

DRAFT 26 Feb 2026

**Submission to the Environment and Planning Committee, Victorian Legislative Council re 2026 Summer Fires:**

- (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;

Despite Victoria being one of the most fire-prone areas in the world, Victoria does not have standard requirements for firebreaks! As a result, many properties and particularly state-controlled lands have no / insignificant fire break / mitigation requirements. This often results in minor fires becoming major bushfires.

Following is a summary of Western Australia requirements that I recommend should be implemented in Victoria.

- A 3 metre wide bare earth trafficable firebreak as close as possible to all external boundaries of the property must be installed by 1 November each year and maintained until 30 April the following year, including along all roadsides / tracks in forest areas in state / council / privately owned areas.
- If it is not possible to install the firebreak adjacent to the external boundary of the property / road due to naturally occurring obstacles, it is acceptable to install the firebreak around the obstacle. If this requires the firebreak to be greater than 5 metres away from the external boundary, a firebreak variation is required.
- Ensure a minimum vertical clearance of 4 metres is maintained along the firebreaks to enable vehicles to drive along the firebreaks without access being obstructed;
- For properties 120 hectares or larger, additional internal firebreaks are required to divide the land into areas not exceeding 120 hectares.
- Install and maintain a 20 metre bare earth area around all haystacks and fuel storage.
- Install and maintain a 20 metre asset protection zone around buildings (or the Victorian 10/30 rule be mandatory for all buildings without exception).
- Where a property is affected by an approved bushfire management plan, property owners must still comply with all requirements in the Fire Mitigation Notice and with any additional requirements outlined within that plan, as well as the above.

Since 2009 Victorian Government and Council decisions have resulted in significantly increased risk of fire ferocity:

- Elimination of timber harvesting has resulted in
  - increased tree density
  - reduction / elimination of trafficable roads / tracks in forest areas
  - reduction in areas that have been harvested / have a fire break effect
  - loss of equipment and personnel that can be deployed to create fire breaks (both before and during a fire).
- 2009 Victorian Bush Fires Royal Commission annual burning targets are not being met.
- Councils have interpreted the 2009 Victorian Bush Fires Royal Commission 10/30 rule as only applying to properties prior to 2009 – resulting in less clearance of flammable areas around structures.
- Councils have been required by the Victorian Government to handle slashing along rural roads without transfer of adequate funding to do so – regrowth during spring / summer is making these fire risks instead of fire breaks.
- Councils are prioritising vegetation protection over fire prevention on roadsides and in council-controlled areas – resulting in significantly increased fire risk / non approval of fire safety burns.

Victorian Government funding of fire services and fire mitigation has not increased in line with increased fire risk, including:

- Funding for Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) has not increased in line with increased risk
- Funding of Fire Ready Victoria (FRV) and other bureaucratic organisations has been significantly increased resulting in less to CFA and FRV
- Funding of Councils is inadequate.

A significant tree-change life-style change has resulted in significantly more Victorians living in forested areas surrounding Melbourne and major cities – significantly increasing risks when a fire occurs. In most cases these people are unaware of fire behaviour / risk – no training has been implemented.

(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;

Given the significantly increasing Victorian population mainly from immigration occurring from countries where wildfires (particularly forest wildfires) are not common it is mandatory that public education should be significantly increased for those living in the country and those living in the cities. Also, visitors (Australian and International) to Victoria need to be educated.

The quality of Public Information relative to fires needs significant improvement. In the recent Otway Complex fires residents in Barongarook were being told “It is too late to leave” and “It is safe to return” in VicEmergency messages sent out within minutes of each other. (The messages should have specified “It is too late to leave” for southern areas of Barongarook, and “It is safe to return” for northern areas of Barongarook). Also, VicEmergency impact areas at one stage showed a large tract of land as impacted when it had not been – causing angst to residents who thought their houses / land had potentially been lost.

There was also a critical overload of VicEmergency warnings / updates, and public was stopped from re-entering areas for several days that had not been impacted and had no risks!

### (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;

CFA has a large fleet of single cab tankers that are unsafe for fire-fighters to be travelling in – especially at high speed to / from fires. Also the fire fighters are not protected as well in the case of a fire burn over compared to more modern twin cab appliances. Immediate action needs to be taken to phase all these single cab units out within the next three to five years.

CFA personnel are required to fund raise for some of their equipment instead of it being fully supplied by CFA / Government.

CFA personnel also have to pay for their own transport to / from fire stations for emergency fire responses and training – and to attend training. The responsibility to train is the governments / CFA’s – so transport should be paid for.

CFA has decided to only supply training that is at a Registered Training Organisation level - which has significantly reduced provided training especially to small country stations and their fire-fighters. Consequently, the majority of CFA personnel have not received any new training or refresher training (other than mandatory annual burn over training) for the last ten or more years.

With the formulation of FRV the majority of CFA’s mid management was transferred to FRV – and a secondment system implemented to provide CFA with mid management. This process has failed

- A large number of CFA mid management positions have been left empty as FRV personnel are not willing to relocate to the country areas where they exist. (Funds for these positions have been given to FRV and are not returned to CFA when not filled).
- An excessive rotating door problem has resulted as FRV personnel seldom relocate for an extended period

- These FRV personnel frequently have limited / no knowledge of country firefighting requirements.
- There is a lack of local knowledge – affecting fire-fighting.

It is recommended that the FRV secondment model to CFA be eliminated ASAP and CFA be allowed to hire it's own mid management once again.

Note: The volunteer (non payment) nature of CFA saves the Victorian Government billions of dollars per year in salaries, overtime, superannuation, and other legally mandatory costs! It even saved them providing meals for volunteers that were on extended duties in the larger 2026 fires. A gross dereliction of duty!

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

CFA recently upgraded all radios – but still requires each crew to manually message turnout, on scene, returning and in-station. This manual requirement is continuing to overload radio traffic when significant fires are occurring – preventing other much more important radio traffic (word-backs and sit-reps and even emergency radio traffic) from being sent / received when it needs to be. An immediate upgrade to allow CFA / Firecom to be aware of the location of each appliance via automatic send/receive of it's grid location (already showing on radios) must be implemented and manual turnout, on scene, returning and in-station radio traffic eliminated.

(5) resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after the fires;

Telecom and radio services in the country rely on base stations (Telstra, Optus, etc) that are frequently reliant on 240V supply / have very minimal battery backup. When a major fire occurs the 240V supply is often cut, and the minimal backup results in these critical communications towers going offline. It is recommended that all critical base stations should be mandated to have a minimum three days battery backup.

CFA training of personnel to man Control Centres has been lacking for many years – resulting in insufficient trained personnel to man critical local incident control centres 24 x 7 in cases of a significant fire. (Remote manning by State Control Centre is not adequate due to lack of local expertise).

(6) the impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery;

Safety of Victorians is critical during and after a fire – but it is also critical that the community and business be assisted to recover immediately after the fire. In particular, agricultural businesses and small-town businesses adjacent to the fire must be facilitated to operate immediately that it is possible.

This is particularly critical for farmers with livestock – who must be allowed to return to their fire affected or fire adjacent properties immediately it is practical for the well-being of the livestock and continuing supply of products (e.g. milk) to the community. Changes to regulations affecting farmers access back to their properties are required – to allow this.

Local businesses also need to be supported to return to operation as soon as possible after a fire. Most small businesses are totally reliant on passing traffic for the viability of their businesses – and extensive road closures critically affect whether or not these businesses can continue to stay open, or fold.

Currently there is a significant shortfall of dangerous tree assessors – with CFA relying on a limited number of FFMV personnel. Immediate training of CFA personnel to be able to undertake this function is required. Also, there is an increasing shortage of equipment and personnel to be able to treat these dangerous trees due to reduction in forest harvesting. A target of identifying and treating dangerous trees within 24 hours of a fire passing should be implemented for all roads – allowing farmers, homeowners, and businesses to return.

(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;

Fire detection and fire fighting has significantly changed in recent years – with fire detection cameras and use of aircraft being two significant changes.

Victorian investment in these and similar modern systems has been slow. Significantly more fire detection sites are urgently required (an early alert allows a fire to be attacked whilst small, before it becomes uncontrollable). Availability of 24 hour per day firefighting aircraft would allow fires to be attacked round the clock (instead of predominantly during day times) – significantly reducing the size and ferocity of fires.

Use of satellites for detection should also be investigated / implemented.

Significant fire breaks / fuel reduction / fire access tracks is critical to fighting fires in native forests. Victoria has not met 2009 Royal Commission targets for fuel reduction, and recent closure of native tree harvesting is resulting in overgrown access tracks and more dense forests.

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

Climate has changed continuously since the world was formed (e.g. ice age, etc) and will continue to do so. Current high temperatures are repeats of temperatures recorded in 1851, 1896, 1920's.

But the problem has been that Australian population has grown from around 500,000 in late 18<sup>th</sup> century to around 28 million today. All these people want to be warm in winter and cool in summer – requiring considerable energy.

The Victorian Government is continually attempting to reduce carbon emissions – but does not include the carbon emissions from fires in their calculations. Eliminating major bushfires would significantly smoke and heat – reducing climate change.

(9) the prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season;

There is a significant over-information occurring today – especially with VicEmergency issuing updates on fires every few hours. (I live in the Otway's impacted by the Otway Complex fires (Gellibrand / Carlisle River / etc) and was receiving three or four different VicEmergency updates every few hours twenty-four hours per day for three weeks or more). A typical case of the “the boy who cried wolf wolf Aesop's fable”

(10) the interjurisdictional support into and out of Victoria leading into and during the fire season, including interstate and international deployments, Commonwealth support and relief efforts; and

Recommend that all fire fighting organisations within Australia should be progressively moved to using the same equipment (fire trucks, radios, etc).

The support / relief provided to affected CFA personnel by inter Victorian, inter state and overseas countries during the recent fires was greatly appreciated by worn-out affected CFA personnel.

(11) lessons from and progress on the implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries, reports and Royal Commissions

There appears to be one major lesson never recognised:

That the recommendations of an inquiry / report / Royal Commission are immediately watered down / ignored by following years bureaucrats / politicians!

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