

East Gippsland Bushfires 2019/20

Final Progress Report

January 2024



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Acknowledgement of Country

East Gippsland Shire Council acknowledges the Gunaikurnai, Monero and Bidawel people as the Traditional Custodians of the land that encompasses East Gippsland Shire, and their enduring relationship with Country. The Traditional Custodians have cared for and nurtured East Gippsland for tens of thousands of years. Council values their living culture and practices and their right to self-determination. Council pays respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in East Gippsland, their Elders, past, present and future.

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Message from the CEO

This marks the fourth and final progress report detailing the advancements in the recovery efforts following the 2019/20 bushfires. Although it signifies the culmination of our progress reports, we acknowledge that recovery is an ongoing process that doesn't simply come to an end. The commitment of Council to assist communities in their recovery remains unwavering for this event and subsequent events.

Our communities, along with the invaluable support of Community Recovery Committees and representative groups, have made remarkable strides, with many of the identified priority actions delivered. However, not all aspects of the recovery process have reached completion. Rebuilding homes, strengthening social connections, and revitalising community and public infrastructure in the aftermath of such a catastrophe is a lengthy journey.

It's crucial to acknowledge that out of the 346 homes lost, only 66 have been rebuilt. While a significant portion of those affected by the disaster have relocated, there is still a need to support those in the process of rebuilding or who have yet to make their decisions.

Looking toward the future, recent events in October 2023 saw East Gippsland facing bushfires and floods within a single week. While such challenges are never easy, Council and our communities are better prepared than in previous years. More work lies ahead, but we have comprehensive plans and actions in motion.

Our strengthened emergency management arrangements position us for a more resilient future. Approaching almost four years since the fires, Council is now in the process of transitioning its current recovery model into an enduring framework for community development and planning. Further details on this transition are provided in the report.

The journey of recovery has been long and arduous, one we fervently hope to never repeat. We take immense pride in the contributions of everyone who has played a role in supporting our shire, with a special mention to the dedicated volunteers within the Community Recovery Committees and representative groups. The achievements and future plans of these groups are elaborated on in this report, beginning on page 14.

It is important to recognise that recovery efforts have been dependent on financial contributions from all levels of government as well as numerous organisations that have provided and continue to provide funding and other support for recovery.

In closing, I extend my gratitude to all our partners who have joined us on this recovery journey.

Anthony Basford
Chief Executive Officer

Introduction

This report marks the fourth and final recovery progress report in response to the East Gippsland Black Summer bushfires of 2019/20. It serves as a summary of the actions taken to address community needs and priorities, as identified through extensive engagement with affected communities and individuals. Building upon the progress outlined in East Gippsland Shire Council's October 2022 report, this document provides insights into the ongoing recovery process and outlines future directions.

While the primary focus of this report is on the recovery from the 2019/20 fire event, it is important to acknowledge the compounding impacts on community recovery resulting from subsequent events. Since the fires, East Gippsland has navigated various challenges, including but not limited to, the impacts from COVID-19, flooding, storm damage, as well as the Victorian Government decision to transition from native forestry for some districts. These events have influenced social recovery and the broader rebuilding effort.

Council extends its appreciation for the funding opportunities provided notably by the Victorian Government through Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV), previously known as Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV), and the Commonwealth Government through the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), and other agencies. These contributions have enabled Council to deliver dedicated community recovery initiatives.

This report, developed by East Gippsland Shire Council (Council), incorporates valuable input from key recovery partners who have collaborated closely with Council to compile this report. Their contributions ensure a comprehensive and informed assessment of the recovery journey in bushfire-affected areas in East Gippsland.

Purpose

This fourth and final report is intended to offer stakeholders, including communities, agencies, volunteers and government entities, an overview of the recovery efforts undertaken in response to the East Gippsland 2019/20 Bushfires, while also highlighting developments since the October 2022 Third Progress Report. Additionally, it provides visibility into the contributions of the Community Recovery Committees and representative groups, serving as a comprehensive record of our collective efforts in the recovery process.

Impacts of the Black Summer bushfires

In the summer of 2019/20, East Gippsland faced an unprecedented natural disaster caused by lightning strikes that ignited multiple fires across the region. These fires, which raged throughout the summer months, presented significant challenges due to their extensive scale, prolonged duration, and far-reaching societal and economic effects.

The initial fires started on November 21, 2019, in remote and challenging terrains, making containment efforts difficult. Subsequently, several fires merged of great magnitude, affecting Gippsland, the North East, and neighbouring New South Wales.

As the year ended, dry lightning ignited new fires west of Mallacoota, culminating in a catastrophic blaze on New Year's Eve, amid extreme fire and weather conditions. On 2 January, 2020, then Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared a State of Disaster under the provisions of the Victorian Emergency Management Act and a few days later advice from the then Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner, Andrew Crisp, was urging holidaymakers to leave East Gippsland.

Arterial roads were closed, communities became isolated, and a collaborative effort involving the Australian Defence Force, Victoria Police, East Gippsland Shire

Council, and other government agencies was launched to provide emergency aid and evacuate residents and holidaymakers trapped by the fires.

Adding to these challenges were the pre-existing issues of drought and economic changes, notably in the timber industry.

On April 2, 2020, East Gippsland officially entered the recovery phase, with East Gippsland Shire Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria (now Emergency Recovery Victoria) taking charge of recovery coordination. The East Gippsland Recovery Committee (EGRC) played a key role in managing recovery efforts.

Recovery coordination and progress

Following April 2020, recovery coordination adapted to meet changing community needs, considering available resources, funding, and recovery priorities of various stakeholders. In September 2021, the EGRC held its final meeting with Council and Bushfire Recovery Victoria continuing to collaborate in the coordination efforts.

Throughout 2021 and 2022, numerous priority recovery initiatives by agencies and organisations were successfully implemented, and the dedicated work of sub-committees and working groups moved closer to completion. Detailed information on these actions are available in the Progress Reports released in September 2020, May 2021, and October 2022.

Future recovery arrangements

From March 2024 and further into 2025, Council will commence transitioning its recovery model. Many of the government structures and arrangements in place from early 2020 have transitioned and the levels of resourcing and services of many recovery agencies or departments including Emergency Recovery Victoria have reduced.

Recovery teams have remained within Council across Economic Development, Rebuild Support Service, Community Recovery and Bushfire Recovery Coordination. Much of the support provided by Council has been made available through the receipt of State or Commonwealth Government grant funding for recovery support initiatives.

Remaining funds are being allocated based on an understanding of the needs of our communities, as CRCs or representative groups finalise the delivery of their priority recovery projects and activities.

Each CRC or representative group is also making its own decision to either continue their work, form new structures, wind down or transition. An essential aspect of the recovery process has been for all levels of government to support the ability of communities to advocate for their own requirements and priorities.

Council is committed to ensuring the committees and other groups established as part of the recovery process are supported to continue as part of the ongoing wellbeing of each community.

The knowledge obtained by the CRCs and representative groups on their communities, unique challenges, resources and capacities will inform how Council will work with communities beyond the current focus of recovery.

Community-centred recovery

Community Recovery Committees and representative groups

Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) and representative groups remain integral to the recovery efforts across East Gippsland with 10 groups continuing to operate since the fire. The CRCs and their members have undertaken a diverse range of community recovery projects and activities since their conception. Council acknowledges the work these groups have done and the significant contribution they have made to their communities' recovery and future resilience. Further information on the work of the CRCs and the representative groups, can be found starting on page 14.

CRC Link-up

The 'CRC Link-up', a group of CRC and Representative Group members, has continued to meet regularly since the 2019/20 bushfires with the secretariat support provided by Council.

Independent facilitator, Peter Williams volunteered to support this dedicated group. In May 2020 as COVID-19 took hold Peter was approached by the lead of Community Engagement for the then, Bushfire Recovery Victoria, who were looking to facilitate digital ways of communities being able to connect. Peter ran a successful workshop with emerging CRC leaders valuing the connection with other CRCs and governments agencies. Since the workshop, Peter continued to volunteer and take on the role as independent facilitator.

"Everything I do is voluntary because I am a community advocate and if I was getting paid, I would no longer be independent. Throughout Black Saturday we received support from many people who had previously experienced disasters, and this was an opportunity for me to pay it forward, where it can help".

During 2023 in addition to online meetings, the Link-Ups were held face to face at Wairewa, hosted by the Wairewa CRC, at the Tambo Crossing Community Centre hosted by Tambo Crossing community members and Orbest Golf Club hosted by the Orbest District Community Recovery and Transition Committee. Face to face meetings at community venues enabled valuable networking opportunities, which allowed hosts to share information on their recovery journeys and showcase infrastructure rebuilding and new developments in the community.



Wairewa Road Railway Bridge, Wairewa



CRC members, Tambo Crossing Community Facility



GRAPHIC RECORDING by melanie murphy. ON GUNAI KURNAL LAND

OROBST GOLF CLUB 2023



CRC members with Certificates of Appreciation, presented by Council at the CRC Link-up Meeting 10 November 2023, Orbest

Community impacts and recovery committees

Bruthen District

Bruthen, Wiseleigh, Mossiface, Fairy Dell and Double Bridges

Bruthen district, home to around 2,100 residents, faced a daunting trial during the 2019/2020 bushfires. Sixty-six percent of its land area was consumed by flames, resulting in the destruction of several dwellings in Wiseleigh. The district grappled with the threat of flames for three months, enduring economic impacts, and losing power, telecommunications, and water services during the crisis. In response, the Bruthen Community Recovery Committee was established. This committee, operating within the Bruthen and District Citizens Association, serves as a steadfast advocate for individuals navigating the path to recovery while diligently crafting a comprehensive recovery plan.

Buchan District

Bete Bolong North, Buchan, Buchan South, Butchers Ridge, Gelantipy, Murrindal, Suggan Buggan, W Tree, Wulgulmerang, Wulgulmerang East and Wulgulmerang West

Buchan, Gelantipy, and the surrounding district, home to approximately 460 residents are focusing on the restoration of community life and the preservation of the natural environment. In response to the bushfire, the Buchan, Gelantipy & Districts Renewal Association (BGDRA) emerged. This representative group united the voices of the community, voicing recovery needs, and guiding individuals and the collective toward a brighter future. Their relentless efforts culminated in the creation of a Community Renewal Plan, striving for the betterment of the entire community.

Cann Valley District

Cann River, Noorinbee, Noorinbee North, Tonghi Creek, Buldah, Chandlers Creek, Club Terrace, Combienbar, Tamboon South, Tamboon/Peach Tree/Furnells Landing and Wingan

The Cann Valley district comprises many smaller communities, with a total population of around 380 people. Ninety-two percent of the land area succumbed to flames, resulting in the destruction of 25 dwellings. The need to evacuate Cann Valley residents was felt significantly by many. The challenges multiplied with the closure of highways to all communities for five weeks in January 2020, along with power and telecommunications losses. COVID-19 lockdowns and border closures further burdened the district, acting as the junction point for two highways entering Victoria from New South Wales. Responding to the fires, the Cann Valley District Representative Group (CVD RG) emerged, offering support and advocating for the community's needs.

Clifton Creek District

Clifton Creek, Waterholes, Deptford and parts of Granite Rock

Clifton Creek, with approximately 270 residents, and its outlying settlements of Waterholes, Deptford, and Granite Rock faced the destruction of 60% of their land area during the bushfires. Thirteen dwellings, 329 kilometres of fencing, and the Clifton Creek Primary School were lost. Responding to the crisis, the Clifton Creek Community Recovery Team (CCCRT) was born. This dedicated team operates with the best interests of the entire community at heart, regularly convening to support the district's recovery. Volunteer members can structure their time on the committee around other commitments.

Errinundra to Snowy District

Bendoc, Bonang, Cabanandra, Deddick Valley, Delegate River, Dellicknora, Haydens Bog, Tubbut, Goongerah

In the Errinundra to Snowy District, home to 341 residents across 208,905 hectares, substantial old-growth and native forests, along with vital wildlife habitats, fell victim to the 2019/20 bushfires. Thirty-nine percent percent of the land area was scorched, resulting in the destruction of 19 dwellings and cutting off roads, power, and communications for many weeks. The COVID-19 further exacerbated the impacts on these isolated communities. Responding to these challenges, the Community Recovery Committee emerged, offering support and assistance to meet the community's needs.

Mallacoota District

Mallacoota, Genoa, Wangarabell, Maramingo Creek, Wallagaraugh, Gipsy Point and Wroxham River

Mallacoota and District, home to approximately 1,161 residents, bore the brunt of the devastating Black Summer fires. A staggering 83% of the land area was consumed by flames, resulting in the destruction of 123 homes and the tragic loss of a life in the Genoa district. The only road in and out of town was closed for 39 days, leading to over 1,500 residents and visitors being evacuated by the Australian Defense Force. The economic impact was profound, compounded by the challenges posed by COVID-19. The toll on flora and fauna continues to exact an emotional and psychological toll on the community.

In the immediate aftermath of the fires, a group of community-minded individuals formed a 'Thinking Group,' taking proactive steps to collect ideas and skills for a community-led recovery. This initiative received support from recovery mentor, Steve Pascoe. Following extensive community consultation, the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA) was established, growing to include over 780 members. This proactive group conducted a Snapshot Survey to gather initial community feedback, which has since informed the locally led recovery process. The 12 members of the first iteration of the MADRA Committee were elected through an independent election overseen by the Victorian Electoral Commission on 21 May 2020. The second iteration of the MADRA committee was elected at the first MADRA AGM on the 17 August 2021. MADRA's dedicated members worked tirelessly to pave the way for a stronger future.

Omeo Region

Omeo, Swifts Creek, Benambra, Ensay, Ensay North, Brookville, Cassilis, Doctors Flat, Hinnomunjie, Livingstone Valley, Omeo Valley, Reedy Flat, Glen Valley, Cobungra, Shannonvale, Bingo Munjie, Tambo Crossing, Tongio, Anglers Rest, Bindi, Uplands, and Bundara

The Omeo District, with a population of around 1,437 residents and a vast expanse of nearly 600,000 hectares, faced multiple challenges with 30% of the land area engulfed in flames, leading to the loss of 15 houses and 36 sheds. The economic impacts reverberated throughout the community as road access, power, and telecommunications were disrupted for extended periods. Reliable access to power, communication, and roads remained elusive.

In response, the Omeo Region Community Recovery Association (ORCRA) emerged in June 2020, committed to supporting and guiding community-led recovery. The group successfully became incorporated and invited community members across the Omeo District to join their ranks. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, face-to-face gatherings became possible towards the end of 2021, through support from Regional Development Victoria Grants. The association's resilience survey identified five priority areas: reliable power and communications, road access, fuel management, and mental health. Working groups have been diligently organising workshops to address these critical areas, bringing the community one step closer to stability.

Orbost District

Orbost, Newmerella, Marlo, Bemm River, Cabbage Tree Creek, Jarrahmond, Brodribb River, Corringale, Lochend, Simpsons Creek, Waygara, Bellbird Creek, Cape Conran, Manarina, Sardine Creek, Murrungower, Tabbara, Sydenham Inlet

The Orbost District, home to 3,889 residents, saw 76% of its land area consumed by flames in 2019/2020. Surrounding national parks also witnessed the loss of numerous flora and fauna species. The local economy, already grappling with timber industry changes, faced additional challenges due to limited summer trading. Communities endured telecommunication and power losses during the fire events while remaining under constant threat for three months.

Responding to the crisis, the Orbost District Community Recovery and Transition Committee (ODCRTC) emerged. Born from the fires and the impacts of timber industry transition resulting from the Victorian Forestry Plan, this committee has played a pivotal role in supporting the community during its journey toward recovery.

Sarsfield

Sarsfield District saw 49% of its land area engulfed in flames and the destruction of 77 dwellings. Communities lost power and telecommunications, and over 130 residents were displaced and an overwhelming 72% of the 276 homes in the area suffered damage.

The Sarsfield Recreation Reserve and Hall Committee stepped up to support the community during and immediately after the fires. In August 2020, the Hall Committee established a dedicated recovery committee known as the Sarsfield Community Association. This committee has worked tirelessly, organising sub-groups to plan, support, and deliver various recovery priorities and projects, fostering unity and hope in the district.

Wairewa

Wairewa, with a population of 87 residents, witnessed the devastation of 86% of its land area. Eleven dwellings were destroyed, and the community endured severe stress and anxiety due to direct flame impact. Many lost their livelihoods, including fruit, vegetable, olive, beef, and dairy producers. Extensive stock losses added to the challenges faced by this close-knit community. Roads, power, and telecommunications were cut off for an extended period, and the iconic O'Grady's wooden trestle bridge sustained significant damage.

In response, the Wairewa Community Recovery Committee (WCRC) emerged as a small yet cohesive group dedicated to meeting the community's needs and supporting personal recovery efforts.

Community Updates



Bruthen District

Progress so far

In a testament to community resilience and engagement, the Bruthen District Community Association (BDCA) saw a successful Annual General Meeting in June 2023. All positions were filled, and the membership increased. The Bruthen District Community Recovery Committee (BDCCRC) with community feedback and existing plans were able to create their Priorities Document. This document was reviewed in January 2023, with most identified actions either completed or in their final stages.

Bruthen's physical landscape has seen remarkable changes. The **Bruthen Streetscape Project**, facilitated by Council, is nearing completion. Features include the **Yarning Circle**, additional parking, traffic improvements, increased seating areas, natural materials and rock walls and gardens. The remaining new public toilets will enhance community amenities. The public toilet at Lions Park, delivered by Council in partnership with the Bruthen Lions Club, serving visitors to the popular skatepark, playground and BBQ area.

The **Bruthen Recreation Reserve Upgrade Project** has been adapted to maximise improvements within its budget, encompassing upgrades to toilets, additional female facilities, and enhancements to netball and tennis courts. Despite a two-year setback due to the pandemic, this community-led endeavour is expected to reach completion by the end of 2024.

“Good progress is pleasing to note. The finalisation of the streetscape upgrade, when it is finally completed, means the township can look forward to renewing its five-year plan and continued improvements. It is the new starting point for other opportunities for strategic town developments.”

- James (Nico) Nicholas, treasurer of Bruthen District Citizens' Association and Community Recovery Committee.



Bruthen's business scene has thrived with the Council's **Pilot Business Boost program**. The **Business Façade Upgrade program** has also boosted the town's commercial appeal. Cultural and social vitality flourishes, with events like the **Winter Festival, Spring Festival**, and a variety of affordable performances through Regional Arts Victoria.

The Bruthen District Neighborhood House (BDNH) secured funding for youth-led projects, children's holiday programs, community events, and training. Initiatives tailored for young mothers and infants have been launched, and consultations with local farmers are ongoing to address their needs. There have been successful funding applications for projects like the **Bruthen Mechanics Hall kitchen upgrade**, with an application for further funding for a new roof underway. Additionally, the **Mossiface Hall upgrade** has made substantial progress, with additional funding applications and further improvements in the pipeline. The Bruthen Neighbourhood House and Bruthen Recreation Reserve Caravan Park have been identified for extension and upgrade and a brief has been developed to obtain design and costings.

Contributing to being prepared for future emergencies The Local Incident Management Plan (LIMP) flyer was reviewed, reprinted and sent to all residents.

Looking to the future

As we move forward, the BDCCRC has integrated back into BDCA. They will continue to access support for community events and infrastructure as appropriate and will be ready to stand up for future emergency events. Importantly, the BDCA is eager to embark on its next five-year Community Plan, in consultation with the community.

Buchan District

Progress so far

In response to the bushfires the Buchan, Gelantipy & Districts Renewal Association Incorporated (BG&DRA Inc.) emerged. Comprising individuals and members from local community groups, this association was founded with the primary mission of representing the community's recovery needs to government authorities. Their dedication extended to helping individuals and the entire community in rebuilding their lives with renewed purpose.

BG&DRA Inc. has continued to make significant strides in its commitment to the community's well-being. Simultaneously, they are working towards boosting economic activity within the district.

BG&DRA Inc. has been instrumental in nurturing a vibrant community spirit through Family Fun Days and AGM celebrations. It actively seeks opportunities for economic growth, aligning with the district's Tourism Opportunity Plan. The association has played a pivotal role in supporting the Project Reference Group; comprising members from local sporting clubs working with Council in the delivery of the Buchan Recreation Reserve redevelopment and endorsing funding for community events like the East Gippsland Winter Festival.

The Buchan District has also hosted a number of recovery-support events and helping community members and businesses tap in to new opportunities and access services.

- **Bushfire Rebuild Support Service** in addition to access to the Concierge and Building Advisory Services in conjunction with Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV).
- **Access to the Builders Incentive and Trades Accommodation** programs for people in Buchan (and the North East) as part of the housing rebuild pilot project.
- **Succession Planning EXPO** focusing on Family, Farm, Finance, Future.
- **STAYS EXPO**; agritourism event supporting visitor accommodation options in for the area.
- **Destination branding** working closely with the Buchan Business and Tourism Association.
- **Enterprise Facilitation** with local start up and existing businesses via the Business Boost.



Furthermore, BG&DRA Inc. is championing economic and infrastructure development for the community through its support for the Main Street and Linkages Project, aiming to enhance footpaths, parking, landscaping, and the installation of an EV Charging Station. The BG&DRA continue to strongly advocate for improving disaster recovery service delivery models in rural and remote areas.

The BG&DRA support localised fire preparation priorities, community preparedness and activations to develop community resilience by securing funding to:

- **Engage a Wellbeing Support Officer** based at the Buchan Bush Nurses Centre to support long term planning for increased Mental Health and Wellbeing services for the Buchan District and wider communities.
- **Upgrade community facilities** at the Buchan Mechanics Hall, the Buchan Recreation Reserve, the Gelantipy Hall and the Wulgulmerang Recreation Grounds to revitalise the facilities and reinforce community connectivity.
- **Provide a community owned generator** at several locations including the Buchan Valley Roadhouse and Buchan Recreation Reserve.

Looking to the future

BG&DRA continues to advocate for funding and endorse support for:

- A five-year **Community Renewal Plan** which strives for the betterment of community.
- Installation of an RV Dump Point.
- Planning and design of a **Nature Based Play Space**.
- **Efforts to develop and increase tourism** to the district (beyond the Buchan Caves).
- The continued exploration of **community enterprise and renewable energy initiatives**.

Cann Valley District

Progress so far

In the Cann Valley district, the third iteration of the Cann Valley District Representative Group (CVDRG) has been working tirelessly to champion recovery needs and has achieved notable progress.

Initiated by CVDRG, the restoration of the **Monaro Centre**, formerly the Noorinbee Winery, is near completion. This project provides a space for diverse recreational, social, and educational activities for Cann River residents and the surrounding community. Plans are well under way to transform the **Mick Baum Skate Park**. The project, facilitated by Council, will upgrade the well-loved site into a modern, inviting facility that promises joy and excitement for the Cann River community and visiting tourists for years to come.

CVDRG initiated a feasibility study to explore the construction of a larger dam at the rear of the school and recreational reserve. The goal is to improve water access and enhance the area with beautiful gardens, picnic tables, and other amenities. CVDRG has also updated and issued Local Incident Management Plans to ensure efficient coordination and communication among various response agencies during emergency situations.

The Committee alongside the Council and other organisations have played a pivotal role in ensuring the availability of **communication infrastructure and equipment** during extreme weather events. The distribution of **UHF radios** to outlying areas and advocacy for **additional water tanks** in public spaces enhance readiness during emergencies. CVDRG has actively contributed to the development of the **Club Terrace Community Facility**, which is well under way and expected to be completed within approximately the next six months. The installation of the Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disaster (STAND) system in the Club Terrace community is an important achievement to note.



Singing and sound healing - Cann Valley



CVDRG has contributed to numerous community gatherings, including the Healing Singing Day, Tree Grafting, Lantern Making Workshops, and Cann Valley Winterfest 2023. These activities received high attendance and participation from the local community and visitors, showcasing local attractions and boosting tourism and economic activity in the area.

Looking to the future

The CVDRG has outlined an array of promising future plans for the Cann Valley district, with several already in progress:

- **Enhancing tourism:** While Council provides routine maintenance at the free temporary stay Cann River Rainforest Campground, the CVDRG continues to look for opportunities to improve this important facility for the local economy. This is supported by improvement in street parking, delivered by Council with funding support from the Commonwealth Government.
- **Point Hicks Bridge:** The CVDRG continues to advocate for this important infrastructure to be replaced.
- **Waste transfer station:** Planning for the new Waste Transfer Station location is in progress, including arrangements for a temporary facility, with CVDRG and Council working diligently to address all facets of the facility effectively.
- **Sprinkler system installation:** The CVDRG is supporting the installation of a sprinkler system on the SES and Ambulance Buildings.
- **Relief Centre training:** CVDRG recently supported relief centre training for community volunteers, enhancing readiness and response capabilities in times of need.

Clifton Creek District

Progress so far

In the wake of the bushfires, Clifton Creek and its neighbouring communities, including Waterholes, Deptford, Granite Rock, and parts of Wy Yung, rallied together to rebuild and recover. This united effort started the Clifton Creek Community Recovery Team, a collective comprising members from five existing local organisations, including the Clifton Creek Hall and Recreation Reserve Committee of Management, Clifton Creek Primary School, two Landcare groups, and the Tennis Club.

The Recovery Team, aided by dedicated community volunteers, accomplished significant milestones that fostered community engagement for mental and emotional recovery. Infrastructure received an upgrade with the creation of a **new outdoor stage** at the Recreation Reserve, poised to host future music events. The community also enhanced its **firefighting capacity** through advocating for a satellite CFA shed and the installation of four Static Water Tanks. Efforts were made to protect and rehabilitate biodiversity and advocate for better **fire management on public lands**. Advocacy extended to enhancing community safety through improved mobile network and internet coverage.

Memorable events like the Sandhill Ashes cricket match against Sarsfield brought neighbours together in the spirit of camaraderie. In October 2022, the Clifton Creek Community Recovery Team organised a grand celebration known as the **"Big Bash"**. This event was a heartwarming gathering that united the entire community and those who contributed to the recovery journey. It featured music, food, artists, entertainment for children and more.



Looking to the future

At the end of 2022, the Community Recovery Team reintegrated into their respective organisations, confident in the success of their collaborative model should the need ever arise again. While the pace of activities may have slowed, ongoing projects include community check-ins facilitated by a consultant and small-group discussions to ensure everyone's voices are heard while finalising the community and recovery plan. Several projects remain, including the installation of shade sails over the playground and the completion of the permaculture community garden at the Hall and Recreation Reserve. A bi-monthly newsletter continues to promote community togetherness through various events like free tennis lessons, tree grafting workshops, supported playgroups, Landcare activities, and photos amidst fields of sunflowers, intentionally planted to bring joy to the community.



Clifton Creek – 2023 winners of the Sandhill Ashes cricket match

Errinundra to Snowy District

Progress so far

The Errinundra to Snowy (E2S) Community Recovery Committee (CRC) adopted the 2019 Errinundra to Snowy Community Plan as its Recovery Plan. The Community Plan was already responding to the issues of being remote and under-serviced, issues that were exacerbated as a result of the bushfires. The E2S CRC has met monthly committing to plans that build resilient, social, built and natural environments.

Significant work has been achieved in the following areas:

- **Improved Road Safety and Amenities** - Community working with Regional Roads Victoria, DELWP and others to fully seal the Bonang Road. Optimisation of community halls and retired school buildings has occurred to provide safe resources for a range of social and community activities. Council facilitated the Commonwealth funded STAND communications equipment. CRC has implemented **climate control** and **access improvements** under the Priority Projects program. Tubbut and Goongerah have community run accommodation in former school buildings and Goongerah has created a co-working space in an old school demountable.
- **Improved local access to health care and wellbeing services** - Three Wellbeing Spaces (Service Hubs) have been created, appropriately equipped for in-person and virtual consultation including IT and Microsoft HoloLens augmented reality software. Funding has been granted by the Gippsland Primary Health Network for a 21-month pilot program in partnership with Orbost Regional Health run by a Nurse Facilitator. The pilot will be professionally evaluated through State Funding and adapted with the intention of seeking funding to continue the program long-term.
- **Established and/or improved telecommunications and internet access** - While there are still large areas of the district without internet or mobile phone access, coverage and access has been boosted at a number of community infrastructure sites on a time limited basis, according to available funding and



program delivery. The community is continuing to work toward equitable and reliable telecommunications and WiFi access.

- **Promoted nature-based tourism and a sustainable economy** - The community have succeeded in the restoration of the Old Growth Walk trail and signage with Friends of Errinundra. Supported Easter Citizen Science Camp 2023 with Goongerah Environment Centre.
- **Boosted social resilience and community connection** - Four community gatherings have been held in 2023, to bring people together, rekindle community spirit, address areas of community interest and link to relevant services including "Our Future – Building Possibilities", "Go Deep into the Wild East" nature based tourism, a "Wellbeing lunch" at Tubbut Neighbourhood house and the Big Bonang Arvo to launch the Wellbeing spaces.

Looking to the future

Looking ahead, the Errinundra to Snowy District is invested in developing a nature-based tourism economy. Including guides and signage, infrastructure improvements for accommodation and camping, advocacy for the Emerald Link and the Sea to Summit trail, and fostering small businesses and employment opportunities in hospitality, tour leadership, and environmental education.

The future holds promise of the Resilience Centres Partnership - projects to adapt or expand infrastructure at community halls, ensuring supplies of power, water, and food during emergencies.



Testing the mixed reality HoloLens headsets, Big Bonang Arvo - Errinundra to Snowy

Mallacoota District

Progress so far

In the Mallacoota district, the fourth iteration of the Mallacoota and District Association Inc. (MADRA) has been unwavering in advocating for recovery needs and accomplishing significant milestones. The Fuel Management Working Group have ensured information and resources have been shared to develop fire risk reduction strategies and ongoing educational and awareness campaigns play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of fire safety. Consistent dialogues with landowners and regular fuel reduction maintenance near vital infrastructure contribute to reducing fire hazards.

MADRA worked with Council and local organisations to redevelop the **Mallacoota Skate Park**. The park caters to all ages, offering a space for play, learning, and social inclusion through active recreation. The skate park, in combination with the **Mallacoota Hall Upgrade**, also Council managed, will ensure a vibrant community space for years to come.

The upgrade of the **Mallacoota Mudbrick Pavilion** has commenced, bringing excitement to the community. This pavilion has been a beloved space for various events and gatherings, and the aim is to enhance its facilities and functionality for the community to enjoy for years to come.

Other significant community-led infrastructure projects include the **Mallacoota Gun Club**, **Mallacoota Pony Club** and the **Mallacoota Golf and Country Club**.

A sub-committee of MADRA collaborated with Council's Bushfire Rebuild Support Service (RSS) and a consultant to tailor solutions for residents facing unique complexities around rebuilding that need to be addressed to move forward. In alignment with previous commitments, MADRA played a pivotal role in partnering with Homes Victoria to secure the first block of land for four affordable housing units, currently in construction off-site. Work on the second and third block will commence in the near future.



MADRA initiated the completion of **community engagement postcards**. These cards serve as valuable tools for gathering insights and feedback from residents, allowing them to articulate their desires and visions for the area's future development. MADRA also facilitated a series of '**Sunday in the Soup**' sessions, aimed at supporting social recovery and engagement within the ongoing recovery work. Red Cross, in collaboration with MADRA, facilitated the **RediCommunities project**, uniting key agencies and the community to evaluate community strengths, risks, and capabilities to build emergency response capacity.

MADRA, in conjunction with the community, advocated for the expansion of the Timber Milling Project to include Mallacoota and the district. This project repurposes fallen timber from fire activity, milling it into usable timber for reconstruction. In the telecommunications sphere, Telstra has upgraded the Mallacoota mobile network, and MADRA has received assurance that a new tower for the Gipsy Point region is nearing delivery.

Looking to the future

Thanks to the relentless efforts of the Committee, Parks Victoria is in the final stages of regulatory processes to ensure the replacement or upgrade of all jetties by the end of 2024.

MADRA has recently engaged in a strategic planning process, supported by a consultant, to consolidate succession planning, prioritise remaining recovery aspirations, and chart the future and strategic direction of the Committee. MADRA looks forward to the future ahead, further endeavours and the greater well-being of the Mallacoota community.

Omeo Region

Progress so far



The Omeo Region Community Resilience Association (ORCRA) has been steadfast in pursuing its seven priorities from the 2021 Resilience Plan. The comprehensive plan comprises seven individual Community Emergency Plans. These plans articulate community expectations of agencies during emergencies and define roles that communities can undertake. This plan found recognition when presented at the Emergency Management Victoria Community Showcase and the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC). <https://ourrecovery.com.au/omeo-region>.

ORCRA, in partnership with Council, recently organised community engagement through a series of five Community Conversations across the region. Representatives from key emergency management agencies and the community came together to address concerns and expectations that emerged from the seven plans. Community Conversations were held in Benambra, Omeo, Swifts Creek, Ensay and Tambo Crossing. These events were a resounding success, marked by good attendance, respectfulness, and excellent outcomes. ORCRA remains committed to pursuing actions arising from these crucial conversations.

Progress across seven key priorities:

- **Fuel management:** Through the fuel management subcommittee, ORCRA maintains close collaboration with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and the Country Fire Authority (CFA) to ensure local knowledge and priorities are considered in fuel management across the region.
- **Telecommunications and alternative power sources:** ORCRA's subcommittee continues to advocate for increased telecommunications and power supply resilience. In May 2023, a community meeting brought agencies and the community together to explore challenges and opportunities in this domain. Council facilitated the installation of Commonwealth funded STAND equipment in community facilities of Benambra, Omeo, Swifts Creek, Ensay and Tambo Crossing now provide reliable communication points in all these communities. Access to solar power and batteries in Swifts Creek provided by RACV Solar is a welcome development. Generators are being accessed for all halls.

Stand Alone Power Systems (SAPS) have been installed in Brookville and Reedy Flat by Mondo/Ausnet and are proving reliable.

- **Road access:** Advocating for consistent road access, timely updates, improved local communication during emergencies, and access to better quality alternative roads remains a focal point. A dedicated Facebook page serves as a central hub for sharing information about road access **issues and emergencies**.
- **Mental health:** ORCRA facilitated a Mental Health Round Table in August 2023, uniting key agencies and community members. ORCRA is mapping out actions based on the outcomes from this meeting, fostering ongoing dialogue with key agencies to customise service delivery for the region's diverse demographics.
- **Funding and grants:** ORCRA's maintains a proactive stance in assisting community groups to secure funding for rebuilding facilities, recovery initiatives, and well-being events. Networking with grant organisations, including the EGCF, empowers more communities to engage in face-to-face discussions with grant decision-makers and fine-tune their grant applications. ORCRA ensures a continuous flow of funding opportunities on its Facebook page, Omeo Region Community Recovery Association, and offers letters of support for grant applications. ORCRA continues to disseminate information to groups, individuals, and organisations. Collaborations between Tambo Crossing, Activating Ensay, Swifts Creek Community Centre, Omeo Hub, and Benambra Neighbourhood House highlight the ongoing and productive effort to strengthen the Omeo Region.

The region has had a strong focus on facility improvements, the **Tambo Crossing Community Facility:** multi-purpose facility, delivered in partnership with Council, is now available and being embraced by the community. With injection from multiple sources of funding the **Swifts Creek Recreation Reserve Upgrade** facilitated by Council, will deliver improvements to the netball courts, meeting rooms and toilets. **Cassilis Recreation Reserve** has seen the installation of new composting toilet, shed and upgrade of facilities, again through multiple sources of funding and delivered by DELWP.

Orbost District

Progress so far

The Orbost District is navigating a landscape shaped by bushfires, floods, and the abrupt closure of the native timber industry. These uncontrollable events have left an indelible mark, yet the spirit of the community remains unwavering, transforming challenges into opportunities for positive change.

Over the past year, the Orbost District Community Recovery and Transition Committee (ODCRTC) has been focused on fire preparation, social recovery, and support for the timber industry transition.

In a collaborative effort with the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the ODCRTC organised **Fire Ready Demonstration Days** in September and October 2022. These events took place in Cabbage Tree Creek, Marlo Plains, Orbost, and Newmerella. Later, in December 2022, the ODCRTC hosted a **Fire Ready Expo**, drawing over 300 attendees. This dynamic gathering brought together key stakeholders such as Orbost CFA, SES, Vic Police, Rotary, Cann River CFA, Moogji, Council Emergency Management team, and Gippsland Lakes Complete Health. These initiatives were informed by a community survey conducted at the Orbost Agricultural Show.

Alongside bushfire recovery, Orbost District has also been navigating the Victorian Government Timber Transition Program since 2021 when the pilot **Community Transition Program** was launched. The Timber Transition project group highlighted childcare as a crucial factor/impact for being able to creating new industries and employment opportunities. In response, the ODCRTC organised **Childcare Round Tables**, engaging partners, community members, and early years educators to dissect the issues and devise solutions. With support from the East Gippsland Community Foundation and GELLEN, an Orbost Early Years Facilitator will be employed. This role aims to nurture individuals pursuing careers in childcare while reforming the network to provide ongoing support.

ODCRTC would like to also acknowledge the Orbost Regeneration Project which will provide a new P-12 school, the **Orbost Community College**,



opening later in 2024. The major project, located at the existing Orbost Secondary College site, will merge the Secondary College with Orbost Primary School and Orbost North Primary School.

Elevating social recovery and community connection remains paramount for all CRCs. ODCRTC has supported and promoted a myriad of applications and events, including free entry to the 2023 Orbost Agricultural Show, chainsaw safety courses for women via Far East Landcare, vibrant music performances at the Orbost Exhibition Centre, and the creation of the Orbost Youth Space.

Other notable endeavours encompass the Hockey Club reunion ball, Bemm River Neighbourhood House initiatives, planning events in Cabbage Tree Creek, the Marlo Cheese Making Course, Winter Festival workshops, and expansive training opportunities for district groups.

The ODCRTC, in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, actively advocate to ensure promises made to the community are fulfilled. The efforts encompass projects under Parks Victoria at Cape Conran, the establishment of a mobile phone tower at Cabbage Tree Creek, and fostering transparent communications regarding support for timber workers, fire readiness, and planning.

Looking to the future

Looking ahead, the community recognises the need to maintain the relationships forged with government agencies during the recovery phase. With numerous emerging leaders stepping forward, the ODCRTC seeks to empower and champion new ideas and voices. Their collective vision revolves around a resilient Orbost district, where opportunities are harnessed for the greater good of the community.

Sarsfield

Progress so far

In August 2020, the Sarsfield Recreation Reserve and Hall Committee established the Sarsfield Community Association (SCA) as the dedicated CRC. Since then, the SCA has maintained a proactive stance, meeting regularly with ongoing subgroups to strategise, support, and execute various recovery projects and priorities.

One standout achievement is the triumph of advocacy spanning nine months to gain funding for the **Sarsfield Hall and Reserve upgrade**. Through relentless efforts and a government review of grants, in April 2023, the community received the news of grant approval. A Project Working Group and Project Reference Group is now formed, jointly operated by the Council and SCA.

Fostering social recovery and focus on fire preparedness, the community continues to unite through monthly Friday Night Feed. Additionally, activities such as the Sandhill Ashes cricket match, Yoga, Women's Groups, and creative and sporting pursuits are consistently offered. The formation of a social cricket club, a first in many years, stands as a testament to community revitalisation.

“The Sarsfield community recovery volunteers are to be congratulated for their hard work over the past 12 months (and nearly four years) for continuing in their unwavering support of the Sarsfield and other bushfire-affected communities’ recovery journeys. The persistent community advocacy resulted in a successful outcome for funding a new community hall and playground, two key community priorities. I would also like to thank all community members who have engaged with us and who have had input into the plans and priorities and assisted and participated in events and festivities. This makes all the hard work seem worthwhile. The ongoing support of volunteers over the next few years is critical to the successful conclusion of the hall building project and other projects in our community plan, and for the hall and reserve continuing to run in a viable manner into the future. I would also like to thank the Council, State and Commonwealth Governments and the various recovery service agencies for supporting us. We could not do all that we have done without all that support.”

- Simon Hof, Vice-President Sarsfield Community Association.

With the closure of the Emergency Recovery Victoria Hub in August 2022, a collaborative effort resurrected the Sarsfield, Bruthen, and **Clifton Creek Recovery Services Network** in late 2022. This initiative has successfully reconnected workers, aligning efforts more effectively with community needs.



SCA actively maintains its website, Facebook page, Snippets newsletter, and contributes promotional articles to local newspapers; Tambo Rambler and The Bairnsdale Advertiser.

SCA has formulated a **Business Plan** for the new hall, the Sarsfield 2030 Community Plan has been developed and master plans has been created for the Recreation Reserve and Nicholson River Picnic Reserve. Infrastructure enhancements include the upgrade of public toilet facilities, including additional disability access and a parents' room, funded by the EGCF. The installation of the STAND Satellite system has delivered free WiFi access, while the addition of water tanks ensures preparedness for future emergencies. Lighting and maintenance equipment improvements through various grants, and funding has been secured for an engaging youth-led project.

Looking to the future

SCA is anticipating the completion of a new community hall will occur by December 2025. This involves the phased replacement of the aging hall with an interim shed that will accommodate various activities while also providing additional storage.

Looking ahead, SCA envisions a diverse range of social and community activities to sustain long-term viability. Initiatives such as cooking classes, wellbeing journals, and training programs in areas like First Aid, Safe Food Handling, and Responsible Serving of Alcohol are being explored.

In a recent move, the SCA and the Hall Committee have amalgamated, streamlining support for the community's recovery journey and the upkeep of community assets.

The SCA has laid out an extensive agenda that includes upgrading their website, reviewing the community plan, implementing road safety measures, actively participating in the Nicholson River project, and taking a central role in the design and construction of the new hall and reserve upgrade.

SCA extends a warm invitation to both new and existing residents, as well as volunteers eager to contribute to Sarsfield's ongoing recovery and future.

Wairewa

Progress so far

The Wairewa Community Recovery Committee (WCRC) was quickly established in response by several members of the existing Hall Committee of Management who recognised the critical need for navigating the recovery journey and providing safer facilities for their community.

The WCRC has been actively engaged in addressing the recovery needs of the community and putting identified priorities into action. Notable achievements include **securing grants** and funding from various sources, forming partnerships with service providers, and successfully initiating upgrade works for the **Wairewa Public Hall** and Recreation Reserve. These upgrades have enhanced community safety and reignited social connections through a variety of community events.

Additionally, the WCRC has supported the development of the **O'Grady's Bridge precinct**, positioning it as a prominent tourism destination and historical attraction for visitors. Their advocacy for nature-based tourism, centered around the **Rail Trail** and the picturesque landscapes of the Wairewa Valley, continues to contribute to the area's appeal as a tourism vantage point.

Safety improvements to critical infrastructure such as bridge restoration, road access, road safety and drainage issues have been a priority for the community. In collaboration with EGSC, the WCRC has worked on several projects, including ember proofing the hall, upgrading window glass,



screens, and doors to meet BAL rating standards, and installing communication infrastructure such as internet and community WiFi at the Hall.

Furthermore, Council has improved road access across Bills Creek, mitigating flooding issues that previously led to road closures, ensuring safer valley access. The community have advocated to DEECA for enhancements to Carl Smith, 3 Mile and 10 Mile roads, advocating for alternative access roads. Additionally, they have endorsed safety improvements in the valley and have supported projects in collaboration with other local communities and organisations in the area.

Looking to the future

The WCRC has successfully fulfilled a majority of their priority items outlined in the recovery plan. The committee has been unwavering in its efforts to address these needs, yielding impressive results for our small community.

While there are still some outstanding tasks awaiting completion, the committee is steadily progressing toward a transition phase. Eventually, the Wairewa CRC will seamlessly integrate as a permanent sub-committee within the Wairewa Public Hall Committee of Management, readily reconvening when the need arises.



Wairewa Community Christmas Dinner

Social Recovery



Social recovery

The impact on residents' social lives and livelihoods from the bushfires prompted a comprehensive response from various organisations and agencies. Recognising the challenges, social recovery initiatives were set in motion to address grief, shock, disconnection, and the financial and emotional distress experienced by communities.

Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) and representative groups played a crucial role in shaping recovery plans that prioritised social, emotional, and mental health aspects. Understanding the need for support, these plans emphasised the critical nature of ongoing recovery efforts.

In June 2022, Council initiated the Recovery Reset – a needs assessment focused on mental health and wellbeing. The assessment identified key social recovery issues, including Emotional Wellbeing, Mental Health, Community Connectedness, Services for Children and Families, Housing, Rebuilding, and Financial Counselling.

The findings of the Recovery Reset were shared to key recovery partners, service providers, and participants. This information has been instrumental in shaping planning strategies, supporting advocacy efforts, and identifying funding needs. In March 2023, Council took steps to address the identified issues, entering into an agreement with the Gippsland Primary Health Network (GPHN) to continue mental health and wellbeing services.

The collaborative program with GPHN aims to enhance mental health service access and outcomes for those affected by the bushfires. Trauma counselling services have been extended to Mallacoota and Cann River, as well as additional outreach in Mallacoota, Cann River, Orbost, Omeo, Errinundra and Snowy. The allocation of funding has ensured the sustained delivery of mental health services, with providers such as Relationship Australia Victoria (RAV) and Royal Flying Doctors Service (RFDS) actively being involved.

The program has catered to 112 clients, including 51 young individuals and two from the Aboriginal community. The collaboration with service providers has strengthened, particularly in supporting people with disabilities, fostering an inclusive referral pathway. Notably, outreach occasions have reached 434 from July to September 2023, marking a 40% increase from the end of June. This uptake is attributed to improvement in promotion, outreach recruitment across East Gippsland, and engaged stakeholder participation.

Council is currently undertaking a review of the Recovery Reset, with a focus on 15 priority recommendations guiding their efforts until June 2024. Key areas of attention include understanding funding end dates for service providers, optimising service delivery, addressing the needs of those in remote areas, and sustaining housing and rebuilding support.

Dr Robert Gordon visits the shire

Dr Rob Gordon is a clinical psychologist who has dedicated his career to helping traumatised communities recover after a disaster. In August 2023, Dr Gordon visited the towns of Benambra, Buchan, Cann River, Mallacoota and Sarsfield which included the Omeo, Bruthen, Clifton Creek and Wairewa communities and led conversations with fire-impacted residents on the topic of comprehending and addressing the enduring trauma that extends beyond physical damage. An estimated 170 community members attended the five sessions.

Dr Gordon highlighted the importance of people taking their time to rebuild after losing homes, emphasising the need for a clear state of mind for thoughtful long-term decisions. This is due to the “cortisol phase” of recovery potentially impacting decision-making.

There were many essential take-away messages and beneficial discussions during Dr Gordon’s tour. In particular, he emphasised the importance of the Stages of Recovery:

- **Adrenaline phase** – at time of event and just after.
- **Cortisol phase** – can go for years, cortisol allows you to carry on, rebuild, work on recovery but takes energy from your body.
- **Identity phase** – who are we now? How has the disaster changed us? What are our values and what do we want for our future?

Dr Gordon also suggested now is a good time to bring artists into our fire-affected communities as they have the unique ability to assist in reflecting and telling our stories. Art projects and cultural initiatives can have a lasting impact beyond the immediate recovery period. They can continue to enrich the community's cultural life and provide ongoing benefits for years to come.

Dr Gordon has visited East Gippsland several times during and since the 2019/20 fires. Dr Gordon’s dedication to providing sound advice and support for bushfire affected residents and communities is evident in the detail in sessions and is always very welcome in East Gippsland. For more of Dr Gordon’s advice on wellbeing in bushfire recovery, please visit:

www.vic.gov.au/your-wellbeing-bushfire-recovery



Dr Rob Gordon



Dr Rob Gordon Community Meeting Sarsfield

Community events

Community connection through events

Community events have remained at the forefront of the efforts of community to foster unity, enhance wellbeing, and bolster resilience within bushfire-affected communities. These events also play a pivotal role in bridging emergency and social wellbeing services within our communities. Supported by the State and Commonwealth Governments, Council has invested approximately **\$324,000** of the bushfire funding into community events since October 2022, contributing significantly to the overall recovery process.

To streamline the management of event funding, Council entered into a partnership, establishing an auspice agreement with the East Gippsland Community Foundation. This collaboration led to the creation of the East Gippsland Small Grants Community Events program, exclusively dedicated to funding events supported by Community Recovery Committees. To date, this arrangement has successfully funded **47 community events** across the 10 flame-impacted districts, further solidifying the role of events in community connection.

Recognising the profound impact of events on community connection, Council is pleased to announce that community event funding will remain accessible through 2024, ensuring that these meaningful and positive outcomes continue to flourish.



Lantern Making Workshop



Fruit Tree Grafting



On Foot in the Gorge - Clifton Creek

Since October 2022, our communities have proudly hosted **116 funded community events** in bushfire-impacted districts, including **24 workshops** designed to nurture community connection and leadership. Each community has identified events that are most meaningful to them, fostering social connections through a diverse array of activities such as community dinners, sporting events, Christmas gatherings, walking tours, and events associated with community consultation. It was particularly heartening to see new events that originated from community recovery priorities recur such as the **Mallacoota Be Ready Day** and the popular **Sandhill Ashes**, underscoring the positive impact events have in our communities.

A notable success story is the **Sarsfield Friday Night Feed**, which grew from post-bushfire community connection. This monthly event continues and has served as a platform for various themes and presentations including the Recreation Reserve Upgrade community engagement.

Large-scale events, like the **Orbost Agriculture Show**, **Buchan Colour Run**, **Omeo Show** and **Bruthen's Medieval Winter Fire and Lantern Festival**, are important for social inclusiveness, engaging various community groups and stakeholders while shaping the local events calendar for residents across East Gippsland.

The **East Gippsland Winter Festival**, a shire-wide celebration, brought people together through events and activities, including **Community Lantern Making Workshops**. These workshops attracted an impressive turnout of **378 community members**, providing a unique opportunity to forge new social connections. Communities across East Gippsland, including Bruthen, Buchan, Cann River, Goongerah, Orbost, Sarsfield, and Swifts Creek, showcased their lantern creations through street parades and community displays, with a key event in Lakes Entrance featuring large lantern sculptures across the Cunninghame Arm Footbridge.



Goldrush Concert featuring Mollimor - Omeo Region



Exhibition Centre - Orbost



Tom McIntosh MP and Shelly McLaren, CRC Chair, opening the Goongerah Wellbeing Space



Sarsfield vs Clifton Creek, Sandhill Ashes 2023

Built Environment Recovery



Support to rebuild

Council acknowledges that rebuilding a home after the fires can be a long and emotional journey. However, reimagining your life, and the home that you wish to live in, is an important step within the recovery process. Understanding that the decision to rebuild demands thoughtful consideration and courage, Council recognises the importance of providing appropriate support when landowners are ready.

In its fourth year, the rebuilding effort persists and remains steady. Council has established two key programs to aid landowners in this process: The Rebuild Support Service (RSS) and the Building Advisory Service (BAS).

Rebuild Support Service

The Rebuild Support Service (RSS) was established by Council in partnership with ERV following the 2019/20 bushfire. The service was developed to provide specialised advice to help streamline both planning permit and application requirements, assisting landowners to navigate rebuilding and make informed decisions within a safe and trauma informed environment. The service has 164 closed clients with another 222 open referrals and 45 clients who are either preparing plans or on hold for various reasons.

Council liaises with various Council departments and external agencies like the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Department of Energy, Environment Climate Action (DEECA) on behalf of landowners. The service also works closely with other Recovery Support Services, to assist impacted landowners connect to a range of support including targeted recovery case management / advocacy assistance, mental health professionals, and financial counselling.

Building Advisory Service

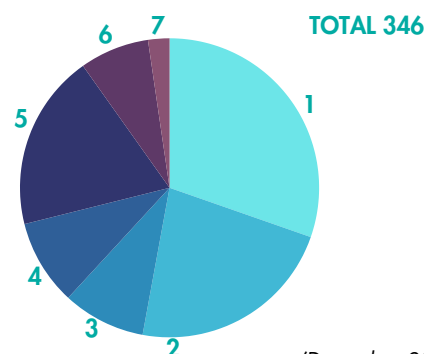
In 2022, Council identified a growing number of landowners encountering obstacles in progressing their rebuilds. Responding to this, Council initiated a trial of the Building Advisory Service (BAS) to provide tailored support during pre-construction and construction phases. This approach assembles external consultants to provide independent building advice, enabling landowners to access assistance at various building stages to meet their specific needs.

Rebuilding in figures

Total number of properties within East Gippsland identified as damaged/destroyed within the Secondary Impact Assessment is 1162 of which 346 were dwellings and 762 outbuildings.

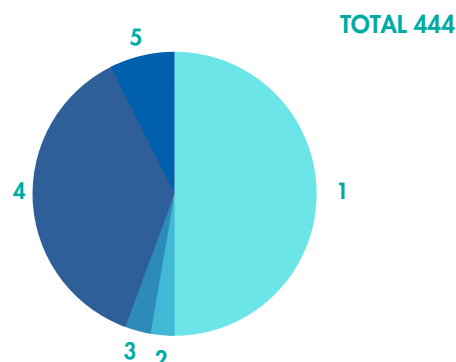
Of the 346 damaged/destroyed dwellings

1. Landowners who have sold or not rebuilding 105
2. Landowners who did not refer to the RSS 78
3. Building Permits issued to landowners 31
4. Planning Permits issued to landowners 32
5. Occupancy Permits issued (rebuilt) 66
6. Landowners referred to the RSS, not progressed 26
7. Dwellings that are agency owned 8



EGSC Rebuild Support Service

1. RSS referred 222
2. Preparing plans and information 12
3. Not rebuilding 13
4. Finalised 164
5. On hold 33



Support and barriers to rebuilding in Murrumbidgee after the bushfires

Council actively supports the Murrumbidgee and District Recovery Association (MADRA) in understanding and tackling the complex barriers faced by residents in the Murrumbidgee District when rebuilding after total loss.

Having a thorough understanding of both the barriers and facilitators of re-building after total loss, through the voices of those with lived experience, is imperative to developing targeted and effective strategies to support. A consultant was engaged to collaborate directly with total-loss landowners, producing a report highlighting key barriers and offering potential solutions and strategies.

These findings guide advocacy efforts aimed at addressing the challenges. A project control group is diligently working through the report's 13 recommendations.

The journey of rebuilding after a disaster is an unforeseen path, and landowners often find themselves caught in a whirlwind of decision making.

Various barriers arise, impeding progress and occasionally leading to decisions to put the process on hold. Some landowners may choose not to rebuild, relocate to another area, or purchase an established home within a township area.

For those landowners who do wish to rebuild, there are dedicated rebuilding support available to enhance support and encourage the rebuilding process.

Need for ongoing support

Individual

- Mental health
- Financial constraints
- Physical health and age



Social

- Social isolation
- Social support from friends and family (f)



Community

- Community support
- Community initiatives



Policy

- Financial relief (f)
- Insurance (f)
- Recovery agency support
- Understanding BAL ratings
- Execution of BAL ratings



Building process

- Navigating the rebuild process
- Access and ability of trades people
- Cost and availability of building materials
- Simple build solutions (f)



f = future and not immediate

Investing in recovery and strengthening our future

Major infrastructure projects

East Gippsland has received substantial funding aimed at addressing community recovery and resilience needs in the aftermath of the devastating bushfires. Many of these redevelopments, upgrades and new facilities have or will contribute to strengthening the future of East Gippsland Shire and its community.

Significant investments have empowered Council to play a pivotal role in supporting local Community Recovery Committees (CRCs). These committees, integral to the planning and execution of community-led recovery initiatives, have received funding for a range of purposes. These include responsive recovery programs, leadership development, small-scale operating costs, and assistance with priority setting and transition arrangements.

The bushfires served as a catalyst, elevating the community's awareness and commitment to incorporating resilience into core planning and community preparedness. At all levels of government and within various agencies, there is a concerted effort to embed resilience in the rebuilding and upgrading of public infrastructure and programs, with the overarching goal of building stronger recovery strategies for future events.

Over the past 12 months, considerable progress has been made with the implementation of various projects. The achievements outlined in this progress report highlight the impact of the funding on the recovery and resilience landscape of East Gippsland.

Major projects

Mallacoota Skate Park

The Mallacoota Skate Park stands as a vibrant family hub catering to all ages, providing a space for play, learning, and active recreation. Following the challenges posed by the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires and the ongoing impact of COVID-19, a united group of local organisations, individuals, and businesses rallied to support Mallacoota's recovery.

Through collaborative efforts involving The Sanctuary (Mallacoota Youth Group), Mallacoota Halls and Recreation Committee of Management, Mallacoota and District Recovery Association, and Mallacoota Lions Club, funding was administered by the Bendigo Bank Community Enterprise Foundation from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal for the design and construction of the new skate park. Council developed the skatepark which was opened in April 2023.

Mallacoota streetscape upgrade

Work on upgrading the streetscape of Mallacoota to improve the functionality, aesthetics and operation of Maurice Avenue continues.

The upgrade was also identified by the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA) as playing a key role in the Disaster Recovery Plan and contributing majorly to commercial and tourist activities. After the tireless efforts of the local Mallacoota community and key stakeholders working with Council, a contract was awarded for the detailed design development of the concept masterplan in February 2023. In August, the design was in its final stages and construction work to commence after Easter 2024.



Bemm River footpaths

Bemm River was severely impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires, at times completely surrounded by the fire front, and isolated for weeks while the Princes Highway was cut. The community endured power outages and shortage of food, water and fuel. The development and implementation of safe pedestrian access in Bemm River was identified as a priority during the recovery process, and in the existing Bemm River Community Plan.

Council secured funding from the Commonwealth Government through the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program to construct approximately 1.7km of an all-weather pathway in the township of Bemm River. The pathway will be a combination of concrete footpaths and wooden boardwalks in areas subject to inundation. Community engagement was undertaken within Bemm River, including several community meetings. As at November 2023 the detailed design is now complete and tender submissions have been reviewed ready to commence work in 2024.

Buchan Caves Reserve Linkage

The shared path link from the Buchan Caves campground to the heart of Buchan marks a significant milestone within the larger Buchan Main Street and Linkages project.

This initiative has breathed new life into Buchan's tourism economy by enhancing visitor access to the town centre and elevating its overall appeal. The shared path link also carries benefits for the local community, facilitating safer mobility within the town. Council secured funding for this project through the Victorian Government's Local Economic Recovery Program, with joint support from the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments.

Bruthen streetscape upgrade: Transforming into a tourism hub

Bruthen's streetscape has undergone a vibrant transformation, thanks to a collaborative effort supported by funding from the Victorian Government's Local Economic Recovery Program (a joint initiative of the Australian and Victorian Governments), and Council. This revitalisation project has elevated Bruthen into a tourism hub.

The township now boasts new gardens, bike racks, a bus shelter, and upgraded street furniture, fostering a welcoming atmosphere. Improved pedestrian paths have been integrated into the town centre, ensuring safer access for residents and visitors alike. Additional parking spaces, including two designated for disabled visitors, have been added. The incorporation of locally sourced Bruthen blue sandstone wall seating, surrounded by native vegetation and thoughtfully designed landscaping, has created an aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable space.

Upgrades to one of Eastern Victoria's most utilised public toilets are to begin shortly. Attention has been given to constructing kerbs, channels, drainage systems, driveways, and bitumen asphalt work with line marking for this project.

Beyond the physical improvements, the streetscape project has aimed to attract investment, generate employment opportunities, and support population growth in the surrounding areas. By enhancing the functionality of the main street, elevating town amenities, and fostering a conducive environment for local businesses, Bruthen is now poised for sustained growth.

Twelve local businesses participated in the Facade Upgrade Program, which offered grants of up to \$5,000 for cosmetic enhancements, including signs, external painting, and improvements to their shop fronts. Although the Facade Upgrade Program has concluded, the Business Boost Program continues to support new and emerging businesses by providing enterprise facilitation and connecting them to valuable resources and opportunities.

To amplify Bruthen's visibility and promote local businesses, Destination Gippsland is spearheading a digital and social media campaign, with a launch event scheduled for the end of 2023.



As part of the Bruthen Streetscape Project, the Bruthen rotunda was relocated, joined by new pathways and garden beds

Project management

Council recognises an active and well-connected community is able to work together with Council particularly during times of natural disaster. Improved recreation reserves and facilities have been a high priority for the impacted community since 2019/20. Working closely with communities, Council is managing project design and delivery for several critical projects across the shire. Projects of significance include:

The **Buchan Recreation Reserve**, which has been jointly funded by the Victorian and Commonwealth governments under the Commonwealth-State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. The local Buchan community welcomed Council's support to upgrade and revitalise the reserve with new and improved sporting and community facilities.

Funding for the **Sarsfield Recreation Reserve and Community Hall Revitalisation** is provided by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts. This redevelopment will create a purpose-built space for the community to come together and recover following the bushfires.

The **Swifts Creek Recreation Reserve Upgrade**, which aims to provide fit-for-purpose sporting and recreation facilities. This project was funded through the Local Economic Recovery Program by the Victorian and Commonwealth governments.

Digital connectivity in East Gippsland

In the wake of nationwide infrastructure delays, the commitment of Commonwealth and State governments to telecommunication projects in East Gippsland, post the 2019/20 bushfires, has not wavered. Importantly, funding commitments continue to be secured and projects are being progressively implemented, reflecting a dedication to improving regional connectivity.

Council has maintained close collaboration with telecommunication agencies, in particular Telstra and NBN, to identify and address remaining gaps and priorities in our region. This collaboration has allowed us to wield influence in securing vital government funding for new towers and place-based telecommunication infrastructure projects. Council remains committed to advocating on the needs of community, as identified in community recovery plans and those highlighted in the 2021 Digital Connectivity - Gaps and Priorities Report.

Acknowledging the substantial investments in telecommunication infrastructure post the 2019/20 fires, Council extends our appreciation to the agencies for the continued efforts in seeking Commonwealth and State Government funding for new projects. **Since 2020, telecommunication funding has committed 23 new mobile towers across East Gippsland**, as well as over 30 significant tower upgrades, augmentations and mobile hardening projects (enhancements to backup power supply) and three major NBN upgrades. Furthermore, the STAND system project bolsters telecommunication resilience for community through free NBN WiFi at community facilities. Further details on the STAND project can be found on page 51, Facility preparedness for emergencies.

Council celebrates the successful completion of projects, with special recognition given to the Eastern Transmission Link. The Eastern Transmission Link is a major telecommunications upgrade that will build, improve and expand mobile coverage along the Great Alpine Highway. The project will create a transmission ring from Bairnsdale to Wangaratta, providing a vital second connectivity path, strengthening network resilience. The project has upgraded a tower in the Tambo Crossing district and introduced a new Macrocell tower in the Omeo township. When complete, the project will also provide a second upgraded tower in Ensay and new 42km fibre optic cable along the Tambo Valley section of the highway.

In response to the growing trend of remote work, increased digital services, and the integration of digital technologies in regional and remote areas, NBN committed to a nationwide upgrade of fixed wireless and satellite networks. This initiative, beginning in March 2023, aims to expand coverage and improve speeds for the fixed wireless system, while enhancing the performance of the satellite system. East Gippsland localities dependant on satellite and fixed wireless systems will particularly benefit from this initiative.

Council extends its gratitude to the CRCs for their instrumental role in helping identify connectivity gaps and priorities within our districts. Council remains steadfast in our commitment to advocating for social and economic digital equity across our region, ensuring critical emergency connectivity to be a priority on our digital roadmap.

Community Microgrids and Sustainable Energy Program

Department Energy Environment and Climate Action and AusNet are working with communities in Mallacoota and Omeo increase energy resilience through the Community Microgrids and Sustainable Energy Program, (CMSEP).

The 2019/20 bushfires highlighted the critical need for resilient power, independent of the electricity grid during bushfires and extreme weather events in rural settings. The CMSEP will support the installation of a mix of solar systems, batteries and diesel generators with the aim to increase access to locally generated energy and storage.

A suite of important public buildings in Mallacoota and Omeo will receive subsidised solar panels, batteries and some generators, with the goal of keeping these buildings available during sustained outages, or in association with emergencies.

For residents across the Omeo township the process is underway to contact all people who submitted 'Expressions of Interest' to receive a subsidised solar system and battery. For people who elect to purchase one of these systems, they will have access to backup household power for dedicated critical circuits.

Mallacoota residents will have the option to purchase a subsidised high efficiency hot water heat pump. The heat pumps will support a reduction in energy use, contributing to the CMSEP and helping to extend the operation time of the Mallacoota Area Grid Storage (MAGS) system.



Aboriginal and Cultural Healing Recovery



Cultural healing

Victorian strategy for Aboriginal-led recovery

The Strategy for Aboriginal Community-led Recovery, launched by Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV) in July 2023, provides an approach to realise culturally responsive Aboriginal community-led outcomes in recovery in coordination with government, councils and delivery partners.

The Strategy is a result of extensive consultation process with Victorian Aboriginal communities impacted by the Eastern Victorian Fires 2019/20 that identified a state-wide need to put Aboriginal communities at the centre of their recovery processes.

The Strategy supports the Recovery Framework, a matrix of the identified Outcomes / Recovery Aspirations and key areas of focus for the Victorian Government, and is broken down into the following domains:

- Foundations of culturally responsive recovery
- Strategic reform and operational needs for Aboriginal community-led recovery
- Aboriginal expertise and decision-making inform government accountability
- Monitoring and evaluation for success

To download a copy of the Strategy for Aboriginal Community-led Recovery, visit www.vic.gov.au/strategy-aboriginal-community-led-recovery

Local Aboriginal Bushfire Recovery Planning Workshop

To assist in the development of an ERV Local Aboriginal Emergency Plan Template and to provide opportunity to meet, understand perspectives, identify resources and develop relationships, the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations (FVTOC), with ERV, facilitated The Local Aboriginal Bushfire Recovery Plan Workshop, held on 23 November 2022 in Lakes Entrance.

The workshop was attended by Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative (GEGAC), Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC), Lakes Entrance Aboriginal Health Association (LEAHA), Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust (LTAT), Moogji Aboriginal Council, Ramahyuck, Yoowinna Wurnalung Aboriginal Healing Service (YWAHS), Council and ERV.

Information gathered from the workshop supported ERV and Council in identifying emergency management priorities in our Aboriginal communities', contributing to the ongoing work in Aboriginal-led recovery.



Bruthen Streetscape Yarning Circle

Projects

The following projects have been approved for funding by ERV. Projects are progressing with estimated delivery in 2024.

- **Fire for Food Workshops** - workshops providing targeted training in traditional fire practices in relation to food and land management. *Black Duck Foods*

Projects continued

- **Elders and Kitchen Facility Upgrade** - renovation of the Elders and kitchen facility, incorporating an incident-response centre for the coordination of community response actions and mapping of a disaster event. *Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative (GEGAC).*
- **Preparing for the future** - creating a place for community providing education on land and environmental cultural management practices. *Moogji Aboriginal Council.*
- **Relief Centre and Sports Pavilion Redevelopment** - previously known as The Lake Tyers Emergency Relief Centre Project. *Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust auspiced by GLaWAC.*
- **Understanding of cultural values** - Understanding of Cultural Values project will work with communities in building greater education and voice regarding fire recovery. *Nindi-Ngujarn Ngarigo Monero Aboriginal Corporation (NNNMAC).*
- **Cultural fire in managing Country** - project will undertake using Cultural fire to help manage Country. Project is in partnership with DEECA and Parks Victoria. Project includes undertaking area mapping for potential role to mitigating future events. *GLaWAC*
- **On Country training** - training and development workshops on the connection to earth, health and wellbeing. *Wayapa Wuurrk.*
- **Healing and Wellbeing Initiatives** - framework to address trauma, support healing and well-being in community. Project also supports employment, training, and community engagement. *Lakes Entrance Aboriginal Health Association.*
- **Resilience building** - project will focus on resilience building within the community through a custom-built mobile service to support community with agency resources for example family therapy, counselling and family violence. *Yoowinna Wurnalung.*

Project highlights

Relief Centre and Sports Pavilion Redevelopment

The redevelopment project, at Lakes Tyers Aboriginal Trust, aims to create a safe and secure area for community during and after a bushfire disaster, in addition to being used for sporting and community activities outside of emergencies. It will replace the existing sporting pavilion next to the oval. The project, which has experienced positive engagement with the community, is in the detailed design stage, including a new mural which came out of the community engagement.

Bruthen Streetscape Yarning Circle

The Yarning Circle is a public sculpture space as part of the Bruthen Streetscape project, a significant streetscape project designed and delivered by Council with funding by Victorian Government Local Economic Recovery Program. The Yarning Circle was coordinated in partnership with Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC). GLaWAC designed and installed the yarning circle, which can be found in Bruthen's Main Street gardens. Embraced by shields representing the five Gunaikurnai clans, the yarning circle is a celebration of Gunaikurnai culture and is designed to support the foundation of respectful relationships and provide a safe place for all to speak without judgement.



Bruthen Streetscape Yarning Circle

Economic Recovery



Investing in business development for a thriving economic community

East Gippsland's economic environment has experienced substantial investment and reinvigoration following the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. The flow of State and Commonwealth funding, together with strong agency partnerships and collaboration has supported the region's small business, tourism, events and agricultural sectors in their recovery efforts over the past three years.

Despite an unpredictable business environment post COVID-19 pandemic with supply chain disruptions, workforce and housing shortages, East Gippsland's economy has shown healthy indicators of recovery with expenditure and visitation all trending positively (see Figure 1 and 2), however, cost of living pressures and rising interest rates have likely contributors to a reduction in overnight visitor expenditure (Figure 3).

The legacy impacts of recovery interventions are likely to flow into future years and with Council's unwavering commitment to economic development along with the East Gippsland's Community Recovery Committees adopting an economic approach as part of their plans for the future, businesses and industries will continue to be supported to thrive into the future.

Business support

Small business recovery mentoring services

While this program by Small Business Victoria concluded in 2022, it laid the foundation for other initiatives funded through our recovery efforts by providing 929 business with case management support.

Investing in East Gippsland's future

Council's Investment Attraction campaign continues to shape the future of East Gippsland by developing an investment prospectus. The campaign showcases the success stories of local businesses through the Invest East Gippsland website, attracting new residents and businesses to our thriving region.

Figure 1: Total expenditure (\$Million)

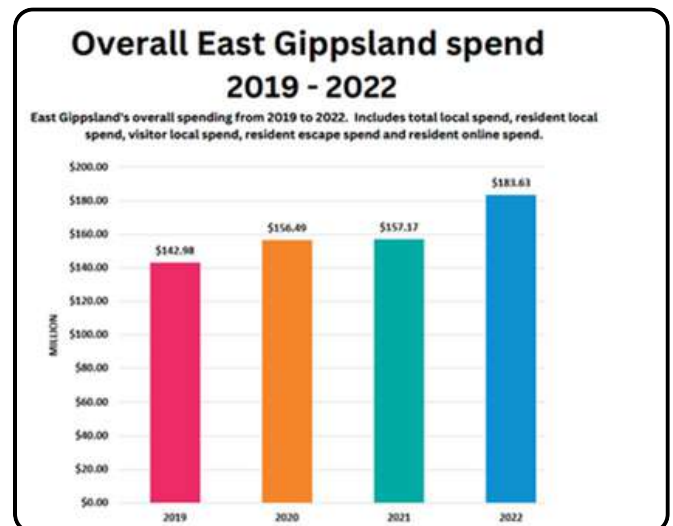
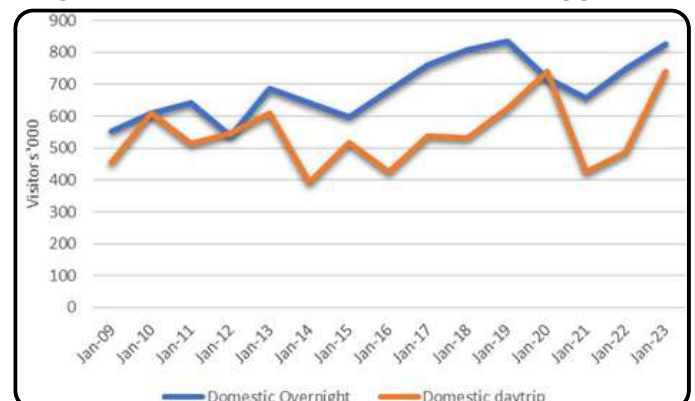
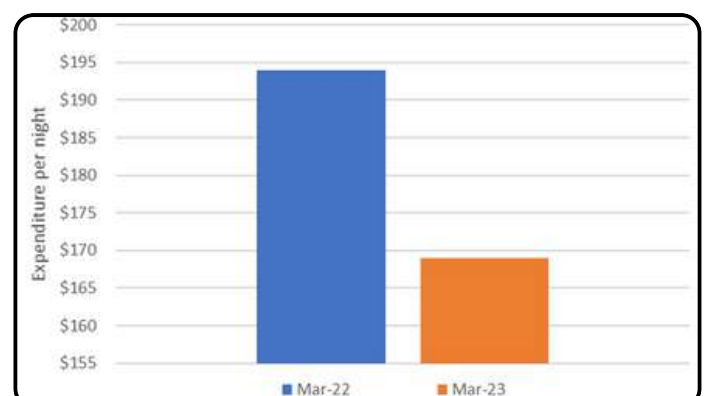


Figure 2: Domestic visitation to East Gippsland



Source: Destination Gippsland - National Visitor Survey, YE June 23, Tourism Research Australia

Figure 3: Domestic overnight visitor expenditure



Source: Destination Gippsland - estimated using data from National Visitor Survey and Regional Expenditure Model, YE March 2023, Tourism Research Australia

Business Boost Program

The Business Boost Program has not only engaged and supported 14 new businesses within Buchan and Bruthen but has also fostered peer-to-peer networks, enhancing the economic resilience of our community. The program is testament to an innovative approach, acknowledged at the 2023 Rural Councils Victoria Forum of rural councils "doing things differently". The program's success has prompted expansion and opportunities are being explored for the program to be extended.

Business support for success

Council's Business Support initiatives, including the Business Concierge and Business Resilience and Development Officer positions, have played pivotal roles in navigating the challenges faced by our local businesses. The Business Concierge has been instrumental in removing barriers for businesses in fire-impacted areas and connecting job seekers with local businesses through the coordination and delivery of the **East Gippsland Job Expo**. The Concierge role has provided internal pathway navigations through Council's internal business units for all relevant enquires across East Gippsland including Buchan, Orbost, Mallacoota, Club Terrace and Cann Valley.

Council has been proactive in delivering various workshops and programs to support local businesses, including the **Australian Centre for Rural Entrepreneurship (ACRE)**. ACRE workshops began in July 2023 and will continue into March 2024. This initiative empowers businesses to increase productivity, enhance efficiency and procedures, create a lean business that can compete with imports/competition and foster a more motivated workforce.

Business support has also focused on strengthening the capacity and connection between our major urban Chambers of Commerce and rural business and tourism associations.

Agribusiness progress and resilience building

More than 450 primary producers were impacted by the fires with significant livestock losses, burnt pastures and horticultural crops and over 2,800 kilometres of fencing destroyed. The fires came after prolonged dry seasonal conditions and drought which had eroded farm business financial reserves.

The economic recovery efforts have continued to support agribusinesses and local farming families in preparation for the future. A series of program and events has been delivered to empower our local agribusiness community, supporting connection, building resilience and proactively responding to a changing climate. These initiatives reflect our dedication to fostering a positive and resilient agricultural sector and nurturing future prospects.

Council hosted two **Agri-Tourism Expos**, shining a spotlight on the vast opportunities and potential developments in rural lands with attendees appreciating the pathway to diversity and importance of connecting with Council in the early stages to understand the process before engaging consultants.



Youth AgriTech Expo

Succession planning

Succession planning forums acted as pathways for the entire family to explore succession planning, family dynamics, farm finances, and the future of farming. Speakers focused on wills, legal processes, considerations, financial matters, case studies, ageing on farms and supports available. Attendees were able to access individual support from financial services after the event. Feedback received noted it was very relevant. Informative but not too technical and an important topic.

Agribusiness mentoring

Twenty farmers looking to diversify their ventures received invaluable guidance through our Agribusiness Mentoring program. This initiative not only enhanced their knowledge but also helped to strengthen the fabric of our local agricultural community. There was growth through utilising transport, increased focus, reduced stress, work life balance, family conferences for decision making and second income stream.

Youth Agri-Tech forums

Council is actively shaping the future by encouraging young individuals to consider careers in agribusiness. Our Youth Agri-Tech Expo helped to inspire the next generation to be part of a thriving industry through immersive experiences and various industry visits. This work will continue into 2024 through offering financial capability sessions, an agriculture economic leadership program, social connectedness rural events, and upskilling workshops. Notably, the latter will be delivered in collaboration with Neighbourhood Houses across the shire, fostering community resilience.

Visitor attraction events

Council secured \$190,000 through the Commonwealth Government's Regional Tourism Bushfire Recovery Grant program to deliver five events three of which were delivered in 2022). Council successfully delivered the Cattlemen 100 MTB event in Omeo with the event showcasing the Omeo Region beyond just the well-known Great Alpine Road. Unfortunately, the Super Trail Lakes Entrance trail running was cancelled due to poor weather conditions and was unable to be postponed with the funding being retained by Austrade (the funding body). Council has taken it as an opportunity to regroup and develop a strategy for future visitor events.



Succession Expo - Buchan



Adam Bloem, Neil Stringer and Hayley Hardy - Succession Expo Buchan

Regional Development Victoria and Local Economic Recovery Program

Regional Development Victoria (RDV), in partnership with East Gippsland Shire Council and key local stakeholders representing government, industry and businesses, supported the coordination of the Economic Recovery pillar working group in response to the 2019/20 summer bushfires. The working group had oversight and responsibility for the development of the Economic Recovery Sub-Plan that detailed over \$90 million of economic recovery projects, designed to support and drive economic recovery and prosperity in the region.

Today, RDV continues to monitor in excess of \$20 million of priority projects that are completed, or are progressing towards completion, funded through the Local Economic Recovery Program Fund and the Bushfire Tourism and Business Fund. Of the 13 funded projects, eight have been successfully completed - notably, the rebuild of the **Mallacoota Abalone Limited Processing Facility, Tambo Valley Honey in Bruthen and the Metung Hot Springs**. A further two projects were completed at the end of 2023, and three projects are due for completion in 2024. Riviera Nautic is now complete while Sailors Grave Brewing still continues.

The Conservation and Land Management Program also delivered



≈40

aid to
bushfire-
impacted
landowners



15

community
projects



10,000+

seedlings
planted



150ha

of weeds
managed



19km

of bushfire-
impacted fencing
dismantled



93km

of fence
line/tracks
cleared

Case Study - Envite Environment - training and skills for bushfire economic recovery

The Conservation and Land Management Program received funding support of \$851,600 through the Local Economic Recovery (LER) Regional Economic Programs Fund. The initiative aimed to empower young people by building their confidence, providing a sense of purpose, and creating direction through education and work experience that ultimately sets them up for a career in conservation management and related fields; skills that are highly valued in the East Gippsland wilderness coast region.

A total of 20 trainees and six school-based trainees aged 14 to 18, participated in the program that taught important skills in areas such as weed management, revegetation, fencing, seed collection and propagation, as well as formally conducting site assessments. A total of 17 trainees completed their placements and successfully transitioned into work and/or further education, obtaining a Certificate II in Conservation and Land/Ecosystem Management as well as key industry tickets including; First Aid, AgChem Chemical Users, and Chainsaw License.

In addition to economic recovery, this project has brought about positive social and environmental outcomes in the East Gippsland community.



Natural Environment Recovery



Recovery in the natural environment

The natural environment is a major attraction for living in East Gippsland and for many residents the impacts of the fires on the native plants and animals were devastating. The rehabilitation of the natural environment has been heavily supported by the dedicated work of Landcare groups and other voluntary community groups and private landholders that have undertaken a myriad of projects across East Gippsland and Council acknowledges the efforts of those volunteers.

Beyond the information below on the weed management undertaken by Council and our partner the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (EGCMA), rehabilitation work has also been undertaken through Parks Victoria and Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA). Visit the websites below for more information.

www.parks.vic.gov.au/news/2023/09/11/05/55/bushfire-recovery-continues-in-east-gippsland

www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/home/biodiversity-bushfire-response-and-recovery

Weed management

Following the bushfires, more than 1200km of Council's road network bore the impact, with 615 km of these roadsides deemed of high conservation value according to Council's roadside value mapping system. Diverse vegetation types, including forests, heathlands, woodlands, and associated flora species, suffered from the aftermath.

In 2022, proactive measures were taken as part of the Commonwealth Government's Bushfire Recovery for Wildlife and Habitat Community Grants Program, leading to the treatment of over 600km of roadside weeds in high-value areas. This initiative aimed at supporting the recovery of roadside vegetation within the burn area. Subsequently, in 2023, state funding empowered Council to reassess vegetation and conduct weed treatment in previously untouched impacted areas. The funding also facilitated the treatment of sites falling under medium or low classification.

A notable highlight from the third progress report involves the Commonwealth Government's funding for weed treatment in foreshores around Mallacoota. Seventy hectares, encompassing the Mallacoota Coastal Walk and popular sites like Pebbly and Betka beaches, underwent treatment for emerging weeds in recovering vegetation.

During these works, fifteen species were identified and effectively treated. Remarkably, this area has shown significant recovery, prompting ongoing monitoring by the Council to track progress.

East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority in bushfire recovery

The EGCMA has invested significant efforts in bushfire recovery over the past three years, and like many agencies, communities and individuals, the EGCMA continues to invest in bushfire recovery.

Following the bushfires, weeds flourished, and with the few wet years following the fires, weed growth and establishment increased further. During 2023, the EGCMA completed over 730ha of woody weed control in fire-affected areas, and over 2,300ha have been treated since the bushfires, working closely with Parks Victoria and the DEECA to tackle remote weeds, treat willows, broom, and blackberries in natural and remote areas.

There has been a focus on targeting weeds along waterways that were impacted by fire across the region. Regular weed treatment and maintenance in the upper river reaches has been a priority, especially the major rivers of East Gippsland. Bushfire recovery works are not limited to weed control for the EGCMA with over 100kms of fencing replaced along waterways following the fires.

Community events hosted by the EGCMA have continued throughout 2022 and 2023 and have proven very popular and well-received by the East Gippsland community. These have included boat trips, walk and talks, and community barbecues and will continue with the focus on informing the community about recovery projects in their areas and listening to community suggestions.



Restoring public assets

The pile fields along the Buchan River have undergone a comprehensive restoration process. Strategically designed to mitigate the impacts of high-flow events, these pile fields play a crucial role in preventing bank erosion and aiding in the stabilisation of the riverbed.

In an effort to naturally reinforce the area, native vegetation has been planted on both sides of the banks. Over time, these plantings are expected to contribute significantly to bank stabilisation and the gradual slowing of water flows. The pile fields, serve as a temporary stabilising mechanism until the native plants reach maturity. This intentional planting also fosters a habitat for a number of living organisms, including insects. These insects, in turn, play a vital role in sustaining native fish populations by providing a crucial food source. The collective result is the establishment of ecologically diverse and thriving waterways, promoting a healthy and balanced aquatic ecosystem.



East Gippsland Shire Council Environmental Sustainability Strategy 2022-2032

The Environmental Sustainability Strategy 2022-2032 is Council's key environmental policy document, guiding work across Council to achieve objectives for climate change, biodiversity, land and water management and resource efficiency.

East Gippsland faces several varying climate risks including more days of extreme heat, harsher bushfires, sea level rises combined with storm surges causing inundation, flooding and other impacts, more frequent and intense heavy rainfalls (including hailstorms) causing flooding, and frequent drought periods.

As the impact of a changing climate emerges, the need for Council individually and collectively to focus on the sustainability of our environment is desperately needed.

Highlighting the seventh goal of the strategy: **Community resilience to response to increasing climate risk and natural disaster.** Over the next 10 years, Council will continue to identify and support additional opportunities to contribute to this outcome by:

- **Improving community emergency preparedness by planning before events happen.**
- **Adapting the agriculture sector**
- **Building resilient communities and infrastructure**
- **Promoting sustainable land-use development**
- **Investing in the growth of emerging industries**
- **Building capacity of all industries to become more sustainable, and;**
- **Protecting our natural heritage and biodiversity**

Council will contribute to this goal by effectively managing natural environments that fall on Council-managed land and improving Council assets to increase resilience to climate change and natural disasters. Council's Municipal Emergency Management Plan, Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Economic Development Strategy also play core roles in achieving this goal.

Planning for Future Emergencies



Facility upgrades and emergency planning

Since the Black Summer bushfires in 2019/20, Council have completed extensive work to ensure our Assembly Areas and designated Emergency Relief Centre facilities are better prepared for future events. Annual audits are taking place to make sure facilities are clean and appropriately stocked. Council is supporting building community capacity through community-led activation of relief centres delivering on community feedback post fire and also highlighted in the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) report.

Facility preparedness for emergencies

Community Facilities and Development Program

Under the Community Resilience and Development Program, the focus is on upgrading identified community facilities to bolster preparedness for future emergencies and foster year-round community connections. This initiative has been funded through ERV's Local Economic Recovery (LER) grants program, allocating **\$1,043,955**.

The four key upgrade components below are intended to improve the resilience and usefulness of community facilities. They include:

- **Bushfire Attack Level Assessment (BAL):** Conducting a thorough assessment to gauge a building's potential exposure to ember attack, radiant heat, and direct flame contact. This assessment will guide construction methods and requirements to fortify the building against future bushfires.
- **Electrical switchboard upgrade:** Implementing an electrical switchboard upgrade, complete with a transfer switch, to enable connection to emergency power sources such as generators.
- **Audio Visual (AV) upgrade:** Supplying and installing AV equipment where needed to support remote and rural communities, promoting connectivity not just during recovery but throughout the year.

- **Ember Protection Upgrade:** Retrofitting existing facilities to enhance protection against ember attack by sealing gaps, cracks, or areas vulnerable to ember lodging, significantly reducing the building's ignition risk.

Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disaster (STAND)

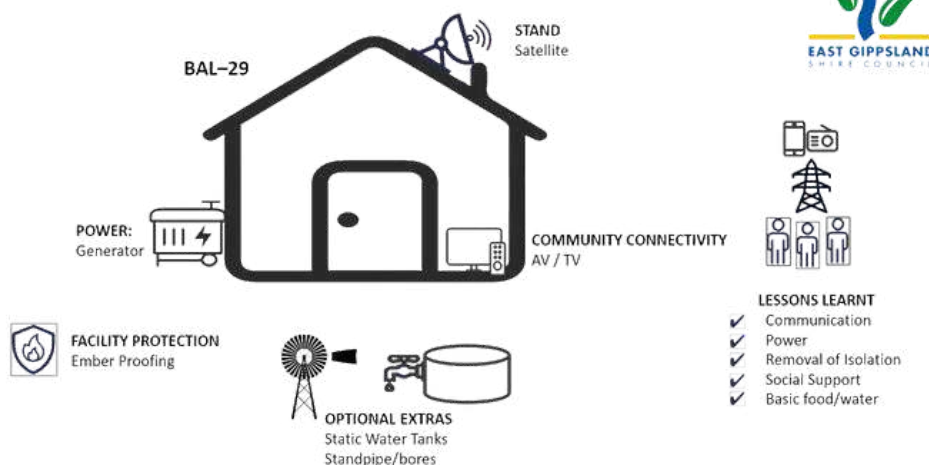
The STAND project is a major part of the Facility Resilience Program providing an upgrade of telecommunication systems including AV infrastructure, Wi-Fi and digital connectivity at selected sites. The project is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government and implemented by NBN and supported by Council and the State Government.

There are two types of satellite communication systems (large and small) being rolled out as part of the pilot stage. The main differences between large and small is:

- Small system comes with only one wireless access point (WAP);
- Large system comes with two WAPs, and a battery backup that keeps the system operating for up to 8 hours.

When an emergency event is declared the system will be switched to active disaster mode resulting in the small sites supporting up to 40 concurrent users and the larger sites up to 100 concurrent users.

FACILITY UPGRADES



Planning for emergencies

Local Incident Management Plans (LIMP)

Local incident management planning has been a considerable focus for Council and communities over the past 12 months with 44 LIMPs now developed across the shire. This two-page document ensures residents and visitors know where to go, what to take and what to expect if major incident affects the area. Identifies where each communities Assembly Area is located. LIMPs are issued to all households and displayed in all lodgings within a district. Are reviewed each year to ensure details are accurate and timely. LIMPs and Emergency Information Booklets on our website: www.eastgippsland.vic.gov.au/community/emergency-management-plans

\$1.2M Disaster Ready Fund

In June 2023, Council was granted \$1.2 million by the Commonwealth Government's National Emergency Management Agency to enhance disaster preparedness and community resilience. The Disaster Ready Fund will be used to extend Council's current projects aimed at advancing disaster and preparedness and resilience in collaboration with communities across the Government's National Emergency Management Agency to enhance disaster preparedness and community resilience. The Disaster Ready Fund will be used to extend Council's current projects aimed at advancing disaster preparedness and resilience in collaboration with communities across the shire.

Timber Bridge Replacement Program

Council's timber bridge replacement program is nearing completion. In the past 9 years over **153 timber bridges** have been replaced with steel and concrete bridges, or where possible, major culverts. The new bridges have a 100-year design life and a load capacity of up to 68 tonne and are less prone to impacts by fires or floods. Suttons Access Road, Combienbar and West Bridge Road, Cabbage Tree Creek were completed in November 2023.

Concrete static water tanks

Increased access to water has seen over 60 concrete static water tanks (47,000 litre) now in place for firefighting use. Water is untreated and not suitable for domestic or livestock use. There are also 14 water bores/standpipes installed for stock and domestic use. Water is potable and suitable for domestic and livestock use.

Community-centred planning

In addition to the LIMPs development, updates and distribution, many communities have held Preparedness Days and other initiatives. These events see agencies and communities come together and share information.

Communities are supported to further develop Emergency plans and to present to Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee and be endorsed or recognised.

Case study - community building resilience

Under the guidance of the Omeo Region Community Recovery Association (ORCRA), five 'Community Conversations' were delivered at Benambra, Omeo, Swifts Creek, Tambo Crossing and Ensay in September to December 2023 to continue to build disaster resilience.

ORCRA presented its Disaster Resilience plan to the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC), where emergency management agencies were provided an opportunity to understand and respond to a listing of community expectations. These expectations were then written in community level emergency plans.

With support from Council and an independent consultant, Community Conversations brought Community and agencies together in community to discuss the progress of these issues and expectations. The outcome highlighted progress had been made, but there was still room for improvement, information sharing in emergencies is critical, and community provided valuable suggestions for agencies to capture local knowledge. Future actions were captured, and an overall report will be provided back to community and again through the MEMPC.



OMEG



BUCHAN



CLIFTON CREEK

TENNIS COURT + HALL UPGRADE

NEW PLAYGROUND



BRUTHEN



THE SANDHILL ASHES



HALL UPGRADE

WAIREWA



SARSFIELD
FRIDAY NIGHT FEEDS

SARSFIELD SNAPS

SOUTHERN GREEN STREAM FROG



illustration by melanie murphy