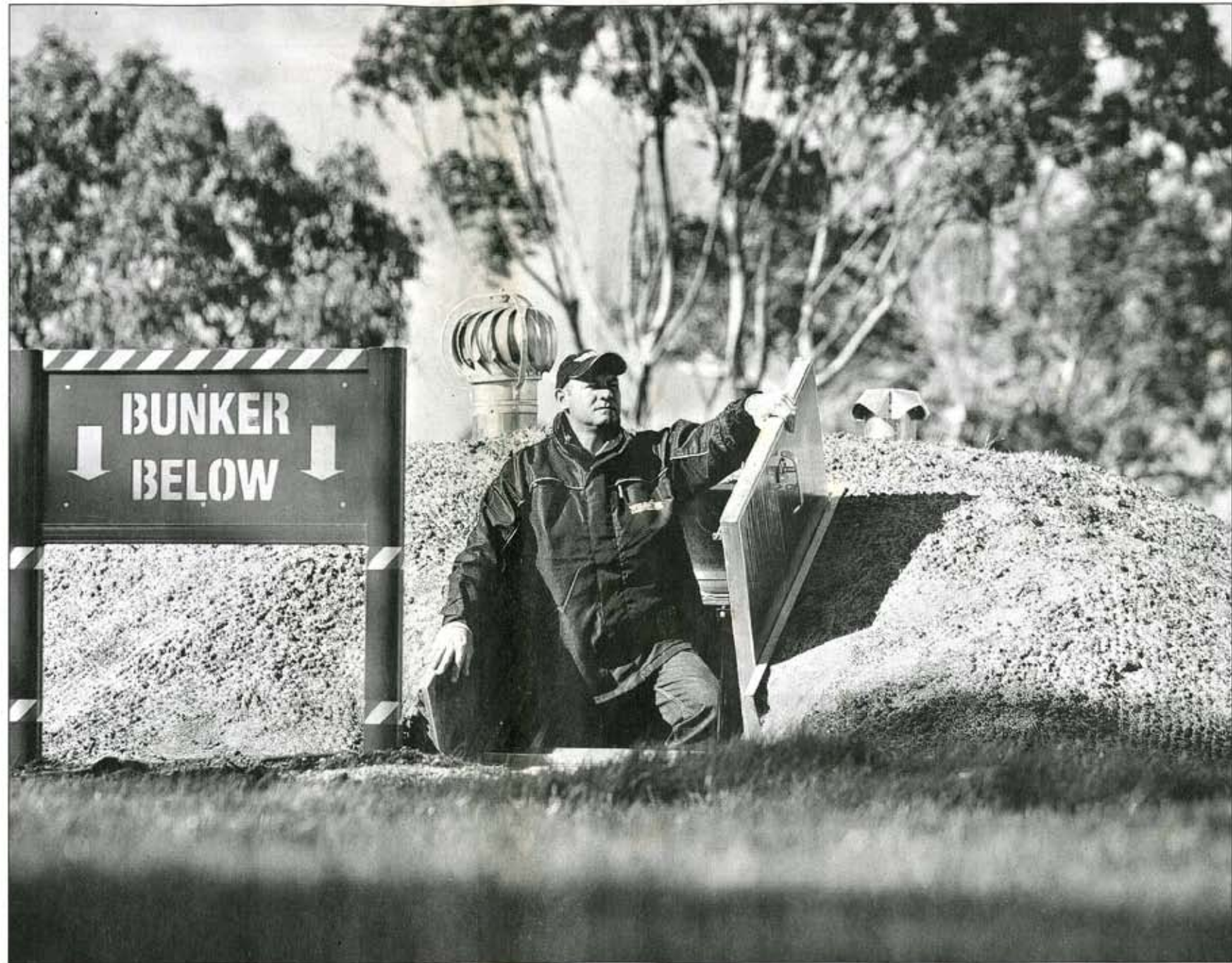


Bunker builders are spreading like wildfire



'A back-up': Anthony Tratt, of Wildfire Safety Bunkers, with a prototype bunker at Keysborough, Victoria, yesterday

Picture: Stuart McEvoy

Stuart Rintoul

SINCE the devastating February bushfires in Victoria, bunker builders have begun to proliferate, each of them offering their own brand of salvation from the flames.

The websites are uniformly terrifying: flames, burned-out cars, a mother comforting her child.

"If things go drastically wrong, as has happened recently in Victoria, you will need somewhere to go to have a chance of surviving while the fury of the inferno passes," says industry

newcomer Fire Safe Bunkers (patent pending) in its pitch to customers.

At Bunkers Down Under (manufacturing concrete tanks in NSW for 40 years), the website shows wreckage of burnt-out cars, with the message "Don't let this happen to you".

At Wildfire Safety Bunkers, customers are told that a bunker is "somewhere to go when there's nowhere to go".

Anthony Tratt started Wildfire two years ago. A former professional supercars driver and plumber, he spent eight years at BHP Research Laboratories in

Victoria, which specialised in fire and load testing of concrete and steel products. In a prototype bunker at a farm at Keysborough, in Melbourne's southeast, he says he supports greater regulation of an industry that trades on fear.

He believes three big issues need to be resolved as bunkers gain greater popularity: minimum standards governing bunker quality and site locations, government support for public bunkers and government rebates for private bunkers in fire-prone areas.

"I've met so many people over these last couple of months that are absolutely adamant they are

going to stay rather than go, in areas that are very scary," he says. "So they need to have something; they've got to have a back-up."

Mr Tratt's family bunkers cost less than \$10,000 and include 100mm-thick concrete, ventilation, 7.2 cubic metres of air when sealed (enough for four adults for two hours), with a further 4.5 cubic metres of air offered as an optional extra. With heavy-gauge stainless steel doors converted from US cyclone and tornado shelters to withstand bushfire temperatures, the bunkers are partly submerged under an

earthen mound facing away from the most common wind direction.

They are constructed alongside a submerged water tank designed to irrigate the area around the bunker for 30 minutes after the fire front has passed and are equipped with lights, an air-circulation system, a door temperature gauge, mobile phone charger, breathing masks for use after leaving, and a survival kit.

Mr Tratt says he has discussed testing with the CSIRO, and claims his bunker will set the standard; new building standards are expected to emerge out of the bushfires royal commission.

Council protected bushfire 'hazard'

Gary Hughes

RESIDENTS in one of the areas devastated on Black Saturday were not allowed to clear highly flammable, noxious tea tree on their land because it was classified as native vegetation by the local council, the royal commission into the bushfire disaster has been told.

Peter Wiltshire, who suffered serious burns and damaged airways trying unsuccessfully to save his home at St Andrews on February 7, said yesterday the tea tree, known as burgan, was "extremely flammable and lets off gases in heat".

Wildfire from burning burgan on a neighbouring property created enough radiant heat to cause a horsefloat at one end of his house to instantaneously burst into flame.

But the local Nillumbik Shire Council stopped landowners clearing burgan without applying for permission, Mr Wiltshire said. "They call it native vegetation and we are not allowed to clear it without a permit. It is probably the most noxious and flammable material. It really is a pest and dangerous."

Mr Wiltshire, who is chairman of the St Andrews Country Fire Authority brigade, said a massive fireball that engulfed his house and caused window glass to melt was fuelled by "black gas" above tree-top level.

He suffered serious burns to his face and both arms, had damaged airways from inhaling heated air and smoke and spent 24 hours in an induced coma in hospital after escaping with his wife and daughter from their blazing home.

Twelve of the 173 people who died on Black Saturday were killed in St Andrews.

Tasmanian Fire Service fire

management planning officer Mark Chladil told the hearing that Victoria's decision to allow people to automatically rebuild on the sites of their former homes using only the new national bushfire building code was "somewhat risky".

Sites needed to be fully assessed for bushfire threat using the full gamut of planning issues, said Mr Chladil, who is also a member of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council.

"To be blunt, rebuilding at the moment would be somewhat risky in each of these places without considering the range of siting, water supply, access, vegetation management options as well as building options," he said.

"There are going to be sites where it will be seen as foolhardy to have rushed in and rebuilt in the same place without addressing these issues."

The social welfare benefits of allowing survivors to rebuild as quickly as possible could be better met by providing each family with an individual building assessor to advise them on rebuilding, Mr Chladil said.

Earlier, the inquiry was told that an essential handbook vital in ensuring the effectiveness of the new national building standard would not be available until at least the end of the year.

Barry Eadie, the head of the Standards Australia committee that developed the new bushfire building standard hastily introduced after February 7, said the new code would not save houses without the companion handbook, which gave crucial advice about such things as planning, water supply, access and maintenance of landscaping and vegetation.