

1 December 2009

Fencing Program Must Continue

The contribution of volunteers in re-fencing fire affected properties in the Traralgon South – Callignee district has been an outstanding success by any measure. Approximately 500 kilometres of boundary fences have been constructed by volunteers from all over Australia.

Timber Communities Australia's Tasmanian members were seeking a way they could help fire victims immediately after the fires. The fact that this district appeared to miss media coverage in the weeks following the tragedy made the refencing project a worthwhile and accessible project for the Timber Communities Australia volunteers.

Since entering a partnership with Tasmanian Rotary Clubs in March, 198 volunteers from both organisations have trekked back and forward across Bass Strait to assist with the fencing effort. Some of the volunteer crews have made multiple trips and intend to return in the New Year.

The presence of a knowledgeable and well organised fencing coordinator has made the project so effective. Benn Friedrichson has been one of fifteen coordinators engaged by the Victorian Farmers Federation and funded by the Department of Primary Industries. In the course of my work I have visited other communities where similar programs have been operating. I believe the Traralgon South program has been the most successful I have seen due to its continuity, availability of donated fencing materials and regular weekly supplies of manpower to allocate to this arduous task.

Friday December 4th marks the end of Benn's funding. The only viable reasoning for this can be the Government treating all refencing projects as equal without measuring their success in the communities. The fact is there is at least 12 months fencing ahead for the Traralgon South / Callignee community.

Unlike the farms that lost fences at Labertouche (where the fencing project was completed some months ago) volunteers face challenging terrain at Traralgon South; extremely steep and undulating and rarely easy going. Never the less, crews never balk at the task.

The volunteer crews keep returning to assist is testament to the resourcefulness of the local community, evidenced by the leadership shown in establishing and running its own relief centre. Similarly affected communities waited for Government and welfare agencies to assist and, in my view, have been slower to recover as a consequence.

A quick estimate of wages, ancillary materials, fuel and on-costs suggests a budget of no more than \$150,000 would allow this program to run for another full year by which time the refencing task would be largely completed. It is a folly of the Victorian Government that its official line (as broadcast on ABC Gippsland, 1 December) is "service clubs can take over the coordination".

As our PM would say “fair suck of the sauce bottle”! Service clubs have been doing more than their share for the past 9 months.

For that matter, so has the Tasmanian Government through supplying free transport on TT Line for all volunteers, their vehicles and equipment. Let us not forget other Tasmanian companies such as Gaffney’s Machinery who sent across a tractor and post rammer for 8 months; Healthcare Insurance for first aid kits and insurance for TCA volunteers or the countless donations of household items from unknown Tasmanian sources bought over by the work crews.

It seems that somebody in Melbourne, oblivious to what has happened on the ground, is calling the shots over the fencing coordinator’s funding. The fact that there is still much work to be done is reason enough to reward the community with additional funding, not punishing it as if it hasn’t achieved.

I commend the calls by our local MPs Russell Northe and Peter Ryan and our MLA Peter Hall to reconsider and extend the positions funding in the New Year. There are many volunteer crews willing to make return visits to assist a resourceful community in need, one that they have all developed a great affinity with.

Trevor Brown
South East Regional Coordinator
Timber Communities Australia
Cowwarr