

Submission Text: I am the Acting Brigade Community Safety Coordinator for the Highlands-Caveat Brigade. The brigade area was significantly impacted by the Longwood fire on Jan 9, 2026. I have held this position since Jan 2025. I am also a Community Fireguard Coordinator for the Highlands group a position I have held for approximately 19 years.

This submission is feedback on the Community Fireguard Program from a local perspective.

Executive Summary

The Highlands Community Fireguard (CFG) group has operated continuously for approximately nineteen years and currently supports approximately 102 residents across 53 households, including both permanent and non-permanent residents, in a high bushfire risk area.

Over time, the group has evolved from a small neighbourhood model into a larger, geographically dispersed network that relies heavily on volunteer coordination, local knowledge, and community cooperation.

The January 2026 fire event demonstrated both the strengths and limitations of community-based preparedness systems. The fire began at Longwood, approximately 33 kilometres (direct aerial distance) from the Highlands community, two days prior to catastrophic fire conditions. This lead time allowed the Community Fireguard group to prepare residents, communicate risk, and support decision-making before the fire reached the area.

During the incident and for the following 34 days, the CFG network provided ongoing updates regarding fire behaviour, back-burning operations, flare-ups, and local hazards. These communications were particularly important for residents who had limited technological capability or difficulty interpreting complex emergency notifications.

The event also confirmed previously identified risks, particularly the role of roadside vegetation in allowing fire to travel along road corridors and impact homes. Community members undertook voluntary clearing works along approximately 1 kilometre of Old

Highlands Road to reduce entrapment risk, despite facing significant regulatory and environmental restrictions.

A critical operational concern identified at all times for the group is the heavy reliance on one or two individuals to coordinate and distribute community messages. This concentration of responsibility creates risk to the continuity and sustainability of communication systems, particularly during fast-moving emergencies or when key volunteers are unavailable. This has always been a recognised issue with the CFA particularly with the large group size and creating reliance on vulnerable systems.

Official emergency alerts appropriately originate through VicEmergency and emergency services. Community Fireguard groups do not replace these systems. Rather, they supplement them by providing local context, neighbour-to-neighbour communication, and practical information relevant to specific locations and conditions.

In different circumstances — particularly where a fire starts locally with little warning — the current informal communication model may not function as effectively as it did during the January 2026 event. Nevertheless, communities continue to do as much as is possible with the information available to them.

This submission advocates for stronger institutional support for Community Fireguard groups, improved communication tools, streamlined risk reduction processes, and recognition of community capability as an essential component of bushfire resilience.

Background

Approximately nineteen years ago, four Community Fireguard groups were established within the Highlands area to support local bushfire preparedness and community resilience. Over time, three of these groups have ceased operation.

One group remains active — Highlands Community Fireguard group.

The group consists of approximately:

- 102 residents
- 53 households
- 65% permanent residents
- 36% non-permanent residents

The group covers residents along:

- Old Highlands Road
- Granite Hills Road
- A portion of Ghin Ghin Road

This region is classified by the VFRR as the only very high danger zone in the Highlands-Caveat Brigade area. (unable to attach) The geographic spread and mixed residency status present unique challenges in maintaining communication, preparedness, and engagement.

The original Community Fireguard model was designed to support small neighbourhood clusters of approximately four to six households within a single street. In practice, demographic changes, property size, and community expectations have resulted in this group expanding well beyond this initial design. Mostly due to the ability to send SMS alerts and also to ensure a consistency for all involved. The Highlands group now represents a significantly larger and more complex network of households.

Evolution of Communication Systems

The initial communication method relied on a traditional phone tree system, where one person would call two people, and each of those individuals would call two more.

While effective in fostering neighbour connections, this system proved to be:

- Time-consuming
- Inefficient in reaching all members quickly
- Prone to inaccuracies as messages were relayed
- Dependent on significant volunteer time

As mobile phone technology advanced, group SMS messaging appeared to offer a simple solution. However, implementation was not straightforward due to:

- Limited availability of suitable programs
- Service provider limitations
- Variations in phone operating systems
- Administrative burden placed on volunteers

Despite these challenges, the printed phone tree document continues to be produced because it:

- Connects neighbours directly
 - Integrates new residents into the community
 - Supports fire preparedness education
 - Provides a backup communication method if technology fails
 - Provides a vital document for the emergency services immediately after the fire.
-

January 2026 Fire Event

The January 2026 fire began at Longwood approximately 33 kilometres (direct aerial distance) from the Highlands community.

The fire started two days before the day of catastrophic Fire Danger Rating. During those initial days, conditions were hot but wind was significantly less severe than on the catastrophic day.

This early period provided a critical window for preparation.

A well-attended CFA Bushfire Essentials meeting had been held in November 2025, where risks for the upcoming fire season were clearly communicated using direct messaging and strong visual material. This session played a significant role in preparing residents mentally and practically for the potential impact of a major fire.

Multiple messages were circulated when alerts were received from VicEmergency for less severe events prior to Jan 9 to ensure as many as possible had the app and were not solely relying on the CFG SMS messages. Residents received the following after the CFG alert.

- Did you receive the VicEmergency notification?
- Have you downloaded VicEmergency?
- Do you need help with the VicEmergnecy app?
- Have you discussed your plan with neighbours?

These repeated prompts were designed to ensure as many residents as possible were receiving the VicEmergency alerts prior to the catastrophic event.

Community Communication During the Incident

Through the Community Fireguard SMS system, the Fire Danger Rating for Friday 9 January 2026 was highlighted early.

Residents were encouraged to:

- Communicate with neighbours about their plans
- Identify who intended to stay or leave
- Support higher-risk residents
- Prepare properties and evacuation plans

Many residents within the community are considered higher risk due to:

- Age
- Health conditions
- Limited mobility
- Limited technological capability

Some rely on younger family members for support. Many of these residents were contacted directly prior to the Longwood event.

As conditions escalated and containment lines failed, clear messages were sent advising residents:

Leave now if you are still in the area.

Every household received the same message.

These messages were intentionally:

- Short

- Clear
- Easy to read
- Action-focused

. Source of information our CFA captain quoted.

Many residents reported difficulty interpreting the volume and complexity of information within official notifications. In contrast, the CFG messages provided clarity at a time of stress in an easily accessed format.

Local Intelligence and Situational Awareness

During the critical phase of the incident, vital information often came from local residents before formal updates were issued.

Examples included:

- Fire crossing Hughes Creek
- Fire at Caveat
- Fire travelling down Highlands Road toward the township

At the time of greatest impact, delays occurred in updating the VicEmergency app due to technical factors at the Incident Control Centre.

Regardless of cause, the practical outcome was that residents relied heavily on local communication networks to understand the evolving threat.

This experience demonstrates that:

Local communication systems complement official information and provide critical real-time context during fast-moving incidents.

Extended Incident Communication — 34 Days

The Community Fireguard group continued to provide updates for 34 days following the initial fire impact.

These communications included:

- Back-burning operations
- New flare-ups
- Spot fires
- Particularly within areas not previously flame-affected
- Local hazards
- Changing risk conditions

Bushfire risk does not end when the main fire front passes. Continued communication was essential for community safety. Many members of the community were the first responders in this additional time.

Roadside Fuel Loads and Entrapment Risk

Prior to the fire, the Community Fireguard group identified roadside vegetation along Old Highlands Road as a significant safety risk.

The concern was that dense roadside vegetation could act as:

A wick — allowing fire to travel rapidly along the road corridor and trap residents

attempting to evacuate and increase the threat to property loss.

This risk was raised with council authorities.

During the January 2026 fire, the fire travelled along road corridors and impacted homes, confirming the previously identified risk.

Community Working Bees and Risk Reduction

Following the fire, the Community Fireguard group organised:

Three large working bees

Residents cleared vegetation along approximately:

1 kilometre of Old Highlands Road

This work was undertaken to:

- Reduce vehicle entrapment risk
- Improve evacuation safety
- Limit fire spread
- Protect residents and emergency responders

The work was voluntary and community-led.

Barriers to Risk Reduction

During efforts to address roadside fuel hazards, the community liaised with council authorities.

However, progress was significantly restricted by:

- Bureaucratic processes
- Environmental overlays - Significant vegetation overlay.
- Administrative requirements
- Approval delays

These restrictions limited the ability to reduce known risks in advance but residents had a very strong sense of the urgency of the need for the works. A significant amount of work was done prior to council assessment.

The January 2026 fire demonstrated that:

The environmental impact from uncontrolled fire was far greater than the impact that would have resulted from controlled vegetation management.

Following the fire, extensive clearing was ultimately performed by residents and machine operators to restore safety.

This reactive work required:

- More effort
- Greater environmental disturbance
- Higher risk conditions

Sustainability Risks — Reliance on Individual Volunteers

A major operational concern is the reliance on one or two individuals to manage community communication.

This creates significant risk because:

- Communication systems depend on personal availability
- Volunteers may be absent, unwell, or directly impacted
- Workload is high during emergencies
- Long-term sustainability is uncertain

Communication systems should not depend on a single person.

Distributed responsibility is essential for resilience but I note this is not always possible and community members work together to protect their own environment. Often bureaucracy hinders the process required.

Role of Community Fireguard Groups

Community Fireguard groups are not a replacement for official emergency alert systems.

Official warnings appropriately come from emergency services.

Community groups play a complementary role by:

- Providing local context
- Sharing real-time observations
- Supporting vulnerable residents
- Reinforcing preparedness messaging
- Maintaining neighbour connections

In different circumstances — particularly if a fire starts locally — the current system may not work as well as it did in January 2026.

However:

It is the system communities currently have, and people do as much as is possible with the information available to them.

Key Recommendations

1. Strengthen and Expand Community Fireguard Programs

Support the establishment and continuation of Community Fireguard groups across brigade areas.

Provide:

- Ongoing facilitation
 - Training
 - Administrative support
 - Program continuity
-

2. Provide Reliable Bulk Communication Tools

Enable volunteer groups to use efficient messaging systems capable of delivering consistent information quickly.

Provide:

- Approved bulk SMS platforms

- Technical support
 - Funding assistance
 - Communication training
-

3. Reduce Reliance on Individual Volunteers

Develop shared communication systems so responsibility does not fall on one or two individuals.

Support:

- Backup communication coordinators
 - Shared messaging protocols
 - Volunteer succession planning
 - Sustainable workload distribution
-

4. Recognise Community Communication as a Supplement to Official Alerts

Formally recognise the role of community networks in supporting emergency communication.

Encourage integration between:

- Emergency services

- Local brigades
 - Community Fireguard groups
-

5. Streamline Approval Processes for Targeted Fuel Reduction

Allow faster approval for risk reduction work in high-risk areas.

Use risk-based decision making for:

- Roadside vegetation
 - Evacuation routes
 - Known hazard locations
-

6. Prioritise Road Corridor Safety

Recognise roads as critical evacuation and relief infrastructure.

Support:

- Regular roadside fuel management
 - Hazard reduction along evacuation routes
 - Community consultation in planning
-

7. Support Ongoing Communication During Extended Incidents

Recognise that risk continues after the main fire front passes.

Provide:

- Guidance for extended communication
 - Support for volunteer workload
 - Coordination resources
-

8. Support Community-Led Risk Reduction Activities

Provide practical support for community initiatives.

This may include:

- Equipment access
 - Training
 - Insurance clarity
 - Funding assistance
-

Conclusion

The January 2026 fire confirmed many risks that had already been identified by the local

community.

Community members prepared early, communicated consistently, and undertook practical risk reduction work.

However, regulatory barriers, communication limitations, and reliance on individual volunteers created vulnerabilities.

Community Fireguard groups represent a proven, practical, and trusted system for improving bushfire preparedness and response but a review of its format and guidelines is required.

With appropriate support, modern communication tools, and streamlined risk reduction processes, these groups can significantly strengthen community safety.

Communities will continue to do as much as possible with the information they have.

Strengthening the systems that support them is one of the most practical ways to improve resilience.

Submitted on behalf of:

Highlands Community Fireguard Group by Andrea Bauer (Coordinator)