

DEPI Ministers Walsh and Smith (and the Opposition Ministers)
Emergency Services Minister Kim Wells
Craig Lapsley Emergency Services Commissioner
Euan Ferguson Chief Fire Officer CFA
Allan Goodwin Chief Fire Officer DEPI
Tim Bull MP

May 8th 2014

To whom it may concern

A public and open inquiry into the Deddick Goongerah – Red Sunday – fires February 9th 2014

On 25th of March 2014, residents of Goongerah, Bonang, Cabanandra, Tubbut, Dellicknora and Delegate River held a meeting at the Bonang Hall to establish a course of action in response to the 2014 Goongerah-Deddick fires, which peaked on “Red Sunday” 9 February 2014. Such is the strength of feeling that people from across the spectrum of views agreed to raise our concerns with government, its agencies and the CFA and we set up a Reference Group to put the views of the communities in writing. This letter and its attachments are the result of this process.

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 planning for prevention and suppression of wildfires 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 Black Saturday fires, yet many of 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 government 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. This compliance to 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 disorganized and hectic resulting in management that is often based on half-pictures and assumptions.

The cost of over one hundred 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 ha 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.

In summary, and with the evidence supplied in the attached documents, the combined communities request a commitment from this government to a full independent enquiry 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.

In the interim, we seek a meeting with the Minister for DEPI and relevant politicians and bureaucrats to set up a process to develop a protocol for more targeted community preparedness and management of future fires (especially first strike options) and associated matters such as road closures.

We look forward to your response in the very near future.

Signatures of reps or individuals

ATTACHMENT 1.

1. Lack of Initial Direct Attack:

On Jan 27th DEPI officials announced at the Community meeting at Bonang that they could not attack Campbell's Knob fire as it was "too remote", making aerial surveillance the only option. The Community feeling is that early attack by rappel crews on the "too remote" fires at Musk Creek and Campbell's Knob would have contained them until ground crews gained access and blacked them out, thereby alleviating the holocaust type destruction of the Snowy River National Park and considerable angst and asset loss by adjoining landholders. After all, these fires started by lightning strike on a single tree! In Tubbut, precious time was wasted and could have been better spent on strategically back burning areas to prevent, or at least minimize the impact on private land.

2. Communication: Misleading, confusing, undelivered information contained in the Community Information Newsletters from DEPI/CFA/Parks Victoria and misleading, contradicting, incomplete, out of date information, data over the radio, phone, websites and contradicting information within offices at the Orbost ICC unit and apparent lack of communication between ICC Orbost and the ICC at Bendoc as well as local CFA and Emergency numbers, the inadequate, delayed and inefficient practices and procedures in cases such as emergencies of this magnitude.

a. It is of extreme importance that communication should work both ways, DEPI-CFA to locals and vice versa. However, this did not happen. Residents attending the meeting have complained that from Jan 16th to the end of the fire event, some people tried up to 20 times to gather information regarding the fires and the calls were transferred to message bank or transferred to personnel on time off and there was a wait of up to 24 hours for information.

Locals have raised concerns in regard to fire suppression as early as Jan 21st but were fobbed off with "cannot release the information" or "rain is coming" or "fire bombing will take place".

b. On Feb 3rd fire reached private property at Deddick and was temporarily contained by a CFA Strike team that night, despite recommendation from Bendoc ICC that they should withdraw for safety reasons. Bonang CFA Brigade attended next day and mopped up. On assessment it became obvious that a strategic back burn was urgently required between the private property and the Snowy River (approx 750 metres) to prevent wildfire coming up the river and thus jumping the Deddick River and creating an out of control blaze on the escarpment.

This initiative was stopped by Bendoc ICC because of "Cultural and Heritage" sites!

c. Misleading information re fires at Gelantipy – turns out it was a false alarm.

d. On Feb 9th at 6pm the Incident Control Centre advised Delegate to evacuate; the message however was incorrect – it was meant for Delegate River and Bendoc!

e. There were instances where residents were informed that their house had been burnt and the next day found that it was false information.

f. In most cases there were no consistent DEPI personnel or team present at Community information meetings or recovery meetings. The changing personnel in attendance were unable to answer questions as information was lacking or they weren't authorised to pass it on or not in a position to commit one way or another. Assurances were given that issues would be raised higher up but that never happened; if it did, residents were not informed.

Assurances were also given that notes were taken and copies of them would be provided to the participants of the meeting but that never happened either. Placations appeared to be the method of dealing with the public, rather than honest or informed communications. This could have been due to under-resourcing, inexperience or incompetence and chaos dressed up as "in control".

g. Some residents were told by strike teams that they would be supported but this did not eventuate. On Sunday Feb 9th strike team tankers waited at Tubbut safer place until the wind and fire abated so they could safely return to Delegate Camp, without seeking to help at Cabanandra and Bonang West where residents were striving to defend their homes and Property.

h. Some of the residents of the Bonang, Tubbut and Deddick area were unaware that there was an evacuation process in place until they heard it on the radio or read it on the website.

Goongerah residents received evacuation warnings via the phones. Some of the residents, already alarmed by the turn of weather conditions, the excessive smoke in the area and the colour of the sky, felt more worried as phone calls by family and friends were received intimating that fire was approaching faster than predicted. More time was spent on phones and computers to establish if what was said on the radio was correct and true.

i. People have expressed concerns in regard to the emergency numbers and calls being diverted to other services at Shepparton or Ballarat, or diverted to message bank, or being told that they would be called back reasonably soon, but never were. It is understandable that in emergency situations we all want an answer right away (and this is not always possible), however, if a statement of intent to call back in 15 minutes is made, then a reply is expected. In some instances people gave up their time and waited at home by the phone for answers that never came, when their time could have been better utilised (feeding stock, fixing fences, networking, planning, etc.) Frustration and anger escalated on top of existing stresses.

j. Orbost ICC told a local resident to call Bendoc ICC for information regarding the road into Goongerah. The woman answering queries told the caller emphatically the wrong information; Bonang Road was open to the South but closed to the North. This type of bungling of information from "authorities" is not only dangerous but destroys confidence and respect for DEPI as competent managers.

3. Road Blocks and its regulations, favouring residents to leave but not come back and Evacuation perceived as a scare tactic:

a. Absentee landholders were unable to gain access to their properties/homes to prepare and protect their assets due to the enforcement of such regulation.

b. Road blocks prevented emergency fodder from coming in, livestock to be relocated for agistment purposes, emergency material to come in for fencing, yards and equipment urgently needed for fire suppression/recovery purposes.

c. Road blocks prevented much needed human resources in assisting fire control, suppression and recovery.

d. Road blocks, especially the one at Delegate River prevented people from going about their business (groceries, local vet and doctor to name a few). Obtaining passes was not an easy task and it required many phone calls and explanations and in some instances passes were also denied.

e. Police on road blocks did not know anything about the geography of where they were working. They knew little about the Communities affected or that there were often no alternatives for people locked in, making life extremely difficult.

f. At the Community recovery meeting, several people enquired about the opening of the Orbost- Bonang road as an important local issue (cattle to be sent to agistment, deliveries of hay and fencing material for those who had been directly affected by fire, just to name a few points); the standard reply was that the road was dangerous but perhaps in the next few days it could be open to locals and limited traffic. Orbost ICC personnel made promises that the road would be open, even with escort vehicles and at certain times of morning and afternoon, but when residents fronted up to the roadblock they were sent back in no uncertain terms. There was uncertainty about where the decision to keep the road closed was made.

g. The road block set up on Jan 16th at Orbost was kept in place until March 17th. As mentioned after the 2003 fires, the Orbost/Bonang/McKillops Rd is the only practical road for the local residents.

h. For much of the time, the Category C road closure existed on the Bonang. It is defined as allowing people offering assistance or bringing supplies and essential services in to go through if they register. Despite this, the Orbost ICC manager (Steve deVoogd?) declared that no one was allowed through unless they were DEPI or related emergency services. This made it even more difficult for locals who had friends or family keen to bring in supplies and help out.

There was no flexibility offered on this. After pursuing this further, police overrode DEPI and allowed some help through in one instance. They saw that the road closure rules were making life more difficult for locals needing help.

4. Lack of consultation/disregard of local knowledge of fire behaviour/topography:

a. At the Community meeting held at Tubbut, some residents asked that back burning be conducted on the south western side of the valley but were told that “at no point back burning was an option”.

b. There was a feeling of disempowerment over the input of the management of the fire. People were informed that crews would be made available if help was needed. No one was told that crews could be pulled out or sent to wait at safer areas at times when they were most needed.

c. It is strong community understanding that despite recommendations made in the 2003 public enquiry report, DEPI ignored advice and information provided by members of the wider community with expertise and knowledge in the development of fire prevention and suppression strategies and that such advice and information was not incorporated into the Incident controllers’ and Incident Management Teams’ decision making.

5. Lack of planning and “real” preparation for fire season: Lack of FRB’s (as promised after 2003 & 2009) and maintenance of forest trails.

a. The opening up of tracks during the fires indicates that it was not done prior to the fire season. This was reinforced by a statement from Orbost personnel in late 2013 that due to lack of resources only the most important tracks would be opened. In general, all the preparation was done in a rushed manner while the fire was approaching instead of having it all ready in place as promised after the 2003 fires. Some forest tracks were closed as trees were over, and creek crossings were not passable. Putting bulldozers on tracks in dry dusty conditions is conducive to creating dust bowls, causing 4WD’s to have a dry bog on tracks, hence impediment to wheel traction and further erosion. Despite remedial works, there is now serious erosion after a small amount of rain. This will now make tracks impassable in all seasons. After the Jan 15th lightning strikes, fires were going at Delegate River, Bonang, Ellery Creek, Joys’ Creek, Mt Jersey, BA Creek, Combienbar, Campbell’s Knob and Deddick Trail. Access to the fires at Delegate River was difficult because tracks were not maintained and this proved to be an issue throughout the fire event. The lack of track maintenance hugely impacted on access to the fire line; as far as we know, no DEPI crew ever walked and had a close look at the fires. In 1982, 1983, 1988, 1998 (just to mention a few) fire fighting crews walked into these areas and spent up to 3-4 days on the fire line. Now, whatever policies and protocol DEPI has (or has not!) prevents crews from doing so. Fires are now let get bigger hoping they can be contained by bulldozed tracks and backburns, which are not at all reliable and only increase the edge of the fire unnecessarily!

b. By Jan 17th-18th Ellery Creek was contained by DEPI, however it wasn’t patrolled or monitored and subsequently escaped to become a large fire. This was then called their summer “campaign fire”.

c. With the weather forecast for high temperatures, northerly winds for long periods of time, lack of strategic fuel reduction burns for the past many seasons and one of the longest droughts just behind us, with only two average winter rains and very low water tables, what did the Department think was going to happen if a fire started from one of the lightning storms? (This is a comment from one person present at the meeting of March 25th). As a result, one of the questions that naturally come to mind is why the Goongerah fire was not attacked with force when it started instead of letting it burn to become the inferno it did? Why the report of a spot over from the Mt Jersey fire was initially ignored? When it was acted on, it was too big and was likely the fire that ripped through the northern end of Goongerah, burnt down a house and raced down the eastern edge of the valley. Why wasn’t DEPI aware of the Jersey fire being a threat to the

Bonang Community (at the Community meeting held on Feb 1st?)

d. Given the knowledge of the computer modelling prediction, and given the extreme hot conditions with the prediction of extreme fire conditions on Feb 9th, people feel that DEPI and CFA were not properly prepared for the fire storm that did occur. There was little or no regard for peoples assets, i.e. fencing, pasture, livestock and buildings. The thrust was to evacuate everyone and let everything else take its chance.

e. A back burn was started off Mt Jersey yet had no containment line. When questioned, the response was “that’s planning on the run”.

6. No night crews in attendance on fire line throughout the length of fire event, sense of incompetence, Lack of confidence, insecurity:

a. Fire crews rostered around the clock would have achieved a much better outcome in fire suppression, as well as support for residents who were abandoned.

b. Evenings and nights are the best time to control and fight fires, whereas all crews seemed to be getting to the fire line late mid morning and leaving early in the evenings, at times lighting up roadsides as they left! This prolonged the fires. Simply put, instead of possibly a two day event, it spanned out for two months!

c. There is a perception that people are not adequately trained, competent nor committed to the prevention and suppression of fires. This leads to a widespread perception that personnel employed are there for the “quick buck”, hence the prolonged fire event. Fires, once declared an emergency, are a huge financial winner for many. This is an incentive to keep fires going in a controlled fashion.

d. There is a strong belief that personnel at senior level are paid “big money” every day during a fire event. This leads to a perception that major fire events are happening more and more often, go on for longer, with no direct speedy attack to put the fire out.

e. It seems that DEPI does not utilise human or machinery resources efficiently. An example being the reluctance of DEPI to utilise CFA strike teams (the them and us mentality of the paid versus the volunteer fire fighter!)

f. There were also cases where machinery was floated in and left idle for days at great expense to the fire budget. Was this due to a new shift, fire managers being unaware of them or a planning glitch?

g. Local CFA crews were commonly on fire patrol through the night due to the DEPI “light it and leave” practice. These burns had the potential to jump lines and threaten local communities. The local CFA members were then exhausted the next day when they were needed to prepare and protect their own assets.

7. Lack of ethical transparency and accountability from the day the lightning struck in the local area

a. There seems to be no serious commitment to protect property and private assets as the work practices and policies have negated the ability to fight fires.

b. From the local level, it seems there is too much hierarchy in the office and not enough personnel on the ground to do the actual work.

c. Decisions are often made by people far removed from the reality and heat of the fire; people in charge that have no knowledge of the areas, some with secret service mentality and do not communicate with locals or with other agencies.

d. There is a lack of accountability in regard to decision making and responsibility.

e. Lack of minuting at community meetings precludes issues raised by people present to be taken further up the hierarchic ladder and be addressed adequately.

8. Community perception of often being given a false sense of security/being let down; lack of support and assistance to people in need during the fire/no check-ups with residents that remained

to ensure their safety before/during/after the fires and Strong perception of “don’t care/no action – let it burn” attitude

a. There are examples of people who felt totally abandoned and angry given that at the previous community meetings (at Bonang/Tubbut) they were promised that every property would have two tankers or two or three DEPI units. Some of these were more personal assurances to individual property holders. Either way, that was not to be the case. CFA strike teams left Goongerah the morning of Feb 9th; previous assurances given at a community meeting were not kept. If promises of protection change, the community must be informed as early as possible.

b. While a DEPI strike team waited and watched at the Goongerah Hall, the northern end of Goongerah was alight and five locals were left to protect 5 properties. One house was burnt to the ground. There may have been a good reason why DEPI were drinking tea on the verandah but it definitely was a bad look!

c. After the remaining DEPI and CFA teams left their safe point later on the evening (Feb 9th) they drove past houses where residents were still present and in some cases fighting fires and never called to see if they needed assistance or if they were injured and went to “protect a safer house” where the resident was not present. Such action goes against the number one priority of saving and protecting human lives. It also demonstrated the insecurity and incompetence of DEPI and CFA personnel.

d. Residents observed that after “Red Sunday” how DEPI crews did not leave Delegate until after 10am every day and returned at night, and still no night crews on the fire line.

e. On Feb 1st a second Public meeting took place at Bonang; the Park Incident Controller produced predictive computer modelling that had eventuated. On Feb 11th (10 days later) at a briefing in Delegate the same person announced “it all went to script!”. The same words were repeated at the Community meeting at Bonang on Feb 15th. We understand this modelling is unpredictable due to the many variations that can arise with slight changes in the data that is fed in. If this modelling is still in its early stages and not being used to inform the Public, why was it being shown around?

9. Financial cost/time cost to those directly (and indirectly) affected by the fires:

a. Family members/friends tried to get home (refer to road blocks) wanting to help local residents prepare and assist before, during and after the fire (now known as “Red Sunday”). They were prevented, leading in some cases to unnecessary loss of property.

b. Reconstruction of lost infrastructure such as yards and sheds, rebuilding of internal and external fences, replacement of equipment such as solar panels, energisers, fencing material, replacement of destroyed livestock and hay, will cost more than what DEPI could ever offer (half cost of materials for neighbouring fences with public land). The cost of Insurance dictates that only basic assets are insured by the majority of landholders.

10. Lack of respect for locals and their “homes”:

a. A number of people experienced offhand and disdainful treatment by certain DEPI staff. The historic differences that exist between environmentally aware locals, logging contractors on the fire lines and some personnel from Orbost was apparent. This was very unprofessional and made for even greater contempt and disrespect.

b. The apparently small issue of ration pack rubbish and plastic water bottles thrown out along the roadside of our towns was a small thing in itself but reflected a lack of respect for our communities.

c. Local walking/riding tracks, well used recreational sites and revered old trees were destroyed in minutes. Locals had no say in what was done or where.

11. Emotional toll – devastation/stress/sense of loss/grief:

- a. Not only the land holders and local residents but their friends and family members that were hundreds of kilometres away felt the stress and emotional drain over the two months.
- b. Some of the residents and land holders of the area have been devastatingly affected by the fires and sustained serious losses of property and livestock worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The process of recovery will take years and plunge some of them into serious debt.
- c. This type of event is something many people living in a fire prone area accept. Many would also accept that agencies responsible for controlling such devastating disasters would be resourced enough to properly tackle the disaster head on from the beginning. Fear of litigation seems to prevent effective fire fighting techniques now.
- d. DEPI campaign fires can create much financial reward for staff, contractors and the local economy, but at massive cost to locals and their environment.

These are some of the issues that came out at the meeting but the list is not exhaustive. The forests of Far East Gippsland have suffered immense devastation which would be hard to account for in monetary terms. It is well known that a number of threatened and endangered species are found only in these forests – their fate is unknown as their refuge is destroyed. With an impacted area of 170,000 ha through some of the richest habitat, it will take decades, or even centuries, for wildlife to return to normal numbers. Leaves will return but healthy ecosystems will take much longer. Tourism in this area will suffer for years to come and business wise, the regional tourist industry will feel the impact substantially; as will the agricultural sector. The amount of land, fences, pasture and stock destroyed will take years to recover and regain normality.

This community believes that current practices in fire prevention, suppression and control are neither adequate nor suitable for our particular environment. Hotter and drier climate are becoming normality rather than occasional events, increasing the length of the fire season and the severity of fires and fire fighting agencies must prepare for this. Transparent accountability, better funding and budgeting, adequate full time, competent and trained personnel with local knowledge of the area, practical support and information for those who choose to stay during the fire events are some of the solutions suggested, in conjunction with extensive consultation with local communities.

Further, we recommend:

1. That resources for effective first attack fire-fighting be reviewed, prioritised and funded.
2. More transparency in decision making of the fire controllers and higher level managers, with review of financial incentives that are counter productive.
3. That consultation with landholders and communities include discussion about how best to prepare for fire, i.e. placement of tracks, strategic fuel reduction burning, etc and be conducted annually, before the fire season starts.
4. That DEPI work with a representative group of community members to develop a fire fighting protocol to be adopted by all parties – locals, DEPI and CFA – to be reviewed at regular intervals.
5. That funds to prevent wildfire impacting on communities be available all year round and not just over the summer season, in order that tracks can be put in place with care rather than urgency and maintained to a high standard and other measures to protect our communities from fire can be conducted. One worker at Bendoc, the skeleton staff remaining between fire seasons, is not capable of doing this.
6. That support be given to the local CFA to enable more people to be trained in order that we increase our pool of local expertise and are less reliant on outside support.
7. That recognition be given to local people coming and going from their properties via a locals' pass or some other means by which people take responsibility for their own movements unless safety really cannot be assured – for instance, while the fire is running.
8. That more honesty and less placation be offered to communities.
9. That a scientific review of the most effective fire suppression methods be carried out.

10. That DEPI provide information on various ways people can make their private assets fire ready.
11. More emphasis be placed on community fire-guard preparations.
12. Meetings with locals be documented and information added into the pool of information used during fire response.