

# **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria**

Alexandra – Friday 24 April 2026

### **MEMBERS**

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

**Necessary corrections to be notified to  
executive officer of committee**

**WITNESSES**

Cr Damien Gallagher, Mayor,

Livia Bonazzi, Chief Executive Officer, and

Andrew Paxton, Director, Community and Development, Murrindindi Shire Council;

Cr Scott Jeffery, Mayor, and

Rachelle Quattrocchi, Chief Executive Officer (*via videoconference*), Strathbogie Shire Council; and

Cr John Dougall, Mayor, Mitchell Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome, everybody, to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria, coming to you today from the Alexandra shire hall. This is a public hearing for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Victorian Parliament looking into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria. The committee is running a series of hearings. We have received submissions, and we will be providing a report to the Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Can I ask everyone who is with us today to please ensure your mobile phones are switched off or to silent and that background noise is minimised. The proceedings today are being broadcast and the microphones pick up a lot of background noise, so if we can keep that to a minimum, that would be appreciated.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today and pay my respects to elders past and present. I welcome the members of the public gallery and those who are joining us online via the live stream. I remind everyone who is participating or observing today's proceedings to remain respectful of the proceedings and request that the gallery remain silent at all times.

The committee acknowledges the significant impact that the recent fires have had on communities right across Victoria, including the communities in and around Alexandra, and we know that the information that is discussed today may be distressing for some people. A counsellor and members of the CFA wellbeing team are here and available to offer support should anyone require it at any stage, and if you do wish to speak with someone, the committee secretariat can help facilitate that.

For our witnesses, all evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, as you can probably tell, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. Those transcripts will ultimately be made public and published on the committee's website.

With all of that out of the way, I will say welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament. I will ask committee members to introduce themselves and start down the end.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Hello. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, a Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Hi. I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**Melina BATH:** Good morning. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

**John BERGER:** John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

**The CHAIR:** We have got representatives from three local government areas with us today. For the Hansard record, before we get started, I might ask each of you just to introduce yourself. Say your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of. We will start down here.

**Livia BONAZZI:** Livia Bonazzi, CEO, Murrindindi Shire Council.

**Damien GALLAGHER:** Damien Gallagher, Mayor of Murrindindi shire.

**Andrew PAXTON:** Andrew Paxton, Director, Community and Development, Murrindindi shire.

**Scott JEFFERY:** Scott Jeffery, Mayor, Strathbogie Shire Council.

**John DOUGALL:** John Dougall, Mayor, Mitchell Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** And online.

**Rachelle QUATTROCCHI:** Rachelle Quattrocchi, CEO of Strathbogie shire.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. The format of proceedings is pretty straightforward. We will invite you to make an opening statement and then the committee will go into questions. I know there are a lot of people before us at the witness table. I am sure you have all got a long opening statement you would like to make. We do not have an enormous amount of time today because we are trying to fit as many people in as we can. So if you can keep your opening statements as short as possible, we will then have opportunities to ask you questions. It is just that the longer the statements take, the less time we get in questions, so we will just bear that in mind. Damien, I think you are going to kick us off.

**Damien GALLAGHER:** Yes. Thank you, Chair, and Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee members. On behalf of Murrindindi Shire Council, welcome to my home town of Alexandra, the civic heart of Murrindindi shire. I appreciate, Chair and committee, that you have witnessed, and will continue today to witness, firsthand the destructive force of the Longwood bushfire, just as I have learned you did in camera, as it were, with the Fawcett community yesterday. The Longwood bushfire started about 50 kilometres to our north-north-east. It is 15 weeks today since fire raced towards Alexandra. Less than 1 kilometre to our north homes and rural properties were impacted. Around 1 kilometre to our south-west the home of the driver in the Acheron CFA tanker crew I led on the day was razed while he fought to defend his community. Nearby, while I was away, pasture, trees, fencing and other farm infrastructure on my own property were ablaze. This was the largest ever wildfire on private property in Victoria's history, and so I offer my sincere gratitude for your extension of the deadline for submissions to this inquiry.

Chair, this is not a post-mortem. Our community is only taking the first steps to recovery, like the family from Caveat whose home is gone and who reached out to council for support for the very first time last Friday afternoon. The experience is raw, and the distraction of fencing and sifting through rubble will have been an impediment to participation for many in this process. Proportionality of recovery support is our clear and present challenge. By any measure – homes lost, outbuildings destroyed or fencing devastated – Murrindindi shire sustained around 48 per cent of the state's summer impact. Yet in recent recovery funding announcements Murrindindi was awarded 8.3 per cent of recovery funding. It is a similar story for the failure of community and farming support funding. In February the Victorian government announced \$6.9 million in mental health support for bushfire-impacted communities. Try to contemplate my frustration after conveying the story of Murrindindi shire: the 4000-square-kilometre and most-impacted municipality has received zero dollars of that funding. Contemplate my frustration at hearing no response to raising this concern and seeing Alexandra District Health, Yea and District Memorial health, and community and philanthropic funded individuals like Warren Davies, the unbreakable farmer, filling the mental wellbeing gap without recovery support – a gap left by a failure of policy. Murrindindi is on the front line of the disaster and at the back of the queue for funding. Our communities are being retraumatised by the recovery experience. The impasse in the resolution of disaster recovery funding arrangements from previous emergencies has meant that critical community infrastructure has not been repaired or reinstated – almost four years on, in the case of the Breakaway Bridge in Acheron. I could

describe in detail how the community has suffered and homes have been lost to the recent fires, not because of fire behaviour failure, but because of an infrastructure recovery failure in funding. These circumstances must not be permitted to be repeated in Victoria.

Council could speak for hours about the unfunded and unrewarded effort required to justify disaster recovery funding claims for the restoration of critical council assets. Equally, I could share accounts of the longstanding power and telecommunication infrastructure challenges that Murrindindi faces on a good day that caused havoc at the height of the disaster. Macro-economic concerns are just like First World problems relative to some challenges around the family dinner table. Please do not discount intersectionality of disadvantage. I could introduce you to young families in Killingworth who have suffered successive seasons of pasture losses and weed eradication expenses due to floods, endured a protracted drought event and even now are counting their stock, shedding, machinery and fencing losses to bushfire, all within four farming seasons. Add in the challenge of sourcing fertiliser and soaring fuel prices, and it might give context to the depths of despair and desperation for some. For families across Murrindindi very real discussions are being had about whether to take the kids to school or whether to feed them. Our metropolitan cousins have craved justice for our farming communities. They were among the first to extend their sympathies and support. I implore the government to support them and direct modest support towards the farmers who deliver the food and fibre we require.

I dedicate my final words to my community. For these people, these proud Victorians, I ask that you give deep consideration to their stories. To your parliamentary colleagues across the chamber and across party lines, I implore action. Adopt and implement recommendations of this inquiry to surmount policy systems and funding failures. I am the Mayor of a selfless community. I celebrate the courage of those who run towards the flames to put themselves between the danger and their community. The bushfire did not respect local government boundaries, nor did our municipal neighbours, including those beside me now, when it came to caring for our residents and us for theirs. Of course I must recognise the spontaneously mobilised best practice community-led recovery hubs we have witnessed right across our municipality, actioned in the hours after the fire but fuelled by community groups, rural hall committees, man walks and the years of community outreach – long-term invested social capital expended in our community's toughest hour. Special people prepared meals and others offered a shoulder to lean on and to cry on. Neighbours helped one another with fencing and livestock. Individuals managed and sourced the distribution of thousands of hay bales and silage feed, and it was the community who offered their homes to those displaced. Council continues to walk alongside them. Across Murrindindi there are so many heroic individuals who shared their time and considerable expertise for the benefit of their neighbours, but that is what we do here. That is the Murrindindi way. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Scott, do you want to speak on behalf of Strathbogie?

**Scott JEFFERY:** I will. Thank you. Good morning, Chair and members of the inquiry. Thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning. Given time constraints today, my focus will be on the Longwood fire from the perspective of a farmer, CFA volunteer and Mayor. For context, my family have lived in the same location at Tarcombe for over 150 years. I have been in the CFA or other volunteer rescue organisations for more than 30 years.

During this fire I spent the first day and a half at the Avenel CFA and the following few days at our family farm. Since the fire I have spent considerable time in the community hearing firsthand what worked, what did not and where meaningful improvements are needed. This submission is also grounded in those lived experiences. Though there is now green grass and blue skies, we are still living in this disaster and we will be for years to come. On Wednesday 7 January a fire broke out at the Yulong horse stud prior to the Longwood fire. I turned out to that fire with the Avenel CFA along with many other brigades. Radio reports spoke of another fire near Longwood, and shortly we would see it. A landowner near the Longwood fire initiation point had called 000 up to 20 times without being connected, delaying reporting in its crucial early stages. I tried to get redeployed to the Longwood fire but was unsuccessful.

I want to map that the appreciation of risks of a fire in flat country to that of a fire burning adjacent to the Strathbogie Ranges on the north-east side may not be immediately apparent. Sufficient resources were not deployed to this fire in a timely manner. There were other notable preventable failures prior to the fire. Fuel loads along the Hume Freeway were not and are not adequately managed. We must confront the trade-off between cost, environment and human safety, particularly on high-volume roads. Further, infrastructure decisions such as wire barriers without appropriate through access points across all lanes created issues during

firefighting efforts. Avenel CFA was impeded during this fire when the fire changed direction and jumped the freeway. It got away from us, heading towards the Longwood township. Furthermore, impact with the barrier is thought to have started the Longwood fire.

During the fire a deeply concerning issue was the failure to use local knowledge and resources. Water trucks, heavy machinery and experienced community members were underutilised or prevented from accessing the fireground. The ICC was staffed with people from afar who were making decisions based on a map and their best information. Likewise, there were inefficiencies in how CFA and Forest Fire Management resources were deployed, including local CFA captains not being resourced as requested.

The concept of asset protection must also be broadened. Homes are not the only assets at risk. In farming fences, sheds and pasture machinery are all assets. My personal observations showed otherwise. On catastrophic Friday 9 January we received a visit from two CFA tankers and a strike team leader who helped protect a shed. Not a single other emergency responder was seen that day, and we lost power, landline and mobile phone service. We were cut off from the world by road and technology. Between my two brothers, my parents and I, along with two brave helpers, we successfully saved six houses, but we were otherwise completely burnt out and lost almost everything else. It took nearly four weeks for AusNet to re-establish electricity, and nearly two and a half months for Telstra to fix the landline. After the fire residents and suppliers were prevented from accessing their properties because roads had not yet been deemed safe. This lasted for weeks. In many cases, the only thing people had left was some of their livestock in a charred paddock. Government services were also, therefore, ineffective. Ag Vic, as an example, reached our farm on day 8 looking to assess livestock, by which time anything not killed by the fire would have suffered enormously had their owners been absent. Coordination, roles and responsibilities of control agencies must be clarified for a disaster of this scale and duration.

The physical and economic impact of this disaster has not been accurately captured and responded to. Many of the most significant impacts sit with small business, primary producers and their supply chains. An assessment by Regional Development Victoria would inform common evidence-based recovery planning and funding decisions, help target assistance and support a consistent, proportionate response. Underlying this issue is the structural funding inequity faced by small regional councils. For three months now our very reasonable financial asks of state government have been sitting with the ministers, with only the bare basics committed to. We are in the dark about future funding. This fire has changed the landscape, and now we risk having that being made permanent. Our community – our ratepayers – do not have the capacity to fund the recovery and rebuild ourselves.

Finally, we must revisit the policies and communications around staying versus leaving, particularly forced evacuations. I believe with preparation, training and resources it is safe to defend your property. I have not yet spoken to someone who defended their home in this fire and lost it. Think about that. Again, we need to ask who is best placed to make these decisions: state government or local residents? The implications and unintended consequences deserve careful, evidence-based review. In closing, thank you again for the opportunity to contribute. These fires have been a hellish experience for many in our community, but one that has been fought with courage, strength and tenacity. I am proud to represent them. I urge the inquiry to deliver tangible, practical improvements. Our communities deserve to be better prepared for what lies ahead.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Scott. John, do you want to make an opening statement?

**John DOUGALL:** I have not prepared a deliberate one, but I am very happy to make a very short comment. Mitchell shire was not as impacted as both Strathbogie and Murrindindi. We did play a very important role as the regional relief centre at the earliest stages. We received impacted families from across the region, and they operated out of the Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre. We took an entirely joint approach. It was one fire without boundaries, and we did operate really on behalf of and in conjunction with our neighbouring shires.

Seymour in 2022, in 2024 and now in 2026 has faced disasters – a series of them. The best part of these responses inevitably comes back to the crisis management and the people. The people make these responses work and they manage the disaster. The people expect that the government layers, the various authorities, operate in a way that supports them, and they see the friction. They see the challenges. They see the funding limitations. They see the impacts that are affecting and delaying their recovery.

I would really like the committee to reflect on each of the detailed submissions that have been provided, but we have to recognise that the residents that have been impacted need to know that the government is there to help, and the wider community needs to know that the government is taking seriously the opportunities to correct and to fix the way we handle emergency management and emergency recovery, because they fundamentally do the work on the ground but they also are subject to the less desirable outcomes. I think we owe it to the community to make change and to avoid the 2022, 2024 and 2026 experience time and again, because this is impacting our communities.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. Livia, I know you wanted to say something. The committee would like to get on to questions, so if you want to make any brief remarks.

**Livia BONAZZI:** I will make it brief. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, committee. The defining issue before this inquiry is not only the scale of the fire, it is what has followed. Equal funding did not result in equal outcomes. The recovery system treated impact as if it were evenly distributed. It is not. This mismatch is now shaping outcomes on the ground – in the pace of recovery, in the visibility of services and in the widening disparity between communities. Recovery is the point at which we either restore communities or quietly lose them. People compare across municipalities, across services, across time, and when they see that disparity confidence erodes. The deeper consequence is this: underfunded recovery does not just delay rebuilding, it compounds trauma – because people are required to keep retelling their story, waiting for support that arrives unevenly or never arrives. A system that is not proportionate in design becomes retraumatising in delivery.

We entered this fire season already carrying the impact of flood, storms and prolonged disruption. Recovery frameworks assume events occur in isolation. Communities experience them as cumulative, layered and unfinished. Local government sits at the centre of this. We are the coordinating authority for the recovery. At the same time volunteers and community-led hubs have been essential. But community is not a substitute for a system that is properly resourced. The core issue before this committee is not just the fire, it is that resilience is not a funding model. When recovery funding is standardised against unequal impact, the burden shifts onto communities, onto volunteers and onto small rural councils with limited capacity to absorb it. And when that happens, costs do not disappear. They are deferred, amplified and return later at greater expense. Our submission sets out 15 practical, evidence-based recommendations. This inquiry does not lack solutions. What it requires now is implementation.

There is a further reality this inquiry must confront. Local government is a recovery coordinating authority under the Act. This is an operational, legal and continuous responsibility, but this responsibility assumes a system that is resourced to deliver it. Right now that assumption does not hold. In Murrindindi recovery has been carried by a small workforce working sustained 14-hour days week after week – coordinating services, managing infrastructure, supporting communities and filling the gaps where the systems have not reached. This is not a sustainable model for delivery and it is not what the system was designed to rely on. Murrindindi is already a financially constrained rural council, and we are expected to absorb one of the most significant disaster recovery tasks in the state. Council cannot realistically discharge its statutory coordinating role if the funding that underpins it is not proportionate to the task.

Because the consequence of the gap is borne by communities, as CEO of this council I have responsibility not only to deliver recovery but then to ensure it can be delivered safely, lawfully and effectively. Under current settings that assurance is difficult to provide. Unless there is urgent structural correction in how recovery is funded, resourced and supported, we will need to consider whether this function can continue to sit with local government in its current form, because we cannot accept a model where responsibility is assigned without the capacity to fulfil it and where the risk of that gap is carried by the very communities we are here to support. We will continue to stand with our community. The question is whether the system and government will stand with us. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will go to questions. Damien, you mentioned someone reached out just last Friday seeking help for the first time. How common in your experience is it for people to take time to process what has happened to them before they reach out, and how well do the support and recovery systems acknowledge the differences in human reactions to trauma?

**Damien GALLAGHER:** We have been advised by wonderful professionals who have been involved in disaster recovery in events right around the world, and they remind us that we are so well prepared as a nation

for emergency response but we are not so well prepared for recovery. So we know that after successive disaster events – for example, after the 2009 bushfires that were happening just to the south of us here in Murrindindi – 12 years was the average time it took for people to come and reach out for the very first time. So we recognise that recovery is not a journey that will be completed in days or weeks but it is years of recovery, and we are seeing even intergenerational trauma. So our team is very aware of those impacts, of making sure that we will continue to have supports available and of being able to connect to different agencies to provide that support well into the future.

**The CHAIR:** And how well do you think that the programs that are provided and the funding that is provided acknowledge that long – I am not calling it a long tail but the enduring nature of some of that trauma?

**Damien GALLAGHER:** I think that is key to the challenge that we have tried to articulate this morning, which is that the support that we are seeing is not proportionate to the impact that we have seen. We need to very much distinguish between the disaster itself and then the impacts and ideally that those support services would be funded proportionally.

**The CHAIR:** What do you mean?

**Damien GALLAGHER:** Not just for local government but for local health services.

**The CHAIR:** You used this term and the CFA uses the term ‘proportionately’. What do you mean by proportionate funding?

**Damien GALLAGHER:** I mentioned earlier that by any measure – by the number of lives lost, by the number of homes lost, by the number of properties impacted, by the kilometres of fencing – it is \$120 million in fencing on private land that has been impacted in the Murrindindi shire. And yet for that 48, 49 per cent of the impacts, council is experiencing in the latest funding round of recovery 8.3 per cent of funding. The funding that is going around the state is absolutely vital for those communities, but as you can see, the impacts of the disaster here in Murrindindi and to our north in Strathbogie are incredible, and we need to be able to see funding that is commensurate with the impact that our community has sustained.

**The CHAIR:** I mean, the committee has spent the week travelling around the state. We have been in the Otways, we have been in the Wimmera and we have been here. The trauma is significant across Victoria. You are not suggesting that some places should get more than others, are you?

**Damien GALLAGHER:** No. I am thinking that the funding should be proportionate to the impact. So I would take not a cent away from those communities, but we are seeing we have before us a \$105 million recovery challenge for our municipality and so far we have received a fraction of that.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks very much for your presentations and thanks for everything you did during the fires. I know both Scott and Damien were out fighting the fires, and the rest of you showed tremendous leadership to get these communities through it, so we do thank you for that. I am interested to know what worked well in the immediate response and what did not work and if there was any breakdown in coordination of the immediate response locally.

**Damien GALLAGHER:** I think we will hear from some professionals that are involved in the response. We have some of the best incident controllers in the country available in Alexandra, about a kilometre away from here, and they dealt with the initial response. Telecommunications was a big issue on the day. We sit at the end of a single point of failure. Power was lost due to the fire in Yea, about 25 kilometres away. That impacted all the telecommunications for NBN and for mobile telecommunications right throughout our area. That was a real impediment to response. We have provided successive submissions to regional telecommunications infrastructure inquiries. We dusted off that inquiry submission we made in 2024 after the floods, and they all exist. We talk about hardening of telecommunications infrastructure and battery backup, because when we are trying to get alerts to community and they cannot get a text message on their phone and their radio will not work, how do you communicate with that community? That is probably, I think, the biggest challenge that I have witnessed in terms of the response.

**John DOUGALL:** Wendy, I am happy to have a go at that. What worked well in the immediate period? The Mitchell shire in collaboration set up an emergency relief centre within hours of the risk presenting. We hosted a community information session on the Thursday night and on the Saturday, and the session on the Thursday night was vitally important to the broader community's safety. That community meeting on the Thursday night, which was an emergency management led meeting, no doubt saved lives. It provided very good messaging, and it was observed by 600 people in the room. There were 1500 people observing live, but 150,000 people viewed that – the thirst for information at that very initial stage the day before the big weather event was extremely high. So getting information to the right people in the right format was critically important. To me that was a major success. The ability to get all of these support services into one location at the Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre, and to be willing to engage with and understand the needs of all of the impacted people and all of the people who were after information at that point in time, I thought was fantastic. So a big hats off to a range of different stakeholders who just descended upon the location because they knew that is where they needed to be. The community goodwill at that point in time was incredibly good as well. This is a community that is conditioned to having to respond. They know how to do that. I thought that was excellent, and I would have to compliment our Mitchell emergency management team that have had the experience through previous disasters. They were excellent at coordinating with the incident controller, the rest of the community and all of those different authorities and support services that descended upon Seymour in that initial period.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you for appearing today and for your submissions, and also thank you for the work that you have done to support your communities and the work that you continue to do. I know that you have very traumatised communities, and many of you carry that trauma yourselves as well, so I recognise that and thank you for being here.

In the submissions – and it is something we have heard before at other places during these inquiries and actually in other inquiries we have done – you mentioned the challenges with trying to access recovery funding. We have heard that there are often a whole lot of really challenging hoops you have to jump through in terms of burden of proof, and for a small council that ties up enormous amounts of resources and sometimes just makes it impossible – the bars are too high to meet. What would you like to see changed about recovery funding for local government to help you respond better and more effectively? What do you need, and what do we need to change about the systems?

**Livia BONAZZI:** If I may, it does not seem to be a lack of willingness from government to provide funding. I believe there is \$370 million allocated to the summer fires of 2026. We do not believe it is hitting where it is needed the most. In relation to the recovery coordination role for council, we have received just over \$2 million. That is, as the Mayor said, 8 per cent. The announcement came at the last minute. There was no engagement in understanding impact on the ground. Emergency Management Victoria has the information around the preliminary impact assessments across all of the impacted areas. That should inform how the funding lands. We all got one size fits all: \$750,000 from the Council Support Fund, and out of the \$15 million we got \$1.3 million. That is not adequate when we are confronted with almost half the impact of the state over a very dispersed community. Twenty-two localities, farming communities, were impacted. They are dispersed; they cannot travel. So the cost of recovery is much higher. There is no commensurate understanding of where that lands. It also comes as a surprise and is sort of withheld – an announcement is made, but then the guidelines come much later. We would like to get much more up-front engagement and understanding of how that money is to be deployed and where it better lands. On top of that there is also other funding directed to the community, and again, the guidelines are such that the eligibility criteria have left out 50 per cent of our farmers. They are not getting the funding that they require. It is up to us to assess and continue to advocate. Despite the willingness, the system seems constrained and unable to deliver where it is needed.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Did anyone else want to add to that?

**Scott JEFFERY:** I will just see. Rachelle has her hand up there. She might like to talk to that.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Rachelle.

**Rachelle QUATTROCCHI:** I have been patiently waiting for you to look up this way. Hello. How are you? Thank you for the opportunity. I did not get an opportunity to talk in the opening statement – happy to submit that to you if that is helpful.

**The CHAIR:** That would be great.

**Rachelle QUATTROCCHI:** Just on the funding streams, one thing I will add to what Livia has just mentioned as well is probably thinking about a risk-based approach, given it is a small rural shire, the terrain and high-risk environment that we find ourselves within and that we are managing day to day, but also in the instance of a disaster and how this is not looked across in terms of a risk-based approach. I think that needs to be taken into consideration in preparation, not reactivity in a disaster. The models need to be looked at. The frameworks need to be looked at from a risk-based approach. The other thing I would say as well is that recovery is long. The announcements were quick and within the first few weeks, which we really welcomed. However, our understanding in talking to levels of government is that this will not be reviewed. I think that needs to be reviewed over time, because as you go through recovery the needs are identified as you move through them and the issues become apparent. Damien spoke earlier about how some people are only now coming forward and asking for things that they need. I think that also needs to be taken into consideration. The recovery is long, and it needs to be considered.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing and for hosting us today. I am interested in the ‘leave or stay’ question. We heard at Fawcett last night actually that the CFA basically were regularly checking those who decided to stay and that that took time out of their response and other work that they were doing during the fires. Of course we have got higher up in the CFA the research and the evidence around the risk to life when people stay. I just wanted to check: how do you compare the deaths that occurred in, say, 2009 with a position that we should be encouraging people to stay? Maybe the staff first.

**Scott JEFFERY:** I am happy to talk to that. I brought that up. The fact that I see in this particular event and with my significant experience in firefighting and in rescue organisations is that if you have a blanket approach to asking people to stay or leave, it is inconsistent with what we have on the ground. Every individual and every property is unique, and they cannot be responded to with a blanket approach. As I said, in this fire I am yet to speak to someone who stayed to defend who lost their property. All the properties that were lost were unattended, and so when you look at that from a post-fire trauma perspective, it is extremely significant. It is extremely significant from an insurance perspective and an ability to rebuild perspective. As I also said, my family and I successfully defended six houses between four groups of us, and quite safely so, so it is possible. My family has been through this before. Other senior people in the CFA in this district have been through this before and also believe that it is safe to stay and defend, providing the work is done in advance of the fire season, people are adequately trained and experienced and they also have the resources on hand to defend their properties.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Mr Paxton.

**Andrew PAXTON:** I think also that the issue of communications comes in. If you have got timely information, you can make a timely decision. We had people arriving at the height of the fire in Alexandra, leaving Eildon and other locations, and trying to find somewhere to go because they did not know what to do. They had no access to communications. So if you have a failure of communication, how do you make an informed decision? You may have a plan, and your plan is to monitor. If you have no communications, how do you monitor the situation? You do not know. We have all become used to having our phones attached to us and having access to information. When that ceases your whole connection to the world – no radio station, no NBN, no mobile coverage for large parts of the shire for weeks when the fire was still running.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Broad.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you very much for appearing today. As has been said, I know the personal impact that this has had when you are also leading a community, so we appreciate what you have done and continue to do. We have heard from locals that did reach out to council for assistance, and it does seem that the government response is very slow. We heard that people stopped ringing the government 1800 number – they were sort of reaching out. We heard also of people still using bottled water at the time, people needing generators and

needing access to graders to get machinery out, and certainly a huge burden on volunteers. One was 30 hours on a truck and another was 36 days on a truck. I am just wanting to understand the slow-turning wheels. It has been said as well there is no playbook with this. It seems you are going from scratch again each time with a disaster. But what is that DRFA funding assistance? I am interested in hearing your thoughts on that as well. But also Breakaway Bridge – I think you mentioned as well previous damage done to that. And Scott, too, I was wanting to understand from you the local resources, the impact on people and the need for people, plant and equipment just immediately after a disaster. But you could perhaps speak to that first – the Breakaway Bridge.

**Damien GALLAGHER:** Yes. Thank you very much. On 14 October 2022 floodwater came down the Goulburn River at the rate of 38,000 megalitres a day. Now, typical flows around that time of year are about 4000 to 6000 megalitres. The impact of that floodwater caused erosion and hundreds of tons of riverside vegetation to land on the Breakaway Bridge at Acheron, about 5 kilometres south of where we are now. The damming effect caused the river to flow around the bridge, and the river is now 50 per cent wider. This is, I suppose, a case study in failure of disaster recovery funding arrangements, in that we are almost four years on and that bridge has not been repaired. It adds salt to the wounds when I consider that on 9 January, when the fire hit that area, 000 calls were being responded to by – and I was in a crew that followed Forest Fire Management to respond to 000 calls on Hobans Road and met a wall of fire as it crossed the road. The crews were not available to get down there so they did a U-turn at 55 Hobans Road, and the people who were in their homes calling could hear and see that the crews were evacuating. If that Breakaway Bridge had been reinstated, the home next door to mine and the home across the road would likely be still standing, because the crews could have arrived from the south. There were crews on Maroondah Highway that could have been deployed. I think that is for me one of the pressing concerns that we have around disaster recovery funding arrangements – this stand-off, I think, when the funding becomes an issue. It costs assets, and it costs lives, potentially.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. We heard from the communities yesterday that quite a few ratepayers are really frustrated that their rates are not going towards what they had hoped to see from their councils. If the state government came up with the funding that you say would be adequate, where would that money go? How would you spend it?

**Scott JEFFERY:** Rikkie, are you talking rates relief funding?

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** The funding that you are asking for from the government, how would you spend that to give back to the community and make sure that ratepayers are happy?

**Scott JEFFERY:** Strathbogie Shire Council has requested of the state government three years of rate relief. What that would do is offset the cost to ratepayers affected by the fires and still be able to have that funding coming into the council. As you would well know, the small rural and regional councils are in very dire financial times. We have been underfunded for the services and so forth that council has to provide and does provide to the community, so it is effectively just keeping the organisation running and no more.

**Damien GALLAGHER:** I know in terms of Murrindindi's very clear advocacy ask, we are talking about \$22 million to support development of the Alexandra relief centre and community recovery support. We know that the community have mobilised to be able to provide their communities with support in that immediate term, so showers and toilet facilities, telecommunications for the community hubs, and reconstruction of community and tourism assets. We know that the Great Victorian Rail Trail is not considered a critical asset, and so it falls outside of disaster recovery funding arrangements, so we have a \$12 million gap with broken bridges and timber across the Great Victorian Rail Trail. We have incurred direct costs of \$4 million for staffing surge support that other councils support. We have what I suggest is a modest request of \$3 million for betterment work, so not building back assets to the current standard, to like for like, but actually putting a small investment into resolving some issues in the past. I will give you an example of Whanregarwen Road, which was flood impacted in October 2022. We repaired that road. We repaired exactly the same section of road where a flood occurred in October 2023. Now, a small investment would have lifted 800 metres of the road out of the flood plain and resolved that issue forever, so betterment is critical when we talk about recovery.

We also have a huge gap in terms of unfunded administration and organisation costs around recovery of around \$3.2 million and then ineligible infrastructure of an additional \$11 million, so we have a very clear \$105 million request for some basic supports. Then there are other supports like primary production recovery packaging. We have got a list of advocacy requests that we have made around targeted business support for those directly impacted community businesses and enterprises but also those that were outside the fire footprint impacted by road closures. We have clear precedents from previous disaster events about that type of support and of course environmental restoration and the telecommunications infrastructure challenges we have already spoken very clearly about.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Mr Berger.

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for your appearance this morning. My question is in relation to rates as well. During our journey, at Ruffly and Fawcett yesterday there were some questions asked about whether, if a farmer or a resident lost all of their belongings in the fire and were unable to effectively trade, there was any rate relief in terms of their quarterly notice, the yearly notice, or whatever it might be in the mix to give them some relief with it and how they might go about that and getting that information so that they understand, if there is rate relief, how they can access it.

**Livia BONAZZI:** We have advised all of our ratepayers that if they have lost property or homes to put on hold any payment because there will be a re-evaluation process. Therefore, the capital improved value will reduce and their requirement for payment will also be, in quantum, reduced. Also in general, because of the financial crisis and the cost-of-living crisis, we provide payment plans and we have very compassionate ways of dealing with communities. But obviously that is one of the advocacies we have for the state government – to provide the rate relief for all of the impacted property owners, of which there are 1200 in Murrindindi alone.

**John BERGER:** Can I just drill into that –

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, John. Rachelle wanted to jump in.

**Rachelle QUATTROCCHI:** Thank you, and I will keep it very brief. If it is helpful, the four councils involved in the Longwood fire have done some really good advocacy on this. We have actually calculated what that would look like and what the ask would be to the state government, and we can provide that to you as part of the submission hearing, if that is at all possible. The other thing I would say also is there has been some really good work individually on advocacy. Actually Cr Scott Jeffery has with him today a copy of our advocacy document. That actually answers a number of the questions you have asked us here today.

**John BERGER:** Thank you. I just want to drill a little bit further into that communication process. Given that some of the farmers in the region might not have the technology or the skills to understand via a computer or via a phone, how is that messaging getting across to them?

**Livia BONAZZI:** Thank you. That question is a good question, and it goes to the question from Ms Rikkie-Lee about how we spend the money of recovery. Ideally we have recovery hubs where we can support our farmers and our communities face to face. They do not engage with technology. Also we have seen that connectivity is poor. When caseworkers try to reach our impacted most vulnerable people, they cannot get through. It is imperative that we have a presence across the 4000 kilometres of the shire, and we are very grateful for the community-led hubs. If it was not for them, then the disengagement would be even more severe and the mental toll would be even more critical than we have observed.

**John BERGER:** Okay. Who is responsible for managing those hubs, making sure that the information that is available is being disseminated in a proper fashion?

**Livia BONAZZI:** I would like to think the council has a responsibility. As we have put forward to the committee today, we are not funded adequately to do so. We are relying on exhausted community leaders and community members who have week in, week out supported their communities. We provide a presence and we do outreach, but we certainly cannot do that to the extent that is required.

**John BERGER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much. You have raised mental health – \$6.9 million in mental health, and you have got zero funding from that. That is not good enough. You have raised that the early response failed – that was Scott, I think around the response – fuel loads on the sides of the roads and the Hume Highway and the wire rope barriers. We have been hearing this a lot over many years, and I do not think it is being addressed.

I want to focus on farms because this is a mature farming area. Many people have been around and been working for many years. They pay insurance and it might not be enough, because costs are being tightened so they are drawing back. They pay for their house but not their fences. They have got wrecked fences and dead animals. I just want to understand: the government will say it is giving some money for grants et cetera, but what needs to happen in this? This is a driver of your economy too as well as your people. What needs to happen in terms of focus for government on this farming area? Can I go to Scott first and then maybe Damien, if that is all right. I am open.

**Scott JEFFERY:** Thank you – a very well articulated problem that we face. In Strathbogie shire more than half of our economic turnover is from agriculture. It is absolutely the number one business, and if you bring thoroughbred horses into it, it is significantly higher than that. What we have seen with these fires is that there is very little support for our farming community. There is a \$75,000 grant called a grant, but \$10,000 of it is effectively unencumbered and for the other \$65,000 the farmer has to go and purchase something. Firstly, they need to have money. They need to go and buy something and then request reimbursement for that, effectively, which is a very challenging situation. Also, to be able to do that there are criteria, and there are a lot of smaller farmers that are missed, particularly as we have been in drought the last few years. There is a \$75,000 primary production income threshold that a lot of people are not meeting, so smaller lifestyle-type farmers are ineligible. It is a big problem.

**Melina BATH:** And still that off-farm income versus farm income – if the farm income is not greater, then they are not going to get the grant as well. I think that is the case. I will go to Damien. Did you have a comment on that?

**Damien GALLAGHER:** A very similar sort of reliance on agriculture in our economy, and our biggest fear is that we are going to lose farming families. We have got 65- and 75-year-old farmers that are contemplating whether or not to rebuild. We have the same challenge of people falling through the gaps and not being eligible for those at the very high bar. We have had a double whammy, if you like, in that we have encouraged over successive years farming operations to diversify their income, get income off the farm or perhaps even have a side hustle with a bed and breakfast, for example. That has land tax implications, and now it has actually reduced their primary production income, which then makes them ineligible for this type of support. So there are lots of impacts happening.

**Melina BATH:** So what is your recommendation for us to give to government on this?

**Damien GALLAGHER:** Well, Council has put together a very clear plan about a lower bar for entry and a lower package, means tested, for some of the operations that are smaller that could make them eligible, given the lack of proportional income that they are getting from primary production.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. And the other question I have is: at the end of today you will have other things that you wanted to say but you did not have time. My question to you is: could you please send them in to us as a response to us? So it is giving you an open door to write something else and talk to us about this.

**Damien GALLAGHER:** And it also goes without saying that across our farming community, mental health is just absolutely central to making sure that their wellbeing is sustained and that we have those farmers into the future.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you all for coming in today. We really appreciate the time you have taken with both the submissions you have made and the evidence you have given this morning. You will be given a draft copy of the transcript to review before it is finalised. With that, the committee will take a short break and reset for the next witness.

**Witnesses withdrew.**