

Heywood
home
gutted

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Do or die!

“Plan now for extreme bushfire or face disaster,” authors plead

STEVE ROBERTSON

A CAPE Bridgewater homeowner, who also lives in the north-eastern Melbourne suburb of Eltham, has charged that governments have not done enough thorough planning for catastrophic bushfires.

Tim Malseed has co-authored a new booklet with Monash University professor and bushfire expert David Packham called *Bushfire Death Trap – The Eltham Gateway*. Although the booklet deals largely with the threat to Eltham, which is set in hilly, heavily wooded terrain, Mr Malseed said many of the same principles applied to the Portland area.

“It’s fortunate that the recent Kentbruck fire here was fairly low-level and the conditions were not conducive to a catastrophic fire,” he said.

“If there had been an extended drought and the winds and fuel load were right, the fire could have spread south and eventually east, creating a disaster for Portland.”

He was in Eltham when the Black Saturday bushfires struck in 2009. He and his wife were ready to defend their property, which would have been threatened had the wind not changed when it did.

“If the East Kilmore fire (of 2009) was replicated in this area, it would have started from Kentbruck and moved south in a narrow, cigar-shaped band down to Cape Nelson,” he said. “From there, with a wind change it would have moved north-east on a broad front, reaching almost to Heywood and Narrawong.”

“The trauma, loss of life and environmental damage would be overwhelming for the Portland district.”

He charged that bushfire authorities have not planned for even one mega-fire, let alone a series of massive blazes across the length of Victoria.

“We saw this on Black Saturday and communications and resources were just overwhelmed,” he said. “In the most intense fires, you have no chance of survival outdoors. Breathe in and, in one second, your lungs are burned from the inside and you die of shock.”

He said firefighting agencies needed to have an extreme bushfire expert to advise them on what to do. He also said most of the planning

was for bushfire response when there should be equal attention paid to bushfire mitigation and prevention.

He wants laws changed to make it easier to clear up fuel from parklands, and give more encouragement to follow the “10/30” rule, clearing trees to 10 metres and groundcover to 30 metres away from homes in fire-prone areas.

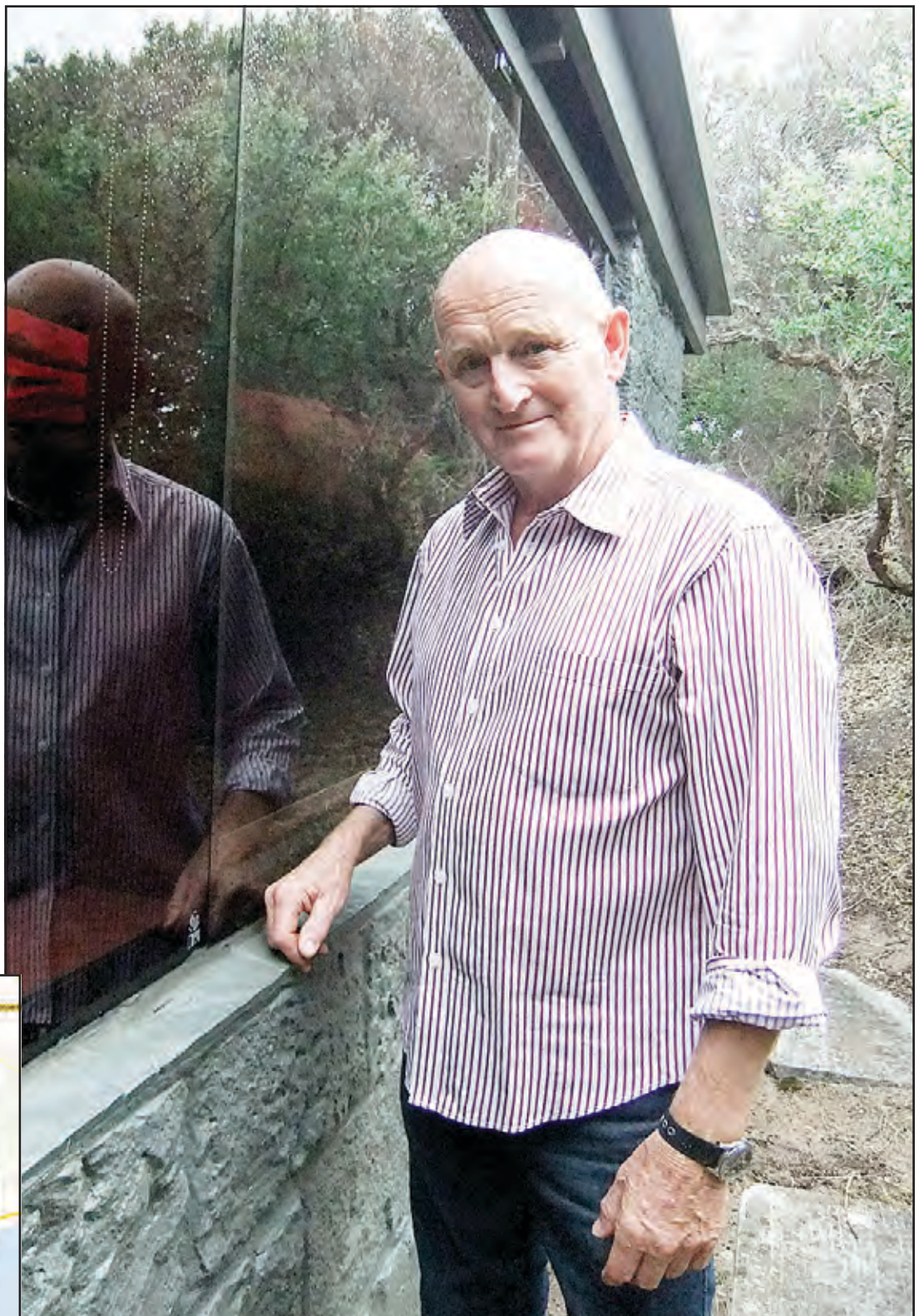
“As individuals, we’ve taken measures to protect our own homes in Eltham and here at Cape Bridgewater,” he said. “When I replaced the roof on our house at the cape, I discovered a small trailer load of tinder-dry straw, which would have exploded in flames in the event of cinder attack. So, we cleaned that out and replaced all wood with aluminium, stone and glass, sealed every crack and left no exposed window timber anywhere.”

He said he and his wife also have protective clothing, boots and helmets ready to wear when they go outside after a major fire has passed through.

“It’s not quite what the firefighters use, but it’s much better than exposed skin.”

In their book, the authors make a series of urgent recommendations to the Victorian government, including requiring the Minister for Planning to add bushfire mitigation to his duties. They also want an extreme bushfire risk analysis including fuel reduction, more action to get rid of flammable trees overhanging power lines, another look at the ‘leave early’ policy, and creating a format for communities to do their own small scale prescribed burning.

“I think it’s like government telling police they’re only allowed to catch petty criminals but not murderers,” he said. “The focus is on small fires when we should be planning for something much, much bigger.”



SURROUNDED by flammable vegetation on three sides, Tim Malseed’s home at Cape Bridgewater is as secure as possible from bushfire, thanks to a new roof, upgraded windows and replacement of all exposed wooden surfaces.

Picture: ELLY HATELEY 130327eh08

SAY Tim Malseed and fire expert David Packham: “During Portland district’s Kentbruck bushfire the Fire Danger Ratings were 60 to 80. If they had been at Black Saturday levels of 150, even 200 in places, imagine the possible outcome. To demonstrate, here’s a map (at left) with Black Saturday’s East Kilmore extreme bushfire superimposed, with Kentbruck, not East Kilmore, being the ignition point.”



District forecast

Today: sunny, 10–22. Tomorrow: sunny, 11–26.

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