

SAYS IT ALL: A message left on Ruffy's main street after the bushfires. PHOTO: Alexandra Mulcaster



'I'M STILL HERE': Craig Martin of Mill Spring Farm inspects burnt fruit trees on his multi generation orchard outside of Ruffy. PHOTO: Joanna Beard

WON'T GO AWAY: David Russell, chair of the recently formed Community Recovery Council (CRC) which represents the needs of the bushfire-affected community, sits inside Ruffy Community Hall. PHOTO: Alexandra Mulcaster

The many hands of bushfire recovery

'IT MIGHT SOUND CRAZY, BUT IT'S A PRIDE THING'

Three new journalism graduates from RMIT visited Strathbogie Shire in September to take back to Melbourne an insight into the longevity of bushfire recovery. In part one of a two-piece contribution to this masthead, their findings align with those of those communities impacted.

By LOUIS HARRISON, ALEXANDRA MULCASTER and JOANNA BEARD

Charred trees form neat rows, and from a distance, the orchard is desolate with no signs of life.

"See those green shoots here? Yeah, this one will survive, I reckon," says Craig Martin, a multi-generation Ruffy orchardist.

Mr Martin watched on as his orchard and livelihood were destroyed by last summer's deadly Victorian bushfires.

Only a quarter of his four thousand fruit trees survived.

"It might sound crazy, but I'm hoping to be back at the market selling fruit this year," he says.

"Even if I only have one box, I want to be there to say 'I'm still here'. It's a pride thing."

Winds in excess of 100kph and forty-degree heat drove the Longwood fire across more than 130,000 hectares of land last summer.

The home of Mr Martin's parents in Ruffy was one of the 320 homes destroyed in the blaze.

Walking around its razed concrete foundations, the only thing remaining is his mother's vintage Singer sewing machine which looks as new as the day it was brought home.

Bushfires and the devastation they bring are not new to the Australian landscape.

As the severity and frequency of these events worsen, they have become an increasingly challenging issue for all levels of government to tackle.

And getting it right is crucial.

Sitting in a busy café, Euroa MP Annabelle Cleeland reflects on the damage done to her family's property and her community in the January bushfires.

"I'm heartbroken because I genuinely know that we will have localities that won't be able to rebuild," she says.

Ms Cleeland says while the community has rallied around each other in support, it hasn't been easy.

"If we don't support each other, no one else is coming to help us, but the human toll for that is significant," Ms Cleeland says.

"Exhaustion and fatigue and loneliness and burnout are significant mental health challenges throughout the region."

Ms Cleeland says, ahead of this coming summer's fire danger period, listening to what impacted communities need is critical in planning responses to disaster.

"We want a community-supported response.

"We have people burnt out, isolated, lonely, and homeless, and we are more than eight months out.

"We're coming into a high fire danger period as well," she says.

David Russell is the chair of the Community Recovery Committee (CRC).

He has spent a lot of time in the Ruffy Hall, among colourful crocheted blankets and sunken couches, supporting his community in the wake of the fires.

The hall and the neighbouring CFA shed are the only buildings which remain standing in town.

Since the fires, the Ruffy Hall has been a lifeline for the town, hosting community events, financial and mental health counselling and a supply of food and clothing.

"There's been lots of volunteer activity. Individuals and organisations have come here and helped. It's great," he says.

"(The help) will start to dwindle away over time, but the fire's impact won't go away, and the recovery is going to take a long time.

"We know that."

Further down the road, Don Cook's verandah overlooks a large property as a cool breeze sweeps through.

It's peaceful here.

Birds swoop in and out from the gum trees along the creek line, and Evie the Kelpie looks around with doting eyes.

But a ring of blackened trees around the property tells the story of a very different day in January.

As a Ruffy CFA volunteer of 20 years, Don is well-versed in how fire fronts move across a landscape and what needs to be done to contain them.

But he says the fire that impacted the region this year was largely "unpredictable" and almost "uncontrollable".

"The old playbook for fighting fires proved less effective on this particular occasion," he says.

Mr Cook's home was spared.

He says he did the necessary preparations like leaving the rooftop sprinklers on, slashing grass around the buildings and clearing the gutters.

But he's unsure how much of that actually helped and how much was "pure luck".

"I'm not going to harp on and say the way I prepared my property is what saved it, because I'm just not sure how true that is," he says.

"It seemed almost totally random which homes were destroyed and which homes weren't".

Mr Cook says there's "real fear" in the community about future fire seasons and how to prepare for them.

Speaking to him, he has a lot of pride in his community.

"This disaster has exposed our communities to a shared trauma that has actually brought us closer together in a compassionate and supportive way," he says.

"The unsolicited support from communities across Victoria and beyond, as well as from people that we will never get to meet, has been positively overwhelming."

Mr Cook points out a small garden bed beneath the verandah, recently planted by volunteers in the wake of the fires.

The dark soil is studded with young native shrubs with healthy glistening leaves.

He says he cleared the patch last year, but hadn't got around to planting before the fires swept through.

He seems happy to see the plants in the ground now, gaining strength as unseen roots gently push through the soil.