Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

24 April 2020
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Executive summary

This submission by Towong Shire Council is presented to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements arising from the extreme bushfire season in 2019-2020, resulting in devastating loss of life, property and wildlife, and environmental destruction across the nation.

The submission is structured to firstly introduce the reader to the context of the Shire and the Council. This is a critical backdrop in enabling the reader to appreciate the comparative capability and capacity of the smallest rural Council in Victoria, particularly given the scale, intensity and duration of the Upper Murray bushfires at the eastern area of the Towong Shire.

The submission presents the experience, learning and recommendations concerning specific aspects of emergency management related to the Upper Murray bushfires. The submission is structured around the chronology of this emergency management event - before, during and after the Upper Murray bushfires.

Council presents the following recommendations to the Royal Commission.

Before the emergency – planning and preparation

Recommendation 1 - Municipal Emergency Resource Program
That additional funding be provided to local Councils, through programs such as the Victorian Municipal Emergency Resource Program, and that an additional portion of government funding be allocated to those Councils with a higher risk profile and limited capability and capacity.

During the emergency – supporting the emergency response effort

Recommendation 2 - Training program to support the statutory roles of MERO, MRM and MFPO
That emergency management training courses be developed and delivered, in collaboration with the local government sector, to provide professional development programs to support officers who are delegated the statutory roles of MERO, MRM and MFPO.

Recommendation 3 - Coordinated specialised support and counselling services
That the Federal Government provide specialised support and counselling services to municipalities and local Councils impacted by large scale events and ensure that these services can be reliably delivered in rural and remote areas.

Recommendation 4 – A more mature ‘emergency response model’
That a more mature ‘emergency response model’ in collaboration with the local government sector that includes the following four inter-related elements:

- A planned, coordinated emergency management system to support all Councils, with particular attention paid to rural Councils with limited capability and capacity;
An experienced, skilled and trained ‘flying squad’ of staff who have the capacity, at short notice, to effectively support any impacted Council/s in major emergency management events through the intense period of response, relief and initial recovery;

Increased funding through programs such as the Victorian Municipal Emergency Resource Program (MERP) to those small rural Councils that have a high-risk profile and limited capability and capacity; and

The active involvement of the local government sector in working with the State to plan and implement this model.

Recommendation 5 - Funding the Upper Murray Events Centre (Corryong) so that it can function as a scalable Relief Centre

That the Federal Government,

- In collaboration with other levels of government, fund the development of the Upper Murray Events Centre in Corryong, particularly given the absence of any suitably equipped infrastructure in the Upper Murray that can support regional events and also double as a scalable Relief Centre considering the likelihood of a comparable emergency event in this remote part of the Towong Shire in the future; and
- In light of the learning stemming from the 2019-20 summer bushfires, review the nature and level of needs that are likely to arise and the associated infrastructure and services that will be required in ‘Relief Centres’ when major bushfires occur in holiday periods in isolated areas of Victoria.

After the emergency – transition to recovery

Recommendation 6 – Improve predictability for communities along the Victorian / NSW border

That the Federal Government, in collaboration with the Victorian and New South Wales Governments work to:

- Achieve higher standards of accessibility and reliability in telecommunications for communities located along the state border;
- Achieve consistency in access to information and services, particularly as applied to emergency management and community services and education;
- Align the presentation and integration of IT based bushfire and emergency information and advice; and
- Ensure compatibility in radio communication between the CFA and RFS and promote joint management exercises between emergency service agencies along the border.

Recommendation 7 – Invest in ‘mobile black spots’ and improve wireless broadband

That the Federal Government increase investment in telecommunications infrastructure for remote communities and Council areas with a high bushfire risk profile, such as Towong Shire. For Towong Shire, this includes increasing funding for the national ‘mobile black spot program’ and expanding the wireless broadband network as well as changing policy settings to enable more extensive vegetation clearance around communications towers.
Recommendation 8 - Facilitate new models of fuel management planning
That the Federal Government implement strategies to facilitate the piloting of models of fuel management planning within existing municipal and regional emergency management planning structures.

Recommendation 9 - Increase the clearance area around boundary fencing to at least 8 metres
That the Federal Government identify and implement strategies to change current statutory planning requirements for exemptions from requiring a planning permit to clear native vegetation by increasing the clearance area around boundary fencing of rural properties to at least 8 metres.

Recommendation 10 – Increase investment in fire-fighting aircraft
That the Federal Government increase the level of investment in fire-fighting aircraft and the associated support and capability requirements for these aircraft.

Recommendation 11 – Involve the ADF in Municipal Emergency Management Planning
That the Federal Government, work in collaboration with other tiers of government to, trial the active involvement of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in the Towong Shire Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee in order to enhance the ADF’s planning and preparation for future emergency events in local government areas with high risk profiles.

Recommendation 12 – Change the natural disaster assistance to allow financial assistance where secondary events post bushfire have resulted in damage to assets
That the Federal Government modify the criteria for natural disaster financial assistance to include the impact of any secondary event following bushfires on Council assets within a set timeframe from the occurrence of the primary event.

Recommendation 13 – A robust model of community led recovery
That the Federal Government actively supports Towong Shire Council in developing, applying and evaluating a model of community led recovery.

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Impact of the bushfires

The Upper Murray bushfires initially presented as a potential threat to the communities of Towong Shire in late November 2019. An Incident Control Centre (ICC) was initially established at the Tallangatta offices of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) on 25 November 2019 with the Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC) operating from Council’s Tallangatta offices that were located next door to the ICC.

The Upper Murray bushfires presented as an immediate threat to communities and townships in the Towong Shire on 30 December 2019, leading to the evacuation of many communities in the Upper Murray area.

A State of Disaster was declared by the Victorian Premier for areas of Victoria including Towong Shire on 2 January 2020 and this remained in place until midnight on Saturday 11 January 2020.

On 7 January 2020, in light of the risks associated with the scale and dynamics of the bushfires, the ICC and MECC were relocated from Tallangatta to Wodonga.

The Federal Government’s Operation Bushfire Assist commenced on 31 December 2019 to support state fire and emergency services across most states and territories in Australia. For Towong Shire, this resulted in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) Joint Task Force 646 being based at the Corryong Recreation Reserve to assist in the Upper Murray bushfire recovery.

During the Upper Murray bushfires, ‘Evacuation Warnings’ were issued by the Country Fire Authority for the townships / communities of Burrowye, Cudgewa, Cudgewa North, Guys Forest, Mount Alfred, Pine Mountain, Tintaldrda and Walwa.

Over the course of the Upper Murray bushfires, ‘Watch and Act Warnings’ were issued by Emergency Management Victoria for the townships / communities of Berringama, Bucheen Creek, Bullioh, Bungil, Burrowye, Cravensville, Darbyshire, Dartmouth, Georges Creek, Glen Valley, Granya, Henlow, Koetong, Lucyvale, Mitta Mitta, Nariel Valley, Shelley, Talgarno, Tallangatta East, Tallangatta South, Tallangatta Valley, The Cascade, Thologolong, Wyeebo, The Lightwood, Beetoomba.

Over the course of the Upper Murray bushfires access to essential services in many communities was lost including electricity, water and telecommunications (landline, mobile and internet services). Electricity outages were experienced by communities from 30 December. While some communities had access to power through temporary generators, full grid power was not restored across all impacted communities until 21 January 2020. Road closures were extensive across the Upper Murray and remained in place until 23 January 2020.

The Incident Control Centre and Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre remained active throughout January and into February 2020 and finally closed on 20 February 2020.

The following map and tables provides an overview of the impact of the bushfires on communities across the Towong Shire.
Snapshot of the impact of the Upper Murray Bushfires 2019-20
Impact of the bushfires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties impacted</th>
<th>Properties destroyed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>548</td>
<td>71 (42 primary residence)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dwelling damaged</th>
<th>Other structures destroyed (includes sheds, not septic or tank)</th>
<th>Other structures damaged (includes sheds, not septic or tank)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stock destroyed</th>
<th>Fodder destroyed</th>
<th>Pasture destroyed</th>
<th>Plantation destroyed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5,067</td>
<td>in excess of 19,000T lost</td>
<td>in excess of 35,000Ha lost</td>
<td>in excess of 3000Ha lost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Damaged/destroyed fencing (internal and external)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3,287 kilometres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communities and properties impacted by the bushfires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of properties impacted</th>
<th>Number of properties impacted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berringama</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biggara</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colac Colac</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corryong</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cudgewa</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guys Forest</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Alfred</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nariel Valley</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pine Mountain</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thowgla Valley</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tintaldra</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towong</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walwa</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>548</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Animal losses resulting from the bushfires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Prior</th>
<th>Dead</th>
<th>Missing</th>
<th>More Assessment</th>
<th>Euthanised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>9,161</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef</td>
<td>64,715</td>
<td>2,991</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep</td>
<td>12,542</td>
<td>1,577</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goats</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horses</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poultry</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bee hives</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>87,405</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,067</strong></td>
<td><strong>467</strong></td>
<td><strong>814</strong></td>
<td><strong>848</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Submission structure and logic

The recent Upper Murray bushfires have certainly left no doubt as to the critical role that Councils play in emergency management.

The Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) ‘Victorian Preparedness Framework’ (May 2018), reinforces the importance of local Councils when stating, “Local government municipalities have essential roles in emergency management, including the preparation and maintenance of Municipal Emergency Management Plans, provision of relief and recovery services and supporting emergency response operations. Because they are the closest tier of government to local communities, municipalities have a central role in building community capacity and resilience”.

The 2019-20 summer accentuated that ‘emergencies are a fact of life in Victoria’.

In order to enhance the emergency management capability and capacity of local government, the State Government, through Local Government Victoria (LGV) and EMV have been leading a three-phase ‘Councils and Emergencies’ project since 2017. Developed in collaboration with the local government sector, the project is designed to:

1. Clarify and confirm the emergency management responsibilities and activities of local governments;
2. Understand Councils’ emergency management capability and capacity, based on the identified needs and risk profile of each individual municipality; and
3. Develop strategies to address gaps in councils’ emergency management capability and capacity.

The first phase culminated in the production of a ‘Councils and Emergencies Position Paper’ (December 2017) that clarified and confirmed the emergency management responsibilities and activities of local government.

The second phase resulted in the publication of the ‘Councils and Emergencies Capability and Capacity Evaluation Report’ (December 2019). This report provided valuable information, including the results of a self-assessment of all Victorian Councils to understand Councils’ emergency management capability and capacity based on the needs and risk profile of each municipality.

In the third and final phase, LGV will work with each Council to develop strategies to enhance its emergency management capability and capacity, focusing on gaps identified in phase 2. This phase will be informed by the project’s previous two phases.

The ‘Councils and Emergencies Position Paper’ framed Councils’ responsibilities and activities around the stages of an emergency. This framework of responsibilities and activities before, during and after an emergency event has provided a useful structure for Towong’s submission to the Royal Commission.

At the heart of the State Government’s ‘Victorian Preparedness Framework’ and the ‘Councils and Emergencies’ project is the aim to enhance the capability and capacity of Victoria’s emergency management. Council’s submission similarly seeks to enhance emergency management planning, policy and practice by reviewing its experience of the Upper Murray bushfires. This submission provides a reflection on Council’s learning before and over the 3+ month period from 30 December 2019. Where relevant, the submission also presents recommendations regarding potential
improvements to current practice across all agencies and levels of government involved in emergency management.

For the purposes of this submission, the concepts of capability and capacity are a constant point of reference and review and are applied in a manner that is consistent with the State Government’s definitions in the ‘Councils and emergencies’ position paper, that is:

- **Capability** is defined as the ability of Councils to undertake emergency management responsibilities and activities; and
- **Capacity** is defined as the level of resourcing Councils have to undertake emergency management (including people, resources, governance, systems and processes).

In brief, this submission is structured to firstly introduce the reader to the Towong Shire and Towong Shire Council. This is a critical backdrop in enabling the reader to appreciate the comparative capability and capacity of the smallest rural Council in Victoria, particularly given the scale, intensity and duration of the Upper Murray bushfires at the eastern area of the Towong Shire.

The submission then explores the experience, learning and recommendations, related to specific aspects of emergency management, sequenced around the chronology of before, during and after the Upper Murray bushfires. Each section provides a succinct overview of Council’s position in relation to the set of responsibilities and activities that define Council’s legislative obligations regarding emergency management.

Finally, the submission deals with several pertinent matters that are of particular interest to the Royal Commission.
About Towong Shire

Towong Shire is located in far north-eastern Victoria, adjacent to the Albury/Wodonga region and approximately 400 kilometres from Melbourne. Its population of 5,985 residents is dispersed across numerous towns, villages and valleys, and its two largest centres, Corryong and Tallangatta, are located just over a one-hour drive apart.

The Shire covers an area of 6,635 square kilometres, of which about 75% is public land. Significant visitor numbers are drawn to the natural beauty of the Shire, with visitors and residents alike enjoying the national and state parks, lakes, rivers and streams and the recreation opportunities associated with these natural assets.

The economy of the region revolves around agriculture, tourism and timber production and processing. Approximately two-thirds of businesses located in the Shire are in the agriculture and forestry industries.
Social demographics

Towong Shire has a declining and aging population. The median age of Towong Shire residents is 58 years, compared with 38 years for persons in Australia, and about a quarter of the population is aged over 65. Given the scale of agriculture in the Shire, climatic conditions and events have a great impact on the socio-economic health of communities around the Shire.

Our dispersed communities often travel vast distances to shop, attend to complex healthcare needs and access other services not available in their locality. For example, a family who lives in Walwa may need to travel 55 kilometres to shop at Corryong's IGA. If they wished to shop at Coles, Woolworths or Aldi, they would need to travel 115 kilometres to Albury or a 230 kilometre round trip.

Telecommunications is also a challenge for many residents living outside the larger township areas. In Council’s priority list of mobile black spots, the majority are located in areas directly impacted by the Upper Murray bushfires. While the NBN has been rolled out in Corryong and immediate surrounding areas, there are other areas in the Upper Murray that do not have access to high-speed internet.

Governance

Towong Shire is an unsubdivided municipality, with five Councillors elected through proportional representation voting. The current group of Councillors were elected on Saturday 22 October 2016 and their term will end with the Local Government Election scheduled to be held Saturday 24 October 2020.

The *Local Government Act 1989* defines the purpose of Councils as follows:

*Section 3A: The purpose of local government is to provide a system under which Councils perform the functions and exercise the powers conferred by or under this Act and any other Act for the peace, order and good government of their municipal districts.*

Organisational structure

Council delivers a wide range of services with a very small workforce. Over the last decade, the Council has worked hard to address financial sustainability challenges (outlined in greater detail below), including adopting a streamlined organisational structure. Council has also implemented shared services arrangements with neighbouring Alpine Shire Council and Indigo Shire Council to deliver services for specific areas such as building services, environmental health, property and rates services and outdoor pools.

Up until 2019, Council’s organisational structure included just two directorates, Technical (Infrastructure) Services and Community and Corporate Services, with the Planning, Economic Development and Communications and Engagement areas directly supervised by the Chief Executive Officer. This very lean structure enabled Council to direct as much funding as possible into service delivery, infrastructure maintenance and strategic projects that attracted significant external funding, however in more recent times it has become evident that sector and legislation changes required an increase to Council’s organisational capacity in some key areas. Towards the end of 2019, a new organisational structure incorporating three directorates, Community and Planning, Infrastructure and Environment, and Corporate and Organisational Development, was adopted. Recruitment, selection and induction processes were still in progress for three Directors and several Coordinators when the Upper Murray bushfires started in December 2019.
Staff resources

Council’s small population and limited resources means that some of Council’s program areas are delivered by very small teams; sometimes a single person who may work in a part-time capacity. In other areas, key services are delivered through shared services arrangements with neighbouring Councils. While these approaches are appropriate and cost-effective most of the time, during the bushfire crisis situation, employees with specialist skills, experience and local knowledge were quickly overwhelmed due to the ‘24/7’ nature of the event.

Resourcing during the initial response phase was further complicated due to the significant number of staff who live in areas that were directly impacted or had close relatives in areas directly impacted. The traditional holiday period also meant that staff were recalled from leave, or their availability to attend work was limited due to school holidays and family obligations.

Financial sustainability

Council faces significant challenges to its financial sustainability, primarily due to its large geographic area, the significant amount of infrastructure that needs to be maintained, the small and dispersed population and low rate-base.

To put this into perspective, a 1% increase to rates and charges yields an additional $60,000. The value of infrastructure per head of Towong Shire’s population is $30,768.09 - more than double the average value of infrastructure per head of population for Councils in Victoria (Source: www.knowyourcouncil.vic.gov.au). To maintain this level of infrastructure as well as provide a wide range of other services to support its communities, Council relies on income from rates and charges as well as grant funding from the Victorian and Federal governments. All these funding sources are subject to government policy decisions, such as the Fair Go Rates System. Council also recognises its communities’ limited capacity to pay given the socio-economic challenges and aims to contain cost of living pressures wherever possible.

Over the last decade, Council has taken decisive action to address its financial sustainability challenges by adopting innovative practices as well as by implementing a systematic cost-reduction program (“do more with less”). This cost-reduction program has been far reaching and all aspects of Councils spending has been reviewed over the past decade from office printers, banking arrangements, fleet and plant policies to stationery and other stores.

The result? In addition to the limited human resources at Council’s disposal as described above, the availability of other resources such as plant, vehicles, equipment and supplies, is also extremely limited.
Before the emergency – planning and preparation

Council’s state of readiness

Under the Local Government Act 1989, Councils must have regard to the following objectives:

- promote the social, economic and environmental viability and sustainability of the municipal district;
- use resources efficiently and effectively;
- improve the quality of life of the local community;
- promote business and employment opportunities; and
- ensure the services and facilities provided are accessible and equitable.

The State Government’s ‘Councils and Emergencies Position Paper’ (December 2017) provides some poignant reflections on Councils’ integral role in emergency management.

“Councils’ emergency management responsibilities and activities are a key component of Victoria’s emergency management system, and councils are often a conduit between state government agencies, local communities, not-for-profit organisations and service providers. Through their municipal emergency management planning committees, local emergency management practitioners identify risks in their LGAs and develop strategies to mitigate those risks. Emergency management agencies in partnership with councils, educate their local communities about the emergency risks they face and what they can do about the risks.

While councils have an essential role in emergency management planning and community engagement, and in leading relief and recovery efforts at the local level, the risks and consequences of emergencies are ultimately shared across all levels of government and the community. Equally, councils’ strengths are particularly in working with the community during and after emergencies, noting that councils are not a response agency.”

Importantly, in stating that ‘no two Councils are the same’, the Position Paper reinforces that each Council will have a distinct risk profile, a variance of approaches to emergency management and different capabilities and capacities to undertake the range of emergency management related responsibilities and activities. The consultation process to achieve the final ‘Councils and Emergencies Position Paper’ stressed that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to Councils’ emergency management role doesn’t work.

These conclusions, which centre on the importance of identifying and responding to the unique risk profile and distinct capability and capacity of each Council, have been echoed throughout Towong Shire Council’s first-hand experience of emergency management during the Upper Murray bushfires. A key conclusion is that the weight of responsibilities in the 2019-20 Upper Murray bushfires rested far too heavily on the shoulders of the smallest rural Council in Victoria. The resultant bearing on the organisation and the effects on individual officers will only be fully realised in the months and years ahead.

Experience

The independent audit of Towong Shire Council’s Municipal Emergency Management Plan was completed in August 2018. This audit, conducted by the Victorian State Emergency Service (VicSES),
Victorian Police and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), includes a comprehensive assessment of all Council’s responsibilities and activities before, or in preparation for, an emergency.

A table condensing Council’s audit results, provided as attachment 1, underlines Council’s positive and comprehensive level of planning and preparation for future emergencies.

The State Government through the ‘Municipal Emergency Resource Program’ has provided a small amount of funding support to specific Councils across Victoria, including Towong Shire Council, to support municipal emergency management planning and preparation. This funding has enabled Council to employ a part-time officer with Emergency Management responsibilities.

In July 2019, Council completed a self-assessment capability and capacity survey of its emergency management ‘maturity’ that was coordinated by Local Government Victoria. An overview of Council’s survey results would readily lead one to conclude that the Council’s perspective, at the time, indicated a very positive level of planning, preparation and readiness for an emergency.

![Survey Results Chart]

The survey provided the mechanism for officers to score Council’s ‘maturity level’ and detail the Council’s planning activities to support the nominated grade across key dimensions of Council’s emergency management roles.

While this information presents as very reassuring, the survey results hide the level of concern held and expressed by the Council officers and the Chief Executive Officer regarding the potential impact of an emergency of any scale on the Council.

The following extracts from Council’s ‘free-text commentary’ within the self-assessment survey, clearly stress Council’s unease and alarm regarding Council’s capability and capacity restraints across all six emergency management planning dimensions.

**Category A – Planning with Stakeholders**

*Towong Shire has the capability to plan with stakeholders but capacity is limited by resource availability in terms of staffing, equipment and funding.*
Category B – Planning within Council

Towong Shire Council has been able to develop a strong planning and documentation framework and stakeholder relationships to support emergency management and response. However, Towong Shire is unable to resource a major emergency. We have insufficient staff and equipment to be able to respond to a major emergency, let alone continue day to day service delivery at the same time. The Shire would need to obtain external resources to continue day to day operations and emergency response. Our neighbouring Councils have similar experiences and so would be very constrained in their ability to assist with resourcing during an emergency. Improvement could be made by the State providing a regionally based emergency response group.

Category C – Risk Mitigation

Council has knowledge and expertise but very limited capacity in terms of staffing and equipment to mitigate emergency risk. This is exacerbated by the large fire prone geographical area that Council is responsible for. Increasing responsibilities imposed on Council by Emergency Management Victoria continually widens the gap between expectations placed on Council and our capacity to adequately comply.

Category D – Planning for Activation

Council plans for a major emergency very well. But Council would have only the ability to respond to the major emergency for 48 hours before exhausting local resources and requesting assistance. The supply of additional resources either to Council (MERP) or Region to be able to support longer term emergencies is critical to the future emergency management capability of Towong.

Category E – Planning or Relief Coordination

There is a significant gap between Council’s capability for planning for relief coordination and Council’s capacity for implementation. This gap has eventuated from the continued increase in the responsibilities that Councils have been expected to meet by EMV, which has not been supported by a corresponding increase in funding / resources. This is particularly apparent in the MERP funding level which has not increased for nearly a decade.

Category F – Planning for Recovery Coordination

Council’s capacity to plan for emergency recovery coordination is negatively impacted by the increasing gap between what is imposed by EMV and existing resources available to Council.
Learning

As illustrated, Council completed a comprehensive level of emergency management planning and preparation prior to the recent Upper Murray bushfires. While the ‘Municipal Emergency Resource Program’ has provided Council with a funding allocation of $60,000 per annum since 2012-13, the level of funding has not changed over an 8-year period and the size and distribution of the state-wide allocation fails to duly recognise the unique risk profile and distinct capability and capacity of individual Councils.

Under the present state policy and practice framework, Council has concluded that no level of planning and preparation would have enabled the Council to more effectively prepare and plan for this event.

That said, there are many potential changes to policy and practice that would enable the emergency management effort of all agencies, including Councils, to achieve better outcomes for communities before, during and after an event of this scale, intensity and duration.

The third phase of the ‘Councils and Emergencies’ project provides a valuable opportunity to work with LGV to develop strategies and action plans, in partnership with the local government sector, to address gaps in capability and capacity. Council fully supports the principles articulated by LGV and the local government sector to guide this key final phase of the project. The report states that Councils’ future emergency management responsibilities and activities should:

1. **Reflect local governments’ strengths, capability and capacity, and be consistent with existing legislative responsibilities and core business;**
2. **Be led by local government only when it is the best-placed organisation to do so;**
3. **Be applicable to emergencies of different scales and complexity, with a focus on community priorities and outcomes;**
4. **Provide opportunities to collaborate and build partnerships with other councils and stakeholders to enhance the delivery of services; and**
5. **Acknowledge local decision making, governance, structures and relationships that already exist between councils and their local communities.**

There are many areas of learning and associated recommendations throughout this submission that reinforce the importance of these principles.

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**Recommendation 1 - Municipal Emergency Resource Program**

That additional funding be provided to local Councils, through programs such as the Victorian Municipal Emergency Resource Program, and that an additional portion of government funding be allocated to those Councils with a higher risk profile and limited capability and capacity.
During the emergency – supporting the emergency response effort

While it couldn’t have happened at a worse time, the scale of the bushfires was always going to overwhelm this small rural Council

Experience and impact

The impact of the Upper Murray bushfires occurred in the middle of Council’s annual Christmas / New Year recess period that commenced on 24 December 2019 and was scheduled to extend to 6 January 2020. Most Council staff were on annual leave with a limited number of officers continuing to fulfil essential roles over the festive season.

The impact of the bushfires on Upper Murray communities and the demands of Council’s emergency management roles and responsibilities necessitated Council’s CEO to immediately require the senior management team and all staff with emergency management related responsibilities to return from leave.

Council was also part way through a staff recruitment program associated with a significant organisational restructure. This is particularly relevant to the Royal Commission given the level of change in the most senior levels of the Council’s management structure and the reduced level of knowledge of local government and emergency management. This diminished the capacity and capability of the Council at a time that was critical.

To illustrate the scale of the senior staff changes, nine of the thirteen Director, Manager and Coordinator positions, sitting across the second and third level of the Council’s organisational structure, were new to the organisation. Six of the thirteen were commencing their first job in local government and all started in their new roles between November 2019 and January 2020.

Over the decade until mid-2019, Council had operated with two Directors, at the second level of the organisational structure, reporting to the CEO. Happenstance, around the beginning of the 2019-20 financial year, the two Directors resigned in quick succession to pursue other career and life opportunities. These resignations provided the opportunity for the CEO to progress the recommendations of the organisational review that had been completed in May 2019. This included a change to a three-directorate structure and included the creation of several new third-level Manager/Coordinator positions to enable Council to manage a range of emerging demands. The CEO’s update message to all staff dated 5 December 2019, highlighted the key drivers for the organisational review as:

- Increased Performance Reporting requirements;
- Various public safety improvements such as changes to emergency management and the increase in pool safety inspection requirements;
- Capping of municipal rates;
- Expanded scope of state auditing of Council activities; and
- Demands related to the imminent new Local Government legislation.
Following approval of the organisational review and proposed restructure, Council commenced its recruitment for the three Director positions in August 2019 and for the Manager/Coordinators roles in October 2019. Two of the three Directors commenced in their roles in November and December 2019 with the final Director taking up his position in January 2020. Two third level officers commenced in November 2019, five commenced in December 2019 and two started in their roles in January 2020.

Council’s scheduled new staff induction program was to be implemented in January 2020 but was not conducted due to the scale and intensity of emergency management demands associated with the bushfires.

Emergency management training designed to orient new staff to the roles of MERO and MRM has always been approached generally as ‘Local Government and emergency management’ training program. Given the multitude of responsibilities and activities related to the role of local government, there is a clear need for a more specialised and targeted course regarding the lead statutory roles of MERO, MRM and MFPO.

**Learning**

The organisational restructure of a small Council such as Towong Shire, is always going to temporarily reduce the capacity and capability of the organisation. Small rural Councils have very little financial capacity to ‘back-fill’ positions and, in almost all instances, staff changes and leave circumstances mean that other staff simply ‘carry the load’.

The timing of the resignation of two Directors provided the impetus to progress the organisational restructure in a manner that was efficient and financially prudent.

The coincidence of the bushfires as new Directors, Managers and Coordinators were commencing employment in a new organisation and, sometimes in a different sector, further diminished the utility of the Council at a critical time. This also underlines the importance of appropriate professional development for officers that are delegated the emergency management related statutory roles.

**Recommendation 2 - Training program to support the roles of MERO, MRM and MFPO**

That emergency management training courses be developed and delivered, in collaboration with the local government sector, to provide professional development programs to support officers who are delegated the statutory roles of MERO, MRM and MFPO.
The realities of life and work in a small rural Council

**Experience and impact**

Towong Shire Council is the smallest rural Council in Victoria with only 109 staff or a total equivalent full-time staff contingent of 76 FTE (comprising 49 FTE full time, 19 FTE part time and 8 FTE casual employees). Of the 109 employees, 67% of staff work and live in the Towong Shire and 33% of the 109 employees live in the bushfire affected area in the Upper Murray.

Over 75% of employees are involved in the provision of direct service delivery in areas as diverse as maternal and child health, childcare and kindergarten services, waste collection, parks and gardens, road maintenance, visitor information centre services and school crossing supervisors, to name a few.

A majority of more senior staff who have program planning, coordination and management roles typically have sole responsibility for specific programs and services. There is a mix of full time and part time employees in these roles. Given the predominance of single officer program responsibilities, there are a minimal number of program areas that have any capacity to cover staff absences, be they for holidays, illness or other reasons.

All staff with emergency management related responsibilities undertake these roles as a component of a broader set of functions and tasks. It is a challenge to ensure that all emergency management positions (MERO, MRM, EMLO, etc) always have staff identified to deputise when the delegated officer is absent.

Small organisations, particularly in the area of local government, often generate a strong sense of shared responsibility and teamwork as well as an intense pride and passion for working with and for the communities where staff usually live. This is very evident in the Council team with staff and Councillors having very active lives involved in local community organisations, including as volunteers with emergency response agencies.

The Upper Murray bushfires had a direct impact on 22% of Council’s staff and their families. Similarly, four of the five Councillors live in areas of the Shire that were impacted by the bushfires.

Over the period of the bushfires and the associated response, relief and recovery phases, staff and Councillors continued to fulfil their roles despite living in the communities directly impacted by the bushfires. This action had a very positive upside, as the staff and Councillors were able to provide local knowledge and valuable insights into the immediate needs of local communities. That said, the bushfires and Council’s emergency management roles and responsibilities also placed significant stresses and strains on this group as they focused on the immediate needs of local communities while attempting to give adequate attention to their own and their family’s requirements.

For staff and Councillors alike, particularly those who are members of the impacted communities, the emotional tensions and stresses associated with the dynamic interplay between meeting and or reconciling personal and community needs has been quite debilitating over the extended response and early recovery period of the bushfires. As the pressing and urgent needs have dissipated and the effects of prolonged endorphins have been experienced, some staff have encountered significant emotional stresses.

There will be times when members of the community, who have experienced very distressing circumstances, will be extremely demanding when contacting Council. This communication can be taxing and traumatic, particularly when staff are talking to members of their own community. Council
staff have experienced rude and abusive communication and complaints that have, at times, been personally directed at them. This can take a significant toll on the limited number of staff located in more remote areas, particularly in those circumstances where staff are dealing with neighbours or fellow community members with whom they share points of everyday contact.

**Learning**

The ‘downstream’ impact of the bushfires on Council staff has been evident, particularly given the scale and duration of the emergency. For some staff the direct impact of the bushfires on their home (or their family’s home) and the pressures related to fulfilling their part in the Council’s emergency management roles and responsibilities has led to significant emotional stress and related mental health issues. Despite the best endeavours by Council’s management to provide guidance and direction regarding the demands and appropriate period of work, the need for taking time out and the importance of accessing support services through the Council’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP), there were many times that these messages of support were not heard and or not heeded.

The key learning from this experience is that more immediate specialist ‘support and counselling’ services are critically needed on the ground and in the place where staff are working as soon as a significant emergency event occurs. In hindsight, this specialist support was needed for all staff, but particularly for those staff who directly experienced the ferocity of the bushfires and the conflict associated with working for Council and being a member of the community that was directly impacted by the bushfires.

Towong Shire, like all Councils in Victoria, has an established system of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) designed to provide staff with ready access to support and counselling services. While this service is valuable and effective in meeting individual counselling support needs as they arise from time to time, it is not an adequate strategy or avenue for supporting whole teams impacted by large scale emergency events such as the Upper Murray bushfires.

For more remote rural communities, such as the Upper Murray area and the Towong Shire more broadly, gaining access to on-the-ground specialist support services is not simple. Council was able to gain access to specialist support for some one-off occasions, but a sustained specialist support service was impossible to access and maintain when critically needed.

Efforts to coordinate targeted specialist support services in March 2020 were prevented by the social distancing protocols related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a need for a state coordinated system to ensure that Council staff impacted by large scale events have ready access to specialised support and counselling services.

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**Recommendation 3 – Coordinated, specialised support and counselling services**

That the Federal Government provide specialised support and counselling services to municipalities and local Councils impacted by large scale events and ensure that these services can be reliably delivered in rural and remote areas.
There must be a better system

Experience and impact

Towong Shire Council was significantly impacted by the bushfires in the Upper Murray area of the municipality. It was only a matter of days after the bushfires belted the Upper Murray that Council was totally overwhelmed by the scale and intensity of demands related to emergency response, relief and recovery. The extended duration of the event placed enormous pressures on the staff and Councillors.

The Towong staff team and Councillors were remarkable.

There were numerous displays and demonstrations of extraordinary commitment, initiative, empathy and support to one another and to the local communities we serve. At the same time, given the very small team of staff, the emergency response, relief and recovery effort quickly consumed and exhausted the Towong staff resource.

Towong Shire Council has a ‘special’ place in the hearts of former employees complemented by an extensive professional network of CEOs and senior managers across local government in Victoria. The scale, intensity and impact of the fires generated an immediate response from several former senior employees who instantly ‘volunteered’ to assist in managing the immediate ‘onslaught’ of demands and the assessment of needs and related actions.

Council’s capacity and capability ‘gaps’ were partly filled by an enterprising, resourceful and make-shift arrangement initially with the eleven Councils across the Hume region in the early part of January 2020. This strategy gained initial traction and immediate response from our Council colleagues across the Hume region and provided critical resources in the ICC, MECC and Relief Centre activities. The erratic and dynamic nature of the bushfires on Hume region Councils, resulted in neighbouring Councils not being able to confidently and predictably meet Council’s staffing resourcing requests.

In the light of this restricted staff resource supply line, the Towong professional network reached out to the CEO at Darebin City Council. Darebin’s CEO, who had experienced the 2015-16 bushfires at Wye River, provided valuable insights regarding the immediate demands and priorities concerning response and recovery. Darebin City Council also made the generous and welcomed offer to coordinate the filling of Towong’s resource needs with staff from across the metropolitan area (particularly Melbourne’s inner and western Councils) as well as the Hume Region Councils.

This arrangement involved Council identifying staff resource requirements within a roster and forwarding this to a key contact point at Darebin City Council who would seek ‘volunteers’ from across the participating Council group. This practice extended to staff resource needs in the ICC, MECC and Recovery Centres as well as other operational areas such as human resource management, customer service and communications. This arrangement extended from 30 December 2019 until 26 January 2020.

While this approach enabled Council to ‘survive’ the bushfire related emergency management experience, it was far cry from a mature, coordinated and shared system of response and recovery. This emergency management event placed an enormous weight of responsibility on the shoulders of the smallest rural Council in Victoria.

All the while, Council continued to provide its ‘business as usual’.
Learning

The resourceful but makeshift approach to meeting the emergency management staff resourcing needs did enable Council to struggle through this overwhelming event and experience. This was achieved through the combination of a comparatively small number of highly motivated but fully stretched Council staff and the remarkable efforts of many ‘volunteer’ Council officers from across the State applying their knowledge and skills to the best of their abilities in difficult circumstances.

That said, there were many dimensions of this arrangement that were not ideal. Council’s experience directly correlated with the issues identified in the State Government’s ‘Councils and Emergencies: Capabilities and Capacities Evaluation Report’ (December 2019), endorsed by LGV and EMV, that stated,

“The most common reason councils identified for not achieving their target maturity was that they lack the capacity to undertake the required range of emergency management responsibilities.”

In discussing the challenges related to staffing, the report identifies:

“People - Staffing (during and after): lack of staffing capacity is also an issue during and after emergency events, when council staff must be diverted from their normal duties to undertake emergency roles. Councils have limited numbers of staff available to resource emergency management during and after an emergency for these reasons:

- the need to maintain business-critical functions (such as finance and aged care services)
- for a major emergency, the total number of staff within the organisation can be insufficient to maintain business-as-usual services and functions while undertaking emergency management responsibilities in activation, relief and recovery. This issue is amplified in smaller councils which will never be sufficiently staffed to resource a major emergency
- staff are not able to take on an emergency management role because they are not sufficiently resilient to deal with the trauma of affected communities, or they may have been personally affected by the emergency and are not able to undertake an emergency role
- not all councils have formal resource-sharing agreements or detailed procedures about how to activate and carry out a resource-sharing agreement.” (page 65)

This set of observations and insights in the State Government’s December 2019 report were the stark reality of Council’s lived experience from 30 December 2019 and through January, February and March 2020. In April 2020, Council continues to endeavour to come to terms with the impact on the organisation and officers involved in the recovery program.

Council’s experience reinforces the need for a more ‘mature emergency response model’ in Victoria that recognises comparative risk as well as the capacity and capability of different local government authorities. Council’s reflection is that the model critically needs the following four components.

1. A state-wide planned, coordinated emergency management system to support all Councils, with particular attention paid to those rural Councils with a limited staff resource capacity and capability.
2. An experienced, skilled and trained ‘flying squad’ of staff who have the capacity to be quickly called upon and located anywhere in Victoria at short notice to effectively support the impacted Council/s through the intense period of emergency management response, relief
and initial recovery. Again, the local government sector has the means to be part of this solution.

3. An increased investment through programs such as the Victorian Municipal Emergency Resource Program (MERP) to those Councils that have a high-risk profile related to significant fire and flood events. This increased funding should be applied in a manner that enables the Councils to prepare and plan for significant events and develop internal systems that allow integration with components 1 and 2 of this ‘mature emergency response model’.

4. This model must be planned and implemented in collaboration with the local government sector. It is clearly evident that the sector is keen to be part of the solution and has regularly demonstrated its goodwill and propensity to respond to emergency related challenges.

Recommendation 4 – A more mature ‘emergency response model’

That a more mature ‘emergency response model’ in collaboration with the local government sector that includes the following four inter-related elements:

- A planned, coordinated emergency management system to support all Councils, with particular attention paid to rural Councils with limited capability and capacity;
- An experienced, skilled and trained ‘flying squad’ of staff who have the capacity, at short notice, to effectively support any impacted Council/s in major emergency management events through the intense period of response, relief and initial recovery;
- Increased funding through programs such as the Victorian Municipal Emergency Resource Program (MERP) to those small rural Councils that have a high-risk profile and limited capability and capacity; and
- The active involvement of the local government sector in working with the State to plan and implement this model.
Coordinating relief – “You had to be there to appreciate the intensity of the situation and the herculean efforts of a few staff and an extraordinary group of community volunteers”.

Experience

An important responsibility held by Councils during an emergency is to lead the establishment and coordinate a range of activities related to Relief Centres, as directed by Victoria Police in its emergency management role of Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator (MERC). Council’s responsibilities and activities pertinent to relief centres are as follows.

- Coordinate local relief and recovery, working with local partners to determine arrangements to manage local relief and recovery activities;
- Coordinate and lead relief services locally by:
  - establishing and managing relief centres where appropriate;
  - coordinating the provision of food, water and materials to affected communities; supported by the Red Cross and other agencies including Foodbank Victoria;
  - working with DHHS to provide temporary shelter / short-term housing / accommodation options for displaced people; and
  - coordinating and managing services with DHHS to meet the psychosocial needs of affected local people;
- Support as needed the efforts of Victoria Police and Red Cross to reunify families and others separated during an emergency;
- Promote a single point of contact for residents to obtain information about available support, services and assistance.

On 30 December 2019, Towong Shire Council was directed by the MERC to establish Relief Centres at Tallangatta and Corryong. Council’s experience of ‘opening’ and coordinating the Relief Centre at the Memorial Hall in Tallangatta, was without incident and, for the most part, ran to plan. Matters related to the lack of staff resources were challenging in the initial days following 30 December 2019, however, this was addressed relatively quickly once Council officers returned from leave and ‘volunteer’ officers from Hume region Councils began to be effectively rostered to roles in the Tallangatta relief centre.

The Corryong relief centre was a radically different experience that demands serious attention by all agencies involved in the emergency management effort associated with the Upper Murray bushfires. In discussing and reviewing the events at the Corryong Relief Centre, with the key officers involved in its establishment and operation, it is difficult to describe the experience and arrangement in terms of a ‘Relief Centre’. It is one of those ‘you had to be there’ events!

The following scenario provides some level of perspective on the dynamics that confronted the Council officers involved.

- On 30 December 2019, Council received the MERC’s request to establish a Relief Centre in Corryong;
- Council’s Director, Community & Planning, who had commenced employment in early December 2019, returned from leave, travelling from Albury and arriving at Council’s office in Tallangatta at 3:00pm. Following a 15-minute briefing, the Director travelled to
Corryong to ‘open’ the Relief Centre, leaving Tallangatta around 3:15pm and arriving in Corryong around 4:30pm;

- The Relief Centre located in the gymnasium of the Corryong Secondary College was opened around 5:30pm on 30 December 2019;
- Given the impact of the bushfire on the majority of Council staff living in the Upper Murray area, only the Director and one other officer were available to undertake all Council’s relief centre responsibilities and activities. The second Council officer undertook this role while also coordinating efforts to ensure her family was safe and protect her home. Two other Council staff, who lived in the Upper Murray area, continued their ‘front-line’ emergency management related roles providing access to or mobilising Council resource requests from the ICC and MECC, while regularly dropping by the Relief Centre to provide information and practical support;
- Over the initial three-day period from 30 December 2019 to 1 January 2020, the Corryong Relief Centre was ‘staffed’ by two Council officers and two local Red Cross volunteers. These efforts were reinforced and sustained by a group of extraordinary volunteers from local churches and community groups as well as an amazing group of local residents who were simply ‘gold’;
- On 31 December 2019, VicPol closed the key road networks and also required many people and communities to evacuate to the Corryong Relief Centre;
- At the peak of activity, the Relief Centre provided refuge for an estimated 1,000 people, with 600+ people relocating from the Nariel Folk Festival to the Corryong Relief Centre;
- The sheer number of people and their vehicles created a level of mayhem in and around the Corryong Secondary College but given the miniscule number of Relief Centre staff and volunteers, there was no capacity to uniformly address this challenge;
- Telecommunications were severely impacted and there was no landline or mobile phone communication or internet connection at the Relief Centre over an extended period;
- On 31 December 2019, power was cut to Corryong and despite sourcing a generator, the Corryong Secondary College facility was not equipped to accommodate this utility;
- Given the power outage, Corryong quickly became a cash only local economy, as the ATMs were not operating. To access fuel and food people needed cash. Many people turned to the Relief Centre for assistance;
- The Red Cross was unable to provide for any of the catering requirements, so the best of efforts was achieved through a combination of the local Corryong ‘Foodshare’ volunteers, the local Lions Club and local businesses;
- Given the significant occupational health and safety issues, many Corryong Health staff had evacuated reducing the hospital’s capacity for critical cases and no DHHS staff or support agency staff were seen for 10 days in Corryong;
- There was no capacity to respond to the needs of people who required a level of medical or nursing support that was below critical;
- Many people were concerned about the safety of their families and friends. Given the interruptions to telecommunications and privacy related protocols, the local Red Cross was unable to provide information regarding family status and reunion. This generated a level of frustration and anxiety for many people;
- On 1 January 2020, ‘emergency service convoys’ allowed people caught in the area, to travel away from the fires through Tallangatta and this relieved the immense pressures and
demands on the Corryong Relief Centre. On the night of 2 January 2020, the number of people ‘accommodated’ at the centre reduced to forty. That said, the Relief Centre experienced a constant flow of people seeking information, support and company;

- The emergency service convoys also enabled three staff (two from Towong Shire and one from Indigo Shire) to relieve the two Council staff at the Relief Centre;
- Additional fires in other areas of the Upper Murray generated new pressures on the Relief Centre between 3-5 January 2020.

Learning

This extremely demanding and at times overwhelming set of circumstances warrants due attention to the need for new thinking regarding the role of ‘Relief Centres’ and the responsibilities of local Councils, and other support agencies, in respect to their establishment and coordination.

Council’s reflections on this experience prompt four conclusions.

1. There is a need for all relevant agencies to rethink the nature and level of needs that are likely to arise and the associated infrastructure and services that will be required in a ‘Relief Centre’ when these emergency management events occur in isolated settings, such as the Upper Murray area of Victoria.
2. Given the geography and natural environment in the Upper Murray, the increasing interest in adventure tourism and the remote nature of many communities, there is a strong likelihood of a comparable event occurring in the future.
3. In the absence of any suitably equipped event infrastructure in the Upper Murray that can support regional events and double as a scalable Relief Centre, there is a need for all levels of Government to give due attention to funding the development of the Upper Murray Events Centre in Corryong as a Relief Centre.
4. At a more operational level, due attention needs to be given to improving the communications in Relief Centres. This might include higher standard internet, greater use of satellite phone in remote locations and the increased transfer of information to and from the staging areas of emergency service agencies to the Relief Centre coordinator.

Recommendation 5 - Funding the Upper Murray Events Centre (Corryong) so that it can function as a scalable Relief Centre

That the Federal Government,

- In collaboration with other levels of government, fund the development of the Upper Murray Events Centre in Corryong, particularly given the absence of any suitably equipped infrastructure in the Upper Murray that can support regional events and also double as a scalable Relief Centre considering the likelihood of a comparable emergency event in this remote part of the Towong Shire in the future; and
- In light of the learning stemming from the 2019-20 summer bushfires, review the nature and level of needs that are likely to arise and the associated infrastructure and services that will be required in ‘Relief Centres’ when major bushfires occur in holiday periods in isolated areas of Victoria.
After the emergency – transition to recovery

Consistency and predictability in accessing information and services are critical for cross-border communities

Experience and learning

There are several issues that present problems for residents in communities within or near Towong Shire that are close to the border of Victoria and New South Wales. These issues create inconsistencies in service provision and a level of unpredictability in accessing important information. Over many months, these issues have been described and raised by the Victorian Cross Border Commissioner, Mr Luke Wilson, with relevant Victorian Ministers and Departments.

At the outset, it is important to underline that effective, reliable telecommunications is critical to ensuring healthy, safe communities. There is a vital need to improve the availability and dependability of access to phone and internet communications in this area of Australia.

That said, the overarching principle of all states should be to achieve a level of cross border collaboration to enable consistency and predictability when residents and communities in Victoria and New South Wales access information and services. This does not appear to have always been the case during the recent Upper Murray bushfires.

Residents and communities have encountered problems in accessing services despite people using the 'natural' communities that align with their proximity to local townships along the state border, immediate access to community services and the most efficient travel routes.

NSW residents seeking to access health and community services provided by Victorian based service providers can encounter issues regarding eligibility. The location of the bushfires has meant that both NSW and Victorian residents have been presenting themselves to various relief centres on both sides of the border. It is reported that NSW residents attending relief / recovery centres in Corryong were advised by DHHS to attend the centres in Albury, NSW which was up to 90km away from their home when there was a Victorian Relief Centre only 20km away.

Similarly, in Victoria, residents impacted by the bushfires were eligible for Victoria’s emergency relief payment (usually a pre-loaded visa card) via DHHS. On the other hand, NSW residents do not have access to this payment. Unsurprisingly, the inconsistency of the experience in accessing support payments tends to generate frustration and tension between cross border communities.

Issues were also reported regarding resident concerns that related to the variation in the application of road closures and roadblocks by the Victorian and NSW police. Local communities have expressed the need for greater uniformity and reliability in the application of protocols for people crossing borders.

Achieving consistency in bushfire and emergency related communications via local radio stations on both sides of the border is important. Similarly, residents and visitors located near the Victorian and NSW border must use at least two state-based apps for fires and road access information. These apps (and the equivalent website icons) are presented differently and this makes accessing clear reliable
information more problematic. In addition, the respective state apps do not provide clear information and coverage of the proximate bushfire/s across the border.

There are benefits to be gained in the Victorian CFA and NSW RFS (and possibly other emergency service agencies) using compatible radio communication equipment and undertaking joint emergency management exercises to improve the level and quality of cross border communication and planning.

Finally, there is inconsistency and a level of confusion regarding the application of school bus services on code red days in communities that are close to the Victorian and NSW border. It appears that inadequate attention is given to the communication with and impact on children, young people and their families that live in one state but rely on transport to get to school in the other state. Improved communication is essentially needed in the application of cross border protocols and services that apply to education and related transport systems.

**Recommendation 6 – Improve predictability for communities along the Victorian / NSW border**

That the Federal Government, in collaboration with the Victorian and New South Wales Governments work to:

- Achieve higher standards of accessibility and reliability in telecommunications for communities located along the state border;
- Achieve consistency in access to information and services, particularly as applied to emergency management and community services and education;
- Align the presentation and integration of IT based bushfire and emergency information and advice; and
- Ensure compatibility in radio communication between the CFA and RFS and promote joint management exercises between emergency service agencies along the border.
The regular disconnect of telecommunications in the Upper Murray

Experience and learning

Effective, reliable telecommunication is critical to ensuring the health and safety of all communities. For the Upper Murray area of Towong Shire, there are significant challenges for residents, visitors, businesses and communities to gain access to a dependable telecommunications service delivered to a consistent standard. This applies to both phone and internet access.

In remote areas, reliable access to communications is a key foundation to enable communities and Councils to effectively plan for and respond to the threat of bushfires and other emergencies.

Many communities across the Upper Murray area experience poor mobile phone coverage and poor internet access as a part of everyday life. In the recent bushfires, telecommunication was severely impacted by cuts to power supply, fire damage to telecommunications infrastructure and the impact of periods of dense smoke. While these direct impacts of fires are always going to dramatically reduce or cease telecommunications for a period of time, the reality is that the residents and communities of the Upper Murray constantly live with a reduced standard of telecommunications service.

In terms of mobile phone coverage, Council, in collaboration with local communities and other tiers of government, has identified thirteen ‘mobile black spot’ areas (see table below). Eight of these thirteen zones are fully located, and a further two zones are partly situated, in the bushfire-affected area of the Upper Murray. The more remote areas of the Upper Murray impacted by the recent bushfires were ‘home’ to ten of the thirteen identified ‘mobile black spot’ areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community location</th>
<th>Mobile Black Spot code</th>
<th>Community location</th>
<th>Mobile Black Spot code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burrowye/ Guys Forest</td>
<td>VIC-0293 / VIC-2232</td>
<td>Koetong/ Shelley</td>
<td>VIC-0956 / VIC-1592</td>
</tr>
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<td>VIC-1319</td>
<td>Tintaldra</td>
<td>VIC-1760</td>
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<td>VIC-1792</td>
<td>Old Tallangatta</td>
<td>VIC-1395</td>
</tr>
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<td>VIC-0880 / VIC-1395</td>
<td>Talgarno/ Talgarno Gap Rd</td>
<td>VIC-1687 / VIC-1688</td>
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<td>Pine Mountain</td>
<td>VIC-1447</td>
<td>Thowgla Valley</td>
<td>VIC-1754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biggara</td>
<td>VIC-0160</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, two ‘mobile black spot’ areas (Mount Alfred and Berringama), not listed above, were funded in round 4 of the Federal Government’s Mobile Black Spot Program. Again both these sites are located in the bushfire-affected areas of the Upper Murray.

An increasing level of information is being relayed and provided to people via the internet. In terms of internet access, 83.7% of Victorian households, as compared to 74% of dwellings in Towong Shire had access to the internet at the last census in 2016. This means that 26% of households have no internet access.

The place of the internet and other telecommunications is of far greater importance in Towong Shire given the nature of industry and employment, the remoteness of local communities and the
comparatively large number of people in Towong Shire who work from home (34%, compared to 4.7% of Victorians).

The NBN coverage map for the Towong Shire (see below) illustrates the challenges in achieving a reasonable coverage given the number of small townships and communities, particularly in the Upper Murray area.

While the NBN map shows the main township of Corryong receiving services, many communities such as Tintalda, Walwa and rural areas in valleys are not. Given that speeds and accessibility are influenced by how far away dwellings are from their exchange, the quality of internet provision is consistently problematic for many communities. Satellite or mobile broadband present as the alternate technology solutions but the latter depends on good mobile coverage.

Communication is vital in an emergency. More investment is critically needed in mobile phone towers, the wireless broadband network (co-located on mobile phone towers) and internet reliability and capacity. More remote communities need confidence in communications infrastructure, particularly when there is an increased likelihood of bushfires. This underscores the need for enabling and ensuring vegetation clearance around communications towers.

**Recommendation 7 – Invest in mobile black spots and improve wireless broadband**

That the Federal Government increase investment in telecommunications infrastructure for remote communities and Council areas with a high bushfire risk profile, such as Towong Shire. For Towong Shire, this includes increasing funding for the national ‘mobile black spot program’ and expanding the wireless broadband network as well as changing policy settings to enable more extensive vegetation clearance around communications towers.
A better approach to protecting townships and settlements

Experience and learning

In the period since the Upper Murray bushfires there have been several community discussions regarding how communities, emergency response agencies and other agencies with various responsibilities for emergency management can work together to improve the level of protection for townships and settlements.

Several pilot projects across Victoria have given attention to this shared goal and have implemented a collaborative approach to plan the management of bushfire fuels on public and private land in and around towns and settlements.

These initiatives have informed the production of the State Government publication ‘Bushfire Fuel Management Guide for the Protection of Townships and Settlements’ (May 2018). This report states,

“It is intended by using this Guide, communities, in collaboration with fire and land management agencies and municipal councils, can plan fuel management actions to increase protection to their town. Fuel management actions are one of a suite of tools available to communities to increase their protection and resilience from bushfires. Using this Guide will also provide greater opportunities for collaboration and empower communities to participate in planning for their own safety.”

There are several examples where the guide has been used to shape part of the work of Municipal Fire Management Planning Committees and Regional Strategic Fire Management Planning Committees and Subcommittees. This has resulted in a planned, systematic and collaborative approach that integrates efforts to achieve multiple, practical outcomes. The guide provides advice as to how to:

- Identify high-risk towns and settlements;
- Resource and support local fuel management planning;
- Adopt township-based fuel management plans;
- Incorporate local fuel management plans into the Municipal Fire Management Plan;
- Coordinate the efforts of multiple agencies and local communities across a municipality;
- Encourage fire and land management agencies to participate in fuel management planning;
- Gather, contribute and share technical expertise and resources;
- Identify areas of high ecological or cultural value where fuel management should be excluded; and
- Apply the use of bushfire fuel management zones and associated plans for townships and for specific landscapes in an area.

As well as the elements mentioned above, consideration should also be given to creating clearance areas along major road networks to allow motorists to pull over in a bushfire situation. These areas will allow travellers to stay put until the fire front has passed.

Given the recent experience of the Upper Murray bushfires and the previous bushfires events in 2009 and 2003, it is appropriate for communities, private land holders, Councils and the range of State agencies with emergency management obligations, particularly those with land management responsibilities, to give due consideration to alternate approaches to fire prevention.
The current municipal and regional emergency management planning and fire prevention management planning structures and systems provide the mechanism to support systematic and coordinated approaches to enable new approaches to improve the protection of townships through integrated fuel management planning.

For remote small rural communities and municipal areas, there is often much to be gained from funding programs that provide an additional incentive and level of financial assistance to facilitate new models of fuel management planning within existing municipal and regional emergency management planning structures.

**Recommendation 8 - Facilitate new models of fuel management planning**

That the Federal Government implement strategies to facilitate the piloting of models of fuel management planning within existing municipal and regional emergency management planning structures.
Greater attention to clearances around property boundaries

Experience and learning

Another hotly debated topic in the aftermath of the Upper Murray bushfires concerns the current policies and statutory planning requirements for removal and lopping of native vegetation around boundary fencing.

The current State Government (DELWP) guidance document covering ‘Exemptions from requiring a planning permit to remove, destroy or lop native vegetation’ (December 2017) states the following requirements:

“The clearing along both sides of the fence when combined must not exceed 4 metres in width, except where land has already been cleared 4 metres or more along one side of the fence, then up to 1 metre can be cleared along the other side of the fence.

There are limits to the amount of native vegetation that can be removed to maintain or construct a fence. Native vegetation can be removed up to a combined maximum total width of 4 metres along the fenceline. This may consist of any combination of width distances on either side of the fence that totals 4 metres. For example, 2 metres on one side and 2 metres on the other, or 1 metre on one side and 3 metres on the other side.

Note that if one side of the fence is already cleared to a width of 4 metres or more, regardless of when this clearing occurred (e.g. a cleared paddock), then up to 1 metre of native vegetation can be removed on the other side of the fence. This is to remove a limited amount of native vegetation that may hamper the construction or maintenance of the fence.

While there are area limits within this exemption the exemption does not automatically allow this amount of native vegetation to be removed. When relying on this exemption the removal of native vegetation must only be to the minimum extent necessary. To meet this requirement, consider the following:

- the exemption is intended to allow maintenance or construction of the fence, not to remove all the native vegetation that could fall on the fence at some point in time
- retain the following native vegetation if its removal is not necessary to enable maintenance or construction of a fence:
  - branches overhanging the clearance area;
  - trees with trunks partially in the clearance area; and
  - ground cover.”

Long standing community debates and recent community meetings following the Upper Murray bushfires have proposed the need for changes to the existing statutory distances that apply to the clearance distances around fences. The general held view in Towong Shire is that distances should be increased from the current 4 metres to at least 8 metres.

Increasing the clearance distance around boundary fencing is identified as achieving a number of benefits including reducing fuel loads around townships, creating a more realistic and practical vehicle path, enabling fuel reduction to be conducted more efficiently and to be monitored more effectively by allowing ‘burning off’ to occur from this clearance line. This would also offer a greater protection
to the boundary fencing on private property. The clearance would also allow fire agencies greater access to more points within a fireground.

The community discussions recognise that this could only occur where practicable and would not apply in areas where there is very steep terrain, rocky outcrops and areas where there is vegetation of high conservation value.

**Recommendation 9 - Increase the clearance area around boundary fencing to at least 8 metres**

That the Federal Government identify and implement strategies to change current statutory planning requirements for exemptions from requiring a planning permit to clear native vegetation by increasing the clearance area around boundary fencing of rural properties to at least 8 metres.
Increased investment in fire-fighting from the air

Experience and learning

The scale and intensity of bushfires over the 2019-20 summer period in East Gippsland and Towong Shires and interstate in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia provide a window to a more prolonged future fire-fighting season exacerbated by climate change and more intense weather events.

The extreme and code red conditions make for disastrous conditions for fire-fighting that necessitate the need for fire-fighting aircraft that can be readily deployed, on either side of the border, to allow quick suppression of fires. This is essential to allow ground crews time to access the fire ground and extinguish the fire before it can develop into a much larger fire.

**Recommendation 10 – Increase investment in fire-fighting aircraft**

That the Federal Government increase the level of investment in fire-fighting aircraft and the associated support and capability requirements for these aircraft.
Our ADF – the reassuring, highly valued involvement of an under-utilised resource

Experience and learning

The Federal Government’s Operation Bushfire Assist commenced on 31 December 2019 to support state fire and emergency services across most states and territories in Australia. For Towong Shire, this resulted in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) Joint Task Force 646 being based at the Corryong Recreation Reserve to assist in the Upper Murray bushfire recovery.

The primary recovery tasks undertaken by the ADF Joint Task Force 646 across the Victorian fireground included clearing 4,848 kilometres of roads and delivering more than 9 million litres of water to a range of affected communities, residents and farms.

Beyond the practical assistance the very presence of the ADF gave local communities an important sense of security and safety following a very daunting bushfire experience. The reassuring presence of the ADF is simply captured in the comment of a resident who stated, “They gave a sense of hope”.

While the contribution of the ADF was highly valued, it was very clear to everyone involved in the emergency recovery effort that the logistical capability and capacity of the ADF was grossly under-utilised. The ADF had many highly trained personnel, across many disciplines, and ready access to plant and equipment that could have been better used in the circumstances.

Given the scale and duration of the Upper Murray bushfires and the sizeable impact on local residences, local farms, community facilities and infrastructure there were many other responsibilities and activities that could have been delegated to the ADF. The best results would have been achieved with a level of planning and preparation before an emergency and a level of coordination and integration into Victoria’s emergency response and recovery protocols.

It is never too late to introduce a change in the dynamics of emergency management policy and practice and the recent involvement of, and learning resulting from, the ADF’s participation provide the opportunity to engage the ADF in future municipal emergency management planning. This could be trialled in a few local government areas that are highly prone to major bushfires.

Recommendation 11 – Involve the ADF in Municipal Emergency Management Planning

That the Federal Government, work in collaboration with other tiers of government to, trial the active involvement of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in the Towong Shire Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee in order to enhance the ADF’s planning and preparation for future emergency events in local government areas with high risk profiles.
**Tweaking financial assistance to recognise the impact of secondary events on bushfire affected community assets**

**Experience and learning**

The scale and intensity of the bushfires in the Upper Murray destroyed large areas of vegetation across the Towong Shire landscape. In certain areas, all vegetation was destroyed; trees, shrubs, undergrowth and grasslands.

In the ensuing weeks following the bushfires, Towong Shire received much welcomed rainfall. The amount of rain would have usually had no harmful impact on community and Council assets. However, in the immediate shadow of the bushfires and the destruction of all plant life, there was no vegetation to absorb and temper the overrun of any excess precipitation. A little rain caused local flooding along roadsides and landslides throughout the Upper Murray area of the Towong Shire. This resulted in direct damage to local roads and drainage in several key locations.

The impact on these assets was not directly caused by the bushfires however the damage was due to the bushfires. This circumstance creates a major financial dilemma for the Towong Shire (and for all local government authorities) as asset damage that directly results from a bushfire triggers financial assistance from State and Federal Governments. Yet the current natural disaster financial assistance arrangements do not recognise or compensate when a secondary event has caused damage that would not have resulted had there not have been the impact of the bushfires.

Towong Shire Council recommends a change to the current natural disaster financial assistance arrangements to include a set timeframe following the bushfires that recognises the impact of rainfall on roads and drainage assets.

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**Recommendation 12 – Change the natural disaster assistance to allow financial assistance where secondary events post bushfire have resulted in damage to assets**

That the Federal Government modify the criteria for natural disaster financial assistance to include any secondary event following bushfires on Council assets within a set timeframe from the occurrence of the primary event.
Towards a more robust model of community led recovery

Experience and learning

This submission underlines the level of impact of the Upper Murray bushfires on Council. The submission provides a summation of the experience, learning and recommended actions that derive from Council’s insight.

Council’s vision includes an aspiration to be ‘a world-class small Council’. This ambition demands that the organisation give due attention to developing a model of community led recovery and ‘reflective practice’ in the communities of Towong Shire. Central to this is the need to ensure our communities are building their resilience to respond to the 2019/20 bushfires, whilst also building their future resilience in case of future disasters.

Council is keen to harness the energy, knowledge, expertise and resources of multiple stakeholders that have an interest in supporting a robust action learning, collectivist and place-based program evaluation model. The stakeholder interests extend to include local communities, Council, businesses, local health and community services as well as Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV), state and national agencies with an interest in community planning and development models, research institutions and philanthropic organisations to draw on the best available evidence and knowledge.

To this end, Council seeks the support of the Federal Government, to enable Council to coordinate, apply and evaluate a model of community led recovery following a significant bushfire event in a rural community.

Recommendation 13 – A robust model of community led recovery

That the Federal Government actively support Towong Shire Council in developing, applying and evaluating a model of community led recovery.