

Submission Text: 2026 Bushfire Enquiry Submission

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As a former level 3 incident controller I believe I have some experience and insights that may assist the Enquiry.

Summary

- Climate change is making catastrophic conditions more likely, more frequent and more intense.
- Fuel Reduction Burning is not effective in preventing destructive fires under catastrophic conditions.
- The Longwood fire was almost entirely on private land, making the call for more fuel reduction burns and grazing on public land at best, irrelevant and a distraction from the real issues.

- The warnings and public briefings were good, but could be better.
- The predictions, warnings and advice given at the public briefing on January 8, were clear, compelling and correct.
- Warnings need to include information on what the fire is doing, as well as how individuals should act.
- Traffic management in the early stages after the fire was poor and need to improve.
- We need to fund new and replacement infrastructure appropriately - to build-in more climate, heat, fire, storm and flood resilience.
- We need to study why some structures survived and others didn't and make this information widely available to the community.
- Fire and emergency agencies: CFA, FFMV, SES etc. need to be funded appropriately so they can continue to deliver the services we need, safely and efficiently.
- Trust in Government and agencies needs to be rebuilt.

It is now obvious that dealing with disasters is the new normal. Increasing the number and intensity of large and catastrophic fires, destructive storms, floods and heatwaves. We need politicians of all stripes to recognise this and behave accordingly, help educate the community about what to do and to minimise exposure and impacts and allocate resources accordingly. This is not the time to foment division or make cheap political points. Life in Australia is changing. It is more dangerous than ever and we need to respond. Dealing with climate change is nonnegotiable.

Fuel Reduction Burning

After every large and destructive fire, there is an inevitable call for more fuel reduction burning. It seems a simple solution, but like most things, once you scratch the surface, it is not simple at all. There has also been calls to reinstate grazing in “the high country” too, as a way of preventing these fires.

Fuel reduction by burning is only effective for a couple of years after the burn, and probably less in grassland. And then, it is only effective under mild conditions. It is not effective under catastrophic conditions.

The Longwood fire was almost entirely on private land. I believe the same can be said for the Natimuk fire and the first (and most destructive) part of the Harcourt fire too. So the question must be asked, where would the proposed fuel reduction burning be done? On farmers land? And as much of the land burnt was grazing land, it rather destroys the “grazing will prevent fires” argument.

Fuel reduction burning is a complex and potentially risky undertaking that requires knowledge, experience, expertise and a degree of guts. They can only be conducted when the conditions are right. The right combination of temperature, humidity, wind speed and strength, fuel loads and fuel moisture. Not only on the day, but in the lead up to the burn, and the days (and weeks) following.

The days on which these suitable conditions occur are limited, and becoming fewer and fewer - exacerbated by climate change. Then crews need to be assembled to implement the burn. There are simply insufficient experienced crews to implement a state-wide fuel reduction program on public land, roadsides and private land at the scale and frequency required to substantially lower the risk across the state.

There would also be challenges gaining long-term community support, particularly if there are any escapes (quite likely at times given that if the target area can burn, adjacent non-target areas are also vulnerable). And as they would have to be done every couple of years, the community is likely to complain of smoke (including the associated health impacts), disruption, continually blackened roadsides and forests, the loss of habitat trees and

impacts from smoke on vineyards, etc.

Regular burning makes the vegetation more flammable and actually encourages fire. Regular burning of roadsides (and other areas) will lead to annual growth of flammable grassland (as was the case when the Railways did this) so once it is started, it needs to continue.

Roadside burning, along freeways, highways and roads is probably not a bad option, but there are challenges with implementation, e.g. difficult terrain, often steep and inaccessible slopes, long narrow strips, traffic disruption during preparation and while conducting any burn, impacts on roadside infrastructure (signs, white posts, safety barriers) fence lines, trees and the big one - who is responsible?

Should landholders share some responsibility for fire hazard reduction on roadsides adjacent to their property, as they are in some cases for weeds? They certainly have much to gain by treating hazards adjacent to their land.

The Longwood fire was a fast moving grass fire burning under catastrophic conditions. No amount of fuel reduction burning or grazing was going to stop it. So we need to find better ways of adapting and responding.

Climate Change

Climate change (as much as many don't want to believe it) is undoubtedly creating more days with more extreme conditions enabling these destructive fires. The science is clear, and denying it only hampers our ability to deal with it.

We need to embrace renewable energy and accelerate its adoption and implementation as much as possible. That means more solar farm, wind farms and transmission lines. Of course, the more we have “generation at point of use” - rooftop solar and batteries, the fewer big projects required. So keep the incentives going. In fact, mandate solar and batteries on all big factories, warehouses, shopping centres etc.

We also need to spend some time investigating why some homes and other structures burnt and others survived. Case studies should then be prepared and made available and promoted to anyone wishing to learn the lessons and take action on their properties to protect themselves in future.

Warnings

Warnings are best when fire information is given, not just actions to take.

Congratulations must be given the Deputy Incident Controller Longwood Fire (Greg Murphy) who provided the community briefing and warnings on the afternoon of January 8. The message was clear and compelling. Some would say “blunt” but that was what was required. I know many people heard the message and acted. Streaming the public meetings is excellent and must continue. Many more Alexandra residents chose to relocate following this briefing and this no doubt eased the pressure of those fighting the fire and providing relief to those who chose to stay. I suspect that some of this is also attributable to the lessons learned after Black Saturday.

A few days after the fire, I felt some of the warnings were “over cooked”. For example, the

messaging remained for several days for Alexandra townspeople to “shelter in place”. To me, that conjures images of the fire raging in to town, ember attack, and it being too late to leave. It may well have been too late to leave because the roads were unsafe, but there was clearly no fire coming in to town, or even a running edge near Alexandra. I have recently seen a short video with FFMV Chief Officer Chris Hardman explaining what “shelter in place” means and what to do. This video is excellent, but it was not what was required when some of the shelter in place messaging was given.

We know that many people “wait to see what the fire is doing” yet nearly all warnings contain no information of what the fire is doing. They only advise people what to do. I can see no reason why there shouldn’t be a brief summary of what the fire is doing, how the firefight is progressing and what is expected. After all, it was this information that made Greg Murphy’s presentation so powerful.

I know we have tried to limit the number of different messages and alert levels given, but sometimes this gets in the way of accurate communication, leading to inappropriate actions.

The VicEmergency app needs some work too. I’d like to see the map display the “wind direction and speed” with the “impact area”. This would enable better understanding and decision making.

Traffic Management

Traffic Management has always caused problems, and probably always will. There was certainly a lot of confusion, mixed and conflicting messages in the community after the major run of the fire had eased. This led to frustration and anger in the community and undermined trust in the fire agencies and their ability to manage the situation.

With all the agencies involved and chains of command, there will always be challenges. From IC (or deputy) to the police liaison, then to the IPOC, then to the police on the ground enforcing the traffic management plan. As well, there is communication with VicTraffic (to update the app and website) and local councils. No wonder there are communication breakdowns and confusion.

At a large and complex incident, the Incident Controller needs to appoint a senior person (preferably a deputy IC) to focus solely on traffic management and communication (this may have been done? but it wasn't effective).

The VicTraffic App is difficult to use in that appropriate zoom level needs to be selected to see which roads are closed. This can be challenging on small screens such as tablets and phones. It should be possible to colour code closures e.g. red for full closure, orange for residents and essential services only, or something similar. The Bushfire.io app manages to show all road closures at all zoom levels. It can't be that hard.

Infrastructure

We need to fund new and replacement infrastructure appropriately to build-in more resilience to cater for climate change, heat, fire, storm and flood.

Mobile phone towers should be able to operate for more than a couple of hours without mains power.

We need Community Hubs across the state with standalone power options - a generator is ok, but solar panels and a battery is a much better option – or both.

CFA and FFMV Resourcing

Of course both agencies should be funded to ensure they have appropriate personnel and equipment.

If the plan is to do more fuel reduction burning, particularly on private land and roadsides, the paid workforce will have to be increased considerably. It is not fair to ask volunteers to take on this job, although it would present great training and collaboration opportunities.

And where will the money come from to fund all of this? Schools? Roads? Hospitals? Increased taxes? Right now, with the benefit of hindsight sight, who wouldn't happily pay an additional say \$200 a year to ensure fire protection and suppression was adequately funded? More CFA tankers, more fire preparation, better planning and implementation, better and more resilient communication networks, more staff to do the work day in and day out etc. When the Victorian Government tried that, there was such an outcry that any change to the system was shelved. I'm not suggesting the plan was perfect, or would have even addressed the issues, but it was howled down on principle. "We don't want to (or can't) pay any more for... anything really".

And we keep voting in people and parties that promise to lower taxes and rates.

Maybe it's because we don't trust governments. Any governments, of all political persuasions. But it is the "government" and its institutions that will be implementing whatever it is we finally agree on. It is simply not workable for individuals or small groups of people to undertake this task on a broad enough scale and frequency to have a meaningful impact. And that is before we even consider the legal and insurance issues.

We need to rebuild our society, structures, institutions and governments to regain public trust and confidence. Political infighting and point scoring will undermine this.

Good luck with that one.

Andy Miller