

Reference group makes a serious stand

Such was the strength of feeling after the February bushfires, residents of Goongerah, Bonang, Cabanandra, Tubbut, Dellicknora and Delegate River and representing a full spectrum of views, have collectively raised their concerns.

The move delivered concise views and clear recommendations and was praised by Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley last week.

On March 25, a community reference group was established at a meeting in the Bonang Hall to put the views of the community. The reference committee members include Patrizia and Phillip Neven (Tubbut), David Ingram (Bonang), Jill Redwood (Goongerah), Laurie Reed (Delegate) and Deb Foskey (Bonang).

A letter was tabled at last Thursday's community discussion with fire chiefs Craig Lapsley, Allan Goodwin and Euan Ferguson, and senior local Department of Environment and Primary Industries and Country Fire Authority figures. It was also addressed to State Government ministers Peter Walsh and Ryan Smith (and shadow ministers), Deputy Premier Peter Ryan, and Member for Gippsland East, Tim Bull.

The submission reads:

"We acknowledge that many people worked long hours with limited state resources and in very trying circumstances and we thank them for it, but we witnessed and experienced some alarming incompetence and mismanagement.

"We believe the evidence is strong enough to warrant the setting up of a truly independent inquiry.

"Our purpose is to list our communities' concerns and propose strategies to improve DEPI, CFA, shire and other officials' fire response and accountability to our community.

"First and foremost, we want to see demonstrated improvements in the prevention and suppression of wild-fires in far East Gippsland.

"We understand that similar community concerns have been documented and presented to fire agencies in recent years, the latest being the Royal Commission into the 2009 Black Saturday fires, yet many of



The community reference group in Bonang met last Thursday, with a noticeable spot-over burn from the February fires in the background, with the state's three fire chiefs - Allan Goodwin (Department of Environment and Primary Industries chief fire officer), Craig Lapsley (Fires Services Commissioner) and Euan Ferguson (Country Fire Authority chief officer). PICTURED: Mr Goodwin, Deb Foskey (Bonang), Mr Lapsley, Patrizia and Phillip Neven (Tubbut), David Ingram (Bonang), Jill Redwood (Goongerah), Laurie Reed (Delegate) and Mr Ferguson. K348-294

the recommendations are still to be implemented.

* The current culture which drives fire fighting in East Gippsland must change.

* We want to see a strategy of direct attack reintroduced into fire fighting strategies in East Gippsland as a matter of course.

* The lack of resources for direct attack in the initial stages and suppression thereafter must be adequate and made available at the earliest stages.

* Communication between fire officers and the community must be current, equal, two-way, informative and accurate and presented in ways that are readily accessible to community members.

* The lack of respect expressed towards local communities must be reversed.

"We believe that many of the problems encountered were avoidable.

"This document is a first step in bringing about changes in procedures and protocols to be agreed to,

adopted and included in training and future policies at all levels.

The combined residents from these communities strongly believe that the handling of the fires by govern-

"We demand a detailed account of expenditure in relation to the Goongerah Deddick Trail fires. We request an Auditor General's review to determine if this money was used in the most efficient way, given the State Government's limited resources."

ment agencies failed our communities in some very basic and obvious ways, particularly fire suppression.

"This has destroyed people's trust in DEPI's credibility as competent

and accountable fire managers.

"As the state's major fire management agency of public land, DEPI has a serious trust problem in our communities following the 2014 fires. This creates a false sense of security within communities that adds to the dangers of a major bushfire situation.

"Our observations at public meetings indicate DEPI presents a veneer in order to hide an inefficient and chaotic organisation.

"It is the residents' firm belief that at every level, the well-meaning professionals inside DEPI were imprisoned by their organisation's inefficient bureaucratic rules, mismanagement of intelligence and a clear lack of both human resources and essential equipment.

"Compliance to inappropriate rules hampered practical judgment, common sense and moral responsibility.

"Combined with stretched resources and personnel, and the inevitable level of human error and inexperience / incompetence, we

believe it led to unnecessary waste of valuable time and money, and led to the creation of a much larger fire perimeter than there needed to be.

"This caused the loss of both private property and some of the most valuable forested landscapes and ecological communities unique to East Gippsland.

"We are concerned that accountability of resource use and decision making during bushfire emergencies is minimal.

"Decisions are made on the run and often with the wrong or limited information, ignoring local knowledge. Rapid personnel change and information sharing is often disorganised and hectic resulting in management that is often based on half-pictures and assumptions.

"The cost of over \$100 million on this year's fires should be open to public scrutiny.

"We demand a detailed account of expenditure in relation to the Goongerah Deddick Trail fires. We request an Auditor General's review to determine if this money was used in the most efficient way, given the State Government's limited resources.

"We acknowledge that chaos is often the nature of emergencies, but with so much at stake, there must be an urgent and transparent adoption of improvements to emergency management.

"The 2014 fires have yet again highlighted the weaknesses which should not occur.

"The new era of weather extremes means this will not be a one-off. It is not good enough to continue fire management on the run with inadequate resources.

"This summer's fires should not have escalated to over 170,000 hectares given our knowledge gained since 2003. This makes decisions like the sacking of 500 DEPI staff (many being land management staff) with this knowledge incomprehensible.

"The combined communities request an immediate commitment from this government to a full independent inquiry to investigate why the Goongerah Deddick fires were so poorly handled. This must be a transparent process where we are consulted on the terms of reference."

A system that doesn't work



CFA chief officer Euan Ferguson speaks with the aid of, ironically, the warmth of a Bonang fire. K348-286

TIME FOR FIRE CHANGE

SPECIAL FEATURE

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"We intend, over the next couple of days, to read that and come back with a response to the group to what we will do and the steps we will take."

The reference group gave the fire chiefs to the end of the May for a response.

"We'll do better than that, we have to do better than that," Mr Lapsley said.

"We'll talk to the group in next couple of days to clarify a couple of things. Give us a week to get us where we need to.

"We don't want this to go on for months and months, enough time has passed."

He said there were concerns that reached "back behind us and reach forward", but there would be a need to be able to agree to disagree.

"If I can't deliver something I will explain why I can't deliver something," he said.

"I hope we can get your issues resolved in some way, shape or form

and I'm sure we can."

Mr Goodwin said he took of the role of chief officer last year knowing that he needed to "be part of this broader group, make changes not just across DEPI but broader emergency services as a whole".

"I'm open to comments, criticism I'm not frightened of that.

"I'll be back at some point.

"Today isn't a rant and a rave, it's a very constructive way to give us some information about your feelings and what you think."

Mr Ferguson said it was now important "we plot a way forward together".

"Clearly, there is a feeling we need to lift our game in a number of areas. We need to explore exactly what that means and exactly how we do that.

"We need to do a bit of analysis, we need to get to you but we will be with you in the journey."

Road closures were top of the agenda for the community after the closed reference group discussion.

"It sits up," Mr Lapsley said, but said there was a balance required between road closures and safety.

"One that is committed to having a

good look at it is (Victoria Police Chief Commissioner) Key Lay," he said.

"So we're applying a system that doesn't work. That tells you to take the lesson and fix it, modify it."

Among the worst affected landholders, Allan and Phillip Neven and Robert Belcher were the most vocal about the issue of road closures. Mr Belcher described it as an "unmitigated disgrace".

"You expect farmers like me to live up to animal welfare standards," Mr Belcher said.

Mr Lapsley said road closure management was vastly different after the 2009 Black Saturday fires, however when describing the use of wristbands to let local traffic in and out he drew blank looks from the 60-plus people in attendance.

"Never heard of it," Allan Neven said.

"We're not sure that's being applied consistently," Mr Lapsley said.

"It's not the poor copper that's on the road block, it's the system we've got to fix. That's up to us to take that away and work with you to work out the system that will work.

"They changed something in '09 and it's still frustrating us.

Let's not whip them (police), let's work with them."

Mr Belcher said there was no longer trust.

"We don't trust you. This is an absolute ground zero. You've blown it," he said.

"All the faults are represented over the entire state and without a full judicial inquiry, it is a case of the fox investigating the chicken shed security.

"It has to be taken out of your hands and ultimately put into the hands of judges," Mr Belcher said.

"I think we need engagement here and the chiefs to understand; if it's true, we need to change," Mr Lapsley said.

As for the three-month delay in visiting the community when numerous other fire-affected communities had received attention, Mr Lapsley did say, but didn't want it used as an excuse, that "we've been busy and haven't had the time to get up there."

Mr Lapsley's final reassurance to the Bonang community: "It's not finished, it's only the start."



Country Fire Authority chief officer Euan Ferguson and Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley document some of the issues. K348-297

'We must lead'

Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley said the motivation behind his visit to Bonang last Thursday was understanding the community's frustrations and criticism.

"The key thing out of this is we've got to lead something and understand the frustrations and concerns, the experiences they've had, and in many of them they are describing them as not a good experience. Let's listen to that for a start, let's work out how to move it forward," Mr Lapsley said.

"It needs something to engage with the community, so we as the leaders in fire can then ensure those other agencies we work with we bring with us - the shire, police or others, that's critical.

"There won't be a single solution in many of the things they (the community) have put forward. Some of them are complex, some deep, some have been here for years, some are not just East Gippsland bound.

"Some things there might be a local solution for a local issue of Tubbut or Goongerah, but a lot of them will be broader."

TIME FOR FIRE CHANGE

SPECIAL FEATURE

Has Mr Lapsley's perception of the impact of the February fires on the community changed with his visit?

"There's no doubt when you come and engage with community you get the real feel, so the true benefit today is the feel, the emotion, the connection, the commitment, to not only identify issues but to have things fixed. Benefit of the day is the engagement, without a doubt," he said.

He said prior to the visit the fire chiefs were aware, through correspondence and discussions with residents, there were a "series of issues".

"Now all I've got to do is be able to put them all together."

Mr Lapsley praised the reference group for its ability to bring together "what might be many issues" under about seven key themes and 11 recommendations.

"We will take that away and in a short period of time and come back to this group with a way we can move those things

forward."

The fire chiefs' visit came a delayed three months after the worst day of the fires. He said there were "two parts" to that.

"One, there could be a perception we don't care and we do," he said.

"I think the time delay has allowed people to crystallise on what the issues are, so it's consolidated the issues."

He said it was important to understand the residents' emotions. However, with such a time gap between the fire and the visit, the immediate emotion had passed and it had allowed people to think clearer.

"We've got now a mature group, elected by the community to represent the community and it's good to be able to have a targeted group to work with, a group that's got a really good cross-section of the community," he said.

"They've been able to articulate clearly what the key issues are. They're well structured; you've got to say well done to that."

Cash grab 'designer bushfires'

The Goongerah community was scathing in its assessment of bushfire resourcing, and has questioned if blazes were able to grow for financial gain.

The fire chiefs heard a multitude of scenarios from the small gathering of about 10 community members last Thursday afternoon. It was explained that resources were used inefficiently, for example:

* A strike team from Melbourne stayed at Newmerella (base camp), drove up the Bonang Road, was in the Goongerah area for a couple of hours and knocked off at 5pm. "They didn't do anything, why were they here?"

* Community members showed teams around the area, prepared them, then those teams went back to Geelong (in this instance) the next day. It wasted residents' time that could have been spent preparing their own properties.

* Not being able to see a fire weeks in advance, looking at a map and recognising immediately it would impact communities - the "let it go" policy.

* A lack of direct attack. The Ellery fire was able to be direct attacked and was one of two nights throughout the fires crews worked all night. The fire was contained, one person was left in control and it got out of control again, the community claimed.

* More resources allocated in the initial instance would be of benefit. "If they could bring more chopper (helicopter) support at the start."

"I know areas have to burn, but you could note where there was a lightning strike and burn them later."

The community questioned the term "asset protection".

"Asset protection is great, but if you've got a thousand-year-old rainforest, what's an asset?" was one comment.

"The environmental assets of the area are not actually given a shoe in, it isn't not looked on as a real asset when it serves (a) an environmental purpose and (b) a tourism purpose," was another comment.

"They didn't really seem to factor in this area at all."

Community leader Jill Redwood said the approach was very upsetting for a lot of people who know and understand the bush really well, and/or come from an environmental background or training.

"To see what was going on; the excessive amount of bulldozing work, tracks, just no consideration for environmental values," she said.

"The light and leave policy was incredibly hard to deal with. At 4pm, home they go, almost with a drip torch out the side of the car."

Another community member suggested it was "fighting fire with arson". "If someone else did that it's seen as arson. You're lighting a fire and walking away from it, that's not responsible in my eyes."

Ms Redwood said there didn't seem to be any proactive work.

"It was all patrolling, bulldozing and burning. They just didn't want to use water, describing the summer's events as "designer bushfires".

There were also criticism relayed from visiting international and interstate fire fighters who had told locals they couldn't believe the approach being taken. A common question was 'why are you making the fires bigger'.

"The whole notion of a 'campaign' fire, it implies that it is something that is there deliberately to raise funds, or to awareness, or to do something," a resident said.

"It really brings into question the motivations of the governing bodies of that fire - I find that pretty concerning. It puts the idea of con-

trolling a fire at cross-purposes with the 'campaign'.

Ms Redwood said it wasn't so much a lack of resources, but a waste of resources.

"Absolute waste," she said.

"It could come under the heading of a scam, the way a lot of contractors were using this fire to line their pockets.

"This sort of stuff would come out in an inquiry, but not if you say we'll make it better next time.

"It does seem like there is some financial incentive to keep fires going rather than put them out. Fires seem to be going for longer and longer, bulldozing more, back burning back more."

Ms Redwood also questioned why mapping wasn't available or fire areas and backburning operations during fires.

"That's not mapped. Why don't we know this?"

Communication was a serious concern when landline telephones were lost and the electricity was cut. There is no mobile phone reception from beyond Bonang to Orbost.

"People have nothing. If something serious happens here you are up the proverbial creek big time," one resident said, highlighting Telstra unwillingness to use an existing tower.

A mail drop - an A4 sheet of paper with an update to the resident who had made it known they were staying to protect their properties - was regarded as an easy fix.

Mr Lapsley conceded that a policy to put the majority of information on the internet doesn't always work, particularly for more remote communities.

"We need to be about to explain what's happening better," he said of the fire response and the logic behind decisions.

Safety DEPI's top priority

Chief fire officer Allan Goodwin has defended the Department of Environment and Primary Industries' role in both the lead-up to and during the fires.

However, Mr Goodwin was quick to deflect the over-arching responsibility of the handling of the far east fires to State Command and Control.

"DEPI crews and people are heavily involved in the fires this summer, they were deep - seated forest fires. Remember, the State Command and Control arrangements are in place," he told the Advertiser.

"We come to work, all our people, to do a good job. First and foremost the principals in our head are keeping our fire fighters safe and keeping our communities safe, and obviously this community feels we let them down in that area.

"Our people are genuine. They want to integrate with other fire services; they want to make sure the protection of the community is first and foremost.

"For us, we're there before the fire and after the fire. Our people are part of the community."

Mr Goodwin said there was a "huge complex of fires, 47 lightning strikes, 45 we put out", and that there were considerable resources in at Club Ter-



Craig Lapsley addresses the Bonang community meeting. Also pictured are Andy Bennett (Goongerah Fire Brigade, second left) and affected Deddick landholder Damian Ventry, of Deddick Spring, who suffered significant fencing loss due to back burning. K348-281

race and other parts of the state.

When questioned if DEPI had reviewed its role in the fires before last week, he said a "key part" of their review was Thursday's discussions.

"Can you fix them (issues) all I don't know, do you agree with them all I don't know, but you've got to hear it first."

The community has been highly critical of perceived 9am to 5pm DEPI working hours.

"I don't think that's true," Mr Goodwin said.

"We had a lot of long shifts over many weeks, early mornings and into the night," referring to personally being present at briefings at 7.30am and knowing "those fire fighters were out on the ground

until dark". Mr Goodwin said he wouldn't necessarily draw a parallel between land management practices and fire response.

DEPI preparation for fires, in a people sense, were ensuring those people are trained and accredited under the Fit for Fire program, he said.

"One of the responsibilities I have is about the safety of fire fighters. There is remoteness, roads. Tasking our fire fighters has to be done in a safe and well prioritised manner."

Money allocated for track and bridge maintenance in this area was extensive, he said, while trumpeting the planned burning achievements. He did concede it was a

"huge" challenge across the state.

Roads and general access?

"We look at it every year in every part of the state."

The community's concern over questionable track and bridge maintenance was rebuked.

Is it up to standard?

"We have over 50,000 kilometres of roads on public land, it's huge," Mr Goodwin said in deferring to a statewide position. He did suggest that East Gippsland was a focus of the "strategic" approach DEPI takes to it track and bridge maintenance program.

But did that strategic approach bear fruit this summer?

"Yes."



Key players within the Department of Environment and Primary Industries - Allan Goodwin (chief officer) and senior land and fire managers Grange Jephcott and Richard Teychenne - listen in at Goongerah. K348-298