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## **BUSHFIRE INQUIRY**

The following is our submission to the Bushfire Inquiry, the tourism industry and businesses associated with tourism have been greatly impacted on as a result of the January 2003 bush fires.

### **Background on the Albury Wodonga Regional Tourism Forum Inc**

Our group is the largest regional, not-for-profit tourism association and was established 6 years ago to increase the level of visitation to the region. The tourism industry also needed a voice or 'forum' on issues that affect the industry that operates in a very fragmented, cross border situation. The group is independent (of government), grassroots driven and made up of over 100 members, many of whom are based in Indigo, Alpine and Towong Shires in North East Victoria. Funding is secured through annual subscriptions, sponsorship, grants and in-kind support with all work performed in a voluntary capacity.

### **Activities**

The Tourism Forum is involved in a range of activities including providing cost effective marketing to tourism operators. Over 140,000 copies of the highly successful Albury Wodonga Regional Tourism Guide have been distributed. The group promotes members on its website: albury-wodonga-region.com.au. There is an extensive coach campaign operating across the region to attract more coach groups – part of the campaign has included the distribution of a promotional brochure external to the region. The brochure promoting 15 x 1-day tour itineraries that takes in the fire affected shires in North East Victoria. All members and their activities are promoted throughout the year by radio 2AY who provide \$40,000 in-kind marketing support. The Tourism Forum is in the process of establishing agriculture and nature (eco) tourism as mainstream products across its 10 Shire region.

### **Our Response to the bush fires**

- January is the most popular time for visitors to come to the region and the income received during this period can and does make or break a business.
- When the first fires commenced in early January we knew that the impact would be high as we received telephone calls from accommodation operators saying that their bookings for January and beyond were being cancelled due to the fires and smoke.
- Coach companies phoned and cancelled not only their planned day tours to fire affected areas but also moteliers in Albury and Wodonga had 5-day group package tours cancelled. Special interest groups that come to the region in Autumn eg garden groups cancelled, publicity in the cities implied we were burnt out.
- When the Eldorado/Stanley/Beechworth fires commenced on 21 January, this situation became a disaster for the industry because 'drawcard towns such as Beechworth' became

- We felt that the industry needed support and we produced a newsletter expressing our sympathy and concern to operators. A questionnaire was attached asking for feedback on business losses etc. We organised a public meeting on 25 February entitled Bring Back The Visitors, 60 people attended. See enclosed newsletter for January-February 2003.
- All members were encouraged to apply for the \$3,000 cash grants through the Small Business Relief Program for small businesses and farmers impacted by the bushfires. The funding being provided by the Federal Government.

### **Federal Government Response**

- Good response to the bush fires and some good initiatives were put in place. Sophie Panopoulos, Federal Member for Indi provided us with information on the small business cash grants program that we distributed (posted, faxed and phoned members). In the end over \$950,000 has been distributed in the Indi electorate to 325 businesses who met the criteria. This cash injection was a 'god send' for our tourism operators and certainly gave them hope/empowerment for the future. The application was easy and simple to complete which encouraged 'stressed out' people to 'give it a go' and apply. It was a fair and equitable way of letting all tourism operators have access to funding that wasn't tied up in knots.
- The hope that there would be an independent Federal inquiry into the bushfires as opposed to a 'closed' shop. Victorian Government departments have a lot to answer for on the way that they conducted themselves during the fires and potential litigation will not allow the truth to be told.

The Federal inquiry will allow people to be heard, there will be greater transparency and accountability and information gathered Australia wide will hopefully increase our knowledge and understanding of how to manage bushfires etc in the future.

### **Tourism Victoria**

We have never had any support from Tourism Victoria even though we have requested it over the years. We are not the RTO (regional tourism organisation) for the region as we are not government funded, yet we are a successful industry group. Tourism Victoria continues to support organisations/Shire Councils that 'roll over for them' and don't need to perform for the industry as they are not 100% funded and accountable to industry as we are.

- No leadership from Tourism Victoria, have treated industry groups such as ours with contempt. We thought they might have a change of heart and assist us because of the seriousness of the bushfires – wrong. eg. on 7 March we sent an email to Tourism Victoria asking what help was available to help the tourism industry, didn't receive a response until 26 March. The response was unsatisfactory.
- Funding was announced by Tourism Victoria - \$1.9 million
- Tourism Victoria has held no public meetings for the tourism operators to attend and discuss how they feel, how they would like to see the funds being spent, what the strategies or priorities are etc.
- Appointed a consultant (no tender put out) to oversee their campaign as an Independent Chairman. The consultant has lived and worked in the region previously and certainly doesn't have the confidence of the myself and others.
- People were appointed (not elected) to a Bush Fire Recovery Co-ordinating Committee to decide on how the money should be spent.
- Recovery campaign being conducted out of Tourism Victoria in Melbourne and not in the region.

- Tourism Victoria placed advertisements in our largest regional newspaper, the Border Mail on the 13 and 14 May 2003 enticing people to go and stay in Melbourne and spend their money. One insert in the Border Mail on Saturday 17 May 2003 was a 24 page glossy brochure called Discover Melbourne – Winter Edition. This brochure offered information on shopping, accommodation deals, nightlife, events calendar and was endorsed by John Pandazopoulos MP, Victorian State Minister for Tourism. Local tourism operators were appalled, that on the one hand Mr. Pandazoulos is telling people to go and visit the North East and spend money (bush fire recovery campaign funds used to put ads in Melbourne papers). This campaign was meant to help the industry get back on its feet and at the same time Tourism Victoria are running advertisements and inserting a brochure in a major regional newspaper encouraging people to go to Melbourne this Winter. How counter productive is this? It is worth noting that in many parts of our region winter is the lowest income period for many tourism operators.

### **Tourism NSW**

- Where is the response?

### **Where things are at and what needs to happen**

- An independent inquiry needs to be held on the real losses experienced by the tourism industry, not only in the fire affected areas but to businesses outside the region (such as city based coach companies) as well.  
It is worth noting that one of our agritourism operators sells a summer fruit that became smoke affected by the January bushfires. The income loss for this period was more than \$50,000. Casual staff were not employed to pick the fruit and the public that come to buy the fresh fruit at the farmgate stayed away. This is one of the contributing factors that has lead this business to be put on the market.
- There is fear for the long-term future as the 'phones have stopped ringing'.
- What happens when the Victorian Government's \$1.9m runs out?
- Where are the short, medium and long term strategic plans for the tourism industry?
- An independent evaluation of public funds spent needs to be done to see what worked and what didn't. Also people who did marketing in their own right to bring back the visitors need to be consulted and their activities evaluated. Too often State Government Departments and Shire Councils take credit for things that they played no role in whatsoever.
- That the Federal Government takes a more active role in regional tourism as tourism now plays a vital role in rural Australia. State Government Tourism Departments have hindered industry growth and development and this needs to be addressed where state boundaries are ignored and that support is provided directly to industry.
- Tourism Victoria and Shire Councils need to treat all tourism operators equally and not promote 'mates only' but promote the best that the region has to offer. In several shires the paid tourism operators have never visited some key tourism businesses.
- Local government responses to the bushfires has been mixed and mostly woeful, for example Indigo Shire only held one evening meeting for the tourism industry in Beechworth, operators in outlying towns were not advised of it.
- A database of all regional tourism operators needs to be established so that operators can be kept informed on what is happening.
- If controlled burning occurs more frequently as a result of new measures to keep the fuel down in the bush then it could affect the tourism industry substantially, particularly in the scenic valleys of North East Victoria. Fuel reduction usually occurs in Autumn and Spring when the region is lush and green and full of colour and visitors love to come to the Bright Autumn festival etc.
- A co-ordinated crisis management plan needs to be put together so that the industry is not