

Reference: MUREDOC-814207702-654

Date: 16 February 2026

Ryan Batchelor MP
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Dear Minister Batchelor

Open Letter - Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires Across Victoria

I am writing to formally request that the deadline for submissions to the above Inquiry be extended by two months, to 15 May 2026, to allow sufficient time for communities and councils most impacted by the fires to meaningfully consider and contribute to the Inquiry.

Murrindindi Shire has experienced a disproportionate share of the impacts from the 2026 summer fires, with almost half of the total state-wide impact occurring within our municipality, including 193 homes destroyed. The Longwood Fire continues to generate active response and relief consequences, with areas within Murrindindi Shire remaining under Incident Control Centre (ICC) arrangements as of today, due to ongoing response activity.

Importantly, it was local emergency service crews responding to the Longwood Fire who were on the ground during the critical escalation period on 9 January, at a time when additional resources were unable to be secured. Since that date, and in the weeks that followed, local communities have led relief efforts, often in isolation, as road closures and dangerous conditions prevented emergency services and government agencies from accessing impacted areas.

Community-led relief hubs have been operating continuously since 9 January, providing essential support, information and coordination. Many residents remain displaced, with households still in emergency accommodation. Families are focused on meeting immediate needs and regaining a basic level of stability. Farmers and businesses are managing stock welfare, restoring damaged land and infrastructure, navigating disrupted supply chains and addressing severe cash-flow pressures. Volunteer-led community groups, including those outside the immediate fire footprint, continue to provide sustained support. Local CFA brigades remain active, responding to flare-ups and maintaining patrols along control lines.

Given these conditions, it is unreasonable to expect those with the most direct lived experience of the fires to have the cognitive capacity, time or emotional bandwidth to engage meaningfully with the Inquiry's terms of reference or prepare considered submissions at this point in time.

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Council is also operating under significant and sustained pressure. We continue to support response and relief operations, including the coordination of works to clear 451 km of fire-impacted local roads to restore safe access for residents, utilities, emergency services and relief providers.

At the same time, Council is establishing new teams, governance arrangements and processes to support medium- and long-term recovery. Many Council staff have been directly impacted by the fires themselves, with a substantial proportion redeployed into emergency-related roles and working extended hours over a prolonged period.

While Council supports the establishment of the Inquiry and its intent, both Council and our communities require additional time to move beyond immediate response and relief demands and to contribute submissions that are informed, reflective and of genuine value to the Inquiry's outcomes.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that the submission deadline be extended to 15 May 2026, to enable those most affected by the fires to participate in a way that is fair, considered and proportionate to the scale of impact experienced.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Gallagher", written in a cursive style.

Cr Damien Gallagher
Mayor