

**Blackwood Action Group**  
**C/- Post Office**  
**Blackwood Vic 3458**

16 November 2013

Mr Hamish Webb  
Acting Regional Manager Land and Fire  
Department of Environment and Primary Industries  
Grampians Region  
402-406 Mair Street  
Ballarat Vic 3350

Dear Mr Webb

The Blackwood Action Group was established by the community to address the fire and sewerage issues which are threatening to limit the town's viability and survival. Overcoming these issues will be critical for the survival and protection of our community.

As you would be aware, Blackwood (including Golden Point, Simmons Reef and Barrys Reef) has been identified as one of 52 Victorian towns throughout Victoria at high fire risk. The Blackwood Action Group and Blackwood community would like to work co-operatively with DEPI to address the fire issues along the public land interface with the town.

Blackwood is totally surrounded by public land which presents a fuel hazard where it borders the town. Wombat State Forest adjoins much of the north-western and south-western boundaries of the town and Lerderderg State Park mainly adjoins the north-eastern and south-eastern boundaries of the town. Many miscellaneous blocks of Crown land are also interspersed throughout the town, some of which no longer provide the community purpose for which they were originally reserved or intended. At least half of the freehold properties in the town border public land and many blocks are enclosed by public land. The community is concerned at the lack of on-going vegetation management and fire prevention on neighbouring public land, which is close to homes.

The Blackwood community enjoys living in the bush setting of Blackwood, but believes the public land interface with the town needs to be better managed for fire prevention to protect life and property. Residents are compelled by Moorabool Shire Council to clear and remove fire hazard on their property every year to minimise fire risk. Council officers regularly inspect properties for compliance within the required timeframe. This is in distinct contrast to the management of the adjoining public land, where minimal effort is made to reduce the risk on an ongoing annual basis.

The community appreciates the large extent of planned burning that has been undertaken by DEPI over recent years, but the fire risk gradually returns as fuels build up over subsequent years. Surface and near surface fine fuels such as grasses and weeds on public land close to houses need to be managed on an

annual basis through additional methods such as mowing or mulching to gain a more sustained reduction in fire risk.

The Action Group recommends DEPI instigates the creation of fuelbreaks on public land around the town, particularly in strategic locations where needed, to protect properties and houses on northern and western aspects. The Action Group has researched the Dandenong Ranges Bushfire Landscape pilot project initiated by the FSCV. The Dandenong Ranges appears similar to Blackwood, with houses on the conventional quarter acre block in a sloping treed landscape that adjoins large tracts of public land. The creation of new fuelbreaks and widening of existing fuelbreaks on public land in the Dandenong Ranges appears to be an important pro-active strategy in understanding and managing the hazard and risk to protect life and property. Fuelbreaks can be used to help control bushfires and provide control lines for planned burning and provide a buffer between hazardous vegetation on public land and nearby houses. The Action Group understands similar fuelbreak works have been undertaken by DEPI on public land in the Otways to protect high risk coastal communities. Based on these examples, there would seem to be no reason why fuelbreaks along the public land interface with freehold land couldn't be similarly considered and applied to strategic areas on public around Blackwood.

The native vegetation on public land close to houses in many areas around Blackwood has been severely degraded from past mining or prospecting activities and invasive weeds have recolonised many of these disturbed sites. Weeds are currently spreading and becoming denser near houses and present a serious fire hazard. Maintaining fuelbreaks, by removing or controlling weeds through mowing and mulching on an annual basis, is more likely to contribute to control measures, and will enhance conservation values rather than degrade them further. Weeds such as Gorse and Blackberry are known to be a high fire risk, so controlling these weeds even through mowing, mulching or slashing along fuelbreaks close to houses will reduce the fire risk.

It is clear that reducing and managing the hazards and risks along the public land interface with freehold land is crucial in protecting the town and the community urge this be addressed. Strategic fuelbreaks throughout the town will help to supplement and strengthen the safety of escape routes and roads that lead to the community fire refuge.

The Blackwood Action Group looks forward to your response and assistance in addressing the issues raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely

Noelle Shader  
**Blackwood Action Group**

Copies: Cr Paul Tatchell, Mayor, Moorabool Shire Council  
Mr Ian Stewart, Captain, Blackwood Fire Brigade