Victorian Farmers Federation

Submission to the 2026 Victorian Bushfires Inquiry

April 17 2026

Executive Summary

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) represents primary producers across livestock, dairy, grains, horticulture and mixed farming enterprises. Agriculture plays a central role in Victoria's regional economies, supporting jobs, exports and food production across the state.

The 2026 bushfires have again highlighted underlying weaknesses in Victoria's approach to bushfire preparedness, land management and emergency response.

For agriculture, the impacts have been significant. Livestock losses, destruction of fodder reserves and widespread infrastructure damage have placed considerable pressure on farm businesses. These are not short-term setbacks. For many producers, the effects will be felt over several years as herds and flocks are rebuilt and production systems recover.

Seventeen years on from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, many of the same structural issues remain. While reforms were introduced following 2009, there has been a gradual shift away from some of the key principles that underpinned those changes—particularly around measurable mitigation and maintaining frontline capability.

The 2026 fires reflect a combination of factors coming together:

- fuel loads that continue to build in parts of the landscape
- more challenging fire weather conditions
- pressure on suppression capacity
- reduced certainty in how mitigation is delivered

From a VFF perspective, the key issue is that risk is not being consistently reduced on the ground.

This submission focuses on where the system is not delivering as intended, and where practical changes could improve outcomes for regional communities and agriculture.

1. Preparation and Fuel Management – Policy Drift Since 2009

The Royal Commission identified fuel load as a key driver of fire intensity and spread, and recommended a clear, measurable approach to fuel reduction.

The shift away from hectare-based targets toward a risk-modelling framework has changed how this is managed in practice. While modelling can help guide decision-making, it has also reduced visibility around what is actually being delivered each year.

For farmers, the issue is straightforward. What matters is the condition of the landscape at the boundary between public and private land.

In 2026, many producers again reported:

- heavy fuel loads on adjoining public land
- limited visible mitigation activity
- inconsistent roadside management
- lack of clarity around who is responsible for managing risk across tenures

Where fuel is continuous, fire moves accordingly. Administrative boundaries do not alter fire behaviour.

The absence of a clear baseline for fuel treatment creates variability from year to year and makes it difficult to ensure that opportunities for mitigation are fully utilised when conditions allow.

A more balanced approach—combining modelling with a minimum level of treatment—would provide greater certainty that risk is being actively managed across the landscape.

2. Fire Suppression Capacity – A System Under Pressure

The ability to contain fires early remains one of the most important factors in limiting their impact.

Over time, there has been a shift toward a model that relies more heavily on surge capacity once fires are established, rather than maintaining strong local capability for early intervention.

At the same time, the operating environment has become more challenging:

- fire seasons are longer
- extreme weather conditions are more frequent
- multiple incidents can occur at once

This places additional strain on available resources and increases the risk that fires will escalate before they can be contained.

From a practical standpoint, once a fire grows beyond the initial attack phase, it becomes significantly more difficult and costly to control. The consequences are reflected in larger fire footprints and greater impacts on communities and agriculture.

Maintaining sufficient frontline capacity to support early intervention is critical to improving overall system performance.

3. Strengthening CFA Membership and Volunteer Sustainability

Volunteer firefighters remain central to fire response across regional Victoria. However, maintaining and growing this workforce is becoming more difficult.

The issue is not simply total numbers, but availability and sustainability. Many brigades report challenges with:

- weekday response capacity
- increasing training and compliance requirements
- ageing membership
- competing work commitments

These pressures affect the ability to respond quickly and consistently, particularly during prolonged fire events.

Addressing this requires a long-term approach that recognises volunteering as part of the broader regional workforce. Practical measures could include:

- stronger support for employers of volunteers
- reducing administrative burden where possible
- targeted efforts to recruit and retain members in high-risk areas

Without sufficient personnel, investment in equipment and infrastructure will not translate into effective response capability.

4. Strike Teams vs Local Capability

Victoria's growing reliance on strike teams points to a broader shift in how fire response is being delivered. While these teams are an important part of the system, they are increasingly being used to compensate for reduced local capacity rather than to complement it.

In practice, the effectiveness of fire suppression is heavily influenced by how quickly a fire can be attacked. Local brigades remain the most effective mechanism for early

response. They know the country, they know the access points, and they understand how fire behaves in their district. That knowledge is difficult to replicate through deployed resources arriving from outside the area.

Where response is delayed, even by a short period, the consequences escalate quickly. Fires that might otherwise be contained early can grow to a scale where suppression becomes far more complex and resource-intensive. This increases the likelihood of:

- whole farm impacts rather than partial losses
- destruction of critical infrastructure such as fencing and water systems
- broader impacts across neighbouring properties and supply chains

There is also a cost dimension. Late-stage suppression requires significantly more resources and carries a much higher financial burden, both for government and for affected communities.

The key point is that strike teams are most effective when they support strong local capability—not when they are relied upon to replace it. Rebuilding and sustaining local response capacity should be seen as central to improving overall system performance.

5. Rural Water Supply and Firefighting Logistics

Water availability continues to be a limiting factor in fire response, particularly in more remote or drought-affected areas. The 2026 fires again highlighted how quickly suppression efforts can be constrained when water logistics are not adequately planned.

In many cases, tankers were required to travel significant distances to refill. This reduces the amount of time they can spend actively fighting fire and limits the overall volume of water that can be applied during critical periods. The practical outcome is a reduction in suppression effectiveness at the fire front.

There are a number of contributing issues:

- uneven distribution of dedicated refill points
- limited visibility or mapping of available water sources
- reduced reliability of farm dams in dry conditions
- lack of formal integration of private water assets into planning

This is an area where agriculture is part of the solution. Farms already hold substantial water infrastructure across the landscape, including dams, tanks and irrigation systems. However, these assets are not consistently incorporated into emergency response planning.

Better integration would have immediate, practical benefits—more refill options, shorter turnaround times and improved fireground efficiency.

Water supply should be treated as core infrastructure in fire preparedness, not something that is addressed once a fire is already underway.

6. Local Autonomy and Community-Led Risk Reduction

There is a strong case for giving local brigades and landholders greater ability to manage risk before it becomes a problem. At present, a number of regulatory and administrative barriers can make it difficult to carry out relatively straightforward mitigation work.

This can lead to missed opportunities—particularly in periods where conditions are suitable for fuel reduction or maintenance activities. It can also mean that local knowledge is not being fully utilised.

Farmers and local brigades have a detailed understanding of their landscapes. They know where fuel builds up, where access is limited, and where fire is most likely to move under different conditions. That knowledge is highly practical and often time-sensitive.

Enabling more local decision-making—within clear guidelines—would likely result in:

- more consistent upkeep of fire breaks and access tracks
- better targeted small-scale fuel reduction
- quicker response to emerging risks

This is not about removing oversight, but about improving responsiveness. A more flexible system would allow local capability to be used more effectively, rather than constrained by process.

7. Strategic Fire Breaks and Landscape Planning

At a broader scale, there is limited evidence of a coordinated approach to strategic fire breaks across Victoria. While there are localised efforts, there is no clearly defined network designed to influence fire behaviour at a landscape level.

Strategic fire breaks serve a different purpose to routine fuel reduction. They are intended to slow or redirect fire movement and provide anchor points for suppression efforts during large-scale events. Without them, options for containment become more limited, particularly under severe conditions.

The absence of this kind of planning increases exposure across the landscape, especially in areas where public land interfaces directly with agricultural production. It also places greater reliance on reactive suppression once fires are already well established.

There is an opportunity to take a more structured approach by aligning fire breaks with existing features such as major roads, rail corridors and utility easements. Done properly, this would provide a framework for more effective containment during major incidents.

This is long-term work, but it has clear benefits in reducing the scale and impact of future fires.

8. Infrastructure Risk and System Resilience

Rural infrastructure remains both a critical support for fire response and a source of vulnerability. While there have been improvements since the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, a number of risks persist.

Electricity, telecommunications and water systems are all exposed to fire, and failures in one system can quickly affect others. For example, loss of power can disrupt water supply and communications, both of which are essential during fire response.

There is also increasing complexity as infrastructure networks expand across regional areas. Linear assets such as transmission lines cover large distances and are often located in fire-prone environments. This creates ongoing challenges in both risk management and emergency response.

From a practical perspective, infrastructure failure during a fire event can:

- limit the ability to coordinate response efforts
- reduce access to critical services
- increase the risk of further ignitions

Addressing these issues requires a more integrated approach. Rather than looking at individual assets in isolation, there needs to be a broader view of how infrastructure systems interact with each other and with the surrounding landscape.

9. Agricultural Impact – A Systemic Economic Shock

The impact of the 2026 fires on agriculture is best understood as a system-wide shock rather than a series of isolated losses.

Farm businesses operate over long production cycles, particularly in livestock industries. The loss of animals, fodder and infrastructure disrupts those cycles in ways that take years to recover from.

For many producers, the immediate losses are only the starting point. They are followed by:

- reduced production capacity over multiple seasons

- increased input costs, particularly for feed
- delays in rebuilding herds and flocks
- ongoing cash flow pressure

These impacts extend beyond the farm gate. Reduced production flows through to processors, transport operators and regional businesses that rely on agricultural activity. Over time, this can affect employment and economic stability in regional communities.

Recovery programs often focus on short-term assistance, but the reality is that agricultural recovery is a long-term process. Support frameworks need to reflect that, otherwise there is a risk of prolonged underperformance across the sector.

10. Renewable Energy Development and Emerging Bushfire Risk

The rapid expansion of renewable energy projects across regional Victoria is introducing a new layer of complexity to bushfire risk management. While the transition to renewable energy is an important policy objective, the scale and pace of development mean that bushfire risk considerations must be more explicitly addressed.

Large-scale wind, solar and transmission projects are increasingly being located in agricultural landscapes often in areas that are already exposed to elevated fire risk. These developments introduce extensive new infrastructure into the landscape, including:

- transmission lines and associated easements
- access tracks and service corridors
- energy storage systems
- dispersed physical assets across large geographic areas

From a bushfire perspective, this raises several practical concerns.

First, linear infrastructure such as transmission lines increases the potential for ignition, particularly during extreme weather conditions. While design standards and safety mechanisms are in place, the cumulative expansion of these networks across fire-prone areas increases overall system exposure.

Second, the scale and layout of renewable energy facilities can affect fire behaviour and suppression efforts. Large solar arrays, wind turbine placements and associated infrastructure can:

- restrict access for firefighting vehicles
- complicate movement across properties

- create additional hazards for crews operating in fire conditions

Third, there is a risk that the expansion of infrastructure is not being fully integrated into landscape-level fire planning. Project-level assessments may not adequately consider how multiple developments interact across a region, particularly where they intersect with existing fuel loads and agricultural production systems.

There are also implications for land use and local capacity. In some areas, the conversion of agricultural land to energy production can alter how land is managed, including changes in fuel management practices and reduced day-to-day oversight. This may contribute to increased fuel accumulation if not carefully managed.

From a systems perspective, the key issue is cumulative impact. Individually, projects may meet regulatory requirements, but collectively they can:

- increase ignition risk
- reduce accessibility for suppression
- add complexity to emergency response
- place additional pressure on already stretched local resources

There is also a need to consider how these developments interact with existing infrastructure risks outlined in Section 8. The combination of expanded transmission networks and other energy assets increases the importance of coordinated planning across agencies and sectors.

The VFF's position is that renewable energy development must be accompanied by a stronger and more explicit focus on bushfire preparedness. This includes:

- integrating projects into regional fire planning frameworks
- ensuring adequate access for firefighting and emergency response
- maintaining clear fuel management responsibilities within and around project sites
- assessing cumulative risk at a landscape scale, not just at an individual project level

Without this, there is a risk that the transition to new energy systems unintentionally increases exposure to bushfire impacts across regional Victoria.

11. Lessons from 2009 – Policy Implementation and Outcomes

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission set out a clear direction for improving bushfire preparedness, with a strong emphasis on measurable action and accountability.

While a number of reforms were implemented, there has been a gradual shift away from some of those core principles. In particular, the move away from clearly defined targets has made it more difficult to assess whether risk is being reduced over time.

There is also a broader issue of consistency. Bushfire policy requires sustained effort over long periods, but changes in approach can interrupt that continuity and weaken outcomes.

The 2026 fires highlight the consequences of this. Where mitigation is not maintained, and where capacity is under pressure, risk inevitably accumulates.

A key lesson is that policy settings need to be both clear and durable. It is not enough to establish frameworks there must also be ongoing focus on delivery and outcomes on the ground.

VFF Policy Recommendations

The Victorian Farmers Federation recommends the following:

1. Reinstating a minimum level of fuel reduction alongside the existing risk-based framework.
2. Establishing dedicated fuel management zones at the forest–farm interface.
3. Developing a long-term strategy to grow and sustain CFA membership.
4. Strengthening frontline firefighting capacity across regional Victoria.
5. Ensuring early response capability in high-risk areas.
6. Investing in rural water infrastructure and improving access to emergency water sources.
7. Providing greater flexibility for local brigades to undertake risk reduction activities.
8. Developing a coordinated network of strategic fire breaks.
9. Embedding agricultural expertise within incident management structures.
10. Establishing a dedicated agricultural fire resilience framework.

11. Introducing regular public reporting on implementation of inquiry recommendations.

Conclusion

The 2026 bushfires have reinforced the need for a more consistent and outcomes-focused approach to bushfire management in Victoria.

Current settings are not keeping pace with the level of risk facing regional communities. Without adjustment, this will continue to result in larger fires, greater economic loss and longer recovery periods.

For agriculture, the consequences are significant and long-lasting. Farm businesses cannot continue to absorb these impacts without broader system improvements.

The focus going forward should be on practical measures that reduce risk on the ground, strengthen response capability and support long-term resilience across regional Victoria.