

Update on Bushfires in Australia - 5 March 2020
Written by Rotarian Phil Armstrong, based in New South Wales, Australia

First and foremost – at this date there are no current fires of any significance. Rain is falling and the flora is recovering well.

Bushfires have impacted in Australia in some way or another since June 2019 with the major impacts being in “Black Summer” – December 2019 and January 2020. During this time, some of the same communities have coped with drought, flood, hail as well as the bushfires!

Some figures on the impact of the bushfires and some of these are best guesstimates while others from my local area are known facts:

- Lives lost Australia – I believe 33
- Lives lost on the far South Coast NSW – District 9710- 8
- Houses lost in Australia – approx. 3500 plus outbuildings (garages, sheds)
- Houses lost in NSW – approx. 2500 plus outbuildings
- Houses lost in Eurobodalla Shire (my Shire) – 501 destroyed – 274 damages and 1716 in the line of fire – saved. Plus outbuildings and fencing.
- Houses lost in the Bega Valley Shire adjoining Eurobodalla (home of PRID Noel Trevaskis) – 448 destroyed – 126 damaged and 1344 in the line of fire – saved. Plus outbuildings and fencing.
- Bega Valley Shire fires had burnt 365,000 hectares which equates to 58% of the Shires land mass.
- Eurobodalla Shire fires had burnt 270,000 hectares which equates to 79% of the Shires land mass.
- If we consider District 9710 which covers the south eastern part of NSW plus Canberra and the ACT – it is believed that nearly 1200 homes have been destroyed which is nearly, half of those lost in the State of NSW.

Since the end of January – with the help of much needed rain – the fires have been controlled and the recovery process has begun but it will take years rather than months. I can only use some examples of progress that has been made and most of it is from my local area.

- The historical village of Mogo was severely impacted on New Year’s Eve. Half of the village main street was destroyed along with “Old Mogo Town” which was a historical display of Mogo’s gold mining past. Positives:
 - Old Mogo Town will reopen in the next couple of weeks offering gold panning to visitors.
 - The Australian Business Council has delivered temporary buildings to allow some of the businesses in Mogo to reopen.
 - Mogo Wildlife Park reopened on 1 March after it had been closed since New Year’s Eve. The staff had worked hard to save the park and apart from a few minor outbuilding being burnt – it was saved – including all 200 animals that include lions, tigers, rhino’s, gorillas, and many smaller primates.
- The three Rotary Clubs on the Sapphire Coast (Bega Valley Shire) are working together to support their community. Their activities to date include:
 - Visiting the 16 schools in the Shire to ascertain the immediate needs of students and families impacted by the fires.
 - Providing vouchers for students needing school shoes and ensuring that the vouchers are for local businesses. This supports the students as well as the local businesses.
 - Working with BlazeAid to assist in rebuilding rural fences with the support of tools and BBQ’s to support the volunteers.
 - Assisting the Social Justice Advocates to ensure that impacted families can access small appliances.

- Also assisting with the transport of donated caravans – many families impacted by the fires are currently living in caravans and may continue to do so in the near future.
- Working with the Bega Valley Shire Council to ensure that Rotary’s work is complimentary to Councils.
- Offering support through the provision of transport and administrative support to ensure that affected people can access appropriate assistance.
- BlazeAid are mentioned above but I highlight exactly what BlazeAid are and what they do. They are a charitable organisation that operates in the main with volunteers to firstly remove damaged rural fencing and then replace it. As you would understand – when so much land has been burnt out – many kilometres of fencing are destroyed. This impacts on the farmers ability to keep what stock they may have saved from the fires, or to restock if they are able- especially with the current rains and the regrowth of grass. Currently we have seven BlazeAid camps around District 9710 and they are being supported where possible, by the local Rotary Clubs through the provision of money, volunteers and catering.
 - Requests for support from BlazeAid are prioritised to perimeter fencing on income producing farms through to “hobby farms”.
 - Farmers are asked where possible, to pay for the materials (labour is all voluntary) and to work with the volunteers if they are able.
 - If farmers cannot fund the rebuild then BlazeAid will financially support the cost of the fences but obviously BlazeAid have limited funds as well.
- Rotary Clubs from within as well as outside of District 9710 are also supporting the recovery of those areas most affected.
 - The Coolamon Club from D9700 has twinned with the Batlow Club (9710) and together they are working on the construction of a remembrance park in Batlow. It will be used to focus the local community on the good that has come out of the fires and not just the bad.
 - Canberra Clubs are financially contributing to the recovery in the Snowy Mountains area.
 - Many Clubs are contacting our District Bushfire Recovery Committee offering support – both financial and emotional.

I guess that brings us to one of the other major impacts of the bushfires – the mental health issues. These will impact everyone in the communities and not just those that have lost homes or businesses. To be evacuated from your home on a number of occasions and not know what you may be returning to, has a major impact on everyone. Obviously for those that lost their homes – this is major but those that did not lose anything, can suffer from “survivor guilt”! I heard one story where a BlazeAid assessment team went out to a local farm and when they arrived the farmer was despondent. “I don’t know where to start or what to do?” This was a very experienced farmer who had been through many things in his life and although his house was safe – he had lost his outbuildings with most of his machinery, his stock and fencing. After a couple of hours with the BlazeAid team starting the process and setting a fencing plan in place – the farmer became more positive about the future. Many people just need to know that someone cares about them and want to provide support!!

While saying all of this – we are a resilient community/country. We will recover and one of the things that will help us recover is knowing that there are so many others offering support from within Australia as well as around the world. We may be a long way geographically from other parts of the world but obviously not forgotten and for that we thank you all. At the moment we need as much support as we can get – monetary, physiologically and emotionally.

Rotary is not normally a “first responder” – we usually pick up the things that drop through the cracks – but with the size of the devastation (especially during December and January), Rotary Clubs in Australia have been extremely active supporting people who have lost everything. We are a great organisation and we can do some amazing things. This is another occasion where we will do what we do best – make a difference in the world.