



## Challenges of farm recovery – Robin McDonald, Rosewhite

### Extract 2 of witness statement to the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission

**Narrator:** Robin and her husband David live on a 380 hectare cattle farm of undulating grassy farmland in the foothills of the alpine area of north eastern Victoria.

53. Although we were able to save our house, the fire had a huge impact on the farm. We lost two large sheds and everything in them (machinery, tools, timber, hay, fertiliser and some household furniture that was being stored there during the house renovations).

54. Of 380 hectares, approximately 315 hectares of the farm were burnt. This meant that we lost a lot of fencing and pasture. [48. ... when a paddock burns, it's not just grass going up in flames. It is feed for the cattle and watching it burn is like watching money burn.]

55. Two of our cows died immediately in the fires and several others were badly burnt. A stock inspector from the Department of Primary Industries came and inspected our herd on the Monday and put down the burnt animals. Three cows and their calves died a short time later and we believe that this was a result of being fire affected. One of our mobs of cattle broke through the road fence ahead of the fire and we found them on Monday a couple of kilometres away at our neighbour's property.

56. One of the most difficult decisions after the fires was working out what to do with our herd. We had little for the cattle to eat and, with no fences, we had no way of keeping them in.

57. We considered various options. At a local meeting shortly after the fires, Christine Nixon advised people that we would have to sell or slaughter our cattle. However these were not viable options.

58. Selling was not really available because after such a long drought and then the fires, no one had enough grass to feed their own cattle let alone buying another herd of nearly 300.

59. We couldn't bring ourselves to slaughter the cattle for a number of reasons. The farm is our livelihood and if we slaughtered the herd we would have no income. We have put many years into developing a quality breeding herd, selecting their genetics and spending thousands of dollars on getting good bulls and so on. Also, the female cattle were on the point of calving.

60. In the end, we saw our only option as being sending the cattle on agistment. Due to the effects of fire and drought in Victoria, we had to send the herd all the way to St George in Queensland. We kept about 80 cattle on the farm. These were mostly the first time breeders who would need extra attention during their calving. We sent the other 200 or so cows up to Queensland.

61. It cost over \$20,000 to send them there and now that many of them have calved, it will cost more to bring them all back. It also costs about \$4000 each month to keep them there.

62. Since the fires we have been focussing on getting the farm back in order so we can bring the cattle home. The main issue was fencing and we have received some incredible assistance with this.

# Bushfire Education



63. The Uniting Church teams of volunteers have been invaluable. They arrived less than a week after the fires and stayed for months working on all fire affected farms in the two valleys. They were well organised, well coordinated and very hard working.

64. Some fencing materials were donated but we also had to spend a lot of money purchasing materials.

65. Assistance received from government agencies included Centrelink payments, a 'Clean up and Restoration' grant, and payments from the Department of Human Services. We also received some money from private organisations and individuals. We got some money for fencing materials and assistance to clear fence lines and fallen timber. We also received personal supplies such as toiletries and other basics.

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