

A new form of
'connectedness'

COMMENT

By JEFF ADAIR

IT was forecast to be a hot week in mid January. And it was. A very hot, hotter than predicted week. Days of searing heat, sapping any remnants of spring moisture and baking the vegetation to tinder dry. It was a recipe for fires and they came to Kangaroo Ground with a vengeance.

Then, just this past weekend, conditions were even worse and it was clearly the worst fire risk day since Black Saturday five years ago. Fires were predicted and they came. And we were right in the thick of it.

The triggers were all there for the Kangaroo Ground fire a few weeks ago, lightning strikes in some areas, and new start fires in other localities, backed up by hot dry winds. On Sunday fires started locally, with the Flannery Court fire being the most significant threat, and then others followed across the State and continue to burn.

Our Emergency Service personnel responded by hitting any fires hard and fast with as many resources as deemed necessary. Under the conditions of the day, even the combined efforts of ground crews, aircraft and a multi agency, multi-disciplined approach could not stem the forward rate of spread. Fires grew in size and devoured anything undefended.

After being conditioned by emergency services for the past 17 years my reactions are automatic these days. Prepare before, be ready on the day, and gather as much information from as many sources as possible when it happens. Plan for worst case scenario, is my motto, and it has never let me down. Recently I have noticed something had changed in the community. I cannot quite put my finger on it, but I suspect that it is about a growing level of connectedness and interdependence about obtaining information from multi-sources and using it to make better decisions.

There is no doubt in my mind that the use of the Warrandyte Business Community Facebook page, the Warrandyte Diary's Facebook page, or more broadly speaking, the use of the internet and multi channels of info sharing, made a huge difference in the decision-making process for fire-affected communities. My observation of the day in Warrandyte and the comments and posts on Facebook is that it connected people. It gave them a perspective and source of information that complemented information from official sources.

Since Black Saturday, emergency services have consistently recommended that the safest option is for people to leave the area. And leave early.

The week of the Kangaroo Ground fire, and this past weekend, Warrandyte looked deserted. Many people had taken the advice and decided to leave early: always the safest option. Many left early, however, I know that many left it until smoke filled the valley.

As things panned out, Warrandyte as a larger community survived yet another threat. Not by very much, but we got through relatively unscathed. Sadly, houses were lost and many residents will be on edge until the summer ends.

I posted a question on the Warrandyte Facebook page after the Kangaroo Ground fire inviting responses to "where people went and what their experience was of the day". From the 95 responses, I found the feedback to be enormously helpful and enlightening in creating better understanding of how the broader Warrandyte community reacted, what they did, where they went, and how they felt. There were so many different perspectives, issues, challenges and differences of opinion. It highlighted that we have come such along a long way, and yet it strengthened my view that have a way to go yet.

My sense is that there is a need to continue the dialogue and discussion at many levels. In my opinion, and this may not be shared by all, that there is a need to continue to open our discussion. To embrace the recent experience, the diversity of challenges, and to build a stronger, more resilient position from collective learning. We need to do this at an individual level, we need to do this as a business community and above all we need to do it as a Warrandyte community.

The challenge is how do we achieve this? Do we create a dedicated channel or forum for Warrandytians to post questions, topics, issues of concern? How do we ensure that as community we establish collective planning rather than individual planning?

Can we build on the feedback, comments and concerns raised. I know we can. However, in order to do so we need to act now and not wait for the next threat based on a weather forecast.

Bushfires arrive in

Heat is on: Helitack crews are in full swing at the Kangaroo Ground bushfires last month and in Warrandyte (below right) on Sunday. Below: Firefighters at the scene of a razed home in Warrandyte.



History shows complacency can kill

REFLECTION

By SANDI MILLER

FIVE years on from Black Saturday, fire in Kangaroo Ground gave Warrandyte a wakeup call, demonstrating many people have forgotten the lessons learnt from the 2009 mega-fire from which Warrandyte so narrowly escaped.

The fire in mid-January during a week-long heatwave had many residents, particularly in North Warrandyte, discovering the inadequacy of their fire plans.

Member for Warrandyte Ryan Smith believes that after coming out of Black Saturday with "a really heightened sense of what could happen", the mild summers we have had since 2009 have led to a sense of complacency. However,

he commends the Warrandyte Community Association for implementing the 'Be Ready' initiative that has "again raised the issue for people".

The Bushfires Royal Commission made 67 recommendations and according to the most recent implementation audit, the government has so far fulfilled 47. Mr Smith concedes the issue of fire refuges is problematic.

"While we want to implement the recommendation, we also don't want to dilute the message of leaving," Mr Smith said. "They are to go to if you are stuck, they aren't there to go to instead of leaving."

Mick Keating, captain of North Warrandyte Fire Brigade, urges people who are planning to leave to still ensure their houses are

prepared.

"A fire will be from one end of North Warrandyte to the other in 20 minutes ... even if you plan to go, you need to have a plan A and a plan B," he said.

Rohan Thornton, who was North Warrandyte captain during Black Saturday, believes "situational awareness" is the key to being prepared for fire. He says "the amount of anecdotal evidence of people (in Kinglake) not knowing that a fire was on their doorstep until the power went off was overwhelming".

Member for Yan Yean, Danielle Green, who is also a volunteer firefighter and who spent Black Saturday on the back of a fire truck, believes the community must remember the lessons learnt from Black Saturday's experience.

"It is easy for people to become complacent ... people talk about it for a while, and I think still people's expectations are that there will be a big red fire truck in their street", she told the Diary. "The best examples are where communities help themselves."

Ms Green condemned the government's lack of an effective vulnerable persons register. However, Mr Smith believes "people have to opt in to it".

"We can't look after every vulnerable person unless they tell you they are vulnerable," he said.

The Bureau of Meteorology warns that with climate change, heatwaves are likely to become more frequent, so having a written fire plan and to "Leave early and live" is even more important than ever.

terrifying wakeup call

By MICHELLE PINI, SCOTT PODMORE and KARLY HICKMAN

THREE Warrandyte homes were destroyed and many others came perilously close to being lost in the worst fire to hit Warrandyte since 1969 on the weekend.

Thousands of residents either left town on Saturday or early Sunday after the CFA declared an Extreme fire danger day amid the worst fire conditions since Black Saturday. However, it ended up being a Black Sunday for three home owners in the Flannery Court fire which destroyed about 10 hectares, according to the Warrandyte CFA.

In Glamis St, resident Brian Robertson's house was the first to be razed. As winds fanned the flames further through the built-up residential area, two more properties in Amersham Drive were also burnt to a rubble.

More than 100 firefighters and two Helitack crews responded to the fire just after midday which took until late afternoon before it was safe for residents to return to town.

Detective senior constable Downes from Doncaster CIU said the bushfire was "not being treated as suspicious" but was still under investigation at the time the *Diary* went to print.

Sgt Stuart Henderson of Warrandyte police said residents reported hearing "what sounded like explosions" coming from the area.

"The CIU and the arson squad are investigating," Sgt Henderson said. "Our early investigations showed that the path of the fire may have originated in the vicinity of the power lines, suggesting that the fire may have been caused by an electrical fault," he explained, pointing out that was still to be determined.

Yesterday SP AusNet and Energy Victoria had representatives at the scene of the bushfire and detective senior constable Downes confirmed Energy Australia was conducting its own investigation into the cause of the fire.

Warrandyte CFA captain Adrian Mullens said despite such a terrible loss for those who lost properties, the rest of us "should consider ourselves very lucky".

Mr Mullens praised the efforts of Manningham council: "I can't say enough about the amazing support we received from Manningham council. We had two 4500-litre street flushers available, no questions asked - that's invaluable."

South Warrandyte CFA captain Greg Kennedy echoed those sentiments.

"There were some phenomenal saves of property," he said yesterday. "They really worked their arses off, those guys. We should be really proud of them."

Brenda Ireland, who was asleep when the fire started, spoke with the *Diary* the day after losing her home.

"We were lucky to get out," Ms Ireland said.

Her husband, Bob Barclay, was watching television and saw smoke. He went to investigate and discovered flames rushing towards their house in Flannery Court.

"He ran in and yelled, 'Quick, we gotta go, the fire's coming'," Ms Ireland said. They drove off honking the car horn to alert neighbours as they sought refuge at the Pines Shopping Centre and waited, unaware that their home, as well as the one next door, would be completely gutted.

"Our next-door neighbour (who was also asleep) told us later that it was our car horn that woke her," Ms Ireland said. "She managed to drive out with flames visible in the rear vision mirror."

Captain Kennedy said: "I don't think I've ever seen a fire grow so quickly. The wind changed direction within about one minute at speeds of around 70km hour."



Devastation: Three homes were destroyed in the bushfire on the weekend. Pictures: Scott Podmore.



Although there were devastating consequences for the owners of the three homes that were lost, it was a remarkable outcome for the Warrandyte community with no loss of life or injury in a fire that burned around 10 hectares.

Residents thanked the incredible work of the CFA who were able to contain the fire despite horrific weather conditions. Those sentiments were echoed all over social media and throughout the Warrandyte community.

The bushfire follows a close call in Kangaroo Ground only weeks earlier during one of the state's worst heatwaves.

That fire took 150 emergency service representatives, four Helitack crews, two air observer aircraft and 10 tankers to bring the Koos Road bushfire in Kangaroo Ground under control, totaling in 12.6 hectares of burnt land.

"These incidents should act as an opportunity for people to assess and improve their fire plans," former Nillumbik mayor and the Warrandyte Community Association's Warwick Leeson said.

Yet obviously several residents remain oblivious to the risks.

North Warrandyte CFA captain Rohan Thornton, who was part of a unit sent to fight fires in Gladysdale before the Warrandyte fire struck, said: "It's clear that not everybody has got the message."

Mr Thornton said he was "flabbergasted and astounded" to receive 95 text messages and calls from Warrandyte residents seeking advice on "what to do".

"But operationally, the response was much better since 2009 because we managed to get 75 appliances to the fire front within an hour and a half."

Be Ready Warrandyte also believes the incidents of the past month serve as a wake-up call to those Warrandyte residents without a comprehensive bushfire plan.

Two community meetings were held in North Warrandyte and Panton Hill last month to ensure residents were kept informed of the ongoing fire situation and potential risk and were well attended with over 200 concerned residents at each meeting. Incident controller Bob Brinkman



Venables and Hern to talk

By KAREN THROSSELL

HELP PROTECT YOUR HOME FROM BUSHFIRE!

NO MORE ENERGY BILLS!
There, have I got your attention?
WarrandyteCAN (Climate Action Now) has organised an evening with two speakers addressing these issues.

Bob Hern, whose business is Bushfire Building and Maintenance, a subsidiary of Low Energy homes Pty Ltd, will speak about what his company can do to maximise the ability of your home to withstand bushfire at the same time as minimising your energy usage. This involves building assessments of your property's preparedness for bushfire attack, building new bushfire resistant homes, extensions and retrofitting existing homes.

The other speaker is Hugh Venables - from BZE (Beyond Zero Emissions), a group of volunteer scientists, engineers and industry specialists - who argues that 80 per cent of us can achieve "energy freedom" if we follow their advice.

I believe I'm doing my bit. I have solar panels and water tanks, and I take three-minute showers and turn my appliances off at the switch (mostly). So I asked Hugh to convince me why it would be worth my going to his talk?

One clear reason is the constantly changing nature of renewable energy technology. For example, he pointed out, did you know there is no longer any gas appliance that is more efficient than an appropriate electric alternative? That gas hot water heaters and gas ducted home heating, can be replaced with cheaper, energy efficient electrical options?

Also, BZE accepts the latest climate science position so they research, publish and present practical information to bring about real understanding of the issues from a source with no vested interest other than the survival of the planet.

They are practice-oriented, and only propose the use of currently available technology that can be implemented immediately.

So although they have produced a range of different reports and action plans, the talk will concentrate on their Buildings Plan and will focus on the home, to give people practical advice about how to save money, as well as the planet, through the choices they make about home energy use.

If you want the latest information on what will help you do your bit for the environment and incidentally for your pocket (or the other way around if that is your bias) and doing as much as you can to protect your home from bushfire, you're invited to attend the meeting on February 26 at 7.30pm at the Mechanics Institute Hall in Yarra St.

facilitated the meeting at North Warrandyte, which had representatives from CFA, Nillumbik Shire and Victoria Police also in attendance among a packed turnout. Fire prediction maps were displayed showing the fire had potential to impact the greater Warrandyte, Panton Hill and Christmas Hills area.

Despite many complex questions from the floor, the message was clear: enact your bushfire plan and leave early. With the Warrandyte township eerily quiet the next day, it is understood that many heeded the warning and left early. As they also did for Warrandyte bushfire on Sunday.

For the meeting held at St Anne's Primary School on Sunday night, there were 350 in attendance.

"I encourage people to think about the consequences of not having a fire plan, including the loss of life and lives of loved ones," Mr Leeson said.

After two major fires in the region already this bushfire season, Be Ready Warrandyte continues its work in raising the level of bushfire preparedness within the community. Its website Warrandyte.org.au/fire experienced unprecedented usage during the recent heatwave and the weekend bushfire.

Community social media pages and groups, including the *Warrandyte Diary* page, Warrandyte Secondhand Page, and Warrandyte Business and Community Network group, have also been a hive of activity as locals, and family and friends from afar, communicated regularly using the social media platform.

Following the Kangaroo Ground fire, a social media-inspired group calling themselves the "bridge ninjas", who "lit up" the Warrandyte Bridge with solar-charged fairy lights at Christmas time, returned to the bridge this time to tie on red balloons and ribbons as a public display of support and appreciation to the CFA.

Police investigations continue into the cause of both bushfires in the past month.

● For more info on bushfire planning see www.warrandyte.org.au/fire