

**VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE
RECONSTRUCTION AND
RECOVERY AUTHORITY**

A CASE STUDY ON AGILITY AND RESILIENCE

A CASE STUDY

Key Topics Discussed:

RESILIENCE AND RECONSTRUCTION

**STATE SERVICES AUTHORITY
GOVERNMENT OF VICTORIA**

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) was established in February 2009 as a time-limited government agency in the state of Victoria charged with co-ordinating the initial two-year phase of recovery and reconstruction following the most devastating bushfires in Australia's history. The scale and urgency of the recovery task created an imperative for public sector agility and responsiveness that involved VBRRA taking on high priority operational roles in a complex operating environment that crossed jurisdictional, portfolio and sectoral boundaries. The VBRRA's recovery and reconstruction framework puts local communities at its centre. Community-led recovery presents challenges, including time costs and resource costs for building capacity. However, its rewards lie in better decision making and stronger community recovery. Community-led recovery also has the potential to strengthen the resilience of communities and their capacity to foresee and adapt to future challenges.

This case study was prepared in March 2010 and examines the VBRRA at the halfway point of its two-year operating timeframe. This means that the full story of the organization is not yet known. Nevertheless, the VBRRA's rapid start-up and eventful first year provide a useful starting point for a conversation about public administration in complex operating environments, public sector agility, governance and operating challenges, and building community resilience.

ABOUT VICTORIA AND GOVERNMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Australia has three levels of government: Commonwealth (national), state and local. The Australian Constitution establishes a federal system of government and defines the boundaries of law-making powers between the Commonwealth and the states.²

Victoria is a state within the Commonwealth of Australia. Victoria has its own state Constitution and can make laws on any subject related to the state. The state government is responsible for a wide range of services including policing, emergency services, public schools, roads and traffic, public hospitals, public housing and business

regulation. The Premier is the head of the Government of Victoria.

Within Victoria, there are 79 local government councils. These councils are established and operate under state laws. Councils provide a diverse range of services, including property, economic, human, recreational and cultural services. They also enforce state and local laws relating to matters such as land use planning, environment protection, public health and traffic management.³

THE 2009 BUSHFIRES IN VICTORIA

With a week of extreme heat and a day of unprecedented fire danger approaching, the Premier of Victoria had warned that 7 February 2009 would be the "worst day in the history of the state."⁴ But the unanticipated scale of the devastation that followed shocked the entire nation. Black Saturday's fires claimed the lives of 173 people. Many others were injured. Communities were traumatized. Homes, businesses and townships were destroyed.

Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon's planned retirement was only weeks away when her police helicopter landed in Marysville. Looking around, she observed absolute devastation. Days before, the resort town had been a popular tourist destination. But now, most of the houses in the town and its commercial hub had been destroyed.

Standing on the steps of the Marysville emergency command post, Premier John Brumby asked Christine Nixon what she planned to do in her retirement. Although the Premier already knew the answer, he and the Prime Minister had a new proposal. "I'd like to ask you," said the Premier, "would you run the reconstruction and recovery authority?"

Christine Nixon accepted the job. It was clear that an enormous reconstruction and recovery task lay ahead. The full extent of the tragedy was only just becoming apparent. Grieving and traumatized communities—people who had lost family, friends, homes and livelihoods—would face the daunting prospect of rebuilding. See Box 1 for the full impact of the 2009 bushfires.

By the time the 2009 Victorian bushfires were contained:

- 173 people had died and many more had been injured;
- almost 430,000 hectares of forests, crops and pasture were destroyed or affected;
- more than 2,000 properties were destroyed; another 1,400 were damaged;
- over 55 businesses destroyed and many hundreds significantly impacted;
- three primary schools and three children's services destroyed, with 47 primary schools partially damaged or requiring cleaning;
- more than 5,000 households accessed case management assistance;
- 366 households required direct housing assistance and up to 500 households assisted into the private rental market;
- over 420 km of arterial roads had been damaged;
- over 10,000 kilometres of fencing had been damaged (private, road and Crown land boundaries, and internal), the equivalent of two return trips from London to Moscow;
- over 11,000 farm animals had been killed or injured;
- an estimated 1,000,000 wildlife were lost;
- over 3,550 agricultural facilities, including dairies, hay, wool and machinery sheds had been damaged;
- around 211,000 tonnes of hay had been lost,
- 70 national parks and reserves, 950 local

parks, 467 cultural sites, more than 200 historic places were damaged; and

- the electricity supply to 60,000 households was cut.

BOX 1: Impact of the 2009 Bushfires¹³

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE RE-CONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY: EARLY ESTABLISHMENT

Fires were still burning when the Victorian government established the VBRRA three days after Black Saturday. The VBRRA is responsible for co-ordinating the restoration and recovery of regions, towns and communities affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Given the massive scale of the disaster, this involves overseeing the largest rebuilding program in the state's history. The bushfires affected 109 communities in 25 of Victoria's 79 local government municipalities. See Box 2 for the VBRRA's terms of reference. An overview of the VBRRA's institutional and governance arrangements is in the "governance challenges" section of this case study.

1. Advise governments, co-ordinate efforts and develop an overarching plan for the restoration and recovery of regions, towns and communities affected by the 2009 bushfires.
2. Work closely with the communities in the process of rebuilding and recovery, and ensure that individuals and communities are consulted closely—with such consultations to be transparent and sensitive to local needs.
3. Analyze and advise governments on the impact of the bushfires on the communities, economy, infrastructure and environment in affected areas.
4. Co-ordinate activities and the work of relevant organizations to help regions, towns and individuals re-establish their communities once it is safe to do so, and in a way that

is respectful of individual and community needs.

5. Ensure that services to affected people are easily available and co-ordinated across all levels of government and community organizations.
6. Work with communities to develop co-ordinated plans to deal with the effects of the disaster on local economies, communities, infrastructure and the environment. These plans should cover the immediate recovery requirements and longer-term development.
7. Have overall responsibility for ensuring that communities are rebuilt and projects are delivered quickly and efficiently.
8. Work closely with all funding sources, including the Red Cross Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund, to ensure effective and co-ordinated expenditure of funds.
9. Report to the Premier of Victoria and consult with the Commonwealth Government as required on reconstruction and recovery efforts.
10. Report regularly on progress to both governments and to communities.

BOX 2: Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority Terms of Reference¹⁴

Initially, with just a handful of people, the VBRRRA commenced its co-ordination and leadership role with limited resources, but also with enormous resolve and goodwill. Offers of help were immediately forthcoming. Individuals and organizations stepped forward to equip the new organization, setting up office space, computers and information systems. Public service departments and private sector businesses provided experienced and capable staff with expertise in policy, planning, logistics, media, information technology, communications, small business, local government, service systems and the natural environment.

In the early days and weeks after Black Saturday, the VBRRRA worked alongside dedicated emergency response, recovery and relief agencies. Access to water, food, clothing, medical treatment and shelter were immediate priorities, as was the restoration of essential services. Scores of agencies had already mobilized. The state's police, fire and emergency services agencies were supplemented with personnel from the Australian Defence Force as well as from federal, interstate and overseas agencies. Government, volunteer and community sector organizations administered medical treatment, paid emergency relief grants, arranged temporary accommodation, managed public health and safety risks, and established a registration and inquiry system to record and account for those affected by the fires.

The scale and urgency of the recovery task created an imperative for public sector agility and responsiveness. There was little room within the VBRRRA's internal structures for hierarchy. The organization's structure was flat, with six teams reporting to the chief executive and chairperson. Information was shared freely and decisions were made swiftly. Christine Nixon used the daily meetings to update staff on what had happened the day before—where she had been, whom she had spoken to and what resources she had committed. VBRRRA staff managed the interface back to federal and state government agencies to follow up on these commitments, which ranged from insurance issues to counselling needs.

Daily staff meetings set the agenda for the upcoming 24 hours. Staff focused on immediate priorities: What is the issue? What is its status? What decision needs to be taken today to make the day productive? Each team would raise issues, and a discussion and decision would follow. All issues were registered in an issues log. The issues log gave staff three timeframe options for dealing with each issue: 24, 48 or 72 hours.

Each daily meeting's objective was to give people enough authority to take action. Staff did not need to go away and write a brief to get something approved. Decisions were made. If they were wrong, they were fixed. VBRRRA Interim Chief Executive Jeff Rosewarne emphasized, "The one thing we didn't want was delay or a sense that no one was in a position to make a decision."

The VBRRRA's early days and weeks were characterized by rapid organizational activity. The VBRRRA convened

decision-making and advisory groups, met with local governments, built a website for public information, engaged communities in a series of open meetings and established a media presence. The VBRRRA needed to bring together the people who would undertake lead roles in recovery and reconstruction—from the Premier to individual members of the 109 affected communities.

The VBRRRA supported a range of decision-making and advisory groups. These included the Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Committee of Cabinet comprising state and federal ministers; an interdepartmental committee of departmental secretaries; an interagency taskforce of senior officials; an expert reference group, including non-government agencies; an industry champions group; and local community recovery committees.

RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION FRAMEWORK

With the adoption of a recovery and reconstruction framework, the VBRRRA developed a more long-term and strategic approach to its activities. The framework puts local communities at its centre around which it encompasses four elements: people, reconstruction, economy and environment. The framework recognizes the interdependencies of local community recovery with each of these four elements. Figure 1 shows the framework and the guiding principles that underpin the VBRRRA's activities.

The framework provides a structured and interactive approach to recovery and reconstruction, keeping the needs and aspirations of local communities at its centre. Both the framework and the VBRRRA's terms of reference (see Box 2) involve working with communities, three tiers of government, departments and other organizations to develop co-ordinated plans for recovery and reconstruction. This includes supporting community recovery committees in developing plans for their local area and co-ordinating a Statewide Plan for Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery.

COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY

The VBRRRA made an early commitment that communities and individuals would have the opportunity to participate in their own recovery and rebuilding process. Each local community would be supported in identifying issues of local concern and in developing plans to address those issues. This approach was designed to maximize opportunities for communities to determine their futures.

Over a two-month period, the VBRRRA held or attended 29 community meetings. These meetings were open events. They provided a forum for individuals and communities to raise issues and concerns and for government, through the VBRRRA, to listen.

Community members used the meetings to pose questions to VBRRRA. These questions ranged from the general (What is VBRRRA?) to the specific (How can you help

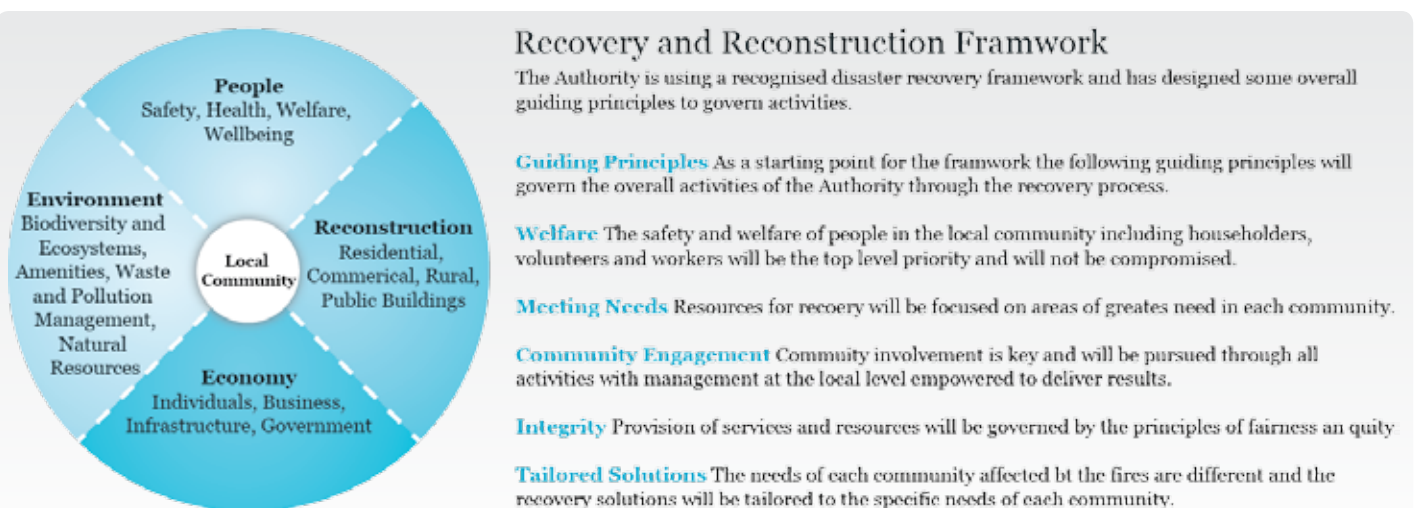


FIGURE 1: Recovery and Reconstruction Framework

SOURCE: VBRRRA, 12 MONTH REPORT, 2009, P. 3

resolve this problem with my bank?). Other questions sought information on the reliability of rumours that had begun to circulate (Is it true that the drinking water is unsafe and that the government is going to cancel the football season?). Publicly airing and settling rumours provided an opportunity for the VBRRRA to reassure the community.

VBRRRA representatives needed to establish credibility with communities. If they did not know the answer to a question, they would admit it and offer to find out. Where individuals or communities raised issues not within the control of government, the VBRRRA took an advocacy role. For example, bushfire-affected households raised concerns with the VBRRRA about issues with private sector companies such as insurers, banks and utility providers. While the VBRRRA had no formal authority over private businesses, it could at least ensure that every insurer, bank and utility provider heard the problem and understood the community's position. VBRRRA staff would make phone calls on behalf of bushfire-affected residents. Companies would at least take their call, listen and consider the concern.

COMMUNITY RECOVERY COMMITTEES

As part of emergency management arrangements in Victoria, each bushfire-affected community was encouraged to establish a community recovery committee. In some areas, this model was quickly enacted. Indeed, some of the 25 local government councils affected by the fires were already establishing and supporting citizen-based groups. Other councils preferred to operate through municipal-level emergency recovery structures that did not necessarily have broad-based participation models or membership from each location within the municipality.

The VBRRRA did not have formal powers to enforce its preferred model. Rather, it relied on relationships, education, conversation and influence to advance its preference. This proved largely successful. The VBRRRA remains clear that it is engaging with communities through citizen-based and local community recovery committees.

The VBRRRA continues to work with 33 community recovery committees. Each committee provides community leadership for recovery and reconstruction in its local area. The committees work alongside other agencies, including regional recovery committees, the VBRRRA, local councils, government departments, and other local groups.

Community recovery committees have prepared 30 community recovery plans. These plans identify ideas, needs and proposed projects that will help each local community recover. Over 1,000 proposed projects cover all aspects of recovery: personal health and well-being, built and natural environment, business and economy, and community strength and well-being. Projects range in their scale, complexity, timeframe and urgency. They include rebuilding community facilities, improving local infrastructure, holding social events and well-being programs, restoring sport and recreation facilities, installing fire safety systems and restoring parks and habitat.

Community recovery committees and plans represent a departure from well established models of government-community consultation. The VBRRRA provided guidance and templates for developing and refining the plans. However, each community recovery committee set its own priorities and retained complete and uncensored authorship over its plans. Each recovery committee tapped into its own local organizations and networks to generate support for its plan.

The VBRRRA incorporated projects identified by communities into a state plan. The plan brings a co-ordinated approach to recovery and reconstruction that crosses jurisdictional, portfolio and geographic boundaries. The state plan is funded by the Government of Victoria, the Commonwealth Government, the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund⁵ and other donors. The VBRRRA is working with communities to further develop the projects featured in the state plan, helping solve problems and ensure that communities are well placed to deliver the projects on time and in accordance with community expectations. This means that communities are supported to deliver on their own priorities. VBRRRA Community Engagement Teams also work with community recovery committees to identify alternative options for developing, funding and delivering projects that have not been incorporated into the state plan.

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY

The VBRRRA's commitment to community-led recovery was not without challenges. Community participation models can incur time and resource costs. Decision making through community consensus can be slower than through individual agencies. Rather than immediately replacing schools, kindergartens, fire stations and other infrastructures precisely as they were, community-led recovery leads to broader debate about how infrastructure should be redeveloped. In some cases, this can lead to replacement facilities that are different from the original infrastructure.

Achieving consensus within diverse communities was challenging, particularly for many individuals who were recovering from traumatic experiences of survival and grieving over the loss of family, friends and property. Furthermore, some communities were working together for the first time and had little or no experience of government processes. They may not have previously been involved in running meetings, engaging stakeholders, resolving issues, scoping projects, managing consultancies and developing formal plans. This meant they needed to develop these capabilities through the bushfire recovery planning process.

The rewards of community-led recovery can outweigh its challenges. People recover better when they can engage in their own recovery process.⁶ Giving decision-making capacity back to individuals and communities is fundamental to restoring a sense of empowerment and control. This is why the VBRRRA sought to create participation opportunities for all individuals and communities who were able and wanting to engage.

Participative models of recovery can lead to better results. Communities made decisions that might not have happened if government had immediately commenced rebuilding public infrastructure. For example, communities have said, "Wouldn't it be great to have the primary school and kindergarten right next door to each other rather than down the road?" These kinds of suggestions can lead to time-consuming debate. Yet these debates are fruitful more often than not. They can result in solutions that might not have emerged in a process imposed

from outside the community.

MARYSVILLE AND TRIANGLE URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK

The development of an Urban Design Framework for the town of Marysville illustrates the challenges and rewards of a participative recovery model. Rebuilding Marysville has been the subject of extensive consultation and heated debate. Nine months after the fires, the new Marysville and Triangle Urban Design Framework was released. The framework sets out a long-term vision for rebuilding and linking the town with neighbouring communities in Buxton, Taggerty, Narbethong and Granton. See Box 3 for an overview of the framework, previously published in the Statewide Plan for Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery.

The development of the Urban Design Framework allowed the community to discuss how Marysville should

The once-thriving resort town of Marysville was devastated in the bushfires: 34 people lost their lives, and the main street and town centre were almost completely destroyed.

Four further fatalities occurred in nearby Narbethong, and some 538 properties were destroyed by the Murrindindi fire.

The task of rebuilding Marysville and surrounding communities is a formidable one, but it is taking shape as the clean-up is completed, people return to the town and the community focuses on its future.

In September, following extensive community consultation, Premier John Brumby, Federal Parliamentary Secretary Bill Shorten, Murrindindi Mayor Lyn Gunter and VBRRRA Chairperson Christine Nixon released the new Marysville and Triangle Urban Design Framework, which sets out a long-term vision for rebuilding the town.

The framework provides design guidelines for developing Marysville as a safer, more sustainable

town with a distinct character that complements the surrounding environment. The framework includes plans for an iconic new town centre; a new community hub that incorporates a primary school, a children's centre, health services and recreation facilities; the rebuilding of the police station, petrol station and general store; better links with other Triangle communities; and the reinstatement and expansion of the oak tree landscape.

The Statewide Plan for Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery funds the next phase of this process, including detailed master plans for five key areas in the town (the "heart of Marysville," the main street and business hub, the remainder of Marysville, Gallipoli Park and the community hub site); civil engineering and technical assessments for sites and projects; and detailed project briefs for reconstruction projects that will be managed by the VBRRA, the local council, government agencies and community groups.

While this planning and consultation process continues, work is proceeding on a number of rebuilding projects that conform to the framework, including the redevelopment of the Marysville Motor Museum site, a new Rebuilding Advisory Centre and the restoration of community and visitor facilities.

BOX 3: Rebuilding Marysville¹⁵

be rebuilt. Extensive community consultation enabled people to participate and have their say about the future design of their town. For example, the framework sets aside a lot on the corner of the main street to become the "Marysville Heart." Before the fires, this land was occupied by the police station. Had government prioritized efficient replacement of infrastructure over community participation, the police station would likely once more be located on one of the best lots in the centre of town. Instead, the police agreed to give up that lot for the "Marysville Heart" and rebuild the police station elsewhere.

The community determined that the "Marysville Heart" will be a precinct where people can gather. It will be a focal point for the local community and for visitors.

The details for the precinct are yet to be decided. The community needs time to decide how to realize its aspirations and achieve an appropriate mix of business, cultural and social activities on the site. The participative recovery model continues to offer to communities support and time to recover in their own way and at their own pace.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

In some areas, one of the less tangible benefits of community-led recovery has been the creation of a civic spirit. Tony Ferguson, Chair of the Hazelwood-Jeeralang Community Recovery Committee, noted that, "Before the fires, we were just a locality...For the most part, we knew our immediate neighbours but that was pretty much it...The future is brighter now as the community is much tighter. You now find that more people have the time for a chat on the side of the road. That's got to be good."⁷

The value of community spirit is difficult to quantify. However, its effects are nevertheless real. It means that working as part of the community is individually rewarding as well as collectively productive. It means that communities are better equipped to lead their recovery, drawing on their own resources as well as support from government and from other organizations.

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

Although the VBRRA is primarily a co-ordinating body, it also undertook operational responsibilities, including three of five "extraordinary" commitments extending beyond government's usual areas of activity. These were establishing systems for managing material aid and donations; overseeing the clean-up of sites destroyed by the bushfires; and constructing temporary villages in three townships.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is leading the government's two other extraordinary commitments. These are a case management service for every affected household and the establishment of ten community service hubs to serve as one-stop-shops for services including financial support, housing and counselling. Over 5,000 households have accessed the case management

service. The DHS has played a significant leadership role in bushfire recovery efforts and is one of the VBRRA's key partners in managing co-ordinated recovery efforts.

The VBRRA's operational responsibilities centre on those activities that do not have a logical "fit" within existing agencies' core business, so its broad terms of reference provide the flexibility to take on operational roles as required. This includes the three extraordinary roles mentioned above and outlined in the sections on "Clean-up," "Material Aid and Donations" and "Temporary Villages" below. It also includes other initiatives, such as providing free portable showers and toilets to people living in temporary accommodation on their land while they rebuild. This allows a degree of agility to respond to community needs as they arise and to shape recovery efforts in accordance with these needs. It enables the VBRRA's role to evolve as needs emerge and change over time.

CLEAN-UP

Senior staff at the VBRRA consider the clean-up operation as one of the agency's most notable successes. Three weeks after the fire, the government contracted private company Grocon to clear debris from thousands of properties. A considerable break from usually protracted procurement procedures and negotiations, the VBRRA progressed from preparing a request for tender document to a signing a contract within six days.

Grocon cleared all properties that owners wanted cleared. Wherever possible, the clean-up operation engaged local contractors, with 69 percent of work undertaken by non-metropolitan contractors located within or close to affected areas. The operation cleared 3,053 properties in four and a half months (almost two months ahead of schedule), removing 400,000 tons of material. This involved clearing up to 300 properties per week at the peak. It included a central role for the Environmental Protection Authority, which ensured the safe disposal of hazardous waste, including asbestos.

The clean-up program received considerably more praise than complaints. VBRRA staff consider this no small achievement in such emotionally fraught circumstances. Clean-up workers received psycho-social training so that they were prepared to work with families who had lost

loved ones and experienced considerable trauma and loss. It was not the "tear down and build" job to which such contractors are more accustomed. Rather, the task was approached with the utmost sensitivity and respect.

If construction workers started to clean up a property and the owner asked them to stop for any reason—to save a rose bush, to give them more time to reflect—they stopped and waited. They avoided areas where family pets were buried. They preserved concrete slabs where children had pressed their hands. They retrieved precious items such as rings, watches and cufflinks.

MATERIAL AID AND DONATIONS MANAGEMENT

MATERIAL AID

People throughout Victoria, Australia and the world were shocked by the scale of destruction and wanted to help. They donated goods, which flooded into relief centres, community agencies and anywhere people thought they might be needed. Under existing emergency management arrangements, non-profit agencies were responsible for material aid distribution. However, these agencies were inundated by the unprecedented volume.

Head of Operations, Betsy Harrington, arrived at the VBRRA on the same day as six seconded staff from the Australian Defence Force. Their immediate task was to deal with 21,000 pallets of material aid. The Defence Force staff went on the road to study and analyze the situation. They wanted to know: What do we have? What is its value? Who needs it? Where is it? and Where should it be? The task was to match the needs of people with the donations—anything from clothing and household items to livestock and musical instruments.

Material aid presented logistical challenges. It needed to be managed, warehoused, sorted, stacked, transported and delivered. The VBRRA contracted a warehouse company to ensure that the bulk of the material aid was in one place and hired a logistics company to organize its transport. Teams of people—bank employees, Royal Australian Navy personnel and other volunteers—sorted through the goods. Regional distribution points were established. The VBRRA made arrangements with local

non-profit agencies, setting up a simple process for them to know what was available and to ask people what they needed. Individuals and families were given the option to come to the main warehouse to collect material aid or to request its delivery.

When asked what could have been done differently, Betsy Harrington did not hesitate. “Early communications,” she emphasized. Early communications would have encouraged potential donors to wait for information about what was needed and where it was needed.

DONATIONS MANAGEMENT

The demand for some donated items outstripped supply. These included vouchers for department stores, furniture, homewares, airline travel and electronic goods. The VBRRA needed a system that was fair, equitable and manageable.

The VBRRA developed a needs-based donations management system. It was designed to meet client needs in a fair, equitable and timely manner in accordance with client and donor expectations. The system recorded what people needed, what was available and what had been given to whom. It included a “points system,” which allocated 1,000 points to affected families. They could choose to “spend” their points as they wish on high-demand donated items. Points could be redeemed for store vouchers, airline travel and services, such as plumbing or architectural services. Popular items were released periodically through a ballot system. This recognized that some individuals needed more time than others to re-establish themselves and access donations. The ballot system avoided the exhaustion of high-demand items before everyone was ready.

Referral cards were issued to 6,000 affected individuals and families. This enabled easy accesses for cardholders to donated goods and services. People could also use the cards for other interaction with government agencies. The cards served as proof of their status as people affected by the fires and entitled to support services.

The VBRRA also delivered a “matching service” for high-value donations for community projects. This included asking communities what they wanted and turning the request into a scope document that could be taken to a

corporate donor so a match could be made. Matching communities with donors was often complicated. Donors from the corporate and philanthropic sectors often have specific parameters for their contributions. In addition, community groups needed appropriate mechanisms to channel money and donated goods. They needed to have the right kind of tax and legal status. They also needed to have the capacity to manage money and projects. If the mechanisms or capacities were not in place, the VBRRA needed to find someone through whom donations could be channelled to the community. By March 2010, a total of 66 community projects had been supported in part or in full by a match.

TEMPORARY VILLAGES

The VBRRA constructed three temporary villages (Flowerdale, Kinglake and Marysville) and smaller temporary housing arrangements in Whittlesea. These areas were hardest hit by the bushfires and lacked sufficient housing for displaced individuals and families needing and wanting to remain in their communities. Victoria had no precedent for this kind of project. The VBRRA, a central agency of government, was confronted with the unique challenge of constructing the villages and equipping them for occupancy. The DHS manages the tenancies for the 253 temporary dwellings. This includes working with residents to transition them to secure permanent accommodation once the temporary villages close.

The VBRRA arranged access to land to construct the temporary villages. The villages include a mix of single, double and family moveable units. Constructing the villages went beyond providing sleeping quarters. It involved building communal cooking and family dining facilities, recreation space, laundries, showers, toilets, storage, pet facilities, storage and security.

Construction work used a mix of DHS knock-down buildings and donated and purchased goods and services. Buildings donated by BlueScope Steel, kitchens donated by Ikea and other assets will be handed over to local government councils for community use when the villages are decommissioned.

GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

The VBRRRA's operating environment is complex. It operates across jurisdictions, portfolios, sectors and geographically dispersed locations. One hundred and nine affected communities, each with its particular needs, are spread across 25 municipalities. The people in these communities experienced significant personal loss and trauma. They lost family members, neighbours and friends as well as homes, businesses and personal possessions.

The VBRRRA continues to work in this complex environment without legislated powers to co-ordinate action for affected communities. The VBRRRA is an administrative office of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. This is an institutional form that can be established rapidly but does not necessarily come with legislative powers and functions. This means that the VBRRRA must rely on partnerships, persuasion, negotiation and force of will to achieve consensus and co-ordination.

Four key factors enabled the VBRRRA to operate effectively without statutory powers:

- Purpose and goodwill. Those involved in reconstruction and recovery efforts have a united purpose: to help affected communities recover and rebuild. There is widespread and genuine goodwill and dedication to achieving this purpose.
- Authorizing environment. The Premier and Prime Minister established an unequivocal authorizing environment. They consistently and publicly emphasized the importance of community-led recovery co-ordinated at a statewide level through the VBRRRA.
- Leadership. The VBRRRA's chairperson, Christine Nixon, has a well-established record of working with communities. She is also widely known and respected within the public sector. Her strong public profile strengthens the VBRRRA's operating legitimacy.
- Budget. The VBRRRA is the central co-ordination body through which state budget decisions are channelled. Departments submit budget bids

through the VBRRRA as part of a co-ordinated package of initiatives. Local governments require access to state funding and resources to deliver recovery services and rebuild public infrastructure.

Strong working relationships are central to managing complex governance environments. For the VBRRRA, this meant a lot of talking and listening. It meant creating the space to build relationships and have productive conversations with communities, state government departments, federal government departments, local government councils, business owners, non-profit agencies, corporate donors, insurance agencies, banks, lawyers, politicians, essential service providers, the building industry and the media.

VBRRRA employees needed to become skilled at conversation, working with people and drawing on networks. This meant bringing everyone to the table, letting them know their help was needed and they were part of the solution. It meant asking the right questions of the right people and finding out what it would take to involve them. Building these relationships was not always easy. However, even when there was disagreement about decisions or processes, there was at least a shared recognition of an overarching objective to help affected communities recover and rebuild.

Relationship-building, although critical, was not always sufficient to meet governance challenges. In the absence of legislated powers and functions, the VBRRRA needed an institutional mechanism to oversee recovery and reconstruction in the most severely affected municipality. The Shire of Murrindindi was the epicentre of Black Saturday's devastation. The fires killed 95 people in the shire and destroyed 1,242 properties. This amounted to significant individual and community trauma. It also meant a large volume of reconstruction projects at a time when local government services were stretched. In addition, the loss of so many properties substantially reduced the shire's capacity to raise revenue from ratepayers.

A special committee is managing bushfire reconstruction and recovery in the shire. Murrindindi Shire's Special Committee Responsible for Bushfire Recovery and Reconstruction has the delegated powers and duties of Murrindindi Shire Council under the Local Govern-

ment Act 1989. A VBRRA representative chairs the committee, which also includes representatives from the DHS, the Department of Planning and Community Development and three members of the Murrumbidgee Shire Council. The committee provides a governance structure to co-ordinate and align policy, planning, community engagement, service delivery and reconstruction projects.

Committee meetings are open to the public. Each meeting agenda includes an open forum in which any recovery and reconstruction issues in the shire can be raised. Meeting agenda, papers and minutes are published on the council's website. Governance support through the committee is supplemented with a funded support package for recovery, which includes funding to build the necessary capabilities to deliver reconstruction projects within the shire.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

The New Synthesis of Public Administration contends that the ultimate role of government is to ensure a resilient society—that is, a society capable of adapting to unforeseen events. It envisages government working with individuals and communities to identify and mitigate vulnerabilities and build adaptive capacity.⁸

Resilience is the capacity to bounce back in the face of adversity. It refers to the ability to absorb disturbances and re-organize while undergoing change. The size of a shock that a system can absorb (without losing its fundamental purpose or identity) demonstrates its degree of resilience.⁹

Professor Bob Montgomery cites eight aspects of psychological resilience for individuals:

1. **EMOTIONAL AWARENESS.** The ability to understand how an individual is feeling and why;
2. **PERSEVERANCE.** The ability to see things through and carry a greater than usual load in order to achieve goals;

3. **INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL.** A sense of being “in charge” rather than being a hopeless victim;
4. **OPTIMISM.** A sense that there is a way out of the difficult situation;
5. **SOCIAL SUPPORT.** The ability to tap into support;
6. **SENSE OF HUMOUR.** The ability to laugh even in difficult times;
7. **PERSPECTIVE.** The ability not to be overwhelmed; and
8. **SPIRITUALITY.** A sense of spirituality (not necessarily religion).¹⁰

At a systems level, Professor Brian Walker notes that factors with a bearing on resilience include:

1. **DIVERSITY.** Greater diversity mitigates vulnerability to single shocks;
2. **MODULARITY.** The impact of disturbances spreads less readily through modular systems than through intricately interconnected systems;
3. **SOCIAL CAPITAL.** Includes high levels of trust and leadership;
4. **TIGHT FEEDBACK.** Delays between a response and when the impact of the response is felt diminish resilience;
5. **COMMUNICATION.** Includes inflow and outflow of information; and
6. **OVERLAPPING INSTITUTIONS.** Sharing tasks across agencies rather than doing everything in one place.¹¹

RESILIENCE AND THE VBRRA

Individuals and communities in bushfire-affected areas are each recovering in their own time and in their own

way. They continue to experience grief and trauma. Some have made decisions about their long-term future—whether to remain in affected areas or move on. Others are not yet ready to make those decisions.

One year on from the fires, it is possible to reflect on how the VBRRA's approaches to reconstruction and recovery co-ordination could have a lasting impact on community resilience. The VBRRA's emphasis on community-led recovery and local decision making has the potential to strengthen the communities' resilience and capacity to foresee and adapt to future challenges. This is consistent with the expectation that people recover better when they can participate and make decisions about their own recovery.¹²

Affected communities demonstrated their capacity to come together and plan for the future amidst unprecedented challenges. Communities worked together, in some cases for the first time, to collectively solve problems, debate issues and support each other to recover and rebuild. They demonstrated valuable skills in identifying issues, engaging stakeholders, setting priorities, developing plans, securing funding, working with public, private and non-profit agencies, and managing projects. These skills will likely equip communities to better meet future challenges.

In 2011, the VBRRA will withdraw from its central co-ordination role. It is currently developing transition plans so that communities, local government, state and federal departments and other agencies can continue to support long-term recovery and rebuild private and public infrastructure in its absence. Effective transition planning will be critical to ensure that case management, temporary housing, financial, health, planning and other forms of assistance leave individuals, households, community groups and local governments better equipped to manage their own long-term recovery. As services are gradually withdrawn or transition to more permanent arrangements, communities will need to be ready to adapt to these changes.

Rebuilding programs are well under way, but reconstruction will not be complete when the VBRRA ceases to exist. For this reason, the VBRRA has taken direct responsibility for only a limited number of reconstruction projects. The VBRRA's central role in reconstruction has been to ensure that households, communities and other

organizations have the necessary capabilities to manage their own projects. Many of these projects have been highly challenging relative to their scale. Communities needed to establish consensus, engage with stakeholders, draw on multiple funding sources, co-ordinate pro bono services, use a mix of purchased and donated materials and adhere to new building standards. The scale of this challenge was magnified by the personally difficult circumstances of many members of the communities.

Communities affected by the bushfires require the resilience and capacity to lead their own long-term recovery. These communities continue to confront challenges arising from the bushfires. Central among the challenges for communities and government is addressing mental health and well-being needs, generating economic recovery and new jobs, and ensuring that communities are well prepared and protected for future fire seasons.

CONCLUSION

The VBRRA is government's central co-ordinating agency working with local communities to oversee the initial two-year phase of recovery and reconstruction from the most devastating bushfires in Australia's history. This large-scale effort crosses jurisdictional, portfolio, sectoral and geographic boundaries.

A clear sense of purpose and enormous goodwill has been central to the VBRRA's ability to operate in an environment of urgency and complexity. There is a genuine desire to support affected individuals, families and communities to recover and rebuild. This common purpose underpins new working relationships between the VBRRA and other agencies. It has been central to the VBRRA's capacity to respond with agility to emerging challenges, taking on both co-ordination and operational roles as required to anticipate and support communities' needs.

The VBRRA's focus on community-led recovery and local decision making is a building block for future resilience. There has been a strong emphasis on capacity building, engagement and decision making at the local level, even when this comes with time and resource costs. The VBRRA's level of success will become more apparent once the organization has reached its two-

year sunset date. The degree to which communities are involved in decision making will likely determine how resilient and well-equipped they will be to continue to recover and plan for the future.

ENDNOTES

1. In researching this case study, interviews were conducted with the following VBRRRA officials in Melbourne from December 2009 to January 2010: Christine Nixon, Chairperson; Ben Hubbard, Chief Executive Officer; Betsy Harrington, Head, Operations; Penny Croser, Head, Policy, Secretariat and Business Services; Jeff Rosewarne, Interim Chief Executive Officer (February–June 2009); Deb Symons, Executive Adviser. The State Services Authority would like to thank and acknowledge these important actors for taking time to reflect on the VBRRRA's first year. The State Services Authority would also like to thank John Hanna for his support in coordinating the case study process.
2. State Services Authority (State of Victoria, Australia), *Welcome to Government*, 1.
3. Department of Planning and Community Development (State of Victoria, Australia), "Guide to Local Government".
4. Moncrief, "Worst Day in History."
5. The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund was established in the days after the fires by the Victorian Government, in partnership with the Australian Red Cross and the Australian Government, raising \$379 million by the time the appeal officially closed in April 2009.
6. Ellis, Kanowski, and Whelan. *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management*; Emergency Management Australia, Recovery.
7. Tony Ferguson cited in the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, *12 Month Report*, 45.
8. Bourgon, "Serving Beyond the Predictable," Occasional Paper No. 8.
9. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "Black Saturday Anniversary: Resilience."
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ellis, Kanowski, and Whelan. *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management*; Emergency Management Australia, *Community Development in Recovery From Disaster*.
13. Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, *100 Day Report*, 4.
14. Ibid.,i.
15. Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, *Rebuilding Together*, 40-41.

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FROM NS6 TO NS WORLD

THE NEW SYNTHESIS PROJECT

The New Synthesis Project is an international partnership of institutions and individuals who are dedicated to advancing the study and practice of public administration. While they hail from different countries, different political systems and different historical, economic and cultural contexts, all share the view that public administration as a practice and discipline is not yet aligned with the challenges of serving in the 21st century.

THE NEW SYNTHESIS 6 NETWORK

In 2009, Madame Jocelyne Bourgon invited six countries to join the New Synthesis Network (NS6), composed of officials, scholars and experts from Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Committed to supporting practitioners whose work is becoming increasingly difficult, this network has engaged close to 200 people from more than 24 organizations. Their efforts have resulted in five international roundtables, five post-roundtable reports, and 17 case studies. Collectively, this work has generated significant insights into preparing governments to serve in the 21st century.

The Network's findings have been captured in the publication of a new book entitled *A New Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century*, and is available in print and electronic formats from McGill-Queen's University Press. Its signature contribution is the presentation of an enabling governance framework that brings together the role of government, society and people to address some of the most complex and intractable problems of our time.

TOWARDS NS WORLD

So where to from here? Reconfiguring and building the capacities of government for the future cannot be accomplished through the publication of a single book. It is a continuous journey which requires the ongoing sharing and synthesis of ideas, as well as the feedback, learning and course adjustments that can only be derived by testing ideas in action.

And so the journey continues and the conversation expands. Our goal is to build upon the rich partnership of the original six participating countries by opening up this exchange with others—wherever they may be located. We seek to create an international community that connects all leaders—from government, the private sector and civil society—committed to helping prepare governments for the challenges ahead.

Next stages of this work will include virtual exchanges supported by web 2.0 technologies, as well as possible thematic and regionally-based networks and events. But no matter the vehicles, success can only be achieved through the active participation and collaboration of those passionate about making a difference.

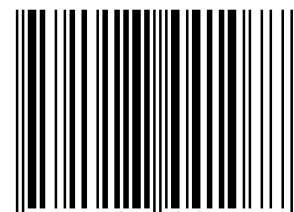
We encourage you to stay tuned to nsworld.org for more information about how to get engaged.

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