
Interim report from the ministerial taskforce on
bushfire recovery

February 2003

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Foreword

The bushfire season of 2002–03, and in particular those fires in North East Victoria and East Gippsland, stand with Ash Wednesday in 1983 and Black Friday in 1939, as the largest bush fires experienced in Victoria.

This week there has been the tragic loss of a fire fighter and staff member from the Department of Sustainability and Environment. The government extends our deepest sympathy to her family, friends and colleagues.

That these fires have not resulted in the levels of tragedy through greater loss of life, and hardship through loss of property as experienced in those two earlier events is in no small way due to the dedication of the fire fighters, the many support staff and volunteers behind them, the preparedness of our communities, and the improvements in emergency management that we have been able to implement as a result of our past experiences. The State of Victoria, and the community more generally, owes a profound vote of thanks to those people who have given unstintingly of their time, or supported their loved ones or employees and colleagues to do so.

The successful suppression of an enormous fire in the Big Desert in the State's North West, was closely followed by bushfires which have threatened different communities in the North East/East Gippsland. These fires have been burning for over 50 days and have burnt through 1.1 million hectares, the majority of which is public land. Much needed rain in the last week has slowed the progress of the fires, but they are not out yet. These fires will continue to burn through March or until heavy autumn rains arrive. Given the last five years of drought this is not certain, but long-range weather forecasts give us reason to be hopeful.

As with any natural disaster, emergency response and recovery procedures came into play immediately. We have reason to be proud of the excellent coordination and cooperation that has minimised individual tragedy and loss. Equally, we can be pleased at the speed with which recovery planning, even though the fires still burn, has been positively activated in the local regions. The State and communities have learnt from the past—recovery is too important to be impeded by poor planning and useless non-cooperation.

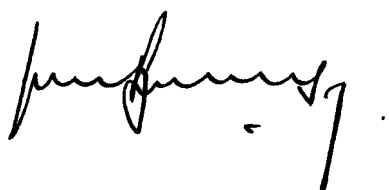
The Premier quickly saw the need for additional focussed government attention and established a Ministerial Taskforce. The terms of reference are to:

- Assess the impact of the fires on the economy, infrastructure, industries and communities in country Victoria.
- Work with Tourism Victoria and local tourism organisations to identify opportunities to assist the tourism industry.
- Determine whether existing Government programs and projects can be fast-tracked to boost confidence in affected regions.
- Assess the need for any additional short-term programs to assist communities and individuals recover from the fires.
- Recommend to Cabinet a range of medium and longer-term policy initiatives to restore growth opportunities and confidence in the regions and across different industry sectors.

The Premier, members of the Taskforce and other Ministers have visited and talked with the affected communities and received submissions. This Interim Report provides the first summary of the actions we have taken to date and the new measures we intend to implement in the coming weeks.

Our attention will continue to focus on longer-term actions that are required to re-establish the social, economic and environmental well-being of the affected communities. These will focus on industry support, infrastructure (including public land assets and tourism), water quality, environmental protection, rehabilitation and community building. These are not easy challenges—either for the Government or the communities in the North East/East Gippsland. But the spirit of unity shown to date in the recovery process shows we are jointly prepared to confront them.

The Taskforce expects to present its final report and strategies in late March. Until then we will continue to consult with and listen to the affected communities to find solutions to the damage wrought in the worst bushfire season for decades.



The Hon John Brumby MP
CHAIR
MINISTERIAL TASKFORCE ON BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery Members:

The Hon John Thwaites MP, Deputy Premier and Minister for Water,
Environment and Victorian Communities

The Hon Bob Cameron MP, Minister for Agriculture

The Hon Sherryl Garbutt MP, Minister for Community Services

The Hon Candy Broad MLC, Minister for Local Government

The Hon John Pandazopoulos MP, Minister for Tourism

The Hon Andre Haermeyer MP, Minister for Police and Emergency Services

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Executive summary

The Premier, Steve Bracks, MP, announced the formation of the Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery on 31 January 2003.

The Ministers appointed to the Taskforce were:

- The Hon John Brumby, MP, Treasurer and Minister for State and Regional Development (Chair)
- The Hon John Thwaites MP, Deputy Premier and Minister for Water, Environment and Victorian Communities
- The Hon Sherryl Garbutt MP, Minister for Agriculture
- The Hon Candy Broad MLC, Minister for Local Government
- The Hon John Pandazopoulos MP, Minister for Tourism
- The Hon Andre Haermeyer MP, Minister for Police and Emergency Services

The final report of the Taskforce will be presented at the end of March 2003.

Action to date

The Government has already responded with a multi-million dollar package to support recovery including:

- \$1 million for the establishment of a Bushfire Recovery Trust Fund with an 1800 hotline for community and business donations. This has been matched by a \$1 million contribution from the Commonwealth Government.
- \$733,000 for a Social Recovery Strategy that includes funds for community development workers and counsellors to Indigo, Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland Shires.
- \$500,000 for the provision of emergency fodder to farmers through the Victorian Farmers Federation.
- \$200,000 for grants of up to \$50,000 each to the Towong, East Gippsland, Indigo and Alpine Shires to support municipal emergency co-ordination centres, community meetings and volunteers and to celebrate the community spirit and resilience during recovery from the bushfires.
- \$175,000 has been provided to over 400 families as Hardship Relief Grants.
- \$200,000 for the employment of 20 short-term employees over three months to deliver immediate emergency fire recovery works in parks and reserves.
- \$100,000 has been redirected to commence repair of key tourism and access roads and tracks impacted by fire in the Alps.
- Rural Finance Corporation Concession Loans to primary producers and small businesses.
- \$100,000 available to fund an additional 5 'doggers' to be employed on a short term basis in Gippsland to work with the local community to coordinate baiting and trapping of wild dogs for stock protection purposes.
- \$70,000 advertising campaign commenced on 16 February 2003 with a series of full and half page announcements from the Premier in Melbourne newspapers outlining the facts relating to tourism in the bushfire affected regions and highlighting events and other travel opportunities.

- \$50,000 to local commercial tour operators to undertake preliminary assessment of fire impact on tourism infrastructure.
- \$30,000 to employ local commercial tour operators to deliver guided walks and interpretation of fire affected areas as a free service to encourage tourism.
- \$10,000 grant to the Omeo Hospital to purchase a new computer server to improve electronic communications with other health services.
- \$50,000 for Public Relations Consultants to work with the tourism industry in fire affected communities.
- Assistance to 342 landholders to undertake comprehensive assessments of agricultural and livestock losses.
- Establishment of the Volunteer Register via an 1800 hotline number for community members to register their interest in assisting in the recovery efforts.
- Repair and recovery to damaged roads and bridges with four roads re-opened and repairs commenced on seven others while assessments of damage and repair works are continuing.
- Extension of Education Maintenance Allowance grants to eligible families affected by bushfires.
- Trauma counselling for school staff and students in fire-affected areas.
- Extension of the Pre-School Support Allowance to bushfire-affected families.
- Business support, referral and access to business programs for bushfire affected communities through Victorian Business Centres.

New initiatives

In addition this Interim Report includes the following new initiatives totalling \$10.6 million to be implemented in the coming weeks and months:

- \$1.9 million Tourism Victoria Marketing and Public Relations Strategy to support the reinvigoration of the tourism sector focussing on industry development, events, newspaper and television advertising and promotion of the fire affected regions.
- \$5.75 million fencing package including \$1.2 million to clear areas around fence lines; \$200,000 to coordinate volunteers/paid workforce for fencing work; \$600,000 for subsidies for temporary stock containment areas, up to \$3.75 million in total as a contribution for dog fencing adjoining Crown land on grounds of public safety and animal welfare.
- Establishment of the \$2.8 million Regional Development Victoria Bushfire Recovery Fund grants program to provide financial support for community infrastructure projects, and economic and community development in bush fire affected regional and rural communities.
- Skilling Small Business for the Future program delivered through Wodonga TAFE to provide 24 people from the farming community in the NE with the skills to develop a business plan which includes a 'disaster management' planning component. This is now part of a business resumption program which involves a business and community roundtable and video conference forum sponsored by financial support of \$10,000 from TXU and facilities support from Telstra Countrywide.
- The Government has reviewed its stock of public land suitable for grazing and will make what it has found available for people that express interest. However, the area is limited so it will not be able to meet everyones needs. The Government will have to prioritise cases based on individual circumstances.
- \$80,000 to support Local Government in the Alpine, Indigo, Towong and East Gippsland Shires to fund structural engineering assessments of 19 identified damaged bridges.
- \$15,000 to provide occasional childcare for families while they participate in recovery activities.
- \$100,000 to replace the standby generator at the Alpine Valley Health Service in Bright.

- Waiving of fees for Certificates of Title lost as a result of the bushfires.

This interim report details recovery responses made by the Government to the social, economic, infrastructure and environmental impacts of the devastating bushfires in Victoria.

The Government will work with the community to build on the actions taken to date to re-establish the health and prosperity of the affected communities.

1. The current bushfire situation

Victoria has received below average rainfall for the last three years, resulting in drought conditions and significant water deficiencies in many parts of the State. Abnormally dry conditions, in conjunction with low levels of soil moisture, have created the potential for extreme fire conditions and behaviour during the 2002–03 fire season in Victoria.

The prevailing environment for fire during the 2002–03 season is similar to those encountered in 1983 when the State was ravaged by the Ash Wednesday bushfires. Most of Victoria is classified as being at extreme fire risk.

Predictions of the severity of the 2002–03 fire season have been realised. To date 3001 fires have occurred across Victoria this fire season with over 1.3 million hectares of forests, parks and private land burnt.

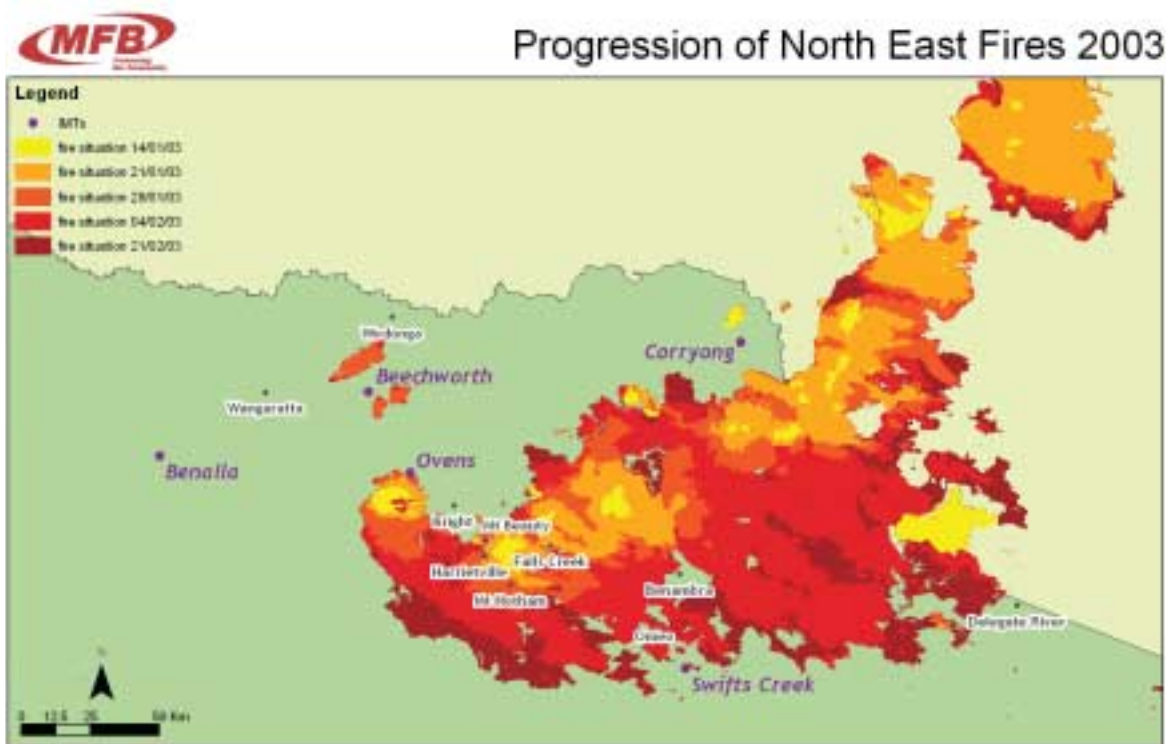
A fire in the Big Desert between the 17 and 24 December 2002 burnt over 180,000 hectares, which alone was over 150 per cent more in area than the twenty year annual average burnt.

Protecting Victoria has been a priority, with fire agencies working together to ensure fire cover and emergency response capability throughout Victoria. The commitment to protecting Victoria has been demonstrated on numerous occasions with major outbreaks of fire at Yarram, Sale, Glenrowan, Eldorado, Stanley, Woodend/Macedon, Lara, Wodonga, Hastings, Cerberus, Morwell, Carlisle River and Lethbridge successfully managed during this period.

1.1 Progress of the fire

On 7 and 8 January 2003 lightning started 84 fires in the North East of the State. All but nine fires were extinguished. The fires in the North East, which started in the Alpine region, moved progressively towards East Gippsland.

The extent of the fires, as they move towards the east of the state, is shown below.

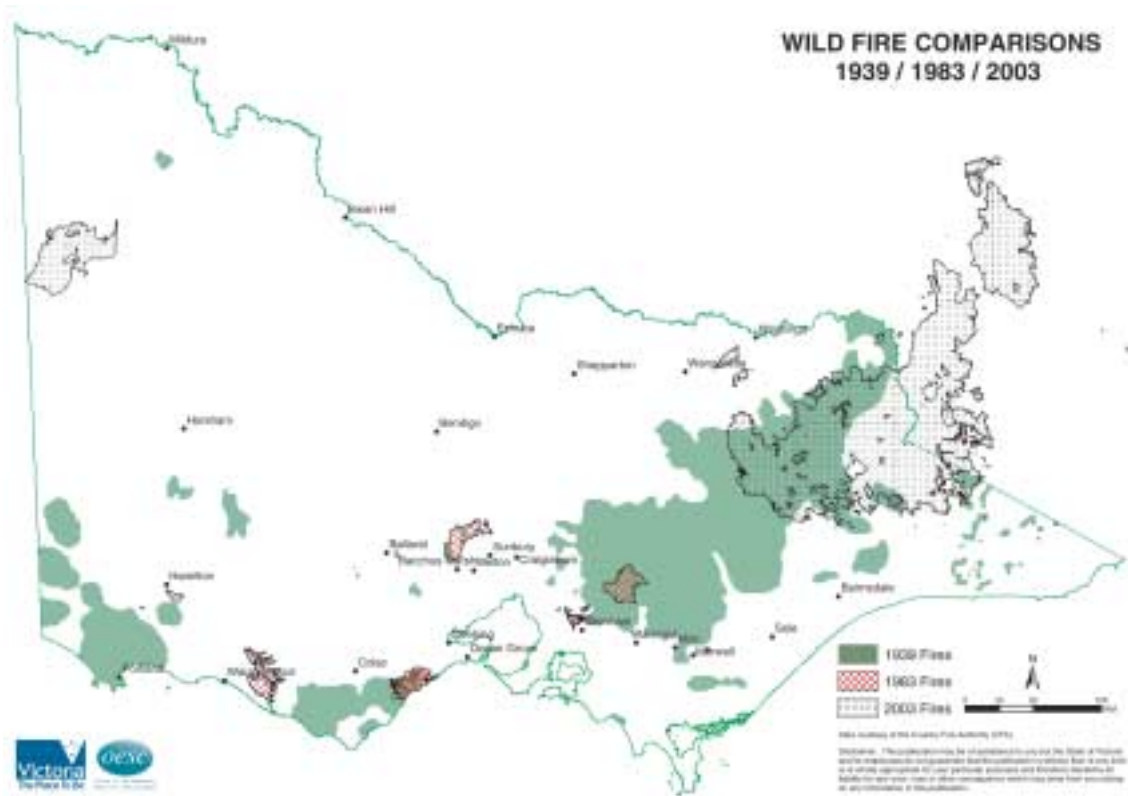


Size

The fires burning in the Bogong Complex in the North East of the State are the largest fires experienced in Victoria since the 1939 bushfires that burnt in excess of 1.5 million hectares. The North East fires have, so far burnt over 1.1 million hectares of land, including 500,000 hectares of park, 600,000 hectares of State forest and 57,000 hectares of farmland. This represents an area equivalent to a 60 kilometre radius of Melbourne (see map below), and over nine times more than the 20 year annual average.



A comparison of the 2003 fires with the 1939 and 1983 bushfires is shown below.



Despite the magnitude of the fires, losses to life and property are very low compared to other major fire events in Victoria. Comparative losses are outlined below:

Losses	1939	1983	2003
Fatalities	71	47	1
Houses	650	2000+	41 houses
Stock losses	N/A	27,000	11,160
Area burnt	1.5 m hectares	200,000 hectares	1.3 m hectares

The comparatively minimal loss of property experienced as a result of the 2002–03 fires are a direct result of the preparation, planning, and commitment of local communities, and fire and volunteer agencies to the protection of lives and properties.

Early indications are that more than 1,100 houses/dwellings in the immediate vicinity of fires were saved. Over 7000 houses/dwellings within normal spotting and ember attack distance (5 kilometres) were also saved. One of the notable characteristics of this fire season has been the greater than normal distance of ember spread, thus more houses/dwellings have probably been saved than these estimates indicate. Other significant saves include major infrastructure, alpine resorts, power generation, communications, towns and villages, important environmental assets and pine plantations.

1.2 Communities affected

The following communities and towns within the Shires of Indigo, Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland together with the alpine resorts of Mt Hotham and Falls Creek were directly threatened by the fires. However the impact has been far reaching, affecting communities across all Shires.

East Gippsland Shire Council

Anglers Rest
Benambra
Bindi
Bonang
Brookville
Bruthen
Buchan
Buchan South
Butchers Ridge
Cann River
Cassilis
Cobungra
Deddick
Delegate River
Dallicknora
Ensay
Gelantipy
Glen Valley
Glen Wills
Hinnomunjie
Murrindal
Omeo
Seldom Seen
Shannonvale
Suggan Buggan
Swifts Creek
Tongio
Tubbut
W. Tree
Wulgulmerang

Wellington Shire Council

Crooked River
Dargo

Wangaratta Rural City Council

Eldorado

Alpine Shire Council

Bogong
Bright
Buckland
Buffalo River
Coral Bank
Dandongadale
Dederang
Dinner Plain
Eurobin
Freeburgh
Germantown
Harrietville
Lake Buffalo
Mount Beauty
Mount Buffalo
Mudgegonga
Myrtleford
Nug Nug
Ovens
Porepunkah
Rosewhite
Smoko
Tawonga
Tawonga South
Wandiligong

Indigo Shire Council

Beechworth
Indigo Valley
Murmungee
Stanley
Woolshed Falls
Yackandandah

Towong Shire Council

Biggara Valley
Corryong
Cravensville
Cudgewa Valley
Dartmouth
Granite Flat
Little Snowy Creek
Lucyvale
Mitta Mitta
Nariel Valley
Thowgla

1.3 Management of the fires

While the fires are still going, at the peak of the current fires the resources committed to suppression activities have included:

- over 1700 CFA volunteers per rotation
- 3350 firefighters and support staff from government agencies (DSE, DPI and Parks Victoria)
- 120 army/navy personnel
- 120 SES staff and volunteers
- 11 Metropolitan Fire Brigade officers per rotation
- Metropolitan Fire Brigade backfill to CFA stations
- 116 South Australian firefighters
- 130 NSW Rural Fire Service personnel
- 68 Queensland Fire and Rescue personnel
- 33 New Zealand fire personnel
- 35 US fire personnel
- 350 specialised 4WD vehicles (slip-ons)
- 81 4WD fire tankers
- 31 first attack dozers
- 6 large dozers
- 70 dozers from forest industry brigades
- one reconnaissance-type aircraft
- 10 fixed-wing aircraft
- 6 light helicopters
- 6 fire-bombing helicopters
- one Infra-red mapping aircraft.

In addition, countless personnel and volunteers from the following organisations have contributed to the fire and recovery efforts:

- local plantation company brigades
- forest industry crews
- Victoria Police
- Red Cross
- Rural Ambulance Victoria
- St John Ambulance
- WICEN (Wireless Institute Civil Emergency Network)
- local municipalities
- Salvation Army
- Bureau of Meteorology.

1.4 Community interaction

Community meetings regarding fire safety and preparedness continue to be held throughout the area and will continue to be held until the fires are suppressed. To date 86 community meetings have been held in the North East and Gippsland with around 8000 people attending.

The meetings were an excellent opportunity to inform and advise residents as to what they could expect when fires occurred, and what they could do to protect themselves and their properties, and about the informed choices they might make.

1.5 Immediate impacts of the fires

Impact of the fire on individuals and communities

The bushfires have had a significant impact on the lives and wellbeing of individuals and communities. This has been intensified because of the amount of time the bushfires have burned, resulting in individuals, families and communities being on high alert for weeks. The affects of this can be significant and long lasting.

Impact on water quality

Much of the land burnt by the current bushfires is part of the water supply catchments for towns in East Gippsland and North East Victoria. As a consequence of these fires, in the short to medium term, river water quality is expected to be affected following significant rain, due to the potential for increased overland runoff. This will occur due to ash, soil and other debris being washed into the rivers. A number of towns pump their water supply from rivers located in the burnt catchment areas. When intense rainfall resulting in a high level of sediment runoff does occur water will not be able to be drawn from these rivers until the water quality standard improves. All towns have water storages, which will be the major source of water to meet water use requirements during periods of lower river water quality.

Impact on forests

Significant stands of commercially valuable Alpine Ash forest within the North East, Tambo and Central Gippsland forest management areas have been fire affected. Alpine Ash is killed by fire, and the timber quickly degrades so must be salvaged within 18 months to be of any value.

Impact on national parks and the environment

Approximately 500,000 hectares in national parks and conservation areas and 600,000 hectares of State forest have been burnt in the eastern part of the State. This includes 60 per cent of the Alpine National Park and 90 per cent of Mount Buffalo National Park.

The fires will have major impacts on natural biodiversity of the region, including critically endangered species and habitats. These will be addressed in terms of a range of rehabilitation programs.

The fires have also destroyed over 60 per cent of the visitor facility infrastructure in national parks and other public land including toilet blocks, picnic tables, viewing lookouts, visitor accommodation, car parks, visitor signs and information boards, snow poles and walking tracks.

Most of the 64 tourism operators that utilise parks and public land tourism destinations have been affected. Four have ceased operation and a small number are able to continue operations by substituting unburnt park areas.

Impact on infrastructure

The fires have affected 870 kilometres of roadway along 11 roads in particular.

The scope of the damage includes destruction of roadside furniture (signs, guideposts and guardrails); burnt trees left in varying degrees of stability; damaged bridges with structural and safety hazards; and unstable roadside embankments resulting from burnt out vegetation support.

Recognising the importance of recovery, the Government has acted quickly on road repairs and reopening.

The repair and reopening of roads and bridges is vital to the local communities and their economic recovery. Some of the key issues to be addressed are:

- The need to stimulate economic recovery by attracting tourist visitation, major projects and capital works.
- Access to reinstate damaged vegetation on key Crown Land areas and National Parks.
- Infrastructure damage to tracks and trails on Crown Land that are used for specific sporting events and nature based activities.

To date 300 kilometres across four roads have been reopened and recovery works have been initiated on the others.

Impact on industry, especially tourism and agriculture

Industry, particularly tourism has been hard hit by the immediate impacts of the bushfires, and are likely to feel the effects for some months to come.

Businesses have lost revenue through the decrease in tourism activity, leading to job losses. Businesses and communities are also suffering from non-recoverable losses resulting from the cancellation of scheduled events.

The agriculture sector, already feeling the effects of drought has had impacts compounded by the fires. Assessments are still being done on agricultural losses, but initial estimates are 57,000 hectares of farming land burnt, 41 houses lost, more than 200 other buildings lost and over 11,000 head of livestock (7800 head of sheep, 3119 head of cattle killed and 184 other stock).

Business recovery will be reliant on support to repair and reopen damaged roads and bridges, strategies to reinvigorate the tourism industry, and support to the farming communities in recovering agricultural losses.

Impact on local government

The bushfire response and recovery has placed significant stress on local government who have responded well to lead and support their communities.

Local government is responsible for managing municipal coordination centres, conducting community meetings and organising volunteer efforts and will play a major role in supporting community rebuilding and resilience.

2. Responding to immediate fire recovery needs

When the fires commenced in early January 2003, the Bracks Government responded swiftly by initiating an emergency response involving Emergency Services, a whole of government recovery response, and setting up a central coordination function to plan, oversee and monitor the response to the bushfires.

Once the extent and severity of the fires to date was understood in January, the Premier quickly established the Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery to oversee the bushfire recovery response. The Taskforce led by the Treasurer and Minister for State Regional Development, the Hon John Brumby, has proactively worked across Government and its departments, and with the community and business sectors to ensure that families and businesses affected by the fires have the best opportunities to recover quickly from the devastation.

The first job of the Taskforce has been to begin assessing the impact of the fires on the economy, environment and communities in country Victoria. This has been achieved through an intensive Ministerial Community Consultation Program (see table below) to cover the geographical area and the range of impacts arising from the fires. This will continue past the release of this Interim Report.

Despite the recent rain, the fires continued to burn and cause problems in some areas. Firefighting teams continue to battle spot fires in rough, remote, drought-affected terrain. At all times Ministerial consultations have been arranged and conducted in accordance with the operational requirements of the local fire fighting effort. If the Taskforce has not been able to visit every community it has not been for lack of interest.

Achieving the balance between emergency response and economic recovery highlights the uniquely complex nature of the fires and their impact on our communities; that is the immediate need to kick-start sustainable economic recovery in parallel with the on-going fight to extinguish the flames.

Members of the Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery have already visited many fire-affected regions, talking to individuals to piece together a picture of the infrastructure that has been lost, how people's lives and livelihoods have changed, the impact on the environment, and what the Government can best do to help communities rebuild. The Taskforce recognises that rebuilding must occur at the individual and community level, but there are ways in which Government assistance will speed this recovery.

Issues identified as imperative on the recovery agenda have consistently included the impact on the environment, farming land, fencing, stock losses, tourism and infrastructure as well as the personal and social cost of the fires on individuals. In many cases, community members have shared personal stories and experiences from the hours, days and even weeks when the fires swept through their lives.

These communities have faced disaster and survived. Their stories and their pleas for assistance and support have touched everyone who has heard them. The Ministerial consultations have been universally well received, with Taskforce members gaining a vivid picture of the challenges ahead. In this way, these

face-to-face encounters with members of the Victorian community are having a direct impact on decision making at the highest level in Government.

In addition to the consultations undertaken by members of the Taskforce, each of the Shires has prepared reports outlining their issues. Not surprisingly, there is a high level of commonality between the issues raised in consultations with the Minister and Shires.

2.1 Bushfire recovery ministerial community consultation program

Victorian Government Ministers have visited the affected areas as follows:

9/10 January	John Thwaites, Minister for Environment, Water and Victorian Communities, visited Mt Buffalo, Myrtleford, Benalla and Lake Makoan.
13 January	John Thwaites, Minister for Environment, Water and Victorian Communities, visited Bendock and Orbost.
14 January	John Thwaites, Minister for Environment, Water and Victorian Communities, visited Marlo.
21 January	Steve Bracks, the Premier, John Thwaites, Minister for Environment, Water and Victorian Communities, and Andre Haermeyer, Minister for Police and Emergency Services, visited Myrtleford and Benalla.
27 January	Bob Cameron, Minister for Agriculture, visited Benalla and Wangaratta.
4 February	Steve Bracks, the Premier, and John Brumby, the Treasurer, visited Beechworth, Bright, Ovens and Eldorado.
5 February	Bob Cameron, Minister for Agriculture, visited Barnawartha, Myrtleford and Ovens. Lynne Kosky, Minister for Education, visited Corryong.
6 February	Lynne Kosky, Minister for Education, visited Bright, Beechworth and Myrtleford.
12 February	John Pandazopoulos, Minister for Tourism and Peter Batchelor, Minister for Transport and Major Projects, visited Bright, Beechworth, Myrtleford and Hotham. Andre Haermeyer, Minister for Police and Emergency Services, visited Bairnsdale, Swifts Creek, Benambra, Omeo and Hotham.

14 February	Steve Bracks, the Premier and John Brumby, the Treasurer, visited Cobungra. John Brumby, the Treasurer, visited Bairnsdale.
16 February	John Thwaites, Minister for Environment, Water and Victorian Communities, visited Falls Creek, Mount Beauty, Mount Hotham and Mount Buffalo.
17 February	Lynne Kosky, Minister for Education, with Jacinta Allan, Minister for Education Services and Employment and Youth Affairs, visited Tallangatta. All Cabinet members in Beechworth.
18 February	John Pandazopoulos, Minister for Tourism and Candy Broad, Minister for Local Government, visited Tallangatta. Lynne Kosky, Minister for Education, visited Stanley. John Brumby, the Treasurer and Bob Cameron, the Minister for Agriculture, visited Omeo. John Thwaites, Minister for Environment, Water and Victorian Communities, visited Omeo and Swifts Creek. Sherryl Garbutt, Minister for Community Services, visited Mt Beauty.
21 February	John Brumby, the Treasurer, visited Benalla and Glenrowan.

All Government MPs visited Beechworth on 16 and 17 February and shared a community lunch with representatives from Country Fire Authority, local Shires, businesses, residents and volunteers.

2.2 Initiating emergency responses

Whilst fire suppression activities continue there are already many recovery initiatives underway in the North East/East Gippsland areas. These have arisen from the quick implementation of our State Emergency Recovery Plan and from the community and volunteer efforts that support the Plan. A major focus for the Government so far has been to provide aid that is of particular need in these extraordinary fires.

In addition to the community and volunteer efforts in fire fighting and fire suppression, many individuals and businesses contributed time, goods and services during the fire emergency. Power companies such as TXU made efforts to reinstate power very quickly, and where they could not, provided generators until it was possible. The Commonwealth Government has pledged \$1 million to the Victorian Bushfire Recovery Appeal. The Australian Tax Office has extended assistance to business operators and individuals by offering to fast-track refunds, interest-free extended payment deadlines, and assistance with reconstructing tax records. Centrelink has instituted an outreach service to affected communities.

A critical role for the Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery has been to assess the need for any immediate additional short-term programs to assist communities and individuals recover from the fires. Responding rapidly to specific requests from affected communities has been an important part of building the relationship between the Taskforce and the communities themselves.

A wide range of immediate and targeted decisions have been announced since the Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery was established in January 2003. Many of these decisions and announcements result directly from the Ministerial consultation program. Listed below are immediate responses made by the Government to date.

Supporting individual and community recovery

- The Government established the Bushfire Recovery Fund with an initial \$1million contribution and launched the 1800 890 390 phone number for community and business donations. The Commonwealth Government subsequently matched this \$1 million contribution.
- The Department of Human Services office in the North East and the Victorian Council of Churches in Gippsland provided a front line personal support presence in emergency relief centres in each of the affected local government areas. These Personal Support Officers provided written and verbal advice on how to manage stress, providing an opportunity for affected residents to talk about their experiences, and advice about local support services.
- The Department of Human Services has committed over \$735,000 for shires and agencies to employ counsellors to provide financial and personal counselling and support, and community development workers to assist local communities across the Northeast and East Gippsland.
- The Department of Human Services has provided \$175,000 in hardship and re-establishment grants to over 400 families across the fire-affected areas. Hardship grants have also been extended to fire related damage to household water supplies via water tanks.
- The Department of Human Services has extended its preschool support allowance to eligible bushfire affected families.
- The Department of Education extended its Education Maintenance Allowance to bushfire-affected families and extended counselling and welfare services.
- The Department of Education and Training has provided trauma counselling to staff and students in the fire-affected areas.
- The Government established a Volunteer Register via an 1800 hotline for community members to register their interest in assisting with the recovery effort on a volunteer basis. Services to be provided will include fence construction, tree planting, painting and debris removal.
- The Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development has allocated \$200,000 in grants of up to \$50,000 each to the Towong, East Gippsland, Indigo and Alpine Shires to support municipal emergency coordination centres, community meetings and volunteers, and to celebrate the community spirit and resilience during recovery from the bushfires.
- The Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development has allocated \$10,000 to Omeo Hospital to purchase a new computer server to improve electronic communication with other health services.
- The Commonwealth Government has acknowledged notification of the bushfires in the Shires of Alpine, East Gippsland, Indigo and Towong as a Natural Disaster and the State Government will make appropriate claims for Commonwealth assistance under Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements.

Supporting farmers

- Information sessions have been held for farmers affected by the fires to address key issues influencing farm recovery from the fires, and community gatherings and meetings regarding fire recovery are now being held by affected Shires.
- \$500,000 has been allocated for emergency fodder to farmers through the Victorian Farmers Federation.
- An extra five 'doggers' have been employed by the Department of Sustainability and the Environment on a short-term basis in Gippsland to work with the local community to coordinate baiting, trapping, and control line fencing over the coming months. The estimated cost of this project is in the vicinity of up to \$100,000.
- Department of Primary Industries' staff has assisted 342 landholders to undertake comprehensive assessments of agricultural and livestock losses. Teams have also provided support to affected landowners in the Northeast and Gippsland including:
 - providing technical advice to these land holders on protection of livestock from fire as well as how to manage post-fire animal welfare and pastures;
 - co-ordinating with the VFF, hay and fodder distribution;
 - assisting land holders to access other support services and assistance through the local Municipal Emergency Centres;
 - re-prioritising the wild dog management effort to focus on fire affected communities, including proposed community meetings for input into priorities;
 - providing input and support to local Recovery committees on agricultural and natural resource management issues including the longer-term requirements for pasture re-establishment, erosion control and re-vegetation.

Supporting tourism

- \$70,000 campaign commencing on Sunday 16 February 2003 with a series of full and half page announcements from the Premier in Melbourne newspapers. The campaign will continue with press advertising and editorial material and will outline the facts, highlighting events and other travel opportunities, and referring people to more information through the Visitor Information Centres, the Victorian Tourism Information Service and the visitvictoria.com website.
- \$50,000 has been provided by Tourism Victoria for public relations consultancies for local tourism communities in bushfire affected regions to assist in providing consumer information and positive tourism promotion.
- Parks Victoria, along with the Department of Sustainability and Environment has held regular meeting with commercial tour operators on public land to discuss and identify priorities for re-establishment of affected tour operations.
- \$50,000 has been provided by Parks Victoria to local commercial tour operators to undertake preliminary assessment of fire impact on tourism infrastructure.
- \$30,000 has been provided by Parks Victoria to employ local commercial Tour operators to deliver guided walks and interpretation of fire affected areas as a free service to encourage tourism.

Supporting business

- The Rural Finance Corporation is making Concession Loans available to primary producers and small businesses that lost physical assets as a direct result of the bushfires.

- The Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development's Victorian Business Centres are providing general business support, referral and access to existing business programs to bush fire-affected communities. Regional field staff are available to:
 - report on impacts in affected communities—business, community and tourism
 - assist local government in developing their bushfire recovery strategies
 - work with communities and councils to develop community leadership and events projects for the recovery phase
 - deliver assistance packages.

Rebuilding infrastructure

- To date four roads (300 kilometres) have been reopened with the initial priority being the removal of unstable trees from roadsides.
- The Department of Infrastructure, in conjunction with local government, has works underway to assess the extent of damage to roads, bridges and roadside furniture such as guardrails, signs and guide posts as a result of the bushfires.

Protecting and rehabilitating the environment and public land

- \$200,000 has been provided by the Parks Victoria for the employment of 20 short-term employees over three months to deliver immediate emergency fire recovery works in parks and reserves.
- \$100,000 has been redirected to commence repair of key tourism and access roads and tracks impacted by fire in the Alps.

Maintaining water quality

- The Department of Human Services has made an assessment of likely water quality issues following rainfall in bushfire affected catchments. In cooperation with the Department of Sustainability and Environment, it found that the water authorities (North East Region Water Authority and East Gippsland Region Water Authority) had good risk management strategies in place to address water quality issues.
- On 11 February 2003 the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Human Services convened a Fire Recovery Planning Workshop in Marysville. The outcomes of the workshop included the identification and scoping of water quality impacts as a result of the bushfires. It also considered the options available to address these impacts.
- The Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Human Services are supporting the water authorities in the implementation of their risk management strategies to provide the best quality water to the affected towns, both in the short and medium term.
- On Tuesday 11 February 2003, the Minister for Water announced that people reliant on tank water will be able to access grants through the Fire Emergency program to replace contaminated tank water. This scheme will be administered through local government and the Department of Human Services. These grants provide up to \$900 for individuals who have to replace:
 - rainwater tanks as a result of fire damage; and
 - contaminated drinking water on properties, which have been affected by fire.

3. Critical problems, interim responses and actions

The magnitude of the fires in the North East/East Gippsland raise serious issues for the communities affected, local industries, the natural environment, and the form of response taken by Government in assisting recovery. The interrelationship between the areas of concern compounds the impact. For example, much of the tourism industry relies upon access to the amenity of the State parks and forests. With their devastation and the dangers associated with a long running fire, the base of this industry is removed. In turn, this affects other local businesses and the broader community, both in economic and social terms.

The main issues facing these communities and the Government are as follows:

- Rebuilding a tourism industry.
- Supporting businesses affected by the impact on other industries and the community.
- Supporting the farmers, already under stress from prolonged drought.
- Assisting the local timber industry, already coping with industry restructure.
- Ensuring water quality and adequate supply.
- Reinvesting in critical infrastructure, primarily roads.
- Protecting and rehabilitating the natural environment.
- Restoring the natural resource base to support tourism and other impacted industries;
- Supporting resilience and regrowth across the communities, through social supports and community development.

Rebuilding the tourism industry

The fires are having a significant impact on the tourism industry in North East Victoria and East Gippsland.

In addition to the lost natural reserves, there has been massive destruction of tourism infrastructure that supports access to those reserves such as roadside barriers, road signage, and other tourism infrastructure.

The fire crisis is having obvious immediate impact on tourism and is likely to have serious detrimental impact for some months after the fire is over.

Consultation with High Country operators has shown that accommodation bookings for the March to May 2003 period are much lower than for the same period last year. Some operators are concerned that would-be travellers who were planning to visit the region during January, February and March have cancelled their travel to the region altogether.

A Bushfire Recovery Working Group, coordinated by Government, has been established with Parks Victoria. Visits and liaison with the fire-affected areas will continue to take place.

ACTION

A \$1.9 million bushfire response marketing and public relations strategy has been approved to commence immediately. In addition to the immediate response of press advertising and public relations assistance, the \$1.9 million package of support and assistance includes:

- A \$500,000 funding boost to regional committees to organise campaigns for Legends, Wine, High Country, Lakes and Wilderness regions. The campaign will commence in March 2003 and the initiatives include:
 - Newspaper advertising
 - Ned Kelly trail promotion
 - Adventure tourism advertising
 - Wine and food advertorials
 - Great Alpine Road marketing.
- An additional \$620,000 major interstate and local **Jigsaw** marketing campaign for affected regions. The campaign will commence in 2003 and continue through 2004 promoting key regional destinations, villages and attractions of the High Country and Gippsland.
- \$80,000 in extra marketing support for existing regional tourism events as an immediate focus to draw visitors back to the region.
- \$300,000 for the creation of a statewide 'Village of Victoria' touring brochure, website and promotion.
- \$200,000 boost to the 2003 Ski Marketing Campaign commencing in May 2003.
- \$50,000 boost to Victoria's Great Escapes and Bed & Breakfast Marketing Campaign. A dedicated marketing campaign will be developed to provide an immediate boost to accommodation operators in affected regions.
- \$80,000 allocated for training and business development program to assist operators still trading after the fires to remain viable.

Supporting businesses

It is acknowledged that a number of businesses have experienced an upturn in business due to the fire fighting efforts and the needs of emergency services personnel in general. However, the majority of businesses in the fire affected regions report a 50-70 per cent business downturn and in some cases, especially tourism reliant businesses, this figure could be as high as 100 per cent.

It will be some weeks before a proper assessment can be made of the impact of the fires on business. Notwithstanding this, business operators in the fire-affected areas have experienced an immediate and major reduction in demand for their goods and services, especially those reliant on tourism. Apart from tourism, the other group of businesses identified as significantly affected are those which are, or will be, subject to a drop in discretionary expenditure by the townspeople and others in their immediate community. These are, for example, general stores, newsagents and clothing stores.

Business operators have and will continue to lose income through a decrease in tourism activity and the flow on to other support industries and services. Communities have suffered non-recoverable losses

resulting from the cancellation of planned events such as the Dartmouth Fishing Contest, Granya Music Muster, Corryong Show, Tallangatta Expo, Mitta Muster, and the postponement of sporting and other events in East Gippsland such as the Bruthen Blues Bash.

The decrease in economic activity has caused reductions in full time, part time and casual staff, resulting in significant unemployment, with the potential to lead to trade and skills shortages in the medium to longer-term. Pre-existing skills shortages will be exacerbated during the recovery phase by the increased demand for professional and trades people particularly in the building and construction areas.

In the longer term, business capacity to achieve and contribute to economic recovery is intrinsically linked to infrastructure repairs to roads and bridges, agricultural recovery, environmental recovery and ultimately the return of tourists.

For many of these communities, the devastating effect of the bushfires has added to the difficulties caused by the drought.

ACTION

A \$2.8 million Regional Development Victoria Bushfire Recovery Fund has been approved and will provide financial support for community infrastructure projects, and economic and community development in bushfire-affected regional and rural communities. Under RDV's Bushfire Recovery Fund small rural towns that have been impacted by the devastation caused during the current bush fire season will be able to receive financial assistance for:

- Business related expenditure to assist local businesses in the recovery stage through a variety of channels including Business Planning Workshops and Marketing Workshops to develop recovery strategies and generate new businesses.
- Community infrastructure that needs rebuilding following bushfire damage, including public fencing, recreation areas, information/signage, public conveniences, community meeting areas and visitor centres.
- Leadership and community events funding to conduct community activities that bring together people affected by the bushfires, including CFA, CWA and other volunteers, local media, charities and schools.

The Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development, through RDV, will have responsibility for on-going regional business development programs.

All major bushfire recovery projects over \$1 million will be subject to the Government's Victorian Industry Participation Policy which aims to boost opportunities for local companies to benefit from participation in these projects.

Skilling Small Business For The Future is a training strategy that aims to empower local communities to work together to develop small business skill development projects that are flexible and responsive to local needs. Since the bushfires, Wodonga TAFE has redesigned its project to provide twenty-four people from the farming sector of the North East with the skills to develop a business plan, which includes a 'disaster management' planning component for their enterprises.

This project is now the final phase of a three-pronged 'business resumption' strategy for the area. This strategy includes a business and community round table and a video conference forum sponsored by TXU and Telstra Countrywide.

Supporting the farming community

Protecting and feeding livestock

The majority of the State, indeed much of Australia, is suffering under an extended drought. The scale of this drought can be measured by the fact that for the first time in decades Australia is importing stockfeed from countries to which it would generally export feed.

The Department of Primary Industries estimates that over 150,000 sheep and cattle have to date survived the fires, and are now faced with little or no feed.

Little spare fodder is to be found. Despite this, the wider Victorian agricultural community has responded magnificently to the dire needs of the North East and East Gippsland fire areas. Donations of hay and fodder are being received from across the State, in particular, the western district and Gippsland, and delivered to fire-affected areas by the Victorian Farmers Federation.

The Government has provided a \$500,000 assistance package to provide immediately needed feed to livestock affected by the Victorian bushfires. The funding has gone directly to the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) to assist in the provision of emergency hay and fodder for livestock which has survived the devastating fires.

The current bushfires have burnt significant areas of public land. Some of these areas include land that has already been licensed for cattle grazing. Other available land in the area is either still potentially threatened by fire or is being regenerated from past fires, and is therefore unavailable for emergency grazing.

Disease spread is also a major issue, especially with sheep and Ovine Johnes disease (OJD) and the Government has implemented a major program of OJD management. Moving stock from the burnt areas and back, could significantly compromise the work that has been done over the last 5 years. Even grazing along roadsides is an issue in this regard. The provision of temporary areas of public land grazing is generally not a preferred option for farmers.

An extensive assessment has been conducted of available land in Gippsland, the North East and Central regions. This assessment has shown that there are only very limited additional areas available for grazing, principally because most suitable areas are already grazed and have little available feed, fencing or water supply. However, if there is public land that is suitable it may be made available where stock containment and in situ provision of emergency fodder is not appropriate.

ACTION

Stock containment and feeding is the preferred option for most farmers.

The Government, through the Department of Primary Industries will work in conjunction with the VFF to coordinate the donation of emergency feed and assistance in the containment and livestock and to provide direct support to those efforts.

Fences

Approximately 1500 kilometres of Crown boundary fencing has been destroyed or damaged by the bushfires so far. In the normal course of events, landholders are responsible for replacing damaged fences on their property where it borders Crown land.

In recognition of the scale of the fires and their resultant hardship the government will provide the following assistance to landholders to assist with replacement of Crown boundary fencing destroyed by the fires and ensure appropriate clearance between fences and Crown land.

This assistance by Government will also aid in protecting stock from possible wild dog attacks through appropriate fence location and construction.

ACTION

The Government will provide a package including:

- \$1.2 million to clear areas around fence lines.
- \$200,000 to coordinate volunteers/paid workforce for fencing work.
- \$600,000 for subsidies for temporary stock containment areas.
- Up to \$3.75 million in total as a contribution for dog fencing adjoining Crown land on grounds of public safety and animal welfare.

Environment

Water quality

As a consequence of the bushfires, adverse impacts are anticipated in relation to increased catchment erosion, flood risks, water quality and river health. These impacts may be experienced as soon as the first heavy rains fall in the fire-affected areas. Addressing these issues will involve a combination of short and long term management and monitoring.

Much of the burnt area is in water supply catchments for towns in east Gippsland and north east Victoria. As a consequence of these fires, river water quality is expected to be affected following intense rain which causes significant overland runoff. This will occur due to ash, soil and other debris being washed into the rivers.

The towns which will be potentially subject to reduced water quality are located in the areas serviced by East Gippsland Region Water Authority and North East Region Water Authority.

The Department of Human Services has made an assessment of likely water quality issues following rainfall in bushfire affected catchments. In cooperation with the Department of Sustainability and Environment, it found that the water authorities (North East Region Water Authority and East Gippsland Region Water Authority) have good risk management strategies in place to address a range of issues including water quality. Whilst the bushfires have increased the potential for poor river water quality, the water authorities are responsible for water quality management and they are preparing to manage this issue in accordance with their established operational practices.

On 11 February 2003 the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Human Services convened a Fire Recovery Planning Workshop in Marysville. The workshop comprised key stakeholders including representatives from:

- Department of Sustainability and Environment
- Department of Human Services
- Department of Primary Industries
- Department of Premier and Cabinet
- Environment Protection Authority
- Parks Victoria
- Alpine Resorts – Falls Creek, Mount Hotham
- Catchment Management Authorities – North East, East Gippsland and West Gippsland
- Regional Urban Water Authorities – North East, East Gippsland and Goulburn Valley
- Rural Water Authorities – Goulburn-Murray and Gippsland and Southern
- Cooperative Research Centre for Water Quality and Treatment.

The outcomes of the workshop included the identification and scoping of water quality impacts as a result of the bushfires. It also considered the options available to address these impacts.

This was of particular benefit to the water authorities in refining their risk management strategies in accordance with this information.

The water authorities pump water from the rivers to off-stream water storages. The storages vary in capacity but during periods when water quality is poor the water authorities will cease pumping river water. The towns will then use the water in storages until river quality improves and the water authorities can recommence pumping water from the rivers. In towns where only small water storage is available the town will immediately move on to the highest level of water restrictions if water quality deteriorates. This will ensure that the available supply lasts as long as possible to allow water quality in the river to improve.

Some towns such as Beechworth have reservoirs which will meet supply needs for a substantial period and these towns are unlikely to need to pump water from the rivers until the water quality has improved.

The water authorities will also consider other matters such as alternative sources of supply, the use of mobile filtration plants and trucking drinking water to towns if any of these actions assist in addressing the water quality requirements of a particular town. The need for such actions will be dependent upon the duration and intensity of rainfall as these factors will determine the level of water quality deterioration and the time until the water quality improves.

The water authorities will consult as appropriate with the people in the affected towns as part of their water quality management strategy.

ACTION

This is a situation that requires preparedness. Actions already put in place include:

- North East Region Water Authority and East Gippsland Region Water Authorities have risk management strategies to address a wide range of potential incidents including water quality issues.
- Towns which may be subject to adverse water quality events have been identified, prioritised and strategies developed. The identification of towns and affected communities is continuing in areas where the bushfires remain burning.
- Water storages will be managed to provide supply for as long a period as possible through the introduction of high level water restrictions where required.
- Alternative supplies of water will be provided if necessary.
- Community consultation will be undertaken by water authorities as appropriate to both educate and prepare people for managing a water quality event.
- Investigate the opportunity for catchment management works upstream of water off-takes to reduce sediment runoff. Some works are already underway in north east Victoria.
- Implementation of water quality monitoring programs in partnership with the Department of Human Services.
- The final report of the Taskforce will address medium and long-term remediation action in respect of long-term viability issues for the provision of water.

Salvage harvesting

Significant stands of commercially valuable ash forests within the North East, Tambo and Central Gippsland forest management areas have been badly fire affected. An accurate survey of fire damage using remote sensing techniques will not be complete until mid-March. In the meantime, damage estimates are being obtained using aerial photography.

Ash species can be killed by fire, and the timber rapidly degrades when left *in situ*. The timber must be salvaged within 18 months to be of any value. Arrangements are currently being put in place to commence negotiations with logging contractors to move from their scheduled areas into salvage logging for the remainder of this season.

If additional contractors are needed, suitably skilled and equipped contractors who are exiting the industry via the *Our Forests Our Future* industry adjustment package will be given an opportunity to participate in the salvage operation, delaying their exit from the industry.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment will negotiate with licencees to use the salvage logging first to meet licencees contracted volume levels within fire affected areas, and then to substitute for supply into areas not affected by the Alpine fires, replacing logging of ash forests that would have taken place elsewhere.

There are important environmental considerations in undertaking salvage harvesting in rehabilitating areas. Special salvage harvesting plans will be developed, as required by the Code of Forest Practices, giving careful consideration to the fragile environmental conditions of the sites, and the requirements of arboreal fauna. More stringent environmental protection measures in terms of silt traps, buffer widths and culvert diameters may be required to reduce sediment transfer where ground cover is severely depleted.

Areas that have been harvested within the past twenty years may not be able to successfully regenerate naturally, and will require seeding.

ACTIONS

- Accurate assessment of damage through remote sensing and field visits.
- Immediate consultation with industry to start salvage logging instead of scheduled coupes.
- Review timing of exits of suitably skilled and equipped logging contractors from the industry.
- Review and implementation of prescriptions for harvesting and regenerating of fire affected forest.
- Seed collection from suitable areas for regeneration and review of local provenance requirements in the Code of Forest Practices.

Ecological recovery

Ecological recovery involves rehabilitation of the environment, particularly as it relates to biodiversity values, soils and other catchment values, cultural heritage values, built assets and visitor services.

The alpine environment within the fire affected area includes highly fire-sensitive species and habitats. The extent and intensity of the fire and the degree of patchiness of unburnt areas will determine the survival and recovery patterns of native environments and species.

There are a number of critically endangered species and habitats occurring within the area, which are at risk from the effects of the fires. Recovery efforts are focussed only on the most important of these, including: the Mountain Pygmy possum, Spotted Tree frog and Alpine Water skink and vegetation types such as Moss beds and Peat bogs, and Plum-pine Shrubland.

Threats to be assessed and mitigated include excess nutrient inputs to water courses, siltation/sedimentation, and the incursion of feral predators and weeds.

A rehabilitation plan is in development, with the involvement of all relevant agencies. This involves a risk management analysis to determine what high priority biodiversity assets have been significantly affected and are now at risk as a result of the fires, which threats may have been exacerbated by the fires and what management actions are required.

There are two phases of the recovery process: immediate stabilisation over the next three months; and longer-term rehabilitation over the next several years.

- Stabilisation: Redressing impacts from fire fighting works including helipads, and new control lines.
- Rehabilitation: Redressing/ameliorating threats exacerbated by the fire or by fire suppression works. Identifying and addressing research and monitoring needs which may be linked into existing programs (for example, threatened species recovery programs).

High priority rehabilitation works on soil issues will need to be addressed before the winter snows and high rainfall events (next two to three months). Other research and monitoring activities may occur over the next 12 months and beyond.

ACTION

The Government through the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Department of Primary Industries and Parks Victoria will:

- Immediately stabilise the impacts incurred during fire suppression including helipads and fire control lines.
- Develop and implement rehabilitation plans to address the major environmental threats such as sedimentation and siltation, nutrient inputs and pest plant and animal incursions.
- Undertake works including pest plant and animal control, erosion control, revegetation, and management of threatened species and communities, to protect and rehabilitate significant environmental values.

Supporting individual and community resilience

The bushfires have had a significant impact on the lives and wellbeing of individuals and communities. This has been intensified because of the amount of time the bushfires have burned, resulting in individuals, families and communities being on high alert for weeks.

The effects can be significant and long lasting. Resources are required to support communities to manage their own recovery through undertaking activities such as; support for facilitation of community gatherings, financial and personal counselling, provision of information and specialist services and financial assistance to pay for bills. This support will allow individuals, families and communities to maintain their resilience through a difficult recovery process.

Financial assistance

The Government is offering a range of immediate financial supports to individuals directly affected by the bushfires due to the need for evacuation or loss of homes. To date a total of \$175,052 in 402 grants have been issued.

Other initiatives have included:

- Extension of Education Maintenance Allowance to those families with children affected by bushfire.
- Initial emergency grant of up to \$900 per household (\$360 per adult and \$180 per child).
- A Temporary Living Expenses grant of up to \$7300 is available to cover the costs of temporary accommodation where the principal place of residence has been damaged or affected. Payment of this is subject to an income test where the principal place of residence is affected. (The principal place of residence does not include holiday homes).
- A two-part Re-establishment Grant totalling up to \$14,600 consisting of two grants of up to \$7300, the first for essential structural repairs and the second for replacement of essential household contents, such as a washing machine, clothing, furniture or appliances. Payment of this is subject to an income test.
- Extension of utility relief grants to those families in receipt of the Re-establishment grant.
- Extension of Preschool grant of \$250 to those families affected by bushfire.

New initiatives will include:

- \$15,000 to provide occasional childcare for families while they participate in recovery activities.
- \$100,000 to replace the standby generator at the Alpine Valley Health Service in Bright.

Building necessary social supports

Financial support is one of the most immediate needs to be addressed. But this will not be enough to aid the recovery of the communities and the individuals within them. Experience has shown that communities with a high degree of involvement in the recovery process will recover faster and more cohesively. The mechanism for facilitating this process is through the establishment of local community recovery committees, with representation from the affected communities, local government, local agencies and state government representatives.

Supporting local communities to develop their own solutions to recovery can also be facilitated by the provision of community development officers. These positions are lynch pins in drawing communities together, ensuring access to service, giving a voice to affected residents and communities, and developing local action plans. Planning is occurring at the local level to ensure coordination with local government and local agencies in achieving more lasting recovery support. The Victorian Council of Churches is actively involved and a visitation program has commenced. Other agencies involved in the provision of social support include the Salvation Army, Victorian Relief Committee, Red Cross, Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund and the Lord Mayors Charitable Fund.

Infrastructure—roads and bridges

Of critical importance to helping the people and industries of the North East/East Gippsland in getting back on their feet will be the reopening of the road network, which has been damaged and made dangerous by the severity of the fires. Even short term road closures have made it impossible for communities to easily access critical supplies, for farmers to move stock to better feeding areas or move fodder, to allow access to insurance or counselling support and to enable any visitors to the area to move around freely. Road closures are making remote communities even more isolated and may impact on longer-term social recovery.

The fires have affected 870 kilometres across 11 roads. To date 300 kilometres across four roads have been reopened and recovery works to road surfaces and safety signage have been initiated on the others. Recognising the importance of this infrastructure to recovery, the Government has acted quickly on road repairs and reopenings.

Currently the focus is on clearing unstable trees along roadsides, checking stability of bridges that have had a high volume of heavy vehicles and machinery crossing and consequential damage to road surfaces and road side furniture such as guide posts, signage and guard rails.

State declared roads

The full extent of fire damage to infrastructure on the declared road network in Eastern Victoria is being progressively assessed. To date, the fire damage has impacted on the following roads:

- Bogong High Plains Road
- Mt Buffalo Road
- Dartmouth Tourist Road
- Great Alpine Road from Harrietville to Dinner Plain
- Great Alpine Road from Dinner Plain to Bruthen
- Omeo Highway
- Benambra-Corryong Road
- Buckland Gap Road
- Benambra-Limestone Road
- Snowy River Road
- Gelantipy Road
- McKillops Road.

The scope of the damage includes:

- Destroyed or damaged roadside furniture such as signs, guideposts and guardrails.
- Burnt trees left in varying degrees of stability.
- Damaged bridges with structural and safety hazards.
- Unstable roadside embankments resulting from burnt out vegetation support.

A number of sections of roads have been closed as the fires continue to burn and because roadside hazards present a safety risk to general public traffic. In conjunction with the Department of Sustainability and the Environment and the CFA, the extent of work required to reinstate road safety is assessed and remedial works implemented to enable the roads to become fully operational.

It is likely that further damage will result from the fires that are yet to be extinguished, and from winter rains that are likely to cause movement in unstable roadside embankments. This assessment will be ongoing and a cost estimate has yet to be determined.

Local government infrastructure

The municipalities that have been affected are Towong, Indigo, East Gippsland and Alpine Shires.

Whilst the assessment is still progressing the damage to local government infrastructure appears to be wide spread with varying degrees of severity. The scope of the damage is the same as for the State Declared Roads above.

Summary by municipality

Towong Shire

Current assessment has identified road surface damage due to dozer crossings and restoration of gravel surfaces. The replacement of signage and guide posts damaged by the fire and structural assessment of ten bridges in the area due to exposure to heavy loads.

Indigo Shire

The current priority is to remove unstable trees from roadsides. The damage assessment has identified road surface damage due to dozer crossings, restoration requirements of gravel surfaces and the replacement of signage and guide posts. There is a requirement for structural assessment of small bridges in the area due to exposure to heavy loads. To date two bridges have been singed by the fire and damaged by the crossing of heavy loads.

East Gippsland

The current priority is to remove unstable trees from roadsides. The damage assessment has identified road surface damage due to dozer crossings, restoration requirements of gravel surfaces and the replacement of signage and guide posts. There is a requirement for structural assessment of small bridges in the area due to being exposure to heavy loads. To date six have been damaged by the fire and by the crossing of heavy loads in Omeo, Benambra and the Buchan Valley.

Alpine Shire

Damage is still being assessed and limited due to active fire activity. Extensive damage to roads systems, especially damage associated with unstable trees and storm water channels. One bridge has been damaged to date. Current priority is to ensure safe access to roads servicing properties.

Of the eleven roads and 870 kilometres that have been affected, repair work has started on all except one, which was still affected by fire, and four roads have been opened. Based on assessments to date an estimated \$2.5 million will be required to repair the road damage alone.

If the fires continue across the area between Orbost and the NSW border an additional 500 kilometres of declared road could be affected. At the current rate for recovery works this would result in an additional \$1.6 million. More work is required to assess the possible damage to road embankments and cuttings. If extensive remedial work is required this could be costly.

Damage to bridges requires detailed engineering structural assessments to determine their level of safety at an average cost per bridge of \$4,000. The Department of Victorian Communities will make available \$80,000 to local government to fund structural assessment of the damaged bridges:

- Towong Shire—ten bridges
- Indigo Shire—two bridges
- East Gippsland Shire—six bridges
- Alpine Shire—one bridge.

ACTIONS

The Government has requested VicRoads to make road recovery in these regions a priority. VicRoads has responded rapidly to that request.

The Department of Victorian Communities will make available \$80,000 to local government to fund structural assessment of the damaged bridges.

4. Next steps

The Interim Report details the substantial action taken to date to assist with recovery from the impact of the fires on the economy, infrastructure, industries and communities within country Victoria.

The Government and community will now build on these actions and develop the long term measures required to re-establish the economies of the affected communities. This will focus on industry support, the restoration of infrastructure, including roads, bridges and signs and water quality, environmental regeneration and community rebuilding.

Future consultation/communities to visit

To ensure that Government continues to be responsive to the needs of the fire-affected communities, the Taskforce continues to meet the bushfire-affected communities and find out about how the communities are recovering and if there are any outstanding issues that need to be addressed.

A program of Ministerial and Taskforce visits will be developed to meet residents and affected farmers and businesses.

Submissions process

The Government has invited submissions to the Ministerial Taskforce on Bushfire Recovery about the impact on communities, infrastructure and local industries such as tourism and agriculture.

Local Government has responded well with detailed and timely submissions. A number of new proposals have been adopted in this report and other recommendations will be included in the final report.

Other submissions will contribute towards the preparation of the TaskForce's recovery package for fire-affected areas of Victoria.

Interested groups and individuals can send submissions to the Secretariat – Bushfire Recovery, GPO Box 4057, Melbourne, 3001, by Friday, 14 March.

Trust fund

On the 17 January 2003 the Premier announced the establishment of a trust fund with a 1800 890 390 hotline to receive community and business donations. The Government has made a \$1 million contribution to the Fund.

The trust will operate at arms length from Government and an independent advisory board will establish publicly available criteria for the allocation of the funds.

Celebrating communities and volunteers

The Chair of the Taskforce announced on 21 February 2003 that a hotline has been established for community members to register their interest in assisting with the recovery effort on a volunteer basis.

Volunteers can provide services ranging from fence construction to tree planting, painting to debris removal. The list of services required will grow as government departments work with local communities to determine the assistance required.

The Victorian Government is currently developing a strategy to recognise and acknowledge the enormous contributions made by communities, fire and recovery agencies during the bushfire.

The Government is working closely with relevant agencies to identify the most appropriate way in which the State can thank, not only those volunteers on the front line, but the many volunteers who worked tirelessly to protect the rest of Victoria during this period.