

Chapter One - Introduction

Document Purpose

Our community encompasses the localities of Mallacoota, Genoa, Gipsy Point, Wangarabell, Weeragua, Maramingo Creek, Wallagaraugh, Gipsy Point and Wroxham, collectively known as Mallacoota and District (MAD).

This Recovery Plan is a dynamic document which reflects our community's priorities as we recover from the devastating bushfires of 2019-20.

The Plan has a number of uses:

- To guide the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association Inc (MADRA) in its community led recovery and advocacy roles.
- As a resource for community organisations seeking information to support repair and renewal activities and funding applications.
- To enable our external funding and service delivery partners - government and philanthropic organisations - to understand how to best meet our recovery needs.

This Plan is not the product of one author or committee. Instead, it captures and synthesises the thoughts and efforts of many individuals and organisations. In so doing, we lay the foundations for community led recovery. This is OUR recovery story.

The Plan is structured as follows:

- [Chapter One](#) provides background information and scope.
- [Chapter Two](#) contains information about MAD including history, geography, demography, values and critical infrastructure.
- [Chapter Three](#) outlines our bushfire recovery framework.
- [Chapter Four](#) contains analysis and strategies for assessing our needs.
- [Chapter Five](#) outlines projects pertaining to aboriginal healing and culture.
- [Chapter Six](#) looks at our priorities for our people and wellbeing.
- [Chapter Seven](#) looks at initiatives for replacing and renewing our buildings and infrastructure.
- [Chapter Eight](#) outlines ways of restoring and reinvigorating our economy including business initiatives.
- [Chapter Nine](#) details initiatives for restoring, protecting and valuing our environment and biodiversity.
- [Chapter Ten](#) looks at budget and finance issues including grants and donations.

The Appendixes contain elucidatory information:

- A list of acronyms and abbreviations is provided in [Appendix A](#).
- [Appendix B](#) is a detailed stakeholder analysis.
- [Appendix C](#) is the Snapshot Survey conducted by the Thinking Group in April 2020.
- [Appendix D](#) is a dynamic progress report.

A companion document to this Recovery Plan summarises recovery initiatives, actions and linkages.

Background

Like so many others in Australia in 2019-20, our district was ravaged by fire. A significant amount of tinder dry bush, unseasonal hot weather and below average rainfall combined to create perfect fire conditions.

The fires reached us on 31st December 2019. The fire was so intense, it created its own weather system and momentum. In scenes relayed around the world, thousands of people sought shelter on our foreshores as the fires approached. They were advised if the Country Fire Authority (CFA) sirens sounded, they might have to enter the water to escape the radiant heat.

Fred Becker, a much-loved timber mill owner, sadly succumbed to a medical condition while defending the family home just outside Genoa.

123 homes were destroyed. Many more properties suffered damage including losses of outbuildings, water tanks, fences, pasture and income producing assets. There was significant loss of wildlife and many birds and animals suffered horrific injuries. The historic Genoa bridge burned as did much of our wilderness coast infrastructure including boardwalks, lookouts and access steps and ramps.

In our district's living memory, there is no comparable event.¹

The damage might have been more widespread but for CFA strike forces in the vicinity which were in transit after assisting the Rural Fire Service (RFS) during the NSW South Coast fires.

Early assistance arrived in the form of the Far Saracen, a Norwegian-flagged supply vessel which services gas and oil platforms. The vessel had been redirected from the Esso gas fields at Golden Beach and arrived on New Year's Eve bringing pallets of food and water and diesel for generators and CFA tankers. The Far Saracen became a temporary home for vulnerable people. The crew also conducted maintenance works on police boats.²

Many residents had evacuated before the fire or were evacuated shortly thereafter; they were unable to return home for many weeks. Families were separated. Some of our elderly residents who evacuated went into temporary aged care, away from their local support systems.

At the same time as locals were evacuating, tourists were arriving in town and became stranded. People (both locals and visitors) and their pets were eventually evacuated by sea

¹ In 1983, fires approached from the Narrows and the West. Fearing the worst, people gathered on the foreshore. A wind shift saw the fire turn back on itself. At that time, 75% of the National Park burned but our townships did not.

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-07/they-fed-us-they-gave-us-beds-unexpected-hero-brings-supplies-t/11849772>

in HMAS CHOULES and MV Sycamore. Those too frail or young to undertake a sea voyage were evacuated by air. Vehicles and other possessions had to be left behind pending later recovery.

Shortly after the fires, the Mallacoota Main Hall was established as an assembly point and informal relief centre. This was an organic process as there is no formal plan in place for such a contingency. The relief effort at the Main Hall was managed by community volunteers.

The Main Hall also became the headquarters for the Red Cross relief and registration teams. As the emergency phase unfolded, daily briefings by emergency agencies were conducted for residents and visitors at the Main Hall.

Our local community radio station 3MGB undertook its emergency broadcaster role, providing information and emergency warnings. The station relied on generator power during this period. Following the daily Incident Management Team meetings, the local SES Controller provided an on-air brief which was made available as a podcast for those outside Mallacoota or were unable to attend briefings.

Residents of Genoa and the outlying districts were cut off from Mallacoota. Without power and with roads closed for a prolonged time, residents had to be self-sufficient, surviving on non-perishable foods and with limited access to amenities such as hot water³. The Genoa Hall was restricted in its capacity to support the needs of community and the Genoa Pub became a community hub. There was no CFA presence at Genoa.

Our two doctors had evacuated prior to the bushfire and returned as soon as possible. A locum doctor was in place and other medical professionals were flown in as opportunity allowed.

The Mallacoota-Genoa road – the only sealed road out of Mallacoota – closed on the 30th December 2019 and did not re-open until the 6th February 2020, a total of 39 days. Only escorted convoys were allowed to leave for NSW due to the dangers posed by fallen and unsafe trees. Travel west of Genoa was restricted to emergency organisations responsible for the massive task of clearing the Princes Highway of debris and unsafe trees. The Princes Highway east of Bairnsdale to Genoa closed on the 30th December 2019 and was closed for 37 days, reopening on the 4th February 2020. The Princes Highway from Genoa to the NSW border closed on the 31st December 2019 and reopened on the 4th February 2020.⁴

Instead of seasonal tourists, Mallacoota became a temporary home for emergency personnel from many organisations including, but not limited to: Australian Defence Force (ADF), Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria (AV), CFA, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), State Emergency Service (SES), Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV), East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC).

³ Letter from Genoa Town Hall committee dated 16 August 2020

⁴East Gippsland Bushfires 2019-20 Asset Impact Snapshot

The power was out for an extended period. Luckily, an AusNet emergency diesel generator was in place and, when commissioned, provided an interim power source as mains power was progressively restored over a number of weeks.

The internet was a communications lifeline. Our internet service is patchy at the best of times and came under considerable strain. The newly installed above ground cabling for the NBN burned and NBN installation has been put back another 12 months pending replacement cabling which will now be underground.

Essential items were delivered by sea or air. Unleaded petrol was rationed, eventually down to a \$10 per day limit for generators only. Diesel was reserved for emergency vehicles only.

Local businesses suffered loss of cash flow at peak tourist time and faced having to close down and/or lay off staff. There has been adverse flow on effects to other businesses.

Physical health and well-being suffered in the aftermath of the fires. Many people were traumatised from being directly impacted or from volunteer exhaustion. Dense smoke for weeks after meant masks were necessary to avoid smoke inhalation. Asthma sufferers had to stay inside. The only facilities in town with air filtration are the Medical Centre and the Mallacoota and District Health and Support Service (MDHSS). For a short time, bottled water was distributed through the Main Hall relief centre and supermarkets following advice not to drink mains water.

Mental health problems surfaced as people relived bushfire trauma and were trying to cope with loss and damage.

In late February 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. The impacts are ongoing and placing further strain on community resilience.

Other ongoing stresses include housing and accommodation pressures, the clean-up of burned homes, rebuilding and loss of income.

A potted history of the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association Inc (MADRA)⁵

In early 2020, MAD locals Lyn Harwood, Leo Op den Brouw, Gail Sands and Don Ashby, together with Steve Pascoe (a Disaster Recovery Mentor) and Eva Grunden (East Gippsland Shire Council – EGSC), began meeting to start the process of a community led recovery program for MAD. Over the next three months the original group of locals expanded to include Leonie Daws and Marie Connellan and became known as the Mallacoota Recovery Thinking Group (the Thinking Group).

On 15th January 2020 a large group of community representatives was invited to attend a meeting to discuss a way forward. This broader group comprised the President (or other elected representative) of every organisation known in MAD. The purpose of the meeting

⁵ Mallacoota Disaster Recovery Group, 2020, *A Potted History of the Mallacoota Recovery Association*, Mallacoota Mouth

was to gauge if there was merit in taking the community led recovery program concept further. The meeting was held in the school library and attended by about 60 people.

A proposed recovery model for co-ordinating community recovery was tested with the community representatives. The proposed model was based on best practice community led recovery and required the establishment of an incorporated body or association. The proposal was endorsed by community representatives and the Thinking Group invited to flesh out a process for establishing a recovery association.

Over the following three weeks the core Thinking Group, together with other interested locals, worked on a draft constitution and a vision and purposes statement. Work also commenced with EGSC to initiate an election process adhering to Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) guidelines. On 2nd February 2020 this work was presented to a larger representative group at the Mudbrick Pavilion. On 4th February 2020, the proposal was put to all interested locals at the Golf Club.

The proposal was overwhelmingly endorsed, and the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA) was formed. MADRA has over 800 members comprising MAD residents and property owners.

Over the following months, the Thinking Group continued working to ensure the vision of community led recovery was realised. This included ongoing work with the VEC, Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) and EGSC and a Snapshot survey to Association members with the aim of articulating their values and to comment on the effects the bushfire had for them.

The VEC managed the election process for the MADRA Committee, the first of its kind in Victoria. Nominations for MADRA committee members were sought by the 16th April 2020. 44 local candidates stood for election. Voting by postal vote closed at 5 pm on the 20th May 2020. The results of the election were announced on 21st May 2020. A high voting response rate of 88 per cent was recorded. On the 9th June 2020, the newly formed MADRA committee elected its office bearers.

We thank the Thinking Group for their vision, courage and hard work.

[Our Committee](#)

Initial MADRA Committee members and office bearers are Dr David Appleton (Chair), Jenny Lloyd (Deputy Chair), Trindi Suratman (Secretary), Graham Dempster (Treasurer), Peter Hancock (Communications), Bryce Watts-Parker (Media Liaison), Jude Benton, Tanya de Geus, Brodie Gaudion, Paul Preston, Mark Tregellas, Kerri Warren.

Administrative Support: Amy Preston

[Our Mission](#)

‘MADRA was established to ensure the needs, wants and aspirations of our community are considered as part of the recovery process following the 2019-20 bushfires. We are a voice for our community.’

We will play an active role in community led recovery by:

- Encouraging community involvement in the recovery and rebuilding process and related activities.
- Identifying and prioritising the needs of MAD and assisting in the recovery and rebuilding process.
- Influencing government bodies to work to meet identified community needs and priorities.
- Facilitating communication of information between community, government and agencies.
- Advocating for individuals, families and community groups.
- Attracting and applying for monies and identifying projects/needs requiring funding.
- Providing a focus for communication and co-ordination between community groups.
- Channelling funding and other opportunities to appropriate groups and individuals
- Working with our funding and delivery partners to ensure optimal disaster recovery outcomes for MAD.
- Working with other Community Recovery Committees (CRCs) to share lessons learned and offer support.

What we will not do...

We are a diverse community which does not always agree. There will be situations where the community is split, and decisions cannot be reached.

In such cases, we will not take sides or mediate disputes. Nor will we will not intervene in the decision-making processes of other organisations or duplicate their roles.

If the matter is being driven by government (local, state and federal), and there is a failure to adequately consult our community, we cannot take on that role. Rather, we will 'push back' to government seeking better information to inform decision making and for more fulsome community consultation (perhaps with an independent facilitator if the issue is divisive). Usually, this will be on issues requiring specialist knowledge and/or policy matters.

We looked to how other communities deal with divergent viewpoints. Key is not rushing decision making (where possible) and encouraging ongoing discussion and respectful debate until all parties reach a position they can live with. If agreement cannot be reached, MADRA's default position is 'we will do no harm'. Our focus will be progressing those community driven initiatives which have community backing.

Our Vision

We will be an inclusive, vibrant, strong and safe community.

Our vision will be achieved when:

- Everyone in our community who needs bushfire assistance has received it, no-one will have slipped between the recovery process cracks.
- We have restored what we loved and improved on what we didn't.

- As a community, we feel confident we are prepared in the face of disaster.
- Through the recovery process, we have identified and created opportunities that promote resilience, diversity, well-being, connectedness and economic security.

Our Structure

MADRA is an incorporated association. At the time of writing, we are applying to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) for status as a Public Benevolent Institution (PBI). This is a precursor to obtaining Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status which enables donors to claim a tax deduction through the Australian Taxation Office (ATO).

Our Stakeholders

A stakeholder is either an individual, group or organisation who is impacted by, or has an interest in, the outcome of a project or process.

Our major stakeholder groups are:

- Community members and groups directly impacted by the 2019-20 bushfires,
- our recovery delivery partners, and
- our recovery funding partners.

There is some crossover between our funding and delivery partners.

Of course, there are many more stakeholders – for example, visitors to our district - and we must be mindful at all times that their needs are considered. Our comprehensive stakeholder analysis is under development and will be placed at [Appendix B](#) when complete.

Community members and organisations directly impacted by the bushfires

This group of stakeholders includes:

- Community members directly impacted by the bushfires who:
 - lost homes or sustained property damage,
 - lost their livelihoods (jobs/income producing assets),
 - have suffered mental and/or physical trauma,
 - are living with a disability,
 - have not yet come back to MAD,
 - may lose their accommodation when rental agreements expire,
 - are living in caravans,
 - identify as being part of MAD but live in NSW, and
 - reside in adjacent communities and who are also suffering.
- Businesses which lost trade, are suffering from cash flow issues or may be forced to close.
- Clubs and associations which lost or suffered damage to buildings and equipment.
- Emergency service and other volunteers who may be suffering post-traumatic stress.

Recovery Delivery Partners

Our primary recovery partners comprise both external and internal agencies and organisations including, but not limited to:

- Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV)
- EGSC
- Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- National Bushfire Recovery Agency
- Red Cross
- Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS)
- Local incorporated associations with applicable remits such as the Mallacoota and District Business and Tourism Association (MDBATA) and MDHSS.

Recovery Funding Partners

Our primary funding partners including, but not limited to:

- Our three levels of government: Commonwealth, state and local
- Philanthropic organisations
- Local charities
- Individual donors.

MADRA Subcommittees and Working Groups (at the time of writing)

Local organisations are already in place with responsibility for many of the tasks associated with the recovery process. Our aim is not to duplicate their functions but to support them to maximise recovery opportunities, including working with Ministers and government agencies to identify funding opportunities and other mechanisms for progressing recovery initiatives.

The MADRA committee relies on community input and involvement in the formation of MADRA subcommittees and working groups. However, we recognise this year has taken a toll and the willingness, energy and capacity to undertake volunteer work is not always there. If requests for subcommittees/working groups to identify local solutions for aspects of our recovery are not successful, the MADRA committee will collate concerns and suggestions and forward to the relevant authorities seeking resolution.

The following paragraphs describe current subcommittees and working groups.

Aboriginal Healing and Culture Subcommittee

COVID-19 has currently precluded this group from meeting with regional representatives. Meetings will commence when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Community Wellbeing Group

The Community Wellbeing Working Group focuses on health promotion, prevention, preparedness and supporting groups to meet the needs of people's wellbeing.

Clarification around the primary actions are as follows:

Health encompasses physical, mental and social wellbeing.

Health promotion: "The process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health." (WHO). This may include education and courses like mental health first aid, tips and promotional events.

Prevention: Activities and processes aimed at reducing the risks associated with an illness. For example, planning localised large indoor spaces that would be available to communities with respiratory issues when smoke/pollen is an issue.

Preparedness: is having the resources in place, based on the community's emotional and physical needs, in consideration of the upcoming summer season plus other times. This will include supporting community providers to have resources and services available as required. To identify gaps in services, support community-based resources and outreach to regional providers.

Supporting groups with their actionable events that enhance social connection and health and wellbeing.

We acknowledge that social connection is imperative for the healing and recovery of our communities and that COVID has challenged us greatly in this process. We are aware not everyone has access to the internet and other communication devices and will work to ensure as many people within our communities have access to communications, services and supports as they become available and as COVID restrictions lift.

Housing Working Group

Many community members are still in temporary accommodation and face having to find alternative housing as rental agreements and insurance arrangement expire. In addition, tenants who did not lose anything to fires face being homeless as rental properties are sold to those who were flame affected. The Housing Working Group is working with DHHS, MDHSS, EGSC, Red Cross and Gippsland Lakes Complete Health (GLCH) to identify housing options for those homeowners and tenants who lost their primary place of residence to the bushfires.

First Anniversary Working Group

The First Anniversary Working Group is looking at ways in which the community and visitors can respectfully and sensitively commemorate the significant first anniversary of the bushfires.

Buildings and Infrastructure Subcommittee

The Built Environment Subcommittee is work with EGSC, the Mallacoota Halls and Recreation Reserves Committee of Management Inc. (Halls and Rec) and other organisations to identify and examine options for replacing and renewing community facilities and buildings. This includes examining shortfalls in infrastructure that was burned and incorporating design improvements as part of the replacement process.

Another key role is looking at fire and future proofing critical infrastructure, such as roads, energy and communications.

Parks Infrastructure Working Group

The Parks Infrastructure Working Group is working with Parks Victoria and EGSC on replacement infrastructure – such as jetties and walking trails - with a view to improving amenity and durability. In addition to design improvements, the Working Group is seeking assurance replacement infrastructure will be in place for peak tourist season.

ADF Memorial Working Group

The ADF memorial working group is working with community and EGSC to identify a location for the memorial gifted by the ADF shortly after the fires. The memorial will be located on the foreshore near the main wharf where so many locals and visitors gathered during the fires.

Mallacoota Sustainable Energy Group

The Mallacoota Sustainable Energy Group (MSEG) was formed in 2011 to identify and examine options for a reliable, sustainable, renewable energy supply for Mallacoota. Part of the work undertaken by MSEG will include seeking funding for an updated Mallacoota Sustainable Energy Feasibility study to take into consideration lessons learned during the bushfires and significant advances in technology.

Business and Economy

The Mallacoota District Business and Tourism Association (MDBTA) is the lead organisation for business and tourism initiatives in our community. MADRA is working closely with MDBATA to explore opportunities for economic recovery ranging from immediate support to businesses to strategic projects and research.

Environment and Biodiversity Subcommittee

Projects undertaken by the Natural Environment subcommittee include weed removal, pest control, erosion control and revegetation projects. The subcommittee sees the opportunity to educate and facilitate interest, love and passion for our biotic and abiotic components of our natural environment while highlighting our region's high conservation and biodiversity values. In addition, the subcommittee supports and promotes sustainable tourism commensurate with our natural and community values, sustainable and renewable energy projects and scientifically backed, viable and well-resourced fuel management projects.

Mallacoota Bushfire Fuel Management Group

The purpose statement of the Mallacoota Bushfire Fuel Management Group is contained in the table beneath.

Mallacoota Bushfire Fuel Management Group

Acknowledgement

Climate change is a major influence on our forests and their flammability. Fuel Management is important for township protection but is only one of a suite of methods for improving the safety of our community.

Purpose

The purpose of the Working Group is to:

- Develop a collaborative, ongoing bushfire fuel management plan that is environmentally and socially responsible, for the protection of the township of Mallacoota
- The plan is to be tenure blind, ignoring boundaries between public and private land

- Communicate the plan to land and fire management agencies and to the members of Mallacoota community. Collaborate with MADRA.

The purpose is:

- **not** to advise or comment on individual property plans
- **not** to implement actions during bushfire events

Membership

Membership of the Working Group will include representative/s of :

- Mallacoota community groups and individuals.
- Mallacoota Fire Brigade
- CFA Region
- Parks Victoria
- Department of Environment Land, Water and Planning & FFM Vic
- East Gippsland Shire Council
- Additional members may be invited or seconded as required.

Short Term Aims:

Quick Win

We acknowledge the trauma that this community has suffered this year and commit to work at a speed that supports the whole community. We are also aware that we have been presented with a unique opportunity to access our forests with greater ease than is normal, and that it would be beneficial to seize this opportunity.

Implement Western Front Proposal

This year our intention is to partner with our agency groups to work on one clear outcome: To implement the work plan developed by this group in 2019 to protect the Western Front of Mallacoota.

Conduct Webinars

Also work will begin on recording and publishing a series of webinars on fuel management. The purpose of these webinars is to give more knowledge to the Mallacoota community in order that they feel represented, 'safer' and armed to make informed decisions about fuel management. We may need to access funding for this opportunity.

Long Term Aims

- Oversee the implementation of the fuel management action plan
- Review the fuel management action plan annually
- Develop a 3 year, rolling, action plan

Revisit the overall fuel management plan every five years

Administrative Working Groups

Association Rules and Incorporation Working Group

The Association Rules and Incorporation Working Group was responsible for developing the Rules of Incorporation for the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association and overseeing

the incorporation process. This group is now overseeing the process of obtaining PBI and DGR status.

Code of Conduct Working Group

The Code of Conduct Working Group developed a Code of Conduct which applies to the MADRA committee, Subcommittees and Working Groups.

Community Consultation Working Group

The Community Consultation Working Group is consulting with various individuals and organisations to identify bushfire recovery needs and gaps and to build a comprehensive stakeholder analysis. When COVID-19 restrictions lift, the Community Consultation Working Group hopes to conduct face to face meetings at the Bushfire Recovery Hub and in outlying districts.

Communications Working Group

The Communications Working Group is looking at the structures and mechanisms through which MADRA communicates within the association and more broadly.

Media Group

The Media Group provides advice and information on managing media requests, enquiries and interviews, as well as preparing background media briefing notes, press releases and communication requirements. The Group is also working to provide consistent branding and building a distinct 'voice' for MADRA. The Media Group will be preparing relevant story ideas, information and footage of MADRA's recovery activities.

Our Communications platforms

Our communication platforms are:

- email mallacoota.recovery.assoc.2020@gmail.com
- mail Locked Bag 1005 Mallacoota Vic 3892
- Facebook MADRA
- Website www.madrecovery.com
- Community Radio 3MGB