

Wye River SLSC's experience and how club members were able to re-start their club activities around the events over summer

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1. Introduction

- 500 members, about 80 active. Of those members only a very small handful actually live in Wye River – only 1 active member – the rest travel from Colac, Geelong, Ballarat and Melbourne.
- Little nervous about presenting today. I am not accustomed to giving speeches as my usual role in the club is Surfguard registrar, not president.

2. Preparation for a bushfire emergency over the last 6 years since Black Saturday

- Community volunteers initiative began following discussions between the SLSC president, vice president, CFA captain and CFA Lieutenants. All recognised the unique and vulnerable setting and location of our town and the ever increasing threat of a major bushfire. The Otways region, and specifically the forest around Wye, was the driest it had been in over 30 years. One road in and out of town. Depending on what direction the fire came from, everyone in town would be forced to evacuate along the one road. Our town's permanent population sits around 80 however over the Summer holidays, particularly on hot days, which are of course the days of extreme bushfire danger, that number swells to close to 5,000 including many campers and day-trippers. So, with those numbers in mind it seemed quite likely that it just might not be possible for everyone to evacuate in time and so a community refuge might well be needed.
- Our clubhouse was determined to be the safest place in town. It is the only community centre or hub and all public meetings, workshops and events are usually held in our clubhouse. It was relatively recently built from solid brick and concrete and is fitted out with a disability ramp, first aid room, kitchen facilities, toilets, sprinklers, a generator, water tanks and, clearly, many members trained in first aid. Also important that the community hub be away from the CFA station as that is where the incident control centre would be set up in an emergency and all of the fire fighting efforts were coordinated from.
- Database of community members was set up and the CVs purchased 2 way radios, hats, fluoro vests, torches and signage and devised and assigned roles such as traffic controllers, medical officers and supervisors.
- The club's role was to provide first aid supplies and equipment, trained first aid personnel and to provide a safe refuge for community members who did not evacuate.

3. Christmas Day and Boxing Day

- Just on lunchtime Christmas Day the evacuation order was issued and it became clear that the fire was rapidly threatening the town. CV's were instrumental in assisting with the evacuation and setting up our clubhouse as a refuge. 10 people chose to stay in the clubhouse rather than evacuate – most were close family members of CFA members fighting the fire and all felt that they could provide support and assistance to those actively fighting the fires. A tanker was positioned between the river and the clubhouse with the sole

role of protecting our building. The pub and the general store were also prioritised as buildings to protect.

- Our priority, back in Melbourne, was communicating with members so that no one tried to head down to Wye if they had not heard the news. A patrol was rostered on for Boxing Day and our regatta and Nippers registration day were scheduled for the 27th together with a big family fundraiser afternoon. Obviously as soon as Christmas lunch is over a lot of people start making their way down to begin their holidays. Surfguard made urgent communication very easy – mass text messages and emails were sent to our whole database advising members not to travel to Wye due to the bushfire emergency and that all club activities were suspended until further notice. We also advised our members to download the FireReady app and to monitor announcements made by Emergency Management Victoria.
- Whilst the decision to immediately suspend all club activities may sound obvious in hindsight, at the time it was unclear when or at what point the CFA would have the fire under control, how much the town would be affected and depending on how much news our members had seen or heard they may have been planning to head down first thing on Boxing Day for patrol. The other concern of course was that if the authorities decided on short notice to re-open the town we did not want to have an unpatrolled beach.
- After a quick ring around the committee agreed to convene an urgent meeting on Boxing Day morning at my place. Whilst there was still a lot of uncertainty as to how much of the town had survived and when people would be allowed back in it was important for us to decide who would be on standby to head down as soon as the town was reopened. My husband and I agreed to be the first club representatives to get back into the town. I was the acting president as the president, my mum, was booked to fly overseas on Boxing Day morning. Important for us to have a presence back in town for two reasons – first, in order to get up to date information to the rest of the committee and our members (it was already apparent that getting information updates from the town was difficult) and secondly to ensure that our clubhouse was providing all it could as the community hub. We drove inland to Apollo Bay to the evacuation centre and then took one of the first buses arranged for the public to go and survey the damage on 27 December.
- Once we got into town it was immediately apparent that our clubhouse was a central hub. Craig Lapsley, the Emergency Management Commissioner, was standing right out the front as the bus pulled up and so I went straight over to him and introduced myself. To his credit he immediately put through a call to get my husband and I permission to remain in town to join with the community volunteers in their work and coordinate what the club could offer. For example we helped with simple things such as pulling out all of the food in the storeroom that was ready for Nippers to help feed all the firefighters and DEWLP workers in town. There were literally hundreds of firefighters coming through the clubhouse for breakfast, lunch and dinner for the entire period that the town was closed down. They really appreciated having somewhere away from the CFA station, which was the incident control centre where they could sit down and take 5 while they had their meals and either debriefed or prepared themselves for the hard work ahead. And of course they enjoyed our wonderful view of the beach. Other practical things we did were setting up some printers and internet range extenders that had been purchased, ready for the season. And connecting all the community volunteers to the club wifi network – they had all maxed out their own phone plans trying to get and to share news. Ensuring club facilities were running such as power and water at the bunkhouse which was housing fire fighters. Filling generators with fuel and

using club cleaning equipment, toiletries and staples to ensure the place was functional. Even just making the volunteers feel comfortable to use the meeting room to coordinate their efforts and feel at home in our clubhouse. Over the next couple of days we realised that we also had an important role to play as club reps in providing emotional support to familiar faces and club members as they arrived on chartered buses to survey the damage to property and the town. The scenes were quite confronting and the whole atmosphere just felt so foreign and surreal that the impact of seeing a familiar face cannot be underestimated.

- Once it became clear that the town would remain closed until well into the new year our focus turned to communicating with the other committee members to plan how and when club activities would resume. Also in regular contact with LSV and the lifeguard coordinator to ensure that when the town reopened the beach would be patrolled. We needed clearance from the EPA given the runoff of fire retardant, ash and other chemicals used in the bushfire into our river.
- Also regularly communicating with various officials from the Council to help coordinate where they could set up their teams and what was required. At one point we had an entire Council hazard assessment team set up in a club member's campsite right beside the clubhouse as we just did not have enough space inside the clubhouse to accommodate everyone at once.
- Then communicating with our members – as well as Surfguard emails we posted daily updates on our club website and Facebook pages to keep all members informed as the situation progressed.
- It was a challenging time as the information coming through to us regarding letting people back into the town kept changing. And understandably we were reluctant to make the call to completely cancel activities such as our Nippers program until it was absolutely clear that it could not proceed. A lot of planning and training goes into things like the Nippers program and bronze camp (due to commence on 28 December) and nobody wanted to call them off, as opposed to postponing them, unless and until we absolutely had to. However there came a point at which we realised we just had to make that call.
- Welcomed dignitaries and politicians including the head of the CFA, head of Victoria Police, Emergency Services Minister, Federal Member of Parliament, State Premier and Prime Minister Turnbull to our clubhouse. Unsurprisingly none of these people came to town alone so we also found ourselves hosting press conferences and media throngs inside and in front of our clubhouse.

4. Getting the season back on track

- Nippers was cancelled which was clearly very disappointing to all the kids. Other clubs kindly invited our registered Nippers to participate in their programs – Apollo Bay, Lorne, Fairhaven and our sister club, Altona.
- Bronze camp was rescheduled to late January over the Australia Day weekend. We were concerned that if no camp was run we would lose some new young members.
- Reguals were held regularly as required.

- Training courses were rescheduled. Our chief instructor and club captain did their best to run awards however unfortunately our participant numbers were down and this is something we will be working hard on next season.
- Patrol attendance was down over the rest of the season. Missing out on the momentum built in the week between Christmas and New Year when the club is buzzing affected member engagement in a big way. This is a challenge we are going to tackle head on this season and our club captain and vice president have devised a number of new initiatives to help with this.
- Wye Big Bash was a new event devised by our club captain to reengage our active members. Round robin of beach cricket and beach volleyball with patrol teams battling it out.
- Fundraising activities were rescheduled. An “Open House” was held in mid January to welcome holiday makers and other community members returning to the town and help club members catch up and reconnect. Also a great event for the kids who had missed out on their time together in Nippers.
- Colac Otway funding to encourage people back down the Great Ocean Road – we applied for funding for two further events – Trivia Night on the March long weekend and the “Wye Revival” family day over the Easter weekend.
- Contingency planning. We recognised pretty early on that the event would have a significant financial impact on our club. Membership fees were well down as many of our family members in particular wait to register on the Nippers registration day. A number of our regular fundraisers simply could not proceed. We were therefore conscious of putting our hand up and trying to ensure that we were not forgotten when fundraisers were working out who to distribute their funds to and when funding decisions for the recovery program were being made.
- The upcoming season will be eagerly anticipated by our members – particularly our Nippers. Thankfully the majority of those families are campers however obviously the loss of 117 houses in town will have an impact on our membership numbers. The good news is the huge cleanup job has almost finished and I know that the rebuilding of at least one house has begun. I also know of a number of families who have decided to rent other properties in town or in nearby Kennett River so that they can maintain their connection to Wye while the rebuilding process goes on.
- Looking back on the events, I am incredibly proud of the role our club played in this disaster and the way we navigated through it and I hope that our experience can provide helpful guidance to help other clubs prepare for the possibility of a similar event.