

# Parliament of Victoria: Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

## Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

### Submission by Pyrenees Shire Council

5 June 2023

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Council is pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee in respect of the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria.

#### About our Shire

The Pyrenees Shire covers an area of 3,434 square kilometres with a population of 7645 (2022). The landscape varies from the very steep hill areas of the Mt Cole, and Pyrenees Ranges to the undulating flat open terrain around the Natte Yallock, Stoneleigh areas. The climate varies between the north and the south of the region. North of the Pyrenees Ranges there is a warmer, drier climate. South of the Pyrenees Ranges is a cooler, wetter climate. Rainfall figures across the Shire ranges between around 480 millimetres per annum in the north and 700 millimetres per annum in the south.

The agriculture sector makes the greatest contribution to economic output in the region. While the agriculture sector is one of the Shire's largest industries, wine manufacturing, health and education, retail, accommodation, cafes and restaurants, construction and transport industries all play an important part in our economy.

Tourism is another important industry to the Shire. The Shire has a range of natural attributes which lend themselves to outdoor activity such as bushwalking, cycling, and sightseeing with around 20 cellar doors operating, and a variety of wine-related and other events such as the Lake Goldsmith Steam Rally, Pyrenees Art Exhibition and Sale, Pyrenees Unearthed, and the Avoca Races.

While we have a relatively small population, Pyrenees Shire Council is custodian of an extensive range of community assets that it provides to facilitate delivery of services to the community. For road assets, it has responsibility for 2,048km of roads varying from sealed roads to access tracks and fire-tracks, 291 bridges and major culverts; 45km of kerb and channel and 18km of footpaths.

The region is home to substantial levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, characterised by low levels of education attainment and low household incomes. The Pyrenees Shire Local Government Area (LGA) is ranked in the 34th percentile of most disadvantaged LGAs in Victoria.

#### October / November 2022 flood events

Pyrenees Shire was impacted by a series of rain events leading to flooding in October 2022. Further rain events occurred in November 2022 adding to already soaked waterways and catchments, and causing further flooding. The communities of Avoca, Lexton, Natte Yallock, Beaufort and Amphitheatre were the most significantly impacted with many homes, local roads, bridges and community facilities damaged.



During the evening of 7 October, residents from the Natte Yallock community were isolated by floodwaters with a number of homes inundated and emergency services unable to gain access to the township. The communities of Avoca, Lexton and Beaufort also experienced significant flooding.

On the 13 October 2022, further flash flooding impacted the communities of Avoca, Beaufort, Natte Yallock, Lake Goldsmith, Trawalla, Amphitheatre and Lexton. The event resulted in the opening of a temporary Relief Centre at the Beaufort Community Resource Centre, where residents requiring temporary accommodation attended. Others self-evacuated and went to friends or relatives for the night. Roads were flooded stopping residents from being able to get home.

Heavy rainfall fell overnight on 13 November 2022 and caused significant flash flooding in Beaufort. The Beaufort Lake spilled and contributed to the flooding. The Relief Centre was again established at the Beaufort Community Resource Centre. According to the SES, deep flooding of up to 0.5m occurred to most properties along Leichardt Street. There were requests for assistance to help residents in Leichardt Street to get out of their houses as they became isolated by floodwater.

Flooding along the Mt Emu Creek impacted areas between Beaufort and Skipton over approximately five days.

### History of flood events in Pyrenees

The Pyrenees Shire has a long history of riverine flood events that have caused substantial damages to the local infrastructure (eg. roads and bridges) and agriculture (e.g. fencing and crops). Towns impacted by riverine flooding include Beaufort, Landsborough, Barkly, Avoca, Natte Yallock Amphitheatre, Lexton, Raglan, Glenpatrick, Glenlofty, Crowlands, Nowhere Creek and Waubra. While there is a high number of buildings at risk of flooding in Natte Yallock and Beaufort, other towns only have a few buildings at risk of flooding. Due to the steep terrain flooding can develop quickly with little warning time available. The road/bridge networks within Pyrenees municipality are frequently and, at times, significantly impacted by flooding. Road access is often cut as a result of heavy rainfall events, leaving a large number of people isolated.

### Strengths of the Pyrenees communities

During times of adversity, rural communities have significant capacity to increase in strength and work closely together to protect one another and the community, as a whole, from outside influences and impacts. Research indicates that there is a strong link between the strength of the community (social capital) and its ability to manage and respond to natural disasters.

The Pyrenees communities are becoming more and more resilient, and history has shown that our communities are very innovative at overcoming adversity with high levels of community spirit. There is a lot of local knowledge in the municipality when it comes to natural disasters. Pyrenees has a strong history of volunteering which adds to important social capital. Service organisation and volunteer activity commenced at the start of the flood event with activities centered on sandbagging, food preparation and delivery of goods to those isolated by the floodwaters.

Community members have greatly assisted in the response and recovery to date, and will be engaged with as recovery activities continue.

Having said that, there are limits to the capacity of volunteers, and Pyrenees communities often lack the volunteers needed due to the demands of volunteering and the ageing demographic.

## Context

Communities, families, individuals, community organisations, sporting clubs and businesses across Pyrenees have been adversely affected by the 2022 floods. The flooding was widespread across the municipality, with inundated homes, properties, farmland and community and sporting complexes. Roads, bridges, culverts and other infrastructure have been washed out and/or been badly damaged. There is an estimation of over \$7M of infrastructure repair works required, and this figure does not include repair to homes or community assets. In summary,

- Over 800 individual segments of local road were impacted.
- 199 private residential, commercial and farming properties have been affected.
- 13 recreation reserves, playgrounds and community assets were affected within Avoca, Natte Yallock, Lexton, Beaufort, Waterloo and Lake Goldsmith.
- 27 roads/bridges were closed.
- 300km of fencing was damaged
- 3 significant events were cancelled (Lake Goldsmith Steam Rally, the Avoca Races, Beaufort Agricultural Show)

This submission puts forward what worked and what didn't work in relation to response, relief and recovery. It includes Council's perspective and also comments made by community members. Recovery is underway and will continue for the coming years.

## What is working well

- In late October, the State Government provided Council with \$500,000 under the Council Support Fund which was very welcomed. This enabled Council to have capacity to support our communities as they undertake clean-up activities and work to restore local facilities and services.
- The decision to allow Council's to use own source day labour under the Victorian DRFA funding was also very welcome, and providing some flexibility in how restoration of assets could be achieved due to limited contractor availability.
- The support provided by relief and recovery agencies particularly Emergency Recovery Victoria has been fantastic. Staff members have been very responsive and helpful in providing responses to questions and advocating on behalf of Pyrenees.
- Council advocated to have the Rural Finance Primary Producer Recovery Grant and the Rural Landholder Grant closing date extended which allowed more time for primary producers to submit applications following a busy year since the floods. Council is really grateful that the request was heard and followed through.
- The ongoing Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP) funding provided to Council is essential and goes some way to support Pyrenees to plan and prepare for emergencies.
- Not for profit organisations such as Rotary and BlaizeAid being available to help residents with fencing, meals and clean up. They were, and still are, offering great support for residents and farmers in the Pyrenees.

## What needs improving

### Early Warning Systems

The large geographical area of the Pyrenees Shire, being in the **upper catchment of several river systems**, requires particular preparation and response. **Flooding occurs quickly and there is little opportunity for warning or notification.** Roads and areas become inaccessible within a short period of time making it difficult to

accurately assess damage in the early stages. Flood waters from the Pyrenees drains to the lower catchments where the communities have more warning and more time to prepare, and so their impacts become more reportable events.

Funding is required to install early warning systems for rainfall, flood and stream gauges (identified in CMA's strategic plan and also local flood studies). There is a need for more publicly accessible rain gauge data linked to previous events so the community can know when to act. As Pyrenees is a small resourced council, it is out of Council's capacity to pay for gauge infrastructure without financial support.

#### Resourcing of State Emergency Service

There is no permanent SES unit located within the Pyrenees Shire and there was a lack of SES presence in this municipality during and following the flood events. SES came from surrounding LGA areas which made response uncoordinated, and some fractured data being received by ICC and Council's MEMO. There was a visible presence of SES personnel in Beaufort for the November 13<sup>th</sup> phase of the event which was appreciated. Council understands that the flood event was widespread and VicSES personnel did the best they could, but this put more pressure on Council and other local measures to be put in place for the response phase.

#### Lack of Rapid Impact Assessments (RIAs)

As there wasn't a strong presence of VicSES in the Pyrenees, Rapid Impact Assessments (RIA) were not fully undertaken which is a responsibility of VicSES. The information that was received was very sparse and took longer than it should have. As a consequence, Council didn't get an early snapshot of the emergency impact used to inform relief activities and delayed Secondary Impact Assessments (SIAs) being started. In addition, there was an increased reliance on Council to provide data to government departments, and at times, at short notice.

The extent of the flooding in Pyrenees wasn't acknowledged at first or had the impact reports to support the extent compared to lower catchment communities. It appears that Pyrenees was left out of the bigger picture, and we found ourselves trying to prove our impacts as time went by.

#### Incident Control Centre (ICC) and communication

There were challenges around communication involving the control agency and the location of the Incident Control Centre. The original location of the ICC (Ballarat) was locationally correct but became more of a problem when the ICC closed (Ballarat area was not impacted very much). The ICC transitioned to Horsham then to Bendigo later which created some communication problems for agencies especially the MERC and Council who were not informed of the ICC changes. In addition, an ICC was not established after the event on 13 November.

#### Insurance Policy and Mitigation Initiatives

Insurance companies' policy are strict around rebuilding 'like for like' when there could be opportunity for mitigations initiatives to reduce the need for the amount of insurance claims in the longer term. For example, the Avoca Recreation Reserve complex was inundated by flood water. Thankfully the building is insured however it would be reasonable to implement resilience measures such as lifting air-conditioning units up off ground level. The lifting is not covered by the insurance company so additional funds need to be sought by the committee. This adds a further impost on the already busy committee on sourcing funding.

#### Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) Claims

There is a heavy administrative reliance on councils to submit DRFA funding approvals which are complex and time consuming. The claim process and portal are easy to navigate, however the process around provision of evidence is very complex and seems to be geared towards denial if the slightest thing isn't captured properly. The need to have fairly current photographic evidence of the 'normal' or 'before' state is expensive

and just one more item that has been put onto local government without any associated funding. This cannot be maintained through current resources, so has to be specifically commissioned every few years.

The fact that councils must pay the first \$35,000 of claims against an event is a significant impost on a small rural council. Also, with the reasonably constant changes around what is eligible and not eligible to claim is difficult to navigate.

The delays in being able to commence works that must be first inspected and approved, causes a reputation issue for Council with its communities. The process on getting non-emergency emergency impact repairs approved before being able to do the works is not understood by our communities and causes reputation issues when they just think that Council is slow in completing repairs.

### Betterment

The concept of 'betterment' is not confirmed under the Natural Disaster Financial Assistance (NDFA) funding arrangements. There is opportunity to repair infrastructure, particularly roads, in a more resilient format to avoid future damage recurring and therefore improving accessibility for community members and save repair costs in the long term.

Pyrenees has a number of examples where improved design of asset restoration can reduce future flood damage to roads bridges and major culverts.

In addition, insurance companies insist on rebuilding 'like for like'. Again, there is the opportunity to build back better so infrastructure can better withstand the next natural disaster saving money in the longer term. Community members are instrumental in providing input into the repair of community assets. With the disruption to their community activities, facility repair and managing their club member's expectations, they are exhausted. A more disaster resilient community asset will ease the workload on community members as well as Councils and other government departments on the repair process.

### Relief/Recovery Case Management

With the widespread nature of the flood event in Pyrenees, it is preferable that case management is conducted through the local health service where there is local knowledge, an understanding of Pyrenees communities and better opportunity for outreach services. Funding is required for the local health service to employ case managers. Whilst, the hotline personnel are skilled and extremely helpful, the current arrangement with case management being conducted through the Flood Recovery Hotline, is not ideal. To deliver more effective relief and recovery assistance for residents, case managers should be locally based where case management staff and council relief/recovery staff can have direct contact at an earlier stage. Unfortunately, it took quite some time for direct connections to be made between hotline personnel and Council's flood recovery staff.

### Capacity of small rural councils in emergencies

The capacity of small rural councils, such as Pyrenees, to continue to deal with emergencies becomes harder as time goes on. This has been made more apparent with the recent rolling events, fires in 2019, COVID pandemic and then the 2022 floods. Staff are at risk of burnout, and it is more difficult to access expertise and support in the context of a widespread disaster. There is a disruption to business as usual with emergency management skilled staff being seconded to EM roles and then having to backfill positions.

There is also the financial burden on councils with the time and resources needed to repair damaged infrastructure, fill relief/recovery roles and plan for future events. Without discretionary funding and having a small rate base, it is difficult to manage Council's responsibilities in emergencies with business as usual with as little disruption to normal services as possible.

There is a large administrative reliance on councils to supply data to government departments, and quite often at very short notice and the DRFA process. Council appreciates the need for accurate data to inform future response, relief and recovery activities, however this puts pressure on councils with small staff numbers.

Building resilience in communities and undertaking mitigation work will require ongoing investment beyond the capacity of Pyrenees Shire Council.

Appreciate the funding support provided so far, but more funding is required for councils to continue with their emergency management responsibilities and provide support for the communities to recover well.

#### Other Related Matters

Pyrenees wasn't recognised as experiencing flooding in the first instance. Emergency relief grants were not open to Pyrenees residents on the website and whilst this was rectified immediately, it did cause inconvenience for residents looking to claim the grant.

This flood event further highlights the value of reliable information and evidence in the form of flood studies.

Council in collaboration with the relevant Catchment Management Authorities have undertaken flood studies for affected parts of the shire however further state support is needed to see these included as overlays in the Pyrenees Planning Scheme.

#### In Closing

With the prediction of more extreme climactic events, ongoing funding and support are vital for response, relief and recovery organisations to support communities. This includes funding for infrastructure mitigation initiatives to protect communities, build resilience, increase volunteerism and adapt to climate change.

Council would be happy to provide further information in respect of any issue raised in this submission. Councils Flood Recovery Coordinator, Jane Bowker can be contacted on [REDACTED] / [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Yours faithfully,

[REDACTED]  
Jim Nolan  
Chief Executive Officer