

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

Lachlan Gales, Group Officer, Wangaratta Group,

Nick Murray, Captain, Upton Hill Brigade,

George Noye, Captain, Ruffy Brigade, and

Chris Lynch, Captain, Alexandra Brigade, Country Fire Authority.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria from the Alexandra shire hall today. We are joined by various representatives from CFA brigades.

All the 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 these hearings is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during these hearings, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same comments, those statements may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All the evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for review prior to its publication on the committee's website.

Welcome, and thanks for joining us today. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will ask members of the committee to introduce themselves.

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

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

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Southern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: For the Hansard record it would greatly assist if you could each state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of. Chris, we will start with you and go down the table.

Chris LYNCH: My name is Chris Lynch, on behalf of the Country Fire Authority as Captain of the Alexandra fire brigade.

George NOYE: My name is George Noye, part of the Country Fire Authority, Ruffy Captain.

Nick MURRAY: My name is Nicholas Murray. I am here on behalf of the CFA and as Captain of the Upton Hill fire brigade.

Lachlan GALES: My name is Lachie Gales. I am here on behalf of the CFA, and I am the Group Officer of the Wangaratta group of brigades.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for joining us today. I will invite you each to make an opening statement. Keep it as tight as you possibly can. Then we will just get into questions after that. I do not know who wants to start, but I am in your hands.

George NOYE: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am here as a local resident, CFA member of 20 years and captain of the Ruffy fire brigade for 10 years. What I am sharing comes from a direct experience on the ground during the Longwood fire. Local weather data from the Ponkeen recorded site had

wind gusts peaking at 104 kilometres an hour on Thursday afternoon. Under those conditions, fire behaviour is driven almost entirely by wind and suppression becomes entirely difficult. In Ruffy we lost a significant portion of our homes. Ten of those belonged to members of my own brigade – firefighters who remained on the fireground protecting others while their homes were being lost. We also lost critical community assets: our Ruffy recreation reserve, the old TC, the school building and the Terip Terip church. These were central to our community, and these losses are felt well beyond the fire itself. Tragically, one life was lost. In conditions like we faced, it is fortunate not more lives were lost. But that does not lessen the impact on our community. During the incident, we lost power to the township and the local phone exchange, leaving Ruffy without reliable communication at a critical point in the response.

Firstly, in relation to prevention, it is believed the fire was caused by a motor vehicle, and this is not an isolated incident. We continue to see repeated ignitions along the same road corridors, often in the same locations, year after year. A key issue with roadside fuel load in many areas, particularly along roads with wire rope barriers, is that vegetation builds up and is not effectively managed. These areas become high-risk ignition zones. From an operational perspective, those same barriers also restrict access for firefighting appliances, making it more difficult to respond quickly and safely to roadside starts. The combination of repeat ignition sources, unmanaged fuels and restricted access is a preventable risk.

Secondly, in relation to early intervention and aerial response, in fire conditions like those we experienced, early suppression is critical. Once a fire establishes under extreme wind, control becomes significantly more difficult and opens a shift to asset protection. There were delays in getting effective aerial resources onto the fire early. The aircraft initially assigned were limited in both capacity and impact to the terrain and the fire behaviour we were facing. Lower capacity helicopters have a role, but in steep country with fast-moving fire, they are not always suitable for a primary initial attack resource. Larger capacity aircraft need to be prioritised early in these conditions to reduce fire spread and overall impact. There was also a missed opportunity around Wallaby Gully. A grader line had been put in on the Wednesday night to secure the flame, reaching nearly halfway around by Thursday morning. Further early work from that line, including burning out, while conditions still allowed, may have reduced the intensity and the run towards Ruffy. The fire still may have broken towards Creightons Creek and Upton Hill under those windy conditions, but the impact to the Ruffy side could have potentially been reduced.

Thirdly, in relation to communication and command on the ground, during the incident we experienced significant communication challenges. CFA communication systems and network connectivity were unreliable, impacting coordination and situational awareness. The mobile command vehicle was limited in its ability to effectively communicate with the incident control centre. As the local brigade captain, I was not contacted by the ICC until days after the fire, despite being on the ground directly impacted. As a result, we were required to source our own Starlink system to establish basic communication capability. Reliable communication and clear command structures are critical for firefighter safety and effective incident management.

In closing, these are not new issues; they are known issues. Addressing them properly will significantly reduce the impact of future fires on communities like ours. Thank you.

Chris LYNCH: Good morning. My name is Chris Lynch, and I am the current Captain of the Alexandra fire brigade. I joined the CFA in 2013, transferred to Alex in 2018 and have held the position of Captain for the last four years. I would like to share with you my experience on the fireground in Longwood. I tell the story so that you might understand how to move forward in helping us move forward.

My first experience on the Longwood fire was on 7 January, a night shift to replace an outgoing crew at 2300 hours. We were given a quick brief from an outgoing crew about their tasking. I worked closely with the strike team leader regarding further tasking. This was difficult as the sector commander seemed either inexperienced or green to the role. We had effective communication with the strike team leader by either the phone or radio on the night. Conditions were inconsistent, making the firefight extremely difficult and it hard to be effective, as it seemed you could put an area fire out and all of a sudden it would come from a different direction.

Tasking later that night seemed ad hoc as communications between the strike team leader and the MCV based at the staging area were either minimal or non-existent. Terrain access made accessing the fire difficult, so we decided in the truck to move to asset protection. This was a decision we carried out for the next couple of days.

Our truck on the night was a new light tanker 2.4C, and it performed exceptionally well, not only for the night shift but the duration of the fire as well.

On Thursday 8 January during the afternoon, the strike team was formed, and the intel had spotted the fire to the Gobur–Kanumbra area. We headed to that area that had potentially been impacted and located the fire in a paddock. We entered the paddock and proceeded to knock down the fire. Shortly after starting this attack, we spotted the fire front moving through the paddocks very quickly and reverted back to a plan of asset protection. FFMV had also joined us on this strike team, and I believe we have an exceptional relationship between both agencies, which made it very easy to work with them a lot, as I know them personally.

Shortly after, we were joined by *Firebird 311*. I could not praise the work they did from that helicopter on the day enough. Clear communication, clear direction and tasking saved numerous houses and sheds in the area under threat. I believe moving forward that aerial support, even if not used for direct water attack but as a spotter, plays a critical role. I found during the duration of the fire it was hard to get exact locations on the fire front when there was a lack of aerial support. CFA and FFMV crews worked hard in the area doing what they could with an erratic fire and unpredictable direction, with both terrain and weather having impact on fire dynamics. Throughout the night we remained in the same area, working hard, protecting properties and doing what we could.

Friday was the day Alexandra came under threat. With my wife and children safely evacuated, I was able to focus my attention on incoming dangers. I left the station early and returned to prepare my own home. I removed the last pieces of debris around the house, moved my stuff away from windows internally and set multiple sprinklers up around the top of the house. With all sprinklers running, the job that I thought I had done well came crashing down as the power went out. Unfortunately I could do no more to my property.

At that time, I put the Captain's hat on and went to work. My job on this day was to protect the town of Alexandra and its critical infrastructure by tasking CFA, FRV and FFMV to particular areas around the town with the assistance of the group and the ICC. Fortunately for us we had practised and trained for this exact event. We had a pretty good idea of what we were going to do. We were not going to stop this fire; we had to move it. With the assistance of the ICC and the Alexandra group, experienced colleagues put firebreaks in. They were implemented around the town, starting the night before and continuing through the morning. Strategic planning and placement of appliances to the firebreaks and utilising FRV on critical infrastructure like nursing homes, hospitals and schools, and with the inclusion of the ICC as well, I felt comfortable we had a good chance of town protection. The use of a big fill at the local pool was all set up and ready to be utilised if required. This big-fill unit had to be borrowed from another brigade, as the Alexandra group does not have one. Moving forward, I believe a big fill in the Alexandra area would be critical.

I found that CFA strike teams came into the area, but there was confusion as to whether the ICC was the staging area or the Alexandra fire station. CFA members felt comfortable at CFA stations. Our auxiliary team under my instruction was to spare no expense in making teams comfortable, making sure they were fed and had necessary equipment, including PPC, before they went on fireground. The auxiliary did an amazing job.

We utilised the command channel 421, being a minimal amount of people, which proved to be invaluable when trying to get to particular people. We used this channel to move critical information so that decisions could be made with confidence. We knew the power outage would affect communication. With any other fire I have been to, it is usually the case. Throughout the fire communication issues continued, so fortunately for us some members had their own portable Starlink so that we could utilise this and overcome the communication issues. It was not a final decision, but it did help a little bit. Alexandra fire brigade utilised social media to push information through to communities. We had proof that this worked and were able to track engagement, with over 1.3 million views over the January period, and key community updates reached over 428,000 people, proving the strength of social media in a catastrophic event.

Multiple community events had taken part prior to this fire, and I think I can say that it made a huge effect on our community, with nearly 85 per cent of our community evacuating or attending the local park as a place of last resort. New mobile tablets were installed, and the FCV did a great job, and I utilised this continuously, especially when it came to setting up trucks on the initial attack. I was able to see gaps and alter tanker positions accordingly.

Once the fire front had come through, it was obvious that our town was hurting. Community needed support, especially those that had sustained total loss. We continue to support our locals with off-the-cuff visits and supply runs. Peer support was starting to make contact and get an idea of affected members, and ensured help was only a phone call away. Fatigue management started to play a big role as members started to feel the brunt. Additional crews stepped up, neighbouring brigades supported and strike teams coming from near and far assisted in lightening the load in the local brigades. I made sure for the health of members that we could accept any offer to help allow crews to rest. I am certainly grateful for the strike teams that assisted during this time.

Moving forward, I would like to see the government look into our ageing fleet of trucks. Fortunately at Alexandra we have newer trucks. However, when I started in my time at Taggerty fire brigade it was on an older truck with exposed cabin on the back, and I think during these fires, especially when we are volunteers – people taking their own time – trucks need to be a priority, as in, this is a safety issue. I also move that the government looks at communication upgrades and looks at extra funding to the CFA to make sure that CFA members, CFA volunteers, can get a help message out if they need it. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. Nick, do you want to go?

Nick MURRAY: Thank you for the opportunity today. Hello. My name is Nicholas Murray, and I am a member of the Upton Hill fire brigade. I have been a member at Upton Hill since 1999 and on the brigade management team all this time. I have been Captain for the last 10 months. During the Longwood fires I spent the majority of my time on a fire truck from 7 pm Wednesday 7 January through to Saturday 10 January at 2 pm. My roles varied from firefighting to crew leader on a truck. On behalf of the Upton Hill community I can honestly say not much went right during the January fires and a lot can be improved on. We felt forgotten because we were not at the head of the fire but rather on a flank. On 7 January my crew and I arrived at the corner of Oak Valley Road and the Hume Freeway for a crew changeover. We were given jobs of burning out if the conditions were favourable. I felt there was a lack of urgency and planning should have been tightened up to allow for a more coordinated approach for preparation for the catastrophic day only 36 hours later. There was a lack of communication about resourcing and a general lack of resourcing.

On that evening of 7 January I was at the point of origin of the fire, the Hume Freeway and Oak Valley Road. We had just four trucks and were lucky a strike team turned up unexpectedly. We had the freeway re-catch fire at 2 am in the morning, and more trucks were called. At 4 am we had a firestorm on Oak Valley Road, and with all the trucks that were still on hand we only lost one house. We changed crews over at 7 am the following morning, Thursday morning, at the Upton Hill fire station. Oak Valley Road was now closed due to trees falling. We had only three trucks on Upton and Tarcombe roads with 20 to 25 houses that needed to be protected. We lost eight in the next 5 hours. We were under-resourced, and crews asked for help but none came.

To help paint a picture of the Upton Hill Brigade area, it is about 7290 hectares in size and has about 75 houses. There is no town, no post office, no shop or community hall. However, 12 homes were lost during the January fires. I recognise it is not possible to have a truck in every driveway, but if we had more than three trucks, it would have made a difference. Our community is devastated. It is a rural community, with sheep, cattle and horse farms, two wineries, numerous vineyards, an olive grove, a cherry orchard and a chicken farm. Thousands and thousands of sheep were lost, vineyards were wiped out and there was no pasture left unburnt. We then had no assistance in the in the next few days while the fire was still burning towards Alex and Bonnie Doon, or even a day or two later. Recovery could have started earlier with help clearing roads as farmers needed to get stockfeed in for surviving stock or get stock out.

On a positive note, I contacted the Shepparton CFA office on Thursday the 8th in the afternoon as our brigade had already been devastated. I also contacted peer support, who wanted to help. We had a meeting on Thursday 15 January to get the community together. Since then we have had peer support attend a number of times along with CFA staff, including deputy chief officer Gavin Thompson, Rohan Taylor, John Macklin and our rock Paul Verbeek. The resilience of the community has been uplifting to help one another and get back on our feet after being knocked down.

I would like to make the point of the two helicopters that went to the Tabilk fire that started only 15 minutes earlier, which were not really needed and could have been redirected to Longwood easily. It needed to go through the air desk in Melbourne and who knows how many other layers of CFA bureaucracy when the pilots

could see the smoke but could not attend. This could have made a difference. Going forward, we need better surveillance on fires, especially in areas where little or no access is available. Drones and helicopters could help do this, keeping fires under local control, as local knowledge is more valuable than anything else and you do not lose sight of the smaller picture, like the Upton Hill community. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Nick. Lachlan, do you want to speak?

Lachlan GALES: Thank you. As I said, I am currently the Group Officer at Wangaratta. I have got significant fireground experience over CFA life since 1986, including every campaign level fire that we have had since 2003. I am also in my operational life endorsed by CFA as a level 3 incident controller and have been accredited with EMV since 2015 and have provided incident leadership in a number of significant fires in that time. Group officers prepare, assemble and deploy the strike teams, which are CFA's core strength. Level 3 controllers ensure their safety and effective use, which is easy to say but harder than it seems. So I bring a perspective which works at both ends, from the brigade level, as you have heard, through to understanding the system – how it works and where it fails.

We have heard today, and I am sure you will hear more in your inquiry, about communication failures. Some of those relate to technologies – radio networks, mobile phone coverage, internet connectivity. All these, as pointed out here today, are vital issues and need to be addressed. But there is a human aspect to these communication failures, which is probably more important to me as I do what I do, at the incident control level particularly. That aspect revolves around a chronic shortage of the right people in the right places doing the right things. In my perspective as a Group Officer and level 3 IC, I see this lack of the correct resource play out in real time often, and we have heard exactly examples of that today already. As a Group Officer I am acutely aware of the deficit I have in my own community in the people available to fill these roles in the way that we need them to be filled.

Across the board CFA lacks depth in numbers for core roles in both the fireground and in IMTs. There are low numbers of sector commanders, low numbers in IMT roles as operations, planning, logistics, you name it. Despite our relatively large workforce, CFA as an agency is particularly under-resourced in these personnel. People become drafted in, all with good intent, but suffer from poor preparation for the role, and subsequently our operations suffer. The experiences that these gentlemen have explained happen all the time. The situation we have inevitably leads to failures and shortcomings at every level of the incident. The current situation we have got sets us up to fail. The training for these roles is increasingly complex and time-consuming and requires exceptional commitment. For some time now the access to the training courses has been very poor. When it is available, the formats are not delivered in a way that helps with volunteer engagement. These are barriers which create circumstances where the communications on the fireground will fail us. It affects every level of incident management and has flow-on impacts into the recovery.

We need to take action to turn this around. It is an urgent issue, and doing so will address a lot of the points that you are going to hear – you have probably heard them already, you have heard them again today and you will keep hearing them. We have to consider what worked in the past and what works for others. We can look back at the government response to the 2009 Black Saturday fires for guidance on how we can respond to what was even then a shortcoming. We can learn from other agencies about how they successfully train and retain volunteers in these more demanding roles. Unless we address the issue of leadership development in a meaningful way, the next parliamentary inquiry will be hearing about these same communications failures again. These failures of leadership and communications on the fireground have catastrophic consequences and drain volunteer morale and engagement. No-one wants that, and our community would expect us to get this right. This inquiry has an opportunity to see that this is addressed now. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Before we go to questions I will just acknowledge in the gallery Annabelle Cleeland, the state Member for Euroa in the Legislative Assembly, is joining us here today.

Lachlan, we have been across the state this week. We were in the Otways and up in the Wimmera and are now over here. We have spoken to a lot of CFA brigades in the last week. This issue of training has come up again and again and again, that the structure of the training is not as conducive to getting new volunteers in or existing volunteers trained up. I am interested in your reflection, if that is your experience, and how you think the training system that the CFA offers could be improved.

Lachlan GALES: There are a couple of aspects to this. I think the training you are referring to in the first instance is probably the basic training, the general firefighter training, and the issues around that. I think with the digital age, we have changed systems. We rely on technology. We rely on websites. There is less personal interaction. Even in joining a brigade now, it is no longer a case of meeting the brigade captain or secretary, filling in a form and then processing it that way; it is a digital system. These systems are very imperfect. The learning management system that CFA has, it is pretty well known and acknowledged that it fails us on a number of levels. These systems are very expensive. They are very expensive to replace, so we persevere with trying to make them work. But we also have got to acknowledge that digital systems do not reach out to everyone in our community. I am a qualified trainer and assessor for the CFA. Part of our training is to make sure people with learning issues, language or numeracy, are catered for. Someone sitting on a website does not necessarily get that care. They are challenged. It is also at a time when to become qualified in any particular role, whether it is the general firefighter right through to the level 3 incident controller, the level of qualification, the amount of courses, the complexity of the path grow and grow. Part of that is because we subscribe to a national standard. Is that appropriate in every instance? Can we change that? It is a very complex subject. I see it as a part of our society as we transition from one kind of life, one kind of communication. But what is happening is that we are losing people along the way, and we are paying for it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is my time. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. We are sitting here in a shire that was the worst impacted shire in the 2009 bushfires, and again this year the worst impacted shire. Many of you would have fought both of those fires. There was a royal commission that made a number of recommendations about how we could improve our response to fires, and a number of those recommendations were about better equipping and supporting our CFA brigades. I am just wondering whether you are any better equipped, supported and enabled than you were in 2009?

George NOYE: Absolutely. For us at Ruffly we have been taking a proactive approach in seeking funding. We have two relatively new trucks. We are applying for an ultralight because of the given terrain for early command and early attack. We have a Rosenbauer big fill on a custom-built trailer that CFA did not want us to build. That increased our capacity from our smaller equipment to be able to fill trucks in triple the time. We still have the small pump. We have our own catering trailer. But a lot of our brigades around us have not had that success and do need funding to bring them up to scratch to be able to protect and support the community.

Wendy LOVELL: So what you are saying is it is spasmodic – some are, some are not.

George NOYE: Yes.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay.

Nick MURRAY: At Upton Hill we are quite a small brigade. We have only got 14 firefighters. We do actually have a new station, since 2009. We have one truck. It is 33 years old. We love it. We do not want to get it replaced, which is really going against what everyone else says, but it is built for our terrain, for rocks, for hills. We find it goes a lot further than some of the newer trucks as we fight fires in our local area. I find we are resourced. There are a few things we could do to the truck, but I feel we have been resourced quite well.

Wendy LOVELL: That is good.

Lachlan GALES: If I may, I would suggest that post 2009 the resourcing was better for a while and then it plateaued, and when you plateau, you start to go backwards.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, absolutely. Thanks. Lachie, you are a highly trained incident controller. We have got Geoff Rowe locally, also very highly trained. We have heard a lot of dissatisfaction with the interaction between brigades and the incident control centre here. We know that people were brought in from New South Wales as incident controllers for here. Why were you not utilised – people who know the brigades, people who know the terrain?

Lachlan GALES: It speaks to my previous point, Wendy, in terms of there is not enough of us. You are right: in district 23 and district 24 there are three volunteer incident controllers, Geoff, me and Cameron at Yackandandah. When these fires erupted, I was fully engaged for three weeks every day dispatching strike

teams. That had to be my priority. There is an issue of numbers, but it comes back to there is also an issue with people being able to navigate the training if they have the aspirations to do the job. So there is a shortage. There is a chronic shortage.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today and for all of the work that you did protecting and supporting your communities, and that you continue to do. I am interested that a couple of you – and I think, Nick, you specifically said this – asked for help and it did not come. Who did you ask for help?

Nick MURRAY: At 4 in the morning when the freeway had already caught fire, we just happened to drive up Oak Valley Road where our brigade area is, further up Oak Valley Road, and I tried to contact the Longwood control point at the rec reserve. I got no answer; I probably tried to contact them three times. And in the end I just put a general message out to any trucks, and trucks arrived, and that is how we only lost one house. There was quite a large fire burning through the area of Oak Valley Road, and as we came out of one of the houses I noticed there were numerous trucks in the area, so they obviously responded. I did not hear them respond, but they turned up and they were all down on the freeway, which is only 3 or 4 or 5 k's away.

George NOYE: At 5:30 in the morning on the Thursday I had not been to sleep, because we should have had a changeover. My crew did a night shift changeover, and we had some crews come in, and with local knowledge of the hills and that we decided to keep them going, otherwise we would not achieve anything and we could have fires jump out and cross roads. I went down to Wallaby Gully, where we established a grader break, and thought that line would have been taken on and possibly burnt out and burnt that bush, which is managed partly by DEECA and some of it is private land, and there was no-one in sight. My local trucks came down at about 7 o'clock and they were like 'Where is everyone?' I said, 'I don't know.' The fire started to build. The wind started to build. We needed to tag on to the end of the containment line if we were going to try and hold it. I think the weather was always going to beat us. We ended up with one strike team for the Ponkeen Creek Road in that sector for asset protection. All the plant and machinery was parked up. I contacted the MCV in Longwood and said I needed plant now urgently. And they said, 'Well, we can't do nothing; we're in changeover mode.' We had to contact one of our own contractors, and he could not get there till 11 o'clock. Thankfully he did, and one grader came up from Keath's that was utilised and saved quite a lot of houses and fodder. But it was too little, too late.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And if you are in those positions, what would you like to see happen? If you have put out a call for help, who should be responsible and how should it work so that you get that responsiveness and support that you need?

George NOYE: Well, obviously, like has been stated, there is a lack of people with the training to run a big incident like that. My people have said, 'Well, why was it handballed from district 22 to Alexandra?' I have been trying to facts-gather as much as I can, and it is simply because district 22 did not have the staff to run that. But then you have an ICC that is so far away from the job, that does not know the local people. We had the MCV down at Longwood and that played a role, but it could not effectively communicate. We need effective communication from the fireground – whether that be another purpose vehicle; we have our FCVs and all that – that has that direct contact with the local knowledge of what is going on.

Nick MURRAY: Can I just say that that bus that was at Longwood was delivered there Wednesday afternoon, maybe early evening. No-one knew how to use it, so it was just a bus. And with regard to the radios, as much as I say 'If they didn't work,' you have got to take into account we are in steep hills. It is erratic. Radio communication cannot go around a hill; it cannot go through hill, and to go around is very difficult. That is why when I called Longwood, maybe they did not hear me – I do not know – and the trucks that were on the freeway could hear me because they were in line of sight.

The CHAIR: Okay. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. Thank you for all the work that you have been doing and that you did on those three or four acute days. I am interested, Chris, in what you said about multiple community preparation events saving lives, and you talked about evacuation. I do not want to put words in your mouth, but can you give me a bit more detail about what that involved in the days leading up, and what was the impact?

Chris LYNCH: Yes. Obviously we did not know the fire was coming, so this was all prior to that. We have a community safety officer that works in our brigade, who is a brigade member, a volunteer, and the CFA was also running the Get Fire Ready campaign, which we jumped on board with and had the opportunity with several local events as well to jump on, for which we took a purpose-built trailer down. We took our trucks down and multiple volunteer fire brigade members to discuss that with the community. We saw that as beneficial. One or two of them were rather large events, so we got really big foot traffic and exposure and person-to-person interactions. We were simply asking the question: ‘What are you going to do if a fire comes?’ And yes, it seemed to be quite effective.

Jacinta ERMACORA: You said that you feel that it saved lives. In relation to leave or stay, was that a part of the education?

Chris LYNCH: We always push the ‘leave’ button. We are in a bit of a situation, which may be very different to these guys, where we have a township of just under 3000 people. They are not all in town, and outside town we have a rather large response area as well, with lots of farms and all that sort of area – cattle, horses. So we knew that when the fire came we could not get out to the broader area – the farmers. This guilt certainly plays a lot in my head, that I had to have tankers and fire personnel to protect the town and critical infrastructure, and then after the fire front had gone through, we could start spreading out. I put my hand up myself that I have one of those properties that was affected. I lost – I am grateful; I still have my house, but not much more. My paddocks, my fences and my freshly cut fodder all disappeared, but I was not prepared to put myself out there and save my house. Just because I am in this position, that is not fair. But I am certainly grateful that the community listened to our plea to leave, and I made that point because I feel that the social media aspect of things is so powerful that this could be extended somehow – I am not sure how, but it reached a lot of people, and I do feel that it had an impact on the community to assist us in moving people out, allowing us to do our job.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. I really appreciate your contribution. I am interested in the radios, because we have heard a bit about that. I understand they were installed last year, and we have heard at other hearings that they worked in Burwood but not necessarily out here. How many firefighters actually experienced communication failures and were forced to rely on their own mobile phones or were uncontactable during the incident?

Chris LYNCH: We certainly did experience and are very familiar with the black spots around Alexandra, so yes, that was when we decided to pump up the Starlink and go on the mobile phone journey, I suppose. The new radios certainly have their positives. They are very good when they work. We are able to track trucks and see personal radios on people. This might benefit us on a structure fire where we might need to know who is inside or who is where. There are benefits there. But certainly in the black spots they were very disappointing, I suppose.

George NOYE: For us, in challenging terrain radios at the best of times are scratchy and we have our black spots. I do recognise that CFA had trialled and tested those Motorola radios extensively. I am a big believer in technology. You can see where the trucks are. The problem was, with the loss of mobile connectivity due to the towers and whatever problem happened there, we could not use the tablet. We could not see where appliances were. We could not communicate on most of the CFA channels because they would not work. So we had to use UHF or send a text message out on WhatsApp to communicate within our own brigade. Days later, when we were back at the station – our landline was never reliable because of lightning strikes, so we went over to an internet system. We lost the exchange, but still the modem that supplies that IP phone connectivity could be through the mobile network. It was down, so we had nothing – no mobile phone reception – within the town. So we had to source a Starlink and set it up so we had basic communication.

Gaelle BROAD: I also want to ask about water access, because we heard from CFA volunteers that they were calling out for more water and being told, ‘You can wait a day for it to be ordered,’ and there were contractors coming and not having the right fittings and trucks having different fittings. I guess there was a lot of time spent refilling. Can you talk to what happened, I guess, and if there is any area for improvement as far as water access goes.

Nick MURRAY: At Upton Hill I experienced, on the Wednesday night, a truck on the fireground – I do not know if the shire brought it in or they just came in. It had no fittings to fit a CFA truck. We had to fill it in through the top, which is very slow. At our station we have a tank for fire use. It is only 9000 litres. That is four truckloads, and that ran out early Thursday morning. We have since sourced a tank, and we are trying to get it upgraded to a 50,000-litre tank, which the fire station can support. Yes, water was a premium. On that day when we lost those eight houses, the trucks were fighting to find water. I know the Upton Hill truck had no suction hoses left on it because they were with our quick fill down in Oak Valley Road, which we could not access, so we had to rely on other trucks and their suction hoses to get water.

Lachlan GALES: There are some positive developments around water. Water across the state is an issue and it is going to become a worse issue, but we did things this year and we are doing other things with vehicles that will improve it, if we can continue to fund it. This year, on a one-off year, funding for bulk water tankers was provided to the CFA and prepositioned around the state. There was one at Wangaratta and it was used very effectively, and if it is not there next year we will miss it. We need it.

The other aspect is the changing nature of our vehicle fleet. CFA came out with a build of ultra heavy tankers. A lot of them went out to the west part of the state, and they are very effective. We have got two in the northern part of the state here, one at Browns Plains and one at Wangaratta North. They are extremely effective. They bring 9000 litres of water, and they give us flexibility and give us an operational efficiency that we have not previously had. We need to look at that kind of innovation and address the water shortage that way. But certainly the funding of those bulk water tankers that we had this year needs to continue.

The CHAIR: All right. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. We have heard that local knowledge is imperative within the CFA, but there are a lot of people who cannot utilise that knowledge in higher leadership roles. We have heard from other districts that they are ineligible to apply for them. Are you finding that is an issue here?

Lachlan GALES: I am a local, and I undertake level 3 incident control. My motivation to do that is to bring local knowledge into incident control teams, to bring a local's perspective even when I am working away into that. There are no formal barriers that I know of that prevented me having that role. The barriers are around achieving the qualifications and being supported through that role to navigate the pathway and get there. The way forward is to increase the number of experienced volunteers in these incident management roles. They have been out there. They understand what it is like. The communication failures you are hearing described here – I have lived them. I know how to fix them, and that is to bring more volunteers with experience into the roles.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: You are all quiet. All right. I will ask the next question. We have talked a bit about communication. What communication systems are you screaming for in the CFA that have not been put in place yet that would make a difference?

George NOYE: For us up in the hills it is Starlink on the trucks. We approached CFA a while ago, being that firefighters over the border in New South Wales and other states have been utilising it in different agencies. It is proven; it is reliable. But we have been given a block, that no, we cannot put that on the truck. It has got to be approved. I have seen, obviously, the benefit of that. We will have to purchase that ourselves and still go through the channels to fit that, but that will enable us mobile coverage to utilise the tablet to its full potential and that security.

Chris LYNCH: We noticed that the issue was prominent coming into it, so we had a Starlink on stand-by. Since then, since the fires have gone on, the Alexandra group have purchased five Starlinks.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: How much do they cost?

Chris LYNCH: I know they were several grand to get the set-up, including the brackets and all that sort of stuff to put on – ballpark five grand to do that whole set-up for five different units. Our intention is to put it on our fire command vehicles, our FCVs, which, for those that do not know, generally would have a strike team or a sector commander in them to assist running the job, so at least as a minimum our IC, incident controller, or on-ground management have communication of some kind. We went and purchased them ourselves and will at the moment be paying the bill out of brigade funds, which in turn is community money. I was not prepared to

use that as an excuse for firefighter safety, so we went ahead and did it. However, I do realise that there are brigades that are not as financial as the Alexandra brigade that would struggle with that.

Lachlan GALES: There are interstate examples of the use of things like Starlink. I was part of an incident management team in Rockhampton dealing with a fire in the Carnarvon Gorge 500 kilometres away. We did that with the vehicles having temporary fitment of Starlink communications.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for your attendance this morning. I am interested to get a feel for the Get Fire Ready events that have occurred around the district and how they have been attended, or if there was a lack of attendance with them. The reason why I am asking that is that all three events that we have investigated this week – the Otways being a lightning strike, the Wimmera being a power pole failure and the Longwood one being an accident on the side of the road – were events that you could not suspect were going to happen in your wildest dreams but did happen. How do people get to those events on the chance that there is going to be an event in time and educate them as to what they should be ready to do?

Lachlan GALES: I can comment on the Get Fire Ready events in the Wangaratta area. They reinvigorated brigades into staging community events. Our community – unfortunately I think it is pretty widespread – suffers from not everyone being as engaged in this subject as they ought to be. It is a constant battle for our community safety people to get enthusiasm from the public around these things. The Get Fire Ready events, enervated brigades, and that flowed through. They got an elevated response. It is still not the response we need – we need more people engaged in that – but it was a positive thing.

John BERGER: Are there any recommendations that you could make to the committee as to how we could bring that more to the forefront to get people more engaged in these events?

Lachlan GALES: Well, it is difficult, because if people are not motivated to attend already, having experienced a summer like we have experienced, how do you motivate them? It is difficult. I think it is an issue of marketing and promotion firstly, but supporting the brigades financially to stage these events made a big difference to them. A lot of these brigades are not flush with funds, and a little bit of money went a long way. So there is a multiplying effect to giving volunteers a small pile of money. They will make the most of it, and the Get Fire Ready events were a case of that.

John BERGER: Lachie, you mentioned leadership development. I would think that, just using Alexandra for example, there would be quite a number of people that have got some skills that would be very well utilised, whether it be leadership, communication or any of those types of skills. How can you attract those who do not want to necessarily be operational on the ground fighting the fire but in the background, lending support?

Lachlan GALES: CFA is currently undergoing a review of its volunteering model, and there are aspects of that that will help. Part of it, to attract people with particular skill sets, is about making the pathway easy for them to do that. There are people that would work in, say, a logistical role in an incident management team, but as a CFA volunteer they have had to do the basic training as a firefighter on the tanker to start the pathway. They are not interested in attending road accidents or grass fires, but they have a skill set, and we need to put them to work where we need them. We have some issues with our model of volunteering that are currently being discussed and reviewed, but that would go a long way, if we could come up with a pathway for people to contribute in another way and bring their existing skill sets. The other part about the IMT development that happens for people that do not have those skill sets is that if they can take part and do the training and get engaged, they end up better in their workplace. There is a quid pro quo to that.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much, gentlemen and all of the people who you work with in this incredible and very emotional time. You are being both professional and you are being affected personally, so I want to thank you for that. Yesterday at Ruffy we heard that the volunteers were very frustrated – and it was collective;

it was not just Ruffy CFA volunteers. They requested from ICC machinery. They said, 'Please come and give us more graders, more hard plant equipment, so we can help to put containment lines in and different things,' but it was not released. Do you have any understanding as to why that was refused? You can take it on notice if you do not.

George NOYE: There is a layer of authority it has got to go through. I know on some sectors plant was requested and denied because they did not want to put a containment line in there because the rehabilitation aspect has been a common –

Melina BATH: Sorry, what was that?

George NOYE: The rehabilitation aspect. When we put a mineral earth control line in, there is a cost associated to re-establish that. But there has got to be a balance of containing the fire, the protection of life and property and putting those lines in. It has been mentioned in other areas looking outside the traditional equipment we use – the speed till and tractors, which is a one-pass piece of equipment that does not require any re-establishment. We had fires back in 2014 –

Melina BATH: George, I am really sorry. What you are saying is super important, but I just want to go back. Was it said, 'We can't give you these pieces of equipment because the recovery or the post rehabilitation might cost something,' or whatever? Is that what your understanding is around that?

George NOYE: That is what I thought –

Melina BATH: The explanation was.

George NOYE: They were hesitant of sending that plant. I requested plant but was not specifically told it was denied, just that we had no operators for it.

Melina BATH: We were told yesterday that some of the local volunteers actually rang up the next-door neighbour three over and said, 'You've got some equipment. Could you bring it here?' And they did. So you internally, I guess, within the small sector tried to find that plant equipment to help you fight those fires, separate to ICC.

George NOYE: Well, if we have got to find the equipment, by any means we will, but technically that is supposed to run through the ICC to be approved for then the recovery later on.

Melina BATH: And I want to ask about MCV. Who was responsible for dumping it there and then leaving? Then yesterday they also said that there were volunteers operating this. I think the quote was something like, 'There was a farmer operating this piece of machinery' – thank God that farmer was there – 'but they didn't have the skills.' So I need to understand, and I believe we should understand, who puts equipment there that is high-tech and does not actually have the responsibility up the food chain to leave someone there to operate it? I find that amazing, and I do not find it fair for you volunteers trying to protect your communities to have these impediments along the way. My time is up. If you have any other communication that you would like to make to this committee on that, we would welcome that.

The CHAIR: We really appreciate the time you have taken today to come and give us this evidence and all the work that you have been doing for so many years in protecting the communities in this part of the world. You will be given a draft version of the transcript to review. With that, the committee will take a short break.

Witnesses withdrew.