

East Gippsland Fires 2019-20

Summary of Impacts



Table of Contents

Background to the disaster	3
Fire Timeline 21 November 2019 - 11 January 2020	4
Fire Timeline 15 January - February 3 2020	6
Preparation	8
Response	9
Incident control centres	9
State of disaster declared	9
Relief	9
Relief centres	9
Early recovery	11
Transition to recovery	12
Impact and consequences	13
Social environment impact	13
Built environment impact	13
Culture and healing environment impact	14
Economic environment impact	14
Natural environment impact	14

Background to the disaster

On 21 November 2019 lightning strikes ignited numerous fires in the Hume and Gippsland Emergency Management regions.

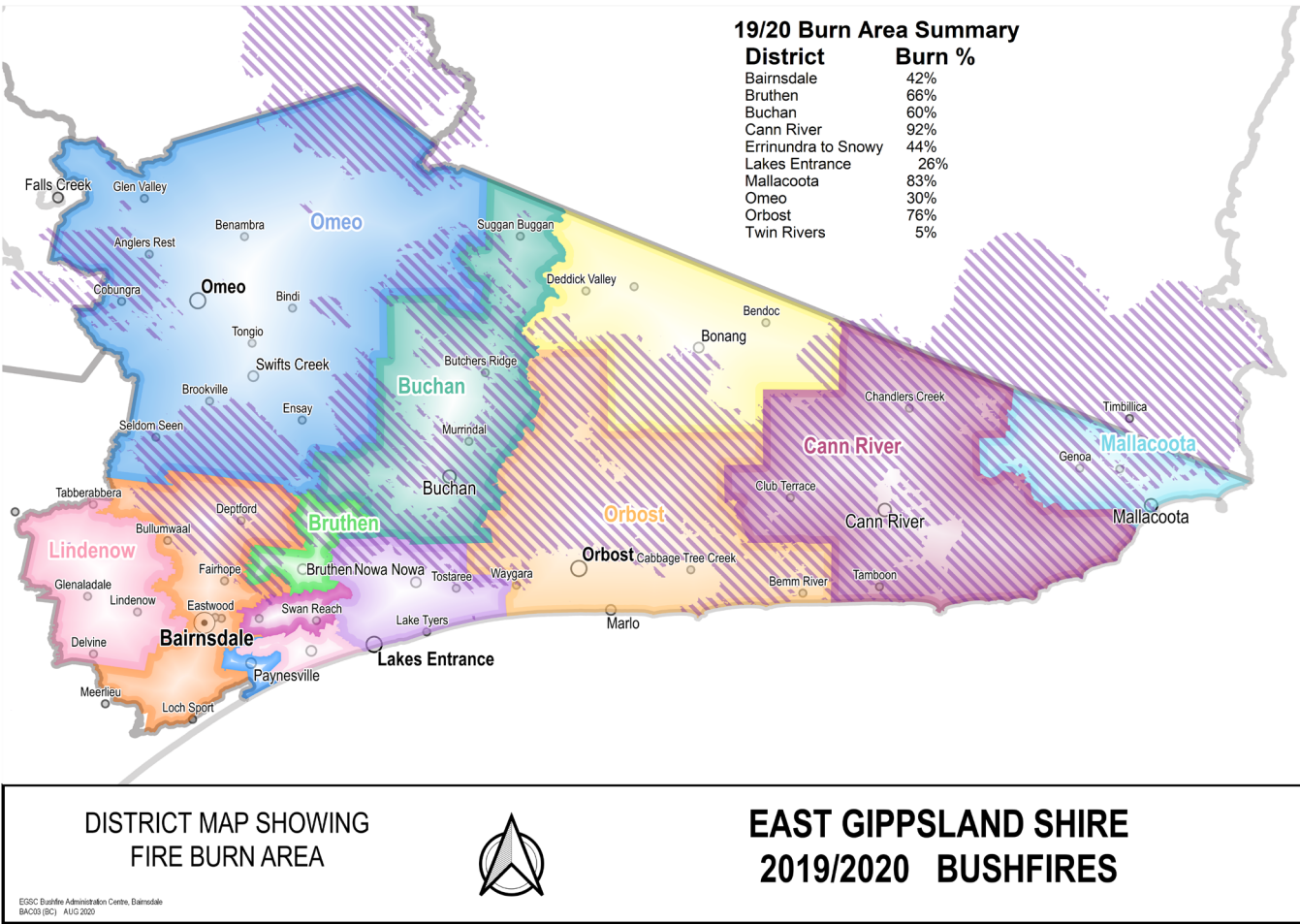
East Gippsland was experiencing significant drought and there was severe, widespread dryness in the region.

Unfavourable conditions and remote locations meant the fires were difficult to contain and several fires joined, creating fires of a magnitude previously unseen in Gippsland, the Victoria's North East and adjacent NSW.

In late December, dry lightning started new fires west of Mallacoota and these merged on New Year's Eve during extreme fire and weather conditions.

On 29 December, Emergency Commissioner Andrew Crisp urged holidaymakers not to travel to East Gippsland and asked all visitors to leave.

On 2 January 2020, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared a state of disaster under the provisions of the Victorian Emergency Management Act for the shires of East Gippsland, Mansfield, Wellington, Wangaratta Rural, Towong and Alpine, and the alpine resorts of Mount Buller, Mount Hotham and Mount Stirling.



Fire Timeline 21 November - 22 December 2019

21/11/19	Fires reported
	Bruthen, Six Mile Track, Marthavale, Barmouth Spur, Mitchell River NP, Billy Goat Bend, Glen Valley, Shannonvale W Tree, Springs Track, Gelantipy, Eaglehawk Track, Gelantipy, Glenmore Road, Nunnet, Rainbow Track, Ensay-Ferntree Creek, Mouunt Little Dick, Bruthen.
25/11/19	Fires spread
	Great Alpine Road impacted north of Bruthen; Ensay fire spotted into back of private property, W Tree fire spotted into private property Mitchell River Park, Bogong High Plains, Mt Bogong, Mt Wills and Snowy River National Parks are closed.
26/11/19	National Parks closed
	Mitchell River Park, Bogong High Plains, Mt Bogong, Mt Wills and Snowy River National Parks.
9/12/19	Fires spread
	Bogong, Towonga Mt Beauty - fires spread Bruthen, Butchers Ridge/ Murrindal, Ensay - Ferntree Creek, Marthavale.
22/12/19	Fires combine
	Marthavale fires combine with Deptford/Bruthen Fire area Butchers Ridge continues easterly direction towards Bonang, Small fires near Tostaree.

Fire Timeline 29 December 2019 - January 11 2020

29/12/19	Fires join	30/12/19	Fires begin	31/12/19	Fires spread	4/1/20	Fires escalate	11/1/20	More fires commence
	Marthavale fires joins with Ensay fire zone -		Suggan Buggan, Wingan inlet.		Butchers Ridge fire spreads through to Club Terrace,		Wingan Inlet burns past NSW border engulfing Genoa, Gipsy Point and Mallacoota.		Cobungra, Chandlers Creek, Bemm River, Cabbage Tree Creek.
	Butchers Ridge/ Murrindal				Wingan Inlet spreads through to Genoa,		Fire impacts Cabbage Tree Creek, outskirts of Orbost,		
	fire continues in north easterly direction.				Ensay fire spread to Buchan, Tostaree, Waygara,		Bullumwaal, Fairhope, Omeo.		
					Fires outskirts Orbost,				
					Marthavale fire continues to spread through to outskirts of Bullumwaal.				

Fire Timeline 15 January - 24 January 2020

15/1/20	Fires continues to NSW border
Watch and Act for Buldah, Chandlers Creek, Wingan River, Weeragua, Wroxham, Wallagaraugh, Lake View, Bemm River, Furnell, Tamboon.	
16/1/20	Fires cross containment lines
Fire burning near Bemm River at Cabbage Creek jumped containment lines through the night, Still fire to the north of Mallacoota; Peat fire at Sarsfield grew by 5 hectares with flare ups overnight, Still activity around Beloka and Shannonvale, Control line works continuing around Bullumwaal fire.	
17/1/20	Peat fires
Morris Peak fire active and now 50 hectares Sarsfield Peat Fire now 12.5-15 hectares and active, Hot spots at 500-600 degrees in some parts, Fire is active East of Beloka and north of Shannonvale.	
21/1/20	More active fires
Active fires in the north east hotspots around Beloka and Benambra.	
22/1/20	Significant fire activity continues in the north
Sarsfield peat fire has about 4-5 hot spots and is starting to track well. Fire activity north of Bemm River with potential for the fire to impact plantations in NSW. Significant amount of hot spots in Cobungra, Beloka and Benambra sector.	
23/1/20	Fires moving to under control
24/1/20	Peat fire tracking well
Buchan Sarsfield	

Fire Timeline 28 January - 3 February 2020

28/1/20					
Sarsfield peat still few hotspots Wentworth fire hotspots detected.					
	29/1/20	Fire activity continues Peat fire hot spots	31/1/20	11/2/20	2/2/20 3/2/20
	Fire activity south of Limestone Road and west of Wulgulmerang. Sarsfield peat fire still some hot spots, Fire activity in the Beloka and Benambra areas.	Fire's activity kept within containment lines Peat fire under control	Wulgulmerang sector has active fire edge, No hotspots in Sarsfield peat fire, Activity around Blaze and Jones Road 100 hectare burnt since previous day with expected 9km run, Activity in Swifts Creek sector kept within containment lines.	Watch & Act Cape Conran / Bendoc area Bendoc division fire active north of Buldah, Watch and Act in place Conran sector has active fire moving westwards from Cabbage Tree Conran Road Fire active to the north of Cape Howe Considerable loss in the Cape Conran area, loss of cabins, toilet blocks and structures.	Bushfire Cape Conran still burning - Increased activity Bonang Area Watch and Act for Cape Conran, bushfire at Cape Conran west of Burbang Road and South of Marlo Plains Road, Bushfire 2km from Bonang is not yet under control, Bushfire 10km east of Bendoc is not yet under control, Bushfire from Buenda Pheasant Creek Track Fire 35km north east of Benamba not yet under control, Sarsfield peat fire continuing to settle down.

Preparation

East Gippsland has experienced many emergency events and natural disasters across the region, Council, and our communities continually review and develop our planning and approach to the way we respond and recover from natural disasters.

Agencies in the region recognise the importance of working together to plan and respond to emergency events and East Gippsland has an active Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee and sub-committees. The East Gippsland Municipal Emergency Management Plan was audited in 2018 and was found to represent a best practice approach.



Bairnsdale Relief Centre.

Major bushfires are a significant annual threat in East Gippsland.

Thirty-three East Gippsland communities have local incident management plans (LIMPs) and several reviewed their plans in the leadup to the 2019/20 fire season, including Buchan, Swifts Creek, Benambra, and Cann River.

Council ran two emergency relief centre training sessions to train 50 staff in the basics of how to open and operate a relief centre in the lead up to the 2019/20 fire season and this proved to be invaluable.



Supplies HMAS Adelaide deployed. Image: courtesy of Operation Bushfire Assist 2019-20 ADF.

Response

Incident control centres

Incident control centres (ICC) were activated:

21 November 2019 at Bairnsdale
23 November 2019 at Orbost
23 November 2019 at Swifts Creek

State of disaster declared

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared a state of disaster on 2 January 2020 for multiple areas, including East Gippsland.



Incident Control Centre. Image: Bairnsdale Advertiser.

Warnings

Council is not the lead agency for bushfire and is bound by official warnings from the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Victoria Police. Managing the warning messages throughout the fires was an enormous task and there were times when the whole region was subject to some level of warning. The messaging was shared with the community via text message before and during the state of disaster period.

Relief

Relief centres

Council opened and operated relief centres with representatives from the Australian Red Cross and the Department of Health and Human Services available to provide immediate support and financial assistance.

Council staff also facilitated the Red Cross registration process through Council's emergency management records database, Crisisworks.

Relief centres operated at:

- Buchan Recreation Reserve – 29 November to January;
- Delegate Country Golf Club – 28 December to 4 January;
- Omeo Memorial Hall – 28 to 30 December;

- Omeo Recreation Reserve – 4 to 13 January;
- Cann River Community Hall – 29 to 30 December;
- Orbost Community Sports Centre – 27 to 30 December;
- Orbost Cricket Oval – 31 December to 3 January and 7 to 11 January;
- Bairnsdale City Oval – 29 December to 17 January;
- Bairnsdale Racecourse – 29 to 31 December and 3 to 11 January;
- Sale Baptist Church – 29 December to 6 January;
- Morwell Recreation Reserve – 29 December to 9 January.



Salvation Army manning the Bairnsdale Bushfire Relief Centre



HMAS Choules delivering supplies. Image: courtesy Operation Bushfire Assist ADF.

Assembly areas operated at:

- Orbost Cricket Oval – 31 December to 3 January and 7 to 12 January;
- Omeo Recreation Reserve – 3 December to 3 January;
- Buchan Recreation Reserve – all summer;
- Mallacoota Community Hall – 5 to 13 January;
- Benambra Community Hall – 3 to 15 January;
- Ensay Recreation Reserve – all summer.

- Medical supplies; and
- Generators.

Victoria Police also arranged for supplies to be brought in from NSW along with setting up and managing detours so people in isolated communities could travel to major centres.

Isolated community relief supplies

Several remote communities were isolated for long periods with closures on major arterial roads including the Great Alpine Road, Princes Highway and Monaro Highway, this led to a shortage of essential goods. Council delivered supplies into these communities with the assistance of Victoria Police and the Australian Defence Force, including:

- Food, including fresh fruit and vegetables, and non-perishables;
- Water;
- Fuel;

Early recovery

Council activated its recovery operations alongside its emergency response operations and convened the East Gippsland Recovery Committee to coordinate the regional recovery.

Council chairs the East Gippsland Recovery Committee with Bushfire Recovery Victoria, which was set up by the Victorian Government to coordinate and lead recovery state-wide, as deputy chair.

Recovery centre

Council activated a local recovery centre in Bairnsdale in early January to provide customer service and manage call-out operations along with the Secondary Impact Assessment team.

Recovery centre staff called affected residents to share information about the assistance that was available. Council also set up an automated referral service to speed up the delivery of support.

Community liaison

Council was active at many community meetings convened through the incident control centre and was instrumental in arranging the Mobile Recovery Information Service, which was critical in sharing information and support services with impacted remote communities.

Over eight weeks, Council staff travelled to 39 fire-affected communities to provide recovery information and support, along with representatives from organisations such as the Department of Health and Human Services, Red Cross, Centrelink, Rural Financial Counselling, Agriculture Victoria, Environment Protection Authority and GROCON.

Data collected by the Bairnsdale Recovery Centre and Mobile Recovery Information Service enabled Council to support applications to the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund, so payments could be made quickly to fire-affected residents.

The mobile service was limited by restrictions put in place to manage the COVID 19 pandemic.

Donations

Council received more than 850 calls offering donations and assistance, this presented challenges with logistics and manpower, consequently the public was urged to donate money rather than goods.

Ultimately Council sought help from the Australian Defence Force and the Salvation Army to transport and store unused, non-perishable goods outside the shire.

The Salvation Army supplied bedding, including stretchers, blankets and other material aid to relief centres, also providing breakfast, lunch and dinner in the first few weeks.

Red Cross coordinated the registration of people in relief centres and ensured 'Register, Find, Reunite' was available on its website.

Locals moved into Lucknow Memorial Hall to coordinate donations, including clothing, blankets, food and vouchers, and a second donation point was set up at Lucknow Primary School when the hall filled within 24 hours.

There were many other examples of private arrangements for donation of goods and volunteer time for both the relief and recovery efforts and the generosity of the public in this regard is greatly appreciated.

Later, Bushfire Recovery Victoria engaged GIVIT to coordinate donations for the recovery phase. This is ongoing.

Transition to recovery

On 2 April 2020 East Gippsland moved officially into recovery and decisions about recovery coordination were transitioned to the recovery committee.

Impact and consequences



Volunteers. Image: courtesy Samaritan's Purse.

- Three fatalities;
- 380 Primary place of residences destroyed (including flats, caravans, holiday homes and rentals);
- 68 Primary place of residences damaged (including flats, caravans, holiday homes and rentals);
- 12 Commercial properties destroyed, and 3 damaged;
- 56 per cent of East Gippsland impacted by bushfire;
- 1,074,841 hectares burnt;
- Princes Highway cut for 37 days;
- Great Alpine Road, Bonang Highway and Monaro Highway closed for several days;
- Telecommunications, power, water, and many minor roads were impacted;
- 75 per cent loss in annual tourism expenditure;
- Estimated loss of visitor expenditure for Gippsland of \$170-180 million; and
- Evacuations from Mallacoota and Omeo by the Australian Defence Force.

Social environment impact

- 46,000 residents directly or indirectly impacted;
- 118 communities impacted;
- Several 'safe spaces' opened for people unable to travel home;
- 11 relief centres activated to support more than 2,380 people;
- Community recovery outreach identifies needs for and advocates for support services;
- Over 15,000 referrals made through the recovery centre;
- 850 Offers of assistance;
- 2,283 Gippsland Emergency Relief Funding applications;
- 9,485 Emergency hardship payments \$9,269,000; and
- 74 Re-establishment applications processed for a total of \$1,669,000.

Built environment impact

- 380 total residences destroyed (including flats, caravans, holiday homes and rentals);
- 68 total residences damaged (including flats, caravans, holiday homes and rentals);
- 12 Commercial properties destroyed;
- 3 Commercial properties damaged;
- 532 sheds destroyed;
- 45 sheds damaged;
- 6,606 kms of fence destroyed;
- 1581 secondary impacts completed;
- 160 secondary impacts required as at 30 July.

Roads

- 420 kms road network impacted – Regional Roads Victoria;
- 650 kms road network impacted – East Gippsland Shire Council;
- 7,500 DWELP road network impacted;
- 15 EGSC bridges impacted;
- 80% road inspections completed;
- Princes Highway: closed 37 days;
- The Great Alpine, Monaro, and Bonang Roads were closed several days.

Power

- 165 pole replacements;
- 2 Transformers impacted;

Water

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| • Additional drinking water; | \$420,000 |
| • Upgrades; | \$500,000 |
| • Sewerage operating. | \$150,000 |

Telecommunications

- 60km Transit Link
- 950 Property Connection interruptions

Culture and healing environment impact

- Statistics incorporated into the five pillars of recovery sub-plans.

Economic environment impact

Loss of visitor expenditure for Gippsland estimated at \$170-180 million;

Of 411 businesses in East Gippsland & Wellington Shires;

- 18 per cent were directly destroyed or damaged;
- 52 per cent indirectly impacted;
- 46 per cent rely on tourism;
- 97 Primary Industries grants;
- 19 Emergency Transport subsidies;
- 19 Concessional Loan applications;
- 89 Small Business Bushfire Support Grants;
- Community recovery outreach officers provided to assist with business continuity;
- 397 referrals to business advisory services for grant assistance; and
- Estimated 685 tourism businesses significantly affected.

Natural environment impact

Land tenure

- 56% National parks and conservation reserves;
- 12% Other conservation reserves;
- 11% Other state forest;
- 67% Other public land; and
- Total Crown land: 1,000,959 hectares.

Waterways impacted

- 53% Water-supply catchments; and
- 32,046 ha waterways.

Rainforest areas impacted

- 32% Cool temperate rainforest;
- 73% Unclassified rainforest; and
- 77% Warm and dry temperate rainforest.