

The Report of the **Bushfire Recovery Taskforce**

Australian Capital Territory October 2003

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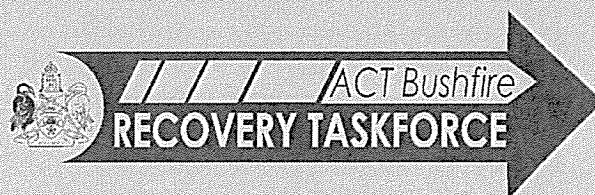
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Chairman's Preface

On 24 January 2003 the ACT Government announced the establishment of a Bushfire Recovery Taskforce to coordinate government, community and business efforts to assist the victims of the devastating fires of 18 January 2003 - one of the most significant natural disasters experienced in Australia – and to guide the longer term recovery of the Australian Capital Territory.

This report documents the work undertaken by the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, but it is more than just a report for the historical record or for formal purposes of accountability. It is designed also as a working reference document. The Taskforce hopes that readers will find the account useful as well as interesting because it is important that the insights from our work are available and can be called quickly to hand if, unfortunately, others are faced with similar challenges in the future.

To this end, the Taskforce has tried as much as possible to provide detailed accounts of the challenges and the efforts made to meet the needs of the ACT community in a timely and effective manner. A comprehensive set of working documents is included in the Appendices attached to the report, again in the spirit of helping others to avoid having to “reinvent the wheel” in the future.

The formal role of the Taskforce ended on 30 September 2003 with the establishment of a new Bushfire Executive to start the process of progressively returning responsibility for the recovery to the mainstream public service.

The Bushfire Recovery Secretariat and the Recovery Centre teams will be continuing their hard work through the 2003/04-bushfire season, with the guidance of the Bushfire Recovery Executive.

I am extremely confident that each of these groups of highly dedicated public servants will ensure that the community continues to receive excellent support.

The recovery process during 2003 has engaged people from across many parts of the ACT community. The recovery is a community achievement, not the achievement of a group of organisers acting in isolation. That said, those working within the Taskforce structure are owed my particular thanks as Chairman.

I would therefore like to record the Taskforce's sincere appreciation of the professionalism and commitment displayed by the many ACT Public Servants who were seconded to the Taskforce Secretariat or who contributed to the recovery effort from their home Departments. Mr Alan Thompson gave outstanding service as Chief Executive of the Taskforce Secretariat and great support to me as Chair.

Also, the Community and Expert Reference Group has provided invaluable advice, support and input into the recovery process. They have served their community in a way that has demonstrated total commitment, professionalism and competence.

Finally, I would like to thank all members of the Taskforce itself for their considerable efforts and achievement. This work has been unceasingly demanding, at times frustrating, often humbling and always a privilege, and I have appreciated the strength my colleagues brought to this most important task.

Sandy Hollway

Chairman

Bushfire Recovery Taskforce

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List of Acronyms

AC	Asbestos cement
ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Service
ACTPLA	ACT Planning and Land Authority
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ANU	Australian National University
BLL	Bovis Lend Lease
CERG	Community and Expert Reference Group
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DEYFS	Department of Education, Youth and Family Services
DoFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
EMA	Emergency Management Australia
ESB	Emergency Services Bureau
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HIA	Housing Industry Association
IEC	Insurance Enquiries and Complaints
MARS	Market Attitude Research Services Pty Ltd
MBA	Master Builders' Association
MHR	Member of the House of Representatives
MLAs	Members of the Legislative Assembly
NCA	National Capital Authority
NDRA	Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements
NGO	Non Government Organisations
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety
P&C	Parents and Citizens
PALM	Planning and Land Management
PART	Property Assessment and Recovery Team

Overview

INTRODUCTION – THE FIRE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

On 18 January 2003, the ACT experienced an unprecedented fire disaster, causing the tragic deaths of four people, 440 injuries treated at local hospitals, the loss of 488 homes and over 90 community, educational, commercial and farm buildings, damage to many other homes and businesses, including rural properties and villages to the west of Canberra, and widespread destruction of physical infrastructure, forests and the environment generally. The total financial cost of the fires has been estimated at \$350m. To this must be added the human cost.

Few people within the ACT have not been affected by this disaster. During the emergency more than 5,000 people were evacuated to emergency centres. Many others went to the homes of family and friends. Many thousands of people participated in fire fighting activities, and in assisting those in the 'front line' of the disaster, as neighbours, volunteers and contributors of goods, services and financial support. In the two weeks after the fire, more than 1,000 volunteers came forward. Evacuation centres were swamped with donations. There was, in short, a spontaneous coming together of the community and great support from across Australia.

This report outlines the key activities, progress and lessons learned by the ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce that, following the crisis and its immediate aftermath, was tasked by the ACT Government with guiding and facilitating the recovery.

RECOVERY ARRANGEMENTS

The ACT Government's immediate emergency response to the fires of 18 January and the initial recovery was well handled through the ACT Emergency Management Plan and its Community and Infrastructure Recovery Sub-Plans and the Health Emergency Management Sub-Plan. Under the State of Emergency declared by the Chief Minister on 18 January 2003 this work was directed by the ACT Emergency Management Committee, chaired by the ACT Chief Police Officer as Territory Controller. This approach continued until the State of Emergency was lifted on 28 January 2003.

However, the scale of the impact of the January 2003 bushfire disaster on ACT citizens and the community and on public and private property led the ACT Government to conclude that there was a need for a specially focused approach to the ongoing direction of the recovery.

While the majority of the Government response to the disaster would be most effectively undertaken by existing Government and community sector agencies, the scale of the disaster, the wide range of responses required and the need to ensure

that momentum and coordination was maintained led to the Government's decision to adopt a taskforce approach:

- on 24 January 2003, the Government announced the establishment of a Bushfire Recovery Taskforce to coordinate the government, community and business efforts to assist the victims of the disaster and the longer-term recovery of the ACT;
- the Taskforce was to report to the Chief Minister as the Minister responsible for Bushfire Recovery;
- a Community and Expert Reference Group (CERG) was established by the ACT Government on 3 February 2003 as a key advisory body to the Taskforce and Government on community recovery issues and as an essential two-way communication channel to ensure that the recovery strategy was informed by community views and needs, and by local knowledge and expertise;
- the Taskforce and CERG were supported by a Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat, staffed mainly by seconded ACT public servants tasked with ensuring that the recovery process was a key priority throughout the ACT administration and that affected people's needs were responded to promptly; and
- the ACT Recovery Centre was established at Lyons on 24 January 2003 as a central point for bushfire-affected residents to access information, advice, services and support.

Bushfire Recovery Taskforce

The role of the Taskforce was to advise the Government, provide leadership for the recovery and act as a bridge between Government agencies and the community. Members of the Taskforce were:

- Sandy Hollway AO, previous resident of Canberra, senior Commonwealth Public Servant and CEO of the Sydney Organising Committee for the 2000 Olympic Games, Chair of the Taskforce;
- Robert de Castella, well known local athlete and Olympic and World Champion marathon runner, as a representative of those people whose homes were destroyed;
- Terry Snow, Executive Chairman of the Canberra Airport Group, as a representative of the business community;
- Maureen Cane, Chief Executive Officer of Communities @ Work (the recently amalgamated Tuggeranong and Weston Creek Community Services), as a representative of the community sector;
- Mr Robert Tonkin, Chief Executive of the Chief Minister's Department; and
- Mr Alan Thompson, the Chief Executive of the Department of Urban Services, who was taken 'off line' to be Chief Executive of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat.

The Taskforce was established with the following functions:

- to develop the ACT Bushfire Recovery Plan;
- to provide regular progress reports to the Chief Minister, as well as regular community and media information on the recovery progress;
- to provide advice to the Government of the needs and responses of the affected individuals, communities and other sectors;
- through the CERG, to coordinate the actions of peak community, welfare, business and education organisations in their contribution to the bushfire recovery to ensure the most effective use of skills and resources;
- to coordinate public infrastructure, housing, commercial and community organisation recovery and reconstruction;
- to coordinate the ongoing government services aspects of community recovery including accommodation, finance/insurance, assistance programs, one stop shop assistance, donations and volunteering; and
- to provide advice on planning and environmental aspects of the recovery.

The Taskforce was small, and focused on action and outcomes. It had strong links to the ACT community. It usefully brought together experience in project management, business, government administration and community development. The Taskforce set as its overall objective not just the ACT's recovery from this disaster but to achieve a better ACT for the future.

The Taskforce first met on 28 January 2003, and released an Action Plan on 18 February 2003 that set out its goals, guiding principles and six key deliverables that provided the overall structure for the recovery:

1. supporting those significantly impacted by the fires;
2. ensuring that the community actively participates in the process of rebuilding and recovery;
3. ensuring clean-up of the Territory in a way that is safe, timely, efficient, cost effective and respectful of the people involved;
4. facilitating rebuilding in a way that is safe, timely, streamlined and provides individuals with real choices;
5. providing up-to-date, relevant and useful information to assist with the recovery process; and
6. learning lessons from this event so the ACT community moves forward positively.

The Action Plan was deliberately brief, informal and to the point, incorporating a start-up list of tasks, with responsibilities and deadlines. It was recognised that it would, and should, be progressively adjusted as required.

Throughout its operation, the Taskforce sought to maintain an appropriate balance between the role that the Government should be advised to undertake, including direct intervention as necessary, and an emphasis on facilitation when the best approach is to clear the way for people to make and implement their own decisions.

Similarly, the Taskforce sought to achieve an appropriate balance between functions undertaken by the Taskforce, its Secretariat and the Recovery Centre and those functions that were better undertaken by line ACT Government agencies or non-government organisations.

The taskforce approach adopted for the ACT bushfire recovery had a number of strengths and advantages:

- the small size of the Taskforce, six members, facilitated cohesion and shared accountability;
- a clear and single focus – assisted the recovery to occur rapidly and in a way that created an even stronger community;
- the members of the Taskforce brought a wide range of appropriate skills and experience;
- the ability to move quickly and make decisions;
- access to Government and support from Government;
- the selection of a high profile taskforce, particularly in the role of chair was important in establishing public confidence and in communicating the objectives and achievements of the recovery in the local and national media; and
- the strong links of all members of the Taskforce with the ACT provided valuable background for the task as well as contributing to a community sense of confidence and momentum.

Community and Expert Reference Group (CERG)

The CERG membership comprises representatives of community groups, fire-affected residents, unions, the business community and the Commonwealth Government. This group of 16 members was chaired until July 2003 by Ms Elizabeth Whitelaw of the law firm Minter Ellison and then by Mr David Dawes, Executive Director, Master Builders' Association of the ACT.

The CERG has proved to be an essential channel through which the recovery strategy has been informed by community views and needs, and by local knowledge and expertise. The Group has never hesitated to raise issues with the Taskforce, draw attention to community concerns, and monitor issues to ensure action was taken.

The role of the CERG is to:

- reflect the views of the community to the Taskforce and the Government, and input the views of the community into the recovery process;
- facilitate dialogue between the Taskforce and the community so as to regularly advise the Taskforce on issues of concern;
- work with the Taskforce to tackle specific issues; and
- assist coordination between the many recovery initiatives being undertaken in the community.

Amongst other achievements CERG has:

- provided direct intervention and assistance on insurance, banking and business issues;
- played an important role in the identification and monitoring of community health (including mental health) and safety issues;
- provided early warning of issues generally, and a channel for communication between the Taskforce, Government and the community in addressing community concerns for both urban and rural residents;
- worked with community groups on a wide range of projects such as garden and environment clean-ups, and the rebuilding of community assets;
- provided direct feedback to Government so as to assist in the tailoring and streamlining of program delivery; and
- constantly monitored the timeliness of service delivery.

The Government has decided that the Community and Expert Reference Group will continue until the end of March 2004.

Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat

The Secretariat was headed by Mr Alan Thompson, seconded from his position as Chief Executive of the Department of Urban Services. The Taskforce Secretariat was a small group drawn largely from the ACT Public Service to provide the specialist skills and resources necessary to support the Taskforce and CERG and to coordinate and manage the wide range of recovery activities both within the government and across the community. The Secretariat was led by senior and experienced public servants on a full time basis, tasked with ensuring that the recovery process was a key priority throughout the Government and that the needs of people affected by the fires were responded to promptly.

ACT Recovery Centre

The Recovery Centre was established on 24 January 2003 as a central location (one stop shop) for bushfire-affected residents to access information, advice, services and support. In the first three to four weeks, the Centre was the delivery point for many relevant services (disaster relief grants, accommodation, clothing, food, property assessment, replacement of birth certificates, personal support, counselling, income support, etc).

Subsequently the Recovery Centre was transformed to provide services via a team of recovery workers and community agencies, using case management and community development approaches. The Centre provides direct services including material support and counselling, has distributed financial grants, and has a key role in linking households with key services and in facilitating community activities and peer support.

The keys to the success of the work of the Recovery Centre have been:

- The adoption of the joint case management and community development model that has proved to be a most powerful way of supporting individuals, families and communities at the same time.

- The “joined-up” government and community response. People have really appreciated the fact that they can get a wide range of government and community services from the one location.

The Recovery Centre at Lyons provides an excellent example of what is possible in service delivery and may well provide an alternative or supplementary model for the future provision of community focused government services. Further details of the Recovery Centre’s activities are contained in Chapter 6.

The Transition of the Recovery to Mainstream Activity

At the end of its first six months of operation, the Taskforce believed that it was important to start the process of progressively returning responsibility of the recovery process to the mainstream public service. This conclusion recognised the fact that, while much has been achieved, the ACT Government will be involved in recovery activities for some time and it was important to ensure these activities were supported within normal public service structures and processes.

As a result of this review, the Taskforce recommended a number of actions, including:

- the formal completion of the role of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce at the end of September 2003;
- the establishment of a new Bushfire Recovery Executive, made up of senior executives from each major Government agency;
- the continuation of the CERG through to the end of March 2004;
- the continuation of the ACT Recovery Centre until the end of March 2004; and
- the continuation of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat, as a branch within the Chief Minister’s Department.

These proposals were adopted by the ACT Government.

To achieve a smooth transition, and to ensure the priority and momentum of the recovery task was maintained, the Taskforce held joint meetings with the Bushfire Recovery Executive during September 2003; and on 30 September 2003 handed over responsibility for ongoing recovery work to the Bushfire Recovery Executive.

The Bushfire Recovery Executive has prepared an Action Plan for September 2003 through March 2004, with the focus of this next phase of recovery efforts being:

- supporting fire-affected households to make their own decisions about whether to rebuild, and support those working through the rebuilding process;
- restoring key public places;
- providing community and personal support; and
- ensuring readiness for the 2003-04 bushfire season.

General Conclusions from the Recovery

The key reasons for the success that has been achieved with the ACT bushfire recovery to date include:

- a high level of community involvement. Part, but by no means all, of this was that the community was directly involved in both the Taskforce and the Community and Expert Reference Group;
- ensuring that the community was well informed about the recovery process;
- ensuring that the recovery process was supported by a comprehensive range of skills and perspectives, drawn from both the government and non-government sectors;
- maintaining flexibility and adaptability. To respond to a disaster of this magnitude requires a management approach and team that can respond to issues very quickly. This requires people with initiative, flexibility, confidence and a high level of personal accountability;
- investing early. A key principle of the Taskforce was to ensure that there was early investment, in time, staff and resources to ensure that emerging issues could be addressed early before they became more difficult and expensive to resolve; and
- developing a clear plan of action.

A number of important beneficial lessons have also been learnt during the recovery:

- be prepared. The strengths and limitations of the ACT Emergency Management Plan showed the value of good preparation, particularly in the activation of the evacuation centres on 18 January. The limitations of the initial performance of the public information system showed where future improvements were needed;
- ensuring a whole of Government approach;
- emergency response is improved by closer linkages between those charged with combat/response and recovery;
- some of the key strategies of the recovery process such as the provision of the Recovery Centre and a Building Design Advisory Service demonstrate the benefits of tailored approaches, including case management, which are able to respond to people's emotional and other needs; and
- focusing on positive recovery and creating legacies.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE

From the beginning of the recovery process, the ACT Government and the Taskforce accorded the highest priority to assisting people directly impacted by the fires with information, services and support.

The structuring and ongoing management of the community support part of the recovery was greatly assisted by the guidance of disaster recovery experts on key issues.

The Recovery Centre was and remains central to the provision of these services. This Centre provides a single place where people can access the services, information and support that they require. On its first day of operation, 375 families registered and 172 hot-line calls were taken. Overall, the Centre has provided services to over 1,500 households, representing around 4,000 people. One third of these people are under 19 years of age, and 10 per cent are over 60.

The forms of assistance provided to people throughout the recovery process have included:

- provision of a range of initial financial assistance for emergency household relief, including non-means tested grants for those who lost homes in the fire. Additional financial assistance was announced in March and July 2003 to assist property owners clean-up their destroyed properties, and rebuild or purchase a house elsewhere;
- the continuing provision of counselling services;
- the provision of financial assistance and advice to fire-affected businesses (including home-based businesses) and rural leaseholders;
- support for community organisations and networks including assisting volunteers, managing large numbers of donations of goods and services, supporting communities and community organisations directly affected by the fires, and supporting 'front line' community organisations and the community-based Bushfire Recovery Appeal; and
- supporting people through the decision making and recovery process, by providing information on parenting after disasters, counselling and mental health issues, and distributing material support, particularly in difficult times such as winter.

Emerging needs were identified through contact with directly affected residents at the Recovery Centre, information from the CERG and contact with community groups and others. Initiatives implemented in response to emerging needs included:

- a specialist case manager to assist with insurance complaints and disputes;
- a program of additional assistance during winter, including facilitating a Winter Warming project involving major charities, a large retail chain and Government to provide vouchers to purchase winter clothing and linen;
- additional measures to assist with rebuilding, including a Bushfire Building Cost Advisory Service; and
- additional assistance for those badly injured in the fires.

From early on in the recovery process, the issue of temporary accommodation was of concern to the Taskforce. It was not known whether finding acceptable interim accommodation would be a significant problem for people who had lost their homes.

The Taskforce commissioned two surveys of affected residents concerning their accommodation arrangements and their intentions in relation to rebuilding their house or selling their land. The surveys were also used to acquire data on ways in which people would find it most useful to receive information as the recovery progressed. These surveys revealed that most residents had found temporary

accommodation, with costs mainly covered by insurance policies, generally allowing people to access the Canberra rental market.

The second survey undertaken in May 2003 indicated that around half of owner-occupier households planned to rebuild, around a quarter had sold or planned to sell their land, and the remainder had yet to make a decision.

Following the second survey a range of rebuilding assistance measures were introduced, and work commenced with bushfire-affected residents who had identified the need for further housing assistance. Housing ACT is also providing additional assistance for the return of tenants when replacement public housing is constructed.

The Taskforce operations in support of people affected by the bushfires confirmed that:

- specific and individualised responses to bushfire-affected clients are the best approach;
- partnerships between government and non-government organisations succeed best in responding to needs;
- community development programs work;
- counselling is vital for individuals and families;
- cross-agency responses and “joined-up” government services are essential in dealing with crises; and
- good information and data is essential to making ongoing assessment of needs and evaluation of issues.

After reflecting on community feedback and key lessons from assisting people affected by the bushfires, the Taskforce suggests that the ACT Government should consider:

- continuing to provide case management for bushfire-affected residents until the majority of homes are rebuilt and demand for counselling and emotional support has reduced. The Government has already agreed that specialised services should be available through the Recovery Centre through the next bushfire season;
- continuing to support people, recognising that they may move at different rates through the rebuilding and recovery processes;
- requesting human service agencies to examine the success of the Recovery Centre, and consider the benefits of adopting similar models of service in environments other than disaster response, for example as a skilled first stop shop for information about human services and for the provision of front line assistance; and
- ensuring that the success of the Recovery Centre informs future emergency recovery planning.

The approach that has been adopted through the Recovery Centre and more generally in the provision of support for people affected by the January 2003 bushfires provides a number of lessons for response to future disasters:

- the importance of seeking early expert advice, both through Emergency Management Australia and community services in the States and Territories;
- the recognition that assistance needs to be provided through both financial support and other means such as counselling, general advice and the provision of information. Counselling helps a lot in normalising people's responses to disasters. It is important to provide counselling services for children, adults and couples;
- the fact that people in undamaged houses located in areas of general devastation are also affected and need support;
- the need also to address the impact on businesses, including home-based and rural businesses as well as affected community organisations;
- the need to provide continuing assistance as circumstances change, such as the provision of special assistance during winter;
- the central importance of future housing options and the fact that, for many households, the making of decisions in this area is prolonged and uncertain; and
- people manage their own recovery in their own time, given good support and accurate information.

INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY

The achievement of a stronger community has been a key objective of the overall bushfire recovery. Engaging the community directly in recovery activities, and developing strong partnerships between the Recovery Centre and community groups and organisations, has been of great importance.

Many of the Taskforce's activities were aimed at providing support and resources to allow affected communities to identify their own issues, respond to self-identified priorities and work together to recover. This community focus was supported through the work of the CERG and the Recovery Centre.

Establishing community partnerships has been critical to the success of the Recovery Centre. Relationships have been forged with both emerging and established community groups, and have been typically characterised by pooling of resources (including financial), working collaboratively on projects, shared leadership on projects and a combined team approach.

The success of the community partnerships model has been the result of its integration with the case management model, the support of local businesses, the establishment of key partnerships and its integration into the community at the 'grass roots'. This has enabled individuals and their communities to participate in the management of their own recovery.

Through these partnerships, the Taskforce delivered a number of specific programs to involve the broader community in the recovery including:

- **A small grants program** to encourage innovative recovery activities. This program generated 32 projects with a total budget of \$118,000;
- **Community projects** such as the Bushfire Regeneration Walks, a Uriarra Community Fun Day, and a Winter Warming Campaign to provide the residents who had lost their homes with warm clothing and blankets; and
- **The garden regeneration project**, a partnership between community associations, corporate sponsors and the Taskforce to restore the damaged gardens of many residents. From May through to October, approximately 90 volunteers worked each month to help on nearly 30 gardens each month.

The contribution of volunteers and the provision of donated goods and services as well as cash played an important part in the overall recovery. The coordination provided by Volunteering ACT and their assistance with insurance was particularly helpful.

The Bushfire Recovery Appeal that raised over \$9m was another successful initiative. The Appeal was established as an independent community activity to ensure that there was transparency in its management and independence in the allocation of grants.

The ACT Government introduced a community recognition program to respond to the incredible community response during the bushfires. This recognition was organised on a nomination basis that aimed at being an inclusive rather than 'exclusive' program. The program was advertised through the *Community Update* and in the media. The call for nominations resulted in over 2000 members of the community receiving certificates of recognition from the Chief Minister.

A considered program of how to engage with the community has been an extremely important part of the recovery process. Strategies to ensure engagement, both formally and informally, and through mechanisms including established and emerging organisations, networks and loose groupings, have contributed to a program where there is a spirit of partnership throughout the community.

The Taskforce's experience of working in partnership with the CERG, community associations, networks and others has reaffirmed the value of such partnerships, and the need to recognise that:

- groups involving a wide range of community members can provide important insight and perspective in projects; and
- programs which actively promote the empowerment of communities and build community networks are important and successful.

INFORMING THE COMMUNITY

The provision of comprehensive and timely information to the community has been critical to the overall bushfire recovery. From immediately after 18 January, a multi-channel communications strategy has been adopted making use of the web, call centre, direct mail and letter-boxing of special purpose publications, in addition to the active use of the print and electronic media.

Important specific initiatives have included:

- the development of the *Community Update* newsletter that has been provided regularly to all affected households and communities;
- the use of the CERG and local community organisations as two-way channels for communication; and
- the development of a comprehensive bushfire awareness kit and advertising campaign to prepare the community for the next bushfire season.

A key reason for the success of the communications element of the recovery has been the early identification of issues by the CERG.

The need for community information before, during and after any emergency should never be underestimated. In large-scale emergencies where emergency services are overstretched, a well informed and prepared community is equipped not only for self support but can also assist less able neighbours. The confidence afforded by sound advice and preparation can do much to prevent stress and panic in the community.

During an emergency, information is crucial in helping to protect life and property. Such information needs to be clear, concise and factual. All information should be verified and cleared before release, but information still must be provided quickly and frequently. Information should be provided through as many sources as are available such as media, web-sites and call-centres. Locally broadcast radio stations have an invaluable role to play in providing up to date information. Information should also be provided through appropriate means for the visually and hearing impaired.

Care should be taken to not only provide information about the existing hazard. Positive messages such as actions being taken to address the situation, what help is available and other information sources should also be provided. A calm and reassuring tone is crucial.

Following the emergency the same networks will prove invaluable in providing information to assist communities recover. A comprehensive communications strategy is also needed to support the recovery.

CLEAN-UP AND RE-BUILD

The most tangible symbol of the recovery process is the clean-up and rebuilding of destroyed assets. The Taskforce determined one of its key priorities was to facilitate a rapid and safe clean-up.

While the Government has direct control over some elements of this process (for example the clean-up of damaged government assets and public areas), other aspects are in the control of residents and other private interests (particularly residential homes destroyed in the fires). Therefore, the Taskforce worked in partnership with key areas of the ACT Public Service, the private sector and residents on a range of initiatives, including:

- coordinating the assessment of the scale of damaged properties;
- establishing a disposal site for contaminated building rubble near the main affected areas;

- engaging a project manager to coordinate the clean-up process for residents in a safe, timely and low cost manner; and
- administering a clean-up grant for residents who used this project management arrangement for their sites – the grant of up to \$5,000 was accessed by 297 households. For those individuals without building insurance the grant covered the total cost of a standard clean-up.

Over 99% of destroyed properties had been cleared by the end of June. The remaining sites were the subject of complex insurance arrangements and other complicating factors. In addition, urban public areas have had debris and dead vegetation removed and recycled.

Key lessons from the clean-up include the benefits of the project management approach, the complexity of insurance issues and the need to deal sensitively with clients who may be upset and traumatised, the extent of under-insurance of buildings and the fact that some 25% of residents did not have home contents insurance. Significant community education and awareness raising is required to ensure that people have better cover against future events.

Experience from previous disasters suggested rebuilding would be a slow process as it is primarily in the realm of private decision making and, for those affected, is a significant life decision.

A number of issues are considered to have impacted on the rate of rebuilding. These include media reports about escalating costs, the complexity of rebuilding, emotional considerations, and reported high level of prices being received for vacant blocks. Understandably, owners need to take time to think through their decisions, and it is now recognised that rebuilding will take more time than originally anticipated.

Consideration of what further support was needed by those who had lost their homes and developing advice for Government was perhaps the single most challenging piece of policy development work done by the Taskforce. It required consideration not just of what measures would be effective, but also of the appropriate role of government in facilitating or influencing individuals' decision-making.

As a result, on 17 July 2003 the Chief Minister announced a number of further measures to support rebuilding. These measures built on previous initiatives such as simplifying planning approval processes, providing relief from land rates and taxes while blocks are uninhabitable, and waiving of a range of fees and charges including development application fees and included:

- developing a 'rebuilding and selling' workbook, to assist people to work through the decision making process;
- introducing advisory services for residents including a building cost advisor;
- establishing a Bushfire Building Cost Monitoring Committee to provide advice to the Taskforce on the movement of prices and ways of managing this; and
- introducing a \$5,000 financial grant to assist people to rebuild.

There have been significant linkages with the building industry to support the rebuilding process including complementary services such as a 'matching' of

residents and builders, monitoring trade and material supplies and participating in the Design Advisory Service, CERG and the Building Cost Monitoring Committee.

Other Government initiatives to assist people recover and rebuild included:

- the waiving of stamp duty of up to \$7,000 for households deciding to sell and purchase a property elsewhere in the ACT; and
- assistance provided to residents in restoring damaged gardens, including the provision of the free plant scheme and the garden regeneration scheme.

Overall, it would appear that about half of the owners of destroyed private dwellings intend to rebuild, about one quarter have sold their properties or intend to do so, and about one quarter remain undecided. Continuing advice and support is being provided to this latter group.

LEGACIES AND SOME CONCLUSIONS

The events of January 2003 were a disaster for the ACT and its community. The fundamental philosophy from the beginning was the need to identify positive elements of the recovery. The Taskforce has been keen to identify tangible legacies for the community in recovering from the disaster.

During and straight after the disaster, the Canberra community showed that it is cohesive and committed to working together to assist fellow citizens. If we can build on this cohesiveness, then Canberra can confidently say that we have emerged from this disaster event an even stronger community.

The Taskforce has actively participated in the process of documenting lessons, creating legacies and assisting various parts of the ACT community to build stronger linkages and partnerships. Some of the activities that the Taskforce has been directly involved in include:

- facilitating the development of a whole-of-ACT Government analysis of the 'immediate' recovery in a submission to the Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January bushfires (McLeod Inquiry);
- facilitating new emergency public information and communication processes;
- identifying the need for the Non Urban Study, establishing the process and participating in the resulting *Shaping Our Territory Report*. All Taskforce members participated in the Steering Committee for this study;
- documenting the lessons of the recovery process, including the Recovery Centre's establishment and operation; and
- participating in numerous conferences and seminars to share knowledge on the ACT experience.

In addition, the Taskforce has also assisted others to create ongoing linkages and legacy activities. Some of these have included:

- partnerships between outdoor recreational industry members, service clubs (particularly Rotary) and corporate sponsors; and
- partnerships between major charities and corporate donors.

A specific challenge for the ACT is the need to enhance community knowledge about bushfire preparedness over the upcoming years.

The Taskforce sees many significant opportunities to move forward from this disaster in a positive manner and suggests that the ACT Government consider:

- ensuring that bushfire preparedness and community education continues to be a focus into the future;
- continuing to encourage those directly involved in the recovery process to share knowledge with others in the community through participating in information sharing, conferences and other forums;
- implementing a process where lessons learnt through the recovery process are integrated into mainstream service delivery; and
- ensuring the recording, collecting and documentation of the January bushfires and the recovery process to provide a resource for those responding to future disasters and to ensure this important part of Canberra's history is preserved.

No doubt organisations in the community and private sectors will also be reflecting on management lessons that can usefully be distilled from the bushfire recovery effort.

Public Sector Management Lessons

The recovery effort has benefited from the professionalism, commitment and expertise of the ACT Public Service. The importance of having an experienced and dedicated staff within the Secretariat to action key decisions was a major factor in the outcomes that have been achieved.

The Taskforce believes that there is a range of issues to be considered when reviewing the lessons learnt from the ACT Public Service response to the recovery challenge. While it is a complex question how readily management experience in a crisis context can be translated into mainstream ongoing public administration and also what are the best means of doing so (training, handbooks, administration structures etc), the Taskforce believes there are areas which have this potential and are well worth examination. Some have already been mentioned, and they include:

- case management as a mechanism for tailored, holistic services to clients;
- the one-stop (or first stop) shop (akin to the Recovery Centre);
- close partnerships with community groups not only for service delivery but also for policy and program design; and
- the input which a project management culture and methodology can have in addressing issues.

At the strategic level, the Taskforce has identified the following lessons for the future:

- engage the community – in order to work well, a Taskforce of this kind must be part of a much wider alliance;

- the 80% principle – when urgent action is required, don't wait for complete certainty or perfect analysis before taking decisions. Adjust as you go;
- teamwork – work in partnership and outsource parts of the task to the organisations best placed to handle them;
- concern with outcomes – streamline processes where possible, monitor results and press for action;
- dedicated governmental machinery – ensure that the Taskforce is well advised and that its decisions lead to action;
- sense of urgency – the mission is recovery from a disaster and 'business as usual' is not good enough;
- practicality – the emphasis is on pragmatism and results rather than elegant corporate planning;
- openness to views and criticism – an important early warning sign of emerging problems; and
- seriousness of the task – remembering in particular that people's lives and their futures will be affected by how well the job is done.

THE FUTURE

While there has been much achieved in these first phases of the bushfire recovery, it is clear to the Taskforce that there will be a need for Government to be involved in recovery activities for some time to come.

Therefore, the Taskforce advised Government that it was appropriate to consider new recovery arrangements, particularly the gradual integration of recovery activities into the normal business of Government.

This does not mean that the recovery process is less of a priority, but that key executives throughout the ACT Public Service will become even more directly involved in driving the recovery process.

In addition to progressing the results of the Non Urban Study relating to the recovery and shaping of the Territory outside urban Canberra, the Taskforce sees that there are four key issues which are vital in the next stages of recovery. They are to:

- ensure that those directly affected by the fires remain adequately supported and provided with the resources to assist them fully recover;
- continue to try to empower people to control their own situations, including decisions about whether to rebuild, and then assist individuals working through the rebuilding process;
- ensure that residents of the ACT are able to again enjoy the recreational and public places which are important to them; and
- ensure that the Government and the whole community are prepared for future bushfire seasons.

The Taskforce worked with the newly formed Bushfire Recovery Executive in the development of its work plan, to ensure that these key activities were included in the next phases of the recovery process.

CONCLUSION

All members of the ACT community can be proud of the response to the January bushfires.

The community banded together to support those directly affected, and spontaneously volunteered their time, goods and money during and after the emergency. The overwhelming response witnessed directly after the fire has continued through the recovery process.

The Government acted quickly and decisively to commence the recovery process, putting in place comprehensive recovery arrangements that ensured that recovery was a priority, and was driven through the community.

All sectors of the community and the Government have worked together in partnership to identify issues, develop responses and implement solutions to the needs of those directly affected, and the community as a whole. While there have been some limited adverse incidents (eg theft during the evening and later from building sites), and some differences of view about the appropriate level of assistance, for the most part there has been community unity about the needs, responses and approach regarding recovery.

This summary and the full report of the Taskforce provide details of the recovery effort, key elements of the process, and the main lessons learnt.

Chapter One

Introduction



On 18 January 2003, the ACT experienced an unprecedented fire disaster causing the tragic deaths of four people; the loss of almost 500 homes and some 93 community, commercial and farm buildings; damage to many other homes and businesses, including rural properties and villages to the west of Canberra; and widespread destruction of forests and the environment generally.

Few people within the ACT have not been affected by this disaster. During the emergency more than 5,000 people were evacuated to emergency centres. Many others went to the homes of family and friends. Thousands of people participated in fire fighting activities, and in assisting those in the 'front line' of the disaster, as neighbours, volunteers and contributors of goods, services and financial support. In the two weeks after the fire, more than 1,000 volunteers came forward. Evacuation centres were swamped with donations. There was, in short, a spontaneous coming together of the community that was matched by generous assistance from governments, businesses, communities and individuals from across Australia and overseas.

Within government, the ACT Department of Education, Youth and Family Services led the community recovery activities and the Department of Urban Services and utility providers such as ActewAGL, Telstra and TransACT led the restoration of infrastructure.

This report outlines the approach, key activities, progress and lessons learned by the ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, which was established by the ACT Government to guide and facilitate the recovery. The aim of this report is to clearly describe what has been done and why; to suggest lessons learnt from these processes for the future; and to provide a reference document to assist in the response to similar large scale emergencies in the future.

The chapters in this report set out the structure and approach that was taken in the coordination of the ACT bushfire recovery, and provide a detailed analysis of the specific activities undertaken by the Taskforce and the Secretariat which supported it.

Except for the brief outline in Chapter Two, this report does not address either the background causes of the bushfires or the immediate operational and emergency recovery response. These matters are addressed comprehensively in the *Report of the Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT* (the McLeod Inquiry) and will be the subject of a subsequent report by the ACT Coroner.

Chapter Two

The fire and its consequences



On 18 January 2003, the ACT experienced an unprecedented bushfire disaster, resulting in tragic loss of life, injuries, extensive destruction of urban and rural, private and public property, and significant environmental damage. This chapter outlines events leading up to the disaster on 18 January 2003, and summarises the losses and damage that resulted. The causes of the fire and the assessment of the operational response are outside the terms of reference of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce. The operational response has been assessed in the *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT* (the McLeod Report) that was presented to the ACT Government in August 2003; while the causes of the fire and the four deaths are the subject of an Inquiry by the ACT Coroner.

THE BACKGROUND TO 18 JANUARY 2003

2002 was a year of severe drought for much of Australia, including the ACT, with water restrictions being introduced in Canberra and Queanbeyan by December. On Wednesday 8 January 2003 lightning strikes from large dry thunderstorms started some 80 fires in the ACT, the Kosciusko National Park in NSW, and the Victorian Alps.

Three fires were ignited in the ACT in the Brindabella Ranges on the western side of the Cotter River, within Namadgi National Park, some 10 kilometres from the nearest grazing properties and some 20 kilometres from the urban areas of Canberra. In addition, a fourth fire—the so-called McIntyre's Hut fire—was burning to the north west of the ACT in the Brindabella National Park in NSW.

18 JANUARY 2003

The fires of Saturday 18 January 2003 were an unprecedented disaster for the ACT resulting in the tragic loss of four lives, numerous injuries and very extensive destruction of urban and rural, public and private property, as well as significant environmental damage to Namadgi National Park and other areas of the ACT and New South Wales.

In response to the extreme situation, the ACT Chief Minister declared a State of Emergency for the ACT at 2.45pm on 18 January 2003 with the Chief Police Officer being appointed as the Territory Controller in accordance with the Emergency Management Act. The Chief Fire Control Officer was appointed as the Alternative Controller so that he could continue to have clear authority to manage the response to the fires. The State of Emergency was lifted on 28 January 2003.

The details of the ACT response to these fires and the assistance provided by the NSW Rural Fire Service and the Australian Defence Force is addressed in Chapter 2 of the *Report of the Inquiry into the Operational Response to the 2003 January Bushfires in the ACT* (the McLeod Report).

THE IMPACT OF THE FIRE

Table 2.1: Human, Property and Physical Losses

Loss	Number
<i>Deaths</i>	4
<i>Injuries and smoke inhalation:</i>	
• People presenting to ACT and Queanbeyan hospitals	440
• People admitted to local hospitals	49
• People with serious burns airlifted to Sydney for treatment	3
<i>Houses and other dwellings destroyed</i>	
• Urban	401
• Rural	87
<i>Other property destroyed</i>	
• Urban	8
• Rural	85
<i>Physical assets destroyed</i>	
• Streetlights – poles and/or lamps	1,080
• Street signs	37
• Other traffic/warning signs	129
• Bridges (urban and rural)	4
• Guide posts	3,950
• Guard rails	3 km
<i>Utilities</i>	
• Power poles	900-1,000
• Electricity distribution transformers	750-800
• Consumers without power at midnight, 18 January	30,000
• Consumers without gas supply at midnight, 18 Jan	6,900
• Significant damage to Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre	
<i>Estimated Stock Losses</i>	
• Sheep	4,000
• Cattle	150
• Horses	35
<i>Areas burnt</i>	
• Plantation Forests (Ha)	16,770
• Rural Leases (Ha)	31,000
• Nature Reserves (Ha)	109,400



Uriarra demonstrates the extent of devastation in the rural areas

Table 2.2: Estimates of Financial Loss **

Item	\$
Private dwellings – 3017 insurance claims recorded relating to contents and buildings	\$199 million
Commercial and Industrial – 151 claims Including pine plantations \$60 million and Stromlo Observatory \$37 million	\$146 million
Motor Vehicles – 411 claims	\$5 million
Farms - 6 claims	\$400,000
	Estimated Total \$350 million*

***Estimates provided by the Insurance Disaster Response Organisation*

Maps 1 and 2 at Appendix A show how the fires burnt the south-western edge of the city.

Some important aspects of the impacts of the fires are not evident from the tables on the previous pages:

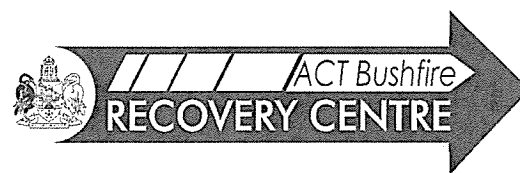
- In the urban areas the destruction pattern was very much 'hit and miss' and penetrated several streets deep. The result was a mosaic of destruction and damage that resulted in many damaged and some intact properties being isolated within wider areas of general devastation. Residents in such properties have subsequently been impacted by the relative isolation, and the impact of the clean-up and rebuilding program.
- In the rural areas of the ACT property and stock losses also represented a loss of income and compounded the severe effects already evident as a result of the drought.
- In addition to physical injuries, many people affected by the fires have experienced major emotional problems; some directly associated with the events of 18 January, and some that have emerged as the extent of personal and community property loss has become known.
- In the more severely fire-affected areas there has also been a loss of local community links as residents have been forced to relocate because of destroyed houses and a significant proportion have either sold or are undecided about entering into the cost and complexity of rebuilding.

CONCLUSION

The January 2003 bushfires in the ACT ranks as one of the largest single day disasters in Australian history and had a wide ranging and devastating impact on many areas of the ACT and its community. Responding to this disaster represented a major challenge for both the government and people of the ACT. This Report summarises the resulting response.

Chapter Three

Recovery arrangements



The scale of the impact of the January 2003 bushfire disaster led the ACT Government to conclude that many aspects of the recovery needed to be coordinated through a taskforce approach, rather than acting only through the normal processes of established Government agencies. Complex issues such as planning for the restoration of the non-urban areas of the ACT required additional expert assistance. Similarly the extent of the disaster called for a broadly based and consultative response that included affected residents – urban and rural, business, unions, the community sector and Commonwealth representatives. In this way the ACT Government was able to achieve an informed and inclusive approach to this complex recovery task.

IMMEDIATE EMERGENCY RECOVERY

The ACT Emergency Management Plan includes detailed sub-plans that set out response and recovery responsibilities and processes. These include:

- the Community Recovery Sub Plan under which four evacuation centres were established on 18 January 2003, accommodating over 5000 people;
- the Infrastructure Recovery Sub-Plan that coordinated the restoration of water, electricity, gas and telecommunications services to over 40,000 residents by 25 January 2003; and
- the Health Emergency Management Sub-Plan that facilitated the coordination of Canberra's medical emergency services that experienced an unprecedented level of demand from people with bushfire-related injuries.

The implementation of these sub-plans was directed by the ACT Emergency Management Committee, chaired by the Chief Police Officer as Territory Controller under the State of Emergency that was declared on 18 January 2003. The State of Emergency was lifted on 28 January 2003.

With the establishment of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce and its Secretariat, responsibility for the coordination of the ongoing recovery work was transferred to that structure.

Since January 2003, key elements of the Emergency Management Plan have been reviewed to incorporate the lessons learnt from the disaster. In particular the Community Recovery Sub-Plan is being fully revised and a new Public Information Sub-Plan has been developed to address the public information shortcomings experienced in January.

SPECIAL RECOVERY ARRANGEMENTS

The scale of the impact of the January 2003 bushfire disaster on ACT citizens and the community and on public and private property led the ACT Government to conclude that there was a need for a specially focused approach to the direction of the recovery.

While the majority of the Government response would need to be undertaken by existing Government and community sector agencies, the scale of the disaster, the wide range of responses required and the need to ensure that momentum and coordination was maintained led to the Government's decision to establish a high level taskforce to guide the overall recovery. (*Refer Appendix 2: Organisational arrangements for the Bushfire Recovery*)

Bushfire Recovery Taskforce

On 24 January 2003, the Government announced the establishment of a Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, to be led by Mr Sandy Hollway AO, the former CEO of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, to coordinate the government, community and business efforts to both assist the victims of the disaster and the longer term recovery of the ACT. The Taskforce was to report to the Chief Minister as Minister responsible for Bushfire Recovery.

The Taskforce was established for an initial period of six months.

The Chief Minister stated that the first objective of the Taskforce was to develop an action plan for the bushfire recovery, drawing on the existing ACT Emergency Management Plan that had been so effective in guiding the initial response to this disaster.

The approach taken by the Taskforce in the overall coordination of the bushfire recovery, including the development of the required Action Plan is addressed at Chapter Four and Appendix 3.

Taskforce Secretariat

At the same time that the Government announced the establishment of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, it also announced the establishment of a Secretariat to support the work of the Taskforce and coordinate the implementation of the Taskforce's decisions.

The Taskforce Secretariat was attached to the Chief Minister's Department and led by Mr Alan Thompson who was seconded from his position as Chief Executive of the Department of Urban Services. The Secretariat was a small group drawn largely from the ACT Public Service that provided the specialist skills and human resources necessary to support the Taskforce and coordinate and manage the wide range of recovery issues, both within the government and across the community. The Secretariat was led by senior and experienced public servants on a full time basis, tasked with ensuring that the recovery process was a key priority throughout the ACT Government administration and that people's needs were responded to promptly.

The details of the structure and operation of the Taskforce Secretariat are addressed at Chapter Five.

ACT Recovery Centre

The ACT Recovery Centre was established at Lyons on 24 January 2003 as a central point for bushfire-affected residents to access information, advice, services and support. The Recovery Centre was established by the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services as part of the initial emergency recovery arrangements. The staff of the Centre were drawn initially from relevant areas of the ACT Public Service, supported by community organisations and specialist personnel from the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Victorian public services. The management of the Recovery Centre was transferred to the Taskforce Secretariat in early February 2003.

The Recovery Centre provides direct services including material support, counselling and support, and has coordinated the distribution of financial grants, linked households with key services and facilitated community activity and peer support. The Recovery Centre has provided these services using case management and community development approaches through a team of recovery workers and community agencies.

Detailed information on the operation and approach of the Recovery Centre is provided at Chapter Six.

Community Expert Reference Group (CERG)

The CERG was established on 3 February 2003 as a key advisory body to the Taskforce and the ACT Government, and as an essential channel of two-way communication to ensure that the recovery strategy was informed by community views and needs, and by local knowledge and expertise. The CERG has brought together community groups, fire-affected residents, unions, the business community and the Commonwealth, chaired by Ms Elizabeth Whitelaw, lawyer and immediate past Chair of the Canberra Business Council for the period February to June 2003, and by Mr David Dawes, from the Master Builders Association, since July 2003.

Detailed information on the operation and approach of the CERG is provided at Chapter Seven, while the report on CERG's own review of its activities is at Appendix 16.

The Next Phase of the Recovery

In June 2003, the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce undertook a review to identify the key recovery issues for the future and to provide advice to Government regarding the next phases. The CERG also undertook a similar review of its functions and future challenges.

These reviews identified that, while there had been much progress, there was still much to do. Significant work still to occur at that time included:

- preparing for the next bushfire season;
- supporting affected households and communities through the next bushfire season, particularly taking into account key events such as the Christmas period, the one year anniversary and potential bushfire threats;
- supporting affected households and communities through the various bushfire inquiries and inquests;
- assisting people through the rebuilding process;

- completing the Non-Urban Study and assisting with the implementation of Government-endorsed recommendations; and
- continuing the Government rebuilding and restoration of public assets.

The Government subsequently agreed to the following Taskforce recommendations:

- the continuation of the Taskforce until the end of September 2003;
- the continuation of the Reference Group until the end of March 2004;
- the continuation of the ACT Recovery Centre until the end of March 2004;
- the establishment of a group of Senior Executives (the Bushfire Recovery Executive) to lead the ongoing recovery process and to manage the eventual mainstreaming of recovery and related support programs; and
- the continuation of the Taskforce Secretariat at a gradually reducing scale, with the Secretariat forming part of the Chief Minister's Department.

An important conclusion of the Taskforce review was that, while it was important to ensure that recovery activities were progressively integrated into the normal business of ACT Government agencies, this transition needed to be managed carefully, and be well supported.

The Bushfire Recovery Executive

While the Taskforce was very aware of a range of activities that still needed to be completed at the end of September 2003, they also recognised the need to progress to the next phase of the recovery process.

The Taskforce believed that the end of September 2003 was an appropriate time to introduce new recovery arrangements, particularly the gradual integration of recovery activities into the normal business of Government. Noting that members of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce would remain available to provide advice into the future, the Government agreed to the establishment of the Bushfire Recovery Executive and to pass to them responsibility for the oversighting of the recovery effort from 1 October 2003.

The Bushfire Recovery Executive is chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive of the Chief Minister's Department and includes the Chair of the Community and Expert Reference Group and senior executives from all major ACT Government departments and agencies.

This Executive is tasked with responsibility for the ongoing recovery process. It is their role to ensure that recovery remains a key priority of Government agencies and that it continues with the momentum created in the initial phases. In particular, the Bushfire Recovery Executive is to ensure:

- there is continuity and a coherent recovery strategy;
- recovery from the January bushfire remains a high priority for the Government and community;
- there is a high level of responsiveness by the Government and partners in responding to recovery issues; and
- organisational arrangements are in place that are adaptable and able to respond to the changing priorities throughout the ongoing recovery process.

To ensure a smooth transition, the Bushfire Recovery Executive began to meet in August 2003, and through September the Executive joined with the Taskforce at their fortnightly meetings and participated in a number of briefing and planning sessions. This provided an opportunity for the Executive to gain an understanding of the future challenges, have a full hand over of issues, and commence their forward planning process.

The objectives and approach of the Bushfire Recovery Executive are discussed at Chapter Twelve, while the Action Plan of the Executive is at Appendix 10.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIPS

ACT Government

A key role of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce was to advise the ACT Government on the coordination and direction of the overall recovery. Coordination within Government was enhanced by the role of the Chief Minister as Minister responsible for Bushfire Recovery.

Arrangements were put in place at the commencement of the Taskforce's operations to facilitate quick decision making on issues which required Government approval; and ensure that the Government was well informed on the recovery process. In particular:

- A dedicated policy advisor from the Chief Minister's Office was located within the Secretariat for the first five months. This ensured good information flow between the Taskforce, Secretariat and the Government;
- The participation of Chief Ministerial advisors in all meetings of the Taskforce. This ensured that there was a good and immediate understanding of the views of the Government on key policy issues;
- The participation of senior officers within the public service on the Taskforce, including the Chief Executive of the Chief Minister's Department; and
- Regular meetings between the Chair of the Taskforce and the Chief Minister.

Commonwealth Government

Because the ACT is the national capital, the Commonwealth Government's involvement in the bushfire disaster was more extensive than would have been the case in other jurisdictions. In addition to the usual Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA), the Commonwealth also had a role through its national capital planning responsibilities and as the largest employer in the ACT. In light of this, the Government put in place a number of strategies, including:

- involvement of the Commonwealth Government in the CERG;
- involvement of the National Capital Authority in the Non Urban Study; and
- contact when necessary between the Chair of the Taskforce and the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA)

The most significant contribution of the Commonwealth was assistance under NDRA. The NDRA provides assistance to States and Territories to alleviate the financial burden associated with the provision of natural disaster relief payments and infrastructure restoration. The NDRA ensures States and Territories are partly reimbursed for natural disaster relief once their expenditure exceeds certain thresholds.

Any financial assistance is generally to be met initially by the State or Territory and eligible expenditures recovered from the Commonwealth. However, the Commonwealth also offered earlier payment to the Territory if required. Due to the cash position of the ACT budget such early payments were not required.

As of September 2003, the ACT Government had received an interim NDRA payment of \$3.3 million of an estimated total of \$17 million towards bushfire expenditure. Further claims will be submitted to the Commonwealth progressively.

Other Commonwealth Assistance

In addition to the NDRA contributions, the Commonwealth also provided the following assistance both during and after the fires:

- **Fire Combat Assistance:** As the scale of the fire escalated, the ACT Government called upon support from the Australian Defence Force (ADF) under established arrangements through Emergency Management Australia. The ADF responded promptly and provided assistance including helicopters, field engineers, operations staff, transport resources, accommodation and backup fire fighting capabilities.
- **Staffing Of Evacuation Centres:** As the emergency unfolded, the ACT Government was able to call upon a number of Commonwealth Government agencies to provide staff to assist with the establishment and operation of evacuation centres. At least 27 volunteers from Family and Community Services and other Commonwealth Departments worked at the evacuation centres.
- **Staffing of the Recovery Centre:** A number of Commonwealth Government departments provided staff to operate in the Recovery Centre for periods of three to six months. Four staff are currently employed and while these staff are paid by the ACT Government, Commonwealth Government Departments have released staff to undertake this work.
- **Additional donations:** the Australian Government donated \$0.5m to the ACT Bushfire Recovery Appeal, and provided a further \$0.5m to help regenerate and promote tourism in the ACT.

The Australian Government has also provided \$1.0m on a dollar for dollar basis with the ACT as a separate support package to the timber processing industry in the ACT that was badly affected by the bushfires.

RELATED STUDIES AND INQUIRIES

In addition to the bushfire recovery work that has been coordinated by the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, a number of related studies and inquiries have been initiated into the 2003 bushfires and into fire fighting, fire prevention and recovery issues. The studies and inquiries that will have some impact or potential impact on the ACT are listed at Appendix 8.

Of these studies and inquiries, two are of particular relevance to the bushfire recovery and thus to the work of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce.

Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January Bushfires 2003 (the McLeod Inquiry)

On 10 February 2003 the Government announced an Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January Bushfires. The Inquiry was conducted by the former Commonwealth and ACT Ombudsman, Mr Ron McLeod AM, and examined and reported on the adequacy of the response to the bushfires by the ACT Emergency Services Bureau (ESB) and its components (ACT Bushfire Services, ACT Emergency Services, ACT Fire Brigade and ACT Ambulance Service) and other relevant agencies, including ACT Policing, Environment ACT and ACT Forests, with particular reference to:

- the preparation, planning and response to the bushfires and of strategies for the evaluation and management of bushfire threat and risk;
- ESB's management structure, command and control arrangements, and public information strategy;
- the coordination and cooperative arrangements with other ACT and interstate, Commonwealth and non-government agencies, including utility providers, for managing such emergencies; and
- the adequacy of ESB's equipment, communications systems, training and resources.

The principal objective of establishing this Inquiry was to ensure that the lessons of this devastating event were effectively learnt and to identify improvements that would both minimise the risk of, and enhance the ACT's capacity to respond effectively to, events of this kind in the future.

The Inquiry provided its report to the Government on 1 August 2003. On 4 August 2003 the ACT Government released the Inquiry's Report and the Chief Minister, on behalf of the Government, accepted the Report's findings and recommendations. The implementation of the Report's recommendations is being directed by a committee of Departmental Chief Executives and the Chief Police Officer, chaired by the Chief Executive of the Chief Minister's Department.

The Government's response to the Inquiry's findings and recommendations and the additional measures that the Government is undertaking can be summarised under five main action areas:

- Fire mitigation;
- Improved emergency response capability;
- Communications and public information;

- Operational procedures and policy; and
- Organisational and legislative change.

Copies of Government submissions, the Report and the ACT Government's response can be accessed on the ACT Government website, www.act.gov.au.

The Non-Urban Study

The Taskforce and the ACT Government identified the need to conduct a specific Non-Urban Study to deal with issues surrounding the future of the non-urban areas of the ACT that had been affected by the bushfires. In determining the scope of this study, it was agreed that the Non-Urban Study should **not** be limited to a planning study, but be a wider exercise that dealt with land use and management, bushfire protection and catchment management.

It was agreed this study would be oversighted by a separate Steering Committee comprising Taskforce members and chaired by the Taskforce Chairman, Mr Hollway, complemented by a wide range of expert representation in the areas of bushfire management, sustainability, economic analysis, natural resource and catchment management and land use planning. A team of expert consultants led by Bovis Lend Lease was engaged through a competitive tender process to be involved in the project. At the same time, the Minister for Planning announced the commencement of an Urban Edge Study to deal with the issues related to fire protection of Canberra's outer suburbs.

There was agreement that, while these specific studies should commence, there was a commitment to continue with the development of the Canberra Spatial Plan as part of the overall development of the Canberra Plan. As such, there was a need to manage the process of parallel planning studies to ensure consistency, minimise duplication and create an understanding within the community of the different aims and scopes of the various planning exercises, what they covered and how to input into them. There was a significant effort in providing information to the community regarding the different studies, and work occurred to ensure the consultation comments were shared.

The Non-Urban Study aimed to respond to short and long term issues associated with the impact of the fires. The scale of the damage in the non-urban area created a situation where careful investigation and studies needed to occur before the restoration of these areas could be planned. The form of this regeneration was not clear, as there were varied opinions on what to do with this land. Considerations which needed to be taken into account in relation to this included:

- potential fire risk;
- environmental concerns, particularly impacts on water quality;
- community expectations;
- land management implications;
- tourism and recreational opportunities; and
- insurance restrictions.

Areas and issues that were identified and examined through the Non-Urban Study included:

- ACT Forestry land;
- the National Park, and other natural areas;
- rural villages which had been largely destroyed;
- a number of “iconic” areas including Tidbinbilla (a nature park and enclosed animal sanctuary), Birrigai (an outdoor education centre) and the Cotter recreational area;
- many of the outdoor recreational facilities throughout the ACT; and
- the rural lands.

On 11 August 2003, the Steering Committee released a document that provided the community with options canvassing a range of land uses and activities that could be accommodated in non-urban areas of the ACT. The document aimed to identify and present options for practical lifestyle improvements of wide geographical spread within the ACT and across a range of activities extending from tourism and recreation to education and science. The pattern of multiple land uses described in the document was developed in the context of an overriding concern for sustainability. Consultation was conducted for six weeks on the options contained in the document to assist with the development of a final and definite strategy.

The final report to Government was released in November 2003, and is titled “Shaping our Territory”. This report provided the Government with a detailed set of ideas and options for the non-urban areas of the ACT. Opportunities for creating a positive legacy as the ACT recovered from the fires were summarized in 113 recommendations, of which 24 were highlighted as requiring urgent attention. The report can be downloaded from www.canberraconnect.act.gov.au.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE RECOVERY

The key reasons for the progress that has been achieved with the ACT bushfire recovery to date include:

- **A high level of community involvement:** The community was directly involved in both the Taskforce and the Community and Expert Reference Group. In particular, the CERG provided a forum for community issues and concerns. Related to this, the Taskforce established a very straightforward but thorough mechanism for recording and tracking issues, namely an Issues Register maintained by the Taskforce Secretariat. This meant that issues could be identified and responded to quickly with the result that the community referred fewer issues direct to Ministers. In addition, the maintenance of the issues register enabled systemic issues to be identified.
- **Ensuring that the community was well informed about the recovery process:** The provision of twice weekly newspaper advertisements; regular *Community Update* newsletters delivered initially to 40,000 households in all affected areas and to all people registered at the Recovery Centre; the provision of direct information and advice via Recovery Centre case managers; the maintenance of a comprehensive web site; and the provision of regular media interviews all contributed to ensuring that the ACT community was as

well informed as possible about the recovery effort. While this approach was relatively expensive, the Taskforce considered that it was vital so that affected individuals and households could work through their own issues in an informed way.

- **Ensuring that the recovery process was supported by a comprehensive range of skills and perspectives:** This approach meant that the achievement of a successful recovery was seen to be a shared responsibility and not just the domain of one sector (particularly the Government). The role that the community and business sectors played through the recovery process was significant and of great value.
- **Maintaining flexibility and adaptability:** To respond to a disaster of this magnitude requires a management approach and team that can respond to issues very quickly. This requires people with initiative, flexibility, confidence and a high level of personal accountability. The staff of the Taskforce Secretariat and the Recovery Centre were selected with these qualities in mind. As well as producing the required outcomes in terms of timely and quality responses to issues, this approach meant that staff developed a high level of commitment and motivation that offset the pressures of long hours and short timeframes. Both the Taskforce Secretariat and the Recovery Centre were able to maintain a stable workforce throughout the more intensive period of the recovery.
- **Investing early:** A key principle of the Taskforce was to ensure that there was early investment, in time, staff and resources to ensure that emerging issues could be addressed early before they became more difficult and expensive to resolve. This approach also enabled the Government and the Taskforce to create the necessary momentum for the overall recovery. An example of the success of this process was the clean-up of 99% of destroyed property waste within four months.
- **Developing a clear plan of action:** Setting out the vision for recovery, together with the Taskforce's key principles and activities, the Action Plan of February 2003 provided a powerful focus for the first few months of the recovery.

A number of important beneficial lessons have been learnt during the recovery:

- **Be prepared:** The strengths and limitations of the ACT Emergency Management Plan showed the value of good preparation, particularly in the activation of the evacuation centres on 18 January. The limitations of the initial performance of the public information system showed where future improvements were needed. The Taskforce initiated the process to rectify that situation, and ensured that public communications became a key strength of the recovery program. Having the awareness to adapt existing plans to meet unforeseen events is also important.
- **Ensuring a whole of Government approach:** A disaster of this scale requires a whole of Government response. While a special purpose taskforce is also critical to achieve the necessary drive and cohesion, strong links must be maintained with all relevant areas of Government. In the case of this disaster and recovery the necessary Government wide links were achieved through:

- The Chief Minister being responsible for the overall recovery;
 - The Chief Executive of the Chief Minister's Department, as head of the ACT Public Service, being a member of the Taskforce;
 - The Secretariat being led by senior public servants drawn from across relevant areas of the Public Service; and
 - Having the bushfire recovery as a standing item of the agendas of the Cabinet and the Management Council of ACT Chief Executives.
- **Creating linkages:** even in the emergency phases of the recovery, the linkages between different groups was evident, and there is acknowledgement that emergency response is improved by closer linkages between those charged with combat/response and recovery.
 - **Specifically tailored approaches:** some of the key strategies of our recovery process, such as the provision of the Recovery Centre and a Building Design Advisory Service demonstrate the successfulness of tailored approaches, including case management, which are able to respond to the emotional as well as other needs.
 - **Focusing on positive recovery and creating legacies:** The Taskforce was very keen to ensure that the Canberra community did not merely recover from the bushfire disaster, but in fact emerged a stronger community. This message has been reinforced through the recovery process.

The January 2003 Canberra Bushfires were an event that impacted on all members of the community. In the immediate aftermath, all members of the community worked together to respond to the needs of those most directly affected, and it was important that the ongoing recovery process was inclusive, comprehensive and positive. The Taskforce believes that the management arrangements put in place supported these principles, and enabled the recovery process to progress successfully.

While the taskforce approach was successful, one aspect that could have been improved was the relationship between the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce and the Community and Expert Reference Group. As a mechanism for community feedback, the independence of CERG from the Taskforce was important. However, to improve communication for any future comparable events, it will be desirable for the chair of a community reference group to be a full member of the Taskforce, even though this will place great demands on the time of the community group chair.

Chapter Four

The Bushfire Recovery Taskforce



The establishment of a small high profile Taskforce with strong links to the ACT community to manage the bushfire recovery was a successful approach that provided a clear and single focus for the recovery, was able to move quickly and be decisive, and had excellent access to the Government and relevant agencies. The Taskforce Action Plan issued in February 2003 provided a structured framework for the recovery and for the development of the necessary supporting budget.

The background to the establishment of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce was discussed in Chapter Two. This Chapter summarises the general approach adopted by the Taskforce. More detailed consideration of specific areas of Taskforce and Secretariat activity is provided in later chapters.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS

Reflecting its range of responsibilities, the Taskforce comprised:

- Mr Sandy Hollway (Chair);
- Mr Robert de Castella, as a representative of those people whose homes were destroyed;
- Mr Terry Snow, Executive Chairman of the Canberra Airport Group, as a representative of the business community;
- Ms Maureen Cane, Chief Executive Officer of Communities @ Work (the recently amalgamated Tuggeranong and Weston Creek Community Services), as a representative of the community sector;
- Mr Robert Tonkin, Chief Executive of the Chief Minister's Department, representing the ACT Public Service; and
- Mr Alan Thompson, Chief Executive of the Department of Urban Services as Chief Executive of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat.

The Taskforce was given the following functions:

- develop the ACT Bushfire Recovery Plan (to be developed drawing on the ACT Disaster Recovery Plan);
- provide regular progress reports to the Chief Minister, as well as regular community and media information on recovery progress;



The ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce

- provide advice to Government on the needs and responses of the disaster victims, the affected communities and other sectors;
- through the Community and Expert Reference Group, coordinate the actions of peak community, welfare, business and education organisations in their contribution to the bushfire recovery to ensure the most effective use of skills and resources;
- coordinate public infrastructure, housing, commercial and community organisation recovery and reconstruction;
- coordinate the ongoing Government services' aspects of community recovery including accommodation, finance/insurance, assistance programs, one stop shop assistance, donations and volunteering; and
- provide advice on planning and environmental aspects of the recovery.

The Bushfire Recovery Taskforce held its first meeting on 28 January 2003.

The Taskforce was aware that while the recovery would involve considerable rebuilding and restoration, the ACT community should not aim simply at a return to the pre-bushfire situation. Apart from the fact that this may not always be feasible, the objective should be a city and Territory more secure and revitalised, having learnt the lessons of the disaster and, moreover, having captured and built upon the community spirit, cohesiveness and pride which the fires brought to the fore.

TASKFORCE ACTION PLAN

In accordance with the Chief Minister's request, the Taskforce developed and published an Action Plan in February 2003 to provide the overall framework for the recovery. This plan is provided in full at Appendix 3. It was far more important that the Action Plan be done quickly than that it be a highly refined corporate planning document. The aim was to set out key goals and principles to "chunk" the project down into sensible parts, to list actions needed and assign targeted dates and responsibilities. It was recognised from the outset that the plan would, and should, change. It was, to an important extent, primarily designed to generate initial momentum for the recovery, rather than be a document of enduring significance.

In summary, this Action Plan set out the Taskforce's goals, guiding principles and key deliverables:

Goals and Key Deliverables

In partnership with the Government and the community, work to:

- support those who have been significantly impacted by the fires;
- ensure that the community actively participates in the process of rebuilding and recovery;
- ensure clean-up of the Territory in a way that is safe, timely, efficient, cost effective and respectful;
- facilitate rebuilding in a way that is safe, timely, streamlined and provides individuals with real choices;
- provide up to date, relevant and useful information to assist with the recovery process; and
- learn lessons from this event so the ACT community moves forward positively.

Guiding Principles

- Being decisive, and ensuring that speed and efficiency is a focus of the rebuilding and recovery process;
- Driving the whole recovery process, whether by picking up issues itself, providing coordination with other organisations or supporting them in taking recovery action;
- Building an alliance of key contributors to the recovery process including business and community groups so that the ACT community as a whole takes the recovery challenge together as a united team;
- Being inclusive, and responding to the issues raised by the community;
- Ensuring constant communication regarding the activities of the Taskforce.;
- Ensuring recovery takes place in a way that people are empowered to help themselves;
- Giving people real options and ensuring people can make informed choices;
- Respecting the needs of different groups in the community; and
- Acknowledging the different timeframes of individuals involved in the rebuilding and recovery process.

THE STRENGTHS OF A TASKFORCE APPROACH

A number of the characteristics of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce assisted in the achievement of its assigned task:

- The small size of the taskforce – six members – facilitated cohesion and shared accountability, simplified the logistics of arranging meetings and promoted a high level of commitment from taskforce members.
- The members of the Taskforce brought a wide range of appropriate skills and experience that contributed to the success of the recovery program. These included skills in major projects, media, and public policy and administration, the sometimes different viewpoints of the business and the not for profit sector, and the perspective of a prominent citizen who, in addition to his own business and media skills also, lost his home in the disaster.
- The selection of high profile people, particularly in the role of chair, was important both in establishing public confidence and in communicating the objectives and achievements of the recovery in the local and national media.
- The strong links of all members of the Taskforce with the ACT provided valuable background for the task as well as contributing to a community sense of confidence and momentum.

CHALLENGES

In undertaking its role, the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce faced a number of key challenges:

The scale of the disaster and scope of the recovery task: This task was immense and of a scale unprecedented within the ACT. While there were many individuals and organisations with experience in different aspects of the recovery process, there were none that were able to provide all of the elements required. No one initially involved in the task would claim to be “disaster experts”, and there was a range of issues faced by the ACT community that were unique, yet required sympathetic and considered responses.

Timing: A disaster will always create a level of “chaos”. The scale of this particular disaster meant that there was a risk that this perception could continue. There was a need to move very quickly to create a sense of momentum and planning around the recovery process.

Time Commitment: The time that members of the Taskforce needed to commit was considerable and certainly in excess of what might have been envisaged at the commencement of the task.

Coordination: The impact of the bushfires meant that many sectors of the community were affected and needed to be involved in the recovery process. A key challenge for the Taskforce was ensuring an integrated and coordinated approach to recovery. It was not just a “whole of Government” approach (in itself a challenging task) that was needed, but a “whole of community” approach to the recovery process.

ACHIEVING THE NECESSARY BALANCE

Throughout its operation, the Taskforce sought to maintain an appropriate view of the role of Government in different circumstances:

- direct intervention such as emergency support to people who lost their homes;
- establishment of necessary facilities such as disposal sites for waste;
- special arrangements such as for overall project management of the clean-up; and
- facilitation when the best approach is to clear the way for people to make and implement their own individual decisions eg streamlining approval processes for the rebuilding of homes.

Similarly, the Taskforce sought to achieve an appropriate balance between functions that were to be undertaken directly by the Taskforce and its Secretariat and the Recovery Centre and those functions that were better undertaken by ACT Government agencies or non-government organisations under the overall coordination of the Taskforce.

FUNDING THE RECOVERY

Once the scale of the damage was understood, it was clear that significant resources would be required to fund the recovery. An important part of the Taskforce's role was to advise the Government on the level of resources that would be required.

Required resources included funding allocations to provide:

- emergency services such as evacuation centres and emergency financial relief;
- funding for the large number of staff in various agencies required to work on a continuous basis to restore basic services;
- equipment and materials, to repair and restore infrastructure and facilities as quickly as possible;
- the recovery management structure, and direct services such as the Recovery Centre;
- assistance packages to those directly affected by the fire; and
- ongoing recovery activities including rebuilding of facilities, restoration of public areas and replanting.

In providing advice to the Government on the recovery budget, a number of factors were helpful. These included:

- A good understanding of the scale of the recovery task (although, as noted later, scoping the task was inevitably a much more imprecise matter than would be the case with more conventional projects or programs). The central positioning of the Taskforce provided a good opportunity to determine both scale and priorities and to give the Government options for action.
- The early development of the Taskforce Action Plan.

However, as is always the case, there were also significant challenges in developing a coherent, responsible and effective budget. These included:

- **Timing:** The development of budget papers is always difficult, with advice regarding expenditure targets often moving daily. Having to coordinate and integrate allocations for centrally managed bushfire related activities as well as those contained in agency budgets posed a significant challenge.
- **The fluid nature of the task:** Throughout the process, the Taskforce was aware that many recovery funding estimations were quite “loose” as the nature and scale of what needed to be done only became clearer progressively. In addition, not all issues could be anticipated, and there needed to be a realisation on the part of Treasury and the Government (which there was) that further requests for funding were likely.

Just as the Action Plan identified some fundamental principles to guide the recovery, so did the budget. An important management point is that it is especially important to be able to refer back to a framework of principles to guide decisions in a project of this kind where not every issue or action can be predicted and where there is necessarily a large element of “learning as you go”.

In developing funding proposals the Taskforce followed the following principles:

1. Putting people first;
2. Investing now to save later;
3. Doing all we can to prevent re-occurrence;
4. Taking the opportunity to replace or restore community assets in ways which are “smarter and better”;
5. Providing a positive legacy for the community; and
6. Getting the balance right between rapid response on the one hand, and not pre-empting longer term decisions on the other.

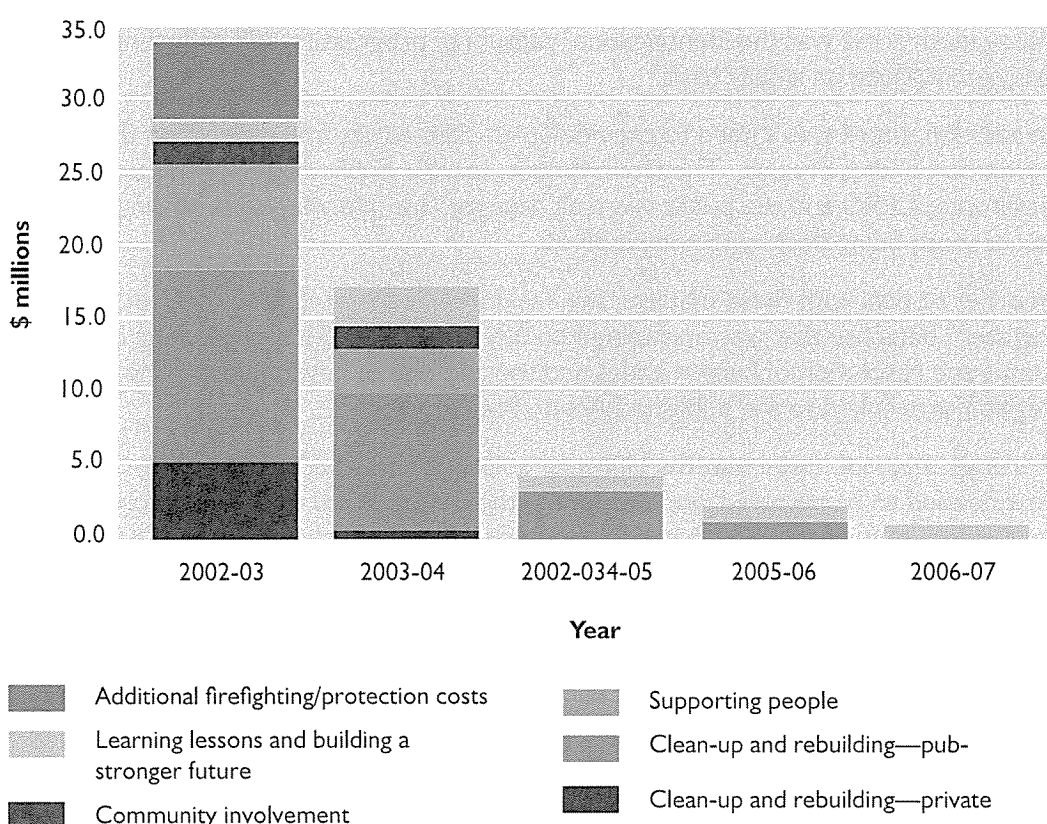
The Government introduced Appropriation Bill 2002-03 (No.2) into the Legislative Assembly on Thursday 20 February 2003. This was passed into legislation on 6 March 2003, and provided \$17.3 million expenditure to fund initial aspects of the bushfire recovery. While it was acknowledged that this might not pick up all expenditure for the 2002-03 year, this Bill provided initial funding for:

- immediate fire response, including provision of hospital services, restoration of infrastructure including roads and clean-up of damaged public areas;
- management structures, including the provision of the Recovery Centre, Secretariat and Taskforce;
- inquiries, including one into the operational aspects of the response to the January bushfires and the non urban study;
- financial assistance packages for residents who lost homes, businesses and rural lessees; and
- other activities such as a tourism package to encourage tourists back to the ACT.

A 3rd Appropriation in May 2003, together with Treasurer's advances, brought the total of bushfire response and recovery in 2002-03 to \$29.7m.

The Taskforce also provided advice to Government regarding the development of an overall bushfire recovery budget for 2003-04. Detailed information on the resulting budget allocation is contained in the 2003-04 ACT Government Supplementary Budget Paper *Bushfire Recovery*, a copy of which is at Appendix 5. In total the 2003-04 Budget and the 2004-06 Forward Estimates included funding of \$22.8 million in a range of areas, as illustrated below.

Table 4.1: ACT Government Budget for 2003-04 (Bushfire related expenditure)



When the budget was developed, the Taskforce was aware that some recovery expenditure would be supplemented by insurance claims and by payments by the Commonwealth through the NDRA and other mechanisms:

- it is expected that around \$50 million will be recoverable through insurance (excluding ACT Forests). These funds will cover reinstating damaged and destroyed assets including fire and ambulance stations, the Health Protection Service Headquarters (Holder), the Grant Cameron Community Centre (Holder), playgrounds, bridges, public housing, depots, signage, observation towers and fencing, and replacement of vehicles and equipment;
- a further insurance payment will also be provided for clean-up, debris removal and reinstatement of a depot and property in ACT Forests – this amount is yet to be quantified;

- the Territory is estimated to be entitled to receive at least \$17 million in total reimbursement from the Commonwealth under the NDRA. Activities for which the Territory expects to receive assistance includes costs incurred for personal hardship and distress relief; restoration or replacement of essential public assets; interest subsidy grants to small businesses; psychological counselling; and other acts of relief and restoration; and
- ACT Forests estimates that it sustained an insurable loss of \$64 million in relation to standing timber.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, a major challenge in the early stages of the recovery process was the identification, capturing, progressing and reporting of issues that arose on a daily basis.

In addition, there was a need to provide up-to-date advice and reports on the resolution of these issues. The Government, specific public sector agencies, the Taskforce, CERG and the public were all “hungry” for information regarding how issues were being dealt with and resolved.

In order to deal with these matters, the Taskforce Secretariat developed an “issues register” database that was maintained on a rolling updated basis reflecting both the status and resolution of known issues and the addition of new subjects. The issues register was linked to the published Action Plan themes.

Through this tool, there was the ability to quickly identify and articulate the issue that needed to be resolved, and determine the best product to deliver information in a variety of formats. This adaptable database allowed for reports, with particular “looks” for different groups, being provided with information and was updated regularly by staff within the Secretariat – the system was easy to use, and we were able to “sell” the benefits of the system to users.

A key lesson learnt through this process is the usefulness of having “off the shelf” data management tools. The need to manage information is a key issue that should be considered for those facing recovery processes in the future.

STREAMLINED PROCUREMENT PROCESSES

Soon after the January 2003 bushfire emergency the ACT Government Procurement Board agreed to streamline procurement procedures for a period of three months for major procurements associated with the emergency and the recovery. The streamlined procedures involved:

- raising the threshold for operational purchasing; and
- fast-tracking of Procurement Board consideration of any large emergency-related procurements.

These procedures worked well, and contributed significantly to the ability of agencies to respond rapidly to emerging needs in the recovery process.

CONCLUSIONS

In analysing the effectiveness of the Taskforce approach, it can be said that the establishment of such an approach was very useful in providing a clear mechanism to guide and facilitate the recovery process. Key advantages included:

- **A clear and single focus:** Taskforce Members had a common goal of assisting the recovery process to occur rapidly, and in a way that created an even stronger community. The development of a plan of action early was critical in determining the details of this common goal and providing a vehicle to present these to Government and the community.
- **An ability to move quickly and make decisions:** The Taskforce began meeting on the day that its membership was announced. It then met weekly for several months. The Taskforce had access to timely information and support from across the ACT Public Service and, while an “advisory” body, it was able to provide clear direction to key players in the recovery, and influence the response of agencies working on different aspects of the recovery process.
- **Access to Government:** Throughout the process there were strong links with the Chief Minister as Minister responsible for the bushfire recovery and with senior levels of the ACT Public Service (the Chief Executive of the Chief Minister’s Department was a member of the Taskforce).
- **Independence:** While an advisory body to Government, the composition of the group, including strong representation from the non Government sector in the Taskforce, ensured that it was able to look critically at all aspects of the recovery.
- **Visibility:** The profile and accessibility of the Taskforce created an environment where there was a high level of awareness within the community of the activities of the Taskforce, its priorities and its views on particular issues. Overall, this created a sense of momentum around the recovery process.

In spite of these clear advantages the work of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce would have achieved very limited beneficial outcomes without the essential support of the Taskforce Secretariat, Recovery Centre and Community and Expert Reference Group that are discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter Five

The Taskforce Secretariat



The establishment of a small experienced and focused Secretariat to support the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce with sufficient resources and autonomy to coordinate the recovery and directly undertake some specific recovery initiatives was an indispensable initial and ongoing aspect of the overall bushfire recovery process in the ACT. No Taskforce (committee) the whatever seniority, could achieve the necessary results without dedicated and high quality support for both advice and execution of its decisions.

A fulltime Secretariat was established within the ACT Public Service to support the work of the Taskforce and coordinate the implementation of the Taskforce's decisions.

The Secretariat was headed by Mr Alan Thompson, seconded from his position as Chief Executive of the Department of Urban Services. The Taskforce Secretariat was a small group drawn largely from the ACT Public Service to provide the specialist skills and resources necessary to support the Taskforce and coordinate and manage the wide range of recovery activities within the government and across the community. The Secretariat was led by senior experienced public servants on a full time basis, tasked with ensuring that the recovery process was a key priority throughout the Government and that the needs of people affected by the fires were responded to promptly.

STRUCTURE

Under the overall authority of the Chief Executive to the Taskforce, the Secretariat comprised five functional groups with the following responsibilities which largely mirrored the main sub-parts of the Action Plan:

- **Construction Group** – responsible for coordination of the clean-up of sites and infrastructure restoration (immediate and permanent). With Planning and Land Management/ACT Planning and Land Authority) coordinate the clean-up and reconstruction of destroyed and damaged houses and community and business premises including streamlining of approval processes, issues of trade and building capacity and supplies, and fair trading issues;
- **Community Support Group** – responsible for coordination of ongoing support programs for individuals, households, community groups, businesses and rural leaseholders, and ACT Government personnel affected by the fire, including liaison with the Canberra Community Foundation regarding the

allocation of the Bushfire Appeal funds. Organising the provision of medium term accommodation, in consultation with Housing ACT;

- **Strategic Group** – responsible for coordination of longer term issues including urban planning, the urban/bush interface, support for the Non-Urban Study, forests, national parks, planning, vegetation, relationships with other parties (NCA, ANU) and integration of the lessons learnt into these issues;
- **Communications and Community Relations Group** - responsible for public information and media relations, coordination of intra-government communications for the Taskforce, and management of the formal community/business/expert consultative process through the Community and Expert Reference Group; and
- **Project Management and Budget** – responsible for provision of project management, budget and administrative support for the Taskforce and Secretariat. Secretary to the Taskforce.

Further information regarding the specific composition of each of these groups is discussed in subsequent chapters of this report. However, there are a number of key issues regarding the establishment and management of the Secretariat as a whole that warrant discussion.

OPERATION, CHALLENGES AND RESPONSE

The size and characteristics of the ACT Public Service had both positive and negative impacts on the establishment and conduct of the recovery.

The relatively small size of the ACT Public Service as a whole meant that there was a good knowledge of the skills, attributes and experience of staff who could contribute to the recovery effort, and there were good personal networks across the Service. Balanced against this benefit was the negative impact on mainstream programs through the very short notice transfer of key staff to the Secretariat at a time of new and emerging priorities. The high level of continuing performance by the ACT Public Service in response to these challenges has provided a very strong demonstration of the overall capabilities and commitment of the Service.

The ACT Public Service is also uniquely placed to respond to the challenges of the recovery as a result of its responsibility for both state and local government functions. This meant that there was a range of people available with a broad and diverse range of experience, including both policy development and detailed program delivery experience across a wide range of areas.

Key reasons for the Secretariat's ability to respond to the challenges it faced included:

- **Built in flexibility:** The approach taken by the senior staff within the Secretariat was to encourage flexibility and adaptability. Staff were able to work within very broad parameters;
- **Ability to create a constructive organisational culture quickly:** Staff surveys identified a high level of motivation within all levels of the team, with many individuals commenting that their involvement was amongst the 'best experiences in my life'. Staff saw an organisation where individuals had a high

level of autonomy, personal accountability, and access to senior staff, and were encouraged to take risks. Even though there was considerable turnover of staff through the management of the recovery, high levels of motivation and personal commitment were maintained;

- **Ability to identify the necessary skill sets, and task people quickly:** As new priority issues were identified, the management team was able to source individuals with the appropriate skill sets. The appropriate matching of jobs with individuals meant that the senior team was able to move forward confidently and rapidly with highly skilled teams;
- **Ability to identify areas where the Secretariat needed to provide direct services:** While the Secretariat role was primarily to coordinate and support the whole of Government recovery response, it was clear that there were a number of key activities which did not fit neatly into mainstream services. The Secretariat and the Recovery Centre took over responsibility for these aspects of the recovery, such as the provision of public information;
- **The retention of the Recovery Centre beyond the initial emergency response:** Responsibility for the Recovery Centre was transferred to the Recovery Taskforce in mid February. The operation of the Recovery Centre is addressed at Chapter Six;
- **Recognition of the value in some cases of outsourcing, notably the coordination of the clean-up process.** It was quickly apparent that if the clean-up took place on an individual household basis, progress would be slow (which was a concern as there were significant safety issues associated with destroyed and damaged sites), disruptive (particularly due to traffic) and expensive. Therefore the Taskforce opted to appoint an external project manager (Bovis Lend Lease) to manage these processes. This initiative is discussed in detail at Chapter Eleven;
- **Recognition of activities for which specific areas within the ACT public sector had responsibility:** Examples included agencies that had lost Government owned assets (with the most significant of these being Housing ACT which lost 88 publicly owned houses), and Planning and Land Management (the predecessor of the ACT Planning and Land Authority [ACTPLA]) that had responsibility for planning and building approvals in the ACT. In these cases, the Secretariat maintained links with the relevant organisations, and monitored progress to ensure that there was a consistent approach and any issues raised by the community were followed through; and
- **Establishment of project management tools that allow easy management oversight and reporting:** The many issues identified during the recovery needed to be recorded, allocated to responsible agencies and addressed. Information regarding progress on issues was also being required by a number of groups, including the Government, Taskforce, Reference Group and the public.

LESSONS LEARNT

As is the case with any major activity, there are a number of lessons learnt that would help if a similar response were needed in the future:

- **Importance of pre-planning:** Although emergency management arrangements provide a considerable level of guidance in relation to recovery activities, it will be useful to have completed a level of pre-planning in relation to undertaking a future large scale recovery activity. This should include having accommodation options identified for a team of people needing to commence work immediately, as well as a pre arranged outline organisational structure for such an event.
- **Selecting a recovery team:** It is important to recognise the value of involving some people who had been involved in the emergency. Having this understanding and knowledge of how the January 2003 emergency unfolded was particularly useful in the early stages of setting up the recovery arrangements.
- **Moving from emergency to recovery:** Staff involved in the emergency and initial response need to be provided with an opportunity to participate in debriefing activities.
- **Organisational arrangements:** the development of a three tiered management arrangement which included the Government, Taskforce/CERG, and Secretariat was of great benefit. However, the resources required to service these bodies were significant.
- **Maintenance of core team:** It became evident that it is critically important to maintain a core team after the initial phase of work has been completed. The ACT Bushfire Recovery Secretariat will continue, with progressive reductions in staffing levels, through to the end of the 2003-04 bushfire season. This approach will ensure both appropriate support for the recovery and an effective transition of ongoing services to mainstream government programs.

Chapter Six

The ACT Recovery Centre



The Recovery Centre at Lyons has become the centrepiece for the provision of individual and community support for those affected by the January 2003 bushfires. The case management service approach and the provision of a wide range of government and community-based support services in one location has been an outstanding success and offers a compelling model for the future provision for community-focused services, at least in some cases, notably where the customer requires a holistic service and where community building and rebuilding in a geographical area is involved.

Planning for the establishment of a Recovery Centre began as soon as the extent of the disaster became evident. The decision to set up the Recovery Centre was made by the Community Recovery Coordinator within the responsible Department, Education, Youth and Family Services. The ACT Recovery Centre was established on 24 January 2003 and located at Lyons Primary School, close to many of the affected areas.

The Recovery Centre was established as an entry point and “first stop” shop for information and assistance, and provided a coordination point for practical and emotional support via a team of recovery workers and community agencies.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CENTRE

The site needed considerable preparation to house the many services required, and staff had to be recruited and rostered to provide services for twelve hours a day in the first instance.

As there was no specific site ready to inhabit, the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services was faced with the significant task of readying the building once identified. Painters, cablers, glaziers, telephone technicians, the ACT Government IT services supplier, carpet layers, carpenters, electricians, security, cleaners, furniture suppliers and warehouse staff worked around the clock to get the facility operational. This Centre was operational only five days after its conception.

FROM ONE STOP SHOP TO FIRST STOP SHOP

The Recovery Centre rapidly became known as the place to go for information or to access any aspect of recovery.

Advertised in radio, newspaper and television announcements as 'the contact point', the Recovery Centre quickly developed a role and identity. This resulted in early registration of bushfire-affected residents for assistance – on its first day of operation, 375 families registered and 172 Hot-line calls were taken. As this process occurred, the ongoing role, activity and response required by the Centre emerged as staff gained a better picture of the level and type of impact sustained by clients.

Initial tasks included:

- coordination of volunteers;
- management of donations;
- establishment of databases to manage registrations; and
- administration of ACT Government grants.

With the establishment of ongoing recovery arrangements, operational responsibility for the Centre was transferred from the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services to the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat on 12 February 2003.

In the first three to four weeks, the Centre was the service delivery point for all relevant recovery services (disaster relief grants, accommodation, clothing, food, property assessment, replacement of birth certificates, personal support, counselling, and income support).

These services were provided by government agencies, community organisations, businesses and charities. Located at the Recovery Centre in the initial weeks were The Salvation Army, Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul, the Insurance Council, Centrelink, Housing ACT, ACT Planning and Land Management, Registrar General's Office and Bovis Lend Lease. Counselling and staff debriefing was provided by Australian Catholic University, Canberra University, ACT Mental Health and school counsellors.

Outreach services also were provided from the Recovery Centre from its opening. The outreach teams were initially comprised of staff who were released from government agencies and community organisations. These included the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Relationships Australia, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and the Southern Area Mental Health Service (NSW) as well as various human service professionals in private practice.

As immediate survival needs were met, organisations began to return to their usual offices, but many maintained special teams for fire-affected people, and maintained close links to the Recovery Centre. Through this process, the Centre moved from providing the central point for the provision of all services, to the point where information, referral and additional assistance could be accessed.

It became an important input to the policy and program design work of the Secretariat and the Taskforce, because of its close contact with clients and their needs. It is important to note that there was a seamless connection between the Recovery Centre and the rest of the Secretariat.

THE RECOVERY CENTRE MODEL OF SERVICE

After the initial phase, the Recovery Centre adopted a service model designed to support people and communities affected by the fire to manage their own recovery. It was recognised that these communities were strong and healthy in their own right, but would need special assistance to support them through this significant and traumatic event.

The model put in place has been an integrated mix of case management and community development. Information regarding community development activities is provided in a subsequent chapter in this report.

Case management provides an individualised or family-unit level service response complemented by community development work, whereby issues reflected in family units are responded to with community-wide information, support and education programs. The development of the model was guided by the Community Recovery Sub Plan of the ACT Emergency Management Plan and the Emergency Management Australia (EMA) Guidelines on Delivery of Disaster Recovery Services.

Case managers, known as Recovery Workers, provide:

- Personal support to individuals, families and the community through the recovery process via home visits, office drop ins and telephone contact;
- Assessment of the social, emotional, financial and practical needs of individual, families and the community in the short, medium and long term;
- Information about services and support available and smooth access to these services;



An international quilting bee produced over 500 quilts for fire-affected families. Quilts from all over Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada were displayed at the Great Hall of Parliament House prior to distribution to fire-affected families.

- Advocacy for flexibility in service provision by government and non-government agencies; and
- A conduit between affected individuals and the Taskforce through provision of information and feedback on concerns and issues.

In non-disaster circumstances these interventions are provided by separate government agencies applying different criteria. In the model chosen to respond to this disaster, case management and community development approaches have been integrated to provide a holistic service to individuals, families and communities. The model provides dedicated, flexible, accessible and quick service to people in distress. Pathways are sought for people through organisational silos, and “red tape” is unravelled or cut.

MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING MODEL

Recovery Workers were provided initially by the NSW Department of Community Services and Victorian Department of Human Services. These departments have responsibility for community recovery in their own States and provided valuable assistance until Recovery Workers could be recruited from within the ACT.

Recovery Workers have since been drawn from all ACT government departments, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and community agencies. They have been recruited from a range of disciplines: social workers; psychologists; community workers; youth workers; community nurses; and housing workers.

This model is a good example of “joined-up government” and is enriched by “government joined up with community”. The Salvation Army and Anglicare have a strong team presence at the Centre, providing friendly home visiting to vulnerable people. Communities @ Work (Tuggeranong and Weston Creek Community Services), and Woden Community Services, have provided community development services from the Centre.

At the time of writing this report a staff member from a community organisation manages the Recovery Centre rural team, providing an excellent example of how the Public Service and the community have come together in a team structure.

Management at the Recovery Centre is characterised by a flat structure and an energetic, flexible, can-do approach. Staff report that this is the best job of their lives, because they can use all their skills and initiative, and achieve results for people.

There is a Centre Manager and an administrative team which maintains budget, records and databases and provides reception, donations and call centre staff. Anglicare and The Salvation Army representatives are housed in the building, along with their stock of clothes and provisions. There are four response teams with a Team Leader and four or so Recovery Workers for the regions Duffy, Chapman/Kambah, Rural and Suburbs, all Other (SAO).

Some very effective work has been undertaken in partnership with Bovis Lend Lease, and Planning and Land Management (later the ACT Planning and Land Agency), and Housing ACT. The “hard hats” and the helping professions have influenced each other in the way they have undertaken their work. For an example of this influence, see the report on the Disaster Relief Grants program at Chapter Eight.

ACT Health and Relationships Australia have provided professional counsellors at the Recovery Centre. These counsellors provide face to face sessions for people seeking assistance with stress, depression or anxiety arising from their experiences in the fire. These services are easily accessible and there are no waiting lists. Mental health and counselling issues are expanded on later in this report.

CONCLUSIONS

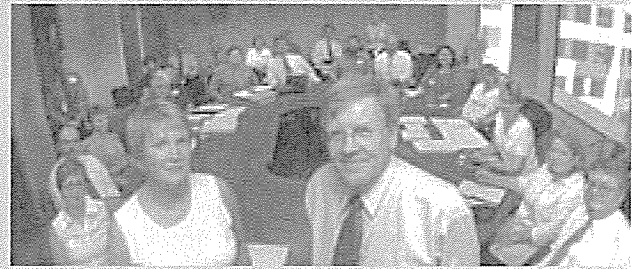
The keys to the success of the work of the Recovery Centre have been:

- The adoption of the joint case management and community development model that has proved to be a most powerful way of supporting individuals, families and communities at the same time; and
- The joined-up government and community response. People have really appreciated the fact that they can get a wide range of government and community services from the one location.

The Recovery Centre at Lyons provides an excellent example of what is possible in service delivery and may well provide an alternative model for the future provision of community focused government services.

Chapter Seven

The Community and Expert Reference Group



The Community and Expert Reference Group (CERG) has provided the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce and the ACT Government with an essential channel of two-way communication to ensure that the recovery strategy was informed by community views and needs, and by local knowledge and expertise from community groups, fire-affected residents, unions, the business community and the Commonwealth. The CERG has been given a continuing role until March 2004. In coordinating and leading the overall community response to a disaster on the scale of January 2003, a body such as CERG is considered to be essential.

The background to the establishment of the Community and Expert Reference Group (CERG) is set out in Chapter 2. This chapter describes the membership, roles and approach of the Group.

COMPOSITION

The members of the CERG are:

- Ms Elizabeth Whitelaw, lawyer and Immediate Past Chair of the Canberra Business Council (Chair 3 February to 30 June 2003)
- Mr David Dawes, Executive Director, Master Builders Association of the ACT (Chair from 30 June 2003)
- Ms Karla Ries, Duffy Primary School Parents and Citizens Association
- Ms Liz Tilley, Duffy resident (home destroyed)
- Ms Joanne Matthews, Kambah resident (home destroyed)
- Dr Tony Griffin, rural lessee
- Mr Jeff Carl, Weston Creek Community Council
- Ms Catherine Townsend, Institute of Architects
- Ms Claire Middleton, ACT Division, Planning Institute
- Mr Peter Malone, Unions ACT
- Ms Nicola Davies, Conservation Council
- Mr Daniel Stubbs, ACT Council of Social Service



CERG was established as the key link between the taskforce, those affected by the bushfires and the ACT community as a whole

- Mr Chris Peters, Chief Executive, ACT Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Mr Richard Tindale, business sector
- Ms Annette Ellis MHR (Member for Canberra)
- Senator Gary Humphries (Commonwealth representative)

ROLE

The role of the CERG is to:

- reflect the views of the community to the Taskforce, and input the views of the community into the recovery process;
- facilitate dialogue between the Taskforce and the community so as to regularly advise the Taskforce on issues of concern;
- work with the Taskforce to tackle specific issues; and
- assist coordination between the many recovery initiatives being undertaken in the community.

APPROACH AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The CERG has been a focused, committed group who have taken their responsibility of being a conduit for the affected community very seriously. Like the Taskforce, they initially met on a weekly basis and spent significant time raising issues that were of concern to the community. In order to be able to deal with the range of issues raised through the community, the Reference Group organised itself into a number of “core teams”. These included:

- **Business Core Team:** This team considered issues in relation to business, including home-based business, the forestry industry and tourism. While many

of these issues were resolved within the first six months of operation, issues such as support for affected home businesses emerged later in the process.

- **Rural Core Team:** This team considered issues in relation to rural lessees and the environment. Many issues were addressed within the first six months of operation but new issues, especially land-use and the regeneration of the environment, also emerged later in the process;
- **Charitable Organisations and NGO Core Team:** This team considered issues in relation to charities, other non-government organisations, donations, community organisations, and service clubs. The team established and maintained many networks. After an initial phase, CERG's involvement in this area moved from direct input to monitoring;
- **Community Liaison Core Team:** This team considered issues in relation to identification of health (including mental health) and safety concerns, memorials, community information needs, and re-building community. This proved to be one of the most important groups and acted as a key mechanism for community concerns to be voiced;
- **Communication Core Team:** This team considered issues in relation to the communication strategy. It assisted and guided the communication strategy and then moved to a role of monitoring; and
- **Construction and Infrastructure Core Team:** This team considered issues in relation to clean-up, planning and building. With the Community Liaison Core team, this team was active in raising and considering issues faced by people attempting to rebuild.

Amongst other achievements to date CERG has:

- provided direct intervention and assistance on insurance, banking and business issues;
- played an important role in the identification and monitoring of community health (including mental health) and safety issues;
- provided early warning of issues generally, and a channel for communication between the Taskforce, Government and the community in addressing community concerns for both urban and rural residents;
- worked together with community groups on a wide range of projects such as garden and environment clean-ups, and the rebuilding of community assets;
- provided direct feedback to Government so as to assist in the tailoring and streamlining of program delivery; and
- constantly monitored the timeliness of service.

The CERG undertook a process of reflection and review in mid 2003. The results of this review are at Appendix 16.

Lessons

The organisational arrangements set in place for the recovery were effective but not, with the benefit of experience, perfect. The Chair of CERG should have been a member of the Taskforce and CERG members should have been allocated a permanent space and some support from which they could work when in the recovery headquarters

Chapter Eight

Supporting People



This chapter summarises the assistance provided to individuals, households, businesses, rural leaseholders and community groups affected by the fires. Initial expert advice and support from other jurisdictions on how the various forms of financial assistance, advice and other support should be coordinated through the Recovery Centre have been critically important in ensuring that the personal aspects of the recovery have proceeded well. The importance of future housing choices as a key decision point in the response of affected households is also addressed.

As was the case with the immediate response to the disaster, providing direct support to those affected by the bushfires was a key priority for the recovery effort. Soon after the disaster, it became clear that there were many people requiring information, services and support.

The structuring and ongoing management of the community support part of the recovery was greatly assisted by a range of disaster recovery experts. These experts provided guidance on the key issues, and identified areas where there was a need to focus, including supporting people through the decision making and rebuilding process, information on parenting after disasters, counselling and mental health issues, and material support, particularly in difficult times such as winter. Financial support was identified as particularly important and was provided, both through Government grants and through community appeals.

The key plank of the direct recovery response was the Recovery Centre. This Centre was designed to provide a single place for people to go to access the services they required.

THE RECOVERY CENTRE

The ACT Recovery Centre was established on 24 January 2003 at the Lyons Primary School to directly respond to the needs of people affected by the Bushfire. The details of the establishment, structure and operation of the Recovery Centre has been addressed at Chapter Six.



The ACT Recovery Centre has provided the community with a "One stop shop" for all facets of the recovery process

ACCESSING EXPERT ADVICE

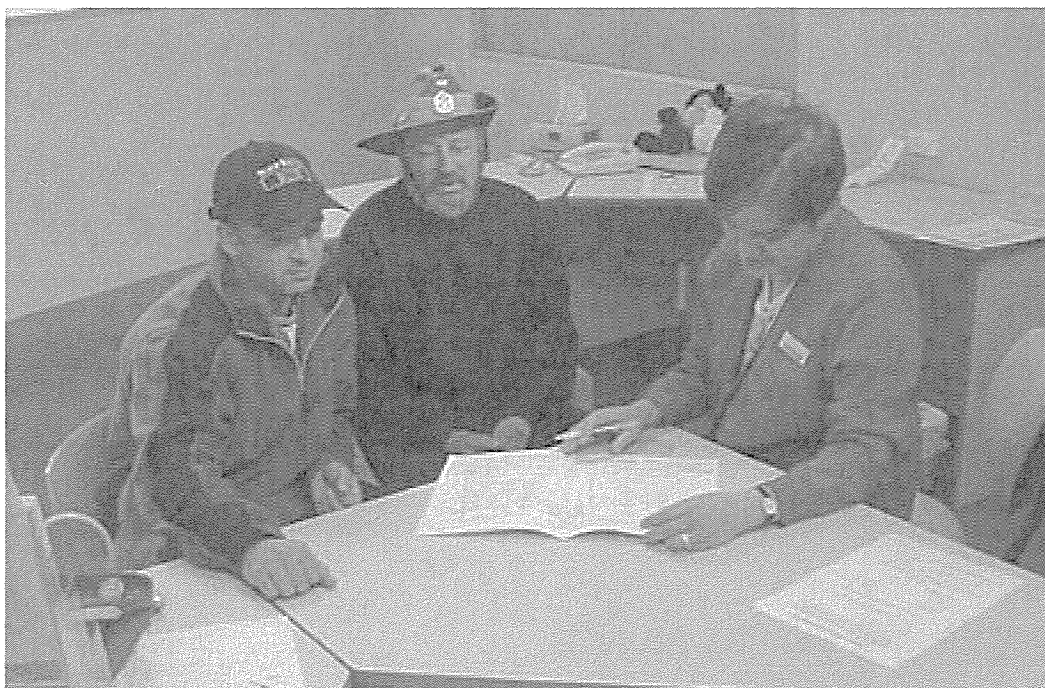
In developing the recovery response, advice was sought from experts in the field of disaster recovery, and the community support strategies used in the recovery effort have been guided by this advice. While this advice was of particular importance at the beginning, it has remained important throughout the whole recovery process.

Recovery Coordinators from the Department of Community Services (NSW) provided valuable advice on financial assistance and recovery arrangements.

Key personnel within Emergency Management Australia (EMA) at Mount Macedon provided ongoing advice and training to Chief Executives and staff from the early days of recovery after 18 January 2003. The National Community Recovery trainer for EMA has provided invaluable assistance to the ACT Community Recovery Coordinator over many years.

Dr Rob Gordon, consulting psychologist, is an expert in the social dynamics of disasters and has provided advice to the Commonwealth, States and Territories following a number of disasters including the Ash Wednesday fires, the Port Arthur shootings and the Bali bombings. In response to the January fires Dr Gordon provided presentations to four gatherings involving people who lost houses, fire fighters, Senior Executives, Taskforce and Secretariat staff, counsellors and Recovery Centre staff. Dr Gordon's work has been very useful in guiding the work of the Taskforce and the Recovery Centre. In particular his work on the stages of community recovery, and the community cleavages caused by disaster, has assisted our understanding of the psychosocial forces unleashed by the bushfire disaster.

Professor Beverley Raphael, the Director of the Centre for Mental Health, NSW Department of Health, addressed counsellors and recovery workers in March. She provided guidelines for managing the traumatised, instructing on psychological first aid, information and education, and targeted counselling for those at higher risk. The NSW Handbook on Mental Health Response to Disasters is a very useful document for the provision of counselling services.



The Building Cost Advisor provides one-on one assistance with housing decisions

Ruth Wraith, child psychotherapist from the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, addressed school counsellors and recovery staff in May. Ms Wraith has extensive experience in counselling children and families affected by trauma in disasters and this knowledge also has been very helpful.

DIRECT ASSISTANCE TO BUSHFIRE-AFFECTED RESIDENTS

Overall Recovery Centre Client Profile

A measure of the number of people most affected by the fires can be seen from the number of people who registered at the Recovery Centre for assistance.

At the end of October a total of 1,585 households have registered, and some 4,041 people live in these households. One-third of these people are under 19 years of age, and 10 per cent are over 60. This is roughly consistent with demography of the area. The Weston Creek district is also characterised by established families with parents 45 and over who have lived there for up to 30 years.

Of the tenanted households, around 48% (81) were public housing tenants, and most of these were living in the rural settlements.

Initial Assistance

The initial efforts of the Recovery Centre were focused on meeting people's immediate needs for food, shelter, medical assistance and clothing. This was largely focused, but by no means limited, to those people who had lost their homes.

However, it was very quickly evident that those remaining in the fire-affected areas also had considerable needs. Many lived without mains electricity for up to three weeks. They had to contend with being confronted by the devastation every time

they looked outside. Parents worked to make the immediate environment one that was safe for their children. Pets, if they had survived, often no longer had fences to contain them.

The Recovery Centre always had an inclusive definition of who was fire-affected. Anyone who defined themselves as fire-affected is able to access support at, and through, the Centre. The Recovery Centre, through the *Community Update*, *The Canberra Times* and community meetings, strongly encouraged everyone who had been affected, in whatever way, to register with the Centre.

Regardless of the material loss, there is often a commonness of experience of 18 January 2003. There is also a need for recognition of that experience.

In the weeks after the fire, assistance was directed towards making the environment a safe one. This included, for example, working with ACT Health to locate swimming pools so that mosquito infestations could be prevented, facilitating assistance so that pools could be fenced, and providing protective kits including masks for people concerned about their exposure to potential airborne hazards such as asbestos.

After these immediate needs were addressed, the focus was on lessening the everyday reminders of the fires. The Gardening Project was a major initiative in relation to this objective and was directed specifically at people still living in the fire-affected areas.

Community Development projects have been designed to include people who have lost their homes and those that remain in the area. There has been a strong need to reconnect with neighbours and to hear each others' stories, often in a very informal sense, of journeys since that day.

Specific Financial Grants

On Sunday 19 January, 2003, the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services was assigned responsibility for the development of a grants program to relieve the personal hardship and distress of people whose houses were destroyed.

An interdepartmental committee was assembled that day, advised by the Department of Community Services, NSW. The Committee met intensively until 22 January, developing eligibility criteria, application forms and advice to staff taking applications.

People who had lost their homes were invited to apply for grants at the Recovery Centre from the day of opening on 24 January 2003. Over three hundred applications were taken on the first day.

Applications were taken by Recovery Workers, initially in the Lyons Primary School hall and later by Recovery Workers in the Centre. Administration has been provided by a grants team within the Recovery Centre, and payments made through the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services.

The Program formally closed on 3 July 2003, and a survey of applications indicates that all occupants of all uninhabitable households applied.

Eligibility

The ACT Government offered two sorts of initial grants for emergency household relief:

- Phase 1 grants - \$5,000 per household for all households who were owner occupiers or renters in the ACT whose houses were uninhabitable; and
- Phase 2 grants - a further \$5,000 per household (a total of \$10,000) for those who did not have household contents insurance.

The grants were not means tested. To be eligible, persons needed to be;

- Either the owner occupier or renter of a property located in the ACT which was declared no longer habitable by the Property Assessment and Recovery team coordinated by PALM;
- For the additional \$5,000, not insured for contents and personal effects; and
- There was to be one grant per household, including group houses, government run group homes and those run by community organisations.

Additional eligibility criteria included:

- Where the house had more than six occupants an additional \$1,000 per occupant was paid.
- For group households, eligibility and distribution of the second \$5,000 was on a proportional basis taking into consideration the insurance status of other members of the household. For families living in the same household, an insurance policy held by any member of the family was taken to apply to the whole family.
- In relation to house sitters, boarders and self-contained flat tenancy arrangements, \$5,000 was paid to the primary householder who tenanted the property at the time of the disaster and other applicants were required to take the matter up with the primary householder regarding a share of the payment except where a separate household was deemed to exist.
- A separate household was considered to exist where evidence of separate living arrangements were provided for in the form of a separate tenancy or electricity account.

Uninhabitable houses

On 28 February 2003, the Chief Minister announced a new process to further examine some fifty houses where there was some debate as to whether they were habitable. Planning and Land Management, this time in partnership with the Recovery Centre, reassessed these houses for their suitability for occupancy, based on the following additional criteria:

- Whether the residents were living in the affected dwelling;
- Whether the residence had all utility services, including water, sewerage, gas and electricity, transport and access to municipal services, such as garbage removal; and
- Whether the residence had functional services in the kitchen, bathroom/s and toilet/s.

As a result, around thirty more houses were declared uninhabitable.

Decision Review

Mr Trevor Boucher, a former Commissioner for Taxation, was appointed to review decisions taken by the Director of the Recovery Centre on grant applications. Twenty-five applicants requested a review of the decision regarding their grant. On the advice of Mr Boucher, the Director changed her decision and paid grants in 11 of these cases.

Special cases where financial hardship is an issue

While almost everyone affected by the bushfires suffered at least some financial hardship the Recovery Centre is aware of only a very small number of people who are in severe financial distress. These situations are being carefully monitored, and donations directed to them where possible.

Financial Assistance

The following financial assistance has been provided to bushfire-affected households during 2003:

Item	Estimated Total Cost/ commitment
Grant to assist in replacing contents (\$5,000 for insured and \$10,000 for uninsured) to the occupants of destroyed houses	\$3.200 million
Grant of up to \$5,000 for those homeowners with building insurance and the cost of a standard demolition for the uninsured to assist with demolition of destroyed houses	\$1.300 million
\$5,000 Grant to owners of destroyed houses rebuilding on the same block (est)	\$0.250 million
Waiver of up to \$7,000 stamp duty on purchase of new home (est)	\$0.700 million
Waiver of fees for development applications etc (est)	\$0.500 million
Waiver of rates to 30 June 2003 and land tax to 31 March 2003	\$0.200 million
Waiver of water and sewerage charges to 30 June 2003	\$0.200 million
Free school bus transport for children who have had to relocate (est)	\$0.044 million
Free plant issue scheme (est)	\$0.043 million
Total	\$6.439 million

For further information on assistance measures, see Chapters Nine and Eleven.

MENTAL HEALTH AND COUNSELLING ISSUES

One of the key activities required by the community centred around emotional support.

Initial Counselling Services

Counsellors, primarily psychologists and social workers from a wide range of agencies (government and non government), volunteered from 18 January to assist in the personal support role in evacuation centres and in the Recovery Centre. This service was organised by the Counselling Committee of the Community Recovery Plan, and Department of Education, Youth and Family Services.

Very effective work was undertaken by outreach teams of counsellors who walked around the affected streets from 19 January until 24 January. These teams provided both a listening ear and very practical support, such as fresh water and toiletries.

Lifeline provided telephone counselling services, and continues to do so. Lifeline also provided the Bushfire Information Service at night, taking over from the Recovery Centre and Canberra Connect.

In the weeks following the fires, Relationships Australia provided face-to-face sessions for people seeking a counselling service, and continue to offer this service at the Recovery Centre.

School counsellors in the government and non-government schools continue to provide services to bushfire-affected children.

Staff from the Australian Catholic University Social Work School provided debriefing sessions for staff coming off shifts at the Recovery Centre.

ACT Mental Health

ACT Mental Health report that there has been very little rise in demand for their services. Initially there were some admissions to the Psychiatric Services Unit of pre-existing patients with mental health conditions who were disturbed by the events. Almost no new clients have approached Mental Health services with bushfire related conditions.

Current Model of Counselling Service

While the Recovery Centre took on longer term staff, ACT Health provided a full time counsellor from ACT Community Care for face to face counselling sessions, in a dedicated counselling room at the Centre. Child and Adolescent Mental Health continues to provide counselling services to children and their families and ACT Mental Health and Relationships Australia provided one counsellor each for adults.

The model of counselling services provided at the Recovery Centre is one of quick and open access. It is a free service. There are no barriers to service and there are no waiting lists. People call and get an immediate appointment. If people cannot come to the Centre, the counsellors visit them in their homes. The counsellors are also available at the many community events organised for the recovery. Many referrals are by word of mouth; people who are satisfied with the service recommend it to others.

The people seeking counselling are, in the main, emotionally healthy people who are experiencing normal reactions to a very disturbing event. Most have never used counselling before, and are reluctant and embarrassed that this might be regarded as some sort of personal failing. In most cases, when people are reassured that these are normal reactions and given strategies to assist with these reactions, there is considerable improvement. The majority of people have one or two counselling sessions, knowing that they can return if their symptoms return and/or are intrusive in their lives.

Many people are using their general practitioners for advice, and a number are prescribed anti-depressant medication.

Analysis of Emotional Health Issues Being Presented

At the time of this report the demand for counselling services is regular and steady; enough to occupy three full-time counsellors. Demand is being carefully monitored, and resources will be increased if there are pressures on the ability to provide quick and easy access. People are offered an appointment within 48 hours of request, and are seen immediately if in crisis.

Recovery workers have regularly reviewed their knowledge of clients and groups of clients and have identified themes and trends emerging over the recovery period. The conditions presented include:

- Everyone in the family feeling “out of whack”, often in different ways; all members of the family presenting with some level of symptoms;
- Sleep disturbance, loss of appetite, mood disturbance, interpersonal problems;
- Anxiety, depression, sadness, feeling flat and lacking energy for life;
- Grief for lost homes, neighbourhoods and friends;
- Anger and resentment at not being warned of the imminent danger, and at loss and injustice;
- Children being clingy with their parents; obsessive play about the fire;
- Children reflecting their parents’ anger; and
- Intrusive thoughts, visual and auditory flashbacks of the fire.

Mental health issues

Over 250 people have been seen by Recovery Centre counsellors; 90% for one to two sessions; and 10% for on going sessions. 40% are children. Children tend to require more appointments than adults, both with their parents and by themselves.

Individuals are also accessing the services of private psychologists. The Australian Psychological Society conducted a survey in the first two weeks of April of the work of registered psychologists in private and government practice. Twenty two psychologists reported that they had seen a total of 165 clients with bushfire related conditions including post traumatic stress symptoms, depression, acute stress reactions and relationship difficulties. Children were suffering sleep disturbances, obsessive behaviour, separation anxiety, regressive behaviour such as bed wetting, and bad dreams.

Relationship issues

In the early days post disaster, people sought counselling around their experiences of the fire itself. Around four to six months after the disaster, people began to seek counselling about relationships and family conflict.

Post Traumatic stress disorder

Expert advice (Professor Beverly Raphael, 2003) indicates that around 10% of the total population of people affected by their experiences during the fires will develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorders. Around 10% of the people using the Recovery Centre counsellors have persisting symptoms, but this is only a sample of the total population. If Professor Raphael is correct, demand for counselling is likely to remain steady and may increase. It will certainly be a long-term need.

Future Service Provision

The continuing effects of this catastrophic event should not be underestimated. Many will recover well, but despite our best efforts some will carry the effects of this disaster for many years. For some, health status and everyday quality of life has been degraded. Health practitioners and community service providers should be alert to this over the next five years, always including a question in their initial interview as to whether a person was bushfire-affected.

Demand for counselling services is expected to remain steady through the 2003-04 bushfire season, and then to taper off. However there could be sudden changes in demand triggered by events such as the anniversary, 'bushfire weather' and the Coroner's Inquiry.

The Recovery Centre is planned to close in March 2004 and planning is underway for the transition of those services that will be ongoing. The best way to meet the ongoing needs of people requiring counselling is being considered. Two possible options are:

- current counsellors to return to their home agencies with a capacity to take some new clients and continue to provide a service to their remaining clients; or
- a counselling team to be retained specifically for bushfire-affected clients, probably located within ACT Health.

It is clear that there will be an ongoing need for counselling services well into 2004 and that the continuity of counselling relationships is a priority. New arrangements must be able to meet the needs of ongoing clients as well as any new referrals arising in 2004.

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF SPECIAL GROUPS DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE BUSHFIRES

Community Organisations

Soon after the bushfires a survey was conducted of over 120 community groups and facilities to identify those directly affected by the bushfires, with the objective of providing special consideration and assistance if required.

Of the groups surveyed, about 65 required some form of assistance, both one-off and ongoing. Assistance was provided by the Secretariat on the basis of community development principles with the aim that these groups were supported to manage their own recovery activities.

The range of assistance provided for affected groups and facilities included:

- information on, and referral to, appropriate sources of assistance;
- linkages with service clubs, the business sector, government and non-government agencies and other community groups who were able to respond to their needs;
- linkages and referrals to sources of financial assistance such as the Bushfire Appeal, Business ACT Grants and government funding programs;
- ensuring affected community based service delivery organisations were identified and assisted where needed, eg via contract variations with government contracting agencies;



Two happy children, who attended a camp for bushfire-affected children in September. The camp was organised by The Salvation Army with support from the ACT Recovery Centre

- matching groups' needs with expert and in-kind assistance by service club members in areas such as business planning, working bee teams, coordination and group facilitation. In many instances linkages made between service clubs and affected groups have developed into ongoing relationships;
- provision of computers to replace those lost or damaged in the fires;
- referring affected organisations' lists of equipment replacement needs to the Chamber of Commerce for matching with business sector donors and publishing these needs in the Community Billboard, *The Canberra Times*;
- provision of grants via the Bushfire Recovery Community Grants Program for community driven recovery projects; and
- assisting with a range of efforts to gain corporate donations and sponsorship for affected groups.

A significant issue for severely affected small organisations was funding. Most of the affected organisations were unfunded or received project specific funding rather than operational funding. Many were underinsured or uninsured and revised their budgets to cope with a shortfall in replacing equipment and facilities or paying for alternative accommodation. Overall, their financial needs have been relatively modest.

The ACT community has responded to many of these groups' plight and donated funds towards their recovery. Several groups received grants via:

- the Bushfire Appeal;
- Business ACT Bushfire Assistance Grants, and
- The Taskforce Community Recovery Grants Program.

The Bushfire Recovery Secretariat continues to provide support to these organisations.

Several of the initiatives instigated to provide assistance to these organisations have been very successful:

- The Rotary Round Table which is facilitated by Rotary and involves the Scouts, YMCA, Outward Bound and Greenhills in discussion about the practical redevelopment of destroyed youth outdoor recreation programs and facilities continues to meet and find shared solutions;
- The use of *The Canberra Times* Community Billboard to advertise the equipment needs of these groups has been successful in getting some equipment donated to these groups; and
- Linkages and referrals are still being made between organisations needing specific types of assistance and those who are able to respond to their needs.

Businesses

Through the Bushfire Business Assistance Package, the ACT Government assisted fire-affected businesses (including home-based businesses) and rural leaseholders in the recovery process. The package was established with a \$3,000 grant component and a loan interest subsidy component, both of which were designed to provide business owners with quick financial assistance to re-establish their business operations.

Applications for the business assistance package closed on Monday 30 June, and by the end of August, 191 applications for the grant had been approved. Twelve applications did not meet the assessment criteria and were not approved. An independent reviewer was appointed to handle the appeals process and assessed four of the declined applications. Three of those applications were subsequently approved.

The Loan Interest Subsidy Scheme is a subsidy for interest charged on loans taken out by businesses and rural leaseholders to repair damage and to cover capital or intellectual property loss resulting from the fires. Seventeen applications were lodged for loan interest subsidies. To date two applications for the loan subsidy scheme have been processed and four applicants are still in the process of finalising paperwork. The remaining eleven have not completed the application process.

Bushfire Business Counselling

In response to a demonstrated need for business counselling and mentoring support for fire-affected business operators, the ACT Government commissioned two consultant and business advisory firms to provide business counselling and mentoring services to all fire-affected businesses registered with the ACT Government.

Both firms worked closely with BusinessACT and the Recovery Centre to identify businesses that suffered significant hardship in the months following the fire, and provided coordinated support to individual businesses.

Computer Allocation

To further assist in the rebuilding process, the ACT Government coordinated the distribution of donated second hand computers and replacement software to fire-affected businesses registered for the Bushfire Business Assistance Package.

Rural Leaseholders

Most farmers and graziers saved their homes but lost many hectares of pastures, kilometres of fences, livestock, numerous outbuildings (silos, stables, sheds), gardens and feed that had been purchased due to the prevailing drought. Scarce water from their dams and tanks was taken not only to defend their own property but also the property of others. Rural leaseholders were already suffering from a severe drought and a number of leaseholders had suffered from the previous bushfires of Christmas 2001.

In the days and weeks immediately after the disaster Environment ACT provided a range of support to rural lessees. They coordinated vets to attend to animals that had been burnt by the fires and arranged for the animals to be euthanised and buried where this was required. In partnership with NSW Agriculture and the NSW Rural Land Protection Board, fodder (cereal straw) was provided initially to leaseholders. In the first month after the disaster a 100% rebate was provided for fodder transportation costs, with a 50% rebate provided in the following months.

Repairs were undertaken to roadside fences to prevent animals from wandering onto roads and leaseholders were provided with chemicals to prevent the spread of weeds. Assistance removing dangerous trees was provided and activities aimed at preventing soil erosion were undertaken.

What little water was left in farmers' tanks after the bushfires was polluted by ash washed from their roofs. Local rivers and creeks were also polluted with ash and other fire debris, preventing potable (drinkable) water from being pumped to replenish tanks. A partnership between the Bushfire Recovery Centre, The Lions Club and AAA All Areas Water Carrying, with the assistance of The Salvation Army and Anglicare was formed to provide a one off delivery of full tanks of water to all rural residents who do not have access to bore or town water. Recovery workers and The Salvation Army have also delivered bottled water to rural residents.

Rural lessees were also eligible for support through the Bushfire Business Assistance Package including the \$3000 grant.

Rural Settlements and Communities

The Recovery Centre Rural Team has also been working to support the residents and former residents of the one-time forestry settlements at Uriarra, Pierces Creek and Stromlo and those whose community is centred on the village of Tharwa.

Uncertainty surrounding the future of non-urban Housing ACT settlements has been an added complication in the recovery process for residents who have lost their homes, their community and their lifestyles to the fire. This matter has been addressed in the Report of the Non-Urban Study, *Shaping Our Territory* that is referred to at Chapter Two and Appendix 8. The *Shaping Our Territory* report of the Non-Urban Study has recommended that, subject to further detailed studies, the destroyed villages be replaced. A Government decision on this recommendation will be important in providing residents with the ability to make decisions and move on through the recovery process.

Many of the residents and their families have lived in these settlements for most of their lives.

It has taken time to build relationships with rural residents in general to a point where they are willing to accept help. Several community groups are now emerging or reforming in the rural areas and the Rural Team, in partnership with community organisations such as Woden Community Service and The Salvation Army have been able to offer further support and help to these groups. This assistance includes hands-on assistance and advice in secretariat and administrative services, facilitating meetings, organising community reunions through BBQs and coffee sessions, debriefing sessions, school fairs and garage sales.

Equestrians

There are a number of properties in rural ACT that provide a variety of agistment and equestrian services to Canberra horse enthusiasts. Two of the hardest hit were the National Equestrian Centre and the Canberra Equestrian Centre. The proprietors, assisted by their customers, fought valiantly to save horses and property in traumatic conditions. Three of the worst injuries sustained from the fires were incurred at one of the Equestrian Centres. Twenty-six horses were lost at one centre (of approximately 35 that were lost in total to the fires).

The Rural Team conducted meetings at the two hardest hit centres and have provided individual assistance to the proprietors and many of their customers. The Recovery Centre provides ongoing support and counselling as required.

NSW Residents

There are a number of rural families, some of whom are registered with the Recovery Centre, who are actually residents of NSW. Some of these families have properties that straddle the border; others have boundary fences that form part of the border. In many ways these people are part of the ACT community even though they live in NSW. They often work in the ACT, send their children to school in the ACT, and spend their money in the ACT. The Rural Team has provided some assistance to border people and is working with Anglicare to provide further support.

EMERGING AND ONGOING NEEDS

Second wave issues – onset of winter

It became clear that the severe winter conditions experienced in Canberra was going to place significant stress on families who had lost all their possessions in the January fires.

It was agreed that it would be useful to develop a winter warming campaign. This campaign was developed with two components. Housing ACT residents were identified as a particularly vulnerable group. The Uniting Church supplied each family with a winter warming basket, full of essential winter items. The second campaign involved the coming together of the major charities and the ACT Government to fund vouchers, through Target stores, for each person who resided in an uninhabitable property at the time of the fires. Both campaigns were successful.

The June “Winter Warmers” initiative, which brought many of the fire-affected back into direct contact with the Recovery Centre, revealed that many people were still hurting. The Rob Gordon workshops had predicted this trend to emerge once people got through the first phase of post-disaster and the initial coping with the practical aspects of survival and life in temporary accommodation. A second phase was predicted, where possible changes and stresses within the family unit and close relationships would be revealed. This duly happened, with an increase in numbers of children and families seeking counselling.

Interim Accommodation

The most identifiable group of affected residents were those who lost homes in the fire. Their immediate needs were clear, and the range of assistance packages provided have been discussed earlier.

However, there was concern about their ongoing needs, particularly in relation to medium term accommodation. While most households were able to secure some kind of immediate emergency accommodation, it became clear that there would be a need for them to secure alternative accommodation, either permanently or while they rebuilt their homes.

The early information provided when this group of people had registered at the Recovery Centre included the use of a range of emergency accommodation including



The fire-affected Canberra community received donations from communities in Australia and around the world including Japan, USA, England, Canada, New Zealand and the European Union

staying with family and friends, hotel and motel accommodation. Based on this information, the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce was concerned that a medium term accommodation crisis might be faced.

Initial Housing Intentions Survey

To respond to this issue, the Taskforce commissioned a survey of households who had lost homes in the fire. This survey was conducted through February 2003 and included 403 of the households who had lost their homes. The Survey found that:

- 44% of all bushfire-affected households or 65% of owner-occupiers planned to rebuild;
- 32% of those interviewed indicated they would require additional interim accommodation before permanent accommodation is secured. However, of the 32% only a quarter of this group (33 households) indicated that they would require Government assistance with their housing arrangements (mainly due to financial reasons);
- Current housing arrangements included 48% renting from private landlords, 10% renting ACT Government (Housing ACT) accommodation, 18% living with relatives, 14% living with friends, 3% living in serviced apartments or hotels, 1% in Caravan parks and 7% in other arrangements;

- The majority of those who were living with friends and family were planning their future accommodation requirements such as private rental or purchasing permanent accommodation.

These results showed that temporary accommodation did not appear to be as big an issue as first thought. However, there was a small group of people who did believe they would need assistance.

Second Housing Intentions Survey

In May 2003, the Taskforce was again concerned about the issues facing residents who had lost their homes. In particular there was concern about the potential of accommodation assistance through insurance arrangements coming to an end. As it was always the intention to contact residents again, the Taskforce commissioned a second survey. 340 residents were contacted, and the survey found that:

- Around half of owner-occupier households planned to rebuild their dwelling. Around one quarter had sold or planned to sell their land, and another quarter had still not made a decision (although most in this group believed they would have made a decision by September 2003);
- fewer households now had a definite intention to rebuild on the same block of land (falling from 64% in February 2003 to 52% by June 2003) and most of these rebuilding households had never experienced building a house before;
- a large minority (23%) of previous owner occupier households had not made a decision to rebuild, mostly because of concerns about rebuilding costs;
- financial issues and rebuilding complexity were the main negative factors causing the land to be sold; and
- A small number of households might require housing assistance between June to August 2003 because their insurance coverage to assist private rental arrangements would soon expire. Another eight households could be in a similar situation before end of December 2003. Across the total of 488 dwellings destroyed, 40-45 households were assessed as possibly requiring emergency accommodation during the rest of 2003 (a similar estimate also emerged from the February 2003 survey).

Following the second survey a range of rebuilding assistance measures were being introduced. In addition, work commenced with bushfire-affected residents who had identified the need for further assistance (see Chapter Eleven).

These surveys provided a sound evidence base for the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce to move forward in relation to temporary accommodation issues. The use of a market research tool to collect information was an unusual approach. While surveys are not necessarily the right approach to collect data in relation to social policy issues it was considered appropriate in this case because:

- The process could be put in place quickly;
- Specific survey research skills were not easily identified in-house;
- The client group was easily identified and accessible;
- In-house people were fully engaged with case work and issues resolution and could not be diverted from this task.

In using the survey approach, there were a number of considerations to be taken into account.

- The survey needed to be packaged in a way that was easily accessible to a traumatised and vulnerable community: introductory remarks were particularly important to 'get right'. There was the need for people to understand who they were being contacted by, why, and what would be the result of this contact. In addition, good public information about the process was needed so that people were aware why they were being approached to participate.
- Mechanisms needed to be in place to respond to traumatised people. In this instance, the market research company commissioned by the Taskforce was given very clear instructions about how to respond to people who needed further assistance. Close linkages with the Recovery Centre ensured that people were looked after through the process.
- It was important to ensure flexibility and appropriate briefing. The company involved understood at the beginning of the process that calls may take longer than usual, due to the nature of the task and the particular situations and experiences of the targeted group.

It is interesting to note that before proceeding to the first survey, a month after the fires, the Taskforce weighed carefully whether it might be seen as intrusive. It was decided to proceed—with sensitivity and care—because the Taskforce felt it must get a better grip on people's accommodation needs in order to anticipate a possible problem. It could be said that conducting the surveys were a positive, not only as a source of data, but also as an indication of real concern about those affected by the fires and determination to help to the extent possible.

Housing ACT residents 'Return to Home'

Urban Housing ACT properties that were destroyed will begin to become available for families to return to before Christmas 2003. The Recovery Centre and Housing ACT have developed a package of assistance to these families, who often face disadvantage, to attempt to prevent significant financial hardship associated with moving house.

Housing ACT will meet the costs of removalists, reconnection of essential services, and assistance towards the purchase of new plants and installation of curtain hardware in all properties. The Recovery Centre has coordinated support from the non-government and charities sector to provide financial and practical support to families. Woden Community Service Inc will provide childcare and school holiday programs for children on the day prior to and of the move, Anglicare will provide families with lunch on the day of the move and The Salvation Army will assess each family's needs and provide financial assistance to help with the purchase of essential items.

CONCLUSIONS

The Taskforce operations in support of people affected by the bushfires confirmed that:

- specific and individualised responses to bushfire-affected clients are the best approach;
- partnerships between government and non-government succeed best in responding to needs;
- community development programs work;
- counselling was vital for individuals and families;
- cross-agency responses and 'joined-up' government services are essential in dealing with crises; and
- good information and data are essential to making ongoing assessment of needs and evaluation of issues.

The approach that has been adopted for people affected by the January 2003 bushfires provides a number of important lessons for the response to future disasters:

- The importance of seeking early expert advice, both through Emergency Management Australia and community services in the States and Territories;
- The recognition that assistance needs to be provided through both financial support and other means such as counselling, general advice and the provision of information. Counselling helps a lot in normalising people's responses to disasters. It is important to provide counselling services for children, adults and couples;
- The fact that people in undamaged houses located in areas of general devastation are also affected and need support;
- The need also to address the impact on businesses, including home-based and rural businesses as well as affected community organisations;
- The need to provide continuing assistance as circumstances change, such as the provision of special assistance during winter;
- The central importance of future housing options and the fact that, for many households, the making of decisions in this area is prolonged and uncertain;
- People manage their own recovery in their own time, given good support and accurate information; and
- The benefit of surveys to acquire data, provided they are conducted with care, sensitivity and professionalism.

After reflecting on community feedback and key lessons from assisting people affected by the bushfires, the Taskforce suggests that the ACT Government should consider:

- continuing to provide case management for bushfire-affected residents until the majority of homes are rebuilt and demand for counselling and emotional support has reduced. The Government has already agreed that specialised services should be available through the Recovery Centre through the next bushfire season;
- continuing to support people, even though they may be at different stages of the rebuilding and recovery process;
- requesting human service agencies to examine the success of the Recovery Centre, and consider the benefits of adopting similar models of service in environments, other than disaster response, for example as a skilled first stop shop for information about human services and the provision of front line assistance; and
- ensuring that the success of the Recovery Centre informs future emergency recovery planning.

Chapter Nine

Involving the Community



The achievement of a stronger community has been a key objective of the overall bushfire recovery. Engaging the community directly in recovery activities, and developing strong partnerships between the Recovery Centre, community groups and organisations has been of great importance. This chapter sets out the various approaches that have been adopted to achieve these objectives including a small grants program to support community initiatives, the garden regeneration project, the involvement of volunteers, the coordination of private and corporate donations, the support of the community-based Bushfire Recovery Appeal and the provision of a community based program recognising contributions to the recovery from all sectors of the community.

Involving the community was a particularly important aspect of the recovery, as the community had demonstrated its ability to drive its own recovery in the early days after the disaster.

It was essential to involve the community formally in the process of recovery, as well as ensure that the principles of community involvement in the recovery were embraced in the model of service provided through the Recovery Centre. There was also the need to ensure that community organisations were able to participate. Amongst other mechanisms, a small grants program was developed to provide a means for the community to develop creative projects that supported the recovery within the affected communities.

The initial community response, while tremendous, did present challenges, notably how to manage volunteers and donations. There was a need to coordinate the community response, both through the community and business sectors and more generally. In addition, there was the need to identify community organisations directly affected, and the level of response and support they needed.

It is very important to acknowledge that differences of view can, and are virtually bound to, arise from time to time, but government and government created machinery such as the Taskforce must not cut themselves off from community spokespeople or groups. Rather, frank discussion of different issues should be regarded as part and parcel of what “partnerships” means in a situation as complex and pressured as bushfire recovery.

FORMAL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN RECOVERY ARRANGEMENTS

Formal community involvement was primarily achieved through the Community and Expert Reference Group (CERG). In particular, the community members of the CERG worked tirelessly with community groups in the affected areas, and facilitated linkages with these groups and government agencies.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AT THE RECOVERY CENTRE

The repair of communities and “community infrastructure” has been an important part of the overall recovery. These functions have been primarily delivered through the staff at the Recovery Centre.

Community development activities have been conducted to help restore the feeling of community within bushfire-affected areas; putting community members back in touch with each other so that shared story telling can happen and common issues can be discussed and addressed.

The framework for community development has been based on the underpinning concepts of disaster recovery as identified by Emergency Management Australia. They include:

- community involvement;
- management at the local level;
- affected area/community approach;
- differing effects/needs for different communities/individuals;
- empowering individuals and communities;
- minimum intervention;
- recognition of community resourcefulness;
- accountability, flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness;
- integration of services – government, community and business; and
- coordination.

Community Partnerships

Establishing community partnerships has been critical to the success of the Recovery Centre. Relationships have been forged with emerging community groups, such as the Phoenix Association and the Chapman Residents Action group, charities, such as The Salvation Army, Anglicare, St Vincent de Paul, and the Uniting Church; community organizations, principally Woden Community Service and Communities @ Work; and other government agencies, such as ACTPLA and Urban Services.

These relationships have been very close and have been typically characterised by pooling of resources (including financial), working collaboratively on projects, shared leadership on projects and a combined team approach.

The ACT Recovery Centre has partnered with community organisations, small businesses, service clubs, charities, schools, companies, residents’ groups, and



The ACT Recovery Centre organised a wide range of community events, including a Health and Wellbeing Expo at Woden Plaza in July.

Commonwealth and State governments to facilitate a diverse range of activities. Examples of these activities are:

- **Bushfire Regeneration Walks:** Walks around the Canberra Hills to encourage residents to re-establish a healthy lifestyle and reconnect with recreation activities. The partners included National Parks Association, various Park Care Groups, The Salvation Army, Kambah Fire Station, and ACT Parks and Conservation Service.
- **Uriarra Community Fun day:** The ACT Recovery Centre partnered with the Uriarra community, The Salvation Army and Woden Community Service to hold a family barbeque at the Uriarra settlement.
- **Winter Warming Campaign:** The campaign sought to provide the residents who had lost their homes with warm clothing, blankets and winter woollies, and household goods. This was a partnership between Lions Clubs of Canberra and District, Uniting Church of Canberra, St Vincent de Paul, Anglicare, The Salvation Army, ACT Government and Target stores.

The ACT Recovery Centre also sought to broaden the impact of its services through the implementation of a community education program to address emerging issues

for specific groups within the affected communities. This strategy aimed to support the broader Canberra community, who had not necessarily been captured in the casework model. Some examples of forums which were delivered, included:

- **“Parenting After Disaster”:** Parenting forums conducted by Dr John Irvine, child psychologist. Partners included Lions Clubs of Canberra and District, The Salvation Army, Parentlink, Duffy Primary School, and St Judes Primary School.
- **“Autumn Reflections”:** A lunch and cruise for the bushfire-affected community aged 70 years+. Partners were Canberra Southern Cross Club, Canberra Cabs, Anglicare, and the ACT Recovery Centre.
- **“Living Well, Being Well”:** An expo providing reminders to individuals and families of the importance of re-establishing their health and wellbeing. Partners were ACT Health and Community Care, Woden Plaza, Little Athletics Association, Environment ACT, Communities @ Work, Heart Foundation, The Salvation Army, Anglicare, Dogs as Therapy, Om Shanti, ACT Fire Brigade, Woden Community Services, Relationships Australia, Scouts, Laughter Clinic, Canberra Youth Theatre, Canberra Museum, Canberra Tourism, ParentLink.
- **“Rebuild or sell”:** An opportunity for the Eildon Place Residents Group in Duffy to discuss issues around the decision-making of rebuilding or selling. The ACT Recovery Centre partnered with the Housing Industry Association, Master Builders Association, ACTPLA and Real Estate Institute of the ACT.
- **“High Quality design”:** The Chapman Residents Action Group have partnered with ACTPLA, the Emergency Services Bureau, Rotary and the ACT Recovery Centre to consider issues of parkland, fire management, neighbourhood voluntary fire units, streetscape and dual occupancy.
- **Salvation Army Children’s Camp:** The Salvation Army, in partnership with the Recovery Centre. During September 2003, 91 children of fire-affected families attended the camp organised by The Salvation Army.
- **Children’s Literary Competition:** The Recovery Centre in partnership with National Library and Rotary. During October in excess of 400 children submitted writings and poetry relating to their experience of the fires.
- **Street meetings:** An opportunity for residents to get together to discuss common issues, develop networks and swap stories. These were facilitated by the Recovery Centre.

The success of the community partnerships model has been the result of its integration with the case management model, the establishment of key partnerships and its integration into the community at the ‘grass roots’. This has enabled individuals and their communities to participate in the management of their own recovery.

The strong support of local businesses in assisting this activity needs to be acknowledged. Without in-kind and material support, this type of activity would have been much more difficult to undertake.

THE COMMUNITY SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM

In April 2003, the ACT Government funded a small grants program, to assist the community to participate in the recovery process. The program was specifically aimed at providing community networks the opportunity to engage in local activity in bushfire-affected areas. These grants were designed to assist the community to:

- rebuild community resilience and connectedness after community trauma;
- re-establish a sense of community and safety;
- regenerate the local environment; and
- be encouraged to recognise the event, yet move on positively.

There were specific parameters placed on the program, with grants required to be small (no more than \$5,000). Assessment criteria included requirements that projects:

- focused on physically rejuvenating an area affected by the bushfire, positively brought affected communities together, provided an established or new community an opportunity to come together or provide an opportunity to remember positive aspects of the bushfire disaster;
- involved a range of partners and local networks;
- provided an opportunity for local communities to drive their own recovery;
- engendered a sense of community spirit.

Fifty applications were received by the closing date of 2 June 2003. This response indicated a high level of willingness to take part in the community recovery process at a time when many of these people were managing their own recovery.

Thirty two applications were supported, reflecting a total budget of \$118,100. While this amount was higher than the initial budget, the quality, spread and number of applications resulted in additional monies being allocated.

Funded projects included:

Schools Projects:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kambah High Growing Plants project • St Judes School Holder Construction for Play • Mt Neighbour Primary School Regeneration Project • St John Vianney School Reflection and Performance Area • Duffy Primary School Greenhouse • Duffy Primary School Parent Recreation Area • St Judes Primary School Irrigation Replacement • Lanyon High and Primary Schools Birrigai Regeneration Project • Weston Creek Primary School Courtyard Regeneration • Shading Stromlo High School Project • Lanyon Schools Cluster Regeneration Project • Duffy Primary School Library Courtyard Project
Environmental Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sukyo Mahakari Regeneration Project • Orana School Hockey Court Regeneration Project • Phoenix Association Private Gardens Regeneration Project • The Woden School Replanting Mt Arawang Horse Farms ACT • Rejuvenation of Blundell's Arboretum • Montessori School rejuvenation of Holder Oval area • Valleys Hockey Club replacement of equipment lost in Bushfires • Uriarra Community Project • Outward Bound Family Regeneration Program • Back in the Saddle equestrian project • Women and Canberra Bushfires Discussion Group and Publication • Phoenix Association assistance for new group • Scouts ACT extension to Camp Regeneration Consultancy Round Table Project • Riding with Zone 16 equestrian project
Arts and Heritage Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pyroglyphics Art Exhibition • King Jack Youth Theatre with Tidbinbilla Reserve • Flints Homestead Redevelopment with Tidbinbilla Pioneers • Phoenix History of Fire-affected suburbs • Tuggeranong Community Arts Community Mosaic • Stromlo History Project

These projects continue to be undertaken within the community. The progress and results of these projects are regularly highlighted in the *Community Update* Newsletter. Through this mechanism, the community is encouraged to become involved in events and see the results of the Community Small Grants Program.

THE GARDEN REGENERATION PROJECT

After the initial period of recovery was completed, it was clear that there was an opportunity to undertake a significant garden regeneration project. Local community associations such as the Phoenix Garden Group and Chapman Residents Action Group had been working with other non-government organisations, but requested that the Taskforce assist them in managing this project. The project provides materials and labour to residents whose gardens were damaged in the fire, and are unable to undertake the task themselves or feel overwhelmed by the enormity of re-establishing their garden. Volunteers and recipients are recruited through *Community Update* and other media.



Students from Canberra Boys Grammar, along with over 100 individual volunteers and numerous corporate and service groups, have assisted at each of the 'Regreening Canberra' Garden Days. The project is coordinated by the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, Anglicare, Phoenix Garden Group and Chapman Residents Association and has assisted over 100 garden owners.

While a number of models were initially discussed, including the option of running a one-off event, it was agreed to run garden regeneration events once a month. From May through to September 2003, these activities were held, involving approximately 20-30 gardens and some ninety volunteers each month and will continue as more homes are rebuilt. Organisations who have provided additional support included Anglicare and Canberra Boys Grammar School. Materials have been donated by the *Ground Force* TV program and many gardening groups and individuals in the community.

This has been a very successful program, resulting in a number of ongoing friendships between volunteers and residents, and restoration of a large number of gardens. Key reasons for success include:

- **its location in the community:** while the Taskforce provided support for this activity, it was a facilitator rather than a leader. Community organisations and associations were the major players who made the project happen;
- **the development of a partnership approach:** the involvement of the community sector, local groups such as schools, key businesses and the Government ensured broad ownership;

- **the provision of administrative support:** in providing a facilitative role, the Taskforce was able to remove some of the administrative burden of the project from community groups. The project ran smoothly and community members were able to be involved in aspects of the project that they were skilled in, rather than being 'buried in paperwork'.

While the program has been successful, there were a number of challenges that need to be acknowledged. They include:

- **keeping the project manageable:** limiting the level of support, and identifying the key groups to be involved assisted in providing a program that was useful, practical and manageable;
- **dealing with liability and insurance issues:** working with volunteers brings with it the issue of appropriate liability insurance cover. The Taskforce is appreciative of the advice provided by Volunteering ACT in managing this issue. Registering events and volunteers meant that volunteers were appropriately protected.

The Garden Regeneration initiative has been a community project, facilitated with government assistance. Volunteers have been regularly called for, and the project sponsored a stall at Floriade 2003, where members of the community were able to donate plants for gardens being regenerated.

VOLUNTEERS, DONATIONS AND CORPORATE OFFERS

Volunteers

Volunteers provided many services in the aftermath of the fires. In many cases volunteers were attached to existing organisations, both Government and non-government. Volunteers were organised to help with a variety of tasks. They were utilised at the evacuation centres, the Recovery Centre, and by those non-government organisations involved in the initial assistance to those affected.

Very soon after the bushfires, there was an overwhelming spontaneous offer of volunteer assistance from many people in the community, both individual and groups. In the two weeks after the fire approximately 1000 volunteers came forward.

An important objective of the Taskforce was to ensure that offers of help from volunteers were acknowledged and utilised where possible.

Most of the calls offering volunteer help were received by Canberra Connect and the Recovery Centre. Volunteering ACT came forward early in the recovery process and offered to expand its usual services to provide the management of volunteers during the recovery process. Importantly, Volunteering ACT could provide insurance cover for volunteers who came under their auspice. Volunteering ACT undertook to register and link the volunteers with organisations who were wishing to involve additional volunteers. The ACT Government met the costs of supplementing Volunteering ACT's insurance to cover bushfire-related volunteers.

Many community organisations involved in the recovery effort utilised their own networks to provide the extra services required and did not call on this pool of spontaneous volunteers. However, Volunteering ACT advertised that

volunteers were available, provided support to the volunteers and matched them to organisations and individual bushfire-affected people. Some 350 people were matched in this way.

Volunteers continue to play a role in the recovery process. They are involved with the organisations that continue to provide support and assistance to bushfire-affected people.

With the spontaneity of volunteer offers after a disaster such as the bushfires, well documented in the literature and so overwhelmingly illustrated after 18 January 2003, the issue of volunteers and the involvement of Volunteering ACT will be addressed in the updating of the Community Recovery Sub Plan of the ACT Emergency Management Plan. This will ensure that the role of volunteers is better defined and understood, and appropriate plans to manage volunteers who offer their services spontaneously after a disaster are put in place.

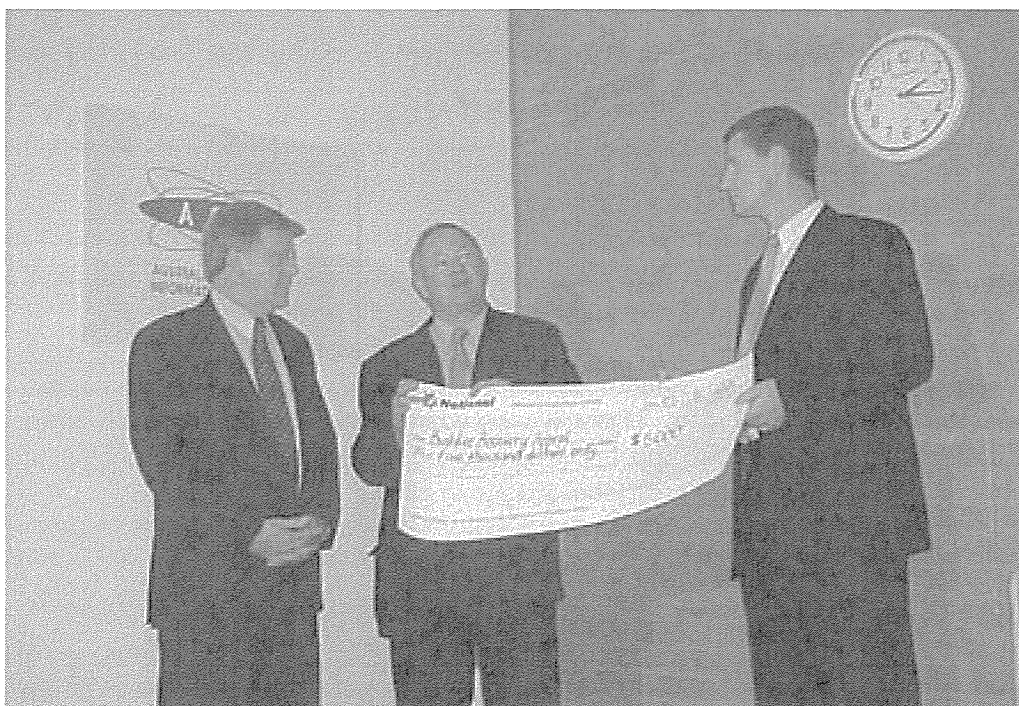
Bushfire Recovery Appeal

Soon after the disaster, the ACT Government moved to establish a Bushfire Recovery Appeal. This appeal was established as an independent community activity to ensure that there was transparency in its management and independence in the allocation of grants. The Appeal was overseen by a Board chaired by two eminent community leaders, with the Public Trustee providing the role of Trustee and Administrator. While this activity was outside the responsibility of the Taskforce, the manager of the Appeal did consult the Taskforce on such questions as how to address cases of special need within the overall distribution of a finite amount of funds. Information regarding the process and lessons learnt has been provided for inclusion in this report by the Appeal. The Appeal is also developing a full report for Government.

The Board and the Management Committee were drawn from the Canberra Community Foundation and had a membership representative of the ACT community and the ACT and Commonwealth Governments.

The Board set criteria for assessing the level of need of all applicants. They were based on a number of key guidelines and principles. In developing the criteria, the Appeal aimed to address issues of fairness and equity in providing assistance for the material relief of those people directly affected by the ACT Bushfires of 18 January 2003:

- Priority was given to those in most financial need and those who were assessed to be in the most difficulty to recover quickly;
- Appeal funds were available for the material relief of households;
- To ensure that the Appeal funds were given to those who are most in need, the Appeal took into account all sources of assistance provided to an applicant;
- Appeal funds were not available to compensate for personal injury, and/or trauma counselling arising from the bushfires. Further, appeal funds could not assist victims of the fires who had lost horses and/or stables;
- People were eligible for assistance irrespective of their insurance status;



Gary Green, Board Member Canberra Bushfire Recovery Appeal receives a cheque for the Bushfire Appeal from the Managing Director of Australian Solutions, Gavan Murphy in the presence of Sandy Hollway. The appeal raised in excess of \$9 million dollars for the fire-affected citizens.

- The Appeal funds were recognised as additional to any insurance payments, government grants, or any other sources of support;
- The Appeal funds were recognised as a generous gift from the community and were not expected to cover the full cost of any loss that may have been suffered. They were to complement any grants or funds received from any other source;
- Small businesses and farm households were able to apply when they had exhausted all other sources of assistance; and
- Applications from community organisations were considered where there had been a direct impact on community facilities in the bushfire-affected area where the facility needed to be available for the relief and assistance of persons in immediate need as a result of the bushfires, and when all other sources of support and revenue has been exhausted.

As noted, eligible groups included households, small businesses, farmers and primary producers, and community organisations. Eligibility criteria were set for each of those groups. In relation to households, the amount of assistance available to householders from the Appeal Fund was based on their level of losses, and who needed it most, with people being eligible for assistance where:

- their primary residence was in the ACT bushfire-affected area;;
- there was a direct or indirect impact of the ACT bushfires on the applicant household; and

- all other avenues of assistance had been investigated.

Some 1268 households, small businesses, primary producers and community groups shared in payments made from the community appeal.

The Bushfire Recovery Appeal has made three rounds of payments to eligible applicants in the first five months after the bushfires of 18 January 2003. The first round of payments were made to successful applicants prior to Easter and Anzac Day. Further rounds have been progressively occurring over the last six months with the final total noted above having been adjusted to cover late applications and appeals. It is anticipated that remaining funds will be provided to charitable organisations that continue to work with these suffering the greatest financial disadvantage.

Generous donations of over \$9 million is an excellent example of the strong community spirit demonstrated after the January bushfires.

The Bushfire Appeal has been very successful in managing the administration, allocation and distribution of grant funds. The Appeal has received an unqualified Audit Report from the ACT Auditor General's Office, and can confirm that all funds received have been used to benefit victims of the fires and no funds have been used for administrative or other purposes.

Some of the reasons that have been identified as being key to a successful program include:

- the decision to establish a process that was at arm's length from and separate to Government;
- the involvement of an independent trustee and administrator;
- the use of current administrative structures, particularly the structure used to administer the established Canberra Community Foundation;
- the involvement of key community leaders who had been involved in previous grant programs;
- the close liaison with the Australian Taxation Office to ensure that all legal obligations were correctly followed;
- working with the Government Solicitor's Office to ensure the trust deed met its obligations;
- working with the Auditor-General to ensure financial compliance; and
- a well-developed internal audit process to ensure process compliance.

Donations of Goods and Services

Following the fires the ACT was inundated with donated material goods from local and interstate donors for people affected by the bushfires. The generosity shown by the local and Australian community was magnificent. The objective of the Taskforce was to ensure that these donated goods were distributed in an efficient and timely manner to the people for whom they were intended and to provide appropriate acknowledgement and thanks for the donations.



Corporate Express, with the support of the ACT Government, donated 250 computers to fire-affected community organisations in the ACT. Pictured with Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, are (L to R): Anita Nyssen and Anthony Baldwin from Corporate Express; Daniel Stubbs from ACTCOSS; and PC recipients Lindell McConnell from Scouts ACT and Craig Webber from Galilee.

The Community Sub-plan of the Emergency Management Plan designates the major responsibility for this task to the St Vincent de Paul Society and notes that they may be assisted by The Salvation Army and the Red Cross. As the donations and offers poured in immediately after the bushfires, a database of donations was quickly assembled and maintained at the Recovery Centre. Names and addresses of people donating goods were kept for reference and later for sending thank you letters. Larger corporate donations were coordinated by the Secretariat. Still other donations were made directly to the charities.

The large volume of donations created many problems for the ACT charities handling their distribution. The problems included pressure on the charities, particularly the St Vincent de Paul Society and The Salvation Army, to immediately match the received goods with people needing them. In the main the charities coped well, but there were some concerns about the perceived rigidity of the processes being used and the perceived lack of understanding for bushfire-affected families by some of the staff and volunteers in the organisations. When these problems were brought to the attention of the charities, changes were instituted to address the concerns. It should be noted that the client profile of those affected by the bushfires was very different to the charities' usual client profile.

Major Charities Committee

The relationships throughout the recovery process between the charities and the Taskforce were very cooperative and mutually supportive and ensured that the distribution of donations worked as smoothly as possible. These relationships were assisted by the setting up of the Major Charities Sub-committee of CERG, and ensuring that representatives of the charities, the Recovery Centre, the business community, members of CERG and the Secretariat met regularly to address issues as they arose.

The Committee also ensured the response was coordinated and that the duplication of effort was minimised. The aim was to ensure that the available resources were used in the best way possible. Initial membership of this sub-committee included representatives of The Salvation Army, the St Vincent De Paul Society, Red Cross, the Smith Family, Volunteering ACT, Anglicare, Lifeline, the Uniting Church, the Recovery Centre, ACTCOSS and the Chamber of Commerce. Later the group was joined by Rotary, Lions and Apex. This coordinated effort and cooperation between these organisations was unusual. It ensured that community welfare and safety was enhanced by spreading scarce resources efficiently and calling on the particular skills around the table for those affected by the bushfires.

Examples of the Committee's work are reflected in the following:

- The St Vincent de Paul Society and The Salvation Army quickly exhausted their own storage resources and required additional supplementary storage. Solutions ranged from the hiring of commercial storage space to the donation of space and containers for storage, with the Major Charities Sub-committee working hard to provide this solution.
- The initiation of the Community Billboard in *The Canberra Times* provided a point of contact for individuals offering and needing goods. Calls to this service were taken by Canberra Connect, checked with the Recovery Centre database and forwarded to *The Canberra Times*. Later the Community Billboard was used to advertise the needs of community groups who lost buildings and equipment in the fires.
- Many generous, but limited offers were made. For example, a number of holidays were donated. These limited offers did not allow for each destroyed household to be recipients. Principles were identified by the Major Charities Sub-committee that supported the view of ensuring these donations were made available as soon as possible. It was agreed that these donations would be distributed on advice from the recovery workers or the Salvation Army counsellors based on need. Donors of limited goods were also asked if the donation could be used in fundraising, for example, as raffle prizes, with the money raised being given to the Bushfire Appeal.

Some very generous donations were made including a queen size bed and linen and a television for each home that was destroyed. Distribution of these donations was a large task and the importance of appropriate identification of bushfire-affected people was highlighted.

Access Card

People who were eligible for donated goods were those people who qualified for the ACT Government Disaster Relief Grant, which was given to those people whose homes were destroyed in the fire. Initially these people were issued with a letter from the Recovery Centre as proof of eligibility for donations. This approach was found to be unsatisfactory as the letters were very easy to copy and did not include enough detail. An access card was designed and provided to each affected household. The card included the names of the people in each affected household and the address of the house that was destroyed and was difficult to copy. In conjunction with a photographic form of identification this card could be used by charities and businesses to identify those people to whom donations and offers were available.

As time went on and the number and volume of donations decreased, staff at the Recovery Centre were able to deal with many donations directly, making them available to people coming to the Recovery Centre.

Once the bulk of donations had been dealt with the focus of the Major Charities Committee changed to identifying and finding solutions to emerging needs. At the time of writing the Major Charities Sub-committee continues to meet and to address emerging needs.

Community Organisations affected by the fires

The Taskforce Secretariat canvassed community organisations that had been affected by the fires and worked with organisations like Rotary to make matches with people who were willing to donate their services. An example of this is the Rotary Roundtable Project that brought together the operators of three facilities which are near the Murrumbidgee River and were badly damaged in the fire. These were the ACT Scouts Association, the YMCA and the Uniting Church (owners of Greenhills) who engaged in a study to re-evaluate their needs, determine what facilities and programs they should offer in the future and analyse a range of partnership opportunities in the Murrumbidgee valley.

Corporate Offers

Following the bushfires many varied corporate offers were made to the Secretariat from businesses in the ACT and NSW who wished to provide goods at discounted rates to those affected by the bushfires. These were distributed quickly and efficiently to households affected by the bushfires.

Initially, the information about offers was made available by Taskforce letter to affected households. In time the offers were combined and published in the *Community Update*, made available on the Bushfire Recovery website, or advised directly to affected households.

Offers ranged from free help and advice, to discounts on household items. The offers were checked before information on them was released. Many of the initial offers were for six months. When it was confirmed that many of the houses would not be rebuilt within this timeframe, many companies extended their offers for at least one year.

The provision of these offers has been greatly appreciated by both householders and businesses.

Community Recognition

There was a need to acknowledge the incredible community response during the bushfires. The ACT Government introduced a community recognition program to provide this recognition on a nomination basis that aimed at being an inclusive rather than 'exclusive' program. The program was advertised through the *Community Update* and other media. A call for nominations resulted in over 2000 members of the community receiving certificates of recognition from the Chief Minister.

Case Study

Lucky—not ‘just a koala’

The 18 January 2003 bushfires changed the lives of many Australian Capital Territory residents—not all were human. The firestorm that ravaged the urban areas also claimed much of the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and most of its inhabitants.

Several days after the fires, a single koala was found alive, but very badly burnt, in the koala enclosure at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. The ACT Government vet Dr Will Andrew was called and he found a koala so badly burnt that he couldn't detect any movement.

The koala was named *Lucky* and she was transferred to the National Zoo and Aquarium where she could be cared for around the clock by Dr Andrew and zoo keepers Simone Bayly and Shelley Tindale. *Lucky's* battle to survive came to the attention of the community after an article in the *Canberra Times*. She became for many people the symbol of recovery – in every sense, the “little Aussie Battler”.

A website, email address and stories in *Community Update* provided the community with information on *Lucky's* progress. To date she has received several hundred emails from all over Australia, the UK, USA, Canada, Asia and Europe. Her media commitments have been numerous. National and international television stations have visited and recorded her story.

Lucky has had a slow and sometimes rocky path to recovery. Her injuries were extensive, not only to her skin, but to her digestive and respiratory tracts, eyes, ears, mouth and nose. Treating *Lucky's* injuries proved to be very challenging. Pharmaceutical companies offered help and provided anti-inflammatory tablets, pain killers, stress relieving medication, eye-drops and skin lotions.

Thanks to the dedication, love and patience of her keepers Simone and Shelley and vets Drs Will Andrew and Susan Bruce, *Lucky* has now recovered sufficiently to enable her to be relocated back to a special enclosure at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

This feisty, cheeky, charismatic and strong-willed koala has become a media star. Her recovery has given many ACT residents pleasure during challenging and difficult times.



CONCLUSIONS

A considered program of how to engage with the community has been an extremely important part of the recovery process. Strategies to ensure engagement, both formally and informally, and through mechanisms including established and emerging organisations, networks and loose groupings have successfully contributed to a program where there is a spirit of partnership throughout the community.

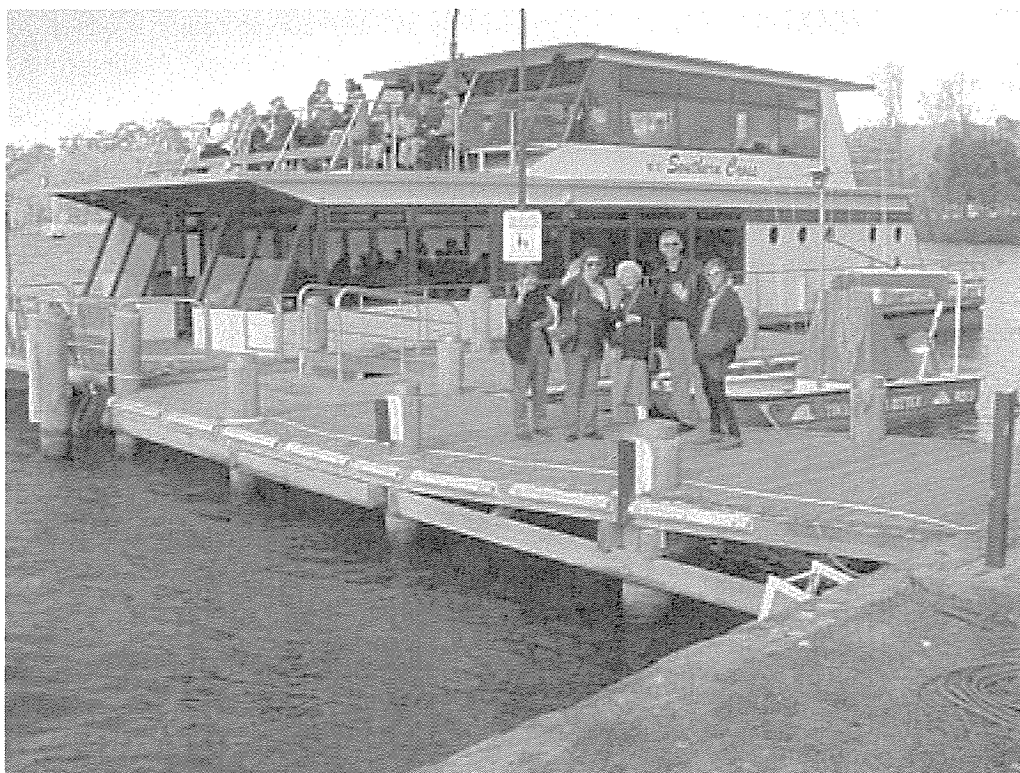
The Taskforce's experience of working in partnership with the CERG, community associations, networks and others has reaffirmed the value of such partnerships, and the need to ensure that:

- groups involving a wide range of community members can provide important insight and perspective in projects; and
- programs which actively promote the empowerment of communities and build community networks are important and successful.

The experience of developing new partnerships and alliances, and establishing projects which facilitated broad ownership of the recovery process has been extremely rewarding for all partners.

In general the distribution of donations progressed smoothly and the aim of providing donated goods in a timely manner to those affected by the fires was reached. Several lessons were learnt:

- Early after any disaster, advice should be widespread through the media that donations of cash rather than goods would be gratefully accepted, with



Approximately 80 older fire-affected residents participated in an "Autumn Reflections" cruise on Lake Burley Griffin. The cruise was sponsored by the Southern Cross Club and supported by Canberra Cabs.

the aim of ensuring that donations of material goods are kept to a minimum, avoiding the problems of storage, sorting and distribution. The influx of new goods from interstate can also have a negative impact on local businesses.

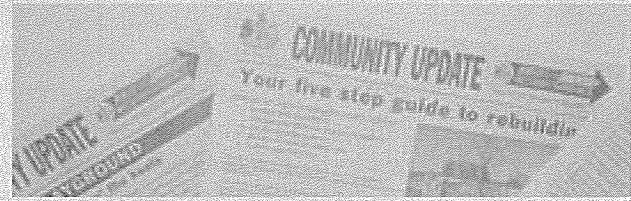
- The distribution of a form of identification, such as an access card, early after the disaster would aid in the distribution of donated goods. Consideration should also be given to the registration form at the Evacuation and Recovery Centres including a section for signed consent to be given for use in the distribution of donated goods.
- The coordination of the effort of charities, business and service clubs through the Major Charities Sub-committee contributed in many ways to the recovery effort and a similar structure should be put in place soon after a disaster as a tool for communication and support for those involved in the distribution of donations and other support issues. Maintaining these relationships in the delivery of mainstream services would benefit the whole ACT community through minimising duplication and making the best use of scarce resources.
- The independent and transparent processes of the Canberra Bushfire Recovery Appeal gave the community the confidence that their financial donations have been distributed wisely.

The Taskforce believes that there are opportunities for the ACT Government to build on many of these successes. In particular, there are opportunities to:

- review the range of current ACT Government community advisory mechanisms, taking into account elements from the CERG model which worked well and may be transferable – for example, the speed with which issues were fed into the system; the access of the group to senior levels of government; the mix and diversity of the group; and the spread of the group across sectors, rather than from specific sectors;
- examine community partnership models utilised through the recovery process, with the aim of identifying aspects of these that can be utilised in ACT Government agencies; and
- ensure that when community input models are introduced, mechanisms to appropriately support community members' involvement are put in place.

Chapter Ten

Informing the Community



The provision of comprehensive and timely information to the community has been another critical and successful part of the overall bushfire recovery. From immediately after 18 January, a multi-channel communications strategy has been adopted making use of the web, call centre, direct mail and letter-boxing of special purpose publications, in addition to the active use of the print and electronic media. Important specific initiatives have included the *Community Update* that has been provided regularly to all affected households and communities, the use of the Community and Expert Reference Group and local community organisations as two-way channels for communication, and the development of a comprehensive bushfire awareness kit and advertising campaign to prepare the community for the next bushfire season.

Throughout the recovery process, communication and provision of public information were clear priorities for the ACT Government and the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce. Early advice from Emergency Management Australia reinforced the need for accurate, timely and comprehensive communication.

The resources required for the overall communication effort were substantial. The changing nature of the issues faced and the broad range of information required by the community proved to be key challenges. The Taskforce also recognised the importance of providing information not only to the community but also to government agencies and non-government organisations.

THE EVOLVING COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE

The Immediate Communications Strategy - From Response to Recovery

Informing the community and responding to their information needs was a key challenge during the emergency period itself. The scale of the disaster was unprecedented in the ACT.

During the emergency, the media (particularly radio) emerged as a major source of information to the community. The media was provided with information to assist people in accessing evacuation centres during the initial recovery process. The media were also able to assist with securing donations from the community to assist with the operation of evacuation centres.

Canberra Connect was the ACT Government's agency for providing public information and links to government services, through a call centre, shopfronts and a website. Canberra Connect provided information and advice for ACT residents during the January bushfires – which occurred in the middle of summer holidays with many Canberra residents away. On the critical days of Saturday 18 and Sunday 19 January 24,000 phone calls were received at the call centre. The Canberra Connect website also recorded over 50,000 visits on the specially constructed Bushfire Status website. Such was the demand for phone information and advice from residents, friends and relatives outside Canberra that the 13 22 81 phone number was initially extended to Australia-wide access and then internationally. On 18/19 January 43% of calls were from outside the ACT. In addition, the Red Cross also established a service to locate displaced people on 18 January 2003.

Ongoing Recovery Communications

Following the immediate emergency period it was clear that the community needed to be informed in relation to recovery. Specifically, the community required contacts and information to assist them to access services and assistance. Initially, this information was provided through the emergency communications mechanisms, specifically the media and Canberra Connect. However it became clear that the recovery process required a specific ongoing communication strategy.

Other jurisdictions had previously used communications mechanisms such as community newsletters targeted at the directly affected areas and the Taskforce was keen to follow this approach. However, there was also a clear need to communicate to the broader ACT community. Newspaper advertisements were identified as the most effective mechanism.

A half page advertisement was taken out on 1 February 2003. The information provided was mainly comprised of contact details for emergency, recovery, charity and utility services. By 14 February 2003 a weekly community newsletter *Community Update* had been developed.

The Canberra Connect call centre continued to provide an important feedback mechanism for community questions and concerns. Weekly reports and other informal networks ensured that there was a two-way flow of information between Canberra Connect and the Taskforce Secretariat.

THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

One of the key challenges facing the Secretariat communications team was the need to achieve a balance between being able to plan strategically and 'getting on with the job'. In late February, the Taskforce contracted communications consultants to assist in both these tasks. For a period of three months, they worked within the Secretariat in providing strategic advice and support.

Target Audiences

There were clearly a number of audiences requiring information and advice. It was also clear that they would need different 'channels' and different messages.

Those directly affected by the bushfires needed information quickly and regularly. This audience included households whose homes were destroyed in the fire, and

who were then dispersed throughout Canberra, those who were still in the suburbs dealing with the damage surrounding them and those living in the rural areas of the ACT. While they needed specific advice and information on practical matters, it was also clear that general public information could play a role in facilitating effective recovery.

The scale of the disaster attracted the interest of many media organisations throughout Australia and internationally. It was clear that there would be ongoing interest in the recovery and rebuilding of the ACT community.

Various Channels

Early advice provided by the CERG and the Recovery Centre suggested that many people directly affected by the fires were not using established media channels. This advice was an early indication that additional communication channels were needed.

The following channels were established:

- a weekly newsletter *Community Update* published every Thursday in hardcopy and on the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce website;
- ½ page advertisements published in *The Canberra Times* on Wednesday and Saturday;
- regular advertisements in community newspapers;
- the Canberra Connect Bushfire Recovery Taskforce website;
- weekly meetings, emails, phone calls, drop-ins at the Recovery Centre;
- PR and media – press releases, launches, stories;
- Community Billboard, matching needs with offers through the Canberra Times;
- emails from the Taskforce;
- communications from the CERG; and
- meetings with key stakeholders.

Benefits of the Communications Strategy

The development of a comprehensive communication strategy supported by a variety of communication channels allowed the Taskforce to respond as issues arose.

Strengths of the communications strategy included the identification of issues by the CERG before they became problems; the diversity in communication channels; the support of the ACT Recovery Centre and community organisations for material and content; and the provision of appropriate resources.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION CHANNELS

Community Update

A key plank in the communications strategy was the development of a community newsletter known as, *Community Update*, to outline key issues and provide advice to bushfire-affected residents. Key elements of this newsletter included:

- **weekly distribution:** From 14 February 2003, this newsletter was produced on a weekly cycle;
- **'low gloss' publication format:** it was agreed that the production of a high publication quality document was not appropriate, and resources should be targeted at providing an informative, relevant and useful document;
- **length:** most editions were limited to an eight page document, with some editions carrying inserts that provided specific information on 'hot topics' such as assistance available and information about rebuilding.

The distribution of *Community Update* changed through the process. While early editions had print runs of 40,000 copies, by July, the circulation became more targeted and was reduced to 28,000. Distribution included:

- direct mail to all families who lost homes;
- letterbox drop to all of the Weston Creek suburbs as well as Kambah, Torrens and Curtin – areas directly affected by the fires;
- electronic distribution to media and registered subscribers; and
- other venues such as schools, libraries, Canberra Connect shopfronts, local clubs, all major shopping centres, local shopping centres in affected areas, health centres, youth centres and community centres.

Key issues covered in *Community Update* included, but were not limited to:

- safety and clean-up advice;
- ACT Government and other community and business assistance;
- block clearance;
- re-building;
- re-greening;
- physical and psychological health and wellbeing;
- community events;
- personal stories of recovery;
- recognition and remembering, and
- the Bushfire Appeal.

The Taskforce decided to provide a special edition of the *Community Update* six months after the fires. Individuals and groups involved in the recovery process were invited to contribute to this process. There was an incredible response to this call, and over 100 submissions were received. Due to the large number of submissions, additional inserts were provided in subsequent editions of *Community Update*. This special 'Reflections' edition is provided at Appendix 12.

The Canberra Times and other newspaper advertisements

From 8 February 2003, half page advertisements appeared on Saturdays and Wednesdays in *The Canberra Times*. Full page advertisements were also placed in the weekly *Chronicle* and *Valley Voice*.

This provided information to the general Canberra community on:

- key announcements;
- specific information on current issues such as clean-up arrangements;
- updated information of issues such as road closures and facility opening hours;
- forthcoming events; and
- contact details for services.

Key reasons for providing these advertisements included:

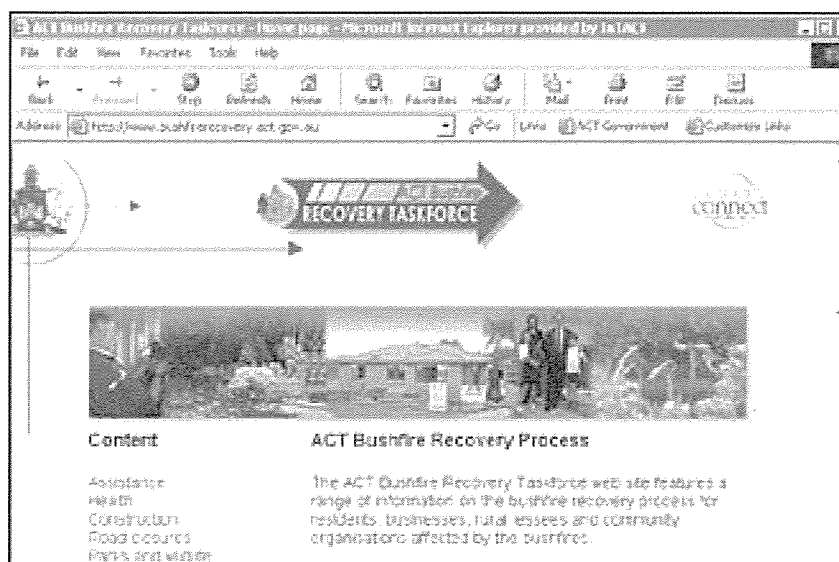
- providing an alternative information source for bushfire-affected residents not accessing the *Community Update*;
- to demonstrate the level of recovery related activities in train for the broader community to access;
- to provide immediate information regarding key announcements, and changes in relation to the recovery process; and
- providing a mechanism for the Government to directly communicate to the ACT community on key bushfire recovery issues and activities.

Canberra Connect

Website www.canberraconnect.act.gov.au

Throughout the bushfire emergency, the ACT community was encouraged to use Canberra Connect, the ACT Government's interface with the community that provides a single point of entry for accessing information and services.

As Canberra Connect was a recognised point of contact for the community, a web page linked to the Canberra Connect site was developed, with direct access from the front web page to www.bushfirerecovery.act.gov.au



The website has been accessed consistently, averaging 1100 visits a week. While there is no comparable data regarding visitation to similar sites, this level of visitation does suggest that the website has continued to be an important source of information to residents and others.

A review undertaken in July 2003 found that although the Canberra Connect recovery website was not as well known or used to access information about the bushfire recovery (compared with the *Community Update* and *The Canberra Times* advertisements), many of the participants felt that retaining, updating and having the website readily accessible was important.

Call Centre

As was the case during the emergency and in the initial recovery phase, Canberra Connect continued to assist residents in the recovery process. Over 7,500 bushfire related calls were taken in the period 20 January to end April. In the same period, over 190,000 visits and 710,000 page views were recorded at the Emergency Services and Bushfire Recovery Taskforce websites maintained by Canberra Connect.

Canberra Connect was a key player in Canberra's Bushfire Recovery Appeal with its call centre, website and shopfronts all accepting donations. Canberra Connect also coordinated the Appeal's fundraising at the Royal Canberra Show.

As the Canberra Connect call centre was a key point of access to the Government for the community, the Taskforce ensured that information, contact details and other advice was provided to the call centre so that they were able to respond to requests from the Community. When initiatives and Government announcements were scheduled, the Secretariat developed information kits including details of the initiatives, likely questions and answers and key contact details for the call centre to assist in responding to queries. This process worked very well, and ensured that consistent messages on recovery matters were delivered.

MEDIA LIAISON AND COVERAGE

Media relations became an important aspect of the work of the Taskforce, and there was a need to ensure that the Taskforce was accessible, responsive and able to meet requests of the media.

While there was national and international interest, the Taskforce's main emphasis was on working with local media outlets, which had an ongoing part to play in the recovery process.

Print (*The Canberra Times*) and radio (ABC Canberra) media provided the majority of the coverage. However, local television stations ABC and WIN and commercial radio have also continued to run a range of recovery stories.

In addition, there were significant local and national documentary style programs, including a number of stories on the local ABC Stateline program, ongoing stories on the ABC Dimensions series and a story on the Catalyst science program.

Media interest has increased at anniversary points such as 100 days and when relevant reports were released.

MOVING THROUGH THE PHASES OF RECOVERY

There were a number of key messages that were identified as important through the recovery, with these messages changing as the recovery process progressed.

In the early days after the disaster, direct communication from the Taskforce concentrated on information to assist people meet immediate 'survival' needs. Messages included information regarding:

- assistance available, and contact details of particular services;
- details of the extent of damage;
- public health and other risks;
- how the clean-up process would be undertaken; and
- how to access material support to allow people to re-establish a 'normal life'.

Through this initial period, the emphasis of the media was on recording the devastation created by the fire, identifying the scale of the disaster, and telling the stories of those affected. There was significant coverage of the events in both the local and national media, through print, television and radio.

As the immediate 'survival' needs of residents were met, the range of concerns changed, and information required by the community shifted in emphasis to include:

- the range of assistance available, and services being provided;
- offers and discounts available to bushfire-affected residents;
- how to deal with problems presenting after a disaster such as parenting, stress, depression and other mental health issues;
- practical advice regarding how to manage issues resulting from the fire such as the clean-up; and
- how individual households were managing the recovery process.

As the recovery has moved into its medium and ongoing phase the emphasis of the public information has changed again to focus more on:

- progress of the recovery process;
- the duration of recovery services and offers;
- rebuilding issues, including costs;
- restoration issues, progress in relation to replacement of Government assets, and the restoration of the public areas; and
- preparations for the next fire season.

As with other phases of the recovery process, there has continued to be a high level of interest within the media. The media highlighted key milestones such as the 100 day and six month anniversaries. The media provided a mechanism for some community discussion on issues such as the appropriate level of assistance, the impact of the release of related studies and reviews and the progress towards the rebuilding of Canberra. During this period, the *The Canberra Times* released a commemorative "recovery" insert on 24 August 2003, which reported positively on the ongoing recovery process.

Evaluation and Review

In the early days after the emergency direct feedback from the community, primarily through the CERG, was that there needed to be more comprehensive and timely information. The need to repeat newsletter articles and information in advertisements as often as possible was also recognised because some people affected by the bushfires were finding it difficult to digest and remember information. This was an important lesson from the overall recovery program – it should not be assumed that information provided is necessarily received, understood or retained.

In July 2003, the Taskforce conducted a review of the effectiveness of its communication activities. A market research consultant was contracted to conduct research with fire-affected residents in the ACT (notably, people who lost their dwellings and people who didn't lose their dwellings but suffered property damage) and other key stakeholders, including people living in the suburbs affected by the bushfires, and people living in Canberra suburbs not affected by the bushfires. The purpose of the research was to determine the demand for and effectiveness of communication products during the bushfire recovery process. Focus groups were held to ascertain the success of different communication channels.

The review found strong support for the *Community Update* newsletter which was highly regarded and felt to be useful by most readers. *Community Update* was considered to be the most important and effective communication vehicle many fire-affected residents received. Hardcopy delivery was the preferred media. Although *Community Update* was highly applauded suggestions were made that the newsletter should provide articles about the rural villages and other suburbs affected by the fires in addition to the perceived priority of focus of news articles towards Duffy and Chapman. Regular repeating of earlier articles, and giving longer time advance warning of forthcoming events and activities should be provided. The graphic design, presentation and "community interest" topics covered in *Community Update* were rated highly.

PREPARING THE COMMUNITY FOR FUTURE EMERGENCIES

The heightened level of awareness following a disaster means that there are enhanced opportunities to provide information on disaster awareness and preparation, and to engage key agencies and the community at large in activities that in normal situations would be difficult. Furthermore, the experience of responding to a disaster of the magnitude of January 2003 resulted in a high level of knowledge within the ACT Government and agencies, and through the community, which needed to be captured and integrated into future responses.

This heightened awareness also meant that it was important to create and maintain a sense of confidence that adequate preparations were in place for the next fire season. This is being achieved through the following activities:

- the development of a new Public Information Sub- Plan for inclusion in an updated ACT Emergency Management Plan;
- the development of a comprehensive community awareness and education campaign to be conducted through the next fire season;

- enhanced fire hazard reduction measures within the urban areas and the provision of timely and sensitive public information about these activities;
- a program of community involvement in fire fighting activities, including the introduction of community fire units at selected locations; and
- a strong program of implementation of the recommendations of the report of the Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires.

CONCLUSIONS

The need for community information before, during and after any emergency should never be underestimated. In large-scale events where emergency services are overstretched, a well informed and prepared community is equipped not only for self support but can also assist less able neighbours. The confidence afforded by sound advice and preparation can do much to prevent stress and panic in the community.

During an emergency, information is crucial in helping to protect life and property. Information needs to be clear, concise and factual. All information should be verified and cleared for release. As a situation develops information should be provided as quickly and frequently as possible. The information should be provided through as many sources as are available such as media, web sites and call centres. Locally broadcast radio stations play an invaluable role in providing up to date information. Information should also be provided for the visually and hearing impaired.

Care should be taken to not only provide information about the existing hazard. Positive messages such as actions being taken to address the situation, help available and other information sources should also be provided. A calm and reassuring tone is crucial.

The date and time of any information release must be clearly indicated. The timing of the next update should be included.

The provision of public information during the emergency phase may require staffing for 24 hours per day for weeks at a time. The recovery phase will also require considerable communications capacity. It is advisable to develop rosters and provide training for as many staff or other appropriate volunteers as possible.

Following the emergency the same networks will prove invaluable in sourcing information to assist the community's recovery.

As well as providing media briefings, interviews and releases, alternative information channels need to be established. Where possible a call centre should be established or scaled-up. Existing websites should be utilised or if possible an incident specific site should be established and linked to all relevant sites. Care should be taken to include all relevant areas of government, the bureaucracy, emergency services, NGOs, evacuation and recovery centres and charities in fax and email communications.

During the recovery phase a comprehensive communication strategy, as outlined earlier in this chapter, is essential.

Chapter Eleven

Clean-up and Rebuild



The scale of the devastation resulting from the January 2003 bushfires required a comprehensive and well coordinated approach to the clean-up of all affected areas. With the exception of the thousands of hectares of burnt forest that will take some years to clear, the objective of finalising the clean-up by end June 2003 was substantially achieved. The use of a project manager to coordinate the clean-up of residential blocks was particularly successful. Of equal importance has been the provision of information and support for the rebuilding of destroyed housing. This remains an ongoing task, as is the provision of support for the resolution of outstanding insurance issues for some affected citizens.

The extent of property damage and destruction caused by the fires meant there was a need for a massive clean-up program and a continuing rebuilding program.

The Government and the community faced significant challenges to clean-up and restore housing, community buildings and government assets.

As well as detailing the overall response to the emergency and the actions taken, this chapter outlines two major segments of the clean-up and rebuilding program:

- the role of the Taskforce and Secretariat in facilitating the rebuilding of private, commercial and community property, including 488 destroyed houses; and
- the replacement of ACT government assets, including buildings, fences, bridges and burnt plantations which is generally being undertaken through the responsible line agencies.

PROPERTY ASSESSMENT

On Sunday 19 January the Chief Planner visited the Emergency Services Bureau headquarters and obtained agreement to enable Planning and Land Management (PALM) officers to begin the process of identifying the extent of property damage throughout the ACT. PALM was assigned this role as it had responsibility not only for planning and lease management, but also was the organisation responsible for building control, building and planning records and maintaining the maps and associated records of the ACT.

PALM created a Property Assessment and Recovery Team (PART) that immediately brought together officers from PALM and representatives of the Canberra planning, building and property industries to coordinate the identification and planning/building

response to the fires. Eventually, PART also involved officers from across the rest of the Department of Urban Services, the ACT Fire Brigade, the Australian Federal Police, and the National Insurance Disaster Relief Organisation. These resources were organised into the following committees:

- Joint Industry Advisory Committee;
- Inspections and Demolitions Committee;
- Data Collection/Supply Committee;
- Planning/Building Approvals Committee;
- Communications Committee; and
- Insurance Committee.

By the end of its second week, PART had developed a computer based data set of destroyed and damaged properties based on 6000 hand written fire brigade reports and 2500 hand written police reports, and had begun the task of verifying the data. This process would have been assisted if there had been a standard set of definitions about what was to be reported or what constituted destroyed, damaged or uninhabitable. The PART team also developed new regulations to simplify the demolitions process, began the process of drafting regulations to simplify the planning approvals process, arranged through the Insurance Council of Australia to obtain details of all building and contents policies in force in the ACT at the time of the fire, and established an effective daily communications package for the Government and the media.

By the end of June, the urban demolition process was virtually completed and data sets compiled by PALM, the Coroner's Unit from the Australian Federal Police and the project managers, Bovis Lend Lease, were able to be compared and finalised. Each data set was established for different purposes and hence there were some differences. The main differences were that PALM's data set covered every property and building destroyed on 18 January that became eligible for a variety of grants. The Coroner's Unit was only interested in properties directly affected by the bushfire and therefore did not count properties such as the two in Giralang that burnt down on the day of the bushfires, as a result of "arcing" power lines caused by strong winds. Finally, Bovis Lend Lease included details of everyone that approached it for quotes, even if the properties involved were not deemed by PALM to be destroyed.

The result as advised by the ACT Planning and Land Authority (formerly PALM) in July, was that 491 properties had homes or other principal structures on them destroyed. The properties contained:

- 401 urban homes;
- 87 rural homes and other dwellings such as community facility dormitories;
- 8 urban other structures such as the Duffy service station, the Holder Veterinary Practice and the Howard Florey Health Centre; and
- 85 rural other structures including the ACT Forestry Headquarters, YMCA Camp Sturt and the Birrigai education facilities.

RESIDENTIAL AND BUSINESS CLEAN-UP

Establishing the Landfill

At the time of the fires, Canberra was implementing a No Waste policy that was aimed at providing disincentives to dump waste at landfill sites. As a result, landfill options throughout Canberra had been reduced and the likely quantum of waste arising from the fires that required disposal presented an issue. The issue was further complicated as the age of most destroyed buildings indicated a strong likelihood of remnants of asbestos cement sheeting contaminating the demolition waste.

As most of the demolition rubble would come from the western edge of Weston Creek, it was decided that a new disposal site should be established as close to this area as possible. ACT NOWaste re-opened part of the former West Belconnen Landfill until a new site could be developed. A site was selected at Stromlo and following the necessary approvals from ACT and Commonwealth planning bodies, Environment ACT and ACT Forests, this site was opened on 7 March 2003. This site remained in operation until 16 June 2003.

After its closure, the waste at this site was covered by a metre of fill, to bury and immobilize any possible contaminants. This area will only be used for open space or recreational purposes to ensure there is no need to excavate into the buried waste.

During the four months after the fires, ACT NOWaste received 28,000 tonnes of potentially asbestos contaminated waste at Belconnen and 120,000 tonnes at the Stromlo site and a further 4,000 tonnes of non-contaminated burnt material at its Mugga Tip.

To support the clean-up, the Government introduced zero fees for non-commercial bushfire waste and \$20 a tonne for commercial waste from bushfire sites accepted before 16 June 2003. This represented a waiver of an estimated \$9 million in standard waste disposal fees.



The Stromlo Landfill commenced operation on 7 March. It received 120,000 tonnes of waste from fire-affected properties up until its closure on 16 June 2003.

Project Management

In the week following the bushfires, the Master Builders' Association developed a demolition project management concept. With Bovis Lend Lease (BLL), they approached the Government with a proposal to:

- Seek ACT Government endorsement of a project management approach to demolitions;
- With ACT Government endorsement, encourage each insurance company covering destroyed buildings to sign on to a project managed demolition process; and
- Seek agreement for all ACT Government buildings to be demolished by contractors employed by the project manager.

Over the following week BLL found that a number of the major insurers already had assessors working with owners to determine the extent of damage and to offer insurance settlements. Accordingly, it was recognised that a project management approach would need to shift its focus from a limited number of three way relationships between BLL, each insurer and one of several demolition contractors to a large number of three-way relationships between BLL, each property owner with a destroyed property and one of several demolition contractors. This added an additional layer of complexity to the proposals, as the need to deal with each owner meant that the potential number of demolition contracts to be managed rose from about 30 to in excess of 400.

Whilst project management would still provide economies of scale, look after public health and safety issues, ensure a quick clean-up and look after the general community's public interests, the sheer number of contracts was likely to require a considerable management effort. These factors were considered by the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, which recommended to the Government that:

- A project manager should be appointed by the Government to manage the demolition clean-up;
- The cost of the "project management" process should be borne by the Government; and
- In the interests of public health and safety the clean-up should aim to be completed within four months and that therefore property owners should be offered incentives to both use the project management services and to clean their blocks within four months.

By 10 February the details of the project management scheme had been agreed, the procurement process to appoint BLL as the project manager had been approved by the ACT Procurement Board and the Government announced that:

- It had set a four month target for the bushfire clean-up;
- It had appointed BLL as the Government's overall project manager for the clean-up process;
- It would provide grants of up to \$5,000 to assist with the clean-up of each destroyed or uninhabitable domestic or community property, provided that the property did not have an insurance policy that made specific provision for the reimbursement of actual demolition clean-up costs and provided that recipients of the grant had their site clean-up managed by BLL;

- It would meet the full cost of demolitions for homeowners who did not have building insurance; and
- Provision was made to look after owners who had already put clean-up arrangements in place before 10 February.

The Government also announced on 10 February that it would be paying the cost of BLL providing overall project management services including community consultation, environmental monitoring and the coordination of the actual clean-up work.

In addition, to encourage the clean-up completion within four months, the Government set deadlines of:

- 2 April 2003 to be able to apply for free demolitions for uninsured homes;
- 1 June 2003 for eligible insured property owners to be able to apply for the demolition grant of up to \$5,000; and
- 16 June 2003 for the waiver of tip fees for demolition waste from residential and community sites and closure of the temporary Stromlo Landfill.

Clean-up Outcomes

By 16 June 2003 BLL had project managed the clean-up of 404 of the identified 491 properties with destroyed structures. It had also worked closely with the insurer, GIO Suncorp, in the clean-up by the latter of 44 properties it had insured. A further 38 properties had their clean-ups arranged by their owners.

Whilst over 99% of destroyed properties had been cleared by the June deadline, three properties remained. Despite their best efforts, BLL was unable to provide these owners with project management expertise because insurance and leasing issues needed to be resolved. However, by the end of October the Cotter Tavern had been cleared and was awaiting suitable fill to restore the site, the ANU Weston Campus was partly cleared and recovery of assets was underway. In contrast the Australian National University's Mt Stromlo Observatory property, with many structures, was still awaiting decisions from its insurer, although temporary accommodation has been provided on the Stromlo site and all staff have now returned to the site and research is again taking place.

During the four months in close consultation with the Taskforce Secretariat, BLL:

- Developed a demolition contractors' induction course covering the Building Act, OH&S, traffic management, load management and other requirements;
- Conducted several free induction courses that were open to anyone to attend;
- Only offered contracts to demolition contractors who had attended induction courses and who agreed to operate in accordance with the requirements outlined in the induction package;
- Arranged for Robson Laboratories to monitor airborne asbestos fibres, both in set locations such as near schools and shopping centres and adjacent to demolition sites;
- Arranged numerous public meetings to explain its role and the nature of the demolition processes to be instituted during the clean-up;

- Successfully handled the few public complaints received about the actions of demolition contractors (such as not using designated routes to the Stromlo landfill, speeding trucks, not spraying water during the transfer of material to truck and uncovered trucks), including receiving positive responses from contractors employed by GIO Suncorp or individual property owners;
- Divided the areas affected by the fires into zones and employed zone managers to be responsible for all aspects of achieving a satisfactory clean-up in their zones;
- Registered in excess of 500 property owners interested in signing on with BLL (including owners of damaged properties who were not eligible for assistance, but still wanted to take advantage of project management);
- Prepared 17 packages of potential demolitions and sought at least three quotes from demolition contractors for each package;
- During the latter two months, BLL also developed small packages of residual demolitions and these packages grew as owners finally made the decision to use BLL's services. In these cases, the contractor operating nearest the proposed additional property was asked to quote on the demolition and, if the owner accepted the quote, the work was added to that contractor's package;
- Assessed the insurance circumstances of each owner who decided to take up the BLL demolition offer with a view to determining if the owner was eligible for the Government's demolition grant. The resulting grant details were provided to the Taskforce Secretariat for vetting and payment; and
- Arranged with the CPS Credit Union to provide, free of charge, a demolition account into which owners would pay any contribution they were required to make and the Government would pay any eligible demolition grant. The moneys were held in 'trust' in the account and when the contractor satisfactorily completed required demolitions the moneys from the account were paid directly to the contractor.

RESIDENTIAL REBUILDING

The rate of residential rebuilding has been a matter of ongoing concern for the Taskforce.

A number of issues are considered to have impacted on the rate of rebuilding. These include media reports about escalating costs, the complexity of rebuilding, emotional considerations, and reported high level of prices being received for vacant blocks. Understandably owners have taken time to think through their decisions. It is now recognised that rebuilding will take more time than originally anticipated.

In April the Taskforce provided all people whose homes had been destroyed with two specially developed documents:

- A Guide to Rebuilding, developed by Planning and Land Management; and
- A Guide to Buying and Selling Property developed by the Office of Fair Trading.

The Taskforce was also aware that people still living in the bushfire-affected areas would face difficulties associated with living in a construction zone. This issue was also raised by CERG. While it was recognised that this could not be avoided, a number of mechanisms were put in place to inform people still living in the bushfire-affected areas of what to expect and where they could get advice or assistance. Information about issues such as noise, damage to footpaths, soil run off and site waste was made available through the *Community Update*, the Recovery Centre and on the Taskforce website. It also formed the basis of information given to induction courses for builders conducted regularly by the MBA and the HIA. Regulators have also been made aware of issues which are concerning residents.

Building Costs

The issue of building costs gained momentum through the autumn period. The Bushfire Recovery Taskforce identified early that it would need to be in a position to monitor movements in local house building costs and to respond appropriately to unusual or bushfire related price rises. It was considered important to monitor trends, rather than actual costs as costs of building can vary dramatically from job to job, depending on a number of factors including site conditions and quality of inclusions.

The ACT office of Rawlinsons Group, an organisation that monitors construction industry prices, offered the Taskforce a Canberra-specific price monitoring service free of charge and the offer was accepted. Rawlinsons provided the Taskforce with house price indicators for four categories of housing – basic standard; medium standard; high standard and premium standard. The Taskforce also liaised closely with the MBA and HIA in relation to building costs.

Up to the end of May, Rawlinsons was advising that building costs had increased by up to 3% since the beginning of 2003.

The Bushfire Building Costs Monitoring Committee was established in mid 2003 to monitor shifts in rebuilding costs, the availability of builders and sub-trades and their relevance to and impact on bushfire rebuilding costs.

Membership includes a representative from each of the following groups:

- CERG;
- Master Builders' Association;
- Housing Industry Association;
- Royal Australian Institute of Architects;
- The Office of Fair Trading;
- ACT Planning and Land Authority;
- Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors; and
- two Community representatives.

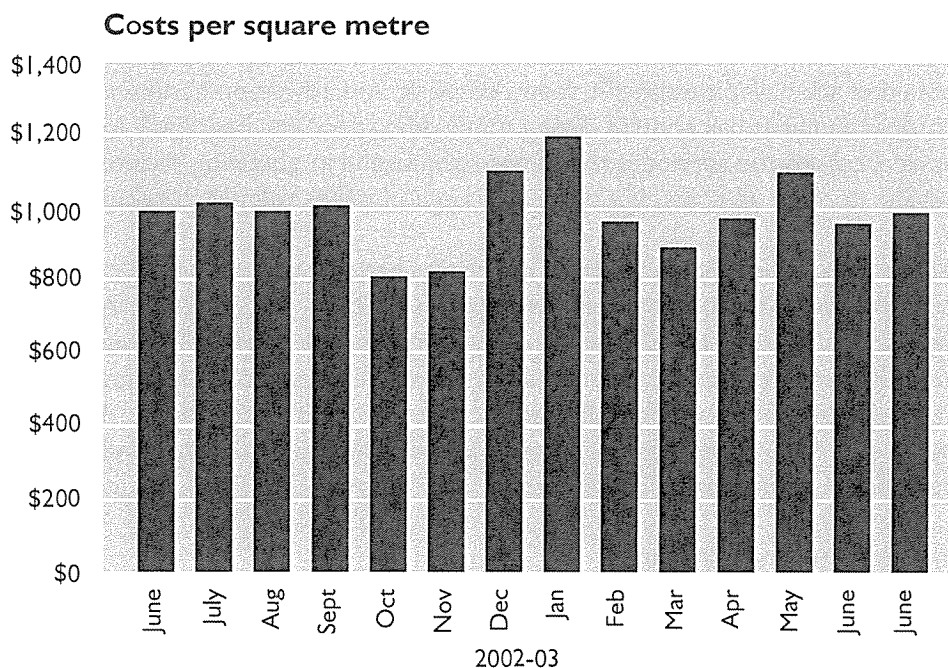
This committee undertakes research and provides advice to the Taskforce on a monthly basis including, information about shifts in building costs, confirmation that any price rises have an appropriate base, identification of materials and trade shortages, identification of building cost or trade shortage matters that may need to be addressed; and possible ways of addressing these issues. The committee also

ensures consultation with relevant industry and community organisations as well as individuals to identify concerns.

The Committee has identified some key issues regarding building costs, and presented issues to the Taskforce. Below is an extract of advice provided in September 2003:

“This report, compiled by the Bushfire Building Costs Monitoring Committee, shows that building costs for residential housing currently average about \$1,000 per square metre. This average rate is based on building costs across the footprint of a house itself, including any garage, and excluding costs for landscaping, fencing, paving and site work. This average rate of is supported by industry figures and reports from the Bushfire Building Costs Advisory Service.

Costs have risen only slightly since June 2002 with spiked increases in December 2002/January 2003.



In particular, costs of bricklaying and plastering had been rising due to shortages of tradespeople and this is being addressed by the vocational training sector. There is no indication that the present costs of these trades have been further spiked by the bushfire event. It also appears that builders are generally doing their best to quote and build for reasonable prices and do not appear to be taking undue advantage of the bushfire situation.

The work of this Committee informs the Bushfire Building Costs Advisory Service which provides advice on building costs to people affected by the bushfires. An important part of the work of the Service will be to provide information to people about what is normally included to arrive at their house building costs per square metre and what other costs they should allow for. The Committee has developed a proforma listing those factors for use by the Service.

The Committee's findings indicate that one of the factors impacting on the overall rise in the cost of building is an increase in trade shortages, which may impact on trade costs in some instances. This is under examination in consultation with peak organisations in the vocational training sector.”

At the time of this report, advice to the Committee based on data provided by the MBA extracted from a small sample of 27 building contracts executed from August to October 2003, indicates that the average building costs was \$1,090 per m² that quarter.

A Building Cost Advisory Service for domestic rebuilding operating out of the Lyons Recovery Centre was established on 24 July 2003.

The Taskforce engaged two quantity surveying firms to form a panel to provide cost advisory services to bushfire-affected homeowners who are considering rebuilding their homes on their blocks and to provide flexibility in the timely delivery of this service.

Each client has different circumstances and therefore different issues for resolution. Assistance provided has included advice on how to reduce costs to keep within budget, advice on preliminary computer generated floor plans with energy environmental design considerations, advice of cost implications on different building materials, advice for owner builders on the importance of making sure all quotes obtained are based on specific scope of work, and advice on contract clauses to ensure the client has control during the building process. Feedback from those who have accessed the service is that it has been useful in obtaining sound, impartial advice, not just on costs, but also on a range of issues related to rebuilding a house.

At the time of writing over half of the clients had not received quotes from builders but for those who had the costs were in the \$1,200 – \$1,500 /m² range. The higher end was related to more complex design with above-standard finishes. Most clients were investigating project homebuilders in order to reduce design fees, but in most cases this was not proving to be satisfactory due to site constraints. A number of the clients had received an insurance payout based on \$1,000/m² and will have to consider building smaller sized homes.

Government Support

The results of the second housing intentions survey, discussed at Chapter Eight indicated that while cost concerns are not widespread, they are a significant factor in both decisions about whether to rebuild or sell and about what to rebuild. In analysing these figures, the Taskforce believed that the 50% estimate of those intending to rebuild may be 'soft'. A strategy was proposed to Government to consolidate this, and make sure that the undecided group sees rebuilding as a viable option.

The Government subsequently announced a range of initiatives:

- A \$5,000 financial grant for those intending to rebuild houses on their original block. This grant is payable when owners occupy completed houses. As at the end of October, 11 such grants had been paid;
- An extension of the waivers for rates, water and sewerage charges to 30 June 2004 on residential properties, rural, and commercial properties that were either destroyed or severely affected. Also, Land Tax was waived to 30 June 2004 for destroyed commercial properties, and destroyed residential properties owned by companies;
- The release of a workbook entitled '*Guide to rebuilding your home or selling your block*' to assist residents work through these processes;

- The establishment of a Bushfire Support Service within the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) to provide a main point of contact and one-on-one services for residents working through the planning and rebuilding processes;
- A commitment by the ACT Government to pay the compulsory training levy on behalf of home-owners proposing to rebuild houses on their original blocks, except those opting for different types of development;
- Introduction of a range of new services to monitor and manage bushfire related building costs, including the establishment of a Bushfire Building Costs Advisory Service, and a Bushfire Building Costs Monitoring Committee; and
- Appointment of a Rebuilding and Real Estate Liaison Officer at the ACT Recovery Centre.

These extra services and financial assistance are designed to help people who are still undecided make an informed decision and encourage people to rebuild on their original block. To further assist, the Recovery Centre also undertook a process of contacting owners of destroyed properties where rebuilding activity had not commenced through September, to offer support and identify if there was anything else that could be done.

Analysis of rebuilding figures in August/September 2003 revealed that 174 households appeared to have taken no action to either rebuild or sell. A new program of positive personal assistance provided through the Recovery Centre was established to contact the owners of these properties to find out what their intentions were and to provide advice about the range of support services available to them.

By the end of October, the Recovery Centre had contacted most of these households and reported that around 38% had decided to rebuild, 35% had sold or intended to sell their blocks and 20% were yet to make a decision. 6% of those surveyed had not responded.

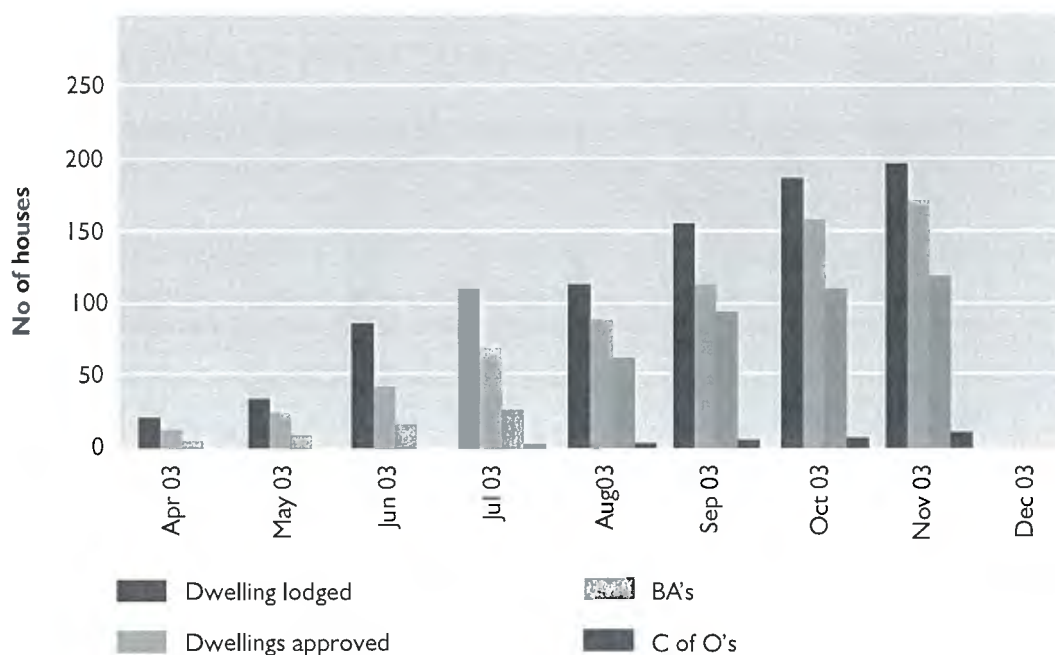
Upon enquiry from the Taskforce, most insurance companies have indicated that they would consider an extension of temporary accommodation assistance beyond 18 January 2004 on a case-by-case basis. This may well become an issue for those households who are yet to make a decision about whether to rebuild or sell.

Construction Status

The following graph shows that rebuilding has started off steadily. As at 31 October 2003, 117 building approvals had been lodged indicating that 117 houses have commenced the actual building process. With estimated building time ranging from 15 to 40 weeks, by Christmas 2003 this should mean that about 10-20% of rebuilding has been completed.

On these 117 dwellings, 103 are private and 14 Government. 13 rebuilt private dwellings had been occupied by the end of October 2003.

Rebuilding after the bushfires



GOVERNMENT CLEAN-UP AND REBUILDING

As well as ACT Government housing stock, a number of key Government facilities were destroyed or damaged. These included 2 fire stations, depots (including the ACT Forests Headquarters), the ACT Health Protection office, playgrounds, recreational facilities in open areas, four bridges, an outdoor education facility and structures such as animal enclosures [as well as animals] within Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. Four Commonwealth Government sites were damaged, two belonging to the ANU: the Mount Stromlo Observatory and a site at Weston, a disused timber mill owned by the Department of Finance and Administration and the Australian Federal Police firing range.

The ACT Government was able to move quickly to clean-up and start to rebuild many of its sites.

Throughout the clean-up and rebuilding phases the Taskforce has maintained close links with relevant ACT Government agencies and the relevant Commonwealth officials to ensure clean-up of affected sites.

When replacing facilities there has been a concerted effort to replace these in a way that better meets the current and future needs of the residents of the ACT. For example:

- Housing ACT identified opportunities to improve the housing provided in a number of areas. Particular streets which had a high concentration of public housing stock were damaged, and as there was total loss, the ACT Government undertook major exercises in redesign. This has meant more housing was on the same sites, and housing stock designed to better meet residents' needs; and

- The form of the replacement of some of the 'iconic' facilities that were destroyed or badly damaged, such as Birrigai, Tidbinbilla and Cotter recreational areas have been included in the Non-Urban Study. This approach has provided the opportunity to ensure that these are replaced in a way that is innovative and meets future needs.

Commonwealth Government Sites

The Construction Group of the Secretariat has been in close contact with the ANU about the clearance of its sites. The ANU has had particular difficulties with its insurers that has seriously delayed the clean-up of its sites. Delays have been particularly protracted in relation to the Mount Stromlo Observatory site. To date, this site has been fenced but very little demolition work has occurred.

The AFP firing range was owned by a private organisation and leased back to the AFP. The Construction Group pursued the clearance of this site with the private lessee who organised to clear the site quickly.

Infrastructure and Utilities

A range of infrastructure was damaged or destroyed in the January bushfires. This included a number of roads (particularly in rural areas), bridges, road signs, guideposts and utilities infrastructure (primarily street lighting, electricity poles, aerial power and communication cables and substations). The major utilities, Telstra and ActewAGL, were able to restore phone services to over 5,000 homes and power to some 50,000 homes within days and weeks. ACT NOWaste provided hoppers at the major shopping centres for frozen and refrigerated food which had been spoiled during the power outage.

As of end October 2003:

- A temporary low level crossing of the Cotter River was provided by Army engineers and upgraded by Roads ACT to provide a temporary replacement for the timber-decked Cotter River road bridge and Cotter River pedestrian suspension bridge. The contract for the replacement of the Cotter Road bridge has been let and construction is expected to be completed in January. At this stage the Cotter pedestrian bridge, which lost its timber decking, is not being replaced. The Kambah pedestrian bridge has been reconstructed and a temporary bridge removed. A replacement road bridge within the Casuarina Sands picnic area is now open to traffic;
- All the initial tree waste collected from the rural road reserve has been recycled. A program continues to monitor and address emerging tree instability;
- Landslides on Murray's Corner, Corin Dam road and Apollo Road have been protected;
- 98% of destroyed guide posts have been replaced.;
- 98% of regulatory (eg Stop and Give Way) signs and warning (black and yellow diamond) signs have been replaced;
- All suburban street name signs have been replaced.;
- 80% of the larger green guide signs have been replaced;

- 95% of log barriers have been replaced. Toxic arsenic residue has been removed; and
- Street lighting has been fully restored.

Public Housing Stock

The Government lost 81 public houses in urban and rural areas of the ACT. There was a need to replace these assets to maintain the public housing stock.

55 houses have been purchased in the urban area to replace rural houses lost during the fires. All are expected to reach settlement prior to Christmas. Whether re-building in the rural area occurs will depend on the Government's response to the Report of the Non-Urban Study.

In the urban area twelve houses are in the reconstruction pipeline, five in Duffy and seven in Kambah. All of these are nearing completion. Housing ACT was able to use project home options, which were relatively inexpensive and quick to commence. One house occupied by people with disabilities is being redesigned to meet future needs.

Two older persons' accommodation units are being reconstructed in Duffy at Pinefield Court and 11 dwelling units in Tanjil Loop. Both older persons' units have been handed over. The Tanjil Loop redevelopment has received Development Approval.

ACT Forests' Assets

All ACT Forests destroyed major built assets have been cleared. These included depots at Pierces Creek, Uriarra Settlement and Stromlo Forest, as well as the Headquarters building at Stromlo Forest and a number of recreational areas such as Blue Range, Vanities Crossing, Wood's Reserve, Deek's Forest, Laurel Hut, and Condor Hut. Reconstruction of most assets will be determined by the outcome of the various planning studies, including the Non-Urban Study.

The clearance of burnt forest areas is being managed directly by ACT Forests and is not addressed in this report.

Environment ACT

All major damaged assets have been removed and sites cleared. The reconstruction of some assets has been placed on hold pending the outcome of the various planning studies. However, Environment ACT has undertaken considerable reinstatement works including ecological and heritage audits, the re-opening of several nature reserves and recreation areas, repairing fire trails and containment lines, and the removal of hazardous trees.

Education Facilities

Uriarra Community Centre, formerly Uriarra Primary School, is still managed by the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services. The fire-damaged buildings, grounds and playground equipment have been repaired and have been in use by the community since May 2003.



The regeneration of the environment has created considerable community interest. Guided walks through the fire-affected areas proved to be popular with residents of Weston Creek

Birrigai Outdoor School suffered significant damage. The administration building, the classroom building, a dormitory block, kitchen, four cottages and numerous outbuildings were destroyed by the fire. The water, sewerage and electricity infrastructure also suffered significant damage making this infrastructure inoperable. Remaining buildings comprising two dormitory blocks and the dining hall suffered varying degrees of damage.

The Government immediately took steps to contain environmental damage and to clear the site of debris. The Department of Education, Youth and Family Services commenced repair works to fire damaged buildings and infrastructure in March 2003 and this work is now complete.

The Government has commenced a community consultation process including the establishment of a consultative group comprising key stakeholders. A public forum was held in May 2003 to discuss the shape and directions of the new Birrigai. As a first stage, planning to replace the school education component lost in the fire is underway.

In recognition of the fact that it would take some time to re-establish the Birrigai buildings and landscape at Paddy's River as a fully operational educational site, the Government has established an interim educational facility known as Birrigai at Jerrabomberra Wetlands which commenced operations in Term 3.

Other ACT Government Assets

- **Playgrounds:** three were destroyed in the fire and re-built. Four were repaired;
- **Fire damaged urban tree and shrub removal:** all unsafe and fire damaged plant material plus burnt koppers logs and contaminated soils have been removed from fire damaged urban areas. Eight hectares of re-grassing has been established in fire-damaged open spaces.

INSURANCE ISSUES

Insurance emerged as a significant issue for many residents, as they struggled to clean-up destroyed blocks, and make decisions for the future.

Complexities arose due to differences in insurance policy details and coverage including clauses and arrangements. This included different approaches to demolition, settlement of claims, GST, underinsurance and details of policies.

The issues and complaints that emerged in the initial phase of the recovery process prompted the Taskforce Secretariat to employ an insurance expert to work with residents on a case management basis. This approach was very successful, and resulted in the satisfactory resolution of many claims. Resolution was achieved through facilitated discussions with various players, and through working closely with individual insurers to examine and resolve issues. The Secretariat also sponsored a number of activities in addition to individualised case managed support:

- in response to a difference of views between some members of the community and insurance companies on the interpretation of policies, the ACT Law Society and the Taskforce Secretariat facilitated a seminar on insurance issues. The number of insurance issues raised with the advisor increased considerably following the seminar; and
- in response to the differing approaches being taken by the various insurance companies, the Taskforce Secretariat arranged a series of national telephone conferences with the managers of as many insurance companies as were available. Objectives were to increase the level of management involvement and presence in Canberra by some companies, to clarify the interpretation of some difficult issues and to obtain faster attention to critical cases.

As at 14 November 2003, 77 insurance complaints had been received, of which 69 have been resolved to the satisfaction of the resident/owner. Two matters proceeded to the Insurance Enquiries and Complaints Scheme (IEC), of which one was rejected. One matter which was referred to an insurer's Claims Disputes Resolution Unit was rejected and may proceed to the IEC. The Taskforce insurance adviser is continuing to liaise with the five remaining residents and their respective insurers to resolve their complaints.

A specific issue surrounded public liability insurance. Bushfire-affected residents who lost their homes were not aware that some insurance companies no longer provided public liability cover once their building claims were settled. This meant that residents with large amounts of debris, unstable structures, empty or half filled swimming pools and other hazards were not protected. At the time this was discovered, there were no alternative products on the market to offer to residents. The ACT Insurance Authority on behalf of the Taskforce Secretariat negotiated public liability insurance for residents with an Australian insurance company. As at 14 November 2003, 60 people have purchased public liability insurance.

Insurance emerged as a significant issue for a number of reasons. While the proportion of residents of destroyed properties with building insurance was remarkably high (only six households did not hold a current building insurance policy), most people reported that they were under-insured. This fact provided significant challenges for people wishing to rebuild, particularly in a market that was

experiencing some rises in costs. This situation also indicated that there was a need for better information to the community generally on the level of insurance that is adequate for householders.

In contrast to building insurance, approximately 20% of residents did not hold home contents insurance. This non-insurance could be due to a number of factors including limited financial resources, competing priorities or lack of knowledge. The insurance advisor prepared a number of articles on insurance which appeared in *The Canberra Times*, *Community Update* and Taskforce Website to educate people about the importance of adequately insuring their home and household contents.

Some significant systemic issues were identified through the recovery process. These included issues related to:

- Quick settlement of claims: After the January bushfires, most insurance companies moved very quickly to respond to customer demands, and likewise encouraged quick finalisation of claims. While this response appeared to be appropriate at the time (in fact the current version of the Community Recovery Sub Plan endorses this approach), it is now clear that in settling claims quickly, some residents lost entitlement to public liability insurance over their vacant blocks.

Furthermore, many residents may have agreed to a settlement at a time when they were traumatised and prior to their accessing adequate information regarding the actual costs of the rebuilding process, and thus may not have received the best financial result. Additionally, once insurance companies had settled claims, many claimants were unable to access further assistance or advice from the company. Lack of assistance and advice has made it difficult for some residents to commence or continue the rebuilding process.

- The approach of loss adjusters: While it is understood that loss adjusters must assess the value of lost property, it is also hoped that they take into account the wider experience of loss and the trauma involved for their clients, and in so doing demonstrate a degree of patience and sensitivity. Disputes were caused by loss adjusters apparently providing insufficient information to residents who have lost their homes or whose homes have been damaged. The Taskforce became aware of instances where offers of settlement less than the sum insured caused considerable anxiety to bushfire-affected residents.
- As a consequence of problems being experienced with loss adjusters, the Taskforce Secretariat met with representatives from the Institute of Chartered Loss Adjusters and invited them to hold a forum to discuss issues arising out of the bushfires with their members and insurance company representatives. The overall aim was to improve the approach adopted by loss adjusters when future disasters occur.
- Insurance companies making lower offers than the "Sum Insured" for the properties: There were examples of some insurers making offers considerably less (90% or lower) than the sum that residents had insured their properties for. One problem was that initially insurers were using rebuilding figures of around \$900 per square metre, which did not take into account design costs, the increased demand for materials, limited supply, limited trades people, low interest rates and associated impact on building market, and inflation.

These are not issues that the ACT Government can deal with in isolation, and they are appropriate to be dealt with at a national level. This issue was taken to the Ministerial Council for Consumer Affairs, with the suggestion that the Council consider the development of a code of practice for insurance companies responding to disaster situations.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce and Secretariat in the management of the clean-up and rebuilding process has highlighted a number of valuable lessons:

- A consistent and structured approach is needed for the collection and recording of data on destroyed and damaged properties;
- Where a large scale clean-up is required, the use of an overall project manager has considerable value, particularly in terms of coordination and environmental management;
- A 'limited time' offer of financial assistance provided an incentive for residents to move quickly to clean-up their private blocks, and thus enhance the amenity for people still living in the adjacent houses. It also provided residents with incentives to join the coordinated approach;
- Clear and consistent information on issues such as costs and planning needs to be provided to those householders who may be considering rebuilding destroyed properties;
- The response of insurance companies after a major disaster also needs to be coordinated, both to ensure the best outcome for those affected and to advise insurers on how to approach often traumatised victims.;
- Following the disaster, all insurance companies should be requested to provide key information relevant to their insurance policies/claims processes and conveyed to the community via media and Government internet site; and
- Immediately following the disaster, the Government in conjunction with insurance companies should hold public forums on insurance. Such forums increase the community's awareness of how the Government's insurance advisor can facilitate resolution of insurance issues.