



Public Report First 100 days

Message from the Chair

The 2009 bushfires culminated in the most significant natural disaster in Australia's history. With this also came the most generous outpouring of financial support this nation has ever seen, through donations to the Red Cross Victorian Bushfires Appeal 2009.



The response from the nation and from people around the world has been overwhelming and this generosity is directly benefiting those who have been so drastically affected.

I am proud to head up the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund Independent Advisory Panel, which has a significant responsibility to determine how to distribute the generous donations to affected individuals and communities in need.

People were motivated to make such generous contributions to the Appeal after witnessing the devastation through the media and hearing the stories of loss and despair.

These donations were destined to go to the individuals and communities suffering terrible losses - the loss of loved ones, homes and memories.

It is with this in mind that the Advisory Panel has made, and continues to make decisions around the allocation and distribution of this funding.

These funds are already flowing to thousands of individuals and families who are starting to rebuild their homes, their lives and their communities.

The Advisory Panel will continue to consult with affected communities to ensure this much-needed assistance is getting to those who need it, when they need it.

There is no doubt that the rebuilding and recovery process will be lengthy and extensive and we are determined to stand by communities and support them in this effort as it continues into the future.

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund is committed to ensuring that those who donated funds to this cause, and the beneficiaries, are continually informed about the allocation and distribution of funding, through the release of regular reports such as this one.

John Landy,
Chair of the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund

The Fund

The Red Cross Victorian Bushfire Appeal 2009 was established on Sunday February 8 by the Victorian Government in partnership with the Federal Government and Australian Red Cross, to support individuals and communities in towns and suburbs affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

Contributions to the Appeal have come from every part of Australia and internationally.

Every cent raised through the Appeal is transferred on a daily basis to a trust account set up by the Victorian Government, for distribution.

The Red Cross Victorian Bushfire Appeal 2009 officially closed at the end of the 2008-09 bushfire season on April 17. Donors were requested to forward any outstanding funds collected from events and fundraising activities to the Appeal by 30 June, 2009.

The total raised through Red Cross donations so far is \$351 million. The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund is responsible for allocating the funds held in trust.

The Fund is overseen by an independent advisory panel made up of seven community leaders, who are responsible for establishing the criteria for the distribution of funding.

Any interest earned will be reinvested into the Fund and spent on individuals and communities affected by the 2009 bushfires.

The Advisory Panel

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund Independent Advisory Panel is made up of community leaders who volunteer their time to oversee the Fund's operation and the allocation of payments.

Chaired by former Victorian Governor John Landy, other members of the panel are: Australian Red Cross CEO Robert Tickner, Melbourne University Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis, Former Deputy Premier of Victoria Pat McNamara, Mayor of Murrindindi Shire Council Lyn Gunter, head of the Victorian Recovery and Reconstruction Authority Christine Nixon and Pam White (ex-officio) Department of Human Services.

Members of the Advisory Panel met on the following dates: 11 February, 13 February, 19 February, 2 March, 10 March, 19 March, 1 April, 8 April, 14 April, 30 April, 7 May, 12 May.

The Victorian Government has provided secretariat support to the Fund through the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The Department of Human Services is responsible for administering the various grants, with assistance from Rural Finance Victoria.

Panel visits

Members of the Advisory Panel have met – and continue to meet with individuals, local government and business owners in bushfire-affected communities across Victoria.

The Chair and/or members of the Panel have met with communities in and around the following areas:

- Boolarra
- Bendigo
- Bunyip (Warragul)
- Callignee
- Flowerdale
- Horsham
- Kinglake
- Kinglake West
- Narbethong
- Marysville
- Myrtleford/Mudgegonga

Allocation of funding

Funds donated through Red Cross to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund are helping people rebuild their homes, lives and communities.

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund Independent Advisory Panel is committed to meeting the needs of individuals, families and communities who have endured the worst natural disaster in Australia's history, in line with the expectations of the thousands who donated to this cause.

No money from the appeal is used for administration costs.

An independent probity auditor has been appointed to ensure appropriate fund distribution processes are in place.

Criteria

The Panel has determined that its decisions on disbursements are made in a considered and consistent way. As a result, each funding decision is assessed to ensure money is distributed fairly and equitably. Allocations are also made to complement rather than duplicate other sources of assistance. The Panel ensures any decision:

1. Is consistent with the appeal's intent
2. Meets a priority need
3. Will provide assistance to 'individuals' and 'communities'
4. Aligns with expectations of affected individuals and communities

5. Does not unnecessarily duplicate other funding and is not a core responsibility of government
6. Can be effectively and efficiently delivered
7. Contributes significantly to immediate, short, medium or long-term outcomes for individuals and communities
8. Aligns with donor expectations for the use of funds.

The Panel also has to ensure that any proposed disbursement is within relevant taxation and legislative requirements that may apply.

Phases of recovery

The Panel recognises there are distinct phases to the recovery process – each with unique requirements ranging from emergency relief through to assisting people with re-establishing their homes and livelihood.

The allocation of funding is aligned with each of these recovery phases.

Immediate

In the immediate aftermath of the bushfires, the Panel made a commitment to meet the priority needs of affected communities by allocating funding for emergency payments.

More than \$53 million was allocated to individuals and families to assist with their immediate needs including payments made for home dislocation, compassion and bereavement, severe injury and payments to assist employees replace tools of their trade.

How the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund has helped:

Payment	Purpose
Compassion and Bereavement Payment	To provide immediate support to those families that have lost loved ones in the 2009 bushfires
Initial Home Dislocation Payment	Funding for people who have lost their principal place of residence or are otherwise unable to return home
Severe Injury Payment	Funding for people who have been hospitalised and require surgery or further hospital treatment
Household Repairs Payment	A short term measure to help people affected by the bushfires to make minor repairs to property such as fire water or smoke damage. *This was expanded to include payments to landlords of investment properties on March 12
Tools of Trade Payment	Payment to assist people who have lost equipment vital to their trade and employment and are an employee working for a registered business
Rebuilding and Recovery Payment (Destroyed)	Payment to homeowners whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the bushfires
Rebuilding and Recovery Payment (Damaged)	Payment to tenants whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the bushfires and need to cover contents lost or damaged.
Rebuilding and Recovery Payment (Tenants)	Payment to people whose principal place of residence was damaged by the bushfires. Up to \$15,000 is also available for the repair or replacement of other external structures including sheds.
Exceptional Hardship Support Payment	To provide financial support to individuals and small business facing immediate hardship, distress or misfortune as a result of their contribution to the bushfire effort
Local Government Relief Payment	Bushfire affected Councils will share funding allocation to deliver disaster-related services that directly benefit residents
Rural Properties Recovery Assistance Payment	Payments to rural landowners of more than 5 hectares for repairs or replacement of on-property structures or land regeneration.
Severe Injury Transition to Home Payment	Lump sum payment to the severely injured who had a prolonged stay in hospital. An additional payment for those who require specialist support.
Winter Needs Payment	A \$2,000 grant per home that has been destroyed or damaged, based on previous appeal applications.
Winter Community Events Package	\$1 million for communities to share in to hold winter community events.
TOTAL	

In this immediate phase the amounts set aside by the Panel to cover each of the payment categories was based on the best information available at the time.

As the real impact of the bushfires is understood, any funds that are not disbursed will be reallocated to reflect the most up-to-date and accurate advice.

Short - Medium term

Sustaining temporary arrangements and making a start on rebuilding homes, lives and communities are keys to the short-medium term phases of recovery.

Rebuilding and Recovery

To provide certainty to the survivors of the bushfires, on Thursday 12 March a public announcement was made that Rebuilding and Recovery grants would be available to people whose homes had been damaged or destroyed in the fires.

Payments include:

- A universal \$50,000 Destroyed Homes payment to home owners whose primary place of residence was destroyed, comprised of a \$35,000 re-housing grant and a \$15,000 payment to cover the cost of lost contents.
- A Damaged Homes Payment of up to \$15,000 to cover the cost of repairing homes damaged in the fire.
- A \$15,000 Tenant Contents Payment to cover the cost of lost contents, for tenants whose rented home was destroyed.

At the time of this announcement potential beneficiaries were advised that the details of a subsequent needs-based payment would be outlined at a later date, and that applications for this payment and the subsequent payment would be released at that time.

Details of Stage 2 of the Rebuilding and Recovery Grant were released on Wednesday April 8. Application forms for both stages of these payments were made available from this date.

Stage 2 Rebuilding and Recovery Payments include:

- A needs-based Damaged Homes Payment of up to \$40,000 to assist with rehousing for people with additional needs.
- An additional Destroyed Homes Payment of up to \$16,000, based upon need.
- Up to \$15,000 to cover the costs of damaged or destroyed secondary buildings affected by fire.

Needs-based payments

Additional need is based on a range of criteria including the size of the household; special family needs that may entail additional building costs; limitations on a household's capacity to pay, such as reduced earning capacity as a result of the fires and; a household's lack of funds, including no or partial insurance.

Financial information

Due to the substantial amounts of funding being made available for destroyed properties, the Panel determined that prior to

Grant Amount	Allocated	Announced	Available	Disbursed to date	Total grants
\$10,000	\$2.3 million	February 12	February 12	\$1.63 million	161
\$5,000 per household, plus \$2,000 for each person over 18 living in an eligible household plus \$1,500 per child under 18 living in the eligible household	\$30 million	February 12	February 12	\$24.34 million	3224
\$7,500 lump sum	\$0.4 million	February 12	February 12	\$922,500	122
\$3,000 lump sum	\$9.5 million	February 25	February 25	\$1.29 million	431
\$5,000 lump sum	\$8 million	February 25	February 25	\$538,914	136
\$35,000 lump sum + \$15,000 contents payment	\$130 million	March 11	April 8	\$20.36 million	712
\$15,000 lump sum	\$28 million	March 11	April 8	\$5.45 million	378
\$15,000	\$0.8 million	March 11	April 8	\$2.68 million	179
Up to \$8,000	\$0.8 million	March 17	March 17	\$168,000	21
\$9 million package	\$9 million	April 2	Local government submission required	–	–
Up to \$5,000	\$5 million	April 20	April 20	\$1.54 million	307
\$50,000 lump sum plus up to \$50,000 to those eligible	\$2 million	April 22	Immediate	\$900,000	18
\$2,000 per household	\$8 million	May 13	May 13	\$2.83 million	1417
\$5,000 to \$25,000 per community	\$1 million	May 13	May 13	–	–
				\$62.6 million	7,106

these funds being released, applicants would be required to receive one-to-one financial information through a participating bank or financial advisor.

The following banks offered to provide this information to applicants free of charge: Bendigo Bank, NAB, ANZ, Commonwealth Bank, Westpac, St George Bank.

Set financial information topics provided during the information sessions are:

- Grants investment options.
- Using the funds to rebuild and recover.
- Getting advice you can trust.
- Financial advice for you.
- Insurance – protecting your assets.
- Personal budgeting.

Other grants

A range of grants to support councils, rural property owners, the severely injured and householders have been made available to support as many people as possible.

Individual grants allocated to date are:

Initial emergency payments: Compassion and Bereavement Payment, Initial Home Dislocation Payment, Severe Injury Payment, Household Repairs Payment, Tools of Trade Payment, Exceptional Hardship Support Payment.

Rebuilding and Recovery Payments: Destroyed Homes Payment, Damaged Homes Payment, Tenant Contents Payment.

Other Payments: Rural Properties Recovery Payment, Severe Injury Transition to Home Payment, Winter Needs Payment.

In addition funding has been set aside for the following initiatives, on an application basis:

Local Government Relief Package: \$9 million has been made available to bushfire-affected councils, to assist in the delivery of disaster-related services that directly benefit residents. Local government has played a significant role in guiding community recovery and is best-placed to deliver services directly, such as trauma and grief counseling.

Winter Community Events Package: \$1 million has been made available to support local communities to run events this winter. A pool of \$500,000 is being made available for grants of between \$5,000 and \$25,000 for Community Development Committees to run events. Those communities without suitable accommodation to hold events, will be provided with temporary facilities, through an additional \$500,000 pool of funds.

The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority will oversee both the Local Government Relief Package and the Winter Community Events Package.

Beneficiaries have until December 31, 2009 to take up these grants.

Full details of the grants and application forms are available on the official Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund website at www.dhs.vic.gov.au/bushfireappeal

Long term

Assisting with the enduring effects of the bushfire tragedy will shape the long-term assistance provided to survivors. The Panel is currently focusing on what type of support is provided into the future, recognising that the rebuilding and recovery process is one that will take place over a period of years, rather than months. Further assistance to support the severely injured over the coming years, long-term trauma counselling and supporting orphaned survivors of the bushfires are among the long term initiatives currently being considered by the Panel.

Funding a range of community projects to sustain the longer term renewal of communities is also being considered for the future.

Advising beneficiaries

More than \$240 million has already been allocated and is available from the Fund to benefit thousands of potential beneficiaries.

The following measures have been undertaken to advise affected communities of these payments.

They include:

- Establishment of a public website www.dhs.vic.gov.au/bushfireappeal and the Bushfire Appeal Fund information line 1800 180 213
- Direct information through training and bulletins to Department of Human Services Case Managers who have face-to-face contact with affected individuals and families. There are currently 393 case managers, assigned to 4256 individuals or households
- Distribution of information through DHS networks at Relief Centres, Recovery Centres and Community Service Hubs
- Advertising in metropolitan, regional and suburban newspapers
- Local government websites and special bushfire information newsletters distributed by affected councils
- Addressing community meetings during visits to bushfire-affected communities by members of the Panel
- Announcements in metropolitan, suburban and regional media

Application process

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund has endeavored to make the application process and criteria for payments as straight forward as possible, while ensuring a robust system is in place so that funds are getting to those they are intended for.

Application information including information forms have been made available at bushfire relief and recovery centres, through DHS case managers and on the public website. Case Managers and trained staff in the call centre are able to provide applicants with information and assistance with application processes.

The application process is administered by the Department of Human Services, with the assistance of Rural Finance Victoria in some cases.

The future

The Panel recognises that the process of rebuilding and recovery is a long-term task that needs to be undertaken in close consultation with individual communities.

As a result, in allocating the remaining \$111 million of donated funds, the Panel will continue to work closely with a wide range of groups and affected communities. This will ensure the continued allocation of funds meets the long term needs of individuals and communities.

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund is keen to ensure that assistance reaches all of the intended recipients. While we recognise that, for a number of reasons, not everyone is ready to claim the available payments, we will work closely with DHS case managers and other on-the-ground workers within the community to ensure the generosity of donors reaches as many people as possible to assist in their journey to healing and recovery.

The Panel is committed to providing clear and transparent information about the allocation and distribution of funding and will continue to update and release periodic reports to the public.

CONTACT

The Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund

www.dhs.vic.gov.au/bushfireappeal

1800 180 213