

# || WHGNE SUBMISSION TO HELEN HAINES MP

Community Engagement Partnership

## **Getting criticism out of the way**

The government's appalling response to the bushfire crisis is a national disaster. Stubborn climate change denial coupled with relentless public scapegoating and deploying a knee-jerk reaction following months of inactivity is indicative of a larger political issue. This is a government that prioritises the comfort of its conservative, right-wing party members over responding to the needs of the Australian public.

Critical shocks to national stability highlight the character of our leaders and in this case, Morrison has demonstrated himself to be insensitive, out of touch, and devoid of any real agenda. However, this should come as no surprise. Morrison has decidedly focused on reducing the size and role of the government, diminishing services, and declaring individual responsibility the cornerstone of a productive society. These are deeply conservative conceptions of leadership and they are fundamentally at odds with the kind of collective imagination required to respond to the climate crisis.

If the Australian people are to put their trust in this government, it will need to confront the very foundations that underpin it, and reimagine a national identity that is built on collective responsibility, coordinated action, and leadership that seeks to lead by example.

WHGNE is left to wonder how many lives, homes, and hectares of vital Australian landscape could have been spared in the presence of strong leadership. An appropriate response would include swift and decisive action, the allocation of sufficient resources, and unwavering support for vital state services.

## **Stories from the Community**

*Anonymous – Doctor in Central Hume*

Whilst the town wasn't directly affected by fire, there has been a considerable health impact, seen firsthand in our rural general practice. The direct impact of the extended period of hazardous air quality and smoke exposure on those with pre-existing lung disease led to a rise in presentations to our clinic with deteriorating respiratory function. Formal advice to stay indoors, wear protective masks and/or travel to a smoke free area became a difficult message to sell to those employed outdoors and couldn't afford a fortnight off work, and those with no family or friends elsewhere in Victoria to stay with - especially considering the majority of the state was also affected by similarly poor air quality. The more profound and widespread impact has definitely been on the mental health of the community, which has declared itself in a variety of ways. Unsurprisingly, those with known anxiety conditions were faced with an extended period of uncertainty, many of whom

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evacuated for regional centres on two separate occasions and remained on edge with each emergency alert update on their phones. Anecdotally, the decision to evacuate as advised or stay to defend properties brought considerable strain to family and relationship dynamics. The complexity of offering primary health care to a community threatened by fire declared itself in multiple more nuanced ways - including delayed vaccinations of children who evacuated, delivering important medication to firefighters working in other regions disconnected by road, and the physical stress experienced by aged care residents evacuated to alternative facilities for the duration of the fire threat. Whilst there is an external demonstration of resilience and strength, in the four walls of a consulting room individuals are opening up about the profound impact these fires have had on their physical, mental and relational health - even in a town 'untouched' by flames.

## *Rachael – Milawa*

My experience reflected some of the research around women and bushfires. I was left on my own on my property with children, pets, livestock and my mother who also lives on the property. My husband has a mechanical repair business in town and he was at work the whole time we were on watch and act and then encouraged to leave. His work was extremely busy as with the extreme weather, cars were breaking down. I had encouraged my husband to buy a pump to use the pool water to defend the house and he didn't show me how to use it! Ultimately it was me who made the decision to leave (we evacuated three times) with children, my mum, pets and belongings. I also made decisions around what we packed and where we went. Once I accepted that I was making the decisions, that it wasn't a collaboration, I felt I could make decisions. One of my neighbours was on her own with her sister – her husband was away. There was a community spirit of sharing information at that local level and checking on older people in our community.

## *Anonymous – Milawa*

I woke on morning of Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2020 to the glow of a dark orange sky. My husband is part of the local CFA and has been involved in efforts to contain the fires, and still, he looked at me with disbelief at how bad things had become. The walkie-talkie sat on the dining table between us as we listened to reports from on the ground; a strange new addition to our breakfast routine. The ominous sky and thick smoke outside the window gave me goose bumps ... I'm a chronic asthmatic.

Knowing that I would struggle to breathe over the coming days, I decided to leave with the kids to somewhere safe. We piled into the car and drove to Melbourne, leaving my husband behind to fight the fires and defend our property.

### Local Emergency Response

Wang/Wodonga did well on being regional relief centres – LGA's accommodated neighbouring council citizens – had no idea how big this would be

- Highlight excellent local response and difference between

### Complexity of federal response

#### Amanda

- Flow on effects/ripple effects – whilst direct impact is clear and easy to deal with, it's the flow on effects – e.g. sitting in Dr waiting office where emergency app goes off and everyone is anxious about it – meeting someone in a café and the first comment is about how's the smoke affecting you – ongoing low level anxiety affecting people working in the field – secondary impact of hearing stories triggers other issues for people – vicarious trauma
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### Changing the relationship to land

- Urban planning
- Integration of indigenous practice

Perspectives on the process for post-bushfire redevelopment (rigour around spending, strategy)

- Looking at recovery through a long-term lens – not only what do we need (physically/financially) to rebuild but how can we strengthen the social capital within communities? How can the built environment improve future resilience? How can

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we bring people closer to one another? Green space? Improved service coordination. Better healthcare access.

- Gender and Disaster workers embedded within each regional area – embed into every women’s health organisation so we can continue to work in partnership with all local government, local business etc. Women’s Health services are part of the fabric of the communities – kitchen table model (Kathy McGowan part of women gathering group we did here)
- Gender stereotypes will impact the way people react and respond, so working with communities to continue to break down these stereotypes
- Women in Barcelona on our facebook page
- Infrastructure Victoria

Perspectives on what Indi needs in terms of recovery

- Tourism: see opportunity here for increased spending on regional tourism/diversifies campaigning
- Local business – mental health issues, staff issues, detriment of staff wellbeing, some investment in social healing
- If we are to survive and continue to live, we need to dramatically change our relationship to the environment
- Cultural change
- Communication to support business

Catherine Ryland, an urban planner and a bushfire-resilience expert. She would like to see more conversation around the idea of planned retreat—rebuilding in low-risk locations, reducing development in high-risk areas, and even relocating existing, unaffected communities, which she describes as the “biggest, bravest, boldest step.” And some experts are starting to consider what such steps would look like: The Planning Institute of Australia has released a national settlement strategy, for instance. It highlighted both the large parts of Australia more and more at risk from the adverse impacts of climate change and the dearth of effective planning for climate change or disaster-risk reduction

Stories from Community

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## Other thoughts

- Clear lack of diversity among 'officials' at community meetings – no acknowledgement of diverse groups and different evacuation considerations – no discussion about accessibility of relief centres or plans for vulnerable community members
- Official members arguing with community at meetings – tempers flaring etc – highlights a need for training for people holding authoritative roles
- Australia scored lowest possible rating of 0.0 for climate policy in 2020 Climate Change Performance Index and was labelled as a *regressive force*
- Fragmentation of response – gov leaving it up to states and the intervening and not communicating – reflect lack of political resilience – low trust, paralysis, infighting etc – gov should represent a resilient people

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