



## **The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (B): rebuilding after the disaster**

In early March 2009, former Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon took up her role as head of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA). Although the worst of the disaster was over, fires continued to burn in parts of the state and survivors were still tallying their losses. In addition to coordinating recovery and rebuilding efforts undertaken by other entities, VBRRA had taken the lead on three main projects in its first few weeks. They were: clean-up, donations management and the construction of temporary villages. In the longer term, VBRRA's goal was to set communities on the path of reconstruction and enable them to manage the process themselves. The Authority also wanted to foster recovery in a holistic sense which encompassed economic, environmental and social aspects. Funded for a two-year period (barring any similar disasters in the near future), VBRRA had a lot to accomplish.

Once access to bushfire-affected areas was possible, clean-up activities were given top priority, both to enhance public safety and pave the way for reconstruction. But the sheer amount of debris to clear was the least of VBRRA's problems, Chief Executive Officer Jeff Rosewarne observed. The nature of the work demanded sensitivity and patience: some survivors were not ready to return; others wanted to salvage what little remained. Furthermore, normal government processes had to be set aside to find and hire a contractor. Prominent Melbourne firm Grocon was soon selected and the entire process of tendering and signing a contract took less than a week. Worth \$30-\$40 million, Rosewarne knew that such a hastily crafted arrangement could put VBRRA at considerable risk but that there was also little choice under the circumstances. In the end, the contract stood up well and the Grocon teams performed their work with due consideration, even halting demolition on some occasions to help retrieve a family photograph or similar personal effects. Approximately

---

This case was written by Marinella Padula, Australia and New Zealand School of Government for Professor John Alford as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The assistance of Christine Nixon, Jeff Rosewarne, Penny Croser, Deb Symons, Betsy Harrington and Ben Hubbard is gratefully acknowledged but they are not responsible for the content herein.

Cases are not necessarily intended as a complete account of the events described. While every reasonable effort has been made to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, subsequent developments may mean that certain details have since changed. This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Licence, except for logos, trademarks, photographs and other content marked as supplied by third parties. No licence is given in relation to third party material. Version 29-04-2011. Distributed by the Case Program, The Australia and New Zealand School of Government, [www.anzsog.edu.au](http://www.anzsog.edu.au).



400,000 tonnes of material was eventually removed, far more than the anticipated 80,000.<sup>1</sup> Three thousand people registered to have their properties cleared. Three months on, 15 percent of property had been cleared and the clean-up was making good progress.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, donations had been piling up rapidly; enough to fill the 100,000 seat capacity Melbourne Cricket Ground with goods to spare. Charities and relief centres were swamped and local businesses such as trucking companies Toll and LinFox had stepped in to assist with warehouse space and distribution services. Donations ranged from gift vouchers and cars to tinned food and second-hand clothes to hard rubbish. VBARRA hadn't originally intended on getting involved but the sheer volume of goods combined with the potential for fraud or wastage made it difficult for the Authority not to. And there were still numerous businesspeople and other prominent citizens eager to make some kind of contribution. VBARRA knew it had to act quickly to prevent missing valuable opportunities as well as coordinate donors in some way. The potential for conflicting or counterproductive efforts was too great.

Betsy Harrington, a supply chain expert, joined the Authority as a loaned executive from BHP Billiton to oversee the introduction of a donations management system as well as supervise clean-up and temporary village construction. VBARRA took over the arrangements LinFox and others had set up and created a centralised database, so Harrington and her colleagues would know what they had, what was needed and who wanted it. She also spent time advising corporate donors on the kinds of assistance that were most useful to survivors. Harrington often faced an uphill battle in convincing companies and the general public that cash was the most helpful donation of all. As aid continued to pour in, VBARRA introduced identity checks so that only registered bushfire victims would receive assistance and developed a "points scheme" for redeeming goods. Under the system, each item would be awarded a number of points proportionate to its value. Survivors would then have a certain number of points to "spend" according to their needs. This had the added benefit of giving survivors a sense of control in enabling them to choose what they wanted most. After three months, more than one third of donated goods had been distributed.

The creation of temporary villages was another major task. Working out where to locate them was the first of many challenges, including determining ownership of the sites VBARRA wanted to use. In the end, a mix of public and privately leased or donated land was used. VBARRA constructed villages and installed the infrastructure while DHS was enlisted to run the tenancy program for two years during which time tenants would be moved into new accommodation. Tenants paid a nominal rental fee and generally consisted of people who wanted to remain in town while they organised reconstruction or those on low-incomes who could not afford to go elsewhere. VBARRA also arranged caravans and portable toilets/showering facilities for those who wanted to live on their own land.

A significant proportion of the village buildings was constructed and furnished with donated goods and labour, which Harrington noted could present its own set of issues – particularly when it came to scheduling a disparate array of contractors to work at the same time. She described the process of village construction as "evolutionary"; problems arose and had to be addressed. VBARRA, for instance, quickly realised that families would need to be accommodated together and wanted communal areas where they could cook and eat.

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: VBARRA

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

Survivors with pets needed special arrangements too. Meanwhile storage space, security and access roads were just some of the many considerations VBRRA staff had to address at the same time. At the three-month mark, the Authority had built temporary villages at Marysville and Flowerdale – by July 2009 residents were moving into the Kinglake temporary village.

## Looking ahead

While most VBRRA staff were consumed with completing the major projects already underway, Jeff Rosewarne and Penny Croser (Head of Policy and Business Services) were occupied with keeping government and inter-departmental committees informed of developments and communicating between them. As VBRRA expanded, they also had to devise an interim structure (*Exhibit A*) and start making longer-term plans, including the ultimate dismantling of VBRRA. Rosewarne was scheduled to return to the Department of Education in the middle of the year and wanted to leave the Authority well poised to lead the next phase of the recovery process.

He and his colleagues quickly set about developing a Recovery Framework and a long term master plan which would detail VBRRA's objectives into the future. The Recovery Framework (*Exhibit B*) outlined four key areas of recovery, encompassing environmental, economic, social and physical aspects. VBRRA would be involved in all four domains in varying degrees but the local community would be central to decision-making processes. Once people had a chance to convene and reach some kind of consensus about their needs, they would be invited to submit a proposal for community recovery which the Authority would help them enact. The combined proposals from all the affected communities would then form the basis for VBRRA's long-term master plan.

Although she had toured many townships just after Black Saturday, VBRRA Chair Christine Nixon was keen to get back out to affected areas to explain how the process would work and to ensure VBRRA got an unvarnished and accurate account of what people actually wanted. Communities could feel twice victimised: once by the fires and then by governments if they went in and rebuilt without consulting widely. She was also acutely aware that simply relying on councils or pre-existing interest groups might not yield particularly representative views and could hinder the healing process. She and her Executive Adviser Deb Symons once again hit the road to attend a series of public meetings. The Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) assisted them in making arrangements and prepared a series of briefs with information on each town. But, as Symons discovered, there was a lot that they didn't contain:

“What we had to try and do was tap into any existing local networks and local community information and you can't do that from the city. You don't know what the local newsletter is or who the lady at the milkbar is. And that's mainly how those meetings were publicised in those days. It was incredibly scattered. No one was in their houses, so you couldn't just post something out. And in the case of Marysville, no one was there. We did what we could and there was a lot of angst about how much notification we could give but if we'd done it perfectly appropriately it would have been 6 weeks notice and everyone would have received a written invitation, including every minister and opposition member and so on. Because it was such a chaotic environment, it was a huge amount of work just to get people in a hall. I remember having to cancel meetings because memorial services were planned on the same day.”

But people did come. More than 4000 residents attended close to 30 community engagement meetings.<sup>3</sup> The first part of each meeting was devoted to explaining the role of VBRRA and dispelling any rumours, after which Nixon took questions from the audience. Issues raised ranged from the prosaic to the perplexing to the deeply personal, but Symons noticed some general themes. In the beginning, she noted, people were predominantly concerned about what would happen next and whether they would be all right. During later meetings, survivors' grief had morphed to anger and frustration – the focus had shifted from what was happening to what wasn't. But Nixon and VBRRA were committed to answering people's questions. Explained Symons: "We took a position early on that if we didn't know, then we would say so. But we promised that we would find out. I think that's where we earned respect because we weren't just going to make answers up. But it was often really hard to follow up on those questions."

Issues and queries raised during meetings were collated and fed back to VBRRA where they formed the basis of daily meetings. The organisational issues log had three options: 24, 48 or 72 hours to take action, even if that was simply referring the question to the right department. Despite reservations in a few quarters about what VBRRA might do, there was still an overriding willingness to help. "We had unprecedented attention," Symons remarked, "When you rang a catchment authority or a department secretary or anybody and said: 'Hello it's VBRRA' they didn't necessarily know how to fix the problem but they would at least take it for us." Added Croser:

"The enormous amount of goodwill across government to coordinate meant that we didn't have to rely on powers to bring a department into line. There are some examples where if we could have stepped in and taken over it might have helped us. But I don't think legislation would have made a big difference to speed of delivery. But without goodwill you might require it."

## **A grassroots recovery**

Now that VBRRA had been properly introduced, the next task was equipping communities to devise their own recovery plans. Nixon had already enlisted the help of Kerry Thompson, CEO of the Maribyrnong City Council and well respected in local government circles, to act as a conduit between VBRRA and affected councils. Some only had annual budgets of several million dollars and weren't accustomed to delivering more than a handful of building projects each year. They needed assistance to handle the influx of work and funds. Meanwhile, Nixon was keen to see communities form representative groups and submit their proposals. Some communities were already well organised. Kinglake residents for example had established their own bushfire recovery group and invited VBRRA staff to their meetings. Others were still wary about involving outsiders and distrustful of government. Nixon knew that they had a long journey ahead, noting that full recovery from these types of disasters took five to seven years on average, often with setbacks along the way. Post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety were common psychological problems amongst survivors and it could take months or even years for them to decide whether to rebuild or move on. People were usually most vulnerable several months after such events when the adrenaline had dissipated along with public attention. Anniversaries, holidays and similar occasions were also difficult times.

---

<sup>3</sup> Source: VBRRA.

In addition to the personal and emotional issues faced by survivors, there were practical challenges as well. Few residents had much familiarity with the everyday workings of government. Some had a whole new set of skills to acquire such as chairing meetings and drafting scoping documents, Symons observed. There was a very steep learning curve ahead.

VBRRA began by encouraging affected townships to set up Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) for the express purpose of developing recovery plans. While some communities parlayed existing interest groups into recovery committees, Nixon strongly encouraged them to form new groups with as little political and historical baggage as possible. Symons noted that VBRRA didn't want to be too prescriptive in its approach to community groups but at the same time wanted them to avoid trouble further down the track.

For instance, VBRRA suggested that groups consult widely, hold open meetings and make consensus-based decisions wherever possible. Some groups took to the process quite naturally, others struggled. VBRRA elected to be patient and allow groups to seek help as they needed it. Community Development Officers were installed at relevant councils to help plans along and manage the VBRRA-local government interface. VBRRA also published material to guide committee members through the process (*Exhibit C*). In total, more than 30 CRCs were set up across 19 municipalities.

Despite the destruction wrought by the bushfires, Symons noted the ways in which it had brought some communities closer in unprecedented ways. For example, in Hazelwood-Jeeralang (a small Gippsland community) residents submitted a proposal to fund new fencing in the area. However instead of seeking an external contractor the plan made it clear that the community wished to work on the project together. This particular community hadn't been particularly involved before but much had changed since the fires. But in many ways it was an exception. Generally, Symons observed, communities that were close-knit and active before the fires were only more so afterwards and tended to get on the path to recovery more quickly.

## **Settling in**

In mid-2009, CEO Jeff Rosewarne departed VBRRA to return to his post. In his place came Ben Hubbard from the office of then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard. He arrived to an organisation in transition: "The day-to-day catastrophes and challenges weren't happening like they were," he explained, "and the internal arrangements were still there for that day-to-day activity, so there was a change of gear. People did a lot and it was very reactive and I think that was right but at some point you've got to slow down and say: "How are we going to do things generally?""

He began to shift VBRRA, now an organisation of more than 80 employees, towards a weekly rather than daily cycle as they began to resolve minor issues, continue clean-up operations and tackle more strategic goals. Compiling and consolidating individual community recovery plans into an over-arching statewide plan was one of the key objectives but Hubbard also had to address some of the more mundane organisational issues that had been unavoidably sidelined during VBRRA's genesis. Matters such as developing an appropriate occupational health and safety policy were attended to. Other challenges included recruiting community liaison staff who had the right skills and background to relate to bushfire victims. This wasn't always easy.

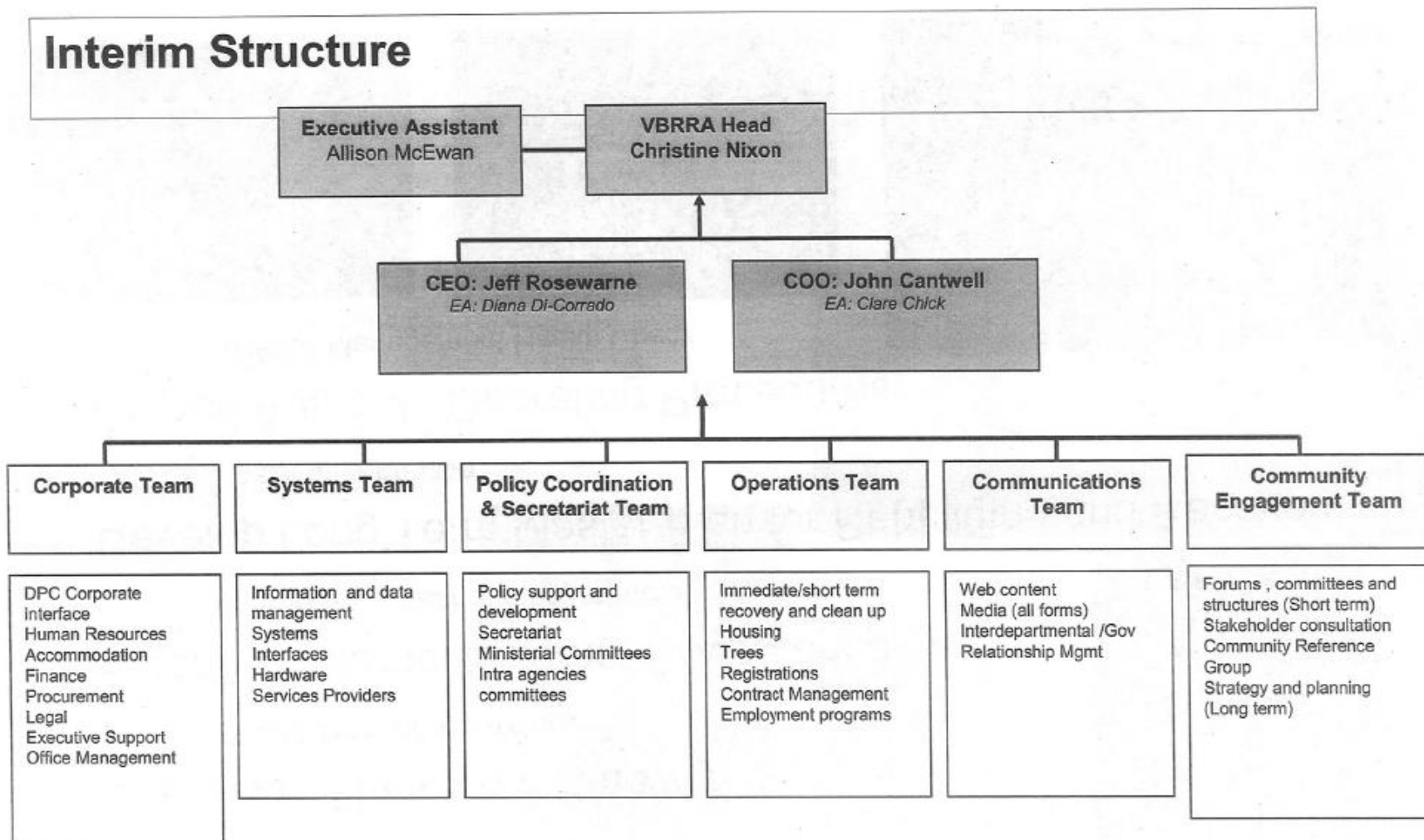
Nor was getting rebuilding projects underway – especially those that involved complex funding arrangements, multiple public and private partners or touchy councils who sometimes felt that they were being usurped. Juggling pro-bono offers and the needs of donors and recipients was another skill VBRRA had to acquire. There was periodic criticism from individual residents, government opponents and interest groups about the amount of time rebuilding projects were taking and the level of bureaucracy involved. But Hubbard had witnessed how attempting to fast-track some projects without proper consultation could backfire. It was a lesson some corporate donors had to learn the hard way as they attempted to get independent projects up.

In October 2009, *Rebuilding Together: A Statewide Plan for Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery* was released. And by the first anniversary of the bushfires in February 2010, much had been achieved (*Exhibit D*). Nearly 300 residents had been housed in temporary villages and more than 1500 rebuilding permits issued. Some 4500 hectares of bushland had been reseeded and 400kms of roads repaired. Almost 90 percent of 21,000 pallets of material aid had been distributed and more than 3000 properties cleared. In fact, the clean-up operation was so successful it finished months ahead of schedule despite the fact that the task was much bigger than originally anticipated.

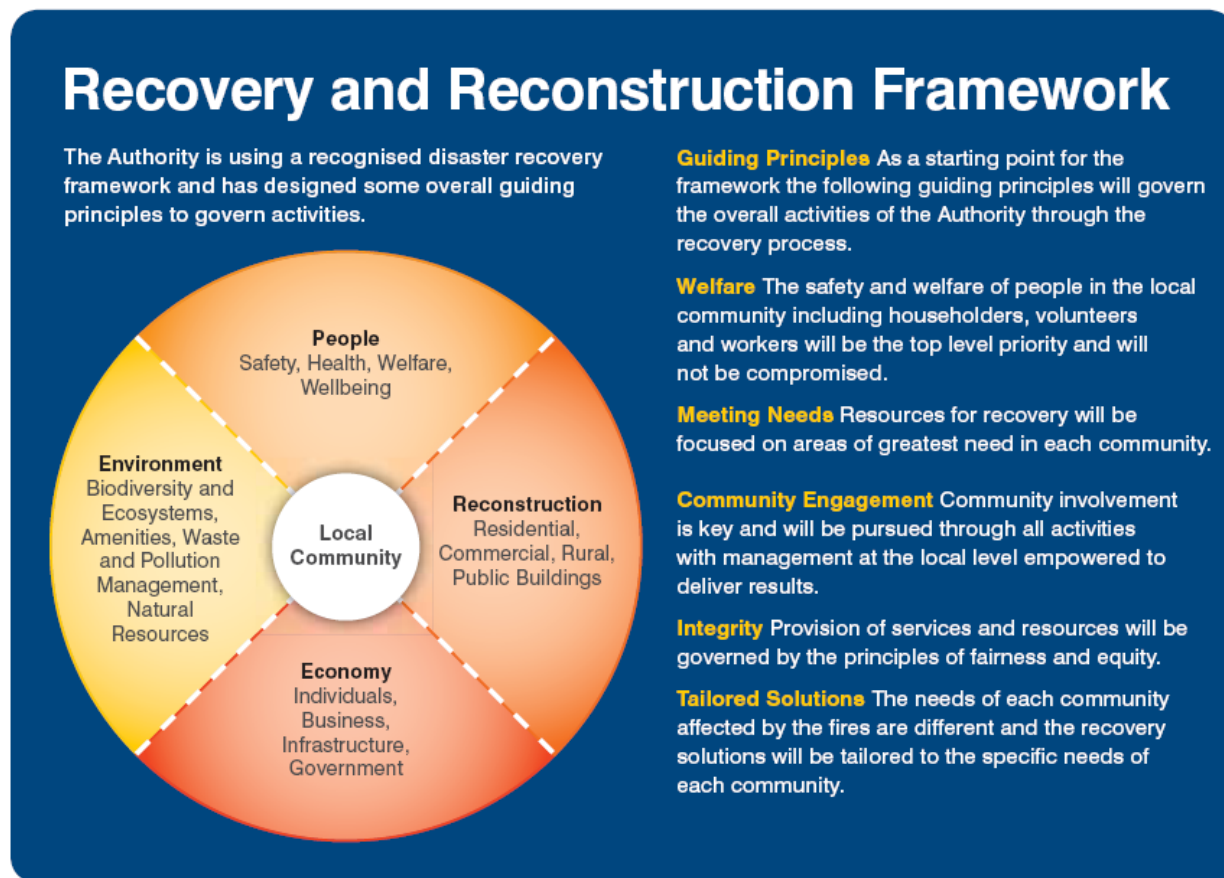
As the organisation was due to wind up in early 2011, many staff were starting to contemplate the prospect of life after VBRRA. Hubbard noted that more than 90 percent of VBRRA staff felt that their work was making an important difference. Penny Croser, Deb Symons and others predicted that many would find it difficult to return to previous roles and usual ways of operating. The VBRRA experience had demonstrated that different departments and levels of government could (largely) put their agendas and rivalries aside to cooperate provided there was a compelling joint mission and sufficient goodwill. (However, having a high-profile and well connected leader like Christine Nixon was also cited as a major asset.) Some believed that these lessons of VBRRA could be translated into everyday government operations; others were less optimistic, forecasting that “business as usual” would prevail. Nonetheless, VBRRA had raised the bar for future disaster recovery but also raised questions. Among them was whether Victoria should have a standing capacity to deal with such events or whether it was better to establish a knowledge base that could be transferred to various situations as needed. Only time would tell.

*Postscript: In July 2010, Christine Nixon resigned as head of VBRRA. As of September 2010, she was set to continue on at VBRRA in a voluntary advisory role.*

**Exhibit A: VBRRRA interim structure**



## Exhibit B: VBRR Recovery and Reconstruction Framework



Source: '12 Month Report' Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, February 2010, p.3.



## Exhibit C: Sample VBRRA Community Recovery Plan

<b>Idea / Need</b>	01	A title for your idea / need
--------------------	----	------------------------------

<b>Description</b>	A description of the idea or need that would help everyone to understand the concept if they hadn't been 'in the room' to hear the idea being discussed to date.	<b>What it would fix / do...</b>	What is the benefit of this idea / need? Who will be supported? How will they be supported to 'recover' or be 'better' as a result of this idea / need happening? How would your community be different from 'now' if this idea went ahead?
--------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

<b>How well is this idea supported within the community? Who has been involved in designing this idea / need?</b>	Are there specific groups of committees within your community that support or sponsor this idea? Have you consulted with people through workshops or meetings? What is your assessment of how well supported this idea is? (Be honest)
<b>What sort of costs would be involved? How might this be funded or resourced?</b>	Can you assess whether this is a major, medium or minor investment - estimated cost? Other funds sources available that might support this? Are there people who would be involved or available? Offers of in kind contributions?
<b>Who would need to be involved to continue this idea / need?</b>	Think about whether you would want / need – council approval and involvement, support from an organisation or particular people, state or federal government 'ok' and support, staff... Who would be your key partners? Who might take the lead on this idea?

<b>Category</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Infrastructure / Community Facility / Rebuilding <input type="checkbox"/> People / Wellbeing / Welfare <input type="checkbox"/> Economic / Business <input type="checkbox"/> Natural environment / parks / wildlife <input type="checkbox"/> Community wellbeing and community strength
<b>Priority</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Highest <input type="checkbox"/> Important <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Lower
<b>Timeline</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Urgent / Now <input type="checkbox"/> As soon as practical <input type="checkbox"/> Medium term <input type="checkbox"/> Long term <b>And, any specific date or timeline to note?</b>
<b>Difficulty Rating</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Straightforward <input type="checkbox"/> Effort required, but can be done <input type="checkbox"/> Longer term and more complex <input type="checkbox"/> Aspirational – a big picture idea
<b>Notes / See Also</b>	Refer to any connected ideas / needs

Source: VBRRRA.

## Exhibit D: VBRR progress snapshot, February 2010

### Communities and People

Community Recovery Committees operating	33
Community Recovery Plans developed	33
Projects funded in plans	Over 250
Community Service Hubs operating	10
Average weekly visits to all Hubs	747
Case managers operating	206 FTE
Active cases	2450
Finalised cases	3033
Bereaved support groups established	8
Membership in support groups	96
People receiving counselling vouchers from the Appeal Fund	1465
Housing needs assessments	1343
People accessing donations management system	3059
Material aid referral cards issued	6831
Material aid storefronts operating	27
People accessing material aid weekly	650
Material aid remaining	11%

### Reconstruction

Rebuilding permits issued	1506
Residents assisted by mobile Rebuilding Advisory Service	614
Volunteer Bushfire Attack Level assessments undertaken	441
Boundary fencing replaced by coordinated volunteer program	6512 km
Damaged roads restored	400 km
Residents in temporary villages	294
Free toilets and showers delivered	370
Properties cleared	3053

### Local Economies

Businesses accessing mentoring services	419
Enquiries to Small Business Victoria and the Rural Finance Corporation	8126
Amount provided through the Income Recovery Subsidy	\$15.9 million
Attendees at Whittlesea Jobs Expo	2500
Resumes collected by employers at expo	1500
Study scholarships available	400
Free nights holiday accommodation offered to affected people	2525
Trout fingerlings released in Murrindindi Shire	2000
Shops operating in Marysville Central shopping centre	8
Full-time staff employed at Marysville Central	13

### Environment

Forests reseeded	4500 ha
Forests being assessed for reseeded	800 ha
Re seeding completed	85%
Control lines rehabilitated on private land	1800 km
Control lines rehabilitated on public land	1600 km
Rehabilitation of control lines completed	100%
Visitor facilities restored in parks and forests	Over 30
Burnt sites in parks assessed to determine extent of fire damage	800
Individual landholders receiving recovery advice	Over 3000
Agricultural field days held for owners of small properties	29
Attendees at field days	Over 600
Stock containment areas	97

Source: '12 Month Report' Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, February 2010, p.4.