



## **The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (A): the challenge**

Saturday, 7 February, 2009: After a day of record-breaking heat in Melbourne, numerous residents took to the streets that evening to enjoy a mild cool change. Many were unaware of the tragic and terrifying events that had been unfolding little more than 50kms away. But as Sunday dawned, so did the realisation that Victoria was experiencing one of the worst natural disasters in living memory. Hundreds of people were feared dead and thousands of buildings had been destroyed or were under threat from a series of fires that were burning across large swathes of northern, central and eastern Victoria. State and federal governments mobilised quickly to provide relief resources. Meanwhile, the public response was swift and overwhelming, with donations of money, goods and services flooding in.

Now, the State was faced with managing the aftermath. On February 10, the State government announced the establishment of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) which would coordinate the very large and complex rebuilding process. Army Major General John Cantwell was appointed the interim head until outgoing Victoria Police Chief Christine Nixon assumed the role in early March. Fires were still burning in parts of the state as she took up her position. Though Nixon had been closely involved with VBRRA from its inception she still faced a daunting task in charting a course for the new Authority whilst dealing with significant logistical obstacles and dozens of traumatised communities.

### **A devastating record**

In total, the February 2009 bushfires claimed 173 lives. In terms of casualties, it was the worst bushfire in Australian history. Fatalities were well in excess of those sustained during

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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 and Deb Symons is gratefully acknowledged but they are not responsible for the content herein.

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prior major bushfires including Black Friday (1939), Ash Wednesday (1983) and Canberra (2003). Approximately 500 people sustained injuries during the blazes, some with life-threatening burns. More than 2100 homes were destroyed, leaving a reported 7000 people homeless.<sup>1</sup>

One million animals were estimated to have perished and approximately 1500 non-residential buildings were lost. Hundreds of culturally and historically significant sites were also destroyed. Socially important infrastructure such as schools, town halls and pubs was lost along with them. Although the events were dubbed “Black Saturday” after 7 February which saw the greatest loss of life, the 2009 fires actually encompassed at least a dozen major conflagrations which burnt from late January until mid-March. Seventy-eight townships were affected and some 430,000 hectares destroyed.<sup>2</sup> By the time the blazes were eventually quelled, almost \$340 million had been spent on firefighting efforts.<sup>3</sup> Approximately \$1.2 billion worth of insurance claims would be lodged in the following weeks and months.<sup>4</sup> Kinglake and Marysville were worst hit, the latter almost completely razed, with fewer than 5 percent of the town’s buildings left standing. They along with towns like Flowerdale and Strathewen had almost been obliterated. Parts of the popular Yarra Valley wine region were affected as well as Wilson’s Promontory National Park – another favourite tourist attraction. Arson was the suspected cause of several fires; others were attributed to lightning strikes and discarded cigarette butts.

Irrespective of the causes, the firestorm was facilitated and exacerbated by a protracted drought plus an unprecedented heatwave throughout southern Australia. By Friday 6 February, the Melbourne morgue was at full capacity after a spate of heat-related deaths; a total of 374 fatalities were linked to the heatwave, mostly amongst the ill or elderly.<sup>5</sup> That same day Victorian fire authorities warned of approaching bushfire conditions “worse than Ash Wednesday”.<sup>6</sup> Saturday 7 February reached a top of 46.4 °C (115.5 °F) - the hottest day in Melbourne since records began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet despite the warnings, the size, speed and ferocity of the fires still caught officials by surprise and left many victims with mere minutes to make life-or-death choices.

## **The recovery begins**

Even as firefighters struggled to subdue blazes across the state, a mammoth aid effort was already underway – the largest seen since Cyclone Tracy decimated Darwin in 1974. On the night of Black Saturday, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and federal Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) Jenny Macklin monitored the fires’ progress closely. “A lot of big decisions had to be made then and there,” she recalled. “We knew that thousands of people had lost absolutely everything. We could see it was going to be a daunting task for families and individuals to pick up all the pieces of their lives. Kevin (Rudd), John (Brumby)<sup>7</sup> and I were constantly talking to each other, working out

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Bushfires leave 7,000 homeless’ *World News Australia*, 13 February, 2009, [www.sbs.com.au](http://www.sbs.com.au) Accessed May, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Source: VBRR

<sup>3</sup> Gray, D. ‘Bushfire measures total \$1 billion’ *The Age*, 6 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Source: VBRR

<sup>5</sup> Cooper, M. ‘Death toll soared during Victoria’s heatwave’ *The Age*, 6 April 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Petrie, A. ‘Worst peril since Ash Wednesday’ *The Age*, 6 February 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Premier of Victoria

how best to structure the relief fund and co-ordinate resources.”<sup>8</sup> Both Governments vowed publicly to rebuild destroyed towns and help repair disrupted lives. The next day Macklin, Rudd and Brumby were at Kangaroo Ground and Whittlesea in Victoria meeting with survivors and local officials. Government agencies and welfare organisations had been there since dawn, offering assistance to victims still struggling to comprehend the scale of the destruction and the velocity at which events had transpired.

In total, four major relief centres were set up on the outskirts of Melbourne to provide emergency assistance including food, first-aid and temporary shelter. Christine Nixon also visited in her capacity as Chief Commissioner. Over the next few days, as police officers manned roadblocks and began the grim task of casualty identification, Nixon toured some of the worst affected areas. The destruction was so severe in some areas that police were using tools such as Google Street View to determine where homes had been. Numerous missing persons were still to be located and the intensity of the inferno had destroyed many recovered bodies beyond recognition. Forensic experts had been called in to aid uniformed officers and start the long process of obtaining dental records or other evidence. Said Nixon:

“It was just sheer devastation. I think in some cases it was an advantage that I hadn’t seen what some of these places looked like before. You saw people who were in absolute shock and people who were desperately trying to support them. It was quite an amazing process. Journalists were just beside themselves, they were shocked; the Premier was shocked; the Prime Minister was shocked and you could gradually see that growing over time.”

The following Tuesday she arrived in Marysville to the incongruous sight of an abandoned boat in the middle of Gallipoli Oval – left in haste by an evacuee. Whilst there she caught up with the Prime Minister and they discussed how the rebuilding phase might proceed. Nixon impressed the importance of enlisting people who understood communities and understood that recovery was as much about restoring communities as it was about replacing infrastructure. Later that day, the Victorian Premier offered her a position as head of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) effective immediately. VBRRA would be a new entity, jointly funded by the State and Federal governments to co-ordinate and report on recovery activities in bushfire-affected areas. This would be the largest program of this kind ever seen in Victoria, costing governments in the region of \$1 billion.<sup>9</sup>

Nixon, who was due to leave Victoria Police at the end of March, accepted the job on the proviso that she could have several weeks to wind up her duties first. She would, however, liaise closely with VBRRA to ensure a smooth transition. Her conditions were accepted and the Prime Minister appointed Major General John Cantwell from the Australian Army to act as interim head until Nixon took over in early March. He would then become Chief of Operations. Cantwell’s initial task was to survey the damage, establish survivors’ most pressing needs and facilitate arrangements. To do this, he brought in his own team of army personnel to accompany him across the state and provide support.

In the meantime, VBRRA had some pressing needs of its own. Jeff Rosewarne, Deputy Secretary (Resources and Infrastructure) at the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, was granted temporary leave to become VBRRA’s interim CEO. Unfortunately however, he had no budget and no staff. The Authority, so far, consisted of himself, Christine Nixon and Major Cantwell. He remembered his first actions vividly: “I

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<sup>8</sup> Skelton, R. ‘Out of the fire’ *The Age*, 31 March 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Gray, D. ‘Bushfire measures total \$1 billion’ *The Age*, 6 May 2009.

came back into my office,” he recalled “and grabbed my two executive assistants and said: ‘I’ve got news for you, you’re coming with me.’” The next challenge would be to find a desk and an office. Attracting additional recruits, however, would not prove to be problematic. “Everyone wanted to come and work for VBRRRA,” Rosewarne noted, “and Departmental Secretaries were incredibly generous in suggesting people and allowing people to come. I know a lot of people and I was relying on people’s judgement that no one was going to send someone unsuitable.” The response was unparalleled; applications flooded in from all over Australia and across the world. Although there was no shortage of talented and capable staff available, Rosewarne wasn’t yet exactly sure who he’d need and what they would be doing.

## **VBRRRA takes shape**

VBRRRA was set up as an Administrative Office of the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) reporting directly to the Premier. DPC arranged temporary funds and facilities to get VBRRRA started. Penny Croser was working within the Policy and Cabinet Group when she volunteered to join VBRRRA as Head of Policy and Business Services soon after Black Saturday. She recalled some early discussions about exactly what form VBRRRA would take, including whether it would be a statutory authority with enabling legislation. But that was not to be. In the end, Croser believed that the government chose the Administrative Office model to expedite VBRRRA’s establishment. But although they lacked legislation detailing VBRRRA’s precise functions, she observed that the organisation had an “enormous amount of goodwill” to draw on. “It seemed that as a coordinating body VBRRRA would have sufficient power to do what it needed to do,” Croser said. But that would entail a wider variety of activities than they initially anticipated.

Most government departments, statutory authorities and local councils had emergency management plans and powers that they could invoke during and after a crisis. Early on, Croser explained, they determined that if a task was a normal part of what a particular authority would be expected to do during disaster recovery, then it would be left to them with VBRRRA providing troubleshooting or fast-tracking help. VBRRRA would also coordinate recovery efforts across departments to avoid duplication of effort and ensure the government’s overall objectives were being met. But the scale of the disaster and depth of need prompted the government to expand VBRRRA’s remit to include service delivery as well. For example, noted Rosewarne, the Premier was keen to get the clean-up process going as quickly as possible and decided that VBRRRA would take carriage of it. “Clean-up was not a role that had a logical place in government,” said Croser, “it was the first big statement about what VBRRRA would do.”

Other problems presented themselves. The public reaction to the bushfires was marked by an outpouring of grief matched by an equally strong desire to help. The official appeal fund set up by the Red Cross, in consultation with the Government, raised in excess of \$100 million in just over a week.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, relief centres and charity organisations were inundated with donated goods and offers of volunteer work. After a few days, agencies had largely run out of space to accommodate the seemingly endless truck and trailer-loads of cargo which were arriving from every corner of Victoria and beyond. Donations encompassed everything from cars, fridges and holidays to toothbrushes and ladies’ lingerie. Cataloguing, storing or

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Red Cross urges people who escaped bushfire to register their details as soon as possible as appeal fund passes \$100 million’ Media Release, Australian Red Cross, 16 February 2009.

distributing these goods properly was beyond the capacity of most centres trying to address the immediate needs of displaced survivors and exhausted emergency workers.

Deb Symons was seconded from Victoria Police to act as Christine Nixon's Executive Adviser and was keeping her abreast of developments until she joined VBRRRA full-time. She too was confronted with a deluge of generosity: "There were several hundred emails per day to Christine with most people offering help," Symons recounted. "They'd range from: 'I'd like to help and I run a trucking company' through to 'I'd like to help and I'm an internationally renowned emergency management [consultant].'" Sifting through them was a job in itself.

Symons had also joined Nixon on many trips to bushfire-affected areas and one of the many aspects that struck her was the diversity of communities involved. They spanned regional centres, isolated rural hamlets and semi-suburban areas where residents often commuted to the city for work. Some had an active, tight-knit civic base. Others were much more disparate, united by little more than a post-code. Yet others had councils that were strapped for cash and/or riven with internal conflicts. And sadly, some communities had lost their leaders altogether. While the shock was palpable wherever they went, Symons observed that survivors on Melbourne's metropolitan fringes were perhaps the most shocked of all. "They were still trying to grasp what happened," she noted. For them it was inconceivable that such an event could occur. Federal Minister Jenny Macklin too had witnessed some of the fallout:

"In the days that followed [February 7], Macklin saw first-hand how incapacitating the losses were. She saw survivors who had been provided with shelter and cash but who had lost the capacity to make decisions. A woman who had received her first payment standing in a hardware shop unable to pick a clothes horse; a man shifting through the ashes looking for valuables only to leave them behind."<sup>11</sup>

Although many survivors struggled to think beyond the next 24 hours, many were also keen to get back into their homes and/or communities as quickly as possible. Friends, family members and total strangers from all over Victoria had opened their homes to survivors but a significant number were likely to be homeless for several months or more. There was the fear that the social fabric of towns might be irreparably damaged if people stayed away too long. There were also concerns about those who could not access public housing (despite being prioritised by the government) or the private rental market. Moreover, regaining a sense of normality was frequently shown to help in disaster recovery, e.g. children returning to their regular schools. While members of the Australian Army worked on restoring basic amenities to affected townships, such as clean drinking water, it was decided that temporary villages would be built to offer stable medium-term accommodation for those who needed it.

Initially Rosewarne assumed that the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) would take charge of the project. DHS had an Emergency Management Branch within its Operations Division which, in addition to providing DHS with emergency management support, had also been designed to:

- Provide overall policy and procedure development for recovery management
- Coordinate state-wide or state-level recovery from emergencies
- Support regions in the regional and local management of recovery from emergencies.

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<sup>11</sup> Skelton, R. 'Out of the Black Saturday fires' *Brisbane Times*, 30 March 2009.

DHS had (in conjunction with the Federal Government) already taken charge of distributing emergency payments to survivors and was arranging case managers to work with individual families. The case managers would establish their particular needs and help victims navigate the burgeoning array of grants and services now available to them. Many businesses had been destroyed in the blazes and the local economy with them. Employment was set to become a significant concern in many townships. A series of Community Service Hubs were being set up around the hardest-hit locations where people could access the information and referrals they needed. However, when it came to constructing temporary villages, DHS was hesitant. To avoid delays, Rosewarne felt that VBRRRA should step in and he soon found himself having to recruit a small army of construction experts. He also noticed a little tension surfacing:

“There was all this emergency work going on that DHS and the CFA<sup>12</sup> and the other authorities had responsibility for and their question was: Does that mean VBRRRA coming in over the top of us? And what we had to do was try and appease them and make it clear that we wouldn't. But at the same time we were doing things that might have traditionally been done by someone else.”

As for the other army, Major Cantwell had been busy laying the groundwork for VBRRRA's clean-up and construction projects. He took a no-nonsense approach to the relief and early recovery phase which was helping to win public confidence that things were underway. Noted Croser: “Local governments were overwhelmed and DHS was pretty stretched and having real trouble dealing with these emerging issues and it really needed a strong central figure to crack through and say: ‘We need water in Kinglake.’ Who pays for it needs to be a secondary question at this point.” However, some within government wondered privately whether VBRRRA could maintain the momentum and make good on its commitments.

## **The next chapter**

By the third week after Black Saturday, VBRRRA finally moved its temporary home in DPC to its new offices in Collins Street near Parliament House. Fitted out with donated goods and labour, the headquarters itself was a testament to community spirit. Nixon was now ready to take over as Chair and, Croser recalled, had some definite ideas about how recovery should proceed: “Christine took a very strong view that we needed to hear directly from the communities themselves – that we couldn't afford to have those views filtered through local government committee processes. We needed a direct route in and representative groups to tell us what the communities wanted.” This stemmed from her research suggesting that community-led recoveries tended to be the most successful long-term. But working with a wide variety of scattered and distressed communities would be no easy feat. Nor would completing the ambitious projects already underway.

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<sup>12</sup> Country Fire Authority

## Exhibit A: Before and after Black Saturday



CFA crew. Source: *Firestorm: Black Saturday's tragedy*, Dennis Jones & Associates, 2009.



Approaching flames, Source: *Firestorm: Black Saturday's tragedy*, Dennis Jones & Associates, 2009.



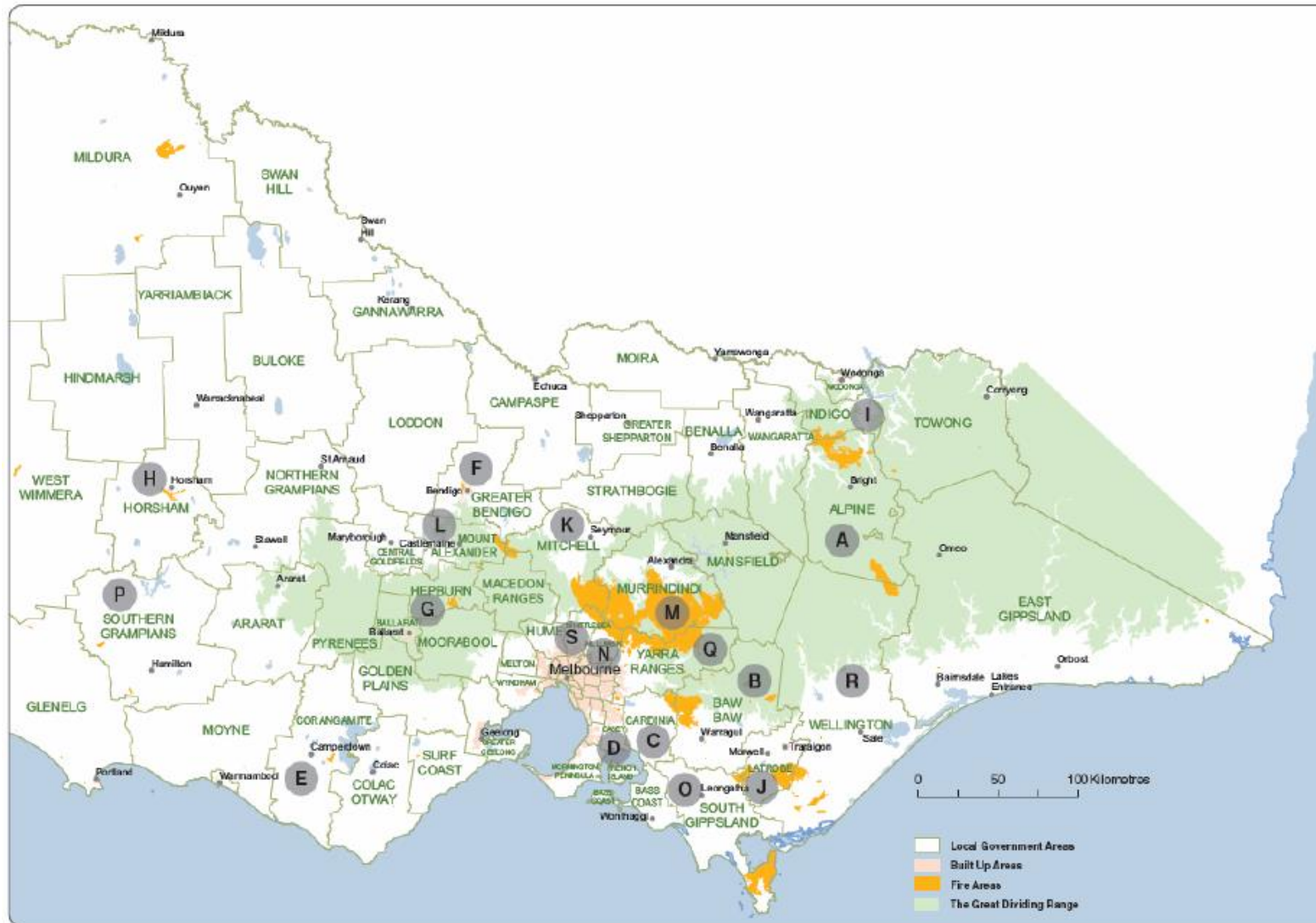
Yarra Glen home after fires, Source: Wikimedia Commons, Photographer: Nick Carson.



Lake Mountain, Source: Wikimedia Commons, Photographer: Nick Carson.



## Exhibit B: Map of bushfire-affected areas



Source: VBRR