

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Colac – Tuesday 21 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 Phil Howard, Deputy Mayor, and

Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's public hearing into the Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria. The Environment and Planning Committee is an all-party committee of the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament looking into the 2026 summer fires. We will be providing a report to the Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Can everyone participating or watching in the room today please ensure your mobile phones have been switched to silent, and just for the benefit of the broadcast, can we ensure that background noise is minimised.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we meet on here today and paying my respects to their elders past and present. I welcome members of the public joining us in the gallery today or joining us online. I remind all those participating in today's proceedings to please be respectful of each other and the proceedings, and I ask the gallery to remain silent at all times.

We acknowledge that the fires here in the Otways but also around Victoria have had a significant impact on many communities and that some of the information that may be discussed today by witnesses may be distressing for some people. For those of us who are here in Colac, there is a counsellor and a member of the CFA wellbeing team available to offer support. Please advise the committee secretariat if you would like to talk to someone.

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 today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearings, 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, as you can tell, is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for review. Following the hearings, all of the transcripts from today will be made public on the committee's website.

Welcome. Now that I have got all of that out of the way, my name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the upper house of the Victorian Parliament. I will ask the committee members to introduce themselves. We might start down the end of the table.

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

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

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

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, also a Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region. Nice to see you.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria Region as well.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: For the Hansard record, it would assist us if you both could state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Andrew TENNI: My name is Andrew Tenni. I am the Chief Executive Officer for the Colac Otway shire.

Phil HOWARD: Phil Howard. I am the Deputy Mayor of the Colac Otway shire.

The CHAIR: Phil and Andrew, thanks so much for joining us today. In these proceedings – you may be familiar with the format – we will give you a chance to do an opening statement and then we will ask questions. I will hand it over to you.

Andrew TENNI: Great. Thank you, and thanks for the opportunity to appear today. In early January 2026 Victoria was under statewide total fire ban conditions and regional fire-risk ratings were catastrophic as temperatures surged and winds strengthened. Friday 9 January was declared a catastrophic weather day for the region. On that day a band of dry lightning crossed late in the afternoon. We were actually sitting on the back deck watching the lightning crack across the sky. It was going vertical right throughout the night. A number of strikes hit the ground and ignited multiple bushfires across the region.

A brief chronology from there: on 10 January, emergency warnings were issued for the Carlisle River area as uncontained fire activity expanded in forested and agricultural zones. As luck would have it, on 15 January a flood event happened on the coast that complicated things again. On 24 January the Carlisle River fire breached containment lines. On 25 and 26 January authorities urged pre-emptive evacuation of over 1000 homes and properties in the Otways. On 27 January, with a severe wind change, the fire surged. Asset protection intensified around Gellibrand, and large-scale aerial and ground operations continued. On 28 and 29 January impact assessment started to confirm structural losses around Gellibrand as the immediate fire threat reduced. Considering the ferocity of the fires at their peak, coupled with the freak flood event, it was astounding that there was no loss of human life and, compared to other regions throughout the state, relatively small numbers of structure destruction.

Fire operations and council's role – the Colac Showgrounds served as a primary emergency relief centre for displaced residents. The ERC was stood up twice over January. The first occasion was on 10 January, and it remained operational for a couple of days. This provided a good test on a smaller scale. When the ERC was opened again, after the fire breached containment lines on 24 January, the fire behaviour and forecast conditions suggested it was going to be open for some time. In order to staff the centre relief was sought from multiple councils around us, and we thank them for their help. The facilities at the showgrounds enabled the ability for people to stay in relative comfort in their caravans and tents as well as other structures. It also provided capacity for them to bring their pets of all shapes and sizes – so at peak occupancy we had about 180 people, 12 horses, 19 chickens, four ducks, 20 dogs, 16 cats and two guinea pigs. The ability to be able to securely transport and house pets and animals was critical to people's decision to leave early. During the initial period of the Carlisle River fire council was asked to contribute heavy plant to assist in the creation of containment lines. In response, three graders, excavators, a front-end loader and water tankers, along with staff, were deployed to support those containment activities. These activities contributed in great measure to the reduced impacts when the fire breached the containment lines on 24 January.

The air response – aircraft played a critical role in fighting the fires and in particular securing assets and vulnerable towns. Colac airfield was used as the base for aircraft used throughout the event. Around 29 different aircraft were housed at different times at the airfield over the period up to February. Over 950 hours were flown, with more than 400 hours of firebombing and 356 hours of air attack supervision.

The warnings – the primary source of information was the VicEmergency app. Everyone was advised to monitor the situation through the app. For the most part this was effective. However, at times the messaging became somewhat confusing. There are currently 14 different combinations of action statements and warning levels through the app. There were points where the polygons started to overlap. That meant that areas were subject to multiple warnings: 'Watch and act – prepare to leave' overlapping with 'Watch and act – leave now'. This led to cracks in the trust residents were placing in the notifications through the VicEmergency app. One of the major limitations that was identified for the app by many was the ability to see road closures overlaid with the fire-affected areas. That made it difficult for residents to leave safely, check on neighbours or to return to their property safely. Community information sessions and the community newsletter played a critical role in providing more detailed and confident information that was easy to follow.

Our recommendations – through the submission we have made 16 recommendations. The key recommendations are, one, a renewed focus on the clearing and maintenance of fire tracks and firebreaks, particularly in thick bushland areas, as part of a regular program of preparation works, and this includes ensuring the appropriate maintenance of Crown land during the winter months; an upgrade of the Colac airfield to provide a stronger regional capability in terms of aviation and emergency rapid response operations as part of

DEECA's emergency planning and rapid response requirements – we have arrangements in place with DEECA at the moment, and the recommendation is to expand that and upgrade that; and an upgrade of the ERC capabilities at Colac Showgrounds. The ERC was a vital part of the response. The ability to accommodate animals and livestock made the decision for many people in the community to leave much easier. Again, properly equipped, this could be a regional response for the whole area. The incident control centre in Colac, a dedicated and upgraded ICC in Colac to provide a regional response to events as they happen – having the ICC located in town provided the ability to manage the event a lot more effectively. And funding for council to make heavy plant fire ready on the back of making heavy plant available to assist in events such as these – councils should be funded to ensure that some plant is equipped and ready to be able to assist in a response capacity, particularly at short notice. This would include making sure the council has the funding beforehand to purchase and have available suitable protective equipment and training so council staff are appropriately ready to assist when called upon as part of the response.

Acknowledgements – the Colac Otway shire acknowledges the outstanding efforts of the CFA, our local brigades; Forest Fire Management Victoria; Emergency Recovery Victoria; the Victorian State Emergency Service; the Department of Transport and Planning; as well as Victoria Police. Locally, we thank our community groups and the many volunteers who worked tirelessly throughout the January 2026 fires for their help and support. Thanks also to our dedicated staff for their tireless efforts. It was 9 January. It was still Christmas holidays, and we also went through the long weekend of Australia Day. Many staff came back off leave from family commitments and other things to help be part of council's response to such a catastrophic event. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Phil, did you want to say anything?

Phil HOWARD: I just support everything that Andrew has said from a from a local perspective. The communication from Apollo Bay – Apollo Bay was probably one of the safer areas when all this was happening, but the communication that some people had was that Apollo Bay was going to be evacuated as well, and of course we suffered a loss in tourism and travel down in the coastal areas. So communication is one we have really got to have a look at – how that works – because people were setting up their own WhatsApp as well to try to get information off local people in different areas. But I also support that, being small rural councils or medium councils, we need funding probably up-front to make sure our equipment is ready to go straightaway but also some of the provisions for local people to stay in accommodation or to have supplies ready when they have evacuated their houses. I think it would be good if councils were funded some money up-front in the short term so our cash flow and our budgets are not greatly affected.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to questions. Yesterday the committee did a tour through the firegrounds. We stopped at Carlisle River and we stopped at Gellibrand and had a chat to the CFA captain in Gellibrand. He said that in his 20 years in the brigade, this January was the worst he had seen. I am just interested in your perspective on how January was compared to other emergency events you have had to deal with in the last 20 or so years.

Andrew TENNI: I have been in Colac for three years. We have had some minor fires around the place. The preparation and the warnings in the lead-up to January, so through November and December, were 'These are the worst conditions that we have seen. Everyone be fire ready and everyone be prepared.' But to see the fires kick off and spread at the pace and the intensity they did was something that – it is Black Saturday stuff again. And then getting into the Otways and talking to the incident control centre about the fact that the terrain, the topography, was making it even harder to be able to manage, that sent some real nervous messages throughout the district. But then when the app started to expand, and quickly – and I understand that emergency services have to plan for the worst-case scenario and be prepared, but when the line got almost up to the highway, that really brought home how severe and how fast the fires were moving. I have never seen anything like that, ever.

Phil HOWARD: From my perspective, I have only been in the district for seven years, so I have seen a couple of emergency events, but I think what is happening now is with everyone's social media, they have got their phones and everything. I think the visual impact that people had from other people taking pictures of the fire really caused some angst. And I think the road closures was another one, where people then feared that the Great Ocean Road would be cut off in all directions. How do they get out if the local roads are cut off and the main roads are cut off too? So it probably comes back to us getting overloaded with information, but where is the source of truth that people can go to? I think that is a big issue.

The CHAIR: It is a really interesting point. You raised the point about information sources. How do you think we deal with or make recommendations about providing people with more certainty about where they should go for information? Obviously the VicEmergency app is where people are directed to, largely, but how do you think we deal with the emergence of alternative sources of information and their impact?

Phil HOWARD: From my perspective, talking to some of the locals, it is probably more about education on how to use the app. You know, they download it, but then there is no real training on how to actually quickly go and read the information or interpret the information. We had the lead-up – there was a bit of criticism about the upgrade to the BOM app. And of course with that negativity about that, then I think some people were confused about sourcing that information off the relevant apps. The local radio stations were good. But again, when you have so much information coming from so many different sources, I do not know how you educate people to go to the right one and learn to interpret it. I do not know what you think, Andrew.

Andrew TENNI: I think one of the things that we put in place three or four days into the event was community meetings, and I think they are critical for people coming in and asking us the questions and getting the right information. In view of not getting the right information, people were standing up their own local WhatsApp groups, and that was really dangerous, because they were saying, ‘Oh, I just went past McDonalds Road; that’s open.’ And we were saying, ‘Well, no, don’t travel down the roads.’ There were warnings that fires had started out at that location. So those community meetings, probably more regularly, where the incident controller, we, DTP and others can come and give the information firsthand, I think are critical. Out of the ERC I was giving stand-up daily briefings to people, and they walked away and they said, ‘Fine. Thanks. Now we know; that’s good.’ And so then they were putting it into media. So I think getting out before the community as soon as possible and giving the information from a central location is critical to managing the messaging.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Can I just ask: where did you advertise your community meetings? Because I know during the flood inquiry we heard about the emergency app being confusing, as you said, but also the lack of knowledge about where community meetings were happening. How did you advertise those?

Andrew TENNI: We went through our local community groups. We had the local CFA, then we also went through our social media, the local radio station – they were stood up within two days. It had to be really quick to get the information out there. So we just flooded the social media and our website and everything else as quickly as we could with locations, times –

Wendy LOVELL: Yes. I am interested in hearing from you how we can improve that VicEmergency app as the one source of truth, because what we heard in our flood inquiry – this is our first bushfire inquiry, so that is why I keep referring to the floods – was that people were confused by the VicEmergency app. They did not know where to look for information in it, and it just does not seem to be clear enough as the one source of truth. So then you have, as you said, community groups starting WhatsApps and starting social media pages. I have even seen members of Parliament trying to post every message, and that is really dangerous, because you only need to miss one and somebody is not informed. How would you improve the VicEmergency app?

Andrew TENNI: There are probably people that can speak with a lot more authority around it, but from what we understand, the local information is sent in centrally to Melbourne, and then Melbourne makes some of the decisions about how that is represented through the app. And so a lot of the local information was that the fire was in a certain area and it was behaving in certain ways, but then that was interpreted differently. As I said earlier, a worst-case scenario was then presented back from Melbourne through the app – I think it was on 27 January, and I have included it in the submission – where all of a sudden the impacted area exploded from west of Lavers Hill right down to Anglesea, and everyone just went, ‘What does this mean? What’s going on here? Is this moving so fast that it’s out of control?’ But the reality was and the information we were getting was that it was really well contained – well, not well contained, but the fire area was still around that Gellibrand area. It could be held there; they were just waiting till the wind dissipated late in the day. And as you saw, at the end of the day, where the fireground went to did not really extend much further past that area of 27 and 28 January. It certainly did not go anywhere as far east as Anglesea. So I think having the capacity to be able to make those decisions, get that information locally and represent that locally on the app would be a big help to then controlling what the messaging looks like.

Phil HOWARD: If I can give just one more on that, just from a user, one of the things that did work out really well in our shire was that councillors – as you said, members of Parliament were trying to do the right thing. Well, sometimes councillors can want to do the right thing but they mix the messages up too. But our set of councillors were quite good and not confusing the message and just staying –

Wendy LOVELL: Yes, but if councillors start doing it – and members of Parliament – there is not the one source of truth. We want people going to the one place.

Phil HOWARD: But having the app myself down at Apollo Bay, every time it pings – it was pinging every couple of minutes, and then it was confusing which ping you were going to go to. Was that the current information? I think from my point of view, if you had every 15 minutes in these situations on that app a bit of a summary of what is happening, rather than having to go to every ping that you got and then the little symbol of the bushfire and the road closures, a summary every 15 minutes or 10 minutes might have been –

Wendy LOVELL: And perhaps community meetings listed on that app as well?

Phil HOWARD: Yes.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. I was lucky enough to come down and see some of the response in action, and it was amazing to see how well coordinated it was at the time. You mentioned that you had some time in terms of lead-in with preparation. Did you feel there was anything more that could have assisted you with that preparation, knowing that we were potentially in for a difficult fire season?

Andrew TENNI: Thanks for coming down and dropping in and checking in on us throughout January. It was much appreciated. I do not think we could have done much more in the preparation. I think with the CFA and others in their messaging, their training, their preparation and their discussions with us, we were well prepared for what potentially could happen. I think the work that we did with the local communities – they had their own local emergency management plans in place. We had contacts in each of the towns and that worked really well. Again, coming back to that one source of truth, rather than them trying to work it all out for themselves, they were contacting us and we were in contact with them, so all that preparation worked really well. We worked with the agricultural and pastoral society on the set-up of the ERC at the showgrounds. It was the first time we have ever done that, and that held us in really good stead. I think all the preparation was all that we could do. I think the clearing of the ground was still an issue. We knew for two years that they were the driest conditions we have ever seen, but there was still a lot of fuel on the ground. A lot of slashing had not been done along the roadsides and things, and so that was part of the issue and the fear leading into January. But who could have foreseen the conditions and the circumstance that happened on the 9th with lightning hitting the ground in so many locations? We are so lucky that more did not get away. The CFA did a fantastic job on the Friday night putting out a lot of the spot fires. They were all around the district, and it just got deep into the Otways.

Phil HOWARD: From my point of view – and I think we mentioned it in our submission – it is about making sure that our assets to fight the fires or emergencies are up to scratch. I think Andrew mentioned about the airfield. I think the aerial bombing is a huge part of it, and it also gives the community some real confidence that there is protection of assets and life. But we have got to make sure that the airfield is up to standard and the assets that support all our firefighters have been appropriately funded.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You mentioned when I was down here that often the immediate response is good from other levels of government, and the community comes together and council is able and given immediate resources to respond, but it is in the weeks and months down the track where it can get difficult because everyone moves on and forgets about what had happened but there are still ongoing impacts. What has it been like down here in terms of that slightly longer term recovery?

Andrew TENNI: I think the recovery has been good. We are still only a couple of months into the recovery process. Again, structure loss was relatively low around the place. We lost 200 kilometres of fencing and things like that. The recovery is going well. I think the support that has been provided from Regional Development Victoria, Agriculture Victoria and others has been good, but the test will come over the next four to six months.

The big issue, as Cr Howard explained, is that we are a region that is dependent on tourism, and we have had two major events that have meant that people have cancelled bookings or not come into the region, and we are suffering significant economic losses. We have worked with and we have been asking Visit Victoria and others to help us run campaigns to get people back in the region. I think there is still a lot of trepidation about coming back into the region. Warrnambool and Portland have done fantastically over January and February, which suggests that people have just kept going down the highway, so we need them back in this region. That support needs to come in the next four to six months to get people in, convince them that it is safe and get them back into particularly Wye River and Kennett River and those smaller hamlet towns.

Phil HOWARD: Can I just add to that too. One of the crucial things, talking to some local people who have been affected by the bushfires and the floods, is the mental health services. We need to make sure of that, because there is always talk about regional areas not having enough support for that. I think some of the people are feeling the effects. The rush is there when the emergency is happening, but it is that time after – ‘Am I supported or am I not?’ I think we have got to be very wary of services regarding mental health as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. I am hearing the source of socials and their self-perpetuating inaccuracies are kind of cutting across the clarity of emergency services information, the complexity of the apps when there are multiple firegrounds, the road closures – it was hard to get out, so they were quickly closed by the sound of what you are saying – and the tourism impacts and preparedness. I grew up in Simpson, and I have been in the Otways all my life – mostly as a visitor, I suppose. We happened to be there. I was out shopping here in Colac and saw the messaging. I think tourists want to show courtesy by not coming and being a burden too early. It is probably a great suggestion to have a promotion campaign, because I think there is that element of it as well as their own fear.

I wanted to ask about the communications infrastructure, which strikes me as one of the high-risk things. We saw a Telstra tower at Carlisle River yesterday that does not have, I understand, any backup power. Loss of power means loss of communications. What is your feedback on that?

Andrew TENNI: There was a loss of power. I think there were over 2000 properties that were affected by that. We do need rapid response crews, and I understand that at the height of the fire it can be hard to get response crews in there. We do need to be able to have that surge capacity – Powercor and others to be able to fix that up. We spoke about messaging. Well, if there is no power out there, they cannot charge their phones and other things that are giving them the information.

Jacinta ERMACORA: The app will not work.

Andrew TENNI: That is right. That is critical. Even now today it is astounding that you are driving through the Otways and there are still black spots and dead spots and things. People in those areas have very sporadic access to internet and connection generally. All those things need to be fixed up. We should not have black spots these days with the technology around. I think the firefighters were trying to shore up the assets as the fire spread. But you are not going to be able to do it every time, so you need that capacity to be able to get it up and running so that people are then connected into what is going on generally.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Do you have a sense that the telecommunications had backup plans, like generators, to quickly get things back up and running?

Andrew TENNI: I think there are two generators in the region. I think there need to be a lot more. I think one is in Apollo Bay – I cannot remember offhand; it is in the submission where the other one is. But there needs to be a lot more, particularly for those people that are in those locations between the coast and the highway. We cannot forget about those people.

Phil HOWARD: Some feedback from local people is if they could source generators in their time of need – I do not know how you do that. A lot of businesses cannot afford to just purchase large generators and have them ready to go. I do not know if there is a chance that you could have portable generators ready to help people in need.

Jacinta ERMACORA: But perhaps Telstra could afford that.

Phil HOWARD: Yes. True.

The CHAIR: Your time is done. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you for being here today. We very much appreciate it. On your recommendations, one of them speaks to firebreaks, fire tracks and a renewed focus on maintenance on Crown land. What do you see as being a critical thing that the council has observed, living and being in your community? In terms of either prescribed burns or roadside vegetation removal, what are some things that you think need to happen that are not happening now, have you been able to advocate for them and if so, how?

Andrew TENNI: I think it is the ability for, particularly, private landowners and others – we have got a lot of agricultural land around; their report back is that it is really complex to work out who to talk to about what and get permission to do backburning and other things. We need to streamline that process for them, get a one-stop shop where they need to go to get approvals, information and even support to be able to manage the vast amount of farmland that they have got. Roadside slashing – yes, council has got some work to do in relation to that; I will admit that. And we will upgrade our programming around those months –

Melina BATH: Can I stop you there? Do you have enough? This is a Dorothy Dixier – not. But do you have enough finance to do that? Is it a fiscally constrained environment and are you cutting back on some things? Do you have the equipment? Or do you just need a little bit more of everything?

Andrew TENNI: I was going to say, for us, if we are going to do that, that takes away from something else. So we have not got the funding to be able to upgrade the program ourselves; if we were to, then we would need additional funding for that. Otherwise we just take it from somewhere else to be able to focus on those functions. But I think along the major arterial roads there was a lot of overgrowth that was there. I think there is also a lot of –

Melina BATH: That are not your roads.

Andrew TENNI: That are not ours – so department of transport roads. There is a lot of vegetation and trees hanging over. A lot of the reports about the fire were that it was running along the tops of the trees in the canopy, whereas normally it runs across the ground. A lot of it was up in the trees, and if it is up in the trees – and you would notice on the roads between Colac and Apollo Bay a lot of the vegetation crosses the road – that makes roads hard to actually contain and to use when fighting the fires through those deep Otways areas. So those programs need to be uplifted in the preparation for future events.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I really appreciate that. And in terms of your communication with government. farmers would come to council saying, ‘We want to do some roadside clearing’ or ‘We want to be a good neighbour. We want to do the right thing.’ They come to you potentially because they do not know where else to go. Is that your sense?

Andrew TENNI: That is right. And the frustration then comes to us, because we are on the ground, yes. So the approvals come from other state government agencies – or the inquiries and the permits need to come from them. But because –

Melina BATH: You are the interface with community.

Andrew TENNI: We are there in front of them: ‘Why can’t you do this? Why can’t you approve this? Why can’t I just go?’

Melina BATH: So a recommendation for us, then, would be in relation to streamlining that and making that clear for landholders who want to reduce fuel in a dangerous or risky environment to be able to?

Andrew TENNI: That is right, and as I say, supported even with further information about how they go about it, what are the best times and other things, so it is not that they are just trying to seek the approval but ‘Here’s some help on how to do it’.

Melina BATH: Help facilitate this and reduce the risk profile.

Andrew TENNI: That is right.

Melina BATH: And our roads can become wicks when you have got heavy vegetation around them. They are attractive, but they are also wicks in fire situations.

You mentioned your heavy plant and equipment and needing to upgrade that. That is going to be significant money for you if you do. Can you just walk us through it? You may need to take it on notice, because my time is out, but could you please provide what you have now, in terms of your plant and equipment, on notice, and if you were going to look around at what would it cost to upgrade your plant and equipment for an area, the potential costs for that to happen, for you to do more. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. As a council, what changes have you made to improve the response for the next fire emergency situation?

Andrew TENNI: Well, we are still in the midst of recovery, and we need to do a deeper review of the incident and the event and our management there. But on the surface, what do we need to do better next time? I think, as I said earlier, our preparation and engagement up-front was good, and we need to maintain that. I think the preparation we need to do is around vegetation removal and roadside slashing. We will need extra funding to be able to do those preparation works, because around the Otways it is not a matter of ‘if this ever happens again’, it is when. It was a weather event that started it. We had last year down near Cape Otway tourists that actually started a fire down there and left a fire unattended, which went through Cape Otway there. So these things are happening. It is about ‘What do we need to do?’ We have got to be funded to be able to do that preparation work better.

The ERCs that we set up – as we say, that was just done with what we had at the time. We had to get in generators, we had to get in fridges, freezers and other equipment for people. While they were there the temperature was between 38 and 42 across that week, and so where do people go and what is the relief there? We need funding to be able to support the maintenance of animals and other things that come into those ERCs. Make them so they are actually appropriate for people to go to, which makes that decision to leave earlier much, much easier. They are some of the things that we need. We spoke about the Colac airfield being available. We had only just finished the discussions with DEECA in about October. And it is great to have that out there, but there are only two aircraft that are going to be there. We used up to 29 in that event. There were also other grassfires and things that took off in the time post January, and luckily we had the aircraft here still to deal with that. But the airfield out there is a basic shed and an old toilet block, and so we need to make sure that those people out there that are doing it – the pilots, the servicing, the maintenance, the fuelling – have got the appropriate equipment and facilities out there to do it properly.

Phil HOWARD: Can I add to that too? Something that came out from the community consultation was the bureaucracy and whose jurisdiction is what. I think you spoke too about that. I think we need to have a look at streamlining who can make decisions when and where to make sure that roads are open, things are cleared and safety and health are paramount. Because we had the flood in between the fires, it showed a little bit of whose jurisdiction is what. That was very confusing.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. I think Phil answered that more, because we had heard a lot about the funding already, Andrew. I was going more to the policies and procedures within council – what changes you would make to improve your emergency response – but that is fine. Staying on that topic, we will flip it around. In a flood response we see a lot of what takes a long time to get cleaned up, say, in regard to rubbish removal and all that. What lagged in the recovery process in council? Did we have any lagging of anything? What took its time, or was it really quick and you got it over and done with?

Andrew TENNI: I think the restoration of all the fencing and things for agricultural properties took a lot of time, and luckily BlazeAid have come in, but they only do parts of it. I think the ability to support communities to re-establish fencing and boundaries is a really big thing. There were five or six houses that were destroyed in the fires, and getting assessments out to those quicker would have been better so they could start the process of replanting and rebuilding.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I had a really good question.

The CHAIR: I can fix many things, but time is not one of them. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your appearance this morning. I am keen to explore a little bit more about the response to the information that people were getting and how they interpreted it, and with respect to, say, residents around the Barongarook area, where they were evacuated probably three or four times, and the frequency with which that happened and how they relied on that information. Were people starting to drop off with the reliability of that, given that things did not quite occur as the information was saying?

Andrew TENNI: Well, two things happened. One was that, in the event of the confusion, they started to, as we say, create their own local WhatsApp groups that asked, 'What are you hearing?' 'What's going on?' 'What can you see?' 'What's the roadblock saying?' 'Is that right?' – almost trying to double-check or validate the messaging that was coming out of the emergency app, which we did not really want. The second part was there were those that were almost fed up with the whiplash of 'in and out' and 'evacuate' and 'prepare'. They just moved out, and luckily, again, we had the ERC open, where they could just go and just bunker down and just say, 'Well, I'm going to wait until those in charge say that it is actually safe to go back, because I'm sick of having to work out whether or not I stay or go.' So yes, the messaging created a whole raft of issues for those people.

More generally, what we found happened was that a lot of decisions – or some decisions – were being made from Melbourne. Those people that had kids back in Melbourne – and they might have been older residents – had the kids saying, 'I can see this on the app: you've got to get out.' And they were saying, 'Well, no, there's no real reason for us.' But 'Yeah, the app says so, so you've got to get out.' A couple of organisations that had management in Melbourne were telling their people that they had to evacuate, and the locals were saying, 'But there's no danger. There's no issue.' One example was Scope. They have got a house here in Colac for severely handicapped people. Melbourne were telling them they needed to evacuate them because the app was saying that the fire was moving quickly. They were saying, 'Well, there's no real danger here.' But at 11 at night, they moved four severely handicapped people into our ERC, which was here at COPACC at the time. We were saying, 'There's no real need to move these people; just don't create any sort of panic or confusion that doesn't need to be there.' So yes, because of the confusion, it manifested itself in a number of different activities that went on.

John BERGER: With the follow-up that you have done since the event, how do you think you can get around these WhatsApp groups that will put out that misinformation about what is not actually occurring?

Andrew TENNI: With the emergency app, the information that feeds the warnings comes locally and is updated locally, and then the warnings reflect that local information. The road closures are overlaid on top of that so people can see what is going on, and that is backed up with frequent community meetings where people can come in and get from the incident controller what is really going on, what really they need to start thinking about, and where the fire is and its behaviour to inform their decisions about whether or not they stay or go. I think that real local information is critical. Again, having the ERC here in Colac – there were questions about whether or not it would be run out of Geelong or elsewhere. In my view, if we had not had it here and been able to give that information locally, we would have had a wide-scale panic. It would have been really hard to manage for all the emergency services, and the messaging just would have got lost in the in the malaise of interpretation.

Phil HOWARD: I think also you have got to go back to that education before the events happen about how people can read the apps and interpret them. The catastrophic warning now is confusing. That is the feedback I get. As soon as it hits 'catastrophic', people do not understand. They think that everyone has to evacuate once that warning is up. But once the rain comes and puts the fire out or the floodwaters subside, people then are very fickle and forget. I think that is when the education can be up, before these disasters happen.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair. I am out of time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much for appearing today, and I guess to your whole team that have come back from leave to help, because it certainly is a massive effort when you are in the midst of it. I am just interested in council budget. What are some of the impacts that you have? What are some of the costs that you face with an emergency like this, and how do you seek to recover those funds?

Andrew TENNI: It has been, in a sense, pretty good. In terms of the response and recovery, the funding that has been provided for government, I have got to admit, has been good. That has been handy, and to give it to us up-front so that we are able to draw down on that is good. But what we have discussed since is that this goes on for another six to eight months, and it is the preparation for the next season that starts to cost. So it is working out with DEECA and others: are councils going to be part of the response, and what does that look like and what is needed to support that? And on the preparation, what needs to be done, what are the frequencies around slashing and preparation that need to be uplifted, and what is the cost of doing that? Rate cap 2.75 – we have not got much in the budget to be able to do that. We are only meeting asset renewal at about 60 per cent. Our funding does not stretch far enough. We are actually only meeting our obligations, and more and more is coming on line with less and less to be able to do it with. So for fire and emergency preparation, which needs to be done – even with the floods, we need to make sure our drainage and everything is okay and can cope with that sort of rainfall down on the coast. If we are going to do that, we need to upgrade our frequency in testing and preparation. That costs money.

Phil HOWARD: Can I add there are also subsidiary things that come out by helping emergency response, and I will give you an example. Down at Apollo Bay, where the CFA shed is is inappropriate. There are also issues when volunteers need to go down to the shed; there is no parking available, and usually these events happen in peak holiday periods. So council is putting money into looking for more car parking availability in Apollo Bay, and that costs us money. That also would happen in Colac. When you are supporting the other authorities that fight emergencies there are always these subsidiary things that come along that hit our budget, and our discretionary funds are very, very minimal, because we are trying to close the renewal gap. So I think it is not just the tangible things you can see that go and fight the fires, it is all those other things that we need funds for to be ready.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. I am just interested in municipal emergency management committees. We heard yesterday that there are some but they do not exist as much as they used to. I guess the role of those committees is to meet regularly in between events, because it can be, as you said, a few years between events. What does that look like on the ground? We also heard about some asset protection being assessed when the fire was already underway. But are there people on the ground that are doing that preparation work throughout the season?

Andrew TENNI: There are. We have got one fire prevention officer, and it would be good to have more, because with the farmers and the properties that we have got, we issue a number of fire prevention notices but we try and actually educate them rather than fine them. And so to get out and around and talk to all those people and to coordinate our preparation with the towns takes a lot of time and effort. There was funding that was supplied for a regional response, and we had a partnership with Surf Coast, Corangamite and ourselves, and that funding has ceased. Between us we had an emergency management officer that was shared. And we run training and scenarios and things to be able to support that. That funding to be able to create those partnerships – as I said, we had to call upon all our partnerships across the region at the time. To have that so that we can plan for it, prepare properly and then be able to draw on that in an event is critical to council. So having that funding to be able to create that capacity would be really beneficial.

Phil HOWARD: And expanding the fire prevention role. What you pointed out about the bureaucracy – farmers could know then if they could slash their roadside and be the good neighbour too, you know. If we had more capacity, we could do more education.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Phil and Andrew, thanks so much for your evidence today. The first witnesses at the inquiry – it is always a good place to start. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review in the coming weeks. And with that, the committee will take a short break and prepare for the next witnesses.

Witnesses withdrew.