

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria**

Melbourne – Tuesday 21 November 2023

#### **MEMBERS**

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Sonja Terpstra

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

**WITNESSES**

Lance King; and

Ken Skinner, Traralgon Community Recovery Committee.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearings for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This is a public hearing for the Environment and Planning Committee, which is looking at the October flood event from 2022. It is our second session of the day.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this 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 proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I might ask members of the committee to introduce themselves. Let us start with Ms Broad.

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

**Sheena WATT:** Hello. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Good afternoon. Samantha Ratnam, Northern Metropolitan.

**David ETTERS HANK:** Hi. David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan.

**Melina BATH:** Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

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

**The CHAIR:** I am Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of today's proceedings.

We thought we would invite you to make an opening statement, if you would like. I understand we are giving you up to about 5 minutes each, so you can choose – toss a coin, wrestle it out. I do not mind who goes first.

**Lance KING:** Away you go, Ken.

**Ken SKINNER:** I am Ken Skinner. I am a resident of Traralgon. This is not referring to the 2022 flood but the 2021 flood mostly. We might be able to help further flood people around the area by sharing some of our experience that we have from being a person in a flood zone and a victim of some of the floods. We have got some of our observations that we would like to convey and pass on.

**The CHAIR:** Did you want to make a further statement now?

**Ken SKINNER:** Rather than the questions, part of my aim is to have a reliable network so that we can monitor the weather and the floods and make our own decisions. We have found that over the years the warning systems have been inadequate or not there at all, and the public get caught out because in the Traralgon Creek there is a very fast response between rainfall and the actual flood. In fact from the actual rain hitting the hills, it is about 6 hours before the creek breaks its bank. What that does is it catches people out with things like farms have their cattle in the wrong paddock and they cannot be moved and we have residents with drums of oil and cars and that sort of thing that float down the creek during a flood.

What we would like to do, first of all, is warning systems. We would like to have a warning system for the general public that are not switched on enough to read the existing stuff and have it be timely. At the moment it

takes about an hour before the met bureau gets their information, and VicEmergency have another hour discretion before they put out their warning systems. I think you will find that the warning to evacuate on the Traralgon flood came after the peak, in which case there was no chance of being able to get out. So we would like to have some timely warnings so that people can prepare. In preparation, it is things like moving cattle, things like moving your cars and taking some low-level things that have accumulated over the years to slightly higher levels to prevent damage. In such prevention of that damage, it then also reduces the recovery afterwards for the people. We formed a Traralgon community recovery committee afterwards, and we looked at some of the items there that we could improve on.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mr Skinner. Mr King, did you want to make an opening statement at all? If you could just state your name as well.

**Lance KING:** Lance King. I am the ex-manager of emergency management for Latrobe City Council. I have since retired. I worked for council for over 20 years, and I have been involved in many floods and emergency management responses – fires and floods – within the community of Gippsland. I no longer live in Gippsland, so I have no pecuniary interest in the flooding of Traralgon Creek anymore. I live in another municipality. But I think it is important for the government to understand the requirements of the community in relation to living in a city like Traralgon, where the flooding can occur very quickly. That timely information to allow people to make informed decisions is really important. If you have your car in the driveway, for instance, and come out the next morning and it has moved across as it flooded, and you need to go through your insurance to get new one, or even if you wake up in the middle of the night and get out of bed and get wet feet, and then you get a warning 2 hours later – is that timely? I think not. Is that appropriate with the amount of information that we have at hand? I think not, again. It is important that we use the relevant information and networks that we have to allow people to make decisions on their own behalf to look after themselves if the people in charge of the event cannot give a timely warning.

What we undertook while I was still at council was to put in a redundancy program. It is still not in place as yet, but it is being worked on as we speak. We have one system, which is the BOM system, which was put in place through the Gippsland regional water monitoring partnership, and it has three flow gauges on the creek and eight rain gauges on Traralgon Creek. Ken and I both know – I have worked with Ken as a community member that lives in the flood zone, and there are others as well. Ken became part of that trusted network and would inform me of his concerns when there was a flood coming. Using the BOM system I could get, in my council office, live information of what was happening. I sat on a BOM committee previously, trying to get a way forward for an app for our community to inform them of what I could see so that they could make those decisions themselves. Unfortunately that never eventuated. The system is fairly old now. It has been in place since – early 2000, I think, that came into place. After the 1997 floods they started working and put that system in place. In relation to that, we tried to put another system in place. They are currently working with a company called Attentus to implement a flood information system for those community members, which will send a text to their phone, and they can set the levels of the text that they need to inform them. So there is a bit going on in this space – for flood warning – at the moment, and it has not been implemented fully. Currently there is funding available for that company to do that work to allow our community to be better informed and to allow them to make decisions on their own behalf.

There are a number of issues in relation to the whole of flood management, and some of the recommendations I have put in my submission around multi-agency response and the training of other support agencies when responding to floods. There is also another issue, which we found fairly significant with some people in our community, of orphaned assets: things like bridges that are not owned by agencies and are not owned by community or the public themselves – private people – that everyone put their hands up and did not want to deal with. Council would say, 'It's not our asset.' Agencies would say, 'It's not our asset.' From my understanding, there is still one private property owner that has no access to his property, and it is only through the goodwill of his neighbour at this stage that he can access his own property. There are a number of things that need to be looked at in this area, I think, that are important to community, and empowering them to make their decisions is the key part of it.

**The CHAIR:** We might use that as a kick-off point for questions. Members will have about 7 minutes each. Ms Bath, do you want to kick us off?

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Chair. And thank you, gentlemen, for being such amazing advocates for your region. I have many questions, but let me take you back to when you developed, Mr King, the *Traralgon Local Flood Guide*. I think that was at your time in council. It was information, a flood map. Can you talk us through that – it had a whole program of, when certain upstream flood levels occurred, it would trigger a response, and people could be actively engaged in their system – and what the council did to communicate? These are people likely to be impacted. Talk us through that flood map system that you had.

**Lance KING:** The initial system that we had was an opt-in system, and we contacted everyone in the flood layer and asked them to provide their phone details, either mobile or home based. As I said, opt-in – they filled out a form, they sent it back to us with their contact details and we put it on a phone register. At the time I had a script in the plan. It was an information docket which we sent out to all those people that lived in those flood zones. They put it in their meter box, and you would have the address of the property and the triggers for minor, moderate and major floods. It was not just me that worked on it. This was a council flood committee document that we worked on as part of the emergency management planning committee. So those documents went out. We got a list of people on a phone program, and there were up to about 600 phone numbers on that system. What I could do through my mobile phone is ring into that system, I could read out the minor flood warning – ‘Not too many ums and ahs in that one’ – play it back to myself and then press send and send it out to everyone on those 600 phone-outs. We know it worked. I had a guy that was in SES. He was in Perth, and he said to me, ‘I got that message in Perth.’ Community members did that. At the time the MERC, municipal emergency response coordinator, the senior sergeant and I went and did a doorknock to make sure it worked on people’s doors. So that worked.

**Melina BATH:** You tested the system. The system worked. It had an emergency toolkit, it had what to leave home with and it had special needs, family keepsakes, valuable and others. It had an emergency checklist – I think I am reading off this – before the flooding, during the flooding and after the flooding. The community was abreast of the situation.

**Lance KING:** Correct.

**Melina BATH:** You also I think in one of your submissions or discussions talked about how you and VicPol would actually go upstream in assessing a flood situation and look at the river gauges and rain gauges.

**Lance KING:** We would not actually look at the river gauges and rain gauges, because usually it was in the middle of the night. But we would drive upstream, and we would actually look at the creek.

**Melina BATH:** So there is a physical assessment that you conduct, and that would inform this part of this?

**Lance KING:** Yes, and we would go back and talk to the incident controller about what was happening up in the creek and roughly how long we thought it would take for the water to hit town.

**Melina BATH:** In 2012 there was a significant flood, and that was enacted at that time. Was it 2011?

**Lance KING:** 2011. There was one in 2011 and one in 2012. I am not sure.

**Melina BATH:** That system was enacted then, and it was removed from the council’s responsibility and went to state government and Emergency Management Victoria?

**Lance KING:** That is right. Yes, correct.

**Melina BATH:** Moving forward to the 2021 flood, on 9 June we see that there were VicEmergency apps going off. There was a moderate flood warning on 9 June, on 10 June in the middle of the night there was a major flood warning at 4:08, 4:15 there was a major flood warning on 10 June, on 10 June at 4:49 it went back to moderate – this is Traralgon Creek; I am looking at the document.

**Lance KING:** This is through the emergency management app?

**Melina BATH:** The VicEmergency app. Then at 6:59 it was a major alert, and by that stage the floods were flowing down streets and the bottom of people’s homes. It went on until 10:30 and the ‘evacuate now’, and the flood had peaked by then. Is that correct?

**Lance KING:** I cannot confirm. Ken can.

**Ken SKINNER:** The flood peaked at 9:45.

**Melina BATH:** That is right. The VicEmergency app was saying, ‘Moderate, moderate, major, now evacuate,’ and if they attempted to evacuate they could be then entering a fast-flowing stream of water that was the road.

**Ken SKINNER:** That was actually the peak, but where it breaks the banks was before that, because it comes up so quickly. But it was around about 7:30, from memory, that it actually broke the banks and came down the main street.

**Melina BATH:** People were getting these warnings through the VicEmergency app. They then were not getting the warnings that were the once-upon-a-time systems through the Latrobe City Council plan – is that correct?

**Ken SKINNER:** That is correct.

**Melina BATH:** So this new improved app was actually not serving them as well as the now redundant one.

**Lance KING:** There is also emergency alert, where the incident controller has the power to identify all the properties in that flood zone and send a message to, a warning.

**Melina BATH:** But that did not happen this time around?

**Lance KING:** No, not that I am aware of.

**Melina BATH:** In one of your recommendations you recommended that flood map overlays be used to develop and prepare polygons identifying flood-impacted areas that you have been speaking about and enable emergency alert to be activated for phone communications within that flood. So that is speaking directly to what needs to happen – real-time monitoring and then real-time response, rather than having it relayed into the BOM and then out to ICC and then the ICC can delay. Two hours means a lot in these fast-flowing, rising floods.

**Lance KING:** Correct, and the other part of that is having someone to go check the creek, you know, not sitting in the ICC. You actually need to go out and have a look. It is easy to go out and start rescuing people after the fact – well, not easy, but in the response stage. But if you can look at what is happening in front of you – a lot of the time it is 2 o’clock in the morning, and it has happened to us lots of times, when you are out in the dark with a torch looking at this sort of stuff – and if you are able to confirm what the gauges are telling you, then you can warn the community in an appropriate manner.

**Ken SKINNER:** To reinforce that of course, if you went to look at the data on the gauges for Koornalla during the major flood –

**Melina BATH:** Koornalla is upstream, up the hill?

**Ken SKINNER:** Upstream, yes. There is no data. It is a false figure, because the gauge had failed, so you physically need to look at it to see what it is actually doing.

**Melina BATH:** Ken, to that point about gauges – and we have heard about gauges in our northern region and the need for them – what is your message to us in relation to gauges and, I guess, monitoring?

**Ken SKINNER:** Back in the early days I used to look at the creek levels and see what it peaked at at Koornalla, what it peaked at at Traralgon South, to get an idea of what it was going to be in Traralgon so that I had an idea. Nobody is going to put their fridge on bricks or shift their cattle if they think it is not going to flood; they will only do it if they think they are going to get wet. So you need to know what the level is going to be. I used to look at river gauges and progress from that because it was always too late to actually look at the rain gauges. The problem at the moment I have is that a lot of the rain gauges do not work consistently. There was one at Callignee, which has now been removed – that is not on the system anymore; the one at Koornalla does not work correctly. And when you are trying to get an average across the hills of rainfall to see what is

going to come down that river, you need those gauges to give the correct information, and you need it to be timely. I quite often rang up Lance to say, 'How much has it rained?' because to wait for the met bureau to put out their figures is an hour and a half delay.

**Melina BATH:** And, Ken, you said that during the 2021 floods you were monitoring this at home.

**Ken SKINNER:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** And then you tried to inform incident control, which sits in Traralgon – it is actually about 200 metres from the creek, ICC – and you tried to ring in and you could not get through at all.

**Ken SKINNER:** No. I got up at 3 in the morning and had a look at the figures. By 4 o'clock I put out a text to my neighbours to say, 'This is going to be the biggest flood in recent history.' I tried to ring SES to tell them they needed to put out a warning, and all I got was a recorded message saying, 'Your call is important to us' and they were too busy. So I could not get through, and I had no other contact that I could get through to to tell them they needed to put out a warning to the public.

**Melina BATH:** So it raises the point about trusted source and local content knowledge being able to communicate with incident control or VicEmergency. Is that a recommendation that you would have?

**Lance KING:** That is one that I have got in there. Recommendation 2 is that a trusted network of locals that live on the creek be included in any local flood guide so the incident controller can ring them, whether they are at home. Previously they used to have these sorts of networks, but it takes someone to update – when people leave and move, pass on or whatever – contact details within the flood guides. That is a really important part so that if you do not have the resources to be able to go out into the field to look at what is happening with the creek, at least you can ring someone that lives close to the creek who is able to inform you of what is happening where they live.

**Melina BATH:** Do you feel that there is this mistrust, like, 'You're only locals; what do you know? You haven't done a course or the like.' I mean, you certainly have in your work, Mr King, but do you feel like this government is pushing back, saying 'You don't know what you're talking about because you haven't got a badge?'

**Lance KING:** I do not believe that. I think it is about educating people to work together, even from an emergency management perspective where we have multi-agency training. And people that live in these areas should be invited along to be involved because they have a key partnership to be able to talk to people and tell them, 'Well, this is what happened last time.' We know all floods are not the same, but the impact is the same for communities in the long run.

**Ken SKINNER:** Following the 2021 flood, in November I got a chance to visit the ICC, and they were all concerned about floods, evacuation and all the rest. I had one look at the rainfall, and it was only a 49-mil total, so there was no chance of a flood at that stage, but the ICC was waiting on met bureaus to give them that answer back before the ICC made a decision on that. So going into the ICC you can communicate with them directly and let them know what your observations are in comparison to an ICC that maybe comes from out of the area.

**Melina BATH:** Indeed this goes to the point about localised knowledge and training, as you said. When I asked Mr Wiebusch the other day about how it was possible the SES officers were having breakfast in the Mantra Hotel, which is again right beside the creek, not far from incident control – it is 50 metres from incident control – while their operational vehicles were being flooded, he said, 'These people were having breakfast. They were not the people that were at incident control managing the event, they were people coming on for another shift.' Do you feel like there is some misinformation there that that could happen? I am just seeking recommendations so that these sorts of things do not happen again.

**Ken SKINNER:** It is probably lack of local knowledge. Some of the SES people come from out of the area. I think initially the SES was set up in the ICC to deal with flooding at Bairnsdale, but it ended up being more down the Traralgon area. Therefore they had come from out of other areas and they did not have that actual local knowledge and also were not aware how quickly it could come up, so they got caught short with their cars stuck in the water.

**Lance KING:** There is a bit of situational awareness that goes along with that, because I am not sure if they had the flood guide out or not. We know that the local shopping centre car park floods, which is just across the road from the new Mantra. We knew that that would flood. I mean, from a municipal perspective we knew that would happen. Whether that was conveyed to SES, I cannot say.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ms Bath. Your time and Mr Ettershank's time have expired. Ms Watt.

**Sheena WATT:** Thank you, Mr King and Mr Skinner, for being with us today. I had some questions about warning systems, but you got through them through the answers to Ms Bath's questions. Mine was more to Mr Skinner and his mention in your submission around older members of the community, that they may have difficulties around some of the uses of the early warning systems. What recommendations do you have for us to consider, particularly around early warning systems, for older community members and those that might have some more diverse needs?

**Ken SKINNER:** Thank you for your question. As part of the community recovery group, there were some government grants. We were able to enact some Get Ready Get Techy – the term they used – and they went out to the community to try and teach them how to use some of these apps. What I find is that there are a lot of people that are not on social media – they do not get the messages. And if you are on social media, you do not have it on at night. That is where my preference is: to get a text message onto a phone so that you actually get a warning in the middle of the night, because these things come up so quickly – so having that text message. I would also like to have it not just to the flood overlay polygon but also to people who register as needing to know a flood is coming, and that includes farmers that live out of the area of their cattle and their properties and elderly people that maybe do not have mobile phones, where they can register through another person or another person can ring or they can have another message service. But what I found, when we had the committee running, was there were older people who do not get all of that information. They did not have the BOM's alerts. I use WillyWeather alerts as well and also the VicEmergency app. I use the whole three of them. But I found the most reliable back in 2011 and 2007 that we had was the text message from council. I found personally that was the most reliable warning system that I could get.

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. Are there any others, apart from text messages? Are there any other channels that you think might be helpful for older community members and those with other diverse needs? Sometimes people put the phone down. They put it in a drawer at the end of that night. I am just trying to work out if there are some alternatives here. I know what my nana does, and she is not –

**Ken SKINNER:** If we have prewarning of a flood, which we generally do from the met bureau, these floods come in the middle of the night, so you say, 'Yes, there's going to be a flood in the evening.' The person goes to bed and before morning comes they have got water on the floor. We had people who were pregnant who got caught in the flood and could not get out. But my personal thought is that you pre-warn people the night before that it may happen, and if it does happen, then we will come up the street with a 'wah, wah, wah' siren and wake you up so that you are aware. I do not know whether that has been accepted by too many people, but as far as waking somebody up in the middle of the night, I cannot think of any other alternatives because a lot of people put their phones on silent.

**Lance KING:** As part of the municipal emergency management plan there is a vulnerable persons register, and we would supply that or council would supply that to VicPol because then they would go and contact those people if they could get in.

**Sheena WATT:** Are there any particular recommendations about improvements to the vulnerable persons –

**Lance KING:** I think there needs to be an opt-in process for vulnerable persons: you know, how do you define a vulnerable person? Do I believe I am vulnerable or not? Have I got some debilitating illness that may determine that I am a vulnerable person? If you think you are a vulnerable person, then you should be able to register on that. For instance, if there are going to be floods or fires or something like that, then you want to be notified. That may be something to look at.

**Sheena WATT:** Vulnerability could be temporary in nature –

**Lance KING:** That is right.

**Sheena WATT:** rather than a permanent vulnerability.

**Ken SKINNER:** It could be your nationality; you might not speak English, for instance. You may not speak English and you might need it. And like I said, as well as that you have the farmer that lives up in town and he is in his paddocks down in a flood zone, so he can also register. So having a register of those vulnerable people and people who need to be or want to be notified I think would be an advantage.

**Lance KING:** Yes, the vulnerable persons register was usually managed through agencies, and from our council perspective, that is how we would work through that process. There are people that do not think of themselves as vulnerable and may be vulnerable that live next door to someone. We would ask neighbours in a lot of instances if they could notify us, but again it is a pretty hard area to manage.

**Sheena WATT:** It is certainly something for us to consider. We have heard in previous hearings about vulnerable persons and how we can make sure that they are looked after and considered very centrally, particularly in that immediate aftermath.

I have more questions, but I am not sure if I have more time. I did read in the submission, Mr Skinner, that you recommend improvements be made to the reliability of rain and river height measuring stations. Can you talk a little bit more about that? And you mentioned earlier about Attentus, so I was not sure if there was a connection between the Attentus proposal and what that particular recommendation is. Is there a kind of –

**Ken SKINNER:** Attentus is an alternative network. It has not yet been put in place but it is going to be put in place.

**Lance KING:** Well, partly in place.

**Ken SKINNER:** Partly in place, but the actual gauges for the river heights and rain gauges are not necessarily working just yet. But as I have said, previous times we have had floods – I have got three river gauges, one of them is not working. And right at this time now, out of the five gauges in the hills there are only two that are reliable at the moment. And having those gauges reliable and working makes it easier to predict.

**Sheena WATT:** So this new scheme, is that related to that?

**Lance KING:** The old system is the BOM system through the Gippsland regional water monitoring partnership, and council pays a large amount yearly into that program to maintain that system. There are contractors through that partnership that, from my understanding in the past, would look after those gauges. The new Attentus one is something that we looked at to put a redundancy system in place. We thought, ‘From time to time the environment system was unreliable, so let’s get a system there that can run parallel with that so that we can look at both.’ There is funding there now for that system to be upgraded, so there will be a number of rain gauges and a number of flow gauges put in place, or river height gauges put in place, which will allow incident controllers to look at both into the future.

**Sheena WATT:** Lovely. That is my time, I think.

**The CHAIR:** That is time. Thank you, Ms Watt. Ms Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you very much. Thank you for coming in. Look, I am just interested: you kind of mentioned some frustration, because you have given feedback from the recovery committee to the government, I assume. You just said there has not been a lot of feedback on the reports and the recommendations you have put forward. I guess I am conscious that we are doing another inquiry and a report. What has been your experience of these flood inquiries that happen?

**Ken SKINNER:** I have seen many flood inquiries over my time, whether it be the water board looking at it or whether it be flood inquiries, and I am yet to see overall an improvement in what we get as a result at the moment. So there have been some changes, but overall we have not seen any improvement yet from the public’s point of view in any warning system.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay. Yes, that is right. Do you have any recommendation for this committee about the importance of providing that feedback to local communities or action?

**Lance KING:** I think – sorry, Ken.

**Ken SKINNER:** No, you go.

**Lance KING:** I think it is incumbent on this committee to make sure that there are some meaningful recommendations coming out in relation to community warning and community information in relation to floods. Also, not only for community safety but for responder safety as well, is the training side of things for a multi-agency response. It is great to have a fire agency come and help a responsible agency for floods, but if they have not had any training, somewhere along the line they are going to get in trouble.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Can you expand on that? Because I did see in – yes, here it is:

The state is pitting too many non-trained response agency personnel at risk by expecting them to respond to flood impacts without the proper training.

Can you expand? What have you seen?

**Lance KING:** I am a CFA life member. I have been in the CFA over 45 years. Now, I have talked to the guys that responded to the flood response, to assist with flooding – SES. They have fire trucks. Depending on how deep you go, they might not float, but they could get washed away. Is there an expectation that they go into floodwaters to assist people? I would say that the multi-agency training for fires and floods needs to be improved, and I know you are not dealing with fires. There needs to be some training for these people to make sure that they are safe within the occupational safety and health requirements – to make sure that the firefighters when they go assisting with floods, the SES guys, have lots and lots of training to deal with a flood response and all that sort of stuff. There needs to be some overlap in relation to when resources get low and they are called upon – that they are aware of what they need to look for and what they can and cannot do.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Yes, we have heard that feedback from CFA, I think it was in Echuca, saying that they were kind of put out there but did not have the background training to assist. We do know that SES has a very low volunteer presence in some regional communities, whereas CFA can be very strong, so you make a very good point. You mentioned ICCs and just the importance of having local experts and tapping into that local knowledge. That is something we have heard across the space. But how would you see that in practice? How can that happen?

**Lance KING:** Again, through our flood plans we have a register of those trusted people, trusted community members, that live in those flood zones, where the incident controller can pick up the phone and give them a call: ‘Are you available to come in and advise us on your knowledge of the floods in these areas?’ Because incident controllers just do not come from one agency anymore or one area of the state, they come from all over. They might not be full bottle at Latrobe City’s Traralgon Creek as they are up in Shepparton or Benalla. We get lots of flooding right across the state. Again, that needs to come back in part of the training side of things, for those incident controllers to be aware in the flood plan that these people might be good to assist them in their time of need.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** When you talk about that local knowledge I guess you are talking about people being close – they can see what is happening in the river. But is it more than that? Is it anything different to levels and where water is travelling in that local knowledge? I guess I am just thinking in terms of flood wardens.

**Lance KING:** It is a little bit more than that. It is knowing your neighbours, the networks you have. Ken has got his own networks. He will ring people and say, ‘You know, you might want to lift up your stove or whatever off the floor because it’s going to be bigger this time than it was last time.’ He can talk to that, because I know after I left council, I rang one of my friends that I grew up with and said, ‘Looks like you might be going to get wet feet again,’ and he said, ‘Yeah, I’m on Ken’s network. He’s already let me know.’

**Gaëlle BROAD:** I think it was in Seymour we heard flood wardens mentioned. So you think people that are respected community leaders can kind of help disseminate information as well as know what is going on on the ground?

**Lance KING:** Yes. I have said previously that we used to have people live on the creek that were in flood plans. I think we need to get back to that, and it is a matter of just keeping them updated and involved.

**Gaelle BROAD:** You guys, when I look at the number of floods you have had over the years, I mean, this is really incredible – 1978, 93, 95, 2007, 2011, 2012 and it goes on. We have bushfire readiness sessions, information sessions. Near out where I live, I know, across the area CFA carry out those. Do you have anything similar for floods?

**Lance KING:** No.

**Gaelle BROAD:** No. Do you think that would be a useful thing in an area with such significant flooding? You know, to sort of have your summer season, your CFA awareness; winter approaches, you talk floods, like, to inform the community. What are your thoughts on that?

**Ken SKINNER:** Flooding occurs anywhere between April and November. It is a large part of the year. When you talk about the number of floods, I have got the records of the creek levels for the floods over the years that I have been taking records.

Just back to your first question: what do we want out of the committee? Quite often we get reports but there is no-one responsible for the actions, and therefore those actions are not allocated to anybody to address, and we do not see any results. We get lots of reports to say what is needed, but we do not get to see the results of that, so that is one of the things I would like to see come out of this.

**Gaelle BROAD:** I would just say to the committee, I have not spoken to you ever before. What you have said is actually very similar to what I have shared with the committee that I heard from another gentleman, who said exactly the same thing.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ms Broad. Dr Ratnam.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you so much for your evidence. It has been really useful. Just picking up on the point that has been raised a couple times, you were asserting in the decision-making spaces there was a lack of local knowledge and some situational context to be able to provide the warnings to the right people et cetera. We have heard throughout this inquiry a sort of a trend to move towards using contingency staff, for example, from government departments as your surge workforce, given as well that it is harder to attract more volunteers and retain volunteers. So we have got this dilemma emerging, with more disaster events which are going to have more wide-reaching impacts needing more people on the ground to help but less volunteers. We are going to have to have the surge capacity, but you talk about this lack of situational awareness and lack of local knowledge having an impact then on your ability to respond to those emergencies. Have you all given any thought about how communities should respond? How do we get that balance right? I know it is going to take us all kind of working together to get the perfect solution, but I am interested in your thoughts on that trend versus the reality of needing the local knowledge as well.

**Lance KING:** I think it comes back to recovery versus preparedness.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Right, there are two parts. Yes, of course.

**Lance KING:** It is about that timely information to people, and it is hard to get the balance right because the systems are not fully operational to be able to allow people sitting at home watching Netflix in the middle of the night that do not want to be warned to get warnings. I see that as part of the educational process. This does not fill the void of lack of resources to be able to undertake response and recovery, but it is about building the education level of community of what to do once they get that initial warning – how to prepare, where to go to, what to do.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Yes.

**Ken SKINNER:** The other thing that you talk about is the amount of people available. From some of the chatter that I have heard there is less and less CFA members volunteering, less and less SES members volunteering, so maybe a program to try and encourage – whether it be an ad program or an incentive program – more of the community into some of those groups. Especially the volunteer groups might assist in having people available when we call on them to assist with the flood.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thank you, that is very useful. I think it is something that we are going to have to ponder quite deeply in terms of recommendations. A point that you have raised before is about community

playing a key part in flood recovery, both in the response but then ongoing with recovery as well. We know that often neighbours and folks like you are usually on the scene before emergency services are able to get there and are often involved in moving furniture and sandbagging et cetera. From your experience locally in Traralgon, do you feel like people have the support they need to be able to provide that response? Is there anything more we can do to be able to support people being able to help their neighbours, essentially?

**Ken SKINNER:** Following the floods we had a meeting, which tended to be a little bit of a pointed meeting – laying blame and that sort of thing. What I would like to have seen, and we discussed it at the flood community recovery meeting, is having a network of people – be it SES, be it insurance agencies, be it Red Cross – where you could get the people together at a community meeting afterward. They could talk casually and give some direction. We had Suncorp come to one of our meetings, and they asked around the community who was insured with Suncorp, and that enabled them to start their insurance processes. We had Red Cross to make sure that people were registered for their losses. Council had a register there. They got people up to the basketball stadium and had everybody register their losses so that then they could be followed up, to try and reduce the amount of trauma for a person that takes months sometimes to get things fixed and cleaned.

**Lance KING:** We have groups in the community – such as Lions, Rotary and all that – that come along and help with the clean-up, because we know floods are messy in the recovery stage. People's houses have got mud and gunk and all that through them. Those sorts of agencies we work with – there are a number of them: all of a sudden, when you need that recovery side of things to help with community, lots of people come out of the woodwork.

**Samantha RATNAM:** This might be a question from Mr King, but happy for either of you to answer. You have talked about the delays in getting flood warning information from the Bureau of Meteorology to the incident control centre. Do you have a sense of what caused the delay or what is causing those delays?

**Ken SKINNER:** I have previously talked with the met bureau, trying to get them to publish their results a bit earlier. At the moment they publish the hour's rainfall 10 minutes after the hour or 15 minutes after the hour. They do actually have that information in to them every 15 minutes. I have tried to get them to publish that information a bit sooner, and they have relied on the fact that they are going to modify their software and their apps, but it has not happened yet. Hopefully they will do some changes then, but it is a long way off.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Okay, so they are conscious of it. Well, they are appearing before us soon, so we might be able to ask them directly about that as well.

**Ken SKINNER:** Yes, if we can get that information quickly out of them – I am not too sure what the delays are to them. But when I joined the ICC at one stage I watched, and they actually had to wait for 10 past the hour for the met bureau to come on the board to say, 'No, this is what the rain rate is at the moment, and it's probably not going to flood.' They were ready to evacuate people or warn people, doorknock people, but we said, 'Oh, look, we'll wait. We've got the met bureau coming on in 20 minutes, so we'll wait for them.' So there is another delay there before decisions are made.

**Samantha RATNAM:** And it adds up.

**Lance KING:** I think that is a more pertinent question for them.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Yes, okay.

**Lance KING:** They would know the technical issues around that. We are probably not privy to that.

**The CHAIR:** We have just got to wait an hour and 10 minutes until they arrive.

**Melina BATH:** It is a lot in a flood situation.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Just on a point that you raised about the assets which might not be owned by anyone, it is not clear who is responsible for some of those assets. You are suggesting creating a register of orphaned assets. Is this information something which should be required to be communicated to prospective buyers at the point of sale?

**Lance KING:** Yes, but is that a 'buyer beware' issue? Is that what you are saying?

**Ken SKINNER:** Section 32.

**Lance KING:** The issue is that no-one takes ownership at the end of the day. I have spoken to East Gippsland Shire Council staff, and during the fires they had down there, they lost bridges too that were in the same position. You have got what is now DEECA owning a certain amount of land on one side, and then you have got maybe the catchment management owning another area, or Southern Rural Water, and then there is the bridge in the middle and no-one wants to put their hand up. Because they were built so long ago, no-one knows who actually built them and to what standard, and they lose that access to the property. So it is a bit of a minefield. It is a statewide issue that needs to be looked at into the future, whoever takes that on board.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** All right, Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Sometimes even when assets are on state government land, nobody seems to own them – that is every levee bank in the Northern Victoria Region.

**The CHAIR:** And we are back to levees.

**Lance KING:** Levee banks are a rule unto themselves, aren't they?

**Wendy LOVELL:** Absolutely. Earlier you talked about your municipal emergency management plan, and every community seems to have quite a detailed municipal emergency plan. We had an excellent one in Shepparton that, like yours, set out all of the actions to be taken at certain times. When the river reached a certain level, this road was to be closed or that road was to be closed or the causeway was to be closed – what exactly would happen – and they were able to follow that plan effectively. But what seems to be the common theme of what we are hearing in these public hearings that we have been conducting is that the warnings failed. You touched on that you used to have your opt-in system, where everyone gave their mobile number and they received a message on their mobile phone, and that system no longer exists. The emergency app seemed to let us down. I know I was confused by that emergency app, and I probably had more information than most people in my community. The warnings that were coming through there were not clear. Even four days after the floodwaters had passed on from Shepparton we were still getting warnings to evacuate Shepparton. You talked about the emergency alert system. That is something that we have been told was activated, but certainly not many people seem to have mentioned that they got a message through it. Do you know how much detail can be given in that and how localised a message can be if they use that emergency alert to send it out?

**Lance KING:** It can be as simple as putting a polygon around two houses, for instance, from my understanding. I am not an expert in the area. I have been asked by SES in the past: what area are we looking at to send out a warning? And they have sent out warnings but only to a defined polygon on a map. So they will draw a line on a map within that area, and they can send out a message to all the phones in that area. That is my understanding of how the system works. That is really good. One of my recommendations is that for all the flood zones that we have, we should have that polygon already pre-planned in our flood guides, and the incident control will pick it up and go, 'Right, that polygon there – we're aware of it, all the phones in that area. We know it's going to be a moderate flood. These roads are going to be closed.' Read out the roads so people can understand that, and then send that message out. There are different areas. You have bollards that you have got to remove so people can get out of battleaxe courts and all that sort of stuff. There are floodgates that need to be open in certain communities as part of that flood-planning process. These can be all conveyed on the flood plan and through that message that they put out in that emergency alert. But for some reason, and I am unsure about why, there is an issue about approvals to use it. I am not sure.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Yes. It would have been very effective. They could have used it in my area. They could have sent out one simple message that said, 'The boulevard will be cut off from this time. We expect there to be homes inundated on the boulevard in Waters Road, Howitt Road, Ferguson Road. Get out now.' It would have been a much simpler message than the very confused messages that we were getting through to our phones. That is really all I wanted to ask you about, that emergency alert, so I am going to cede the rest of my time.

**Lance KING:** Sorry, with that emergency alert, we had a script for minor, moderate and major flooding. The script was written out in front of the person that records that message, and that could go out in a text message as well, is my understanding.

**Melina BATH:** Into landlines?

**Lance KING:** Yes.

**Wendy LOVELL:** And that is the type of thing that people need to get – something direct to their phones – because they are all out sandbagging, they are not inside listening to radios or watching TV or waiting for the landline to ring, so text messages direct to their mobile phones that give them accurate messages and timely messages about evacuating and, yes, getting out. I mean, in Shepparton we had detailed flood maps that had red dots on all of the houses that would flood. We knew which houses were going to flood. There was no doubt about it. They were so accurate it was not funny, but people did not get the messaging.

**Ken SKINNER:** And the other thing – sorry, you talked about the met bureau coming in later on – is that one of the other recommendations from the community recovery committee is to break up that weather bureau zone, where we have west and east Gippsland that goes all the way from probably Pakenham up to Cann River or Mallacoota. It is such a large area that the met bureau warnings are different for East Gippsland versus south-west Gippsland.

**Melina BATH:** So refine it?

**Ken SKINNER:** Refine it a little bit.

**Wendy LOVELL:** And the BOM warnings and stuff like that – you know, they are all very sort of high-level and vague. It is fine to say, ‘We knew the water was coming for two days.’ Seymour had been flooded. Nobody really understands how it is going to impact when it actually reaches their property unless they are given that detailed information. I am giving the rest of my time to Melina.

**Melina BATH:** Forty-five seconds.

**The CHAIR:** All 45 seconds is yours.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much. Look, we had Commissioner Crisp say that there were gaps in the system. We have a 95-page document that came out analysing the storms across Gippsland, and I think Traralgon Creek gets three paragraphs. This is not a leading question, but have there been improvements? Do you feel that the community feels more comforted by improvements, and if not, what needs to happen – in 18 seconds?

**Ken SKINNER:** My answer is no. I do not think the community has any comfort. We have lots of recommendations come out in reports, but at the end of the day, when a flood happens we do not see the results of that.

**Lance KING:** I think we have gone backwards since 2010.

**Ken SKINNER:** And that is where any recommendations out of this should get allocated to a person and some resources added to make sure that those recommendations that you recommend, ongoing, actually get actioned.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** One of the things that has struck me in the course of both your evidence and what we have heard previously is ensuring that the messages that people get have got the right amount of information in them. We have got evidence that some people are feeling that they are not getting enough information and that it is too generalised, and others are saying, ‘Well, we get told things,’ ‘We get too many alerts and they all come in, and then we don’t get enough when it changes.’ How do you think we get the level of information right? What do you think needs to be in a message that gets sent out from an authority to residents?

**Ken SKINNER:** If you take the VicEmergency app, for instance, I get messages every hour that the Latrobe River is in flood. As it is going down, if it is above the minor flood level, I continually get those messages, as opposed to the ones when it is going up and going to be flooding.

**The CHAIR:** So you think that is too many in that instance?

**Ken SKINNER:** There are too many in those instances. When it comes to giving the right information at the right time, I think that is where the ICC is very guarded in not wanting to panic people, but I think it is better to have them informed up-front and to say it may happen – just use the words ‘It may flood’ – because people are not going to put their fridge up on bricks and move everything out of their garage if they do not think it is going to get wet. They will only do it if they think it is going to get wet.

**The CHAIR:** That comes to my next question. We have got to strike the right balance. What do you think the tolerance is for members of the community for getting over-warned or given too much information? And what do you think the consequences of that are?

**Lance KING:** The old cry wolf syndrome.

**Ken SKINNER:** If you get too many warnings, you will disregard them. I think they need to be few and accurate and pointed at a particular time. They do not need to come every hour. You need to warn people up-front that we are expecting flooding, but you do not need to tell them every hour, because they will just switch them back off again if they are not affected at the time, and therefore they will miss the critical ones when it increases.

**Lance KING:** I think that the VicEmergency app is appropriate in relation to – I know they send out lots and lots of updates in relation to the Latrobe River or whatever river it is and the flood level that it is at, but the critical part of the information flow comes to that scripted ‘minor’, ‘moderate’ and ‘major’ flooding for your location. So the generalised stuff – ‘It’s flooding from Yallourn all the way to Rosedale’ and ‘It’s dropping’ or ‘It’s rising’ or whatever – comes out is fine, but then that targeted scripted stuff is the important stuff for the community; that is the trigger for them to make informed decisions.

**The CHAIR:** And who do you think they would trust to give them that information?

**Lance KING:** Currently it is the responsibility of the incident controller, and I still believe it should be with the incident controller given that he has all the available information at the time. And that is the critical part. The incident controller – he or she, whoever they are – has that information available to make that decision. They are the one closest to the impact. They should be the one that is empowered to give those level warnings out. If it is through a text or via the radio or whatever, you can always raise them or lower them. If you know that, you know, we have got another 20 mil in that gauge, well, geez, it is going to go up a bit more.

**The CHAIR:** One of the things that you are obviously very knowledgeable about and experienced in is what is happening in and around Traralgon. One of the things we have got to think about as a committee is the replicability of solutions to other and general and not exactly comparable locations and circumstances. How applicable do you think your experiences are from where you live to other parts of Victoria?

**Ken SKINNER:** I think they pretty much mirror. We have got the example of just that 6 hours total from rain to flood, but the actual warning systems where we pick a polygon over the flood overlay I think can be applied anywhere. You can pick up that same system and use it for any flood overlay in the rest of Victoria and use that same warning system. I think it is applicable for other areas, maybe not as urgent as we get it with the very quick flash floods like we get, but I think the actual program or the system should be mirrored.

**The CHAIR:** So your views about things like the incident controllers being the ones who should be determining the detail and frequency of the warning systems – you think that is replicable?

**Lance KING:** I think so.

**Ken SKINNER:** I think so, yes.

**Lance KING:** Also, in relation to that, there have been flood studies undertaken on all of our rivers right across the state. Some are at different levels, and the hydraulic effect of creeks and rivers are different right across the state, but in undertaking that flood warning and that community information, I think it should be easy to roll out right across the state in a similar format.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard that in another area, where people were getting text messages in the middle of the night and phones were turned off, some had suggested that there be an installation of loudspeakers on power poles. Is that the kind of thing that you think would work?

**Lance KING:** We are going back to the old CFA siren days for warnings. People need to take some responsibility for where they live. I truly believe that. But by giving them the tools to make informed decisions – if for a local area that speaker on a pole works for them, well and good, but for the majority I do not think that that would across the state, because if it is a windy, stormy night you might not be hearing that noise. We put sirens on a number of stations after some fires some years ago. I do not know if they still work or not.

**The CHAIR:** Sure. That is my time. Mrs Tyrrell is not here, but Ms Bath, did you want to take any of her time?

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much. I appreciate the call. In relation to assets, we know that when Traralgon Creek flooded it also flooded the rec reserve. I guess this might be a leading question, but all that information still needs to go to all of those user groups and community organisations, because the football club and all of those areas down there were smashed; they lost such a lot of assets – and again, putting things up or taking them out. The men's shed – this is a big plug to the government, and the government can listen to this – is uninsurable now, and it needs to find a new home. So how can those community organisation groups be incorporated into the plans that you are talking about?

**Ken SKINNER:** I think they need to go on the phone register for a start. Because a lot of those people would live out of the area of their assets, they need to be warned, and they might have a couple of hours when they can go and pick things up. I think that is the best way you can inform them. Obviously, the locations of those places – a lot of them are in older buildings that are down at flood levels, so they do have assets –

**Melina BATH:** Mitigation.

**Ken SKINNER:** Look, mitigating the flood: in the Traralgon Creek, there is very little you can do. You cannot put up levees. There is talk of a Traralgon bypass and having a retaining basin as part of that bypass, but that is going to affect everything upstream. I heard a comment to say that it would never happen until Loy Yang mine had been closed down and was finished. But that is probably the only mitigating thing that you could try and reduce the flooding with in the town, but I do not see that happening for a long time.

**Lance KING:** In relation to that, after the 2021 floods the council had three recovery committees and worked very closely with that sporting community. That was one of the committees that they were working closely with. Yinnar was another recovery committee. So it would be best to ask that committee, that user group, that same question and, you know, get their response directly. If they did not put a submission in, in my opinion it probably would have been good if they had, to be able to inform the committee of their needs and the government of their issues.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I know it has been raised in Parliament a few times as well. In relation to Attentis, I guess the other thing is that some people like you, for example, Ken, have got it on their laptop. Is Attentis free? Could we log on and look at it ourselves?

**Ken SKINNER:** Correct.

**Melina BATH:** So that is something that can help people inform themselves. The new system that is going to run parallel with Environ – I think that is the old system –

**Ken SKINNER:** Enviromon, yes.

**Melina BATH:** is that something that – you know, Attentis is a private business – the Latrobe City Council has purchased?

**Lance KING:** No.

**Melina BATH:** No? Tell us; explain to us.

**Lance KING:** Attentis came to council with the proposal of setting up a network right across the municipality for air quality, weather, fires and floods. So the air quality, the weather and the fires are all currently working; some of them are not operational and need updating, because they got some funding from the federal government and the company put in over a million dollars out of their own pocket to install this system. When I was at council, just before I left, we were fortunate enough to get a grant for some funds to

update the system to include flood monitoring. And when we put the system in place, the 44 units across the municipality, we put them down the creek as well – three units down the creek. So as part of the upgrade there will be, I think, 12 rain gauges installed, and there will be three river-height gauges installed. That will allow people to access them remotely from their phones.

**Melina BATH:** And it is free?

**Lance KING:** And it is free, yes.

**Melina BATH:** And then the BOM should get that real-time monitoring every minute of the day?

**Lance KING:** That is up to the BOM to access it, like anyone else in the public.

**Melina BATH:** But it is available?

**Lance KING:** It would be available, yes.

**Melina BATH:** It is available. And then the BOM could, if noticing the elevated levels, report at any time to incident control if there is a heightened situation?

**Lance KING:** Well, the incident control could look at it themselves directly.

**Melina BATH:** Directly, okay, and make informed decisions – or they could, as in part of your recommendations, speak to people with trusted local content knowledge, such as Mr Skinner, for example, or others in different places. Is that correct?

**Lance KING:** That is correct – or get in the car and go for a drive and have a look.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. But, say, I am unable to do that, you can still get –

**Lance KING:** Yes, correct.

**Melina BATH:** So that Attentis system could be rolled out – I am not a plug for them, I am just asking – in other municipalities across the state?

**Lance KING:** I am aware that is happening currently.

**Melina BATH:** Do you know which ones?

**Lance KING:** Ararat, Southern Grampians – just to name a couple.

**Melina BATH:** And at whose cost? Who is wearing that cost?

**Lance KING:** They are working with councils, is my understanding.

**Melina BATH:** Is it a big cost impost?

**Lance KING:** I do not know.

**Melina BATH:** You are not aware. But, you know, the other thing is, we talk about resilience building and information gathering, and we have heard it in this committee. Is it also about equipping councils? Could there be a grant scheme, for example, from government to equip councils to tap into this system which would provide information to locals, residents, BOM and ICC?

**Lance KING:** Yes, that would be, I suppose, appropriate if the government deemed so.

**Melina BATH:** Does it only fit each municipality, or could it be region-based – like, is there a physical gate?

**Lance KING:** Currently Baw Baw Shire Council have a number of units in their municipality. You can see the weather tracking live from one municipality to the other on the system, so there are more than the

municipalities I have named that are currently benefiting from this system. There are different funding models that they are looking at, but if councils were funded through a grant scheme – it is not for me to say, but yes.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. My time is up. Thank you to the committee for providing some extra time. Thank you, gentlemen.

**The CHAIR:** All good. Thank you, Mr Skinner and Mr King, for your evidence today. You will receive a copy of the transcript shortly before it is published. The committee will take a short break before we resume in about 10 minutes.

**Witnesses withdrew.**