

# 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

## Submission

by  
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***They said the fire came so fast on Black Saturday there was nothing they could do. They said there was no warning; that there was no time.***

### Bushfire Background

I grew up in East Doncaster in the 1960s, and knew Warrandyte, and its Bushfires, well. I remember darkened, smoky skies and ash landing in our back yard, like snow. I remember watching fires in the Dandenongs too, which we could view from the kitchen window. My first experience of Bushfire was in 1963. I was four years old. I stood at the front gate while my mother ran across the road and down to the Bush behind the houses opposite to help put out a fire. What amazed me was how quickly the flames raced up the trees. How fast the fire became out of control. How quickly it lapped our neighbour's back fence. The fire tamed, my mother returned home, dishevelled in her totally unsuitable summer dress, determined to be better prepared for a next fire. There and then she put together a 'Bushfire kit', filled with protective clothing and simple fire fighting equipment, which hung ready in the shed.

When I was young I spent a lot of time in Marysville. My family were friends with the owners of one of the large, rambling old timber guesthouses adjoining Bush at the back of Kings Road, at the southern edge of the beautiful hamlet community. It was easy to be in love with Marysville, it was such a pretty place during Autumn and Spring, and so cold and wet in winter with snow on nearby Lake Mountain. But I feared the summers, hearing the crackle and hum of the bush, the eucalypt oil vapours thickening in the heated air and the sense of being oppressed by walls of tall timbered slopes holding us in and shielding our view of the distant sky and possible fires approaching.

I now live in the Central Victorian town of Castlemaine, but I have also lived in the surrounding Bush settlements of Moonlight Flat, Barkers Creek, Wattle Gully, Golden Point, Chewton and Green Gully, Newstead, all of which are high-extreme fire risk areas. Because of my concern about Bushfire safety, I have organised Community Fireguards in some of these locations.

Before coming to Chewton in 1983, I lived on farms at Humevale (between Whittlesea and Kinglake), Christmas Hills, Eltham North and Eltham. At Humevale I lived on 60 acres, surrounded by dense bush to the north, east and west in the foothills leading to Kinglake. The property joined the Yan Yean Reservoir bush reserve to the south. With the severity of the 1982 drought, I became increasingly concerned about my own safety and that of my animals - 18 horses, 300 ducks, goats, sheep, other poultry, dogs.... I felt extremely vulnerable on that small farm surrounded by so much tinder-dry bush. Although I knew of some safety measures, my ignorance of what to do and how to cope in such a

threatening environment, if a fire was to come through, grew to an overwhelming fear and sense of terror.

In November 1982, there was a fire which burned from Mt Disappointment to Flowerdale. It did not impact significantly on human habitation, but was close enough to act as a serious wake-up, get-ready call. By February 1983, I was terrified that if a fire came through the region it would be an inferno. I didn't know what to do. My mother, Joan Webster, had some bushfire knowledge and was a well respected journalist, so following a number of conversations with her I went to her place on a particular day in February and asked her to write a book with me, for people like me, on what to do, if a bushfire comes. That day was a total fire ban; extremely hot and windy. From her back yard in East Doncaster, we watched smoke drift across the sky and cover the sun. That day was called 'Ash Wednesday'.

The next morning I took the book idea to the Melbourne publisher I worked for and he agreed such a book was needed. I then drove to Mt Macedon and as a photographer was allowed in through the police road block because I was on the photographic committee of the National Trust. I took photographs which later helped Joan and me, along with new CFA and CSIRO knowledge, to understand aspects of bushfire behaviour previously not understood. After extensive research, writing, and collecting of photos, *The Complete Australian Bushfire Book* was published in 1986. I was the photographer and illustrator of the publication. The book, now called *The Complete Bushfire Safety Book* is in its third edition. Joan also wrote *Essential Bushfire Safety Tips*, published by the CSIRO. Its second edition was launched in 2008 by the Minister of Police and Emergency Services, Bob Cameron. These books have helped thousands of Australians come to terms with Bushfire environs and how best to live with the annual threat and survive. But on Saturday 7 February 2009, it became clearly evident that too many bush dwellers did not know what to do. Or didn't know enough. And that is the real tragedy. Australia is meant to burn, but people are not meant to build houses amongst the kindling. When people place themselves and their possessions in a highly flammable environment, they must learn how to protect themselves properly. We need to break through the heavy wall of ignorance; this idea that so many hold dear that Bushfire won't happen to them or if it does they will just leave.

Twenty-six years ago almost to the day, I knew what would happen if fire came to those mountains, so laden with fuel even back then. It did not take much to imagine how this holocaust could happen. On Black Saturday, the Mountains burned like a bonfire, waiting to be lit. I had been expecting such an inferno for almost three decades. What did they mean when they said the fire came so fast, they had no time, they had no warning. I'm surprised it took so long.

The terrible fires of Black Saturday did not come to my Shire this summer, but they could have, and they may come next summer, or the next. As Australians, who live, work, study and travel in rural/bush and urban fringe environments, knowledge on how to protect ourselves, our families, and communities in homes, workplaces, schools and cars is essential. We all need to learn how to prevent another tragedy like Black Saturday, like Canberra, like Ash Wednesday. Bushfire will continue to burn with increasing velocity and frequency due to climate change. It is imperative that we reconsider habitation amongst dense native vegetation. That we ensure mandatory bushfire education in schools and through Community Fireguards. That we design buildings able to withstand firestorms. That we rally together like we can after a disaster, to help one another, prevent disaster. To rebuild communities so that they will be safe, not just rebuilt. Because every year in SE Australia, from September to April, bushfire can destroy many, many lives and millions of dollars worth of property and infrastructure. In a rural environment we must be prepared and be practised. Because Bushfire can come to any of us, at any time.

## Understanding Black Saturday

First we had drought. When the drought went on for years it was called a state of dryness. Everything was dry. The ground was cracked. Normally in summer we get cycles; a string of days which increase in heat until a really hot day with gusty hot north winds comes and a Total Fire Ban is declared. Usually, in the late afternoon or early evening, a south-west wind change brings a thunderstorm with rain and cooler temperatures. But this year we just got hot, then hotter, then unbearable. The last rainfall was mid December. No rain at all in January. We had a week of 40-44deg days. Then down to the mid thirties for the first week back at school and then it was Saturday. The hottest day ever. We had 45 deg here, though other parts of the State were even higher.

On Saturday, 7 February 2009, warnings of an extreme high fire danger day, with all the elements of a possible Ash Wednesday scenario, were naturally obvious and publicly well announced. Obvious, perhaps, to those who had experienced the 1982/3 drought and Ash Wednesday. To those who understand bushfire behaviour. To those who have knowledge of lighting real fires - to cook on, to keep warm by, to burn off with. Perhaps some of the younger people in the Mountains had never seen a real fire before, not even at a barbecue, and did not consider the speed. Perhaps this generation expected Bushfire warnings to come through technology, instead of the sky and the wind and the woods.

Throughout the summer I was relieved to be living in town, but on that Saturday I remained vigilant, checking outside in all directions, for any sign of smoke, with intense regularity. I watched my garden become shrivelled and scorched, the sky turn brown with dust. Severe wind gusts blew my timber garden furniture over. Glass in my windows, under the veranda, became too hot to touch. I heard the fire siren. Mid afternoon. There was a fire at Kilmore. One at Redesdale. Another out of Bendigo.

At Bendigo, our regional city 50km away to the north, 57 houses were destroyed and one person died on the unsuspecting urban fringe. To the east, about the same distance away, in the rural area of Redesdale, a fire burned 10,000 hectares and destroyed 14 homes and much livestock.

A photographer at the Bendigo Advertiser was sent to Maiden Gully to get shots of burning homes. She went 'click' and retreated, the heat too intense to withstand. She could not fathom the amount of curious teenagers in the vicinity, wearing only shorts and bare feet, so close to radiant heat. I have relatives in the area who realised they were the only ones prepared with a fire pump, and apart from their neighbours across the street who were ready with garden hose, they were the only residents in their street to emerge from the cooler comfort of their homes. Another relative, also prepared, ended up with the only house left standing in their street.

There was a fashion parade in Bendigo that Saturday. The organiser said people kept disappearing from the parade - to see if their house was being affected by the grass and scrub fire. One couple returned to their house, in the path of the fire. They put out little fires started by falling embers with their garden hose. The neighbouring houses, on both sides, burned to the ground. On one side, an elderly man had risen from watching the television, aware of the fire too late. His house was gone and he only had two things left in the world, his shorts and his thongs. The woman from the parade, saving her house, was dressed in a skimpy dress and high heels. On seeing the dangerous attire the woman was wearing, the elderly man said, 'I only have two things left, but please take these...' and handed her his thongs.

During the afternoon, the Kilmore fire burned towards Wandong and destroyed a number of houses and people died. This was reported on the evening

news. The southwest change came and we thought the worst was over. The temperature dropped from 45 deg to 35 and we came outside of our homes and rejoiced. We opened our windows to let the overwhelming heat of the day out. I was surprised, and relieved that so few major fires had occurred; comparatively so little lost on such a potentially disastrous day. More than surprised; I felt uncomfortably bewildered.

At 11.30pm I checked the DSE website one last time before bed. I checked on fires in all the locations I had a personal interest in. Near Marysville, crews attended the Murrindindi Mill fire, and a small fire 12km south of Marysville which the DSE noted as 'of some concern'.

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***Those who lived and died in the hills on Black Saturday, did so alone; left to their own resources, ready or not.***

It was not a surprise to have such wildfires leave so much destruction in their paths and yet everywhere I go, everyone I speak to, wants to, needs to, talk about the events which seem unbelievable. Inconceivable. Painfully, shockingly, real. Everyone I speak to knows of someone who died, or someone who lost their house. Many of the fires were close enough to where we live. Close enough to know someone. To know the places well. Close enough to grieve.

I have spent many hours reading through blogs, diaries, media reports, ABC Bushfire Community and radio talkbacks to try and understand what happened in the Mountains I once knew so well. I could not find a time-line of the fires anywhere. I could not make sense of the lack of information on the DSE and CFA websites even late into the night on Saturday 7 February. I now have a clearer picture. There were many fires around the state on that day, but the largest, now referred to as the Kilmore East - Murrindindi Complex South and North fires, began at Kilmore.

Under the worst weather conditions known in Victoria, CFA fire fighters from near and far went in their fire trucks to aid those at Kilmore. When there is a really big fire, the idea is that members of the CFA and DSE go there to fight it, to control it and to prevent other areas in its path from being engulfed. Ninety fire trucks were at Kilmore. The fire travelled to Wandong and beyond, almost to Whittlesea, where the wind shifted from north-northwest to a westerly, sending it through Humevale, Strathewen, St Andrews, Steels Creek and eventually Yarra Glen and Healesville. When the cool change came, the wind direction changed from severe hot gusty north to north west winds coming across deserts, to a cooler south-westerly which traditionally turns fingers of fire paths into hand width fire-fronts. In minutes, the entire north-eastern flank sped up the dense Mountain range which hosted the townships of Kinglake West, Kinglake and Flowerdale. There was no fire truck left at Kinglake. Locals, ill prepared and unsuitably un-clothed, used the remaining water tanker to douse and save the pub where many sheltered.

In the meantime, there seemed little response to fire activity which tore through forests towards Narbethong, Granton, Marysville and Buxton. The fire spotter on Mt Gordon alerted the CFA of the Murrindindi Mill fire around 3pm. A fire truck was sent out from Marysville and then recalled. Almost two hours later, a local ambulance officer informed Marysville's CFA of a fire at Narbethong. They said they would 'investigate'. At 6.24pm twelve fire trucks and tankers were sent to Kings Road, to back burn, but within 15 minutes were surrounded by burning embers. They retreated to the Oval.

Very few inhabitants, from Wandong in the West to Taggerty in the East, seemed to record what time anything happened after about 6.30pm. For some it was endless hours spent trying to locate loved ones or getting as far away from the fire front as possible - most having no idea where the fire front, or fronts, actually

were. All they knew was darkness, smoke, fear, and the roar of ferocity we can only imagine. Those who stayed to defend their homes were either frantically occupied with checking for and dousing burning embers the entire night, or discovering how inadequate their unpractised fire plan was. Many, it seemed, did not understand the firestorm was threatening Kinglake or Marysville until it was there. Some did all they could to make their house safe enough to be there when they returned - unaware of how many hours, days or even weeks that might be.

For most, residents and authorities included, the devastation of the fires was not revealed until daybreak on Sunday morning. The first news reports of what happened at Kinglake and Marysville aired at 9am. For those on the mountains, unlike many other fires in the past, their nightmare was not televised on the spot by the media, nor even by the bushfire authorities we had all come to trust in to transmit the latest fire information. The visuals we have now were recorded on mobile phones that in the pandemonium only worked as cameras, and those brave or daring enough to focus through their camcorders whilst beating back the fiery beast.

Those who lived and died in the hills on Saturday evening, did so alone; left to their own resources, ready or not. And yet these same survivors speak the loudest of praise for the fire-fighters, because, whilst it may seem as if they were abandoned when hell came rushing to their doors, those fire-fighters were friends and family and neighbours, who left their own properties unattended to try and stop wildfire harming others. This is what the CFA do. When the local siren howls, trained men and women who volunteer their time and skills go to where they are called. CFA members help each other out, all over the place. That Saturday however, has made many of us realise - for a fire like that, regional brigades are simply too few.

On Monday 9 February I took my mother to Melbourne to be interviewed by ABC2 on their morning news programme. Then I went to Whittlesea to see what I could see. To make it visually real. To connect again as close as police road blocks would allow, to a place I once became a part of and where in those summers I lived in so much fear. As far as my eye could see, looking east or west, the blue-black mountains smouldered. Every crease, every fold, every peak, every ridge, burned to a crisp. At the Whittlesea fire station I asked about Humevale. The fire officer shook his head and said, 'Devastated. There wouldn't be anything left standing.' Now nothing except black sticks like stubble; once towering trees.

On Friday 20 March I went to the Kinglake area for three days. My mother was invited to speak at a forum on Rebuilding Communities and I was invited to take photos, touring on one day with an ecologist. On the drive down to Kinglake we followed the path of the fire from East Kilmore and stopped at Humevale. I was overjoyed to see how many houses were still untouched, including the farm I lived on. Because of the wind direction at the time the fire arrived there, it followed the north side of the creek, mostly, pulled along by the gully in which it nestled, leaving the residents of most properties on the south side to thank their lucky stars as the firestorm fled on to Strathewen.

At Strathewen, it was overwhelming to take in the vastness of destruction. To not be able to see the full extent from any vantage point and yet to be faced, in any direction, rolling hill after hill, with comprehending the enormity of such an event. To picture how the SW wind change came and took the entire north-eastern flank and turned it into a fire front that powered up the steep escarpment to Kinglake West and Kinglake and beyond. I did not focus on the destroyed buildings. After a while it became too much. Yet another pile of twisted corrugated iron interrupting the blackened and bristled landscape. Each a tomb-like monument to someone's once upon a home.

What interested me most were the places that did survive, that were saved. Often appearing as a green oasis, where oaks, poplars and other European

deciduous trees had acted as radiant heat and spark shields. Or where signs were erected stating, 'This House was Actively Defended', and 'We were not lucky - we stayed and fought the fire'.

I took many photos throughout the Kinglake National Park and in the townships and Bush settlements. On April 30, my mother and I went to a Rebuilding Communities forum in Yarra Glen, where she was a guest speaker. The following day we went to Marysville. Parched, singed or burnt to the core, the ravaged landscape now displayed vibrant signs of regeneration. New shoots of grass and fern, be it bracken or tree, marking the passing of time with a brilliant uncoiling of new green life.

I feel very strongly about continuing to reach out to people, to raise awareness, to inspire discussion, encourage questions and find solutions. Australia is meant to burn and Australians need to learn how best to defend their homes and their lives. On Black Saturday, some people already knew how. Dawn Hartog's entire Community Fireguard group at Kinglake saved all their members homes. Behind the shops at Kinglake (which still stand), where the forest was very close to houses (most of which burned), one home stands defiant, fitted with roll down metal shutters, no underfloor area, a sealed roof and a safe garden. Embers would not have stood a chance to get in.

Being a Saturday, a great many more people were in their homes, on such a dreadful day, and at their weekend getaways in the hills. Too many of them did not know what to do on a bad fire day, let alone what to do if a fire came. Few had a well-practised fire plan. People died on the roads with a firestorm raining down on them, clad only in thin dresses or shorts. Often bare-chested and bare-footed. At Humevale, a mother picked burning embers out of her children's hair as she forced them, screaming, into the car to flee.

On the day the Royal Commission was held at the Flowerdale Hotel, I listened to two women discussing and comparing their individual stories of preparedness for Black Saturday. A third woman sat quietly with them. By the Friday evening, February 6, they were each ready, with fire pumps filled with petrol purchased before 5pm, gutters cleaned, yards cleared and protective clothing ready. One of the women commented on how much she now loved her mop, having saved her house with water mopped from buckets onto landed embers. The third woman was asked by the other two if her house was saved. She said, 'No.' Her plan, if a fire came, was to leave. Hesitantly, she told of how her daughter drove towards Whittlesea, into the oncoming fire.

## The preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks, particularly prevention of loss of life.

Nothing could have stopped the fires on Saturday 7 Feb. The conditions of extreme heat and dryness, furious wind gusts and human habitation amongst high fuel load vegetation led to the disaster inflicted by wildfire. But people did survive and did save their homes, where they knew how. Not fire-fighters, just ordinary people with the awareness, courage and determination to learn how to prepare beforehand and to do what they needed to do to battle ember attack and how to be safe when the fire front arrived.

The difference between those whose lives and property survived and those who's didn't, was attitude and knowledge, capability and resources. The same difference applies to those who go to the sea and choose to swim inside or outside the flags. It is the same for those who drive safely or not, within the speed limit, or not, with or without a seat belt, with or without alcohol or drugs, with or without a roadworthy vehicle, with or without a licence. In a rural environment, people with the attitude of being capable and practised can be prepared and safe in the event of fire. Just like those who choose to get behind the wheel of a car safely or into deep water knowing how and where to swim.

In July 2000, I moved into a lovely mud-brick home on 1 acre in Moonlight Flat, close to town and surrounded by the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park. By the summer I realised how dangerous that potentially was, if a fire were to come, if I were home on my own with my two year old child. I organised a Community Fireguard for the area, of which a dozen households initially attended and became part of a phone tree. We cleared tonnes of leaf litter from around the house, set aside a 5,000 gal tank for fire fighting purposes and bought a fire fighting petrol pump. By February, when all the dams in the area were dry, I learned that in the event of a Bushfire, the local CFA would not be entering our high fire risk location and that our specified tank was the only assured source of water.

Although I knew how to protect myself and my home, I did not feel confident with a very young child. Our tree lined road was the only way in or out of the area so it was too risky to leave my property if a fire was happening. I thought about leaving early on potentially bad fire days, but where would we go for the entire day? During January, most of my friends in town were away on holiday, at the beach. The childcare centre was closed. I could not spend hours in local shops or at the library.

Then, on one really hot night, the temperature still 35 deg at 1am and the wind was picking up, I heard a neighbour, two properties away, call "Fire!" I could not see anything out my window but I felt overwhelmed with how much I suddenly had to do to be prepared. I ran to the bathroom and began filling the bath, I grabbed towels, I ran to the kitchen sink and it was full of unwashed dishes, my heart was racing, I was in a state of panic. I had so much to do to be ready and the fire was only two acres away. As it turned out, there wasn't a fire, not a Bushfire. Someone had knocked over a candle and quickly smothered the flames. But I learned a very important lesson. How much time is needed to be ready for a fire? Where is the fire? I had always assumed a Bushfire would start somewhere else, far enough away to give me time to be ready for it. From that night on, I left the water in my child's bath, until I needed to bathe her again. I kept my sink available for use. I learned that fires can come from anywhere, at any time. It wasn't necessarily going to be during the day. And it wasn't always going to be in summer. The following Bushfire season began much earlier than anticipated. Someone in our street using a welder caused a Bushfire to start in September.

Bit by bit, year after year, I became more ready. I acquired more bushfire-kit things as I could afford them. In 2003 I moved to a modest fibro house in Wattle Gully, Chewton, set amongst fields of grass adjoining nearby Bush. I organised another Community Fireguard, door knocking by foot on more than thirty households. Whilst most wanted to be on the phone tree, many of whom came to the initial meeting, only a small number actually developed a bushfire plan and actively prepared their property and themselves. Those who didn't gave the impression that to think about what was needed to be done around their properties was too much. They didn't have the time or the interest. It seemed easier to shrug the whole idea of Bushfire off, to believe it wouldn't affect them, that it just wouldn't come, or if it did, 'She'd be 'right, mate.' It seemed easier to think I was 'paranoid'; overly concerned because of my mother and her book.

One neighbour thought she would be fine because her husband and her son were in the local CFA. She thought our information nights were unnecessary for her. It took a bit of convincing, but she came when she faced the fact that her men would be away fighting fire fronts, leaving her alone in the house.

It was difficult to find the house where a frail elderly couple lived. It was hidden behind a dense variety of native trees and shrubs. The couple were reclusive and saw my visit as an unwelcome intrusion. He assured me he would have all the sticks on the ground picked up by the end of summer and that they

would be fine. The local CFA persuaded me to let my worry go; that if a fire came, I would need to forget about them.

Bit by bit, as a community, we discussed our local issues and our individual properties and became more united and caring and safe. The local mine manager undertook a project to clean-up a major vegetation hazard close to a number of houses. Some women in the area were on their own with children, and it was decided that on a bad fire day they would come to my place, that my house was the safest and closest refuge. Being close meant they could return soon after a fire front had passed and possibly still save their home. I was the most prepared and practised and I was continually learning how to be ready. I was often the one to call in a fire. I was in a good position for spotting smoke in a number of directions. I have called residents on the phone tree to let them know of fires burning in their immediate vicinity.

One day I saw smoke in the Bush north of the Moonlight Flat pine plantation, a few kilometres away to the north of me. Fortunately the wind was blowing from the west and the fire was quickly contained by local brigades and water-bombing helicopters. It was a weekday, and this is what I learned. One retired man and myself were the only residents at home in the area and not somewhere else at work. I actually tried calling many people on the phone tree but I got the engaged signal. Apparently, Telstra were doing some work on the lines that day, so landlines were not a form of communication. I felt very isolated. I then began to fill my gutters with water. It was a small house. The gutters took twenty minutes to fill. So from that day on, I filled my gutters at the beginning of summer and kept them filled. Time is of the essence when there is a Bushfire nearby and this meant one less thing to do. I put a ladder at the manhole – and left it there for the summer. I cleared away burnable fuel – years of leaves – under the house and vacuumed out the ceiling space. I bought a big water pistol and my then six year old child practised climbing up the ladder and squirting to the far reaches of the roof void.

The bath was always full, so was a 44 gallon drum, and plenty of buckets with scoops and mops and large garden sprayers filled with water at various locations around the house. In a Bushfire, mains water pressure and electricity will probably fail. So will the phone. Residents cannot rely on any infrastructure to save them. Having an independent water source is empowering. So is having a detailed Plan. And being prepared means putting that plan into practice. I like practicing on bad fire days. That way I test my protective clothing (securing my hat in strong winds) and equipment as well as my nerves. It's an opportunity to see if children have grown out of last year's protective attire. My Bushfire survival kit consists of strong cotton clothes which cover the full length of my arms and legs, a broad brimmed hat, strong leather shoes, leather gloves, a mask and goggles. It's a good idea to have one in the car too, the minimum being a pure woollen blanket per person. And plenty of fresh drinking water. Pets should be inside and livestock placed in a bare paddock.

One resident in our area liked the phone tree idea but to the frustration of her close neighbours she did nothing to make her property safe. She had eucalypts growing right next to the house and her gutters were always full of leaves. At the immediate front of the house she had a huge long stack of wood for the winter. Her attitude was that she didn't care if her house burned down. If a fire came she was going to leave. But she wasn't considering the possibility that she might not be able to leave nor was she thinking about her neighbour's properties if her house and wood stack were burning. She wasn't calculating the increased intensity and higher temperatures and increased radiant heat put out by her abandoned burning house and wood stack on her neighbour's attempts to be as safe as possible. Not only would they need to contend with a Bushfire, they would need to protect themselves and their property from the added intensity and 'flame zone' of her raging wood stack fire and house fire.

There was excellent news footage taken of the Canberra fires which shows how gardens can ignite houses and how houses can ignite neighbouring houses. Inappropriate vegetation such as volatile fir trees and conifers cause windows to shatter and embers to blow inside. Each burning house placed the next house in danger and on and on. It is not surprising that whole streets are reduced to ash where residents have fled.

To Evacuate or Stay? – That is the question. Those who choose to stay home in rural Victoria on a bad fire day need to know how to shelter safely. Even if they cannot save their house, they need to know when to stay inside and when to go outside. They need to know a pure wool blanket can save their life. They need to drink lots of water.

I understand the situation where those who plan to stay if a Bushfire comes do so because it is convenient. But they must learn how to do so safely. If they make the house safe and they have practised their fire plan, and they remain vigilant on a bad fire day, then the house can save them just as they can save their house.

For the entire duration of each summer, rural residents live with the threat of possible Bushfire. If the plan is to leave, there will be many, many days they will need to consider leaving their home early. In fact, in order to be sure they are safe, they would need to find somewhere they can stay for every day that has high temperatures and strong winds. Is there somewhere they can go to, where they can continue to work and get the children to school; somewhere to relax on the weekend with them that is safe from fire? Safe evacuations may need to be for the whole day and night, perhaps for consecutive days, like during the last week of these summer school holidays.

When people say they will leave, they need to know when it is safe to go and they need to know where they are going to. What if a fire is in the way? I urge Councils to establish premises in towns to be used for Bushfire refuge – a fully serviced “Community House” where people (and pets) unable to defend their own homes, who decide to leave their Bush properties on high fire risk days, early, can have somewhere to go.

For those unsure what they will do, leaving the decision to go until the last minute may be too late to leave. It may be too difficult to see through smoke and embers. Trees or power lines may have fallen across the road. Other bewildered and panic stricken drivers will also be on the road. So will frantic wildlife. Emergency service vehicles might be dashing about. It will be extremely hot. People in cars will still need to have a plan of what to do and how to protect themselves while the fire passes through. Even if residents decide to leave they need to know how to shelter safely. A Roadworthy should include woollen blankets. And drinking water.

For those choosing to Go early, they can leave their home so that it will have a greater chance of being there when they return. The more it is sealed, the less chance embers have of entering. The less cluttered verandas and immediate surrounds are, the less chance of fires starting close to the house.

Information about the design and siting of buildings helps reduce bushfire risk. Recommended fire safety construction aspects help. Metal shutters, metal flywire enclosures and fitted ridge capping helps. Moist, fire retardant planting and 20m fuel clearing from houses provides greater protection. Adequate water reserve and drip sprinkler system fitted to the house can save.

I think it would be absolutely terrifying to hear the roar of Bushfire coming towards you and then passing through at such a speed. The way to reduce the panic is to get busy putting a fire plan into action. There is no time to be idle or wondering. The more active and ready you are, the less panic you will feel.

Knowledge on how to protect one's property and life can be gained through reading the Bushfire literature made available in brochures by the CFA and with more detail in Joan Webster's *The Complete Bushfire Safety Book*

(Random House) and *Essential Bushfire Safety Tips* (CSIRO) and through establishing a Community Fireguard. I suggest information regarding Bushfire safety be made available on front desks of Visitors Centres.

My favourite survival story is one from Kinglake West, on the road to Flowerdale. Jane tells her story to Libby Gore on ABC radio's Bushfire Community on 9 February 2009. Jane hears of the fire at Kilmore. She had been complaining for years that where they live mobile phones don't work, so they have a CFA scanner, to listen to the latest fire reports. Before the telephone lines go dead she speaks to a friend in Whittlesea who tells her the fire is already there, so she calls a friend at Wandong. There is no answer. Jane becomes afraid that the fire is much closer to her than is publicly known. The CFA continue to report that the fire is at Kilmore, nowhere else. She decides to leave and travels with her two children to Flowerdale and onto Seymour, which is safe. Her husband has stayed on their farm. They are fortunate to have five dedicated farm workers who choose to stay and help. They have two containers filled with 1,000 litres of water each on the back of a truck to fight any fire that might come.

In the morning, the woman returns to the farm, with no outside news of events in their area. She discovers Flowerdale and Kinglake West almost completely wiped off the map. The CFA turn up at their property, at 6am, for the first time, to fill their truck with water from the farm's dam. Although the fire front has long passed through, there are burning trees and fence posts and sheds and houses for miles and miles in every direction, which they will need to fully extinguish. But this one farm, with six able-bodied adults and some water, managed to save 500,000 chickens. They did not lose the house or their lives or their chicken farm. Not a single one.

I think all those who saved property and lives should receive medals for bravery.

## Land use planning and management, including urban and regional planning.

***'Of some concern to the Department is the continual subdivision of private land adjacent to public forests throughout the area, resulting in housing development in high-risk fire areas.'***

DSE, North West Region, Bendigo Fire District, Fire Protection Plan 2003.

DSE, Alexandra/ Broadford Fire Districts, Fire Protection Plan 2007.

The Bushfire issue is of utmost importance to residents and communities of regional environments and yet it is continually ignored by developers, town planners, architects, councils and home-buyers.

In June 2003, as a Member of the Happy Valley/Moonlight Flat Steering Committee, Mt Alexander Shire, I submitted a report on the Bushfire Issues of the study area which had a number of characteristics that made it vulnerable to extreme bushfire risk. A development plan involving a significant increase in housing in the valley needed to consider the fire risk to future residents and the measures that households should adopt to lower the individual and community risk. The location was part of a bush Corridor in which a large Pine Plantation was situated in the middle.

*Jon Stanthorpe, ACT Chief Minister had said (7.30 Report ABC), 'Pine Plantations must be away from towns...'* Risk factors in the study area included a proposed housing estate which would interface with Bush on three sides - west, north and east. Much of the wide Creek Flat area was infested with dead wattle, gorse and blackberry presenting high fuel loads. Lessons from the Canberra bushfires were a potent reminder of the risks directly applicable in this case – that merging Bush and human habitation became Canberra's Achilles heel.

I suggested hazard reduction for private land and fuel reduction on public land administered by Dept of Primary Industry, Dept of Sustainability and Environment, Parks Victoria and Shire Councils. Cleanups to consider biodiversity.

- Cool Burn-offs by DSE and DPI followed by Landcare rehabilitation – to prevent erosion and provide wildlife habitat.
- Eradication of weeds such as gorse, blackberry, radiata pine etc.
- Revegetate with fire retardant plants.

None of this has been done.

Suggested Defensive Infrastructure for Urban fringe and Regional Housing Estates -

- 30m (minimum) Firebreaks between housing and high fuel load areas.
- Compulsory Water tank reserved for fire purposes with every house
- Compulsory Community Fireguard/Education.
- Community fire safety plan mandatory for residents
- Road access with adequate turning circle for fire trucks
- Planting of fire retardant vegetation, eg European deciduous trees, orchards and market gardens on perimeters of villages and towns.

The 2003 Fire Protection Plan, DSE, North West Region, Bendigo Fire District, defined high fire hazard areas as, 'Areas where, if fire occurs, it would create a dangerous situation for both residents and fire fighters', and recommended stringent controls on development in these areas.

'In the event that a decision to allow housing development – On site permanent water storage reserved for fire fighting of at least 20,000 litres with CFA compatible couplings on each block.'

The DSE's Fire Protection Plan for the Alexandra/ Broadford Fire Districts states - 'A number of significant townships are located adjacent to public land within the area and these pose particular challenges when considering fire protection issues. In particular, the townships of Marysville, Narbethong, Toolangi and smaller 'villages' such as Granton and Enoch's Point require special attention due to their proximity to forests. Where possible and appropriate, regular fuel reduction burning works are carried out adjacent to these townships to reduce the risk of damage by uncontrolled fire.

*Of some concern to the Department is the continual subdivision of private land adjacent to public forests throughout the area, resulting in housing development in high risk fire areas. To a degree this trend is causing the Department to regularly re-assess priorities and strategies for fuel management.'*

To ensure the safety of human lives and property in extreme high-risk areas, the State Planning Policy Framework insists on fire hazards being considered in planning decisions 'to avoid intensifying the risk through inappropriately located developments.' Supported by both the CFA and Parks Victoria, the Wildfire Management Overlay is an essential ingredient to the success of any development and needs to be recognised as such and respected in Planning Schemes.

A Wildfire Management Overlay means the CFA will place conditions at the planning permit and building permit stages that will require a range of control measures to deal with the wildfire risk. Shire Councils need to employ an Officer to ensure Wildfire Overlay conditions, such as defensible space around dwellings exists, that water tanks are adequate and rooves are sealed, are upheld.

Permit conditions include –

- Water supply permit conditions such as a minimum of 10,000 litres on-site static storage, maintained solely for fire fighting
- Recommended fire safety construction and design aspects
- Access requirements for fire brigade vehicles –such as driveways with an inner radius of 10 metres and adequate turning circles for fire trucks

- Vegetation management permit conditions includes 30 metre zones of defensible space surrounding each proposed dwelling with no elevated fuel on at least 50% of the 'inner zone', sparse elevated fuel, reduced leaf litter and isolated or retardant shrubs. This provides an area of protection from radiant heat, direct flame contact and ember attack.

Establish Regional Shires Bushfire Safety Planning Policy – to include Emergency Plan, for Rural/Bush and Urban Fringe residents.

Shire Councils must make a place available in towns for residents who wish to leave their homes early on a bad fire day and don't have anywhere to go. Somewhere people can come in the morning, with their pets, and wait for bad fire days to pass - especially the elderly, invalid and disabled, and mothers with young children.

It would be safer for all concerned if trees grew on private land and in parks rather than along roadsides. With or without Bushfire, strong winds can bring trees down onto roads and vehicles. Habitat for wildlife close to fast moving traffic never made any sense. Having people drive through corridors of flame doesn't either. This should be considered when Vic Roads plant vegetation along the sides and centres of freeways, such as near Mt Macedon on the Calder.

Those who were fined (in one case \$30,000) for clearing native vegetation on their property in Kinglake in order to create a Bushfire safety zone, and their house survived because of this work, should be compensated.

## The fireproofing of housing and other buildings, including the materials used in construction.

In 'A guide to building in Victoria after the bushfires', the Victorian Government has announced the new residential building standard. With all due respect to the 'extensive research, expertise from fire and building authorities, public consultation around Australia... to ensure that homes are built to a higher degree of fire safety', I believe safety may be compromised in the absence of information regarding Bushfire behaviour and how the owner/resident can play an important role in ensuring that homes are better protected in bushfire prone areas.

This will not only depend on the type of construction and the property's level of bushfire risk. A more finely tuned risk assessment than the new residential building standard's focus on construction requirements would be necessary, to address the level of exposure that a building could face under bushfire attack. Homeowners need to understand that the new residential building standard, the type of design, construction, materials, the location and siting of their homes may be the basis of the ability of buildings to withstand a bushfire attack however, greater protection for the occupants will also depend on proximity of combustible vegetation to homes, flammability of contents in and around home, availability of sufficient water, protective clothing and practised fire plans. Protection for occupants who may be sheltering in buildings while the fire front passes and increased chances of the building surviving will depend greatly on these survival factors and the occupants understanding of them.

The new residential building standard in the State of Victoria should cover all buildings on the fringes of the metropolitan area and those adjacent to state forests, not only new buildings, alterations and additions.

Despite the Government's assurance that 'A great deal of scientific modelling has gone into the new building standard', the 'Bushfire Attack Level (BAL)' should not be the main key to determine the type of construction required.

Homes lost in the 2009 Victorian fires burned no matter what the material used in construction. There were many, many examples of stone, mud-brick, solid brick and brick veneer homes, with some or all of the walls standing, but all else destroyed. It was just as possible for a timber house to remain intact as a concrete fortress, providing the occupants had done the necessary fire prevention and safety chores.

New and existing homes at risk of bushfire need to be required to have:

- Wall and roof joints sealed against ember attacks
- Windows protected by non-combustible shutters or 5 mm toughened glass. Openable portion screened with steel or bronze mesh.
- Sub-floor supports – enclosed by external wall or protection of underside with a non-combustible material
- Floor – slab or enclosed by external wall
- Doors – fitted with shutters, weather strips
- Decking – non-combustible and no gaps
- Vents - screened with steel or bronze mesh

There also needs to be greater focus on reducing the temperature levels of bushfire attack, by reduction of dense, fine fuel vegetation and external content clutter within the defensible safety zone. Houses need to incorporate construction requirements that provide ember protection at all levels and eradicate direct flame contact.

The Victorian Government's description of predicted bushfire attack and levels of exposure is interesting but does not explain who will be responsible for assessing the following and in what season, in regard to localised fine fuel load. I am curious to know how someone can assess, in July for example, whether a house should be classed as 'Bal-19' or '29' or '40' due to a surmised 'Increasing levels of ember attack and burning debris ignited by windborne embers together with increasing heat flux between 12.5 and 19 kW m<sup>2</sup> or 19 and 29 kW m<sup>2</sup>, or with the increased likelihood of exposure to flames.'

No buildings should be permitted in the 'Flame Zone', 'where there is direct exposure to flames from fire front in addition to heat flux and ember attack.' Occupants need to understand that hazardous/combustible material introduced close to housing and other buildings, which may not be part of the construction or permanent fixtures can create a flame zone once ignited.

Houses are primarily at risk from ember attack. Able-bodied residents can put out small fires if they have an independent water supply in tanks and other receptacles such as baths, 44 gallon drums, buckets etc. In the event of Bushfire, mains water pressure and electricity may fail. Residents will need buckets filled with water at various locations around the house, scoops, sprayers and/or knapsacks, water pistols mops and wet towels. It is advantageous to block downpipes and have gutters already filled with water.

The new building standard considers the existing vegetation on the site and the distance between buildings and vegetation. But it needs to be more specific and consider types of vegetation. Trees may be acting as spark shields and increase protection to the buildings and occupants because of their moisture content, size and position. The amount of fine fuel beneath vegetation and the density of flammable vegetation near buildings are as much a factor in determining the intensity of fire. It would be helpful for local Councils to have available –

- Design and Siting guidelines for Bushfire safety
- Planting of fire retardant vegetation information.

It is often believed that houses explode in Bushfire, but a spark or burning ember gets inside the house, through an open window, through cracked glass from fire

burning close to a window, through a vent, down a chimney, up, under the house, under the doors, under the eaves, under the roofing material, into the roof void and into the house. Then you have a house fire. If no one is there to check on any of those sparks entering through any of the cracks or gaps, or if people don't know all the places to look - particularly in the roof void - then the house fire will burn away at varying speeds depending on the interior fabrics of furnishings and contents until, when there is no oxygen left, the windows will burst/break open, implode, and produce a display of sudden fire outside, like an explosion. Unless you were inside the house, you may not even know it was alight. It may have been smouldering in the roof for hours and yet from outside it would appear to have "just exploded". If there is a Bushfire, smoke will be everywhere; there won't be the normal indication a house on fire. Some people lose their house long after a fire front has passed because they did not check the roof void.

During Ash Wednesday houses in Mt Macedon burned down despite their well kept and well-watered gardens and being built of solid materials. The sad part about Mt Macedon is that many residents were spending, back then, \$500 a week on water delivered to save their gardens from one of the worst droughts Victoria has known. But few had even a small water tank attached to the house. There was no water to put out the house fires. Some magnificent gardens survived on the slopes of that ravaged mountain. It was heartbreaking to see the burnt out shells of once grand mansions, where often the two storey chimneys were all that stood proud, all because the owners had not prepared for fire. They did not know what to do. Or they did not want to know.

Many Marysville residents were under the impression that they could rely on water coming from Steavensons River, where at the Falls the town generated their own supply. They did not consider the possibility of trees falling on and destroying the pump system. Residents, who did not prepare their properties with an independent supply of tank water, found they had no water pressure to fight the fires with. The owner of the Crossways Inn was close enough to the river itself to bucket water and save the property.

It would be a great incentive to residents to consider safety improvements and preparedness on their house if Insurance companies recognised how houses can be saved and then gave financial rewards. The safer the house, the lower the premium. A check list could be devised including safety features such as no underfloor area, a cathedral ceiling or sealed roof, metal window shutters, tank water reserves and sprinkler system.

## The emergency response to Bushfires.

Why? Why? Why? The Royal Commission is presently trying to find answers to the many questions regarding the emergency response to the Bushfires. Why did vital information seem to take so long to be relayed from fire spotter to fire chief? Why was some vital information not passed on at all? Why were there so few to attend to so much? Why were residents so appallingly unaware?

Why were 12 fire trucks and tankers manned by over 50 CFA volunteers, with an extra eight or nine firefighters from the DSE sent to Kings Road, Marysville, where a spot fire had been seen, to light a controlled burn, 15 minutes before becoming engulfed in burning embers, and just escaping with their lives? Why were there no fire trucks in any of the streets, to assist residents to douse the embers that would eventually take hold of most of the town's buildings?

But even if there had have been at least one fire truck left at Kinglake and Marysville, would they have made any difference overall to the fire? Not even ninety trucks at Kilmore slowed the fire down. Would it have been better for fire fighters to concentrate more on private properties and towns?

What if there had have been a Bushfire-safe refuge already established in these locations, would residents have gone to them, rather than risking their lives by driving through a road with flames on either side to Alexander, or down the treacherous Kinglake to Heidelberg Rd, or by risking staying in their unprepared homes?

How many residents responded to the emergency by wearing protective clothing and putting out spot fires which landed before the front arrived? How many had enough water? How many knew to go inside while the fire front passed (5-10 mins) then return to check for spot fires for as long as embers fell? How many knew to constantly check the vulnerable spark entry points of their house? And if their house was alight, did they know to go outside onto already burnt ground? Did they know to shelter behind a radiant heat shield or beneath a woollen blanket and to drink lots of water? Why didn't they?

And what of the aftermath? People died on Ash Wednesday where fires were deliberately lit but they were not sealed off as crime scenes. Why was Marysville closed for six weeks, to anyone apart from a team of forensic scientists and police? How upsetting for those residents to be separated from loved ones, to be trapped either in or out of the town, to not be able to rummage through the remains themselves in the process of discovering and letting go. How upsetting for those who wished to rescue their distraught, injured and dehydrated pets and livestock. And why so much back-burning throughout the fire affected areas, destroying yet more habitat and food for already desperate wildlife?

Why the monopoly of Grocon clearing sites?

And what of the future? What about next summer and the next and the next? What about the safety of all the communities along the Great Ocean Road? I spent the last summer holidays there. There are a lot more houses now than there were on Ash Wednesday. A lot constructed without Bushfire safety in mind, nor maintained with safety in mind. Did residents learn nothing from the 1983 fires? Or are they all new folk, who hadn't given it much thought, if any?

The friends I visited had this sign in their house for Wye River, Separation Creek and Kennett River residents, advising them of the Bushfire Emergency Evacuation Procedure in those areas.

'Should a bushfire threaten our villages and evacuation becomes advisable, single note ALARMS will sound continuously. Cover up in woollen clothing and go immediately to your designated disaster area. Wye River Caravan Park, Separation Creek and Kennett River foreshores where emergency services people will be there to assist you.

- Close all your doors and windows – but don't lock them.
- If you can't get away stay in your house or vehicle until the fire front has passed.
- Clear the Ocean road quickly. Emergency vehicles must have unhindered access to it.'

I wonder how many summer holiday makers will have a supply of 'woollen' clothing for all the members of the family? I wonder where the fire will be when they sound the alarm – Lorne? Wye River? Separation Creek? How much time will residents have to go immediately to the foreshore? Will they all be driving their cars down those steep streets, all at the same time? What if the wind has caused fallen trees to block the roads? Where will they all park if they can get through? What will they do once on the foreshore? Will there be shelter from the storm? Will children be fed? Will they sleep on the sand? Will there be blankets?

Will it be safe to drive along the Great Ocean Road? What if the fire comes and smoke makes it too difficult to see and there are multiple car collisions like at Kinglake? Will emergency service vehicles need to push them out of the way, over the edge and into the ocean in order to get through? Or will they say, oh

well, nothing we can do now and back-up to where they came from? What if they can't back up, what if the fire has caught up with them? How will a panic stricken driver, whose vision is impaired by thick smoke, 'clear the ocean road quickly'?

If holiday makers and residents realise they 'can't get away' and they follow the emergency procedure and 'stay in your house (or vehicle) until the fire front has passed', what if embers preceding the fire have already ignited the house? People need to know what to do every step of the way. People need to be educated thoroughly on bushfire safety and preparedness, not have half thought out statements printed in red under the guise of knowledgeable authority.

If Bushfire comes to the Otways or to the Dandenongs without the authorities and inhabitants taking it seriously enough to have already consulted each other with an informed and practised disaster plan, then god help them.

## Public communication and community advice systems and strategies.

The public is informed when it is a Total Fire Ban day. This information is on the News. It is on signs outside CFA stations and often at the entrance to towns. It is on the CFA and DSE websites. A Total Fire Ban Day is the first 'get ready' signal.

On a bad fire day, when I hear the CFA siren, I know local firefighters are being called to get on a truck and go and fight a fire somewhere. If I cannot see smoke, I wonder where the fire is. If it is a really bad fire day, the fire could be anywhere. When I heard the fire siren on 7 February, I assumed our trucks were heading out to the Redesdale Fire. I knew about this fire, and the one at Bendigo, because of the ABC radio reports.

Before 000 came into being, I used to be able to call the local fire brigade and ask someone where the fire was. There were two numbers. One to call in a fire and one to make enquires. Local volunteers, with local knowledge, answered the phones. They knew where the fire was, because they knew the area. When I have called in fires on 000, I have had trouble being understood. One time, the person could barely hear me. There have been delays in getting the name of the place right. If you've never heard of it, Chewton can be thought to begin with a 'T'. In the end it's easier to give the postcode, although in this case, the same postcode is shared by numerous other locations, in each direction outside Castlemaine. Then there is the difficulty of explaining how one road has numerous names, or there may be the same name of a road in various locations. When you speak to a local, they know where you mean. And they can also tell you where a fire is with greater accuracy. Re-introducing a local bushfire phone line would solve the problem of overload which occurred on 7 February with 000 and 1800 240 667.

I have asked our local brigades if it would be possible to have a black (or white) board outside the CFA stations with the location of the fire written on it. They thought it was a good idea, but it hasn't happened. If I live out of town and I am in town doing shopping, for example, and I hear the fire siren, I want to know if the fire might impact on my home. If it is potentially a threat, I might have time to go home and defend it. If it isn't, my stress levels will drop enormously. I realise the CFA usually put this information on their website, but that's no good to me if I'm in the supermarket. I want to be able to walk or drive to a central hub of information – perhaps out the front of the Town Hall – to know where a Bushfire is. Perhaps at the designated refuge hopefully made available by Shire Councils in towns for residents who wish to leave their homes early on a bad fire day and don't have anywhere to go. This same place could then become the Emergency Relief Centre if needed.

When I am at the beach and I hear a siren, I get out of the water because a shark has been spotted in the vicinity and might pose a threat to human life. We need a system that warns people that a Bushfire has been spotted in the

vicinity and might pose a threat to human life. The CFA siren is what most rural inhabitants recognise as that system. Since the advent of pagers, this excellent traditional alarm is not always used, not automatically as a public warning system, even if the public, have, all their lives, relied on it as such. Many, many years ago, the local CFA rang different bells to mean different locations ie. One bell meant the fire was in town. But even if the siren went off simply as a signal of emergency, as it is traditionally interpreted, then people can follow up on further information by phone, by the internet, or by a chalk message on a board.

In the Otways, a notice given to residents at Wye River, Separation Ck and Kennett River, advising them of the emergency Evacuation Procedure in those areas, states, 'Should a bushfire threaten our villages and evacuation becomes advisable, single note ALARMS will sound continuously.'

I have explained to my Community Fireguard groups the frustrations and helplessness they may feel in regards to communication in the advent of a fire in the area. A lot of time can be wasted calling people on the Phone tree, only to find they are not answering. They may not be home or they may be outside activating their fire plan. Phone and electricity lines are usually the first casualties of firestorms. Mobile phone networks can become overloaded and cease to operate. To prevent some of the intense aloneness likely to be felt during the chaos of a fire, it is worth making contact with neighbours and other vital members of a Community Fireguard group the night before each Total Fire Ban day or bad fire day, to find out whether they will be at home. On one occasion I let a neighbour know that I needed to go to Bendigo for a couple of hours. If a fire were to come, we had a mutual arrangement to take care of each other's pets. On the drive home, I saw a huge smoke plume in the general direction of my house. As I got closer I realised the fire was in the Chewton Bushlands and the wind was blowing away from Wattle Gully. Even though my home was safe, I already felt greatly reassured by the previous contact I made with my neighbour. Had there been a direct fire threat, they would have called me.

In the event of no phones working, I have batteries available – for when the power goes out - to listen to ABC Regional Radio bushfire advice. ABC radio does not always get it right, but they often get it first and they may be the only reliable source. I was listening to reports about the Muskvale fire near Daylesford on 24 February 2009. I could see the massive smoke plume from my home in Castlemaine. At one stage the presenter said the wind change had come and the smoke was drifting in a north-easterly direction and had reached Ravenswood, just south of Bendigo. I was watching this fire out my window and was taking photos of it. The wind had been a westerly and then it shifted to a north-westerly, taking the smoke away from us, rather than towards us. The south-west wind change came some hours later. It is quite possible that the smoke seen in Ravenswood was from another fire and should have been reported as such. Residents south-east of Muskvale would have been under ember attack and would not have known this were they relying on the radio for their information.

## Training, infrastructure, and overall resourcing needs.

- Establish Community Fireguards throughout Regional Victoria, to educate residents on their own properties and within their neighbourhoods and local environs.
- Through Community Fireguards, establish lists of people unable to defend their property and if need, provide transport to collect them early on a bad day.
- Educate children in schools
- Educate other groups and organisations and workplaces.
- Educate the Media
- Create Bushfire Safety Policies for all rural schools.

- Create Bushfire-safe schools as was done in the 1980's in the Dandenongs, Warrandyte and Toolangi.
- Ensure DSE, Parks and Council clean up volatile vegetation near to residential properties.
- Re-establish the practice of CFA doing controlled burn offs on private land, to reduce flammable hazards.
- Encourage community service groups to help with Bushfire prevention work such as clearing and cleaning defensible zones around houses; to assist those unable to clean gutters on a regular basis and to remove fire hazardous material from around home including in roof voids, sub-floor areas and gardens.
- Encourage seasonal tasks for Bushfire Safety and prevention, including the practice of fire plans, or fire drills, particularly on bad fire days.
- Provide a Bushfire Safety Tips column in Local Rural Newspapers.
- Put power lines underground
- I would like to see some of the \$300 million dollars raised for the Bushfire appeal go to people in rural communities for the costs involved in prevention and preparedness - before next summer.

## Accountability and Responsibility

As we mourn the terrible loss that Bushfire brought to Victoria on Saturday, 7 February, and as we praise those who aid the devastated, let us also remember individuals and families who saved their lives and property by being prepared and practised. It is easy to overlook those who had a fire plan and survived amongst the tragedy. As we watch news reports we are seldom given answers as to why some houses still stand and why others lie smouldering. Houses ignite because of ember attack. If a house is well cleared and sealed, and if someone fills gutters, closes vents, checks inside the roof void, wears protective clothing and has an independent water supply to douse small fires, there is a great chance of survival, despite a horrific ordeal.

I don't accept the 'people had no warning' response, because if you have lived in SE Australia for any length of time you will know it burns somewhere every summer and that when hot north winds blow on an extremely hot day after weeks of no rain there is a good chance of a devastating firestorm somewhere. No one can predict where the fire will start, but once it has, it will burn in the direction the wind blows it. If a fire starts in Kilmore East and the wind is blowing from the NNW, unless that fire is contained, it will travel to Wandong. Even if it is contained, in those conditions, embers can easily be blown outside containment lines and spot fires will start new fires burning in the same direction. When the wind changes direction and blows from the west, the fire will travel to Humevale and then onto Strathewen. When the south-west wind change comes, whatever is ablaze will be blown in a north-east direction. So, what is on the map to the north-east of Humevale? Kinglake West. What lies in the north-east path of Strathewen? Kinglake. Are people so bad at geography?

Maybe. But its more than that. How many people actually went outside their homes and knew which way the wind was blowing? How many tuned in to any available information to know where or if there was a fire? How many scanned the sky for smoke, or sniffed the air, at regular intervals? Has the electronic, technological age removed people so far from natural warnings?

I believe the people who were not ready, did not want to think about needing to be ready. They didn't want to take the responsibility required to be prepared. How many had their protective clothing laid out ready to wear? What exactly did their Bushfire plan consist of? Did they even have one? If not, why not? Were they so new to the area and hadn't got around to it yet? Did they not understand the environment they were moving into? Or didn't they care? And if they didn't care then, do they now? Does it really matter if you lose everything?

I know you can't make people be prepared and practised, or even willing to be, and for some it's not possible. Or can you? We have laws to make people cut long dry grass in paddocks. The government now recommends residential building standards for new buildings. And we can tell people to dress appropriately for Bushfire in the same manner that people have learned to wear sunscreen and a hat to prevent skin cancer - through persistent education and media advertising.

Residents can be encouraged to think about which of their possessions are most precious and what they would wish to save in the event of fire and to put them in a safe place for the duration of the Bushfire season. This may be at a friend or relative's place in a town or in a sealed metal box buried in the ground.

There is some talk of making evacuation mandatory, but this is totally impractical. We can however, provide people with more detailed information regarding evacuating or staying so they can make a more informed choice; so that they better understand the consequences.

The extreme fire danger warnings issued on Tuesday 3 March 2009 tested many people's already frayed nerves. Even in Castlemaine we heard of people packing boxes and driving to Melbourne. Many, with a heightened sense of fear since Black Saturday, thought they were lucky to be in Castlemaine, where 'there are many exits'. As if Castlemaine, a substantial town, would burn. As if it would somehow be safer outside of the town, driving through the scrub and Bush, where the fire, or spot fires, would actually be. But it is the same thinking that sends people to their deaths whenever there is a bad fire. The panic flight response. The fear that sees people fleeing the potential safety of their homes into the smoke and chaos on the roads, often to their death.

There were 57 houses lost on Black Saturday in Bendigo, our regional city of 100,000 people, and I think this is what has caused many to think that nowhere outside the great metropolis of Melbourne is safe. But the houses burned along the urban interface, adjacent to or a part of old mining areas littered in dry grass and scrub, bush and small cluttered farms. Although some houses were reported as being only 2km from Bendigo's central fountain, all houses lost were on the rural/urban fringe. And I doubt they were fire-prepared.

During the highly stressful three last weeks of February, I think many people chose to leave their rural homes, because Saturday 7 Feb was so horrific and the devastation so widespread, that unless they felt confident and well practised in defending their property, most were too fearful or unready to contemplate staying. There were also those who could not contemplate leaving. I heard one woman's story on the radio as the small town of Taggerty, north of Marysville, was yet again on full alert. She said there was no way she was leaving because she had animals to care for. She had 'activated' her fire plan and saved her house four times in two weeks. I think people like her are the real heroes.

On Tuesday 3 March 2009, a Total Fire Ban Day, almost all Victorian rural schools were closed and children were ordered by the Education Department to stay home due to the predicted 100km per hour hot north winds followed by a south-west change. This decision, handed down at 2pm on Monday afternoon, might have been disastrous, as many children live outside of towns, in vulnerable villages, on hobby farms or in Bush settlements. The late notice meant some parents, who both work, or were only one, could not take a day off and had to leave children home alone. There was no guarantee of families being fire prepared, or their rural homes made fire-safe. On the day, there were one hundred fires State-wide, fortunately all of which were quickly controlled.

Our sense of trust in being safe has been shaken to the core, and not only by the events of one day, but by weeks of constant threat. I suspect the fear of Bushfire will not dissipate for quite some years, if ever - and they will need to be unlikely green years - unless our communal Bushfire safety knowledge grows.

There is also the responsibility of the media which needs to be looked at. The issue of drama versus education. Instead of the repeated message, 'The fire came so fast there was nothing they could do', a balanced report on how some didn't know what to do and others did. The need for reporters to be better educated on the subject of Bushfire. To focus on how and why houses and lives are saved. Instead of the message, 'Through no fault of their own', to have a more investigative approach into who was and wasn't prepared. Who was and wasn't responsible. Whose fault it was and who's it wasn't.

The media could help greatly to educate. Instead of just displaying hero figures standing on roof ridges clad only in a pair of shorts, they could point out the effect of radiant heat and how you don't see fire-fighters dressed like that. People who under-dress risk their lives. In Bushfire people die of dehydration, asphyxiation and radiation. There is an opportunity to publicise this fact. Instead of promoting messages of dangerous last minute flight responses such as where Mark Strubing of Kinglake told Nine Network television news, 'We jumped in the car and we were only literally just able to outrun this fire' or where Jack Barber of Kinglake who 'fled just ahead of the flames with his wife and a neighbour', said, 'We had a fire plan. The plan was to get the hell out of there before the flames came', both of which were described as 'extraordinary tales of survival'. The media could highlight stories such as the 97 year old man at Calignee who couldn't save his house but saved his life sheltering under a pure wool blanket.

On the ABC, Four Corners' *Eye of the Storm*, broadcast on 27 April 2009, Liz Jackson reports on the tragedy of Marysville with a focus on revealing the timeline of events and the response by the local CFA. She states, 'Of the 400 buildings that made up the township of Marysville, only 14 were left standing.' There were actually 35 saved.

When Bruce Jefferson is interviewed about his deceased daughter and son-in-law he believes they '...wouldn't have stood a chance.' He says, 'So you know why are these people saying, stay and defend or, give them the option, they shouldn't be given that option.' He doesn't know if his family decided to stay and defend their home, or just left it too late to leave. But Liz Jackson follows with, '... it's just too hard to stay and defend if it's essentially a fireball.' The Marysville fire was not 'essentially a fireball.' It was burning embers preceding and following a fire front.

Throughout the whole programme only one sentence is given to those who knew what to do, which seemed more than what the local CFA was capable of. According to Liz Jackson, 'When the fire died further Glen Fiske (Captain of Marysville Brigade) joined up with the other firefighters, down at the Oval. Later they went back to town, to see what they could do, helping out **pockets of people who'd stayed and defended their houses and survived.**' Glen Fiske added, 'There was a couple of houses that we put some work into. But there wasn't a lot for us that we could do by then. So we kept drifting back to the oval. That's basically what we did for the night through.'

Journalists used to report car accidents making the driver appear void of responsibility. They would say, 'The car ran off the road', or 'The car veered out of control', as if the driver had no say in the behaviour of the vehicle. Now reporters raise the question as to whether alcohol or drugs or speed or fatigue were a factor. The attitude towards responsible actions before and during Bushfire, and accountability for lack of Bushfire preparedness, needs to be addressed by the media, and certainly by this Royal Commission. This way the public will realise there are wise or foolish choices to be made in the event of Bushfire and that it is possible to learn how to be safe, rather than sorry.

Appendix

Image from Black Saturday: Survival at Strathewen  
by Katherine Seppings

