

Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

Parliament House

Spring Street

Melbourne Vic 3002

4 March 2026

**Re: Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria**

Dear Minister,

This submission seeks to address the following aspects of the *Terms of Reference* as follows:

1. (1) *The preparation and planning by government, emergency services agencies and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides*

I believe that the Government needs to seriously consider subsidizing the use of private equipment which provides valuable assistance during bushfires. Private equipment must be allowed to help and assist the CFA, working with them and under their direction. There is ample recent evidence of the work that private units were able to do in the Grass Flat/Natimuk fires in the Wimmera in January 2026.

Clearly, private equipment would need to be of a certain standard to be subsidized but this would enable more fire units to be available at the fire scene more quickly. I would suggest subsidizing private units at ¼ or 1/3 of total costs of units.

Private units are also very valuable in protecting private structures such as homes, out buildings, sheds etc. This provides tremendous assistance to CFA tankers as they then have a much better chance to concentrate on the main fire. I have experienced this assistance many times in the past.

As a past Captain (17 years) and Deputy Group Officer (as a CFA volunteer for 70 years), I know very well how valuable their help can be. Very often these private units are the first on the scene and can have some fires under control when the CFA arrives. On days of extreme weather, you only have 15-20 minutes to bring a fire under control. If not, you have lost it. If we could lessen the impact of some fires and prevent them from becoming major disasters, the cost of subsidizing private units would be far less than the millions paid out by State and Federal governments to victims and the cost of fighting these major fires.

2. (7) *The impact on the environment, including native wildlife and any measures to better protect native forests, including technology for early detection and fire fighting in remote locations*

Property owners in rural areas need to be allowed back in sooner after a fire has passed to attend to their injured and maimed stock. It is unacceptable to allow burnt and injured animals to suffer for days after a fire has passed. Property owners are aware of the dangers after a fire. Under other circumstances, stock owners would be liable for cruelty. Are the authorities going to accept that liability?

3. (8) *The impacts of climate change on the natural environment, which has resulted in more frequent and intense bushfires occurring in Victoria*
4. (9) *The prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season*

If climate change is a factor in these fires, we have to be smarter and do some things differently.

- 1) There needs to be more understanding by governments and education provided, about property protection and things that people can do to protect their homes well before the fire season begins. Some simple activities include: blocking downpipes on houses and other buildings, filling spouts with water, soaking as much water as possible around buildings before evacuating, giving structures a better chance of survival.
- 2) Such messages could be aired when *Watch and Act messages* are broadcast.
- 3) Many houses and buildings ignite from ember attack after the main fire has passed.
- 4) I believe that fire prevention needs to be improved. Many existing fire access tracks in National Parks are not well maintained, with tree canopies growing over the centre of tracks and tracks closed off. These past tracks, if reopened, are valuable for ground tanker access and are also important places to start a back burn if necessary. Aircraft do an excellent job, but ground tankers are still required to extinguish the under fire. Also, due to wind and smoke impairing visibility, some air drops do not always get their target.

More fire access tracks should be made within national parks and linked up with some of the existing roads, making large separated areas. This would result in less impact on the scenic value of parks and each area could then be burnt separately over 8-10 years, allowing each section to regenerate {see 5) below}.

- 5) Controlled burning of one section at a time gives native wildlife a chance to escape and avoids the mass devastation of animals like that which too often has occurred during out-of-control. Regeneration after a cool burn creates a fresh food source for native animals. This is the system that our First Nations people used and these refreshed areas also became new hunting grounds and food sources for them.

I believe they used to do a 'cool slow burn' by burning back into the wind, which allowed more time for the wildlife to escape and there was then less chance of burning the crowns of trees. This practice also means that there is not the buildup of undergrowth that is so dangerous when a fire breaks out. Sometimes now, the undergrowth has not been touched for 20-30 years! We will always have dry lightning. It has been a frequent event in the Wimmera and takes up a major part of our local volunteer fire fighting time and resources as well as those of governments.

This means a change in thinking on the part of governments to:

- a) allow landowners to burn/slash roadsides without penalty prior to summer;
- b) fund rural Councils more generously so they have the ability to slash/burn areas for which

they hold responsibility;

- c) implement continuous cool burns of built up debris in fire prone areas and
- d) develop a workforce, trained in this aboriginal knowledge, that is paid properly to implement such cool burning plans across the State.

The financial cost to the Government of doing more fire prevention work would be nowhere near the cost of fighting these most recent fires. If climate change is part of the reason we had these recent fires, then we have to be smarter and change our fire protection and prevention management to compensate. With the mulching and bare earth equipment available, permanent fire breaks can easily be made and maintained around areas of importance and public interest. This should be discussed with local communities, CFA brigades and Group Officers whose areas join National and State parks. They should meet with Forest Fire Management officers at least annually to discuss fire protection, preferably after a ground inspection.

6) When a fire is out of control, the decision to back burn must be made early which may mean sacrificing more country but it allows for a wider burnt break which is more likely to be successful. These decisions need to be made by the Forest Fire Management officer in charge of the fire ground and supported by the Incident Control Centres.

7) Better funding to ensure there are more Park Rangers to perform this work, is urgently needed.

8) Fire prevention needs to continue on a larger scale as a matter of top priority. Forest Fire Management should not have to answer to restrictions placed on them by other groups; they are doing the job to avoid emergency situations later and are protecting life and property.

Respectfully submitted.

Ivan Smith

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