



# East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Committee Chair's Report

September 2020

**Joint report from East Gippsland Shire Council  
and Bushfire Recovery Victoria**

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

On behalf of Council, I would like to acknowledge the Gunaikurnai, Monero and the Bidawel people as the Traditional Custodians of the land that encompasses East Gippsland Shire. We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in East Gippsland, their Elders past and present.

# Table of Contents

<b>Report Purpose</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction from the Chair of the East Gippsland Recovery Committee</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. East Gippsland Shire – Context for recovery planning and action</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Overview of the Black Summer fires – what happened</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. Recovery Coordination - Establishing the East Gippsland Recovery Committee (EGRC)</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. What has been delivered so far?</b>	<b>10</b>
5.1 Social recovery	11
5.2 Economic recovery	12
5.3 Built environment and infrastructure recovery	12
5.4 Natural environment recovery	13
5.5 Culture and healing	14
<b>6. What has been delivered - recovery by the numbers</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>7. The impact of COVID 19 on recovery – a unique context for recovery</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>8. What still needs to be done</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>9. Next steps for the East Gippsland Recovery Committee</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>10. Membership and thanks</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Appendix 1 Bushfire Recovery Arrangements</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Appendix 2 East Gippsland Bushfire Recovery Newsletter</i>	<i>50<sup>th</sup> edition 22</i>

## Report Purpose

This report aims to provide the communities, agencies, Council and the State and Commonwealth Governments an update on work of the Committee. These reports will be released from time to time as deemed useful.

# 1. Introduction from the Chair of the East Gippsland Recovery Committee

It has been approximately nine months since the Black Summer fires in East Gippsland, depending on your community. We have come a long way with restoration of assets including roads, bridges and coastal infrastructure. The clean up by GROCON has progressed well and is expected to be completed by the end of August.

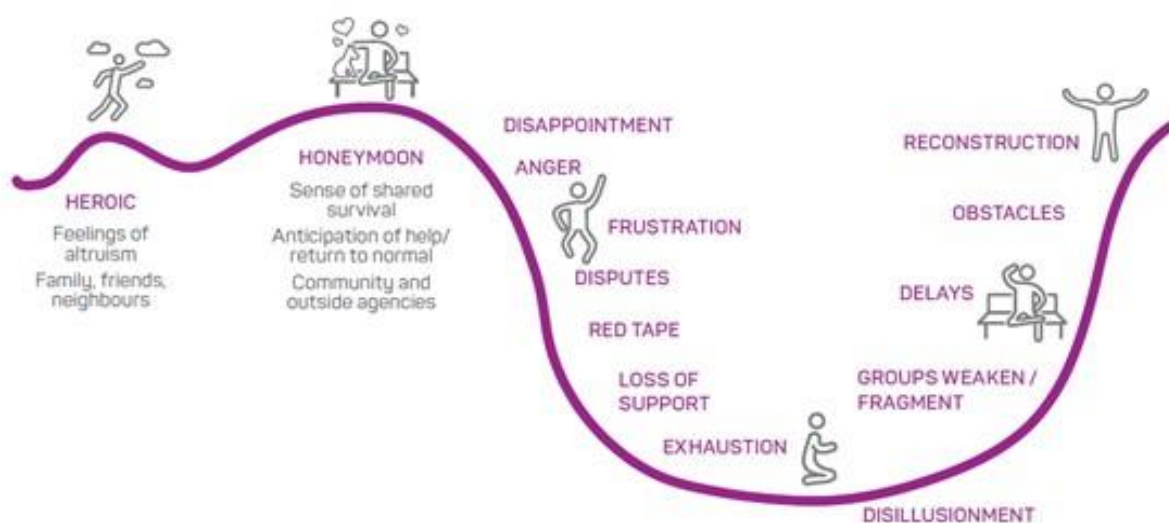
Rebuilding is underway in many areas, and there has been support for local business. The impact of COVID 19 has however slowed many aspects of recovery and has compounded the impacts on business and community.

The East Gippsland Recovery Committee (EGRC) has been at work since January and version 1 of the East Gippsland recovery plan is nearing completion. The plan will be updated based on continuing feedback from communities about priorities. Community Recovery Committees (CRC) are now up and going, in many communities.

I continue to be amazed by the resilience of our communities and the way in which community members are supporting each other.

There are still gaps in the recovery supports for our community and a lot more work to do. Our challenge is to identify these gaps by listening to our communities. The hard work and frustrations of rebuilding continue, and for some communities the prospect of the next fire season, and the need to prepare, looms.

Each of us has a role in recovery, and it is timely to remember this period, nine months on from the fires, can be really challenging. Anne Leadbeater, a consultant and Red Cross mentor from Kinglake, shared with us the following illustration of the recovery journey (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2018).





Recovery can be a long journey with frustrations, obstacles, weariness and much more. COVID 19 complicates this recovery journey, slowing progress and increasing isolation.

This report provides a snapshot of recovery progress and the work of the recovery committee over the first nine months since the fires. Some things will inevitably be missed, but I hope it provides you with a picture of the work underway. The recovery plan to be released shortly will provide further information about the support available and the plans and projects from here.

I am heartened by a number of communities that are getting on with the job despite the obstacles, and by the communities that are taking the opportunity to look to the future, considering what is important, and planning how to get there.

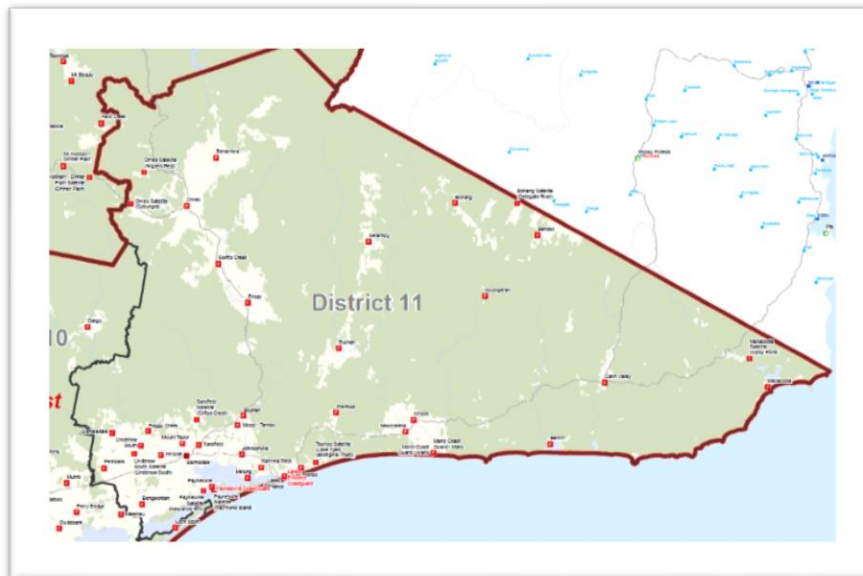


## 2. East Gippsland Shire – Context for recovery planning and action

Council's vision for East Gippsland is to be the most liveable region in Australia - a place of natural beauty, enviable lifestyles, and opportunities. The size, dispersed nature of our communities and their demographics pose particular challenges and opportunities in recovery.

Covering 20,931 sq kms, East Gippsland is the second largest municipality in Victoria and encompasses 10% of the land area of Victoria. Each of East Gippsland's adjoining municipalities (in Victorian and New South Wales) also experienced the impact of fires this season.

About half of East Gippsland's total population (approx. 46,000), is located in the centres of Bairnsdale, Lakes Entrance and Paynesville in the south-west corner of the shire. Outside of these centres, the pattern of settlement is very dispersed, with more than 40 separate communities. The distribution of local fire brigades, as shown in the



adjacent figure, is one indicator of the spread of communities across the East Gippsland Shire. The dispersed nature of the population contributed to some of the impacts during the fires (such as isolation) and contributes to the challenge of delivering recovery services.

Almost 75% of land and water, including the Gippsland Lakes in East Gippsland, is in public ownership, and consists mainly of state forests, national and coastal parks. Only about 60 sq kms of land in the shire is classified as urban, the balance is rural land or natural assets. While this makes East Gippsland a great place to live, it also contributes to higher fire risk.

The age demographic in the East Gippsland community is slightly older than most other communities in Victoria, with much of the population between the age of 45-84 years. 30% of the population live in single person households and about a quarter of households do not have internet access. The dispersed population, nature of households and limitations on digital connectivity all affect the planning and delivery of recovery activities.

### 3. Overview of the Black Summer fires – what happened

East Gippsland faced an unprecedented natural disaster during the summer of 2019-20 after lightning strikes started numerous fires across the region.

The fires which burnt out of control throughout the summer months were particularly challenging due to the extent of area under fire, the duration of the fires, and the substantial community and economic impact, which may continue for years.

East Gippsland was already experiencing significant drought which meant there were extensive areas of fuel throughout the shire.

The first fires began on 21 November 2019 and the remote locations and unfavourable conditions made them difficult to contain. Several fires joined creating fires of a magnitude never previously experienced in Gippsland, the North East and adjacent NSW. In late December dry lightning started new fires west of Mallacoota and these merged on New Year's Eve during extreme fire and weather conditions.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared a state of disaster under the provisions of the Victorian Emergency Management Act on 2 January 2020, a few days after Victoria's Emergency Management Commissioner, Andrew Crisp, urged holidaymakers not to travel to East Gippsland and asked all visitors to leave.

Arterial roads were closed, numerous communities were cut off and the Australian Defence Force and Victoria Police worked with East Gippsland Shire Council and other government agencies to deliver emergency supplies and evacuate residents and holidaymakers trapped by fire.

The region remained under various states of warning for several weeks and residents were evacuated numerous times.

By the time the disaster had passed, the fires had burnt more than 1.1 million hectares, representing 56% of East Gippsland. The extensive cost included loss of human life, property, livestock, wildlife, damage to the natural environment and resources and air quality. Significant impacts to livelihoods and consumer confidence resulted in wake of the devastation.,

Three people died, an estimated 410 residential properties and 27 commercial properties were damaged or destroyed. In addition, 5,300 sq km (68.3%) of state forest and 483 sq km (41%) of nature reserve were burnt.

The bushfires have had a devastating impact on local economies across Gippsland. It is estimated that with the impact of the bushfires and subsequent COVID 19 restrictions, East Gippsland has seen an estimated reduction in economic output in 2019-20 of 15-23%, as well as a 75% loss in annual tourism expenditure.

Lost income continues to impact businesses, staff, supply chains and the community, resulting in instability, uncertainty and acute stress. These impacts from COVID 19 and the Black Summer fires amplify the ongoing challenges of prolonged drought and economic challenges such as long-term changes in the timber industry.

On 2 April 2020, East Gippsland moved officially into the recovery phase, and decisions about recovery coordination were transitioned to the East Gippsland Shire

Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria, supported by the East Gippsland Recovery Committee (EGRC).



## **4. Recovery Coordination - Establishing the East Gippsland Recovery Committee (EGRC)**

East Gippsland Shire Council with the support and assistance of many government agencies and community organisations made the decision to establish a recovery committee prior to the formal transition from the response to the recovery phase of this emergency. This recognised that due to the scale and duration of the fires, some communities were beginning recovery while others were still responding to the fires.

Previously there would have been separate regional and municipal recovery committees set up to facilitate recovery at different levels of government and within the community. Due to the scale of this event a combined Regional and Municipal Recovery Committee was formed with Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) as Chair and Deputy Chair respectively.

The first meeting of the EGRC was held on 9 January 2020 only days after the devastating New Year's events had taken place. It was certainly a chaotic time with constant changes of the fire situation and the response required. It was also a time when communities were trying to come to terms with what had occurred to them, their neighbours and their communities.

The early agenda included response updates, which may seem unusual for a recovery committee; however, response, relief and recovery were all occurring at the same time to different degrees.

Notwithstanding the ongoing response, communities were starting to look to and for recovery support. Note that during an event, the Incident Controller has responsibility for and control of areas that are subject to response activities, including make safe activities such as road clearing.

In the early days of the EGRC a four-pillar approach to the recovery process was adopted. This approach recognises the social, environment, economic and physical pillars in recovery as outlined in the Emergency Management Manual of Victoria. As the recovery developed a fifth pillar, 'Culture and Healing', was also added in relation to Aboriginal people recovery needs being unique and needing specific attention, consistent with the State-wide Recovery Framework.

Working groups reporting to the EGRC have been established to lead and coordinate work under each of these pillars at the municipal and regional level. Already the work of the EGRC and Working Groups has been informed by issues and priorities identified by communities and increasingly this will be formalised through Community Recovery Committees (CRC's).

In addition, a critically important approach for the EGRC was the adoption and use of the National Recovery Principles (refer appendix 2). The principles put the community front and centre in all recovery activities. These principles have guided the work of the EGRC and the working groups sitting under the committee.

A first version of the East Gippsland municipal recovery plan will be released shortly reflecting the work of the Committee and working groups to date.



## 5. What has been delivered so far?

Recovery progress is a result of the resilience and hard work of communities across East Gippsland. Much has been achieved in the last nine months thanks to the efforts of the many involved including individuals, communities, volunteers, not-for-profit organisations, businesses, business organisations and government agencies at all levels.

The following is a summary of some of the progress over the last nine months. I apologise now as I will inevitably miss the important contribution of some as there have been so many individuals and organisations that have been involved.

Consistent with the National Principles for Disaster Recovery and a commitment to community led recovery, community leaders with support from Council, BRV and Red Cross, have established CRC's (or interim committees) at:

- Mallacoota and district,
- Buchan and district
- Wairewa
- Cann Valley
- Sarsfield
- Bruthen,
- Clifton Creek
- Omeo and district
- Snowy to Errindundra.
- \*Orbost and district is expected shortly.

A recovery plan for East Gippsland is in preparation and will be released to the community for feedback in relation to priorities and gaps. Five working groups reporting to the EGRC have been established to plan and coordinate recovery activities for:

- Social
- Economic
- Built environment
- Natural environment
- Culture and Healing.

A recovery centre was established in Bairnsdale in January 2020 by Council and since then BRV has established recovery hubs in Mallacoota, Cann River, Orbost, Buchan, Sarsfield and shortly in Omeo. Together the hubs provide a one stop shop for people to connect to and access a range of services. More than 15,000 referrals were made through the Bairnsdale recovery centre.

A case support system has been established to connect individuals impacted both directly and indirectly, with the range of support services available. Almost 3,000 calls have been received by the 1800 number since the hotline commenced in March 2020. Approximately 1,500 cases have been supported across the six funded agencies. Key issues for case support include access to grants, clean up, mental health, financial counselling and requests for temporary accommodation

GIVIT has established in East Gippsland to connect people wishing to donate goods and services with impacted individuals

A Mobile Recovery Information Service was also established and teams of representatives from Council, the Department of Health and Human Services, Red Cross, Centrelink, Rural Financial Counselling, Agriculture Victoria, Environment Protection Authority and GROCON visited 39 fire-affected communities to provide recovery information and support before COVID 19 restrictions came into effect.

East Gippsland Shire Council published a Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter. The first edition was on the 6 January 2020 and now more than 50 editions have been published. This is now supported by online information from BRV, Council and many other agencies.

Progress of key work delivered so far is summarised by each of the five recovery environments.

## **5.1 Social recovery**

- The Victoria Government announced \$23.4 million for psychosocial and mental health support services state-wide. This includes access to early intervention, specialist mental health treatment and advisory services; grants and brokerage; community engagement and support and rural peer outreach worker programs.
- Aboriginal community-controlled organisations within the fire footprint have received approximately \$3 million to establish social and emotional wellbeing teams to engage with community and provide culturally safe support and healing.
- Immediate financial assistance and support was made available for directly impacted families and residents. Government and non-government organisations continue to provide financial support and financial counselling to enable families and residents to respond to their own recovery.
- Bushfire Recovery Victoria and Department of Health and Human Services continue to coordinate housing options for impacted residents including short-term modular housing, bond loans, public and community housing and public housing assistance.
- Short-term modular housing is available for families who lost their primary place of residence to enable them to live on their properties in these homes for a period of up to three years whilst progressing permanent rebuilds.
- Dr Rob Gordon and David Younger provided facilitated sessions to government schools. Four bushfire recovery practitioners have been established to assist school-based recovery planning and psychosocial supports, with Mallacoota receiving funding to employ a dedicated practitioner.

- Various children and young persons' research projects into the impacts of bushfire continue to be undertaken by local agencies.

## **5.2 Economic recovery**

- Immediate financial support and mentoring was made available for directly and indirectly impacted businesses. Small Business Victoria and Council assisted impacted businesses to apply for grants through the "Form Buddies" program.
- Advocacy: When initial business financial support was limited to businesses directly impacted by the bushfires, the Council, and other affected councils, advocated strongly for assistance to be provided to indirectly impacted businesses as well. This change was subsequently made.
- Council, Destination Gippsland and East Gippsland Marketing Inc worked together to deliver campaigns encouraging visitors to return to East Gippsland. These campaigns were delivering great outcomes through February and into March before COVID 19 brought a halt to this work for the time being.
- Agriculture Victoria field officers contacted 907 agricultural properties within the fire footprint. More than 450 primary producers were impacted by the fire. Producers reported more than 1700 livestock dead or missing, 16,800 hectares of pasture burnt, 250 hectares of horticultural crops lost and over 2800 kilometres of internal and external fencing destroyed.

## **5.3 Built environment and infrastructure recovery**

- Registration for the GROCON clean-up of fire impacted properties closed on 30 June 2020. Approximately 748 structures have been registered for clean-up and the work is expected to be complete by the end of August 2020.
- Council has established an interim Bushfire Rebuilding Support Service to assist landholders navigate the rebuilding process. The rebuilding and planning processes are not straightforward and there will be significant work to step through these issues with some landholders.
- The Secondary Impact Assessment is an assessment of all fire impacted properties. While most properties have been assessed, the completion of the assessments has been delayed by COVID 19.
- Nearly 1000 km of the estimated 5500 km of fencing lost has been replaced – led by the impacted landholders and supported by Blazeaid, Commonwealth and State funding. Council has established drop of points for fencing waste.
- Initial domestic water supply replacement has been completed and some grants are available to replace some domestic water tanks and associated infrastructure.
- Significant progress has been made in reopening and restoring public infrastructure. For example:



- six of the ten Council road bridges requiring replacement have been completed and two additional impacted bridges have had major repairs completed.
- the Genoa pedestrian bridge replacement has been designed and external funding is being sought.
- 100% of the impacted council road network has been assessed and works have been commenced on 45% of the impacted roads, with 21% completed.
- similar works are underway on the Regional Roads Victoria network and DELWP forest roads.
- clean-up works on arterial roadsides are well progressed with merchantable timber recovered.
- works are progressing with the restoration of the Mallacoota foreshore assets, the other key group of Council assets impacted, with lookouts, board walks and tracks being progressively restored and returned to community use.

## **5.4 Natural environment recovery**

- \$1.75 million has been provided to Traditional Owners in fire affected areas across the state to undertake activities to read and heal Country.
- Wildlife welfare triage units were established in partnership with Zoos Victoria and the RSPCA Mobile Animal Care Unit and supplementary feeding of wildlife undertaken through aerial food drops.
- Works to restore impacted waterways is underway, beginning with replacement of fencing along rivers.
- Debris removal in areas impacting public infrastructure along waterways has been completed where required.
- Multi-agency weed control is underway across private-public land in fire affected regions, strengthening community and agency partnerships.
- Aerial and ground control of pest animals has been undertaken across approximately 260,000 Ha of fire zone.
- Aerial reseedling of mountain and alpine ash across 11,500 ha of public land is underway.
- 15 Eastern Bristlebirds were captured from Cape Howe in February and housed at Melbourne Zoo to insure the population against the threat of local extinction due to the continuing fire threat. Seven birds were safely returned to Cape Howe in early April.
- Re-establishment of 80% of the 'Southern Ark' fox control program in East Gippsland.
- Demolition and decontamination work have been completed for 90% of fire impacted Parks Victoria sites. Bridge reinstatement is nearing completion at Buchan Caves Reserve, and Cape Conran priority assets repair is underway.

- South West Arm and other visitor sites have been reopened around Mallacoota Inlet.

## 5.5 Culture and healing

- Culture and healing have been established as a standalone focus in bushfire recovery for the first time adding to the 'four pillars' historically used to plan and coordinate recovery activities
- Case support programs include dedicated culturally appropriate services
- Engagement with traditional owners and aboriginal groups is being embedded within planning for each of the other pillars of recovery.



## 6. What has been delivered - recovery by the numbers



### EAST GIPPSLAND

Data Current: 27 August 2020

#### Small Business Bushfire Support Grant

**\$9.28M**

Funding Released

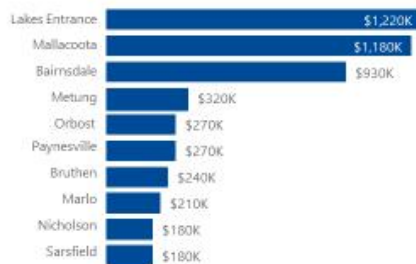
**1,079**

Applications Received

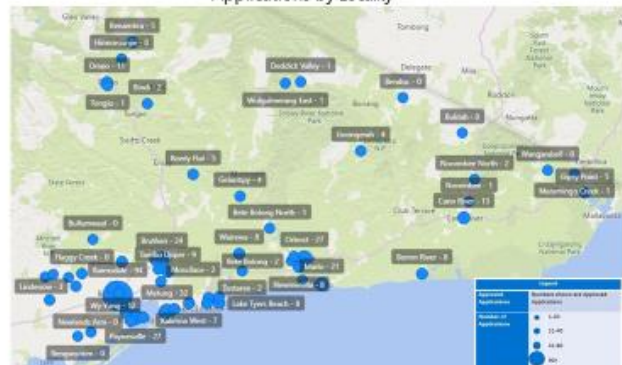
**864**

Applications Successful

#### Funding released to date by Locality - top 10



#### Applications by Locality





## EAST GIPPSLAND

### Primary Industry Grants Program

**\$10.47M**

Funding Released

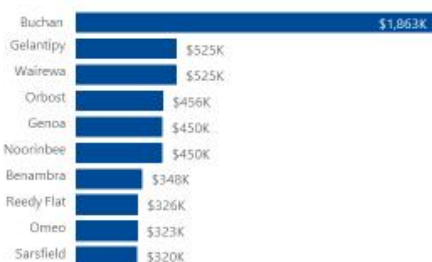
**189**

Applications Received

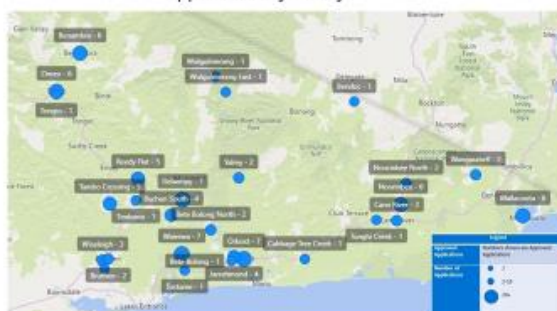
**157**

Applications Successful

Funding released to date by Locality - top 10



Applications by Locality



Data Current: 27 August 2020

### East Gippsland Shire Council Rebuild Support Service

Data Current: 28 August 2020



## EAST GIPPSLAND

### Emergency Re-establishment and Emergency Relief Assistance Payments

**\$1.78M**

Re-establishment Funding Released

**147**

Total Re-establishment Applications

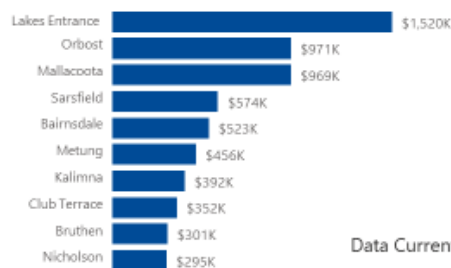
**\$9.26M**

Relief Application Funding Released

**9673**

Total Relief Applications

Total Funding released to date by Locality - top 10



Data Current: 26 August 2020

### Freight Subsidy

Industry	Funding Released (\$K)	Grant Amount %
Beef	\$183,274	64.59%
Mixed Farming	\$74,581	26.28%
Dairy	\$16,398	5.78%
Apriarists	\$5,566	1.96%
Sheep	\$3,936	1.39%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$283,754</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

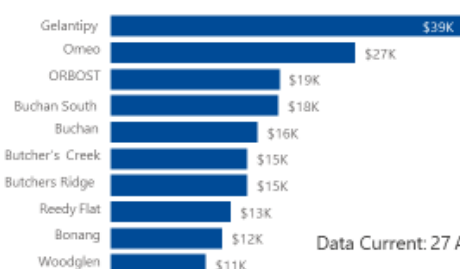
**71**

Applications Received

**61**

Applications Successful

Total Funding released to date by Locality - top 10



Data Current: 27 August 2020

### Low Interest Loans

Applicant Classification	Loans Requested (\$K)	Total Loans Approved (\$K)
Small Business	\$4,307,768	\$100,000
Primary Producer	\$1,759,000	\$100,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$6,066,768</b>	<b>\$200,000</b>

Data Current: 27 August 2020

**30**

Applications Received

**2**

Applications Successful

### Business Recovery Adviser Service

Level of Impact	Number of Businesses
Direct Impact to Business	114
Indirect Impact to Business	258
Impact to Business Unknown	273
<b>Total</b>	<b>645</b>

**200**

Businesses Supported

Data Current: 25 August 2020

## **7. The impact of COVID 19 on recovery – a unique context for recovery**

The impact of COVID 19 on the recovery effort cannot be underestimated.

During the bushfire event a number of communities and their residents were isolated for more than a month. This created significant supply chain issues for food, fuel and other essentials resulting in isolation and a strain on communities to function.

The COVID 19 pandemic has placed many of those communities back into isolation and lockdown only weeks after roads were opened. The impact on businesses, people's mental health and wellbeing and daily lives is immense.

Many of the activities that would normally take place during a community recovery simply cannot be done or are not allowed to be done, for example;

- agencies have moved to on-line communications,
- events have had to be cancelled that were really making a difference, such as the Sarsfield community dinners.
- the clean-up is more complicated; and
- the basic need of human interaction to support grief and loss has been severely hampered.

The COVID 19 pandemic has also created a response requirement by agencies that have only just worked through the bushfire event. Food security is again being raised as an issue and agencies are responding accordingly. The mental stress on business has become acute as many service-based retail and tourism businesses either try and adapt or simply stop operating. Only time will tell whether all the businesses required to close will in fact reopen. Recent research suggests that areas in East Gippsland are very vulnerable to these types of economic shocks due to their reliance on one industry type, notably tourism.

The very functioning of the EGRC had to be moved on-line as agency representatives modified their working patterns. The EGRC has been acutely aware of this impact and in conjunction with member agencies, issues have been worked through as they arise. It is now a permanent agenda item at meetings to ensure matters are dealt with as effectively as possible.

## 8. What still needs to be done

While there has been much achieved, the recovery journey is long and there have been, and will continue to be, many challenges and roadblocks.

The following is a summary of some of the focus areas for the coming months;

- Support the ongoing work of community led recovery through the CRC's. Additional funding for projects and the work of the CRC's is becoming available.
- Continue to connect community members with the support they need whether that be housing, financial, counselling, legal or other services. There is an important task to ensure that these supports continue to be matched to the needs of the community.
- Short-term modular housing will be made available to residents who lost their primary place of residence and need alternate housing while they complete the rebuilding process.
- While approximately 40 planning permits have been issued, significant support will be provided to assist landholders rebuild, whether that be primary places of residence, other dwellings, agricultural buildings or other structures. This will be a significant focus for the coming months.
- Communities have highlighted their concerns about preparedness for next fire season and there is need for significant work in this area, including reviewing and updating local incident management plans and improvements to community facilities.
- Ensuring culture and healing is embedded in all our recovery activities, including recognition of the role of traditional owners, and supporting the Aboriginal community in East Gippsland to heal, support their families and connect with culture.
- The continuation of COVID 19, on top of the bushfires and drought, is placing unprecedented ongoing pressure on our businesses and so there is a need for continued financial assistance and business advice.
- Planning is underway for marketing East Gippsland as a place to visit when COVID 19 restrictions allow and a key support to this is the continuing work by Parks Victoria and DELWP to reopen public land visitor sites. There is a need to work with a number of communities on their economic recovery and renewal.
- Economic recovery for East Gippsland will be a long process and there is a need to focus on the delivery of key economic recovery initiatives and advocate for funding for key projects.
- Strengthening the resilience of public infrastructure, including the road network, telecommunication, energy supplies and other utilities. This has been highlighted by community as a key priority.

## **9. Next steps for the East Gippsland Recovery Committee**

The EGRC will continue to meet to plan and coordinate recovery activities at the broader East Gippsland scale.

Version one of the recovery plan and sub-plans will be released shortly and while we have endeavoured to listen to the priorities of our communities in recovery, this will be the opportunity for our communities to identify priorities and gaps. This is particularly timely with the number of CRC's currently operating or getting underway.

The EGRC will continue to work with CRC's as they plan for the future of their communities and identify priorities and gaps. We will then work with the CRCs to see how together we can best respond to those issues.

We also recognise the priority of working with impacted individuals to support them through their own recovery journey, including for example, rebuilding properties, re-establishing farm or other businesses and so much more. We will continue to review the support provided and, to the extent practicable, tailor this to the needs of the impacted individuals and businesses.

## 10. Membership and thanks

The EGRC is chaired by the East Gippsland Shire Council CEO, with the deputy chair nominated by Bushfire Recovery Victoria. The committee consists of senior regional representatives from:

- National Bushfire Recovery Agency
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Jobs Precincts and Regions
  - Rural and Regional Victoria
  - Agriculture Victoria
- Department of Environment Land Water and Planning
- East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority
- Department of Transport
- Regional Roads Victoria
- Department of Education and Training
- Services Australia
- Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
- Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative
- Red Cross
- Victoria Police
- Country Fire Authority
- Parks Victoria
- Environment Protection Authority Victoria
- Victorian Cross Border Commissioner

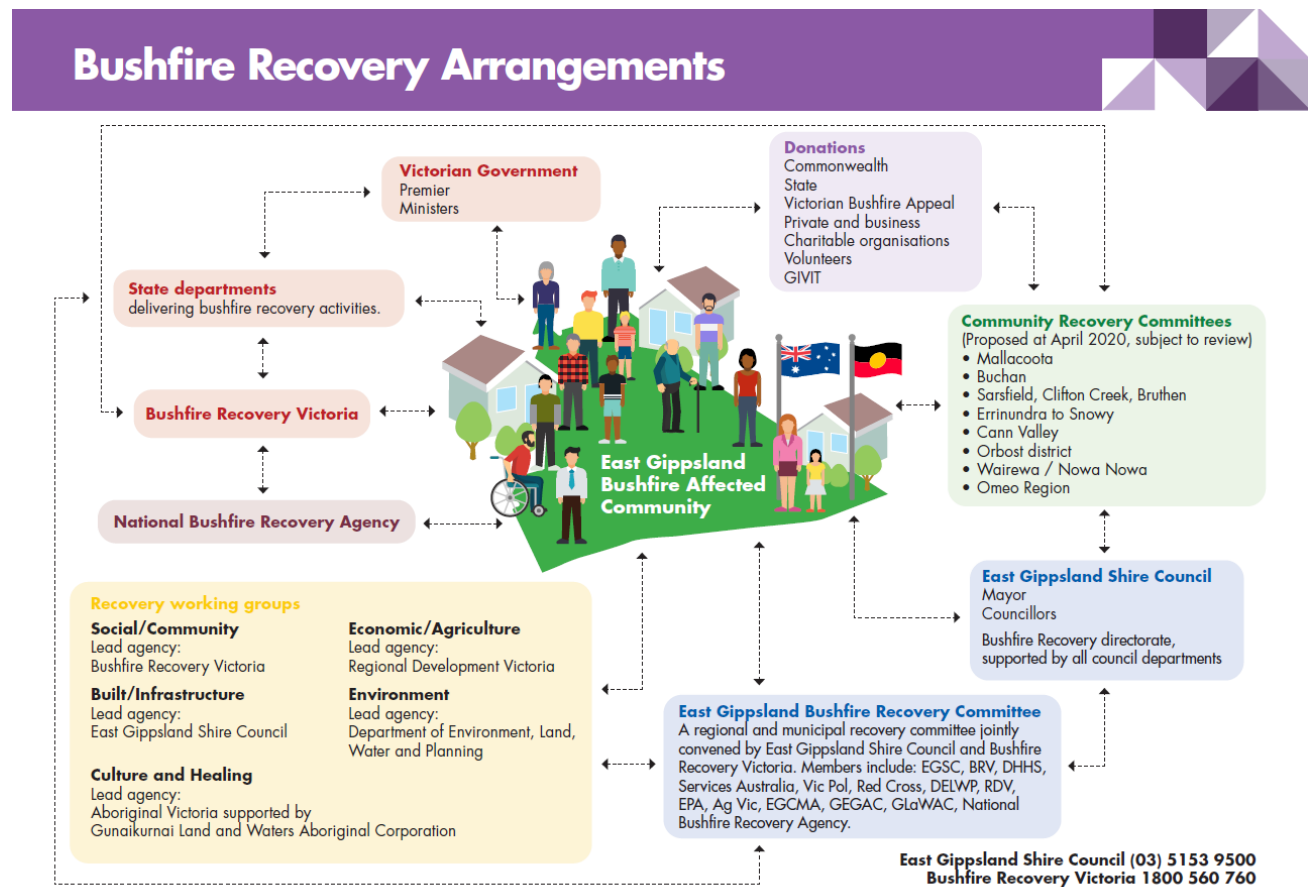
The East Gippsland Shire Council Mayor is also a member of the committee.

In finishing thanks needs to be directed to all members and contributors of the recovery process. At times and to this point, people were working extraordinary hours and juggling many complex tasks and decisions. The good will demonstrated between agencies has been a testament to how things can be done. There will always be learnings and there should be, but everyone involved was there for the right reasons doing their best for our community.

Thank you



## APPENDIX 1 BUSHFIRE RECOVERY ARRANGEMENTS



## APPENDIX 2 EAST GIPPSLAND BUSHFIRE RECOVERY NEWSLETTER 50<sup>TH</sup> EDITION

### Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May – Edition 50



The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements has begun its public hearings. The Commission heard early on from local voices, through pre-recorded direct accounts from Tim Cashmore, principal of Mallacoota P-12 College; and Kirsty Hargreaves, Mallacoota Real Estate.

The initial round of hearings focuses on:

- The changing global climate and natural disaster risks.
- The impact of the 2019-20 bushfires on communities and the built and natural environments.
- Responsibilities of the Commonwealth in relation to natural disaster arrangements.

Daily themes and the witness list are published on the Commission's website in advance of hearings. Transcripts and evidence will be published each day, after proceedings are adjourned.

History project: The Commission has also launched the *2019-20 Bushfire History Project*.

The Commission invites people to submit videos or photographs taken during the bushfires or the ongoing recovery.

[naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au](http://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au)

#### Fencing grants extended

The Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund (GERF) and Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) have extended the closing date for the bushfire recovery fencing grants program.

More than 100 farmers have already received assistance under the \$1.4 million program, which will now be open until Monday 8 June, unless the fund is fully subscribed prior.

Access the online application form and review the criteria on the VFF website at <https://bit.ly/3bRIY15>

#### Newsletter moves to fortnightly

This Bushfire Community Newsletter will now be published fortnightly on a Friday.

The newsletter will continue to provide updates relevant to local communities as bushfire recovery continues. News, support information, milestones and community and agency items will continue to be shared through the newsletter, Council's various other channels, and in mediums relevant to individual communities.

Between editions, keep an eye on our website, social media and in local media.

The next edition will be published on **12 June**.

***Please find a recap of some of the information shared over the past 50 editions at the end of this newsletter.***

#### Connect to bushfire recovery services

The National Bushfire Recovery Agency and Services Australia have launched a new website [Recovery Connect](#).

Recovery Connect links the public to the available bushfire recovery services in their area.

People can search for different types of assistance they may need – be it financial, emotional, accommodation, environmental, physical health, food and household supplies or support for their animals. They are then directed to a range of support services available in their area.

1

Bushfire Recovery Centre – 03 5153 9500 or [BushfireRecoveryContactCentre@egipps.vic.gov.au](mailto:BushfireRecoveryContactCentre@egipps.vic.gov.au)  
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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May – Edition 50



Recovery Connect currently focuses on bushfire support and will be developed in future to include other disaster recovery services, such as for COVID-19 and drought.

## Community Recovery Hubs

Hubs delivered and operated by Bushfire Recovery Victoria are opening across bushfire-affected communities.

The hubs will serve as important community meeting places that link locals to the practical support they need. Services at individual hubs are being specially tailored to the individual needs of each community and include planning and rebuilding advice, individual case support, access to government and non-profit service providers, and small business advice.

Hubs in Mallacoota, Buchan and Sarsfield are now open with hubs in Cann Valley and Orbost opening from this week.

A recovery centre (hub) in Bairnsdale has been operated by Council since January and supported by Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

Hubs will be staffed by locally based hub coordinators to provide face-to-face support and help reduce the complexity for local community members.

In line with current coronavirus restrictions, hubs will be operating with physical barriers, space restrictions and forward bookings where required for the safety of staff and locals.

Community members are encouraged to visit their local hub in person but are asked to call in advance to book a visiting time. In locations where physical hubs aren't yet open, community members can still call hub staff and access all available services. [brv.vic.gov.au](http://brv.vic.gov.au).



Katie Symes (above) is the Mallacoota District Hub Coordinator. She'll be a familiar face on the ground, working with locals, helping them with advice and practical support, and linking them to vital services when and where they need it.

To find out more about your local recovery hub, including locations, opening times, contact details and the name of your local Hub Coordinator, visit [www.vic.gov.au/community-noticeboard-bushfire-recovery](http://www.vic.gov.au/community-noticeboard-bushfire-recovery)

## Grass seed assistance

Blazeaid will provide eligible farmers in East Gippsland with perennial grass seed to re-establish pastures in burnt paddocks.

The seed is offered to regenerate areas where the ground cover remains poor, eroded or weed infested and is unable to become highly productive without pasture re-establishment.

Farmers will have 12 months to sow the seed supplied, with preference to sow as soon as possible.

To apply please contact Kevin Butler at Blazeaid on 0418 530 471.



# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May – Edition 50



## Bridge replacements continue

Another two bridges damaged during the summer's bushfires have been replaced by council.

The Yalmy Bridge at Jarrahmond (Orbost) was damaged during firefighting activities. The new bridge (pictured below) has an asphalt deck.

The Harrisons Creek–Fairhaven Road bridge at Genoa was one of more than a dozen bridges destroyed by the fires. The new bridge is 10 metres long and has a concrete deck



## Grocon clean-up figures

As at 22 May, East Gippsland's statistics are:

- Properties needing clean-up: 554 (+4)
- Inspections at property completed: 531 (+7)
- Clean-ups started: 242 (+60)
- Clean-ups completed: 205 (+52)

All bushfire waste is considered asbestos contaminated and can only be handled by Class A contractors. With clean-up works increasing, the supply of local, licensed crews is maxing out.

Grocon and BRV continue to prioritise and engage local subcontractors where possible across the project, including the engagement of plumbers, surveyors, arborists, electricians and other services.

Contractors can register their interest by calling 03 9631 8833.

## When is my site being cleaned up?

All property clean-ups are scheduled to be completed by August 2020.

Property owners will be provided at least 72 hours' notice of clean-up commencing. Registered property owners are also reminded to return their consent forms in order to progress the planning of their property's clean-up.

## Can I still register?

Yes. Register by calling 1800 560 760 or online at [vic.gov.au/bushfire-clean-up-program](http://vic.gov.au/bushfire-clean-up-program). You will receive confirmation of your registration via telephone or email. Grocon will inspect your property where you'll complete a consent form.

## Disability advocacy

Gippsland Disability Advocacy has employed an advocate specifically to support people with disabilities who were impacted by the summer bushfires.

For more information contact Delia Harry on 0427 968 876 or [deliaharry@gdai.org.au](mailto:deliaharry@gdai.org.au)

## Disaster assistance for farmers

Register with Rural Aid for disaster assistance, available for farmers and primary producers affected by drought, fire and floods. The assistance program includes:

- domestic water deliveries
- fodder deliveries
- financial assistance, subject to meeting Rural Aid criteria
- Farm Army volunteers to help on your farm.

3

Bushfire Recovery Centre – 03 5153 9500 or [BushfireRecoveryContactCentre@egipps.vic.gov.au](mailto:BushfireRecoveryContactCentre@egipps.vic.gov.au)  
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Rural Aid also supports eligible farmers with pre-paid gift cards and provides confidential counselling assistance.

Learn more at [ruralaid.org.au](http://ruralaid.org.au) or call 1300 327 624.

## **Bushfire Case Support Program**

The Bushfire Case Support Program can provide practical and personal support for people who have been affected by the 2019-20 Victorian bushfires. It is a free service.

- Discussing your needs and the next steps
- Information and support to access services
- Completing paperwork and accessing grants
- Community information
- Financial counselling and assistance with insurance
- Advice for business owners
- Financial support to help with immediate needs.

Support can be provided face to face, over the phone or at a location that suits you. To access the Case Support Program, call 1800 560 760.

## **Anglicare financial counselling**

Anglicare offers free financial counselling to individuals and families affected by the bushfires.

Contact the service by calling 1800 286 260 or email [bushfirefcgipps@anglicarevic.org.au](mailto:bushfirefcgipps@anglicarevic.org.au).

## **Bushfire Recovery Centre**

The Bushfire Recovery Centre continues to be here to support the community. Face-to-face interaction is limited and available via appointment, but the centre is literally just a phone call or email away.

The Recovery Centre is available to assist with the enquiries 8.30 am – 5.00 pm Monday to Friday by phoning 5153 9500. Or you can email [BushfireRecoveryContactCentre@egipps.vic.gov.au](mailto:BushfireRecoveryContactCentre@egipps.vic.gov.au)

Referrals and advice continue to occur for financial and legal support services; financial and personal counselling and business support.

## **Small business support line**

This new service was set up by the Australian Government to offer financial counselling for small businesses affected by the bushfires and experiencing financial difficulties.

Call 1800 413 828 or go to [www.smallbusinessbushfire.org.au](http://www.smallbusinessbushfire.org.au)

## **Grants and financial support**

Refer to the April editions of the newsletter on council's website for a list of available grants, [eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/bushfire](http://eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/bushfire)

## **Waste disposal**

### **Prescribed waste – houses and structures**

- Houses and structures (prescribed waste) can only be removed by Grocon or private contractors. All contractors must be licensed asbestos removalists and only Grocon contractors can use non-EPA permitted vehicles to transport waste to disposal locations approved by Bushfire Recovery Victoria.
- All waste must be triple wrapped. Cost is \$286 per tonne.
- 24 hours' notice must be given to nominated sites, Bairnsdale Landfill – 5152 6535 – and Orbost Landfill – 5153 9500.

# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May – Edition 50



## Metal

- Burnt metal waste can be taken for free to the sites listed below until further notice.
- Clotheslines, white goods, trampoline frames, play equipment, water tanks, scrap metals are all accepted.
- Boats - fibreglass boats not accepted.
- Trailers with melted fibreglass are not accepted as scrap metal but will be accepted into landfill at the normal charge.

## Green waste

Bushfire green waste is being accepted. Please remember to social distance and adhere to measures put in place at the waste sites.

**Green waste and household metal as described above will be accepted at:**

- Bairnsdale Landfill – 5152 6535
- Lakes Entrance Landfill – 5155 2148
- Mallacoota Transfer Station – 0427 144 002
- Orbost Transfer Station – 0429 412 833
- Omeo Transfer Station – 0429 865 358
- Buchan Transfer Station – 0419 359 763

## Farm fencing wire waste

Sites have been set up by DELWP and council to stockpile agricultural metal/wire only waste.

Council has negotiated with a private contractor to collect this waste metal from these stockpile sites:

- Ensay North: Blowhard gravel pit, Little River Road
- Cobungra: Plowmans property at Tolands Road

- Newmerella Recreation Reserve (western side of the showgrounds near highway, away from horse yards)
- Buchan: old sawmill, 2286 Bruthen-Buchan Road
- Omeo: 181 Depot Road
- Wairewa: DELWP water point area, Carl Smith Road (site has been signed and flagged)
- Nowa Nowa: old railway station
- Cann River: old gravel pit off Cemetery Track

## Free bushfire waste vouchers

- Council is offering extra free waste vouchers to properties in the bushfire areas that have burnt items that are not included in the categories covered in this newsletter. They cannot be used for prescribed waste. To have a voucher posted to you, call 03 5153 9500 to register your name and property details.



# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



We launched the Bushfire Community Newsletter on 6 January as a 'single source of truth' for bushfire response, relief and recovery information.

Initially distributed three times a week, the newsletter has been available on Council's website, Facebook page, in printed copies and by subscription.

It has featured the lows, some positives, various forms of support and assistance information from Council and countless other agencies, news and milestones.

For edition 50, we have provided a snapshot of the information shared over the past five months.

There will be ongoing support from agencies and organisations across Australia to help East Gippsland residents and businesses work through the aftermath of these fires.



*Mayor Cr John White with two of the hundreds of Army Reserves, and Governor-General of Australia His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) outside the relief centre at Bairnsdale City Oval on Sunday 5 January.*

## **Edition 2 – 8 January**

Council had already started working through a range of options regarding rates and valuations for fire-affected residents and property owners.



*Three convoys of donated hay, on more than 100 trucks and trailers, went to the High Country, Buchan/Gelantipy and Omeo districts on Sunday 5 January.*

## **Edition 1 – 6 January**

The bushfire emergency has been devastating for our communities and residents.

You are not alone, and we as a region are not alone.



*Council was receiving assistance from other shires to help support our staff and community, by maintaining services where possible.*

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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



## Edition 3 – 10 January

Councillors and staff attended community bushfire meetings at Omeo, Buchan, Cann River, Nowa Nowa, Clifton Creek, Sarsfield (held in Bairnsdale), Mallacoota and Orbost over the past few days. We also called in on Bruthen and Lakes Entrance and have continued our presence in Bairnsdale, particularly around the relief centre, Incident Control Centre and our Recovery Centre in Service Street.

The resolve of all communities has shone through at all visits. We picked up on the different pressures being faced in this emergency.

We were live streaming many of these meetings on Facebook for those displaced by the fires (or for residents to watch later).



*Cr Mark Reeves chatting with Cann River CFA Captain Peter Stubbs.*

## Edition 4 – 13 January

Mayor Cr John White requested both the State and Federal governments to prioritise local contractors and businesses as the region started its recovery from the devastating bushfires.

Cr White said the major clean-up of the bushfire-affected properties is yet to start, due to a combination of persisting fire threat and limited road access.

"We have many resources, including the Australian Defence Force, on the ground making areas safe and accessible," Cr White said.

"As soon as a clean-up program is announced, I urge government to offer our local contractors and businesses the opportunity, in the first instance, to be part of local clean up and associated works.

"It is incredibly important for morale, families, communities and our economy that local contractors and businesses are a key part of the recovery and reconstruction process," Cr White said.

"By prioritising local contractors and businesses in recovery works as instigated by government will ensure local employment opportunities. This will send a further strong message of support to bushfire affected communities," Cr White said.



*Corporate philanthropist Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest (left) had a flying visit to East Gippsland, which included Mallacoota and Bairnsdale. Mr Forrest announced \$70m in Australian bushfire support and it was great chance to share our region's story and discuss opportunities.*

2

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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



*Essential supplies loaded and ready to be flown out to one of our isolated Far East communities. Council staff also delivered and connected generators to standpipe bore pumps in Wulgulmerang and Gelantipy following a request from the bush nurse.*

## **Edition 5 – 15 January**

Representatives from Council and other organisations started travelling to remote fire-affected communities to deliver emergency relief and recovery information from Council and various other agencies.

## **Edition 6 – 17 January**

Council's Works Department commenced marking up and felling dangerous trees on council roads with the assistance of Australian Defence Force, and additional external arborists have been brought in to assist with this task.

Work was completed by Council's geographic information officer on road hierarchy maps for each fire effected community. This work included overlaying maps of the affected fireground across the municipality with all of council's rural link, collector, access, fire access and limited access roads 43 locality maps in total.

This mapping would assist in prioritising roads for clearing and restoration.



*Local, state and federal government working together: Council's General Manager Place and Community Stuart McConnell, Head of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency Andrew Colvin, Mayor Cr John White and Bushfire Recovery Victoria Chair Ken Lay met on Thursday evening in Bairnsdale to discuss a coordinated approach to bushfire recovery in East Gippsland.*

## **Edition 7 – 20 January**

It was announced on 19 January that homes destroyed by bushfires would be cleaned up under a state and federal program that prioritises local contractors.

# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



The clean-up applies to insured and uninsured residents and there will be no cost to property owners.

Council has a key role in leading recovery with our communities and Mayor Cr John White said the clean-up program was what the community and Council had been advocating for, so recovery could start progressing.

"This clean-up will give our communities, and most importantly impacted residents, some certainty on this vital stage of recovery," Cr White said.

The \$75 million Victorian bushfire clean-up program will be led by Grocon, appointed by the Victorian Government. Local contractors prioritised to demolish, remove and safely dispose of building materials either destroyed or damaged beyond repair.



*Deliveries of hay were made into Cann River under Army escort, thanks to the efforts of Need for Feed and Orbost district farmers and transport operators.*

## Edition 8 – 22 January

Almost 300 East Gippsland businesses gave Council a comprehensive initial snapshot into the immediate and predicted longer term economic impacts of the bushfires through a Rapid Impact Business Survey.

The survey results indicated that more than 40 percent of the respondents were open and trying to operate as normal. Just below 40 per cent were

operating at a reduced level and 18 per cent were closed because of the fires.

The results indicated businesses had lost 29 per cent (average) of their annual income since the fires started, and 71 per cent of their January trade.

Based on the 295 survey respondents, more than \$17 million had already been lost from the local economy.

The current challenges identified in the survey included retention of staff, especially casual and part-time staff; being unable to get supplies in, or export products out due to road closures; local people not having capacity to spend; and few tourists around.

The survey identified financial assistance through a range of mechanisms as the greatest requirement, though respondents said the focus has to be on both short term and longer-term planning and business support.

## Edition 9 – 24 January

On 22 January I was able to join Bushfire Recovery Victoria's Ewan Waller and local Members of Parliament Tim Bull and Darren Chester on a visit to Mallacoota.

Mallacoota has been isolated for some time now and I have been wanting and needing to get out there to meet with locals and see for myself the impact of the bushfires.

There has been some dreadful damage.

From above you can see the devastation on the periphery of the town and get an understanding of how the fires got right into town as a result of numerous spot fires.

While I was there, I was fortunate to meet with many locals. I can only imagine what they must have gone through that night and that day and the

4

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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



fact that they're still there is just astonishing. I am amazed by their resilience.

I also took the opportunity to catch up with Council staff who remain in Mallacoota and thank them for their outstanding work keeping everything going under such difficult circumstances.

It is my hope that this community is one of the first to see people return and have damage repairs get underway.

- Mayor, Cr John White



On Thursday 23 January Council welcomed a Fijian Army contingent of more than 50 personnel to Orbost.

As is Fijian culture, the welcome included a ceremony (dry kava ceremony because they were headed for work!), dance and song and speeches.

Australian Army Major General Jake Ellwood and Emergency Services Commissioner Andrew Crisp flew in for the welcome ceremony.

Council thanked the Fijians for the generous offer of assistance, and how their presence in Orbost

(and East Gippsland more broadly) would assist in the community-led recovery after the bushfires.



## Edition 10 – 28 January

Council's Works Department continued felling dangerous trees on fire-affected council roads with the help of Australian Defence Force and arborists.

Roads were prioritised to get frequently used roads open as soon as possible.

As conditions allowed, residents and permit holders were be able to travel daily between 8am and 8pm from Tuesday 28 January on the Princes Highway between Orbost and Cann River.

Work continued from both ends of the closed Bonang Road. A steep terrain harvester had been brought in due to the severe impact on trees.



*Gelantipy locals gathered for a community meeting and barbecue on Monday of the Australia Day long weekend.*

# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



## Edition 11 – 29 January

Mayor White participated in a special roundtable at the invitation of Sir Peter Cosgrove, Chair of the Community Rebuilding Initiative.

Cr White detailed the type of help our community needed to assist with recovery at the Canberra meeting of mayors and chamber of commerce representatives from bushfire-affected areas.

The Community Rebuilding Initiative was unique because it has been specifically designed to help businesses get back on their feet, provide jobs, re-establish key industries such as tourism and agriculture, and rebuild community facilities.

The focus of the roundtable was economic recovery.

Cr White said the chance to explain the challenges and opportunities firsthand at Parliament House was much appreciated.



*Council's Alanna Jones filming an interview for the Australia Defence Force, explaining how Council and the ADF has worked together. Alanna's role during the fires had been in logistics to ensure supplies made it to isolated communities, a far cry from her usual role as coordinator at the Bairnsdale Aquatic and Recreation Centre.*

## Edition 12 – 31 January

Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund (GERF) announced on 30 January it had reached its initial \$5 million target, with the tally currently sitting at \$5,340,075.66.

The GERF team, supported by Council, was continuing to receive and process referrals daily.

As of 29 January, 1,123 referrals from fire-affected East Gippslanders had been approved and \$2.545 million dispersed - about 48 per cent of funds raised to that point.



*Staff from other Victorian councils including Mornington Peninsula, Mount Alexander, Central Goldfields, Glen Eira, Melton, Ballarat, Manningham, Maroondah, Knox and Yarra, and the Victorian Council of Churches joined our secondary assessment team.*



# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



## Edition 13 – 3 February



Fire and infrastructure losses continued, particularly around Cape Conran (above), to start February - a timely reminder the fire season was far from over.



It was great to have 3AW's Ross and John in Lakes Entrance promoting that East Gippsland was open for business. Mayor White spoke to the popular pair about the impact of the bushfires on the region, including the direct impact on community members, and businesses across the municipality.

He acknowledged the support for Lakes Entrance and Paynesville and Metung, but Cr White particularly highlighted areas including Orbost, Marlo, the Alpine region into Bemm River.

The message was to ask Melbourne listeners to plan ahead for any long weekends, and to come and support the entire shire when there is so much to see and do.

## Edition 14 – 5 February

At its meeting on 4 February, Council moved to provide some direct assistance to bushfire-affected ratepayers by allowing additional time for 2019-20 rates and charges to be paid.

Council approved exempting all ratepayers from penalty interest on unpaid 2019-20 rates and charges (due 15 February) until 31 May 2020; deferring payments for all 2019-20 rates and charges for all properties identified as being in the bushfire impacted areas, until 30 June 2021 with no penalty interest for that period; adopting a Financial Hardship Policy; and endorsing a simplified Financial Hardship process for all properties in identified bushfire affected areas, as well as any ratepayer whose primary source of income has been directly impacted by the bushfire event.

## Edition 15 – 7 February

Grocon, had started meeting with community members about the clean-up program.



Mallacoota Lions Club with support from local tradespeople and Council completed a project to quickly restore beach access at Bastion Point with a temporary structure.

# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



*Council hosted City of Melbourne Lord Mayor Sally Capp, CEO Justin Hanney and staff. The City of Melbourne extended an offer of support to East Gippsland and Council took up the offer.*

## Edition 16 – 10 February

Council acted quickly to go to tender on replacing six timber bridges destroyed by bushfires, at Buchan, Karlo Creek, Tabberabbera, Jarrahmond and Genoa.

By early February, Council knew of 16 bridges that had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair. It was estimated those bridges would cost more than \$4 million to replace.

Meanwhile, the Princes Highway was now open all through East Gippsland and into southern NSW, and the Genoa-Mallacoota Road was also open.



*WNBL Melbourne Boomers players Chelsea D'Angelo and Penina Davidson with Mayor Cr John White on visit to Bruthen. The Boomers spent time with Bruthen Primary School students.*

## Edition 17 – 12 February

On Sunday 16 February, from 1pm to 6pm, a bushfire relief concert - Fire Fight Australia - was held in Sydney and broadcast live by Channel 7.

Channel 7 is organising 'live sites' around Australia to watch the concert and one of those sites was Sarsfield Recreation Reserve.



*Fire damage at Betka Beach, Mallacoota.*

## Edition 18 – 14 February

On Saturday 15 February, the Townsville-based 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment conducted a freedom of entry ceremony at the Omeo Caravan Park. This group had been operating out of Omeo and providing essential support and aid to the East Gippsland community since 16 January.

Granting permission to a formed body of armed men and women is a centuries old tradition that signifies a mark of trust, friendship and confidence held between the regiment and the community

Meanwhile, Buchan and Gelantipy Racing Club would stage its annual Canni Creek Picnic Races on Saturday 15 February, complete with a fire-damaged, and now iconic, winning post.

The Buchan Caves Reserve reopened to visitors, minus cave tours, on 14 February.

8

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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



## Edition 19 – 17 February

The Buchan-Orbost Road was opened to the public.

While many arterial roads had re-opened, many minor roads were still closed and cannot be accessed by the public. This included Parks Victoria roads and tracks in fire-damaged areas.



## Edition 20 – 19 February

After 91 days of bushfire activity, fires that affected communities and areas around Wulgulmerang, Gelantipy, W Tree, Buchan, Wairewa, Bruthen, Sarsfield and the Tambo Valley were declared contained on Wednesday 19 February.

## Edition 21 – 21 February

Peat fires at Cape Conran continued to burn and were 71 hectares in size. Firefighters are actively working to suppress the fire.

A community meeting was held at the Marlo Fire Station to discuss the response. Emergency services were working with EPA, government agencies and specialist firefighters to develop a long-term strategy to extinguish the peat fires.

Drones with infrared technology are being used to map the peat fires. Carbon monoxide monitoring was being conducted around the peat fire.

Cape Conran Coastal Park remained closed.

Meanwhile, Mallacoota Foreshore Holiday Park re-opened to existing bookings, and the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association was up and running and membership of the association was steadily growing with approximately 500 members.



*Battle Point on the Tambo River (between Tambo Crossing and Ensay) on 19 February after an afternoon storm event. A 30-kilometre stretch of the Great Alpine Road was impacted.*

## Edition 22 – 24 February

The Victorian Government announced it was holding an inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfires, with community sessions planned for across East Gippsland and the state.

Meanwhile, the Combienbar and Bonang road were re-opened.

# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



Players from the Melbourne Storm visited the region. Storm players and staff held a training session at Bairnsdale Football Netball Club before heading to Metung on Friday night for a community thank-you event.

The Storm were among about 70 people, including tradespeople and people from other sporting clubs, rolling up their sleeves and helping with clean up tasks around Sarsfield.

Most of the helpers had travelled from Melbourne to pitch in.

Tradies from across the country have been visiting East Gippsland on their own time over recent weekends to help fire-affected communities including Buchan, Clifton Creek and Sarsfield.



Senator David Van hosted a roundtable and tour of East Gippsland on 20 and 21 February with Consul Generals, Consuls and staff representing China, Croatia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, North Macedonia, Russia, Slovak Republic, and the United States.

The roundtable was also attended by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade State Director Andrew Cumpston, Mayor Cr John White and Council's General Manager Business Excellence Peter Cannizzaro.

The visit included a lunch and roundtable at Council's Palmers Road office, an opportunity to explore Lakes Entrance, a cruise aboard the Thunderbird, and on Friday a tour of the Lakes Entrance Fisherman's Co-Op.

## Edition 23 – 26 February



Clifton Creek Community Hall hosted a Farms N' Fences fundraising and friendship night. Organisers declared the event very successful. The evening included children's entertainment, live music, food and giveaways. The event was supported by businesses, local and from further afield, and raised money to help replace farm fences in the local area.

10

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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



*Repairs to the bushfire-damaged bridge at Reeds Road, Goongerah, were completed. The timber deck was replaced with precast concrete panels, spanning 13 metres x 4.2m.*

## Edition 24 – 28 February

The Far East Gippsland fires (Snowy 16 Complex) were declared contained on 27 February. Lightning strikes started fires in the region on 21 November. Further lightening and spot fires then started fires in the Snowy District on 25 November. More than 660,000 hectares of land had been burnt.

The peat fires near Cape Conran and Marlo Plains continued to put up smoke for some weeks.

Meanwhile, Council continued to plan for a bushfire waste influx.

## Edition 25 – 3 March

East Gippsland relief agencies and communities were overwhelmed with generous offers of support and donations during and after the bushfires.

An online charity was now managing all offers of donated goods, services and funds. This includes corporate offers of assistance.

GIVIT – [givit.org.au](http://givit.org.au) – matches the offers with people who need assistance – ensuring those most in need get exactly what they need, where and when they need it most.

Council also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Regional Roads Victoria for RRV to complete rapid impact assessments on Council-managed, fire-affected roads, once they have been returned to Council (from the Incident Controller) following the fires, to assist with the reestablishment of the road network as soon as possible.



*Minister for Fishing and Boating Jaala Pulford MP and Talking Fishing's David Kramer launch the Golden Tag Competition, which aimed to get visitors to return to East Gippsland.*

## Edition 26 – 6 March

The Buchan Caves Reserve reopened for underground cave tours on 7 March.

The survey was also launched to capture all the great things about the Clifton Creek Primary School to help inform the rebuild process.

# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



*Ken Lay, Chair of Bushfire Recovery Victoria, and Ewan Waller (BRV East Gippsland) visited Clifton Creek and chatted to community members about their experiences and the recovery journey. Mr Lay's two-day visit also stopped in at communities in Bruthen, Dinner Plain, Cobungra and Bairnsdale.*



*Bruce Guaran (Cobungra Station manager), Ewan Waller (BRV), Ken Lay (BRV), Sue Agnew (Council), Tony Kewish (local farmer), Graeme Symons (CFA Omeo District Group Captain), Daniel Plowman (local farmer) and Sarah Duncan (BRV) at Cobungra.*

Council held a free bushfire recovery sing-along concert celebrating the sounds of the '60s and '70s at the Forge Theatre in Bairnsdale.

The 'Superstars Celebration' was hosted by Lisa Budin Price. There was a free morning tea prior to the show and a great turnout enjoyed the show packed with the music, stories and swagger of two of the most exciting decades in music.

Her Excellency the Honourable Linda Dessau AC, Governor of Victoria returned to East Gippsland, taking part in a business roundtable in Orbost. The Governor met with the Mayor, Councillors and CEO, visited staff at Orbost Regional Health and toured Sarsfield.

## **Edition 27 – 10 March**

Bushfire Recovery Victoria indicated Grocon clean-up works would commence the week of 10 March.

As at Wednesday 4 March, 570 properties registered for clean-up and 268 property inspections were completed.

## **Edition 28 – 13 March**

The Victorian Government announced new statewide planning changes for give bushfire-affected residents.

Anyone who has lost their homes or businesses due to bushfire can build temporary residential or commercial accommodation on their land without a planning permit, subject to safety requirements and a planning consent.



*Council launched a series of short videos featuring local community members, Council and other agencies talking about their bushfire and early recovery experiences. These videos followed daily updates during the height of the bushfire response.*

12

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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



Trevor and Leslie Bell of Bell Real Estate in Melbourne donated a semi-trailer of hay and two smaller trailers of hay and dog food to help farmers in the Omeo Region. The donation was coordinated with Joe and Trudy Connelly in Benambra, who stored the items and distributed to those in need.

## **Edition 29 – 17 March**

Councillors and senior shire staff visited the Genoa Wayside Stop to discuss community projects and bushfire recovery with the Genoa Town Committee.

The reinstatement of pedestrian access across the Genoa River was listed as the number one priority for the community, linking the town and wayside stop, after bushfires destroyed the heritage-listed bridge.



Deputy Mayor Cr Ben Buckley surveys the damage to infrastructure at Betka Beach during Council's visit to Mallacoota. The visit included a business community networking event, a community breakfast and Council Meeting in Cann River.

## **Edition 30 – 20 March**

Council adopted a plan to provide additional rate relief to two groups of ratepayers - bushfire impacted property owners and commercial / industrial properties. Council will allocate \$3.62 million for rate waivers and other measures to support the community.

Orbost Landfill was on the way to accepting bushfire waste after Council awarded Goldsmith Civil and Environmental the contract to maintain the temporary site. The Bairnsdale Landfill Cell 3B (below) started accepted bushfire waste.



# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



## Edition 31 – 24 March

The global Coronavirus pandemic dealt a blow to bushfire recovery and related activities. All Inspector General of Emergency Management (IGEM) bushfire enquiry sessions have been postponed, and Council's mobile recovery service cancelled.

## Edition 32 – 27 March

The Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund's 2020 Gippsland Bushfire Appeal closed, bringing to an end the fund's biggest fundraising effort to date - \$10.4 million, of which \$9m had been distributed and the remainder was earmarked for fencing and fodder assistance.

GERF president John Mitchell said the appeal received outstanding support within the region, all states and from countries around the globe. "We'd like to sincerely thank all of the businesses, ethnic and community groups, organisations, families and individuals who have so generously given their time, money and extraordinary support to help East Gippsland communities.



Orbost Landfill received its first loads of bushfire waste.

## Edition 33 – 31 March

Her Excellency The Governor of Victoria, The Hon Linda Dessau AC wrote to East Gippslanders:

"The start to 2020 has certainly been a difficult one, with the bushfires that caused so much destruction in parts of our State, and now COVID-19.

Our thoughts are with those in areas still grappling with rebuilding and recovery from the fires. And, indeed, with everyone, as we all now try to cope with this health challenge and its far-reaching effects.

We know that in recent months, as in the past, Victorians have demonstrated their resilience and their generosity in response to the bushfire crisis. Now, more than ever, we need to pull together, to follow the advice and rules set by the experts, to be calm and clear-headed and to be mindful of each other's safety and needs."

## Edition 34 – 3 April

Council decided that interest would not be charged on any current year rates that remain unpaid at 30 June 2020.

The decision by Council was also extended to include no further interest being charged on rate arrears for the 2019/2020 financial year, from the date interest was last raised, being 15 March 2020.

Council has made this decision to help the community in light of continued bushfire recovery, and the economic impact that COVID-19 is having on the community.

## Edition 35 – 7 April

Nominations for the 12-person Mallacoota recovery committee opened. The election was being conducted by the Victorian Electoral Commission.

Council has suspended all Secondary Impact Assessments until further notice due to COVID-19.

This decision is based on the direction of the Chief Health Officer as well as feedback provided by fire impacted communities.

14

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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



## Edition 36 – 9 April

Throughout April, the National Bushfire Recovery Agency engaged with people in bushfire affected communities about the way communication was delivered and how they are engaged in bushfire recovery.



*The 16-metre long Wattle Hill Road bridge was replaced. Located on Buchan South – Ensay Road, the bridge was destroyed during the fires.*

Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) recovery teams continued to assist with fencing recovery works, track clearing and hazardous tree removal.

Staff had so far completed 204 successful fencing funding applications covering 475 kilometres of boundary fencing adjoining public land impacted by fire.

## Edition 37 – 14 April

Council issued a follow-up survey to business operators across the shire to help gain a deeper understanding of how businesses are being impacted by the compounding events of drought, bushfire and now COVID-19.

## Edition 38 – 17 April

Grocon clean-up statistics for East Gippsland Shire stood at:

- Properties needing clean-up: 538

- Inspections at property completed: 470
- Consent deeds sent to State for approval: 275
- Consent deeds approved by State: 233
- Clean-up started: 41
- Clean-up completed: 22

## Edition 39 – 21 April

Forty-four nominations were received to fill the 12 vacancies on the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association committee.

## Edition 40 – 24 April

Council's process for allowing bushfire affected residents to meet their short-term storage needs, such as a shipping container, was formalised.

## Edition 41 – 28 April

Rural Aid, which works to support farmers and rural towns, was offering a webinar series called The Community Builders. The Community Builders Series will be held at 10am every Tuesday from 5 May to 7 July. The series had a focus on community rebuilding and resilience and will cover a range of topics designed to inspire towns and prepare them for post COVID-19.

## Edition 42 – 1 May

Council completed its rates review for impacted bushfire properties. This included assessing information regarding property loss and the impact on individual property valuations. Letters and amended accounts (where required) were issued to ratepayers.

## Edition 43 – 4 May

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements received more than 1,400 submissions since inviting public submissions on 2

# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



March. Comprising 12,552 pages, approximately 78 per cent of submissions were from individuals with the remaining submissions from organisations.

More than 190 were received as verbal submissions by phone or sent directly to the Commission, while 1,230 were made online through the submission portal or by email to the Commission. This figure will increase when posted submissions are received.

## Edition 44 – 8 May

The Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund (GERF) partnered with the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) to support farmers affected by the East Gippsland bushfires.

The fund allocated \$1.4 million to farmers from the \$10.4 million GERF raised during its 2020 bushfire appeal.

The partnership was made possible following consultation with East Gippsland Shire Council, Bushfire Recovery Victoria, VFF and other agencies.

## Edition 45 – 12 May

With most bushfire recovery programs still in place, Council introduced further support measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the COVID-19 Community and Business Support Package, council will waive, refund or reduce a number of fees and charges. Most waivers and refunds apply from April 1 to June 30, 2020.

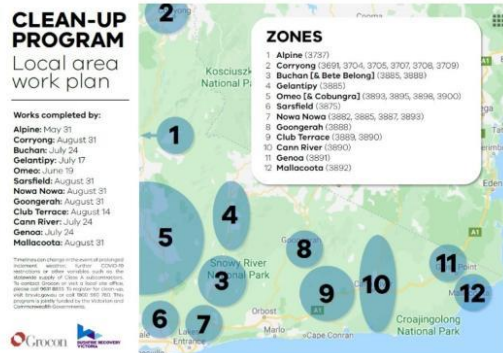


A popular walking track in Mallacoota was reconstructed as Council continues rebuilding assets destroyed in the summer bushfires.

## Edition 46 – 15 May

Grocon indicated all property clean-ups are scheduled to be completed by August 2020. To date the clean-up statistics are:

- Properties needing clean-up: 551
- Inspections at property completed: 519
- Clean-ups started: 138
- Clean-ups completed: 114



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# Bushfires 2019-20 Community Newsletter 29 May - Edition 50



## Edition 47 – 19 May

The Victorian Government announced it would deliver funding to ensure Clifton Creek Primary School is rebuilt.

Minister for Education James Merlino announced more than \$4.2 million for Clifton Creek Primary School, honouring a commitment to rebuild the school.

*Recovery hubs, delivered and operated by Bushfire Recovery Victoria, started opening across the shire.*

## Edition 48 – 22 May

The Mallacoota and district communities embarked on a locally-led recovery journey after the summer bushfires fires, and part of that process has been establishing a community recovery committee.

Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA) announced the results of the committee election on 23 April.

Eighty-eight per cent of members returned votes and the following candidates were elected: David Appleton, Jude Benton, Tanya de Guess, Graham Dempster, Brodie Gaudion, Peter Hancock, Jenny Lloyd, Paul Preston, Trindi Suratnam, Mark Tregellas, Kerri Warren, Bryce Watts-Parker.

Three sites in the Omeo Region will soon be upgraded with the installation of new water bores and 100,000-litre storage tanks.

Ensay will receive a bore, storage tank and standpipe that will enable the community to collect water during periods of drought.

## Edition 49 – 26 May

Community Recovery Hubs delivered and operated by Bushfire Recovery Victoria started opening across bushfire-affected communities.

The hubs will serve as important community meeting places that link locals to the practical support they need.

Services at individual hubs are being specially tailored to the individual needs of each community and include planning and rebuilding advice, individual case support, access to government and non-profit service providers, and small business advice.

### Find your local East Gippsland community recovery hub

<b>Buchan:</b> 5609 Buchan-Orbost Rd Please phone ahead of visiting buchanhub@brvic.gov.au 0407 281 123 Hub Coordinator: Rebecca Steenholdt	<b>Cann Valley:</b> Location opening soon You can call today and access services cannvalleyhub@brvic.gov.au 0400 842 671 Hub Coordinator: Paula Strong
<b>Sarsfield:</b> 10 School Rd, Sarsfield Please phone ahead of visiting sarsfieldhub@brvic.gov.au 0400 363 945 or 0408 934 978 Hub Coords: Allison Norfolk, Neil Smith	<b>Orbost:</b> Location opening soon You can call today and access services orbosthub@brvic.gov.au 0409 041 947 Hub Coordinator: Eleni McIlroy
<b>Mallacoota:</b> 62 Maurice St Mallacoota Please phone ahead of visiting mallacootahub@brvic.gov.au 0407 085 499 (Open 11-4 or by appt.) Hub Coordinator: Katie Symes	<b>Bairnsdale:</b> 24 Service St, Bairnsdale Hub operated by East Gippsland Shire bushfirerecoverycontactcentre@egipps. vic.gov.au 5153 9500 (Select 1)



All Bushfire Community Newsletters, videos and support and assistance information is available on Council's website [eastgippsland.vic.gov.au](http://eastgippsland.vic.gov.au) under the 'Bushfire Information' tab.

## **Contact us**

### **Telephone**

**Residents' Information Line: 1300 555 886 (business hours)**

**Citizen Service Centre: (03) 5153 9500 (business hours)**

**National Relay Service: 133 677**

### **Post**

**East Gippsland Shire Council, PO Box 1618**

**Bairnsdale 3875 Australia**

**Fax (03) 5153 9576**

**Web [www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au](http://www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au)**

**Email [feedback@egipps.vic.gov.au](mailto:feedback@egipps.vic.gov.au)**

### **In person**

**Bairnsdale: 273 Main Street**

**Lakes Entrance: 18 Mechanics Street**

**Mallacoota: 70 Maurice Avenue**

**Omeo: 179 Day Avenue**

**Orbost: 1 Ruskin Street**

**Paynesville: 55 The Esplanade**

### **Outreach Centres**

**Bendoc Outreach Centre -**

**18 Dowling Street**

**Buchan Resource Centre -**

**6 Centre Road**

**Cann River Community Centre -**

**Princes Highway**