

## Submission to the inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

This submission is presented by the **Harcourt Progress Association Inc. Committee**. Our Committee Members (honorary) are residents of Harcourt Valley and our submission particularly pertains to learnings from each of the following:

- our collective lived experiences of the disastrous bushfire event of 9 January 2026,
- our very extensive interactions with the community in taking on the role as the Harcourt Fire-Relief Committee almost immediately after the fire. The Committee established and oversaw, the operation of the Emergency Relief Centres in each of Harcourt (at the Harcourt Leisure Centre) and Castlemaine (at the former Mitsubishi Dealership). The two Centres very quickly enabled the provision of a range of essential and emergency-recovery services and goods to both, support and assist our community in the aftermath of the bushfire event, overwhelming numbers of whom had lost all but the “clothes on their back”,
- our Committee’s liaisons with a wide range of organizations including:- government, local government, community and charitable bodies, and of critical importance, our direct support for and the overseeing of, a very large contingent of extremely dedicated volunteers from our wider community, all to assist in providing essential services out of the two Relief Centres;
- media reports; and
- very extensive and detailed discussions with fire-impacted community members, including a notable number of whom are long-term residents of Harcourt Valley and surrounds.

### Our very special - Harcourt Valley

The Harcourt Valley is widely considered as a contiguous rural community made up of a small central town and several surrounding, small rural districts. Harcourt, as the key hub, has a population of 1,040. It is surrounded by and acts as a support hub to a collection of smaller settlements: Harcourt North (132), Ravenswood (7), Ravenswood South (79), Barkers Creek (482), Sutton Grange (154), Walmer (263) and Faraday (189). Whilst somewhat dispersed, these villages / districts tend to function as a combined community, sharing such as:- services, schools, emergency response networks, and local infrastructure. Together they form a combined population of 2,346 people, comprising a collective Harcourt Valley community.

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Harcourt Valley in central Victoria, is extensively known for its fertile land comprising the valleys and foothills surrounding Mount Alexander. It is situated around 8 km from Castlemaine, 30 km from Bendigo and 120 km from Melbourne. Harcourt Valley is located within each of - the Mount Alexander municipality and Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

Harcourt has a 150-year long and well-respected history of apple and pear farming, planted in its rich granite soils and in more recent times, it is increasingly known for its vineyards, fresh produce, apple juice, cider and wine production. Of critical importance, the Harcourt Co-operative Cool Store is the engine room of the apple industry and importantly, where more than 90 small businesses stored wine, beer and other produce from this fertile Valley. Well-known and highly regarded businesses including - Henry of Harcourt, Bress Wines, Harcourt Valley Vineyards, Black Jack Winery, Mount Alexander Winery and Harcourt Apples, each forming part of a most enterprising business community in this fertile valley and surrounds. The collective contribution of this industry to Harcourt and its surrounding district is celebrated annually in March through a community event called the 'Harcourt Applefest'. We proudly and particularly emphasize, that the 2026 event was, notwithstanding the devastating bushfire, again diligently organized this year, only a few weeks after the devastating fire. As a testimony to the resilient spirit in and wide community support for the Harcourt Valley community, the Applefest event was a huge success, drawing an estimated ten thousand visitors from the wider region and beyond, as part of the community recovery, support and healing process.

## Background... to the 9 January 2026 bush-fire event

The bushfire (was ignited) in Fogarty's Gap Road Ravenswood at approximately 2.30pm that afternoon, then travelled in a southerly direction, boosted by catastrophic weather conditions and being fed, with fierce 100km/hour winds. Fire fighters and emergency responders faced perhaps, the worst fire conditions in Victoria since Black Saturday, and whilst they responded quickly, the conditions were described as, 'impossible'. The fire descended upon Harcourt and Harcourt North at approximately 4.30pm after leaping across six lanes of traffic on the Calder Motorway. The fire then impacted Mount Alexander at approximately 7.30pm. This fire, at times becoming a raging inferno considering the vast quantities of dead timber and weed undergrowth on the mountainside and foothills, was finally contained a long eight days later, on 16 January 2026.

**Of particular note....** Our community was served by a highly dedicated and skilled team of CFA volunteers from across Victoria and supported by some 250 water tankers and three aircraft being deployed from across the State. Our own Harcourt CFA Captain, Andrew Wilson, was the initial incident controller and his dedicated crews were at the forefront, fighting the 'ferocious' fire. We would especially like to record that it was a privilege to be part of the very prolonged and highly appreciative applause for the most generous CFA members at the first Town Hall meeting following the fires. We must also specifically record that in typical rural-community style, a most enthusiastic band of volunteers came forward and 're-fueled' the firefighters with healthy, hearty meals during the fire-campaign. Our HPA

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Committee Members especially record and extend our personal gratitude and that of our community, to the Harcourt CFA Captain and all the members together with the many other Victorian CFA members who dedicatedly supported the Harcourt Valley.

Of significant note, our Committee Members also wish to record their utmost appreciation to the volunteers at the Victorian Miniature Railway (VMR) in Harcourt, who in the period preceding the fire event, undertook extensive grass slashing and other clearing of their land on the northern and western sides of Harcourt township – the direction from which the fire was fiercely approaching. This preparation work later proved to be critical, when the raging fire arrived, as the reduction of surface fuels then slowed the rate of spread of the fire, reduced radiant heat and also, the dispersion of air-borne fire-ash. Our Committee Members and many community members consider that the work of the VMR volunteers significantly disrupted the fire's path, giving CFA crews critical time to deploy resources, establish asset protection, and safely engage the fire under more manageable conditions. The VMR volunteers were also instrumental in fighting the fires through the operation of two of their custom-built rail water tankers, maneuvering water loads along the miniature rail line and using one of their small locomotives to reposition and deploy water where it was most needed. The VMR volunteers topped-up their loads from a 20,000-litre tank close by. The CFA units also heavily utilized a dam on the property to access water for the firefight.

Our Committee must also reference, that it was most heartening to note that Harcourt Fire Brigade Captain, Andrew Wilson, specifically credited the preparation work by the VMR volunteers in disrupting the fire's path.

We, on behalf of our community, must record with the highest appreciation, that the above-described clearing works, without doubt, also contributed to the saving of some nearby residences, a key business and other community infrastructure on the edge of the township.

We also acclaim the most dedicated work of the amazing CFA Volunteers, VMR volunteers and many other dedicated community members, which saved the majority of the town's community infrastructure, including such as, the Harcourt Valley Primary School, Kindergarten, Harcourt Leisure Centre, Victorian Miniature Railway and businesses in the Central township area.

In addition to the above, the VMR Committee most generously made their facilities available as an initial Relief Hub where vital goods and items were stored for release to fire impacted residents including critical quantities of stock feed and hay for farming properties which had lost all their stock grazing paddocks in the fires.

Sadly, some 53 homes were catastrophically impacted, the majority in Harcourt, one in Sutton Grange and two in Walmer. Three of these homes belonged to CFA volunteers, who returned from their fire-fighting task to devastatingly, learn of their own losses. Additional to these homes were many other structures and items including - shedding, vehicles, machinery, water tanks, tools and other outbuildings; some supporting rooftop solar panels

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and housing solar batteries were also destroyed. This left residents not on the electricity grid, without power, trades-people without their essential tools and equipment, farmers and orchardists without vital equipment, resulting in people losing their regular source of income.

Of critical importance to our economy, the Harcourt Cool Store was completely fire damaged (destroyed), along with the very popular Coolstore Cafe next door. The structure was insured, but many producers were unable to insure the small quantities of their products stored inside. The Albanese and Allan Governments have since, kindly committed \$500,000 towards accelerating the re-build of this essential Harcourt Cooperative Cool Store facility. It is absolutely critical, in supporting the next season's produce from across the Harcourt Valley and beyond. Also of huge concern is that, over 80 businesses in Harcourt and the surrounding region rely on the Coolstore facility to store fruit, seed potatoes, wine and craft beer at an appropriate temperature. Other goods which are also warehoused at the Coolstore buildings include earth moving equipment, furniture, water filters and batteries for business owners.

A further two businesses were catastrophically affected in addition to the Coolstore, these were Mount Alexander winery and as noted, the Coolstore Cafe.

Another two businesses were significantly damaged in the fire:

- Bloom Property Styling, a home staging business, lost its warehouse and stock. The owner, Stephen Upton was in a burn-over while fighting the fires as a volunteer member of the CFA; and
- Henry of Harcourt Cidery was also heavily impacted, losing much of their well-established orchard and regrettably, all of this year's crop.

Also of critical importance is that '**statistics and numbers**' can only ever tell a small part of the story. They just cannot capture the depth of disruption, grief or uncertainty that people in the Harcourt Valley are now having to live with after losing homes, businesses, essential equipment and places of meaning. These losses are without question, profound, life-altering and deeply personal. Our Committee Members heartfelt condolences go to every person and family directly impacted / affected by, the 9 January fire.

Notwithstanding the above outlined concerns, it is becoming clearer that the people of Harcourt Valley have shown remarkable grit, determination and commitment to one another in the weeks and now months, since the fire. The manner in which our community has stepped forward - supporting neighbours and fellow community members, rebuilding routines and facilities, and together planning for recovery is truly admirable. This strongly reflects a strength that absolutely deserves recognition by Governments and Authorities alike. Recovery will however take a long time, in some instances – years, and each person's path will be notably different. Of significant importance is the 'gutsy' dedication and determination being shown to date across the Harcourt Valley. It speaks for a community that is working steadily, together and collectively, establishing a **positive vision** toward, not just rebuilding

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what was damaged / lost, but importantly for what they would particularly seek for a successful future for our community, whilst importantly, protecting what remains.

### **Some critical concerns....requiring Government attention..**

It is most regretful that Rural Victorians broadly face persistent structural barriers to gaining adequate insurance for fire and flood, many of which issues have been repeatedly identified in major inquiries. Submissions to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, well before the current cost of living crisis, highlighted that insurance premiums in bushfire-prone regions were already disproportionately high relative to income, thus compounding affordability barriers for small rural communities. More broadly, the Royal Commission reporting on relief and recovery noted that rural residents often face limited market competition, fewer insurance products tailored to mixed-use rural properties, and complex policy exclusions that make it difficult to secure cover that reflects actual risk and land use patterns. Homes and businesses are either insured, underinsured or not insured and this isn't necessarily a reflection on any individual, but rather a reflection of the extent of an extensive structural issue.

Insurance policies are different for individual households and businesses. If insured, typically fencing surrounding the home is insured, but not the fencing for paddocks. There have been successive insurance premium increases across successive years as the district is considered a bushfire zone, which may have led to some families being unable to afford insurance cover. Many properties and businesses may also be significantly under-insured. Some may have inadequate contents insurance. The terms and conditions on policies vary from provider to provider. Almost all insured homes and businesses will likely be unable to replace like for like when all contents require replacing. The Department of Families Fairness and Housing and Dhelkaya Health are addressing the community's immediate housing needs, however time will uncover what many people have been unable to secure, including safe affordable housing in Harcourt Valley in the longer term. The psychological impact of this situation will be devastating on many in our community **and Government attention and assistance toward this issue is considered critical.**

Bushfire survivors who lost their homes may be detrimentally impacted if replacement housing is located outside Harcourt and district, with displacement disrupting vital social, economic, and emotional support. Considered of critical importance, staying within the district helps survivors maintain connections with family, community, work, and importantly, services that are essential for recovery after trauma. Relocation elsewhere can deepen feelings of loss and isolation, create practical hardships such as increased travel and financial strain, and weaken community cohesion, ultimately hindering both individual and collective recovery.

**Recommendation: Our Harcourt Progress Association Committee** strongly recommends that the inquiry not just considers, but also constructively addresses:-

- The structural nature of high cost of insurance premiums and limited diversity of insurance products in rural Victoria, the consistency of policies across providers and whether climate risk is outpacing existing insurance models. Furthermore, our Committee recommends Parliament investigate whether housing needs are able to be addressed for Harcourt Valley individuals and families in the Harcourt Valley region within existing Victorian Housing Registrar housing stock and allocations. If not, how might these needs be met, if they are unable to be met by insurance coverage.
- This task might also include such innovative issues as - reviewing the type of construction permits and simplifying processes for issuing of same when required for **re-building** on land with certain zonings AND ESPECIALLY, have regard to the type and style of house construction.
- Of **particular note** in this regard, is that there are now a notable range of businesses which provide some excellent examples of quality 'pre-fabricated' dwellings. Importantly these can be erected within weeks, not the usual many months, possibly years. An additional issue of concern is the demand for re-building structures (whether homes or shedding, etc.) will without doubt, lead to a 'shortage' of builders and relevant tradespersons. This situation will consequently, and most unfortunately, lead to lengthy delays in building construction, require people to be living for extended periods in temporary situations and also, the ever-present potential for adverse psychological impacts and similar on many of our community. **Innovation and wide positive thinking** on the above issues by our Statutory Authorities, is considered to be critical,.

## Impact on land and wildlife

The dominant landscape feature of Harcourt Valley is Mount Alexander, which provided a recreation and tourism backdrop for activities like bushwalking, which included the goldfields walking track from Bendigo to Ballarat and mountain biking trails at La Larr Ba Gauwa Park, an historic oak forest and a free campground at Leanganook.

4,500 hectares were burnt across a perimeter of 68 kilometers, this includes residential, commercial, bushland, farmland, orchards, vineyards and the referenced, Mount Alexander.

Mount Alexander also accommodates critical infrastructure which supports major communications services across the wider region and irrigation water reticulation in the hinterland; both of these services were severely impacted by the bushfire and lead to lengthy service interruptions and delays and of course, expensive repair works.

Of critical note is that Mount Alexander was almost completely fire damaged (9/1/2026), according to maps released by the Incident Control team. Mount Alexander Regional Park remained closed eight weeks later. Qualified wildlife rescuers were reportedly curbed by the parks closure, road closures and police blockades, qualified rescuers were only allowed to enter private property, in- spite of having emergency training and a MOU with State

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Government agencies. The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action has not released information estimating the number of wildlife directly lost to the fires, the number of animals euthanized or the post fire stress of dehydrated and starving animals – nor is there any information on the impact to fauna. To our knowledge there is no published Mount Alexander specific environmental impact report.

Without question, Mount Alexander is a highly significant natural asset to Harcourt Valley and it contributes to the tourism economy for local businesses by bringing visitors to the Valley through patronage to the popular walking trails, mountain bike and camping facilities.

Our Committee has also given very particular attention to the **2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission finding that “bushfires obtain their energy from fuel and their speed and direction from the weather, topography and the fire itself. These factors affect fire behavior, including the rate of spread, flame height and angle, persistence in the area, and the way firebrands travel”.**

Of absolute significance in this regard is.... **the conditions on 9 January 2026 were catastrophic, heat was in excess of 45 degrees and winds were in excess of 100k/ph – firefighting in these types of conditions is ‘unimaginable’.**

**Critically, the 2009 Commission went on to say “the only element that can be controlled by humans is the management of fuel. Prescribed burning— ‘the controlled application of fire under specified environmental conditions to a predetermined area and at the time, intensity and rate of spread required to attain planned resource management objectives’—is the most effective mechanism for managing fuel.” (p 280)**

Also of significant note is that... **Dja Dja Wurrung advocate for cool, wet, low-intensity cultural burns that work with moisture and seasonality, to protect ecosystems, and maintain cultural responsibilities to Country. They distinguish these clearly from Western controlled burns, which are hotter, riskier, and focused on fuel reduction rather than ecological health.**

The above points are particularly drawn to attention... as Members of the **Harcourt Progress Association Committee**, we have in the aftermath of the fire, been frequently approached by long-term residents of the Valley who frustratedly drew attention to the apparent complete lack of attention given in recent decades to the management of what they described as ‘a catastrophic dry-fuel load’ especially on Mount Alexander and its foothills and also in a number of other rural locations including roadside and creek-beds, in the municipality. A number of residents have also, strongly criticized Governments as effectively completely disregarding: the previous Royal Commission, the experienced advice which both long term residents, and the long-time traditions and actions of our First-Nations

people, who strongly advocate for a vastly improved fuel management regime on the Mount in particular.

**Recommendation: Our Harcourt Progress Association Committee** would strongly recommend that the manner in which future dry- fuel loads on Mount Alexander are managed and how qualified wildlife rescuers are able to enter fire grounds be not just reviewed but indeed, actioned by the Parliament in a manner to specifically enable **and in fact require**, more practical fuel reduction management practices. It is also submitted that a similar review of and action be required by Government, to address the vast areas of highly inflammable non- indigenous weeds (including such as gorse and blackberries) which currently grows uncontrolled on each of private and public lands, often in close proximity to each of - residential developments and significant adjacent bushland. The uncontrolled growth of such environmental weeds notably contributes to potential wildfire hazards. As an aside, such extensive weed infestation exists and appears untouched and unmanaged in many areas adjacent to quite dense bushland and urbanized development around the edges of Castlemaine township.

As referenced above, strong Government attention to the above outlined issues could also potentially result in more positive considerations to such as conditions in fire insurance policies.

## Impact on essential services

The 9 January 2026 bushfire certainly exposed significant vulnerabilities in the resilience of essential services across Harcourt Valley and beyond.

- Loss of telecommunications and broadcast capacity - Destruction of the Mount Alexander transmission tower disrupted radio, television, NBN and Coliban Water systems. The absence of any backup services meant the district had no connectivity, severely limiting emergency communication, warnings, coordination and community information flow for a period.
- Failure of electricity infrastructure - Fallen power lines near the Elizabeth Street substation caused a prolonged power outage across the district. Numerous fire-damaged power poles required replacement, slowing restoration. Loss of electricity reduced the functionality of pumps, generators, emergency systems and household access to water.
- Compromised drinking water supply - A burst water main allowed contaminants to enter the town water network, rendering it unsafe to drink. Repairs could not be undertaken while the fireground remained unsafe, prolonging the outage. A temporary drinking-water trailer was deployed, highlighting the lack of built-in resilience. Properties on tank water were dependent on generators for access; if generators failed or tanks were contaminated by firefighting runoff, households had no safe water source.
- Damage to transport infrastructure - Fire damage to the Bendigo railway line required VicTrack repairs, reducing transport capacity and limiting movement of people, goods

and emergency personnel. Widespread road damage and closures restricted post-fire recovery operations.

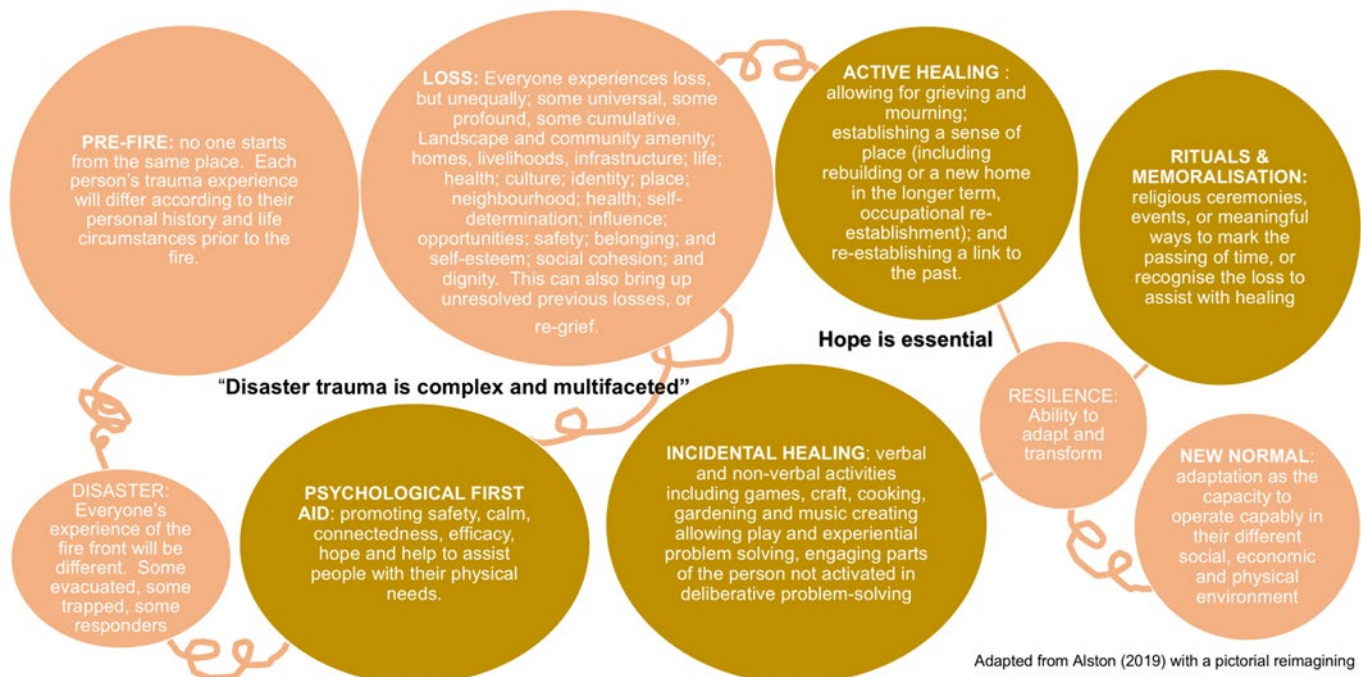
**In response to the above...our Committee submits the following Recommendation:**

That Parliament urgently explore how critical community services and infrastructure can be future proofed for Harcourt Valley and other communities, from loss by wildfire. Of particular note in this regard is - our preceding recommendation concerning the need for vastly improved management of dry fuel loads on the Mountain - "Alexander", the foothills thereof and indeed nearby rural roadsides, would contribute positively.

## Psychological impacts

Our Committee Members have been briefed on how the extreme trauma incurred by many of our citizens because of the fire devastation and importantly, how individuals may be psychologically impacted in each of the short and longer term and ongoing, what recovery might look like in the long term for some in our community.

### Trauma informed approach in the bushfire recovery



Adapted from Alston (2019) with a pictorial reimagining

Those most directly affected by the fires are likely to be those who experienced direct fire damage to their homes, property and businesses, livelihoods, or other assets that hold economic, physical, social, cultural and personal significance. However, immediate neighbors who did not incur any direct loss/damage, may well experience trauma and feelings of guilt.

Fire impacted home and business owners who lost property have experienced trauma of varying intensity and form and are highly likely to be experiencing ongoing psychological

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distress. This will potentially include significant disruption, displacement and relocation and unimaginable shock and grief.

CFA first responders who were defending their own communities are also likely to be experiencing significant psychological distress, balancing voluntary responsibilities with personal loss, fear, and exhaustion, some of whom lost their homes and businesses, are also highly likely to be experiencing psychological distress.

Others directly affected may include people who have suffered injury, illness, or had existing health impacts exacerbated because of the fires e.g. smoke, air quality, heat and inability to access existing services and support, due to closures and relocations.

Also affected are those who were evacuated, who also had their sense of safety, stability, and security threatened. The following towns in the district were required to evacuate: Harcourt, Harcourt North, Ravenswood, Walmer, Barkers Creek, Muckleford, Faraday, Golden Point, Elphinstone, Metcalfe, Sedgwick and Sutton Grange. Harcourt was closed to these residents for some period, creating a disconnect from their community. Mount Alexander remains closed to the community. There may be a lot of disenfranchised grief in the community, resulting from witnessing the extensive suffering and loss experienced by so many people in Harcourt Valley and also fauna and flora at Mount Alexander, even where no fire damage was caused to personal assets.

Fire behaves unpredictably. Driven by wind and conditions beyond human control, it can impact neighboring properties in vastly different ways — leaving one home destroyed while another remains untouched. This randomness can be confronting and deeply distressing for those affected; potentially inducing survivor's guilt for those who didn't experience fire damage.

People also entered this disaster with very different levels of resources, support, and existing pressures. People who were uninsured or underinsured, living on limited incomes, single parent households, older persons, those without transport, or with fewer family or community supports are likely to face longer-term challenges in the rebuilding and recovery process, equally so are those who have compounding stressors going into the fires e.g. relationship breakdown, bereavement, disability, job loss, mental health issues and financial distress are likely to have high levels of psychological distress.

Information during the fires was largely shared through social media and digital platforms. Community members with limited access to technology — particularly some older residents — may have been disadvantaged in receiving timely updates. Additional support may be required throughout the recovery process to overcome associated consequences.

Most evacuated residents were prevented from returning to their properties anywhere from two to five days.

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Children are particularly vulnerable to psychological distress as their needs may be overlooked while their parents try to cope with the overwhelming responsibility of rebuilding and resuming a new normal whilst carrying a personal trauma load.

Women are potentially at increased risk of family violence in the aftermath of a bushfire. Women are often at-risk during disaster events, especially those already living in a domestic violence situation, as they often must rely on their abusers to access shelter and supplies. Women often aren't included in preparing and planning for emergencies, and this contributes to the widening gap in gender inequality, as men are disproportionately in charge of management and planning (Larin, 2024).

Another group who are likely psychologically impacted are First Nations People living on Dja Dja Wurrung Country and Djarra people themselves, as the scale of environmental destruction at Mount Alexander would have profound cultural and spiritual impacts with regard to their connection to Country.

Belonging and community connection are important factors for recovery and to facilitate resilience, for Harcourt and district. People who weren't born locally e.g. culturally or linguistically diverse families may be at increased risk of experiencing isolation.

People may also be indirectly affected over time through disruption to the local economy, essential services, infrastructure, employment, and through social, health and psychological impacts.

The communities of Harcourt, Castlemaine, Chewton and surrounding towns are distinct, yet deeply interconnected. While some residents experienced direct loss of homes and businesses, the broader district has also been affected by service disruptions and likely economic impacts, including the loss of the Coolstore and reduced access to Mount Alexander tourism / recreation facilities

Many community members evacuated as a precaution, and many others are now volunteering in recovery efforts. In a small, close-knit community, supporting others who have experienced significant loss places volunteers and community members at risk of vicarious trauma.

## Psychological support

Dhelkaya Health, the local health service and Anglicare Victoria are either directly or providing case management access to formal psychological supports for community members. However, it is anticipated that many affected persons may/will not want to/will delay access to, formal psychological support. There is a significant need for opportunities for incidental healing.

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**Recommendation:** It is recommended that Parliament review existing Victorian Government relief and recovery funding and determine whether it sufficiently extends to opportunities for community members to engage in incidental healing.

## Our wide Community led recovery effort

The recovery has been community led, primarily by our Harcourt Progress Association (HPA) which is a long-standing incorporated local community organisation that supports the wellbeing, development and resilience of Harcourt. It must be recorded that the work of the HPA Committee Members who are all volunteers, have contributed many days of donated professional time: behind the scenes and in over-seeing and coordinating the relief effort, promoting fundraising activities, managing the most generous community donations and the allocating donated funds to impacted community members through a series of phased relief funding programs. This was achieved firstly via gift cards to assist community to meet immediate needs after the devastating fire and secondly to assist people who had lost their permanent residence from the fire. We are hoping to provide a third phase of funding to impacted persons. Other tasks of the HPA Committee Members included overseeing and supporting the very large band of community volunteers, whilst ensuring legal and regulatory issues were monitored. The volunteer recovery committee has been highly organized addressing issues including media, communications and operations. Adequate resourcing and specialized support arranged where desired, has been a critical issue. Examples include community engagement, governance and the referenced funding allocations which will assist / enable our HPA to continue supporting the community sustainably throughout the recovery process.

Critical services including toilets, showers, meals and a community pantry along with introduction to service providers for necessary services were initially provided at the Harcourt Leisure Centre by our Harcourt Progress Association with the generous support and approval of the Mount Alexander Shire and also the Harcourt Cricket and Football Clubs in enabling the HPA to set up the Relief Centre in the Leisure Centre Facility. The HPA Committee also records its absolute gratitude to the Castlemaine Community House organisation and its staff for its assistance and guidance in the setting up and operation of essential community services –including a food kitchen providing, hearty lunch-time meals provided at the Relief Centre for community members.

As noted, the Victorian Miniature Railway, most generously became a relief centre and gathering place for community members in the immediate aftermath of the fires, providing food, water, stock food and emotional support to fire affected locals. The VMR Committee have without question, played a most pivotal role and became a critical community hub for Harcourt and district, cementing its place in Harcourt as a place of belonging for the entire community.

In addition, a bushfire Donation/Distribution Centre was established in Castlemaine, operated by Tania Butterworth under the auspice of the Harcourt Progress Association and

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the most generous support of both, a team of highly dedicated volunteers and the Castlemaine Rotary Club, providing materials and essential needs to families who experienced fire damage. The community has most generously supported the Donation Centre who in turn support the fire impacted community. The Centre is, as noted, teamed by highly dedicated local volunteers.

The Organization, BlazeAid has taken up residence at the Blue-light Camp at Derby Hill in Maldon for three months to accommodate volunteers who will most generously rebuild fences and other structures that have been damaged. The most generous BlazeAid volunteers have been highly appreciated by impacted farmers and property owners

With regards to social connection, the Harcourt Bowling Club also opened its doors to welcome the community for social bowls, a barbeque and a chat on 18 January 2026. A pool party was also held at the Harcourt pool on 20 January 2026 to bring the community together and experience a sense of normalcy, with a bbq put on by Rotary Castlemaine.

The HPA Committee also wishes to particularly extend its most grateful appreciation to our local parliamentary representative, The Honorable Maree Edwards who has provided immediate and intense support to our Greater Harcourt Community and certainly our HPA Committee in guiding and assisting our community.

**Recommendation:** We would implore that Parliament should investigate ways to reduce the load on volunteer community members in the relief and recovery effort and better enable community-led recoveries.

Actions could include:

- reducing red tape e.g. easier grant applications for bushfire impacted communities, or fast tracking dedicated incorporated recovery organizations or community led services;
- place-based funding directed to impacted communities with decisions made locally to address local service gaps;
- a community development fund for community identified priorities. This would be in addition to existing individual support and relief packages.
- availability of structural supports to prevent, recognise and respond to volunteer fatigue and how these could be mobilised at the community level.
- community developed recovery plans developed by the community, listing their own domains and priorities encompassing Harcourt and District - a road map if you like.

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Community resilience has shown how the Harcourt Valley community was able to:

- persevere through the fires in 1969;
- the millennial drought; and
- overcome the loss of thirty-eight homes when the Calder Freeway was upgraded in 2009.

The community, through many public funding campaigns and events, business and private donations / contributions has raised a significant amount of money to assist in supporting impacted families. Much of this funding is being distributed through the Harcourt Progress Association Inc. assistance programs

**Recommendation:** The Parliament consider the establishment of a community resilience fund to enable the community to identify gaps in services, infrastructure or preparedness.

The Harcourt Progress Association Inc. is pleased to present the above submission on behalf of our community and respectfully requests positive Government consideration and action in relation to the outlined community supported recommendations.

Ivan Gilbert  
Chairperson

