

BATLOW

RECOVERY FORUM SUMMARY

THANK YOU

Thank you to everyone who attended the Batlow Recovery Forum on Wednesday 19 August 2020 at the Batlow Literary Institute.

The forum was hosted by State Member for Wagga Wagga Dr Joe McGirr MP and Federal Member for Eden Monaro Kristy McBain.

This summary provides an overview of the discussions at the forum. The key theme was opportunity for renewal.



Presentations were made by:

- Major General Andrew Hocking - National Bushfire Recovery Agency, Deputy Coordinator
- Mark Conlan, Resilience NSW

(L-R) DR JOE MCGIRR, MARK CONLAN, KRISTY MCBAIN, MAJOR GENERAL ANDREW HOCKING, JAMES HAYES

IMPACT ON BATLOW

At tables of approximately 6 community members, plus a table facilitator, participants were asked to discuss, as a group, the impacts of bushfires and COVID-19 on the town and region. Each table was allocated a topic to explore in terms of impacts: 'Economic', 'Social', 'Natural Environment' and 'Built Environment'. A representative from each table reported back to the rest of the room.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Key points raised:

- Funding required for both short and long term recovery
- The impacts are long term. Recovery will take 5-30 years, providing there isn't another fire
- Key Batlow employment industries impacted
 - Loss of orchards, softwoods
 - Beef industry has experienced drought, stock losses, restructuring, as well as livestock deaths caused by increase in clover post fires
- Charities impacted with shutdowns limiting funds raised, however, communities continue to need support
- Uncertainty for businesses
- Ongoing recovery for services

"Batlow industries were already suffering from drought before bushfires and COVID-19"

"Community shop had to close for fires and then close again for COVID and now struggling to get volunteers"

"Put Batlow on the map, good and bad"

"Spike in economy during recovery, has now gone back down"

SOCIAL IMPACTS

Key points raised:

- Anger over the language used during and after the fire. The town was told it was "undefendable"
- Strong reactions – anger, shock, loss
- Out of town vs in town culture – each had different resources
- During fires town was more cohesive through necessity
- Displaced networks – not everyone has returned, people are feeling lost
- Fear of future
- A positive, socially, to come out of the bushfires is that it has energised certain sectors of community and engaged the younger generation

"Loss – widespread, felt by everyone whether burnt or not"

"Fear and uncertainty around businesses and employment, as well for those connected to vulnerable and older people"

IMPACTS ON NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Key points raised:

- Lost flora and fauna
- Loss of natural beauty, which impacts on tourism and key attraction that draws people to move to the area
 - Seeing visual impact affects mental health
 - Loss of Sugarpine Walk
- Lost forestry, which leads to jobs losses
- Catastrophic impact to private and crown land
- Leftover debris and dangerous trees
- Impact on farmers and their pastures
- Change in weather system, fog now rolling in to town

"Loss of dung beetles, which led to flies"

"Erosion occurring, loss of ground cover and damage of trees"

"Loss of hollow trees – breeding grounds"

"Fire caused instant drought, had to sell stock"

"Visual impact of cutting down trees"

IMPACTS ON BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Key points raised:

- Many key buildings and infrastructure impacted, including roads, cannery site, packing shed, privately owned accommodation and businesses, nursery and supply farms, forestry assets, walking tracks/trails and old hospital (backpackers accommodation)
- Lost service station
- Loss of jobs and income
- Impacts immediately after fires, included:
 - Vegetation cleared around infrastructure e.g. telecommunications, crown lands
 - Limited resources
- Issues surrounding rebuilding, including zoning issues for businesses, ability for accommodation to expand, and lack of free land for housing

"Loss of potential, with the cannery"

"Communications unreliable"

"Need for industrial generators"

NEEDS OF BATLOW

Each table was allocated a new topic to explore, as a group, the needs of Batlow and the solutions to the discussed impacts. A representative from each table reported back to the rest of the room.

ECONOMIC NEEDS

Key points raised:

- Need to diversify local industries
- Need a vision, strategic plans and community engagement, with all levels of government involved
- Develop tourism industry in area
- Support new industries
- Seal roads around dam
- Invest in infrastructure
- Attract seasonal workers

"Too reliant on forestry"

"Lost important tourism assets e.g. SugarPine – need major attractions e.g. botanical garden, free flight aviary"

"Walking tracks, use of old railway corridor, railtrail network"

"Seal Brindabella Rd"

SOCIAL NEEDS

Key points raised:

- Needs to be easy to obtain housing
- Develop community's skills to attract tourism
- Infrastructure to support industry and jobs
- Activities and facilities for youth
- Ongoing mental health support
- Events needed
- Action to reduce impact of future fires

"Tourism – develop capacity within community. Business mentors/training e.g. apply for grants, marketing. New business opportunities"

"Ability to socialise, people stopped socialising due to devastation of fires. Possible event to mark start of fires – lift everyone's spirits"

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT NEEDS

Key points raised:

- Concern over Humelink, need to preserve natural beauty
- Support to prevent landslides, future fires and control erosion
- Management of weeds and control feral animals
- Need for backburning, wider buffer zones and regrowing buffer zones
- Government agencies need to review and update management plans e.g. forestry, as well as develop management plans for areas of natural significance
- Private and public land holders held accountable
- Integrate wildlife corridors

"Streamline processes, cut red tape for local feasible projects"

"Keep blackberries under control"

"Holistic approach to maintain sustainability e.g. cultural burning"

BUILT ENVIRONMENT NEEDS

Key points raised:

- Need accommodation for seasonal workers and tourists
- Provide lot sizes and rezonings that attract people to move to area and allow rebuilding
- Seal key roads, including around Talbingo dam and connection to Talbingo
- Protect town from future fires
- Need business infrastructure
- Convert buildings into tourist sites and build attractions

"Reset button for town."

"Opportunity to look at LEP, how does the town function- need to assess as have lost so much"

"Many who work in metro, may consider working remotely/regional. Provide spaces to attract people"

"Cannery site could be tourist hub, e.g. cider bottling"

"Fresh thinking and new ideas"

NEXT STEPS FOR RECOVERY

Participants were asked to discuss what they think should be the next step in the recovery process.

Responses varied. A few tables recognised multiple community representative organisations already exist, with some identifying the need for these groups to work together and communicate more.

Key points raised:

- Community needs to unite, in order to advocate and create change
- A recovery committee could be created to unite existing groups however there are concerns over duplication and community members being time poor
- A follow up forum would be valuable
- Some people identified the need for a vision, strategy and plan to drive the process, while others emphasised the need for 'less talk, more action' with a focus on identifying and agreeing on projects



"Use existing committees to communicate with government"

"Change narrative from recovery to renewal and betterment"

"Key agencies come to town for a whole week so that people can come together"

POST EVENT FEEDBACK

39 FEEDBACK FORMS WERE COMPLETED

The following questions were asked, with participants asked to select a number between 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree). See below the average score for each question.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

The forum was appropriate 4.51

The venue was appropriate 4.39

The forum objectives were clearly stated 4.38

The forum content was interesting and relevant 4.46

I felt like I was able to have my say 4.33

There were opportunities for me to participate in an engaging and appropriate way 4.56

Participants were asked 'Do you have any suggestions about how the forum could have been improved?'. Overall the feedback was very positive, with many people saying it could not have been improved. Other responses included the need to identify actionable items that could be voted on, notice of questions prior to the event to allow consideration, run a followup forum and better heating.

Participants were asked 'What did you value most about today's forum?'. Common responses were the opportunity to express thoughts and hear the ideas of other community members, the community spirit and unity and hearing from different levels of government.

Finally, participants were asked 'Do you have any other comments?'. The most common responses were thank you and the need for a followup forum.

STAY IN TOUCH

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