

Est. 1877

# Bairnsdale Advertiser

OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER - 138th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

MONDAY, JANUARY 26, 2015



**BEEF WEEK**

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FEATURE

**AUS**

## Vics a misfit in extreme fire grants

Bushfire campaigners have gone straight to the top to get clarity on Victoria's fire warning system and Australian disaster relief, which they believe are out of whack.

Former Nillumbik Shire councillor, Belinda Clarkson, a campaigner for bushfire fuel reduction burning and adequate warnings, and who was present at the bushfire mitigation forum in Bairnsdale late last year, last week wrote to Prime Minister Tony Abbott for a second time about the issue.

In October last year, Ms Clarkson told the *Advertiser* that if a fire like the Kilmore East blaze on Black Saturday 2009, was sparked at Dargo in the morning, Bairnsdale could face catastrophe by late afternoon.

And the problem, she said, was the State Government's maximum hourly rate of spread for bushfire was severely underestimated.

"With the Victorian Government's reliance on a maximum hourly rate of spread of nine kilometres per hour, there may not be good reason to warn the people of Bairnsdale to evacuate," she said.

"However, with the Federal Government stating the maximum hourly rate of spread is 24km/h, evacuating Bairnsdale would be crucial.

In November, Ms Clarkson wrote to the Prime Minister asking why Australian taxpayers should pay for a repeat of Black Saturday's systemic warning failures in Victoria.

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# Start using the best science

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That letter received a response from the assistant secretary of the National Security Resilience Policy Division (at the request of the Minister for Justice), who said under Australia's constitutional arrangements, state and territory governments had primary responsibility for emergency management and for the protection of life and property, which included the management of bushfires and public warnings using the best science and modelling available.

Ms Clarkson said that of critical importance to other Australian states and territories, that letter confirmed that Aus-

tralian disaster grants would effectively make them pay possibly tens of billions of dollars, based on the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

"With the greatest respect, would you please instruct Victoria that its responsibility under Australia's constitutional arrangements is to use the best science available, and not an apparent erroneous construct of that science," she said.

Ms Clarkson said it appeared Victoria was in breach of Australia's constitutional arrangements on public warning about extreme bushfires.

"If this is indeed the case, Why should the governments of New

South Wales, Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory be asked to finance extreme disaster grants for Victoria?"

"As Prime Minister of Australia, I believe your instruction on this matter is clearly required."

The letter was also sent to Opposition Leader Bill Shorten and all state and territory leaders and opposition leaders.

Ms Clarkson provided the following as a sequence of Victoria's "apparent erroneous construct of the best science":

1. In 2012 the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research

Organisation (CSIRO) released a paper on Black Saturday's Kilmore East extreme bushfire, which acknowledged "...high surface fuel loads, long unburnt..." and stated "...one could say the fire spread 24km in an hour" (2012).

2. The Australian Government Minister responsible for the CSIRO, the Hon Ian Macfarlane MP, unequivocally confirmed the 24km/h figure with the words "...the fire spread 24km in an hour" (August 15, 2014).

3. Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner, Craig Lapsley, then apparently in error stated "...the fire speed increased to 9km/h - the fastest it would get..." (September 10, 2014).

4. Former Victorian Government Minister, the Hon Kim Wells MP, Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Bushfire Response, repeated Mr Lapsley's apparent error "...a maximum 9km/h bushfire rate of spread" (November 3, 2014).

5. Three of Australia's prominent bushfire experts were independently consulted "...would you please advise me on the relevance of the differ-

ence between the Victorian Government's 9km and the Australian Government's 24km maximum fire spread in an hour" (December 12, 2014).

Roger Underwood, one of Australia's most respected extreme bushfire analysts / commentators said Victoria "...appears to have adopted a warning system that underestimates the rate of passage of fire by more than 50 per cent...such a serious inbuilt flaw has the potential to lead to an even worse disaster than that experienced on Black Saturday".

David Packham, internationally recognised extreme bushfire scientist, wrote the fire "...transformed from a wind driven fire to a convective fire when it impacted the extreme fuel levels...dramatically increasing the speed of the fire".

Phil Cheney, respected Australian extreme bushfire scientist, wrote "...under extreme fire weather...convective processes can generate wind speeds within the fire area that are much higher than the ambient wind speeds and may result in a dramatic and unpredicted escalation of fire behaviour".

## Bairnsdale <sup>\*</sup>Advertiser

Established 1877.

The Bairnsdale Advertiser is published Monday and Friday.