

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

16 November 2013

Mr Craig Lapsley  
Fire Services Commissioner  
L26, 121 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne Vic 3000

Dear Mr Lapsley

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. The community is concerned the town is doomed to extinction as a result of restrictions on building or rebuilding in bushfire prone areas. Many residents have indicated they will stay and defend their properties due to fear they may not be able to rebuild if they lose their house in the event of bushfire. Overcoming these issues is critical for the survival and protection of our community.

The Blackwood Action Group urges you to initiate a special case study to address the fire hazards around the township of Blackwood (including Golden Point, Simmons Reef and Barrys Reef). Although Blackwood has been identified as one of 52 Victorian towns throughout Victoria at high fire risk, the need to identify and mitigate much of the risks still needs to be addressed.

The Blackwood community appreciates the efforts already undertaken by your office (FSCV) to create a community fire refuge and install a community alert siren. The key to continued success in resolving the fire hazard issues in Blackwood will depend on the collaboration of land management agencies as well as emergency services working with the community. The 'Future Ready Communities' pilot program in the Colac Otways Shire that encourages the community to consider new and innovative ways to working together with emergency services appears to be a suitable program that could be adopted in Blackwood. The Action Group believes such a program needs to be initiated by the FSCV to effectively engage the relevant government agencies to work collaboratively with the Blackwood community to improve fire protection in and around the town.

Blackwood is unique in that it is totally surrounded by public land, which currently 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. Numerous 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 particularly concerned at the lack of vegetation management and fire prevention on neighbouring public land, which is close to houses.

The Blackwood community enjoys living in the bush setting of Blackwood, but clearly the public land interface with the town needs to be better managed for fire prevention to protect life and property. Moorabool Shire Council is pro-active in issuing fire hazard clearance notices to ensure residents undertake fire hazard removal to minimise this risk. Council officers regularly inspect properties for compliance within the stipulated timeframe. This is in considerable contrast to the management of the adjoining public land, where no apparent effort is made to reduce the risk on any ongoing regular 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 obtain a more sustained reduction in fire risk.

The Action Group recommends the creation of fuelbreaks on public land around the town, particularly in strategic locations where it is needed to protect properties and houses on northern and western aspects. The Action Group has considered the Dandenong Ranges Bushfire Landscape pilot project initiated by the FSCV. In many aspects the Dandenong Ranges appears similar to Blackwood, with houses on the conventional quarter acre block in a sloping treed landscape adjoining large tracts of public land. The creation of new fuelbreaks and widening existing fuelbreaks on public land in the Dandenong Ranges appears to be an important strategy in managing the hazard and risk to protect life and property. Established fuelbreaks will help control bushfires, provide control lines for planned burning and provide a buffer between hazardous vegetation on public land and nearby houses. Similar fuelbreak works have been undertaken in the Great Otway National Park to protect high risk coastal communities. Based on these examples, it would seem reasonable that fuelbreaks along the public land interface with freehold land could be similarly provided in strategic areas 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. Given these weeds are currently spreading, becoming denser and presenting a serious fire hazard, the managing authorities must be compelled to control them to reduce fire risk. 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 generally 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. The weed issue on public land around Blackwood needs further addressing from a fire hazard and fire management aspect.

The Blackwood Township Protection Plan needs updating to include the community fire refuge and community alerting siren. As part of this process, the Township Protection Plan could also be revised to include measures to mitigate fire hazard or risk in the landscape to protect the town. Strategic fuelbreaks throughout the town will also help supplement and strengthen the safety of escape routes and roads that lead to the community fire refuge.

Resilience in the community following a bushfire will largely depend on whether lives and property can be adequately protected and whether Blackwood residents will be permitted to rebuild if they lose their home. There needs to be a focus on protecting life and property through all aspects of planning and fire prevention and management. We urge the FSCV to engage the relevant government agencies to work together with the Blackwood community to achieve this common goal. It would appear that reducing and managing the hazards and risks along the public land interface with freehold land will play a crucial role in this outcome. The community needs to have the confidence and assurance that building or rebuilding is possible, to ensure the town's survival. This will minimise the risk of people putting their lives in danger trying to protect their house in a bushfire.

The Blackwood Action Group looks forward to your response, assistance and guidance in helping the Group to address the issues raised above.

Yours sincerely

Noelle Shader  
on behalf of the **Blackwood Action Group**

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