



The Recovery Story

The 2003 Alpine Fires

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Ministers' Foreword

Bushfires in Victoria are part of our lives and always will be. Sometimes though, the State experiences fires of such magnitude that people's resolve and capacity to cope are severely tested.

Over the summer of 2002/03, Victoria experienced one of the worst bushfire seasons that the State has known since European settlement. The conditions that summer were extreme and the result was the worst fires since Black Friday in 1939.

Started on 7 January 2003, the Alpine fires burnt nearly 1.3 million hectares over nearly 60 days. On a day of Total Fire Ban, lightning ignited 87 fires in the North East and East Gippsland regions. More than 40 fires were also started in NSW and ACT.

The vast majority of the area burnt was public land – 1.19 million hectares of parks and forests, including 60% of the Alpine National Park and 81% of the Mt Buffalo National Park. Firefighting efforts were in hard to access, remote and rugged forest terrain, making the fires very difficult to control and put out. In addition, 90,000 hectares of private land was burnt.

The fires also burnt about 800,000 hectares in NSW and ACT, so that in total nearly 2 million hectares were affected throughout the Australian Alps.

The consequences of the fires included reduced water quality and quantity, loss of vegetation including habitats for flora and fauna, destruction of commercial timber, and damage to recreation and tourism infrastructure assets, cultural sites and farms adjacent to public land.

A Ministerial Taskforce, appointed by the Premier, determined a funding package of \$70.6 million for recovery works on public land associated with natural and cultural assets and support for agricultural private landowners affected by the fires. This is the biggest bushfire recovery effort ever undertaken in Victoria, if not Australia, and was characterised by a collaborative whole-of-government approach.

The Recovery Story – The 2003 Alpine Fires tells the story of the enormous work that has been done over the last two and a half years to help the recovery of our natural resources and support private landholders whose properties were burnt and communities that were affected.



Photo: Pam Dennison, DSE

This publication captures the mood and actions of the people who have had to rebuild in the aftermath of the fires. It describes the impacts of one of the worst fires in Victoria's history and the many projects initiated by the State Government to help local communities to get back on their feet and to rehabilitate and protect the alpine environment.

The Bushfire Recovery Program described in *The Recovery Story* does not include the State Government's funding support and assistance for communities that was coordinated through the Department of Human Services and involved local government and the Department for Victorian Communities.

The Bushfire Recovery Program for the environment and agriculture focused on four areas:

1. Asset repair or replacement in parks, forests and alpine resorts (\$24.9 million);
2. Protection and restoration of water catchments and water supply (\$23.9 million);
3. Restoration of ecological and cultural heritage values (\$13.2 million); and
4. Providing practical assistance for affected farm enterprises (\$8.6 million).

The government agencies involved with coordinating and doing much of the work described in these recovery stories are the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Parks Victoria and the Department of Primary Industries. Also involved were the North East and East Gippsland Catchment Management Authorities, VicForests and the managers of the three affected alpine resorts. Staff from these agencies and organisations did an excellent job in delivering the recovery program and responding with support and empathy to communities who suffered during and after the fires.

There have been significant benefits and outcomes from the recovery work as you will read in the following stories. Public land managers now have an increased understanding of environmental processes that occur after such major fires. There is a vastly increased understanding and knowledge of Indigenous cultural heritage in the Alps. The partnerships developed between government agencies and local communities have been strengthened and will be a valuable foundation for the future. There is now a better community understanding of fire and recovery processes.

The amount of work carried out is substantial and it is amazing the way communities have rebounded. Their resilience is inspiring and the work that public land managers have done is admirable.

The State Government's Bushfire Recovery Program is now formally complete but government agencies will continue to support the recovery efforts of land managers, private landholders and communities.

Photo: Pam Dennison, DSE



We are proud of these recovery stories and hope that this publication and accompanying DVD present a clear picture of the great efforts and positive outcomes of the financial commitment made by the Victorian Government towards restoration and rehabilitation of our Alpine assets and surrounds.

The stories presented here will be important reflections in the case of similar large-scale wildfire events on public land. This information will be used to inform future bushfire recovery efforts.

We thank staff from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Department of Primary Industries, Parks Victoria and VicForests who have dedicated the past two and half years to supporting the communities recovering from the 2003 Alpine fires, and we thank the communities themselves for their optimism and collaboration.

The Hon John Thwaites, MP
Minister for the Environment



The Hon Bob Cameron, MP
Minister for Agriculture



Introduction

Victoria has one of the most fire-prone environments in the world due to a combination of its landscape, vegetation and climate. After six years of consecutive drought, a dry spring and a warning from Bureau of Meteorology that conditions were similar to those leading up to the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, Victorians and firefighting agencies knew that the summer of 2002/03 was potentially dangerous.

The first fires for the season started in September 2002. By the beginning of December, the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and the Country Fire Authority (CFA) – the two key wildfire fighting agencies in the State – had already attended more than 375 fires; almost three times the 20-year average.

The Recovery Story focuses on the 2003 Alpine fires, which burnt 1.19 million hectares of public land and 90,000 hectares of private land. It was the largest fires since Black Friday on 13 January 1939 when almost two million hectares were burnt, 71 people killed and whole townships were wiped out in minutes. In comparison, the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires burnt 210,000 hectares in Victoria, 47 people lost their lives and 2000 houses were destroyed.

Tragically, one DSE staff member lost her life while on firefighting duty during a flash flood on 26 February 2003. It was the dedication of firefighters, support staff and volunteers, the preparedness of communities, and improved emergency management systems that were a large part of the reason why there was not greater loss of life and property.



Photo: © Michael May, DSE

Lightning from a dry electrical storm that swept across much of north-eastern Victoria on 7 and 8 January 2003 ignited more than 80 fires. Most were quickly controlled, but the largest fires in the alpine region moved progressively towards East Gippsland, combining to become a major force in remote, inaccessible terrain.

The fires burnt for 59 days and were finally declared contained on 7 March and safe on 30 April 2003. This was the longest campaign in the recorded history of firefighting in Victoria. The corresponding recovery program is the largest ever committed to by a State Government.

Although thousands of hectares of land were burnt and assets on public and private land damaged or destroyed, the destruction and loss could have been much more severe. Major assets saved included the Mount Hotham and Falls Creek alpine resorts and Mount Buffalo chalet and ski fields, power generation plants, communications facilities, towns and small rural communities, as well as many environmental assets and pine plantations.

At the peak of the fires, the resources and number of personnel committed to firefighting operations included:

- 3350 firefighters and support staff from government agencies;
- more than 700 CFA volunteers per rotation;
- 120 army/navy personnel;
- 120 State Emergency Service (SES) staff and volunteers;
- 11 Metropolitan Fire Brigade officers per rotation;
- firefighters and personnel from South Australia, NSW, Queensland, New Zealand and the United States;
- 81 4WD fire tankers;
- more than 100 dozers (including forest industry brigades);
- 10 fixed-wing aircraft, a reconnaissance aircraft and an infra-red mapping aircraft;
- 6 fire-bombing helicopters and 6 light helicopters;
- 2 Erikson Aircranes; and
- more than a dozen crew transport aircraft.

In addition, there were countless personnel and volunteers from the Red Cross, Victoria Police, Rural Ambulance Victoria, St John Ambulance, local plantation company brigades, forest industry crews and local municipalities providing invaluable support.

Immediate impacts of the fires

The 2003 Alpine fires had severe, immediate impacts and also long-lasting effects on people and communities, the environment, businesses and industry in the North East and East Gippsland regions. The immediate impacts included closed roads, loss of public and private assets, closure of facilities, disruption to communities; schools unable to open for the new school year and children forced to move away from home.

Impact on water quality

Much of the land burnt by the fires is part of water supply catchments for towns in the North East and East Gippsland. Ash, soil and other debris washed into the rivers, affecting water quality in the short to medium term. Towns that directly pump water from these rivers had to rely on water storages as their main water source until water quality in the rivers improved.

Impact on infrastructure and assets

The fires affected 870 kilometres of roadway in the Alps. Signs, guideposts and guardrails were destroyed. Burnt trees that could fall onto roads had to be removed. Bridges with structural and safety hazards needed to be assessed and repaired or replaced. Roadside embankments that were unstable as a result of burnt vegetation required remedial works to restore stability.

The fires destroyed more than 60% of the visitor facility infrastructure in parks, such as toilet blocks, picnic tables, visitor signs and information boards, car parks and visitor accommodation, snow poles and walking tracks.

In State forests, bridges, roads, culverts, signage and recreational assets, including camping ground facilities were burnt or damaged.

Impact on parks, forests and the environment

The fires burnt approximately 1.19 million hectares of parks and forests, causing a major impact on the natural biodiversity of the region, particularly on critically endangered species and habitats. In particular, the species or vegetation that suffered the most are those that were already under threat, degraded or low in number before the fires.

Within State forest, commercially valuable stands of Alpine Ash forest the North East, Tambo and Central Gippsland forest management areas were burnt. Alpine Ash is killed by fire and the timber degrades quickly, so salvage harvesting was necessary within the first 18 months.

Impact on tourism and cultural heritage

The tourism industry centred around the alpine region was hard hit by the fires. While the fires raged, more than 1000 tour operators whose businesses focus on using parks and public land, suffered a loss of business revenue. Similar losses were experienced by tourism operators providing services to anglers targetting the affected regions' riverine trout fisheries.

Many alpine huts were burnt or damaged as a result of the fires. Some of these huts provided important refuge for bushwalkers and cross-country skiers. Other huts held historic value; built by early visitors to the area, including cattlemen.

The fires also caused damage to historic mining workings and huts – a link to Victoria's gold rush era and another element of the Alps' attraction as a tourism destination.

The Alps also contain remnants of Victoria's original inhabitants. It is an area rich in Indigenous cultural heritage. The fires and suppression efforts impacted on cultural sites and remains, but it also uncovered many previously unknown ones.

Impact on private land and agriculture

The fires compounded the effects of a drought for the agriculture sector. Around 90,000 hectares of private land was burnt, affecting 659 landholders. At least 250 farm buildings were destroyed and more than 13,000 head of livestock was lost and kilometres of fencing destroyed or severely damaged.

The Bushfire Recovery Program

In April 2003, the Ministerial Taskforce set up by the State Government at the peak of the fires announced the \$70.6 million Bushfire Recovery Program to guide the work needed to protect and restore the alpine area's cultural and natural assets and support affected neighbouring private landowners.

The focus was on:

1. Progressive repair or replacement of infrastructure assets in parks, forests and alpine resorts;
2. Protecting catchments and water supply;
3. Supporting species and habitat regeneration, and protecting cultural values; and
4. Providing practical assistance for affected farm enterprises.

Photo: Sue Berwick, DSE



Snow gums regenerating at Mt Buffalo – this area was also burnt in 1985, illustrating nature's ability to recover.

The Recovery Story is organised into five chapters. The first four relate to the four focus areas listed above.

Projects within these focus areas are described in relation to what the recovery effort was, what was delivered, and what the results have been. Case studies are used to highlight in greater detail the projects and tasks that were undertaken. The fifth chapter has a story about education activities and communication, media and partnership building efforts.

Photo: Sue Berwick, DSE

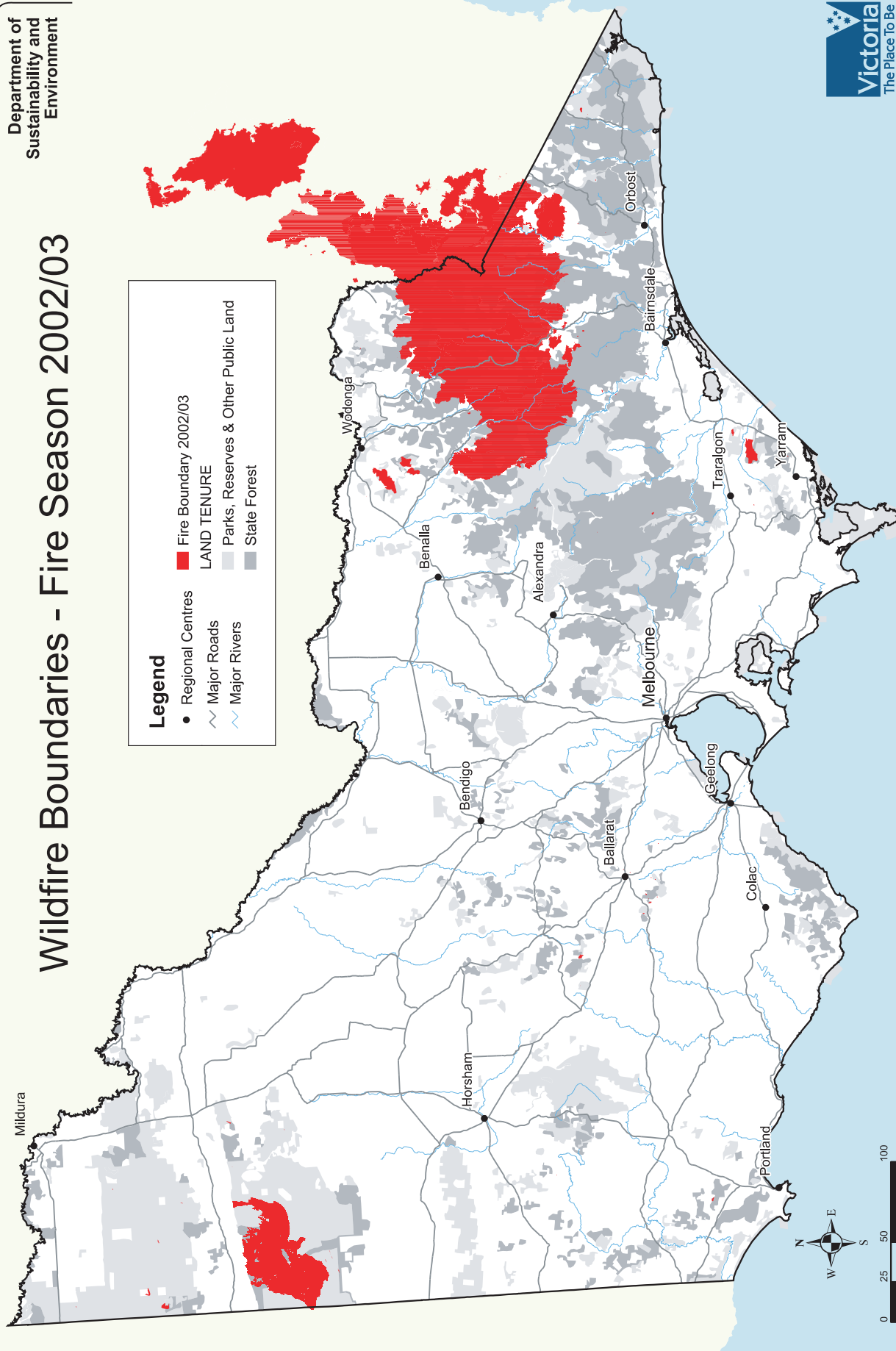


Regeneration at Mt Buffalo – spectacular wildflowers one year after the fire.

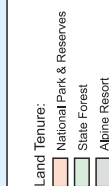
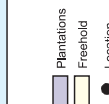
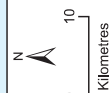
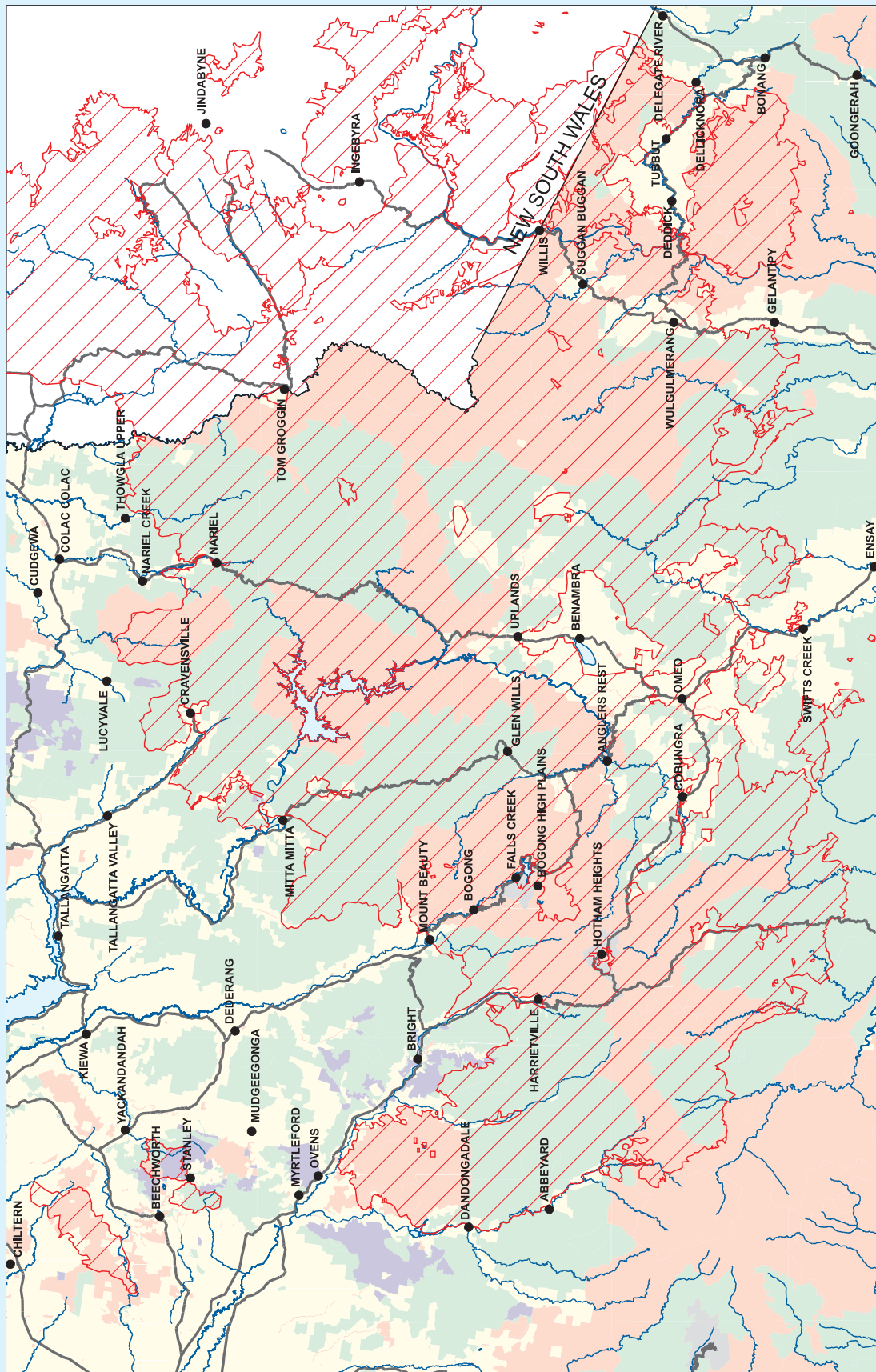
The scale and intensity of the fires has transformed the environment of the Victorian Alps for decades to come, so the fire recovery response needed to recognise that transformation and deliver strategies for sustainable solutions.

The Recovery Story documents and describes the assistance to industry, communities and the environment. These 23 stories help to give readers a greater understanding of the broad spread of projects and the work that was done to aid recovery in the aftermath of the fires.

Wildfire Boundaries - Fire Season 2002/03



Victorian Alpine Fires 2003 - Fire Boundary and Land Tenure



Legend