

MIDNIGHT IN HELL

Unexpected opportunities have been rising from the ashes of the Black Saturday bushfires

Of the natural disasters considered a threat to aquaculture, bushfire would in the past not have been uppermost in people's minds. That has certainly changed in Victoria after the 2009 Black Saturday fires tore through the Shire of Murrindindi.

Nestled in the in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range, two hours north-east of Melbourne, trout farmers learnt painfully that the wet environs of the Goulburn River were no protection at all from the

firestorm that struck on 7 February 2009.

President of the Victorian Trout Association Ed Meggitt vividly recalls the day as unbearably hot, smoky and frightening. And that was before ash completely blotted out the sun.

In the dark, as generators failed, people in the area endured a terrifying time huddled under wet blankets in buildings being battered by flying branches and ember-filled gale-force winds.



Buxton Trout Farm's Mitch MacRae.

PHOTOS: PAUL JONES

One farm's road to recovery leads to MasterChef

Buxton Trout Farm has been notching up a lot of firsts. Established in the 1950s, it was the first commercial trout farm in Australia and the first to smoke fish on site using Dutch eel-smoking expertise.

And due to the volatile nature of the Australian bush, it was the first trout farm – possibly anywhere in the world – to be wiped out by bushfire, only to rebuild, restock, and go on to supply would-be gourmet chefs on a television food show.

That particular road to recovery, says Mitch MacRae who has managed the family-owned business for 22 years, was literally paved with one unexpected act of goodwill after another.

“It was such a devastating event, not only for the farm but the whole area, that in the scheme of things, the total loss of our fish stock didn't register at first,” he says.

But rotting fish – malodorous tonnes of it – refocused attention to the trout farms. As local people helped with the disposal, Mitch MacRae's options for the future were becoming extremely stark: wait 12 months to ensure rain did not wash water-fouling ash into the river and possibly lose the farm through bankruptcy. Or rebuild.

Financially unable to wait, Mitch MacRae took a risk and opted to restock. Ironically, Victoria's long-running drought provided the next round of assistance – low rainfall kept ash on the ground and water quality high. And despite a stock shortage within the industry, Mitch MacRae managed to purchase trout from a farm in Gippsland that was coming up for sale.

That gave Mitch MacRae just three weeks to move stock, despite the most direct road route made unpassable by the bushfire. “At that point, the government's Fishery Department made their trucks available whenever they were not in use for government releases,” he says. “Between them and our vehicle, we moved about 36 truckloads in 20 days. That gave us about 12 tonnes of stock.”

Pledges by customers – including wholesalers – to keep their fridges open to Buxton Trout Farm produce provided a much-needed psychological lift that recovery was possible.

By spring 2009 there were enough sizeable fish to get back into the market, albeit at 60 per cent of full production levels. The tourist side of the business recovered as well, despite the loss of accommodation.

Fishing, cooking and travel shows all did their bit for the bushfire survivors and as word spread that the region would welcome visitors, a nation eager to help responded.

“That made a huge difference for us,” he says. “So many tourists tell us they heard about us from various television shows and that has helped us to maintain numbers to just below pre-fire levels. That support helped our business survive.”

As media personalities sampled Buxton Trout Farm products – which include hand-milked caviar and wood-smoked trout paté – word spread to MasterChef producers. In a cook-off aired in May, the show's novice gourmet chefs wielded their skills on Mitch MacRae's trout and caviar.

“We are not a large production farm, so we look to value-add with quality food targeted at market niches,” he says. “It takes all our products – and the recreational fishers – to make a viable business, so we really appreciate the marketing opportunity provided by MasterChef.”

He now considers the farm well on its way to recovery and he is immensely grateful for the public's support. In a bid to reciprocate all the goodwill, he was recently in a position to provide trout for release by the state's fisheries department, a gesture that could boost the fortunes of fishers in the Eildon and Geelong environs.

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While Ed Meggitt's family business, Goulburn River Trout, was fortunately 10 kilometres from the fire front, others suffered the full force of the conflagration.

At the Buxton Trout Farm, the river turned black and toxic, as flames passed over the family home where local people had taken refuge.

They all survived, but damage to infrastructure – the hatchery, tanks and stock – was extensive.

Four of 10 trout farms (comprising 220 tonnes of trout stock) were destroyed.

“The area had already experienced 12 years of drought leading up to the bushfire,” Ed Meggitt says. “River flows were low and temperatures in the preceding fortnight were high, averaging 39°C.

“That meant fish were already under stress. Then, on Black Saturday, many farms experienced record temperatures – readings like 48°C – and water



Four of 10 trout farms – 220 tonnes of trout stock – were destroyed in the Shire of Murrundindi, in Victoria’s Great Dividing Range, on Black Saturday.

temperature was at a record high too.”

It was the heat that killed the fish, he says.

The Shire quickly learnt that impacts on that scale affect the entire community. And for all, the initial heart-breaking priority – not discounting the terrible human tragedies – was dealing with the fish floating belly-up in blackened ponds.

The task seemed overwhelming before volunteers arrived, unbidden, to help in the recovery.

“The community support was incredible,” Ed Meggitt says. “Local people helped net and bury the fish in the immediate aftermath.

“Fly fishers with a fondness for the area organised work groups and provided equipment, joining local people in the clean-up.

“Banks and insurance companies pitched in with less conspicuous acts of philanthropy, depositing money into the accounts of the worst affected. The psychological lift from all the goodwill was important.”

Slowly, as the forest regenerates along a river still missing a shading canopy to cool the water, the

aquaculture operations have been rebuilt and are returning to production. The Buxton Trout Farm has restocked the newly rebuilt hatchery and in the spirit of that recovery is selling ‘extra smoky smoked trout’, a wry marketing twist that immortalises the bushfire.

In a session devoted to recovery from natural disaster, Ed Meggitt summarised the lessons learnt from Black Saturday at the FRDC-sponsored 2010 Australasian Aquaculture Conference held recently in Hobart.

He said that as counter-intuitive as it may sound, bushfire is a risk for aquaculture and operators do need a fire plan.

Ed Meggitt says they also need to be flexible in their response and to be prepared for impacts that are felt long after the fire front has passed, especially water quality issues. But ultimately, he warns that disasters can occur at a scale that can overwhelm the ‘best laid’ plan.

“Some acts of nature are bigger than all of us,” he said. “In the case of Black Saturday, luck and fate rather than management determined whether we survived or not.” **F**