FOREWORD

by Bruce Esplin, Emergency Services Commissioner, Victoria

As Victoria enters the 2007-08 bushfire season the State is once again confronted with forecasts for an extreme bushfire season.

The Bureau of Meteorology anticipates over the next three months Victoria will have a 60 to 70% chance of below average rainfall and anywhere up to a 75% chance of above average temperatures. These forecasts match the climate change warnings that many scientists are predicting in papers such as the 'Bushfire Weather in Southeast Australia: Recent Trends and Projected Climate Change Impacts' report released earlier this year by the CSIRO and the Bushfire CRC.

The evidence in the report predicts an increase in the incidence of bushfires throughout Australia to the extent that it was necessary to create two new categories on the Forest Fire Danger Index. The current two highest daily fire danger ratings are 'very high' for a rating greater than 25, and 'extreme' when 50 is exceeded. The two new ratings have been defined as 'very extreme' when the rating exceeds 75 and 'catastrophic' when it exceeds 100.

It is no longer relevant to talk about above average bushfire seasons. They are starting earlier, lasting longer and include more extreme fire weather days. Drought and bushfire is becoming the norm, wet years the exception.

Currently, large parts of Victoria are facing the harsh reality of the eleventh year consecutive of drought, which has created more forest fuel and less chance for fuel reduction burning. The State has also seen substantial population growth in the urban fringes, where due to close proximity of housing and infrastructure, the emergency services face new challenges in fire risk reduction. The Melbourne urban fringes and the outskirts of provincial cities are predicted to be the high-risk zones of the coming season.

It is vital that, now more than ever before, the fire and emergency services work in partnership with the community. Victoria's emergency management arrangements are built on the premise that communities need not, indeed should not be passive recipients of services, but should be active participants in their own safety planning and decision making.

Within the mitigation, response and recovery process there needs to be flexibility and diversity, template solutions do not work. Inclusion of cultural and locally relevant issues is essential to strengthen community participation. There is a need for fluid, organic structures of communication and devolved decision making to the lowest level possible. It is essential that the community is involved in the decision making process wherever practicable. Long term plans should be built on community engagement not just community consultation. There needs to be recognition that local planning for local needs is potentially one of the best means of building communities' self-reliance and resilience and empowering their recovery process.

The fire services have made significant improvements to their capability and procedures to ensure they can play their part. It is imperative that individuals and communities in high fire risk areas are encouraged do the same. Improved community safety and resilience is about well informed communities, communities that are even better equipped to respond appropriately and safely to emergencies. It is vital the community is confident, educated and informed about decision making, so they can take the best possible course of action. Communities that are able to facilitate the success of their own mitigation, response and recovery, make the work of the multiple agencies involved with fires easier and more effective

As we look to the future and the predictions for increased large scale or 'mega fires' that no response capacity will be able to extinguish, it will be increasingly important that communities are prepared and able to play their part. When resources alone will not be enough, three things be important in determining our success: Firstly, the quality and extent of our mitigation and prevention programs. Secondly how well we work together, and most importantly how we work with communities; and thirdly how effectively we communicate — with each other, and most importantly with the community.