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Coroner recommends stronger fire safety requirements for off-road racing events

A coronial investigation into a fatal incident at the 2022 Rainbow Desert Enduro Race (Desert Enduro) has prompted Victorian Coroner Ingrid Giles to recommend stronger fire safety requirements for vehicles and competitors in off-road motorsport events.

On 4 September 2022, Gerald Hoekstra, 46 and Ede Taric, 50 were competing in the Desert Enduro held in Rainbow, Victoria, when Gerald, the driver, lost control of their vehicle and collided with a tree. The vehicle rolled, landed on its side, and was engulfed in flames. Two competitor teams stopped, saw Gerald trying to exit the vehicle, and unsuccessfully attempted to extinguish the fire with six one-kilogram fire extinguishers. Members of the Rainbow Country Fire Authority arrived at the scene approximately 12-13 minutes after the incident and put the fire out. The post-mortem examination showed both men had survived the collision but not the effects of the fire.

Coroner Giles focused her investigation on how the fire occurred, attempts made to extinguish it, and Gerald and Ede's ability to self-extricate from the buggy.

Gerald and Ede were competing in a modified 2021 Can-Am Maverick X3 side-by-side buggy, capable of speeds up to 130km/h. Modifications included installation of hand-held fire extinguishers with a minimum combined capacity of two kilograms and two auxiliary 35 litre fuel tanks. Prior to the race, the vehicle was scrutineered by a qualified official and was confirmed to be compliant with Motorsport Australia's (MSA) requirements in place at the time.

During the investigation, a Victoria Police Arson Chemist confirmed the fire was likely caused by heat from the buggy's catalytic converter igniting spilled fuel around the vehicle following the crash. While the auxiliary fuel tanks had been installed properly and were compliant with MSA safety requirements at the time, the tanks had a plastic fuel cap and filler neck that protruded from the buggy's safety cage, which left them vulnerable to damage. The cap detached from the filler neck on one of the tanks in the collision and the filler neck did not contain a reflux valve – a one-way valve that automatically closes if the tank is upended. Her Honour found that "had a reflux valve been present, the fire would have most likely been prevented, in that the fuel would not have spilled freely from the tank."

The MSA regulations governing the race required each competing vehicle to be fitted with hand-held fire extinguishers, which Her Honour found to be inadequate given that the fire could not be safely extinguished until the CFA arrived with a tanker despite earlier efforts to calm the fire with hand-held fire extinguishers. A plumbed-in fire extinguisher system may have been more effective, as Her Honour noted, "plumbed-in systems are primarily designed to provide the occupants with an immediate extinguisher response that can increase the amount of time available to extricate from the vehicle during an incident and limit the effect of the fire on the occupant."

At the time of the Desert Enduro 2022, MSA required that vehicles be designed so that racing crews could exit their vehicle within 10 seconds, however, Coroner Giles noted in the finding that, "at the time of Gerald and Ede's collision, there was no mandatory self-extrication timeframe, and no testing was performed of competitors' ability to do so." While MSA has since provided education to officials and resources for competitors regarding self-extrication, its 2025 policy does not require all participants to be tested as a mandatory check prior to a race.

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Since the fatal incident, commendably, MSA has mandated the presence of reflux valves in fuel tanks, the prohibition of any structures protruding outside the safety cage structure, and doubled the required capacity for hand-held fire extinguishers for off-road racing events. MSA has also introduced a staged implementation of mandatory plumbed-in fire extinguisher systems, however, Her Honour found that “the extended roll-out period of three years that is currently being overseen by Motorsport Australia means that the lives of off-road racing competitors who do not already have such a system remain at greater risk in the event of a fire – and in my view, unnecessarily so – until the change becomes mandatory in 2029”.

To further improve competitor safety in off-road racing events and prevent similar deaths, Coroner Giles recommends that:

- Motorsport Australia and the Australian Auto-Sport Alliance require, with immediate effect or otherwise before the end of the 2026 racing season, that all off-road vehicles participating in sanctioned off-road racing events be fitted with plumbed-in fire extinguisher systems.
- Motorsport Australia and the Australian Auto-Sport Alliance undertake, with immediate effect or otherwise before the end of the 2026 racing season, mandatory testing of all competitors involved in sanctioned off-road racing competitions as part of pre-event scrutineering to ensure that each occupant can self-extricate within ten seconds.
- Motorsport Australia develop improved and more specific guidance for organisers of off-road races as to what constitutes ‘appropriate firefighting equipment’ at the start, finish and paddock area of an event, including consideration of requiring dedicated mobile fire units to be present.

The finding can be accessed [here](#).

Media contact:

0407 403 371

mediaenquiries@courts.vic.gov.au