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Subject: FW: Submission: Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]
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From: Murray and Ruth Homes [mailto:homesmr@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, 20 April 2020 2:06 PM
To: RCNDA - Enquiries <RCNDA.Enquiries@royalcommission.gov.au>
Subject: Submission: Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

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Attachment available until 20 May 2020

Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin

Dear Commissioner,

Please find attached our submission.

It is based on our submission to the Victorian State Independent Inquiry into Bushfire Preparedness, in which we raise a number of important issues that are also relevant to the terms of reference for the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

Blairgowrie, located on the Victorian Mornington Peninsula, is surrounded to the north, northwest and the southwest by National Parks and State Reserves. The local CFA volunteers for a number of years have warned our community that in adverse bushfire conditions, they would not enter a number of areas south of Melbourne Road, within residential Blairgowrie, on the grounds of crew safety.

High fuel loads, mostly ground level weed infestation, dead trees and in some locations, rubbish, represent a High Fire Danger to our community. This is ten years after Black Saturday and the associated Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission.

The Victorian model of the Municipal Emergency Management Committees is, in our view, deeply flawed. It typically (and cynically) centralises power and authority within frontline departments, but conveniently diverts blame when, in the event of a major fire, something goes badly wrong. We cannot identify a Minister or a government official who will accept responsibility in these circumstances.

It must be emphasised that strong leadership at a central level is required to reduce high fuel loads and to prepare communities for natural disasters. The frontline Victorian Ministers have been missing in action.

We would be pleased to provide any additional information you may require, and we are prepared to further participate by way of telephone conference. Our submission may be published by the Commission.

Yours sincerely,

Murray Homes,
Blairgowrie Community Fire Prevention Action Group



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Review Fire Season 2019:20 (ed).docx

31.2 MB

Submission
To Independent Inquiry
2019-20 Victorian Fire Season

Inspector General of Emergency Management
GPO Box 4356
Melbourne. Vic. 3000

From
Blairgowrie Community Fire Prevention Action Group.

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1. Starting Point: State Policy on Bushfires Must be Applied

We understand that State Government has a bush fire policy designed “to protect lives, property and the environment in that order.”

We discovered this policy priority when we were invited to read a document in the office of a local member of parliament. We were not able to take a copy.

It is our experience that the policy is not well understood at community level nor within Government departments.

It is clear to us that the policy has had limited circulation within the bureaucracies and is not being applied.

It appears government departments are either ignoring the direction or they will only implement the policy if special additional finance is provided.

Your Inquiry should outline existing government policy and ensure that the priority for saving lives, property and the environment *in that order* was and is being applied.

When we examine the decision-making processes on fire prevention, we do not see any evidence that the frontline ministers are meeting together regularly to coordinate the implementation of state fire prevention policy. We suspect that this has become the task of the non-elected political ministerial advisors who are all about the political quick fix, winning the political battles on a day-to-day basis and kicking the hard decisions down the road.

The Review should include an examination of how such responsibilities and accountabilities, from Ministerial level downward to front line operational areas are defined for all government departments with a view to ensuring that State Government policy and processes within decision making for fire preparedness can be and is being complied with in an effective and coordinated manner. Examination of such policy and processes should also include how evidence to demonstrate compliance with coordinated implementation responsibilities can be measured and recorded. The present arrangements are not working.

We have noted the general acceptance that Climate Change represents a menace to our way of life, our economy, our jobs, our farms, our industries and our environment. Our scientists and Australia’s own CSIRO and BOM, are continuing to warn us there will be an increased frequency of adverse weather events and more severe fire events. If they are correct, and all the independent evidence points that way, we will have to do more on several fronts including more robust fire prevention measures.

Fire prevention and preparedness needs to be in the forefront of the Inquiries deliberations. It cannot avoid the issue, and from that starting point it will need to lay out the policies, strategies, structures and supporting practical measures that must be implemented by government and its related bodies.

2. Summary of Submission

Within the six Terms of Reference, our submission is directed to the following two matters:

- Preparedness Ahead of 2019-20 Fire Season
- State Evacuation Planning and Preparedness Process

Why have we responded to the Inquiry?

Blairgowrie is a declared High Fire Danger Area.

We are concerned because high fuel loads still exist on public land in Blairgowrie/Sorrento, in the following areas:

- Evacuation and Collector Roads
- Mornington Peninsula National Park
- Bayside Foreshore Reserve
- Rosebud to Blairgowrie Freeway Reserve
- Roadside Verges
- Council Reserves

We are concerned at:

- a lack of dialogue between conservation and fire prevention groups at local, district, shire and state levels on the need for increased fire preparedness measures arising from Climate Change
- the lack of inter-government coordination within the structure of the Mornington Peninsula Municipal Emergency Management Committee
- the need to protect the powers and integrity of the position of the Municipal Fire Protection Officer

What needs to be done?

- Beginning at local level, we need to start discussions on fire preparedness, involving the full range of interest groups. These discussions could be chaired by Mayors, and at higher levels by state and federal leaders.
- Ensure the review places sufficient emphasis on achieving effective coordination between all relevant levels of government and that this coordination is measured and recorded in a transparent manner.

- More robust fuel reduction on the above-mentioned public lands to keep pace with the forecast increasing risk of fire danger, caused by climate change.
- Increased community education programs addressed to summertime holiday makers and visitors to the area
- The introduction of emergency community alert sirens
- Planning and establishment of safe fire refuges for the inevitable contingency of large numbers of people seeking shelter on beaches
- Appointment an expert independent panel , to include experts in road systems and traffic management, coastal vegetation, fire prevention and coastal planning to establish a fire prevention and preparedness plan for the area south of Melbourne Road bordered by the Mornington Peninsula National Park. This panel must specifically address concerns of CFA volunteer crews about accessing areas south of Melbourne Road in adverse bushfire conditions.
- The Inquiry and the State Government to confirm support for the retention of the Freeway Arterial Reserve as a major future Evacuation and Access Road for the communities of Rye, Blairgowrie, Sorrento and Portsea on the grounds of future population growth and community safety
- New protocols established for the conduct of major sporting, cultural and recreational events in fire prone areas across the state
- New specifications established for fire breaks and asset protection zones in coastal areas
- Simulated exercises on the transport of pre-school and school children to and from Blairgowrie on Total Fire Ban Days

This will require:

- Active coordinated leadership by the frontline state ministers
- A commitment by all government agencies to implement through clear lines of responsibility, relevant command and control communication, state government policy to protect lives, property and the environment in that order
- A review of the role, reporting line and location of Municipal Fire Prevention Officers
- Changes for the more effective role and purpose of Municipal Emergency Management Committees and the associated accountability of Municipal CEOs.
- The identification within the State Cabinet and the Bureaucracy as to which high level officers is to be solely responsible and accountable for Fire Prevention measures across the State

3. Our Submission

3.1 Blairgowrie

Travel Victoria describes Blairgowrie as “being located on a thin strip of the Mornington Peninsula facing Port Phillip in the north and Bass Strait to the south, nestled between the popular beach resorts of Rye and Sorrento. A compact commercial centre is situated opposite the bay beach featuring a supermarket, speciality shops and cafes.”

At the last Census it had a permanent population of approximately 2,313.

The combined populations of Portsea and Sorrento is 2,522.

Approximately seventy-five percent of its housing can be described as holiday homes however this is progressively changing as baby boomers retire and replace old homes with modern homes.

It is an important summer destination for day visitors, tourists, caravanners, boating enthusiasts and holiday makers.

It has little or no public infrastructure. Our children attend primary schools and pre-school centres at either Sorrento or Rye. Secondary level students attend schools in Rosebud and beyond. The only public buildings we have are a large Blairgowrie Yacht Squadron Marina and Club House, a small public hall and a satellite fire station associated with Sorrento CFA.

Yet a vibrant community exist within this coastal location. Six cafes provide daily meeting opportunities for the socially interconnected community of Blairgowrie.

3.2 Blairgowrie in Summer and during Public Holidays

The summer holiday and the fire season coincide.

The population of Blairgowrie increases on Boxing Day from 2,300 to an estimated 25,000 including day visitors

The access roads to and from Melbourne and local roads are jammed, especially on warm summer days when the beaches are packed and parking is extremely difficult.

This heightened activity continues until the Australia Day holiday. Then it becomes weekend focused until Easter, long weekends and beyond into winter.

Currently our CFA Satellite Station has only one registered CFA volunteer member.

3.3 Our Assessment of the Current Bushfire Risk in Blairgowrie

The CFA, at public meetings and in top level briefings with our former State Parliamentary Representative, have told us that ‘a Bushfire in Blairgowrie is not a matter of if, but when!’

The whole of Blairgowrie is currently designated by the CFA as a ‘high fire danger area’.

We recognise, that in general, the area north of Melbourne Road, bounded by Point Nepean Road is better prepared than the area to the south of this road. The better preparedness of the

area north of Melbourne Road is due to the prevalence of bitumen roads with concrete curbs and gutters and tidy and well-defined nature strips. We acknowledge the joint efforts of our community and the Shire in achieving this outcome in the north.

However, in our view, the area south of Melbourne Road where unmade, narrow roads predominate and the Mornington Peninsula National Park lies on its border, is an Extreme Fire Danger Area requiring urgent attention by the Inquiry.

3.3.1 What we find from these maps for the Blairgowrie area

Figure 1: MORNINGTON PENINSULA - BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT OVERLAY

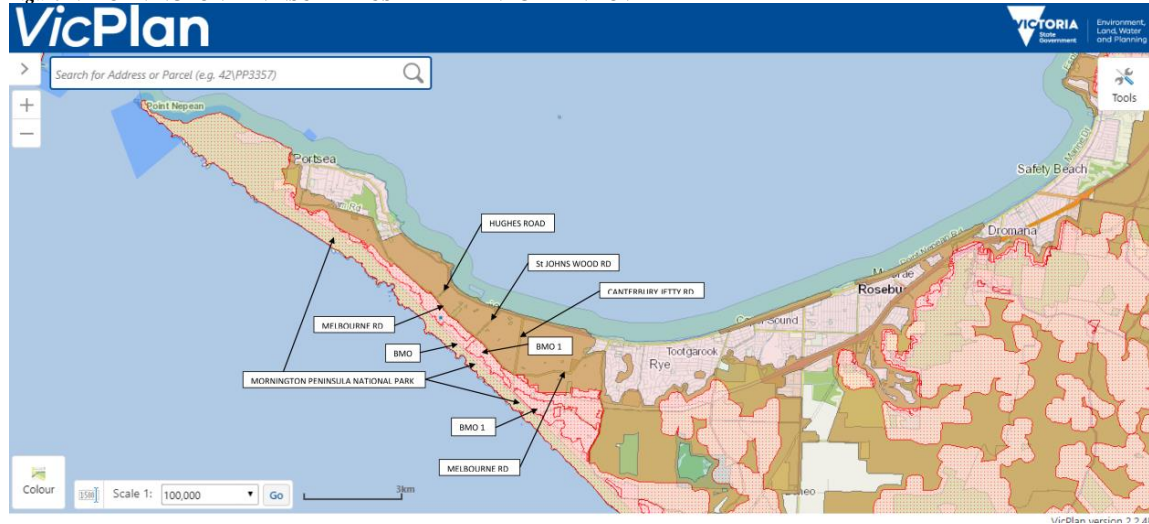


Figure 2: ENVIRONMENTAL SIGNIFICANT OVERLAY



Arising from the 2009 bushfires, Victorian government Town Planning Rules and National Building Regulations were revised in an effort to better protect the construction of buildings in bushfire risk areas. Current legislation states that the entire State of Victoria is bushfire prone. Blairgowrie is a suburb administered by Mornington Peninsula Shire Council (MPSC) and subject to the planning strategy and policy frameworks of the Department of Environment

Land, Water & Planning. This comprises a number of compliance ‘overlays’ relevant to bushfire risk.

The majority of Blairgowrie is zoned General Residential Zone 1. There are some minor Lower Density Residential Zone areas bordering the Mornington Peninsula National Park (‘the Park’) which is classified a Public Conservation And Resource Zone. Following the Black Saturday 2009 bushfires, significant work also occurred to codify bushfire risks applicable to new developments in designated risk areas. Codification occurred in amendments to planning rules and technical construction standards.

Under the MPSC Planning Strategy the Blairgowrie landscape south of Melbourne Road has two defined Bushfire Management Overlays (BMO and BMO 1), while the landscape north is a Bushfire Prone Area – see Map 1 above. (Source VicPlan, DELWP).

As a consequence of the bushfires in Victoria in 2006/7 and subsequently in 2009, the term Bushfire Attack Level was coined by the independent non-government peak body, Standards Australia, in the publication of Australian Standard AS 3959-2009 Construction of Buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas. The standard established six definitions of fire risk and termed Bushfire Attack Level (BAL).

Under the MPSC planning strategy and policy framework BMO, all land areas and properties south of Melbourne Road are designated as either BAL 40 (immediately adjacent to the Park) or BAL 29 (a little further from the park) closely corresponding to BMO and BMO 1 respectively. These are the two highest BAL categories below the most severe BAL FZ (Fire Zone).

Property developed landscape south of Melbourne Road is bordered by the Park which is managed by Parks Victoria. The Park runs for approximately 30 km of coastline featuring a network of cliff top tracks with spectacular ocean views and dense coastal vegetation. It occupies a narrow coastal strip from Point Nepean National Park in the west, to Cape Schanck in the east. It has an Environmental Significant Overlay – see Appendix Map 2 – (Source: VicPlan DELWP).

The purpose of the BMO is to identify areas where the bushfire hazard warrants bushfire protection measures to be implemented by the practical implementation of the AS 3959 standard and any Municipal planning permit conditions. Also, to ensure development, it is only permitted where the risk to life and property from bushfire can be reduced to an acceptable level.

The community would generally support the BMO intent as a bushfire protection measure along with the technical standards imposed by the relevant BAL description for developments.

In our view, Parks Victoria, as the manager of MPNP, has been delinquent in providing any measure of protection to the community from a potential bushfire in the Park.

Arguably while the community must abide and accept government legislated bushfire prevention rules and regulations, it appears that its agency, Parks Vic, does not.

It is unacceptable, even hypocritical, for a government agency such as Parks Vic to be able stand behind a planning Environmental Overlay and refuse to remove high fuel loads close to and adjacent to residential Blairgowrie.

While we accept back burning in the Park is not a practical management tool, it is practical to remove environmental weeds and dead vegetation and establish a 10metre asset protection zone as prescribed in Amendment VC83, along its border with residential Blairgowrie.

3.4 Blairgowrie - Unprepared for the 2019/20 Fire Season.

3.4.1 High Fuel Loads on Public Lands

Eleven years after Black Saturday, high fuel loads, mostly weeds, rubbish and dead trees, still exist on large areas of public lands to the north and south of Blairgowrie.

3.4.2 Evacuation and Collector Roads

The Evacuation and Collector Roads – Point Nepean, Melbourne, Hughes, St Johns Wood and Canterbury Roads in Blairgowrie are not fully cleared of roadside fire prone weed infestation, dead trees and rubbish. These roads are not able to provide safe passage in a bushfire emergency.

3.4.3 Neglected and Degraded Mornington Peninsula National Park in Blairgowrie

The Park is in a neglected state with high levels of fire prone weed infestation. This, in our view, is the most significant reason why the area South of Melbourne Road is ‘an extreme fire danger area’. Within the degraded Blairgowrie precinct of the National Park, there are no designated fire breaks or asset protection zones right up to private property boundaries.

There is no east-west fire break along the Park’s northern boundary parallel to residential Blairgowrie. Further there are no north-south fire breaks within the Blairgowrie section of the park.

(See Additional Background Information Page 13)

3.4.4 Freeway Reserve

Excess fuel loads exist on the Freeway Reserve where it enters Blairgowrie South of Melbourne Road. (See Additional Background Information on Page 14)

3.4.5 Roadside Vegetation

This issue is complicated by a number of complex legal issues that apply to all Victorian Roads and these issues need to be clarified.

Roads in Victoria are owned by the State yet in country Victoria, local farmers are expected to clear the roadside of noxious weeds and fire prone weed infestation. At the same time the State and the Shires wish to exercise a reserve power of veto. Some of the most significant examples of native trees can only be found within roadside reserves. This tension is well known by all parties but has never been resolved.

There are many road verges within Blairgowrie which are overgrown with weeds, dead trees and vegetation rubbish especially south of Melbourne Road.

We have suggested a common sense solution for Blairgowrie and the Mornington Peninsula where the Shire publishes, on its website, information to landowners on the care of roadside

vegetation which takes into account both roadside safety and fire prevention measures. We believe, in urban settings, landowners should accept responsibility for their nature strips.

However, in the wider evacuation and collector roads the responsibility for fuel reduction measures must be a major responsibility of government and its agencies. Where clearing has been undertaken by government on these roads, there has been a willingness by some landowners to control roadside vegetation in their vicinity. This should be encouraged by government.

(See Additional Background Information on Page 18)

3.4.6 Bayside Foreshore Reserve

The Foreshore Reserve runs along both sides of Point Nepean Road in Blairgowrie, as it follows the coast. The foreshore is managed by a Committee of Management on behalf of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP).

The foreshore area to the south of Point Nepean Road needs to be cleared at ground level, of fire-prone weed infestation and dead wood. The area to the immediate east of the Blairgowrie Shopping Village, requires urgent attention as there is no fire break or service road between the foreshore reserve and residential areas of Blairgowrie.

Very good work has been undertaken to make the foreshore camping grounds safer on the north side of Point Nepean Road.

3.4.7 Dangerous Local Roads South of Melbourne Road

Poorly designed and unmade, the narrow north-south bush tracks are dangerous. Local CFA volunteer crews have repeatedly warned that in adverse bushfire conditions they will not enter this area. We respect this judgement and agree that fire fighters should not be asked to put their lives at an unacceptable risk.

3.4.8 Storage of Firewood and Building Materials

Successive Mornington Peninsula Shire Fire Prevention Officers have claimed they do not have sufficient powers to address this issue. Firewood can be seen on fence lines and is also stacked along-side houses for quick access during winter. Flammable building material can also be seen stored under timber houses. Should the storage of firewood be a matter for government regulation or self-regulation?

3.4.9 Bushland Reserves

‘Asset Protection Zones’ (fire breaks) are generally in place for the Shires bushland reserves north of Melbourne Road but not south of Melbourne Road. Why? This needs to be addressed.

3.4.10 Community Education

Locally conducted community safety programs are successfully reaching the permanent population through Community 3942, for example. Also, the local Foreshore Committee has excellent information and advice in place for caravanners and campers.

However, there is absolutely no local capacity to connect with other tourists, day visitors and holiday makers and holiday house renters. This represents a dangerous deficiency, but the

problem could be addressed by compulsory notices in the holiday houses and through the letting agencies including online services, and the Shire.
(See Additional Background Information page 17)

3.4.11 Transport of Pre School and School Children on Total Fire Ban Days

Blairgowrie secondary students are transported to schools at Rosebud and beyond. Younger Blairgowrie children are transported to pre-schools and primary schools at Sorrento and Rye. These ‘school runs’ are made by parents in private cars, school buses and public transport buses.

During late December and January, February and into March, students come home in school buses during arguably the most dangerous time for bushfires - 3.00 to 4.30pm along roads that are not fire safe. Simulated Exercises to test emergency evacuation coordination between school authorities, parents, bus drivers, bus companies and emergency services need to be conducted each year.

3.4.12 Brush Fences

In earlier years wire fences were used between properties and along roadsides and many still exist. However, during the last twenty years, high brush fences have been installed for privacy, security and aesthetic reasons by property owners, and are becoming more common.

In areas south of Melbourne Road, brush fences have also been installed as summertime dust barriers along unmade roads and dirt tracks.

Some have even been installed on boundary fence lines between private properties and the national park. In this high fire prone area of Blairgowrie, brush fences provide a highly flammable pathway for bushfires.

3.5 What Needs to be Done

3.5.1 Clarification of Responsibilities and Accountabilities

Responsibilities and accountabilities, from ministerial level downward to front-line operational areas must be defined for all government departments (and related bodies), to ensure that state government policy and processes for fire preparedness are clear, and will be complied with in an effective and coordinated manner. Such policy and processes would also include recording of evidence to demonstrate compliance with coordinated implementation responsibilities in a transparent manner.

3.5.2 Respond to the Impacts of Climate Change

The Mornington Peninsula Shire, which is responsible for applying and coordinating state government policy on fire preparedness, has declared a Climate Change Crisis.

At this stage we have not seen any evidence of an additional effort by the Shire to do more to counter the risks associated with the predicted increase in the severity and frequency of bushfire events related to climate change.

The same can be said for the State Government.

The Inquiry needs to identify the crucial fire preparedness measures that must be undertaken to keep pace with the impacts of Climate Change and it cannot be all about ‘back burning’.

The Inquiry should note external influences on the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council designed to counter existing state planning legislation that arose from the recommendations of the previous Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission. The Inquiry should be aware of the current campaign by the Nepean Conservation Group to have our Shire excluded from existing state wide fire prevention planning regulations. The campaign is illogical and against the public interest. It must be called out by the Inquiry.

The Fire Group, on a number of occasions, has urged the Mornington Peninsula Shire to convene a meeting between conservation and fire prevention groups. We suggested that the Mayor should chair this proposed discussion.

Instead the Shire and the Nepean Conservation Group co-sponsored a public meeting on fire prevention but representatives from the Fire Group were refused permission to address the meeting. The Fire Group has again requested discussion with the Conservation Group without reply, hence our renewed suggestion that the Mayor should become involved.

It is going to be very hard to achieve a state or national consensus when this cannot be achieved at the local level. The Fire Group, the Shire Council and the Nepean Conservation Group have all acknowledged Climate Change which would be a good starting point for a much-needed conversation.

The Chair of Community 3942, [REDACTED], has expressed interest in facilitating this important local dialogue.

The Inquiry, should in its recommendations, support similar discussions state wide.

3.5.3 South of Melbourne Road

An independent panel needs to be appointed to establish a fire prevention action plan for this hazardous high fire danger area.

Specific attention needs to be directed to the management authorities responsible for the National Park, Council Reserves, the Road Networks including the Freeway Reserve and Roadside Vegetation and fire breaks.

Specific attention should be addressed to the concerns of CFA volunteer fire fighters and the local CFA leadership, who have publicly confirmed a reluctance to enter this area during adverse bushfire conditions. A desired outcome of the Inquiry should be an action plan, that must be implemented by the state government and its agencies, the MPSC and the local community.

Left to its own devices, the Shire and the other Government Agencies, to date, do not appear to have the “can do” capacity and the sense of purpose for this prevention mission.

3.5.4 Evacuation Roads - a State Wide and Local Issue

To support the developing strategy to ‘leave and leave early’, the Inquiry should require all major state wide evacuation and access roads to be cleared of ground level fire-prone roadside vegetation, as well as any large trees that represent an obviously unacceptable risk to the travelling public.

Fire Safe exit roads must be in place between towns, regional centres, cities and our state and national capital cities, which was not the case, for example, during the recent Mallacoota fires.

Specifically, our recommendations apply locally to the Point Nepean Road and Melbourne Road between Portsea, Sorrento, Blairgowrie and Rye, and the ongoing connections to Melbourne via the Peninsula Freeway and East Link.

3.5.5 Collector Roads

An important feature of our area is the way in which our network of narrow local roads feed into three much wider north-south collector roads - Hughes, St John's Wood and Canterbury Jetty Roads - which allows the movement of traffic into the north or south of Blairgowrie, and in turn into the major evacuation roads, Pt Nepean and Melbourne Roads. There is only one way in and one way out of the Peninsula beyond Truemans Road to the east of Blairgowrie.

These north-south collector roads within Blairgowrie should also be considered as fire defence lines and accordingly cleared of ground level weed infestation, rubbish and dead trees.

3.5.6 Freeway Reserve

The Inquiry should support VicRoads long standing plan to extend and construct an arterial road along the existing Freeway Reserve between Rosebud and Blairgowrie.

While we are aware that MPSC currently objects to this plan, it should never the less be supported by the Inquiry on the grounds of community safety and as a required outcome for the continued application of the 'leave early' exit strategy.

3.5.7 Coastal Areas - Fire Breaks

There is no consistent public information or guidelines on the most appropriate specifications for fire breaks or asset protection zones within coastal areas. This information, when available, needs to be shared with all stakeholders.

3.5.8 Major Social, Recreational and Sporting Events

Protocols for the approval and safe conduct of these events in fire prone areas need to be reviewed and clarified given the predicted increased fire risk.

(See Additional Background Information page 16)

3.5.9 Fencing

Guidelines for fire resistant fencing in high fire danger areas need to be developed for different applications across the State.

4. Additional Background Information

4.1 Mornington Peninsula National Park

Large areas of fire-prone weed infestation exist along, and in the Mornington Peninsula National Park from Portsea to Cape Schanck.

There are no North-South Fire Breaks within the Blairgowrie precinct to manage a bushfire running from Portsea/Sorrento into Blairgowrie and in the less likely scenario, from Rye into Blairgowrie.

There is no East-West fire break along the northern boundary of the Park where it meets residential Blairgowrie. Thus, there is a seamless wall of vegetation, mostly fire-prone weeds, that spills over into residential Blairgowrie.

There are only a few access tracks for fire fighters to enter the National Park.

Over the years we have been provided with different narratives from Parks Victoria:

'Firebreaks could be used in Portsea and Sorrento to burn back against any fire heading towards Blairgowrie.'

'Fire breaks would be of no use against a fast-moving bushfire in the National Park as it would go straight over the top.'

'We would never burn back along a firebreak within the National Park. It would be far too dangerous.'

'Computer modelling suggests that even in extreme situations in excess of Code Red conditions, a bushfire running from Sorrento along the National Park into Blairgowrie would not, under any circumstances, enter residential Blairgowrie.'

'Houses, two back from the northern border of the National Park would be at risk from a bushfire in the National Park.'

'Fire Access tracks will not be required into the Park as any bushfire in the National Park will be managed by aerial tankers and helicopters.'

4.2 Freeway Reserve Between Rosebud and Blairgowrie

This Freeway Reserve was established by the Bolte State Government 50 years ago and VicRoads has indicated recently that it has been identified as a future road of importance indicating that in the first instance it will be an arterial road.

Consultants employed by VicRoads prepared a fire plan which outlined priority areas for weed and vegetation removal, and initially some work was undertaken to implement this plan.

Over the years as new freeways were constructed in Victoria, state finance for the fire prevention along this freeway reserve has declined in real terms.

At the beginning of the 2018/19 fire season, representatives of the Fire Group, CFA, VicRoads and the Shire inspected the freeway reserve at its point of entry into Blairgowrie in the vicinity of Canterbury Jetty Road and Tibir Street, where a number of entry and exit ramps were proposed.

Agreement was reached, as an emergency measure, that extra funding should be sought to remove a huge area of dead trees, rubbish, and fire-prone weeds and invasive vegetation. This area was alongside Melbourne Road, an important and critical evacuation road.

No emergency funding was provided for the 2018/19 fire season.

No emergency funding was provided for the 2019/20 fire season.

So, we continue to have, inside residential Blairgowrie, on public land, beside a critical evacuation road, a massive concentration of fire prone weeds, rubbish and dead trees that would 'go off like a bomb'.

This is eleven years after Black Saturday and associated Bushfire Royal Commission!

4.3 State Evacuation Planning and Preparedness Process

One of the great achievements of the last Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission has been the growing acceptance at community level of the CFA message to 'leave and leave early to a safer place'.

This strategy is clearly saving lives.

When we, in the Mornington Peninsula, assess the advice to leave and leave early, we are concerned that the present network of Evacuation and Collector roads are not up to the task of facilitating a mass evacuation and are not safe.

VicRoads has previously stated its future intentions to construct an arterial road along the freeway reserve. We have welcomed this intention as an important step in providing increased evacuation capacity in times of emergency.

The Inquiry should be aware that the Mornington Peninsula Shire, which continues to endorse the recommended 'leave early' advice, is now campaigning to have the Freeway Reserve, which runs from Rosebud West to Blairgowrie, rezoned to a 'conservation zone'.

Looking to the future population demographics and the likely increase of permanent residents from Rye to Portsea, this MPSC rezoning proposal must be challenged by the Inquiry.

4.4 Where are the safer places for people living in Blairgowrie?

Advice to head to nearby Rye and Rosebud has been mentioned but in Extreme and Code Red conditions, there are not enough public places in these locations to provide adequate shelter in severe heat, especially for the elderly and young families.

For some people 'leaving early' would mean returning home to suburban Melbourne, or going to stay with relatives or friends in a place of safety until the danger is past.

We have a real problem with the many people who have rented holiday homes at great expense for a week or more and who are understandably extremely reluctant to abandon their holiday plans and leave, even for a day! Most of these tourists/holiday makers are not aware of the risk and have no fire plan.

For many reasons (cliffs, currents, rips, extensive fire prone vegetation) the ocean beaches are a dangerous evacuation choice.

By far the most popular choice is to head to safety of the front beach. When we discuss this beach option with people, we find that their intention is to stay in their holiday homes to escape the heat, and only move to the front beach when they see smoke. They then intend to drive to the front beach, park cars, cross Point Nepean Road and stay on the beach.

The plain truth is that our road system will not cope with thousands of people simultaneously driving to the front beach and finding a place to park. This is why the CFA talks down this option and urges people to leave the Peninsula and leave early.

The reality is that this advice will be largely ignored in a bushfire emergency. Most of the people, if they arrive there, will be on the front beach with limited shade and water. Elderly people and young families will find this experience difficult in the extreme, as exemplified by recent events in Mallacoota and the NSW south coast towns.

Ten years ago, the Blairgowrie Yacht Squadron offered its facilities to support people sheltering on the beach but at that time its buildings did not meet acceptable building standards.

With its new building built to compliant fire standards and despite repeated offers from the BYS, the Shire has, only this summer, commenced discussion to have the club house used as a possible Post Emergency Recovery Centre.

The Shire has been extremely slow to respond to this offer. The current negotiations appear to be centred on the issue of legal liability.

The agreement between the Surf Lifesaving Victoria and the State Government for the various life saving clubs to become emergency centres could be an acceptable model for application in Blairgowrie.

4.5 Major Events on the Southern Peninsula

During our summer time a number of State, National and World Yachting Regattas are held which brings additional people, cars, boats and trailers to our Peninsula Yacht Clubs. There are no protocols in place to prepare these visitors for a possible bushfire emergency. Without this information, and months ahead, they book large holiday homes in high fire risk summer locations on the Peninsula.

The Portsea Polo Club conducts a major polo event within the Nepean National Park during January - the peak of the Tourist and Fire Seasons. Ten thousand guests in party mode, caterers and horses surrounded by high fire fuel loads, and crammed into a narrow peninsula, with one way in and the same way out is a disaster waiting to happen.

Another event that brings large numbers of people is the Rye Gift. It is conducted in January each year at the Rye Football Ground on Melbourne Road, our major evacuation road for traffic from the western end of the Peninsula.

The economic benefits of these events must be weighed against community safety.

Protocols for the conduct of major sporting and recreational events in fire prone areas across the state need to be examined by the Inquiry.

4.6 Preparing our Community.

We are confident that Community 3942 has local understanding of the issues and can reach out to our permanent population and prepare them for each fire season. We have absolutely no capacity to influence or look after the large tourist summer population that literally swamps our town.

We can send out urgent messages to our permanent population via email trees and Facebook which link the membership of a number of community-based organisations. Because these email distribution lists are active, they have a high degree of connection and messages sent through these networks become talking points within the permanent population. Important messages can also be sent out by the South Coast Medical Centre and the Blairgowrie Yacht Squadron as well as other community groups.

We also have a dedicated public notice board as well as websites that provide information about Shire, Foreshore and the activities of Community 3942.

As we do not have any official Fire Danger Rating signs in Blairgowrie, we have adapted a cardboard CFA fire danger indicator for this purpose.

Each year we have a Fire Prevention Awareness town meeting sponsored by and chaired by Community 3942. In December 2019 more than 90 people attended a such a town meeting held at the Blairgowrie Yacht Squadron. The meeting was targeted to people new to the town.

In the event of a predicted period of sustained heat we do have the capacity to pre-warn our permanent population.

Our permanent population are users of the Emergency Victoria Management App and nearly everybody has a mobile phone so they can receive day time emergency messages. During night time, mobile phones are frequently silenced or placed in another room as the constant notifications can interrupt sleep.

4.7 Providing Advice to our Summer Population

This is an impossible task. Because of state privacy provisions we do not have access to the list of owners of holiday homes. We have no access to the contact details of people holidaying in Blairgowrie and their guests.

It is our experience that people holidaying on the Peninsula have no expectation that a coastal holiday could in any way be impacted by a possible bushfire. For them the bushfire experience is associated with a country holiday, not the coast. They do not have an expectation of a bushfire and consequently have no fire plan. They also are far less likely to be connected to the Emergency Services App.

The CFA is reluctant to support a fire plan based on ‘heading to the beach’ as they are deeply concerned that on extreme hot days, local people and visitors will shelter in houses, and when a fire becomes a reality, they will jump in their cars and attempt to flee to their favourite parking spot near the beach. Our road systems within Blairgowrie will not be able to cope!

Panic, traffic jams, accidents - a disaster waiting to happen!

Local knowledge tells us there will be a dash to the beach because the evacuation roads are not safe. There is no emergency planning at any level for the thousands of people who will be on the beach.

Because Blairgowrie visitors and holiday makers are usually heavy users of mobile phones, they will, however, receive emergency text messages when authorised by Victorian Emergency Services.

If the intention is to use radio and the digital platforms to prepare all Victorian communities then the fire risks associated with coastal communities must be highlighted. However the recent bushfire season in NSW and Victoria in particular, highlighted the real safety weakness and loss of electricity and communications as a result of fire destroying fundamental infrastructure.

We would make an urgent request that the recommendation of the previous Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission for a network of Community Alert Sirens be implemented. We know that a network of community alert sirens was originally approved for the southern Mornington Peninsula, and it would make great practical sense for these sirens to be installed. It would go a long way to activating a prompt community response, especially late at night.

We can remember the Premier of the day announcing that all the recommendations of the Bushfire Royal Commission would be adopted and implemented. Similar announcements of bipartisanship were made by the Leader of the Opposition. Despite an initial burst of action, complacency and a lack of budget courage has set in within all Government agencies.

What has happened to the Community Emergency Alert Sirens previously informally promised to Blairgowrie?

It is a ‘no brainer’ for Blairgowrie and the other coastal communities of the Nepean Peninsula to have community alert sirens installed as a high priority.

4.8 Roadside Vegetation

The Fire Group holds the view that landowners should accept responsibility for looking after the ‘nature strips’ at the front of properties.

In earlier times, our Shire claimed total control of the roadside verges and demanded that each resident gain a council permit for any changes.

When property owners responded to the findings of the Bushfire Royal Commission by clearing their nature strips, a number of local residents were threatened with legal action by the Shire. The local community, especially north of Melbourne Road, took on the Shire and followed ‘good-old fashioned common sense’, removing excess fuel loads from the front of

their properties. Recently we have noted tentative moves around the Shire to have this draconian permit process renewed.

The common sense solution is to provide, on the Council website, some helpful guidelines that provide sound ideas that take into account roadside safety and fire prevention issues along with a list of recommended fire-resistant indigenous plants. Aside from fire prevention common sense, verge management is also about responsible land care.

The Fire Group has previously recommended this course of action to the Shire.

The legal position surrounding management of roadside vegetation is an unresolved state wide issue that needs resolution.

In Blairgowrie and other coastal villages, especially where there are heavy concentrations of holiday homes, a partnership could be forged by the Shire with the property management businesses, which maintain properties on year by year basis by mowing lawns, trimming trees and removing ground level weed infestations. The Shire and fire authorities would do well to engage with these people.

4.9 Mornington Peninsula Emergency Management Committee

The bringing together of people from the various government agencies operating at regional or Shire levels in emergency management should be maintained, especially for the task of managing emergency situations.

However, the local emergency management committees at the municipal level have failed miserably across the state in the coordination of the removal of hazardous fuel loads on public lands.

This is true for Blairgowrie and the rest of the Mornington Peninsula. The question must now be asked: should this function of a coordinated response by government agencies be a centralised or devolved responsibility?

How can this model work for fuel reduction on public land when there is no over-arching state policy being applied and the front-line Ministers are missing in action?

Currently, it could be argued that the present arrangement is an example of ‘centralisation of power and decentralisation of blame.’

5. Blairgowrie Community Fire Prevention Action Group

This group was formed soon after Black Saturday by the Blairgowrie Action Group which is now Community 3942. The Fire Group is a stand-alone organisation, with the task of making Blairgowrie a safer community.

As a courtesy, the Chair of Community 3942 receives copies of all the correspondence and policy documents of the Fire Group and attends key meetings. A representative of the Fire Group attends the monthly meetings of C3942 to report on all developments.

The Chair of Community 3942 has chaired all of the Town meetings called to discuss bushfire prevention issues.

The Fire Group is made up of people with strong interests across a number of community policy issues but who have also accepted the special task of monitoring fire prevention policies at state and local levels.

From the time of the Bushfire Royal Commission we have responded to every review undertaken in Victoria. We have sustained a high level of energy for nearly a decade in advancing the fire prevention agenda.

The professional background of Fire Group members is in publishing, engineering, community development, education, credit unions, industrial relations and farming. One member of the fire group was also previously a volunteer member of the CFA with more than 25 years of service in three different brigades.

We have had detailed discussions with all the government agencies with responsibilities in community safety and fire prevention.

During the past ten years we have been legally threatened by the Mornington Peninsula Shire for organising a working bee to remove 15 trailer loads of rubbish, weeds and dead trees from a road reserve within the urban perimeter. This roadside area had not been cleared for more than fifty years, judging by the age of the material found.

We have also received an official “Shire Commendation” for our role in bushfire prevention.

Our warnings that the Blairgowrie area is not fire ready and is not keeping pace with the increasing risks of more intense bushfires due to climate change, have been met with some resistance from the Shire, despite its declaration of a ‘Climate Change Emergency’.

Because of the risk of arson, we have not publicly canvassed fire prevention issues during the summer months.

6. Our Blairgowrie Fire Protection Plan

Soon after its formation the Fire Group proposed a bushfire protection plan for Blairgowrie.

We proposed that priority should be directed to clearing along the two East-West Evacuation Roads, Point Nepean and Melbourne Roads, and the three North-south Collector Roads, Hughes, St Johns Wood and Canterbury Jetty Roads.

This rectangular grid would provide defensible fire defence lines and protection of safe access and evacuation routes.

We noted that Hughes Road, the boundary road between Sorrento and Blairgowrie, was the shortest distance between the bay and ocean beaches and represented the best opportunity for confronting a bushfire approaching Blairgowrie from Sorrento.

We suggested that St Johns Wood Road, which runs north and south from the bay to the ocean through the middle of Blairgowrie, also offered similar fire defence and evacuation opportunities.

Canterbury Jetty Road, which is the boundary road between Blairgowrie and Rye, is another important North-South Collector Road which could provide a defence line against a fire approaching Blairgowrie from Rye. It represents the final opportunity to stop a bushfire running from Blairgowrie and spreading out into the more extensive residential and bushland areas of Rye.

We agreed that the clearing of these roads from ground level weed infestation required the highest Shire priority, and accepted that, in the meantime, clearance of ground level vegetation by the Shire along minor local roads was a lesser priority.

We have also advocated for a north-south fire break within the National Park at St Johns Wood Road and for a fire break on the Sorrento side of Hughes Road.

An east west asset protection fire break along the northern border of the Mornington Peninsula National Park where it borders residential Blairgowrie, has also been proposed by the Fire Group.

We also identified the need to tackle the fire dangers associated with high fuel loads on the foreshore south of Point Nepean Road

In its own tentative way, the Shire seems to be going along with our plan, but we do not see any evidence that it has been adopted by other government agencies, in particular Parks Victoria and VicRoads. Our plan is such a basic, common sense approach that it is both surprising and disappointing that it has not been adopted by the Municipal Emergency Management Committee of our Shire, and then picked up by the other government agencies.

Our Fire Protection Plan should be noted by the Inquiry as an example of effective community engagement. Has the Shire submitted the plan to its Emergency Management Committee? We suspect not!