

# TRANSCRIPT

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

### **Inquiry into fire season preparedness**

Melbourne — 28 February 2017

#### Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Ms Samantha Dunn

Mr Khalil Eideh

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Daniel Young

#### Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

Mr Jeff Bourman

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr James Purcell

Mr Simon Ramsay

Ms Jaclyn Symes

#### Witness

Mr Craig Lapsley (sworn), Emergency Management Commissioner, Emergency Management Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — I declare open the hearing of the environment and planning committee, its inquiry into fire season preparedness. I indicate that evidence taken here is protected by parliamentary privilege, but what is said outside is not necessarily protected by parliamentary privilege. I welcome Craig Lapsley, the emergency services commissioner, to the table. The committee has looked at evidence concerning the western side of the state and the air crane. You have expressed, obviously, an interest in giving evidence on that. We have taken some evidence already, but I welcome any contribution you would like to make and then we will ask some questions.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Fantastic. Thank you for the opportunity to come back. I should also introduce Mark Stephens, who is my executive strategic advisor in the emergency management commissioner's office. Mark does not need to speak, but he might help me in getting some of my attachments in order.

Thank you for the opportunity. Obviously aircraft is the key issue, and I have got a couple of maps I would not mind to run through just to set the scene. First of all, there is a map that is showing Victoria with a number of colours on it, which is a risk map. This map we use to define where the life and property risk of the state is. So if you look at the legend on the upper right-hand corner, there is obviously life and property, and it has got colours from red, orange, yellow and down into some — —

**Ms SHING** — So this is the document, just for the sake of completeness, from the 'Southern metropolitan regional fire management plan' — 'Figure 6 — bushfire risk landscapes'?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — That is it, yes. So I have taken it from the southern metropolitan plan, but it is used for all regional and metropolitan fire management plans. And the reason I have taken that is to show that aircraft is integrated into the risk. So it is not just an operational tool; we actually look at it across what we mean by operational risk. I think the key thing with this is to separate what is the forestry risk, the agricultural risk, and to also bring it into where the people — the population of Victoria — interface with the bush or the grass risk. In there, there is a large red area, which is over the Dandenongs, but it reaches from basically Kinglake down to Drouin in West Gippsland, and it picks up the Dandenong areas, it picks up the Yarra Ranges. It has got a red striped line behind it, which is actually the water catchments. So it shows that it is not just about life risk; it is about the critical infrastructure and what the water catchments mean to the state, which are very important.

But broader than that, there is an orange circle that is actually where the community predominantly live in Victoria. So it reaches from Apollo Bay, it goes up around Beaufort, across through central Victoria, comes around through the back of the Dandenongs, the Yarra Ranges and into West Gippsland through Leongatha and down to Foster. The reason I say that is I will then explain the placement of aircraft, and then I will go to the question in hand about the western district side of it.

So if I place that map down and go to the second one, which is the Victorian aviation resources 2016–17, it is a map of the state that has symbols of aircraft on it. I will just explain the aircraft symbols for a moment. There are little planes with fixed wings, there are helicopters in there and there are different sizes of aircraft. I will explain all of those a little later. But the strategy that we use in Victoria that we have developed over the last five years, and particularly post the royal commission — so from about 2011 onwards and certainly after the final report of the royal commission in 2012 — was to have fixed-wing aircraft in the western side of the state to deal with the agricultural risk, fixed-wings in the eastern side of the state, which deals with the forested and agricultural risk, and in the centre of the state — very much matching the previous map of where the majority of the population interfaces with the bush — is where the helicopters are.

We run 48 aircraft as the standard base fleet of fixed-wings and helicopters, and out of that 48 about two-thirds actually drop water, and then they are supported by other machines, other helicopters or fixed-wings that provide what I will call air traffic control or the safety around aircraft.

In the last number of years — I will park that, and we can come back to that at any stage — the key issue that we have been working on is recommendation 20 from the royal commission. The final report, July 2012 — the implementation, or the bushfire report — goes into recommendation 20, and I will take you to it. Recommendation 20 was very clear about fireground response, and it had a number of recommendations. One of them was that:

The Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment amend their policies on aerial preparedness and standby arrangements, their dispatch protocols and the management of aircraft in order to do the following ...

There are other recommendations in there, but the key one was to:

establish a system that enables the dispatch of aircraft to fires in high-risk areas without requiring a request from an incident controller or the state duty officer.

So the royal commission was very clear in its findings that we did not want any further situations where aircraft sat on the ground and it was wait, wait and wait until someone said, 'Send it'. So in Victoria we then launched into what we call predetermined dispatch. Now you will not find 'predetermined dispatch' in the recommendations of the royal commission. What you will find is that that recommendation was then taken forward and we developed a document called *Pre-Determined Dispatch for Aircraft in Victoria*.

**Ms SHING** — Could we have a copy of that document provided to the committee at some stage too, please?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — You may. I can leave this one behind.

**Ms SHING** — Thank you.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — That was a key document. We are the only state in Australia that uses predetermined dispatch or immediate response. In there the document will take you to a trial that was conducted in 2012 of a helicopter based in Bendigo. The Bendigo trial for predetermined dispatch 2012 was for the fire season 2012–13. We ran a single helicopter from Bendigo that then was proved in its evaluation to not only be up in the sky in the immediate time that fire trucks were up, but on many occasions it was on the fireground before fire trucks were. It was able to commence the suppression of fire as fire trucks were responding. We found that, particularly with volunteers, the volunteers were on the fireground for a shorter period of time, so they were able to do their job, pack up, mop up, black out the fire with the aid of aircraft and be home quicker, or be available for the next call, or whatever that may be.

Now, that pilot, the trial of predetermined dispatch was watched with interest by a number of people. We did not have full support across the agencies. It was seen as, 'Would it work?', 'Would it compromise safety?', 'How do you get ground crews to work in an effective way with something above them?', 'How do you get ground to air working?', 'How do you not water being dropped on fire trucks?', and for a long period of time, for probably a decade or more, it was very strong that you never flew a helicopter or a fixed-wing without what they call an air attack supervisor above — that is, the eye in the sky.

We were saying very clearly that with the right protocols to address the royal commission, these machines should fly by themselves. When there is only one aircraft in the sky there is nothing else to worry about; the pilots can do that effectively. The pilots are trained to do so. As a second machine comes up, pilots talk to each other, but as it escalates in numbers you do need the eye in the sky, so the air attack supervisors do need to come.

We proved that out at Bendigo in 2012–13, we proved it for operational efficiency, we proved the safety of it — and when I say 'efficiency', it was exactly as I said before, it was about time on fireground, getting to fires, and I use the terminology 'keeping small fires small'. You will not extinguish a fire in totality with aircraft alone; you will need tankers on the ground to do that. It is a joint procedure. So that is there. Over the next couple of years we then progressively started to turn on what we call PDD.

**The CHAIR** — What did you say?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — We progressively turned on predetermined dispatch in other locations apart from Bendigo. So that was important. Now I will stop there for a second, and I can hand that up in a moment.

The next map, which is a coloured map — and I apologise for the maps, but I thought it was the safest way to explain a number of things — was the statewide PDD footprints for 2016–17. You will see in there that in 2016 we have got coloured environments, which means that is where an aircraft flies — so the green one around Bendigo or the blue one around Colac or the yellow one around Moorabbin is where a nominated aircraft is operating for predetermined dispatch. You can see in 2016 we have the 99th percentile of the state covered in predetermined dispatch by the allocation of aircraft — there is a small corner up in the far north-west that borders the South Australian border and there is an area on the Bellarine Peninsula in and around Geelong at Lara, in the grasslands, that we have not got, and we will look at the next step of how we address that issue —

but we moved it. So that is where we got to in 2016–17, as we talk about this fire season. Now, if I take you to the next one, which is the same map but it has got some black lines on it.

**Ms SHING** — Is anyone else using the PDD by this stage around Australia, Mr Lapsley? Still standalone?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No, there is no other state that is using predetermined dispatch apart from Victoria.

Now, the next map that has got the black lines on it is important for the discussion and the question that is at hand. The black line that runs in the north-western side of the state has got three coloured areas between Ouyen, Nhill and Mildura that we turned on this year. So we turned them on as PDD and gave the harvest area of Victoria predetermined dispatch out of Nhill, Ouyen and Sea Lake. Ouyen and Nhill were fixed-wing bombers, two of them operating together, and Sea Lake — or later Birchip — was a helicopter, and that in itself was the first time that we had actually covered the harvest part of Victoria.

In an agricultural sense — and I look at Mr Ramsay, who would understand, particularly from his VFF days — the most critical time of a harvest is when the machinery is in the paddock. That is the most likely time to cause a fire, or one of the most likely times apart from lightning. So we this year for the first time invested to put predetermined dispatch up there, and I have got to say the feedback from CFA and the farming community up there has been absolutely stellar, in the sense it fully supports the fact that we have had those aircraft up there on predetermined dispatch.

I might also add — and this is not a criticism, this is a reality — that when the farmers are on their tractors, it does not mean that you are going to see four or five volunteers on a tanker, because they are actually out working. So tankers will be turning out with probably twos or threes on them — reduced crewing — so the aircraft above is really important in the effectiveness of keeping a joined-up fire service. It is about how do you get the crop done, how do you get people on fire trucks, how do you protect your neighbour's property and your property, and how do you work from the sky? So that corner has been extremely successful this year.

If I come into the bit that is around the metropolitan area, Ballarat has traditionally not had PDD, and the reason it has not had PDD is the fact that the air crane was located at Ballarat and the two air cranes in the state do not run on PDD because they take too long to wind up and they do not get off the ground, and I will explain the performance of some of the aircraft. So I have been looking at this for over two years, as to how do we put a helicopter in Ballarat that can run on PDD. The Ballarat firefighting community understood that I was looking at it, but the emotional attachment — and I will say it is as simple as the emotional attachment — to the crane is very significant, and I personally knew that the day we moved the crane out of Ballarat or replaced it with a helicopter that could operate on PDD would be a significant change, but the right thing to do. And I can give you performance data in a moment to not only model what we did by taking it in there but we had the PDD helicopter fly to a fire at Meredith only last week and we have got the performance data and we can present that to you today.

So Ballarat was move the crane back into another airport, and I will explain where that went in a moment, and put in a smaller helicopter that runs on predetermined dispatch, and that was about getting out the door and in the sky as quickly as we could. The second part of that though was at Olinda — so if you come around in that black line. The helicopter at Olinda has been there for a decade or so, but it did not run on PDD, so this year we turned that on. So we have got one in the Dandenongs now that is running on PDD, and likewise a helicopter at Moorabbin to cover the Mornington Peninsula, the Casey and Cardinia catchments or Western Port catchment.

So we turned on Ouyen, Nhill and Sea Lake. We turned on Ballarat. We turned on Olinda. We turned on Moorabbin, and we extended an aircraft that was already based into the Cobaws out of Mangalore, and out of Bendigo into the Macedon Ranges. So you can see inside that black line last year that was not covered by PDD a critical area for fire and protection of people, where people actually live, and we were able to achieve that within that black line that I have got covered there.

The two other circles that sit in the north-east — one is a helicopter based in Ovens, which has been there for years and is a rappel aircraft, where crews actually rappel from the aircraft into remote areas. We turned that on to PDD, and likewise the rappel aircraft at Heyfield. Those are the two circles.

The change management issue with those is, in a forestry sense, the rappel aircraft runs only with the rappellers. It will hover. It will allow the crew to rappel into remote areas. The helicopter will stay committed to where

they are for safety reasons, because it may have to pick them up and take them out, and they most likely will cut a clearing — so the crew that hit the ground will cut a clearing — for the helicopter to land and work right beside them, and also give them water support but also safety of exit. So we changed the procedures there to say these go out as predetermined dispatch, and then they will come back and pick up the crews, which means we are getting water on fires quicker.

**Ms BATH** — Craig, could I interrupt you? When you are talking about PDDs, volume capacity of water on the ground — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I will take you to that if I may in a moment so I can give you the evidence of what that is. So, for the first time, in 2016–17 we have been able to achieve coverage except for those small areas, and there is one in central Victoria, which is Puckapunyal, and we do not fly over Puckapunyal.

**Ms SHING** — For obvious reasons.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Obvious reasons, and if we do, we get special permission. So in that sense we have been able to give, I will say, 99 per cent coverage, but you can see there are parcels of land that we have not covered yet, and we will look at this year how we either modify or seek additional aircraft. So they are the four maps. From there, hopefully I have been able to explain the risk across the state, the fleet of what we operate, the reason why we have moved to PDD from a royal commission point of view and the number of years it has taken us to get there, and the movement of why the air cranes are not on PDD, because of the size of them and how they start up.

Now I will take you to performance, and then I will take you to the capability of the aircraft. I think you have got that little diagram. If I can just walk you through this, and please bear with me, you may wish to ask me questions as I go on this one. The issue here is: when I went to the district 15 planning committee, which is CFA district 15, based in Ballarat, one of the group officers presented to me that where they had run a model — and it is in here — the smaller helicopter based in Ballarat would carry 1400 litres versus the crane that carries 7500 litres. That is their maximum, and I will show you in a moment some of the issues with not reaching maximum water all the time.

From that, if you look at the second column from the left — the first column is time; the second column is a type II helicopter, which is the smaller helicopter carrying 1400 litres per load. Automatic dispatch, so it gets dispatched straightaway. The start-up time to get it in the sky is estimated in this model at 5 minutes, and then it is on-scene in 12 minutes. So by the time it gets off, flight to fire — this was a model of a fire — it is on-scene in 12 minutes. Then it drops water every 3 minutes at 1400 litres and comes up on the 27-minute mark with six drops of water at 8400 litres.

If you go to the next column over and you look at the air crane where is an automatic dispatch, we put in this model 15 minutes for on-scene firefighters to say, ‘We want a helicopter; we want an aircraft’. That goes back through incident control, and it gets dispatched. The start-up time would be, in there, 5 minutes, 10 minutes to get into the air. So there is 10 minutes of winding the machine up, 2-minute travel, which is the same as what we put on the other side, and it lands on the 27-minute mark on the fire. That would be its first drop of water. That is 7500 litres at the 27-minute mark, whereas the other model was 8400 litres on a smaller aircraft doing six drops.

My strategy, and I will stand very strongly by this and I will prove this in the next piece of evidence, is that you can wait 27 minutes and get one big drop of water, but the fire has had a 27-minute run on you and will have a head that is quite big on it, and it is a matter of then, ‘What are you trying to protect?’. The smaller option of either rotaries or fixed-wings in predetermined dispatch is to run rotations and keep hitting it and keep hitting it and keep hitting it and keep hitting it. If you look at that red model there, what it shows is the six drops, and the sixth drop is when the crane would have turned up to drop the load. What it does not show there is that those red circles would be reduced in size with every drop you had. So the model is about keeping small fires small, and it has worked everywhere else in the state, and it is working in Ballarat. That is the desktop model. Those figures were presented to me by one of the group officers, and I said at the meeting, ‘Thank you. You’ve actually helped me and given me some confidence about how much water we get in in that period’.

The second thing, if I keep going on the next matrix, which is built from a fire at Meredith on 22 February 2017, the aircraft at Ballarat went to four fires. So in the top matrix there are the Campbelltown, Mount Franklin, Meredith and Tecoma fires. For three of those fires it was not needed. It was in the sky and was not needed to drop water and was sent home. However, the Meredith fire, for which the time of page was 12.08, if you go across to Meredith, I will take you across the matrix, 12.08 was the time of page. It was airborne 7 minutes later, so at 12.15 it was in the sky. It travelled for 16 minutes to get to the fire and was in attendance at 12.31. It then dropped, and you will see in there, nine loads of water, which was a total of 10 600 litres of water through the nine loads.

I will just stop there for a second. At the same time down, so down the bottom in scenarios 1 and 2, we would see the cranes turning up either from Ballarat or Essendon — and there is one at Essendon still. So if we sent the Essendon one, it would have turned up at the 45-minute mark. The Ballarat crane would have turned up at the 41-minute mark and dropped 7500 litres. You can actually look at the 45-minute mark, where the smaller helicopter has done eight loads of water at 9000 litres, and at the 41-minute mark, where it has done seven loads of water at 7600 litres. So we are ahead of the game. The principle of keeping small fires small is solid as a rock.

From that, if you look at the bottom table, it has got 'progressive volumes' or it has got 'litres per load'. If I take you down the litres per load, it has got the capability to lift 1600 litres maximum. Do you see that the first load is 744? And it is got varying loads. When the helicopter goes out fully loaded with fuel it will pick up a lesser amount of water, and obviously as it burns fuel it then weighs up its water load and its fuel load. It is also about elevation, it is also about the heat of the day and it is about the heat of the fire. So you will see there that the pilots have got to do a balancing job about what they pick up. It is recorded in weight, so we know it by weight. And then they will distribute the water. The interesting thing there, though, if you look at the times, is that they are all about 3 or 4-minute turnarounds. So it is about being able to do very small, short turnarounds from a dam or from a water supply, dropping the water and keeping going.

**Ms SHING** — Is that consistent with international use of aircraft as part of a matrix in firefighting and the drops that occur in similar terrain?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — It is, and it is all reliant on where the water is, and this year we are not travelling far for water. We have got water in dams and so on. That is a good supply of groundwater.

Again, here is our model that I presented earlier that we work through with the volunteer group officers in district 15. This was the first time — and it just happened to be last week, so it is fresh data, and you are one of the first see it — that we said, 'There's our performance. There's the performance around the scenario of the crane'. What we have not got in these scenarios here is whether the crane would be lifting 7500 litres each lift, because it would challenge the same about the amount of fuel on board, elevation and temperature it would operate in. We have still put in here the assumption that the crane would be lifting its maximum load and not a reduced load of where we have got that.

I may stop there, if you wish, and then there are other things I would not mind talking about — how we have talked to Ballarat in particular about moving aircraft and providing additional aircraft on days of needs and how the crane, for example, has operated in other parts of western Victoria this summer. I suppose what I have tried to do is give you the logic, the royal commission logic, a desktop model of the way we believe it would work to actually help support it and also the evidence from fires of last week that is saying that keeping small fires small is working, PDD is effective and it is the absolutely right thing to do to run aircraft in our nominated bases that are not the cranes. The two cranes and the LATs are strategic resources that fly anywhere in the state. For that matter, this season we have had them interstate to provide that level of support.

**Ms SHING** — Just to New South Wales? Has Tasmania benefitted from — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Only to New South Wales this year. Last year we had LATs in New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania and the previous year we did. I suppose I am looking at the Chair to say, 'Have I confused you with data?', and hopefully not.

**The CHAIR** — No, not at all —

**Ms SHING** — It is actually very, very helpful.

**The CHAIR** — I am actually going to challenge some of your data. I am curious about this model that you have created here, because it seems to me to compare apples and oranges in a way. If the air crane was put on a PDD basis, the figures would look quite different.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes, you have still got to wind the crane up. It takes 15 minutes to wind it up, so we do not get the efficiencies out of it. The small helicopters you can wind up — there was one out of Mangalore the other day that was out the doors in 3½ minutes and pulled a fire up just out of Seymour. The cranes to wind up is not — the operators will say that they will do it, and they love to be in the sky, but they need to be strategic resources. We have only got two cranes and we are not going to run them all over the place.

**The CHAIR** — But just to be clear here, these do not strictly compare precisely the same thing; they are two different models.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Sorry, which ones?

**The CHAIR** — These two on this chart.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — This one here?

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms SHING** — Just indicating for the record, ‘Indicative response time and load’ documents.

**The CHAIR** — If the air crane were on a PDD-type arrangement, it may be somewhat different. You are saying that it still takes 15 minutes to get out. Is not that in part the fact that it has not got — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Look, I think the question is a little bit broader. To run the cranes on PDD is not an effective way to run the cranes. If you look at these four jobs on the other thing, if we sent a crane to Camperdown and got turned back, to wind them up and have them operating in that environment is not the way we would want to run the cranes as strategic resources. The littler helicopters, to wind them up quicker, to get them out the doors, is the way to effectively do it. We would not see cranes on fires before fire trucks — they are so bulky, you have to send fuel trucks with them, they run a crew of seven on them with two pilots. So we have just got to operate differently — —

**The CHAIR** — So it is a resource issue in that — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — It is a resource issue. It is the capability of it, and that is why you do not see others run the cranes on PDD at all. We would not be able to justify putting the cranes on PDD. That is not the way to run the cranes. It is not an effective way to run the cranes. They are big machines and they need to wind up in a way to be effective in their operation. The best thing for the cranes is to go to the most strategic fires and let the smaller machines pick them up, and when a fire on the wrong day is running, that is when the strategic resources should be coming to do what they do and do best.

**The CHAIR** — On a second matter, I thought it was a little ungenerous of you to dismiss opposition as emotional attachment to the crane. There are some quite senior people who have a different view inside the firefighting services in its broad manifestation. I think you would concede that.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I do. I think, Chair, if I may, in Victoria we have got this emotional attachment to the cranes where we still call them Elvis, and Elvis has not been in the state for three years, if not a fourth.

**The CHAIR** — It is a descriptor, isn’t it?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — It is.

**Ms SHING** — It is an affectionate descriptor.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — It is this emotional attachment to these orange cranes — that they have to be at every fire. I have to say —

**Ms DUNN** — I do not care what is dropping water on me.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — and I have said very clearly and I am not being rude to anyone at all, that people were saying that we are compromising safety by not having a crane in Ballarat. That is absolute rubbish.

**Ms SHING** — That was the evidence of the mayor of Ballarat.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — That was absolute rubbish and I will stand — —

**The CHAIR** — And not only the mayor. There are senior fire people —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — That is fine.

**The CHAIR** — who have communicated to me directly in writing about some of these matters — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Well, Chair, I would like to talk to them and I would be very pleased to talk one to one with them about the evidence that we have got on the table, absolutely. And I mean that in the sense that I do care for our volunteer and career staff — that they know what we are doing. But I have got to say that the emotional attachment to these orange cranes is very, very significant. Very significant.

**The CHAIR** — I think this is ungenerous in the sense that they have a different — —

**Ms SHING** — This is the witness's evidence, Chair, so you can disagree with it all you want, but that is what has been said.

**The CHAIR** — Let me be quite clear. There are senior fire people who have a different view on this matter —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — That is right.

**The CHAIR** — and to dismiss that as emotional is in my view ungenerous.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I accept what you are saying.

**The CHAIR** — They are people of significant experience. In fact some of them are setting up some of the key protocols, as I think you understand. Mr Rigg, for example, in Ballarat — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — It is interesting, Chair —

**Ms SHING** — It is not being dismissed, Chair. You have verballed the witness.

**The CHAIR** — No, I have not.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Mr Rigg and I spoke on Friday, and he has acknowledged exactly what I have put on here — that we have got the best operating rapid response for Ballarat.

**Mr MELHEM** — There you go.

**Ms SHING** — And that is on the record, Chair.

**Ms DUNN** — Glad to hear that, Mr Lapsley.

**The CHAIR** — So in correspondence that lays out his views in some detail, he has changed his mind on that? Is that what you are — —

**Ms SHING** — Well, you have had a conversation with him directly, Mr Lapsley?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I had a conversation with Wayne Rigg on Friday by telephone, and he did not question at all the effectiveness of the small helicopter doing PDD.

**The CHAIR** — Is it true that he has not been given preferment or promotion because of his views on these matters?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No, no.

**Ms SHING** — Has he not just given a supportive statement, Chair? Now you are just looking for a man never landed on the moon sort of conspiracy theory.

**The CHAIR** — No, it is not a conspiracy theory.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Mr Rigg is a very competent individual and he applied for a job — —

**The CHAIR** — And he has got a very significant history in this area.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes, and we have sponsored him overseas on a number of occasions, if not four, where I think I have sponsored him for probably two, if not three, of them. He applied for a job in CFA, and probably CFA needs to answer this question, and he did not get it. Obviously he is going through his right of appeal at the moment, I understand — —

**The CHAIR** — I understood that had been denied.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No, I think you might find that last week he was given the opportunity to do so.

**The CHAIR** — So there has been a reversal?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — He took it to — —

**The CHAIR** — At least the inquiry has achieved something.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes, true. So he has taken his right to the commission.

**Ms DUNN** — Is this not a matter for the CFA?

**Ms SHING** — Sorry, how is this a matter for EMV, Chair, and how is this actually within the bounds of the terms of reference? Seriously, just — —

**The CHAIR** — It very directly relates to bushfire preparedness, and the presence of bushfire resources directly relates to the safety of people — —

**Ms DUNN** — If someone does not get a job — —

**Mr MELHEM** — So if someone who is disgruntled goes and makes allegations, you are going to take his word for it? That is not — —

**The CHAIR** — You have said that. I thought you would have been supporting — —

**Ms DUNN** — Good try, Chair.

**Mr MELHEM** — No, I actually support the commissioner in his work and his presentation and I deal with the facts, not with politics. Let us deal with the facts, not the politics.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — So if you wish, Chair, I am quite happy to talk to any of the people who have communicated to you about where we are and what we have done.

**Ms SHING** — Yes, let's see if they exist, Mr Davis.

**The CHAIR** — Well, I think the witness has indicated they do exist, and he has indicated — —

**Ms SHING** — Well, he spoke with one last Friday who refuted what you have actually just tried to claim in the committee. Isn't privilege a wonderful thing, Chair?

**The CHAIR** — The fact that Mr Lapsley was having this conversation actually directly reflects the fact that he knows there is an issue.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Well, maybe. The reason I was talking to Mr Rigg was not about that; it was about a project he is working on at the moment to do with night vision that we are trying to get up as well.

**Ms SHING** — So you continue to work together in a productive and collaborative way?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes, absolutely.

**The CHAIR** — He is a very professional individual, Ms Shing.

**Ms SHING** — As Mr Lapsley has just agreed.

**The CHAIR** — We both agree with that.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes, absolutely. Just on that, I suppose the last part of what I was of a mind to present today is two if not three things. One is there is a number of lists that you have there, and I will not take you through them step-by-step, but they are two sided. One is the readiness arrangements for aircraft on a daily basis, and you will see a list of aircraft.

**Ms SHING** — This is the document ‘State fleet aircraft readiness arrangements for EMV’?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes, that is it, and there is a series of them. If you flip through quickly and you go to the last line on each of them, you will see the heading ‘Additional resources’ down the bottom. For example, on the first one we run an additional helitack in Ballarat. If you read right across, it is about the Buninyong road race. We saw a need to put an additional helitack in Ballarat to follow the bike race through Buninyong, and that is there for the first two pages, showing that it was there for a number of days. It then goes down to the third one where there are half a dozen or more additional resources, and you will see in there that there are additional aircraft in Ballarat again. One of them, the very bottom one, so the third page down, is a type 1 heavy Helitack 260 based in Ballarat. That is actually a Blackhawk that we brought in from New South Wales for that day, whatever the day is — 30 January 2017. On that day we had three helitacks running out of Ballarat just to show that from time to time we add additional aircraft into different locations. You will see there that there were additional in the Latrobe Valley, Albury, Bairnsdale, Ovens, Moorabbin, Ballarat, Essendon and Ballarat. That was a question to me about how we move the fleet around.

If I go a little further, to I think the very last one, you will see in the bottom one about additional resources that a Helitack 344, which is an air crane, was moved to Lethbridge with a Firebird to support it. On the same day an additional helitack was brought up to Ballarat.

One of the questions to me from the Ballarat CFA district 15 committee was: would we guarantee a crane to come back into Ballarat on a regular basis? The answer was no. We will take them back into Ballarat; we will take them to wherever we need to, because they are the strategic resources. This example here, the air crane, moved into Lethbridge because we were very much about the Bannockburn-Lara-north of Geelong grasslands. We were moving it to where we believed the highest risk of the day was, and we do that with the cranes and strategically move them.

I have not shown you others, but there are other examples where one of the cranes moved into Albury obviously protecting the northern parts of Victoria but also southern New South Wales, and at the same time the larger tankers went and operated out of Dubbo and Sydney, because their risk was bigger than ours, and one of the cranes went to Canberra. I just wanted to show that with the four strategic resources, which are the two large air tankers running out of Avalon and the two cranes — one out of Essendon and one out of Moorabbin — and from time to time a third crane, which is actually the spare crane, we stand up and operate three cranes.

The last of the presentations, which is from the national air fleet, is all of the different types of aircraft we fly in Australia. Not all of those are in Victoria. For example, the very large one on the bottom, ‘10 tanker air carrier’, is the very large air tanker that runs out of Richmond air base, and the one which has got on the tail of it ‘132’ — that runs out of Richmond air base as well — is the sister of the one that runs out of Avalon, which is 131. The one with ‘162’ on its tail is run out of Avalon as well. So the four large air tankers have the ability to fly at significant speeds in the sky obviously, and we have run them into Adelaide — we run them out of Avalon — we have run them into Tasmania and then we reposition them. They cannot land everywhere; they can only land at certain airports, and Avalon is critical to it, Albury is critical to it. We get into Canberra and we get into Richmond in Sydney, so there is a group of places.

Obviously you have got the air cranes. There are six air cranes in the nation — one in Western Australia, one in South Australia, two in Victoria and two in New South Wales; that is the six. When I say we were operating a

third one this year, New South Wales elected to drop one of theirs off their fleet and kept the large air tankers operating, and it was based in Victoria and we were using it as a third machine for those peak days.

I will not go into all the rest, but that gets into the different types of aircraft from the fixed wings that are small, big and large, and then you have got helicopters that are the same, with the crane being the biggest. The one above it is the S61, which is the next closest; they run out of Colac and Mansfield.

I will leave that with you, without an explanation of them all, but what it does show in a picture is that we are an extensive user of aircraft. We own none of them; they are all on lease. They all operate either in another part of the world or in other parts of Victoria or Australia, and obviously the small fixed wings are normally into crop dusting and the helicopters are utilised 365 days of the year doing other work, and obviously the summer season is when they come into fire. That is all my handouts on what are the strategic assets and why we have moved the fleet.

In closing I will say, Chair, that change does not come easy. One of my hardest jobs in the last number of years has been to pick up the royal commission recommendations and implement them in an effective way. I will stand very strong and very definite about the aircraft strategy of this state, which I have championed personally for the last number of years. I take a passionate interest in understanding aircraft, because it is absolutely critical for the safety of Victoria.

**Ms SHING** — Have you had all your questions?

**The CHAIR** — I will come back in the second round in due course if we can.

**Ms SHING** — Thank you very much for the evidence that you have provided at this particular appearance, Mr Lapsley. I would like to take you directly to evidence that the mayor of Ballarat, Samantha McIntosh, provided to this particular inquiry. She expressed a number of concerns about the change in location of the large air tanker and said:

You do not know what it is going to be like at times of fire. We know, as I said, that the flight pattern coming from Melbourne up to Ballarat and surrounds can be hampered by wind and by terrain. This therefore makes that flight path much longer, much greater and much more concerning. By having the air crane in Ballarat there is no question about the time saved and the ability to have a much greater response. My other great concern is that 2000-litre difference in the type 2 helicopter compared to the air crane of 7500.

Given that you have given evidence to the committee this morning about how it would not be effective, to quote you, to run cranes on PDD and that the best thing is for cranes to go to strategic fires, what do you say in response to the evidence given by the mayor of Ballarat on those concerns?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Hopefully I have been able to explain the logic, the operational efficiency and the reasons to keep small fires small in the evidence today. Hopefully that evidence will assist the mayor of Ballarat in understanding why we have done what we have done, and like I said to the Chair, I am quite happy to go and speak to anyone. I have spoken to the previous mayor. I have spoken to the current mayor, but it was at a social function where I had dinner with her and shared some of those views of mine. I certainly have not had the opportunity to sit in a quality time with the current mayor of Ballarat, and I am quite prepared to do so and present exactly what I have presented here today on the logic and the efficiency of what we are out to achieve.

**Ms SHING** — Thank you for that. I would like to take you to evidence that was given by the former acting CEO of the CFA, Mr Wootten, to this committee. He indicated that in a matter involving litigation, the view was that it was a matter for the CFA to resolve, and if you could do anything — ‘you’ being Mr Lapsley — to support the CFA, then you would. He also indicated that he thought, ‘Craig and I had a couple of conversations about it’ and that the ‘discussions around the EBA were weekly meetings with senior officers from the department of justice’. Mr Lapsley, can you tell this committee what conversations you had with Mr Wootten in relation to the CFA’s approach to litigation and the binding arbitration that was entered into?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I had no discussion of any detail, and I certainly do not know of the figure that was reached. I think it has been presented in evidence here. So that was new information to me. If had to recall, it was something in hundreds of thousands of dollars. It is either \$360 000 or \$460 000.

**Ms SHING** — The Chair indicated to Mr Wootten in his evidence that in the UFU report there is an arbitration settlement listed of \$484 045 and a reimbursement figure of legal fees. What discussion did you

have, if any, with Mr Wootten or anyone else in relation to the settlement or any outcome flowing from the arbitration between the CFA and the UFU?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — None. None in any detail of where it went, how it got to a final figure and when a final figure was even paid.

**Ms SHING** — And did you have any conversation with anyone from the minister's office, the minister, the Premier's office or the Premier in relation to the way in which this matter was resolved?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — In Minister Garrett's period I knew that there was a claim on the table — that the UFU was seeking reimbursement of costs — but no further discussion.

**Ms SHING** — Did you have any conversations directly with the minister in relation to that particular issue?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No. I think if you go back, and it is listed today, the then chief of staff would have been in the position, and it was one of those things to say that there was noise — I will call it 'noise' — around a claim. I had no line visibility of the claim and no line visibility of what was actually being claimed or what reimbursement was sought for.

**The CHAIR** — No 'line — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No line visibility — that is, no responsibility, line visibility of what that was. I will call it 'noise', but when I say 'noise', I knew there was tension about a figure.

**Ms SHING** — Mr Wootten has given evidence to this committee. He said:

I would have had conversations certainly with Craig Lapsley about the matter. I cannot recall if there were others, but certainly Craig I asked for advice.

Mr Davis, the Chair, says:

And what was his view?

Mr Wootten then says:

His view was that it was a matter for the CFA to resolve and if he could do anything to support us, he would.

Is that correct, in your view?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — That would be the intent of it. To me, this was a CFA issue that needed to get dealt with by the CFA. There was nothing I could do in my — as I said, Chair — line responsibility to resolve what was a claim on the table.

**Ms SHING** — So you had no capacity to influence or capacity to become involved in that conversation?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — There is nothing in the role that I play that could deal with reimbursement of a figure that was being sought.

**Ms SHING** — Mr Wootten's evidence was:

His view was that it was a matter for the CFA to resolve ...

Mr Wootten has also given evidence that in fact that was his decision, that he acted alone and that 'if he could do anything to support us, he would'. What does that mean in terms of 'anything to support us'?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Look, if they needed a discussion, I have always been open to discuss with the CEO or the chief of the CFA about any issue on the table. I think sometimes we live in a fairly lonely world and those discussions are important to have, so it was more about knowing and also acknowledging that Michael was an acting CEO. If he needed some level of support, I was more than happy to have that chat. You would know my history at the CFA; I worked at the CFA for many years. I understand the place of old, and that would have been very much support to Michael as an acting CEO — that if he needed to have a discussion, verbalise something — frustrations — however he wished to do so, he could do so. I certainly was not aware of the settlement, and I certainly was not aware of a figure that was settled on.

**Ms SHING** — So by ‘support’ you mean an informal process —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — A discussion.

**Ms SHING** — to provide a mechanism to have those conversations if Mr Wootten desired.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes, and certainly as an acting CEO to make sure that he could feel his way in his feet about what was right and wrong in decision-making.

**The CHAIR** — Well, indeed, and you, as a longstanding CFA person, must have had a view, even informal, about this matter. Frankly, this was a try-on — a union trying to drag — —

**Ms SHING** — He just indicated he did not actually know anything about the settlement matter.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I was not aware of the circumstances.

**Ms SHING** — He just talked about noise, Chair. Do not change the evidence.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — In that sense, Chair, I was not aware of the claim itself and what size it was.

**The CHAIR** — You knew there was tension about a figure.

**Ms SHING** — ‘Noise’, Chair, was the evidence.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — There was noise, and there is always tension. If it is about money, there will be tension.

**Ms DUNN** — Well said, Mr Lapsley.

**Ms SHING** — Yes, you are talking to a chair who was a minister who could not resolve a paramedics agreement for four years while he was the minister. So yes, you would be used to noise on that front, Chair.

**The CHAIR** — So you must have had a view about the claim that had been put in in general rather than knowing the details or the specifics. But you must have known that this was an incredible try-on.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Look, I never went to the detail, Chair, so again it is a little bit about what is seen to be right and wrong on the day, and obviously other people made a decision on the best information they had. That is where I was certainly keen to see that Michael as an acting CEO — if he needed to have the chat, we would have the chat. He has obviously taken advice and made decisions. I was not aware of those decisions, and I certainly was not aware of a quantum — as in, a quantum that was being put forward and a quantum that was being paid. So my knowledge to the end of it is zero knowledge. Like I said, I knew there was something in the documents in here that was in the 300 000s or 400 000s from the evidence that was presented here.

**Ms SHING** — Which the Auditor-General also looked at and found no issue with. Thanks, Mr Lapsley.

**Ms DUNN** — Thank you, Mr Lapsley, for your evidence today and your contribution to the emergency services generally. I just want to bring you back to the predetermined dispatch model that, you stated earlier, no other state uses in Australia; so it is only Victoria. I just want to understand a little bit more as to why you think that is the case.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Good question. I think culturally they are exactly the issues we were dealing with in 2012 about safety, about control of the aircraft and who makes the decision, and those issues you do need to work through. Incident controllers do like to control. They are actually bred to control, so they like to actually control their resources for how they do so. So to have these assets that are coming on automatically is a culture change for incident controllers.

Even this year in the Dandenongs, to turn the Olinda helitack onto predetermined response was debated by the command leaders of DELWP and CFA as to whether it was right. You talk about Mr Rigg. Mr Rigg had the job to negotiate that, and I think he used the words to the command leaders, ‘I don’t think you understand. The commissioner is very committed to this. He believes it’s the right thing to do’, and they were saying, ‘But we still want to have the ability to say when it goes and to what fire’.

For interest, I watched with interest a fire at Carrum Downs, where the helitack out of Moorabbin went to it, and it was very effective. It was not asked by the fire trucks that were there; it automatically turned up and integrated itself in the operations in a safe way. I watched Trevor Owen, as the assistant chief officer from CFA, only yesterday tweet that the successful summer season in the south-eastern region meant that there was a third less fire calls, and that was because of ground resources, a good fire prevention program and automatic response aircraft. So there are some of the senior command officers now acknowledging that it is the right thing to do.

I might add that this year, and I had the opportunity before this hearing to talk to Mr Ramsay quickly, the figures for this summer — and I mean, we are on the last day of summer, so I have got to be careful here; we could have something this afternoon that takes me out — —

**Ms SHING** — Yes, no-one needs a repeat of this morning, Mr Lapsley.

**Ms DUNN** — Exactly. It is Melbourne.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — So one day less of summer — 3200 grass and scrub fires in Victoria and only 9000 hectares burnt. Now, that is somewhat significant. Admittedly we have not had extreme day after extreme day —

**Ms DUNN** — That is true.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — but we still had every potential for 3200 fires to be bigger than they were, and ground support — so the people on the ground have done a stellar job — but also air support have been significant.

**Ms SHING** — It is unfortunate that that does not get a run in the media, Mr Lapsley.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Well, we might have to try and do that at the end of summer. I might wait, myself, to make sure that I am solid tomorrow about my figures —

**Ms SHING** — Yes, nobody put a mozz on it.

**Ms DUNN** — That is right. Wait until April.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — But it is there, yes. Sorry?

**Ms DUNN** — Wait until April before you make that claim.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Exactly. Though we have got a dry period.

**Ms DUNN** — I guess it is new territory and from the evidence you have presented it is an incredibly effective, and in terms of what you have said about this summer season, it is proving to be an effective model to integrate into fire management. I actually do not have any further questions.

**Mr RAMSAY** — I only have a couple of questions, Mr Lapsley. I guess I want to go back to perhaps the reason why you are here, and that is to respond to the mayor of Ballarat's concern about placement of the skycrane at Ballarat or not, and the question I posed to her was, as I understand it, that the skycrane can be dispatched to Ballarat under certain circumstances. So I assume it is a hot weather event that has high north winds. I just was not sure what criteria you might use for that, Craig.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I think I used, Mr Ramsay, the example of when I went through the daily dispatch to Lethbridge. So we took one of the cranes, and it might have been one of the last of the examples in those spreadsheets, where we assessed the grassfire risk on whatever date it was — I think it was 30 January — to be significant, and we moved one of the cranes to Lethbridge. That could have been Ballarat. That could have been Beaufort. That could have been Bendigo. What it allows us to do now is we can use the two cranes and the larger tankers as true strategic assets, whereas before when it was locked in at Ballarat and we took it out, it meant Ballarat had no coverage — zero coverage. So last year when the crane was taken out of Ballarat on 24 December to go to the Wye River fire and spent the next week in the Wye River fire, there was no coverage in Ballarat unless we backed another call-when-needed machine in.

So that is why I say there may be those concerns. As I said to the Chair, if we need to go and talk in detail to the mayor of Ballarat, we will do that, because I am very solid about the logic. It is not only about a single point; it

is about multiple points of how we get the best out of the fleet that we operate. So having the air crane in Ballarat and lifting it out to go to a major job somewhere, because that is what they are there for, means we leave a hole in the Ballarat area. If I guide you back to that map that showed the black lines around it, that was happening in Ballarat on a regular basis. There was no crane there because the crane had gone to the Grampians, or the crane had gone to the Otways, or the crane had gone to the Macedon Ranges —

**The CHAIR** — At times of need.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — at times of need. When it is away at times of need, do you know where the other need is — in Ballarat. So there is a fair chance Ballarat was left open. I did not bring that evidence today, but if you want, I can probably show you that — the amount that Ballarat was left without an aircraft, with no aircraft.

**Ms SHING** — You could provide that to the secretariat, Mr Lapsley.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — We will give an example of that, which would be the previous season and particularly over the Wye River period, when there was no coverage on critical days in Ballarat because the crane had gone, whereas now we have got a predetermined dispatch and we are using the two cranes as strategic assets wherever they need. It is the right model, and if I need to, like I said, go and explain that in a broader sense to the mayor, I will certainly do that.

**Mr RAMSAY** — So can I just have clarification: you have no skycranes at Avalon; they are both at Moorabbin?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No, the two cranes at the moment are: at Essendon — and we have had one at Essendon year after year after year — and the one we moved from Ballarat we put into Moorabbin. Moorabbin is not necessarily for —

**The CHAIR** — A long way away.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — And I have heard people say it is sitting next to the water. It is actually about that red ring I showed first of all on that risk map about where people live. It goes right into the centre of where we can get into the Dandenongs, over the back of the Dandenongs and support what is the peninsula. Although people might go, ‘They’re not going to be the biggest fires’, a 50-hectare fire in the Dandenongs or a 50-hectare fire in the Yarra Ranges can do more damage than a 2000-hectare in the back blocks of somewhere. That is not degrading any part of Victoria or where we live; it is simply weighing up risk, and that is what we do every day. We have got to weigh up risk against operational need. And the two cranes to be centrally located to then move out to where they need to be, and also they run with fuel tankers — as soon as the aircraft is in the sky, the fuel tankers run — so connection to major arterials is also important.

**Mr MELHEM** — Commissioner, reflecting on the fire preparedness for this season, which has got a few hours to go officially, reflecting on how we went as far as our preparedness goes and, secondly, noting that we are in the last phase of implementing the bushfires royal commission recommendations, and I suppose starting to think about the next fire season, I am interested for you to touch on how we went — I know you touched on that earlier, but how you measure that — and then what things we can do for next season to sort of get better prepared.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — The evidence that we presented today is evidence that we picked up off aircraft movement and fighting fires. That is important. We will work through that and have a look at what it means. On the prime facie of the evidence that I have pushed today we have got a model that is effective. We have had it working in the harvest area of Victoria — so the Mallee and Wimmera — very successfully. We have covered in the areas that did not have predetermined dispatch, and we have done that well. The bit that I do have to look at is the Lara and Little River corner and the Bellarine Peninsula. You can see by that map that we have not coverage there, so what do we do? Does that mean modification of a location or additional aircraft? Then it is about making sure the strategic resources, the four of them — the two cranes and the two LATs — are effectively used, and we have seen them this year.

There is some learning from this season outside Victoria. With the fires that were in New South Wales only weeks ago on a Sunday in the Hunter and north of the Hunter, our two large air tankers, their large air tanker and their very large air tanker went constant all day, and there is prima facie evidence that we will work with

New South Wales Rural Fire Service to understand and to say, 'Those fires would have done significantly more damage without the big aircraft being on them', which means these strategic assets are true strategic assets. Put them on the big fires that are going to do the damage, and let the little ones pick up the predetermined dispatch to try and keep small fires small.

**Mr MELHEM** — To follow up, do feel you are getting enough resources to deploy these sorts of actions?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — In aircraft, yes, and I say that every year that I have been commissioner, both fire commissioner and emergency management commissioner, we have moved the fleet. That is both sides of government that have been supportive of us all the way through. It is an important part. Where trials have been done under one leadership of government we have been able to consolidate with another. I have got to say — and I am not here to play politics, I am simply here to put the operational efficiency on the table — we have been supported and we have moved the fleet from what would have been 35 aircraft in 2011 to now 48 standard aircraft. Some of that has been new money; some of it has been contractual arrangements to get efficiencies out of contracts. We have gone to national contracts now, so we see the fleet being managed in an efficiency sense far better. We have had dollar efficiencies which have allowed us to access other machines, but we have also had additional funding, particularly for the two large air tankers and two helitankers — the type 1 helitankers.

**Mr MELHEM** — I agree with you absolutely that this should never be a political thing. You are spot on. How are we ranked internationally in comparison with other jurisdictions who face similar weather patterns? Have you done or got any research?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes. We have got an agreement between California state and Victoria state to share information. California is very similar to us. In many, many aspects — the way in which our people live, the love of the coast, the love of water, a desert backdrop, fire that is entrenched in the history — they are similar to us. To California or Cal Fire, Los Angeles county and Riverside, we have got some very strong ties. In aviation we have actually had people embedded in their aviation units. As you said before, Mr Rigg was one of those who has flown in the LA County Fire Department. We organised that for a trip last year to make sure he experienced it. I myself was part of a number of aviation issues in both the British Columbia part of Canada and in California. We are tied, and we do learn.

The other thing is the large air fleet comes from Canada and America. It operates in their summer and then it comes into our summer, so we bring the expertise of the operators, the pilots and the crews with us, and we learn a lot from those. And vice versa, they learn a lot from us.

**Ms BATH** — Mr Lapsley, thank you for your evidence today. You mentioned the royal commission report, which you brought in with you today and were referring to earlier, and part of that report talks about the setting up, the establishment, of district 27. Going to Mr Melhem's point before about resources and adequate funding, do you feel in general that district 27 has been adequately funded?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Just a point for the record, the royal commission report I referred to was the bushfire royal commission, and that did not have district 27 in it; the Hazelwood report, so subsequent to that, had district 27 in it. District 27 I have been a very strong supporter of. I believe it is absolutely the right thing to do in the management of fire services particularly in Latrobe city. The reason for that is that the challenges the Latrobe city will face today and tomorrow are very significant, and we can see that in how it plays out with management of what are landscapes that are very different, so to have a management structure there is good.

The initial resourcing has been, in my mind, sufficient to establish a district. I have not seen the day-to-day budget process — that is a question for CFA about some of the challenges of those issues — but the establishment of the office, the infrastructure, the management staff, the connection into other brigades within district 27 and the group system to my understanding are there. I think there have been some frustrations in implementation that have not been pure in the sense of achieving what they wanted by the exact time lines. I am not sure that is money related, though; it is about implementation.

**Ms BATH** — Thank you for that. The closure of Hazelwood is imminent — one month away. How will this affect the risk landscape across the valley?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — From mid-2014 until late last year I chaired a task force that I believe was very successful, and it was not because of my chairing; it was because of what people brought to the discussion. That

connected government departments, agencies, the business sector and the broader business sector to what needed to be done. The issue that I did not chair that committee for was then the closure of Hazelwood, so that was a decision made after we had closed that task force. However, the Latrobe Valley Authority I have kept in contact with, and I probably spend a fair amount of my time — not in 2017, but before that — in Morwell and in the valley, so I understand the valley.

**Ms SHING** — You have been spotted on numerous occasions, Mr Lapsley.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Yes. By some I am treated as a local and some people think I actually reside in the valley — that is not quite true. But that tells me the amount of time that I have spent there.

The challenges ahead of the valley are quite significant, and obviously those employment issues are big. In a risk landscape, the work that has been achieved, particularly in the Hazelwood mine, is up there. I will not say it is 100 per cent complete, because it is a working environment, it has got working faces. But the areas that were under threat and risk of fire and did burn with fire have been dealt with in an effective way by coverage, water systems and management systems. What we will work closely with, with all the agencies, is to make sure that as the mine is enclosed that that continues. It is obviously key that our partnership with the Latrobe Valley Authority will be part of that — to make sure that that continues on and in a way that is effective and that we do not see in 15 months or 15 years, I suppose, modifying back to some bad habits of not having good fire prevention and good fire management.

**Ms BATH** — Because the consequences — —

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Are very significant.

**Ms SHING** — Sorry, you just said that in terms of mine fire safety the work that has been undertaken in the mine, the work is up there. Do you mean in terms of managing risk or do you mean in terms of the actual risks that are attendant around the mine itself? Just to clarify what your evidence was there.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Both. So to be clear, with the works program that has been put in place to cover areas, to provide water systems and provide management systems, the energy and effort and investment has been exceptional. What we have got to do now is make sure that that work is continued, as I said, for 15 months, 15 years — as long as it takes — because it is not going away. It is a landscape that is different and it is a landscape that will not be an operating mine. Remember we have done the same at Alcoa in Anglesea, and that is another exceptional example of what was community concern, and we worked with the community in Anglesea to make sure we understood the closure of the mine was done effectively. So we have seen the work, but what we have got to do is maintain it.

**Ms BATH** — There has been a great deal of speculation over a long period of time around, I guess, the relationship, the morale, between the city and the country in terms of CFA. My question, and it probably comes from grassroots people in my electorate and volunteers, is how do we not disadvantage our volunteers, our country systems, when a squeaky wheel seems to be getting continually a lot of notice?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — I have a pretty fundamental belief — and I understand what you mean by a squeaky wheel — that we do have to listen and manage multiples, and we need to be strong in leadership. I think I have presented evidence here before to say that we have got to protect but we have also got to evolve. We have got to understand what Victoria is in the future and have modern systems to do that. Now whether that is CFA or MFB or whether that is DELWP or whether that is SES as the primary provider, or Ambulance Victoria as a first responder, they are the challenges that we have all got to lead. What we have got to understand, though, is that the strength of CFA in a community-based environment is very strong, and we have got to be careful that we do not erode that and not understand the value of it. That is a challenge for all of us.

**Ms BATH** — I agree. Thank you, Mr Lapsley.

**The CHAIR** — I just had one further question. Are you doing any work on changing the CFA service model or boundaries or work on amalgamations between the CFA and the MFB?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No, I am not.

**The CHAIR** — No work at all on the service model or the boundaries?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — There is no work that I have done in seeing a new model for CFA, if that is the question.

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — What I have got to do, though, is make sure that we have got organisations that are able to deal with the future direction. Now that means there will be change. But there is nothing on my remit to look at changing legislation or changing organisations — if that is the question.

**The CHAIR** — It is the question. Thank you.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Can I just ask, Mr Lapsley, are you aware of the circumstances surrounding the sacking of south west regional manager Bob Barry?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — No, I am not. I have spoken to the CFA chief and indicated that there were complaints against the individual, and they were dealt with through the management of CFA. So I am not aware of the detail, and I have not spoken to Mr Barry since he has left CFA. And you will know yourself, Mr Ramsay, that I have worked with Mr Barry in a previous life, so I do know Robert Barry fairly well.

**Mr RAMSAY** — So you would not venture an opinion? Would you feel he has been harshly treated by the CFA hierarchy?

**Mr LAPSLEY** — It is probably unfair for me to comment because I have not seen the claims of whatever the claims are about his behaviour or why he was actually dismissed. I have not seen the claim, so I cannot comment on what might be a claim on the table, and I understand it is also being dealt with in other courts.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Mr Lapsley. We appreciate your time.

**Mr LAPSLEY** — Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**