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Black Saturday bushfire survivors 'left short'

By **REMY VARGA**, REPORTER

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Victoria's deepest wound is set to be reopened after Black Saturday bushfire survivors launched a petition demanding the state government force the energy company responsible for the tragedy to pay more compensation to victims.

Leading the charge is Don Brown, who said it was unjust that survivors who lost loved ones, homes and animals in the 2009 blaze were saddled with the costs of rebuilding their lives.

"Why have the survivors been asked to carry the financial burden as a result of the bushfires created by an international company, which has escaped the penalty of paying for the loss of life and damage they were responsible for?" he said.

A royal commission found an ageing powerline and an old electrical conductor caused the Kilmore East-Kinglake and Murrindindi Mill fires in the northeast of Victoria.

The combined death toll for the two fires reached 159.

Both were the responsibility of AusNet Services, then known as SP AusNet, which is 49 per cent publicly owned.

Singapore Power owns 31 per cent of the energy company and the State Grid Corporation of China holds the remaining 20 per cent.

AusNet has already paid \$494 million to the victims of the Kilmore East-Kinglake blaze and \$300m to the Marysville claimants in separate class-action settlements.

The compensation payments were made in December 2014 and February 2015 but the petitioners say they were denied crucial information in pursuing their claims and were left short-changed.

The Victorian government put a \$3.7m price tag on each life lost. The royal commission into the Black Saturday fires estimating the damage across the state at at least \$4.4 billion.

Mr Brown, a former horse breeder and property developer, lost his vast estate in the Murrindindi fire after it spread to the town of Narbethong.

His late wife's beloved garden, which had stood for 120 years, was incinerated.

Mr Brown said extra compensation payments would restore dignity to survivors.

"It would allow all survivors to recover their dignity and live the rest of their lives without further financial hardship," he said.

A government spokeswoman said the petition would be considered under normal procedure.

"We understand the tragic events of Black Saturday and the impacts this had on local communities are still being felt to this day," she said. "The petition currently before the upper house will be considered as part of normal parliamentary procedures."

An AusNet spokeswoman said the class action had been settled without an admission of liability.

"The settlement was reviewed by the Supreme Court of Victoria, which found the terms to be reasonable, and therefore closed the matter," she said.

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