

## Black Saturday – An Emergency Animal Management Plan put to the test

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### A background to the Shire of Yarra Ranges

The Shire of Yarra Ranges is located on metropolitan Melbourne's eastern fringe. It was formed in 1994 following the amalgamation of the former Shires of Lilydale, Healesville, Sherbrooke and Upper Yarra.

Home to a population of around 145,000 people, the Shire covers an area of over 2500 square kilometres. Approximately one in every 30 Victorians lives in the Shire which stretches from the densely populated outer suburbs up into the surrounding foothills and agricultural valleys and forested areas of the Great Dividing Range. It is one of Victoria's largest, most varied and scenic municipalities.

The Shire contains some of the most environmentally important areas in Victoria, which are a significant factor in attracting residents and tourists. The mountainous landscapes and the Yarra River valley contain areas of remnant native vegetation, much of which is botanically and zoologically significant and forms important habitat for wildlife.

The responsibility for animal management vests with the Shire's Local Laws team. The operational elements of the team comprise seven well equipped animal management officers (Rangers) and three multi-skilled Parking Officers. The operational elements are managed by a Team Leader and the team is supported by a Coordinator and a team of four administration and business support officers. An Executive Officer oversees the overall management of the team.

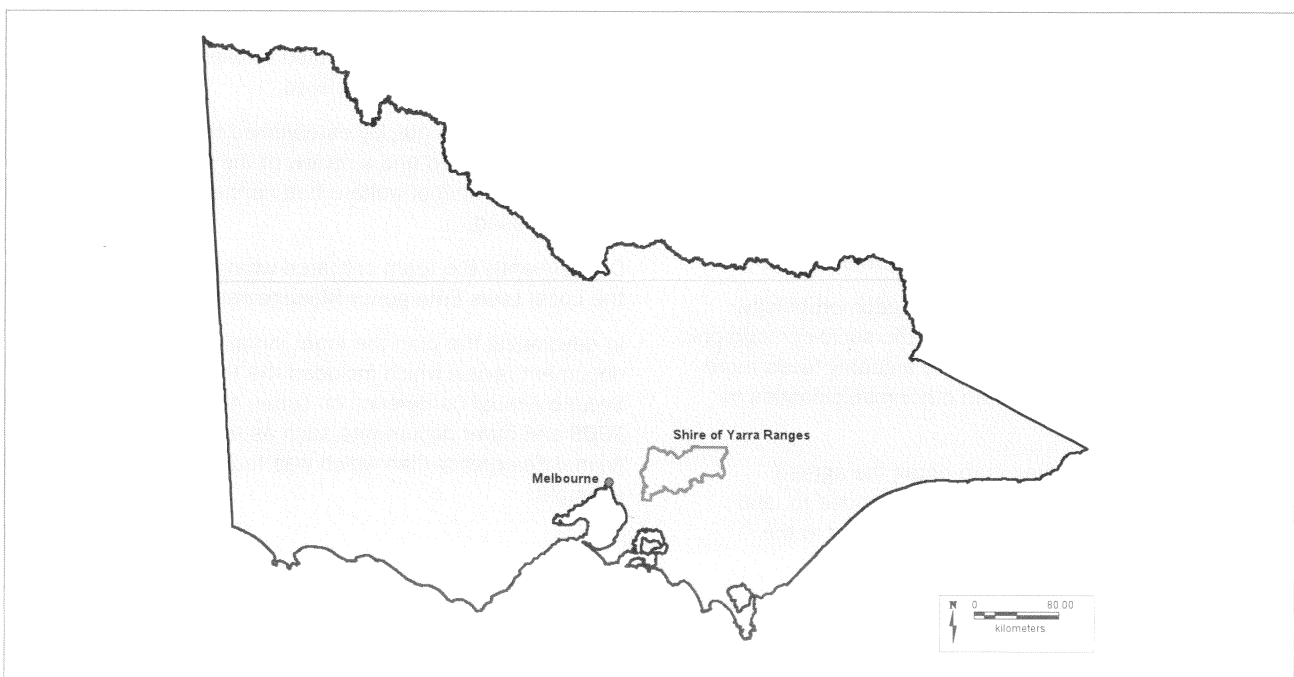
Each year the Local Laws team receives approximately 3,000 requests for service related to animal control and management issues. With one of the largest registered dog populations in Victoria it is estimated that there are over 30,000 dogs and 18,000 cats owned in the Shire. With the Shire having a large rural aspect it follows that the teams animal management response extends to issues related to stray livestock and animal keeping at 'hobby farms'.

### The bushfire and the Yarra Ranges

The Shire is recognized as being in one of the most bushfire prone areas in the world due to its mountainous topography, highly flammable native vegetation and climatic patterns that combine to create severe fire hazard conditions almost every year. Another factor that makes this area particularly hazardous is the combination of forest/urban environments and the number of residents and tourists.

Since the 1900's, the following serious fires have occurred in the Shire:

- 1905 *Healesville area*
- 1913 *Sassafras/Monbulk*
- 1923 *Belgrave/Upwey/Ferny Creek*
- 1926 *Dandenong's/Upper Yarra/Healesville areas*
- 1932 *Upper Yarra (Matlock)*
- 1934 *The Basin/Ferntree Gully*
- 1939 *"Black Friday" – Dandenong's/Upper Yarra/Healesville*



- 1944 *The Basin/Ferntree Gully/Monbulk*
- 1954 *Upper Ferntree Gully/One Tree Hill*
- 1962 *Dandenong's/Upper Yarra/Healesville*
- 1968 *The Basin/Sassafras/Ferny Creek/Upwey*
- 1972 *The Basin/Sassafras/Upper Ferntree Gully*
- 1973 *Lysterfield*
- 1980 *Upwey/Mount Dandenong*
- 1983 *"Ash Wednesday" – Dandenong's and Upper Yarra*
- 1991 *Yarra State Forest/Mt Little Joe*
- 1997 *The Basin/Dandenong Ranges/Montrose*

Prior to 7 February 2009 (Black Saturday), "Black Friday" was the most disastrous bushfire ever recorded in Victoria. At Woods Point the whole town was demolished destroying 143 houses. In Warburton, 16 men were killed, 20 houses were lost and every saw mill in the area was burnt to the ground. The second most damaging fire in Victoria was "Ash Wednesday" where at Belgrave Heights and Upper Beaconsfield, 21 people died including 11 CFA volunteers. Approximately 300 houses were destroyed and 1800ha of bushland and pastures burnt out. In Warburton 13 houses were destroyed along with 41,000 ha of forest.

On 7 February 2009, Victoria was devastated by the worst bushfires in Australia's history when 173 people lost their lives.

Around 78 communities were directly impacted and entire towns were left unrecognisable. The fires burnt more than 2,000 properties and 61 businesses. Police stations, schools and kindergartens, fire and emergency services facilities, churches, community halls and sporting clubs were also destroyed or badly damaged. Almost 430,000 hectares of land were directly affected, including 70 national parks and reserves and over 3,550 agricultural facilities.

The fires had a direct impact on the Shire of Yarra Ranges with the loss of eleven lives. The communities of Steels Creek, Dixons Creek and Chum Creek were devastated by the Black Saturday fires. Hundreds of properties were destroyed, thousands of livestock were lost along with immeasurable numbers of wildlife.

### Emergency management planning

The purpose of the *Victorian Emergency Management Act 1986* is to provide for the organisation of emergency management. The Act requires that municipal councils prepare a Municipal Emergency Management Plan.

Given the combination of the regions geomorphology, the history of natural disasters and the socio-demographic trends in its communities the Shire arguably faces more potential natural disasters than other municipalities in the state.

The aim of the Shire's plan is to detail the agreed arrangements for the prevention of, response to, and recovery from, emergencies that could occur in the municipality.

The broad objectives of the Plan are to:

- a. Implement measures to prevent or reduce the causes or effects of emergencies;
- b. Manage arrangements for the utilisation and implementation of municipal resources in response to emergencies;
- c. Manage support that may be provided to or from adjoining municipalities;
- d. Assist the affected community to recover following an emergency;
- e. Complement other local, regional and state planning arrangements.

The Shire is responsible for managing municipal resources and co-ordinating community support to counter the effects of emergencies during the response and recovery phases.

This includes management of:

- a. Providing emergency relief to combatants and affected persons during the response phase;
- b. The provision of supplementary supply (resources) to control and relief agencies during response and recovery;
- c. Assisting various agencies during the response and after emergencies;
- d. Assessing the impact of an emergency; and
- e. Recovery activities within the municipality, in consultation with the Department of Human Services.

Within the Municipal Emergency Management Plan sub-plans detail specific functions designed to deliver the aims and objectives described above. Examples of these include the Communications Sub-Plan, Public Health Sub-Plan and the Welfare and Emergency Relief Sub-Plan.

### Animal welfare sub-plan

In August 2008 as the fire danger season drew closer warnings were issued by various agencies suggesting that the 2008/09 season would be worse than previous years.

In preparing for approaching danger the Local Laws team reviewed the procedures it would invoke should an emergency response be required.

Surprisingly it was quickly established that no such procedures existed and a review of the MEMP revealed the matter of animal welfare had neither been identified nor addressed.

Consequently the team prepared what is now known as the Local Laws Emergency Management Plan LLEMP.

In developing the plan the team initially conducted a document review which included the *Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference on Urban Animal Management 2008* and other documents such as the City of Bunbury's *Animal Emergency Plan* which was found to be a valuable example.

## What was planned

In developing the plan a number of staff workshops were conducted to explore previous emergencies, likely scenarios, existing practices and potential functions and responsibilities that might be required as part of an effective emergency response.

Expert advice was sought from Victoria Police and consultation occurred with the Victorian Animal Aid Trust and other related agencies.

The advice received from emergency management experts was noticeably consistent with the material available from the 2008 conference proceedings.

During development of the plan a recurring theme was the need to ensure that an updated contact list was available. The purpose of such a list is to have available the contact details of any person, agency, organisation and service provider who may be required to help deliver one or more aspects of the plan.

Once completed, the plan was quickly adopted by the Local Laws team and soon became a 'yet-to-be-endorsed' addendum to the Municipal Emergency Management Plan.

Although the plan focused upon the management of livestock and pets during emergencies, it also accommodated the plight of wildlife (birds and animals) even though they primarily remained the responsibility the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

The aim of the plan was to be prepared for the 2008 – 2009 Fire Season and in so doing, define the roles and responsibilities of Authorised Local Laws Officers and support staff during an emergency.

The purpose of the document was to enable Authorised Officers and Administrative Support Staff to understand their roles and responsibilities in assisting members of the community to manage their pets and livestock during an emergency.

The objectives of the plan were to:

- Support and assist the Municipal Emergency Management Plan
- Identify triggers for activating the Local Laws Emergency Management Plan
- Co-ordinate Local Laws functions and animal rescue and/or shelter during an emergency
- Encourage and facilitate community awareness about the need for self managed animal plans during an emergency
- Increase community knowledge and confidence that animal welfare will be considered during an emergency
- Identify and prioritize the requirements of groups at risk during emergencies
- Facilitate the hygienic management and disposal of animal waste and carcasses during an emergency
- Secure the assistance of community members with animal handling skills
- Provide immediate animal welfare assistance at emergency Relief Centres

What was planned for however, soon became a reality that far exceeded the team's imagination and the scenarios explored.

## The reality

The plan anticipated an incident or event that might have a duration of about 24 hours. It was expected that the Municipal Emergency Management Plan would be implemented and there would be a quick and effective sequential transition from each of the anticipated emergency management phases of *response*, *relief* and *recovery*.

The reality was an intense and tragic event that extended for 27 straight days. The Shire's Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC) was commissioned at 1000hrs on Saturday 7 February 2009 and was stood down at 1100hrs on Wednesday 4 March 2009. For a significant portion of that time the MECC and the associated Relief Centres operated 24 hours a day.

In essence, the Bushfire Emergency was a prolonged activity for the Shire that saw all three emergency management phases occur in parallel to each other.

Between implementation of the Local Laws Emergency Plan and stand down the Local Laws team had:

- Coordinated the Local Laws Emergency Management Plan from the Municipal Emergency Control Centre as part of a relevant sub-plan.
- Received requests for service, provided advice and undertook actions as required.
- Coordinated and assisted with the transfer and removal of stock from fire affected properties to places of agistment.
- With the Department of Primary Industries, coordinated and conducted the humane destruction of wounded and burned animals.
- Installed over 6 kilometres of temporary fencing to contain stock on fire damaged properties.
- Distributed 12 kilometres of fencing wire and star pickets for temporary fencing.
- Coordinated the receipt, recording, management and distribution of food and water for stock and domestic animals: including 3000 bails of hay, 1300 pallets of hard feed, water delivery and the distribution or water troughs.
- Investigated numerous reports of abandoned and suffering animals.
- Provided victims with advice, guidance and support about accessing a variety of resources for animals.
- Transported emergency veterinary supplies for animal welfare agencies into fire affected areas.
- Investigated reports of opportunistic requests for assistance.
- Installed 20,000ltr stock water tanks at Steels Creek and a stock water point at Chum Creek.
- Provided hands on assistance at Relief Centres in relation to animal and traffic management.

The MECC was opened on the morning of 7 February 2009 – Black Saturday. The weather was atrocious across the whole of Victoria. Wind speeds had reached gale force and the temperature was soaring. By mid-afternoon fires were burning throughout the State – the Shire of Yarra Ranges was enveloped by a pall of smoke and a number of townships were under direct threat.

Intuitively, many staff found themselves gravitating towards the Municipal Emergency Control Centre as others checked in via telephone.

Upon activating the Local Laws Emergency Management Plan it became apparent that not all staff would be available to take up duty - they too were under direct threat, had evacuated or were unable to be contacted.

Herein lay one of the greatest challenges – having enough suitably trained staff to respond to the emergency for extended shifts at all hours of the day and night for week after week. The fires started on a Saturday and by the following Thursday evening the team had dedicated almost 1000 man-hours towards their emergency response.

General advice for those preparing emergency management plans is to pursue Memorandums of Understanding with key stakeholders who have a role in emergency management. The value of this came to fruition as soon as the gravity and magnitude of the disaster was realised and the Yarra Ranges' CEO formally requested assistance from those municipalities who are signatories to such MOU's.

During the emergency the team was directly assisted by twenty one staff from other municipalities including: Maroondah City Council, Knox City Council, City of Boroondara, City of Whitehorse, City of Casey, City of Whitehorse and the City of Greater Dandenong. The lesson from this is to build extensive and effective rostering practices to deploy and account for many additional staff.

The Shire of Yarra Ranges owes a great debt of gratitude to those organisations and their staff because it would have been impossible to respond effectively (if at all) without them. They assisted directly in the emergency response, relief efforts and in the continuity of daily Local Laws operations.

The revised plan now provides guidance for the Emergency Response Coordinator to consider *when* to start developing rosters and whether or not to mobilise extra staff and when to schedule rest breaks.

## Emergency response

The emergency response primarily focused on the establishment of Relief Centres and provision of immediate support to victims and those who had 'self evacuated' into perceived 'safe areas'. For those taking refuge at Relief Centres arrangements were made for the temporary accommodation and care of their pets.

The Victorian Animal Aid Trust, one of the State's peak animal welfare bodies, is located within the Shire. The VAAT commissioned its pound and kennel facilities making them available for emergency accommodation. Over the 27 days and beyond, hundreds of animals from within the Shire were housed and cared for by the VAAT.

Reports of injured wildlife were routinely referred to Wildlife Victoria and along with the Department of Primary Industries, three teams of shooters were formed and tasked with the responsibility of assessing the health of burnt and injured livestock.

Of those directly affected by the fires, such was the ferocity and intensity of the flames that relatively few animals required euthanasia: so few survived the flames. The Local Laws team had the unenviable task of coordinating the removal and burial of victim animals on private and public land.

Thousands of kilometres of fencing were destroyed by fire. Consequently the team was constantly called upon to remove livestock from roads and secure animals on adjacent land or relocate them. This activity alone caused a considerable drain on available resources. Removing stock from roads was anticipated in an emergency response but it was never expected to be on such a large scale or for such a long duration.

## Emergency relief

Immediately following an emergency *response* the Shire's Emergency Management Plan anticipates a swift transition to the *relief* phase. This phase focuses on the immediate needs of victims, such as food, clothing, clean water and shelter.

In the Shire of Yarra Ranges the Black Saturday fires were not contained until 4 March 2009. Eventually known as the Kilmore Murrundindi Complex, the main fire to affect the Shire, burned continuously and consumed an incredible one third of the Shire.

*The shaded areas represent areas burnt by the fires. Note the Kilmore Murrundindi Complex to the north and the Bunyip State Forest fire to the South.*

As the fires continued after Black Saturday a number of townships in the Shire came under renewed threat. With on-going extreme temperatures, high wind events and the constant presence of thick palls of smoke there was a heightened sense of anxiety within the community. Relief Centres in the townships of Yarra Glen and Healesville remained open for weeks on end. Centres were also activated at Lilydale and Kilsyth on Melbourne's urban fringe in response to renewed fire threats in the south of the Shire from a new fire in Lysterfield State Park and a fire in the Bunyip State Forest which had commenced before Black Saturday.

At each Relief Centre team members were required to maintain a presence and be available to assist with animal welfare matters. They were first to arrive in the township of Healesville which had been cut off to incoming traffic. Arriving in the town at about 11:00pm, they were met with an inconceivable scene with much of the town's population having self evacuated to the Coles Supermarket car park (in the town centre) and to large sports fields and reserves on the outskirts of town. Evacuated with their owners, these areas had become a temporary home for horses, cats, dogs and all manner of domestic pets. The immediate demand was for the team to provide cages and arrange feed and water.

As the extent of the tragedy emerged, the team was able to distribute from the Relief Centres, large volumes of mostly donated, domestic animal food and stock feed.

They also routinely transported animals directly to the VAAT pound for housing on a temporary basis. In addition to their active role in the emergency, the team also played a brokerage role facilitating contact between those needing emergency agistment and transport and those who could meet their needs.

Offers of assistance from the public were astounding, both in volume and in generosity. Donations included thousands of bails of feed, pallets of hard feed, fencing equipment and materials, animal handling equipment, troughs and water carting, agistment, stock transport and temporary accommodation for domestic animals.

The demand for these goods and services was as unexpected as their supply was unprecedented. Supply and demand of these goods required efficient management and in the early stages of the Shire's relief efforts, they were referred to the Local Laws team.

As a consequence the team was required to allocate valuable resources to the receipt and distribution of these goods and services. This placed even further pressure on the team's capability to respond.

It soon became necessary to formally transfer the role to other areas of the Shire's relief efforts. Not surprisingly this element of the Local Laws role has been the subject of review as the team prepares for the 2009/10 bushfire season.

Organizing relief efforts also included planning the layout and operation of Relief Centres. One example was the high wind event and associated extreme fire danger expected on the weekend on 2 & 3 March 2009. The Shire identified the Lilydale Show Grounds as an ideal site should residents decide to evacuate from the Yarra Valley or find themselves displaced through tragedy. During the prolonged emergency the show grounds had earlier been home to a 'tent city' courtesy of the Australian Army.

In planning the activation of the Relief Centre the team arranged for temporary corrals to be transported from Sydney. The corrals were installed to ensure that horses and other livestock brought to the Relief Centre could be housed safely and securely. Water points in the form of troughs were also installed and feed for all manner of animals was stockpiled and made available to anyone needing it.

The Lilydale Show Committee and VAAT played an integral role in making available a vast array of cages and enclosures.

## What we learned

As the emergency subsided and the team started to transition back to seemingly mundane daily business, a number of formal debriefing sessions were undertaken.

From those sessions some clear lessons emerged.

First and foremost, the fact that a plan existed was fundamental to the team's ability to respond to the emergency regardless of whether the activity related to the response or relief effort.

The plan provided clear roles and responsibilities by establishing a 'chain of command'. Being present in the Municipal Emergency Control Centre enabled the team to respond not only to changing needs but to also be a participant in the planning processes implemented as part of the 'whole of Shire' disaster response.

The debriefs confirmed that some scenarios identified and discussed during development of the plan had come to fruition. Importantly (but sadly) some of the more 'far fetched' scenarios had also come to fruition but had not been adequately explored and accounted for because they were considered beyond a 'worst case scenario'. The team has learned: 'if you think it might happen, it could and therefore, no matter how far fetched it might seem – plan for it!'

Fundamental to the team's ability to respond to a multitude of tasks was the availability, and use of, a detailed and up-to-date contact list. As foreseen by the emergency management experts, the contact list was one of the most valuable tools at the teams disposal. If nothing else, the team learned the value of: work-shopping scenarios, brainstorming – who might we call upon, and then translating that work into a contact list.

Business continuity was a matter not adequately addressed in the Local Laws plan. As the emergency unfolded Local Laws operations were divided into two sub-branches – Local Laws Emergency Response and Local Laws Daily Business.

Whatever the title used - Local Laws, Community Compliance, Neighborhood Services, By-Laws - the area vested with most of the regulatory responsibilities for animal management is by its very nature one of the most contentious areas of Local Government.

The demands on the industry are unrelenting and expectations are incredibly high. In the Shire of Yarra Ranges the fires impacted directly upon those needs in the rural areas of the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges. However, for some in the densely populated urban areas within the Shire such as Kilsyth, Mooroolbark and Chirnside Park, it was business as usual.

A few short weeks after Black Saturday, at a time when the team was continuing its emergency response and relief efforts, the team continued to receive complaints from unaffected areas about barking dogs, dog poo, cats breaching the curfew and dogs wandering at large. High risk matters such as dog attacks and dogs rushing required investigation and pending matters such as permit applications and prosecutions required resolution.

The team was able to maintain a level of business continuity by seconding staff from other areas within the Shire to the *Daily Business Team*. Those staff, as well as a skeleton crew of existing members was ably assisted by staff from other municipalities. Not having this contingency in place would have curtailed the Shire's ability to deliver its primary animal related (and general compliance) functions and responsibilities for an entire month.

The availability and benefits of counselling, has also emerged as a primary lesson.

The care and well being of staff is paramount. For some in the MECC hearing senior police members say *"...in this emergency our first and foremost concern is the safety of our members ...after that comes the safety of the general public and then after that comes the protection of assets and property"* was probably confronting. However, after taking a moment to process the message this proposition emerges as entirely reasonable and proper. The care and well being of staff is paramount.

For the team, care and well being extended beyond ensuring that staff were only executing tasks they were trained and equipped to perform. It was also about ensuring they had access to care such as trauma counselling and that they were adequately rested.

Trauma counselling is a science. There is a body of knowledge which acknowledges that a person's response to a trauma can manifest itself in all manner of ways. Sometimes the way in which a person responds to a trauma has a detrimental effect on their health and well being. Knowing this brings a responsibility to ensure that staff have immediate and on-going access to appropriate levels of care in the form of counselling.

## Revised plan

As a consequence of the February bushfire emergency the Local Laws Emergency Management Plan is now incorporated as a sub-plan within the Municipal Emergency Management Plan. The revised plan draws upon the experiences of Black Saturday and the weeks that followed. Importantly however, the plan is flexible enough (by design) that it can be implemented in complete autonomy to the MEMP and can be adapted to any emergency response be it flood, land slide or any unforeseen event that requires immediate action.

The February bushfire emergency was a tragic event – the State of Victoria experienced the most devastating bushfires in its history resulting in catastrophic loss of life and public and private property.

Through planning, hard work and a commitment to doing 'what could be done – if it could be done', the Local Laws team, with the help of its stakeholders, made a significant contribution towards the Shire's emergency response and relief efforts.

## About the author

Greg Talbot is the Executive Officer of the Shire of Yarra Rangers – Local laws team. A relative newcomer to the field of Animal Management Greg has worked in various roles for State Government with the Victorian Prison Service and Community Correctional Services.