

Bushfire Event 2019/20 - Wollondilly Council

Summary of Preparation, Response and Recovery Actions

(Last updated Feb 2 2020)

Preparation (before the emergency)

Local Emergency Management Committee (incident and response management planning)

- Council has an active LEMC which comprises representatives of Emergency Services & Support Services (Police, Ambulance, Fire & Rescue, RFS, SES, Health, Welfare, Local Land Services, Transport for NSW, Water NSW) and relevant Council Staff
- The LEMC meets quarterly and discusses a wide range of emergency management issues covering preparation response and recovery
- Examples of September LEMC actions: emergency escalation communication line for staff, so they are aware of who to call; vulnerable communities list created in readiness to evacuation.
- After the first catastrophic fire day on 12th November a debrief was convened on lessons learnt from that day in particular the evacuation process for schools, vulnerable communities and welfare issues for the community and animals.
- On the 29th November Section 44 was declared and an actions meeting was convened with Managers to assign preparation tasks. The list of Neighbourhood Safer Places was reviewed and evacuation centres looked at for suitability.
- On the 2nd December a Bushfire Status meeting was convened with all relevant agencies to discuss how Council could assist emergency services and support services with evacuation centres, communications, water, road closures, welfare and animal evacuations. Managers communicated to relevant staff the status of Section 44 and the Wollondilly Operations Centre at the depot was prepared.

Community Preparedness and Awareness

- We continually work with the local RFS regarding bushfire awareness messaging and communications (e.g. promoting bushfire survival plans)
- In 2018 we produced a guide for residents to assist in being prepared for emergencies – “Wollondilly Emergency Management Guide”
- Wollondilly was also involved with the RFS in their “Get Ready Wollondilly” weekend on 14th and 15th September.
- Our Community Resilience Innovation Project commenced in the aftermath of the 2016 Storm Event. Outcomes have included:
 - Launch of the “Get Ready Wollondilly!” online toolkit in May 2019 (all about how to be prepared and resilient)
 - Stronger relationships with OEM, Disaster Welfare, Response Agencies
 - Better approaches to Community Engagement on emergency and resilience matters – e.g. a Community Resilience Committee established

- Promoting the Get Prepared App (a Red Cross preparedness app)
- Council has supported RFS in delivering several community preparedness workshops in high risk townships (e.g. Oakdale, Buxton, Nattai) and assisted in a recent “hotspots” workshop which trained rural landholders in managing fire on their properties in the Orangeville/Werombi areas

Planning for Recovery

- In 2018 Council developed a Wollondilly Local Recovery Toolkit modelled on the NSW Local Recovery Toolkit and Guidelines.
- It contains information and templates on a range of useful recovery related matters such as:
 - Setting up Local Recovery Committees
 - Template Resources including TOR, membership, agendas etc.
 - Recovery Centres
 - Recovery Action Plans
 - Communicating in Recovery
 - Recovery Needs & Capacity Assessment
 - Disaster Appeals
- Council and JR Richards and Sons (waste contractor) constantly reviewed bushfire threat information to prepare modified waste collection runs if required to ensure continuity of service.
- Council’s street sweeper service assisted removing possible leaf debris from roadways and gutters in high risk villages across the Shire and also prepared modified sweeping schedules to ensure the continuity of service across the Shire.
- Council and JR Richards and Sons supported the waste service needs for all Wollondilly and Wingecarribee Rural Fire Stations. Additional bins were placed at selected stations in readiness for any escalated bushfire threat.
- Council prepared bushfire waste clean-up options ready for implementation based on possible bushfire threat impact zones.

Hazard Reduction

- Council has an extensive and ongoing hazard reduction program for lands which we own and manage. The focus is on highest risk areas first in accordance with Wingecarribee / Wollondilly Bushfire Risk Management Plan, which includes western areas such as Buxton, Oakdale and Nattai.
- Vegetation clearing adjacent to properties to create asset protection zones was undertaken e.g. Peak road, Matcham road, Meryla Street, Blatman Avenue, Bingara Place, Scotchies Reserve and Lyn Gordon Reserve.
- Hazard reduction burns also completed on bushland owned by Council land e.g. Meryla St Couridjah and 1531 Werombi Road. We proposed burns in Belimbla Park and Silverdale, however the Silverdale Road burn has been repeatedly postponed due to hot dry winters making it unsafe to undertake.
- Vegetation clearing has been undertaken on roadsides to ensure safe emergency exits for residents and access for emergency services. The focus is on keeping road shoulders clear and removing dead/dying trees and branches that are likely to fall and block the road in strong winds. Recent works include East and West Pde Buxton, Belair Road, Sheehys Creek Road, Burragorang Road Nattai, Ridge road Nattai, Old and New Jerusalem Roads,

Steveys Forest Road, Barkers Lodge Road, Fergusson Road, Tylers Road Bargo, Braddocks Road, Eagle Creek road. It is noted that we are not aware of any issues with access or egress being blocked by trees, prior to the areas being burned.

Response (during the emergency)

Bushfire Response Preparations – triggered by Section 44 being invoked

- 24 hour Roster covering weekends, public holidays etc. developed to manage and administer Council's internal Support Operation Centre (to efficiently manage Council resources and support the larger EOC operation).
- Operational staff contact List developed including availability and verification of competency for plant items to enable the safe and efficient deployment of resources.
- Operational Staff rostered in advance to attend depot and cover predicted needs of RFS requirements at short notice (including plant operators, truck driver and mechanics)
- Wollondilly Council plant hire panel contract reviewed and critical plant types (water carts, graders, loaders etc.) identified and placed on standby to ensure availability and flexibility in responding to RFS requirements.
- Traffic Control requirements predicted and resourced through Council's traffic control contract in advance to ensure suitable fast response for road closures. This included 24 hour rolling traffic control coverage of road closures as requested by Police, RFS etc. for several days at a time.
- Central tracking document continually updated on Council's record management system to monitor each and every internal and contract staff member's location to ensure safety and allow quick response to requests.
- Well-being checks undertaken with all deployed staff at regular intervals to ensure up to date location and continued staff safety.
- Council's Internal Support Operation Centre (located at the depot) manned 24 hours during critical times and all information recorded on white boards, with a "soft" backup in Council's Record management system.
- Council provided water filling stations with water carts to fill residential mobile tanks for the purpose of property protection – these were advertised via social media and well utilised by the community.
- Council put together joint departmental teams and these were deployed into areas to inspect and repair assets, assess risks and remove damaged trees to ensure safety of the community as quickly as possible – these teams consisted of personnel with experience in tree removal, horticulture, civil assets and plant operation (included both Council and contract plant, machinery and staff)

Waste

- Council and JR Richards & Sons implemented modified waste collection runs on all Catastrophic and Emergency Bushfire days to ensure continuity of service.

- Facebook messages were posted to advise residents of changes to runs and the importance of placing bins out the night before. During the main three weeks of the bushfire threat, JR Richards and Sons provided a service every day. Only one small part of a Tahmoor run was impacted on Thursday 19 December 2019. The drivers returned to service these bins on Friday 20 and Saturday 21 December 2019 when it was safe to enter the areas.
- Council and JR Richards and Sons supported the waste service needs for all Wollondilly and Wingecarribee Rural Fire Stations, all evacuation centres and RFS logistic sites e.g. Helicopter site. The servicing of all bins and the placement of additional bins was completed during the bushfire event.
- Council activated the appropriate bushfire waste drop off options in response to the fire impacted Wollondilly areas. A letter was sent via Australia Post and also hand delivered by SES volunteers to all fire impacted properties identified by the Rural Fire Service advising on the free bushfire waste drop off options on Friday 20 December 2019 and Monday 23 December 2019.

Crisis welfare response (immediate responses during the crisis)

- 1800 number established (free call)
- Cash handouts made available
- Distribution of donated food hampers / water / toiletries etc. commenced
- Council's Library operated as a respite centre
- Council helped support the operation of evacuation centres, e.g. at Picton Bowling Club
- Counselling and pastoral care was organised and provided (through the support by the Red Cross and the SES)

Recovery (after the emergency)

Community Recovery Information Centre

- CRIC established in Council's foyer providing information, counselling services, referral info to other agencies, assistance provided in completing financial grant applications, crisis payments, food hampers, gift cards, toiletries, donated Christmas gifts etc.
- The CRIC was open over the Christmas to NYE break with largest attendance on Friday (19 people). Numbers gradually diminished over the following days. Most enquiries were for replenishing food supplies and accessing crisis support payments through the Mayor's Relief Fund
- Representative from OEM, Red Cross and Insurance Council of Australia also attended and assisted
- The CRIC continues to operate on an as-needed basis

Donations Coordination and Distribution

- Donations / offers of assistance register established
- Council has received and coordinated redistribution of donated goods/essential items

- Cool rooms hired for the storage and distribution of fresh food
- Council has registered as a participant in the donations distribution platform GIVIT

Wollondilly's Local Recovery and Resilience Committee

- Wollondilly's Local Recovery and Resilience Committee was stood up for this crisis and has to date met multiple times since the commencement of this current crisis. Its purpose is to coordinate recovery operations in collaboration with key agencies and the community. Its membership comprises:
 - Community members, some of which represent community orgs such as CWA, Community Links, Church groups, Tharawal Land Council etc.
 - Staff reps from State and Federal MP offices (one from each)
 - Various reps from OEM (Disaster Welfare team as well as their Recovery team)
 - Wollondilly Mayor and one other Councillor
 - Red Cross
 - CEO of Wollondilly Council
 - Various Executive/Senior Wollondilly Council staff
 - Staff rep from Wingecarribee Council

Mayor's Relief Fund

We have promoted the Mayor's Relief Fund and have conducted a series of grant funding rounds.

- Approximately \$350,000 has been donated or pledged to date*.
- Approximately \$177,674 has been disbursed (or approved for disbursement) to date*
- Approximately 135 families/individuals have been supported to date* either through initial crisis cash handouts or through subsequent funding rounds

*as at 30/1/20

Bushfire waste drop off options

- Bargo Waste Management Centre opened on 22 December 2019 to accept bushfire effect waste for residents who received letter for free until 31 January 2020.
- Oakdale Temporary bushfire effected waste drop off centre was operational from 4 -12 January 2020
- Council arranged with Remondis Picton to make their facility available for the free drop off of spoilt food from Saturday 21 December – Sunday 12 January 2020. This service was available to all residents effected by any power outages across the Shire due to the bushfire event.
- Wollondilly and Wingecarribee Council have collaborated to extend the free drop off service at Bargo Waste Management Centre for bushfire effected residents in Balmoral and Buxton (Wingecarribee) residents.
- The free drop off service at BWMC for bushfire effected residents in Wollondilly and Balmoral/ Buxton at has been extended to 28 February 2020.

Communications

- Council has compiled and continually updated a series of specific webpages devoted to bushfire crisis information. The pages cover matters such as:
 - Being prepared
 - Location of Bushfire Prone Land
 - Road Closures
 - Financial Assistance options
 - Donations
 - Mayor's Relief Fund
 - Waste and Bushfire Clean-up
 - Re-Building and Planning
 - Injured Wildlife and Animal Welfare
 - Health, Safety and Wellbeing
 - Replacing Personal Documents
- Council has, throughout the crisis and in the aftermath, maintained continual Social Media messaging on key matters, emergency alerts, recovery information etc.

Trees

- All 'at risk and hazardous' tree work has been completed in fire affected areas and we have now moved into 'clean up' tree work.
- Council has managed very significant clean-up operations in Nattai, Buxton, Bargo, Balmoral and Werombi utilising council staff and plant and several tree and earthmoving contractors. We predominantly engaged local contractors however several crews from Sydney also assisted in order to make maximum progress before Christmas. Most of the work required heavy plant and specialist tree workers, of which there is a limited supply locally.
- Each affected roadside was inspected by council's tree experts. Firstly fallen trees were removed from the road, then structurally damaged trees were marked for removal or pruning. Trees that had been killed by the fire (e.g. Black Sheoak and Wattles) were also marked for removal. Marked trees were then removed by contractors. This involved mulching leafy parts and small branches. Where possible trunks were left in the bush as habitat for small native animals, however in some locations this was not possible so those trunks have been stockpiled. Hollow trunks will be removed from the stockpile and placed in bushland reserves as habitat and solid trunks will be mulched and spread on gardens.
- Council's tree experts are making themselves available to inspect fire damage trees on private property and determine if removal is required.

Wildlife

- Council has compiled a range of information on its website regarding wildlife welfare issues

- Council has also contacted WIRES to find out what resources they require in the care of injured animals and council will then assess how we can support them.

Biodiversity / Habitat

- Detailed surveys will occur following conclusion of operational activities and advice from RFS over safety. Impacted areas are largely on Catchment Land (owned by Water NSW), National Park (owned by National Parks and Wildlife Service) or Crown Land (owned by Department of Lands).
- In response to impacts to habitat, Council will be offering fire affected homes 20 free native plants. This offer is in addition to the entitlement for Wollondilly residents to received 5 free native plants per quarter and up to 100 plants every 6 months for larger properties.
- Council will implement measures to promote natural regeneration and enhance habitat on any impacted Council land.
- Staff will collaborate where opportunities exist with Government agencies on other public land.
- It should also be noted that Council has in its Operational Plan the preparation of a Koala Management Plan that will apply across the Wollondilly LGA. This provides an opportunity to assess impacts and implement actions to restore habitat.

Community Recovery Meeting

- Held Bargo Community Hall January 13

Greater Sydney Region Recovery Committee

- A GSRRC has been formed led by the Office of Emergency Management
- Four subcommittees have also been formed:
 - Health and Wellbeing
 - Infrastructure and Environment
 - Agriculture and Wildlife
 - Economy and Tourism
- It comprises Blue Mountains, Lithgow, Wollondilly, Hawkesbury

Council Report scheduled for Extraordinary Council Meeting February 11

This report will be proposing a range of new recovery initiatives relating to

- Rates relief
- DA fees
- Use of the Federal Government's \$1m Recovery Grant