Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Climate Action Team (Colac Otway) submission into the Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this important inquiry.

Our team and wider membership are residents of Colac Otway Shire, many of whom live in the Otways which was severely impacted by this summer's bushfires.

Like many other places in the country, our turn came for a climate-exacerbated crisis, an Otways series of bushfires which have burnt over 16,500 hectares of country and killed uncountable birds and animals. The fires destroyed eight homes, and provided a terrifying near-miss of several of our homes. It was not only fires that affected residents, but the long period of anxiety, following the original 10/1/26 bushfire caused by lightning, as we waited to see if it could be contained. Which it ultimately wasn't, taking off again on 23/1/26.

Our response to the following selected Terms of Reference is based on our lived experience and our long involvement in seeking greater responsiveness by government at all levels to the crisis of climate change.

(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.

Hundreds of air and ground fire crew were mobilised during this extended bushfire event. Whilst local people including the Climate Action Team are extremely grateful to these brave fire-fighters, many of whom were volunteers, we are concerned that current fire preparation policies are inadequate.

Expenditure at the 'pointy end' of 'fighting fires' will have been high, in the millions of dollars. We would like the Committee to consider more 'upstream' interventions into fire management such as 'cool burns'. This fire technique is undertaken during cooler months with less opportunity for fires to become unmanageable, as has happened too frequently. There are now several instances providing empirical data as to the effectiveness of cool burns in the Otways:

a. The Conservation Ecology Centre (CEC) undertook research throughout the Otways National Park, notably the Carlisle River heath country, over at least a decade which involved multiple patchwork cool burns. The CEC staff were researching the use of these areas, among other goals, in providing refugia during fires for the vulnerable remnant marsupials of Victoria. During the Otways bushfires it was noted that the areas so treated had significantly withstood the impact of the first bushfire (10/1/26) in contrast to surrounding bush. Unfortunately the second bushfire (23-27/1/26) appears to have now impacted those cool-burn areas. However, the initial contrast between cool burn areas and untreated bush is significant.

b. A landholder resident in a densely forested area on the top of one of the higher hills in the Gellibrand River valley has been conducting regular cool burns for over 15 years. It is worth noting that on the day the fires took off again (Saturday 23/1/26) and hit this hill, burning in the end approximately 40 acres surrounding his home and coming to within 100 meters of it, the fire was slowed down sufficiently by the cool-

burn landscape around his home to enable him on his own to patrol the fire perimeter before the air and ground fire crews arrived to halt the fire's advance.

c. Prior to the Otways bushfires of the previous summer (2024-25), a significant area of cool burn had been established in the Carlisle River heath country over a number of years by DEECA personnel in collaboration with Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation and the Conservation Ecology Centre. It is evident that that this extensively treated area was a significant factor in preventing that bushfire taking off into the national park and surrounding Otways communities such as Apollo Bay.

These data suggest that cool burns may, at the very least, have slowed down several dangerous fire-fronts, thereby providing fire crews with significant support at critical times. It is valid to ask whether more extensive cool burning would have, in the instances noted, provided even greater risk-management. Whilst cool burns are required to be undertaken with some frequency, we would suggest the Committee consider the feasibility of them being less costly over time than the very high cost of 'crisis' emergency responses to bushfires; not only in dollar terms but in terms of the potential for the loss of human life, devastation of ecosystems and biodiversity, destruction of homes and other important infrastructure, as well as the long-term effects of extreme stress on local communities.

(2) The causes and circumstances of the bushfires, including climate change and the adequacy of the Government's climate policies and actions, forecasts, warnings and public education on bushfire threats.

<u>Global heating exacerbates all extreme weather events</u>

As noted, members of the Colac Otway Climate Action Team were directly impacted by the Otway complex of fires this summer, with some having to leave their homes for 2-6 nights due to extreme bushfire risk and a catastrophic fire danger day. The fiery conditions were worsened by dry lightning strikes, which ignited fires over a large area. In the same shire, on 16/1/26 intense flooding at Lorne, Kennett River, Cumberland River and Wye River was experienced after 180 mm of rain fell in 6 hours over Mount Cowley, causing mayhem for campers at a time when camping grounds were full.

The science couldn't be clearer: the bushfires that have been burning in the Otways for weeks were significantly exacerbated by global heating. As are the floods experienced locally this summer and all the flood events accelerating throughout our continent, and the cyclones, the extreme heat events (which kill the most people), the massive accumulating biodiversity loss, the coastal erosion…the list goes on.

These events are no longer unusual. As long predicted, they are the outcome of global heating. This time we had well-turned-out response teams; 170 vehicles including fire trucks, helicopters and heavy machinery to help our local CFA and DEECA crews. This response undoubtedly cost a lot of money. How long will governments be prepared to foot the bill to support impacted communities like ours prepare, fight and recover from future fires?

Fossil fuel companies should be taxed and should have to contribute to an emergency preparedness fund, as advanced by Friends of the Earth. Communities have long paid into a fund, whether it was called the Fire Services Property Levy or the recently controversial Emergency Services and Volunteers Levy. Fossil fuel companies should no longer be able to profit and not contribute to the cost of allowing communities to prepare for disasters that will arise as a result of their activities. There should be no more privatised gains and socialised - and environmental - costs. It is the least they can do.

Global heating, caused by rising carbon emissions from pre-industrial levels of 280 ppm to 429ppm in early March due to the burning of fossil fuel, were the cause of these fires. We used to think we could beat this, drive the emissions down but increasingly with State and Federal governments approving fossil-fuel projects that will have the opposite impact, this seems unachievable. If we have lost the drive to keep 1.5 c alive, we expect our governments to continue to support communities in emergencies.

Depletion of groundwater makes drying landscapes more vulnerable to bushfire

It is not only a drying climate that has affected our Otways landscapes, but decades of over-extraction of Otways groundwaters and waterways. It is now acknowledged by all, including state water authorities, that groundwater has been over-extracted from the Barwon Downs Borefield for over 40 years; this has had a "catastrophic"[1] effect on Otways Groundwater Dependent Ecosystems. The depletion of groundwater in what has traditionally been a water-abundant landscape has led to hundreds of square kilometres of 'drawdown', a drying landscape the science indicates may take over a century to recharge. It was often noted by crews who fought this summer's fires that the ground was "very dry"; it was also observed by many that, whilst lightning struck "all over the Otways, hundreds of strikes", it was in the areas most impacted by the depleted Lower Tertiary Aquifer that the bushfires took off.

The Committee should note the significance of the summer's Otways bushfires taking off over a groundwater-depleted, that is dry, landscape. The local Landcare group (Land and Water Resources Otway Catchment) are strongly advocating at this critical time, with CSIRO indicating further very significant drying for this region as elsewhere as a result of inaction on climate change, for the aquifer to be left to recover. That is, that no more bores be sunk into the depleted Lower Tertiary Aquifer, such as Wannon Water have indicated is intended, and that the Gellibrand River receive a Water Entitlement for a legislated access to its recovered aquifer.

Inadequacy of the government`s climate change policies and actions

The State Government has reneged on the strong push to prevent new homes being connected to gas appliances and to phase out gas usage in the near future. Until we respond as a community to embrace electricity developed from renewable sources and end all fossil fuel systems to produce electricity, the critical 1.5 degrees of warming will not be safeguarded. It is no use developing all the systems to respond to increasing fires and floods, unless the state becomes extremely pro-active on developing renewable energy systems. People living in bush-fire prone areas are challenged by rising insurance premiums, and community neighbours have said that they cannot keep up with the increases. If homes and farms are destroyed without insurance as a safeguard, a whole new problem will arise for the state. People will become homeless on their land, which will become worthless if it is completely burnt out or flooded, and there is no money to rebuild homes.

(3) Funding, equipment and appliances for the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, and recruitment and retention of CFA volunteers;

FireTracker app to be made available to local Incident Controllers.

The CFA currently has access to the FireTracker app which shows deployment of assets (e.g. ground and air vehicles/planes/helicopters, machinery and crews) in relation to bushfires. This app should be made available as a matter of priority to local Incident Controllers to support the best possible

[1] Nelson, R. L. 2022. *Water rights for groundwater environments as an enabling condition for adaptive water governance*. Ecology and Society 27(2):28. https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-13123-270228

decision-making regarding deployment of Forest Fire Management personnel and fire-fighting assets. This would enable a more strategic and holistic response to fires.

(4) The emergency responses to control and contain the fires, including adequacy of resources and communications.

We are among many supporters of the Friends of the Earth's advocacy for Large Air Tankers (LATs) for our state. As we all know by now, fire seasons are getting longer in both hemispheres, and Australia is at risk of losing access to the LATs that we currently lease from North America. At present Australia only owns 1 LAT, which is owned by the NSW Rural Fire Service. Yet we require 6 or 7 LATs to be available each summer. The committee should consider whether Victoria should also purchase its own LAT, which can then be leased to the northern hemisphere in our winter. It should also consider whether leasing arrangements for our large (type 1) helicopters are adequate given fire seasons are getting longer in both hemispheres.

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

This Inquiry should ensure they hear from the Conservation Ecology Centre at Cape Otway. Although the Centre may be in an assessment and recovery phase at this time as much of their long-term research work will have been in the fire impacted areas, especially in the Carlisle River heathland, they are a highly experienced team at the forefront of managing and protecting local flora and fauna.

We agree with the Friends of the Earth position that there should be no return to a hectare fuel reduction burning target – this will increase ecological damage across the state, without significant benefits to human safety or protection of human assets. Funding place-specific research, so that our bushfire fire mitigation strategies can work with Victoria's landscapes and specific vegetation, would be far more effective than any blanket application. (See (1) above).

The state invests enormous amounts of money into fuel reduction. For instance, $160 million was allocated in 2023-24 on 'fire risk reduction strategy'. Rather than funding more fuel reduction, Victoria should allocate funding to:

> Carry out an independent assessment of the ecological impacts and economic effects of current fuel reduction programs.
>
> Protect and manage forests to build their fire resilience. Specifically, this means allowing forests to mature to a less flammable phase.
>
> Allocate additional funds to expand its firefighting workforce and rapid detection and suppression of new start fires.

It is essential that the Committee recommend that the government modify fuel reduction burning practices to ensure that, when they are employed that they do not cause ecological damage, especially loss of older and large habitat trees. Several of the Climate Action Team whose land was impacted over this summer by the rapid incursion of multiple 'control lines' and habitat clearing also believe this could be undertaken with more consideration of the environment.

Whilst we agree with the Friends of the Earth advocacy for burns to be undertaken "strategically and close to towns and homes – not at scale in forested reserves", as noted in (1.b) above we believe that the Committee should also consider the potential for patchworks of 'cool burns' – not only around townships - to enhance landscape resilience in the face of bushfire.

We support the changes recommended by Friends of the Earth:

> Requiring Planned Burn Controllers to develop strategies to protect ecological assets, such as habitat trees and known areas containing threatened species or fire sensitive communities in their fire management plan for each burn.
>
> The Australian Workers Union (AWU) suggests the addition of a further 2 Field Assessors per fire District (increasing from 16 to 48 state wide) which would facilitate the extra ecological assessment work prior to burns being undertaken.
>
> Require incident controllers managing fires on public land to include strategies to ensure the protection of ecological assets in their fire management plans.

There is a view held by many that the damage of fires is compounded by over-zealous 'clean-up' of hazardous trees after fires. There needs to be clearer guidelines and more effective oversight to ensure that only trees that truly pose a risk to the public or human assets are removed in the clean-up process – and that maximum habitat is retained, including along roadsides.

(8) the impacts of climate change on the natural environment, which has resulted in more frequent and intense bushfires occurring in Victoria.

Please see (2) above

Thank you for your consideration of this submission to this important Inquiry.

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