its recommendations were accepted without change.

The value of roads as firebreaks or firebreaks generally is debatable during an event of such intensity as our recent fires.

## **PLANNING AND BUILDING CONTROLS**

Council has a large range of controls on private property via its planning scheme and building controls. A review is currently underway to reassess the fire prone zone that applies under our building code and whether Council implements the ' Wild Fire Overlay' as recommended by the CFA to specific rural areas.

Council also actively encourages property owners in the rural areas to undertake appropriate fire protection measures suitable to their own properties. In rural areas we currently require a storage of minimum 90,000litres of water with 20,000litres held for fire fighting purposes. This is double the 10,000 CFA recommendation. However in the drought situation this is not always possible.

One issue of concern is the availability of water for stock and domestic and for fire fighting purposes in rural areas. The number of bores being sunk and the climatic conditions of recent years has serious implications for the level of the water tables/aquifers in the region.

## **FIRE FIGHTING ARRANGEMENTS**

Council is extremely pleased with the overall fire fighting efforts of the major combating organisations in regard to the fires in Indigo Shire. These were the Country Fire Authority, the

Department of Sustainability and Hancock's Plantations. They were ably assisted by many other organisations and individuals with manpower and equipment.

Councils own operations were also very effectively deployed in directly assisting on the fire front, assisting with prevention measures, road clearance, traffic management and other resourcing. Better radio communications equipment, tanker couplings and other equipment would assist in this type of situation.

No further comment is provided on the adequacy of arrangements of the combating authorities as Council was not directly involved in this part of the operation.

## **MUNICIPAL EMERGENCY RESOURCE CENTRE**

Council's establishment and operation of the Municipal Emergency Management Centre went relatively smoothly except for:

- Minor problems with the establishment of the phone system and ultimate number of phones. Telstra were very cooperative and helpful in sorting this out.
- A small PABX type system at the MECC would be a better resource than individual phones/lines.
- No allocation of CFA/DSE liaison personnel to the MECC which prevented effective communication between the Incident Control Centre (ICC) and the MECC. This is MAJOR ISSUE where accurate information must be provided on a timely and consistent basis.
- Some contact details were incorrect in Council's emergency management manual which suggests that better follow-up procedures need to be in place on the twice yearly update of contacts.
- Recording of requests and allocation of resources would be better done via an email and /or fax system rather than duplication of recording at the ICC and a repeat at the MECC.
- Some requests for resources were made directly by local CFA units/operational centres rather than via the ICC.
- Radio communications need to be provided in the MECC for Council, Police, SES and perhaps CFA use
- A better list of commercial/private resources for each type of emergency would speed up the processes although "Yellow Pages" was the best resource. This resource provided electronically would be an excellent tool.
- Use of acronyms can be very difficult for staff involved. Glossary needs to be provided for each type of emergency.
- There were no trained Red Cross personnel at the MECC. Three local volunteers who had nothing to do with Red Cross took on the catering resource management position and did a fantastic job.
- Vests are needed at the MECC to clearly identify authorised personnel and their role.

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

Council's main shire office was established as the main community information centre for the shire and was staffed by Council employees and some volunteers.

It received thousands of calls over the period of the fires. Some were general information calls but others were emergency type calls relating to "evacuation notices heard on the ABC radio" or use of refuges, relief centres and arrangements, etc.



The biggest issue for this centre was that they were not receiving accurate, timely information that could be passed onto the public.

The ABC regional radio based at Wodonga was an excellent medium for public communication. In an emergency of this nature and magnitude it would appear to be the best avenue and therefore formal communication protocols should be developed between the ABC, combating authority and Council's communications public centre.

### **VOLUNTEERS**

There was an incredible effort from volunteers who assisted Council's operations in the fire situation. These included:

- MECC staffing
- Relief Centre staffing
- Council public communications centre staffing
- SES
- CFA and Urban brigades
- Food preparation and distribution
- Contact with HACC clients and known isolated persons.

When utilising volunteers there is a high degree of responsibility on the Council to ensure that the volunteers can undertake the tasks allocated. All that is then needed is a simple registration process to ensure that they are adequately covered by Council's insurance policies relating to volunteers. Indigo Council has in place a very comprehensive information package and training available to prospective volunteers. All volunteers undergo a thorough assessment and registration process before commencement of duties on Councils behalf.

Mention must also be made of the businesses who made an enormous contribution to the fire fighting and relief/recovery efforts.

Many businesses provided reduced cost or free services, materials and equipment and were only too happy to contribute their services where needed. This was very evident in the catering area where local hotels and other businesses provided excellent service.

