Recovery from natural disasters: Community experiences of bushfires in North East Victoria from 2003-2009

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Recovery from Natural Disasters:
Community experiences of bushfires in North East Victoria
2003 to 2009

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Charles Sturt University or the people consulted during the research project.

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Introduction

This report presents findings from key informant and focus group interviews conducted in the Beechworth region in North East Victoria in late 2010 and early 2011 to explore community experiences with bushfire events. The case study is part of a larger research project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency and led by James Cook University titled “Recovery from disaster experience: its effect on perceptions of climate change risk and on adaptive behaviours to prevent, prepare, and respond to future climate contingencies.” The project is aimed at 'identifying private and public sector groups’ beliefs, behaviours and policies that have supported community resilience to a disaster event.

Beechworth and its district lies within the Shire of Indigo, a predominantly rural area, including the townships of Beechworth and Yackandandah, and localities of Eldorado, Stanley, Bruarong and Wooragee (Figure 1). Settlement of the area dates from the 1840s, with land used mainly for grazing. Rapid growth took place from 1852 into the late 1860s, due to the gold rush (Indigo Shire Council, 2010). The township of Beechworth was established in 1853, becoming the central town of the Ovens River goldfields and the administrative centre for north-eastern Victoria. The railway line was opened in 1876, although the population was already declining by then, due to gold production waning, with commercial gold mining ceasing in 1921. The population was relatively stable until the 1960s, with growth spurred by tourism. The population declined slightly in the early 1990s, but has seen a steady increase in recent years. Land is used mainly for farming, fruit and nut growing and viticulture (Indigo Shire Council, 2010).

Beechworth has long been recognised for its beauty and historical architecture resulting from its lustrous beginning with the discovery of gold. Located 30 kilometres south-west of Wodonga in the Ovens-Murray region and 200 km north of Melbourne, Beechworth has since become a high profile destination for week-enders, overseas tourists and lifestylers looking for a quiet life within reach of a major regional centre (Indigo Shire Council, 2010).

Today, Beechworth is a Premier brand tourist destination with a bright and prosperous future. The culture is one of innovation and openness to new ideas and new people (Indigo Shire Council, 2010). While the population statistics tend to suggest a town in decline, there is local evidence that this trend is on the turn. The challenge for Beechworth now is to build on its premier brand while
maintaining a strong sense of community and the cultural, environmental and heritage assets which are the foundations of its current success. There is a strong sense of optimism and pride in the community which is a far cry from the ‘Mad and Bad’ old days.

**Climatic conditions and Bushfires**

The climatic conditions of Beechworth are generally moderate with maximum temperatures in summer averaging 27°C and winter minimums of 2°C (Bureau of Meteorology, 2003). The area receives an annual rainfall of over 1000mm on average. The history of major emergencies in the region has largely related to bushfires and flooding (White, 2009). Within the last decade, the Beechworth district experienced three bush fires; in 2003, 2006 and 2009. After 5 years of drought and the devastating fires in 2009, the winter rains in 2010 brought widespread flooding across the alpine region and the Murray Darling river system.

According to the climate change projections for north east Victoria (Victorian Department of Regional Development, 2010), the region can expect hotter/drier summers with more days over 40°C, more frequent dry years, rainfall to be variable around a lower annual average, where extreme rainfall events are more likely, and an increase in the number of very high and extreme fire-weather risk days.

Southeastern Australia is acknowledged as one of the most fire prone areas in the world. Prior to the 2002/03 fire season, two of the defining fire events in Victoria were Black Friday in January 1939 and Ash Wednesday in February 1983. To this list is now added the Eastern Victorian Fires of 2003 (Bureau of Meteorology, 2003), and the devastating fires on Black Saturday, February 7, 2009, where many lives were lost.

**2003 Bushfires**

The Eastern Victorian Fires began with the passage of thunderstorms across central and eastern Victoria during 8 January 2003. Lightning associated with these thunderstorms initiated over 80 fires across eastern Victoria (Bureau of Meteorology, 2003). Over a period of nearly 60 days between January and March 2003, well over 1 million hectares of National Parks, State forests and grazing land were burnt (Bureau of Meteorology, 2003). This was the largest single Victorian fire since 1939. Remarkably, given the extent of the fire, there was no loss of life in Victoria directly attributable to the fire.

The Beechworth fire started at approximately 18:00, three kilometres south of Beechworth on public land near Buckland Gap Road. It began burning in eucalypt forest and private property in a south-easterly direction under the influence of a strong north-west wind. Beechworth, Yackandandah and Stanley were surrounded by fires that came close to reducing homes and businesses to ashes. The flames came perilously close at Stanley and Eldorado where pine plantations were destroyed. Some families had fires in their front yards but the worst was averted, “…thanks to the awesome efforts of the 800-odd firefighters who massed around Beechworth and as the locals say ‘worked their butts off for us’ around the clock” (Davies, 2003).
**2009 Bushfires**

Prior to the bushfires on 7 February 2009, there had been 69 days of major bush fires occurring across North East Victoria and into the Gippsland region of Victoria. This period saw temperatures range between 38°C and 45°C with thunderstorm activity (electrical without rain) in some areas. It was considered an exceptional heatwave affecting most of south-eastern Australia. The extreme conditions set many new records in terms of high day and night time temperatures as well as the duration of extreme heat. The fire danger during this period remained very high to extreme (White, 2009).

On 6 February 2009, the day before the Beechworth fires, “…the fire agencies confirmed what they had been predicting for a number of days, that Saturday 7 February 2009 had been categorised as an absolute **extreme fire weather** spike day” (White, 2009, p 7). The region already had an active fire burning 7km SE of Nariel in the Towong Shire. “However, due to the terrain and the remote location, there were no known impacts on local communities that required the activation of the Department’s regional response or recovery arrangements.” (White, 2009, p7)

At 12.40pm the Regional Emergency Operations Centre was advised of a fire in the Hume Region. “Within the next few hours, the first reports of the loss of life and property were being received within the Regional Emergency Operations Centre” (White, 2009, p8). The size and scale of the bushfires presented significant challenges for the immediate management of this incident in the Hume Region. Multiple active fires were being reported across multiple municipalities with limited information available at that time. Relief centres were opening simultaneously across three separate municipalities (Alpine, Mitchell and Murrindindi) because of the increasing number of displaced persons from fire areas due to widespread self evacuation by individuals, families and communities.

In Beechworth, people congregated around the hospital, police station and the school. Active fires were presenting significant threats to critical facilities, equipment, supplies and patients within the health sector. Fires burned at Beechworth’s door- mainly Stanley and Mudgegonga areas, but the town itself was spared. These fires significantly impacted on the Indigo Shire and neighbouring municipalities of Alpine, Mansfield and Wangaratta in terms of smoke, anxiety and the engagement of local emergency services being drawn from across the state.

*The Beechworth bushfire that claimed two lives, [burnt through 30,000 ha] and destroyed several homes, started near a power line on Black Saturday and would likely have been faster, fiercer and spread further if not for previous years’ fuel-reduction burns, the royal commission into the fires has been told* (Miletic, The Age, September 15, 2009)

In the weeks that followed, the community was impacted upon by a decline in tourism. The media was reporting that Beechworth was burning, and the decline in visitor numbers for the rest of the season was significant. Within a few weeks of the fire, a Regional Recovery committee was activated to coordinate a multi-agency, approach to the recovery process across the Hume region.
**Methods**

**Key Informant Interviews**

Eight individuals and one couple were interviewed between November 2010 and January 2011. These ten people were involved with the 2003, 2006 and/or 2009 bushfires in the Beechworth area in the following capacities:

- Co-ordinator, Beechworth Neighbourhood Centre, arrived just post 2003 fires & was in this role for 2009 fires,
- Owner, Carriage Motor Inn Beechworth, then president of the Beechworth Chamber of Commerce for 2009 fires,
- Bushfire Youth Development Officer, Indigo Shire, also covering Alpine Shire. Working with children aged 10-25, mostly 10-17yo,
- Manager, Emergency Management Planning Committee, Indigo Shire;
- Team Leader, Community strengthening project, Indigo Shire;
- Former Manager of Community Planning, and Municipal Recovery Manager, Indigo Shire. Experienced 2006 and 2009 fires in this position;
- Bruarong farmer, Bruarong Hall Committee member, formerly Indigo Shire Home and Community Care worker (2009 fires), active fire fighter;
- Stanley resident, Stanley CFA member, researcher;
- Orchardist – property lost in 2003 & 2009 fires. Buckland Gap resident, Beechworth CFA member and coordinator of the Beechworth Health Service’s Planned Activity Group (elderly residents living at home).

Key informants were asked the following questions:

1. Who do you think were most affected by the fires? Why?
2. Who do you think coped best during the fires? Why?
3. What policies, strategies or practices can you think of that have emerged to minimise vulnerabilities and disaster risks? (agency/community)
4. Do you think the fires have influenced people’s perception of climate change?
5. What government programs have you been involved in that were in direct response to the fires?
6. Were there any surprises for you?

Key Informant interviews were digitally recorded and notes made of key points. Notes were enhanced later using the recordings and key quotes extracted.

**Focus Groups**

Four group interviews were held in December 2010 and January 2011 with the following focus groups:

- Stanley community (SFG) – Five women, members the Stanley newcomer women’s social group, set up post 2003 fires for mutual support.
- Bruarong community (BFG) – Sixteen members of the Bruarong Hall Committee and the Bruarong community, including farmers, CFA members and businesses directly impacted by the 2009 fires (Eight women, eight men).
Beechworth business community (BBFG) – Five members (Four women and one man) of the Beechworth Chamber of Commerce representing tourism and general business and including people whose homes were directly threatened by fires in 2003 and 2009.

Government Support (GFG) – Four members of the Indigo Shire Community Resilience Committee (two women, two men), representing Indigo Shire Council, Regional Development Victoria, Emergency Management within the Department of Human Services Victoria, and Ovens and King Community Health Service.

Focus group questions were altered slightly according to the group membership (for precise questions see Appendix 1), but were all based on the following framework:

Individual questions:

1. What was your experience of the fires?
2. How was your business impacted by the fires?

Open to the group:

3. Who or what helped you during the fires? (services, people, groups, experience)
4. What sort of things helped you to recover from the fires?
5. Who do you think were the most and the least affected by the fires? Why?
7. What services were provided to people during and after the fires to help them recover?
8. What other sorts of things helped people to cope during and after the event?
9. In your view, has your community been strengthened or weakened by the fires?
10. Do you think the community is now better prepared to face future fires?
11. Do you think there is a risk of more frequent and/or intense fires occurring in the future?
12. Do you think the fires have influenced people’s perceptions of climate change?
13. Has the risk of fires made you consider leaving this community?

All focus groups were digitally recorded and later transcribed in full.

Data Analysis

Key Informant notes and Focus Group transcripts were analysed using the standard qualitative techniques as described by Patton (1990). A process of identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data was used. Four main themes emerged as a logical framework for the data; fire experiences, recovery experiences, reflections on experiences and the future. Participant responses to individual questions were further categorised within one or more of these themes before being re-presented in the writing up process in a question and response format. All other bushfire related responses are included in the report. In the results below, respondents are coded as (K*) for Key Informants and SFG, BFG, BBFG and GFG for focus group respondents as above.
Results

1. Experiences of the Fires

What was your experience of the fires?

Learning of the fires

People became aware of the fire very quickly either through informants or from seeing smoke. A major source of early information about the fires for community members were CFA members, who were paged as soon as the CFA itself was notified of the fire, and privately alerted people. Interviewees reported learning about the fires through an informal network of work colleagues, family, friends and neighbours.

“... a neighbour rang at six o’clock on the Saturday night to say there was a fire at Beechworth. We saw the smoke come in and (my husband), well his mate who was in the CFA, he rang him and said it was pretty bad. So (husband) rang us and said ‘it’s not looking good’...” (BFG)

Many people were also checking regularly for smoke themselves, especially in 2009 when the conditions were so bad.

“... we knew it was coming and in fact I was reading the paper that day. We were at home that day and I was reading The Age which I’d picked up. We’d closed the shop. It was a hot stinking day so we’d closed early. There wasn’t a lot of activity; no one was moving. So I was reading The Age, the front page of The Age; ‘The premier warns; bushfire - the states a tinder box’. My son was sitting on his computer and at 6.13 the smoke came out of the gap and my son was one of the first who saw it...” (BBFG)

“... we’d already seen it because it was on the horizon...” (SFG)

Farmers with corporate neighbours were informed by them;

“Both times we got phone calls from the Hancock’s because we’re next to their pines and then we got a phone call from the Department of Ag or whatever to tell us to move our cattle to a small paddock if we could because there was a big fire coming.” (SFG)

Preparing

On hearing of the fire, people generally returned home immediately and prepared to fight the fire. Preparations included preparing houses and cleaning up yards, checking equipment (pumps, hoses etc) and putting it in place, evacuating horses to enable the owners to concentrate on saving pastures if possible. On an individual level having the capacity for self sufficiency when utilities fail and having reliable and suitable equipment and knowing how to use it were very important to their ability to defend their properties. People spoke of having battery operated radios, old style telephones, good fire pumps and water supplies, even tough clothing and boots. Taking preventative action, having insurance, having warning of the fire and time to clean up and move stock were all part of tackling the fire with confidence.

“I think it’s better to (be self reliant). You can trust yourself, you know where things are. You know how to deal with all those things...” (BBFG)
“...we’ve got a great dam and we got a good pump and we felt confident that we could fight it ... we’d already ploughed around because we’ve got bush on our property and pines... We felt in control, I know that sounds silly, but if you’ve got the right people who are experienced in fire fighting...” (SFG)

Once prepared, people waited... Waiting on high alert was difficult and the stress didn’t stop even when the fire had passed;

“...just got stuck into it, cleaning up round the place and just waiting. That was the worst part, just waiting...” (BFG)

“I was watching it and getting scareder and scareder and I got so scared that I had to sit down on the ground because I couldn’t think of anything else to do even though the fire brigade was sitting there...” (BFG)

“I mean here it was, all around you. Even though it was a fair way away at night time it got close. I’d be spending all day mopping up all the burnt stuff that was still burning - this was after the fire- and at night time I used to stay awake all night just to keep an eye on it. And the scary part was it would be flaring up of a night; you’d see it or you’d hear a crash down up the hill... a learning experience I guess! Not that we really needed it...” (BFG)

**Staying or going?**

Interviewees had definite plans pre-fires on whether they would be staying or evacuating. Some would definitely stay and had prepared themselves and their properties with the protection measures that they felt would enable them to do so.

“So we weren’t too perturbed ... we felt quite confident ... we’re pretty well set up.” (SFG)

Some would definitely leave and were prepared to take that action.

“...if you’re not experienced enough or capable enough, I mean in our case with (my husband’s) state of health we would have been a potential burden. They would feel they would have to come and try and save us, whereas they could let the house go...” (SFG)

“I listened to (friend)... and she said to me, and I’ll never forget that; ‘Unless you have a team you cannot fight a fire - you’ve got to go. You cannot do it with two people because it’s there, it’s there, it’s there, and I don’t think you should split up and I don’t think you should stay. I think if there’s only two people, unless you’re very fit young able people....’ We could not have done it. So I felt that our decision to leave was the right decision. We’re only two people with no experience, and I stick to that.” (SFG)

Others were physically prepared to stay and defend their property, but were also prepared to evacuate, depending on the circumstance of the day. They needed information to help them decide.

“...the police were driving real slowly and I ran out and said ‘What should we do? I’ve got a husband who’s not well, but I think we’re well prepared’ and they said ‘We can’t tell you whether to go or stay. You have to make that decision yourselves’. I don’t know if that’s normal policy is it? ...They just said ‘if you’re going, go now or you won’t get out’. Anyhow I persuaded him and we ended up in Beechworth and he ended up in hospital the next day...” (SFG)
**Knowing what to expect**

For others, however, previous experience with fires had given them a broader knowledge of fire behaviour. Combined with the local knowledge that comes with long term residence, this meant they knew what to expect;

“... because you knew eventually it was going to turn up (in the valley). It was just when and how long it was going to take. And then when it did come in it came in by spot fire at first.” (BFG)

Knowing what to expect gave people a sense of confidence and allowed them to relax somewhat even during the event;

“... so I knew when it started, when the wind had changed and when it was coming up. So after that it was really just a waiting game; just watch (neighbour’s) (property) and periodically wet things down and wait and see what happened. But just after dark I knew the wind had shifted and I knew where it was going and so at that point I could relax because I could actually sit on the ground and listen to it roar across the valley across from your place, and I knew where it was going.” (BFG)

Newcomers to the area found their lack of experience in this locality a great source of stress.

“I was here for the 2009 fires; very different from the ones I’ve experienced before. I was in the Adelaide hills and then I was in Canberra. In a city it’s totally different. You’re very much on your own (here). I think we were pretty naive...” (SFG)

“The difference between 2009, 2006 and 2003 was also the length. The 2003 and 2006 fires went for well over six weeks and it was that living with the constant threat. You’d hear people say ‘I just wish the fire would come and get it over and done with’.” (GFG)

In Bruarong, the behaviour of the fire surprised some people as a wind change brought it back the day after it had passed and people thought themselves safe.

“... and I mean we thought we’d missed when it headed South on Saturday so we were quite surprised when we were impacted on the Sunday.” (BFG)

**Keeping informed**

The main sources of information during the event were ABC radio and word of mouth. A small number of farming people had UHF radio and listened in and communicated using that.

“...the ABC helped him. It certainly helped us and kept us reassured and they were only acting on what they knew but we knew a bit more because we had a lot of communication through the locals...” (BBFG)

Mobile coverage ceased early in the 2009 fire. Home phones were used for local tracking of the fire, with several instances of the phone being vital in receiving help;

“... we got a call from (neighbour) about ten, ten thirty asking us to go down and help and he got down just in time to help (them) save their house...” (BFG)

While many relied on the ABC radio coverage, there was also much criticism of its usefulness;
“I was listening to the ABC radio and that was mostly probably half an hour to an hour behind in their reporting all the time. And because there were repeated reports all the time you couldn’t get a sense of ‘is that report new or is it old?’ because they didn’t put a time on the report or a date, so you didn’t know how long it had been on the radio for.” (BFG)

Looking after each other

Interviewee’s fire stories invariably contained actions based on concern for family, neighbours and friends. Looking after each other was a key feature of preparing, fighting the fire, and dealing with the aftermath.

“... a friend came from Beechworth to help us and he stayed for three nights and he was an absolute god send to us...” (SFG)

“... and then (friend) came up and the police came up and asked me if I was going to stay and I said ‘Yes, I’ll stay’ at that time. I thought ‘Yes, we’ll be alright’ and then (friend) came up and he stayed the night and he just looked around the property all the time...” (SFG)

“The first fires, friends came out from Beechworth. The second fire two or three lots of friends came out with utes with water tanks on because we hadn’t had those. I hate to think...” (SFG)

“... with that my husband took off to help everyone else and friends came out. We just watered ...” (SFG)

“Because I was more worried about your place,(neighbour), and yours, because I could see where it was at. And that’s what they probably said on the uhf radio - it was me calling to go down to your place...” (BFG)

“We had three guests in (the motel). My husband, because we’d been through this and we knew that north east Victoria would probably be absolutely annihilated, he did a bit of preplanning and he got some masks ... he had gone out and got some boxes just in case we did have guests. We had three guests; two were from Europe and one was from Melbourne. So we gave them the masks. The power went out, the phones went off, so we said ‘Okay, we’re a group’. They started to panic. We said ‘Don’t panic! We’ve been there, done that! We know all about it. What we’ve got to do is stick together and keep each other fully informed. So that means you don’t go without us and we won’t go without you!’ We said ‘Everybody goes together. We’ll let you know, plus we know the lay of the land, and we’ll see what’s happening.’ They were happy to put their trust in us. We gave them the masks and said ‘You might need these.’ And we told them to keep them on the Sunday or the Monday - whenever they left - we told them to keep them just in case there were further problems down the road which we didn’t know of, or wherever they were going...” (BBFG)

Fighting the fire

Interviewees who engaged with the fire did so either as CFA members or as community members defending their own, their family’s or their neighbours properties. Community member’s roles included a home-based role defending the home and refilling water supplies or actively fighting the fires in the paddocks.

In Bruarong, when it came, the fire was moving slowly as it was in pastures rather than the bush. While the weather conditions were extreme, on farmland the fire was more ‘normal’ and the
farmers felt a level of confidence at preventing too much damage, while recognising that if it were allowed to pass into treed areas and difficult terrain no-one would be able to stop it. Particularly dangerous localities were known and acknowledged by the local community, as are the ‘point of no return’ places.

“I just said to him ‘just keep it in the gully and don’t let it get out’. So yeah, he just ran around the back for a lot of the day. You just get one side right, to save it coming in again from the back.” (BFG)

“... I don’t think anyone else can understand the desperation you feel when it’s your place. Like it doesn’t matter who comes in, in a fire truck or, they’re not going to understand the desperation... You’d do anything ... The wind changed and it came back at us. We’d already lost two hundred and fifty acres of our farm and you’re trying to save every last bit. And the people where I live say it’s only grass. They don’t understand! It’s not only grass... that grass is our life! It’s not just grass...” (BFG farmer)

Interviewees frequently referred to a sense of confusion and the difficulty of knowing what was happening around them as the fire passed. They mentioned factors such as lack of visibility due to smoke, the difficulty of moving around and physically getting to the fires at night, frequent wind changes, the uncertainty of identifying burning landmarks and not knowing what action other people were taking.

“...and then I think, I’m not sure because there was so much smoke, but I think from there it popped across into our landcare patch which was full of trees and then, because by that time it was dark - don’t ask me what time it was - it was just getting dark...” (BFG)

“... the smoke was so thick and down here at the fire shed they asked me to stay up there and watch for spot fires and let them know. Well I don’t know, I’ve spent all my life out there and I couldn’t see anything... 2003 was worse because of the smoke. It was all encompassing. You couldn’t breathe. It was in your house, it was there all the time, even though it was a long, long away...” (SFG)

**Different perspectives on fire fighting approaches**

Tensions between CFA and community members over decisions made and actions taken during the fires were evident. These arose due to the different perspectives, with community members focused on minimising damage to their own properties and to their community and locality, by stopping the fires if possible, and the CFA taking a broader view of containing the fires and preventing loss of life.
“(The) CFA were there for a while but they didn’t want to do what we wanted to do. So that was it. You take it on your own and do what you can do, and if you do it wrong so be it. If it does go wrong what are you doing? You’re only putting the fire ten minutes, half an hour in front of itself - which it’s going to do anyway. So you just make a decision and stand by it.” (BFG farmer who put in a backburn)

“CFA doesn’t take command of individual land holders - it has to look at the broader picture of the whole fire - when it was apparent that your place wasn’t in direct impact of the fire...” (BFG CFA member)

Criticism of the CFA’s approach in general were common from both ex-members and non-members. For farmers, especially older farmers, one point of contention was a policy change from trying to put fires out to trying to contain them only; leaving in their view, a greater risk of fire escaping. The move away from back burning as a frontline fire fighting strategy was seen as stripping the fire fighters of a critical tool.

“...there seems to be a tendency to wait for it to come out of the bush and out of the fence line and stop it out in the country and that’s fine, it’s logical to a large extent, but if that policy is to continue the cost of insuring fencing is going to increase...” (BFG)

“And the old blokes years ago, when you went to a fire if you didn’t have a box of matches with you they’d kick your backside, because if you didn’t have a box of matches and the fire was coming the safest thing you could do is light a fire. And then once it burns you can get in there, whereas today if you light a fire you’re in trouble! So that’s why I stepped back from the CFA.” (BFG)

Another criticism was a perceived move to larger vehicles, which need paved roads and large open areas to work in, removing the possibility of a rapid early strike. The most forceful criticism was of the mandatory training rules which have resulted in a loss of fire fighting experience, local knowledge and manpower.

“I’m no longer active because I won’t do all my training... You’ve been in the brigade for years; you’ve been put in all sorts of situations, and then it comes to the time when you haven’t done all your training - which I’d never do because we’re a volunteer and to go away and do your training you’ve got to pay someone to come in and run the farm or help do things. So therefore I don’t go on the truck anymore and I just thought well I’m not allowed on the truck anymore I’ll set myself up so I can look after myself and neighbours around me... Our CFA they’ve had people in it for years who taught a lot of the younger ones what to do, but they’re kicked out because they don’t do their training. So that’s it!” (BFG farmer)

“...under the new regime of the CFA there is no recognition of prior learning and it’s false. It hasn’t been rectified and the CFA have lost thousands of good people that probably should still be there if prior learning and experience had of been recognised.” (BFG CFA member)

The system of fire notification and response through the ‘000’ call was also heavily criticised by farmers and community members. Farmers felt that this added critical delay time to the response – the difference between being able to ‘pounce’ on a small fire and put it out, and having to manage a large bushfire. They also felt that the management of the fire services from distant headquarters excluded the local knowledge and lessened the accuracy of the response.
“...don’t bother calling them because someone in Queensland will answer it... You’ll never get the message through. You’ll never get assistance - they’ll never understand it. For an emergency system it’s useless!” (BFG)

“...you’re really on your own aren’t you, because we’re not supposed to ring local people if we see anything. We have to call 000 and that’s part of the problem... You have to use the system and see how the system fails you because that fire would have had to get a lot bigger before anybody would have done anything about it...” (SFG)

**Praise for the CFA, especially on a local level**

Criticism of strategic decisions made by CFA management also came from CFA members, although long term members emphasised the great improvements in the CFA’s knowledge of fire behaviour and it’s physical capabilities through training, communications and improved equipment over the past 50 years.

“...from my point of view it is an exercise in organising the chaos. I’ve been in the CFA off and on since I was sixteen and I’m now sixty two and my belief is that the CFA gets better at making the chaos less with every big fire event” (BFG CFA member)

There were also many examples of an informal network of contact between residents and local CFA, creating an unofficial layer of fire management on a local level. The local knowledge and sense of community of CFA members was highly valued; people could be confident that they would be doing their best for the community, and that they had the knowledge to do so.

“...he’s the CFA regional whatever... So he was up within ten minutes - he had his jammies underneath his uniform... Anyway so he then went and got some people from CFA and he could locate it; there were still some embers there and he went and looked at it and then they had the truck go up...” (SFG)

“... we had a lot of confidence in the CFA in particular... I felt very confident because the people who were in charge had such good local knowledge; which tracks (to use) and all the rest of it, to the extent that some of the orders they were getting from above they ignored because they said ‘No this is more important than that’. “ (SFG)
**Being away**

For CFA members, being away fighting other fires while their own community was threatened was very difficult.

“I was more concerned about the people on the truck because obviously they wanted to go home. I was actually the strike team leader so my job was to keep them focussed on the job we were doing down there because they all wanted was to leave as you could imagine. But we were already committed down there until we could get released which was the next morning. It didn’t feel great because I knew darn well that I had four trucks and the whole lot could have been up here; all those trucks would have been focussed on this area had the fire started earlier or whatever…” (BFG)

Even when they were released to return home, physically getting there was difficult;

“It took me twelve hours to get home from Kilmore. I had to go via Mount Beauty and three fire trucks to get home so I ended up getting back here about twelve o’clock on the Monday after a series of incidences; the bus broke down so I was sitting in forty two degree heat and tried to get rescued by a fire truck. Then I had to get on another fire truck to Kancoona and I ended up working there putting out spot fires and doing what we could up at Kancoona for about four hours. And then eventually that fire truck was able to take me to a friend’s place who was able to take me to home, and on the way home they told me my house had burnt down! So I hadn’t even got there and I got pulled up at the front of (neighbour’s) place of which the tankers were sitting in the driveway and about sixty million people all dived on me, saying ‘I hope you weren’t planning on going home’…” (BFG)

**Lucky and unlucky**

‘Luck’ was a theme common to the different focus groups. Luck played a part in the management of land leading up to the fires and the weather conditions on the day, both of which affected the intensity of the fire, where it started and the path it took, whether your house was burnt or not;

“It was only sheer bloody luck actually, because (neighbour) had some stock and it was only about a week or two before wasn’t it, and we had electric fences setup and they were being pains in the arse... They kept going through the fences so I said ‘get them off!’ So they did and I’m pretty pleased that they did, otherwise I’m pretty certain that they would have gone…” (BFG)

“... say the fire had started at Wooragee on Saturday afternoon instead of Beechworth. We would have copped what Barwidgee creek and Mudgegonga and Kancoona copped ... It’s basically luck of the draw... It’s only a few minutes over the hill to Wooragee. If it actually starts in Wooragee on a day like that - you don’t get many days like that - but if it actually starts it’ll be here in an hour or so. It won’t be like we had then…” (BFG)

Luck also featured in the capacity of communities to respond during the event, particularly regarding who was there to help, and where you were when it started.

“I think that we were very unlucky up here in that we were the last fire to start in the state. The fact there were over six hundred fires in the state on that Black Saturday and ours was basically the last one to start... most of the appliances and Yack, Myrtleford, Beechworth, Baranduda; all those tankers were down at Kilmore. They had already left here when our fire started ... I think you’ll find that it’s the luck of the draw that we happened to be the last fire in the state, so we were the last
people; all the resources were taken from all over the state to go down to Kilmore, Marysville all that way, including me. I was actually down in Kilmore with the Yack tanker, the Myrtleford tanker the Beechworth tanker and the local crews when this fire started ... so we had some experienced fire fighters down there instead of here.” (BFG)

How was your business impacted by the fires?

Businesses were impacted by the fires both directly and indirectly. Impacts were immediate and longer term, depending on the type of business. Farm businesses suffered direct impact with loss of pastures, trees, and fencing to the fires. While the interviewees knew of others in the locality that had suffered loss of houses, shed, livestock and even life, none of those interviewed had done so.

“We lost roughly around about two hundred acres; I think it was about three and a half kilometres of fencing but no stock or anything so I considered we were extremely well off compared to a lot of other people...” (BFG)

CFA members were impacted financially due to loss of income and having to close their businesses while they fought the fires.

“...for me, running a small business as I do, every time I leave I actually pay to go and fight the fire. My fixed costs are just like farmers; interests, overdrafts, insurance - they all keep on ticking. For me unfortunately I’ve got contracts in place where I’ve got to supply timber, so in both these events I’d be on the fire line for twelve or fourteen hours and I’d come home and spend two or three hours in my shed working, get four hours sleep and go back to fight the fire. I was in with the mop up, go back to the shed and work .... I employ these people and we’re all CFA members. My business isn’t big enough to pay them when we’re all out fighting fires and we all find it extremely hard because after the week that we put in, not only do I lose at that time - which is a period of loss just like other people have had - we’re all so tired I can’t get the business up and running once more just like all the farmers do. And so the productivity for the next couple of weeks is absolutely shot because we’re all stuffed...” (BFG)

Many businesses in the region rely heavily on tourism. While February is traditionally a quiet month for tourism operators in the area, many suffered from loss of income particularly due to the fires. They felt that the situation was worsened by the naming of the fires as Beechworth Fires, which didn’t reflect where the fire was actually burning.

“...we had a number of suppliers saying ‘Are you guys still operating?’ because they had the impression in Melbourne that Beechworth was devastated!” (BBFG)

Self employed people servicing the tourism operators also suffered, having to stop work during the fires and then from having jobs cut as the tourism operators tightened their budgets.

“Yeah for a week or so I couldn’t do any work because there was a lot of fire stuff, but then local business were affected that I worked for so they cut back on my work.” (BBFG)

For some business, the losses of the slow months after the fires were offset by the initial influx of fire related services, as the LaTrobe University Beechworth campus hosted the regional logistics centre.
“... our motel then was going to be used a centre for the firemen... (afterwards) we sent the bill off to the government. We just did our normal tariff; daily. The shift didn’t enter into the equation because we wanted to help if there was anything we could possibly do so we just sent the bill off to the government and that was paid, and that then looked after us for the next few months...” (BBFG)

Some business owners feel that the situation has never really recovered; that tourists have become wary of visiting at all during the summer due to the possibility of bushfires, and even that people are not moving to the area due to perceived fire danger.

“I find the press very damaging and still to this day and we’re seven years down the track... we have people ring and say ‘North East Victoria is on fire’ and it’s not on fire... And it’s also the other affect too, we’re not in a position at the moment where we’re under any danger and we’ve had one of the slackest periods we have ever, ever had. There’s so many people suffering in Beechworth...” (BBFG)

“... it has been severe for the last twelve months, absolutely, because I think after 2003 - and there was more fires over the hill in 2006 also - I think the people who were going to come to Beechworth or north east Victoria just remember all of those things...” (BBFG)

Who or what helped you during the fires?

Information and communication

Having ready access to information was vital according to respondents. Being prepared on a neighbourhood level was also helpful. Neighbourhood phone trees for disseminating urgent information and knowing what other people’s plans were, gave people the confidence of being well informed. Most people kept informed during the days of the fires by listening to ABC radio.

“I think what helped, we were listening to the ABC. You trusted the ABC...” (BBFG)

Interviewees felt that good means of communication during the fire event were helpful to their feelings of confidence and safety, and their ability to fight the fire effectively.

“I think having the UHF helped people because I was calling to the boys out in the bush, saying ‘It’s just started up here’ and I had young boys down there hearing me, and they would straight away come up. So that was a huge help just having those other people who could hear and having people helping you so much quicker. So we found that was a real benefit.” (BFG)

A network of friends

Many interviewees felt that the help and support of family, friends and neighbours during the fire event was crucial. Not only did physical help make it possible to save their homes and farms from burning, but the presence of others gave them opportunities to sleep, eat and relax during the days of watching and waiting.

“...we had some friends and (friend’s) dad and uncle. They were fighting the fire and I was back at the house with the girls filling their fire trucks and making sure everything was right at the house...” (BFG)

“... our friends came from Corowa and they were able to stay. You need your own little support group that is away, that can come straight away. This young bloke came from over there and he didn’t know us from a bar of soap and he said ‘I wanted to be really helpful’ and he said ‘My idea is that if
we’ve got a fire over there I know people who will come to me and support each other’ and so we’ve now got our own little group; not your neighbour down the road but somebody who will fly in, they were there within an hour and a half…” (SFG)

Phone calls and messages of goodwill from outside the community were also greatly appreciated, giving people a psychological boost and allowing them to counter some of the negative media affecting the region.

“… there were people ringing and checking that Beechworth was okay and that I was okay, and that was very humbling… It was also a good opportunity for me because being in the Chamber (of Commerce) and the Chamber is very involved in getting the message out to the community that Beechworth - to the tourists in Melbourne - so I’m using these networks to say ‘Please spread the news that we’re okay’, through this network of people who were very concerned about me ….” (BBFG)

**A sense of community**

In the face of the fires, even confident and self reliant people needed more than competence and good equipment. This support they found from both their immediate and the broader community;

“… I knew all that, and I knew that I was safe, but I needed the community around me. I needed that communication. I needed the ABC to say what was going on, even though they were maybe a little bit behind the fires. I still trusted them. They knew what was going on…” (BBFG)

“It was the kindness of people, people asking you how you are and people stopping you in the street and saying ‘Are you alright?’ That was the sense of community and the sort of bonding that was terribly important…” (SFG)

“…the taking care of each other and the turning to each other and that. Of course coming from the city you really see a huge difference….“ (SFG)

“… even the Premier, in the 2009 fires. It was pretty good to know that the state was behind you...” (BBFG)

**Effective services**

People who evacuated appreciated the organisation of the services set up to assist

“… it was so well coordinated in Beechworth. I think that was the Department of Human Services or whatever they call it in Victoria - I’m not a Victorian. There was a meeting at the hall - we had to register there saying were we from and all the rest of it - and then they said ‘What would you like to do?’ They had mattresses and so on and I said ‘No, I’m off to a motel.’ They organised that and they paid for it; I didn’t expect them to do that. We wrote and said how wonderful we thought they were. That support was incredible…” (SFG)
2. Experiences of Recovery

Getting back to normal, or not

Getting back to normal was expressed on several different levels. Initially, this meant getting back to a normal state of ‘self’. People closely involved with the fire events particularly needed to recover from the extreme stress and lack of sleep. It was difficult for them to come down from a state of constant vigilance;

“I thought, it’s okay now and I said to (husband) ‘I think it’s okay’. So I said to (husband) ‘I can go home to bed now’. So I went home and rested. It was just awful; on the way home I said to (husband) ‘I think there’s another fire down there, maybe near Padbury’s’. Anyway we get closer and (husband) says ‘No it’s not, that’s our place’... Yeah, just amazing. Anyway it was very nerve wracking... It actually took five days before I let my guard down, because like .... said, it could have come at us again from the West, the North West, so ...” (BFG)

“...every day I used to go in and check the house; every room, every cupboard, every door just to check to see if there was a (fire smouldering). I did that every day for a week...” (BFG)

Businesses and daily life took longer to recover, depending on the restoration of infrastructure like sheds and fences, and on the weather. Fortunately for farmers, the following season delivered good rainfall;

“Actually I was speaking to (husband) one day - one of the bush fire recovery nights - I was pretty down in the dumps because a lot of damage and a lot of grass burnt, and he said ‘Don’t worry, we’ll have a good spring because there’s water in Lake Eyre, and when there’s water in Lake Eyre we’ll get rain’. Sure enough it rained, and all my trees and all my moss came back, and he was right and I think that probably made the recovery easier. If we had gone straight back into the drought then...” (BFG)

Tourism operators were not so fortunate, with many believing that business has still not returned to normal. Once the fire emergency had passed, businesses in the region could have come back to normal quickly had the tourists returned, but they did not. These businesses were faced with a situation largely beyond their control.

“...part of the really awful, even tortuous response, as far as I’m concerned, is weeks drawing into months later when your business hasn’t recovered and you are running short of money and you can’t do a damn thing about it. You can’t get any help at all, because after all nobody else understands... whereas during the fire itself you can make decisions and you’re in control; we can leave, we can stay, we can do the gutters, we can do this, we can do that. But the most horrific time, even when you survive, is that period after when you have no control at all and you can’t do a damn thing about it. You’ve got money to advertise, (but) you can’t get them back into town...” (BBFG)

Interviewees gave examples of people who were not able to get back to normal. Many felt themselves still affected, or could name community members still affected by previous fires.

“I do believe that the stress put poor elderly .....into hospital ... he’s not a very rested casual sort of bloke anyway and it was just the thing that tipped him over the edge. He had to go to hospital... It took a long time; it wasn’t immediate. No sleep - it was months later, no sleep and he was just worried about everything...” (BFG)
“... probably about twelve months after the fires I still didn’t like visions of flames and things burning on the television at all. That just brought me right back down. I just didn’t like it at all and the other thing I didn’t like was I think it was the Red Cross sent out a brochure to me for money saying all these people have had their houses burned, they’ve lost everything, can you donate? I thought bloody hell…” (BFG)

“Especially when its days of high fire danger... One of my colleagues who I work with she was burnt out in the 2003 fires and she gets incredibly nervous even now... She volunteered to watch the whole time…” (GFG)

What sort of things helped you to recover from the fires?

**Knowing the status of your network**

Interviewees spoke of their initial need to ‘check in’ with family, friends and neighbours, as soon as the threat had passed.

“Just knowing your neighbours are alive. Knowing that everybody is pretty safe. I contacted everybody and they said ‘You were pretty well devastated with burn outs’ and I said ‘Is everybody right?’ Yeah, and that’s good…” (BFG)

Once people established the status of their immediate network, they took stock of their own situation - checking livestock and properties – and then of the broader situation in terms of the other fires which had been burning. Interviewees made frequent references to people who were worse off than them; both in local and statewide terms.

**Talking**

Talking about the experience with others who had been through it was commonly expressed as a means of recovery after the fires.

“Talking to your neighbours, talking to your friends.” (BFG)

“I think the talking is the best of the lot, no matter who you meet, who was in the fire, they start talking about it. You know it shows it’s still niggling there a little bit... You haven’t got time to worry in fires. You know what I mean? You just do it, but talking about it has helped me to get over it.” (BFG)

“And that first function at the hall fairly soon after; 250 Stanley people came, which was unheard of - all came to share the experience a lot and to talk, and that was just a natural debriefing that was going on...” (SFG)

**Support from the community**

For some businesses, a conscious effort by community members to shop locally after the fires helped them to stay viable until business returned to a more normal basis.

“After that, it was something that I guess I learnt, the loyalty of our customers was actually quite humbling. We actually had really good responses from the local themselves, (they) came and bought shoes and supported us. We had a really good local support ... it was a quarter of what we’d usually do but that helped us survive. It was our sole income so we survived off our locals.” (BBFG)
The generosity of the broader community, from supportive phone calls from overseas and donations of money, time and labour, to discerning gifts of needed items from similar communities, all showed that people cared and wanted to help.

“As far as I was concerned people cared. That’s the most important thing. The donations that came in, people did care about what was going on…” (BFG)

“I thought it was really good they way they had the four wheel drive clubs and that, that volunteered from all over New South and everywhere. And the one that come to us, we could only have them do a little bit of ours because they couldn’t go into bush where it was a danger to be working under trees, but we had a group that stayed at the Dederang hotel for months, wasn’t it. And you know these old men just volunteering their time and that’s real encouraging when you see such generosity…” (BFG)

“The Tallangatta Valley community got together. They sold cattle, raised some money, and they purchased two trailers with two motorised with pneumatic drivers. And one’s gone down to Mudgegonga and one’s gone to Yackandandah Landcare and now it’s up at the other fires that were up at Charlton - it’s still being worked up there. And they also got a post hole borer and a few other things. So actually the generosity has been overwhelming…” (BFG)

Helping other people

Being able to help other people was also important for many.

“I was a bit confused about what to do because we were lucky. Mudgegonga wasn’t so lucky and so a couple of times - and (friend) went with me - we went down to the Mudgegonga hall to see what we could do…. Their hall was up to the roof with donations and one thing people would come in with a couple of big bags and walked around and we’d go ‘Yes you may take the shampoo’, ‘Yeah look, you’ve got a teenager so why don’t you take some CDs’, ‘You’ve got a dog, so put some dog food and dog mats in. Take it!’ We had to physically do it for them because they didn’t feel like they had the right to do that…” (SFG)

“I think you need, in any town I think you need to feel that you’re doing something… “(SFG)

“All that helping is to help you to recover…” (SFG)

“So in fact there’s that real need to (help). You survived, your house is alright…” (SFG)

Despite the clear need, and the desire to help, people felt unsure of how best to do so. They felt that the awkwardness of the situation could be eliminated through the mediation of a service in the role of matching volunteers with need.

“And I was confused about whether I had a right to be there, to do what I could or whether the people of Mudgegonga felt that an outsider had come in and what were they doing there; were they sticky beaking? Were they trying to be a do gooder? or whatever… There’s a fine line isn’t there, that you feel don’t want to invade… So I think after the fires I would have liked to have Red Cross or somebody set up a structure to say anyone who wants to volunteer in helping people for recovery put your name down and we’ll send you here, or we’ll send you there or whatever. And then I would know that those people had asked for help, because we were told to go to the cafe type of thing in Mudgegonga and we sorted clothes, but you know we would have loved to have gone further and
gone into people’s homes and cleaned it from top to toe for them, but there was no structure in order to act as an interface, in order to take some of that assistance one step further ... I would have like to see something a bit more organised.” (SFG)

**Having people in the community able to lead**

Interviewees acknowledged the importance of natural leaders coming forward to play a mediatory role. Many could name one particular person who had particularly helped in their community. As a result of the evidence of this natural leadership, one woman was in the process of organising leadership training for the local communities, hoping to build a more solid structure encouraging natural community leaders to come forward in future.

“Another one of our friends who was a farmer, he was just there and he visited every farm and saw what they needed and then organised some people and some local distributors from Melbourne to do this, and you know... And he took it upon himself, almost like a pastor, and had a cup of tea with people. But he was one of them, he was a farmer. You know what I mean? And he could do that because he was retired from farming, whereas your husband is a farmer, he had to get back to farming. So again with more structure there would be more people who could come in and be organised. We need those people like him who naturally...” (SFG)

**Getting on with the job**

Keeping busy was expressed by interviewees as a good start to recovery. Like ‘feeling like you’re doing something’ for other people, actively working at rebuilding your own livelihood provided a positive outlook and prevented people from dwelling on their losses.

“You’re too busy getting everything back to normal” (BFG)

**Attending State Fire Recovery activities**

Many participants had attended some form of state government funded Fire Recovery activity, such as community barbeques, concerts or trips away. Although the subsequent spending of the Bushfire Recovery funding was severely criticised, most people also expressed their particular appreciation of the activities which brought people together, encouraging them to talk and to share an enjoyable experience.
“I went on one of those weekends down to Lorne and it was very lovely... it was three hundred women and I enjoyed it very much, and it was very sobering for me because everybody I spoke to had lost their home...” (BFG)

What services were provided to people during and after the fires to help them recover?

Service provision following the most recent (2009) fires was seen as having improved considerably compared to the 2003 events. Initial responses from participants labelled the 2003 services as ‘nothing’, and the 2009 services as ‘a huge amount’.

The importance of acknowledging mental health issues

In 2003, basic emergency infrastructure such as refuge and relief centres operated successfully during the fires, as did the short term council led cleanup operations immediately afterwards. Volunteers and the Department of Primary Industries responded promptly to the needs of livestock and native animals affected by the fires. However, support and recovery services for the residents impacted did not begin until 4-5 months after the event, and the funding allocated was minimal.

“DPI came the next day to see if their animals were alright, but nobody knocked on the door till probably four to six months later to ask ‘Are you okay?’ And psychologically, those first days, it’s very powerful...” (GFG)

Community service agencies found a marked community backlash following the 2003 fires. People were defensive and unwilling to become involved with the services offered.

“In 2003 a lot of that door knocking didn’t happen until six months after and there was a lot of anger... that no one came to help ...no one came to ask if they were okay.” (GFG)

In contrast, following the 2009 Beechworth fire, making immediate contact in the interests of human welfare and mental health was a priority;

“.. down here we were on the ground within two days and we had teams of people, two people per car, full of all bits and pieces and we’d mapped out the path of the fire and our staff actually did this over a ten day period covering all the fires that were burnt. They knocked on the door and basically said ‘Just want to make sure you’re okay, check in’... We did all the properties in Indigo Shire and Alpine Shire so we got across that whole thing, so when case management came into play we had already identified people who we knew weren’t going to cope... So we engaged really quickly and we made those connections and then everything was simple. And the people will tell us now that if that hadn’t happened they probably wouldn’t have reached out. They would have stuck there and burrowed in and nothing would have mattered...” (GFG)

The focus has now shifted beyond the immediate physical needs of the community during and after the events, to supporting recovery and resilience.

“Support services are now pretty much enshrined just for this event. There’s emergency grants available, personal hardship grants available pretty much straight up. There are relief centres enshrined, neighbourhood safer places have come in as a result ... case management is now included on the list of emergency management plans and revised ... Certainly the Commonwealth Government
through the division of general practice have put in what they call the ATAC division, and so they’ve actually bolstered up the numbers of medical or allied health practitioners to pick up that high level of stress which probably has never been picked up before in past events.” (GFG)

Taking a longer term view has meant new roles and approaches to enable an informed overview. For example;

“...on the mental health and the health side a new role was introduced which was the health commander. His overall responsibility was looking after the health impacts of an event; so not necessarily first aid or ambulance responses but big picture. So first aid services, the mental health of the community, the health system, the ability to communicate within the disaster as well. So that could be the senior ambulance officer or some other designated person whose role is not to worry about what the ambulance is doing on the ground but the bigger picture in conjunction with health and community services as well. So that’s a support group to look at the big impacts outside of the individual event.” (GFG)

**Taking a more co-ordinated approach**

The 2009 fires and the Bushfires Royal Commission have resulted in many legislated changes to planning and operations from CFA to local, state and federal government levels. A major focus is ensuring that both immediate and longer term responses are better co-ordinated. One simple example is that the CFA has realigned its management boundaries to coincide with local government boundaries. The creation of Emergency Management Teams including police and emergency services, local council and state agencies such as the Department of Human Services, means that responses are now co-ordinated across agencies, with responsibilities clearly defined to ensure the consideration of vulnerable people in particular localities. One particular tool discussed was the Vulnerable Persons Register, which provides support for vulnerable people, their carers and families to plan and prepare for fire, and enables a rapid response when emergency action such as evacuation is necessary.

“...it’s a strategic thing, also if there’s a bad weather week they will be contacted by an appropriate person for the council or whatever and say ‘Have you enacted your plan?’ And if they haven’t got a plan I think the program was to contact the carer or contact the relatives and say ‘We haven’t got a plan. This is your mum and dad, or whatever, do you think we need something?’ You know, we can’t force something on them. So you know there’s checks and balances in the system, ...it’s a dynamic thing.” (GFG)

Agencies now work together to provide information and referrals, avoiding the ‘white ute syndrome’

“...where multiple utes keep turning up. You’re just about to get your head down and do some work and someone else turns up and there’s another hour gone. So it’s a matter of making sure that people have got the information then and there. That’s direct information, so when people ring DPI they give them a whole lot of information so they can now make decisions, or if they need assistance they’re referred on, and that’s a process and it’s captured there.” (GFG)
What government programs have you been involved with as a direct response to the fires?

All key informants and most focus group participants had personal experience with at least one government initiated fire recovery program.

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal (VBAF) funds donated by the people through the Red Cross funded a whole range of programs through the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VIBRA). The best known amongst participants was Community Recovery plans; plans designed in each local area by a Community Recovery Committee. The Indigo Shire Council had a legislated role with a designated recovery manager working with the CRCs. CRC’s developed Community Recovery plans for their community which featured community events like community barbeques and ‘pamper’ days, mass marketing to restart tourism and infrastructure for community support. Stanley received new notice boards and a regular community newsletter; Bruarong received community hall improvements; Beechworth new football club rooms and a bike park.

“... the money was fantastic; in Mudgegonga they can see that money on the ground; fencing, the hall... They really felt supported. By and large it’s been good (KI8)”.

Key informant interviewees generally felt that the appeal funds were a wonderful resource for communities and were a very important factor in community recovery. However there were many criticisms of the allocation process and the projects that were funded as a result. Interviewees felt that the funding came with ‘caveats’ preventing the people who need it most from accessing it (eg. farmers) and directing that it be spent on things the community didn’t want or need. Allocation was based on grant submission writing expertise and/or the active lobbying of prospective beneficiaries – not skills necessarily available to those who most needed the money.

“There was a lot of fire money coming in. Some of that was potentially wasted and misused; funding was got and how those grants are going to be acquitted I have no idea. A wicked waste! (KI8)”

A major issue acknowledged in all focus groups was the difficulty farmers faced in rebuilding fire damaged assets. Many were unable to access assistance routinely offered to businesses due to the criteria used to assess business income.

“...it was fifty one percent income on the farm and we’d been through a drought so no one was actually going to be able to meet that, because most of the income was coming from somewhere else. And the other thing for us was a lot of people were saying ‘What’s the difference?’ between a farm being a business, when people down Kinglake in their back shed were getting lots of support because their business was burnt, but farmers weren’t...” (GFG)

Other farmers were unable to replace boundary fencing through the usual neighbour cost sharing arrangements, because when their neighbour was the government – in the case of state parks or forests – the government would not contribute to the replacement cost.

“...they were the worst neighbours whereas the neighbours we’ve got, we get together and say ‘Come one let’s get this fence up, this is ridiculous!’ It’s done and dusted.”
Business owners were also prevented from accessing services by criteria they felt were unfair. “To qualify for the stuff to rebuild your business ...to qualify for that is just incredible what you have to do.” (BBFG)

There was also disappointment that the community was not able to think collectively once the recovery money started to flow: “Its all been very disappointing the way the community groups have only thought of their own pockets; their own new kitchen, their own little building. If the groups had got together the money could have been utilised so much better... (KI9)”

Focus group community members were highly critical of the way in which the VBAF funds were spent. Having given money themselves, imagining it going to help fire victims in places like Marysville and Kinglake to re-establish themselves, they felt doubly let down by a system which would not then allow their own fire affected community to spend money on the things they felt were most important. Both the strict criteria shaping ways in which the money could be spent, and the process by which spending decisions were made, left them feeling guilty and angry about wasting money.

“... at the various meetings about how to spend the money that Stanley could have, time and again things like another fire truck are mentioned, but (the response was) 'New fire trucks? That's not from this money. 'They had what they call 'community consultation' there... they had three or four of them... Yet when we went to the subsequent meeting they said a whole lot of things have come out but the three most important things that the community has expressed an interest in are the reflection seat at the dam (laughter and jeering)... the notice board and the newsletter and all the other things! I don’t believe they had proper consultation with the community. Then people said, and I think quite rightly, they and their family members and friends had donated quite generously to the appeal and they felt appalled that a lot of the money was going to be spent on these trivial items...” (SFG)

**Bushfire Youth Recovery Gift**

VIBRA also funded the Bushfire Youth Recovery Gift (BYRG). This funded a Bushfire Youth Development Officer to work with Indigo and Alpine Shire for three years. Groups of young people were able to apply for funds.

“They’ve done some really good things. It’s been a great opportunity to get some things happening for the young people. Like we did trips to Melbourne for kids who’d never left town, where they learned how to use public transport for the first time. We did music and drama workshops, and equipment so they can keep on. (KI3)”

**State government recovery programs**

The Victorian government also provided funding and instigated recovery programs, including Community Development Officers for every shire. Key informants had been involved with Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) funded winter and summer events, Department for Youth programs, and the Department of Human Services (DHS) and Office of Emergency Services funded Community Strengthening Project. One state government activity which resonated positively with interviewees was Police Chief Christine Nixon’s two visits to the communities of Stanley and Bruarong after the 2009 fires.
Local Government programs
The Indigo Shire undertook response initiatives like providing a skip service for fire debris, especially fencing. They also instigated the Community Resilience committee.

3. The Wisdom of Experience

Who do you think were the most affected by the fires and why?

People who lost family members
The first response to this question from many interviewees referred to the people killed in other fires in 2009, such as Marysville and Kinglake. Two people were killed in Mudgegonga by the 2009 Beechworth fire. The fact that so few died in this region reminded people how lucky they were, and the remains of the house where the death of the local couple occurred, with the children’s cubby house standing untouched beside it, are a stark warning to the locals to prepare for the next fire.

“We felt pretty lucky here, considering what happened in other areas; people lost property here, but there was no loss of life (KI7)”.

“I didn’t know the people who died in Mudgegonga but it was two too many.” (BFG)

“... when I go to Myrtleford I can’t always look at that bit... I look at that little shed there and think ‘how can that be?’; and they’re gone. And it just makes me continually aware of what can happen here - and I think.... summed it up - we’re all psychologically of the same view; that it’s going to happen again at some stage. The potential is there. All we can do is be prepared as we can. The first thing you have to do is be insured - isn’t that right? - and see if we can do it better next time.” (BFG)

People who were ‘burnt out’
Again, interviewees acknowledged the impact of the fires as worse for people who were directly affected through loss of property and livestock. As this was a comparatively small number of people (2003, 2006 and 2009 fires burnt mainly forested areas) most interviewees referred to others. Even those who had been burnt out themselves regarded others as being more severely affected. A Key informant who worked with farmers in the aftermath of the 2009 fires stated;

“The people looked just destroyed - they’d been shooting stock all day. One tough old farmer said it nearly did him in. It’s just so hard; the fire, the CFA, the working, then coming home and destroying your own stock. ‘Layers of despair ‘is the term I used. It’s the sort of stuff that doesn’t go away...” (KI8).

Old people
Old people – particularly those in institutions for the aged, were seen to have been badly affected by the fires.

“... the hospital had the CFA guys come out during the fires, and after the fires, telling them what they should be doing because they were really, really scared. Quite badly affected. I know (firend’s) mum, she was ringing two days before that day just to check what was going on, because she’d heard what was going on, and then just constantly worried about what she should be doing...” (BBFG)
Children

Interviewees were concerned about the psychological effects of the fire on children, having witnesses their distress during the fires and changes in their behaviour afterwards. Information sent to schools explaining the new fire rating system was of particular concern.

“The school was closed down for a week and the buses couldn’t go, and we tried to really protect our kids from the imagery on the television - you know, hundreds of people dying. And we’re very fire aware at our place, you know, our kids see us batten down the hatches – this is a serious thing, it could seriously happens to us. And then the government sent home this sheet explaining - to the school children! - all the different Codes, leading up to Code Red; saying ‘You may die. You will not be safe’. They sent that to the kids, little kids! So our little boy is nine, he tends to worry about things and he doesn’t say much, but he’s old enough to read and he says ‘Sit down mum, I want to read you this’ and it said ‘There is nothing you can do. You might die. Your house may burn’ and I thought ‘What is the government trying to do?’ And there’s been these longitudinal studies of children who have survived fires and what happens to them when they grow up. And what happens to them is they won’t take any risks; they get married early, they won’t travel and I didn’t think it would happen to our kids…” (BBFG)

“I was also working at the school and that was really interesting, to see the impact on the kids when they came back to the school. And the kids were like, they wouldn’t leave the edge of the building. They just stayed. They played really close to the building. They just had to be able to get inside really quickly, you know? And any little bit of – like when they were burning off or something – there was this real panic; ‘what’s that!’ So that was quite a big impact…” (BBFG)

“There is a difference with that adult communication and communicating with children, because they’re not going to believe their dad or their mum. They’re going to believe what they’re seeing! And it takes a lot of persuasion for a parent to say ‘No, we’re not getting out of here because it’s safe’…” (BBFG)

“…the under 10’s who consumed it all via the television. It was never ending and I’m sure the discussions surrounding it by family members have left them scarred and this will be a problem in years to come” (KI9).

However, others had witnessed what they felt were more positive outcomes, with children able to contribute to the defence of homes and family responses.

“There’s actually another side to that... The fires that started the other side there. When we came up two days later everything was black, and there was a house there in the middle of the devastation. And I said ‘How did that happen?’ and I asked a few people. And what had happened was there was a boy there whose father was on the CFA. And the boy had been dragged along to the CFA meetings all his life and hated his dad because he had to move the bloody wood pile and had to keep the leaves clean and had to make sure he knew how the pump worked. Dad told him how and he was home by himself that day and he knew exactly what to do! He turned on all the pumps, watered everything down and he saved the house. And he was just getting desperate apparently when the fire trucks came up the drive. But he done everything; he had it in him instinctively. He didn’t panic, he knew what to do. ” (BBFG)
“My boy was at home and he saw the fire and he was worried, obviously, and (daughter) was worried and I was worried, and we went through the terrifying stage as well. But (son) was calm. I just kept saying to him ‘This is what we’re going to do. Remember what we talked about? The wind is blowing that way, we’re safe’” (BBFG)

**People who come from the city**

Both established residents and newcomers themselves felt that newcomers to the area were greatly affected by the fires. Many were extremely stressed as fires approached, through a lack of experience with bushfires and fire behaviour, lack of knowledge about what services and structures were in place, lack of knowledge about what to do themselves, and feeling isolated in facing the situation. Several families had moved to Stanley from Canberra just before the 2009 fires. These people did not expect the fires and were terrified, did not know what to do or where to find information and had no networks established within the community. Key informants felt that many in this group were very needy post-fires; they expected to have things done for them afterwards without contributing themselves, and showed little initiative.

“They couldn’t find out what was happening; no-one knew. One woman came into town to try and find out and all the shops were shut; only (the greengrocer) was open and she had to go to (him) and ask what was happening. He didn’t know so she just had to go home thinking no-one knows what’s happening. She had no phone, no radio... (KI1)”

“... 2009 we had a big meeting over here when the fires were around. I noticed a lot of the newcomers were really panicky and wanted to be told what to do. A number of people in the group behind me were asking questions, lots of questions, about what do I do, where do I go, to how do I go, who’s going to tell me when I have to go, that sort of stuff.” (GFG)

“I have no idea really what happened in Kinglake, but most of the people are people like me; they come from Melbourne and we live in the outer suburbs and they have no idea really of what they were doing...” (SFG)

Some newcomers had prepared for bushfires with a plan to leave, and did so. They, however, were also distressed by being unable to find out what was happening to their homes when they were away and feeling powerless to take any action.

“... my husband couldn’t sleep at all while we were away ... he felt once he was back he could have some control. So I don’t know what he was going to do, but we still had the hoses out and had the sprinkler system on our roof, and we had all that set to go. And we had a promise that if I was too frightened we would just leave again so he got up every two hours and walked right round around the perimeter of the house and smelt the smoke or whatever...” (SFG)

**People who left**

For people who left, lack of information was a source of frustration. With no mobile coverage and the ABC coverage specific to local areas only, people out of the area had little access to current news of their community.

“I tell you what being remote you get no information; (ABC station) 774 supposedly telling you things. They read it off the CFA website, because we were on the CFA website the whole time, and
they were just reading off the web site. And so therefore you actually don’t have any intimate relationship with what’s going on. And then ... rang me and that was Sunday morning. He said ‘No, the threat’s over. Everything’s alright’. And then of course I came back on the Sunday. We knew our property was alright, and .... had been up, and other people had been up. And so we came back on the Tuesday ... Rich was desperate to come back and be part of the team…” (SFG)

These people could not easily find out when it was safe to return.

“…when do you declare an area safe? I think that’s very hard when people leave, because where do we go? Our beach house was our home so we had no problem. We’ve just sold that place so when it happens next time we’ll go and be in a motel or something, and so therefore how long do you stay away? And how do you find out if there’s no way of communicating? Maybe now that we’ve got mobile coverage, maybe we will be able to find out… “(SFG)

On their return, they felt even more isolated from the community, having missed a highly emotional experience shared intimately by those who stayed.

“...I thought ‘We just shouldn’t be here!’ The people that were here, they stayed, but we didn’t belong. Do you know what I mean? We should have stayed out and let them do their thing, but we went to the fire shed, you know, and did whatever. But I must say after - we’d come from Melbourne - that sense of community is just incredibly strong. And to be part of that was very powerful…” (SFG)

People who worked with the fires and the people afterwards

The people who were fighting the fires were also seen to be affected, not only through the physical and mental stress of days of fire fighting, but through the responsibility they felt for their communities. Local government and rural organisation staff, counsellors and social workers were mentally and emotionally drained by the depth and constancy of need they experienced from the community. The CFA volunteers in particular have a personal connection with the people and the landscape. They work long hours in extreme conditions, taking responsibility for decisions which will affect people they know.

“One would assume that the sort of people who go into the CFA are the sort of people who care, and the sort of people who care about the decisions they make; there’s an emotive connection. But quite a few of them... the CFA was made up of older locals; these were people who really connect to the landscape. When it was their own landscape they were really gutted; trying to make decisions about their own landscape. The responsibility and also physically; it’s really hard work! ... It just wears you out; the lead up, the anticipation, the fighting and the mopping up” (KI8).

“ (the firefighters) come and go all day and all night, they keep going and going and going, and I often think; “you need a stint at home with your family, you’ve been out too long (KI9)”

“We tend to think [firefighters] are a bit immune, but particularly where there was loss of life; that adds another layer (KI7)”.

“(My husband) was the ... Landcare co-ordinator and we went down there 24 hours after the fires and they were still slaughtering livestock then. It was just devastating. I was just shattered by that. Much to Alpine Shire’s credit they got in very quickly and removed the dead, the destroyed livestock. Because it was just like going down to hell. It was really, you know, apocalyptic” (KI8).
“... the people who took on a role after the fires, like counselling or helping others. Other people dealt with it in their different ways but those people had to just put their own stuff aside to help other people; they’ll be dealing with it for a long time yet (KI7)”.

The stresses associated with working with the fires and the fire affected communities also contributed to people walking away from these roles.

“I know people who resigned from the CFA because they didn’t like how the organisation responded. People who had been in the CFA for years walked away - several cases…” (GFG)

**People who felt vulnerable and unsupported**

Key informants were surprised at the number of people expressing their need for support both during and after the fires. Women in particular were frightened and came together for support during the fires;

‘.... the bookshop became a place where people came. There was a huge need for people to talk. Women, especially the older women. They were frightened and needed to talk... they came back again in the really hot weather – nervous again (KI1)’

The support services called in after the fires case, managed fire affected individuals and families. The support service focus group participants were overwhelmed with people needing help;

“.. we were told only to manage twenty people and we ended up taking a hundred and fifty plus…” (GFG)

The people they supported were not necessarily those who had lost the most, but those who were less able to cope on a daily basis. They felt vulnerable and unsupported, responding to political and weather events negatively.

“The November before last summer - and remember we got up to almost forty degrees days - where the case managers worked, people just flooded through the door... (we had) spikes in case management load even when the minister didn’t come to Stanley, when the royal commission report (came out). It just put people back ... “(GFG)

**Who do you think were least affected by the fires and why?**

Most participants could not name any groups of people who were ‘least’ affected – everyone was affected to some degree. Key informants and tourism operators did point to some tourists and town based people as ‘fools’ who were not affected presumably because they did not understand that they were themselves in danger.

“Town people. Gawkers, who had no idea what it meant. We had them up here sightseeing with their kids in the car! Come to watch us burn; said it was educational for the children!! ... They didn’t even know where North was; what it meant if the wind came from the North. They didn’t get it, it just didn’t gel with them (KI9).”

Another group thought to be less affected were those ‘tree-changers’ whose roots lie in the city;

“... they’ve got a lot of money often, they are well insured, they may well have another house in Melbourne or somewhere else, they can just set their sprinklers on a timer and they just go. So their
livelihood and their landscape is not impacted, they haven’t got that connection to the land. Sometimes I think they are the least affected (KI8)“.

Who do you think coped best? Why?

**Those who could anticipate best**

Interviewees commonly responded that those who coped best were the people who could anticipate how the event would pan out. They may have experienced bushfires, especially in their current location, before. They may have experienced other traumatic events.

“... people with experience of emergencies or losses in their lives. They had personal resources that gave them some context in the situation, about what was required and what was important... that it wasn’t about bricks and mortar but about people. People who’d had trauma in their lives... (KI7)”

“I think it was probably the people who had some experience, so they knew roughly what to expect, or had been through it before. It can be devastating at the time, but you think ‘Yeah, I’ve been here and done that. Let’s get on and move on...’” (BFG)

People who had experienced bushfires before were able to prepare and be confident in the adequacy of their preparations and be clear about the action they would and would not take. Having been through the experience before is seen as important in being able to anticipate the fear and the ‘awfulness’ of the event, as well as have a sense of life beyond the fires.

“We knew we were fine. We’ve been through it before and know what to expect, what to do...(KI2)”

“The people who coped best were the people who have done the preparation to be aware of what may happen and can take some action to alleviate the situation. The people that I found have been the worst affected emotionally hadn’t had experience in fires before and had no preparation.” (BFG)

“Being aware of the potential and the impact is also a coping mechanism because it helps you prepare and be ready for the next disaster... I think the Stanley community is going to come into this season, which may or may not be bad, but they’ll be prepared more because they’ve got these little crutches. They’re educated more; they’ll know when they have to leave. They’ve got choices. I suppose when people haven’t got choices... and it becomes apparent to them, it just compounds their concern, their worries; little things becomes big things and so forth.” (GFG)

One long time Stanley resident was prompted by others in the group to illustrate this point with her story;

“I had someone come out after lunch on the Saturday who said ‘What are you doing?’ - I had the oven going and it was stinking hot - I said ‘Because I think before the days out we’re going to need a lot more food’, and I had a pile of clothes at the front door, you know, because I was expecting it. I could smell the eucalyptus in the air. It was ready to go ...” (SFG)

**Country people**

Even if people haven’t experienced bushfires themselves, interviewees believed that country people in general are better able to cope with bushfires. Farmers in particular are seen to have more resistance and resilience because they learn how to deal with a whole range of things. They see fire
as a part of life, something that comes and goes just as do floods, droughts and storms etc. They are used to looking after themselves and ‘just get on with it’.

“I grew up on a farm and you know, you were told; keep an eye out on those days, and you don’t leave the property. It’s a sort of responsibility; for yourself, your family, your community, your livestock. We had a different way of thinking. We took it very seriously. So, you grew up and it was a part of your life (K18)”.

“Yes and I think it’s also people with parents who have experience and they’ve passed down that experience. So even if they might not have fought a fire before 2003, their parents have fought a fire and they’ve heard about it and they know what to do or whatever...” (SFG)

Young adults

Key informants working with young adults believed they coped well, both through being country people – and therefore expecting natural disasters to some degree - and because they have such different values to adults;

“... city kids would have been traumatised .... Kids; if it doesn’t directly affect them they are fine. They don’t get anxious like adults or worry about other people as much... (K13)”

People who are able to ‘deal with’ their experience

Interviewees commonly referred to coping as being a personal trait above all else; an ability to deal with things that either have or they don’t;

“Those who you expect to cope, coped! The people who get on and do things. We’re very lucky here; we’ve got a very good brigade who look after each other and people. Everybody knows everybody and everyone’s comfortable with each other and just gets on. When you’re having a bad moment you just spit the dummy and thats done, and get on with it! I only see firefighters here; the people you expect to cope (K19).”

Those interviewees associated with government services focussed on people’s ability to process their experiences in a positive way. They noted that people reacted very differently to the fires, regardless of what actually happened to them.

“...it became more apparent that some people might have had very small losses but the impact that the fire actually had on them as individuals was far worse than people who had actually been cleaned right out.... it’s how people actually deal with that stuff when it actually comes and threatens them.” (GFG)

“... the more I think about it lots of the people who were directly affected coped and managed straight after it and recovered quite well. .. it’s got to come back to personality and how vulnerable people feel and their personalities a little bit. I’m not too sure to be honest but I don’t think it’s as black and white as those who were burnt out and not burnt out. I think it comes down to, I don’t want to use the word mental strength or something like that, but coping mechanisms I suppose of individuals. And that’s pretty hard to define in people...” (GFG)

However, even those who would normally be able to cope may not always cope. This ability can be affected by other factors such as cumulative stress or something else that has happened to them;
“...some people may be very strong and resilient, but on that particular day something may have rendered them vulnerable. For example if you’ve just had a baby, or broken your leg the day before. I think it’s important that people acknowledge that vulnerability is a fluid thing. People can’t be pigeonholed. (KI8)”

“... it’s about where people are at, when the event actually strikes, in terms of how they make the decision about what they’re going to do. I would say the people that we’ve been seeing where there’s been cumulative stress, or things that may not necessarily bear direct relationship to a fire, that their coping tends to break down fairly quickly... I think the relationship between the way in which people respond to these things actually impacts on what they do down the track...” (GFG)

**People who had good support networks and could talk about the fires**

Again, participants with an outside perspective identified those with good support networks within and beyond their communities, as people who coped better. Community connections were also referred to by newcomers.

“... friends and family, maybe people here at the time, but also a broader network ... People who maybe weren’t involved with the fires but who were able to come in with some fresh energy and compassion and a sense of being able to help. People who had someone who could just drop in and say hello and how are you going, just have a chat (KI7).”

“... where people are well connected and supported in the community they actually seem to be able to maintain I guess a sense of self and a sense of purpose in terms of what they do... “(GFG)

“...that’s connectivity, looking after everyone. I suppose the newcomers have got the issue where they’re not connected in the community and that’s where they’re isolated and not resilient I suppose. But when the community supports each other ... “(GFG)

Support networks also enabled people to talk, and those who were able to talk were also seen to have who coped best with their experiences.

“We are really lucky that we have a [CFA] group who can talk. The ones who want to talk, talk, the others never will anyway. They really need to talk to each other about what’s been happening, to unload. It gets on top of them if they can’t unload. We are really lucky, - it depends on who you have in the group but there are a few really good talkers here for these rural guys (KI9).”

“People coped very well on the whole. It’s to do with the ability of this whole community to talk. People talked everywhere – this is an amazing community (KI1).”

“There are different stratas in this community, who can talk, but there are some who tend to get left out, who need to be included (KI1)”

**Women**

Many interviewees felt that women coped better than did men. Although many women found the fires terrifying, they felt able to acknowledge that, have an emotional reaction, then move into a recovery phase.

“on the day, the men took charge. But after the fires, the women talked (KI1)”
“... the women fell on their head real quick in general terms and then they got up and recovered and then the men fell over.” (GFG)

“But I think there’s still that thing about the men being the stoic. Sort of got to stand up - to their own detriment. Whereas the women are quite happy to fall over and cry, and then they’ll get up. And then they start worrying about their men folk. .. The men don’t feel what they need to feel. They just keep pushing it away; ‘Just got to keep going, got to put up the fence, got to go out in the truck, got to do what I’ve got to do’ and it’s like they put that in front of them so they actually don’t have to feel what’s going on around them...” (GFG)

One interviewee felt that this was a common cultural phenomenon, only recently acknowledged in Australian culture and societal structures.

“when you look at different cultures through the ages, the women through the different cultures appear to be the stronger body. You know with the aboriginal culture they have a lot of women elders and they control what goes on ... if you look at the Australian culture now I suppose now the amount of women in politics coming up through, and as lawyers and all that, it’s sort of changing. Where it was a male dominated country for the last hundred and fifty years in strength but now it’s reverting... emergency services is predominantly male but that’s obviously changing ... the community is empowered with knowledge as well. It’s not so much a man’s domain ...” (GFG)

**People who were physically well**

Key informants noticed that those who were healthy before the events were more able to maintain an optimistic attitude and retain their health despite the stresses caused by the fires;

“Their immunity and wellness helped them to be buoyant; some people got sick afterwards, but some were able to not go down (KI7)”.

“We had a couple of older men die after the 2003 fires. One of them was quite sick, but he was totally shattered by the fires (KI8)”

**Who coped less well and why?**

In responding to those who coped best, participants were able to also state quite clearly two groups who coped less well. Newcomers, with no experience of fires or of the expectations of rural communities “were totally traumatised (K19).”

“There’s something very elemental about fires; it sort of gets into your guts, and its very, very frightening. That’s why I worry about these people who haven’t experienced fires (K18)”.

“...they have a different way of thinking – more likely to be expecting someone to come and help than the farmers (K16)”

Community services interviewees also identified those people who were unable to process their experience as those who coped less well;

“... we see a lot of people where once the adrenalin rush is over they start to then move into that second stage of coping, which is quite stressful. The first stage is just ‘got to get something done’, whatever you’ve got to do. Once you actually get out of that, it’s got something to do with the long term focus on recovery. Some people stay in a very heightened sort of mind set, so their anxiety and
everything stays quite heightened, and I think that those people don’t start coping until that stops... and some of them are they’re still there - and that’s a long time now - because they’re not letting themselves feel what would be a natural feeling of ‘Oh no, I’ve lost something’ or, you know. Some people aren’t feeling it and that’s a long time, and so the longer that goes on, the bigger the fall usually. But for those people who actually let themselves feel it and for other people who felt it quickly, at least they felt it and they’re going to recover.” (GFG)

What other sorts of things helped people to cope during and after the event?

**Having a place to gather as a community**

Resilience committee members particularly noticed the importance to communities of having a place to get together, from the initial stages of shock after the fire event to the rebuilding and strengthening of the community.

“… the whole town might have been burnt out but they had a footy shed left over and everyone gathering at that one point. So they could start on their process of taking in what had happened, their grieving process and then as time went on, they petered off and started getting on with different things.” (GFG)

Following the 2003 fires, communities recognised the need for both a strong sense of community and a focal point. The rebuilding or renovating of community halls was a common project in the region, meeting both of these needs.

“… they recognised that rebuilding - I think it was one of the football grounds – was giving a sense of structure back to the community ... it was a focal point for the community and I think it’s really the whole project; giving that sense of community back to the community.” (GFG)

“… the feedback we got was that it was the best recovery plan, it gave the community a reason to get together even though they had to make the scones and casseroles and bring them down to the working bee. And they had a meeting place at the end of it, and the uses afterwards - you know, just having events.” (GFG)

**The generosity of the broader community**

Many comments were made on the generosity of local businesses and charities, with examples of ‘the Salvos’ who worked directly with families and people who had lost property, particularly in Bruarong, and local businesses who were generous in donating items to individual and community groups. While community members had issues with the spending of VBAF money, the process of community consultation - designed to help allocate these funds – also provided a forum to discuss community needs, from which other opportunities arose.

“I will say that on the list at some stage was this barbecue. It was a trailer; it had a barbecue and it had a generator and it had a light and it had provision for a drinking water tank. Somebody mooted that was a good thing to have during a fire because if you have to set up in a remote area you can still feed the fire fighters. If there’s nothing else you can still feed the fire fighters because you’ve got no power, and also it can be used at other events right throughout the year. Well that didn’t meet the criteria! However there was another type of thing, and (an Indigo Shire worker) did do this, he made application to a board that had organisations that were willing to donate something substantial to fire prone areas that had been affected by fire, and they would choose what they
would do.... anyway what happened here was this went to the board and Snowy Engineering they donated it and we used it the other night...” (SFG)

Knowing what to do next time

Having been through the fires, many people felt relief at finally knowing what it is actually like. They have made definite plans for next time based on their experience. Many, to their own surprise, have decided that they will evacuate; recognising their inability to cope with the terror of the event.

“We’d tell the guests ‘We’re going to go’. We’re going to lock the motel and we’re just going to go, end of story. It’s been very, very, very hard and terrifying...” (BBFG)

“... if it happened again she’d go, she said. She’s not staying again because it was, it was terrifying! The fire was just on our backdoor step really. It was a k away and it was terrifying, and I was frightened...” (BBFG)

Has your community been strengthened or weakened by the fires?

The immediate response to this question was that the fires had definitely strengthened the community, bringing people together and creating stronger networks. The experience of the fires brought the advantages of a strong community to the forefront, prompting people to focus specifically on strengthening their communities. However, after consideration, some felt this state would not necessarily last, and that the community may actually be weaker in the longer term through loss of members and the stresses and bitterness of the community decisions taken during and after the fires.

Stronger networks

The creation of stronger networks through the experience of the fires is one area that people definitely felt meant a stronger community in general.

“We have neighbours networking their plans with their neighbour. You get three neighbours or four neighbours together talking about what’s happening in the future; if a fire comes from there or there we’re going to plough that way and plough that way and leave this patch open as a back stop...” (BFG)

“We might have different ideas on how to do things, what preparations to do, this is not going to dissuade us one bit from helping each other or working with each other...” (BFG)

“If anything happens again, the people are there, there’s no doubt...” (SFG)

“Personality wise, friendship wise, even people that you’ve hardly met and talked together, we’re closer because we’ve got things to talk about and a commonality. I think that’s made us stronger...” (BBFG)

Fostering community spirit

Community strengthening activities have come from both grassroots and agency level. Individuals and community groups have organised community activities expressly designed to foster community spirit and create and strengthen community networks, and have taken advantage of fire funding to improve community facilities:
“We had afternoon teas – just at our place - for people to just come and talk. Not as a formal thing, just to have a talk. It was really good for the blokes to just sit on the verandah and have a beer; the women just sat around and talked (KI7).”

“We’ve tried to build the community. We have regular community get-togethers... after the fires we had about 85 people - pretty good for a little place like this! The community centre has been refurbished; it’s got a catering kitchen and a verandah and deck, and we’re hoping that will mean it will get more community use (KI7).”

**Fostering resilience and leadership**
The Beechworth Neighbourhood Centre have applied for and received Adult Community Education (State government) funding for a community learning partnership with North East Mental Health, Yackandandah Community Education Network, Indigo Shire, and a group of Stanley women. The partnership focuses on resilience and women; training women in resilience and leadership, on a general scale at first and then in response to needs and interest. This is a direct result of finding that so many of the natural leaders in the Victorian communities destroyed by fire were incapacitated through death or being overwhelmed, and those who came forward had no experience or training in leadership, coupled with research showing that people can be prepared to lead before a disaster.

**A crisis brings us together, but time brings us back to normal**
Many participants felt that the fires had initially strengthened their community, but that over time the feeling of solidarity had faded and the usual community differences of opinion emerged.

“But then it disappears...”

“Everyone has their view. You’ve heard about the safer places and the bunkers and their point of view, and then someone who wants to preserve the change rooms and trying to make that a safer place, and half of Stanley approve of it and half of Stanley think it’s a waste of money...” (SFG)

“... they are more concerned about their own individuality and their own selves without looking out the front door.” (BBFG)

Business people believed that the ongoing psychological effects of the fires and the loss of tourist income had caused people to close businesses and leave town, draining the human resources of the town. In this sense the community has been weakened through loss of capacity.

“...we’re just fighting a losing battle, you know. You wonder what today’s going to be like; I’ve just come back from Melbourne and we’ve lost our caravan park girl...” (BBFG)

**What policies, strategies or practices have emerged to minimise vulnerabilities and disaster risks?**
Key Informants identified a number policies, strategies and community practices that have emerged as a result of the fires. The focus on strengthening communities from individual, community and agency levels, was seen as a particularly positive aspect. Key activities influencing fire policies, strategies and practices included the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, the Fire Recovery Committee and the Community Strengthening Project.
Official strategies of particular value in reducing risk and vulnerability included fire preparedness kits such as the CFA Fire Ready ‘roadshows’, Vulnerable Persons Registers, the identification of Neighbourhood Safer Places and the new fire rating system.

Despite the universal acknowledgement that a safe place for residents to go is needed, Neighbourhood Safer Places (NSP’s) were a controversial subject. Interviewees believed that despite NSP’s being designated as places of last resort, many in the community (including schools) have ‘go to the NSP’ as first on their fire plan. They felt that there is potential for confusion as towns will have a number of places with a range of different purposes, all with similar names such as NSP, refuge, relief centre etc. This could result in problems in an emergency. Furthermore, they pointed out that NSP’s may not actually be the safest place in a fire.

Informants believed that the new fire ratings system will help people to anticipate the level of threat as long as they know what each code actually means. However, they did question the likelihood of people actually following the advice associated with the new fire ratings. One example given was that people always want to wait and see and won’t leave early on a Code Red day – most have nowhere to go and do not want to pay for a motel.

Were there any surprises for you?

The strength of community spirit
Key informants were surprised by the strength, and by the breadth, of community solidarity during and after the fires. They found that locally, great community spirit emerged. People were seeing other people’s need as greater than their own – especially in communities like Kinglake and Marysville - and wanting to help. Even those directly impacted by the Beechworth fires were not asking for a lot themselves, and were offering help to others.

“It was so heartening to see; people were looking beyond their own patch” (KI2).

Locally, people who had never taken an active community role came to the fore and ‘really got out and worked’. In Stanley, new locals were instrumental in getting Telstra to do a deal with SP Ausnet to replace the Stanley phone tower – a major problem during the fires.

The feeling of solidarity with the wider community was also evident. Phone calls came from all over the world.

“...people we knew to ask if we were OK, people we didn’t know to find out what was happening in general, even to ask where donations could be sent. One woman rang and said she had a whole load of packs made up – soap, undies, women’s products – and who should she send it to! We didn’t need any of that stuff – pretty embarrassing really. The whole nation got together” (KI2).

Having all been through something together, communities and workplaces made allowances, even months after the event, for people not being able to continue ‘normally’.

“... everyone understood that. It was a wonderful thing that for quite a few months after the fires there was a general understanding that people were at sixes and sevens, they were still trying to get back on track, and that was OK, that was understood (KI8)”. 

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That governments were able to cut red tape
Key informants were also surprised that the government was able cut red tape to respond. From a shire perspective, the council forgot about boundaries and bureaucracy and ‘just did what needed to be done’. Even the state government was able to do this to a degree, for example by temporarily waiving planning regulations. Key informants believe that in the 2009 fire, because of the enormity of the disaster, everyone was stunned, much more than the ’03 and ’06 fires.

“There was less ‘process’ and more action, which was really great. Usually it is all process!” (K17).

The importance of local knowledge
Local knowledge as an important factor in both response and recovery was mentioned by several key informants. They had noticed that agency people who came in after the fires found that they knew how to do their jobs, but didn’t have the local knowledge to direct their efforts.

“They didn’t know what the community was actually like before the fires, so how could they know what to do? They’ve finally recognised that familiarity with the community is so important in recovery...” (K18).
4. Looking to the Future

Do you think the community is now better prepared to face future fires?

Participants believe that the community is better prepared to face future fires. Individuals are better prepared, with experience informing their fire plans, their equipment purchases and their property setup. Improved individual preparation means that there is more equipment available to assist the community, and more opportunity to stop the fire. Farmers are also rebuilding the features that used to be the domain of the CFA, chiefly the ability to respond locally. Interviewees believe that the Indigo Shire now does more work on prevention; more frequent roadside inspections and on-ground action where needed, free green waste days at the tips before fire season.

**Individuals are better prepared**

Individuals and households have upgraded their equipment, their management systems and their plans as a result of their fire experiences.

“... we’ve put in a wall phone now, we’ve put another tank in for the bore water and we’ve got them both full, we’ve got generators. We’ve got generators to make power in the house so we can have some light - we had nothing. We’ve put sprinklers on the roof all as a result of this...” (SFG)

“... we’ve put an extra gate in our front paddock because our driveway was between big trees, and I mean we wouldn’t be able to get out and fire trucks wouldn’t be able to get in if the trees came down, and we’ve put sprinklers on our roof. I still don’t think we’d stay though because we’re too old and too unfit...” (SFG)

“After the fires I did a bit of risk management and looked at what would happen if I did lose everything... I noticed when I went out to different clients that they had their computer and they had their back up next to their computer. They back up their computer every night, but what happens when a fire goes through? What happens if the roof leaks? What happens if the power surges? I had a hard drive which I used to leave in my bag or wherever my laptop was, but I thought if there’s a fire I wouldn’t necessarily take my bag...” (BBFG)

**The community is better prepared to respond on a local scale**

The Brurarong community in particular has leveraged the assistance available by building strategic infrastructure such as water tanks on private land accessible to CFA trucks, and water pumps on certain private properties to enable those residents to be self sufficient.

Individuals have not only rethought their personal systems, but their ability to respond given the changes to the way the CFA operates. Where the ability to respond used to be through the local CFA, regulations have effectively excluded many locals from operating as legitimate members.

“... I just thought ‘Well, I’m not allowed on the truck anymore. I’ll set myself up so I can look after myself and neighbours around me’...” (BFG)

The CFA has also changed from a collection of locally focussed units to an organisation that responds on a strategic, landscape scale. Older farmers bemoan the loss of the rapid local response that used to be the first priority of the local Fire Brigade.
“When we had a rural unit here ... over I suppose fifty, sixty years or more we had dozens of fires start in Bruarong and none of them lasted more than quarter of an hour or twenty minutes... While we had that unit here we never had any worry.” (BFG)

Some farmers have equipped themselves with small ‘slip-’ units to enable them to respond rapidly to a fire in the immediate neighbourhood.

“We’ve all gone out - like you’ve bought one and I’ve bought one - so that we can put them on and get them off quicker... The reason I got my own unit, well, you can’t rely on the fire brigade. I’m not slinging off at the fire brigade or anything else, but...” (BFG)

Farmers in particular are also planning for strategic, cooperative responses to future fires.

“We ploughed fire breaks in but instead of doing so much at our place, we should have went along the road where we did and into the neighbours, straight over the hills. Because (neighbour) was on the other side of the hill putting fire breaks in his place and if we had of had it cut off the fire would have chased out of our place, probably to the hill of his place, and none of this end would have burnt.” (BFG)

The response and communications systems have been improved

Interviewees felt that the Black Saturday fires and the Bushfires Royal Commission had resulted in significant improvements to community infrastructure such as fire refuges and neighbourhood safer places, the equipment, operation and management of the CFA, and particularly to communications capacity.

The local CFA’s have updated and increased their equipment, improving their capacity to fight fires in future but importantly also their capacity to respond quickly, through the addition of ‘slip on’ units which all members are trained to use. They have also improved their communications through the addition of pagers.

Community members have lobbied successfully for improvements to telecommunications infrastructure, in particular the new Stanley communications tower.

“We’re better prepared, like to spend more money on the infrastructure of the CFA. And the communications people spent money on phones to improve those... I think we’re better prepared because the ABC and the communication people are working on the shortcomings...” (BBFG)

However, issues remain. Interviewees were concerned about lack of funding for local CFA trucks, and lack of action regarding overhead powerlines. Above ground powerlines are both responsible for fires starting and result in loss of power during bushfire emergencies. Interviewees were pessimistic about lines ever being placed underground.

“...but not on a communal basis. We still don’t have any more fire trucks or anything like that. I don’t know whether it would even be possible to have a generator that kept things going in the town... They’d have to improve the electricity link or whatever we get. And why does it go out every time? Well it goes out every time because you have to put the power lines underground...” (SFG)

CFA response initiatives like Community Fireguard and more informal versions like telephone trees have been picked up in some communities. These initiatives need community leaders to take them
on, and ongoing work to keep updated. A general observation was that rural communities seem to have more of a ‘looking after your neighbour’ attitude and are more likely to be involved in whole of community activities. Interviewees gave examples from their own communities of planned telephone/email networks for the express purpose of improving communications.

“We send out emails but we also have a whole list and everyone on the committee has 10 people they ring to invite them, and we’ve found that we have a really great response. We’ve found that that is a really good opportunity for when we have a strong message to get through (KI7)”.

Communications in a broader sense have also improved. During the 2009 fire, the Beechworth Chamber of Commerce set up a template using photos showing ‘business as usual’ in Beechworth; people sent this out to their databases and via social networking sites. These tools were seen to have made a huge difference; when there was no information to be had from the authorities, people were using twitter and texts to track the fire – getting absolutely up to date information. The Chamber has since developed a strategy for future emergencies using social networking sites, media and business databases.

Attention has also been given to media communications:

“... to educate [the media] about sensationalising the fires, showing complete insensitivity to the people in the midst of it, using footage from other places if reality isn’t sensational enough (KI8)”.

Some work is also being done regarding the naming of fires to make sure they reflect the actual situation to the wider community.

“People need to know where the danger is, not where it started (KI7)”.

Do you think there is a risk of more frequent and/or intense fires in future?

Responses to this question ranged from those who felt that fire intensity would continue to fall within the range already experienced, to those who expected more frequent and more intense fires in the future. Those who expect increased fire activity have a variety of different reasons including increased risk as a consequence of higher population density in bush areas, as a consequence of changed forestry management practices, and as a result of climate change.

The risk fluctuates with the normal climatic variations

Some participants believed that the risk of fire is dictated by the seasonal conditions, and that fluctuation in climate, and therefore of fire risk, are quite normal. They felt that because the perception of fire risk is directly linked to whatever weather is happening at present, many people might feel that we have increased fire risk, but as time goes on they will realise that it was just a temporary climatic phase.

“... I think if you look at a much, much bigger window I think this is what happens; I think we’re going through a period of time where we are having hotter days, but ... if we wait a bit longer the rain was going to come. So are we going to have hotter days interminably? No, because we’ve had the last of the very hot days and maybe we’re going to go through three or four years, or twenty three years, where we’re not.” (SFG)
“...the weather was similar in many ways. I know we talk about climate change, but we went through these fluctuations; sort of heat rounds and things like that...” (SFG)

The risk has increased through human induced changes to climate
Many, however, while acknowledging the normal variations in climate patterns, felt that human induced climate change is definitely a factor in increasing the risk of more severe and intense fires.

“I think there’s a lot to be said for that, and there has been huge fluctuations, but I think we still have to take into account the increasing effect of the human population on it and that’s being realistic about it.” (SFG)

The risk to humans has increased because more people are living in the bush
Participants commented on the fact that more city people – ‘tree changers’ - are building in high fire danger areas, whether through a blasé attitude to fire risk and an expectation that local authorities will look after them, or through misconceptions about the nature of the area they are moving into.

“... and I guess the other thing too is the preparedness to be building in more remote locations, you know you see people building in bushlands...” (GFG)

“There’s a spike in building applications and requests for places like Beechworth and Yackandandah and Stanley because people have still got this misconception of what that is...” (GFG)

Management of the bush has changed, causing increased fire risk
Participants felt that different management practices had definitely increased the risk of fire and the potential intensity of fires. They pointed to the regulation of wood collecting from the bush, the regulation of burning rubbish in summer and the exclusion of livestock from national parks as causes of increased fire risk and intensity.

“I worry about the changes. We used to have a lot more clearing happening. With undergrowth, people used to go out and bring in their own fire wood. And you talk to some of the oldies; someone said the other day up around the gorge you used to go right through without any undergrowth. People take it away and stuff. It’s just that old traditional way of doing things is not happening...” (BBFG)

There was acceptance of the practice of locking out livestock, as long as measures were taken to control any fires escaping those areas;

“... it’s going to burn, that locked out area, and that’s fine, it’s a matter of control so it doesn’t leak out of that... Burn it and it doesn’t matter if it’s more intense ...” (BBFG)

Plantation forest management systems have increased the risk of fires
Interviewees who lived particularly close to plantation pine forests felt an increased risk of fire due to modern management practices. They distinguished between days of high employment in the industry resulting in local people being on hand and charged to react immediately to fire, and the current management of forests from corporate headquarters, with fewer people on the ground.

“We were never ever frightened of fires. Fires were something that happened down in Wangaratta; grass fires ... there were always men employed out in the pines in the nursery, a lot of men, and they were mostly local men and if a little fire started it was just put out straight away. And it was not a
department or CFA called, but we always felt very safe because the pine people looked after the pines. That was the big thing here and of course they’re not there now…” (SFG)

They also felt that state forestry enterprises had superior monitoring and fire management practices in contrast to the corporate forestry company dominant in this area.

“And the monitoring, I’ll go back to New South Wales and my son because he works in state forests; On a bad day if it’s a bit cloudy, a bad day with big storms coming, they have all their men on call ready to go. They have dozers in strategic positions. They have a chopper ready and a light plane and they actually put them up in the sky, and they fly around and when something gets zapped over there they go straight to it... Whereas here, I mean this is a massive pine forest…” (SFG)

**Do you think the fires have influenced people’s perceptions of climate change?**

While some participants took this as a personal question and were willing to ‘declare their position’ on climate change, others referred more to the local and general population views. Scepticism about climate change was something participants felt still existed in the community. This was evident in references, (particularly by farmer participants), to long-term fluctuations and weather cycles. However, there were also many acknowledgements of a new unpredictability in the weather and the extremes experienced over the past decade.

Participants engaging with the community on a professional basis felt that the cumulative impact of natural disasters was gradually changing perceptions of climate change, while at the same time having a debilitating effect on farmers and rural communities. People were aware that organisational plans at local and state levels include strategies which respond to an increased frequency of natural disasters.

**There is still scepticism out there**

Participants felt that scepticism exists within the community, based around local experiences of climate fluctuations, and a focus on the ‘global warming’ aspect of climate change.

“I think there’s still a lot of scepticism out there that it’s just another drought…” (GFG)

“I think part of it too is we talk about ‘global warming’. It’s not global warming it’s climate change and part of that climate change is warming. It creates these extreme weather conditions, you know. That’s what causes it. The sceptics, you know; ‘You bastards told us it was going to be bloody dry, and where’s your global warming? It’s getting colder this winter and it’s raining! What do you know?’ Yeah okay. It’s ‘climate change’ not ‘global warming’ it’s ‘climate change’.” (BBFG)

“... people who say oh well you know, we’ve had floods before; droughts, fires... Talking to people here I realise that most of them think that was just a mad day; the heat, the wind; everything just went mad. It was once in a lifetime and they’ll never have to deal with it again. They don’t think about it being a product of the drought, the environment, something larger. And then when we get a summer like this with all the rain, those people say; see? What are you talking about you gloomy thing? (KI8)”

Some participants expressed scepticism themselves, using that same local knowledge and personal experience;
“Thirty year cycle. I remember Poppy saying this happens every thirty years; you get thirty years of dry and then you get thirty years of wet, variations in between but...” (GFG)

Those experienced with bushfires felt that linking fires with climate change was too big a leap, as each fire is different and has it’s own particular flash-point.

“That particular day is one day you’ll never see again I hope, even the lead up to it. It was just one horrific day (KI7)”. 

“You couldn’t really say that that’s what caused the fires. You wouldn’t know” (BFG)

Everyone’ agrees that the weather conditions are extreme

However, participants agreed that extreme weather is being experienced both locally and in other areas, and that the current conditions are beyond the experience of their collective memory. They pointed to a decade of heat, extreme weather conditions ‘in every direction’, and the risk of fire that such seasons bring. The acceptance that they must expect more such extremes was both explicit and implicit.

“It’s certainly made people think about water, less water to fight fires. I don’t hear much about climate change, but certainly much more about different ways to fight fires presuming there isn’t the water. “(KI9)

“The old timers, they’ve never seen conditions like this, haven’t seen the spring come in like this. I know that’s my local neighbourhood around here, haven’t seen so much water...” (GFG)

“A lot of people are saying it’s never been this extreme. A lot of the old cocky’s are saying, like my dad said he’s never seen...” (GFG)

“That’s from various people from right across the Hume region, that haven’t seen these events...” (GFG)

“I’ve just come back a week ago from central Australia. They’re singing the same song! We went through Mildura north through Burra into Cooper Pedy up to Glendambo and got as far north as Marla on the Stuart highway and they’re all singing the same song...” (BBFG)

“But the weather conditions in Victoria are greater and every decade is hotter than the one before. This last ten years has been the hottest and the weather conditions are getting worse, so whatever causes the fire it’s harder to stop on those days. And we’re going to get more of that...” (BFG)

The cumulative impact of natural disasters is ramming it home

Interviewees working with those affected by natural disasters in the region felt that fire was just one of the events affecting people’s perceptions of climate change. They are concerned that as climate change accelerates the frequency of such events, people will either adjust, or ‘fall over’.

“So the cumulative impact of disasters which perhaps in the past would have occurred very ten years or twenty years but now it’s happening bang, bang, bang... I think the drought was obviously the start and then the fires and the floods. I think it’s going to be a short sharp series of events and it’s just going to chip away at people...” (GFG)
“The last two years there’s not a lot of trust in anything, like they can’t hang their hat on something they know; ‘We know that it’s going to happen’ - which is probably what they’d done for fifty years of farming - and now all of a sudden ... I think it’s rammed it home that the climate has changed... I was talking to the council and they were saying that the cumulative effect is really impacting them and they were saying that the floods on top of everything else is just going to tip a number people over...” (GFG)

Are you aware of anyone who has moved out of the area because of the fires?

This question prompted discussion of demographic change within local communities and within the region. The Bruarong focus group (an established farming region) proudly reported no movement from their community due to fires. The Stanley focus group, with a village populated by long term locals and ‘tree-changers’, reported some movement from the community due to the fires, and were concerned about that the fires had created a perception of their village as unsafe to live in. This concern was shared by the Beechworth Business group.

The Beechworth Resilience group – local community service people - believed that the fires had prompted movement between fire regions, and that climate change in general was causing an exodus from rural communities which would increase in future. Only one participant had even considered moving because of the threat of fires; most agreed that proper preparation reduced the risk to an acceptable level, and that ‘fire season’ was only a short time to endure; outweighed by the benefits of living where they live for the rest of each year.

Fires have prompted people to move

Some participants knew of people who had moved to the larger regional centre of Albury-Wodonga as a result of their experience with the fires. They believed that these people had a realistic view of their ability to prepare adequately for and cope mentally with future fires, and had made a sensible decision.

“A lot of the old people have moved. They made that decision. I know one of my neighbours, it was just too much, and she’d been on the land. Just too much, too much to worry about, too much grass...” (GFG)

Ironically, people have also moved away from more severely fire affected regions, to the case study region. Participants put this down to people’s desire to live in a certain type of rural setting, despite the inherent dangers. These people have made a judgement within their desires of what is a safer place;

“..We picked up a lot of people who moved from Kinglake who had come to live here, because it was safer! And you go; what??” (GFG)

Perceptions are stopping people from moving into the area

Rather than making people move away, participants believe that the fires have effectively put people off moving to the area. Coverage of the fires has given an impression that this is a dangerous area to live.
“I think it affects people. I’ve got a friend who says she just couldn’t come and live here ... I didn’t say it was logical, it’s just a perception.”

“I mean the news out there paints such a horrific picture! I remember the ’03 fires: our son had just got married and went to Queensland on his honeymoon and the fires started on Tuesday, and they were hearing things like ‘the tiny town of Stanley has been wiped out’. He rang up and he said ‘you’re still there! I thought it was gone’.” (SFG)

**Climate change in general is forcing people to leave**

Participants from the Beechworth Resilience focus group in particular believed that the cumulative effect of extreme events, including fire, was already forcing people – particularly farmers - to leave rural areas.

“... it might be the community impacts suddenly force some people out. That’s what’s coming out of our links at the moment, with the locusts and the floods ... Enough’s enough! How much more can you throw at us? And the other things that are happening, probably in the bigger picture, within Australia and outside Australia as well...” (GFG)

**If you are prepared, there’s no need to move**

Despite having fire plans ranging from defending homes and fighting the fires, to preparing their properties and leaving, participants agreed that the risk of fire would not make them leave the area altogether. Described by one participant as ‘doggedness’ rather than resilience, people spoke with pride of the changes, preparations and plans they have which will enable them to continue to live here even if bushfires do become more frequent and intense.

“If I went back to Melbourne I’m more likely to be involved in a car accident than I am to be killed in a fire. I really do believe that, because I don’t believe that your life is at risk in a fire situation, if you take the precautions ... and it’s such a tiny part of the year! It’s like about six weeks, if anything, out of the twelve months of the year where Stanley is the most beautiful place to live. It’s a very small time... (SFG)

**Conclusion**

The Beechworth bushfires over the past decade culminated in the worst fire in living memory in 2009. Responses to our interviews two years later showed above all that the fires were and remain a raw emotional experience for many. Tears flowed and tempers flared; emotions still run high as talking about the fires brings the experience back, summed up by one interviewee with

“I thought I was over the fires, but obviously I’m not!” (KI9)

The fires brought people and communities together and brought out the best in people; concern and compassion for others, generosity with time and money helping others, community leadership from individuals who had never been involved before. They also brought out bitter arguments over current fire-fighting policies and practices, criticism of agency responses and systems, and a harking back to days of more localised control.
The people who coped best with the fires were those who could best anticipate the event, who were physically well, who were able to take effective action for their own safety and that of others, who were supported by family and community, and who could talk about their experiences. Those most affected were those who were new to rural living, children, the elderly, and the people who were closest to the day to day trauma caused by the fires; firefighters and agency personnel.

Communications during and after the fires was a critical factor in peoples sense of being able to place their situation within the overall context and to understand the status of their networks. Factors helpful to recovery after the fires included community support on an immediate neighbourhood scale, on the broader local and state government scale, and even national and international solidarity. Being able to help other people, being able to ‘get on with the job’, and having community leadership were also important aspects of recovery.

Each bushfire event has prompted a more thoughtful and informed response by individuals, communities and governments at all levels. Residents and communities have increased their capacity to prepare for and fight fires, to work together and to care for their community afterwards. People generally expressed confidence in the ability of their community to face future fire events. Local government and state government agencies have shifted their focus from reacting to events to creating optimal conditions and systems for recovery. Such mechanisms as identifying vulnerable groups and fire awareness campaigns aim to reduce exposure to fire risk, while the response focus is on timeliness, maintaining community mental health and creating a more co-ordinated ‘big picture’ approach.

For the future, agency workers accept that the government’s approaches are based on expectations of more frequent and severe natural disasters caused by climate change. Community members also expect more frequent and severe fires, but attribute this to changed management practices and patterns of human settlement as much as climate change. Scepticism about climate change is still evident amongst interviewees, but a quiet acceptance that ‘things are different now’ is also evident.

“.. they don’t say it, they won’t name it, but I think they know it...” (KI1)
References


Victorian Department of Regional Development 2010 - Regional Climate change projections. www.climatechange.vic.gov.au

Appendix 1   Focus Group Questions

Bruarong residents: Wednesday 5th January, 6.30 pm

Individual questions:

What was your experience of the fires?
When and how did you find out about the fires?

Open to the group:

Who or what helped you during the fires? (services, people, groups, experience)
What sort of things helped you to recover from the fires?
How long before you were back to your usual routines post the fires?
Who do you think were the most and the least affected by the fires? Why?
Who do you think coped best? Why?
Have you been through similar events before?
In your view, has your community been strengthened or weakened by the fires? (in what way?)
Do you think the community is now better prepared to face future fires?
Has the risk of fire made you or anyone consider leaving this community?
Do you think there is a risk of more frequent and/or intense fires in future?

Beechworth Resilience group: Tuesday 21st December, 3.30pm

Who do you think were the most affected by the fires? Why? - and the least?
Who do you think coped best? Why?
What services were provided to people during the fires to help them recover? and after?
What other sorts of things helped people to cope during and post the event?
In your view, has your community been strengthened or weakened by the fires? (in what way?)
Do you think the community is now better prepared to face future fires?
Do you think there is a risk of more frequent and/or intense fires in future?
Do you think the fires have influenced people’s perceptions of climate change?
Are you aware of anyone who has moved out of the area because of the fires?
Who else should we talk to - groups or individuals?
Stanley women’s group, Thursday 16th December, 10am

*Individual questions:*

What was your experience of the fires?

When and how did you find out about the fires?

*Open to the group:*

Who or what helped you during the fires? (services, people, groups, experience)

How long before you were back to your usual routines post the fires?

What sort of things helped you to recover from the fires?

Who do you think were the most and the least affected by the fires? Why?

Who do you think coped best? Why? Have you been through similar events before?

In your view, has your community been strengthened or weaken by the fires? (in what way?)

Do you think the community is now better prepared to face future fires?

Do you think there is a risk of more frequent and/or intense fires in future?

Do you think the fires have influenced people’s perceptions of climate change?

Has the risk of fire made you consider leaving this community?

Business group, Thursday 16th December, 8am

*Individual questions:*

What was your experience of the fires?

When and how did you find out about the fires?

How was your business impacted by the fires?

*Open to the group:*

Who or what helped you during the fires? (services, people, groups, experience)

How long before you were back to your usual business routine?

What sort of things helped you to recover from the fires?

Who do you think were the most and the least affected by the fires? Why?

Who do you think coped best? Why?

Have you been through similar events before?

In your view, has your community been strengthened or weaken by the fires? (in what way?)

Do you think the community is now better prepared to face future fires?
Do you think there is a risk of more frequent and/or intense fires occurring?

Do you think the fires have influenced people’s perceptions of climate change?

Has the risk of fires made you consider leaving this community?