

ABOUT OUR COMMUNITY

The Toowoomba Region is part of Southeast Queensland, a dynamic region that generates one-fifth of Australia's economic growth and is home to one in seven Australians. The Toowoomba region is Queensland's largest inland centre and is also the gateway to Southwest Queensland.

The Region spans almost 13,000 km² and it includes Toowoomba City and the regional centres of Cambooya, Cecil Plains Clifton, Crows Nest, Goombungee, Greenmount, Highfields, Millmerran, Oakey, Pittsworth, and Yarraman, along with numerous smaller townships. Each area has its own unique history as well as contributing uniquely to the regional economy. In 2022, the Toowoomba region had a population of 178,399. The region also includes tribal areas of the Bigambul, Western Wakka Wakka, Giabal and Jarowair peoples.

The Toowoomba Region has transformed its agricultural base into a diverse and strong economy, offering a range of business, investment, and employment opportunities. The Toowoomba Region had a \$11.63 billion economy in 2022 and hosted 90,183 jobs, and over 16,849 registered businesses.

As the largest employer within the Toowoomba Region, the Health Care & Social Assistance industry has added over \$1.3b of value to the Toowoomba economy which is over 60% more than the second largest value adding industry being Manufacturing. The Agricultural industry has added \$822m of economic value, making it the third largest contributing industry. Tourism has contributed to the diversity of the Toowoomba Region economy. The growth of sports and event tourism is expected to continue the growth of this sector.

ABOUT THE DISASTER EVENTS

Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) has been actively supporting the community and Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) response to bushfires since the early onset of the 2023 bushfire season. This season was predicated on the above average rainfall received in 2021-2022 wet season that resulted in higher levels of grass and fine fuels. With the below average rainfall, hot and dry conditions, this vegetation cured and became ready fuel for the bushfire events.

In each of the events, detailed below, there were multiple agencies and organisations providing vital assistance to protecting the communities affected. The brief descriptions do not intend to infer any party not mentioned were not critical in the operations undertaken.

The Pines/Wattle Ridge/Cypress Gardens

Late on Saturday 18th November a bushfire started in The Pines locality. An Emergency Alert campaign for residents to Leave Immediately was issued and a Place of Refuge was activated by the local Progress Association members in the Wylahra Grove Progress Hall. The LDMG Stood Up at 0800hrs Sunday 19th November and commenced the opening of the Millmerran Showgrounds as an evacuation centre. A community meeting was held in the afternoon at a neighbouring Rural Fire Brigade Shed before evacuees from the Place of Refuge relocated to the evacuation centre 30km away. The Gore Highway was closed and damage assessments showed the infrastructure damage was to sheds, fences and shipping containers. On Monday 20th November the LDCC was active however a moist weather system brought significant rain to the area and the warning area was deemed safe for residents to return with caution. The evacuation centre closed at 1330hrs, the highway was reopened, the LDCC ceased operations and the LDMG moved back to Alert. A Community Recovery Hub was open on Thursday 23rd and Friday 24th November for affected residents to access assistance.

Cypress Gardens/Millmerran Downs/Captains Mountain

On Monday, 23 October, a bushfire started in the vicinity of Ayers Rock Road in Millmerran Woods. The fire rapidly spread to surrounding land. QFES requested residents to evacuate, and the Community Alert Siren was sounded. The LDMG was already at Alert due to the Fire Danger Ratings and moved to Stand Up at 1300hrs. The Millmerran Showgrounds was activated as an evacuation centre and housed displaced persons and animals until it closed on Friday, 27 October. This bushfire was contained by Saturday, 28 October, however continued to burn internally with some flare ups needing to be responded to by local rural fire brigades for the next week. The fire destroyed 3 homes, 1 caravan and multiple structures such as sheds and shipping containers. The Gore Highway was closed for 4 days as were many local roads. The power supply line to the area was affected resulting in residents losing power as well as the only telecommunications tower. This resulted in the loss of phone and internet services to people that remained as well as responding agencies.

The power was reinstated at 1430hrs on Thursday 26, October. The Gore Highway was reopened with speed limited to 60kms per hour from that same afternoon. The Local Recovery Group began to activate on Friday, 2 October with the initial meeting. The LDMG moved back to Lean Forward on Monday, 20 October at 0830hrs.

Deongwar State Forest

There were two bushfires ignited in the Deongwar State Forest, located in the Somerset Regional Council area. The southern fire resulted in the closure of Esk Hampton Road impacting on access for TRC based residents as one of the significant arterial roads to the Brisbane Valley area. The northern fire posed a risk to the TRC's owned and operated water supply dam, Cressbrook Dam, and associated infrastructure. The LDMG moved from Lean Forward to Stand Up on Wednesday, 1 November in response to these fires. Mitigation measures were taken by fire authorities to protect the dam wall and other telemetry equipment by conducting back burning and pushing in fire breaks with machinery. Fortunately, on Friday, 3 November the fire behaviour lessened, weather conditions became favourable for control and containment of the fires. TRC LDMG moved back to Lean Forward as of 1000hrs. Then that afternoon there was a system of moist atmospheric conditions that resulted in thunderstorms and rainfall that fell in a broad area, including the fire grounds. The Esk Hampton Road was reopened with speed restrictions in place.

Wutul/East Cooyar

On Monday, 16 October, a fire in the vicinity of Wutul was ignited. This rapidly moving bushfire resulted in the closure of the New England Highway and local roads. Temporary accommodation was provided for any residents requiring alternate locations due to evacuating; however, all found their own arrangements. One house was impacted due to embers finding ingress into their roof void and resulting in the ceiling collapsing. Other losses included rural fencing, fodder, tools, and equipment in sheds. This fire was contained and extinguished the following day.

Kumbarilla and Dunmore State Forests

Kumbarilla and Dunmore State Forests Bushfire started on Tuesday, 5 September, ignited by dry lightning, and burnt out approximately 2000ha and caused over \$10 million of lost forestry products over 7 days as a result. The LDMG moved to Stand Up on Friday, 8 September when the Bureau of Meteorology revised its fire weather briefing and a risk of ember attacks on Cecil Plains township and surrounding areas were predicted. In response the LDMG activated an evacuation centre in preparedness for a potential evacuation order for Cecil Plains and surrounds, facilitated a community meeting in Cecil Plains for QFES and QPS to provide critical information to residents and the Local Disaster Coordination Centre to coordinate support under the local disaster management arrangements. The forecast worst case conditions did not eventuate at the height of the fire behaviour and the risk to the community subsided on Saturday, 9 September. The bushfire was finally contained by Monday, 11 September and the LDMG moved back to Alert the same day.

LOCAL RECOVERY GROUP

- Chair – Councillor Carol Taylor
- Local Recovery Coordinator- Mike Brady General Manager Infrastructure Services Group.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

TRC, Toowoomba Region community members, Department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts, Department of Housing, Darling Downs Hospital and Health and Hospital Services, Department of State Development, Manufacturing, Infrastructure and Planning, Qld Police Service, Qld Ambulance Service, Qld Reconstruction Authority, Australian Red Cross, Lifeline, GIVIT, Department of Education, Department of Transport and Main Roads and Services Australia (Centrelink).

ROADS and TRANSPORT

- Roads managed to ensure safety of the travelling public with minimal disruptions.
- Fire damaged road infrastructure identified and replaced.

ENVIRONMENTAL

- Damage assessments have been completed.
- Wildlife numbers have increased in impacted areas.
- State Forests, reserves, hiking, and walking trails have reopened and are being used by the community.
- Hazardous fire affected trees blocking road corridors have been removed.
- Effective waste disposal has been undertaken.
- Green waste and other hazardous waste items have been removed from the nearest Council owned waste facility.
- Community education initiatives for conserving biodiversity and building resilience through bushfire mitigation and preparedness campaigns have been developed, implemented and are successful, in partnership with local natural resource managers and environmental groups.
- Conservation and pest management programs have been implemented and pest management controls i.e., wild dog fencing has been repaired.
- Injured wildlife have fully recovered from their injuries and returned to their native habitats.

BUILT

- Damage assessments have been completed.
- The community has been supported with the facilitation of the reconstruction and repair of homes where necessary.
- An impact assessment to understand damage to community facilities has been completed.
- Damaged sections of the Main Wild Dog Check Fence have been repaired/ replaced.
- Telstra communications tower back up power supply has been assessed and upgraded.
- Starlink included in the National Emergency Alert System.
- Telstra disaster management and recovery contact point established.
- Wylahra Grove Hall power board has been upgraded to allow backup power supply to be connected.

HUMAN and SOCIAL

- Ongoing engagement with Human & Social Recovery Sub-Group to ensure all parties kept informed on activities and engagements (i.e., Lifeline, Red Cross etc.)
- Community members who were displaced have returned home or transitioned into long term accommodation.
- Community Recovery Hubs established in the immediate term then longer-term ongoing access by community via existing support services.
- Children from the affected area have returned to school, early childhood centres and day care.
- Community members have accessed financial assistance.
- Community members have accessed psychosocial support as required.
- Community and visitors attend and participate in community events and sporting events (service agencies wrapped around these events).
- Communities building stronger connection with local non-government organisations.
- Social connectedness in the affected areas have returned and increased from pre-bushfire levels.
- The community have enhanced their bushfire mitigation and preparation before the next bushfire season.
- Community educated in relation to Bushfire Survival Planning and supported in enacting measures through funding, resources, and education.

ECONOMIC

- Supply chains have opened and returned to normal.
- Workers can access their place of employment.
- Home based small businesses have returned to operations and accessible by clients.

ROADS and TRANSPORT

- Gore Highway, Esk Hampton Rd and several local roads were closed.
- Disruption to freight and logistics with the need for diversions via Wyaga to Inglewood around the closures.
- Hazardous trees had fallen or were at risk of falling over roads.
- Minimal damage to road and associated infrastructure.

ENVIRONMENTAL

- Loss of native fauna and flora, particularly the land burnt in and adjacent to Wondul National Park.
- Large pockets of vegetation destroyed, native bushland around and inside impacted areas.
- Land management challenges exacerbated as a result of the Region's drought conditions.
- Native fauna and flora loss exacerbated as a result of the Region's drought conditions.
- Increase in waste and landfill requirements as a result of burnt items.
- Monitoring of the regeneration of high value ecosystem areas and nature corridors such as road reserves to support the biodiversity and habitat in the burn extent.
- Contamination of soil and potable water as a result of fire retardants.
- Damage to approximately 14km of Pest Control Dog Fence (south west Millmerran) causing increased risk of vector incursion between neighbouring areas that are typically protected.

BUILT

- Three homes were destroyed – two in Millmerran Downs and one in Cypress Gardens along with other infrastructure including sheds, tanks, and fencing.
- In total, four homes were impacted at Millmerran Woods. Infrastructure destroyed on these properties included shipping containers, an off grid solar system and batteries, generators, water tanks, sheds, stock yards and a caravan.
- A shed, tank, pipelines, and fencing were destroyed at a property at Cypress Gardens. Three sheds were impacted in Condamine Farms. One home in East Cooyar had their ceiling collapse due to embers burning undetected in the ceiling. Another property in East Cooyar lost a shed and yards were burnt.
- The Sporting Shooters Association sustained damage to a toilet block, 7km boundary fencing, all internal fencing, over 200 warning signs and several of the shooting structures on the ranges.
- Approximately 14km kilometres of the Main Wild Dog Check Fence damaged or destroyed by fire or firefighting activities in the Millmerran area.
- Loss of power supply and consequently loss of telecommunications for 3 days.
- Telecommunication outages in the Millmerran Woods fire in October and use of alternate internet providers, particularly Starlink satellite internet (which are not on the National Emergency Alert System), residents did not receive critical emergency alerts.
- Wylahra Grove Progress Association Hall lost power resulting in an outage of water and sewage systems.
- Damage to seven (7) high voltage poles required replacement due to the Captains Mountain fires.

HUMAN and SOCIAL

- Damage Assessments 28/10/2023 identified a total of 10 properties with impacted structures and other assets. 3 of which were primary residences.
- Cumulative financial and psychosocial impacts on individuals and families experiencing lasting effects of the region's bushfire and compounding events.
- Psychosocial impacts exacerbated for impacted individuals and families immediately impacted by the bushfire. Exacerbation of psychological stress on impacted households.
- Mental health of business owners and primary producers, with this event exacerbating the challenging business environment created by the cumulative impacts of the bushfires.
- Increased stress/anxiety as a result of:
 - * Prolonged periods of drought, extreme weather events and affordability concerns
 - * Having to clean after bushfire impacts on residences and businesses.
 - * Having to move into temporary accommodation.
 - * Having to leave the area to be placed in temporary accommodation due to loss of home.
 - * Lack of access to essential food and medical supplies.
 - * Loss of income due to not being able to attend work (transportation impacts, home priorities, psychological trauma).
- Disruption to day-to-day functioning, services and/or supplies within affected areas due to the limited TRC service offering in these localities.
- 3 Day power and communication outage impacting to day-to-day functioning, services and/or supplies within Millmerran Downs, Cypress Gardens, Millmerran Woods, Captains Mountain and Bringalily due to the limited Power and communications service offering in these localities.
- Damage to the Sporting Shooters Association, there's loss of social connectedness during delays to repair and continue with events.
- Access to waste facility impacted due to road closures and bushfire warning messaging preventing at risk residents from moving in the area.
- Potential for reduced tourist numbers and community events due to road closures and media's portrayal of impact.
- Exacerbation of the already financial strain on residents, poverty, social isolation, chronic health conditions and disadvantages
- Increased workload on primary producers, hobby farmers and rural lifestyle blocks to repair and restore damaged infrastructure such as fences, sheds and equipment that is uninsured or underinsured.
- Vulnerable residents with health conditions unable to undertake clean up or do not have the resources to employ someone nor the support networks available to assist with the clean-up and repairs.
- Proactive residents that did take mitigation and preparatory action on their property still impacted due to high vegetation and fuel loads on neighbouring properties owned by absentee owners.
- Compounding impacts from repeated disasters and climatic hazards such as drought, fire, pandemic, flood, and fire again, worsening the above damage.

ECONOMIC

- Costs associated with repairing/replacing approximately eight kilometres of damaged sections of the Main Wild Dog Check Fence.
- Disruption to businesses and industry was mitigated as the transport networks were diverted as required.
- Impact to most of employed residents accessing their place of employment in person.
- Loss of fodder and fencing for graziers within the burnt areas
- State Forestry fires resulting in loss of timber products, e.g., Kumberilla/Dunmore estimated at over \$10million lost.
- Disruption to small businesses run from homes in the burn area.

ROADS AND TRANSPORT

- Continue to monitor and address affected roads for fallen trees weakened by the fire as per normal maintenance regimes.

ENVIRONMENTAL

- Undertake damage assessments across impacted areas.
- Undertake a hazardous tree assessment and remove trees blocking road corridors or at risk of failure.
- Undertake remediation works to remove or relocate soil if found to be contaminated.
- Rescue and recovery or disposal of native fauna.
- In partnership with wildlife carers, support impacted animals.
- Remove green and/or hazardous waste items as required.
- Work in partnership with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services and other relevant agencies to conduct hazard and risk assessments for damaged areas and develop education initiatives to build resilience through knowledge of their risk.
- Develop and implement conservation and pest management programs in impacted areas including repair of pest control mechanisms i.e., dog fence.
- Undertake water quality monitoring and reporting.
- Ascertain the likelihood of potential contamination to soils and waterways.
- Assist landholders in the disposal of domestic/livestock animals as required.
- Work with local partners on obtaining funding to expand on existing bushfire mitigation on private land and develop programs similar in areas without them yet.
- Government owned land management practices to be reviewed and improved in alignment with the community expectations and relevant legislation, in particular funding for fuel management on public lands and roads.

ECONOMIC

- The Sub-committee to facilitate positive engagement with intergovernmental departments to ensure recovery efforts are targeted to the local level, sustainable and successful.
- Implementing referral process from Council's rates for primary producers who enter a payment plan and are working with Rural Financial Counselling Services, to retain their rates discount during financial difficulties.

BUILT

- Undertake damage assessments across impacted areas.
- Reconnect essential services (power and telecommunications).

HUMAN and SOCIAL

- **Short term:**
- **Sanitation** – pressure clean roof area / tank / gutters (removal of blaze tamer / retardant / ash).
- **Potable water – supply onsite** (for rain harvesting asset connected to structure) – re-fill existing water tanks.
- **Potable water – re-fill transportable containers** – re-fill existing water pods (mobilised via resident's own transport) where the pods/receptacles are the only form of water storage on the property.
- **Asset Loss** – rubbish / waste removal – fire impacted areas only.
- Program of community engagement on identification of locally led priorities for building disaster resilience and social capital through such activities as skills building provided to the community and bushfire mitigation and preparedness - (including psychological first aid, Disaster Dashboard, Bushfire Survival Plan, Fire Danger Ratings)
- Engage with local community representatives to identify their recovery priorities in the medium to long term and advocate for support and additional funding to aid them in developing, implementing, and monitoring locally led initiatives to return to their new resilient normal.
- Council request additional DTATSIPCA /QRA resources to increase the capacity of the local service system/s and community networks to support the recovery of impacted residents and groups, including the Wylahra Progress Association, Sporting Shooters Association, Landcare and Cooyar Show Committee and others to be identified.
- Council work with local services, groups, and networks to help impacted people adapt to changes and overcome adversities brought about and/or compounded by the bushfires.
- Engagement with children and youth in the affected areas through the childcare and schools as well as libraries where available to ensure their views and experiences are included. Talk to kids about emergencies and disasters (e.g., Birdie's Tree, Stormbirds, ARC Pillowcase project)
- Involve children and youth in campaigns to increase household level preparedness, across diverse localities and household formations and situations.
- Council ensures that targeted responses to and inclusion of vulnerable people in the discrete fire-impacted communities are achieved.
- Council works with local services and networks to develop strategies to help vulnerable people keep safe in emergencies and disasters; by expanding on the Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) training with carers and providers under the *CRRO*.
- Council work with businesses and primary producers on preparedness and adaptation projects.

- Advocate for infrastructure investment in the seven localities south-west of Millmerran for better telecommunication services, resilient to loss of power, regardless of the hazardous event (Black Spot funding).
- Replacement of seven (7) high voltage poles along Orchid Drive, Millmerran Downs.
- Council collaborates with local community leaders, groups, and networks to assess resilience and collect meaningful information about critical infrastructure and support services required for affected community, with a particular focus on high-risk people, groups, and locations.
- Informed by the local level collaboration, advocate for improved investment in the above services.
- Upgrade Wylahra Grove Progress Association Hall power board to allow back up power supply to be connected.
- Provide water to those affected properties in Millmerran, not on bulk water supply to assist with wash down of dwellings to remove ash and fire retardant used by QFES.
- Provide debris collection to ensure access and safety for residents returning to their residences.
- Establish contact point for Telstra disaster management and recovery functions.
- Advocate for Starlink to be included in the National Emergency Alert System.
- Repair/ reinstate damaged sections of the Main Wild Dog Check Fence.
- Investigate opportunities and lobby for programs that support bushfire mitigation and recovery.
- Provision of comprehensive building and development approval advice to residents rebuilding
- Advocate for grant funding for fencing materials for non-eligible property owners to support repairing. For eligible primary producers, advocate to State Government that the assistance be grants and not loans.

RECOVERY OBJECTIVES

- 1 Ensure community has access to immediate and ongoing support services during the response and recovery program.
- 2 Ensure the community is aware of and has access to immediate and ongoing psychological support services during the immediate response and recovery program.
- 3 Identify and advocate for funding streams for eligible residents of affected areas and investment in the delivery of enhanced mitigation and preparedness activities.
- 4 Provide access to housing support services for the community during the response and recovery program.
- 5 Facilitation of activities, events, and gatherings to encourage social connectedness and building community capability and capacity to lead their own recovery.
- 6 Identify and promote funding streams to support local community organisations and not-for-profits to deliver sustainable programs.
- 7 Recovery activities ensure businesses have access to financial support services to restore/rebuild their businesses.
- 8 Identify and develop a funding strategy to appropriately resource recovery initiatives across the region.
- 9 Implement effective and efficient process to reopen state and council owned facilities/recreational areas in line with protocols.
- 10 Implement effective and efficient process to enable community members to transition to longer-term accommodations if applicable in line with protocols.
- 11 Regional economic resilience is supported by increased levels and sophistication of planning undertaken by businesses.
- 12 Ensure the community has access to all forms of infrastructure.
- 13 Represent the community and advocate priority actions and issues on their behalf with critical service owners and higher levels of government
- 14 Environmental restoration and protection (unique flora/fauna endemic to region) program has been developed, implemented and progress monitored – medium to long term.
- 15 Environmental restoration and protection (prevention of spread of weeds) program has been developed, implemented and progress monitored effectively – medium to long term.
- 16 Effectively and efficiently restore the transport networks to its pre-disaster condition or better while minimising the disruption to industry, the travelling public, and residents.
- 17 Capture and implement improvements in impact assessments, stakeholder engagement and community need assessment through improved planning, capability, and capacity building for future disaster events.
- 18 Collaborate with all areas of the local Disaster Management Arrangements to adequately fund and deliver enhanced prevention and mitigation measures at the individual, household, organisation, and community level against future risks.
- 19 Embed a culture of continuous improvement to strive for best practice throughout the undertaking of recovery and resilience activities encompassed and driven by this Local Recovery Plan

RECOVERY TIMEFRAMES

