The Event

On the afternoon of October 17, 2013, under the influence of severe weather conditions, a serious bushfire broke out in the Lower Blue Mountains (Winmalee) and Mt. Victoria in the Upper Blue Mountains as well as at several locations along the Bells Line of Road. The Bells Line of Road links the small hamlet of Bell to towns such as Mt. Tomah, Kurrajong, Kurmond and finally Richmond, in the Shire of Hawkesbury.

Some damage was also occasioned in the townships of Mt. Wilson and Mt. Irvine, both of which are situated to the west of the Bells Line of Road.

I was appointed as Recovery Co-ordinator the following day, the 18th October 2013.

The majority of property loss occurred in the lower Blue Mountains (Winmalee) where 196 residential dwellings were destroyed with a further 110 sustaining major damage to varying degrees. Fencing, sheds and other outbuildings were also destroyed or damaged.

There was no significant loss of livestock although a number of domestic pets were injured or killed during the fires.

There was substantial damage occasioned to utilities, predominately to the electricity infrastructure with many poles, transformers and so on being damaged or destroyed. Gas and water infrastructure was not severely damaged largely due to these services being located underground. Whilst road infrastructure was not badly damaged, there was severe damage to signage and roadside posts etc.

The area most impacted upon, Winmalee, is heavily timbered and houses are generally situated on ridge tops making them particularly vulnerable. The Winmalee fire generally followed the prevailing topography impacting upon some two hundred ridge top dwellings. Most of the damage sustained in the Winmalee area occurred within the space of some two and a half hours.

One of the major issues facing emergency services was the speed with which the fire travelled denying them the opportunity get ahead of the fire to enable “backburning techniques” to be employed.

Natural Disaster Declarations

The whole of the City of Blue Mountains LGA was declared a natural disaster area together with a small portion of the City of Lithgow.

Recovery Approach

I chaired the first Blue Mountains Recovery Committee Meeting on 21 October 2013. The focus of the recovery approach was to ensure all fire affected residents had access to Government and non-government services.

Four Sub-Committees – Wellbeing, Donated Goods, Services and Appeals, Restoration and Economic were also formed and comprised representatives from community, local government, not for profit and government agencies. All Committees included residents who had been directly impacted by the bushfires. This structure enabled a comprehensive, community-led approach to the Recovery Operation across all four elements of Recovery.

Psycho-social Wellbeing and Economic Impact and Needs Assessments were conducted across the community of directly and indirectly affected residents by Sub-Committees. These provided a comprehensive evidence base for recovery planning and later, Community Recovery funding.

I also made myself personally available to impacted residents both on a day to day basis and during Public Meetings and other Forums. Judging by commentary from fire affected residents, the recovery process was accepted as being both speedy, broad ranging and effective.

The scale, duration and complexity of this natural disaster - the largest experienced in NSW in over a decade, was matched by the scale and duration of the NSW government relief and recovery operation – 5 months in total, before handover to the Blue Mountains City Council for the ongoing long-term recovery.
The Government provided over $13.6 million in funding in a range of packages for people directly affected by the fires for clean up and disposal operations and support and more broadly for the community's ongoing recovery.

It is worth noting that the appointment of the Recovery Co-ordinator was intended to cover the Lithgow LGA but the Lithgow Council declined an invitation to join the recovery committee and took no part in the recovery process.

Establishment of Recovery Centre

A Recovery Centre was established by MPES at the Presbyterian Church hall on Macquarie road Springwood on Tuesday 22 October 2013. In addition the Blue Mountains City Council made available office space at its Springwood office for the Recovery Co-ordinator and his staff. Premises were also obtained in Springwood specifically to accommodate Government agencies such as Dept. of Public Works, EPA, WorkCover and others.

The Recovery Centre operated from 22 October 2013 to 6 December 2013. Agencies at the Recovery Centre included Community Services, Step by Step, Births, Deaths and Marriages, Departments of Health and Mental Health, Housing, Education and Insurance Companies. A total of 844 contacts/intake forms were completed with 1631 adults and 549 children attending for assistance.

There were significant communication challenges within the centre itself due to the paucity of telecommunications infrastructure but this was overcome with the use of cellular telephony, internet modems and so forth.

Establishment of Bushfire Information and Support Centre:

As the needs of residents diversified and became more about re-building and returning to work and social lifestyles, the Recovery Centre transitioned into a Bushfire Information and Support Centre which saw 141 people. It opened on 9 December 2013 and operated until 18 March 2014. Agencies at the BISC included the Departments of Fair Trading Public Works, Environment Protection Authority and Workcover. They were supported by a joint BMCC and RFS Re-build team.

Impacts

Health and Welfare

Physical health was not a major factor given that no serious injuries were sustained. However mental health progressively became an issue and will continue to do so for a considerable time. This is due to the emotional factors linked to the loss of possessions, pets and identity. Emotional health will also be an ongoing issue due to the gap between the sum insured and the cost of rebuilding under altered building codes. In some cases short falls of up to $180,000 have been identified and it is apparent that in such cases a great deal of mental anguish will present itself as home owners grapple with the enormity of the task of rebuilding, if indeed they are able to do so. Welfare arrangements including access to counselling was made immediately available and arrangements are in place for longer term access to mental health care professionals with the engagement of Gateway Services (Step by Step) and the Beyond Blue organisation.

Economic

There was significant economic impact as a result of the Winmalee fire and the so called State Mine fire. The fires impacted on a relatively small part of the Blue Mountains as a whole and not at all on the tourist and hospitality precincts. However, media and other depictions of what occurred caused the general public to believe that the region was being so severely affected by fire as to make it unwise to visit. The general public believed, erroneously, that the fires were an ongoing situation and that there had been considerable disruption to the tourist and hospitality infrastructure.

Many reservations at hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and other tourist venues were cancelled and it would be some months before confidence in visiting the Blue Mountains would be restored. This took a significant effort on the part of the Government, the council and those involved in the local recovery.
There was also economic impact on the fire affected area in as much as local businesses, mainly small, lost the custom of residents formerly living in the fire affected areas, due to their need to relocate. A number of small businesses in the Winmalee area reported heavy losses and some were unable to continue operation.

All in all it has been estimated that the loss of visitor revenue to the Blue Mountains over a four month period, is between $150m and $180m. It will be recommended in this report that a number of measures be taken in the future to negate erroneous perceptions of the gravity of an event such as this. It will also be recommended that resources be committed to educate potential visitors to the Blue Mountains that the precinct remains a quality tourist destination which carries little or no risk to the casual visitor where such is the case.

Infrastructure

Given that the fire did not impact upon areas containing major civic amenity, being more on a locality than a township, the loss of public infrastructure was relatively low and was confined in the main to damage to utilities such as water, gas and electricity delivery systems. Clearly road signage suffered very badly as did roadside guide posts and so forth. There were however no major public amenities destroyed by the fire.

Environment

Given the prevailing weather conditions and the deficiency of rainfall prior to the fire occurring, fuel moisture contents were unusually low. The intensity of the fire was thus of a high order exacerbated by high temperatures, low humidity and strong winds.

The vegetation in the fire affected locality is predominately dry sclerophyll forest based on Hawkesbury Sandstone with relatively shallow soil depths.

A significant proportion of fire affected terrain suffered total defoliation especially on western slopes. In some areas understory was completely destroyed and accordingly there were recorded high losses of fauna for which this understory is primary habitat.

Australian Eucalypt is extremely resilient to exposure from high intensity wildfire and it could be estimated that up to 90% of Eucalypt will regenerate.

An issue for land managers will be the inevitable infestation of weed growth which will present challenges for flora and fauna rehabilitation.

Safety and Wellbeing

The initial phases of the operation presented major challenges to emergency services to ensure the safety of local residents. A heavy Police presence together with effective traffic control arrangements prevented injury in all but a small number of cases. Wellbeing was of course an ongoing issue but the establishment of support services in the very early stages of the recovery process went a long way to ensuring that resident generally felt their wellbeing was being accommodated.

Health

As with all major events, medium to long term mental health will be the primary issue as will the potential effect on respiratory systems as a consequence of the ingestion of particulate fire related matter. Local health services were well able to manage these issues and the States health services were quickly and ably responsive.

Welfare

Welfare arrangements for short, medium and long term were quickly established and were largely instrumental in ensuring that welfare issues were quickly addressed.

The primary issues of course were temporary accommodation, the provision of clothing and personal items, cash and access to agencies which would expedite the reissue of crucial documentation such as birth certificates, licenses, marriage certificates and other relevant documents.

Three weeks after the fires, a support service, jointly funded by NSW and the Commonwealth Government under NDRRA was established to provide information, referral, supportive counselling and crisis intervention. The Service, “Step by Step” is still offering these services in the Blue Mountains.

Asbestos clean-up and disposal
This was a significant issue due to the large number of destroyed dwellings containing asbestos. The immediate challenge was to render safe these properties and this work was coordinated through the Public Works Department and involved the spraying of building remains and surrounding areas with a compound to arrest the fibre in situ. This was a painstakingly slow process due to the need to stringently adhere to prescribed regulations so far as asbestos was concerned.

It took more than 10 days to treat each of the asbestos contaminated properties and this of course would have an impact in the ultimate removal of building debris. Identifying asbestos contaminated blocks was a difficult and time consuming task however the efforts of Fire and Rescue NSW, the EPA and NSW Public Works ensured this task was completed as quickly as possible.

There was also the issue of making safe some 200 building sites where trees, masonry and galvanised iron posed a major safety threat.

To this end Australian Defence Force (ADF) assets were deployed with heavy machinery and the State Emergency Service assisted in the identification of dangerous trees and their felling.

**General waste clean-up and disposal**

It is well established that delays occurred in the commencement of debris removal and this is largely due to the complexity of arrangements entered into by the Government with three major insurance groups- IAG, Suncorp and Allianz.

Despite a good deal of public concern about the speed with which the clean-up process was undertaken, once arrangements had been agreed to work commenced very quickly and all sites were cleared within a reasonable time frame. There has been much conjecture on the necessity to embark upon the arrangements for clearing and comparisons continue to be made with similar processes undertaken in Tasmania and Victoria.

NSW did not adopt the single contractor approach used in Tasmania as the Tasmanian circumstance differed in a critical way, namely that almost all the destroyed homes in the Blue Mountains were insured, whereas almost none in Tasmania were. The NSW Government took the view that it was preferable that the insurers work individually with their existing clients.

**Make safe and Cleanup Funding**:

The NSW and Commonwealth Governments funded $11.4 million for make safe and clean up operations. These operations included the removal of asbestos, concrete slabs and dangerous tress on fire affected properties. 99% of properties have been fully cleared and owners are moving into the rebuilding process.

In the clean-up process the Government ensured that:

- There were no charges for water used by Blue Mountains residents to defend their homes during the bushfires
- Fees to replace documents such as birth certificates and driver’s licences were waived
- Levies for people taking bushfire waste to the tip were waived
- Low income earners were able to access disaster relief grants for essential household contents and for structural repairs

The Commonwealth Government also made available the Australian Government Disaster Relief Payments for residents whose homes were destroyed or sustained major damage.
**Community Recovery Funding:**

As part of the longer term recovery the Government worked with the Commonwealth and with the Council to structure a package of assistance that would benefit the entire Blue Mountains region. A key element of this program is the $1.8M Community Recovery Fund announced on 14 February 2014. This Community Recovery Fund includes:

- funding to the Blue Mountains City Council for employment of Community Development Officers to support ongoing community recovery efforts.
- funding to beyondblue including for training resources that build capacity to “prepare for future events”
- a Regeneration Marketing Campaign to promote tourism and
- funding for economic recovery grants, and grants to support community-led socio-economic recovery and local resilience building activities.

**Assistance for Small Business:**

The NSW Government has activated a range of assistance measures for small businesses. In particular, concessional-rate loans of up to $130,000 for small businesses and primary producers who have suffered direct physical damage to their assets from the bush fires. This includes the Blue Mountains bush fire events beginning on 10 September 2013 and 16 October 2013.

**Ongoing Recovery:**

At the time of the termination of the Recovery Co-ordinator’s tenure, there were probably no more than 50 or so issues to be dealt with and the majority of these would be dealt with by the transition team. Any outstanding matters will be taken care of by the recovery methodology under the auspices of the Blue Mountains City Council.

On 30 January 2014, the NSW Government announced that the Blue Mountains recovery would transition to a Council led rebuilding process.

The Recovery Co-ordinator’s term expired on the 14th February 2014. The transition from state to locally led recovery progressed smoothly with a local Recovery Manager and support staff being appointed immediately NDRRA funding was approved.

Another significant feature of the process was the extraordinarily high level of support given by the private sector and various community groups in the amassing of goods and services. Such was the generosity of these groups as to overwhelm recovery staff with material which would be difficult to distribute to residents given the fact that they had been relocated over a wide geographic area but eventually donated goods and services were, in the main, distributed.

The NSW Government remains committed to working with the Blue Mountains community as it recovers from the fires. A range of NSW Government agencies including MPES are members of the new Recovery Committee chaired by the Council’s Mayor.

**Long term recovery**

As stated earlier, the primary challenge for the community is related to the high proportion of policy holders who were unknowingly underinsured. Unknowingly, because most were not aware that stringent alterations to building codes in bush fire prone areas would add significantly to the cost of reconstructing homes on sites affected by fire.

A significant number of dwellings had a bushfire attack level of flame zone and those that did not fall into that category were generally at BAL 90. This means that the cost of rebuilding using fire resistant material and other measures will add significantly to the cost of rebuilding and in most cases the sums for which policy holders were insured will fall well short of the cost of rebuilding.

This is not an issue which can be resolved in the context of what occurred on October 17th.
It is however an issue which needs to be addressed for the future and to this end recommendations will be made which, if implemented, will enable residents in bush fire prone areas to be more aware of their level of exposure and insure accordingly.

In terms of economic recovery, the State Government moved quickly to make available funding for promotional campaigns designed to re-establish the tourist trade and accommodated various types of loans to assist small business in the reestablishment of the enterprise. It should be noted however that apart from a mushroom farm and a major commercial nursery, little damage was occasioned to business premises. That said, it is acknowledged that in many parts of the Blue Mountains, is a major economic activity and some of this enterprise fell within the precinct of the fire affected area.

The Recovery Co-ordinator was supported by a small staff he established, some of whom were local residents and by a second MPES team. Media and Communications officers were provided by the State Emergency Service and the NSW Rural Fire Service, both to be commended for making available resources to aid the recovery effort.

Penrith and Blue Mountains Councils were also very generous in making their staff available for the recovery process. The Media and Communications interagency team established an interactive website and distributed update information to those directly and indirectly affected by the bushfires. This was via email Newsletter Updates, the website and the Gazette. The Recovery Coordinator embraced all media with regular and at times daily interviews with radio, TV and print media. Facebook was also engaged by the Media Team. Reference to individuals and organisations will be made in the summary and recommendations. The communications strategy was widely applauded by the fire affected community.

Observations

- Generally speaking, the recovery operation was handled effectively. The fire affected residents were, in the main, satisfied that they were ably assisted during the short and medium term recovery operation. There are however a number of observations that may assist future recovery efforts.

- The adopted registration process meant that residents requiring assistance from particular agencies were locked into a cycle of having to complete numerous forms repeatedly and often with the same information. This can be easily overcome and it will be recommended that a single registration form be designed.

- It was apparent that high levels of anxiety prevailed amongst residents associated with the loss of possessions, particularly during the first few weeks after the incident, which is usual. It is important that the mental health needs of the community are monitored closely and considered by the Recovery Committee.

- An area of considerable consternation permeated the community in connection with the apparent slowness of commencing the clean-up operation. Whilst regrettable, the delay in the commencement of the clean up operation has been dealt with and explained in the body of this report.

- Facilities for the recovery centre and recovery staff, whilst adequate, presented a range of challenges, particularly in the area of tele-communications.

- Another area of concern to both residents and recovery staff was that there was no formal closure to Phase One of the recovery effort. The planned public meeting had to be postponed due to competing priorities.

- The issue of whether or not concrete slabs would be removed (where required) was also a major issue around which policy needs to be developed.

- Immediately after the fire impact, residents were prevented from returning to their home sites by motor vehicle but in many cases were allowed to proceed on foot. The decision to allow people to
proceed on foot is considered to have potentially endangered them to a greater extent than had they been allowed to do so by motor vehicle.

• Another major issue was the extent to which damaged, fallen and dangerous trees ought to have been removed from areas beyond those in close proximity to the building footprint.

• Damaged swimming pools, both above and below ground, also became an issue with above ground pools being considered part of the Government organised clean-up but severely damaged below ground pools, in the main, were excluded.

• Public meetings and specialist forums were considered by residents to be very useful and the conduct of these on a regular basis should be enshrined in policy for future recovery operations.

• Considerable confusion existed about transition arrangements from the State to Local Council and as said earlier there exists a wide body of opinion that the State led recovery ought to have been continued until Council was in a stronger position to take over that responsibility.

The recovery effort would have been considerably more difficult had it not been for the overwhelming support and expertise of many Government and non-government agencies.

All Government agencies including MPES, the response agencies, Roads & Maritime Services, Workcover, Family and Community Services, EPA, Public Works, ATO, welfare groups, Neighbourhood Centres and many others executed their responsibilities efficiently and in the main, compassionately.

All personnel who worked in both the recovery centre and in the recovery coordinators office are worthy of the highest commendation.

The various agencies and Councils which lent staff to the recovery effort are also acknowledged with appreciation as is the Blue Mountains City Council for its outstanding response to the initial impact and subsequent recovery.

Whilst many frustrations were encountered during the recovery process, these should serve as lessons to make future recovery efforts more cohesive and expeditious.

Despite the many constraints which prevailed the recovery process was dealt with probably in record time and to the satisfaction of a significant majority of residents.

Mention must also be made of the manner in which the insurance industry dealt, collectively, with the issues arising from the fires. It would be neglectful not to give credit to the industry as a whole and its staff for the manner in which it dealt with claims, often going beyond contracted agreements to lessen the impact on policy holders. The manner in which the industry cooperated with public works in the clearing process is also worthy of commendation.

**Recommendations**

1. That a single victim registration form be designed, which captures all relevant details required for use by any support agency both in the Response Phase at Evacuation centres and during the Recovery Phase. That such documents when completed form part of a wider database which can be accessed by all relevant agencies

2. That where, in the future a similar process for land clearing is adopted, the rationale and process is better explained and widely promulgated.

3. That recovery policy incorporates the need for regular public meetings which give access to officials and representatives of agencies, as required.
4. That prior to the commencement of any major clean-up, firm policy be established and made known to the extent to which material removal will be the responsibility of the home owner, the Council or the State led recovery effort.

5. That the insurance industry be asked to include in its “Code of Practice” the need to consult policy holders in bushfire prone areas on the issue of Bushfire Attack Level (BAL). This will ensure, to some extent, that policy holders insure their properties to a level commensurate with building costs under a variety of building standards and requirements. (For checking with RFS).

6. That State and Local Government agencies maximise communication to the residents owning bushfire prone properties to be aware of their level of exposure by having access to the BAL relevant to their property.

I express my appreciation to Ministers Constance and Gallacher for their support during the crisis as I do to Vicki D’Adam CEO, MPES and her staff, led ably in the field by Rachel Nibbs. Blue Mountains Mayor Mark Greenhill and General Manager Robert Greenwood displayed true leadership on behalf of their ratepayers and gave the recovery effort enormous support.

I appreciate that one is on dangerous ground to single out one entity as being outstanding however I am prepared to take that risk in nominating NSW Public Works as having performed beyond and above the call of duty with diligence and efficiency.

The response agencies, NSW Rural Fire Service, Fire and Rescue NSW and SES apart from having dealt with the impact remained to support the recovery effort in many ways and for that I am grateful.

ADF personnel and NSW Police are to be commended for their efforts in both the make safe process and the keeping of public safety respectively.

Finally, to those staff in the recovery coordinators office, I pay special tribute to their professionalism, dedication and compassion.

Phil Koperberg AO AFSM BEM
Blue Mountains Recovery Coordinator