

# 2019-2020 Victorian Bushfire Appeal Final Report



Petra Ries Images



# Message from The Honourable Patrick McNamara, Chair, Victorian Bushfire Appeal

From late 2019 and into 2020, Australia experienced what has been described by various experts and commentators as the worst bushfires in our history. Across the country, major fires had been burning across Queensland and New South Wales since early September 2019. Fires ignited in the Northern Territory and Western Australia later that month, and across Tasmania and South Australia by late October. By late November, every state was alight when fires broke out in Victoria, following lightning strikes in East Gippsland.

On 2 January 2020, the Premier of Victoria announced a state of disaster. This was the first time the Victorian Government used these powers since they were included in the Emergency Management Act 1986 following the devastating Victorian Black Saturday bushfires in 2009.

Despite the rapid response, people lost family members, homes, pets, possessions and community infrastructure to the bushfires that swept through Victoria. People responded with generosity, compassion and action. The intent of those who donated was clear: while nothing could ever replace lives lost or memories destroyed in these fires, people wanted to give individuals and communities who had lost something or everything, a start on rebuilding their lives. Consistent with this, the intent of the Victorian Bushfire Appeal was to provide practical relief and recovery to individuals and communities in towns and suburbs affected by the 2019 and 2020 Victorian bushfires.

As this report demonstrates, the intent of those who so generously donated has been honoured. \$37.2 million, including interest earned on donations, has been raised through the Victorian Bushfire Appeal. All of these funds have been used to directly support individuals and communities affected by the bushfires. Over \$12.1 million has helped people to recover through immediate relief and more than \$25.1 million has supported community recovery initiatives. This includes \$13.2 million to fund community foundations that will work in partnership with donors, local organisations and communities to support medium to long term recovery initiatives.

The Appeal has been committed to showing those directly affected by the bushfires how donations intended to support them have been distributed. It is also a way of thanking those who contributed so generously by demonstrating how their donations are helping people who need it most.

The report recognises the enormous amount of work done by agencies, organisations and volunteer and paid individuals to support those in bushfire affected areas including volunteer and paid community organisations; local governments, the Victorian and Australian Governments, and Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

# Message from David Impey, CEO, Community Enterprise Foundation, Bendigo Bank

Although it's been more than two years since the Black Summer Bushfires, the devastation witnessed across the country hasn't been forgotten. Like everyone I watched on with dismay as community after community was hit and although the fires created challenges, they also highlighted the amazing resilience and capacity we have to support each other in times of need. Since we launched the Victorian Bushfire Appeal, we have seen streams of customers, non-customers, and businesses across the country and around the world, continue to donate funds to the Appeal to support the recovery of communities – generosity like we had never seen before.

The significant support and strong partnership with the Victorian Government enabled us to move quickly to support those in impacted areas. Through this partnership and the generosity of the Australian community, international donors and the Bendigo Bank, we delivered many impactful outcomes across Victoria. In many cases, impacted communities were those in which our Bendigo Bank brand is represented, either via company-owned bank branches or our unique community-owned branches. As arguably Australia's 'community bank' in name and nature, communities in which our partners represent our brand were under direct threat – and we acted immediately to show our support. It is in our DNA to support communities in both good or bad times and we will continue to do so into the long term. We have achieved this by investing in the social fabric of communities and supporting local organisations and communities to build capacity and resilience.

The Community Enterprise Foundation is the charitable arm of Bendigo and Adelaide Bank and all funds raised are held in trust with Sandhurst Trustees. In partnership with the Victorian Government and reputable not-for-profit charities, funds in Victoria hit the ground early. Our role, and that of Sandhurst Trustees, is to ensure all funds are directed to support the recovery of the people and communities in need. This approach provides assurance and comfort to donors who gave so generously to support impacted communities and individuals. To ensure that we are accountable and open with our generous donors, we have held fast to our belief that the best outcomes are achieved by working in partnership with communities. The overarching strategy of the Victorian Bushfire Appeal has been to seek the input and guidance of impacted communities regarding the allocation and disbursement of funding. We know that impacted communities know better than anyone what their immediate and long-term recovery needs are.

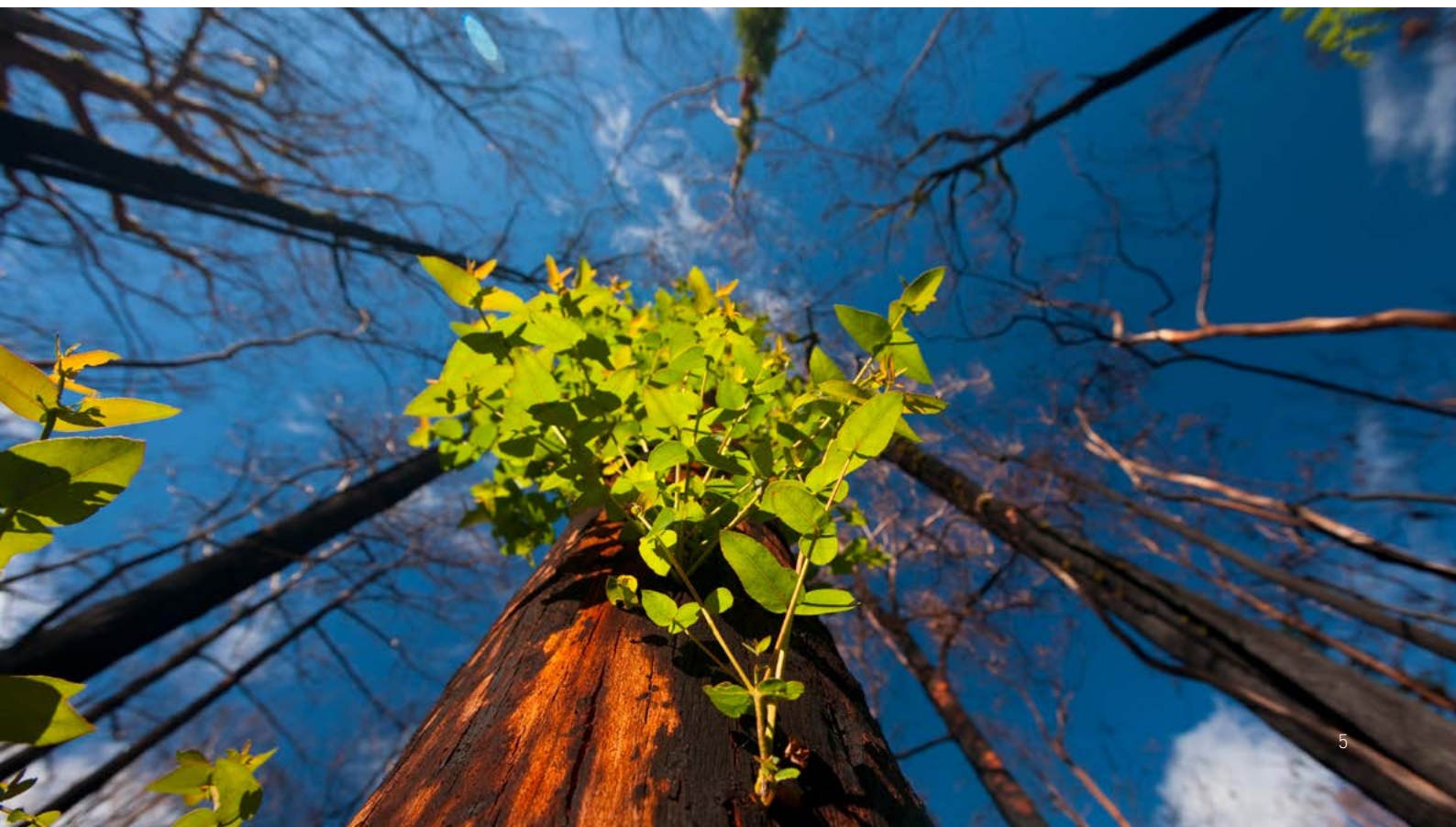
In the immediate aftermath the Appeal provided relief in the form of bereavement payments for those who lost loved ones in the fires, housing and essential services support for individuals and families and fencing support for farmers.

When the focus shifted to supporting short-term recovery needs the Appeal launched the first round of our Bushfire Recovery Grants Program in mid 2020. This program focussed on short-term recovery and was strategically designed to put the needs and priorities of communities at the centre of every funding decision. We achieved this by consulting with community recovery committees and ensuring that their views were sought and considered on every project that received funding. This approach has ensured that the allocation of funding was community led, highly impactful and reflective of community priorities.

### **Medium to long term bushfire recovery**

We've been here before and we know that community recovery following a natural disaster is a marathon, not a sprint. While the world's attention has turned to COVID-19, we have continued working with bushfire impacted communities to make sure they're getting the support they desperately need. If the arrival of a global pandemic was tough for us, it only served to compound and exacerbate the hardships faced by locals in bushfire impacted communities. Now, more than ever, it's important that we continue to support and back their recovery and rebuilding efforts.

The appeal has delivered \$13.2 million in funding to support the long-term recovery of communities. This has been achieved by the provision of funding to locally led and locally run Foundations that will provide grants to support community recovery initiatives into the long term. Through the long-term recovery phase, we will stand shoulder to shoulder with these organisations to ensure their long-term success and the success of the communities they will support to rebuild and recover. We know that the greatest success for our communities, and our State, will come from an ongoing community-driven recovery and rebuilding process. We'll be there every step of the way.



# Victorian Bushfire Appeal

In response to the 2019-2020 Victorian bushfires, the Victorian Government partnered with the Community Enterprise Foundation (CEF), the charitable arm of the Bendigo Bank, to establish the Victorian Bushfire Appeal (the Appeal). Appeal funds are held by Sandhurst Trustees Limited (the Trustee). An independent Advisory Panel was appointed to oversee the distribution of the funds raised by the Appeal.

## The Advisory Panel members were:

**The Honourable Patrick McNamara**, Chair

**David Impey**,

Chief Executive Officer, Community Enterprise Foundation

**Pam White**,

Board Member, Country Fire Authority

**Sue Cunningham**,

Victorian Director, Australian Red Cross

**Natalie O'Connell**,

Councillor for East Gippsland Shire

**Joanne Duncan**,

Member for Gisborne

**Lee Miezis**, Chief Executive Officer, Bushfire Recovery Victoria (replaced by Carmel Flynn, Acting Chief Executive Officer in February 2021).

The Appeal opened on 2 January 2020 and officially closed on 31 December 2020, receiving donations and interest totalling \$37.2 million.

The Victorian Government and the Community Enterprise Foundation have delivered on the Premier's guarantee that every cent of the money raised be used to directly support bushfire-affected people and communities.

The independent Advisory Panel overseeing the Appeal knows it is responsible for allocating these funds on behalf of all donors, and it does so with rigour and compassion. This report outlines how the Appeal has supported survivors of the bushfires and their communities since it was established, and how it will continue to provide support to individuals and communities where it is most needed.

People from across the world gave what they could to help those impacted by the bushfires. Individuals, businesses and governments entrusted the Appeal's Advisory Panel with the task of ensuring those who are most in need received the support they required. The Appeal's intent is reflected in the Advisory Panel's Terms of Reference:

*Funds raised will be used in a range of locally identified charitable areas to provide practical relief and recovery in the fire-affected areas. Funds raised will be used to aid individuals and communities in towns and suburbs affected by the 2019 and 2020 Victorian bushfires. Bendigo Bank will not deduct any costs from public donations to cover Appeal costs. All interest earned on donations will be invested back into the Appeal. Should the funds raised exceed the amount required to meet these needs, any excess funds will be used to assist in future disasters in Victoria.*



To ensure funds were disbursed consistent with the Appeal's intent and the expectations of donors, a set of principles and a list of criteria for payments were developed by the Panel that aligned with the Appeal intent. To support impacted individuals the following criteria was applied:

- Beneficiaries are Victorian individuals who have suffered losses in the 2019-20 Victorian bushfires.
- Eligibility for individual relief payments is for families who have lost their principal place of residence, whether they be homeowners or renters.
- All funding decisions have been supported by analysis of needs.
- Funding decisions are supported by an analysis of the needs of the cohort that will benefit from the funding initiative, including consideration of the extent of loss suffered by an individual.
- The assistance will not unnecessarily duplicate assistance from government or other sources.
- Although duplication should be avoided, the Advisory Panel recognises that some individuals may require additional support beyond the type already allocated.
- There will be no distinction between those insured and uninsured.
- There will be no requirement for individuals to account for the use of the grant.
- There will be no means testing for grants to individual recipients.
- Initiatives will need to have a degree of flexibility to take account of beneficiaries with exceptional circumstances.

In the case of community grants the following allocation principles were applied:

- Funds will be allocated consistent with donor expectations and the Appeal Intent.
- Beneficiaries are Victorian communities who have suffered losses in the 2019-20 Victorian bushfires.
- The organisation must be able to manage the level of funding provided.
- The initiative should, where possible, align with the organisation's charitable aims.
- Funding will not unnecessarily duplicate other funding.
- Funding will not be provided for functions that are a core responsibility of government.
- Priority initiatives for funding was identified by considering the following:
  - + community intelligence about medium to long-term recovery needs
  - + other intelligence about medium to long-term recovery needs, for example, input from local service providers
  - + whether the initiative has been shown to be effective in supporting post-disaster recovery (where there is evidence of its efficacy)
  - + the degree to which the other principles, above, are adhered to.

The paramount concern for the Advisory Panel has been to meet the needs of bushfire-affected individuals and communities. In the immediate aftermath of the bushfires, more than \$12 million was disbursed to support people through immediate relief payments, initial housing assistance, bereaved support and property re-fencing.

While the Advisory Panel's first priority was to focus on providing support to individuals and families to assist with their urgent and ongoing needs, the Advisory Panel was always aware that the Appeal intent also included a requirement to assist communities to recover. The Advisory Panel recognised community rebuilding as an essential part of the healing of individuals and an important way to build on the strengths and connections within affected communities.

# Financials

Since the 2019-2020 Victorian bushfires, \$37.2 million has been provided to the Appeal, including interest earned. Every cent is being used to support individuals and communities affected by the bushfires and all costs to administer the donated funds are covered by the Victorian Government. A full list of the grant distributions can be found [here](#).

When the Advisory Panel has committed funds, it makes an informed estimate of the likely total cost. Sometimes the estimated amount committed for a gift will be lower than what is required, and the Advisory Panel may endorse an increase in the amount of funds committed.

Alternatively, sometimes an amount committed may not be fully expended and in those circumstances the balance of any funds that remain is directed towards other gifts where it is most needed. The Advisory Panel has monitored expenditure against predicted estimates since the Appeal's inception.

The Advisory Panel periodically reviewed the amounts committed and made a number of adjustments to ensure the Fund was fully committed and all of the donated monies were used to assist bushfire affected people.

Windermere Child & Family Services administered the initial bereavement payments to those families who lost loved ones in the fires.

They have worked closely with fire-affected residents to ensure housing payments were made to assist with rebuilding.

Through an additional grant, Windermere continued their support of at risk and isolated community members, still impacted by the bushfires.

## Financial assistance to individuals

In the immediate aftermath of the fires the Advisory Panel recognised the significant displacement experienced by many individuals, whose homes were either lost or significantly damaged and those who were required to evacuate. In some cases, people and families left their homes on multiple occasions.

The Appeal moved quickly to support people who needed assistance in covering the costs associated with leaving their home. The Appeal distributed a total of \$12.3 million to support residents in bushfire-affected areas who experienced loss of, or damage to, their primary residence. This included both renters and homeowners.

The Appeal made available a \$25,000 Housing Assistance Gift to assist 308 households that lost their primary place of residence. Within four months, the Appeal made a further \$15,000 available to these households, in recognition that the cost of rebuilding is significant.

Fifteen months on from the fires, the Advisory Panel recognised that some households were still experiencing significant financial hardship and that this hardship was proving to be a barrier for these families securing long-term, stable housing. Over \$2 million, made up of program underspends, was provided to relieve the distress being experienced by these households.



## Rebuilding - one fence at a time

Funding supported BlazeAid's work in providing critical fencing for bushfire affected properties across Victoria. Fencing volunteers helped farmers to move forward by ensuring that their livestock was secure as they worked towards re-building.

A \$1.5 million grant from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal helped fund the day-to-day costs associated with the BlazeAid volunteer camps including the base camps which provided an environment that encouraged the community to engage with the volunteer teams.



## Providing food for more than 2,500 people.

Since the fires, the Albury Wodonga Regional Food Share has experienced a sustained 40 per cent increase in demand for food. The organisation and its 100-plus volunteers have worked tirelessly in securing and distributing food to those in need across north-east Victoria.

A \$100,000 grant from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal has provided food supplies and made it easier for people in need to access food and other essential items.

## Family Violence Initiatives

Very early the Advisory Panel recognised the link between natural disasters and increased violence against women. The Advisory Panel responded by funding three specialist service provider organisations to deliver family violence specific services and programs. Each of the programs aim to support individuals and communities impacted by family violence and reduce the incidence of family violence.

The Advisory Panel provided over \$800,000 in funding and ensured that services are coordinated and delivered by local agencies.

- Gateway Health \$391,342
- Centre against Violence \$70,459
- Gippsland Lakes Complete Health \$356,500

# Community recovery funding

From the outset of the Appeal, the Advisory Panel recognised the need to allocate funds towards short, medium to long-term recovery initiatives. It also recognised that recovery efforts are more effective when they are community-led. The Appeal has distributed \$2.2 million towards short to medium term recovery via the Bushfire Recovery Grants Program. This program had a short-term focus and was run in close consultation with community recovery committees across Victoria. In every instance the Appeal sought the view of local Community Recovery Committees to ensure that proposed projects were supported by the local community. All funded projects were endorsed as recovery priorities by their local Community Recovery Committee.

The Advisory Panel recognises that each community recovers at its own pace. Communities were supported to apply for grants in their own time with the support of the Community Enterprise Foundation and the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Secretariat. [Read the full list of the projects and programs funded here.](#)

Here are some examples of projects funded by the Bushfire Recovery Grants Program:

## A modern community hub for Clifton Creek

The local hall in Clifton Creek is the centre of community activity. The building was especially important after the area was severely impacted by bushfires on 30 December 2019. The Clifton Creek Hall became a relief centre during the fires as it was used for vital emergency assistance and respite for locals. A grant of \$187,322 will upgrade the Clifton Creek Hall facilities making them accessible for all. It will include a new disabled bathroom and a significant upgrade to create a new sun smart outside BBQ area.



## Recovery ramps up in Mallacoota

Mallacoota was severely impacted by the 2019-20 Victorian bushfires in which 123 homes were lost and many more properties and community facilities severely damaged. The trauma and distress caused by the fires has deepened by the COVID-19 restrictions. This has particularly impacted the local young people who have been isolated and unable to connect socially in an informal space.

The much-loved, but out-of-date skatepark at the heart of Mallacoota is set for a complete upgrade thanks to the generosity of Victorian Bushfire Appeal donors. Funding of \$600,000 from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal's Community Grants Program will go towards the redevelopment of the Mallacoota Skate Park as a community recreation hub. With ageing equipment to be replaced with new jumps and ramps, and features that are accessible to wheelchair users, younger children learning to skate, scooter users and BMX riders of all abilities.

The new park will also provide a visual symbol of community pride in recovery, a space for local artists to display their pieces, a venue for groups to hold community events, and a place for young people suffering from trauma to get together and connect.



## Assisting with enduring efforts

Through a community led approach \$13.2 million has supported local community foundations to deliver recovery funding over the next ten years to the Alpine, East Gippsland and Towong Shires.

The Community Enterprise Foundation together with Border Trust and the newly formed East Gippsland Community Foundation will continue to distribute funds to support the medium to long term recovery needs of bushfire affected communities.

Community foundations are independent, community-owned organisations that are established for the benefit of their community and will operate in perpetuity.

The Community Enterprise Foundation will support the Alpine and Wangaratta communities, whilst Border Trust will support the Towong community. The newly established East Gippsland Community Foundation will assist the bushfire recovery of the East Gippsland community.

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Advisory Panel proudly acknowledges the First Peoples of Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which we live and work and pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

## **Accessibility**

This document is available for downloading at [www.vic.gov.au/bushfireappeal](http://www.vic.gov.au/bushfireappeal). Please contact [vicbushfireappeal@brv.vic.gov.au](mailto:vicbushfireappeal@brv.vic.gov.au) if you require other accessible formats.

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