Submission: Fire Preparedness, Response and Recovery in Agricultural Communities

A Combined Agriculture and Volunteer Emergency Services Perspective

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1. Introduction

I make this submission from the perspective of both an agricultural producer and a volunteer emergency services leader. Operating a dairy farm in South-West Victoria while also serving as a CFA Group Officer provides direct insight into how fire preparedness, response, and recovery function in rural communities.

At the outset, it is important to note that the timing of this Inquiry presents some challenges for meaningful community input. The current fire season is still ongoing, and many farming and rural communities remain in response or early recovery phases following recent emergency events. As a result, several operational lessons, recovery impacts, and community experiences are still emerging. The inquiry timeline is therefore relatively tight, and it is likely that further insights will become clearer once the season has concluded and communities have had sufficient time to reflect on outcomes.

In regional Victoria, agriculture and emergency response systems are deeply interconnected. Farmers are often among the first on scene, provide critical local knowledge, supply water access and machinery, and form a significant proportion of the volunteer emergency services workforce. At the same time, farming businesses are highly exposed to fire risk and can suffer long-term economic and social impacts following fire events.

Effective fire policy must therefore recognise agriculture not only as an at-risk sector, but as an operational partner in preparedness and response.

2. Fire Preparedness and Planning

Fire preparedness in agricultural areas must extend beyond individual landholders and volunteer brigades to include stronger accountability for statutory bodies and infrastructure managers whose assets and landholdings intersect rural landscapes.

Farmers are subject to clear expectations regarding fire prevention planning, fuel management, and seasonal preparedness. However, preparedness outcomes are undermined where equivalent standards are not consistently applied to public land managers, utilities, and infrastructure authorities. Fire risk does not recognise tenure boundaries, and preparedness must therefore be coordinated across all land managers.

A recurring issue across rural Victoria is the delayed or inconsistent completion of fire prevention works on roadsides, rail corridors, easements, telecommunications infrastructure, and other statutory-managed land. These areas can present significant ignition and fire spread risks, often adjacent to highly productive agricultural land, yet remain outside the control of neighbouring landholders.

During the recent Otways fire complex, local experience highlighted several preparedness challenges that reflect broader systemic issues. These included delays in roadside fuel reduction on identified high fire-risk roads within the Colac Otway Shire, and telecommunications infrastructure that had not been adequately cleared ahead of the fire season. Such circumstances increase ignition risk and place additional pressure on emergency response resources once fires occur.

Improved preparedness requires:

- Clear and enforceable expectations on statutory authorities to complete fire prevention works within appropriate seasonal timeframes.
- Greater oversight of preparedness activities undertaken by infrastructure and utility providers.
- Transparent reporting of fire prevention activities undertaken by statutory bodies.
- Stronger coordination between statutory authorities, local government, CFA, and agricultural communities prior to each fire season.

Preparedness planning should recognise that failure to undertake prevention works on statutory-managed land directly increases risk to farms, volunteers, and rural communities. Accountability must therefore be shared across all land managers, with preparedness treated as a system-wide responsibility rather than an obligation placed predominantly on private landholders.

Strengthening accountability at this level will materially improve early-season risk reduction and reduce reliance on emergency response once fires have started.

3. Impact on Farms and Agriculture

Fire impacts on agriculture extend well beyond immediate asset loss.

Loss of pasture, fodder reserves, fencing, livestock, and water infrastructure can affect production for multiple seasons. In dairy regions, fire impacts also extend into milk supply chains and regional economies.

Farmers frequently operate in dual roles during incidents — contributing to response while simultaneously managing risks to their own businesses and animals. This dual expectation must be recognised in emergency planning and recovery settings.

Agriculture should be formally recognised as essential infrastructure within emergency management frameworks, particularly in regions where food production underpins community stability and employment.

4. Emergency Response and Resources

Rural fire response relies heavily on volunteers and locally available resources.

Farm machinery and local knowledge often play an important role in early containment, particularly in grass and crop fires. However, this must occur within clear safety and incident management frameworks.

Key considerations include:

- Maintaining adequate tanker capacity and access to reliable water sources.
- Recognising the increasing pressure on volunteer availability during extended fire seasons and drought.
- Supporting safe integration of agricultural resources where appropriate.
- Ensuring ageing fleet and infrastructure do not erode rural response capability.

A significant operational concern across rural Victoria is the ageing appliance fleet that volunteers are required to operate. Ongoing underfunding of CFA capital replacement programs has resulted in appliances remaining in service well beyond their intended operational lifespan. This has a direct impact on reliability, safety, and operational effectiveness during fire incidents.

Volunteers should not be placed in situations where ageing equipment increases operational risk or reduces response capability. Modern fire behaviour, increasing fire intensity, and longer fire seasons require appliances that meet contemporary safety and performance standards. Investment in modern appliances should be recognised as a core component of preparedness rather than discretionary capital expenditure.

There is also an urgent need to properly resource dedicated teams tasked solely with making road corridors safe and reopening roads as soon as practicable following emergency events that impact roadside trees and infrastructure. These resources should have a clear operational priority of road reopening rather than broader recovery activities.

Extended road closures have significant unintended consequences in agricultural regions. Delayed access impacts:

- Farmer wellbeing and fatigue during already stressful emergency periods.
- Animal welfare, particularly where access to feed, water, or milking infrastructure is restricted.
- Milk collection logistics, which rely on consistent and timely road access.
- Movement of emergency services and essential supplies.

Rapid reopening of safe road access should be recognised as a critical component of emergency response and early recovery in agricultural regions, not simply an infrastructure task.

Volunteer attraction and retention remains a growing challenge across rural emergency services. Consideration should be given to practical measures that recognise the significant training commitment, response availability, and personal time contributed by volunteers. One option worthy of consideration is for the Victorian Government to cover the registration cost of a

primary vehicle nominated by an active volunteer. Such a measure would not represent payment for service, but rather recognition of the ongoing readiness, training commitment, and response time provided by volunteers, and could contribute positively to both attraction and retention outcomes.

Emergency response systems must be built around the reality that rural communities provide much of the operational capacity during fire events.

5. Land and Fuel Management

Fuel management remains one of the most effective risk reduction tools available.

Farmers manage fuel loads daily through grazing and land management practices. However, inconsistencies in fuel management between private land, roadsides, and public land continue to increase risk to both farms and communities.

Improved outcomes require:

- Recognition of agriculture as an active fuel management partner.
- Greater consistency in fuel reduction approaches across land tenures.
- Practical balance between environmental regulation and fire risk reduction.
- Improved coordination between land managers, councils, and emergency services.

Fuel management must be approached as a shared responsibility.

6. Supporting Farmers as Land Managers in Prevention and Suppression

Farmers manage the majority of Victoria's rural landscape and play a direct role in both fire prevention and early suppression. However, the cost of maintaining appropriate equipment and infrastructure continues to increase, particularly during periods of financial pressure associated with drought and rising input costs.

There is a strong case for targeted grant programs that support farmers in their role as land managers and risk reducers. This includes assistance for:

- On-farm firefighting units and slip-on systems.
- Water storage and pumping infrastructure suitable for firefighting.
- Grading and maintenance of fire access tracks and breaks.
- Equipment that supports early suppression activities in grass and crop fires.

Supporting farmers in this way should be viewed as an investment in community risk reduction rather than individual assistance. Early intervention on private land often prevents fires escalating into larger landscape-scale incidents requiring significant emergency resources.

Providing practical support for prevention and suppression capacity recognises the shared responsibility between government, emergency services, and landholders in managing fire risk.

7. Responsibility of Statutory Authorities and Infrastructure Managers

A consistent concern across rural communities is the uneven application of fire prevention responsibilities between private landholders and statutory authorities.

Farmers are subject to clear expectations regarding fuel management and fire prevention activities. Equivalent expectations must be consistently applied to statutory bodies and infrastructure managers whose assets traverse large areas of rural landscape.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Telecommunications providers such as Telstra.
- Local government road managers.
- Water authorities and irrigation infrastructure managers.
- Rail corridor managers.
- State and regional road authorities.
- Energy and utility providers.

Unmanaged vegetation and fuel loads along roadsides, rail corridors, easements, and infrastructure reserves frequently create ignition risks and contribute to fire spread. These risks are often outside the control of adjacent landholders but directly impact farms and rural communities.

Recent experience during the Otways fire complex also demonstrated that community engagement by responsible authorities can be inconsistent during prolonged incidents. Clear, timely, and consistent engagement with affected communities is critical to maintaining confidence, enabling farm-level decision making, and supporting safe operational outcomes.

Greater oversight, accountability, and enforcement of fire prevention obligations is required to ensure that statutory bodies undertake timely and effective fuel reduction and maintenance activities. Fire prevention must be applied consistently across all land tenures if community risk is to be reduced.

8. Infrastructure Resilience (Power, Water and Communications)

Reliable infrastructure is critical to both farm safety and emergency response.

Power outages affect milking operations, refrigeration, and water supply. Telecommunications failures significantly reduce situational awareness and response coordination during emergencies.

Priority considerations include:

- Improved resilience of rural electricity supply.
- Backup power capability for critical farm infrastructure.
- Recognition of farm water storage as a firefighting asset.
- Improved reliability of communications networks in fire-prone regions.

As rural areas experience increasing infrastructure change through energy transition, resilience must remain a central consideration.

9. Recovery and Community Support

Recovery in agricultural communities is complex and long-term.

Following fire events, farmers face immediate income loss while also needing to rebuild infrastructure and restore productive capacity. Where fire follows extended drought, recovery challenges are compounded significantly.

Recovery frameworks should prioritise:

- Rapid and accessible recovery funding for primary producers.
- Streamlined insurance and rebuilding processes.
- Mental health and wellbeing support for farming families and volunteers.
- Recognition of cumulative impacts across multiple climate and economic pressures.

Community recovery is strongest where agricultural recovery is supported early.

10. Conclusion

Agriculture and volunteer emergency services in rural Victoria are inseparable. Farmers are not only affected by fire events but are central to preparedness and response capability.

Future fire preparedness and emergency management policy must be developed in partnership with agricultural communities, recognising their operational role, local knowledge, and ongoing contribution to community safety.

Practical, locally informed approaches will deliver better preparedness, safer responses, and stronger recovery outcomes for rural Victoria.

Regards,

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