

Building Construction Advisory Panel Action Plan and Approach relating to rebuilding of Wye River & Separation Creek

Overview

The Emergency Management Commissioner convened a panel of bushfire and building experts to provide advice to the Commissioner and partner agencies on the challenges and opportunities in supporting the rebuild of the built environment of Wye River and Separation Creek.

To assist in determining the advice and actions required of the Building Construction Advisory Panel, the Panel has considered appropriate reports, including the review into the 2016 Wye River and Separation Creek Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) Assessment Study Report (the Wye/Sep Report), and the post-bushfire analysis undertaken by CFA and CSIRO.

The Advisory Panel found the Wye/Sep Report provided a standard application of the current regulatory and policy framework under the Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO) as prescribed in the planning scheme.

The Panel also advised that Wye River and Separation Creek face significant challenges due to the hazards and risks from the landscape, topography, vegetation types and density and fuels loads.

As well as considering the appropriate reports, panel members have also visited the area and spoken to community members.

The proposed outcomes and actions are below.

Outcomes

To assist with resolving some of these complexities and resulting tensions between existing policy and regulatory requirements and rebuilding Wye River and Separation Creek, the Advisory Panel has recommended a more holistic approach beyond the Wye/Sep Report to identify further opportunities to achieve improved bushfire safety prior to a bushfire event in consultation with the whole community. As a result, key recommendations are outlined below, underpinned by the following criteria:

- Applying a holistic bushfire safety approach to rebuilding houses lost, and
- Improving the bushfire resilience of existing buildings not lost during the fire extending to the whole Wye River and Separation Creek settlements as part of the overall community response.

Action Plan

The Panel has developed an action plan with four key themes on Asset Protection Zones, improving bushfire resilience for re-builds and existing buildings, improving overall community resilience to bushfires and ensuring ongoing engagement with community. To ensure effective implementation these themes will require a shared approach between community, shire and agencies.

Action 1 – Asset Protection Zones

Demonstrate how a site can go from Flame Zone (FZ) to Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) 40 by establishing Asset Protection Zones (APZ) around the settlement boundary, and where and if this might be possible or feasible in Wye River and Separation Creek. This will require defining APZ structure and specifications to look for opportunities for reductions from FZ to BAL40.

Once the feasibility assessment is completed the community will be engaged through neighborhood groups with similar circumstances, as well as whole community discussions. This process will be facilitated through the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning with panel members.

Action 2 – Guidance, advice and technical assistance

Provide guidance and technical details for improving the bushfire resilience of both re-builds and existing buildings that are considered to be at risk from the spread of fire through the township.

This would require providing a list of effective and efficient options beyond the existing bushfire construction standards in terms of building design and construction and ‘good-practice’ elements, and highlighting the importance of street scape building siting, design and construction*.

This would be achieved by the Panel working with the Wye River and Separation Creek communities to pull together key considerations and information sourced from a variety of areas into a single voluntary bushfire resilience ‘guideline’ for individual sites and the township. These guidelines would also provide information to architects, builders and building surveyors working on the rebuild and upgrades and improvements for existing buildings.

There is also an opportunity to substantially reduce hazards and risks at individual sites and in the broader community based on the findings of the CFA/CSIRO post-fire analysis. The Advisory Panel suggests the provision of information and guidance on how this can be achieved, taking information from lessons learnt that can contribute to an overall improvement of the township’s bushfire safety.

Community engagement approach and timeline

The first draft of the ‘guideline’ will be developed through two community workshops in May 2016 and provided back to the community for feedback. Further workshops will be held mid-year to develop and refine the guidelines, bushfire safety practices and their interdependencies. The Panel will also do a case study and undertake fire engineering modelling on the rebuild of a dwelling using the guideline.

The guideline will become a living resource and will therefore be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they continue to meet community and industry needs.

The guideline and key information will be available through the One Stop Shop and a version will be provided to Architects, Builders and Building Surveyors to help guide improved resilience provisions and good design schedule for materials and methods of construction. The Office of the Victorian Government, with support from DELWP, will also be running an Architect and Building Expo, which will incorporate the Panel’s expert advice.

**Note that good options beyond the existing bushfire construction standards does not necessarily equate to more expensive options. Rather the goal is to achieve above the minimum standards and improve bushfire resilience in the most efficient and effective way.*

Action 3 – Community Resilience

Build on the existing Community Fire and Emergency Management Plan with an emphasis on a whole of community approach and commitment to its development and implementation. The plan should include details around governance to support implementation of all agreed safety and improved bushfire resilience measures and include the following agreements:

- I. Between community and government regarding establishment and maintenance of APZ around the settlement boundary where achievable
- II. Within the community on vegetation/fuel management, internal community agreement around settlement rebuilding to reduce building to building ignition and improved resilience of existing/remaining buildings and ongoing maintenance of township fire prevention, preparedness and response measures and elements.

Consideration should also be given to establishing a Bushfire Place of Last Resort or Community Fire Refuge.

Community engagement approach and timeline

Once the draft guidelines are developed the Panel will undertake a feasibility study into the concept of Neighborhood Safer Places, Community Fire Refuge and Neighborhood Bunkers in partnership with the community, DELWP, Colac Otway Shire and CFA.

DELWP, EMV, CFA and Colac Otway Shire will build on the existing Community Fire and Emergency Management Plan to include:

- The voluntarily adopted resilience guidelines, associated technical guidance and good design schedule for materials and methods of construction to become an appendix to the community fire and emergency management plan
- Community agreement to a whole of community response and commitment to ongoing maintenance of building stock, vegetation management and bushfire safety practices.

Community workshops will be needed to present and explain the community fire and emergency management plan and formally seek community commitment to its implementation.

Action 4 – Ongoing community engagement

Government and agencies commit to engage with the Wye River and Separation Creek communities to explain and refine each of the four actions, their interdependencies and community safety outcomes, guidance on re-building and improving bushfire resilience of the remaining existing buildings, vegetation management and maintenance and the lessons learnt from the CFA/CSIRO post fire analysis.

This is important because a higher BAL rating is not necessarily an improvement on personal safety or guarantee of building survival, especially when Fire Danger Ratings reach severe and above.

For example, according to the *Australian Standards 3959 Construction of buildings in bushfire-prone areas*:

This Standard is primarily concerned with improving the ability of buildings in designated bushfire-prone areas to better withstand attack from bushfire thus giving a measure of protection to the building occupants (until the fire front passes) as well as to the building itself.

Although this Standard is designed to improve the performance of buildings when subjected to bushfire attack in designated bushfire-prone areas there can be no guarantee that a building will survive a bushfire event on every occasion. This is substantially due to the unpredictable nature and behavior of fire and extreme weather conditions.

As no house is constructed to fully withstand fires community engagement should include discussing with the community bushfire planning, including leaving early versus staying and defending, and the consequences of leaving late, and other key primacy of life considerations.

This discussion should be extended to include the value of a private bushfire shelter for all residents wanting to stay and defend their property.

Explanation and community understanding of the options community members have in the face of bushfire, primacy of life and property protection will be critical to building community resilience to bushfire.