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# NETWORK CONNECT

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# Green shoots in the Upper Murray

Life has been tough in the Upper Murray region over the past 18 months. Residents were just beginning to come to terms with the devastating bushfires that tore through 32,173 hectares of land when COVID-19 dealt another cruel blow, followed by a spate of youth suicides. But three generations of rural women who have stepped up to lead the rebuilding efforts say the green shoots of recovery are already promising to leave the area even stronger and more resilient than before.



**Gemma Whitehead**

Gemma Whitehead's family has lived in Corryong for generations but not even her 93-year-old grandfather had experienced anything like the ferocity of the fires that hit the Upper Murray region on December 30, 2019.

'He lived through the 1939 fires and he said this fire was so much worse — he never thought that he'd see a fire like that,' Gemma says.

When the central support hub for the small community, the Corryong Neighbourhood Centre (CNC), reopened a week later, the 22-year-old was the only employee on deck.

'We had up to a 100 people a day coming in, wanting to know where they could access that initial help, and I was here on my own. Usually, there's a team of up to five of us, but everyone had evacuated or couldn't come in because the roads were closed. So, for the first two days, I had person after person asking the same question, "What financial assistance is there?"'

With the roads closed, Gemma was also needed to work a 12-hour night shift assisting with local traffic control after putting in a full day at the CNC. For weeks, she operated on a couple of hours of sleep.

'It was a crazy time. I think adrenaline had definitely kicked in because I didn't really feel tired.'

When thoughts turned to the rebuilding effort, Gemma was one of the founding members of the Upper Murray Youth Working Group, which was formed to ensure young people have a voice in the recovery.

**'It was a crazy time. I think adrenaline had definitely kicked in because I didn't really feel tired.'**

Gemma says the response from local kids has been fantastic, with robust contributions from children as young as 12.

With many funding organisations keen to support young people during the recovery process, Gemma is confident projects on the wish list, including a mountain bike track and new skate park, will receive funding.

'Previously we wouldn't have seen any opportunity for new infrastructure or funding to run youth trips. I grew up here and there wasn't much to do!' Gemma laughs. 'Now they've got all this support and an opportunity to make change.'



**Thea Newton**

Retiree Thea Newton is the Secretary of the CNC Committee and when the fires began closing in, she stayed to help keep its social enterprise bakery open.

'Local residents were asked to evacuate, due to another fire threat and the lack of electricity and water and seventy-five



Opposite: The land is showing signs of bushfire recovery; Top: The green pastures of the Upper Murray; Above: Cattle on dry, smoky landscapes in the Corryong area.

per cent of people left. We only had five staff left in the bakery so I helped until some of them returned. Every afternoon, a small band of volunteers from the CNC helped to pack lunches for the firefighters and government employees.'

Thea was part of the recovery meetings from the start, being a member of both the Upper Murray and Corryong Community Recovery Committee (CRCs).

'We felt it was so important that Corryong had a CRC that a few local residents made a little noise to make it happen.'

'It's a huge process. Being on committees in a small rural town, we sort of get used to dealing with things with two zeros behind it but, all of a sudden, you're looking at things with many, many zeros. One of the chaps said to me, "It's quite intense, isn't it?"'

But Thea is convinced the effort will be worth it, with projects on the books that will improve the quality of life for locals as well as boosting tourism in the region.

'It took us about two years to raise about \$30,000 to put shade sails over the playground and now you can put in for a grant and get \$175,000 to do a project.'

'Obviously, it's not something you would have wished for but there could be a silver lining,' Thea says.



From left: Gemma Whitehead, Jo Mackinnon and Thea Newton.



## Jo Mackinnon

As the Chair of Upper Murray Incorporated, a volunteer organization with a focus on cross-border economic development, local farmer Jo Mackinnon was a key driver behind the region's immediate recovery efforts.

'We had the first meeting on the 18th of January, straight after the fires. We had a room full of everyone from police to ambulance, to head of the hospital, the schools — any sort of community group or leadership group you could imagine.'

'Then an organization called Bushfire Recovery Victoria was formulated and nine community recovery committees were set up in nine communities, with a representative from each on the Upper Murray Committee.'

Of the nine committees, seven are headed by women. 'Some of that is because women are naturally leaders; we get on with it.'

Once the initial emergency passed, it was clear there was going to be some tremendous funding opportunities for an area that has traditionally been overlooked, Jo says.

Some of the funded projects will ensure the region will be better prepared for a future natural disaster, such as the installation of solar power and batteries

on critical infrastructure, which will enable the grid to switch to renewables to maintain power during a disaster.

'We had nearly three weeks of no power at all. We didn't have mobile phone connection or internet.'

A marketing push, backed by investment in tourist infrastructure, will also boost economic development locally, Jo says.

'On the health and wellbeing side of things, we need to make sure that our kids really are resilient, and they do know that they're loved, and they're cared for, and that's going to be a big challenge for the community,' Jo says. 'Maybe that is going to be an ongoing commitment by the community.'

However, all three women are feeling positive that the recovery efforts will leave the Upper Murray stronger than before.

'We're actually just in the throes of putting up the Upper Murray community recovery plan for consultation,' Jo says.

'It's a plan that we can use for the next few years to go through the next recovery phase and maybe it's a plan that when there's a disaster somewhere else, we can say, "This is what we did. It might not be what you want to do, but at least it's something that might help you".'

Jo says she's proud of the document that has been pulled together by volunteers.

'We hope that this plan will be something that the community will be happy to embrace.'

### SAMPLE OF THE FUNDED PROJECTS\*

Through the community-led Bushfire Recovery processes, State and Federal funding has been secured for the following initiatives:

\$5M	\$3M	\$500K	\$1.73M	\$140K
Great River Road touring route – wayside stops, walking tracks, marketing and promotion	Upper Murray Power Plan – project to scope and develop renewable energy systems	Need to Reseed Program – supporting bushfire affected farmers to seed and regrow pasture	Upgrades to Community Halls in Cudgewa, Towong, Walwa, and Biggara	Tintaldra Avenue of Honour – replanting the beloved trees along this local landmark

If this article has brought up issues for you, contact the confidential crisis support service **Lifeline**, open 24/7 at **13 11 14**

\* approximate figures

