

# Report on the New Bushfire Reality Climate Adaptation Forum

*Sunday 10 November 2019 1:00 – 4:30 pm*

*At the Ballarat Mechanics Institute*

## Adapting to the NEW CLIMATE REALITY BALLARAT 2020-2030

**For the Ballarat Emergency Management Committee**



BALLARAT  
RENEWABLE  
ENERGY  
AND ZERO  
EMISSIONS



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REGIONAL SUSTAINABILITY ALLIANCE



## INTRODUCTION

On 10 November 2019 a community forum was held at the Ballarat Mechanics Institute to provide residents of the Ballarat region with an information session and opportunity for discussion about the new bushfire reality then about to confront us.

The Forum, which was coordinated by BREAZE Inc. Board member, Joe Natoli, was a collaborative venture with Cherie Draper, from the Ballarat Environment Network (BEN), the Regional Sustainability Alliance of Ballarat (RSAB) and the Department of Environment, Land, Water, and Planning (DELWP).

The following report summarises the event under key headings before making recommendations based on the community feedback received during the Forum.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Well before the horrific bushfires of the 2019/2020 season, it was widely understood by firefighters, fire researchers and climate scientists that whilst bushfires are a fact of life in Australia, the rapidly warming climate is making them more frequent and more extreme. The New Bushfire Reality Forum was envisaged as offering residents an opportunity to listen to experts explain this new reality and to participate in discussions to gain a better understanding of it and how they might affect be affected.

Issues addressed included:

- Why our bushfire risks are increasing and how these risks should be managed
- The effects this new reality is likely to have re power supplies, water supplies, and transport disruption
- Our current Emergency Management Planning systems
- What should be considered when preparing a Bushfire Plan
- What householders should do to prepare and protect their property for the coming fire season.

The Forum included audience discussion groups to identify community issues and questions to contribute to Ballarat's Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP).

The Forum was also an opportunity for Ballarat residents to acquaint themselves with a number of relevant community groups and organisations that had stands at the venue: CFA, 15 Trees, Ballarat Community Health, CEC, a representatives for home bushfire sprinkler systems, Extinction Rebellion, Ballarat Permaculture, BREAZE, Friends of Canadian Corridor and a local business < [www.sonnenschutz.com.au](http://www.sonnenschutz.com.au) > that sells fire shutters.

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**THE PANEL**

Keith Jackson, Manager of Infrastructure and Engagement at Grampians West Waste and Resource Recovery Group, chaired the panel which consisted of four guest speakers—who were joined on stage by BREAZE board members, Joe Natoli, the Forum Coordinator, and Ian Rossiter, Secretary BREAZE and Chair of the Regional Sustainability Alliance Ballarat (RSAB).

The key invited speakers were:

- Michael Boatman – Operations Manager Ballarat Country Fire Authority (CFA), Chair Grampians Fire Emergency Committee
- Adrian Whitehead – from Council Action in the Climate Emergency (CACE)
- Bill Cook – Municipal Emergency Manager, City of Ballarat and CFA volunteer.
- Tony Brady – CFA Vegetation Management Officer

**WHAT THE EXPERTS COVERED**

**Ballarat CFA Operations Manager, Michael Boatman** delivered a detailed presentation on how weather patterns are changing, citing the 2018 State of the Climate Report (Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO), noting key trends such as the increasing occurrence of heatwaves, and declining rainfall, rigorously substantiated with statistics and published research. The verdict was a 25% increased fire risk attributable to climate change with projected accompanying changes of average temperature increases of 1-4.5°, more very hot days, and a reduction of 15-25% in winter/spring rainfall.

He then went on to explain how this change in weather conditions due to climate change influenced fires, which are now so extreme that they in turn create their own weather, producing pyrocumulonimbus clouds and dry lightning. Essentially climate change has increased flammability, bringing more hot and dry days, a longer fire season with shorter intervals between fires and uncontrollable fires, increasing risk of species loss, and erosion around waterways.

The implications of all of this for firefighters are: longer fires, increased risk of heatstroke, greater demand for fire fighters and more firefighting resources—as the extended bushfire season has made sharing resources between states and countries more difficult—and less time for controlled hazard reduction burning. In his conclusion Michael Boatman also recommended building community resilience through preventative, community-based interventions.

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**Botanist and ecologist, Adrian Whitehead (CACE)**, began by noting that 1100+ councils and 20 countries have now endorsed the Declaration of Climate Emergency. In making the case for the importance of building community resilience he noted that the Victorian Local Government Act required it, predicting that communities will, more and

more, have to fend for themselves. He also noted the addition of a sixth category, Code Red on the Forest Fire Danger Index, that is signposted along our highways.

By building community resilience in Ballarat, Adrian Whitehead suggested the city could become a role model for other regional centres. Key risk factors he raised were:

- Food Supply—30 x days of non-perishables and 5 x days of perishables; 12% of our country population has food security issues; Foodbank is the relevant agency here, but an emergency would stretch resources meaning local input/supplements and storage is advisable. A major food crisis is predicted to occur before 2070.
- 2) Power supply—querying the number of wooden power poles, and the plantations surrounding the Ballarat power station.
- 3) Water—querying whether the sewerage system would cope without water.
- 4) Communications—noting that during bushfires phone lines often go down with power lines, cutting communications channels.

Adrian Whitehead concluded by noting that homes could be made more resilient with solar panels and community sharing of solar via microgrids with battery back-up power, and by growing one's own food.

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**Municipal Emergency Manager with the City of Ballarat, Bill Cook**, spoke in a question and answer conversation with Forum coordinator, Joe Natoli about his role: supporting the incident management team by opening a relief centre when one is required, in consultation with the incident Controller, Vicpol and Council; and staffing the centre along with other agencies as identified in the Emergency Management Plan, and in accordance with roles set out in the State Government's Emergency Management Manual Victoria.

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**CFA Vegetation Management Officer, Tony Brady** discussed bushfire preparation on a household level, emphasising the importance of every household having a bushfire plan including consideration of when you would leave and where you would go. He advised residents to have a written plan—including things such as what to take and how to manage pets— and to share it with their neighbours. He stressed the importance of knowing and understanding the level of risk. For people with sprinkler systems he emphasised keeping a check on water supply and having back-up power for the water pump. He also advised leaving early, or, if deciding to stay and defend, to make sure you are properly attired and equipped. He recommended the CFA's survival kit and gave a list of what should be included in a bushfire plan.

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After the panel members had all spoken afternoon tea was served to give participants an opportunity to mingle and to investigate the various groups represented at the Forum. Following this audience members participated in the discussion groups they had signed-up for when registering for the Forum. During the discussions audience members shared their thoughts and ideas on what was needed to be better prepared in the event of a bushfire. Issues raised in these groups were then presented to the panel of speakers to respond to.

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## THE FORUM DISCUSSIONS

The community discussion groups elicited a number of responses and suggestions. BREAZE focused the Forum presentations and discussion at three levels

### A Personal.

What are people doing currently to protect their homes and themselves from bushfires? What additional steps need to be considered with the new bushfire reality?

### B Local Community.

What preparations /resources are local communities using to protect their communities from bushfires? What additional steps should we consider with the new bushfire reality?

### C Local, State and Federal Government actions.

What are the Government and local authority preparations/resources currently in place to deal with bushfires? What additional steps need to be taken to deal with the new bushfire reality and to reduce the overall impact of global warming which is driving the situation?

## DISCUSSION GROUPS:

### *A. Concerns from personal-focussed discussions:*

- **Refuge points:** Uncertainty re location of fire refuge points and safety of these locations, mainly open areas
- **Communication:** Information from ABC radio and Vic alert valued, but concerns about loss of phone connectivity during fires
- **Fire plans:** Having plans in place and material packed in the event of a fire is not an easy task. Some confusion of who should have a bushfire plan
- **Exit plans:** Many had a general intention to leave but had not established a timeline or route or list of what to take. Finding another place to go, and transport to get there, in the event of a bushfire, can be challenging for some
- **Identifying a safe route:** what to do where there may only be one access road and/or low visibility. How to be flexible and adaptable as circumstances change—wind direction, road closures etc.
- **Vulnerable Persons:** Situation of people with limited mobility or capacity to move

### ***Suggestions from personal-focussed discussions***

- **Refuge Centres:** Open large community facilities as fire refuge centres in times of emergency. Encourage community use prior to the fires
- **Accommodation register:** Consider establishing a register of homes that could offer short term accommodation in event of a bushfire emergency
- **Public education:** Upgrade information/guidelines to encourage/assist people to have exit plans in the event of a serious bushfire event
- **Property Protection:** Assess/communicate effective methods of protecting homes such as, sprinklers (plus need for on-site diesel powered pumps, dedicated water supplies and fire resistant fittings), bunkers, and fire proof window shields—via open homes whenever possible.
- **Undergrowth protection:** Information re less flammable trees suitable for planting close to buildings to reduce fire risk.

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### ***B. Concerns from community-focussed discussions***

- **Vulnerable Person's Register:**<sup>1</sup> Concern was raised regarding the management of the register and how it was being maintained. When asked, panellists agreed that it was hard to get onto the register. There was concern that this was due to resourcing and that pressure to name a relative/carer might inadvertently leave some vulnerable persons without any support in the event of an emergency
- **Workplace support:** Issues raised on workplace and school based planning so everyone is involved in the process.
- **Animals:** Discussion about pets and livestock which are known to be high priorities for many, meaning that if they are off-site when a fire threatens their inclination is to return for their animals.
- **Neighbourhood safe places:** There was confusion about neighbourhood safe places—their locations and if they were actually intended for or ready for use
- **Threats to suburbia:** Concern that people are not safe even in an urban environment and of complacency from suburbia that “nothing will happen to us”.
- **Community self-help:** Relatively few people knew of the *Community Fireguard* program operated by the CFA. This program encourages networking via self-help neighbourhood groups to assist in preparing for and dealing with bushfires.
- **Evacuation procedures:** Concerns about orderly evacuation before and during fires and how local community groups could support this process particularly for people with mobility issues and no transport.
- **Scotsburn:** Very positive comments about the efforts taken during the Scotsburn fires in 2016 to communicate with people and the community support given after the fire.
- **Hazard reduction:** Some people noted that significant fire hazards in their area were not addressed. They were unsure whether this was because neither CFA or DWELP were aware or believed there was a fire hazard or were responsible for the area.

### ***Suggestions from community-focussed discussions***

- **Workplace support:** Businesses and other workplaces in bushfire risk areas must be briefed to support their staff in the event of high risk situations and recognise that people may be unable to come to work when compelled to evacuate.
- **Promote the CFA's Community Fireguard initiative:** Promote this CFA program to expand neighbourhood uptake.
- **Promote preparation & sharing of bushfire plans—** with family and neighbours
- **Stay and defend:** The safe requirements to stay and defend should be referenced in any discussion of choosing to stay or leave.

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### ***C. Concerns from government-focussed discussions***

- **Grazing on Crown land:** Concern raised about people unable to graze cattle on Crown Land and thus reduce fire risk
- **Roadside hazard:** Concern raised re fire risks from roadside reserves
- **Telecoms:** Breakdown in phone communication during fires is critical. People rely on it yet phone towers go down. What is the solution?
- **Emergency refuges:** Review large community facilities for bushfire refuges— with back-up power and adequate fire protection— advise need for such facilities in bushfire planning.
- **Public communication:** Consensus that more resources are needed for public communication about how to prepare for potential bushfires to deal with general ignorance regarding what is required re bushfire planning or how to prepare your property.
- **City-fringe fires:** How will suburbs at the city fringe protect properties from fires if all residents are told to evacuate? Historically spot fires are extinguished by well-prepared householders and save both the householders house and their neighbour.
- **New Suburbs:** What planning regulations apply for new suburbs exposed to bushfires? Do they include emergency refuges?
- **Ignorance re need for diesel pumps** and other relevant equipment (e.g. metal tanks and pipes) for water supply on rural properties in case of power failure. (Petrol pumps are not suited due to the likelihood of the petrol vaporising in the heat). Households also need a minimum of 15,000 litres of reserved water.
- **New class of bushfire:** Bushfires now often so intense that 'stay and defend' is untenable.

***Suggestions from government-focussed discussions:***

- **Strategy criteria:** Safe requirements to stay and defend should be referenced in any discussion of choosing to stay or leave.
- **Bushfire Plan:** Develop a bushfire plan template that will facilitate/encourage household bushfire emergency planning
- **Building regulations:** Urge strategic planning regulations for new suburbs exposed to bushfires. These should include fully resourced community fire refuge centres with back-up power and water supplies and reliable telecommunications.
- **Deaths:** A full analysis of the cause of recent bushfire deaths.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Forum raised some overarching issues for Emergency Services in preparing for events similar to this season's fires.

- **Emergency refuges:** Review of large community facilities for fire refuges in the event of a major fire and ensuring these have back-up power and fire protection
- **Fire proofing properties:** Reviews needed of building standards for properties in bushfire prone areas.
- **Urban fringe fires:** Reconsideration of how houses can be protected on the urban fringe in the event of spot fires reaching the area and all residents evacuated. Who will stop small fires taking hold?
- **Vulnerable persons:** Re-consideration of criteria for the Vulnerable Persons Register, how it is maintained in bushfire areas and how vulnerable people are to be assisted/evacuated in the event of a major incident.
- **Public communication campaigns:** Public campaigns are needed around *Preparing and Communicating Your Bushfire Plan*, and to raise awareness of the CFA's Community Fireguard program. A household bushfire plan template should be promoted to encourage householders to devise/share their Bushfire Plans with family and friends.

## CONCLUSION

The huge bushfires in NSW that immediately preceded the Forum and the fires that ravaged the East Coast of Australia in January have overtaken the warnings that the Forum was intended to offer to the Ballarat Emergency Management Committee. The CSIRO models—of how a warming climate will dry the landscape, dramatically intensify bushfires and extend the fire seasons—are now reality.

We thus appreciate there is likely to be a root and branch reassessment across Australia of how communities prepare for and respond to bushfires.



We note some re-assessment has already been undertaken by a group of former Fire and Emergency chiefs through the Climate Council, who released an open letter to the Federal Government in April 2019 and again in December 2019 outlining their concerns about the impact of climate change on bushfires. Their recommendations on reassessing preparation and response to bushfires are attached.<sup>2</sup> This group will be holding its own bushfire crisis summit in 2020 and we believe our local Emergency Service officers should participate as a matter of the highest priority to assist in future bushfire preparations.<sup>3</sup>

In the age of digital online media, communication too often seems an easy and simple business. Unfortunately the sheer volume of information people have to deal with on a daily basis means that the most important communications, such as how to prepare your bushfire plan, will not necessarily cut through. We hope that this Forum and the issues and recommendations raised will assist the BEMC in getting its message out to those who need to hear it.

The BREAZE Board would like to thank the four guest speakers who generously shared their time and expertise with local residents at the Bushfire Forum. And on behalf of all of those who contributed to the Forum—the guest speakers, the volunteers involved in planning, promoting and running the forum, along with the local residents who attended—the BREAZE Board asks that the Ballarat Emergency Management Committee gives due consideration to this report and its findings.

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*This report was written for the Ballarat Emergency Management Committee by BREAZE Inc Board members who were involved in the Forum.*

Mary Debrett, President, BREAZE Inc.

Joe Natoli, Forum Coordinator,  
Vice President, BREAZE Inc.

Pat Hockey, Secretary, BREAZE Inc.

Therese Footner, BREAZE Inc. Board

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<sup>1</sup> The Vulnerable Persons Register is a local list of people who may need consideration in an emergency. The register is maintained by agencies that provide personal care, support and case management services to people living in the community and is made available to police and others with responsibility for helping vulnerable residents evacuate during an emergency. A review of the Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy was undertaken by the DHHS in 2017: The 2017 discussion paper <http://www.daru.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/VPE-Discussion-Paper.pdf>  
The 2018 policy - <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/vulnerable-people-emergencies-policy>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/full-list-of-fire-and-emergency-chiefs-recommendations-to-federal-government/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/17/hugely-disappointed-emergency-chiefs-to-hold-bushfire-summit-with-or-without-pm>