

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Climate Resilience**

Wangaratta – Wednesday 4 December 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

Ailsa McMillan, Unit Controller, State Emergency Service Benalla Unit; and

David Coates, Unit Controller, State Emergency Service Myrtleford Unit.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience in Victoria. Welcome to some representatives from the SES.

All evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders, so the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law and you are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by the privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a copy of the transcript following the hearing for review. Those transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee. Welcome. Thank you. I am a Member for Southern Metropolitan Melbourne. I will ask the committee members to introduce themselves.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Hi. I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for the Northern Victoria Region.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria Region.

**The CHAIR:** And online –

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, coming to you from Warrnambool today. I am a Member for Western Victoria Region.

**David ETTERS HANK:** And David Ettershank from Western Metropolitan Region.

**The CHAIR:** The first thing you need to do is each state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of for the Hansard record, and then I will invite you to make an opening statement. I do not mind who wants to go first.

**David COATES:** Ladies first.

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Ladies first – there we go. I am Ailsa McMillan, and I am the Unit Controller at the Benalla SES Unit.

**David COATES:** David Coates. I am the Unit Controller at the Myrtleford SES Unit.

**The CHAIR:** It is pretty straightforward. We will invite you to make an opening statement, and then we will ask you some questions. Maybe, Ailsa, do you want to –

**David COATES:** Go ahead.

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Okay, me again, first. No, you go.

**David COATES:** You want me to go – okay.

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** You have got a written one.

**David COATES:** Okay. As the Controller of the Myrtleford unit, I have only been in town in Myrtleford for 4½ years after making a tree change from Melbourne. Just to give you an idea of our particular unit, we have 10 active volunteers who are trained to provide a variety of services to the community in times of emergencies.

The services that we routinely provide include clearing of fallen trees and tree damage to property. We also provide services in times of flood, including sandbagging operations and doing things like assisting the riverside caravan parks to evacuate a few times. We do not receive our requests for assistance in a nice gradual spread across the year. As you would expect, when there are times of flood or major storms we can be hit with a whole series of requests for assistance in a short period of time, which really stretches our resources given that we only have 10 active volunteers and two vehicles. We essentially have two crews of people, and for safety reasons there are time limitations on how much work we can do, so we can get quite stretched at times.

For anyone who volunteers with the VICSES, as I have found since I joined, there is a substantial commitment in time to be trained to provide those sorts of services. It is not something where someone can come along one day and then the next week can be chainsawing trees and doing things like that. There is a process that people need to go through to receive various competencies, such as using a chainsaw or getting qualified to do four-wheel driving, which is something we need to do in our area a fair bit, and various other things. That process to get those competencies recognised can be sometimes overly bureaucratic and rigid, to the extent where we have had someone who is a professional arborist, uses a chainsaw five days a week clearing trees, taking about two years to be recognised by the SES as being able to use a chainsaw, where we in the SES only do a subset of what he would normally do because we in the SES do not fell trees; we can only really deal with trees that are already fallen. That can become quite a frustrating thing for volunteers, and they sort of question why they remain in the service. There are lots of reports around that are indicating there are fewer and fewer people doing volunteering in a formal setting, and I think that it might have been partly affected by the COVID restrictions.

It is always a challenge for us to develop new volunteers, and with the training programs they need to go through it is quite an onerous process to get them up to speed. So I think one of the things that might need to be done if we are going to be receiving greater demands on our time is to perhaps look at what we can do to enhance our recruitment processes. I have got an idea there about how we might try and engage youth in particular in a subset of what we do that is not dangerous but might contribute substantially to what we do in terms of information gathering.

I also think that if there are more storms, more incidents and that sort of thing coming along, more floods potentially, then we need to re-emphasise to people, particularly tree changers like me who come into a rural setting, that they cannot expect the SES to turn up every time there is a flood and sandbag their house. We might not have the resources, and they are going to have to have a fair element of self-resilience. So in that regard I would expect that we will need to continue to emphasise and maybe strengthen education programs and things like that to help people to help themselves in times of need. That is about what I wanted to say.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, David.

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** I think that if we are talking resilience, we need to also talk vulnerability, and we need to look at the vulnerabilities of the area we are in. Benalla, as I am sure all of you know, was hit extremely hard in the 1993 floods. That was absolutely devastating to the town in its impact, and I think we need to acknowledge those sorts of vulnerabilities of the community to that – that there are events that might get to that sort of phase. The SES will be able to help and hopefully make the situation better and make some sort of effective response to it, but we will not be able to mitigate against everything; we will not be able to solve it as such. In that sort of scenario – we do go into those greater scenarios with a changing climate and more extreme events – we will find ourselves sticking to key lessons around warning people, making sure that they know what is happening. That is probably the lesson that the Benalla unit took out of the 1993 flood, making sure that people are not waking up with water in their bedrooms. Whatever you have got to do, get out there and make sure that they know that this is on the way so that then they can make good decisions for their own individual circumstances.

There are some positives with the Benalla unit, with our flood response. We have got really good knowledge locally, so in the 2022 event we were able to work really, really well with our local agencies. We got the police, the council and the SES and the CFA all in the same room from really, really, really early on, all working on a coordinated response. We do not get a lot of time or notice for a flood event in Benalla. From the start of the event to the end is probably 36 hours tops, to the peak. So we need to be really on board to get an effective response going and to get all the mitigation actions in. We need to know what it is that we are doing ahead of time.

We are quite across our local flood plan, and having that local knowledge is absolutely invaluable. It is not something that you can substitute for at a higher level of control structure. You really need to have people on the ground who have that knowledge there. And having the strong connections from really early on – our unit controller at the time did a fantastic job of talking with all the CFA brigades in the area ahead of time and linking in with them so they would be able to provide us with information. That sort of thing is invaluable, because then you are getting information from elsewhere in your footprint. Our footprint is the entirety of the Benalla LGA, so 35 k's down to Nillahcootie and probably another 20 k's up to the Boundary Road to the north, so we have got quite a wide area to cover. With two or three vehicles out in the field, you are not going to be able to see everything going on. So those sorts of local networks are really important as well. I think that is about it.

**The CHAIR:** Sure. No worries. Thanks for that. Let us go on to questions. I am interested in any observations that you might have over the time you have both been in the SES – what you think has changed in terms of the nature of the incidents that you have been called out to look at – and any reflections you have got on frequency as well.

**David COATES:** Well, having only been in Myrtleford for 4½ years and in the SES for slightly shorter than that, I do not have that long history going back. But one of the things that has struck me is that we tend to get essentially tornadoes. We had one only a couple of months ago that came through and affected Whorouly, which is a small settlement just not far from Myrtleford. It just ripped trees out, and you can see the line.

**The CHAIR:** Describe to me what you encountered when you went in.

**David COATES:** We received a whole series of requests for assistance on the pager in a short time – like minutes apart – and we headed down the road out of Myrtleford towards where we were told they were. It was getting dim in the late afternoon light. On the Great Alpine Road, which is the main road through Myrtleford, there was a tree down, and then we looked a bit further and there was another tree and another tree. We managed to get one vehicle past and down the road to Whorouly, and it was just devastation. The tornado had come along the road and gone up across Great Alpine Road, and you can still see today the line where it just ripped off trees at about that height above the ground. The trees are there, but then there is just open space. Dozens and dozens of trees were all down on farming land and across the roads and a few on houses as well, so it was quite a shock. Thanks to the local community – as a lot of rural areas do, the local community were out with chainsaws and tractors and things, pushing trees off roads, and that continued on for a number of days until it was all cleared. So that is the sort of pressure. We do not get jobs just averaged out over the year; it comes in a lump.

**The CHAIR:** It comes in bursts. Ailsa, what are you seeing in Benalla? What are the sorts of incidents you have been called out to?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** I am in a similar situation to David, where I have only been part of SES for five years now, but I think that is probably the observation – that, yes, you will get a burst of activity. Some years have more bursts than others. I did the stats on this recently, and I think our average call-out rate is 250 jobs a year. In the 2022–23 financial year we got a little over 500. And the main sorts of events in that – I think we got a storm that January, and obviously the 2022 floods fell into that as well. But the storm events are probably the ones where we get the biggest job count, because you can get a huge flood with huge consequences but very little in the way of requests for assistance. And we have had other events. Similar to what David said there about Whorouly, there was a storm where we probably had 5 k or 10 k worth of road that just had trees on it on the way out to Warrenbayne, and I think we got one job called in for one tree. Sometimes a job can mean one tree, and sometimes a job can mean 'We only called it in once because we're not going to call it in 200 times.'

**The CHAIR:** So you are seeing these periods of intense events having that effect on the trees and –

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Yes. If a storm hits that area and that area has got a lot of trees on it or has got houses in the way, then it is going to impact on what it is going to impact on – what is in the way.

**The CHAIR:** And how well do you feel like you are equipped to respond to those types of events?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** The Warrenbayne one is probably a good example, because we had a heap of our crews chipping away at one road that was one entrance into the town and the council crews on the other one with their

heavy machinery. I think the council crews beat us to the T-junction, and we all went home at dawn and left council to it for a bit.

**The CHAIR:** Right. Ms Broad.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you. I am interested in your role in educating the public. I know the SES does local flood guides on how to sandbag and you were mentioning how you should not expect the SES necessarily to be able to come and do that, so people need to know themselves. I was at one public event, and there were volunteers there with the SES. I commented on the lights and different things, and everything had been bought by them as volunteers to set up the community engagement. Do you have any insights into whether there is any funding for community engagement with the SES? How does that process work?

**David COATES:** The short answer about any funding for community engagement is no, there is no funding. If there is a cost to do something, then the unit would be expected to fund it out of our own resources. We all have our own bank account, where we receive a grant from the state government each year. Apart from that, if we need more money, we need to raise funds in the community, which might be tin rattling or whatever idea we come up with. If there is too much of an impost from doing that, I think volunteers provide a lot of time and commitment to the service as it is without having to also go out and tin-rattle and sell raffle tickets and things like that. But a lot of community engagement we do does not really come at a direct financial cost. For instance, at the Myrtleford show the SES has a big stand there each year. We do not have to pay for a stand there. We provide materials to the community, like the local flood guides and things, which we get from our regional office, which do not come at a cost to us. So other than all the time commitments of all the volunteers on the day and the day before preparing, there is no real direct cost.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** I know the CFA does a promotion during fire season, but with floods it certainly comes to SES to provide leadership. Do you see it as the SES's role to educate the public or engage the public to be ready for events like that, or is that more what you think the state government's role should be, like Emergency Management Victoria?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** I think that is absolutely on us to do, and I think it is something where there is a lot of room for us to improve on.

**David COATES:** Yes. I would say the SES is the control agency for floods, so it is on us to provide the materials and the education, that sort of thing. But there might need to be a recognition in government and perhaps a small amount of funding that is targeted at people to be prepared, more so than perhaps they are now, for floods. We do normally have a fair bit of warning, as Ailsa mentioned, with floods – a matter of hours and potentially days if the water is coming down the Ovens River. We might need to just strengthen what we do so that people can be more prepared. A lot of long-term locals know: 'Oh, here we go again.' They just want to hear from us where the sandbags are and where the sand is. They will come with their trailers and fill them up themselves and look after them. But then people who might be newer to the community are not aware of that and do not know what to do. So we need to make sure we do not have too many people fall through the cracks. As an SES crew with only 10 people, we try to help the vulnerable and elderly with sandbagging around their doors or whatever it might be. In a town of 3000 people, how do 10 people do that? So we need people to help themselves.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Yes. So perhaps a recommendation, do you think, for this inquiry to help people be more resilient would be to provide that support for the community engagement?

**David COATES:** Yes, for sure.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** You mentioned the training backlog. My understanding is, just from the floods, that only a certain number of providers provide training and it can take a long time for people to go through the training. Has that been your experience? You mentioned the need to provide credit perhaps to fast-track some of the training for people to volunteer.

**David COATES:** Yes, recognition of prior learning is problematic in the SES. I used the example of the person who waves a chainsaw around every day and then comes into the SES and is told that he is going to go through hoops to get what we call – everyone starts off in a supervised capacity. He has got to go through to a position of being unsupervised, which is fair enough – has he got the right mindset and things like that, is he

contributing to the team? But then he was going to have to do a two-day course on how to use a chainsaw, how to pull the chainsaw apart and put it back together and use the chainsaw safely and things like that. It was an insult to him, and I get it. It was because their competency numbers did not align what he is trained in professionally with what SES wanted. Because the competency numbers did not align, SES was saying, 'Well, you're going to have to do a two-day course.' Eventually we got that overturned, but I think there are a few things there that –

**Gaelle BROAD:** Could be fast-tracked.

**David COATES:** It could be fast-tracked, yes – not put obstacles in people's way when it is hard to get volunteers.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Ettershank, any questions?

**David ETTERS HANK:** Thank you, Chair. I think that the SES is one of those organisations that people do not tend to think about until they really need them, and then they really need them. Can I ask you: I think community organisations everywhere are struggling with maintaining their volunteer base, and I am wondering if you have any thoughts on what the state government can or should do to assist the SES in terms of both recruiting and retaining volunteers.

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Yes, that is an interesting one, and I think that is one of the key points. I think retaining – in the early stages I think that there is a fair bit of turnover in the life of volunteers nowadays, and it is sometimes tricky at a unit level, given that we have got low numbers to start with and we are all just trying to make do with what we have got and keep everything going. Then, when you get new members turn up and you have got to organise a training weekend for them to get them through the initial basic training, just to find the time to do that – at the moment I have got two new members and I am trying to organise a weekend for them, and I have put it off for a month now. Understandably, they are chomping at the bit – they want to get on the truck; they want to get going – but just with what we have got, we have not got round to it yet. I do not know what the wider SES budget looks like for training or anything like that; that is probably a question for other people in the organisation. But if it would be possible to perhaps run that sort of basic training across the region for new members on a quarterly basis – something like that – that might help us to give them a better start to their journey in SES.

**David COATES:** Perhaps I can add my thoughts to that too. I think one role perhaps for the state government would be to look into how they can promote volunteering in any setting and the benefits to the individual who does the volunteering. I see from my perspective that volunteering in a group like the SES builds your networks within the community and improves your mental health through things like that – working as a team and contributing to something where you feel, 'I've done a good job here.' There are a lot of benefits to volunteering that perhaps need to be communicated a bit more broadly. It might be at the moment to try and encourage people to join groups like the SES or the CFA or whoever it is. Even some less formal volunteering can help people in the mental health space, I think. Having said that, I think maybe SES can look at trying to develop some other roles that it can use to encourage people to get into the SES. You mentioned the CFA. I think most people have a reasonable understanding what the CFA does, but a lot of people really do not actually really know what the SES is there for. I certainly did not have much of a clue when I was living in Melbourne, and a lot of people really do not know what we do, what the scope of things is that we contribute to. So perhaps we suffer on the recruiting side for volunteers because people really do not know who we are or what we do: 'Why would I volunteer?' Perhaps we need to look at ways to give people more exposure to SES.

I have got a little bit of a concept I am thinking about at the moment. There is a youth-type program within SES which is not adopted widely across the state. But one of the things we might be able to do is try and give youth a role, like an information-gathering role, at times of flood or storms – give them more of a sort of formal structure of access to the apps that we use, give them a shirt that says 'SES', make them a sort of formal member that is not operational but can provide information. One of the things SES has been doing in recent years is working on intelligence gathering. We use a thing called Snap Send Solve now. There is a password-protected part of that that people in SES use. They can take photos of river gauges or river levels or things like that, and that gets sent through to a central point. Maybe we can develop that role a little bit to try and

encourage youth to take that on, and if they see events near where they live, then they could perhaps contribute that information to that information gathering and feel like they are a real part of SES. That means we are not ever putting them in danger but they start to learn a little bit about what we do and we include them in things, and potentially, when they get to 18 or more, they might consider becoming an operational volunteer.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. I think you hit on something there with getting people involved. Mansfield high school – I do not think they do it anymore – used to have a year 9 elective around firefighting, which then became a feeder scheme for the CFA. We all know that after a flood event SES might get a bump in membership or after a fire event the CFA do, because people in the community feel helpless and they see the volunteers in the SES and the CFA actually contributing in their communities, so it helps to then give a bit of a bump in volunteerism.

One of the ideas that was put forward yesterday by one of the local government areas when we were listening to the City of Greater Bendigo and the Macedon Ranges shire was for state government to provide some funding for community preparedness and resilience. That was in an education role with the community around what happens in a disaster. Obviously, SES and things like that would participate in that, but also it was about the local governments being funded to build their knowledge of the events in local areas. I wonder if you have thought if there was a funded program like that that ran as an information session for the community and whether that might help you to recruit people as well.

**David COATES:** My experience is that people do not think about disasters until they are imminent or they have happened. We have had community forums in Myrtleford that do not attract a huge number of people when there is nothing imminent. There was one earlier this year, a few months ago, when there was the potential that flooding might hit. There was not any forecast flooding, but it was the time of the year when flooding was potentially going to hit, and it did not attract very many people at all. I think it is because there is a lot of complacency. People have got busy lives. Until something is imminent they do not really want to spend the time.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Yes. Okay. Are there any ideas that you have from Benalla? No?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** No.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. You talked about sandbagging and the vulnerable in the community, particularly I guess older residents. I found it difficult to sandbag at my age, to lift the bags in – to do that now – and need help. Obviously, you guys are so busy when an event hits and you are trying to fill bags and distribute bags. Is there an answer to how we make sure that those who are really vulnerable in our community, the elderly who live alone and that, do have access to assistance with sandbagging?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Yes, it is really, really tricky, because it is hard to know. When a call comes through and it just says ‘Request for sandbags’, you have got to do a bit of deeper digging to work out if it is someone vulnerable or not. And absolutely, we have got limited resources, the SES, to get onto that, particularly by that point, as you are approaching the peak, when people are going to be calling for it. We are going to have 15, 20 members. There will be 15, 20 members of the local CFA around helping out too. We can do so much, but trying to sandbag up to a thousand properties in a larger sort of one-percenter flood is not possible. But yes, as to how you highlight who those are who need it the most, that is worthy of looking into.

**David COATES:** We get a lot of support also from CFA when there is flooding, and other members of the community as well. If something is happening where we need to be filling a lot of sandbags – two years ago we had to do that, so we set up a location for that. The CFA filled a lot of sandbags and provided them to those long-term community members who knew what to do, and they came and got them. So the CFA filling those sandbags allowed our crew to go and see those more vulnerable people who had called out for sandbags with a request for assistance. That lets us do that to the best of our ability.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Good teamwork.

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** I think the other thing in this is we are talking a lot about sandbagging, but the other part of what SES is highlighting to people is that they should also be lifting their belongings, because

sandbagging above a certain height of water is not really going to be very effective at all, and again, if you have got floorboards and the water is going to come up through your floorboards anyway, the same. So I think we need to get the message out there a bit more widely about people lifting their belongings so that if they evacuate or if they come back again, then they have protected their belongings at least.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. I was interested in the comments that you made about the importance of localised knowledge and using that particularly in disaster preparedness and responses. I am wondering: what can be done to better support the use of that local knowledge? But at the same time, what information or support would be helpful at a more centralised or state level? Where do you draw the line? Who is best placed to take responsibility for that?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** It is really tricky, right? That is a really good question, because you have got your municipal flood plans and those are designed to try and capture a lot of this information. But because they are living documents, I guess there are some pieces that maybe have not made it into them or there is a little bit of nuance here or there, and that is the sort of thing that you really only get from the people who have been on the ground for those 30 years, 20 years, whatever it is. They have seen those events before and they have seen that little bit of nuance, and they know that there is that little drain culvert thing that needs to be lifted up to get the flow to go this way. Those little really nuanced things sometimes do not make it into the plan – and things to go and look at. In 2022 we went and looked at Baddaginnie – as in, we knew that even though there are no gauges in that particular creek system, we were getting info from CFA down that way. Plus, we saw the amount of rain and water heading down that way and that we needed to go down there and take a look, and we did, because there are culverts there that will not take the water and it diverts into town. We were not going to do nothing, so we talked to council, and they organised for three 6-inch pumps to be put over that culvert to try and lessen the water amount that was going into town. We did that, so you do not know what would have happened if we had not. But it is possible that that made a fair difference, and that is just from that local knowledge of the people that we had in the room on the day. They knew that we had a particular sort of bottleneck to the water flow in that location.

There are other similar actions in Benalla itself as well. There is a whole section in the south-west side of town where there are a hundred properties that end up isolated beyond the moderate level of flooding, and knowing about that in advance and having that really, really front of mind for us during the response meant that we actually got a tailored warning sent out for that little patch I think about a couple of hours before they got isolated – 4 or 5 hours before they were isolated by the floodwaters – and that was also supported by a doorknock with the police and SES members. I think we spent about 2 or 3 hours on a doorknock of that area before they became isolated. There was one person who got doorknocked, and they were about to catch a flight in the morning. They decided they had better get out then, otherwise they were not going to catch their flight. You get stories like that too that help you to remember it in future.

**David COATES:** I agree there that the local knowledge is extremely important, and also for it to be captured by formal studies. I understand at the moment there is a formal study being done into the Ovens Valley catchment, and I think there is a report due out in February. At the same time the Alpine shire emergency plan for storm and flood is under review, and both of those will take a lot of input from local knowledge, which is extremely important. Because every flood is a bit different, those reviews cannot be done once and you cannot think that is going to be right for 20 years, because things will change. The built environment changes, and the flow of water changes.

I understand there is the potential that the Ovens Valley flood study that is underway now might make mention of the likelihood in the next 20 years that the Ovens River might actually change course. It goes past Myrtleford in the outskirts of Myrtleford, and it might end up changing course and coming right through the middle in an existing creek bed, and that will become the Ovens River. So we need to start planning for how that is going to impact things when water levels rise as well.

There is a diversion channel at the moment just upstream of Myrtleford that is designed to try and take water away from creeks and into the Ovens. That does go through the outskirts rather than through town. But we know from local knowledge, for example, that once the water level gets above a certain height, that diversion

channel does not work and in fact water does the opposite of what we want and comes through town instead of down through the Ovens. So that local knowledge is just so important.

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** I think another key thing on the local knowledge is that if you have it and you have got it in the back of your mind, it is not just there in the book to look at when you need it, it helps you with being proactive in your response. It is like getting ahead of the flood. If you are ahead of the flood, then you have got time to put in those actions that need to be done. Sometimes there are those drain valves and stuff that need to be shut, and you cannot get to them once the water has got up to a certain height. If you are ahead of the flood and ahead of it, then you can get those actions done with plenty of time to do them safely.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you for the work that you do. It is true that volunteering is a very satisfying thing for everybody involved. I kind of think being in the SES perhaps has got a little bit more to do with people, because you are literally called out to help people in certain situations. Whereas the CFA – I volunteered there at our local brigade for a few years – is putting fires out, basically, with a little bit of community. Did I hear you say that Benalla has 10 members?

**David COATES:** It is Myrtleford that has 10 members.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Oh, right. Myrtleford has 10 members. How many members have you got in Benalla?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** I have got 29 on the books and 25 operational.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Twenty-five operational members – right. That is an enormous number of call-outs, 500, for that group of people to do over a year. It is way more than Port Fairy and Warrnambool. Is it mostly trees and storms, or is it floods as well?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** That particular year with the 500 call-outs was mainly one large storm and a fair bit of flooding.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** That was this year?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** No, the 500 was the 2022–23 financial year.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Oh, right. Okay, thank you. You are very good on your data. There was a great scenario there where you were able to get ahead of the curve, as you said, and I am guessing that people really appreciated that and there was not the same angst that you get when you have got that unpredictability where people are not expecting a disaster or an emergency. Is that true?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Yes. I think expectation is a huge part of it for the community. If people have a fair amount that they expect is going to happen, that is going to hurt a lot less than if you get the 1993 scenario of waking up your bedroom going, ‘Oh, that’s water.’ If we can get that out there and/or beforehand if people know what their flood risk is – what sort of level the water could get to at their place in a large event – then that is going to go a lot of the way to how they feel about it at the end of the day. If people know that that is a possible outcome, then they are going to be hopefully less upset, because it is something that they have sort of preplanned for already in their minds and that they know could be a potential result. If you have not had that, then it is going to be many, many, many times worse.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** So that kind of points to locally based community education between SES, CMAs, council and the community. That sounds to me like a really important thing for us as a committee to note. The other thing I kind of wondered about listening to the discussion before about the idea of a junior SES is – are you structured in a similar way to the CFA, where you have got a group of brigades or a group of units?

**David COATES:** Yes, each town in our local area, in the north-east, has an SES unit. So Myrtleford, Wangaratta, Bright, Yackandandah, Beechworth, Chiltern – a lot of towns have an SES unit.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** And all those towns belong to a group or a –

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** No. The CFA would have a group structure where they have got one sort of main town or main brigade, and other brigades around would be under that sort of group. So Benalla group has other brigades, like Warrenbayne, Samaria et cetera, whereas SES does not have that. We do theoretically have a cluster arrangement going, and we have got that for our support teams from the regional teams, but the units themselves – their cluster arrangements could be stronger. We have restarted one up in this part of the world. There is one between Wangaratta, Benalla, Yarrawonga, Rutherglen – I have probably forgotten one of them, so sorry, whichever one of you I forgot. But that has been restarted recently, and that has been working with training on a monthly basis, and that has been absolutely fantastic for shared training and everybody from all those units getting to know each other ahead of when we are in it for real during an event. So stuff like that is absolutely fantastic, yes.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Is that a mechanism that could work well for, say, a training officer for junior SES or a training officer that could serve the cluster, like in the CFA? Not exactly the same as the CFA – your version of it.

**David COATES:** There is that informal sort of training structure that has been mentioned between a number of SES units, and there is an administrative structure where there is an office in Benalla which is separate to Ailsa's operational unit. There is an office of paid VICSES staff, and they arrange formal training and things like that for the region. It is known as the Hume region. That is a formal sort of structure, I suppose.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** But there is no official link between the individual units and the Hume region team?

**David COATES:** Well, the Hume region team office in Benalla is all paid staff, and all the other offices, like Ailsa's in Benalla and mine in Myrtleford and in the other towns, they are all purely volunteers. But if we need someone to be trained on using a chainsaw, to use that example again, then we rely on the regional office to schedule a weekend when the training can be available, and we might have members coming from multiple operational units to attend that training.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you very much. Absolutely awesome.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. I know that you see a lot of diversity in the call-outs that you are sent to, but do you see any infrastructure that is a repeat offender, not standing up to the test when it comes to weather? So do you see, say, a bridge or a road or a building and say, 'That could, should or can be done better'?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** I would say the obvious one on that is when you are driving down a lot of our roadways you see a lot of trees that are already overhanging the road, and they drop branches – gum trees drop branches. We spend a lot of our time on tree-down traffic hazard jobs, as they get coded in the system, and it is one of those jobs where it is a shared responsibility. But by our standing operating procedure we basically need to get out there to make the scene safe, even if we do not remove the tree. Yes, that takes a lot of our time and resources and effort.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** So you are saying the maintenance of the trees on the side of the road?

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Yes.

**David COATES:** Yes. From my area there are some infrastructure-type issues that obviously could be rectified if the money was available. We have one of our main streets across Myrtleford that crosses a creek, and the road crosses it in the form of a – not a culvert –

**Ailsa McMILLAN:** Floodway.

**David COATES:** floodway. That creek goes up every winter and some number of days the road will be closed. The infrastructure could be changed to make it a bridge. I think there has been consideration to that given in the past, but 'Oh, it's too expensive.' The street is fairly busy in terms of trucks, for instance, so it needs to be a certain rated bridge. But to avoid having to close that road every winter for some number of days, even when there are no substantial floods, money in an ideal world would be spent on making that into a bridge. When there are more substantial floods, Great Alpine Road, which is the main road through Myrtleford,

can become closed on both sides of the town. There has been a bit of work done on the side towards Bright, where a couple of hundred metres of rail trails are being upgraded slightly so that cars can go off the lower Great Alpine Road and up a couple of metres on the rail trail and along there to provide some sort of access for emergency vehicles to get through, but on the other side there has been no work done. The flood studies speak to those sorts of issues, and in an ideal world some of those things would be attended to to make them more resilient in bigger and bigger floods or more frequent floods.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes. All right. Thank you. We are out of time.

**The CHAIR:** David and Ailsa, thank you so much for coming today and giving us the benefit of your experience. We really appreciate that. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript in about a week to review.

With that the committee will take a short break to reset for the next witness.

**Witnesses withdrew.**