

# Facing fire with foresight: the Community Based Bushfire Management project in East Gippsland

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Reducing risk using community-based and place-based approaches addresses problems that are specific to a location or a community.

The Mallacoota community has been involved in the Safer Together program since 2015. The Community Based Bushfire Management project is part of the Victorian Government Safer Together program. Community members work with a facilitator and take a community development, strengths-based, place-based approach to reduce their bushfire risk. Place-based approaches are favoured by many in the emergency management sector as well as by the Victorian Government. Communities work with agencies such as the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Victoria Country Fire Authority (CFA) as well as local government to establish connections, learn from one another and determine strategies that reduce bushfire risk at the community level. Around 30 communities across Victoria have participated in the project.

Communities have varied in many ways: in size, demographic profile, bushfire risk, vegetation and ecological profile, fire history, socio-cultural variables and more. Community diversity means a range of risk-reduction strategies have been collaboratively devised by those involved in the project. Some of these communities have experienced bushfire (e.g. Wye River), but none has endured the extreme conditions faced by communities in East Gippsland during the summer of 2019–20. These fires burnt for more than three months and destroyed hundreds of thousands of hectares of East Gippsland vegetation. Multiple communities were exposed to these fires, including Cann Valley communities, Buchan and Mallacoota. All these communities participate in Community Based Bushfire Management project.



Mallacoota residents discuss vegetation management during a visit to bushland in local areas.

Image: Michele Kearns

The program started in 2015 and Mallacoota was one of the first six communities to be involved. In these early days, the facilitator spent much time working on bringing the community together over the issues related to bushfire risk.

Since 2018, the focus for Mallacoota has largely been on the development of a vegetation management plan, particularly for the western aspect of town. The community, working with project agencies and local government, devised a fuel-break plan for this high-risk aspect of the town. This plan took time to devise because the land upon which the break was planned has multiple private landowners who had to be involved to develop the fuel break. At the same time, the community identified that information on insurance was not clear and they organised a seminar on home insurance. Chris Nicholson from Victoria Legal Aid travelled from Melbourne and presented 'After the Fire – Insurance and Rebuilding'. This session provided local residents with vital information related to insurance and

property rebuilding after a bushfire, including the application process, disclosures, underinsurance and the cost of rebuilding. Some residents who attended the event had not updated their insurance in over 15 years and others had homes with features that would not have been covered by their current policy. Others were worried about being underinsured and attendees asked questions about the crisis aspects of insurance and claiming.

Two weeks after this session, the devastating fires struck.

After the fires, residents who lost everything contacted Chris and thanked him for the session and to tell him that, because of what they learnt, they had increased their insurance and were in a better position to rebuild.

When asked about the value of these sessions and that this information had been requested by the community, Chris said:

*Knowledge is power. If people understand how insurance works and what they are dealing with, they are armed with that knowledge, they will know how to protect their assets and they will know what they need to do when a crisis hits. [The talk] was a great example of how the community, the department and different agencies are working together.*

Despite the vast devastation caused by the fires in 2019–20, the Mallacoota community has returned to its fuel-break plan development. Despite being in the midst of recovery (and the COVID-19 pandemic), the community recognises that there are still large areas of unburnt, high-risk vegetation surrounding the town and they are determined to see their fuel-break plan come to fruition.

The township of Buchan joined the project in 2019. Residents did not have much time to work with the local Community Based Bushfire Management facilitator to develop any bushfire risk-reduction strategies. They had, however, had discussions and meetings and the relationships and networks proved valuable since the summer fires. Facilitator Gail Cumming said:

*While we have not yet had the opportunity to talk about what the community might like to do to reduce their bushfire risk, they do all know each other a lot better, and they know the agency and local government staff a lot better. These relationships have made things easier now that we are in recovery. People know who to turn to, they are happy to pick up the phone and make a call. Everything is so much easier when you know one another.*

The Cann Valley includes many small communities, such as Cann River, Combiobar, Club Terrace and Noorinbee, all of which were affected by the 2019–20 fires. Each community is unique and has its own particular needs. Gail is the local facilitator there also and has worked closely with the community, with Bushfire Recovery Victoria and others to determine the community's focus. Prior to the fires, these communities worked with Gail on issues of high fuel loads surrounding the communities, the finer details of the local incident management plan and local Neighbourhood Safer Place options. These discussions brought people together

and helped to develop relationships and they also improved the understanding of risk and the fire potential of the area. All of this increases preparedness at the household and personal levels.

In the months since the fires, community members in the Cann Valley have focused on approaches that aid recovery as well as preparedness for future events. Sessions with Dr Rob Gordon, a well-known and well-respected trauma psychologist, presented opportunities for people to share and record their personal stories. There is also work being done by Landcare to restore the land and discussions regarding the rebuilding of community assets have occurred. There are also plans to host 'stay and defend' workshops, which is a CFA education program.

One of the many important issues raised while working with the Cann Valley communities is the needs of the local Indigenous community. Gail teamed with Aileen Blackburn, a local leader of Monero/Yuin descent, to understand what these needs are and how they are included in community-based bushfire management in the area. One of the desires of Aileen and her fellow community members is to see more traditional land care occurring, including cultural burns. This has become one objective for the area. Aileen said:

*Our ancestors and Monero descendants of Cann River have long cared for country and continue knowledge of culturally driven fire tools essential for the spirituality and wellbeing of our children, grandparents, women and men's business. The bushfires have shown that the land and people are one, when one is hurt we all hurt. Efforts to improve bushfire preparedness and land management into the future must include substantive meaning Aboriginal decision-making across the entire breadth of land and water management. Far East Gippsland is indeed fire-prone country, but with willingness of all community to work with us, and adopting more culturally appropriate interagency consultation methods, we can use our voice to help and, in doing so, respect our ancestors and this land.*

The beauty of approaches like those used in the Community Based Bushfire Management project is the flexibility they offer. No two communities are the same and by allowing time and space for a community approach, unique strategies to reduce bushfire risk can be developed. In East Gippsland, this approach has allowed communities to share their stories, build connections and work collaboratively with others to determine how they would prepare for, and recover from, bushfire.

## End notes

Community Based Bushfire Management in Victoria. At: <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-october-2019-community-based-bushfire-management-in-victoria/>.

Victorian Government Place Based Approaches. At: [www.vic.gov.au/framework-place-based-approaches/place](http://www.vic.gov.au/framework-place-based-approaches/place).

Bushfire Recovery Victoria. At: [www.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery-victoria](http://www.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery-victoria).