

For immediate release

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Bushfire town receives legal advice about recovery eligibility

The heavily bushfire impacted community of Sarsfield has received legal advice about its eligibility for the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery grants program.

‘We were gobsmacked when we were knocked back by the National Resilience and Recovery Agency,’ said Simon Hof, the President of the Sarsfield Community Association (SCA). ‘When we asked for feedback, the NRRRA simply said that we weren’t eligible because of the ABN of our hall committee. This same situation has affected the bushfire impacted towns of Ensay and Wairewa. We’ve spoken to lawyers to see if this is correct and have received legal advice that we are in fact eligible and should have had our applications assessed properly.’

‘The guidelines are easy to read,’ explained Simon. ‘Section 5.1 has a list of entities which are eligible to apply, including ‘an incorporated not-for-profit organisation’ which fits the hall committee perfectly. The next section has a list of entities which aren’t eligible, which includes ‘a Commonwealth or state government agency or body (including government business enterprises) with the exception of those entities referred to in Section 5.1.’

‘This indicates to us that there’s no problem with our eligibility. We were assisted by professional grant writers, and Ensay’s application was also prepared by professional grant writers. Even those companies, who are experienced in reading guidelines like these, are clear that we are eligible to apply and have our application assessed for funding.’

Sarsfield’s application was for funding to replace the ageing hall, the only public asset in the community which does not even have a pub, school, or any place other than the hall for the community to gather for recovery events and activities.

Simon explained that the communities of Sarsfield, Wairewa and Ensay are now banding together to confirm the initial legal advice which they’ve received. ‘It’s reassuring to have our lawyers back us up and say that our reading of the guidelines is correct, and that we deserve to at least be assessed.’

On seeking feedback about the reason for the knockback from the administrators of the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery grants, the Sarsfield community was told that their application was never even read by the assessors, as the ABN of the hall committee indicated that it was a ‘state government entity’.

‘That was a real kick in the teeth,’ Simon said. ‘If we’d been assessed properly and found that our application didn’t deserve funding, we’d have taken it on the chin. But to discover that they’d thrown our application in the bin at the very start of the process, without reading past our ABN, is further traumatising a community which is still dealing with the devastation of the bushfires.’

Simon went on to describe how this difficult situation arose. ‘In rural areas, local halls and recreation reserves are either under council management or under the management of the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP).

‘Most rural people wouldn’t know if their local football oval or hall was council or DELWP land, they just appreciate how these assets support the community through providing a venue for local sports and community gatherings.’

‘Sarsfield’s recreation reserve is under DELWP management. What this means here on the ground is that it’s managed by a hardworking group of six community volunteers, who hold working bees and barbecues and enable the facility to remain available for the community to use.’

Following the Black Summer bushfires, each impacted community was required to form a Community Recovery Committee (CRC) to guide decisions and apply for funding for bushfire recovery projects.

‘We did everything we were asked to do,’ Simon explained. ‘We formed a CRC (now called the Sarsfield Community Association) which from the outset has worked hand-in-hand with the long-standing hall committee. We consulted with Sarsfield locals, and our application was based on the recovery priorities which the community were crystal clear that they wanted. Both community groups are incorporated, and for the Black Summer bushfire recovery grant we used the ABN of the local hall committee.’

Further compounding the dismay of the Sarsfield, Ensay and Wairewa communities is the fact that they have since become aware of other projects funded under the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery fund which will occur on DELWP-managed land, but where the application was submitted by a different community committee, whose ABN didn’t denote them as a ‘state government entity’.

Scott Lamshed, a member of the Sarsfield Community Association, described the trauma of not only hearing that Sarsfield’s application wasn’t even read, but the response from the NRRRA since that time has made things worse for him and other community members. ‘All they’ve said to us is that we were responsible for ensuring that we were eligible to apply. We checked everything and even the professionals were clear that we were eligible. It smacks of victim blaming, with no discussion allowed.’

Scott and his partner lost a home during the fires, and he described how difficult it still is two years later. ‘Two years on, we’re still working on cleaning up our property. It’s gut-wrenching to be honest. However, the physical impact of the bushfires is nothing compared to the emotional impacts.’

Scott went on to describe how the NRRRA outcome had compounded the emotional impacts following the bushfires. ‘This response from the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery fund was incredibly hard to take. How can they throw out our application, fund others on DELWP land, fund projects which were nowhere near the fires, and then tell us that ‘we should have known’ that we’d be ineligible?’

Sarsfield was one of the most heavily impacted towns during the Black Summer bushfires. Of the 270 homes in Sarsfield prior to the fires, 200 properties were damaged, and 80 homes were completely destroyed by the bushfires.

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