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15 March 2026

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

Dear Chair

**MITCHELL SHIRE COUNCIL SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO THE 2026 SUMMER FIRES  
ACROSS VICTORIA**

Please find attached Mitchell Shire Council's submission to the Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria.

Within Mitchell Shire, 11 homes were destroyed, along with various other outbuildings. Over 4000 livestock perished, thousands of kilometres of fencing and there was extensive pasture/hay loss.

Mitchell Shire Council and the community are appreciative of the support and assistance received during the event, as such much of our submission is focussed on recognising the efforts of community and agencies who have provided our Council and our residents with support as we progress through the recovery phase.

Whilst the assistance which continues to be received is beneficial there are a number of issues and challenges which require urgent consideration and remediation.

Council have identified 26 recommendations, which if implemented would improve the whole of government approach to preparing for, responding to and recovering from future disasters.

Mitchell Shire Council has been proactive following the fires, by establishing a Recovery Hub in Seymour, delivering outreach services from the Highlands Hall, hosting community connection opportunities, and developing a Fire Recovery Plan which sets out immediate, short, medium, and longer term objectives and actions aimed at facilitating community recovery.

In addition to the Longwood fires, Mitchell Shire Council has had extensive impact from natural disasters in recent years, including the October 2022 floods which saw over 250 homes and business receive over floor flooding, January 2024 floods resulting in over \$5million worth of damage to Council infrastructure, most of which had just been repaired following the October 2022 floods.

These events place extreme pressure on community, as they navigate other struggles such as drought, financial hardship and compounding mental health and disadvantage which studies provide is directly correlated to natural disasters.

Mitchell Shire Council Submission to the *Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria*

It is more imperative than ever that all agencies and levels of government undertake honest reflective practice and commit to genuine and effective change in the best interest of current and future communities.

Mitchell Shire Council's aim is to grow the economy, enhance quality of life, develop spaces that enrich everyday life, ensure good governance, and foster civic pride and community connection.

We hope that the Committee will carefully consider our submission and recommendations when developing your report into the 2026 Summer fires across Victoria.

Mitchell Shire Council would like to request the opportunity to present to the Committee to expand upon any of the recommendations, or any other elements of the submission.

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Your Sincerely,

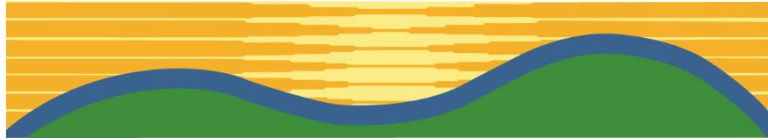
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**CR JOHN DOUGALL**  
MAYOR

[REDACTED]

**MARY AGOSTINO**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

**MITCHELL SHIRE COUNCIL**



**Submission to the  
Victorian Parliamentary  
Inquiry into the 2026  
Summer Fires across  
Victoria**

## **MITCHELL SHIRE COUNCIL SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE 2026 SUMMER FIRES ACROSS VICTORIA**

- [1] Please find below Mitchell Shire Council's Submission to the Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria. Whilst all agencies and levels of government deserve acknowledgement for the significant response and recovery effort, there are areas for improvement to ensure that Councils and their communities and are better supported for future events.
- [2] Mitchell Shire Council's Submission aims to recognise existing initiatives, celebrate community and organisations whose efforts have been integral in the delivery of community support, and provide recommendations that would support future preparedness, response and recovery.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- [3] Council's submission makes 26 recommendations which, if implemented, would work to improve all governments' level of response to bushfire and other emergency events. We trust that committee will fairly and carefully consider these recommendations.
- i. That State Government fully fund Council's slashing program for works undertaken on roadsides under the responsibility of Department of Transport.
  - ii. That State Government amend the CFA Act 1958 to allow Councils to issue Fire Prevention Notices on all land, including state owned land.
  - iii. Develop a new Municipal Emergency Resource Program (MERP) risk-based funding formula.
  - iv. Increase the statewide MERP funding allocation.
  - v. The State Government should maintain and expand streamlined LGV funding pathways with clear eligibility and immediate post-disaster disbursement to ensure councils can respond and recover rapidly without financial strain.

- vi. That Emergency Water Supply Point funding continues to be prioritised to support Council's delivery of emergency water supply and drought relief infrastructure.
- vii. That the State Government provide funding to develop Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre as a Regional Emergency Relief Centre to ensure its future suitability to withstand high volume use.
- viii. Formalising mechanisms to prioritise local businesses in clean-up and recovery programs would enhance community self-reliance, improve the speed and quality of recovery work, and provide lasting economic and social benefits in fire-affected regions.
- ix. Ensure future cleanup programs are announced quickly with clear eligibility criteria, the delay in announcements of clean up places burden on Council to manage waste.
- x. CFA reinstate Fire Access Road Subsidy Scheme funding so that critical infrastructure and works can be delivered.
- xi. That the Emergency Services Volunteers Fund Levy be applied at the same rate as the Fire Service Levy, for farmers until at least 2030.
- xii. That the State Government coordinate and fund rapid energy resilience assessments for fire-affected properties to determine suitability for solar and battery installations.
- xiii. That additional financial assistance or subsidy programs be established to support the installation of solar and battery systems for eligible households.
- xiv. That emergency recovery frameworks incorporate distributed renewable energy solutions as part of long-term disaster resilience planning in fire-affected communities.
- xv. Commission the Department of Jobs, Skills Industry and Regions (DJSIR) to undertake a full Economic Impact Assessment of the 2026 Longwood Fires and consider the compounding impacts of 2022 and 2024 flooding.
- xvi. Developing a streamlined and coordinated system, where all grant information is triaged and communicated through a centralised channel to both councils and

- affected communities, would improve clarity, efficiency, and equity in the distribution of recovery support.
- xvii. That State Government formally recognise and acknowledge the invaluable contribution of community volunteers and ensure they receive appropriate support, training, and resourcing in future events, strengthening local capacity and resilience in fire affected communities.
  - xviii. State Government increases the expiry period for existing use rights for fire-affected properties from 7 years to 10 years to provide residents with adequate time to consider and progress rebuild options.
  - xix. State Government provide a subsidy for planning permit application fees associated with Longwood Fire rebuilds to reduce financial barriers to recovery.
  - xx. State Government fund Councils to deliver a place-based, Council-coordinated and consultant-supported planning assistance model, where residents are directly supported to understand and complete planning and compliance requirements. This model would streamline permit processes, improve rebuild efficiency, reduce delays, and ensure reconstruction outcomes align with safety, environmental and community standards.
  - xxi. State Government establish dedicated funding and clear cross-agency responsibility for post-disaster environmental monitoring and rehabilitation to ensure coordinated, whole of landscape-ecosystem recovery.
  - xxii. EMV commit to hosting livestream Community Information sessions for all Level 3 incidents.
  - xxiii. EMV change evacuation overlay from red to a colour that does not clash with the red catastrophic fire danger rating overlay.
  - xxiv. State Government establish locally situated mental health services integrated with emergency response and recovery frameworks.
  - xxv. State Government redirect public appeal funds to locally administered relief funds, such as the Strathbogrie Relief Fund, to enhance equity, transparency, and responsiveness in directly supporting affected communities.

- xxvi. State Government embed funded betterment provisions in disaster recovery programs so Councils can upgrade damaged infrastructure to more resilient standards rather than like-for-like replacement.

## **BACKGROUND**

- [4] The Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre was activated as the primary Emergency Relief Centre for the Longwood fires in January 2026. During its operation, the Emergency Relief Centre supported over 260 families over a 9 day period, totalling close to 1000 people relying on this site for shelter, comfort, services and information.
- [5] Due to the extensive, multi-council footprint of the fire, which triggered evacuations across several local government areas to Seymour, Mitchell Shire Council staff were supported by colleagues from Strathbogie and Murrindindi. Together, they assisted residents and visitors from across the state who gathered at the Emergency Relief Centre after evacuating the fire and seeking shelter from the extreme conditions.
- [6] Mitchell Shire Council recognises the vital role pets play in people's lives, particularly during emergencies. For this reason, the Council ensured that all pets presenting at the Seymour Emergency Relief Centre were accommodated.
- [7] While this approach can create additional complexities, it has a significant positive impact — supporting residents in making timely evacuation decisions and aiding their recovery, especially in circumstances where homes and personal belongings have been lost.
- [8] Due to its proximity and range of available services, Seymour serves as a vital hub for many of the small communities affected by the Longwood fires outside of emergency situations.
- [9] However, neither Seymour nor anywhere within Mitchell Shire has access to a local mental health provider. As a result, individuals experiencing adverse impacts from the fires are required to travel significant distances to access appropriate mental health support.

## **PREPARATION AND PLANNING BY GOVERNMENT, EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES AND THE COMMUNITY AHEAD OF THE FIRE SEASON**

### **Slashing program on Department of Transport Roads**

- [10] Council bears the majority of costs for roadside slashing at key township entrances located on state managed arterial roads, with only minimal financial contribution from Department of Transport.
- [11] This has created an inequitable and ongoing cost shifting burden to local government for vegetation risk mitigation on infrastructure outside Council's responsibility. Despite arterial roads being under State Government management, Councils remain exposed to community expectations and emergency risk where township entrances present unmanaged or inconsistently treated.

**Recommendation I:** That State Government fully fund Council's slashing program for works undertaken on roadsides under the responsibility of Department of Transport.

### **Unable to issue Fire Prevention Notices on government property**

- [12] Council's inability to issue Fire Prevention Notices on state-owned land significantly limited its capacity to enforce hazard reduction and protect public safety.
- [13] Without statutory authority to mandate fuel reduction or maintenance on these parcels, Council's preventative efforts are constrained, and the responsibility for mitigating fire risk was effectively shifted to other agencies.
- [14] This gap highlights the need for clearer legislative frameworks or cooperative arrangements that enable councils to work with state land managers to ensure consistent, enforceable fire prevention measures across both public and private lands, thereby reducing community exposure and enhancing overall bushfire resilience

**Recommendation II:** That State Government amend the *CFA Act 1958* to allow Councils to issue Fire Prevention Notices on all land, including state owned land.

### **Municipal Emergency Resource Program Funding**

- [15] The Victorian Government provides \$4.9 million each year for the MERP to support rural, regional and outer-metropolitan Councils to plan, prepare and deliver activities that will assist their communities in an emergency.
- [16] It supports councils to:
- [17] Deliver emergency management responsibilities established in legislation, state plans and policies including the SEMP and the Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy
- [18] Contributing to better prepared and more resilient communities
- [19] Embed emergency management as a core component of council business.
- [20] The funding is shared between 64 (out of 79) councils at five different funding levels (\$40,000, \$60,000, \$80,000, \$120,000 or \$240,000 per annum) based on each council's relative emergency risk profile. Mitchell Shire Council receives \$60,000 per year.
- [21] Many unsuccessful attempts have been made for the State Government to consider a comprehensive review of the Municipal Emergency Resource Program which include:
- [22] MAV Emergency Management Committee submission to the 2024 State Council, which put forward a motion relating to increases in MERP funding (along with other matters relating to Councils and Emergency Management)
- [23] MAV pre-budget (2023) submission calling for increases to the MERP
- [24] MERP funding deficiencies were identified in the 2022 'Role of Local Government in Emergency Management Position Paper'
- [25] Since 2012 when the MERP program was introduced (aside from some COVID-19 specific increases) the funding allocation has remained unchanged or indexed. For context, Council's Enterprise Bargaining Agreement recognises a quantum of increase at 3% in 2025.
- [26] As a result of the MERP stemming from post 2009 Black Saturday resourcing programs, it has a particular fire risk (and CFA catchment) focus. This is detrimental to low fire risk, high flood prone municipalities.
- [27] In addition to its recognised fire risk, Mitchell Shire Council carries significant flood risk and received major flooding in October 2022 and further moderate flooding in 2024.
- [28] Given the current and highly outdated funding formula, MERP does not provide appropriate all hazards support to Councils.

**Recommendation III:** Develop a new Municipal Emergency Resource Program (MERP) risk-based funding formula;

**Recommendation IV:** Increase the statewide MERP funding allocation

### **Recognition of LGV funding**

- [29] Local Government Victoria (LGV) funding was provided promptly following the January 2026 Longwood fires, enabling Council to respond quickly and in a coordinated manner while ensuring minimal financial impact on local government budgets.
- [30] This timely allocation allowed critical recovery activities, such as debris removal, road clearance, and community support services to commence without delay.
- [31] The rapid funding response during the Longwood fires demonstrates the effectiveness of this mechanism in supporting councils to manage both immediate response and early recovery phases.
- [32] The Longwood fires experience underscores the importance of maintaining and potentially expanding streamlined LGV funding pathways, ensuring local governments can act decisively in emergencies while preserving financial sustainability.

**Recommendation V:** The State Government maintain and expand streamlined LGV funding pathways with clear eligibility and immediate post-disaster disbursement to ensure councils can respond and recover rapidly without financial strain.

### **Recognition of EWSP funding**

- [33] Emergency Water Supply Points (EWSP) funding enabled Council to install and maintain critical mitigation infrastructure, including standpipes and water tanks, which are essential for firefighting and community safety.
- [34] During the January 2026 Longwood fires, the availability of these strategically located water points significantly enhanced both volunteer and professional firefighting capacity, particularly in areas with limited reticulated water access.

- [35] The funding allowed Council to proactively position resources in high-risk locations, improving operational efficiency and reducing potential fire impact on properties and agricultural assets.

**Recommendation VI:** That EWSP funding continues to be prioritised to support Councils delivery of emergency water supply and drought relief infrastructure.

### **Seymour Emergency Relief centre**

- [36] The Seymour Relief Centre served as the primary emergency relief centre for the January 2026 Longwood fires for several days, creating significant additional pressure on staff and volunteers.
- [37] As the sole Emergency Relief centre during the initial emergency, it was responsible for coordinating emergency relief, registration of affected residents, distribution of supplies, and provision of information and welfare services.
- [38] The concentration of demand at a single location strained resources, limited the ability to deliver timely support to all affected community members, and highlighted the risks of relying on one centre in major fire events.

**Recommendation VII:** That the State Government provide funding to develop Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre as a Regional Emergency Relief Centre to ensure its future suitability to withstand high volume use.

**Recognition for Local suppliers for cleanup**

- [39] Although there were some delays in announcing the state clean-up program which lead to confusion between property owners and insurance companies the prioritisation of local contractors and suppliers in post-fire clean-up programs is essential for both economic recovery and operational efficiency was a priority for Council.
- [40] Supporting local suppliers ensures that recovery spending remains within the community, helps rebuild livelihoods disrupted by the disaster, and fosters stronger community networks and collaboration.

**Recommendation VIII:** Formalise mechanisms to prioritise local businesses in clean-up and recovery programs would enhance community self-reliance, improve the speed and quality of recovery work, and provide lasting economic and social benefits in fire-affected regions.

**Recommendation IX:** Ensure future cleanup programs are announced quickly with clear eligibility criteria, the delay in announcements of clean up places burden on Council to manage waste.

## **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**

### **Redaction of FARSS**

- [41] The CFA Fire Access Roads Subsidy Scheme (FARSS), ceased in 2023. This grant provided Council's with funding to deliver critical fire mitigation infrastructure such as fire tanks and access tracks.
- [42] Councils relied heavily on this funding to deliver such infrastructure, and following its cessation, have been unable to deliver additional tanks which have been highlighted as a priority through Councils' engagement with local brigades.
- [43] The scaling back of FARSS funding places the financial and operational burden back on local government, restricting the ability to proactively install essential mitigation infrastructure in high-risk areas.
- [44] It is essential that funding schemes such as FARSS recognise the changing nature of peri-urban and interface communities. Notably, as communities grow these geographically large municipalities will see increased community interaction with fire prone areas.

**Recommendation X:** CFA reinstate FARSS funding so that critical infrastructure and works can be delivered.

### **Emergency services levy, Rates and waste charges relief**

- [45] In response to considerable backlash from the farming sector following the 2025 State Government's announcement of the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, the Victorian Government provided exemption options for primary producers, in recognition of the significant financial burden placed on primary producers, particularly during a time of declared drought.
- [46] Many agricultural operators experienced significant losses to livestock, crops, infrastructure, and income, yet remain liable for ESL charges despite the extraordinary financial pressures caused by the disaster

[47] Temporary reductions, waivers, or deferrals of the levy for impacted properties would provide meaningful financial relief, help stabilise farm operations, and support broader community recovery.

***Recommendation XI:*** That the Emergency Services Volunteers Fund levy be applied at the same rate as the Fire Service Levy, for farmers until at least 2030.

## **RESILIENCE OF CRITICAL SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUCH AS ELECTRICITY, WATER AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS DURING AND AFTER THE FIRES**

### **Energy Resilience and Support for Fire-Affected Homes**

- [48] Prolonged power outage presents significant challenges for households, including impacts on safety, wellbeing, food security, communications, and the ability to remain on their properties during recovery.
- [49] Considering should be given to alternative and more resilient energy solutions. Coordinated assessments of surviving homes to determine suitability for solar systems and battery storage could provide a faster, decentralised power solution.
- [50] Supporting the installation of these systems would not only assist residents during the immediate recovery period but also strengthen long-term community resilience to future disasters.

**Recommendation XII:** That the State Government coordinate and fund rapid energy resilience assessments for fire-affected properties to determine suitability for solar and battery installations.

**Recommendation XIII:** That additional financial assistance or subsidy programs be established to support the installation of solar and battery systems for eligible households facing prolonged grid outages.

**Recommendation XIV:** That emergency recovery frameworks incorporate distributed renewable energy solutions as part of long-term disaster resilience planning in fire-affected communities.

## **THE IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY, BUSINESS AND AGRICULTURE AND EFFORTS TO AID IN RECOVERY**

### **Economic impact assessment**

- [51] A State Government led regional economic impact assessment is essential to accurately quantify the long-term effects of the January 2026 Longwood fires on businesses, agriculture, tourism, employment, and the broader local economy.
- [52] Evidence-based investment to restore and strengthen local economies, ensuring that recovery efforts address both immediate losses and long-term economic resilience.
- [53] Despite numerous requests, a regional economic impact assessment is yet to be considered.
- [54] Without a comprehensive, centralised assessment, Councils and state agencies cannot fully understand the scope of economic damage or plan effective recovery programs.

**Recommendation XV:** Commission the Department of Jobs, Skills Industry and Regions (DJSIR) to undertake a full Economic Impact Assessment of the 2026 Longwood fires.

### **Agricultural grant criteria and general grant announcements: (Single source of truth)**

- [55] Agricultural recovery grants following the January 2026 Longwood fires were highly restrictive, with some programs offering only 40% eligibility, which excluded many farmers who experienced significant losses.
- [56] Coupled with the sheer number of grants announced, variations in eligibility criteria, and differing Federal and State programs, this created a complex and confusing landscape for both Council and the community to navigate.
- [57] The lack of a single, coordinated source of truth for grant information meant that residents and Council staff were often uncertain which grants applied to specific situations, who was eligible, and how to access funding.
- [58] This fragmented approach delayed recovery, increased administrative burden, and caused frustration for fire affected communities already under considerable stress.

**Recommendation XVI:** Developing a streamlined and coordinated system, where all grant information is triaged and communicated through a centralised channel to both Councils and affected communities, would improve clarity, efficiency, and equity in the distribution of recovery support.

### **Recognition of volunteers and community hubs**

- [59] Spontaneous volunteers, such as community hub staff, played a critical role in providing immediate relief, coordination, and support to residents affected by the January 2026 Longwood fires.
- [60] Their efforts included distribution of food, water, and essential supplies, as well as offering emotional support and guidance during the emergency and early recovery phases.
- [61] These volunteers and community hubs operated under significant pressure, often bridging gaps in formal emergency services and Council resources.

**Recommendation XVII:** That State Government formally recognise and acknowledge the invaluable contribution of community volunteers and ensure they receive appropriate support, training, and resourcing in future events, strengthening local capacity and resilience in fire affected communities.

### **Streamlined rebuild planning**

- [62] Following the January 2026 Longwood fires, there has still been no announcement regarding planning referral assistance for impacted property owners.
- [63] Council continues to await guidance or support from the State Government on the provision of planning services to help residents navigate complex planning requirements.
- [64] Streamlined and timely planning pathways are critical to enable affected residents to rebuild safely and efficiently while maintaining appropriate safety and environmental standards.
- [65] A more place-based approach, where residents are directly assisted to complete planning and compliance obligations, would significantly improve rebuild efficiency, reduce delays, and ensure that recovery aligns with safety, environmental, and community standards.

**Recommendation XVIII:** State Government increases the expiry period for existing use rights for fire-affected properties from 7 years to 10 years to provide residents with adequate time to consider and progress rebuild options.

**Recommendation XIX:** State Government fund a subsidy for planning permit application fees associated with Longwood Fire rebuilds to reduce financial barriers to rebuilding.

**Recommendation XX:** State Government provide targeted funding to Councils to deliver a place-based, Council-coordinated and consultant-supported planning assistance model, where residents are directly supported to understand and complete planning and compliance requirements. This model would streamline permit processes, improve rebuild efficiency, reduce delays, and ensure reconstruction outcomes align with safety, environmental and community standards.

## **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**

### **Environmental Rehabilitation and Responsibility**

- [66] Post-fire environmental rehabilitation is a critical component of recovery but is often under recognised within disaster funding frameworks. Bushfire impacts such as vegetation loss, displaced wildlife, soil instability, erosion, sediment and ash runoff, habitat destruction, and invasive species establishment require ecological monitoring and active rehabilitation measures including erosion control, revegetation, weed management, pest animal control and habitat restoration.
- [67] These activities are essential to stabilise landscapes, protect waterways, and support biodiversity recovery, yet they frequently fall outside core infrastructure reconstruction programs. As a result, Councils and other land managers face unfunded or unclear responsibilities for environmental restoration along roadsides, waterways, and public land interfaces.
- [68] Effective environmental recovery also depends on coordinated action across land tenures, including local government, catchment management authorities, state forest and parks, and private land.
- [69] Where rehabilitation timing or standards differ between land managers, ecological outcomes can be compromised, for example through weed spread or sediment movement across boundaries.
- [70] Embedding clear responsibility, additional resourcing and dedicated funding for environmental rehabilitation within disaster recovery arrangements will support consistent, whole of landscape-restoration and reduce long-term environmental degradation.

**Recommendation XXI:** State Government establish dedicated funding and clear cross-agency responsibility for post-disaster environmental monitoring and rehabilitation to ensure coordinated, whole of landscape-ecosystem recovery.

## **THE PREVALENCE AND IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION LEADING INTO AND DURING THE FIRE SEASON**

### **Community information Sessions and Warnings**

- [71] During the Longwood fires, two community information sessions were delivered from the Seymour Emergency Relief Centre. These sessions were attended by approximately 600 people and viewed online by more than 150,000 people. These numbers prove the appetite for clear communication by our community.
- [72] The messaging delivered by the Incident Controller at these sessions was clear, considered and undoubtedly saved lives.
- [73] As the fire impacted four municipalities, having a single point of reference was difficult throughout the livestream of these sessions.
- [74] As a result, the 'hosting' Council was left to manage comments about the community information session that were outside of Mitchell (for example, Murrindindi residents asking questions on Mitchell's Facebook page).
- [75] This could have been resolved by EMV acting as the host of livestreaming sessions and providing appropriate technical support.
- [76] The warnings provided during the Longwood fire were comprehensive however evacuation warnings (displayed as red on the Vic emergency app) clashed with the Catastrophic Fire Danger Rating overlay which is also displayed in red. This resulted in confusion and difficulty interpreting warnings.

**Recommendation XXII:** EMV commit to hosting livestream Community Information sessions for all Level 3 incidents.

**Recommendation XXIII:** EMV Change evacuation overlay from red to a colour that does not clash with the Red catastrophic fire danger rating overlay

**THE INTER-JURISDICTIONAL SUPPORT INTO AND OUT OF VICTORIA LEADING INTO AND DURING THE FIRE SEASON, INCLUDING INTERSTATE AND INTERNATIONAL DEPLOYMENTS, COMMONWEALTH SUPPORT AND RELIEF EFFORTS**

**Mental health**

- [77] Long-term, place-based mental health supports are essential, as trauma and recovery impacts persist well beyond the initial emergency phase. The January 2026 Longwood fires caused significant psychological distress for residents, including loss of homes, livelihoods, livestock, and a profound sense of community disruption.
- [78] Mitchell Shire currently lacks a local mental health provider capable of delivering sustained, community specific mental health services, forcing residents to rely on distant services that may be difficult to access and lack familiarity with local context.
- [79] The absence of embedded, place-based support limits the ability to provide early intervention, continuity of care, and tailored recovery programs that address both individual and collective trauma.
- [80] An embedded, locally based mental health service is essential to building trust and promoting access and inclusion. Outreach or other services lack appropriate connection to community and are substantially less likely to encourage community to access the required support.

**Recommendation XXIV:** State Government establish locally situated mental health services integrated with emergency response and recovery frameworks.

**Appeal funding to local arrangements:**

- [81] In response to the Longwood fires, the State Government established the 2026 Bushfire Appeal to raise funds to support communities across Victoria.
- [82] Centralised or externally managed appeal funds often struggle to respond quickly to the diverse and immediate needs of residents.
- [83] Community often voices concerns about transparency of the distribution of funds as part of Government lead appeals.

- [84] Local administration allows for faster assessment of priorities, ensures funds are directed to where they are most needed, and builds trust within the community that support is both fair and effective.
- [85] It also enables Councils and local committees to work directly with residents, leveraging intimate knowledge of local circumstances, infrastructure, and vulnerable groups.
- [86] Establishment of local appeals could be facilitated by State Government developed and administered governance frameworks.

**Recommendation XXV:** State Government redirect public appeal funds to locally administered relief funds, such as the Strathbogie Relief Fund, to enhance equity, transparency, and responsiveness in supporting affected communities.

#### **Betterment of infrastructure rebuild after an emergency event**

- [87] The restriction of betterment of infrastructure following emergency events remains a significant issue for local government.
- [88] After the October 2022 floods, many councils across Victoria were required to reinstate damaged roads, drainage, signage and associated assets to their pre-event (“like-for-like”) condition to meet funding eligibility criteria.
- [89] This status-quo replacement approach restored functionality but did not address underlying vulnerabilities, meaning that when emergency events occurred, the same assets were again damaged, creating a cycle of repeated loss, disruption and reconstruction.
- [90] Although the impacts of bushfire differ from flood, similar betterment challenges arise in fire-affected areas, including replacement of road surfaces, culverts, guideposts, signage and roadside infrastructure exposed to heat and heavy vehicles undertaking recovery work.
- [91] Opportunities to incorporate more fire-resistant materials, improved drainage, or strengthened road formations are often constrained by funding rules that prioritise reinstatement over resilience.

[92] Enabling practical betterment during reconstruction would reduce long-term costs, improve asset durability and service continuity, and strengthen community resilience to future emergencies across all hazard types.

***Recommendation XXVI:*** State Government embed funded betterment provisions in disaster recovery programs so councils can upgrade damaged infrastructure to more resilient standards rather than like-for-like replacement.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

[93] Mitchell Shire Council's submission highlights a range of challenges and opportunities as a result of the January 2026 summer fires across Victoria.

[94] Council makes the following 26 recommendations and expects that they will be carefully considered by the committee:

- i. That State Government fully fund Council's slashing program for works undertaken on roadsides under the responsibility of Department of Transport.
- ii. That State Government amend the CFA Act 1958 to allow Councils to issue Fire Prevention Notices on all land, including state owned land.
- iii. Develop a new Municipal Emergency Resource Program (MERP) risk-based funding formula.
- iv. Increase the statewide MERP funding allocation.
- v. The State Government should maintain and expand streamlined LGV funding pathways with clear eligibility and immediate post-disaster disbursement to ensure councils can respond and recover rapidly without financial strain.
- vi. That EWSP funding continues to be prioritised to support Council's delivery of emergency water supply and drought relief infrastructure.
- vii. That the State Government provide funding to develop Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre as a Regional Emergency Relief Centre to ensure its future suitability to withstand high volume use.
- viii. Formalising mechanisms to prioritise local businesses in clean-up and recovery programs would enhance community self-reliance, improve the speed and quality of recovery work, and provide lasting economic and social benefits in fire-affected regions.
- ix. Ensure future cleanup programs are announced quickly with clear eligibility criteria, the delay in announcements of clean up places burden on Council to manage waste.
- x. CFA reinstate FARSS funding so that critical infrastructure and works can be delivered.

- xi. That the Emergency Services Volunteers Fund levy be applied at the same rate as the Fire Service Levy, for farmers until at least 2030.
- xii. That the State Government coordinate and fund rapid energy resilience assessments for fire-affected properties to determine suitability for solar and battery installations.
- xiii. That additional financial assistance or subsidy programs be established to support the installation of solar and battery systems for eligible households.
- xiv. That emergency recovery frameworks incorporate distributed renewable energy solutions as part of long-term disaster resilience planning in fire-affected communities.
- xv. Commission the Department of Jobs, Skills Industry and Regions (DJSIR) to undertake a full Economic Impact Assessment of the 2026 Longwood fires.
- xvi. Develop a more streamlined and coordinated system, where all grant information is triaged and communicated through a centralised channel to both councils and affected communities, would improve clarity, efficiency, and equity in the distribution of recovery support.
- xvii. That State Government formally recognise and acknowledge the invaluable contribution of community volunteers and ensure they receive appropriate support, training, and resourcing in future events, strengthening local capacity and resilience in fire affected communities.
- xviii. State Government increases the expiry period for existing use rights for fire-affected properties from 7 years to 10 years to provide residents with adequate time to consider and progress rebuild options.
- xix. State Government provide a subsidy for planning permit application fees associated with Longwood fire rebuilds to reduce financial barriers to recovery.
- xx. State Government fund Councils to deliver a place-based, Council-coordinated and consultant-supported planning assistance model, where residents are directly supported to understand and complete planning and compliance requirements. This model would streamline permit processes, improve rebuild efficiency, reduce delays, and ensure reconstruction outcomes align with safety, environmental and community standards.

- xxi. State Government establish dedicated funding and clear cross-agency responsibility for post-disaster environmental monitoring and rehabilitation to ensure coordinated, whole of landscape-ecosystem recovery.
- xxii. EMV commit to hosting livestream Community Information sessions for all Level 3 incidents.
- xxiii. EMV change evacuation overlay from red to a colour that does not clash with the red catastrophic fire danger rating overlay.
- xxiv. State Government establish locally situated mental health services integrated with emergency response and recovery frameworks.
- xxv. State Government redirect public appeal funds to locally administered relief funds, such as the Strathbogie Relief Fund, to enhance equity, transparency, and responsiveness in supporting affected communities.
- xxvi. State Government embed funded betterment provisions in disaster recovery programs so Councils can upgrade damaged infrastructure to more resilient standards rather than like-for-like replacement.