

Recovery Update



Welcome to the first edition of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority's community newsletter, Recovery Update. This regular newsletter will provide important information for affected communities. We hope you will find it useful and informative.

Bushfire appeal funds to help communities rebuild

More than \$130 million in donations to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund will be distributed to people whose houses were destroyed or partially destroyed by this year's devastating bushfires.

All homeowners whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the bushfires will receive a Rebuilding and Recovery Grant of \$50,000. This consists of \$35,000 for rebuilding and \$15,000 to replace contents.

Tenants whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the bushfires will receive a \$15,000 payment for contents lost or damaged.

People whose homes were partially destroyed by the bushfires and who will need to relocate during rebuilding will receive a payment of \$15,000 for costs associated with repairs and rebuilding.

A further needs-based payment will also be made to homeowners whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the fires.

The needs-based payment is currently being considered by the Appeal Fund Advisory Panel and will be assessed on criteria which could include: the number of people in a household; special family needs that may entail additional building costs; limitations on a household's capacity to pay, such as reduced earning capacity as a result of the bushfires; and a household's lack of funds, including no or partial insurance.

Full details of the needs-based payment are being considered and will be announced shortly.

This brings the total allocation from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund to \$180 million, with more than \$50 million previously allocated to more than 2,500 families to assist with their immediate emergency needs.

Rebuilding homes, businesses and public places

Government funded clean-up and demolition program

The largest and most complex clean-up and demolition program in Victoria's history is now underway with Grocon clearing bushfire affected properties across the state.

The Government-funded clean-up program is open to any person who owns property affected by the recent bushfires.

It covers the removal of rubble from houses and other structures destroyed by the bushfires. Grocon will also clear away any dangerous trees that are in the immediate vicinity of those bushfire-damaged structures.

The clean-up does not include debris that was on a property before the bushfires. Any bushfire-damaged trees that are not in the immediate vicinity of a damaged structure will need to be removed by the landowner.

Over 80,000 tons of debris are expected to be cleaned up. Current estimates are that 2,029 homes, 11 community buildings, 59 commercial buildings and 2,385 agricultural sheds, dairies and machinery will need to be cleaned up.

If you would like the Government to clear your property for free, or had your property cleared by a licensed contractor prior to 27 February 2009 and would like to apply for reimbursement, contact the number at the bottom of the page.

Grocon will use local contractors where possible.

Housing and accommodation

New housing program to provide accommodation for families rebuilding

Having a secure place in which to live is a vital part of the recovery and rebuilding process.

More than 1,400 households have now been provided with accommodation assistance. This includes providing temporary emergency accommodation or assessments of medium-term housing needs.

The Victorian Government is providing a temporary housing program in the form of community housing, generously donated homes and, where necessary, portable homes and caravans during clean-up and rebuilding.

The medium-term housing program will provide flexibility and choice to those in need. Some will want to move away from bushfire-affected areas and others may wish to move back to their home communities.

For those people who want to return to their communities every effort will be made to assist them to live in or as close as practicable to their community.

Housing will be allocated on a needs basis and determined by an extensive assessment of each household's circumstances.

All accommodation provided through the Office of Housing's temporary bushfire housing program will be free for an initial 12 weeks, with rental paid after that period at similar rates to public housing.

People in need of housing can discuss their needs with their case manager or register at their nearest Relief Centre, Recovery Centre, Community Service Hub, or any Department of Human Services office.

Message from the Prime Minister and the Premier



Australians will never forget the pain and devastation of Black Saturday.

The tragic loss of life and destruction of homes, properties and towns inflicted a terrible sense of grief on us all. However fire affected communities want to rebuild – and the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments are ready to help.

Rebuilding Victoria after the 2009 bushfires is the biggest reconstruction effort since Cyclone Tracy. It will involve communities, the private sector and all levels of Government. Most importantly, the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments will ensure that affected regions, towns and individuals are all actively involved in the rebuilding effort.

This newsletter will keep you up to date about the rebuilding process. It will provide practical

information in the one place. It will also keep you informed about the work of Victoria's Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, which is already working to address immediate and short-term rebuilding challenges on the ground.

Thank you to everyone who has worked so hard to help our fire-affected communities reclaim their lives.

The road ahead will be challenging, but if the courage, determination and community spirit demonstrated by the Victorians at the heart of this tragedy are anything to go by, together we will succeed.

Kevin Rudd
Prime Minister
of Australia

John Brumby MP
Premier of Victoria

Message from Christine Nixon

The recovery and rebuilding of communities devastated by the 2009 bushfires will be the biggest of its kind ever undertaken in Victoria.

The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority has been established to ensure that the task of rebuilding becomes the State's most urgent priority.

In my visits to fire-affected communities I have seen the incredible spirit and determination with which people are approaching the rebuilding effort. This is being supported by the Authority as we coordinate the efforts of three levels of Government and the broader community.

Progress is already being made.

Initial efforts were focused on immediate needs. Tens of millions of dollars in grants have been paid to families to help with immediate essentials, and case managers are available to work with every affected family.

All displaced people who registered at Relief Centres and Recovery Centres have been offered temporary emergency accommodation, either at a nearby hotel, motel or community and public housing.

Governments are now working together to fund important support and rebuilding initiatives, including site clean-up and demolition. Medium-term issues, like temporary housing, are also being addressed with villages being built in some communities.

The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority will work with each and every community to help them rebuild as quickly as possible, and in the way that they want.

I want to ensure that fire-affected communities are regularly informed of the Authority's work. Subsequent editions of this newsletter will also feature a community noticeboard, where communities can contribute their own local news, information and events.

Details on how you can contribute to upcoming newsletters are on the back page.

Christine Nixon

Chair, Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction
and Recovery Authority

New building standards for bushfire areas

The Victorian Government has introduced new building standards for homes, targeting high bushfire risk areas, to help save lives and property.

Victoria brought forward the adoption of the Australian Standard for Design and Construction of Buildings in Bushfire Prone Areas. The standard was due to be adopted by all States and Territories in May 2010.

The new Australian Standard applies across the whole State. Areas will be defined under six Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) categories from low to extreme risk.

Every new home built in Victoria will undergo a BAL assessment as part of the application for a building permit. This will determine the method of construction to be used to better protect properties from the threat of bushfires. Some of the grants outlined on the page opposite, may help meet some of the increased building costs.

The Building Commission is currently holding seminars across Victoria covering all aspects of rebuilding including the new regulations. Please call the number at the bottom of the page for more information.

Case managers

The Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service has been established to help all Victorians affected by the bushfires get the support they need.

Case managers will work with individuals and families to determine and prioritise their needs, follow up on the agreed actions and report back.

They will help Victorians to locate and access a range of services they need to get back on track, including (but not limited to):

- Education for children
- Financial support
- Access to health services
- Accommodation
- Employment
- Counselling services including trauma counselling
- Legal and insurance matters

Once registered, an individual or family will be contacted by phone to have their needs assessed before a case manager is assigned to them. Please call the Information line to register.

GRANTS & ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE

Many types of financial assistance are available through Governments and the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund, including cash grants and tax relief for households and businesses, as well as access to many important services free of charge.

Your case manager should be able to help you decide which grants are most suitable for your circumstances.

If you do not have a case manager you can call the Information line to register.

Alternatively, information about financial assistance is also available at Relief Centres, Recovery Centres and Community Service Hubs.

Please call the Information line on 1800 240 667 for more information on these forms of assistance.

Individuals, families & households:

Emergency grants through the Department of Human Services

The Department of Human Services is making emergency grants of up to \$1,067 per household for immediate and urgent accommodation, food and personal needs.

Information on how to access the grants is available through Recovery Centres and Community Service Hubs or by calling the number at the bottom of the page.

Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment

The Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment is available to people who have been adversely affected by the Victorian bushfires.

It provides \$1,000 per eligible adult and \$400 per child. Claims for this assistance can be lodged with Centrelink until 7 August 2009.

Grants through the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund

Small businesses and individuals who provided exceptional support to communities in the aftermath of the bushfires will be eligible for a \$8,000 grant from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund.

Up to \$10,000 is available to families whose home has been destroyed or left uninhabitable, for the purchase of essential items including clothes, toiletries, toys and basic items needed to run a house.

A \$10,000 compassion and bereavement payment is available for people who have lost a family member in the fires.

A \$7,500 grant is available to people who have been seriously injured to help meet medical costs and other costs expenses resulting from the injury.

Up to \$5,000 is available to individuals under the Emergency Tools of Trade Payment if they are employees of a registered business and if they have lost equipment vital to their trade or equipment.

\$3,000 is available to repair homes damaged but not destroyed in the fires.

Homeowners whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the bushfires will receive a

Rebuilding and Recovery Grant of \$50,000. This consists of \$35,000 for rebuilding and \$15,000 to replace contents. This grant will be made available to people rebuilding in their community or relocating.

Tenants whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the bushfires will receive a \$15,000 payment to cover contents lost or damaged.

People whose principal place of residence was significantly damaged by the bushfires and who will have to relocate during rebuilding will receive a payment of \$15,000 for repairs and rebuilding.

A further needs-based payment will also be made to homeowners whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the fires.

Temporary Living Expenses Grants & Re-establishment Grants through the Department of Human Services

Temporary Living Expenses Grants assist households with the cost of temporary accommodation and living expenses when a principal place of residence is unfit to live in or inaccessible for more than one week.

Re-establishment Grants assist with the re-establishment of a household's principal place of residence. This includes the repair of structural damage and the replacement or repair of essential household contents.

Temporary Living Expenses Grants and Re-establishment Grants are subject to an income test and a needs assessment.

Funeral expenses

The Victorian Government through the Transport Accident Commission is providing a \$10,000 payment for the cost of funerals of those who lost their lives in the fires.

The Commonwealth Government is also providing a \$5,000 special payment to assist with funeral and memorial related costs.

There is also assistance available in the following areas:

- Free computers
- Drivers licenses and car registration
- Counselling & mental health support
- Free legal advice
- Birth, death & marriage certificates
- Free public transport
- Stamp duty & land titles relief

Businesses:

\$51 million for small businesses and farms

The Victorian and Commonwealth Governments have provided \$51 million for the first stage of a business assistance package.

Businesses damaged or destroyed by the bushfires will be eligible for a grant of up to \$25,000 to help rebuild, with an initial payment of \$5,000 upfront.

Low-interest, concessional loans for affected small businesses and farms of up to \$200,000 will also be available.

Any bushfire-affected business is able to access free, independent business advice to help them determine how best to respond to the impact of the bushfires.

Income assistance for employees, small business & farmers

The Commonwealth Government is also making available financial help for employees, small business owners and farmers who have lost income as a result of the bushfires. You may be able to claim support if you provided assistance to family or friends defending properties or have since helped family members affected. You could be eligible for up to \$486 a fortnight if you're an adult with a dependant child.

VECCI Business Relief Emergency Fund

Small businesses in bushfire-affected areas that were not burnt out but are experiencing financial hardship as a result of the bushfires may be eligible for initial grants of up to \$5,000 through the VECCI Business Relief Emergency Fund.

Community organisations:

There are a number of grants available for community organisations through the Department of Planning and Community Development.

- Grants of up to \$30,000 to community organisations to employ bushfire community recovery officers
- \$10,000 to Neighbourhood Houses to cope with extra demands placed on their services
- Grants of up to \$100,000 for community sports clubs

Grants of \$3,000 for community events and activities are also available through the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development.

Accessing donations

Thousands of Victorians and Australians have generously donated goods and services to those affected by bushfires. Charities and communities have been overwhelmed by the volume of donations, in particular: clothing, utensils and bric-a-brac.

If you have a need for donated goods, case managers and staff at Recovery Centres and Community Service Hubs will be able to help you with what's been donated, subject to availability. You can also go directly to any Salvation Army or St Vincent de Paul store to access donated goods.

Co-ordinating the donations, through Government agencies, different charities and the transport and storage industry has been a major logistical challenge for volunteers, agencies and businesses. Matching up the donated goods with needs is often difficult but there is work being done by Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority to better co-ordinate the task. More details will be released soon.

Livestock

The Victorian Government and the Victorian Farmers Federation are providing emergency fodder for livestock. Farmers who need emergency fodder or who require assistance in assessing burnt livestock should register with the Department of Primary Industries.

If you find wandering livestock or horses contact your local council for assistance, who can arrange for the animals to be impounded and checked for identification and ownership. If possible confine the animals somewhere safe in the meantime.

Fencing

There are a number of assistance options available for primary producers whose fencing has been damaged or destroyed.

The Government will repair or pay 100% restoration costs where the damage has occurred in the course of control work by fire suppression agencies. The Government will also reimburse reasonable insurance excess payments to a maximum of \$400 on all insured Crown Land boundary fences destroyed or damaged.

Primary producers whose income from farming accounts for greater than 51% of their total income can claim a Clean-up and Restoration Grant. This can be used to assist with restoration of fences destroyed or damaged as a result of bushfire.

The Victorian Farmers Federation is also coordinating a register for fencing volunteers. Farmers requiring assistance with fencing should call the Information line for more details.

Roads

At the height of bushfire activity on Black Saturday, around 100 roads were closed. There are still around 40 affected in some way (either fully closed or opened only to local residents and/or emergency services).

Overall, some 490 kilometres of road have been affected by bushfires with damage done to over 35 kilometres of guard rail, 3,100 signs and 16,750 guideposts.

In addition, at least 9,000 roadside trees need to be cleared in the worst affected areas.

VicRoads works closely with police and fire authorities to open bushfire-affected roads as quickly as possible, but not before ensuring they are safe to drive on.

Before a road can be opened to traffic, VicRoads must undertake emergency repairs, clear away debris and do a full safety assessment.

Temporary lower speed limits have been introduced on many re-opened roads to further ensure public safety.

Many roads are still missing line-marking, edge-lines, signage and guardrails, or have crews still working on them.

VicRoads asks that all motorists drive with, extreme care and patience, obey all speed limits and look out for other motorists.

Road closure information can change quickly during bushfires. VicRoads works closely with emergency services agencies to ensure road closure information on its website is as accurate as possible.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment and Parks Victoria are also working on a reopening strategy for parks and forests. A priority will be to make roads safe so that some may be opened in time for Easter.

Royal Commission

Premier John Brumby has announced that a Royal Commission will be held into the bushfires.

A Royal Commission is the highest level judicial inquiry available.

Former Supreme Court judge Justice Bernard Teague AO will chair the Commission, which has already begun its work. It will provide an interim report by 17 August 2009, with a final report due by 31 July 2010.

The Commission will look at every aspect of the fires including how they started, preparation by Governments and other agencies ahead of the threat, and the response to them.

The Commission's community consultation dates are available at www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au

Water

Keeping catchments and personal water supplies protected is a key priority. Following bushfires, water in tanks can become contaminated from debris and ash. A number of local councils have been working across communities to clean tanks and get them ready to collect water again.

Tank cleaning programs are at different stages in different communities. If you need help cleaning your water tank please contact your council for more information. People with further queries about their water supply should contact their local water authority.

Stay informed as we rebuild

Victorians affected by the recent bushfires can now access information in four ways to help stay informed as their properties and communities are rebuilt.

The 'We Will Rebuild' website provides visitors with access to all relevant bushfire reconstruction and recovery information.

The Information Line (1800 240 667) will continue to provide callers with an easy way to access the information they need.

Victorians can also keep up to date with the reconstruction and recovery process via mobile phone. Mobile users can register for free SMS alerts by texting the word REBUILD and their postcode to 13 GOVT (13 46 88)*.

*Standard SMS charges apply to initial registration SMS. This service is not available on the Vodafone and 3 networks.

Have your say

If you have a suggestion or would like to contribute to future editions of this newsletter please email newsletter@wewillrebuild.vic.gov.au or phone 9092 5875.

We are looking for community events for our notice board or any other feedback.