



# Benalla Sustainable Future Group

Benalla Sustainable Future Group Inc.  
P.O. Box 642 Benalla 3672

## Benalla Sustainable Future Group (BSFG)

Submission – 27 June 2024

### Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

### Inquiry into Climate Resilience

#### Introduction

Benalla Sustainable Future Group is a group of concerned Benalla citizens who work with relevant stakeholders towards achieving a sustainable future for our municipality, the region and globally. Through several Action Groups, we undertake targeted activities to achieve this objective.

The Legislative Council's Inquiry falls directly within our sphere of interest and primary focus, and we are very pleased to have this opportunity to make a consolidated Submission set out below.

We commend the Legislative Council's work so far on instigating this important Inquiry and look forward to its recommendations on preparedness of the Victorian community to face the rapidly occurring climate change locally and globally, and recommendations on steps to be taken to address this existential challenge.

We note that BSFG also submitted to a similar Inquiry on 12 February 2020 "Inquiry into Community Action on Climate Change"; a copy of that Submission is attached to this document, as the matters covered in that Submission are still of direct relevance now.

Our response below addresses each TOR as necessary. In general, our comments are focussed on our locality, but much of this Submission has national and global application.

#### ***a. Main Risks and Impacts of Climate Change and c: Barriers facing Victoria:***

##### **Floods and Fire:**

Victoria's built environment in regional areas such as Benalla is historically situated in riverine locations due to the necessity for a drinking water supply in the early years of European settlement. The consequences are evident: Benalla for example has a long history of floods from the Broken River and its tributaries, with the most recent major events being in 1993 (500 houses inundated), 2010 and 2022.

Climate change experts have stated clearly that increased frequency of and more severe flooding, along with extremes of temperature and risk of bushfire, are an inevitable consequence of rapid human-induced climate change. Floodplains such as the Broken River will be subject to more severe flood impacts, with major direct consequences for communities such as Benalla. An indirect but severe consequence is the likelihood that home and business insurance will become prohibitive or simply unobtainable for property located within a designated flood area, even if parts of such localities are themselves flood-free<sup>1</sup>.

Associated with this impact is the strong likelihood of significant losses in property value. Events in Lismore NSW after the devastating floods of 2022 bear stark witness to this impact on individuals and the local community.

Improved flood mapping will assist in preventing future development in high-risk areas. Nonetheless, a recent development by Benalla Rural City Council, using state and federal government grants and council funds, resulted in a cinema being built directly in the floodplain of the Broken River. The 2022 flood referred to above inundated the site whilst still under construction. The seating levels for this cinema are below the major flood level: whilst the CMA required Council to waterproof the external walls to attempt to obviate potential flood impacts internally, this seems a poor response to an obvious problem.

Riverine environments also commonly include important stands of vegetation. These, while not as high-risk for fire as in more mountainous heavily vegetated terrain, are nonetheless an increasing risk to their communities. Benalla has escaped major fires from this source, but the possibility remains and indeed grows under the impacts of climate change.

Benalla however also includes hill country forming the foothills of the Strathbogie Ranges and the Mt Samaria locality, as well as towards the Warby Ranges. These areas are already becoming economically uninsurable due to the risk of fire, and as fire seasons become longer and more intense this problem will be exacerbated.

### **Increased extremes of temperature:**

Predicted increases in temperature extremes impact disproportionately on the lower socio-economic and age demographics of our community. Benalla ranks at the lower end of the scale of Victorian municipalities and has an older age profile than average. Abundant evidence indicates that excessive heat is a silent but deadly killer, exacerbated by age and socio-economic status.<sup>2</sup>

Projections suggest that by 2050, mass migrations due to unliveable summer conditions in many countries are an inescapable consequence of unchecked temperature increase. Year on year, heat records are being broken: the UN Secretary-General suggested recently that Earth is only four years away from crossing the 1.5 degrees of heating.<sup>3</sup>

In Victoria as long ago as the 2009 summer, excess heat deaths far exceeded the tragic 173 fire-related deaths in the Black Saturday fires. The State Government's response saw a reduction of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-13/kensington-banks-melbourne-water-flood-mapping-value-loss-fears/103960736>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240613-how-to-cool-down-urban-heat-islands-in-americas-heatwaves>

<sup>3</sup> <https://fortune.com/2024/06/05/climate-change-heat-records-windfall-taxes-paris-accords/>

around 50% in the next period of intense summer heat in 2014, but the figure remained at more than 100.

Benalla's relatively aged and poorer standard housing stock coupled with few places to retreat to in extreme heat means that we are particularly exposed to likely impacts from this aspect of climate change. Recent state government data on housing for example shows that in terms of thermal comfort for this region: -

- 46% reported that their house was too hot last summer (state average 44%)
- 36% reported their house being too cold (state average 39%);
- 20% had to leave their house due to extreme heat or cold (state average 18%)

#### **Economic Impacts:**

Agriculture is a key part of Benalla's economy. Changes in rainfall patterns together with increased temperatures and fewer frosts (important to some product growth) will significantly impact our agricultural sector.

Benalla also benefits economically from snow traffic travelling through to the Victorian alpine snowfields of Mt Buller, Falls Creek, Mt Hotham and Mt Buffalo, or those in NSW. A recent report suggested that the ski industry is at risk of collapse due to climate change, with the snow season potentially reduced to half due to increased temperatures.<sup>4</sup> Flow-on consequences will adversely impact towns such as Benalla (a convenient travel distance for a break between Melbourne and our ski fields), let alone the towns relying most heavily on this industry.

#### ***b. How the Victorian Government is Preparing:***

BSFG is not in a position to comment on this question.

#### ***c. Barriers to upgrading infrastructure:***

BSFG is not able to provide direct comment on this question. We do note that (from our subgroup Renewable Energy Benalla) that major impediments exist to the uptake of home batteries (principally cost), and to implementation of community batteries. This second consideration relates the current State Government policies and tariff structures which make it impossible for Communities to actually benefit from Community Batteries (as distinct from the system benefits by the likes of Ausnet).

#### ***d. Adequacy of the current planning system***

BSFG is keenly interested in this issue. Our Group holds strong views on the need for much better controls on subdivision and associated land clearance, and on dwelling type, solar orientation and associated matters.

The current provision in the planning scheme for replacement offsets for clearing of native vegetation or alternatively a payment to the planning authority is insufficient to achieve meaningful replacements. We are opposed to offsets outside a municipality for loss of vegetation within that municipality, and to the notion of contributions, unless a requirement is imposed which demonstrates to the community that the offsets or financial contribution are beneficial to the municipality.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.9news.com.au/national/snow-season-perisher-thredbo-slashed-up-to-half-ski-industry-at-risk-of-collapse-climate-change/10b3454e-3e63-41a1-b48d-a99fc40d59e1>

*Other matters relevant to the planning system will be subject to submissions by individual members of BSFG.*

**e. *What more can be done?***

The scope for responding to this question is so wide that we are not able to devote enough resources at this point to do it justice.

**f. *Whether further enquiries may be required***

This again is a matter on which BSFG is not able to comment.

**Summary:**

BSFG is greatly appreciative of the opportunity to make this submission. The submission has been prepared for and is supported by the Management Committee of BSFG. Should the Inquiry wish to hear from us to expand on the points made above, we would be prepared to do so.

David Blore

President BSFG

27 June 2024