

# Devastation to Restoration



An Account of the  
**2018 South West Bushfires** by those Involved

# Devastation to Restoration

An Account of the St Patrick's Day Fires of SW Victoria,  
March 2018

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*Cover photos:*

*Top: Cobrico Swamp burning. Bottom: Planting day near Lake Elingamite, hosted by Regreen 4 Fireaid.*

# The March of Fire

*"Fifty years of work, gone in six hours. I didn't know where to begin." (Lorraine Negrello, Glenfyne farmer).*

Extreme temperatures, strong northerly winds and power infrastructure failures created the "perfect storm" for what have become known as the St Patrick's Day Fires. Between 8pm on Saturday March 17, 2018 and 9am Sunday March 18, 53 fires started across five local government areas in South West Victoria. According to Emergency Management Victoria's 2018 South West Fires Community Report, published in December 2019, by the time the fires were extinguished over 24,000 hectares had been burned with 26 residences and 66 outbuildings razed to the ground. The death toll of livestock was nearly 3000 animals. Native flora and fauna were also decimated. There was no loss of human life, but for those directly involved, the fires had a devastating effect on their livelihoods and sense of wellbeing.

The catastrophic fire season of 2019-2020 which burnt over 18 million hectares of Australia has somewhat overshadowed all previous fires, but every bushfire tells a different story. It is important therefore, to document and learn from these tragedies so that we are better able to deal with a future where bushfires are more frequent and more furious.

The St Patrick's Day Fires primarily affected farmers with more than 90% of the fire footprint being on private landholder tenure. It is no surprise then that Landcare has played such a key role in the recovery process. This publication not only explains how, but tells the stories of some of those directly involved in the fires including landowners and emergency service providers. Most importantly, the project aims to address what worked and what didn't in the traumatic journey from conflagration to restoration.



Hillside at Glenfyne, March 2018 and September 2018.

# Healing the Land - Landcare and Recovery

Emergency services including Country Fire Authority (CFA), Victoria Police, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), the Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), Environment Protection Authority (EPA), Parks Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria have defined roles in the response and recovery phases of a fire event. Not so with Landcare in Australia. Each network responds in an entirely different manner as there is no script or policy that applies for Landcare in a post-fire period.

Geoff Rollinson of Heytesbury District Landcare Network said: "Several Landcare staff in Southwest Victoria have had experience with fire-affected communities, including colleagues Nick McKinley from the Leigh Catchment Group and Libby Riches (formerly of the Southern Otway Landcare Group). The 2015 Scotsburn Fires and the 2015 Wye River-Jamieson Track fire in the Otways region were the most recent at the time so Nick and Libby were our first calls to discuss their response.

We then phoned John Robinson, who is a Victorian Landcare Program staff member at DELWP, and also a volunteer member of the

Upper Maribyrnong Catchment Group that was involved in the recovery after the 2014 Mickleham-Kilmore fires. Conversations and meetings with other contacts including Nerissa Lovric from Agriculture Victoria and Ross Martin at DELWP led to the idea of applying the collaboration model adopted by our network for projects."

On a personal level, John Robinson feels that funding for Natural Resource Management (NRM) fire recovery is very ad hoc and varies immensely from fire to fire.

As an example of this he said: "Unfortunately for the landholders impacted by the 2014 Mickleham-Kilmore fire, which burnt 23,000 hectares, it was not a big enough fire to attract large amounts of much needed funding for long term fire recovery projects. The Upper Maribyrnong Catchment Group did manage to secure \$50,000 in Australian Government Disaster Relief funding to reinstate fencing along waterways and off-stream watering systems damaged in the fires, and a \$30,000 2014/15 Victorian Landcare Grant to tackle a major gorse infestation across nine fire-affected properties.



Burnt farmland near Terang.

However, by comparison, the 2015 Scotsburn fires that burnt 4500 hectares received funding of \$624,000 from the Victorian Government to revegetate the fire-affected areas. The Scotsburn Phoenix Project that was established to deliver this funding wound up in late 2020.”

John holds the view that a pool of funding for NRM fire recovery should be established by the Victorian Government. The management and disbursement of these funds could be undertaken collectively by the 10 Catchment Management Authorities,

against agreed criteria. The availability of a pool of NRM fire recovery funding would enable funds to be disbursed strategically, quickly, and effectively in response to local needs. This could include directing funds to support and enable community-led approaches to fire recovery such as Landcare.

He said: “As things stand just now, securing funding for NRM fire recovery can come down to knowing the right people to lobby or the right program to target.”



Students from Mercy Regional College in Camperdown planting trees at Errey’s farm, Cobrico.

# The Role of Heytesbury District Landcare Network

Heytesbury District Landcare Network employs four staff at an office in Timboon and covers 170,000 hectares from Peterborough to Princetown in the south and Terang to Pomberneit in the north.

Three days after the fires ignited, various agencies had already attended many properties to deal with stock beyond saving and BlazeAid had established a centre at Cobden to install fencing.

Geoff Rollinson said: "Our first reaction was to venture into the landscape to see how landholders were impacted, in addition to making calls to check in on people. We encountered a devastated landscape. People picking through the remains of their burnt-out properties was a tragic sight to behold. Downed electricity poles were still

smouldering days later and in the absence of boundary fencing stock were wandering freely."

In the days that followed the St Patricks Day Fires, it became apparent that, although help was out there, for those in need it was unstructured and confusing.

Geoff said: "We discovered they were getting up to 10 phone calls or visits daily in the response and recovery effort. "Red-plate madness" became a metaphor for the ceaseless stream of government vehicles visiting properties with their red number plates. As the sense of chaos and uncertainty in the farming community and townships increased, it became apparent that a measured and collaborative response from our Network might work better.



Paul Hartrick (left) and Geoff Rollinson (right) of Heytesbury District Landcare Network.

Our community-led collaborative model encouraged government service providers to work across boundaries such as organisational and geographical. We suggested our community-based organisation take the lead and invite government agencies to join us in multi-purpose team site visits. Meetings of the collaborative team working with the affected landholders led to faster and better results.”

Thanks to this approach HDLN was granted funding from DELWP’s Community and Volunteer Action program and emergency funding for on-ground works through a Treasurer’s Advance (TA2).

Geoff said: “After receiving assistance, advice and most importantly advocacy support from senior regional DELWP staff, \$150,000 was secured through TA2 for on-

ground works and associated activities. This non-core funding was vital in providing seedlings to help restore the landscape.”

A dedicated Fire Recovery Officer role was created at HDLN, leading to the employment of Paul Hartrick. Corangamite CMA came on board to deliver riparian fire recovery projects. HDLN also secured funding through the CFA’s Safer Together program to run a series of workshops, community gatherings and planning sessions for the mutual benefit of fire impacted landholders and others in the community. The steering committee for these projects also commissioned a series of interviews to provide a more human dimension to the recovery process. Kirsty Hawkes, journalist and science writer, was engaged for this purpose.

Post-fire event organised by Corangamite Shire



# Project Subjects and Questions

The ten subjects selected for interview included four landowners, five state and local government employees and a CFA volunteer. Two of the landowners, Barbara Cowley and John Errey, were based near the Cobrico Swamp peat fire near Cobden, while two, Kerryn Guthrie and Tony Negrello were based at Glenfyne. Government officials included Ross Martin of DELWP, Nerissa Lovric from Agriculture Victoria, Sharna Whitehand of Corangamite Shire; Gene Gardiner from Corangamite CMA and Rob Adinsall of Glenelg Hopkins CMA. Bryce Morden CFA captain for Timboon was also interviewed. Visits were conducted between 17 July 2019 and 22 August 2019. The information given is current to that time period unless otherwise stated.

Interviews were conducted informally with a framework of questions:

## **For landholders:**

- Describe how the fires impacted you personally?
- How did it affect family, friends or others you are associated with in your work or personal life?
- If applicable, how did they affect your property including stock, built assets, wildlife and vegetation?
- Did you have contact with government agencies or community-based organisations during the initial fire impact period or thereafter? If so, who were they?

- What was your experience when they called in to see you or made contact by phone?
- Has Landcare assisted you in the recovery period and if so what has been your experience?
- What suggestions do you have for how the organisations might work better during any future fire events?
- Any other comments?

## **For others:**

- Describe how the fires impacted you personally or professionally
- Did you work with other government agencies or community-based organisations during the initial fire impact period or thereafter? If so, who were they?
- What has your experience been when working with other people and organisations?
- Have you worked with Landcare in the response and recovery period and if so, what has been your experience?
- What suggestions do you have for how the organisations might work better during any future fire events?
- Any other comments?



# Lessons in Loss

Certain themes became evident in these interviews. These have been highlighted below. The three peat fires, especially the Cobrico Swamp fire, caused particular problems and greatly increased the recovery period for those affected. For this reason, the topic has been given more space. (p.39)

## Dependency on Electricity and Technology

Communications became difficult for fire affected landowners that evening because the electricity went down early on. Of the other subjects interviewed those most affected by power cuts were Sharna Whitehand who was Corangamite Shire's designated Municipal Emergency Response Officer (MERO) that night. When her phone battery went flat, she had to sit in her car so she could recharge and use it. Bryce Morden, CFA Fire Captain, similarly had

battery problems which has caused him to get backup batteries for the brigade's mobile phones. He also questions whether their UHF radios being run on digital rather than analogue is really an improvement. Beware also of having your car trapped because the garage door is electric, he warns. Several subjects, including Bryce and Barb Cowley, said that the Victorian Emergency Services app was not helpful as it was too slow in its updates.

## Life Changing in Unexpected Ways

Due to the fires, two of the landowners have had to make massive changes in their lives and farming practice. John and Joy Errey had left farming altogether and were working in other careers. The couple and their son all gave up their jobs to work full time on the farm after the bushfire.



Warrnambool's newspaper "The Standard" kept up constant reports on the state of the fire at Cobrico.

For the Guthries, the destruction of their inadequately insured shearing shed and their lack of fencing insurance has led them to give up sheep farming altogether and concentrate on beef.

## **Praise for Corangamite Shire, Volunteers and Charity**

Corangamite Shire was almost universally praised for their actions particularly the personal care taken by the mayor, Jo Beard. As Kerryn Guthrie said, "She was still calling us to see how we were going 18 months after the fires." And as Bryce Morden pointed out, the council was much less used to dealing with bushfires than those in Gippsland, so they did really well. BlazeAid and the Uniting Church were also commended for their help. Food vouchers were especially appreciated by the landowners so they could feed volunteers.

Kerryn also made an interesting point that the diversity and personal problems of the BlazeAid volunteers was a valuable life lesson to her children.

## **Mental Health**

All four landowners expressed varying degrees of sadness and trauma over their scorched properties. Barbara and John had strong concerns about the wildlife. Everyone in Kerryn's family was impacted mentally manifesting in sleep problems and anxiety. Out of Corangamite's 180 affected households between 50 and 70 received on farm counselling. John Errey described the service, provided by the Shire, as helpful and vastly superior to the counsellor he tried in Warrnambool. The three creative organisations set up by Sharna Whitehand at the Shire, were another practical and successful way to improve mental health for

Jo Beard, then Mayor of Corangamite Shire, was widely praised for her help in the recovery process.



the fire affected communities. In Timboon CFA psychologists went to the local school to talk to children. Farmers also mentioned the trauma on livestock resulting in miscarriages and ongoing health problems.

## Wildlife Toll

The two landowners by the Cobrico Swamp were most vocal on the fire's wildlife toll. John Errey, a member of the Elingamite Cobrico Landcare Network since the 1990s, was concerned and perplexed by the numbers of dead frogs he found during the winter of 2018. He is also saddened that the pygmy possum population is no longer evident and by the injured mammals he encountered. He put six out of their misery

and still sees a roo with a burnt leg today. As a longstanding member of the same Landcare group, Barb Cowley was not only distressed by the large number of dead wallabies she saw, but about the loss of plants and habitats. She also mentioned the rare Swordgrass Brown Butterfly (*Tisiphone abeona*) which lives exclusively on peatland and has been seen at Cobrico. The survival of wildlife undoubtedly contributes to the mental health of fire affected landowners. Barb says she was "heartened" to hear frogs calling from the trenches during the winter of 2018. In terms of habitat re-creation it was good to hear from Gene Gardiner of Corangamite CMA, that a burnt out site near Scotts Creek which was home to yellow bellied gliders has been replanted.



Pygmy possums (*Burrhamys cercartetus*), once common on John Errey's farm, disappeared after the bushfires.

## Bureaucracy and Insurance Problems

Red tape, officialdom and insurance companies were recurrent themes amongst the landowners. Government employees were of course very careful in any comments they made on these subjects. While Tony Negrello appreciated the help of the Victorian Farmers Federation in filling in forms, having to spend the \$10,000 State Government grant before you actually got the money was “not the best.” John Errey was similarly unimpressed by the “horrendous paperwork” required to get a

low interest loan through Rural Finance so much so that he gave up. The Erreys opted for a higher interest loan with NAB which was granted within three weeks rather than nine months. Barb Cowley was so frustrated by the red tape and discrepancies she encountered that after her interview she set out specific recommendations including a halt on GST for hobby farmers who did not qualify for the \$10,000 government grant. Sharna Whitehand of Corangamite Shire also suggested improvements especially in terms of managing landowners’ expectations and interactions with government services.



The scarred landscape of Cobrico after the fire.

# Barbara Cowley, Landowner, Cobrico

Barbara (Barb) has 265 acres which she rents out to two local farmers, one of whom, Will Scott, leases grazing in the fire affected area. The property was her husband's family farm and she came to live there in late 1982. She has been a widow for 23 years. She has two children and seven grandchildren none of whom live nearby. At 10.30pm on the night the fire started she relocated to a friend's home in Cobden. In total she spent 25 days away from her home with weekends spent with her daughter in Ocean Grove.

Barb is a Uniting Church member and a very active volunteer in the community. The Uniting Church Op Shop in Cobden was quickly inundated with contributions for those affected by the fires, so they set up an emergency centre in the church complex. Cobden Uniting Church Bushfire Relief Distribution Centre received thousands of donations including clothing, food, (both fresh and tinned), toiletries, including enormous amounts of toothbrushes and toothpaste, hundreds of bottles of water, sewing machines and quilts and a great deal of pet care items such as dry and tinned food, leads and dog beds. Many groups and individuals donated money and one of the more unusual donations was 20 tonnes of wood which arrived in May. Some items donated, such as evening dresses and a pair of diamante high-heeled shoes, were less useful at the time, but sold later. As Barb says: "Everything went to a good purpose." With other volunteers, Barb helped make up grocery and toiletry bags for people affected by the fires. When they found they required items that they didn't have, they were able to put out calls on Facebook, and their needs were met. Colac RSL were helpful in this.



According to Barb, although people were slowly coming into the relief centre, some were reluctant to take much as they would say that there must be others more in need than they were. There were some too who were unable to come in because of the various situations they found themselves in. The centre's volunteers decided that if people weren't coming in, they would go to them. Thanks to the cash donations they were able to purchase fresh meat, bread and vegetables to go with the donated items. Everything was distributed on these "food runs." Warrnambool and District Food Share also supplied fresh and frozen items.



With the donated money, the relief centre was able to give out \$100 vouchers, to be spent locally on provisions, to each adult in the affected zone. (The community had instigated a similar voucher system at the Cobden Spring Festival some years before.) In total the group issued 219 vouchers. This supported local businesses which were also negatively affected by the fires.

Barb's house, which overlooks Lake Cobrico, was unharmed. Although she was never concerned about the fire overcoming her property, she continues to be worried about the fauna and flora in the aftermath of the fires.

Of the 80 acres of her land which was burnt, 15 acres is pasture and 65 is what she describes as "the scrub". She noted that there were a large number of dead black wallabies and is concerned about the plants and wildlife which have either lost their lives or habitats. One of these, which has been photographed there, is the rare and beautiful Swordgrass Brown Butterfly (*Tisiphone abeona*) which lives exclusively in peatland. Barb is worried about blackberries and other weeds taking over, but was heartened to hear frogs calling from the water in the trenches during the winter of 2018.

On the land that is grazed, Barb said there are several large holes where the ground has caved in and is a concern for cattle. Also, the shelter which the trees, rushes and sedges afforded for the cattle has all but gone.

Barb recognises that the local CFA did a great job, but overall there was very little understanding of how to contain a burning peat bog and it was not until advice and help was obtained from those experienced in peat fires that the fire was eventually contained and then put out. Wannon Water was very helpful during this process and allowed water to be pumped in from Ewans Hill Reservoir which helped to extinguish the fire earlier than it might have been.

Since the fires there have been changes in the landscape. The way the water lies on the land during the wet months has altered and obvious flooding is now occurring more on the north-west side of the lake, rather than the south-east. This has been observed over the two winters since the fires, and photos taken in September 2010 seem to support this. Barb thinks it may be that the trenches, dug to contain the fire and since filled in, are the main cause of these changes.



The rare Swordgrass Brown Butterfly (*Tisiphone abeona*) which lives exclusively in peatland.



The water of Lake Cobrico is so peaty it turns this white kayak paddle into stunning orange and yellow colours.

Barb is pleased with the way that DELWP has acted to provide information and support following the fire. Due to wet conditions however, the trenches were not filled in until March 2019. Then further work was needed on the trench line, so fencing will not be complete until either late 2019 or the beginning of 2020 at the earliest.

It is estimated the fencing will cost at least \$35,000, which is being funded by DELWP.

As mentioned earlier Barb was pivotal in the recovery period. She was impressed at how well organised, generous and helpful everyone involved was and said many continued to help for months after the fires were extinguished. All unused donations were sold and raised over \$6,000 which was added to the funds available for the vouchers. These included the Meriba Service Club which raised \$2000, Bemm River Fire Brigade who donated \$500, the Rotary Club who knitted hats, the Bendigo Bank Fund, Rural Aid who came down from NSW, ABC Ballarat who spear headed the boot campaign and the DHHS who sent someone to see her because she was too busy to go and see them. Barb also commended the Shire's information sessions and live streaming on Facebook.

Barb has been a member of the Elingamite Cobrico Landcare Group since February 2000. She has had a long and fruitful relationship with Heytesbury District Landcare Network who have been instrumental in helping revegetate her property over the years prior to the fire by supplying thousands of native tree seedlings, and also grants to help with direct seeding and fencing. When Geoff Rollinson called her soon after the St Patricks Day fires to explain that various department officials wanted to come and look at her land, she invited him to be her "Project Manager" and gave him full permission to organise visits. Until the end of 2018 water and soil testers came monthly.

# Barb's Recommendations:

## Relax Red Tape and Mind your Terms

"The Shire was not able to give out names of people in the affected areas which created a lot more work for the volunteers. This policy should be changed or relaxed during an emergency. Generally, all red tape should be relaxed. Don't use the term "fire victims" as this seems a bit negative, rather "those affected by the fire."

## Donations

"Understand the disaster needs and put out information accordingly. Inappropriate donations can cause more work. If in doubt as to how to help, cash is best."

## Insurance

"Insurance and legal aid help was needed later on perhaps more than in the immediate aftermath. Support needs to be ongoing. Have a dedicated ombudsman (or someone in similar role) for the duration, such as 12 months or more. Nothing should be in the "too hard" basket."

## Technology

"Perhaps a hot-line for government assistance or to help with issues. Also a disaster dedicated website, or easy to find section on local government website, that can be used for information, chat sessions and making sure that avenues for help are well publicised. The VIC Emergency App was not all that helpful as information wasn't always current and often misleading."

## Hobby farmers

"Hobby farmers without an ABN were unable to access the \$10,000 government grant, so had less assistance. I suggest a temporary halt on GST for hobby farmers and others affected who don't have an ABN, but who have to purchase items to re-establish themselves. Perhaps they could be allotted a special dispensation number from the Shire, who would know that losses occurred, and then the GST be refunded through the annual tax return. Or a register of receipts and out of pocket expenses could be kept and submitted to see what can be reimbursed - the less red tape the better, though."

## Continued support

"Recognise that some problems and issues surface later on and may not be apparent in the immediate aftermath. Support the town, region, area that the disaster has impacted. Use the businesses for whatever purchases need to be made, support the businesses who are supporting the people! Gift cards and vouchers are a good idea, but ideally to be spent within the affected area. Most businesses will have, or be able to make up, vouchers."



# John Errey, Farmer, Cobrico

Historically the Errey family came out from England and settled on this site in 1856. John and his wife Joy moved into the farmhouse in 1994. They have a 600 acre dairy farm bordering the Cobrico swamp. 540 acres were fire affected.

The Erreys had not been farming for six years when the fire occurred, having leased the property out to other farmers. John and Joy lived in their house in Port Fairy. The tenants' lease was due to expire at Easter 2018 and they had declined an extension of their lease. The Erreys were planning to re-lease their farm or put it up for sale. However because of the fires, the couple moved back and in June started dairy farming again. They considered leasing the property in its fire damaged state, but as John says, it would have been fraught with difficulties and they would have had to sell their house in Port Fairy. Joy was about to take on a new job at the Port Fairy Hospital as a Diversional Therapist for frail, aged patients and John, who is trained as a fitter and turner, had work too. They both had to give up their jobs.

The Erreys have five adult children. Their 29-year-old son, Christopher, has been living on the property since the fires and as of June 1, 2019, has resigned from his job and is trying his hand at running the farm. John reckons it will be five years from March 2018 before the farm is running well again. At that stage their son will either take it over or they will sell. Returning to their burnt farm has been a major change in their plans and has caused a lot of grief for John and Joy.

When the fires struck, John and Joy were in Port Fairy. They had spent eight months



in WA, with six months as camp hosts on a cattle station in the Pilbara, returning to Victoria in November 2017. Their daughter, who lives in Scotts Creek, texted them at 4am on 18 March to tell them that the Errey farm was in the fire line. The tenants had evacuated to the Civic Hall in Cobden. The Erreys returned to the property on Sunday 18 and stayed in the front house which was a little further away from the peat fire than the main farmhouse. Family and friends came to help put up temporary fences and make a start on repairing the damage, but Blazaid were not allowed in for three weeks due to toxic smoke levels. The Erreys tried to keep out of the smoke as much as possible by using the wind direction. Individual carbon monoxide monitors were eventually supplied by the CFA. However, John has had breathing problems since then and uses Ventolin now though his need for it seems to be diminishing.

The two houses and the dairy were undamaged by the fire, but all the fences, two sheds and all the shelter belts were gone. On insurance John said: "In the end we got half of what we expected."

The fences were insured and one of the sheds, but we had no insurance to clear up all the dead cypress trees or to re-seed the paddocks. We got a quote of \$160,000 for the clean-up so we bought an excavator for \$60,000 to do it ourselves. We've spent about \$40,000 on seeds plus paying the contractor. From having no debt, we now have a substantial mortgage."

On June 6, the Erreys bought a new dairy herd, this time of 130 Friesian cows, as opposed to the 340 strong stud herd they had had before. By August 2019 the herd had increased to 200 cows. John said: "We needed an income while we fixed the farm. By June 2018 we had 50 useable acres. For dairying you should ideally have 2 acres per head so we had to use a lot of hay for extra feed. Most hay was donated from Need for Feed and fed on the feed pad. The reseeded paddocks were ready by October, but we had to be careful not to overgraze with such new grass."

In terms of wildlife, John enjoys bushwalking and a bit of bird watching, so he was very sad to see the swamp burned and all the tea tree gone. He found a lot of dead frogs during the winter of 2018 and wonders why. Prior to the fire, he had

observed a number of pygmy possums feeding in the gum trees near the house, as many as eight in a tree at one time. He has not seen them since. At the time of the fire he found various burned and injured mammals, such as wallabies, kangaroos and koalas. He put six animals out of their misery. Over a year later he frequently saw a large kangaroo with a burnt leg who "moves slowly, but seems to be pain free."

### **Help and Officialdom**

John and Joy's contact with officials and others over the fire emergency and recovery periods has been extremely mixed. John describes the bureaucracy around the extinguishing of the peat fire as frustrating. He said: "The swamp has a cultural heritage overlay though to my knowledge no Aboriginal artefacts have been found there. There seemed to be a power struggle between different departments. I reckon the peat burned could have been minimised if there had been timely cooperation between parties."

When John encountered the CFA the next day, he said the local CFA were fantastic. The CFA also set up a base on the property to fight the peat fire.



The role of each department and change of staff over time made it confusing for the couple to know who to approach and which body was in control. The EPA set up sensors and computers in the Errey's farmhouse to monitor toxic smoke for four weeks. Five aircraft flew above the site for six weeks. These included four helicopters, one used for detecting hot spots, and a plane normally used for crop dusting. The sound of a helicopter now puts John on edge. Joy was concerned about the chemicals/agents used for fire deterrent.

John has some concerns about the trenches which were dug to stop the fire. He says: "It was a week in when they started digging the trenches and it took a year to fill in the trenches. Our neighbours have lost cows in the filled in trench. It's very boggy and they have sunk. We've lost one ourselves and dragged out four. Two of these are still not fully recovered."

John and Joy found Corangamite Shire to be helpful and efficient. They organised skips and helped with tree clearing. They also provided a psychologist who came out weekly for about eight months. John found her extremely useful unlike the one he tried in Warrnambool. The Corangamite Shire were very professional and assisted in many ways for an extended period even into 2019. Having constant contact certainly makes a

difference when under such pressure.

The couple also appreciated the food vouchers organised by the local Uniting Church and Community Fund and the \$2000 from BlazeAid for fence posts. They were disappointed not to be able to attend many of the farmers' nights which BlazeAid ran, as they were too exhausted at the end of the day. BlazeAid were also helpful with fencing the 17km of boundary fence, John putting in the posts and the volunteers running the wires. Prior to the fire, the farm was surrounded by electric and barbed wire. They are still putting the electrics back in and in August 2019, John described the fencing as "nearly there." The Port Fairy Lions Club also helped with fencing, visiting weekly until March 2019.

Financially Rural Finance were helpful in getting the \$10,000 recovery money, but less so when it came to organising a low interest loan. There was a limit of \$200,000 to be paid back over five years. As John says, "The paperwork was horrendous. A lot of people gave up." It took Rural Finance exactly nine months to process this loan. (March 2019) Although the NAB had a much higher interest rate, the loan was granted in 2.5 weeks which enabled the Erreys to purchase 100 cows and get started in June 2018.



Six kilometres of trenching was constructed and filled with water, as the main fire control strategy at Cobrico.

The Erreys have been members of the Elingamite Cobrico Landcare Network since the 1990s. At the time of the fire they had a 4km long native shelter belt. Some of these trees were planted through Landcare, but others date back over 100 years. Since September 2018 Heytesbury District Landcare Network have been planting, fencing and providing direct seeding on the property initially in conjunction with Deakin University's Regreen 4 Fire Aid. Work with Landcare continues. Geoff Rollinson organised for Camperdown College students to plant trees. John says that their planting efforts were better than those of the university group. The Camperdown College students were well adept at planting trees and identifying black berry plants and other weeds which had germinated after the fires. As a result, the survival rate of seedlings is about 70/75% compared to 50% of Deakin's effort. Other influences to take into consideration was experience, and the different soil types and moisture content of the planting sites. Due to the lateness of planting, trees planted in the wetter areas obviously had a better chance of survival. Deakin did an excellent clean-up of burnt timber from the shelter belts and have built

a strong front entrance way to the property and tree guard around the oldest remaining tree on the property which survived the fire. "This was their area of strength," said John.

The direct seeding has been very successful along Curdie Leichfield Road, but nothing showing at this time on Erreys Road. Soil tests have been undertaken on this site.

Joy says: ". In the days after the fires, there was a constant flow of agencies controlling our property and/or offering assistance. To be honest at first it seemed like a wall of shirts with different monograms on their pockets while we were trying to get our heads around who they were and at the same time the impact of the fires. However, looking back everyone had an important role with their own agenda. Hopefully the data collected can assist with future planning for others. We remain extremely grateful for all of the community and agency assistance we have received even though at times this may have not been evident due to fatigue and emotions. It is now 17 months on. It has been a very long 17 months, but you just have to take control and keep moving forward, accept what has happened and get on with it."



Tree planting at the Erreys' farm.

# Kerryn Guthrie, Landowner, Glenfyne

Kerryn is a teacher at Cobden Primary School. She is married to Scot and has four children. The family have been farming their 600 acres at Glenfyne for ten years. Everything was burned apart from the two houses on the property though as Kerryn says this was by luck rather than design. Scott's parents were in the main farmhouse. They left when the fire started and stayed away for two weeks. Kerryn and her family live in a house outside the property which was not fire affected. When Scott's parents returned to their property, Mr Guthrie senior, would not come out of the house as he found it too hard to look at the damage. Kerryn describes Scott as "overwhelmed." She says that she "could not fall apart as she had to keep it together for the family."

Scott, who manages a transport company in Terang, took eight weeks off work. Kerryn missed a total of eight days' teaching and her children missed about a month of school so as to help their parents and grandparents. They are all now very competent fencers. They also gave up all their sport commitments and were very helpful. All have been affected by the experience. The youngest boy (then 12) is now very fearful of fire, the eldest boy (then 18) has trouble sleeping when it's windy and Kerryn's only daughter spent her 17th birthday building fences.

The family had a holiday in Lombok booked for July. To maintain some kind of work/life balance they decided to go as planned and they also went on their annual water-skiing holiday in January 2019. However,



all remain emotionally scarred. In January this year, almost a year after the event, the Guthries were due to visit Scott's 102-year-old grandmother in Melbourne. It was a hot, windy day in January, but despite setting off twice, in the end Scott could not bring himself to leave the farm.

Although the two inhabited houses survived, an old bluestone cottage containing antiques and farm records was burnt to the ground. The farm ran 200 sheep and 200 Angus cattle. Thirty animals died as a result of the fire, six of them cattle. Later cows aborted their calves and sheep with burned udders and feet had to be put down. The sheep fared worse than the cows, most having coughs and some even rendered blind. Friends took the livestock and kept them off the property for three months.

One of the results of the fire was that the Guthries have given up sheep farming and now have about 20 for their own needs. The biggest factor in stopping farming sheep was that the shearing shed burned down. It was insured for \$70,000 but would have cost \$250,000 to replace.

The couple did not have fencing insurance as they had not expected a bushfire, so they used the \$70,000 to rebuild fences. As both of them work, they did not qualify for the \$10,000 government relief grant. Sheep fencing is also more expensive than cattle fencing so the decision was made to sell off the remaining sheep for which they got very little money as farmers don't want to buy fire affected stock in case of future problems.

With the cattle, the four bulls they had at the time were okay, but they have had to buy more cows for breeding. As Kerryn says, "Cattle breeders only sell their unwanted stock, so it's a bit like starting the herd again. We've lost a lot of good genetic material which takes time to establish.

Even in August 2019 the rate of successful cow birthing is way down compared to pre-bushfire numbers. With no shelter, the cattle are suffering in harsh weather. Also, with only one cattle yard instead of the previous three, the farm is running much less efficiently."

Kerryn was upset by the animals but was most disturbed by the destruction of the 250 European trees, mainly elm and oak, which she had planted as shelter belts 6-10 years earlier and were at a height of 3-4 metres. The trees had been expensive and high maintenance. Some native plantations were destroyed too.

In July 2019, Kerryn estimated there would be another 12 months before the infrastructure on the farm was back to where it had been. The order of restoration was fencing first then electrics, troughs, plumbing and finally trees.

Everyone Kerryn dealt with over this period was helpful and supportive. The CFA told her that their fire was one of the fastest moving on record.

Corangamite Shire were extremely helpful according to Kerryn and organised skips for the clearance process. She dealt with Jo Beard and Jarrod, the former even ringing weekly to see how they were going for three months after the event. She is still in touch nearly 18 months later.



Gilson College students from Melbourne learning how to plant trees at the Guthrie's property.

After the fire they "didn't even have a hammer." Rhys-Evans of Colac who sell farm machinery lent them a tractor two days after the fire which they used every day for three months. Although they had insurance on all their equipment, generally the replacements are not as good as the originals because there was no time to shop around for bargains. The Guthries ended up buying an excavator for \$24,000 as renting one was unsustainable economically. They were also lent a fire engine, a bobcat, a truck and a fence post driver from various sources. Seventy staff from Scott's work came to help for a weekend.

Blazeaid volunteers arrived a week after the fire to help with fencing. They camped at the Go-Cart Club in Cobden and helped until September, every day for the first three months and then at weekends. None of them had any experience fencing, but the family really appreciated their help. A total of thirty Blazeaid volunteers worked at the Guthries. Kerryn was really grateful and has sent them all thank-you cards. She said: "The local doctor was there. I didn't

recognise him at first. There was a violinist and a maths professor. Most of them had their own difficulties in life. One man was homeless, and another was taking a break from looking after his wife who has Alzheimer's. I think it was great for our kids to see how kind and courageous people can be even when they have their own problems."

The family and volunteers spent every day fencing for a month and have completed 36km of fences.

Kerryn describes the work of the Cobden Uniting Church as "amazing." She said that at first, she resisted the food hampers they were being offered, thinking she could manage. Then, realising she had nothing to feed the workers, Kerryn accepted the supplies and found them really helpful.

Kerryn's dealings with Heytesbury District Landcare Network have been positive. HDLN provided 2000 tree seedlings and volunteers and students to plant the trees in September 2018.



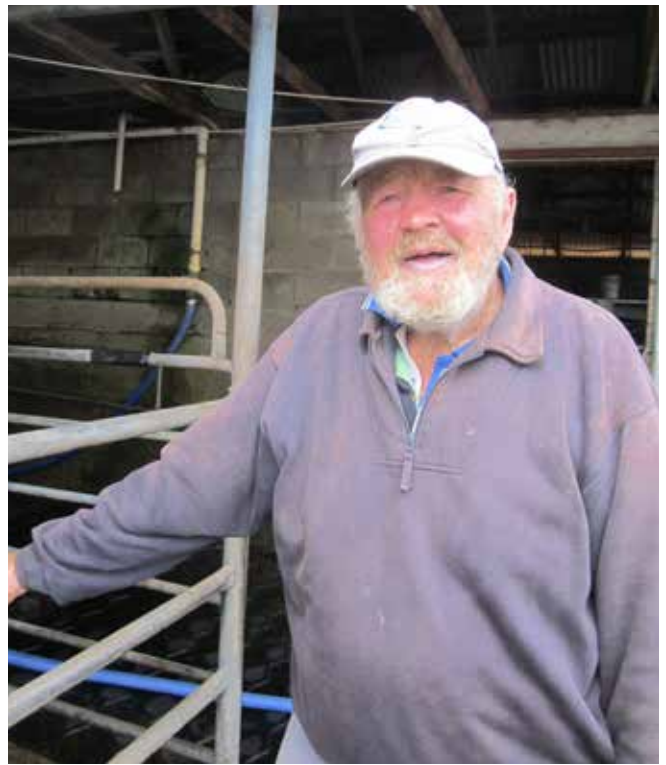
Gilson College students from Melbourne learning how to plant trees at the Guthrie's property.

# Tony, Lorraine, Shane and Dean Negrello, Farmers, Glenfyne

Tony and Lorraine have lived on and worked their 800-acre dairy farm for 48 years. About 600 acres of their land was fire affected. The property has been in the family for 140 years. The couple have two adult sons, Shane and Dean and a daughter, Michelle. Shane lives with his parents and Dean helps to run the farm, living nearby with his wife and two children.

On the night of the fire Tony had gone to bed as the power was out. Lorraine was up reading by torch light when she heard a bang. She went outside and could see the fires on the horizon. She woke Tony up and together with their dog, the couple climbed into the ute at about 10.30pm and drove to Glenfyne Public Hall to find out what was going on. Shane decided to stay at the property and spent the night going between his parents' and his brother's house. Between 2am and 4am he remained at his brother's place as the worst of the fire passed through. Meanwhile Tony and Lorraine, finding Glenfyne Hall empty, drove to Cobden where they found hundreds of people gathered in the football grounds. Jo Beard, local councillor and Corangamite major who lives in Cobden gave them information, but by 1.30am the Negrellos thought their farm had gone. However, at about 5am Shane called and told his parents that the house and dairy were intact.

Tony and Lorraine returned to their property on Sunday 18th March at about 10am. Lorraine said the worst thing was coming



back to see everything black and so much of it destroyed. She still gets emotional about the experience and said: "50 years' work gone in six hours. I didn't know where to begin." She says they have lost so much money, that they are still highly stressed and with hay so expensive, milk prices down and milk yield still reduced to 7000 litres per day from 10,000 prior to March 17 2018, things don't seem to be getting any better. Dean, who is planning to take over the farm, is concerned about the future.

The Negrellos had 400 Holstein-Friesian cows and three bulls. Of these 19 cows died over a period of two weeks. When the fire approached the milking herd they stampeded to the dairy and one was trampled to death. Tony said, "Normally I shut them in the paddock, but I must have had a feeling something was going to happen because I left the gates open so they could come home." Of the other deaths, one cow was tangled in a fence and had to be destroyed and another was so badly burned its tag had melted to its face. Five yearlings also died.



With no power until a generator was loaned to them on Tuesday, the cows were left un milked for two days, but did not suffer any lasting health effects from this. The generator, which was obtained for them by their bank manager from the Terang Racecourse, was not powerful enough to pump water as well as run the dairy so Corangamite Shire brought water in every day for ten days. Two paddocks were not burned, so the cows were put there and given hay. A group of eight cows which had been drying off away from the others were found in the Curdies River where they had stampeded because of the fire. Although they needed help getting out of the river, they were, remarkably, unharmed. One other animal owned by the Negrellos to be affected by the fires is Dean's curly retriever dog which now won't let Dean out of his sight and follows him everywhere.

The CFA did not make it to the Negrellos' property. Tony describes the survival of the house, dairy and a post rammer, at some distance from the homestead, as "miraculous." Only one barn was burned down and this has since been rebuilt although it was insured for \$10,000, but has cost \$34,000. They have also spent \$34,000 reseeding the burnt paddocks. This process continues today.

All the fences on the property, many of which had quite recently been renewed, were destroyed. They were insured for \$58,000, but \$200,000 was needed to replace them. With the help of Blazeaid volunteers and some cousins who came to stay, the boundary fence was completed in five weeks. Cobden School closed for two weeks after the fire so Dean's son Matthew, then 11, was delighted to have time off and helped with the fencing too.

Shane was disappointed by the CFA's absence, but two days after the fire, DELWP (referred to as Parks by the family) arrived to take down dangerous trees which they did with a skill that impressed Shane.

The Negrellos were very impressed with the efforts of the Uniting Church. With five or six BlazeAid volunteers at any one time, they had extra mouths to feed, and the food donations were a great help for that. They said that the vouchers provided for local shopping didn't always scan properly at the till, but salespeople still got them to work.

The Shire offered them skips to get rid of debris, but they decided it was easier to bury the burnt wire etc. Some hay was donated, and Murray Goulburn provided water tanks.

Dean explained that most of the BlazeAid volunteers were over 60 so fencing was slow, but some had experience and they were an entertaining bunch particularly an Irish divorcee.

"Many of the BlazeAid workers could be described as grey nomads and follow BlazeAid around helping with disasters," he said.

The family mentioned their bank manager who was based in Warrnambool. He visited them and other clients on a number of occasions and managed to get a lot of fence posts for them for free.

Sarah Montcrieff of the Victorian Farmers Federation in Warrnambool was also very helpful and came out to help them fill in the required forms to get the \$10,000 being offered by the State Government. Tony said this process was "not the best" as they had to spend money before they got any by showing invoices etc.

Twenty years ago, Landcare provided and planted thousands of trees for them on 35 acres of hillside and gullies. All of these were scorched and 80% are dead. Heytesbury District Landcare Network is replacing these. The Negrellos are also looking forward to HDLN's Paul Hartrick bringing out some school kids for planting and fencing trees around a gully where cows have nearly sunk to their deaths. Corangamite CMA are also offering help with planting and fencing around the Curdies River.

# Rob Addinsall, Field Services Manager, Glenelg Hopkins CMA

Hamilton based, Rob Addinsall has worked for GHCMA since 2007. Prior to this, he owned a sheep farm north of Hamilton so had first-hand experience as a landowner during the Ash Wednesday Fires of 1983. He recalls that there was very little in place for the recovery process back then and that things are certainly better now.

GHCMA are unusual amongst CMAs in having a “works crew” comprising two permanent staff members and two casual employees. Part of their remit is to respond to fire and flood events immediately so as to protect assets. The team was deployed on Monday 18 March following the fire to help any landowners in need. They would have worked on approximately fourteen properties over three weeks.

Boundary fencing was the main activity as containing stock is always the first thing to be done after a fire event. Like many CMA works crews, GHCMA’s works crew was established in 2009 largely as a response to Black Saturday. Since then most CMAs have lost these crews. GHCMA’s crew has continued albeit with less personnel than at its inception.

In the first week after the fires, DELWP contacted Glenelg Hopkins CMA to get an estimate of the time, stages and money required to remediate the damage done to previously funded projects in the fire affected area. In a desktop assessment, staff identified 20-25 properties. After



considering each on an individual basis – factors such as who had insurance and who did not, had to be considered – four landowners were deemed eligible for recovery funding. One of these was in the Gazette area, the other three were further south and included the Hopkins River on their land. The CMA had last helped one of these farmers following the floods of 2016, the repercussions of which are still being worked on.

DELWP provided a total of \$270,000 for the St Patricks Days Fires response and recovery stages. On-ground work included planting trees and putting up fences. This work has only been completed in May 2019 due to the time taken to assess damage and eligibility for funding. \$90,000 of the original sum was returned to the Forest and Fire Division of DELWP in June 2019 to continue with further recovery works in the fire affected areas.

One of the more positive things to come out of the disaster was that the CMA used recovered burnt timber to make “fish hotels” – riverbed habitat for fish.

Community information sessions were conducted in all areas affected by the fire. Glenelg Hopkins CMA staff attended most of these, however it was noted that one meeting at Penshurst was attended by mainly non farming and government agency staff, with only a couple of fire affected farmers. Most farmers were extremely busy doing recovery works on their properties.

Regarding the role of government bodies after a bushfire, Rob said: "There is usually a mad rush of government personnel on to the farms when the farmers are still in shock. Farmers can feel overwhelmed with everyone wanting to help at once and a constant stream of cars coming up the drive."

Rob said: "The primary aim in the immediate days after a fire is to restore boundary fencing to contain stock. The CMA provided assistance for that task with the use of the works crew and then purposely waited several weeks before assessing any riparian affected works that weren't an immediate priority."

Glenelg Hopkins CMA used Heytesbury District Landcare Network as a conduit for communicating directly with farmers. Of Geoff Rollinson, Rob said: "Geoff has been fabulous. He has a lot of respect and contacts in the area."



"Fish hotels" made from burnt timber on the Merri River.

# Gene Gardiner, Waterways Project Officer, Corangamite CMA

Gene has worked for Corangamite CMA for 15 years. This was his first encounter with a major bushfire. On a personal level, Colac-based Gene was concerned by the bushfires for a short time on March 17 because the wind was coming from the northwest, but his house turned out to be unaffected.

Gene said: "When there is a natural disaster, the CMA automatically reaches out to DELWP. The question we ask ourselves as the CMA is - Have any of our assets been affected?"

Gene discovered that 7 project sites had been affected by the fires. 40,000 trees and 5,000 kilometres of fences which the CMA had funded for private landowners had been destroyed. DELWP provided \$460,000 to recover these sites and to help prevent erosion at new sites such as gullies and riverbanks.

CMA staff didn't start site assessments of the fire affected areas until six months after the event. At this point it was noted that there was already a lot of regeneration of native plants, but there were also a lot of weeds such as thistle and blackberry.

Betty Russell, a Scotts Creek landowner, received assistance to replant a 6 hectare site which has been identified as habitat for yellow bellied gliders. In the 1980s with help from the local Landcare group, Betty and her late husband had planted native trees in what was then a bare paddock. The area has been replanted with native grasses,



tussocks, shrubs and trees. Gums include manna, swamp and messmate, all favourites of the glider.

For the rehabilitation of previous projects, 4.5 kilometres of fencing has been replaced, 10 hectares of weeds are being controlled and 20,000 trees, shrubs and grasses are being planted.

After the CMA had done what they could for their existing burnt sites, they moved on to Stage 2 – unknown impacted areas. They knocked on the doors of all landowners in the burnt area a year after the event to ask what they could do to help. The money is all committed to projects which are ongoing.

By August 2019 CCMA had had expressions of interest from another 8 landholders in the unknown impacted areas. This work is likely to comprise 10 kilometres of fencing, 8 hectares of weed management and 33,000 trees, shrubs and grasses to be planted.

CCMA and Heytesbury District Landcare Network have a long and fruitful working relationship. Gene has worked with them for 15 years. He explained: "During the fire

recovery process HDLN acted as middlemen for the CMA. They were particularly useful in accessing past projects which would have been handled by Landcare then, but were now under the auspices of the CMA, such as in the case of Betty Russell.” HDLN also organised community barbeques where Gene met bushfire affected locals and heard their stories. In his dealings with bushfire survivors, he was not in the least distressed as all concerned seemed calm and relatively positive.

The amount of support given to the fire affected by Corangamite Shire greatly impressed Gene. He attended the first public meeting at Terang Town Hall. Generally, his experience of dealing with other organisations has been positive, with everyone working well together.



This beautifully carved, life-size, wooden model of a yellow-bellied glider (*Petaurus australis*) was made and gifted to Heytesbury District Landcare Network by skilled local craftsman Barry Mounslley in 2006. Based at the Timboon office, it has become both an educational tool and a mascot. Planting has been carried out to restore the habitat of this parachuting possum, which has featured in HDLN's logo since 2002 and since 2016 has been listed as "Near Threatened".

# Nerissa Lovric,

## Land Management Extension Officer – Meat and Wool, Agriculture Victoria

Nerissa Lovric has worked in agriculture and natural resource management for the past 15 years. Nerissa is based in Colac and her current role with the Meat and Wool Team within Agricultural Services involves delivering extension activities for farmers including whole farm planning courses, field days and other training programs.

During the fire recovery effort Nerissa and other Extension Officers from Agriculture Victoria visited impacted farms to provide advice on soil, pasture and farm business recovery.

Meetings with individual landowners provided the opportunity to assess the physical, social and economic impacts on each farm and begin the process of recovery planning.

Nerissa was able to provide large aerial farm photos that farmers could use for planning purposes. She said: "These were well received by farmers as many did not have an up to date aerial photograph of their property."

Having a background in soil science, Nerissa was well placed to investigate the unique characteristics of the peat soils in the Cobrico area. This involved assisting with soil testing, soil test interpretation and consulting with soil scientists who specialise in peaty soils.

'The characteristics of peat soils are very different to other soil types and rehabilitation works required careful



planning and an ongoing monitoring program' said Nerissa.

Whilst working on the fire recovery effort, Nerissa and other Agriculture Victoria staff worked collaboratively with the Heytesbury Landcare Network and other government agencies including DELWP, Parks Victoria, CFA, the CMAs and Corangamite Shire Council. This was facilitated through regular meetings and combined site visits where required.

Nerissa said: "The last thing affected farmers needed was multiple government agencies knocking on their door. There are great benefits in sharing information and expertise between agencies, particularly when a complex range of issues are involved. Working collaboratively with community organisations and government agencies requires a thorough understanding of each other's roles in the post-fire recovery phase. Discussing roles and responsibilities for each stage of an emergency response is something I think we should do more of in emergency management."

# Ross Martin,

Program Manager  
of Community and  
Partnerships, Barwon South  
West Region, Department of  
Environment, Land, Water  
and Planning, Warrnambool

Ross has worked with DELWP for twenty years in a number of different roles including public land management, statutory planning and most recently climate change adaptation. After the fires, senior management asked him to be the Fire Recovery Coordinator for DELWP. This was because of his understanding and knowledge of the affected region and communities and his experience in working on complex projects. Ross was in this role from early April until December 2018.

He described his role as “challenging” and the funding processes to support recovery as “difficult to navigate for a novice in the role.” He feels that in general Victoria is well organised and resourced for the emergency response phase of a bushfire, but better supports could be put in place for the recovery phase. The department is currently addressing this. During the emergency response phase DELWP partners with the CFA. An important part of wildfire management is the construction of fire control lines. In these fires the control lines were primarily constructed on private land. DELWP put in the fire control lines as agreed with the CFA with the proviso that the land used for control lines would be rehabilitated after the event. Rehabilitation might include fencing, track reinstatement and revegetation. Also piles of dead trees



from roadsides which had been put on private land had to be stacked and burnt. Fire recovery work also occurred on Crown land which in this case was Camperdown Golf Course and Lake Elingamite.

In the initial weeks of the role, Ross spoke to all the agencies with expertise and recovery responsibilities to gain an understanding of the fire recovery policy, processes and funding context. He also went to two community meetings in Colac to listen to impacted community members. He was given a full-time staff member to deliver the fire control line rehabilitation works on private land as well as rehabilitation of Crown land. Mick Davies, who had some experience with fire recovery, was the on-ground man while Ross dealt with the agencies including CFA, CMAs, DHHS, Dept of Agriculture and local councils. An important part of Ross’s role was coordinating and collaborating with other agencies.

Ross believes that using existing relationships and networks is the best way to work in the fire recovery area. Department of Health and Human Services was the designated lead organisation for the fire recovery effort so the relationship with DHHS and local government fire recovery officers was very important.

Heytesbury District Landcare Network was given a key role because Ross had known Geoff Rollinson professionally for many years. Ross knew him to be well connected and respected in the community. He said: "We made an early decision that Geoff should be the face of our response. He and Mick went to visit the farmers and identified what work needed to be done."

During his eight months as Fire Recovery Coordinator, Ross discovered that DELWP's fire recovery policy / processes were still a work in progress. He said: "Fire recovery is one of the most stressful areas of work

in the department. You are dealing with people's losses and the emotions can be very raw. Fire recovery policy and funding arrangements can and are being improved. The department learns from each fire and adjusts our policy and support arrangements accordingly. The transition from emergency to recovery phases can also be improved. For instance, information recorded during the emergency response phase can sometimes be difficult to locate once you move into the recovery phase. Also, some of the actions taken in the emergency response phase of a fire can have significant implications for the fire recovery phase."

### Peat Fires

The peat fires at Cobrico Swamp and Lake Elingamite extended the emergency response phase of the fire because of the difficulty in extinguishing these fires,



A helicopter fights the Cobrico Swamp peat fire.



particularly Cobrico. Six kilometres of trenching was constructed and filled with water as the main fire control strategy. Although this strategy was successful, there were unintended consequences which disrupted adjoining farm operations for quite a few months. The soil excavated from the trenches was identified as potential acid sulphate soil. These soils, when exposed to oxygen, are chemically reactive resulting in the production of acid and sometimes heavy metals that can become an environmental hazard if not managed. For this reason, the department monitored the spoil piles and groundwater for several months before backfilling of the trenches began. Backfilling involved incorporating lime into the backfill material which effectively neutralised the acid generated from the soil reaction.

Since the fire local farmers around the Cobrico swamp have noticed the water

is lying differently. Ross admits that they don't know enough about the hydrology of Cobrico and that the drainage may well have been affected by the trenches and extensive areas of burned soil.

Ross would like to see some work being done on the increasing risk of peat fires. There are over 100 peat swamps in the Barwon South West Region. With a dropping water table and hotter summers, the risk of peat fires is increasing. Traditionally farmers have drained swamps to gain extra pasture or cropping areas, but to better manage peat fire risks, water needs to be put back into these swamps. He is hoping to get a university to do a study into peat fire risks. He says: "Our best defence is to understand the environment and work with it. Farmers are pretty flexible and innovative if they understand the risks."



Aerial photo of Cobrico fire

# Bryce Morden, Timboon, CFA Fire Captain, Timboon Brigade

Bryce, joined the CFA in 2005 while living at Maffra in central Gippsland. He has lived just outside Timboon for ten years and has been the local brigade captain for three years. There are currently 30 members in the brigade including 25 firefighters.

On 17 March 2018 the Morden family (Bryce, his wife and three children) spent the day competing at the Kangaroo Classic multisport event at Princetown so everyone was tired that evening. There was a power cut and Bryce was in bed when, about 8pm, one of his CFA members alerted him by text that she could smell smoke and wanted to know if the brigade had been called to any jobs. (The CFA normally use pagers as the network is more reliable, but she did not have her pager with her, only her mobile). She was attending a formal dinner in Timboon so asked Bryce if he could meet her at the fire station with a change of clothes suitable for wearing under firefighting uniform. Thanks to his 4WD Bryce was able to get past three fallen trees on the road between his house and Timboon. Five volunteers were assembled at the station by the time the first fire call was received. With Timboon Tanker on the road, more volunteers arrived and seven or eight volunteers remained at the station all night, going out to attend small local jobs in Timboon Pumper. Other members crewed the brigade 4WD towing a trailer mounted pump to fill fire trucks quickly from dams.



Timboon Tanker initially set off in a westerly direction to a call of fire at Loves Road, but they were soon re-tasked to a fire between Scotts Creek and Simpson to the east. Six brigades ended up at this fire and once under control, the Timboon crew went to attend the southern edges of the fire between Scotts Creek and Glenfyne. The crew were out until 7am.

The last big bushfires Bryce had attended were in Gippsland in 2006 and 2009. What was new for him about the St Patrick's Day experience was that it was a nighttime operation. With power out it was hard to see where the buildings (built assets) were unless they had generators to supply light. Also at this time CFA helicopters were not permitted to undertake night operations. Only the police helicopter was out and flew overhead around 2:30 am. Following successful testing, CFA helicopters are now permitted to fly in the dark.

Technology proved problematic in various ways during the emergency period. An elderly person had called triple zero

because their car was trapped inside their garage as its doors relied on electricity. By 3am the Timboon crew's mobile phones were all dead as the phones quickly used battery searching for signal. (As a result of this battery packs to recharge phones are now available). So, communications on the night were mainly through UHF radios. As these radios are now run on a digital rather than analogue system, they either work well or don't work at all. The old analogue radio system allowed some transmission even if the reception was bad, the new system works better when it works but worse in poor signal areas. The Victorian Emergency Services app was not really up to the task as information was too slow in being updated so inaccurate information remained on the system. Bryce urges individuals to use the app as a starting point, but to also pay attention to their own senses including what they can actually see and smell.

On a personal level Bryce was worried about his family back in Timboon. He was concerned that the fire near the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary would spread to Timboon especially as he heard early in the night that the fire truck at the local station of Brucknell had an electrical fault. The truck started eventually and the fire was well contained.

Nor did fire spread to the Otways which was Bryce's other concern. In the end the Morden family evacuated to the Port Campbell Surf Club as they had safe passage with few trees along their route to Port Campbell.

That the fires fell on a Saturday night and also St Patrick's Day put further pressure on Bryce. Although there are several people in the brigade who are qualified to drive the truck, only he had not had anything to drink. Truck drivers must have zero alcohol in their system so Bryce was the driver. As he said: "With a volunteer service it's hard to plan for these things."

The brigade had five "person trapped" calls during the night. When they got to the people they discovered that none of them were really trapped. It was more a case of relatives panicking and calling Triple Zero. There was even a call from Canada from concerned overseas relatives.

Bryce encountered a number of different organisations during the night. The SES were out clearing roads of fallen trees. Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria were attending accidents where drivers had crashed into fallen trees. Bryce believes that things run more smoothly if connections and trust have been built between agencies during time outside emergencies. The Timboon brigade had much stronger connections with AV than with VP through doing first aid courses with the former. Bryce was disappointed with the police that night. The local Timboon officer had been sent north to direct traffic and was then unable to get back to his post. Meanwhile police from Port Campbell went to the Timboon Hall which is the community's designated "bushfire place of last resort" and told people gathering there to leave for the coast through falling trees and in smoky conditions. Hundreds of people and animals ended up on the beach at Peterborough or at Port Campbell Surf Club.

In the aftermath of the fires Bryce was very impressed by Corangamite Shire and particularly mayor, Jo Beard, whose ability to communicate and empathise was outstanding. He said: "The shire really stepped up. They're not used to disasters of this scale like some of the other councils in Gippsland for instance."

He was less impressed by the CFA's management of the community de-brief meeting. The Timboon Brigade was not informed so most of the team, including Bryce, missed the session. As with all incidents, says Bryce, the CFA received a lot of praise, but also a lot of criticism. The Timboon Brigade were sent thank you cards by pupils at the Timboon School. Reading the messages, a senior brigade member felt that some of them hinted at the writer being traumatised, so they visited the school with CFA psychologists from the critical incident support team. It was hoped that talking to the children about the incident and how bushfires spread helped them to feel less disturbed.

As a result of the fires, Bryce and his team, have been working on a community bushfire plan. However, meetings for this have not been well attended. Bryce said:

"People forget very quickly. Those that show up tend to be retired or elderly and some see cutting down trees as the best fire deterrent. On the upside, more people have bought sprinkler systems and generators to prepare their properties for fire."

Bryce strongly believes that people should not rely entirely on emergency services and that they should have a bushfire plan. He says: "It is best to evacuate within the town rather than drive out when there could be trees falling in the high winds. It can be as dangerous or more dangerous than the fire itself to leave in these circumstances." He is also concerned about the highly flammable introduced grass, phalaris, which is not planted by farmers in the area, but can be found as a weed especially along roadsides.

Bryce said he did not deal with Landcare over the fires.



Cobrico swamp on fire.

# Sharna Whitehand, Emergency Management Officer, Corangamite Shire

Sharna has worked for Corangamite Shire for four years and has a great deal of experience in fire-fighting both in Australia and in America where she lived for 12 years. She and her family now reside near Peterborough. On the night of 17 March, their house lost power. Sharna was designated Municipal Emergency Resource Officer (MERO) that night and her boss was away camping. As the MERO, Sharna was inundated with phone calls from 9pm until 2am. When her phone battery went flat, she sat in the car so she could recharge it. Calls came from the Incident Control Centre in Colac which is made up of a number of agencies. The team there were looking for support from the council in the form of water tankers, emergency relief centres and local information. Sharna has had to coordinate council's response to incidents in the past, but this was the biggest bushfire emergency she has been involved in with Corangamite.

Sharna said the Shire was on "their normal severe weather level of preparedness" and they were aware that Saturday was going to be a severe fire danger day. With this in mind their weekly regional teleconference with emergency services was rescheduled from Monday to Friday. She said: "In an emergency people want to gather so two relief centres in Port Campbell and Cobden were opened by the communities themselves. In Camperdown we had already designated the theatre as a relief centre."



The Cobden and Port Campbell centres had two Corangamite Shire employees each. These were people who happened to live locally or had evacuated there themselves. However, it was impossible to get in more staff to Cobden as the roads coming into town were closed.

Sharna's boss drove home early from his camping trip and took over from Sharna at 10am on Sunday. Sharna slept that day and was back on duty at 5pm to work through the night. For the next six weeks Sharna and many others at the Shire worked approximately 16-hour days. Sharna then officially moved across to the Fire Recovery Coordinator position. It was her role to help the 180 impacted families. In the early stages of recovery, her duties included providing skip bins, organising safe asbestos removal, the cleaning and filling of water tanks and the burying of dead animals. Her role evolved with the needs of the impacted community over the 15 months that Council had a Fire Recovery Team.

## Key Contact Times

Affected households were contacted at five key points after the fire. Sharna said: "In the first two weeks we visited or called every property to make sure people had the basics – somewhere to stay, food, transport. Then two months later we visited everyone again. We gave them a contact list and connected them to a weekly newsletter on the recovery process."

Third contact was in July 2018, four months after the fires, when each household was encouraged to apply for up to \$2500 from the SW Fire Relief Fund. This was set up by Emergency Management Victoria through the Bendigo Bank in Cobden and Camperdown when the emergency had officially been declared a disaster. It enabled individuals and organisations to donate money to help the fire affected. A total of \$370,000 was raised for the 220 households affected over three shires. The

disaster status also triggered the \$10,000 compensation for farmers which Sharna assisted primary producers to apply for.

Fourth contact was just before Christmas, a time which can be difficult even for those who have not suffered a disaster. The focus was about getting back to normal activities and habits. A second round of money, similar to the first from the South West Relief Fund was given out and Deakin University donated 360 boxes of household goods which the Shire delivered.

Fifth contact was in February 2019 just prior to the anniversary of the disaster which was deemed to be another hard date to deal with psychologically and is important for residents to recognise such milestones. Sharna is not a psychologist but is good at recognising issues and directing resources accordingly. Council has access to resources and professionals who are expert in trauma recovery.



Christmas fair organised through Corangamite Shire.

## Counselling and Creativity

An On-Farm Counselling service had already been in place since October 2017 to deal with mental health in farmers due to the downturn in the dairy industry. The service was set up through Southwest Healthcare and Colac Area Health. In February 2019 it was extended for 12 months and proved invaluable in the wake of the St Patrick Day's Fires. Of Corangamite's 180 affected households, between 50 and 70 received on-farm counselling. Three counsellors covered the three shires. They would go out to farms and walk and talk with owners. For some a one-off visit was enough, for others a psychologist was recommended. Eighteen people were still seeing the counsellors at the twelve-month milestone. The long wait time to see a psychologist was the impetus for the service in the first instance.

Following a disaster of this kind, DHHS recognises and prepares for an increase in domestic violence, substance abuse and children not doing so well at school. Six months after an event is known to be the peak danger point for mental health. The shire is the lead at the local level.

Sharna and others noticed that many fire affected people were turning to craft as a coping strategy. In March 2019 the council provided seed funding for three creative organisations to run a program of events over the next 18 months. Groups were set up through progress associations in Cobden, Camperdown and Terang. Activities included making workshops, music, performance, poetry readings, open mic sessions, markets and all kinds of visual art.

## Landcare

Sharna contacted HDLN when she saw an article in the local newspaper regarding a Deakin University initiative called Re Green 4 Fire Aid. The aim of the group was to provide and plant vegetation for farmers, but many of the species being donated were non-native or unsuitable for the sites. Sharna said: "It was critical Geoff be part of this." By May 2018 Re Green were taking advice from Landcare and tree planting commenced with appropriate species.

## Peat People

The Incident Control Centre had to manage three peat fires. For farmers affected by these fires the recovery process has been slower as the fires took much longer to extinguish and came with a number of health hazards which the others would not have encountered to the same degree. Smoke inhalation was more dangerous as peat fires burn with more carbon monoxide and smoke was composed of much finer particles than an ordinary grass or bushfire. These particles can get into the lungs and require the wearing of a P2 mask at all times. People who needed to milk cows in the area also needed to wear carbon monoxide monitors to ensure their oxygen levels didn't get too low. There is also the fear that fires might reignite in the summer heat. Peat fires have been known to burn for many years. A peat fire at Yeodene has been burning underground for 20 years.

DELWP, CFA and Parks Victoria continued to monitor the sites for hotspots using infra-red mapping techniques with helicopters and special wands. Sharna thinks that DELWP did a good job in keeping property owners informed and there were no repeat blazes.

## Improvements

Sharna explained that Forest Fire Management, which is an amalgam of DELWP and Parks Victoria, is misunderstood by the general public. They work with the CFA during a bushfire emergency wearing green overalls as opposed to the CFA's yellow uniform, but people are often confused as to who they are, most often referring to them as "Parks" or "the department".

Sharna said, "FFM are more used to working on public land so they are not so used to

dealing with landowners. This can lead to oversights in their behaviour such as not informing landowners who, when, where or why they have stationed themselves on the property. There is room for improvement here."

With DELWP during the recovery period Sharna feels expectations need to be managed. If a farmer is told something will be done soon, they may expect it in the next two weeks, not six months. Dates and deadlines need to be clarified from the outset.



Musicians playing at Camperdown Courthouse.



# For Peat's Sake

## – The Necessity of Keeping Cobrico Wetland Wet

*Kirsty Hawkes gets stuck into peatbogs and swamps which, without water, can all too easily become fen fires and peat pyres.*

It's easy to get bogged down in terminology when it comes to peat. When Mark Gunning, CFA incident controller for the Cobrico Swamp fire, was asked to present a paper at the International Association of Wildland Fire – Fire Behaviour and Fuels Conference 2019 in Albuquerque, USA, he found over ninety definitions. For me, coming from Scotland, the term peat is inextricable from the word bog, so I was pleased to find this explanation in the National Geographic:

*Peat forms in bogs. Bogs are a type of wetland with a high acid content. Like all wetlands, bogs are inhabited by marshy plants, including trees, grasses, and moss. The bog's acidity prevents this vegetation from fully decaying. This partly-decayed organic material builds up in bogs. Over millions of years, it becomes peat. In certain circumstances, peat can be an early stage in coal formation. Most of the time, however, peat is a unique material.*

Peat covers between 3% and 5% of the earth's surface depending who you ask. The biggest areas are in the northern hemisphere especially Canada, but peat bogs can be found in New Zealand, Indonesia and South America.

Nearly three decades ago when I was a public relations officer for Scottish Natural Heritage, Scotland's government agency for wildlife, I was asked to extol the wonders of peat bogs. These threatened habitats were,

I wrote, "treasure troves" of biodiversity, home to many rare plants and animals and "encyclopaedias of land use and climactic changes". Peat bogs, more commonly called peatlands now, were a hard sell then and still are.

### All in a name?

The use of the word "bog" is symptomatic. In the UK it is slang for toilet, "bog standard" means "ordinary", "bog off" is self-explanatory, "bogging" is a Scots expression for "disgusting", "bog trotters" is a derogatory term for Irish people and try typing "bog" on your iPhone – the emoji it supplies says it all. Unsurprisingly the word derives from Gaelic and Irish for soft, moist and flexible, hence the word "bogged" for getting stuck. Perhaps having more peat and more Scottish settlers, in New Zealand areas of peat are described as bog, but in Australia the word "swamp" is used. Etymologically rooted in an old Germanic word for "sponge" or "fungus", "swamp" was popularised in the USA, particularly the Deep South, and as such, like "bog", suffers from negative connotations – think duelling banjos and alligators.

Barb Cowley lives next to what is listed on most maps as Cobrico Swamp Conservation Reserve, but she would rather the name was changed to Cobrico Lake and Wetland Wildlife Reserve. She says: "The name just doesn't fit. I don't like the word swamp. It suggests a boggy area. A lot of the land is not that wet, and the lake gets missed out altogether in the name. It's a permanent lake."

Barb does however refer to this part of her land as “the scrub” and in this she is technically correct. According to the Victorian government the habitat represented by Cobrico Swamp is “swamp scrub” or EVC53 where EVC is “ecological vegetation classification.” Once again hardly a sexy name, but according to government sources only 5% of the Swamp Scrub present at European settlement remains in Victoria.

But whether we call a wetland a marsh, mire, quagmire, soak, bog, fen, swamp or as Roald Dahl would have it a “quelchy quaggy sogmire”, if it contains peat, in a drought-prone country like Australia, it presents a fire hazard. This then is peat’s biggest PR problem here.



2019 Aerial view of what is officially called Cobrico Swamp Conservation Reserve, but Barb Cowley prefers to call Cobrico Lake and Wetland Wildlife Reserve.

### Peat for Power and Plants

When I first heard that the peaty Cobrico Swamp was on fire, it made no sense to me. Such places are wet where I come from, but due to drought and drainage, this is not the case in Australia. That the fire persisted for nearly seven weeks was more understandable. I grew up with peat fires

which stayed lit all night in the family hearth. That we were inhaling small particulate matter and potentially impacting our health was unknown to me.

According to the National Geographic Finland, Ireland and Scotland are the biggest consumers of peat as a fuel. South West Victoria was heavily settled by Scots and Irish, but with so many trees to burn, using peat as a fuel never caught on. Ireland currently has three peat fuelled power plants, but reliance on peat power has decreased since its heyday in the 1960s when peat provided 40% of Ireland’s electricity. In 2016 it produced about 8%, but 20% of the country’s carbon emissions, creating more CO<sub>2</sub> than coal and twice as much as natural gas.

The most familiar use for peat in Australia is in gardening, but at a growth rate of 1cm per 1000 years it’s hardly a renewable resource. Over the past few decades some countries have moved to phase out the use of peat in horticulture, but nowhere has this actually happened and Canada remains the biggest player in the industry. Some commercial production occurs in Australia largely in Tasmania where only 0.006% of land is sphagnum peatland, the preferred type for gardening.

### Peat Beats Climate Change

The English National Trust which owns extensive historical gardens has been peat free for many years. On the Trust’s website peat is extolled as “of great importance to our planet:

- as a carbon store – peat holds more carbon than the combined forests of Britain, France and Germany
- for wildlife – many scarce species inhabit peatlands
- for water management – peat holds up to 20 times its own weight in water

- for archaeology – peat preserves a record of past vegetation, landscapes and people.”

According to the UN the 3% of peatlands which cover the Earth’s surface store twice as much carbon as the world’s forests which make up about 31% of the land. They are a massive carbon sink which should be nurtured.

The Scottish government via Scottish Natural Heritage sees peat as part of the solution to a warming planet. In February 2020 £250m of funding was announced for peatland restoration over the next ten years, as a “clear nature-based solution to the climate crisis.” Peat PR in Britain has come a long way since my day. Its image in Australia is rather different, but not without its advocates.

Mark Bachmann of the Nature Glenelg Trust is passionate about peat and wetlands.

“Nearly 70% of wetlands in western Victoria have gone since settlement and even the ones left have been modified by drainage. The southeast of South Australia and south-western Victoria would have had thousands of hectares of permanently saturated peat. After co-ordinated drainage programs to open up much of this land for agricultural development, only a fraction is left in its undrained state. As our climate gets drier, it is vital that we restore wetlands, not only as wildlife habitat and carbon stores, but to greatly reduce both the risk and the impact of bushfires. And of course, fully hydrated peat wetlands stay wetter for much longer than ordinary wetlands, even in a drought.”

(Interestingly Mark thinks that Cobrico Swamp might more properly be described as a “fen” than a “bog” due to its hydrology. He makes a good point, but for the purposes of this article he has kindly agreed to “bog-off.”)



Mark Bachmann of the Nature Glenelg Trust is passionate about wetlands.

### Peat Pyres

But once peat has dried out it becomes a tinder box capable of creating a bushfire which is difficult to put out and extremely toxic. Colac-based Mark Gunning has been a fire fighter since 1980 and has taken a special interest in peat pyres. He encountered his first near Hamilton during the Ash Wednesday Fires of 1983 and since then has been battling them with greater frequency.

“Each peat fire is different,” he told me, “but they are always hard to put out and often require expensive earthworks and technology to meet complex challenges. Yeodene Peat Swamp, near Colac, has been burning on and off for at least 25 years. Fires can go on burning underground without anyone knowing for years and then one day conditions will be right, and they’ll kick off on the surface. It’s like tooth decay.”

A rumour circulated around the Cobrico fire that expertise had to be called in from Tasmania in order to subdue the fire. Mark clarified this:

“Australia has a limited capacity of specialist vehicles called CAFS (Compressed Air Foam

Systems) which are good for extinguishing peat fires. The Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania are well advanced with CAFS capability and are often called upon to support Victorian firefighters. On this occasion the CAFS vehicle came from Tasmania.”

Mark’s expertise in peat fires took him to Gippsland in the summer of 2019/2020. Of the 19 firefighters tackling one peat fire there, all were treated and some hospitalised for smoke inhalation.

He said: “Peat fires release more carbon dioxide and monoxide than regular bushfires. Also, it’s heavy work where you are closer to the source of the fire and for longer periods. We all recovered though.”

Of the St Patricks Day Fires, eleven were peat fires, three of which were significant. These were at Lake Elingamite which burned for four and a half weeks, the area between Lake Bullen Merri and Lake Gnotuk near Camperdown which took two weeks to suppress and at Cobrico where high levels of carbon monoxide were detected near the fires and fine particulate matter for up to 5km. Cobden’s schools and early childhood centres were closed, and 58 patients/ residents were evacuated from Cobden’s hospital and aged care facility.

### Peat’s Flora and Fauna

No such evacuation was possible for the plants and animals which call Cobrico Swamp home. The rare and beautiful Swordgrass Brown Butterfly (*Tisiphone abeona*) was photographed here in 2005. This species has eight subspecies. All are associated with the wetland loving plant genus *Gahnia* such as tall saw-sedge (*Gahnia clarkei*) which is listed in a botanical survey of Barb Cowley’s property carried out by botanist, Geoffrey Carr on 31 March 2009. Geoffrey describes the habitat as “a structurally intact Swamp Scrub site” but points out that it is surprisingly dry and thus lacking in the biodiversity he expected. He

did however record one rare plant species, the Leafy Twig Sedge (*Cladium procerum*), and one threatened orchid, the Small Sickle Greenhood (*Pterostylis lustra*). It is not known whether these plants still grow there. The latter grew under the Woolly Tea Tree (*Leptospermum lanigerum*) where much of the ground has collapsed since the fire and is scarred with holes like a battlefield, making it very hard to walk on and extremely fragile.



Leafy Twig Sedge  
(*Cladium procerum*)



Small Sickle Greenhood  
(*Pterostylis lustra*)

This is why drones were used in May 2020 to distribute 32 kilograms of native seeds over 40 hectares of burnt ground. Using planes or helicopters would have been much more expensive and seeds would have scattered well beyond the targeted area. The five drones were able to release seed only 2-3 metres above the ground. It is the first time this type of technology has been used in Australia for peatland

rehabilitation. The project, which was managed by Heytesbury District Landcare Network, was funded by DELWP at a cost of \$80,000 and includes funds for continued monitoring and a follow up survey. Seventeen species of seeds were flown and sown. These included trees such as Scented Paper Bark (*Melaleuca squarrosa*), shrubs like Myrtle Wattle (*Acacia myrtifolia*) and grasses including Wallaby Grass (*Austrodanthonia caespitosa*). Geoff Rollinson of HDLN is especially keen to compare the areas which have naturally regenerated with those that have been assisted by aerial seeding.

Geoff and Ross Martin of DELWP continue to seek funding for research and restoration of peat areas and hope to engage a university on the subject. As Geoff says: "Historically farmers have seen wetlands as an obstacle to productivity. Drainage is still going on today. The wetland at Cobrico has shrunk over the decades. When peat is present taking out the water turns them into a fire hazard. Restoring wetlands would be a good strategy for increasing the resilience of the land and keeping more carbon in the soil."

Meanwhile as a result of the 2018 peat fires Corangamite Shire has commissioned local mapping of peat swamps to be better prepared for future fire events. As part of this, the fire committee has also taken part in a peat bushfire workshop. The shire has shared its methodology with other councils. Surf Coast and Colac-Otway look likely to follow suit. Mapping peat areas will certainly help when it comes to fighting a bushfire on the site but replenishing these sites with water would be a preventative measure.

As veteran firey, Mark Gunning, says: "I'm a conservative kind of person, but the scale of bushfires I have attended in the last ten years quadruples what I have experienced in the previous thirty. There's something going on with the climate and it's not good. Peat fires are getting worse as things get drier. We shouldn't be letting farmers take more water out of these wetlands. It's just exacerbating the problem."

If peatland continues to be regarded as a fire hazard rather than a valued wildlife habitat and watery haven from fire, peat's public image will continue to be problematic. If it's all in a name, then let's rename these



Preparing the drones for seeding at Cobrico.



## Acknowledgement of Country:

Heytesbury District Landcare Network acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land. Heytesbury District Landcare Network also acknowledges and pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

## Acknowledgements:

The author of this publication would like to thank everyone who was interviewed and consulted in its production including Barb Cowley, John and Joy Errey, Kerryn Guthrie, Tony, Lorraine, Shane and Dean Negrello, Rob Adinsall, Gene Gardiner, Nerissa Lovric, Ross Martin, Bryce Morden, Sharna Whitehand, John Robinson, Mark Gunning, Mark Bachmann.

## Photography credits:

Cheryl Heynemann, Barb Cowley, Geoff Rollinson, Mark Bachmann, Corangamite Shire Council, Glenelg Hopkins CMA, "The Warrnambool Standard", Google Commons.

## Authorised and published by:

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Published May 2021



