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

Dr Marina Lewis, and

Philippa Bailey, Climate Action Team, Colac Otway; and

Dr Claire Feniuk, Director, Conservation Strategy and Partnerships, Conservation Ecology Centre.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into the 2026 summer fires in Victoria. We are joined now by representatives from the Conservation Ecology Centre and the Climate Action Team, Colac Otway.

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

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

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask the committee to introduce themselves. I will start down the end.

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. Good morning.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, the original Member for Northern Victoria.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: For Hansard, I would be grateful if you could state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of so we can make sure it is all accurate. I will start with you, Claire.

Claire FENIUK: I am Claire Feniuk, appearing for the Conservation Ecology Centre.

Marina LEWIS: Marina Lewis from the Climate Action Team, Colac Otway shire.

Philippa BAILEY: Phillipa Bailey, the Climate Action Team, Colac Otway shire.

The CHAIR: Proceedings are pretty straightforward. We will invite you to make an opening statement and then we will ask you some questions. I will hand it over to you. Claire, do you want to start?

Claire FENIUK: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Claire Feniuk. I am the Director of Conservation Strategy and Partnerships at the Conservation Ecology Centre. We are a regional NGO based here in the Otways. We work across the lands of the Gadubanud, Gulidjan and Kirrae Whurrong people of the Maar nation, and I want to acknowledge their enduring connection to country and leadership in caring for these landscapes.

We recognise that many of the conservation threats that we are facing, including bushfires, do not respect fence lines and property boundaries, and neither can our response to them. To this end, the CEC works across tenure at scale and in partnership with government agencies, public and private land managers, traditional owners and

local communities to develop and share evidence-based solutions for conservation in the Otways and beyond. Much of our work focuses on building long-term ecological resilience to the increasingly severe impacts of climate change. That includes more than a decade of research in the Carlisle heathlands, which were so heavily impacted by the recent fires, and our resilient forest program, which is delivered in partnership with the Victorian government and Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation, focused on climate adaptation and forest management.

What we have learned through this work, and what the recent fires reinforced, is that bushfire risk cannot be understood solely as an emergency management issue. Emergency services, both volunteers and professionals, did a truly remarkable job managing these fires under extremely challenging conditions, and many of our own staff and colleagues were directly involved in those efforts. But if the conversation stops there – if we reduce complex landscapes to a narrow focus on fuel reduction and emergency response – then we risk missing the much bigger lesson. If we want to build long-term ecological and community resilience to climate change, not just respond to risk in the short term, then we need to think about bushfires as one aspect of complex and dynamic landscapes. The forests and heaths of the Otways are not just fuel for bushfires. They are social, cultural and ecological systems. The Carlisle heathlands, for example, are ground parrot country for their traditional custodians. They are a critical refuge for threatened small mammals like the long-nosed potoroo, and they are a sensitive ecosystem that actually requires fire of the right sort. And they are surrounded by forests, farmlands and local communities whose lives, homes and livelihoods are closely tied to the health of these landscapes.

Building resilience in places like this requires knowledge sharing, collaboration, coordination and robust conversations about the merits and trade-offs of different management actions – not parallel efforts siloed by land tenure but shared whole-of-landscape planning. To be effective this cannot be a one-off planning exercise. It is an adaptive and ongoing process built through ongoing conversations, revisited decisions and continuous learning. These conversations need to be happening all the time – when we are planning routine management activities like prescribed burning, when we are preparing how we respond to the next big bushfire through short- and medium-term recovery and into the long term. And for those conversations to be meaningful they need to be grounded in good information, research and monitoring that tells us how landscapes are responding to management and climate events, Indigenous knowledge and obligations to country, and the insights of people who live and work in these landscapes every day.

Following the recent bushfires we focused on monitoring the impacts of the fire to inform the next phase of decision-making. Priorities include tracking small mammal population recovery and monitoring emerging threats, including feral animals, pathogens like *Phytophthora cinnamomi* and shrub encroachment. The 2026 fires happened to impact one of the most well-researched places in the Otways, which gives us a rare opportunity to learn valuable lessons that can shape recovery, but without sustained monitoring feeding back into the decision-making process that opportunity may be lost.

Here in the Otways we have developed a model for this sort of place-based, collaborative and whole-of-landscape adaptation planning. The resilient forests program has brought together government agencies, traditional owners, scientists and communities to understand forest management options and trade-offs, plan for the future and adapt as conditions change. We have built trust, we have shared knowledge, we have kickstarted key research and we are now working to demonstrate what this model looks like in practice through the Centre Road healthy country trial. This work is still evolving, and there is much more to do here in the Otways, but we believe that the model has real merit and that what we are learning here can inform how these challenges are managed across the state.

What we would ask this committee to consider is how government can create the conditions and systems of governance that support this kind of locally informed, collaborative and biocultural approach to climate adaptation planning and embed it within the dedicated agencies who are already doing so much of this work. I welcome the opportunity to tell you more about the ongoing work in the Carlisle heathlands and the work that we are doing through the resilient forest program or, better yet, to get you out there to actually see the work that we are doing on the ground and meet so many of the people involved. Thank you for your time.

Marina LEWIS: Thank you for the opportunity for the Climate Action Team to address our submission to the inquiry. Our submission is based on our lived experience of the bushfires in the Otways, not only over the last summer but the summer prior, and our long advocacy for serious action by all levels of government to the

accelerating crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. Like many other places, our turn came for climate-exacerbated crisis. Otways bushfires burnt around 16,500 hectares of country, devastating landscapes and ecosystems and killing uncountable birds and animals. Fires destroyed eight homes locally and came terrifyingly close to several of our own homes. We and our communities were also subject to weeks of anxiety, waiting to see if a semi-contained bushfire would take off. It did. Our sincere respect and gratitude is extended to the many air and ground fire crews mobilised during these fires. Our main responses to the terms of reference are in relation to preparation for bushfires; causes contributing, including drying landscapes; and the vexed issue of insurance.

Preparation – expenditure at the pointy end of fighting fires will have been high, in the millions of dollars. We ask the committee to consider more upstream interventions into fire preparedness, such as so-called cool burns, a density reduction technique, or fire technique, undertaken during cooler months, with less opportunity for fires to become unmanageable, as has happened too frequently with burn-offs or hectare burns. Claire has already alluded to some of those, the research happening with the Conservation Ecology Centre. There are now several instances providing empirical data as to the effectiveness of cool burns in the Otways. A landholder resident in a densely forested area on the top of one of the higher hills in the Gellibrand Valley has conducted regular cool burns around his home for many years. On the day the fires took off again – Saturday 23 January – and hit his hill, burning in the end approximately 40 acres around his home and coming to within 100 metres of it, the fire perimeter was slowed down sufficiently by the cool burn landscape to enable him on his own to patrol the perimeter before air and ground crews arrived.

Cool burns undertaken in the Otways have been going on for more than a decade. Indications are that they help to slow down and moderate the fire fronts. Conservation Ecology Centre's Claire here has spoken to their research on Otways cool burns, but we would like to just add our recognition of the extreme importance of this research, including on the provision of refugia – refuge during bushfires – for remnant communities of marsupials now extremely vulnerable all over our state. Data suggests cool burns may at the very least have slowed down several dangerous fire fronts, providing fire crews with significant support at critical times. It is valid to ask whether more extensive cool burning may have, in the instances noted, provided even greater risk management. We suggest the committee recommend the Victorian government support funding for an independent assessment of the ecological impacts and economic effects of current fuel reduction programs and support specific research, such as that undertaken by the Conservation Ecology Centre, into the effectiveness of cool burns in bushfire-prone landscapes and require the development of strategies to ensure the protection of ecological assets in all state-initiated fire management plans.

With regard to causes, the science could not be clearer. The Otways bushfires that burnt for weeks were significantly exacerbated by global heating, as were the floods experienced locally this summer, with intense flooding and mayhem at Lorne, Kennett River, Cumberland River and Wye River after 180 millimetres of rain fell in 6 hours over Mount Cowley and all the other flood events accelerating throughout our continent, the cyclones, the extreme heat events which kill, in fact, the most people, and the massive accumulating biodiversity loss and coastal erosion – the list goes on. We suggest the committee recommend the Victorian government stop approving the gas and oil exploration and extraction which is adding fuel to the global crisis; get serious about fast-tracking the renewables transition, which is clearly for our national security, as the current global fuel crisis indicates; and support efforts to make polluters pay – that is, be appropriately taxed. People are being left behind. Communities are fracturing. Such a tax could help people address cost-of-living issues, including insurance, and Philippa will say a few words in a moment about that. However, it is not only the drying climate but a drying landscape that has made the Otways more vulnerable to bushfire.

Decades of overextraction of groundwater, a fact now widely acknowledged, has had a catastrophic drying effect on local landscapes, biodiversity and groundwater-dependent ecosystems. Over the bushfire period multiple crews, including those who fought two large fires at my property, spoke to the dryness of vegetation and soil. It was also observed by many that whilst lightning struck all over the Otways – hundreds of strikes – it was in the areas most impacted by the depleted lower tertiary aquifer that bushfires took off. With CSIRO predicting further very significant drying for this region, the Climate Action Team supports Landcare advocacy, stating that the Otway aquifer system should be left alone to recover – that is, no more state-sponsored water mismanagement of the Otways aquifer system, including no more bores. We suggest the committee recommend the water minister Harriet Shing immediately declare an environmental entitlement for the Gellibrand River system designed to allow the damaged aquifer to recover, which will benefit the hydration of the entire Otways landscape, and disallow any further extraction from the lower tertiary aquifer, including

proposed bores at Curdievale. I will hand over to Philippa now to say a few words about insurance. Thank you for your attention.

The CHAIR: Very quickly, if you can, Philippa.

Philippa BAILEY: Just a couple of points to pick up, which Marina mentioned. I noticed – it is a very minor point – the adequacy of the government's climate change policies and actions. That got me a bit fired up, because I feel that the state government needs to really be proactive. A lot of the suggestions, like reductions of gas and moving across to electricity, have been pulled back over time. So I would say very strongly that we need this to happen, because we are going to experience these fires on an ongoing basis each year. I would like to encourage the government to do that. Also, the other thing is the insurance. Now, this is a real issue among neighbours. It goes up every year. People are really frightened that if they do not have any insurance, what will happen if their property burns down? We know there are often a lot of problems getting the insurance back, and we have heard that other areas in Australia still have not even rebuilt. I would like to suggest some way of insurance companies being more ethically responsible so that they understand what is happening here – maybe some sort of government intervention that keeps insurance premiums at a reasonable level for people. The one thing you do when you feel your property is at risk: 'I've got insurance, so I can build back again. As long as I take my vital things with me, I'm okay.' But if you have not got the insurance, I think it is really fearful. Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. We will go to questions. We will only have a short amount of time each for the questions. I just want to start. Claire, on the research you conducted on the cool burns and patchwork, the ecological benefits have been spoken about. Did the research look at what made a successful program? We can obviously understand the ecological research, but from a programmatic point of view how do we understand what worked here and how do we understand the success factors that could replicate that elsewhere?

Claire FENIUK: I think a key factor in the success of the work that we have been doing in the Carlisle has been looking at mosaic winter burning, so putting cool patchy fire into these landscapes as a means of managing fuel but also protecting biodiversity in those landscapes. I think the key to the success has been the strength of the partnerships that underpin that work – so the work between Forest Fire Management Victoria, Parks Victoria, the Conservation Ecology Centre, University of Melbourne and Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation. It has been a really strong partnership built over many years of collaboration, and it has enabled that work to happen – to be respectful of the bicultural values in that landscape, to be thoughtful about the design of interventions at a landscape scale so that we can actually conduct research around them. One of the big challenges with research is finding suitable controls and setting things up so that we can actually learn from them. The relationship between us and the University of Melbourne and then FFMV and PV has meant that we have been able to design research trials there so there are really good opportunities for learning and sharing those lessons.

I think long-term investment in the work there has been a really important factor. We have done over a decade's worth of work in the Carlisle landscape. That provides a huge opportunity for us now to be thinking about post-fire impacts and what recovery looks like in that landscape, because we have got lots of very good before-fire data from that landscape. I think it is those factors that are really important: the partnerships, the long-term investment and the collaboration.

The CHAIR: Can it work at scale?

Claire FENIUK: I think it can. I think a lot of the lessons that we are learning here in the Otways are scalable. I think that partly that is about the approach and that there are versions of this approach that could be applied in very different landscapes – the approach being that partnership between government and communities, traditional owners and research institutions is a scalable model that could work anywhere. I think the approach, being a bottom-up approach, led by what is needed on country and responding to the needs that the landscape is demonstrating to us, is an entirely scalable approach. I think the challenge is around embedding that in systems of decision-making in the long term so that we are thinking about long-term landscape management but also bushfire preparedness for fire seasons and also recovery planning and so on. Actually embedding that in the way that decisions are made is one of the big challenges that we are thinking about right now through the resilient forests program.

The CHAIR:All right. Ms Bath, do you want to –

Melina BATH: Yes. Thank you. This is very interesting and music to my ears. The right fire enhances ecosystems, but clearly the wrong fire can incinerate them, and I really appreciate the work you are doing. Again, the partnerships are really important, and you mentioned a number of them. Are you looking to evolve in terms of partnering with local landholders? Is that something that you will move into? Because I feel like it is – you mentioned community – all of community, and they are a part of that community. What are your thoughts on that?

Claire FENIUK: Thinking about things across tenure, across public and private land, is a hugely important aspect of the way that we plan and build resilience to climate change. Like I said at the start, challenges like bushfire do not respect property boundaries, and it is what happens on both sides of the fence that really matters, so it is a hugely important part of what we are doing. The resilient forests program, as an example in that space, really is trying to think across tenure and to dissolve some of those silos around decision-making, particularly about forest management. So it is bringing local community organisations – the Landcare networks across the Otways are participating in that program – but also really engaging community members in these conversations about forest management, planning and decision-making. A lot of that takes place on public land, obviously, and a lot of the big levers that you can pull are on public land. But private land is such an important part of the landscape mosaic that we have here in the Otways, so empowering community members with the knowledge and understanding about what is happening in the landscape around them – things that they can do on their own properties but also feeling confident in the decisions that government are making and being part of that decision-making, understanding what the trade-offs are, understanding where the knowledge gaps are and where research needs to happen – has been a really important part of that process.

Melina BATH: Thank you. That is fantastic. In terms of the evaluation, this has been going for 10 years – that is a significant time – but it is evolving, I am sure, as you are going. What are some of the inhibiting factors – and I guess you were mentioning about ongoing funding for this from government. What are some of the blockers where you go, 'I know we don't know enough about this' or 'How can we show that there's been that reinvigoration or resilience of the ecosystem?'?

Claire FENIUK: Just for clarity, the work that we have been doing in the Carlisle landscape has been going on for about a decade, and that has been a series of different projects over time. The resilient forests program is newer; it was first funded as a 12-month pilot in the 2023–24 financial year. We are now in the third year of that funding. I think one of the big challenges that we have is around that continuity of funding. Some of the things that we are talking about are about long-term change in these landscapes, and when we are talking about pulling some of these big management levers – mosaic burning, as an example – it takes a long time for us to see that change play out over time. So knowing that we can trial management, do the work and monitor it over time and that the decision-making framework will allow us to provide information as part of an adaptive management process is a really important part of that process.

Melina BATH: Thank you – and I am really sorry my time is out. The resilient forests program: can you provide some more context to that for this committee – take it on notice and provide, you know, a summation of your work over the last three years?

Claire FENIUK: Yes. Absolutely – very happy to do that.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. Marina, I was interested in your comments about the drying of the Otways and climate being a big driver but also groundwater overextraction contributing to that. If there is further extraction – new bores – and if there are not environmental flows restored to the Gellibrand, what can we expect to see, based on your knowledge of this area and the work that your group has done, in terms of the landscape and the soil?

Marina LEWIS: Good question. I think we can expect further drying. That is the simple answer to that. There are observation bores in the Otways that indicate that the whole landscape has dried 2 metres below the surface since the 1980s. When extraction began in the early 1980s, it was clear that they could only take a

certain amount out of the aquifer system. Nevertheless – that was the science then – approval was given to take many, many more megalitres than that, and that has resulted in a deficit in the Otways landscape. And as I said, during the summer we spoke to multiple crews. There were many, many crews on our land and throughout our valley, and the dryness was the thing. And it was not just the vegetation dryness; it was the soil dryness. You did not have to go down far to find there was no moisture in the ground. So I think if you sink more bores into that lower tertiary aquifer, you will get more drying.

Philippa BAILEY: Can I just add something: we have noticed more frosts. We are all growers in the area, and this will affect a lot of crops. My apple crop was wiped out by an early frost in October, and that is all attributed to the drying of the land underneath – so more problems.

Marina LEWIS: And the Otways are fabled for their greenness, fabled for the wet. People in this room here came 40 years ago and it was a mess; you would go to the Otways and it would be mud and slush. This was the Otways – this very wetness. As we are hearing from the science, it is going to get drier, and it is no longer that landscape. It has already shifted a lot. So certainly the aquifer needs to recover if this landscape is to recover.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Is that dryness something that has been borne out in some of the research that your centre has done?

Claire FENIUK: It is certainly a driver of some of the research that we are doing and some of the thinking around the resilient forest program, recognising the increased impacts of climate change and the modelling that shows that we are going to experience more volatile weather, increased and extended periods of dryness and higher bushfire risk. So it has been a driver of the need to do this research on the ground, yes. And I think what it does is underscore, as I said at the beginning, that this is far broader than an emergency response and planning challenge. It really is about thinking holistically about the landscape and how it is cared for and about the interactions between land use, land management, water balance and bushfire risk. There is so much. They are so interconnected, all of these things, so I think there is a huge risk in taking a narrow focus that thinks purely about fuel management.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. Thank you very much for your contribution. In your submission you have got a number of recommendations, but the one that really jumped out at me was 'introduce taxes for fossil fuel companies to contribute to emergency preparedness', which actually is a federal space; we are a state government. But I was interested to know if, on the basis of that, you are also recommending a national emergency disaster fund that would address that issue as well.

Marina LEWIS: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It is a contested space and there are lots of different recommendations. What you said, Philippa, about insurance – I think it would address that as well.

Philippa BAILEY: Yes. I mean, it seems a no-brainer. I have seen people writing in to the papers about this – that we should tax the users of fossil fuel. We could have funds drawn back to the councils and local areas, and we could use these as backup. I think it is really important.

Jacinta ERMACORA: But as the transition continues, use of fossil fuel will reduce, and so taxes – I am wondering if you are thinking of broadening it more to the national population as a fund rather than just –

Philippa BAILEY: There is a local government campaign pushing that, and I think it would have to be federal. But the streams actually come back for the people that need it. That is what we are looking for.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So you would say that would be a legitimate recommendation for this committee?

Philippa BAILEY: Yes. Absolutely.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. Thanks. I am finished.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: I am interested in your paragraph (3). You talk about the funding of equipment and appliances for the Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria and recruitment and retention of CFA volunteers. Can you tell us a little bit about what is happening here locally – if there is a lack of volunteers or if there is a lack of equipment?

Marina LEWIS: Thank you for the question. Our understanding is that there is a lack of volunteers all over the state and in fact probably nationally. Certainly in our area volunteers tend to be older and actually recruiting the younger volunteers is problematic. You can talk about cost of living and all the pressures on younger people in our country and in our state. Yes, it is an issue.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. You also talk about equipment and appliances.

Marina LEWIS: I am not in the CFA myself. I am just reading what we can read in various outlets. It does appear that the CFA are very clear that they need upgraded equipment, more modern tankers. There is a real issue around helicopters and having them available. The bushfire response in our valley – we were extremely lucky at that time that there were all these crews available. What would have happened if all the fires were going at the same time and there were other fires? This is the scenario we are looking at into the future. Unless the CFA is well resourced to be able to respond to multiple fires in our state, there will be communities like ours that will be burnt out. I do not think that is something that is acceptable.

Wendy LOVELL: Would you say there is a widespread belief in this community that the CFA and those who are fighting the fires were under-resourced to manage a fire of this size?

Marina LEWIS: I am not sure that I would want to make that claim for the CFA locally, because I am not in the CFA, Wendy. I would leave that to the CFA to respond to. But generally speaking I would say yes, the CFA is making the claim that they are underfunded and they need more resources.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for your appearance this morning. Claire, I might start with you. Yesterday we did a tour of the fire-affected region, and we saw firsthand where a cool burn had gone through, I think in 2021 or 2023, on both sides of the road. One was severely impacted. The other one was less so in terms of the canopy, to the effect that the resident whose property was saved was quite thankful that that had occurred. Are the strategies that were adopted back in 2021 to clear that piece of land or get rid of that undergrowth still the same strategies that you adopt now going forward?

Claire FENIUK: I cannot speak to the specific example that you are talking about. For a lot of those sorts of management decisions, if they are on public land, it would be Forest Fire Management Victoria or Parks Victoria that would be taking those management decisions, and on private land that is obviously private land managers. From the CEC's perspective, our interest really is in doing the research to understand exactly the sorts of phenomena you are talking about there and the associated benefits for biodiversity, so understanding how those sorts of management actions are actually impacting ecological outcomes – that is, vegetation diversity and structure, the implications for fauna, but also the implications for fuel and future bushfire risk. Our work is primarily focused in that sort of space.

We know that the work that has been going on in and around the Carlisle area that was fire impacted has included lots of work that we have been doing on mosaic burning. That has fundamentally changed the way that fires have been put into that landscape subsequently. That has been shown to be really effective at managing fuel but also protecting the habitats there that are really important for critical weight range mammals in those systems. That is really beginning to change practice within the Carlisle heathland system. The work that we are doing through the resilient forests program includes some research around mosaic burning in forested landscapes on the northern ramps of the Otways. That is the area on the northern slopes coming up from the Otway Plain behind Deans Marsh and Lorne – that area. In that landscape, that is looking at, again, essentially cool burning – small, patchy mosaic burning applied frequently – rather than conventional prescribed burning, which tends to be hot. It tends to treat large areas and it happens on a sort of rotation between 12 and 20 to 25 years, and we know that those sorts of burns favour shrubs. So whilst you get an initial decrease in fuel loads after a conventional prescribed burn, what we are seeing over time and by the sort of five- to seven-year mark is that shrubs really start to come back quite intensely. So there is a question about, in the long term, whether that is a sustainable approach to managing fuels.

The work in the northern ramps is looking at a different application of fire – so mosaic burning, a more frequent application of fire but at a much lower intensity – and understanding the implications of that for biodiversity but also for forest structure and for fuel in the long term. So we are doing a lot of work in that space, thinking about how fire can be used as a management tool but also, alongside that, thinking about things like mulching and mechanical interventions where putting fire into the landscape is a risk or as part of a process where you might mulch first and then subsequently put fire into that landscape. From our side, our interest is really in understanding the consequences of those sorts of management actions and really learning from those and, where there are merits, seeing them scaled. And we are beginning to see that happening in the Otways. There are some really exciting land management trials that we are part of in collaboration with University of Melbourne and with Forest Fire Management and Parks Victoria here.

John BERGER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you, Chair. We heard from the council's chief executive just before about preferring not to fine farmers but more to educate farmers when you talk about some of the bushfire prevention strategies. I am interested in your thoughts on, say, utilities and councils. Is there an obligation on them or what is the consequence for them if they do not maintain roadsides, for example? I have a resident around Harcourt that had property near VicTrack and also council land and had 6-foot-high grass there and lost their house. What are your thoughts on the consequences for authorities in maintaining land when it comes to bushfires to assist with that prevention?

Marina LEWIS: I am glad you asked that. There is some conversation in my community in the Gellibrand River valley about support – and I believe that the CEO and Cr Howard mentioned something like this earlier – enabling people to undertake specific burns on their own property and supporting people to do that. And I think the conversation that I am hearing is that because we have seen the success – in fact it was on my property that that cool burn happened. So we are seeing the success of this – and I am fascinated that you are doing it in forest too, Claire, because this was in the forest area too – if people are enabled to do that, which means education, which comes back to something that was said earlier too. People need education in so many ways, including how to manage their land in this drying landscape. So if council or authorities were to support local landholders in training and understanding biotechniques, fire management techniques, more clearly – I think there would be a role for that; I really do. And our landscape is so vast. You know, conventional prescribed burns that take in all these acres and are very, very hot are a pretty clumsy response to a complicated, delicate question of our ecosystems, which, quite frankly, are in distress all over our country. We have got to do better on this too. So I think that actually there is a lot of traction potentially for doing something like that.

Gaelle BROAD: In later submissions they were talking about the importance of agriculture in this region and perhaps having incentives where people can get funding for equipment to help them with that bushfire response. Would you support a recommendation like that?

Marina LEWIS: Absolutely.

Philippa BAILEY: Yes.

Claire FENIUK: Yes.

Marina LEWIS: But it comes back to what Claire was saying earlier: it is about holistic approaches. At the moment so much is still siloed, so how do we do some of that fantastic partnering and get people into the same room having these conversations to actually start making a difference in these ways?

Claire FENIUK: And thinking about the private land component of the landscape is really important – so thinking about the partnerships with organisations like Landcare, which have such a long history of doing that sort of work, and that sort of extension as a mechanism, but also thinking about the role of the CFA and opportunities there and thinking about traditional owners in this space and the opportunity to work with them and thinking about their role in applying those sorts of approaches in the wider landscape. I know you were asking about consequences for bad actors, essentially. I think what we have tried to do, and started through the resilient forests project, is to think about how we build collective stewardship. How do we build trust? How do we all have a shared understanding of what the risks are and our own role in that landscape and responsibility to

build that sort of collective stewardship approach and have information shared with people about what works and how to manage these landscapes better?

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you, and thank you all for your evidence today. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the coming weeks. And with that, we will take a short break.

Witnesses withdrew.