



# Final report

---

## Back to Business Bushfire Recovery Project – Victorian Coordinator

Project code: L.ADP.2009  
Prepared by: Lyndon Kubeil  
Agriculture Victoria  
Date published: 15 February 2021

PUBLISHED BY  
Meat and Livestock Australia Limited  
PO Box 1961  
NORTH SYDNEY NSW 2059

Meat & Livestock Australia acknowledges the matching funds provided by the Australian Government to support the research and development detailed in this publication.

**This publication is published by Meat & Livestock Australia Limited ABN 39 081 678 364 (MLA). Care is taken to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication. However MLA cannot accept responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the information or opinions contained in the publication. You should make your own enquiries before making decisions concerning your interests. Reproduction in whole or in part of this publication is prohibited without prior written consent of MLA.**

## **Abstract**

'Back to Business' (BtB) is an MLA bushfire recovery initiative to provide producers with free access to one-on-one support sessions with a local farm management consultant for up to three sessions. The three sessions were tailored to assist farm owners and managers to understand and assess their own situation and the options to rebuild their business after being affected by fire. The key benefit of the BtB program for the Red Meat Industry was supporting the recovery process of fire affected producers to return to full productivity as quickly as possible. The strategic nature of the program also supported producers to potentially change their production system to increase future productivity.

Registrations were slow, even after extensive promotion of the program. The stress and pressure of recovering from the immediate fire made it hard for producers to consider the strategic nature of the BtB program, they were focused on the immediate needs such as fencing and feeding. Twenty-eight producers were engaged in the BtB program following a six month extension to the program.

The overall satisfaction from Back to Business participants was 9.42 out of 10, with two thirds of participants rating the program 10/10. Ninety-two percent of participants implemented the action plan developed and the rest have partially implemented the plan. One Hundred percent of participant would recommend the Back to Business program to other producers affected by a natural disaster.

## **Executive summary**

### **Background**

Back to Business was an initiative to support bushfire effected red meat producers through the recovery process. The program provided three consultancy sessions aimed at reviewing the farm businesses current situation, prioritising the recovery process and providing a plan for the producers to follow.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of 'Back to Business' were:

- To provide all red meat producers in bushfire affected areas the opportunity to participate
- To deploy a state coordinator to partner producers with local farm management consultants
- To increase the capability of producers to better understand their situation, and develop a recovery plan to assist them in getting their business back on track
- To provide the opportunity for ongoing support from a farm management consultant over three sessions

### **Methodology**

A panel of farm management consultants was established via a tender type process for producers to choose the consultant most relevant for them. Once a producer registered and nominated the preferred consultant the consultant scheduled the three farm visits. The first session identified the key issues to address on following visits and a plan was provided to the producer to support the recovery process.

### **Results/key findings**

- The overall satisfaction from Back to Business participants was 9.42 out of 10.
- Ninety-two percent of participants implemented the action plan developed and the rest have partially implemented the plan.
- One Hundred percent of participant would recommend the Back to Business program to other producers affected by a natural disaster.

### **Benefits to industry**

The key benefit of the BtB program for the Red Meat Industry was supporting the recovery process of fire affected producers to return to full productivity as quickly as possible. The strategic nature of the program also supported producers to potentially change their production system to increase future productivity. The BtB program also provided an avenue to engage with producers who have not engaged with MLA and /or a private consultant previously.

### **Future research and recommendations**

The provision of one on one farm specific support was highly regarded and supported the recovery process of bushfire affected producers.

The most appropriate timing of this support is difficult, continuous feedback was provided indicating that producers weren't ready to think strategically about the recovery process and were only focused on the immediate needs such as fencing and feeding.

## Table of contents

Abstract.....	2
Executive summary .....	3
1. Background .....	5
2. Objectives .....	5
3. Methodology .....	5
3.1 Consultant Engagement.....	5
3.2 Producer Sessions .....	6
3.3 Evaluation.....	7
4. Results .....	8
4.1 Registered Consultants .....	8
4.2 Producer Registrations.....	8
4.3 Business Demographics .....	8
4.4 Business Recovery Plans .....	10
4.5 Evaluation Results .....	10
5. Conclusion .....	17
5.1 Key findings .....	17
5.2 Benefits to industry.....	18
6. Future research and recommendations.....	18
7. Appendix.....	21
7.1 Producer Registration Details .....	21
7.2 Evaluation Results .....	21

## 1. Background

In 2019/20 bushfires impacted large areas of farmland nationally. MLA's Back to Business initiative was designed to support red meat producers through the recovery process, with a particular emphasis on strategic planning and prioritisation. The BtB initiative would also provide an opportunity to support producers to critically analyse the business and farming system. The BtB program was coordinated by Agriculture Victoria with delivery conducted by private consultants. Three one on one sessions were provided by the program. It was a requirement that the initial farm visit be conducted by a consultant with a strong farm business economics background to conduct the appropriate cash flow and prioritisation planning. Following visits could then engage other consultants with the appropriate skills to plan the recovery process identified in session one.

Traditionally, support to bushfire affected producers is offered through field days and group-based activities. BtB was unique in that it provided one on one advice at a strategic level. This approach was well received by those that engaged in the process as reflected by the evaluation with a rating of 9.42/10 for the program and 100% of participants recommending it to other bushfire affected producers.

## 2. Objectives

The objectives of 'Back to Business' were:

- To provide all red meat producers in bushfire affected areas the opportunity to participate
- To deploy a state coordinator to partner producers with local farm management consultants
- To increase the capability of producers to better understand their situation, and develop a recovery plan to assist them in getting their business back on track
- To provide the opportunity for ongoing support from a farm management consultant over three sessions

The objectives were met for those producers that registered for the BtB program. The number of registrations was much lower than was initially expected, however the feedback strongly suggested the pressure and stress associated with dealing with the immediate recovery needs was a significant barrier for producers engaging in the program.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Consultant Engagement

A panel of farm management consultants was established via a tender type process for producers to choose the consultant most relevant for them. The process remained open to allow relevant consultants to engage in the program throughout. Once a producer registered for the program they were asked if they had a preferred consultant, if not they were asked to choose a consultant for the list of eligible consultants. If a consultant was nominated and was not on the list they were provided the option to register via the tender process. Once a consultant was selected a service delivery agreement was developed to outline program delivery requirements and payment terms.

### 3.2 Communication Strategy

An extensive communication plan was conducted to engage bushfire affected producers and private consultants. The table below outlines the communication strategies used.

Communication Platform	Target Audience	No. Editions	Audience/ edition	Comments/outcomes
Mail (hard copy)-	Producers	2	868	BtB details were included in 2 editions of the Ag Recovery Newsletter mailed to all fire affected producers.
Mail (hard copy)	producers	1	868	A copy of the BtB flyer was mailed to all fire affected producers
Email Newsletter	Support Organisations	10	200	The BtB flyer and guidelines were included in 10 editions of the Ag Recovery Guides email newsletter
Press Release- Radio & Newspaper	Producers	1		ABC Radio interview with Jason Strong promoting BtB. Local newspaper articles
Social Media- Facebook & Twitter	Producers	4	18519 followers	4 tweets 4 facebook posts
BWBL & BB email Newsflash	Producers	5	5500	The BtB flyer was included in 3 editions of the Newsflash
Webinar	Service Providers	1	18	A webinar was delivered for Private Consultants to recruit BtB deliverers
Zoom meeting	Rural Financial Counsellors & case managers	1	12	An overview of the BtB program was provided to Rural Financial Counsellors and bushfire victim case managers
Email Newsletter	Producers	30		BtB was promoted each week in the Agriculture Victoria Ag news column

### 3.3 Producer Sessions

'Back to Business' consisted of three individual sessions between farm management consultants (FMCs) and bushfire affected red meat producers. An outline of the suggested sessions is detailed below, though the program provided flexibility given the variation in individual farm circumstances and operations.

#### *Session 1.*

- General farm visit to review situation and determine immediate priorities.
- An information pack was provided that contained fact sheets on general recovery considerations.
- Provide support in identifying and applying for applicable funding available as well as other avenues for support including mental health, access to feed, cost exemptions and subsidies.
- Provide an overview of the next session plus determine any other support required.

#### *Session 2.*

- Suggested to occur within one month of Session 1.

- Follow up on any applications or actions arising from Session 1.
- Farm visit to consider:
  - Budget and cash flow
  - Livestock plan – keep, feed or sell
  - Pasture and feed budgets, pasture re-establishment
  - Infrastructure rebuild plan
  - Other areas identified
  - Determine any additional support required
  - Develop an action plan and goals (short and long term) for recovering

#### *Session 3.*

- Suggested to occur with enough time to start to implement at least part of the action plan
- Establish progress on action plan and identify any further support required
- Determine ways to remain in contact and ensure avenues for support are in place
- Short evaluation to be completed

#### *Session Action Plans*

An action plan was completed following each 'Back to Business' session. The action plan then formed part of the written record of the session and provided a hard copy document for the producer for their reference.

Action plans included:

- Clear time frames that were achievable by the producer.
- Enough detail to be meaningful to the producer when reviewed at a later date and enough detail for other service providers such as a financial advisor, vet or counsellor to understand the issues and opportunities identified.
- Appropriate information, resources and support identified and details of follow up commitments by the consultant in future sessions.
- Detail the outcomes of the actions taken by the producer and if there are further actions required.

### **3.4 Evaluation**

Following the final visit producers were asked to complete an MLA designed evaluation. Producers were provided the option of completing the evaluation online using Google Forms or a hard copy option which was later entered onto google forms by an Agriculture Victoria staff member.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Registered Consultants & Producers

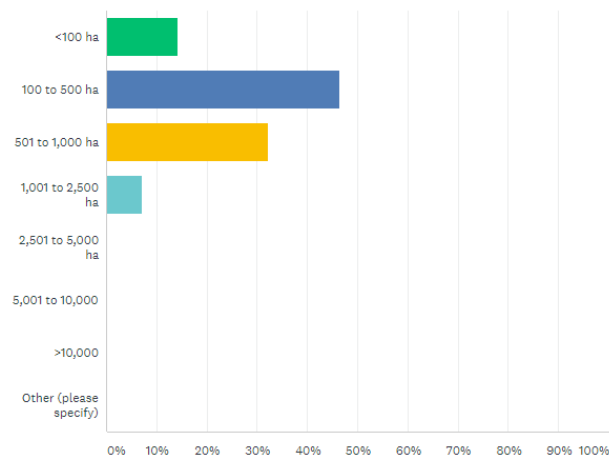
A panel of 29 consultant applied and were registered to deliver the BtB program within Victoria and 29 fire affected producers registered for the BtB program. A full list of both consultants and producer details is provided in the complete version of the report.

The communication plan for engaging producers and private consultants was extensive. There was wide spread knowledge of the program within the fire affected communities and all avenues available to promote the program were utilised. Feedback has indicated that the low level of engagement was not due to lack of awareness of the BtB program, but more likely due to the timing of delivery when many producers were not in a strategic mindset and overwhelmed by the recovery task at hand.

### 4.2 Business Demographics

Property Size (ha)

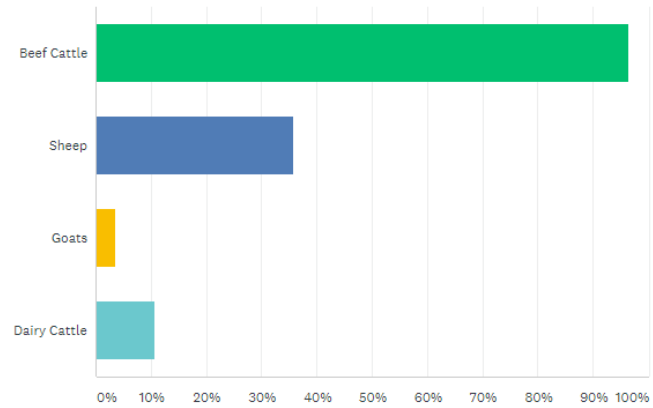
Answered: 28 Skipped: 0





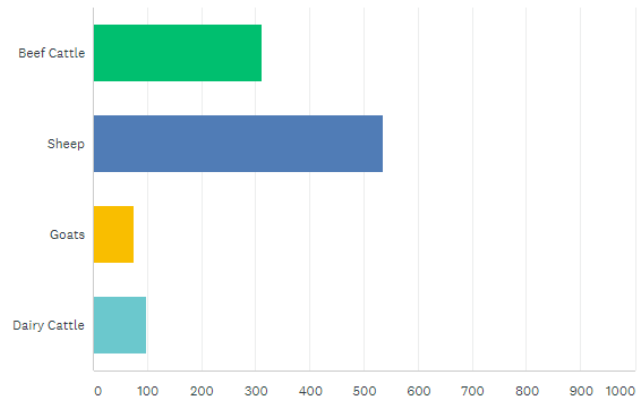
### Type of livestock do you run in a normal season

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0



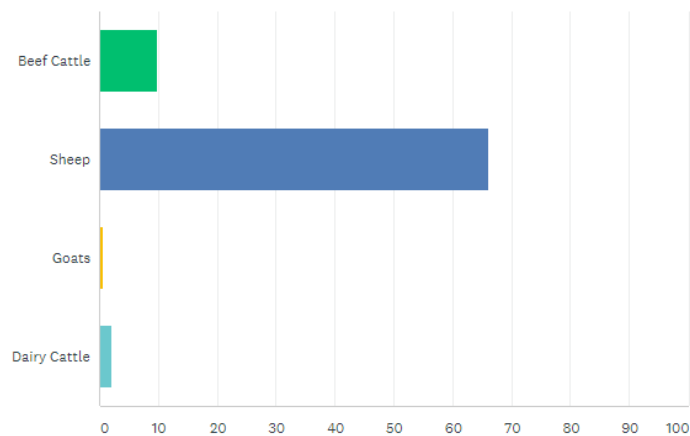
### Number of each livestock type run in a normal season

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0



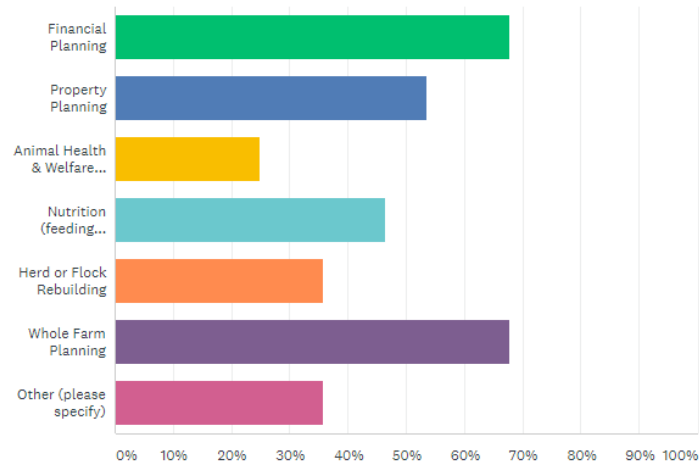
### Livestock losses

Answered: 23 Skipped: 5



## What type of consulting services are you seeking?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0



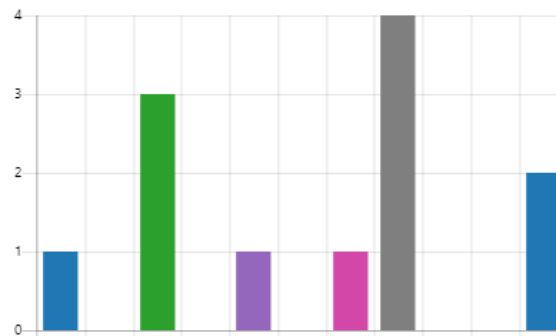
### 4.3 Evaluation Results

#### 6. How did you find out about the Back to Business program?

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

- MLA e-newsletter (Friday Feed... 1
- MLA website 0
- Email from MLA 3
- Beef Central or Sheep Central 0
- Other media outlet (Newspap... 1
- Back to Business Webinar 0
- Social media (Facebook, Twitt... 1
- An advisor (eg, consultant/ag... 4
- Another producer 0
- Farming systems/producer go... 0
- Other 2

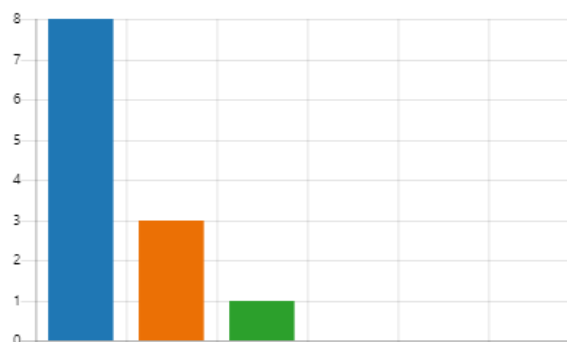


#### 7. Previous to the back to business program, how often did you utilise a farm consultant/advisor?

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

- Never 8
- Yearly 3
- 2-6 times a year 1
- Monthly 0
- Weekly 0
- > Weekly 0



8. After completing the Back to Business program, how likely are you to continue to utilise consultants/advisors in your business?

[More Details](#)

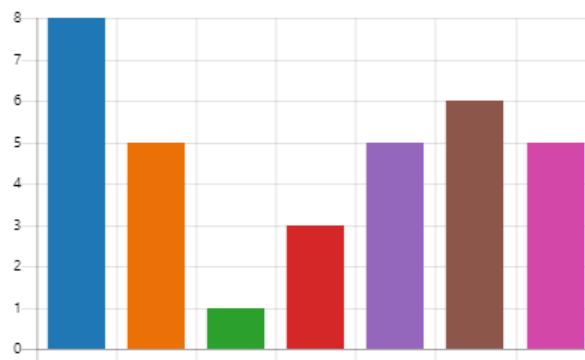
● Very likely	8
● Somewhat likely	4
● Neither likely nor unlikely	0
● Somewhat unlikely	0
● Very unlikely	0



9. What type of consulting assistance were you provided with?

[More Details](#)

● Financial Planning	8
● Property planning	5
● Veterinary advice	1
● Nutrition (feeding programs)	3
● Herd rebuilding	5
● Whole farm planning	6
● Other	5



20. Rate the overall level of support received as part of Back to Business

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

12

Responses

9.58

Average Number

12. The speed at which your request to join the Back to Business program was responded to

[More Details](#)

 Insights

12

Responses

8.83

Average Number

---

13. The level of support you received as part of the Back to Business program

[More Details](#)

 Insights

12

Responses

9.25

Average Number

---

14. The constulant/s you were assigned to work with as part of the Back to Business program

[More Details](#)

 Insights

12

Responses

9.5

Average Number

---

15. Your overall satisfaction with the Back to Business program

[More Details](#)

 Insights

12

Responses

9.42

Average Number

---

16. The advice you recieved as part of Back to Business was valuable for your business

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

12

Responses

9.25

Average Number

17. The three sessions all provided appropriate advice for your situation

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

12

Responses

9.25

Average Number

18. Your knowledge of recovery from natural disasters has improved as part of the Back to Business program

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

12

Responses

8.08

Average Number

19. The back to business program has increased your confidence in making change on-farm

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

12

Responses

9.17

Average Number

21. Have you implemented the action plan on farm that was developed during the Back to Business sessions?

[More Details](#)

- Yes 11
- No 1



## 22. What change/s have you made?

### 10 Responses

1	anonymous	Pasture establishment, fertiliser programme. While the initiative proposed were not new to us, the experience with the consultant clarified our vision for action required.
2	anonymous	Putting budget into action and making decisions on pasture improvement and fencing following fires
3	anonymous	Changed Sheep Enterprises from Merinos to composites. Consolidated change in cattle breed as well to better suit markets
4	anonymous	Many
5	anonymous	Changed cash flow, planning for future and risk management
6	anonymous	Changed accountants firm, employed soils consultant, implementing animal health plan.
7	anonymous	Infrastructure repairs undertaken, professional advice sought (finance, solicitor)
8	anonymous	Decided on a fertiliser and pasture reseeding program for autumn 2021.
9	anonymous	Modified weed spraying programme. Acquired pasture seed and planned for autumn fertiliser and sowing application.
10	anonymous	Applied fertiliser Continued weed spraying More aware of paddock selection

## 23. Have you noticed a positive change in your business since completing the Back to Business program?

[More Details](#)

● Yes	8
● No	1
● Other	2



## 24. Why did you decide not to impliment the action plan?

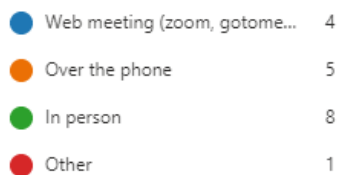
1 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Busy with silage fodder production, cows calving, refencing from fires, unavailability of some resources, border lockdown limited movement. Some of the action plan has already commenced.

## 25. Was the devliery of your Back to Business sessions impacted by COVID-19?

[More Details](#)[Insights](#)

## 26. How was delivery of your Back to Business sessions facilitated?

[More Details](#)

## 27. Did you feel as though the program delivery was successful via this method?

[More Details](#)[Insights](#)

28. Would you recommend the Back to Business program to other producers affected by natural disaster?

[More Details](#)

 Insights



29. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the Back to Business program?



7 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	In person for every session would have been preferable but covid interfered. Because it was implemented late from MLA we went into busy time of year and timelines were tight.
2	anonymous	I think the ag vic staff doing the initial bushfire recovery on ground work could have been equipped with more information to share the program with fire affected producers. 3 of my peers were referred through me, we directly impacted by fire and hadn't heard of the program till I told them. Its need way more promotion for it not to blend in with all other offers of support
3	anonymous	More funding so there can be continuous support
4	anonymous	Make benefits of the program easier for producers to understand.
5	anonymous	N/A
6	anonymous	Not really. Consultant has been very responsive to my needs.
7	anonymous	Fine as is.





## 30. Any other comments about your experience in the Back to Business program?

8 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Very good consultant who facilitated well and communicated with us at our level and gave relevant examples from his own experiences.
2	anonymous	Consultant was fantastic. I rang 6 people on the list before I settled on him. We did it face to face before covid. If we had to zoom it wouldn't have been anywhere near as successful
3	anonymous	Matt was excellent
4	anonymous	Offered \$\$ in an area not covered before and therefore good incentive
5	anonymous	Prompted us to update our financials, wills, tax agent.
6	anonymous	The tailored one on one support offered throughout the program has proved highly beneficial to our farming
7	anonymous	You nominate a name from a list of people you don't know. Works out well if you and your consultant get on to the important issues.
8	anonymous	Consultant John is a good listener and has experience and know how to provide valuable advice.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Key findings

- The overall satisfaction from Back to Business participants was 9.42 out of 10.
- Ninety-two percent of participants implemented the action plan developed and the rest have partially implemented the plan.
- One Hundred percent of participant would recommend the Back to Business program to other producers affected by a natural disaster.
- The only gap identified with the BtB program was how to engage highly stressed producers in the process. The timing of project delivery needs to be assessed.

## **5.2 Benefits to industry**

The key benefit of the BtB program for the Red Meat Industry was supporting the recovery process of fire affected producers to return to full productivity as quickly as possible. The strategic nature of the program also supported producers to potentially change their production system to increase future productivity. The BtB program also provided an avenue to engage with producers who have not engaged with MLA and/or a private consultant previously. Sixty-seven percent of participants had never used a private consultant prior to participating in BtB, and all of these were either very likely or somewhat likely to continue to use consultants in their business in the future. Three participants were not members of MLA.

## **6. Future research and recommendations**

The one on one business advice was unique and very well received by participating farmers. The one issue which needs to be considered is the lack of uptake of an excellent opportunity for fire affected producers. Feedback from many people engaged in the fire recovery process was clearly that the timing was a challenge to engage affected producers. Priority tasks such as fencing and caring for livestock in a highly stressful environment was a barrier to engaging more producers. This is difficult as the program offered strategic planning advice which needs to happen early in the recovery process. This is the major issue that a program such as BtB needs to address for future recovery type projects.