



Victorian Bushfires 2003

Submission by East Gippsland Shire Council

**House of Representatives Select Committee
on the Recent Australian Bushfires**

**Inquiry into the Incidence and Impact of
Bushfires**

May 2003

PURPOSE OF THIS SUBMISSION

East Gippsland Shire Council has prepared this submission in response to invitations from both the Commonwealth and State Government to contribute to an examination of the bushfires in the 2003 summer season.

East Gippsland Shire considers this an appropriate opportunity to contribute to the inquiries, outlining the perspective of Local Government, and on behalf of our communities.

East Gippsland Shire considers that it is important that there be an ongoing examination of the causes and impacts of wildfire, to ensure that our communities do not need to encounter such a damaging and stressful circumstance again. The cost to individuals, communities, the economy, the environment and infrastructure of our community is too great.

OVERVIEW OF FIRE IMPACT IN EAST GIPPSLAND SHIRE

For eight weeks this year, the high country of East Gippsland – with adjoining areas in Victoria and New South Wales – was ravaged by fire or at serious risk of being engulfed.

Sometimes it was fire in the form of a terrifying wall of flames bearing down on a farm or township, sometimes burning debris raining from the sky, sometimes just a lurking red presence over the ridge or up the valley.

The fire was always there, often unable to be seen through the thick blanket of smoke, more or less active according to weather conditions, subsiding to smoldering embers, flaring up again to come in from a new direction or menace another community.

As the fire crews, emergency services, land owners and volunteers fought to contain the existing blazes, new fires sprang into life behind them from spotting or lightning strikes.

While the countryside is slowly recovering, the reality is that despite the large areas of land burnt in this incident, vast areas remain untouched, and may present an ongoing threat to communities and important infrastructure.

With the falling rain, comes further environmental damage to soils, waterways, water quality and human health. The consequences of the fires have not ended with the last hot spot extinguished.

The fire-affected communities have now turned from the long, wearying and worrying battle against the fires to the equally wearying, often heart-breaking task of taking stock, cleaning up and rebuilding their properties and their lives. This will go on for a long time yet.

The 2003 Victorian Bushfires in the East Gippsland High Country need to be viewed, not as a single incident affected the community, but should be seen as one event in a series of challenges for the community, as the fires came in the context of drought, flood, livestock disease and ongoing economic adjustment.

These communities are famed for their resilience and independence, but it has been tested too many times in the recent past for local efforts alone to be able to guarantee their survival and revival.

Background

East Gippsland's fire-affected areas straddle the highlands of the Great Dividing Range, from Mt Bogong in the west to the Cobberas in the east, including the headwaters of the Mitta Mitta River to the north and the Mitchell, Nicholson, Tambo and Snowy River systems to the south. The Mitta Mitta forms part of the Murray-Darling Basin and the Mitchell, Nicholson and Tambo Rivers flow into the Gippsland Lakes.

High country streams provide water supplies for many towns in the region and for domestic and stock use in rural areas.

Due to the nature of the terrain, settlement in the area is dispersed in small townships or hamlets separated by tracts of bush or extensive farming areas. They form distinct communities, each with their own character and identity.

An extensive road network is needed to service this pattern of isolated. Community facilities also need to be provided in a number of locations.

Response requirements and recovery efforts have had to deal not only with widespread damage to crucial public infrastructure, but also with provision of services and supports in a range of different locations, in order to maximise accessibility for residents.

The main towns in the areas directly affected by the fires are Omeo, Benambra and Swifts Creek, both of which have around 250-300 residents. The smaller townships and localities in their immediate districts are home to roughly equivalent numbers of people.

The area north of Buchan contains a significant rural and rural residential population, as does the Tubbut-Bonang-Bendoc area east of the Snowy River.

The Omeo-Tambo Valley area differs in many respects from the rest of East Gippsland Shire: the population is relatively young and has fewer aged people; men outnumber women significantly; most men are in the labour force but many women are not; unemployment is high outside the main towns; education levels are below average; employment in primary industries is very important; many households contain only one or two people but there is also an above average proportion of large families; household incomes are low; and home ownership is below average.

As with other rural areas in the Shire, the proportion of children is high, late teens and young adults are under-represented, there is a concentration of people in the 35-74 age groups and relatively few people over 75 years. However, the on-farm population tends to be concentrated at the higher end of the adult to middle aged range, raising issues of farm succession and enterprise change.

Land tenure in the area is strongly related to landform. The mountainous areas along the Divide and in the Snowy River valley are predominantly public land. They encompass the Alpine and Snowy River National Parks and cover environments of very high nature conservation significance. These include alpine and sub-alpine areas, bogs and moss beds that help regulate seasonal water flows in upland streams, wet forests, cypress-pine woodlands and the habitats of endangered species such as the Brush-tailed Rock wallaby.

The Parks and adjoining areas are also major tourist resources. Attractions include: scenic drives on the Great Alpine Road, the Bogong High Plains Road and across McKillops Bridge; famous fishing rivers such as the Mitta Mitta and Cobungra; canoeing and rafting opportunities on the Mitta Mitta, Buchan and Snowy Rivers; walking trails and high summits; historic huts and mine sites; lookouts such as the Little River Gorge viewpoint; and picnic and barbeque areas.

The State forests of the area, especially the tall Alpine Ash forests in the vicinity of Swifts Creek, have high values for timber production. Most timber harvested from the Tambo Forest Management Area is processed outside the region, but a new mill has been established recently at Swifts Creek. East Gippsland Forest Management area includes a number of processing facilities, including sawmills at Buchan and Bendoc.

The valleys and high plateau areas, such as Benambra and the Omeo Valley and the areas north of Buchan, represent significant resources for breeding and grazing of cattle and sheep. Some diversified agriculture and horticulture also occurs in these areas, such as production of nuts, wine grapes, berries and herbs.

The high country areas of East Gippsland have experienced major economic and social adjustment during the last decade, as a result of fluctuations in commodity prices and demand, agricultural and timber industry restructuring, drought, floods, storms and Ovine Johnes disease.

Many of these change processes are still working their way out in terms of stresses on individuals and communities. To this must now be added the impact of the fires.

Fire history & extent

The fires of the Bogong Complex began on 7 and 8 January 2003 as a result of lightning strikes in the alpine areas, then spread quickly into East Gippsland Shire. Concurrently, fires sparked around Pinnabar near the New South Wales border headed south. The Bogong Complex fires merged and spread to join those of the Kosciusko Complex in NSW, forming one enormous and inaccessible blaze, expanding on a number of fronts.

By mid January, public lands in East Gippsland had suffered extensive damage but relatively little private property had been affected. After prolonged hot weather and recurrent high winds, fires threatened Benambra, Glen Wills, Glen Valley and Shannonvale and caused substantial damage in Cobungra on the Great Alpine Road.

Fires advanced down the Omeo Valley and Omeo itself faced fire fronts from several different directions, particularly on the Australia Day weekend (25-27 January) and into the next week. Only heroic and sustained efforts from fire fighters and residents prevented much greater losses in the Omeo area.

Swifts Creek, to the south, came under sustained ember attack from burning debris and spot fires started as far away as Ensay. The main blaze near Omeo gradually spread south into the headwaters of the Tambo River and the Bindi valley and approached Cassilis and Brookville.

At the same time, the fires raced eastwards and engulfed a number of farms at Wulgulmerang north of Buchan. Properties at Suggan Buggan and Gelantipy were also affected. Across the Snowy River, fires were active in the Deddick Valley, around Dellicknora and south of Tubbut.

Throughout February, the main fire continued to spread and to test containment lines. Spotting created new fire fronts in unpredictable places, including on the west side of the Snowy River near Gelantipy. At the end of the month, good rains fell in some of the fire areas, reducing the immediate risk.

Damage from flash flooding has occurred in several places, including Omeo Tongio, near Swifts Creek, Cobungra, Omeo Valley and Anglers Rest.

Lightning strikes caused smaller fires near Cann River, Nowa Nowa and Bruthen at various times throughout the bushfire crisis. Most of these were able to be extinguished quickly.

Summary of Damage

Fortunately, no-one was killed or seriously injured as a result of the fires in East Gippsland, though many lesser injuries were experienced.

The fires burnt almost 1 million hectares of land in East Gippsland.

Around 50,000 hectares of this was freehold land, mostly (60%) in the catchment of the Mitta Mitta River and the remainder in the Tambo and Snowy River catchments.

Nearly 350,000 hectares of public land was burnt in the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority region. Half of this was in the Snowy River system, with the remainder spread between the Tambo/Nicholson and the Mitchell Rivers. North of the Divide, a further 534,000 hectares of public land in the Mitta Mitta catchment was affected.

Fires impacted on over one quarter of the area of the Mitchell basin used for urban water supplies, almost 20 per cent of the equivalent land in the Tambo/Nicholson catchments and more than one third of the town water supply areas in the Snowy River system.

The fires burnt over 390,000 hectares (60%) of the Alpine National Park and affected 600,000 hectares of forested public land, including Pinnabar State Forest in East Gippsland.

Major private property damage in the Shire included:

- 36 houses lost
- 21 woolsheds and 175 other significant buildings damaged or destroyed
- 3,450 cattle (on 50 farms), 8,900 sheep (on 40 farms), 13 horses and 65 goats and other animals either killed or injured so badly that they had to be put down
- over 2,600 kilometres of fencing destroyed
- damage to or loss of machinery, stock yards, stores of hay (equivalent to 150,000 small bales) and other fodder, perennial pastures, tree crops and other assets.

Significant numbers of heritage places, including mining relics and historic houses, were also burnt.

Damage to or destruction of public infrastructure assets totalled \$11.836 million and included:

- 'State declared' roads, bridges, 'road furniture', drainage systems
- Local roads, bridges, 'road furniture', drainage assets
- Recreational and tourist facilities in parks and forests and on public land in townships.

Substantial damage was also caused to privately-owned distribution networks and fixed assets, including:

- Power distribution network
- Communications and telecommunications equipment.

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES & BUSINESSES

The impact of the fires on individuals and communities was most severe in those areas immediately exposed to the flames, particularly those that sustained substantial damage to property or livestock.

However, many – if not most – other communities in East Gippsland have also been affected by the fires.

Some, such as Buchan and Bruthen, had good reason to fear that they would be next in line to feel the fires' impact. Others, such as Bairnsdale, Orbost and Bendoc, operated as bases for fire response activity. Many, including Ensay and Cassilis, suffered economic effects due to loss of trade from tourism or from the inability of timber harvesting and haulage operators to access their coupes. And still others provided large numbers of volunteers to fight fires or support the front-line crews and local residents.

An unusual aspect of this particular fire was the length of time that communities had to wait for the threat to turn into reality.

This had some benefits, giving time for owners to clean up around their properties and for emergency services to put in firebreaks and other precautions. However, it also added to the mental stress. Residents were on high alert for prolonged periods and suffered days – or in some cases weeks – of disturbed sleep whilst maintaining their vigilance against falling embers.

Many people were under a double load, involved in direct fire fighting activities, whilst trying to protect their own homes. The 'delayed action' nature of the crisis, combined with road access closures and loss of communications, exacerbated the isolation felt by residents. It also prolonged family separations and disrupted normal community activities, such as schools, the mobile library service, meetings and social interactions.

An unusually large number of calls to the East Gippsland Recovery Centre come from individuals seeking access to counselling services, underlining the degree to which anticipation of the fire and the sense of being cut off preyed on people's minds.

Residents have been – and still are – at risk of damage to their physical health as well as to their mental equilibrium. Respiratory conditions have been exacerbated by thick smoke, rapid burial of dead animals is essential to avoid outbreaks of disease, hazardous materials from buildings damaged or destroyed must be disposed of appropriately, and ash contamination of drinking water in tanks and streams poses immediate and ongoing threats. Burnt trees in paddocks and along roadsides also represent potential dangers, as do unconfined stock.

Some farmers have lost houses, major farm buildings, fences, stock and fodder. Many have saved at least some of their animals, but are under pressure trying to confine them safely without fences or feed them in blackened paddocks, with hay and other feed scarce and dams still empty. Destruction of exclusion fences has allowed wild dogs to move in from fire-affected public lands, with drastic effects on already weakened livestock.

Some local businesses have been fully occupied catering for the needs of fire crews and other emergency personnel. Others have been at a standstill due to road closures and dangers to life and property. Clients have been cut off from accommodation businesses; timber industry and nature-based tourism operators have been unable to access their areas of operation.

Tourism operators may take years to coax back their market in the face of bad publicity, blackened vistas and damaged recreational assets on public land.

The timber industry faces an even more difficult future. Cutbacks in logging rates to achieve sustainable yields were already firmly on the agenda before the fires and the extent of mature forest available to the industry will now be reduced even further. In the short term, there are imperatives associated with the planned salvage of Ash species forests burnt during the fires. To fully utilise this resource, investments will need to be made in upgrading key access roads and bridges.

In devising recovery strategies, the local community should be fully involved. Care must also be taken not to undermine the economic base of the affected regions. Volunteers and external workforces should not be used for tasks that would generally be the responsibility of local tradesmen and other contractors, unless businesses are already over-stretched and unable to respond.

IMPACTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

The fire has affected huge areas of public land including many environments recognised for their high biodiversity value.

Much of the Australian bush has evolved with fire and will recover from it, but some species will not. The alpine environments are typically wetter and cooler than those at lower altitudes and many of the native species are not adapted to frequent or intense fires.

The fires and suppression activities have affected many threatened fauna species, both land-dwelling and aquatic, as well as threatened flora species – including plants found nowhere else in Victoria. Several depleted vegetation communities have also suffered damage. In addition, many recorded indigenous and archaeological sites and dozens of alpine huts have been affected to some extent.

The scale of these fires and the type of terrain affected means they will have significant impacts on catchment processes, clean air and water, biodiversity values, visitor and tourism experiences and services, indigenous cultural values and heritage cultural values.

Fire suppression activities have also had a substantial impact in many areas: 7,000 kilometres of fire control lines have been established, ranging from new 'mineral-earth' firebreaks, through significantly widened established tracks to minor improvements to other existing trails. Control lines will require careful remediation if they are not to become a cause of future environmental degradation.

On both public and private land, fire damage increases the risk of weed invasion. Wild dog predation is an issue for native fauna as well as for stock.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION BY INQUIRY

East Gippsland Shire Municipal Fire Prevention Plan

In accordance with the relevant requirements of the *Country Fire Authority 1958*, East Gippsland Shire has prepared and maintains a Municipal Fire Prevention Plan (MFPP). Council also has a Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP).

The MFPP has been developed by Council's Municipal Fire Prevention Officer, in conjunction with four Municipal Fire Prevention Committees (MFPC) located across the Shire with meetings in Orbost, Omeo, Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale.

The Municipal Fire Prevention officer chairs each MFPC, which has membership from each fire brigade in the region, and land managers and agencies such as Department of Sustainability and Environment and TXU.

The MFPP frankly acknowledges the challenges facing the community of East Gippsland in dealing with fire, given the dispersed nature of the population and the vast areas of forested public and private land that exists.

The Vision enunciated by the MFPP is *"The Shire of East Gippsland will be a safer place in which to live, work and visit"*.

Given the risks and challenges identified by the MFPP, a key to success of the plan, is the cooperation between Council and local Brigades (of which there are 32) and other land management agencies in the Shire. Council works hard to maintain these relationships, and on an annual basis travels with all brigades around their areas to identify and inspect fire hazards that are included on a work plan for action by Council and other relevant agencies. This strategic approach to the management of specific issues and sites has been very effective in the allocation of resources and the overall reduction in hazard areas over time.

Although concern about the achievement of designated hazard reduction burning on Crown Land has been raised by the MFPC over time as part of the risk analysis process, Council has not experienced any particular issues or difficulties in achieving the cooperation of land management agencies in addressing removal of fire hazards as part of the normal implementation of the plan. During the bushfires, an issue was raised about debris that had been accumulated in river beds as a result of Catchment Management Authority Willow removal programs. This matter was subsequently addressed at the time, however, this may be an issue that is raised again.

East Gippsland Shire Council's Municipal Fire Prevention Plan was last audited by the Country Fire Authority, for compliance with the requirements of the *Country Fire Act 1958* on 14 January, 2003. Council was advised that the plan met the requirements of the audit. A copy of the Certificate of Audit can be found at **Appendix 1**. No areas were identified for improvement or action. The State Emergency Service audited the East Gippsland Shire Municipal Emergency Management Plan on 24 December, 2002, and advised that it had been assessed as *"Complying fully or more than adequately with the*

Guidelines". No areas were identified for improvement or action as a result of the audit. A copy of correspondence from the SES and the Certificate of Audit are at **Appendix 2**.

East Gippsland manages an active Fire Prevention plan and process. In 2003, Council allocated expenditure in excess of \$190,000 towards fire hazard inspections and enforcement and on ground hazard reduction works. This expenditure does not reflect staff time and management of Council assets requiring fuel reduction works.

East Gippsland Shire issues an average of 2200 notices for fire hazard clearance on private property across the Shire on an annual basis. During the fire emergency, Council found it necessary to investigate quite a number of additional complaints about fire hazards as the awareness of the community was heightened across the Shire.

Council allocates an experienced, permanent full time staff member to the role of Community Safety, Emergency Management and Fire Prevention. Council also engages a range of contractors to provide inspection and hazard reduction services in preparation for the Fire Danger Period.

In 1999, East Gippsland Shire Council was the recipient of a Commendation Award as part of the National Awards for Innovation in Local Government for Innovation in Emergency Management. This award recognised a system implemented in East Gippsland Shire Council, that involves the preparation and management of extensive resource lists that document contact details for a comprehensive range of community and other resources that would be required to be accessed in emergency situations. These resource lists were an invaluable resource to the Shire and the MECC during the management of this bushfire event.

East Gippsland Shire Council plays an active role in preparing communities for the fire hazard season. The municipality will always be vulnerable to wildfire as a result of the large areas of forested public land. East Gippsland Shire allocates funding to this program in accordance with normal budgeting constraints. Should expansion or enhancement of the role of Local Government be proposed, consideration will need to be given to the potential cost and resource implications.

Managing Scale and Complexity

The scale and complexity of issues and impacts of the 2003 Bushfire Emergency highlights a number of issues that are worthy of consideration as part of the inquiry. These issues include the following:

- Time to prepare, but additional stress on community

The length of the event meant that most communities had adequate time to undertake fairly extensive preparation works for the community generally, and as individuals. If nothing else, the event has raised people's knowledge and awareness of fire hazard issues and personal preparation for fire, right across the Shire.

Along with the time to prepare also comes an additional stress on the community. Triggers for stress include:

- Constant pressure associated with being prepared and waiting for the event.
- Impacts to normal community life and work, given limited access to the area and impact to normal routines.
- Pressure that many people had in having dual responsibility for protecting the community and looking after their family and businesses.

While most would cope with these pressures in an emergency situation, the period of time that these pressures had to be sustained has a significant impact on individuals across the community.

- **Shire Geography and Population Patterns**

The geography of the Shire, and the location of the fire impacts, means that the damage has been quite dispersed. Most major access routes in the Shire have a north/south orientation that means that the individual areas affected are quite disconnected from each other, and access to the areas limited, especially during the fire period.

The effect of this is that the variety of community impacts and needs; the provision of services and support and ongoing communication with the affected areas presents a range of challenges for the Shire.

Many of the areas are quite isolated and are often without many of the community facilities and support networks that might be expected to exist in communities these days.

While dealing with these types of challenges is not new to East Gippsland, an event of this scale places a significant impact on the Shire and other service providers.

- **Response and Recovery – Concurrent Requirements**

Given the timescale of the event, it was necessary for Response and Recovery actions to be occurring concurrently. This was certainly acknowledged as necessary, however it needs to be recognised that this fact presented some logistical challenges.

In planning and implementing recovery actions, additional issues such as roadblocks; communication challenges; our remoteness from the communities affected and the ongoing threat of the fire were all issues that had to be taken into account.

Initial planning carried out in consultation with the MECC really meant that Council had to anticipate a worst-case scenario, with the potential situation being that fires continued to burn for a lengthy period across the Shire. This meant that the logical base for recovery purposes was Bairnsdale, our major township. However, public perception indicated that the recovery should have been managed from the affected areas

Available on ground resources, such as plant and equipment, were also being stretched between fire preparation, response and recovery tasks – sometimes

without appropriate coordination. For example, Council found itself in situations where equipment to be used by the Shire in animal burial activities was seized at Swifts Creek for Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) purposes, making it difficult to undertake Council's immediate responsibilities.

- **Emergency Management Structures**

The scale of the event also introduced a range of issues that require further examination and resolution from the perspective of the structures put in place.

DSE incident control centers (of which there were a number locally and regionally) introduced a layer of control that needs to be understood in the context of the Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC).

The MECC Debrief conducted by the Victoria Police, indicated clear approval of the operation of the MECC in East Gippsland, with a small number of issues identified for follow up and improvement. It did appear that some DSE staff did not have a clear knowledge of the role and purpose of the MECC. Our experience indicates that the MECC was not always kept in the information loop; for example, there were situations where information relevant to the MECC was not known about until heard on the local radio. Also, the number of Incident Control Centres meant that there were many people involved in the management of the fire who did not realise the importance of updating the MECC on activities.

The focus of the Incident Control Centres on direct management of the fire perhaps meant that there was a failure to recognise that there was a requirement for the MECC to coordinate a range of matters around the fire, and that there was a need to include the MECC fully in a wide range of issues across the Shire.

Details of the MECC debrief can be made available to the Inquiry if required.

Likewise, the fact that recovery activities were being carried out by a range of agencies also lead to the perception that recovery was not being coordinated, when in fact the East Gippsland Shire Emergency Management Plan establishes a process for this to be managed effectively.

Because the MECC was managing all activity apart from the Fire, and was not necessarily recognised in the fire management structure, the integrity and effectiveness of the MECC was potentially compromised as it's role and value able to be contributed to the process was not necessarily recognised.

- **Public Health Issues**

The scale of the event also introduced a range of potential public health issues. These include:

- The need to establish large staging areas for fire fighting purposes in often remote and poorly serviced areas. Public health issues were not initially a significant focus of fire management logistics, however, a significant effort was required to deal with issues that arose in at least some locations. This issue was subsequently addressed in conjunction with the Department of

Human Services, but there is a need to ensure that these concerns are adequately catered for in any future event.

- The need to dispose of large numbers of animal carcasses in a timely manner. Council certainly experienced problems associated with an inability to extract animals from inaccessible locations. There is certainly a need to assist farmers with this activity in a timely manner, as this proved to be a very distressing process for all involved.
- Disposing appropriately of potentially contaminated building materials from destroyed infrastructure and house sites. Council had to work quickly with the relevant authorities to prepare some accurate and informative information for residents.

A copy of an article prepared by East Gippsland Shire Environmental Health Officer is attached for information and an overview of the issues (Refer to **Appendix 3**)

- Indirect Impacts of the Fires

East Gippsland Shire has also experienced a range of indirect impacts as a result of the fire, that are unlikely to be properly recognised. These direct impacts include:

- Damage caused to bridges, possibly as a result of use by heavy vehicles involved in fire protection works, that are located outside the fire impacted area. It will be difficult for Council to provide conclusive evidence of the cause of the damage, and difficult to obtain funding to rectify the damage caused.
- Damage to road and drainage infrastructure as a result of ongoing impacts following rainfall events in the fire affected area.
- Impacts to waste management infrastructure as a result of preparation for the fires that resulted in the generation of an enormous amount of green waste, and other waste disposed of at small landfill sites. The landfill sites have also been impacted as a result of the clean up activities with the deposition of building and fencing waste. This will result in the premature closure of some sites and conversion to transfer stations ahead of the anticipated schedule.

Living in Bushfire Prone Areas – Planning and Building Controls

The East Gippsland Planning Scheme incorporates a Wildfire Management Overlay (WMO), which uses data provided by the Country Fire Authority. The Shire does not, however, have a declared Bushfire Prone Area. A project has, accordingly, been initiated by the CFA and Council to update the WMO and declare a corresponding Bushfire Prone Area. The new WMO would be updated via an amendment to the Planning Scheme – Amendment C18 – while the Bushfire Prone Area (BPA) would be declared under the *Building Act 1983*.

The draft WMO/BPA, which was prepared in early 2002, currently includes all vegetated areas (including Crown land) within the Shire with a 100 metre buffer. It is significantly greater than the present WMO and also covers some existing urban areas. It is proposed to refine the overlay areas by 'ground-truthing' and as well to evaluate its best translation into the Planning Scheme, having regard to suitable exclusions and development provisions. It will also need to be evaluated in light of the recent fire event.

The CFA has, in addition, prepared an Applicant Kit, which is proposed to be exhibited in conjunction with the WMO. It provides a self-assessment tool to assist Council's to evaluate proposals within these areas. It provides some siting principles and likely requirements.

The need to mitigate fire risk against property will need to be taken into account in the context of any new proposals to rezone additional land for rural living, particularly near to or within heavily vegetated areas, and to ensure that appropriate 'defensive' measures are available, such as a static water supply and appropriate fuel reduction. It will also dictate appropriate building construction standards within these areas.

Roadside Vegetation Plan

East Gippsland Shire is currently in the final stages of completing an upgraded Roadside Vegetation plan for the entire Municipality. This plan has been developed in consultation with the community and the Country Fire Authority. Impacts and implications from this fire event will be accommodated as best possible in the final version adopted by Council.

Community Concerns

In conjunction with a range of Government agencies and related organisations, East Gippsland Shire Council recently met with the community in Ormeo. The dual purpose of the meeting was to make agency and Council staff available for discussion locally and to seek feedback in respect to ongoing issues for the community.

Many of these issues reflect the overwhelming impact of the fire and it's ongoing implications for these rural communities, including a desire that the impact of the event be adequately recognised and compensated. There is a clear feeling that these key issues need to be addressed comprehensively once and for all.

The issues can be summarised as follows:

- **Communication and coordination**
This includes communication and coordination between governments and agencies, and a clear desire by the community for clearer channels of communication both during and after the event.
- **Recovery**
Clearly the community wants to focus on recovering from the fires, and will need relevant assistance to make sure that this happens. While much of the focus has been on the direct impact of the fires, the long term consequences for many are

significant, especially given the existing challenges facing rural communities. There is a need to recognize the long term needs of the community. Responses will need to address a range of financial, material and personal issues. Many parts of the community do not feel that the response to date has been adequate.

- **Fuel Reduction Burning/Hazard Management**
The community has significant concerns about this issue and the management of surrounding public land. There is a clear need for this matter to be investigated and addressed in a constructive manner, having adequate regard for impacts to communities.
- **Incident Management**
Many community members have raised issues in relation to the management of the event, including concerns about the following:
 - Adequate use of local knowledge.
 - Appropriate application of available resources.
 - Communication and coordination of activities.
 - Expectations of volunteers, and availability of volunteer firefighters over the extended time of this event.
 - The need for a clearer emergency management structure that is understood by all.

A copy of the Ormeo Community Consultation – Participants Feedback can be made available if required.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Having regard to the experiences of East Gippsland Shire during this year's bushfires, and feedback from our community, the following future management strategies are recommended for consideration:

- **Learning from Experience:**
It is important that we take advantage of fire preparedness work carried out as part of this event, and that where possible these learnings be incorporated in the Municipal Fire Prevention Plan. Assistance will be required from the CFA and DSE to facilitate this translation of information. Consideration needs to be given to the development of strategic protection plans for communities, and this may need to include the maintenance of strategic infrastructure developed during this event. Analysis needs to be undertaken to ensure that we act strategically in the recovery of works to ensure that, if similar circumstances arise, we are prepared to respond.
- **Management of the emergency:**
Communication protocols between the various management centers needs to be clarified. Consideration needs to be given to establishing specific management structures for major incidents, especially where they impact across multiple Shires and management regions.

Adequate training is required to ensure that all involved have some understanding of the emergency management structures required to be implemented including the Municipal Emergency Management Plan.

- **The Role of Local Government**
Should the inquiry determine that Local Government should have an enhanced role in Fire Prevention, additional resources will be required.
- **Availability of Plant and Equipment**
The overall availability of plant and equipment required to fight a fire of any significance is an issue that will require addressing. East Gippsland Shire provides much of its outdoor services through external contractors, and only has access to plant through these arrangements. While our contracting arrangements require that plant and equipment be made available during an emergency, fire response agencies were also calling on these resources to combat the fire.

Additionally, reductions in timber industry activity in the East Gippsland Shire may lead to a further shortage of equipment and trained personnel for fire fighting purposes.

- **Public communications and community advice systems:**
A variety of methods of communication were utilised in East Gippsland both during and after the fire. This attempted to recognize the different needs and communication infrastructure available to the community. Despite our intention to simplify the communication processes, lack of information and communication continues to be raised as a significant issue. It is suggested that consideration be given to the development of communication protocols that should always be used, with the aim of advising people up front how we will communicate with them, so that there are no misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations.
- **Individual Fire Preparation**
Encourage residents to maintain their fire preparedness following all the work put in across the Shire this year. While it is understood that there are campaigns implemented by the Country Fire Authority each year, thought might be given to a preparation day – something like Clean Up Australia Day, where everyone is encouraged to clean up in preparation for fire in one coordinated effort. This would mean that Council could plan for such an event and coordinate the disposal of material generated from clean up in an effective way.

Strategic management of public land, together with private landowner preparedness is required.