

**Bill SYKES MP**

Member for Benalla, Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture & Water

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25 March 2009

## **Help at last! Funding for fire affected business**

Nationals Member for Benalla Bill Sykes welcomes the announcement of funding for businesses that have been financially affected by the February bushfires.

“This is good and this is timely,” Bill Sykes said. “To date there has been very limited assistance for people in bushfire affected areas, who saved their homes, saved their businesses but suddenly found themselves with limited, if any, income. Seven weeks down the track there are many Victorian businesses hurting because of a downturn in trade due to bushfires. In this instance it’s a case of ‘better late than never’.”

Bill Sykes went on to praise the efforts of Regional Development Victoria (RDV) in calling for the establishment of the new private sector trust fund, Business Relief Fund, which will be operated through the Victorian Employers’ Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VECCI).

RDV confirmed they had pressed for the establishment of the fund in response to an identified direct need for assistance to financially impacted businesses because of the bushfires; businesses that have been financially impacted and who have little or no alternative sources of income during the bushfires.

“I have been concerned for some time now these people were falling through the gaps. Business operators in the Myrtleford area raised this issue with me at the Bushfire Royal Commission community meeting last week,” Bill Sykes said.

Bill Sykes continued: “Prior to that I had been contacted, not only by businesses in fire affected areas, but by businesses whose income had all but dried up as a consequence of the fires. A machinery operator in Lima South, for example, suddenly found his cash flow significantly reduced because his machinery was stuck at Marysville and has not been able to work for the last six weeks.”

Grants of an initial \$5,000 and additional \$20,000 are available for small businesses in bushfire-affected areas that were not burnt out but who are experiencing financial hardship as a result of the bushfires.

“I hope VECCI will cast a wide net in determining the eligibility of businesses for the Business Relief Fund,” Bill Sykes said. “Businesses affected by the bushfires has certainly had a flow-on effect. In the weeks after the fires, local, interstate and international visitors stayed away from fire affected areas or were limited by road closures. In turn towns on tourist routes like Mansfield, Alexandra, Eildon, Beechworth, Bright, even Bonnie Doon saw a reduction in visitor numbers.”

Businesses that are able to substantiate a loss of income due to the bushfires are encouraged to register by contacting Regional Development Victoria office in Wodonga on (02) 6056 9198 who will pass on the details to VECCI for consideration and further action. Businesses will be able to apply on line via VECCI from Friday 27 March.

**Media contact: Bill Sykes (03) 5762 2100 or 0427 624 989**

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