



**EMV**  
EMERGENCY  
MANAGEMENT  
VICTORIA

# Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire

January - March 2014

## Community Report

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Emergency Management Commissioner

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July 2014

Working in conjunction  
with Communities,  
Government, Agencies  
and Business.

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Please note:

That this information may not be complete or be representative of all efforts made by the emergency management sector in managing the Goongerah-Deddick Trail fire as it is based only on existing information available to EMV at the time of the compilation of this report.

# 1 Purpose

## Introduction

The Fire Services Commissioner (FSC) initiated a review of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire under the provisions of Section 10 (i) of the *Fire Services Commissioner Act 2010*. The role of the FSC was superseded by the Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC) on 1 July 2014.

The Terms of Reference for the Community Report were:

- to engage with and consider community concerns relating to the management of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire,
- to engage with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) Chief Officer and Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) Chief Fire Officer,
- to ensure strategic ownership and engagement within the fire services agencies about the fire management of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail fire,
- to work with the community to identify their issues of concern and actions to improve,
- to provide observations and actions that will be implemented by the FSC (now the EMC), CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer
- for the EMC to report to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services on strategic issues, actions and any systemic issues.

The review is to respond to the concerns raised by the community and to promote improvements in fire and emergency management arrangements into the future.

A preliminary report was drafted to provide information regarding the Goongerah-Deddick Trail fire within the context of the 2013-14 fire season, contrasted with the themes from the issues raised by the Goongerah-Deddick Trail fire Community Reference Group. The preliminary report provided a starting point for consultation with the community. This preliminary report has been superseded by this final community report.

## 2 Executive Summary

This community report provides an opportunity for the Deddick, Tubbut, Bonang and Goongerah communities to reflect and to express their issues and concerns regarding the Goongerah-Deddick Trail fire that burnt for some 70 days on public and private land.

The report is not designed to list individual issues and individual answers, rather to provide context to determine overarching strategic issues and actions that together will improve the management of fires.

The community has formed a Community Reference Group and the state leaders of the fire services have met with the community to listen and gather the key issues that require improvement strategies to be developed and implemented.

The process of individual or small groups of community members being able to communicate direct to the fire services state leaders has been engaging and very informative. There has been four strategic actions identified and will now be implemented by the fire services (CFA and DEPI), Victoria Police, Local Government and the Community. A joined up approach to progressing and resolving these issues is the only way to achieve a new, refreshed approach.

The Strategic Actions are:

- *Victoria / NSW Cross border fire arrangements*
- *Initial Attack / utilisation of resources*
- *Road Traffic Management*
- *Community involvement in fire preparedness, response and recovery*

The Strategic Actions are the key to bringing together multiple themes and provide a clear set of actions that will address the issues identified by the Community and the Emergency Management Commissioner and Chief Fire Officers.

Note:

The issues raised by the Forest Industry (Fire) Brigades (FIB) will be progressed separate to this report.

## Executive Overview

During the 2013-14 fire season, Victoria experienced more than 4,600 grass and bushfires of which 78 were significant. It was a fire season of significance that challenged emergency services and communities.

There were several East Gippsland fires during the 2013-14 fire season – one of which was the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire which impacted on the Deddick, Tubbut, Bonang and Goongerah communities for 70 days resulting in 165,806 hectares of private and public land being burnt.

There has been significant concern expressed by the impacted community members and resulted in the FSC commissioning a review of the management of the fire which has provided the opportunity for community members to directly provide their experiences and observations.

On 15 January 2014, a significant band of lightning moved across Victoria and ignited multiple fires in East Gippsland and other locations across Victoria. This lightning has been described as some of the most intense lightning experienced in East Gippsland. These fires in the main were managed from the Orbost Incident Control Centre.

Success was achieved with many of the fires however there were significant fires that, without a total control strategy being achieved, would result in fires joining up and progressing to be large, complex fires that would test fire control and East Gippsland communities.

On 9 February 2014, an extreme fire danger rating day was forecasted for the majority of Victoria. This was cited as the worst fire danger day since Black Saturday on 7 February 2009. Communities across Victoria were warned of the seriousness of this day and communities reacted appropriately. Although there was significant fire operations across Victoria no one lost their life and minimal lost of residential property resulted.

The weather conditions were such that the fire became extreme and intense. Significant public and private land was burnt and the smoke column provided by the fires was so significant it produced its own fire weather, consistent with mega fire behaviour. The intensity of the fires would challenge ground and air resources.

Communities in Deddick, Tubbut, Bonang and Goongerah also prepared for the extreme fire danger day. This individual and community preparatory work proved to be very successful. Personal and family decisions were made to leave and move out of the area, whilst others decided to stay and work to defend their properties. These decisions were underpinned by good well-informed information prior to 9 February 2014. This was a key factor to the success of many.

Resources from CFA and DEPI were deployed to assist community preparedness however some resources were allocated away from the area to other fire operations. Those resources that remained in the area were staged in strategic locations.

The fire control strategy was to 'stage' fire vehicles in strategic locations. The 'staged' fire vehicles waited in the safety of the staging areas. However, this was viewed by the broader community as not being willing to assist community members protect private assets such as houses, sheds, and other critical agriculture assets.

Community members considered this was not as per the "plan" described by fire control at community meetings that occurred on previous days. This inaction was perceived by many community members as a breakdown in fire control strategy and support to a community under direct threat of fire.

This 'lock down' strategy appeared to remain in place from 9 February 2014 to 10 February 2014. During this period, significant damage occurred on private land and to private assets the fire was intense, but for the most, controllable and manageable. During this 'lock down' period the Community reported fire fighters were watching from afar, doing little, playing cricket and providing little or no support to a needing and desperate community.

To further complicate the negative experience of the community, the traffic management points that restricted access and egress were well established. This was a source of extensive frustration for many community members. With a long fire operations period, there were 24 hour road blocks that operated for weeks. This proved extremely problematic with restrictions placed on community members who wished to protect their properties, provide care and medicine to others, attend to livestock and/or function as a community by obtaining information and resources to manage their lives during an extended fire period.

Community meetings were conducted with a level of success prior to 9 February 2014, however after this date these quickly became very difficult forums with many community questions not being able to be adequately answered.

### 3 Review process

Local residents held a meeting at Bonang Hall on 25 March 2014, where concerns were raised in relation to preparedness for, response to and recovery from the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire. The community subsequently established a Community Reference Group.

The written submissions coordinated by the Community Reference Group for this purpose identified the issues of most concern and provided recommendations. This, and another eight additional individual community submissions, were provided to senior representatives of the fire services at meetings in Bonang and Goongerah held on 8 May 2014.

As a result of significant community concern, the then FSC initiated a review of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire under the provisions of Section 10 (i) of the *Fire Services Commissioner Act 2010*. The review was to respond to the concerns raised by the community and to promote improvements in fire and emergency management arrangements into the future.

A review panel comprised of CFA Chief Officer Euan Ferguson, DEPI Chief Fire Officer Alan Goodwin and the then FSC Craig Lapsley who all visited Bonang and Goongerah over a three day period from 17 to 19 June 2014.

They met with community members over 28 sessions and received further written submissions from community members, business, fire brigades and a forest industry brigade. The time spent at Bonang and Goongerah provided an insight into the experiences and concerns expressed by community members within the area during the fires.

While community members who attended the individual consultation sessions expressed concerns with the management of the fire, some community members also commended the firefighting effort and information they received during the fire.

The detailed information provided by the community has formed the basis for this updated community report. It should be noted that this report does not provide or seek to reproduce the level of detail and the specific accounts of the individuals and groups who took the time to provide this in depth information for the purposes of this review. It does aim to holistically reflect the issues raised by the community as a means to identify and target actions that will address the concerns of the community in a collective and cohesive way.

It includes the observations of CFA Chief Officer, DEPI Chief Fire Officer and the then FSC (now EMC) and the actions that are required as a result of the review process.

Any information used as part of the community report to illustrate particular points, concerns and actions required have been de-identified.

The community report will be made available to all interested community members.

#### **Identified themes and issues from community submissions**

The initial submission provided by the Community Reference Group identified 11 areas of focus, with corresponding anecdotal evidence, in relation to the state's preparation and response to the 2014 Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire.

The then FSC broadly confirmed these 11 themes as outlined in his letter to the Community Reference Group dated 14 May 2014. These 11 themes were:

- Initial attack
- Incident management / incident strategy
- Information to the community / communications
- Community / private asset protection
- Cross-border inter-agency arrangements and deployment

- Road blocks – traffic management
- Local knowledge
- Planning and preparedness / shared responsibility
- Resourcing
- Community engagement
- Human, agriculture and farming impacts.

An analysis of the consolidated Community Reference Group submission and individual submissions found the most prevalent themes, based on their frequency of appearance in individual submissions, were:

- information to the community / communications issues, specifically around community members receiving inaccurate and delayed information
- perceptions from community members that (DEPI) ignored local knowledge that was provided
- inflexibility of road blocks and its potential to increase risk to the health and safety of local community members
- the lack of planning and preparedness – in particular, the inadequate fuel reduction burns in the local area since 2003
- lack of aggressive initial attack.

## 4 Bushfire management

### State control priorities

The *State Bushfire Plan 2012* outlines strategic control priorities to provide clear direction from the State Controller to Regional Controllers and Incident Controllers on the key strategic priorities that must be considered and actioned during the management of any significant or complex fire.

The priorities articulate the focus on the primacy of life and issuing of community warnings and information to assist people make informed decisions about their safety, and to communicate other priorities including the protection of property, economies and the environment.

The policy underpins the planning and operational decisions made by agency command and control staff when managing fire. The priorities are:

- Protection and preservation of life is paramount – this includes:
  - Safety of emergency services personnel
  - Safety of community members including vulnerable community members and visitors/tourists located within the incident area
- Issuing of community information and community warnings detailing incident information that is timely, relevant and tailored to assist community members make informed decisions about their safety
- Protection of critical infrastructure and community assets that support community resilience
- Protection of residential property as a place of primary residence
- Protection of assets supporting individual livelihoods and economic production that supports individual and community financial sustainability
- Protection of environmental and conservation assets that considers the cultural, biodiversity, and social values of the environment.

The priorities articulate the focus on the primacy of life and issuing of community warnings and information to assist people make informed decisions about their safety.

### State Command and Control Arrangements

The following is an extract from the *State Command and Control Arrangements for Bushfire in Victoria 2013* (September 2013) with regard to the line-of-control in place for the 2013-14 fire season.

#### ***Line-of-Control***

Control relates to situations and operates horizontally across agencies. Those appointed to the control function for bushfire are accountable for the control of the bushfires managed within their span of control. They provide direction to all other agencies responding to the emergency, at their respective tier.

The 'line-of-control' refers to the line of supervision for those appointed to perform the control function. The line-of-control for bushfire in Victoria is State Controller, Regional Controller and Incident Controller. The line-of-control for bushfire is in place at all times but is not activated until a fire has potential for or reaches a major fire status.

The purpose of the line-of-control for bushfire in Victoria is to ensure an operational, informational and evaluative connection between the controllers at each tier so that the FSC, who has legislative accountability for the control of major fire and is the State Controller for bushfire, is assured that the needs of the community are being met.

### **State and Regional Controllers**

The FSC is the State Controller for bushfire and performs the role continuously.

For the extent of the bushfire season, the FSC approves the appointment of rostered Regional Controllers to take charge and provide strategic leadership for bushfire readiness and response in each Region.

During the bushfire season, both the FSC and Regional Controllers monitor all fires and their potential consequences but only actively manage fires with the potential to become major fires. This could be all fires on days of high fire risk. Outside the bushfire season, the FSC appoints Regional Controllers on a needs basis.

### **Incident Controllers**

In first response, the fire services agencies normally appoint Incident Controllers to manage bushfires according to their jurisdictional responsibilities.

In readiness for bushfire on days of high fire risk or for major bushfires, the State or Regional Controllers may appoint Incident Controllers, based on their qualifications and experience and regardless of their agency.

Since the control function operates horizontally across agencies, Incident Controllers must communicate with the commanders of all the other agencies responding to the bushfire, including the commanders of their own agency resources.

### **Incident Management Team structures**

As outlined in the *State Bushfire Plan 2012*, the fire services are committed to the use of the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) at the incident level. Within AIIMS, the Incident Controller may be supported by an Incident Management Team (IMT) which usually comprises individuals from the control agency and the key support agencies. The IMT provides support for public information, planning, operations and logistics functions.

In accordance with the incident management functions identified in the State Emergency Response Plan (Emergency Management Manual Victoria Part 3), all Incident Controllers must adopt a functional management approach to bushfire management to ensure an IMT can easily take over management of a bushfire, if required. A functional management approach must achieve the following incident management outcomes:

- Establish and maintain control
- Ensure safety of personnel
- Predict the spread of the fire
- Issue warnings and advice to the community
- Develop a summary Incident Action Plan in accordance with Standard Operating Procedure J3.03
- Coordinate resources
- Build a common operating picture

The IMT works closely with the Emergency Management Team (EMT), if one has been established.

The incident level management structure has an Incident Controller and an incident structure that includes Divisions and Sectors.

The incident management structure for the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire operated with an Incident Controller based at the Orbest Incident Control Centre (ICC) and a Division operating from Bendoc to manage the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire.

## 5 Operational context

### ***The 2013-14 fire season***

The 2013-14 fire season was long and challenging for emergency services and Victorian communities.

Victoria experienced a heatwave, long running fires in hard-to-reach, remote bushland, and fast moving grass fires threatening Melbourne's fringe. From December 2013 to March 2014, there were:

- 19 days of extreme and severe fire danger ratings
- 17 days of Total Fire Ban.

The fire services fought more than 4,600 grass and bushfires, an increase of 300 from the previous season, and attended almost 40,000 incidents during the season. Serious fires across the state included:

- Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire
- Wyperfeld National Park
- Grampians Northern Complex
- Big Desert Wilderness Park - Red Bluff Wildlife Reserve
- Mickleham-Kilmore
- Wunghnu Complex
- Hernes Oak / Driffield / Hazelwood mine fire.

Attachment 1 provides an overview of serious, significant and other fires for the 2013-14 fire season as well as further state-wide context during that period. There were a number of fires in East Gippsland during that period, including the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire.

### ***Events of significance***

Following the heatwave of 13 to 17 January 2014, the weekend of 8 and 9 February 2014 was a period of high heat conditions as well as high fire danger. Maximum temperatures across the state were 38°C to 42°C with strong north to north-westerly winds.

On 9 February 2014, there were 78 going fires across the state, with a number of new starts. There was now fire within the disused areas of the coal mine pit at Hazelwood power station and the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire had tripled in size and merged with other fires.

Victoria's emergency services, with the assistance of 2,850 interstate and international colleagues, worked to manage the fires. There were 1,675 dispatches of aircraft delivering almost 10,000 hours of work during the season. Further, a total of 3,644 warning and advice messages were issued to Victorian communities over the course of the season.

### ***State losses***

The 2013-14 fire season saw 80 residences and 2,992 kilometres of fences destroyed or damaged, and more than 21,000 livestock lost. More than 463,000 hectares of private and public land was burnt, more than double from the previous season. Attachment 1 provides an overview of key loss and damage information.

As at 21 March 2014, 6,423 event / personal hardship payments totalling \$4.4 million were issued to members of the Victorian community affected by the 2013-14 fires.

***Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire chronology of events***

Attachment 2 contains information that demonstrates how the East Gippsland fires were managed in the context of what was happening across Victoria. The information has been synthesised from the documents produced throughout the duration of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire which include:

- State Emergency Management Team (SEMT) meeting minutes
- SEMT Situation Reports
- State Control Team 7-Day Action Plans
- State Operational Briefings.

Attachment 3 provides maps of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire that reflect the time periods outlined in Attachment 2.

## 6 Community submissions

### Community Reference Group submission

The consolidated Community Reference Group submission identified 11 areas of focus, with corresponding anecdotal evidence, in relation to the state's preparation and response to the 2014 Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire. These areas of concern were:

- Lack of initial direct attack
- Communication
- Road blocks
- Lack of consultation / disregard of local knowledge
- Lack of planning
- No night crews
- Lack of ethical transparency and accountability
- Community feeling of “being let down”
- Financial cost / time cost
- Lack of respect for locals and their homes
- Emotional toll – devastation / stress / sense of loss / grief.

As shown in the table below, 10 out of 11 of the FSC/EMC's themes broadly correlate with the themes presented in the Community Reference Group submission. The only theme that was identified by the FSC, but was not raised in the Community Reference Group submission was “Cross border inter-agency arrangements and deployment”.

<b>FSC themes</b> (as per FSC letter to CRG 14 May 2014)	<b>Community Reference Group submission themes</b>
Initial attack	Lack of initial direct attack in mid January. Lack of the right resources to achieve initial attack effectively.
Incident management / incident strategy	Lack of ethical transparency and accountability
Information to the community / communications	Communication of information not consistently done and some networks not used. Information very hard to get.
Community / private asset protection	Community feeling of “being let down” on the 9 <sup>th</sup> February and days / weeks after.
Cross-border inter-agency arrangements and deployment	Lack of effective deployment of NSW resources into Victoria. (collected as part of verbal submissions)
Road blocks – traffic management	Road blocks in place for long periods with no understanding of local needs.

<b>FSC themes</b> (as per FSC letter to CRG 14 May 2014)	<b>Community Reference Group submission themes</b>
Local knowledge	Lack of consultation / disregard of local knowledge, local leaders and local community.
Planning and preparedness	Lack of planning for impact on private assets.
Resourcing	Limited night crews deployed, Lack of effective deployment – fire trucks in staging areas for hours/days.
Community engagement	Lack of respect for locals and their homes. Community meetings not providing opportunity for community to be heard.
Human, agriculture and farming impacts	Financial cost / time cost Emotional toll – devastation / stress / sense of loss / grief

The community submission provided anecdotal information in relation to the community's concerns across the 11 areas of focus.

It is important to emphasise that this anecdotal information has not been validated or tested for reliability. Furthermore, given the limited sample size, the issues raised may not be representative of the broader population. As the majority of this anecdotal information are observations from the perspective of the community only, it is important that the validity of these comments and assertions be tested based on facts and evidence where necessary.

The consolidated submission from the Community Reference Group also included 11 recommendations:

1. That resources for effective first attack fire-fighting be reviewed, prioritised and funded.
2. More transparency in decision making of the fire controllers and higher level managers, with a review of the financial incentives that are counterproductive.
3. That consultation with landholders and communities include discussion about how best to prepare for fire, i.e. placement of tracks, fuel reduction burning, etc. and be conducted annually, before the fire season starts.
4. That DEPI work with a representative group of community members to develop a fire fighting protocol to be adopted by all parties – locals, DEPI and CFA – to be reviewed at regular intervals.
5. That funds to prevent wildfire impacting on communities be available all year round and not just over the summer season, in order that tracks can be put in place with care rather than urgently and maintained to a high standard and other measures to protect our communities from fire can be conducted. One worker at Bendoc, the skeleton staff remaining between fire seasons, is not capable of doing this. That support be given to the local CFA to enable more people to be trained in order that we increase our pool of local expertise and are less reliant on outside support.
6. That recognition be given to local people coming and going from their properties via a locals' pass or some other means by which people take

- responsibility for their own movements unless safety really cannot be assured – for instance, while the fire is running.
7. That more honesty and less placation be offered to communities.
  8. That a scientific review of the most effective fire suppression methods be carried out.
  9. That DEPI provide information on various ways people can make their private assets fire ready.
  10. More emphasis be placed on community fire-guard preparations.
  11. Meetings with locals be documented and information added into the pool of information used during fire response.

The eleven community recommendations have been considered by the review panel and have taken these into account in their observations and in the development of strategic actions.

## **Individual submissions**

The community submission included eight accounts from individuals or groups (henceforth referred to as individual submissions) which provided anecdotal information in relation to the 11 areas of focus.

Subsequently, during the conduct of the 28 individual consultation sessions held in Bonang and Goongerah from 17 to 19 June 2014, the review panel received a further 22 written submissions.

Five of these submissions were from community members who had previously provided a written submission. For this analysis, their original submission has been consolidated with their new submission. Therefore, this report has analysed written submissions from 25 different individuals or groups of community members.

Furthermore, analysis of the new submissions identified a new recurring theme of community trust in the emergency services. The issues raised in the individual submissions, based on the 12 themes are shown in the chart below.

It is important to note that not everyone provided written submissions. Other community members preferred to speak at the consultation meeting of their choice, these were also noted and make up information provided in this report.

## 7 Observations and themes

This section of the report seeks to analyse and consolidate the issues raised by individuals and groups of community members, together with the observations of the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer following consultations with the community held in Bonang and Goongerah from 17 to 19 June 2014.

It should be noted that the thematic analysis and observations do not provide or seek to reproduce the level of detail and the specific accounts of the individuals and groups who took the time to provide this in depth information for the purposes of this review. It does aim to holistically reflect the concerns across the 25 written submissions from individuals or groups of community members as a means to identify and target actions that will address the concerns of the community in a collective and cohesive way.

The 11 themes are:

- Initial attack
- Incident management / incident strategy
- Information to the community / communications
- Community / private asset protection
- Cross-border inter-agency arrangements and deployment
- Road blocks – traffic management
- Local knowledge
- Planning and preparedness / shared responsibility
- Resourcing
- Community engagement
- Human, agriculture and farming impacts.

From these 11 themes, there are 4 Strategic Actions that will set the improvement initiatives.

### ***Initial attack***

Individual submissions received indicated that there was a lack of an initial attack on the fire, with some community members providing detailed information on their own experiences and what they observed during the initial stages of the fire. The submissions stated that according to DEPI, there was no initial attack on the fires because the areas were too remote for a safe direct attack and that there were a lack of resources.

However, the community felt strongly that:

- the days of benign weather were not taken advantage of after the ignition of Campbell's Knob, Musk Creek and Deddick Trail fires and that better fire suppression/control outcomes could have been achieved
- air support with rapel crews should have been tasked to combat the fires at the initial stages.

Furthermore, one submission stated that firefighters today are better trained, equipped and supported to undertake initial attacks, which leads to community members questioning why has there been a change in strategy from aggressive to passive firefighting. The prevailing community view is that a more effective and

concentrated initial attack would have reduced, and may have even prevented, the subsequent impacts of the fire.

The issues raised in relation to the lack of initial attack also overlap with the themes “local knowledge” and “resourcing”. More specifically, community members believed that DEPI ignored local knowledge and questioned why sufficient resources were not allocated to initially attack the fires in force.

While unable to be explored fully within the scope of this report, there was evidence that by 30 January 2014, firefighting efforts in Gippsland were being supported by interstate crews and that aerial resources had been increased.

### **Initial attack**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer noted the following observations:

- lack of aggressive initial attack.
- rapid deployment of agencies resources to enable fires to be attacked in the early stages of fire development
- efficient, appropriate and timely utilisation of aircrafts, dozers and firefighters in supporting initial attack of fires
- taking advantage of the windows of opportunities in lulls in weather to get on top of fires
- time of firefighting, including night and early morning crews in attendance on fire line may have achieved better outcomes in fire suppression.

### ***Incident management / incident strategy***

The key observations raised out of the review around incident management and/or incident strategy were:

- the absence of DEPI night crews left local CFA members and community members to combat the fire without support
- DEPI’s perceived reluctance in tasking CFA strike teams and not providing them with clear directions and refusing support from local CFA personnel
- an opinion that coordination of activities across the various agencies and state divisions was poor
- the lack of focus on environmental impacts as a result of current fire management.

The submissions also raised the issue of the visibility of CFA and DEPI firefighters and appliances waiting in staged areas, while local community members fought fires to protect their private assets. This contributed to a growing sense of abandonment and a loss of trust towards the emergency services within the local community.

While unable to be explored fully within the scope of this report, the safety of emergency services personnel and the terrain in which the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire was fought are important factors to consider further in relation to these points.

**Observations – Incident management / incident strategy**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- the lack of night and early morning shifts to achieve more effective use of resources and capitalise on lulls in weather and fire behaviour.
- the promise of crews on 9 February 2014, which were subsequently not delivered
- remote management of fires and the role of Divisional Command
- the location of the Incident Control Centre
- pre-formed Incident Management Teams.

***Information to the community / communications***

Community members cited issues with completeness, accuracy and/or timeliness of information provided by:

- community newsletters
- ABC radio
- websites – specifically, the speed of the websites and inaccuracies relating to the status and location of fires displayed on maps
- The ICC
- Local representation at Community meetings, and
- Where needed, interpreter services.

In addition, community members felt the information provided within community meetings was not always accurate and helpful. In particular, they felt that the lack of an initial attack was not adequately explained. The submissions reflected community members' desire for more open and honest meetings.

Other areas for improvement reflected in the submissions were:

- promises to return phone calls were not always kept by Bendoc ICC
- lack of mobile communications coverage in the area and poor radio reception.

The submissions also revealed that community members found it extremely difficult to obtain current and definitive information on the status of their assets and properties. This was especially the case for community members who were not in the local area during the fires. One community member found Facebook to be the most reliable source of current information.

As information and warnings is a very broad area, it was unable to be fully explored within the scope of this report. However, there was evidence of issues with information and warnings issued to the community. Examples included occasional delays between publish time and appearance on the VicEmergency website, confusion about multiple messages for the same incident and incorrect date stamps on Advice messages on Facebook.

It should also be noted that a range of improvement actions have been implemented at the state and regional levels in relation to providing more timely and accurate information and warnings to the community.

### Observations – Information to the community / communications

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- completeness, accuracy and/or timeliness of warnings disseminated by emergency broadcasters
- dissemination of timely, tailored and relevant information - information to the community / communications issues, specifically around community members receiving inaccurate and delayed information
- dissemination of information to locals by locals
- the need for a systemic approach in disseminating and sharing of information that is not reliant solely on mobile and internet services.

### ***Community / private asset protection***

Multiple submissions reflected the strong feelings of community members in relation to the inconsistent and sometimes described by community members as inadequate action taken by fire services to protect community and private assets. Analysis of the comments and examples showed that community expectations were raised by:

- community perception that the primary focus of firefighting is asset protection
- a community information newsletter stating that the key priorities were community protection, private asset protection and information provision
- commitment made by emergency services personnel to community members at community meetings that they would assist in the protection of private assets, a commitment that was subsequently broken.

The submissions identified that if it were not for the extraordinary efforts of locals, the fire would have destroyed many more assets. The submissions reflected a community that felt abandoned, fuelled by the appearance of CFA and DEPI resources visibly waiting in the staging areas while community members fought the fires on their properties.

Further analysis of the community information newsletters confirms that the protection of communities and private property were stated as key priorities under the heading “Incident Information”.

The focus on the protection and preservation of life was reflected in practice when:

- Victoria Police carried out door-knocking on 2 February, recommending residents to evacuate. However, Victoria Police reported that nobody evacuated.
- a further recommendation to evacuate was issued for Goongerah on the evening of 8 February. Twenty-seven houses were door-knocked and of these, nine households indicated that they would stay. Victoria Police later reported that 22 people remained, with no children in the town.

It is noted that Community Information Newsletter number 14, stated that “*The focus remains on firefighter and community safety*” which is consistent with the Strategic Control Priorities (refer to Section 4 of this report).

### **Observations – Community / private asset protection**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- the promise of firefighting equipment to protect private property, which were then not available
- property inspections of vacant blocks and unoccupied homes
- that the community did well to protect their properties.

### ***Cross border inter-agency arrangements and deployment***

Information collected from the face to face review sessions indicated that community members understood that offers to help made by the NSW Forests, Parks and NSW Rural Fire Service were initially rejected. The eventual acceptance of help was too late, which minimised the positive impact that the extra resources could have provided. Furthermore, anecdotal information within one submission suggested that interstate crews were not provided with sufficient information to operate effectively.

Community concerns have resulted in some community members calling for a review of the current cross border inter-agency arrangements.

It should be noted that analysis of operational data suggests plans for the deployment of two specialist arduous firefighter taskforces from NSW to support East Gippsland commenced on 20 January.

Furthermore, prior to the Goongerah fire joining with the Buchan Jackson fire, which occurred on 12 February, significant interstate resources were already deployed to battle the fires. More specifically:

- prior to the end of January, the firefighting effort in Gippsland was being supported by interstate crews from NSW
- NSW aircraft were deployed to the Gippsland fires
- New Zealand personnel supported the firefighting effort in East Gippsland.

### **Observations – Cross border inter-agency arrangements and deployment**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- the need for the current cross-border arrangements to be refreshed
- that NSW resources stopped at the border
- the need for cross border joint exercising
- planned engagement of all brigades around the border
- working together collaboratively within and across brigade / groups.

### **Roadblocks – traffic management**

Road blocks and traffic management was a strong theme from the community. The views presented within the submissions indicated that:

- locals should be allowed re-entry to their farm or dwelling after gathering supplies
- locals' families and friends should be allowed entry past the roadblock to provide supplies.

According to one submission, the above could be achieved if a permit system, using proof of identity and residence, is implemented to allow landowners through road blocks. Issues included the need for better communication between police, road authorities and fire control in setting up adequate road controls and that road blocks should be informed by local knowledge. This includes better preparation of traffic management personnel to enable them to make informed decisions, and where required, seek approval through the appropriate chain of command.

The impacts on the affected community members included business interruption, inability to attend doctor appointments and increased personal stress. As identified in the submissions, the potential severity of the above impacts resulted in some community members circumventing road blocks, which only served to increase the risks to their safety.

Traffic Management Points are put in place to ensure the safety of the public and the emergency services staff. They also ensure emergency services personnel have priority access to combat or respond to a fire. They seek to ensure that people with a valid reason or justified need, can enter a fire-affected area in a timely and controlled manner – when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so.

This report acknowledges the *communities' need to support friends and family during a time of crisis as well as to attend to livestock*. However, as stated previously, the top strategic priority is the "protection and preservation of life (both community and emergency services personnel)". In alignment with this strategic priority and the Traffic Management Point policy, there was evidence that: hazardous tree management programs were in place on 12 and 13 February to enable safe access and the opening of roads in various locations. On the 17 February, it was reported that work was continuing through the week to make fire-affected areas safe for the return of residents including assessing and clearing dangerous trees. It was not until 18 February that Animal Health response teams, escorted by fire services personnel, were allowed access to the areas affected by the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire. Subsequently, on 19 February, community members were being escorted in and out of Goongerah.

#### **Observations – Road blocks – traffic management**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- the application of the Traffic Management Point policy
- the length of road closures
- the use of passes and issuing of passes
- inflexibility of road blocks and its potential to increase risk to the health and safety of local community members
- police awareness of community needs including food, water, medicine, livestock and supplies.

### ***Local knowledge***

The disregard for local knowledge and therefore disconnection with community was a key theme raised in the submissions.

Community members felt that the local knowledge they provided in relation to planning and preparation and initial attack were ignored. The submissions reflected a sense of disempowerment and community perception of disrespect and indifference for intimate local knowledge gained over decades.

Community members felt the information flow in community meetings was only one-way. Submissions provided examples of community meetings where local knowledge was ignored and minutes of the meetings were not reflective of the input provided by community members.

While one submission acknowledged that local residents were advised of planned burns, it also argued that far greater benefit could be gained if emergency services genuinely worked and consulted with the community to identify critical areas for fuel reduction burning.

In relation to recovery, one submission believed that recovery organisations also needed to have an appropriate level of local knowledge in order to operate effectively.

<b>Observations – Local knowledge</b>
<p>Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the use of local knowledge was not well executed</li> <li>• perceptions from community members that fire control ignored local knowledge that was provided</li> <li>• new managers in DEPI and CFA needing to be aware of local areas and issues.</li> <li>• CFA Group structure was not well supported by CFA District resulting in some instances the Group structure was ineffective.</li> <li>• local leaders were not involved in incident management.</li> </ul>



### ***Planning and preparedness / shared responsibility***

Issues around planning and preparedness, more specifically around fuel reduction burns, were raised by 13 out of 25 submissions. Views in the submissions were that the community is receiving less Fuel Reduction Burning (FRB) each year.

The submissions reflect the belief that:

- tracks were not adequately maintained and were not cleared prior to the fire season
- emergency services should develop and implement processes to ensure local knowledge is sought from the community at an early stage to inform the planning process for FRB in the local area
- emergency services should be transparent with the community with regard to the reasons and criteria behind why certain areas are subjected to fuel reduction burning while other areas are not.

In relation to FRB, many community members felt that there has been very little FRB in the region since 2003, especially around the Northern, Western and Eastern side of the fire area. One submission raised the issue of inaccurate information being reported on the level of FRB in the area and argued for periodic verification of the actual fuel load.

However, other community members felt that FRB are as damaging as fires, with long-term health effects, and questioned the effectiveness and evidence behind the benefits of FRB. One submission acknowledged that there are divergent opinions in relation to FRB within the community, but believes that the state should work with the community to adopt a balanced approach.

It is important to note that given that the state and responder agencies have limited resources in an environment where extreme weather events are becoming more frequent, it is vital that communities themselves are fully engaged in the resilience building process and that the process is led from within the community and that the state provides appropriate opportunities to engage.

#### **Observations – Planning and preparedness / shared responsibility**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- community strongly believe that track maintenance program is poorly executed
- community believe that the planned burning program is not comprehensively done with a lack of burning in some key locations
- individual community preparation is overall good however is not sufficient for high intensity fire behaviour
- broader community planning is inadequate
- the lack of planning and preparedness – in particular, the inadequate fuel reduction burns in the local area.

#### **Resourcing**

Resourcing related issues were raised in many of the submissions. Anecdotal information presented within the submissions showed that one reason provided by DEPI as to why the fires were not attacked directly at its initial stages was a lack of resources. DEPI communicated this to the community members at community meetings. Furthermore, the submissions questioned whether the strategic decision to not initially accept resources from NSW and to concentrate resources elsewhere instead of allocating these resources to attack the Deddick Trail fire at its initial stages was a correct one.

Inefficient utilisation of resources was raised by the community, which included:

- DEPI's alleged reluctance to task CFA strike teams, with culture differences (between paid and volunteer firefighters) and financial incentives cited as drivers
- the absence of night crews in attendance on fire line, which was a key reason behind the prolonged fires as perceived by the community.
- reluctance to use NSW fire services resources in an effective manner during the early stages including the 9/10 February 2014.
- use of private contractors heavy equipment

Prior to the end of January, the firefighting effort in Gippsland was being supported by interstate crews and aerial resources had been increased. Community Information Newsletter number 8 for the Far East Gippsland Fires dated 2 February indicated that five strike teams would be deployed in the area.

By 9 February, significant commitment of aircraft, including nine helicopters and five firebombers, supported by an additional six aircraft provided by NSW each day were deployed to the Gippsland fires. New Zealand crews continued to support the firefighting effort in East Gippsland. In addition, seven strike teams plus equipment from the NSW Rural Fire Service were ready to surge into East Gippsland if required.

At this time, Victoria had almost no capacity to increase resource levels to manage the existing fires in East Gippsland given the prevalence of fire across the state. It was noted that the resources needed to properly address the existing fires in East Gippsland far exceeded available levels and that in the absence of rain, controlling this scale of fire would require significant resources.

Over 400 firefighters including interstate resources were reported to be fighting the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire on 3 March 2014. Over the course of the season, there were 1,662 hours of aircraft operation reported for the Orbost complex of fires.

### **Observations – Resourcing**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- the effective deployment (non-deployment) firefighting personnel and resources was inconsistently applied, including the management of strike teams. This included DEPI, CFA, NSW and private contractors.
- littering of the community in some areas occurred with no follow up nor clean up (Bonang) and firefighters playing cricket in staging areas was sighted by the community as disrespectful and wasting time.

### ***Community engagement***

Community engagement was an issue identified submissions, with the majority of examples relating to the communities' perception of disrespectful treatment of community members by DEPI staff and ineffective community meetings. These claims have not been validated or tested with fire agency personnel.

While some community members reported having easy access to information, generally community members reported feeling that the community meetings were dominated by one-sided information flow, where local knowledge provided by attending community members was ignored. Submissions showed that three different facilitators were used for three consecutive meetings with poor handover of information, which resulted in inaccurate information being disseminated through this lack of continuity. This, compounded with the community belief that the minutes were not reflective of their meetings and no provision of notes after meetings, resulted in a loss of community trust and confidence, particularly in DEPI.

In relation to community engagement prior to the fire season, community members felt that emergency services should have processes in place to engage with the local community at an early stage and tap into the wealth of local knowledge which should then inform planning and preparedness in the local area.

It should be noted that at least 19 Community Information Newsletters were produced for the Far East Gippsland Fires and that a number of community meetings

were held during the Goongerah-Deddick Trail fire to provide information and address community concerns. Community meetings were held at Bonang, Goongerah, Delegate and Tubbut.

Community meetings were well attended by local communities and by various agencies including CFA, DEPI, the Department of Human Services, Victoria Police, NSW Rural Fire Service and East Gippsland Shire, however attendance by specific agencies at particular meetings varied.

Community meeting summaries indicated community dissatisfaction with DEPI as a fire service.

Successful community engagement requires shared responsibility. Further exploration and dialogue on the local activities provided by departments and agencies, as well as community participation, would help inform and improve the way community engagement occurs for the affected community. The extent to which local community engagement takes place in preparation for fire seasons is an important area for consideration.

#### **Observations – Community engagement**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding:

- management of community meetings – community involvement
- different model of engagement for long duration fires
- trust and respect lost for the emergency services within the community
- engagement prior to the fire to better inform planning and preparedness
- community committee structure
- potential for this event to be used as a case study.

#### ***Human, agriculture and farming impacts***

Eight submissions provided information on the impacts of the fire, with some submissions providing very detailed figures on the losses incurred. A high level summary of these impacts included:

- damage and loss of fencing
- loss of livestock
- loss of houses
- high financial impact due to losses and damage of fences, livestock, as well as business interruption costs
- impact on bees and honey flow
- environmental impacts, including the loss of rare and endangered species.

The full extent of human, agriculture and farming impacts were unable to be explored comprehensively within the scope of this report, however it is clear that the 2013-14 season had impacts on communities across the state.

As noted earlier in this report, the 2013-14 fire season saw 80 residences and more than 2,900 kilometres of fences destroyed or damaged, and more than 21,000

livestock lost across the state. More than 463,000 hectares of private and public land was burnt.

The Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire impacted over 165,000 hectares of public and private land including areas of state significance for flora and fauna. Information dated 25 March indicated that the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire had claimed at least nine residences, 86 kilometres of fencing and 163 livestock.

Evidence showed that on 18 February, it was deemed safe for Animal Health response teams, escorted by fire services personnel, to access areas affected by the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire. Escorted access was expanded to community members the next day.

### **Observations – Human, agriculture and farming impacts**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations regarding impacts on:

- restricted road access and egress provided a frustration and direct impact on the appropriate access to animal welfare support (veterinary).
- post the fire the ability to get access to “fire wood” has become an issue for many local community members.
- the post fire human impact have been significant and requires the recovery approach to engage with and monitor individuals health and well being.

### ***Community trust***

As a result of the management of these fires and the range of issues canvassed earlier in this report, there has been significant erosion of local community confidence and trust in fire control.

As identified in the submissions, some of the drivers behind the community losing trust and feeling abandoned were:

- promises made by emergency services to support the protection of private assets.
- community members witnessing resources waiting in staging areas while they combatted fires to protect their private assets
- disparaging remarks and disrespectful treatment of the local community
- littering
- community members witnessing firefighters undertaking recreational activities during the fire
- perceptions around DEPI culture and financial incentives which contributed to a lack of initial attack.

One submission identified the redevelopment of trust and goodwill as fundamental in ensuring healthy collaboration occurs between the community and emergency services to minimise the likelihood and impact of such an event occurring again.

**Observations – Community trust**

Following consultation with the community, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer made observations:

- Community trust has been significantly impacted in a negative manner.
- There is a need for DEPI, CFA and VicPol to engage with the community to rebuild community relationships and trust. Local community-based collaboration must occur between the community and emergency services' regional, district and local managers to build new and refreshed relationships.

## 8 Strategic Actions

The community submissions and individual consultation sessions provided an insight into the experiences and concerns expressed by community members within the area during the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire.

While community members who attended the individual consultation sessions expressed concerns with the management of the fire, some community members also commended the firefighting effort and information they received during the fire.

The detailed information provided by the community has formed the basis for this updated community report.

Four Strategic Actions have been identified that will include issues identified from the eleven themes discussed with the Community.

The Strategic Actions are:

- *Victoria / NSW Cross border fire arrangements*
- *Initial Attack / utilisation of resources*
- *Road Traffic Management*
- *Community involvement in fire preparedness, response and recovery*

The strategic actions will now set the direction for improvement with involvement and leadership required from all involved these being DEPI, CFA, NSW RFS, NSW NPWS, local communities and local government.

## 1. Strategic Action – Victoria / NSW Cross border fire arrangements

### **Problem Statement**

The NSW / Victoria cross border fire arrangements in the Bonang / Delegate general area were not fully effective during the 2014 fires.

### **Outcome Statement**

The NSW / Victoria cross border arrangements for all fire operations on the border are activated locally to support local fire operations and operate effectively for NSW / Victoria fire services and the community.

### **Owners**

CFA Operations Manager Region 11 and DEPI Land and Fire Manager Gippsland in conjunction with NSW RFS and NSW NPWS.

### **Actions**

- Extend Victorian emergency broadcasters to include coverage from New South Wales (NSW) radio stations operating in NSW at Cooma and Bega.
- Review radio and mobile phone black spots as part of the cross border fire preparedness and capability assessment.
- The NSW / Victoria cross border fire arrangements be refreshed, exercised and ready for operation in November 2014. To achieve this, CFA Operations Manager District Eleven, DEPI Land and Fire Manager Gippsland and responsible NSW Rural Fire Service and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service Regional Managers are to ensure that:
  - the cross border arrangements cooperation guidelines are refreshed and approved by October 2014.
  - exercises are conducted in November 2014 in both NSW and Victoria with all fire services attending all exercises.
  - joint aircraft operations are included in the cross border arrangements and exercising with the Delegate and other NSW air bases being tested and included in all Bonang / Delegate area fire operations
  - the forest industry brigades that operate in NSW and Victoria are included in cross border arrangement
  - the cross border arrangements include processes to manage any non-compliance or non-inclusion of all available resources from NSW or Victoria to ensure these occurrences are reported immediately to fire control and Incident Management Teams who are responsible for effective resource management to maximise local border and support resources
  - Incident Management Team inclusion of NSW and Victoria incident management personnel is to be proactively managed for cross border fire control.
  - the NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner and Emergency Management Commissioner Victoria be briefed on completion of cross border arrangements and exercising.

## 2. Strategic Action – Initial Attack / utilisation of resources

### **Problem Statement**

The initial attack to all fires in the area was not effective and all resources were not effectively deployed.

### **Outcome Statement**

The initial attack to all fires is maximised by ground and air resources.

### **Owners**

CFA Operations Manager Region 11 and DEPI Land and Fire Manager Gippsland supported by CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer.

### **Actions**

- Incident and Regional Control Teams support initial attack resources to control fires at the earliest opportunity by deploying ground and air resources to all fires
- For remote area fires that are not controlled / suppressed in initial attack, Incident and Regional Control Teams to complete an operations analysis to determine the type of resources and the operational period to achieve suppression at the earliest opportunity.
- Cross land tenure fire control which maximises all the available resources to achieve initial attack will be deployed under a single control structure – this will include all resources fire services resources (Victoria and NSW) and forest industry brigades (where established)
- Initial attack and ongoing fire control to operate 24 hours a day to maximise lulls in weather, fire behaviour to maximise fire control tactics and strategy
- Initial attack and fire prediction be communicated to all fire service agencies and the community detailing the success, challenges and timelines to achieve fire control / suppression.
- Fire control / Incident Management Team to engage with CFA Groups to ensure local resources are actively engaged and included in the Incident Action Plan.
- ensure that cross land tenure issues do not impact on timely and appropriate first attack
- deliver timely assessment of remote areas from ground and air to ensure an appropriate and timely initial attack occurs
- ensure that the training and deployment of CFA and DEPI personnel includes the need to extinguish fires in initial attack to keep fires small
- reconsider initial attack from aircraft to fires in remote areas.
- ensure that major fire operations review the role and functional resourcing of Divisional Command to achieve a more effective result
- include local knowledge, local leadership, and local community in incident management strategy and incident management teams.
- during resource deployment, consider effective use of fire fighting resources during lulls in weather and during evening, night, and early morning periods.
- Maximise the use of private contractors that are deployed to fires to ensure an effective and efficient outcome.

### 3. Strategic Action – Road Traffic Management

#### **Problem Statement**

Road Traffic Management was not understood nor accepted by the community during the 70 days of fire operations.

#### **Outcome Statement**

Road Traffic Management Systems are effectively communicated to the community in the preparedness phase, response phase and recovery phase. Road Traffic Management Systems must consider the consequences of a fire impacted community and consider different approaches for long fire operations.

#### **Owners**

Victoria Police EM Superintendent Gippsland in conjunction with CFA Operations Manager Region 11 and DEPI Land and Fire Manager Gippsland.

#### **Actions**

- revisit the state traffic management protocol to address short, medium, and long term road closures to better address community needs of access and management of community needs.
- The four tier Road Traffic Management System be communicated to the community in the preparedness phase of each fire season.
- The implementation of the Road Traffic Management System as part of a fire operation is communicated to the community at community meetings during the fire operation and provide the reason, timelines and opportunity for community members to seek clarification
- The Incident Controller and Victoria Police Manager responsible for Road Traffic Management implementation are to ensure that:
  - all personnel managing Road Traffic Management points are appropriately briefed with local knowledge
  - the access of key personnel to affected areas is a critical consideration as part of management of the Road Traffic Management System, this includes experts that provide human and animal health support etc
  - the four tier implementation is proactively reviewed to ensure an appropriate level of road closure is established, especially for long duration fires.
  - fire service resources provide escorts to vehicles as appropriate.

**4. Strategic Action – Community involvement in fire preparedness, response and recovery*****Problem Statement***

Community members are not included in fire preparedness, response and recovery activities in a structured and meaningful manner.

***Outcome Statement***

A structured approach is established that engages the local community trusted networks and trusted leaders. This will support community involvement and understanding of preparedness, readiness, response and recovery plans. This extends to providing fire control managers access to local knowledge, local leaders and local community information to establish a more comprehensive management of fire and the community.

***Owners***

Shire of East Gippsland, Victoria Police EM Superintendent Gippsland, CFA Operations Manager Region 11, DEPI Land and Fire Manager Gippsland supported by the Director Risk and Resilience EMV.

***Actions***

- A Community Emergency Management Plan be established which will assist development of the CEMP through a local Community Emergency Management Committee that includes local community trusted networks and trusted leaders
- The Bonang / Goongerah Community Emergency Management Committee be established with community leaders from community networks including the Neighbourhood House, School Committee, local Fire Brigades, local Hall Committees and interested community members with appropriate balance of gender, age and other factors
- The Community Emergency Management Plan be based on the next generation plan being drafted by Emergency Management Victoria and local government. This planning process would also interface with local government and state government department programs such as the public land planned burning program and public land fire access tracks.
- Ensure that CFA and DEPI local management structures engage with the community prior to fire season through the community emergency management plan
- Review the process of community meetings to better cater for community needs in the immediate, short, medium, and long term after the initial run of fire.

## 9 Conclusion

The 2013-14 fire season was of significance and challenged Victorian emergency services and communities. There were more than 4,600 grass and bushfires of which 78 were significant.

Several of these fires were in East Gippsland, including the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire which impacted on the Deddick, Tubbut, Bonang and Goongerah communities for 70 days resulting in 165,806 hectares of private and public land being burnt.

After the fires, local residents held community meetings, where concerns were raised in relation to preparedness for, response to and recovery from the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire. The community subsequently established a Community Reference Group to lobby for a judicial inquiry.

The significant concern expressed by the impacted community members resulted in the FSC (now EMC) commissioning a review of the management of the fire. This provided the opportunity for community members to directly provide their experiences and observations, in writing and verbally.

The process included the CFA Chief Officer Euan Ferguson, DEPI Chief Fire Officer Alan Goodwin and the then FSC Craig Lapsley meeting with community members in Bonang and Goongerah. Over 28 sessions were held over a three day period from 17 to 19 June 2014.

The time spent at Bonang and Goongerah, coupled with the written submissions from community members, provided an insight into the experiences and concerns expressed by community members within the area during the fires.

While community members who attended the individual consultation sessions expressed concerns with the management of the fire, some community members also commended the firefighting effort and information they received during the fire.

The detailed information provided by the community has formed the basis for this community report. While it does not provide or seek to reproduce the level of detail and the specific accounts of the individuals and groups who took the time to provide this in depth information, it provides a consolidation of issues raised by the community as a means to identify and target actions that will address the concerns of the community in a collective and cohesive way.

From this process, the EMC, CFA Chief Officer and DEPI Chief Fire Officer have agreed a series of Strategic Actions be implemented before the 2014-15 fire season. These Strategic Actions aim to respond to the collective concerns raised by the community and promote improvements in fire and emergency management arrangements into the future.



Figure 2: Overview of state areas of interest as at 9 February 2014

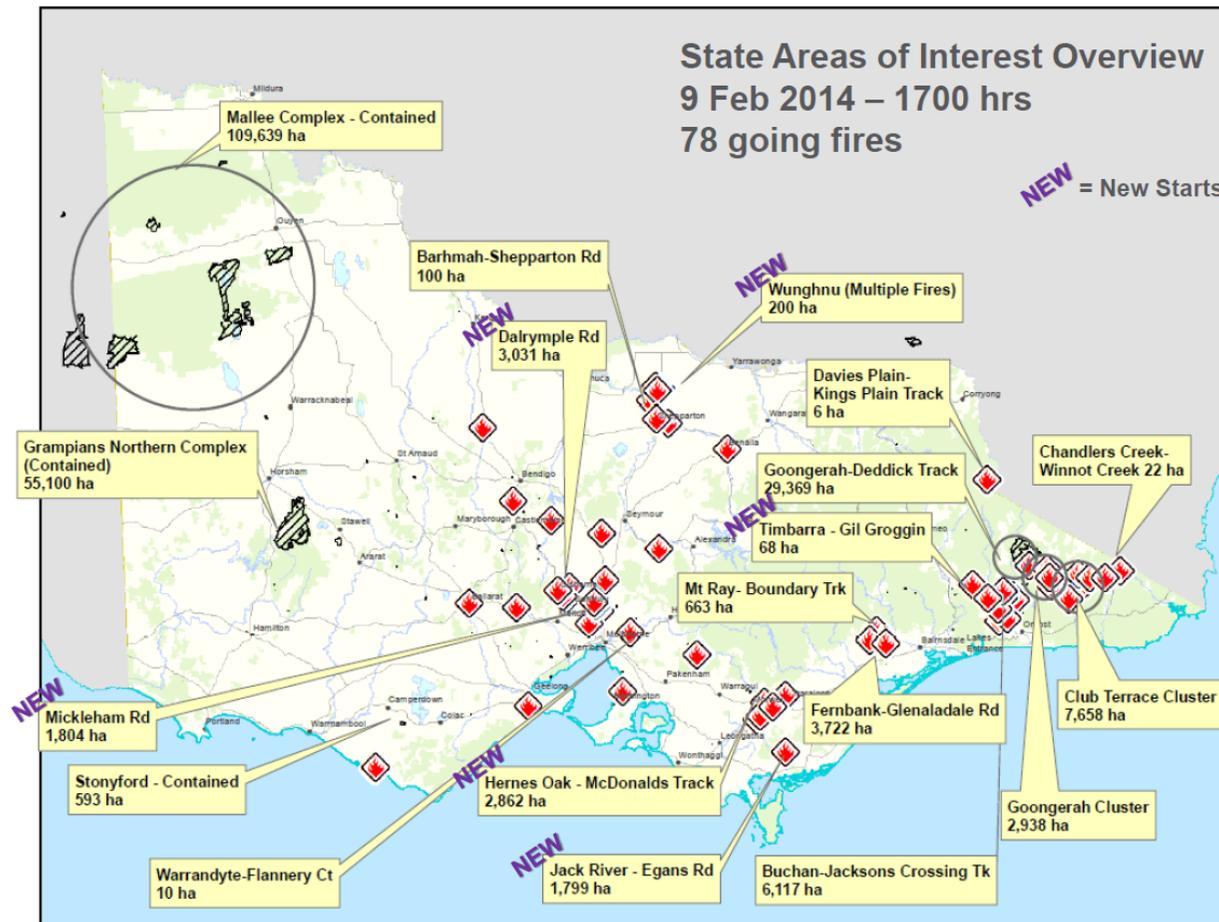
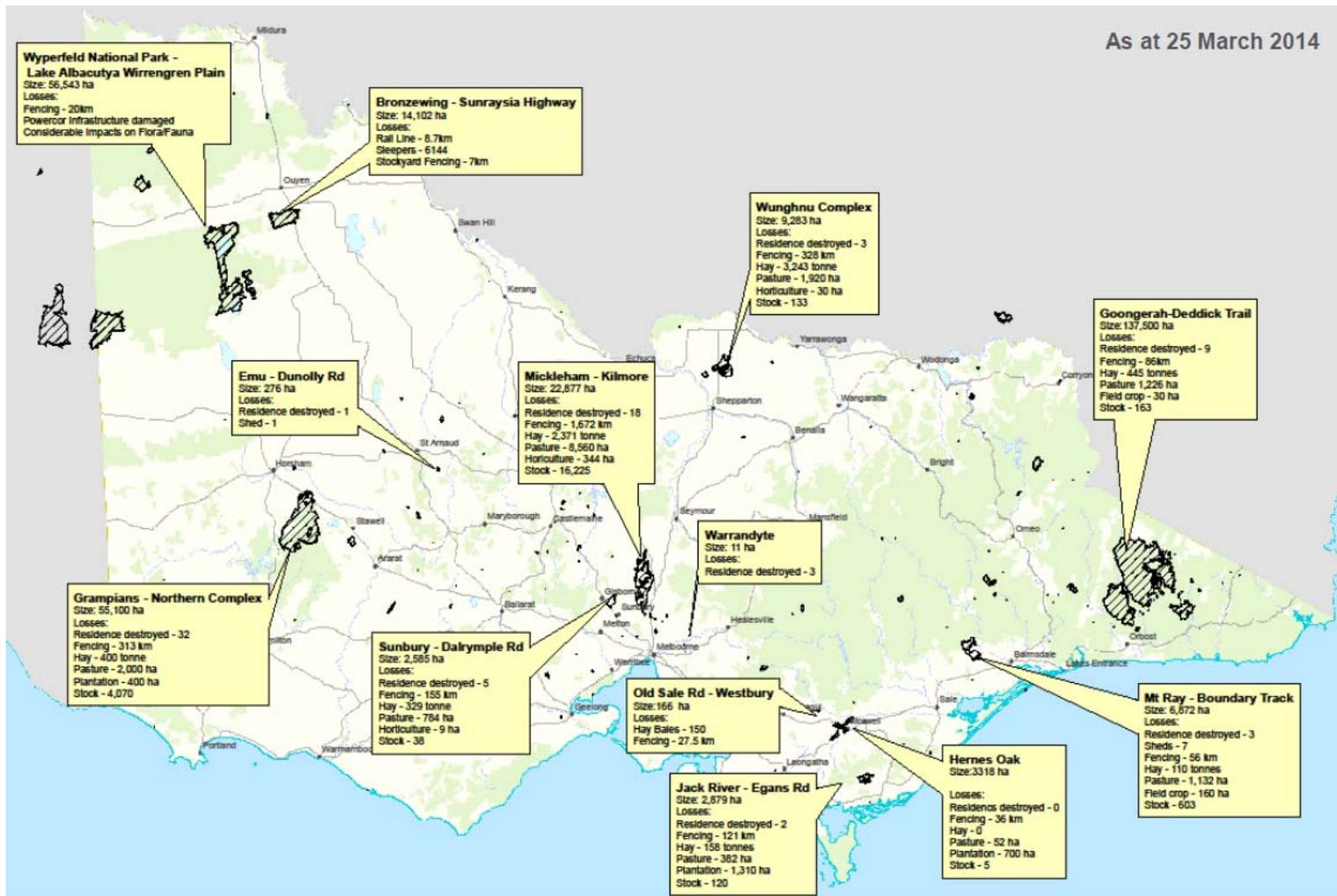


Figure 3: Overview of 2013-14 fire season state losses as at 25 March 2014



## Attachment 2 – Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire chronology of events

Attachment 2 contains information that demonstrates how the East Gippsland fires were managed in the context of what was happening across the state. The information has been synthesised from the following documents produced throughout the duration of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire:

- State Emergency Management Team (SEMT) meeting minutes
- SEMT Situation Reports
- State Control Team 7-Day Action Plans
- State Operational Briefings.

### Week commencing 13 January 2014

The week of 13 January was characterised by a heatwave from 13 to 17 January and Total Fire Bans across much of Victoria. On 15 January, the Bureau of Meteorology issued a severe thunderstorm warning for East Gippsland. Lightning strikes from these storms ignited a number of fires across East Gippsland, many of these in difficult and rugged terrain. Total fire bans were in place in East Gippsland on 15 January and the remainder of the week.

On 16 January, it was reported that Bendoc Incident Control Centre (ICC) was coordinating a number of fires in the region. It was also noted that there were a number of high community impact fires in Gippsland.

On 17 and 18 January, it was reported that East Gippsland was being closely monitored. Risks to transmission infrastructure, timber resources, the closure of the Princes Highway, economic loss to local business and animal welfare (both domestic and wildlife) were noted as issues requiring management. In addition, a relief centre was opened in Orbost. East Gippsland was noted as a major area of fire activity and the State Control Team (SCT) began looking into major resource strategies for Gippsland.

On 19 January, it was reported that there was no power in Goongerah, which had been shut off due to the fire impacting on power lines. As at 3:30pm that day, there was a Watch and Act message in place for Goongerah.

### Week commencing 20 January 2014

On 20 January, the heatwave and thunderstorm conditions of the previous week had left a large number of going bushfires in regions across Victoria. There were significant large fires in difficult terrain in Gippsland, Grampians and Loddon Mallee Regions.

The Goongerah and Club Terrace fires had not yet joined but it was noted that it would be a significant event if they did. Incident Management Team (IMT) planning was underway for a major back burning operation in the area as well as planning for deployment of two specialist arduous<sup>1</sup> firefighter taskforces from NSW to support East Gippsland.

It was also noted that the State Control Centre (SCC) had commenced collating impact assessment data from East Gippsland along with other regions. Regional representatives were also providing information and input to inform recovery planning for the fires.

On 23 January, it was reported that significant fires continued to burn in a number of regions including East Gippsland, with significant areas of public land impacted. Continued efforts were made on fire suppression, control and recovery. It was reported that two schools in East Gippsland would not open at the start of the new school year in the following week with road and bus route closures being contributing factors.

### Week commencing 27 January 2014

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to firefighters with the capacity to perform firefighting tasks for long periods under arduous conditions.

As at 28 January 2014, there were 13 going fires across the state – eight of these were in Gippsland and were noted as being of greatest concern as they were characterised as significant large fires in difficult terrain. It was noted that the firefighting effort in Gippsland was being supported by interstate crews and that aerial resources had been increased.

On 2 February, it was noted that the weather forecast for the next two days was of particular concern for the going fires in East Gippsland, due to their potential to impact on remote communities.

Due to the predicted fire behaviour overnight, plans were made to warn people before night time. An Emergency Warning and Emergency Alert was issued for the Goongerah fire. A Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) was not issued given the geographic size of affected areas and the isolation of some of the affected communities. Instead, Victoria Police carried out door knocking, recommending that residents evacuate; however it was advised that nobody evacuated.

### **Week commencing 3 February 2014**

The impacts of dry and hot weather over the previous weeks had elevated the threat of fire across the state. Some rainfall had been experienced across East Gippsland but this had been patchy and would not have extinguished heavier fuel.

On 3 February, it was noted that the impacts of smoke were being experienced by East Gippsland communities and that it was being monitored. It was also noted that fires in Gippsland were the focus at the state level. A predicted wind change was a key factor in the impact of the Goongerah fire and different strategies were being considered and actioned to cope with the change, including back burning.

The message for the Goongerah fire was downgraded to a Watch and Act but the recommendation to evacuate remained in place. The highest level of traffic management was in place. Bonang Road, which runs through Goongerah, was the only road closed and two schools remained closed.

Relief centres staffed by the Department of Human Services and Red Cross were opened in Orbost, Delegate and Cann River to provide support to affected communities. As of 6 February, the recommendation to evacuate Goongerah was downgraded.

On 7 February, the likelihood of the fires in Goongerah linking up and forecasted fire danger ratings for 7 and 8 February of “Very High” and 9 February of “Extreme” were noted.

On the morning of 8 February, it was noted that lightning strikes over Gippsland from the previous night would have ignited more fires in remote, rough and hard to reach territory. These fires were expected to grow in size.

It was reported that a draft strategic plan for East Gippsland, which looked at impacts on communities, had been prepared. Concentration of effort on the fires, across Incident, Regional and State Control Centres was noted taking into account a need to readjust plans after 9 and 10 February given the “Extreme” fire danger forecast for 9 February.

Later on 8 February, fire danger ratings were predicted to spike at levels higher than “Extreme”; however, this was not significant enough to call a Code Red<sup>2</sup>. It was noted that fires in East Gippsland had combined and that fire activity continued overnight and intensified due to strengthening winds.

A recommendation to evacuate was issued for Goongerah on the afternoon of 8 February. It was reported that 27 houses had been door-knocked and of these, nine households indicated that they would stay. It was later reported that 22 people remained, with no children in the town. Fire behaviour modelling showed that communities in Tubbut and Bonang were also at risk. Emergency Warnings and Watch and Act messages were also issued for several other areas.

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<sup>2</sup> Code Red refers to the worst conditions for a bush or grass fire. Homes are not designed or constructed to withstand fires in these conditions. The safest place to be is away from high risk bushfire areas during a Code Red.

## 9 February 2014

Multiple large fires were now established in East Gippsland with townships and private land affected. Some fires were expected to merge and threaten more communities. The fires were expected to be of a long duration given the scale of the fire and the terrain in which they were occurring.

It was noted at the state level that in the absence of rain, controlling this scale of fire would require a few thousand firefighters working around the clock for a month or more.

At this stage of the 2013-14 fire season, firefighter and incident management resources across the state were weary and largely already committed to existing fires. All regions were planning to be self-sufficient for initial attack in relation to ground forces. The Gippsland fires were to be managed within existing resource levels at least until after Sunday.

A significant commitment of aircraft, including nine helicopters and five firebombers, supported by an additional six aircraft provided by NSW each day were deployed to the Gippsland fires. New Zealand crews continued to support the firefighting effort in East Gippsland but it was noted that interstate and international resources would need to be expanded. It was noted that the NSW Rural Fire Service had seven strike teams plus equipment for their own fires and ready to surge into East Gippsland if required.

The fires were also expected to impact on some mobile phone, emergency services radio and television infrastructure, which would severely impede firefighting communications.

Existing traffic management remained in place for identified high-risk communities. These were designed to manage traffic flows around identified high-risk main arterial roads to assist with access and egress to affected areas and provide for traffic diversions. Managing traffic, including interstate freight, was considered a significant issue for the Princes Highway in East Gippsland.

Activated Incident Control Centres (ICCs) across the state included traffic management and evacuation managers. It was noted that any evacuation decision would require Incident, Regional and State Control Centre level discussion.

It was noted that schools and childcare facilities would be closed and that bus routes servicing local schools in the area would be cancelled. There was the potential for schools in remote communities to be closed for extended periods due to the fire risk.

With regard to relief services, in addition to existing support provided by Red Cross and the Victorian Department of Human Services, the Victorian Council of Churches (VCC) was noted as active in East Gippsland. The VCC Emergency Operations Centre was on standby, as were regional teams in high risk areas. The Salvation Army, Commonwealth Department of Human Services, Save the Children and Foodbank Victoria were also on standby to provide support to affected communities. Furthermore, there were plans to allocate agriculture recovery resources to East Gippsland.

## Week commencing 10 February 2014

The behaviour of the large established fires in steep and thickly forested terrain in East Gippsland was expected to go through periods of relative dormancy punctuated by bursts of convective behaviour when the fire size would expand rapidly.

At the time, Victoria had almost no capacity to increase resource levels to manage the existing fires in East Gippsland. Sustaining some specialist resources was noted as being acutely difficult. It was noted that the resources needed to properly address the existing fires in East Gippsland far exceeded available levels.

As of 10 February, there were 28 going bushfires and grass and scrub fires across Victoria with 17 of these in Gippsland. The largest of these was the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire, which had trebled in size and had burnt more than 66,000 hectares.

In addition to Victorian resources, resourcing models indicated that NSW taskforces were supporting the Bendoc, Cann River and Orbost and two New Zealand taskforces were continuing to support firefighting efforts in East Gippsland.

Over 12 and 13 February, the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire had joined with other fires in the complex. Work on containment lines and back burning operations was a focus; however, tree falls were noted as an increased risk to firefighters. Hazardous tree management programs were put into action to enable safe access and the opening of roads in various locations across the state, including East Gippsland.

Watch and Act messages remained in place for the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire. It was noted that smoke was impacting communities in East Gippsland and some communities had become isolated due to the impact of the fire. Telecommunications outages were being monitored and rectified.

Schools and early childhood facilities in the area remained closed during the period. Consideration was being given to relocating Goongerah students while schools remained closed.

Field teams began undertaking assessments and responding to animal health issues in fire-affected areas, with the exception of Goongerah and parts of Orbost, as it was still deemed unsafe to do so.

### **Week commencing 17 February 2014**

As at 17 February, the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire had joined together with other fires in the Snowy River National Park and was now 128,879 hectares in size and continued to impact areas of state significance for flora and fauna. Work on containment lines and back burning operations continued with New Zealand crews continuing to support the firefighting effort.

Advice messages were in place for a number of towns in the area. Traffic management remained in place at this time and it was noted that the community of Goongerah was unhappy and there were high levels of stress as there was still no access to their properties. The State Emergency Management Team had requested more information on this.

Reported losses at this point in time included ten houses in East Gippsland plus significant stock and fencing losses. The Goongerah Early Childhood Development Centre remained closed and the only school still closed was both campuses of the Goongerah P-8 School. Students of this school were attending their classes at Bendoc Community Hall.

On 18 February, it was noted that a Deputy Incident Controller, Relief and Recovery had been deployed to the Orbost Incident Control Centre to assist with recovery planning. Animal health response teams, escorted by fire services personnel, were now able to access the areas affected by the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire.

Work continued through the week to make fire-affected areas safe for the return of residents including assessing and clearing dangerous trees.

On 19 February, a "Very High" fire danger rating was in place for East Gippsland. As such, back burning strategies were noted as being impacted and fire activity increased due to warm dry north-westerly winds. Community members were now being escorted on roads in and out of Goongerah.

As of 20 February, field teams had assessed 15 properties. Two horses and 400 sheep were assessed with one sheep euthanized.

Towards the end of the week, it was noted that fire severity in parts of the Goongerah- Deddick Fire was extreme. Due to significant uncontrolled edge and unburnt country within, the potential of fire runs and spot fires remained, dependent on the weather.

These areas also had the potential for landslide, flooding, erosion and water quality risks due to the scale and severity of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire. Thirteen parks managed by Parks Victoria were either fully or partly closed to public access due to fire activity or impacts.

It was noted that resource levels appeared to be insufficient to meet needs at the time, including that of the units tasked with findings and deploying resources.

### **Week commencing 24 February 2014**

With better fire conditions on 24 February, efforts continued on back burning and containment. Resources continued to be rotated, with consideration that maintaining preparedness for fire across the whole state was important.

During this week, recovery committee meetings were held in response to a number of fires across the state, including in East Gippsland. The Department of Human Services, partner agencies and local government continued to support affected communities with recovery. Community information sessions were held in Goongerah on 26 February and Bonang on 2 March. The Goongerah P-8 School Tubbut campus was now open for the first time in 2014.

**Week commencing 3 March 2014**

The Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire was now 164,000 hectares in size. Over 400 firefighters including interstate resources continued to support the firefighting effort during this time. Interstate involvement was to be reviewed as there was a predicted wind event mid-week and note of potential demobilisation of their support by the end of the week.

**Week commencing 10 March and beyond**

The Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire was declared contained on 10 March and declared safe on 27 March, 70 days after it started. Once the fire was contained, operational efforts turned to monitoring and blacking out along control lines and assessing and rehabilitating roads, trails and tracks.

### Attachment 3 – Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire Maps

Attachment 3 provides maps of the Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire that reflect the time periods outlined in Attachment 2.

**Figure 4: Orbost District Incident Management Team Overview as at 17 January 2014**

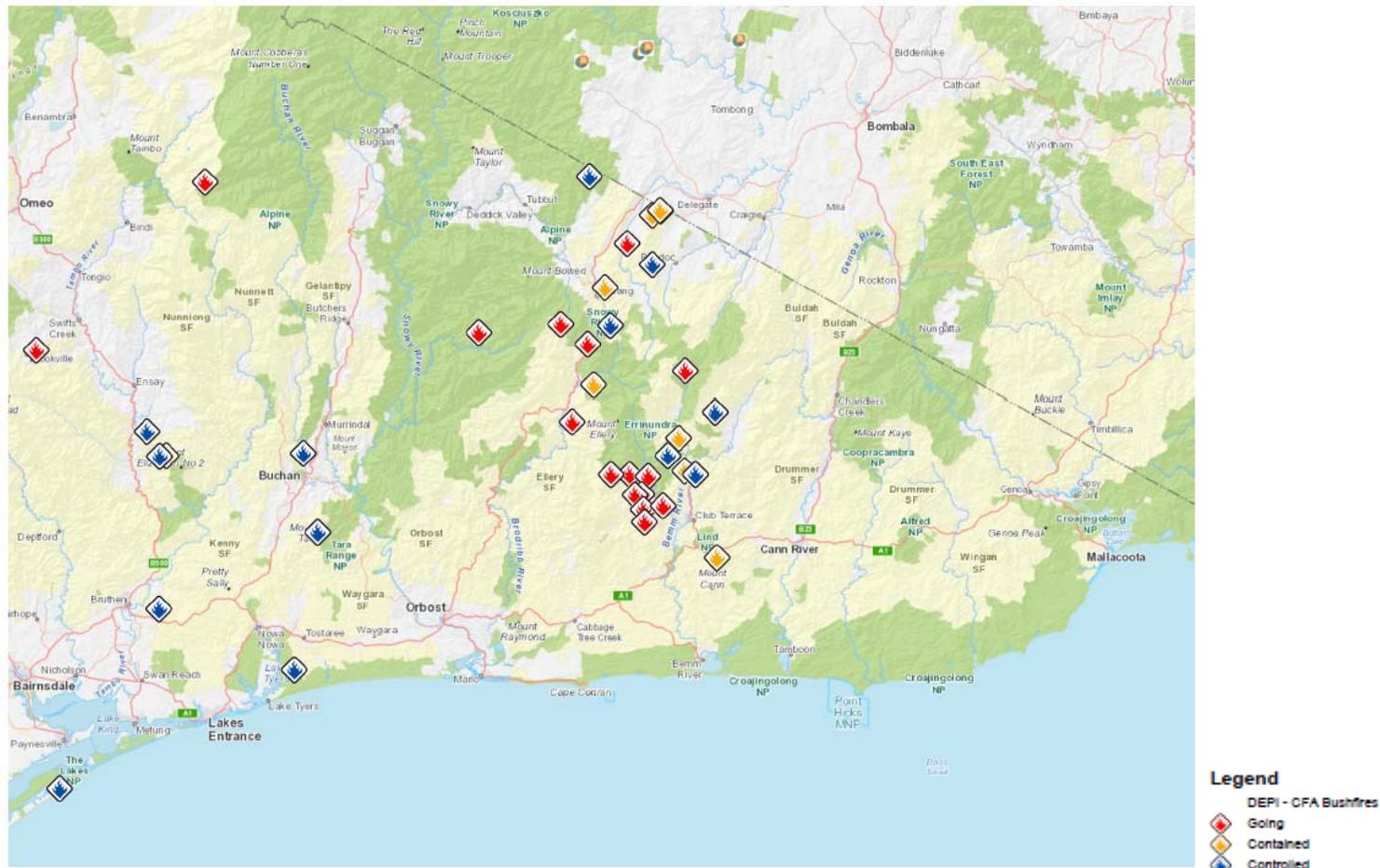
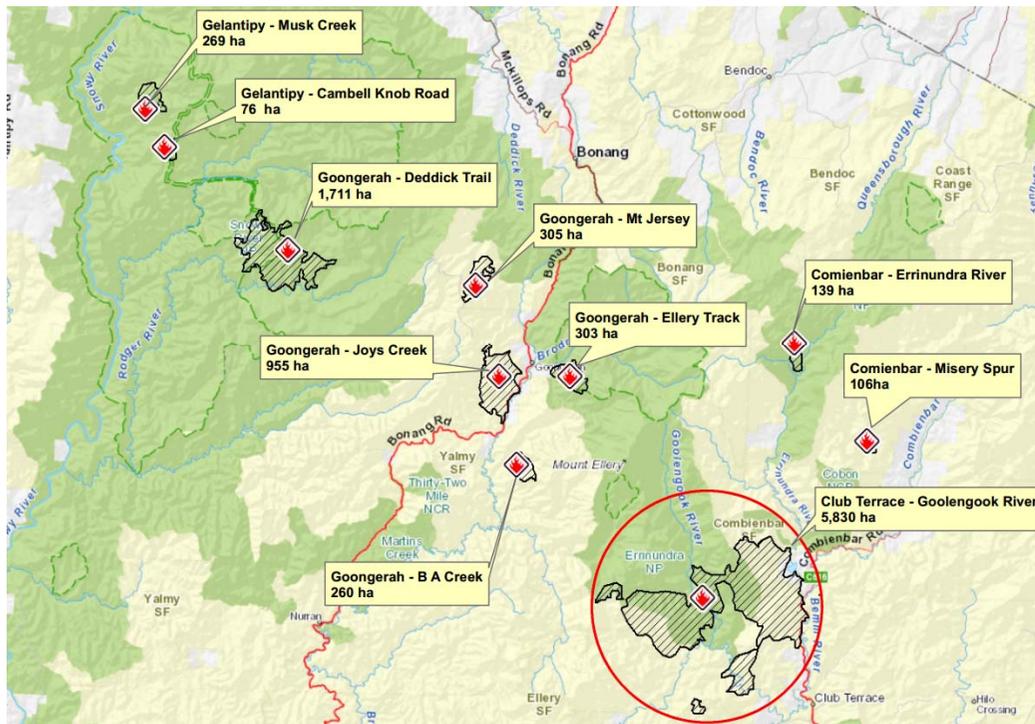


Figure 5: Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire as at 27 January 2014



**Figure 6: Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire as at 3 February 2014**

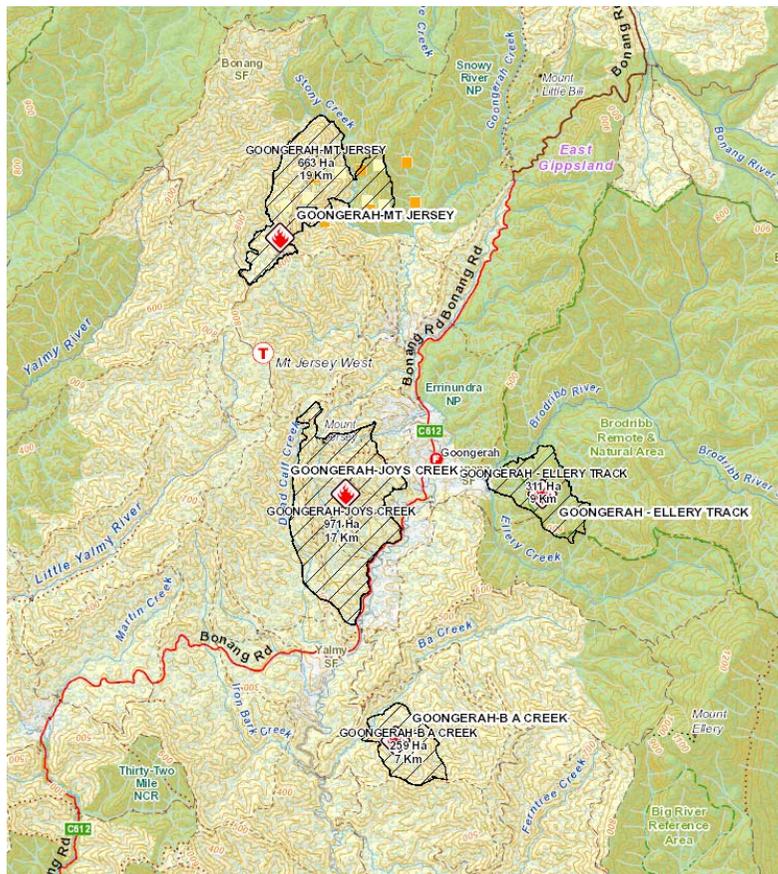
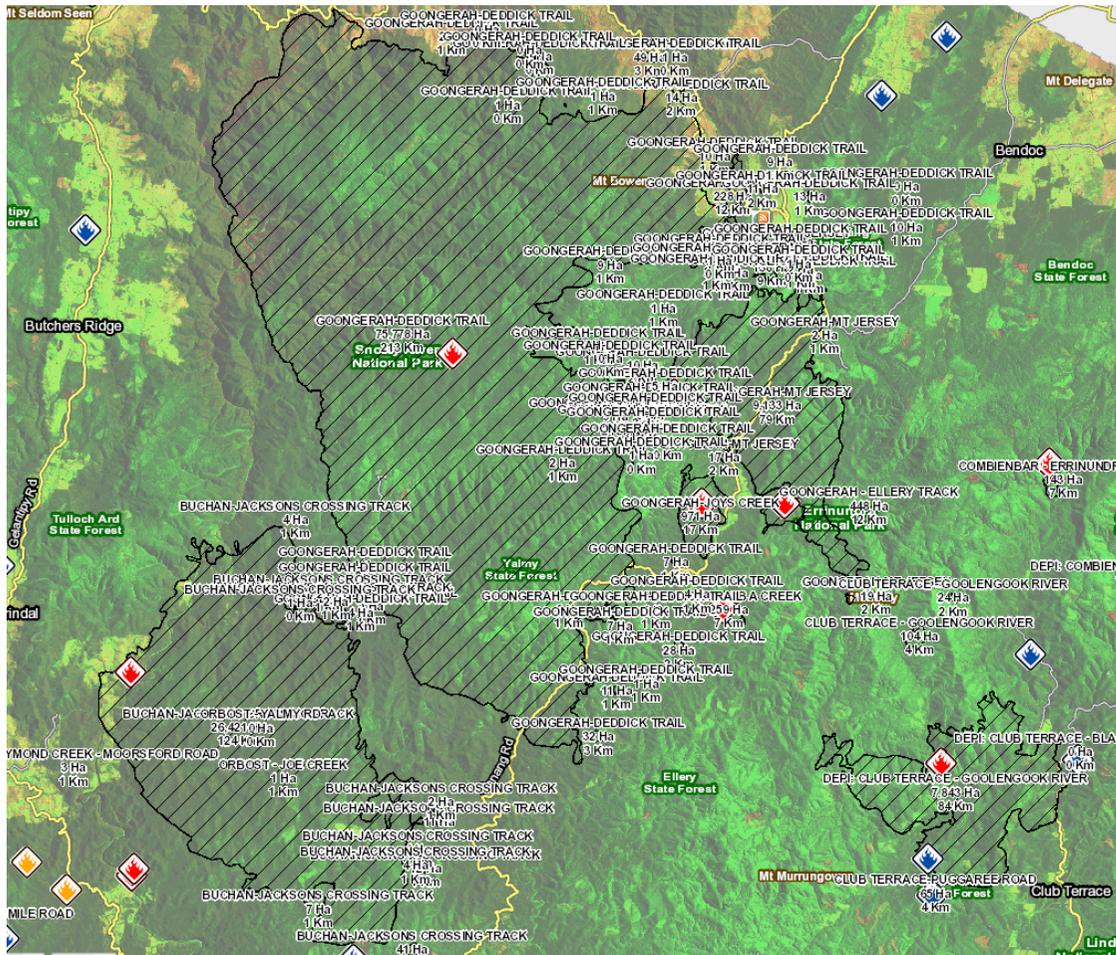
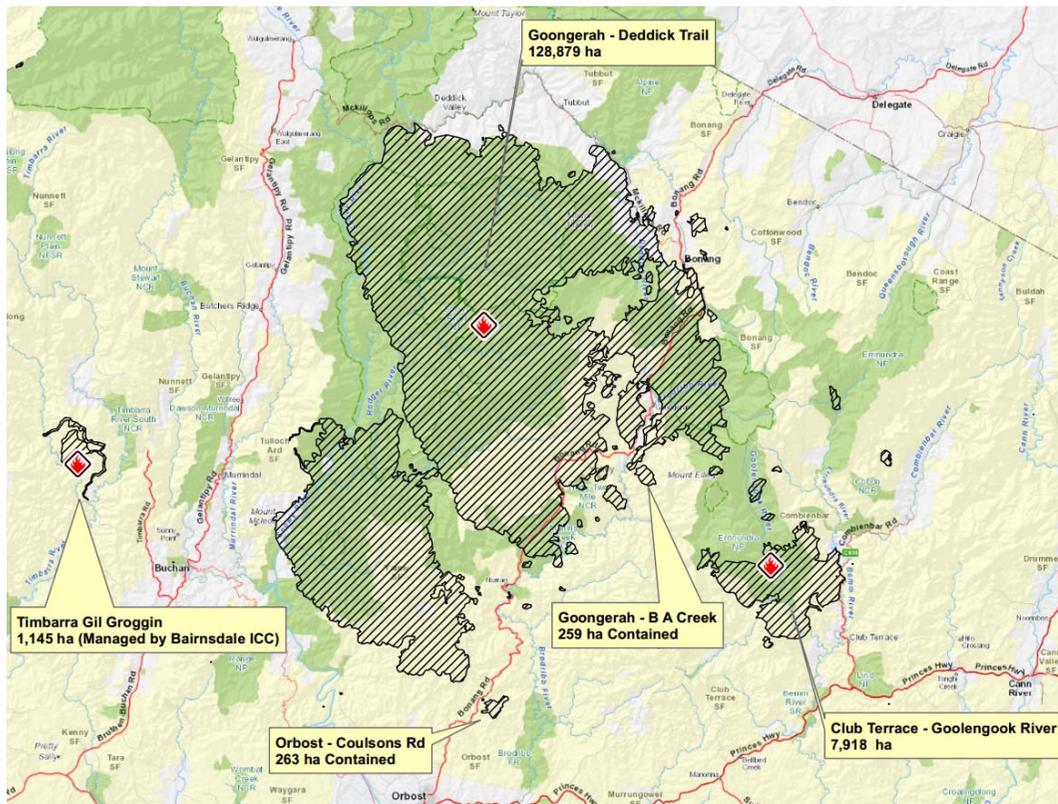


Figure 7: Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire as at 10 February 2014



**Figure 8: Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire as at 17 February 2014**



**Figure 9: Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire as at 24 February 2014**

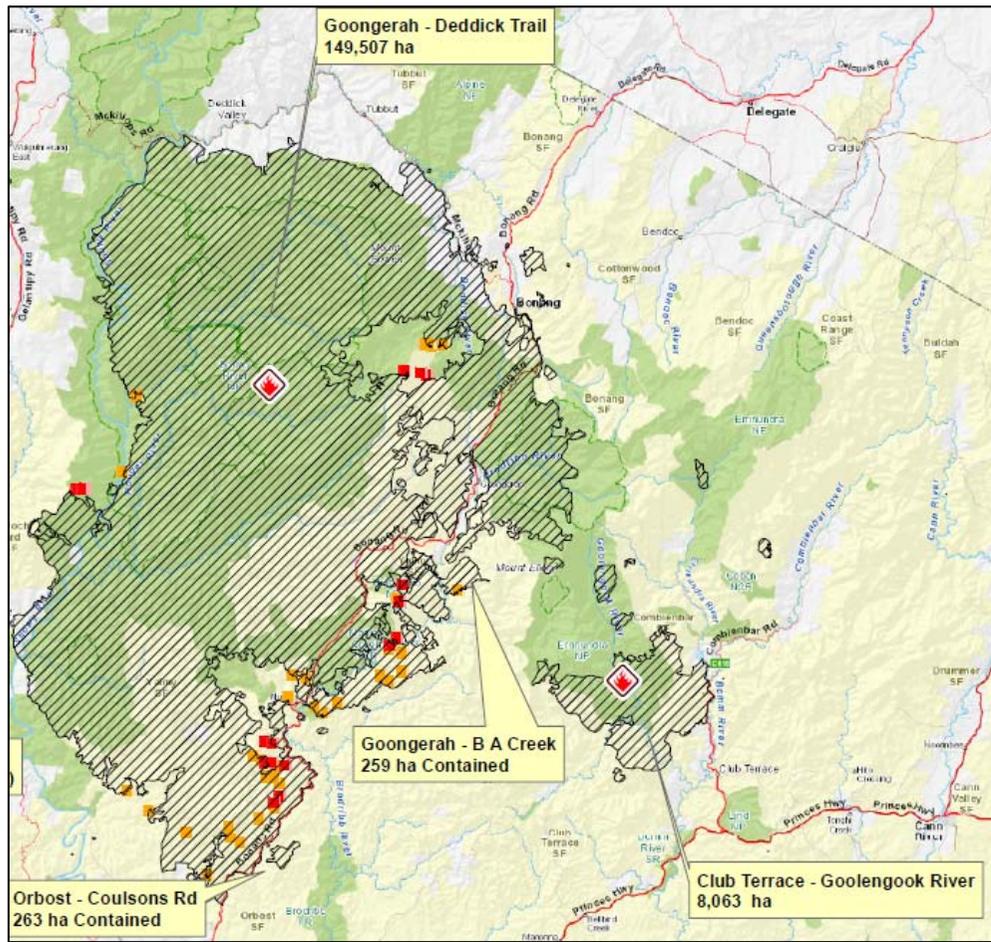


Figure 10: Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire as at 3 March 2014

