

Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Fire Season Preparedness

Blackwood Action Group

Overview

This submission is presented by the Blackwood Action Group on behalf of the Blackwood community.

The Blackwood Action Group was originally formed by the local community to help fight for the Towns survival, which at the time was threatened by the new building regulations for fire prone areas in 2011 and the Government's failure in 2012 to deliver the announced and promised sewerage scheme. At that time, there appeared to be separate silos of fire emergency agencies, primarily CFA and DEPI, (now DELWP), with very little engagement with each other and the community. As fire management issues rose, the local fire brigade didn't have responsibility for DEPI managed land and the community and Blackwood Action Group initially found DEPI and some paid CFA staff difficult to engage with to have these issues addressed.

Only after approaching our local member of parliament Marry-anne Thomas, Emergency Management Victoria and the Council, did this level of engagement improve through the Blackwood Community Emergency Management Plan proposal that was initiated. Particular acknowledgement in this endeavour is attributed to the support received from Craig Lapsley and Steve Cameron of Emergency Management Victoria and Cherie Graham, Emergency Manager, of Moorabool Shire Council, who took Blackwood Action Group's request and the community's needs for township protection seriously. As a result, the Blackwood Community Emergency Management Planning Group has since been formed and has been successfully engaging with all agencies and is already achieving positive outcomes in pro-active fire protection for the town. There is still a long way to go, but at least we (government fire emergency agencies and the community) are all now on that journey together.

The township of Blackwood is listed as one of the 52 high risk bushfire prone towns across Victoria. The town is made up of several settlements, Simmons Reef to the west, Golden Point to the east, Barrys Reef separated to the north and the larger settlement of Blackwood in the centre. All of these areas are collectively referred to as Blackwood in this submission. Blackwood is totally surrounded by forested public land, classified as Wombat State Forest (70,000 hectares) to the north and west and Lerderderg State Park (14,250) to the north-east and south. Most of the recommendations in this submission relates to the management of public land close to the town.



Blackwood is now a good example of where the community is effectively working with Government fire management agencies, local government and the local fire brigade on bushfire preparedness and fire prevention. This could present a valuable opportunity to bring all the work to date from the different agencies and community together through “safer together”.

The amount and nature of preventative burning

Blackwood Action Group and the community is generally satisfied with the level of broad scale preventative burning that has been undertaken in areas to the north and west, but close to the town, particularly in areas that would potentially result in the reduction of bushfire threat, ember attack and spotting into the town from a major bushfire. Blackwood Action Group supports broad scale preventative burning in strategic areas that will benefit the town.

However, Blackwood Action Group believes that more fire prevention works need to be undertaken on an annual basis to address bushfire risk at the interface of forested public land with freehold residential properties. Previously, the local Blackwood fire brigade regularly burnt the forested public land around the boundary of the town (known as the donut around town). Of recent times, DELWP’s former agencies took over this role and the level of preventative burning at the interface residential properties is far less frequent and the local community has become concerned at the fire risk in areas not treated. Blackwood Action Group recommends that alternative fire preparedness measures be undertaken at the interface with residential properties, particularly the creation of fuel breaks to protect the town with annual or bi-annual mowing or slashing.

The effectiveness of preventative burns in achieving community safety

Preventative burning is seasonal and resource dependent, so has limitations in its effectiveness unless the burns can be undertaken in strategic areas which will benefit township protection.

Blackwood Action Group recommends strategic firebreaks be created adjoining the town at the interface with residential properties. The understorey in this environment has been extensively disturbed from mining and prospecting and is highly weed infested (mainly Blackberry, Gorse and Broom), so is of low conservation value and needs to be mowed, mulched or groomed at least annually to reduce the fire hazard to protect the town.

A long term goal of the draft Community Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) is for Blackwood to become a BAL 29 town through bushfire preparedness works. Blackwood is



predominantly an historic timber town, with many properties and several precincts now recommended to be covered by the Heritage Overlay under the Moorabool Planning Scheme. The recent heritage study undertaken by the Council now puts a greater focus on conserving the history and many timber buildings in the town. This in turn puts more pressure on the need for better bushfire preparedness. If a bushfire destroyed a building or buildings listed under the Heritage Overlay, rebuilding would be subject to the Bushfire Management Overlay and a Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) assessment would be required. As most properties in Blackwood are likely to currently fall into the category of BAL Flame Zone or BAL 40, the construction of walls would need to be of stone, brick or masonry to comply with this level of bushfire protection. This would markedly change the heritage character of the town, unless the site can be managed to reduce the BAL rating and which will permit restoration of reconstruction using timber.

During the gold mining era, the forest around Blackwood was cleared for timber and mining. However, today the forests have grown back up to the township boundaries with residential property. Former mullock heaps and prospecting areas adjoining the town have been invaded by fire prone weeds which clearly present a fire hazard to the town.

The emphasis on integrated fire protection needs to be both in and around the township boundary. It is important that DELWP provide effective fuel breaks strategically located on Crown land around the town, preferably adjoining residential properties where conservation values are relatively low and weeds need to be effectively controlled. The acceptable width of these fuel breaks needs to be determined, depending on the terrain and level of protection required to protect life and property. The goal of the Draft CEMP is to aim for a BAL 29 rating at the interface with residences, which will be very important for trying to protect the historic features of the town as much as possible.

Ideally the width of fuel breaks should be targeted at achieving an agreed BAL 29 rating for residences, where practical and depending on the circumstances such as slope and the direction of the hazard etc. This standard may not be achievable for all properties, but will in part contribute to protecting the town as much as possible by lowering the bushfire risk.

An objective assessment of where best to locate fuel breaks could be undertaken in consultation with the Bushfire Building Council of Australia. The prescriptions for the fuel breaks could alternatively follow the assessments that were undertaken through the Dandenong Ranges Bushfire Landscape pilot project initiated by EMV. In many ways, the Dandenong Ranges are similar to Blackwood, with houses on the conventional quarter acre block in a sloping treed landscape adjoining large tracts of public land. The creation of new fuel breaks and widening existing fuel breaks on public land in the Dandenong Ranges appears to be an important strategy in managing the hazard and risk to protect life and

property. Similar fuel break works have been undertaken in the Great Otway National Park to protect high risk coastal communities. Based on these examples, there would seem to be no reason why fuel breaks along the public land interface with freehold land couldn't be similarly applied to strategic areas around Blackwood.

Maintaining fuel breaks by removing or controlling weeds through mowing and mulching on an annual basis is more likely to enhance conservation values than degrade them further. Preference would be to permanently eradicate these weeds, however, this is likely to be a costly long term ongoing process. Weeds such as gorse and blackberry are known to be a high fire risk, so controlling these weeds even through mowing, mulching or slashing along fuel breaks close to houses will reduce the fire risk.

The co-ordination of such planning and preparation with other departments and across government agencies

There is substantial room for improvement with co-ordination of agencies across government with both DELWP and CFA burning together and encompassing both public and freehold land. The community could also play a role if permitted to mow or brush-cut the understorey (which is mostly weeds) on forested public land within a specified distance (needs to be wider than the current 4 metre vegetation clearing exemption along fence boundaries) adjoining their property. If nothing is done by government agencies to reduce fire risk, locals are likely to undertake this work of their own volition to protect their property from bushfire risk. Ignoring the issue won't make it go away!

In 2011, when the Township Protection Plan was being prepared, a public meeting was convened by the CFA and Moorabool Shire Council, but there was no representation from DEPI. Obviously DEPI needed to be a major partner in the Township Protection Plan process and their lack of representation in this process did not install confidence in the local community towards the ability of Government to deliver on Township protection. Hopefully the days of the CFA and Council undertaking one process and DEPI (now DELWP) undertaking a separate Fire Operation Planning process is a thing of the past. Township protection through bushfire preparedness needs to be a fully integrated process involving all agencies and the community. Blackwood Action Group considers the Government's new initiative of 'Safer Together' as being positive and more integrated, hopefully with the local community being involved in decision making in bushfire preparedness such as through the Community Emergency Management Planning (CEMP) process.

As a result of the CEMP process, it is great to see DELWP and the Council now actively upgrading fire tracks or fire breaks around the town, removing hazardous trees close to



houses and mulching weeds on old mining sites. This has only come about through the community having a voice and demonstrates the power and effectiveness of working together! There is still a lot more work to do, particularly relating to the small miscellaneous blocks of Crown land scattered through the town.

It is also acknowledged that fuel management needs to be implemented on freehold land, but this is largely achievable through implementing the requirements of Bushfire Management Overlay.

The impact of land tenure on the ability to provide fire prevention activities and the differences between types of land tenure such as national park, state forest, regional park and others

The impact of land tenure on the ability to provide fire prevention activities is evident throughout the town of Blackwood. Being an old mining settlement, there are numerous blocks of miscellaneous Crown land scattered through the town. Many of these small Crown land blocks were originally reserved for community purposes when the population of the town in the late 1800s had 13,000 people residing, but today there are only about 300 permanent residents.

It would seem that these small blocks of Crown land are low priority for management by DELWP and are overlooked for fire prevention works with the main focus of fire preparedness being on larger blocks of State Forest or State Park. By contrast, the CFA vegetation management officer has rated some of these small blocks of Crown land as high priority for fire prevention works because they are close and down slope of houses. Such opposing views from different agencies exist and the issue is yet to be resolved. The main focus should obviously be on minimising bushfire risk to the Town. If the Government isn't prepared to address the task then Council or the community could address this issue if permitted to manage the land as a committee of management or allowing locals to physically undertake this work (such as controlling the weeds and mowing strategic parts of the understorey).