

# **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**

Alistair Drayton, Chief Officer, Operations, and

Chris Jones, Unit Controller, Lorne Unit, Victoria State Emergency Service;

Lachlan Sutherland, Deputy Group Officer, Corangamite Group, Country Fire Authority; and

Scott Turner, Director, Forest and Fire Operations, Barwon South West, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

**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 for this session by representatives of various emergency agencies.

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 that you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and say the 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 the evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. 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 in the Legislative Council. The committee will introduce themselves. Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The CHAIR:** For the Hansard record it would assist if you would each introduce yourself and the name of the organisation you are appearing on behalf of. Scott, we will start with you and go down the table.

**Scott TURNER:** Thank you, Chair. Scott Turner, Forest and Fire Operations division within the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Lachlan Sutherland, CFA.

**Alistair DRAYTON:** Alistair Drayton, Chief Operations Officer, VICSES.

**Chris JONES:** Christopher Jones. I am Unit Controller at Lorne SES Unit.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you all very much for joining us today. It is pretty straightforward: we will invite you to make an opening statement, we will ask some questions and we will take it from there. I do not know who wants to go first. Do you want to go first, Scott?

**Scott TURNER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all. As I said, I am Scott Turner, the Director of Forest and Fire Operations and also the deputy chief officer for the Barwon south-west region with FFMVic, which is the operational arm of DEECA. The Barwon south-west region extends from north of Geelong across to the South

Australian border and takes in the coastline and, importantly, the forested areas of the Great Otway National Park and also down to the volcanic plains of the far south-west and extends through to the agricultural land to the north of the Otways and the forested areas. I am responsible for leading and delivering the fire prevention, preparedness and response operations across the public lands of the Barwon south-west region for Forest Fire Management Victoria – and as I said, that is DEECA’s operational arm – across public lands. During January 2026 I held a number of roles at state, regional and local levels in response to the operations through Forest Fire Management Victoria under the Victorian emergency management arrangements. FFMVic under the DEECA banner is responsible for risk-based fire management planning, fire prevention and fire preparedness, fuel management programs and emergency response and recovery across protected public lands in the state of Victoria.

As the members know, Victoria is one of the most bushfire-prone areas in the world and also one of the driest areas. The bushfires of 2026 were amongst the most extreme that Victoria has experienced, following almost two years of dry conditions matched by above-average temperatures. In the Barwon south-west region severe rainfall deficiencies in the two years leading up to the bushfires meant that into the 2025–26 high-risk weather season there was a heightened bushfire risk across the entire landscape. The Victorian government’s submission to this inquiry details the significant whole-of-sector preparedness program and the works that were undertaken ahead of the 2025–26 high-risk weather season based on statewide strategic priorities and the risks that were presented to the state. At the Barwon south-west level, preparedness activities leading up to the 2025–26 high-risk weather season began with comprehensive preseason briefings and exercising across all of our partner agencies, and for our FFMVic this included the onboarding and training of our seasonal forest fire operations officers, our seasonal fire crew, ensuring that we had updated readiness and response plans. We had updated our aviation resourcing, and where that was to be allocated with our partners, and ensured that our fire towers and associated infrastructure were operational. In addition, we had obtained additional resourcing and activated these earlier than we normally would, due to the predicted dry season, to ensure that our preparedness was aligned with a risk-based approach.

FFMVic, or DEECA, was the control agency for the Otways fire complex, including the ignition strikes that are now known as the Carlisle River and Kennedys Creek fires. As the committee has seen, planned burns done in recent years across that footprint supported the containment of the Carlisle River and the Kennedys Creek fires, reducing the overall spread into private lands and into the adjoining country. The management of the response to these fires was a coordinated, controlled and collaborative approach across the state’s emergency management partners, our professional volunteers, our career staff, our emergency management partners in regional, local level and local government and, importantly, our communities in the Otways and the surrounding districts. In addition, we were supplemented and supported by resources both on the fireground and in incident management from our interstate colleagues.

One of the key discussion points is no doubt the decision to evacuate communities during the Carlisle River second run later in January. This decision was not taken lightly and was made by the incident management team based on comprehensive fire modelling, the utilisation of local technology initiatives for the Otways area through the FFMVic decision support system, review of the Bureau of Meteorology forecasts and expert judgements from incident management personnel from within the incident management team here at Colac. Modelling showed that if containment failed under those predicted fire conditions on Tuesday 26 January, over a thousand properties would have been impacted by the fire. Evacuation was the safest option to protect people’s lives. This was a coordinated approach, and following thorough consideration and planning the incident management team here at Colac worked closely with Victoria Police, SES and other agencies to deliver a well-sequenced evacuation. Emergency warnings were updated and traffic management plans enhanced, and the extensive doorknocking supported by safe and orderly movement of communities indicates how well the risk had been articulated to communities and how responsive they were to the risk that was expected.

The incident management team and all of our emergency management agencies understand how deeply disruptive evacuation can be, noting that it is not a common occurrence, and the option to do it in this event was not taken lightly. The incident management team and emergency management partners were extremely grateful for the community cooperation and resilience and their early actions to support the outcome, demonstrating the value of proactive evidence-based evacuation planning and strong interagency collaboration, all focused on the prevention of loss of life under extreme fire conditions.

If I focus briefly on the suppression and supporting the firefighters on the ground, professional volunteers of the CFA and now FFMVic fire crews, the state's firefighting aviation fleet, as we have heard this morning from council, provided an integral support to on-ground firefighters, suppressing the fire, and in addition was utilised to gain aerial intelligence to support decision-making and the longer term community preparedness. As well as aerial operations, firefighting is also supported by heavy plant and equipment through FFMVic and many of our contractors, including local government, to create containment and fallback lines ahead of the fire and to provide protective options for community both on public land and on private land.

A combination of aerial suppression, constructed mineral earth breaks and just-in-time firefighting by the men and women who were out there reduced greatly the impact on private property when the fire took its run during extreme fire conditions. It is pleasing to note the incident management team, while focused on the firefighting operations, also commenced recovery planning to support our communities and to support communities returning to a sense of normal. To date 93 per cent of containment lines have occurred across private land. That goes to the incident management team to allow us then to focus later on in the year on public lands. That is a dedicated focus to supporting our community to return to a sense of normality after these fires.

I would like to close by acknowledging the impact these fires have had on individuals and on the communities of the Western Otways and acknowledge the contributions, the actions, the collaboration and the support that communities give to our emergency management agencies and that we give back to communities in supporting their restoration. I thank the panel for the opportunity to provide comments and after the others I am happy to take questions, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. Lachlan.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I would first like to introduce myself. I am a third-generation farmer from Larpent, west of Colac, and actively involved in local sporting clubs and serve as a volunteer firefighter. I have been a member of the Country Fire Authority for 34 years, having joined after completing secondary school. I am currently a member of the Larpent Rural Fire Brigade and also serve as a Deputy Group Officer, or DGO, within the Corangamite group. The role of DGO in the Corangamite group is to support local brigades in protecting their communities through preparedness, training and operational support.

The Corangamite group covers an extensive area stretching from Wye River to Apollo Bay, Cape Otway and then north through Carlisle River, Irrewillipe, Nalangil and Dreeite. This region forms a long rectangle to the west of Colac and includes stony barrier country in the north, flat grassland through the centre and heavily timbered undulated country to the south. This southern terrain is the type of country that was impacted in the Otway fires complex.

As part of our bushfire preparedness we conduct annual pre-season group training exercises to ensure all brigades are operating at the required level of readiness for the upcoming fire season. These exercises help maintain a strong connection between group leadership and local brigades. They assist newer members in identifying leadership roles within the group, and they also allow us time to complete essential pre-season training mandated by the chief officer. The small townships of Carlisle River and Gellibrand are both within the Corangamite group. They are surrounded by a significant amount of public and private land that is managed by Forest Fire Management Victoria – FFMV – and the CFA. As a group we have strongly developed a working relationship with FFMV operational staff, many of whom our DGOs have worked alongside for many years on fires both large and small. While FFMV staffing numbers have reduced over recent years, it remains valuable to have familiar personnel working together on the ground. An important part of our preparedness is effective communication between our district office and local brigades. This is achieved primarily through the use of WhatsApp, allowing for rapid distribution of information and feedback on what we refer to as 'spike days', days of elevated fire danger. This system allows us to identify which stations are crewed, where resources may be stretched and which DGOs and group officers are available.

During January I spent up to 12 days actively involved in the Otways fire complex while also continuing to operate a dairy farm. My days typically involved farm work until midday before deploying to the fireground and often not returning home until after midnight. My roles included strike team leader, divisional commander and operational support. I was deployed across multiple locations, including Carlisle River, Irrewillipe, Barongarook, Kawarren, Gellibrand and Lismore, and I was also involved in the initial response to flooding at

Wye River and Cumberland River. From 9 January onwards, fire danger ratings were elevated due to the prolonged drought conditions in south-west Victoria. The Otways forests were extremely dry, and we observed significant fire behaviour well into the late evening on many days, a time when fire activity would normally subside. Fire movement was predominantly west to east and frequently crossed constructed control lines.

I was extremely proud of the volunteers I worked alongside for their commitment and dedication. This included not only the local volunteers but also the initial and relief crews who travelled from other regions across Victoria and interstate, often leaving behind their own communities to assist ours. These travelling strike teams were invaluable when local crews became fatigued and required rest. The community of Gellibrand provided outstanding support to firefighting efforts up until the day residents were required to leave the township due to the imminent fire danger. While some structures and assets were lost, I believe the losses could have been far greater given the speed and the intensity of the fire. It is a credit to all agencies involved that no lives were lost.

Preparedness works in Gellibrand were also important, particularly the recent installation of the water tank, which I understand you may have seen yesterday at the Gellibrand hall, which provided a reliable water source for firefighting appliances without relying on the town's hydrant system. Aviation assets also played a significant role in fire suppression. They were critical for intelligence gathering, identifying hotspots and actively supporting suppression efforts when conditions permitted. The availability of nearby dams allowed aircraft to operate efficiently, with a substantial number of aircraft being deployed. Without aviation support the spread of the fire would have been also significantly greater.

Several challenges were also observed during the fire suppression operations. Increased fire activity often coincided with shift changeovers between day and night crews, at times when relief personnel were not yet fully briefed and when fire behaviour was almost at its most severe. This resulted in volunteers remaining on the fire line for extended periods of time. It was also not uncommon to encounter members of the public on back roads, having been directed there by navigation applications attempting to bypass established roadblocks. As a dairy farmer I also observed that extended road closures, particularly around the Carlisle River area, due to tree hazard assessments, significantly disrupted the milk collection on farms in the area. This placed additional stress and emotional strain on farmers who had already been impacted by the fires in the preceding weeks.

Another challenge was the heightened anxiety within the Colac community during the early development of the fire. As a local resident, I received multiple emergency warnings and advisory messages combined with a visible fire front on the southern horizon. This created considerable community anxiety. On the first night of the Carlisle River fire I attended a fatal car accident involving individuals who had self-evacuated from an area 10 kilometres from the fire front. A medical episode was identified as the cause. While community awareness is essential, emergency messaging must be carefully managed to avoid unnecessary panic.

Looking forward, I believe the current processes around brigade, group and community preparedness are generally sound. Our members continue to perform exceptionally well despite operating an ageing fleet of fire vehicles. Community members are responsive to warnings and advice. However, further improvement could be made in the vegetation management on both public and private land. Enhanced vegetation management would also assist in the early control and containment of fires, and local government should be encouraged to actively support agencies with this work. Lastly, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to share my experiences and observations of the Otways fires in January 2026.

**Alistair DRAYTON:** Alistair Drayton, Chief Officer, Operations, at the Victoria State Emergency Service. I perform roles such as state response controller and regional controller. I am also an accredited level 3 incident controller, and I did join the Colac ICC in late January as deputy incident controller.

I would like to acknowledge the Gulidjan and the Gadubanud, the local traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting today. I would also like to acknowledge all First Nations people who may be with us here today and recognise their enduring connection to country and the deep natural, social and spiritual significance of the landscapes that we are discussing.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge the many communities across Victoria impacted by the 2026 summer fires and to recognise the profound and lasting impacts that all natural disasters have on the lives, livelihoods and wellbeing of our communities. Finally, I acknowledge the dedicated staff and volunteers across our

emergency services, government, non-government organisations and local community groups who played such a significant role in managing the response to the 2026 high-risk weather season.

I am extremely proud of the role VICSES plays in emergency responses across Victoria, particularly the contribution of our dedicated volunteers, who continue to support fire response operations across the state, and I am joined here today by our local VICSES Lorne Unit Controller Chris Jones. Thanks, Chris. In addition to being the control agency responsible for the 24/7 operational response to floods, storms, landslides, earthquakes and tsunamis and delivering the largest road crash rescue service in Victoria, VICSES also provides critical support to our partner agencies. This includes Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria and our fire agencies – Country Fire Authority, Forest Fire Management Victoria and Fire Rescue Victoria – particularly during large and complex incidents such as bushfires.

In preparation for the 2026 high-risk weather season VICSES staff and volunteers undertook extensive readiness activities to support the fire agency partners. These included the distribution of high-risk weather seasonal operational updates to all members in early August 2025 in response to the elevated risk of an early fire season commencing in October, completion of agency intent and assurances across the units in our regions, refresher training to ensure relevant competencies and skills of current fire support operations and ongoing briefings and reminders focused on hydration, fatigue management and wellbeing, recognising the demands of a prolonged fire season. Alongside this, VICSES continued preparations for other key hazards, with strong and sustained focus on flood and storm readiness.

As we have seen both here in Victoria and across the globe, we are experiencing increasingly intense and frequent weather-related emergencies. Concurrent and cascading emergencies are not uncommon, with fires and floods not only occurring in isolation. The 2026 season was no different. On 15 January 2026 a strong, unstable, moist east-south-easterly flow directed over the Otways. Storms moved slow, resulting in prolonged heavy rain. From around midday, rain instantly increased significantly as storms became near stationary. Over 180 millimetres of rain was recorded at the Mount Cowley rain gauge in a 6-hour period, whereas rainfall observed in coastal towns was much less – Kennett River 61 millimetres and Lorne only 8.7 millimetres. As this significant and record-breaking rainfall travelled rapidly through the catchment, it led to sudden, devastating flash flooding along the Great Ocean Road, causing widespread damage and disruption to communities, the environment, critical infrastructure, local businesses and the tourism sector. Despite the scale of the disaster, the coordinated response and emergency services, together with the extraordinary efforts of the communities, prevented loss of life and minimised injuries.

The events of this season reinforced the important point that we work as one. Just as VICSES cannot manage the floods and storms alone, our fire agencies cannot manage large, complex fire events in isolation. Effective outcomes depend on interoperable systems, shared doctrine, strong relationships and trust. The Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System is nationally known as AIIMS. Its recognised framework is used by fire and emergency services in Australia and New Zealand to coordinate effective and integrated responses to incidents. AIIMS also provides the framework for emergency managers to identify the roles and the actions of agencies in response, especially where there are concurrent risks or competing responsibilities.

Further, Victoria's robust governance arrangements, including the shared doctrine, support and ensure effective cooperation and coordination across agencies when delivering emergency management functions, particularly when managing concurrent emergencies. Throughout the 2026 fire season VICSES members supported the fire operations across the state, contributing both at incident management level and on the ground. The support included incident management roles such as planning, logistics, operations, staging area management and ground support, to name a few.

In closing, the 2026 high-risk weather season reinforced the importance of preparedness, partnership and shared responsibility. VICSES remains committed to strengthening capabilities, supporting our partner agencies and working closely with our communities.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. I might start – probably where you finished, Alistair – on these concurrent and cascading events. Obviously the terms of reference of this inquiry are about the fires, but it is a bit hard to assess the impacts of the fires on this community over January when we have got fire igniting on 9 January, a significant flooding event on the 15th and then a breach of containment and escalation of a fire on the 24th. It is quite unprecedented, I think, in the state of Victoria to have such a significant and diverse emergency response

required in such a short period of time. What worked in the set-up of emergency management and response to deal with those vastly different instances in the small geography in a small period of time? What worked well, and what do you think needs to be improved?

**Alistair DRAYTON:** I think the framework which we work in, within the AIIMS structure, and I think the relationship and the management arrangements here in Victoria under Emergency Management Victoria are in that catchphrase before – ‘We work as one.’ We are very close, and working with that creates flexibility and adaptability as well in the sense of emergencies and being able to respond to those. Each of the agencies have their own internal command structures, but again, when we get into our control space we do have that flexibility and adaptability. One of them in particular was the fact that the footprint of both this particular fire in this area here and indeed this flash flood already had an active incident control centre established, which was fortuitous in that sense.

**The CHAIR:** So did the same incident control centre deal with both of the emergencies occurring at once?

**Alistair DRAYTON:** That is correct. They had the flexibility, and our arrangements allow for that to occur, for that to be absorbed into it. It does not happen immediately. You do let an incident escalate to a point where it needs additional or greater structure placed upon it based on not only the number of jobs but the consequences that are also falling from a particular incident.

**The CHAIR:** When it was clear that the incident had escalated enough that it needed to be integrated into the broader ICC framework, how did that occur and what were the consequences of that?

**Alistair DRAYTON:** The consequences from the actual outfall itself, from the event, I think was inevitable – the vehicles and caravans being washed onto the shore – from a consequence-based point of view. It became evident very quickly this was a multilocation event as well. The difficulty in getting some of our people and crews to those became quite challenging. There was a greater need to put in infrastructure across the top, and that became identified really quite early in the space. Acknowledging the state arrangements, which had oversight from a regional control point of view and were a collaboration of the class 1 agencies, again, were able to assist in identifying together at a state level the need to apply a greater level of leadership, if you like, across this. That is why arrangements, conversations and decisions were made to inject additional skills and need into the incident control centre at Colac to enable them and that management team to oversight this particular incident.

**The CHAIR:** Scott, FFMVic was the control agency for the fires. What impact did the flash flooding have on your work in terms of dealing with the fires that had started on the 9th and then getting ready for the outbreak on the 24th?

**Scott TURNER:** Thanks for the question. As identified by Alistair, the AIIMS system is uniquely scalable, and within Victoria, quite proudly, the Victorian emergency management agencies train together and exercise together. Adding the complexities of the flood was similar to adding an additional division to the fire. Under the incident management arrangements, the incident controller had the same responsibilities about warning our communities, informing our communities and creating safe areas for our communities to be in or to return to, and as part of that the flood was added as an additional division to allow them to basically put a team within the incident management team to look at the flood and keep the team looking at the fires.

**The CHAIR:** Do you think that the integration of that was relatively seamless?

**Scott TURNER:** It took time to do that, to bring the people together. The seamless part was ensuring that we had consistency in the messaging that went out to our communities, and it allowed that to happen at a local level, at a regional level and at a state level, and importantly the validation to occur. So from here the validation occurred out of the Geelong regional control centre and then again overseen by the state. So our tiers are mirrored. That gives us that seamless integration. It is a timeliness one about bringing people together into a location, and that is what we saw in this event. It was a number of hours as local responders occurred at the local CFA brigade and the local Lorne SES unit as information came in to allow us to bring additional expertise into the incident management team.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Lovell, do you want to?

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks. Yesterday we visited the Gellibrand fire station and heard from the captain there that the three big things that they need are training, equipment, including trucks, and volunteers, and I was just wondering if you could expand? You talked about the pre-season training, but if you could expand on the need for additional training locally and equipment and say whether that has an impact on your ability to recruit and retain volunteers.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** I guess without being there yesterday and without hearing Tony, I think the captain of Gellibrand that you spoke to, without hearing what he had to say – training and the opportunity to train are there. I guess the availability has been cut back in recent years. Training – we are a volunteer organisation and often we have got full-time jobs and have to volunteer either after work or on weekends. So sometimes – I assume that may be what he is referring to – it is not always available for the right time and for suitable times and suitable people. Also, the training has been changing its structure – you would have to check this – regarding an RTO structure. I cannot elaborate on that because I do not know how RTOs work – probably for more investigation. Then the last part of your question?

**Wendy LOVELL:** The last part was about equipment and trucks.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** I guess I referred to an ageing fleet. I mean, I am sure everyone is aware of the publicity, and the statistics are there on the age of the CFA fleet. For instance, I see trucks going out with members riding on the back into a bushfire in open air, and I do not think that is safe.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Yes, absolutely. Just reading between the lines in your answer there, when you talked about training not being available at the times that volunteers are available to do the training, are you telling us that training is kind of provided 9 to 5, Monday to Friday?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** No, not at all. I guess training has got to be provided over the whole state. Some members may have to travel if they want to train on a weekend 2 or 3 hours away, and it is not often locally at the right time, which does not suit people.

**Wendy LOVELL:** So if you could make a recommendation on training, what would your recommendation be?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** In an ideal world I think opportunities to train on weekends, in the evenings, and some people work shiftwork so during the day. I guess you cannot please all the people all the time, but more opportunities overall.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Scott, I think it was you that talked about the seasonal fire group. Can you just tell us the strength of numbers of the seasonal fire group and what their roles actually are?

**Scott TURNER:** Certainly. FFMVic brings on seasonal forest fire operations officers each summer. We bring them in in the lead into our autumn burn season to allow us to use that workforce (a) to refresh them if they are returning crews, which many of them are, or to upskill the new ones into the autumn burn program, then to look at what we are doing across the landscape for summer, then obviously use them at the end for any rehab or recovery works, and then importantly for the spring burning season. Our seasonal workforce complements the permanent workforce that we have in each of our work centres across the state, and it is also a seasonal workforce that we can move. So they are extremely agile, and as we saw in these events, we moved our forest fire operations officers from across Victoria to here. Their training is aligned with what CFA do and with many of our partner agencies in other jurisdictions. This part of the world was fortunate this year. We had an increase due to the dryness of an additional 22 above our normal cap for the Otway region.

**Wendy LOVELL:** What is your normal cap?

**Scott TURNER:** Fifty-eight and then additional, which is an advantage for us, similar to CFA, in rostering personnel to go but also then being able to provide them some of that fatigue and relief management to ensure that they are at their peak and optimum ability to respond to emergencies or also support the community.

**Wendy LOVELL:** That seasonal fire group, are they sourced – you said some of them are returning, but are many of them volunteers, so that it is taking capacity away from one to fill another hole?

**Scott TURNER:** No. Many of them are young people that have come out of university and are doing those types of things. A number of them actually travel the world doing seasonal firefighting, so a number of our personnel leave here and go to Canada or America, and they supplement the volunteering. Notably in the Otways many of the FFMVic staff are also CFA volunteers, so in this instance they focus on their FFMVic work but then will also contribute outside of that to the CFA. So it is strong collaborative partnership.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today, and also thank you for all the work that you did over that fire season. I think we have heard how this was really a very severe event, the fires and the floods, and it is actually a credit to everyone involved that there were not more homes lost or any lives lost locally, particularly given the scale of the fires. You have talked a bit about what worked well and that great collaboration across organisations, but what can we learn in terms of preparing? We will inevitably have more fire seasons around this area. What can we learn from that? What needs to change to ensure that we do not have a more devastating outcome down the track?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Interesting question, because fire is a part of Australia and it is unfortunately a part of Victoria, and we see intense fires every 10 or 15 years. I think educating the community is something that we have done and must continue to do. We have a community that travels rapidly between areas. We have a lot of tourists travel through the Otways and around the Great Ocean Road and up back through the Otways to cut across. So people have to be aware of fire and what fire potentially can mean to them and how they can be impacted. So continuing to educate the community, not only the community that lives in the fire-prone areas but communities that will travel through the fire-prone areas, is important. Mitigation and suppression – I mentioned the need for more controlled burning, and I know how hard it is for these guys to get controlled burning done. The time taken to prep areas to burn is considerable and often hinders the amount of burning that can be done, because burning can only be done during certain times of the year – cool burning or hot burning. So we need to enable agencies to do the burns to protect the areas. They do a great job, and you saw that yesterday – what those burns can do to protect communities. We have got a lot of government land with a lot of native forest right along one of the best parts of the world, particularly in Victoria, on the coast down there. Does that partly answer your question initially?

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Are there other resources or systems changes that potentially could assist with management of any future fires or disasters around here?

**Chris JONES:** My patch is from Fairhaven all the way to Skenes Creek and goes into Mount Sabine Road, so we have got a very large patch of the Otways in our backyard. Part of the issue, which has been going for a long time, has been mobile phone coverage. I have got something I wrote, so I will talk to it. Mobile phone service between Lorne and Wye River is unreliable, particularly during emergency events or high season tourist times, often leaving users with no signal at all. Significant outages, especially for Optus customers, were reported during January 2026 during the fire and flooding events. The Great Ocean Road is a beautiful road, but it has got a lot of features that prevent the coverage. There are persistent failures and poor reception. Outages are common in the area between Lorne and Wye River. It impacted us during the flash flooding and the fire event.

Emergency risks – the flash flooding and bushfire incidents have highlighted that mobile networks can fail to support emergency alerts. When you do not have coverage – in fact I was told about an emergency alert. I did not get one on my phone, yet I was right in the middle of it. The other thing is that towns like Lorne and Wye River have terrible coverage during summer. The mobile networks just freeze up and stop. During summer holidays networks get overloaded, resulting in slow or non-existent service. If you were in Lorne at the Pier to Pub day – I happen to be a troubleshooter on the Pier to Pub as well – we had ash and smoke coming over. It was not an issue – it was communicated to everybody and was managed really well – but I can tell you that our mobile phone network just stopped during that. This has been a problem for quite a period of time. There is no quick fix, but it is really important that we put some effort into looking at this mobile phone network.

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

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Excellent question. Thank you. I have got a couple of questions, so I am happy to take some of the answers on notice if we do not get enough time. Just on the mobile phone coverage, it is the mobiles that inform community members to evacuate, and if they are down – I know so many stories of narrow escapes by 30 seconds and 1 minute because they simply had no phone coverage; they were unaware. I think that is our biggest risk to life. I think the emergency response is strong now.

I just want to ask about roads and also about the camera program. As a committee we have been hearing about road closures and the effect on our communities, both during and after. Is there information that communities need to be provided with, and are there ways that communities can provide information to emergency services on road closures?

**Scott TURNER:** I guess I will kick off on the road closures. There is formal notification via the VicEmergency app. As we heard this morning, shires replicate that information through their community networks, as does Victoria Police, so that is there. There is always the opportunity, and we heard yesterday how local WhatsApp groups allow people to get around road networks. Incident management teams, regardless of the emergency, put a lot of consideration into why they close roads, and it is about community safety. It is dangerous enough sending the men and women of our professional volunteer agencies and our career emergency management agencies into these areas without opening them up more broadly, so it is a very considered approach. It is done in consultation with Victoria Police and the road managers to ensure the ultimate focus is on the safety of the community, either those that have remained and not left or those that are seeking to go back in. That is the primary one for why we look at the road closures and why we have a tiered approach to who we let back in and out. It is around their safety and maintaining the safety of responders.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Do you think communities need more information about what is happening on a day-to-day basis to actually achieve road openings? I think communities think roads close and no-one is doing anything about opening them.

**Scott TURNER:** We send messaging out daily – updates to what is happening in our emergencies – and as you heard this morning, we also undertake community meetings. It is the opportunity to refer people to more than one source. We mentioned mobile phones. We have strong collaboration across Victoria with the ABC radio network to allow that. Also to impart information at each tier of governance we have really good communication sharing, where people amplify the messages that are going out. It is about the consistency and the messaging to look after our community and their safety.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** DEECA has a fire-spotting camera program, and my understanding is it is a pilot; there is still research being conducted. The Victorian Forest Products Association is also doing a similar project in the private land space. Have the two projects met, has there been collaboration and do you think it would be logical for those two sectors, in developing up this new early detection, to work together?

**Scott TURNER:** Across Victoria both DEECA or FFMVic and CFA have staffed fire towers, where we have staff up them. What we have explored in recent years is using camera technology with AI. The Green Triangle Fire Alliance in the far south-west of Victoria and then into the south-east of South Australia has used AI and a number of commercial providers. They are one of the providers that are supporting the Victorian investigations, and through local arrangements we are learning from them. Fortunately for the Barwon south-west region, for this region, we have had strong integration with the Green Triangle Fire Alliance and access to their camera network, and that has helped inform some of the work that DEECA is doing – and more broadly, the Victorian government – on researching cameras and AI opportunities for detection.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Just very quickly, is that an important new innovation in early response and prevention in the context of, say, lightning, which appears to be the worst?

**Scott TURNER:** In this example, we were able to use the cameras not only to support the people in the towers to detect them, but they also detected a number of fires, due to the timing and the weather environments, that people were unable to see. The other advantage of the cameras is the incident management team in Colac or people at Geelong or in town in our State Control Centre can access the same cameras to get live feeds to supplement the intelligence we get from aircraft and, importantly, from our people on the ground.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thanks.

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

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much. I have a thousand questions in about 4 minutes. We were out at Tomahawk Creek Road yesterday. Thank you very much to you and your team. We saw on one side of the road there had been a prescribed burn. Now, imperfect as prescribed burns can be, we saw a marked difference in the way the fire behaved when it met both forest that had not been prescribed – so it was just fuel-loaded or there was plenty of fuel hazard there – and that which had, in 2021. My question is more on notice. I really want to understand the footprint of that prescribed burn: how much of it was actually the footprint that was supposed to be, and then how much was done. If there is anything that you can tell us, Scott, about that and about the fire that came up from – I do not know if it was south or north, because I am out of my bearings, but if you could provide the whole context around that so that our committee can learn about the importance of these preparatory burns, if that is okay. Thank you.

Also in relation to fuel hazard levels in this region, the government at the moment has put out a snapshot of a regional level but not a district level. I think it would be really helpful for us to understand at a district level for this region – I am happy for across Victoria – that bushfire risk profile. That would be fabulous if you could do that. The other thing is I was really impressed with the CEC just before and the resilient forests program. It would be great to understand further – they said that you collaborate with them – the role in breaking down silos. If this is a case study that has happened, that would be fabulous, Scott. Thank you.

And I will move on. Lachlan and Chris, if I could just thank you both for the amazing work that you do in your communities. Lachlan, I think you mentioned CFA vegetation management teams – is that right? Can you expand? Because I think we have heard about these. They have been around for a long time. I feel like 10 years ago they were under pressure of a diminishing role or whether there was funding. Can you speak to that and their role in this vegetation management – you know, fuel reduction on roadsides and the like?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Briefly, I do not have a great deal of experience with those individuals, but I know they do exist in the assistance of managing private land and vegetation management, and not only through burns, but also through slashing and mulching, which work – I do not know whether you saw yesterday that that work was done around Gellibrand prior to the approaching fire.

**Melina BATH:** To save that asset that was really important.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** But they are also involved in doing work leading into the fire season as well.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Lachlan, in terms of the training cutbacks – and you answered Wendy's question, which was fabulous – I heard flexibility, because your members are volunteers and they have nine-to-five jobs or maybe they have different types of jobs. Is that in Melbourne or can it be delivered here?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** It is delivered regionally and locally. And probably thinking back to the answer earlier, I would also like to add that those packages and programs have become quite a bit more extensive than they were five to 10 years ago.

**Melina BATH:** Tony said that, yes.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** And instead of being one-day courses they potentially could be three-day courses, so it is a lot more contact hours that people have.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Three consecutive, or –

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Not necessarily. They are separated over nights or weekends.

**Melina BATH:** They could be more flexible.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** And look, they are flexible, but the feedback I get from members is they want more flexibility.

**Melina BATH:** Yes, and you are a rare species, a beautiful species called volunteers who help us in the fireground, so we really appreciate what you do.

And then overall probably a wider question: in my mind I heard ‘fix the VicEmergency app’. We did a flood inquiry, and I have been in other inquiries when we had massive fires in the east of Victoria. We had these same issues, where there is multiple messaging in different contexts of ‘leave or go’. This is quite concerning for a local making a decision. It happened in the flood inquiry. What needs to happen there?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** It is interesting, because being involved in emergency services I understand the message. I understand where it is coming from and what message they are trying to pass on to the public. But on the other side, I sit there and I receive messages, and when you receive a message you have to read beyond the top. That is part of the problem. People do not scroll through the message, and if you read the whole message, it gives you the whole story. That is where my thoughts go around –

**Melina BATH:** Education of community.

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Yes, and the way messages are delivered, and particularly around this fire. The area of Larpent, for example, borders on Irrewillipe and where the fire was, but also goes 12 to 15 kilometres to the north, which is a long way from where the fire impacted. But that was put into the emergency warning zone. So the polygon, or whatever they describe it as, at the time can be quite extensive but affect a lot of people that may not be initially impacted.

**Melina BATH:** Needing that information –

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** So refresh that, or –

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Yes, and making sure there is understanding of the app and how it works.

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

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. Gentlemen, the floor is yours for this one, okay? I am expecting a good reply. What changes in policy or legislation would you like to see to ensure a more efficient response and structure for the bodies that you represent? And silence. Come on – this is the golden question, boys.

**Scott TURNER:** If everyone is quiet, I think there is a really good opportunity for us to acknowledge that mitigation and preparedness is a shared responsibility. As we have all heard, and even as the panel said today, there is a lot of focus on burning and fuel modification on public land. As we heard from the Conservation Ecology Centre, we are partnering with them to look at doing tenure-blind works, and we do that both on this side of the Otways and on the coastal side – an opportunity for greater preparedness and mitigation, tenure-blind and on all landowners. Particularly if we look at some of the critical infrastructure things – we have heard about roads coming and going, about how we maintain those – looking after communities ahead of any event is a shared responsibility at each tier and down to local landowners. So I think there is a positive opportunity to support everybody. It is not a single agency responsible.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** No, that is all right. Is there any bureaucratic red or green tape that is strangling you from serving the community better? You are looking uncomfortable.

**Scott TURNER:** Look, I would not speak on any red or green or blue-coloured tape, any colour tape, holding it together. I think it is that opportunity to bring communities together. Many of you will remember that over generations we have seen that in emergencies we come together afterwards. It is the opportunity to come together ahead of an emergency.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Still silence?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** I guess an extended budget – and the availability to have updated appliances. I would go back and add vegetation management and the work that can be done with mitigation. Also, having seen some of the equipment that travelled from interstate and worked on our fireground, it was topnotch – particularly from South Australia. The level of their equipment was right up there. They travelled with good teams of mechanics and their own first aiders and medics to treat their people. I guess it is around equipment and the money that is directed there and supporting volunteerism as well. We are very fortunate to have a very large bank of volunteers in the CFA who leave their work, often unpaid, to commit to things like we saw in

January. We work alongside these guys and the guys in paid roles very well. But the number of volunteers are decreasing. For some reason people are not willing to stick their hand up to be volunteers, for whatever hurdle that may be.

**Alistair DRAYTON:** We would all welcome additional funding. That would be terrific. I think there are a couple of nails that have been hit on the head already in relation to resilience and education. You live in the bush – it burns. You live near a river – it floods. What is your shared responsibility? What are you doing about your risk? I think there is a greater need for education and people to understand their environment better. That is really, really important to do. That is something that I know that we have. If you look back over the last couple of decades, we are not just sending red trucks and rescue trucks to instances. Now we are spending a lot of time and effort on education and the projects and those risk areas that have been identified. I think we are doing that, but I think we need to do more. I think there is an onus on individuals and landowners in relation to their own risk and their own environments. It is something that we need to continue to challenge ourselves in addressing.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay, I will give you an easy one to finish up on then. Live satellite feed of the fires – I was talking to somebody involved in the Longwood fires over the weekend, and they said if they had had access to live satellite feed of the fire, it would have been much easier to communicate where it was at that very time. Do you think that would be something that would be beneficial?

**Scott TURNER:** If I look at how these fires were managed, we used aircraft extensively with a lot of technology to see through the smoke. Our challenge with many satellite feeds is the bureau provides a feed, which we can see now with smoke modelling. You cannot see through the smoke. It is the technology that is available now in Victoria that we have enhanced in recent years with our aircraft, both fixed-wing and rotary, to see through the smoke. A greater availability of those platforms is what supported us here in knowing where the fire was, and our technologies, where our men and women on the fireground are reporting in where they are and what they are doing, so we are getting the 3D picture of intelligence. It is us utilising that and moving with technology as it goes forward.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Berger.

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. Lachlan, this is a question for you in your other role as a dairy farmer. I just wanted to understand: does the industry have a strategy around bushfires in this region? It would appear to me that if there is a fire in a particular place, farm door pick-up is pretty essential given the timeframes that are around it. Does the industry get together and say, 'If in the event this is what's going to happen, can we help you out in prioritising farm door pick-up?'

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Dairy Australia is an organisation that sits above. We pay a levy as a dairy farmer to Dairy Australia. They help and support there. They have a regional WestVic Dairy, which is out of Camperdown. Obviously you have to milk your cows twice a day. You have milk. If you do not milk them, it becomes an animal welfare issue. You have to feed them, and often you do not have feed because you may have been burnt out. So there are a number of things that can impact you there. Farmers will dump milk, which can become an environmental issue. Often that milk goes into effluent ponds that are used to manage manure and stuff. Often there is a great deal of communication between transport companies, milk companies and the farmer and also into the control centre as well. Having worked previously in a control centre, back when Wye River fires were on, there is communication between all people involved.

**John BERGER:** In terms of those road closures, are they able to bypass them if in the event –

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** If the roads are unsafe, these guys will not let them through. What I was leading to in my statement was more around: can those roads be tidied up faster for that reason and should that be a priority in the future? As you do at a personal level, you know those farmers that reside in Carlisle River.

**John BERGER:** That is all I have, Chair.

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

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you. I guess it is a question – can the roads be cleared faster in future? What needs to happen for that to occur?

**Alistair DRAYTON:** There is a far greater emphasis placed on road openings and closures. Closures are clearly for safety. An incident controller will appoint traffic managers to continually look at that and where the risks are, but there is a continual need to reduce the size or the number of roadblocks around. It is definitely a focus that has become more prevalent, in relation to thinking about the impacts on the community. There are closer ties with not only the department of transport but we bring in Victoria Police, the Department of Education, in relation to school bus routes and all of those sorts of things and the impacts, and also heavy transport – what the issues and impacts are in relation to those in milk, hay and those sorts of things. Working at the state level, I was part of a program trying to get feed and things that we do put priorities on through certain roadblocks. We give them what we call wet escorts, in relation to fire trucks, to accompany them through roads that would be closed to the public but enabling fodder and such like to get through in emergencies. So far greater emphasis is placed on that now than ever before.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** And you would also support the call for roads to be reopened faster?

**Scott TURNER:** It is a focus, and it is balancing that focus between the fire operations and the availability of people. As the member saw yesterday, there are extraordinary amounts of trees on the roadside that need to be assessed to allow people to go in safely. As was highlighted, the opportunities utilised in this example were taking fire appliances off the fire line to support or to escort people in and out to do some of those essential services and then working with industry and Ag Victoria to support the dairy industry and other farming communities about how to do that. It is that combination across all the land managers, noting there are many in Victoria, and how we come together. Then to open them safely for community is also a partnership with Victoria Police, and it is about whether it is safe to put the community back on and navigate them, noting we build our roads to a standard focused on community safety.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** I am interested in radio systems, particularly for the CFA. I guess in central Victoria, we heard, that with radios there were major issues, and people were flying blind when they went in. They did not know where other trucks were. They might have had up to 60 calls to their private mobile. Did you experience any issues in the area?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** Look, not greatly. I guess that terrain that you would have been in around Gellibrand is not very friendly to any sort of radio coverage. Even if you have satellites, they are going to be covered by the trees. So there is nothing more that I would – you know. Does that answer your question?

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Okay. It was certainly a big issue in –

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** It certainly was not life threatening, I did not think.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Okay. It was around Harcourt. I am just interested too – we heard a bit about smaller brigades. I guess they are required to do the 30 per cent contribution for VESEP funding. It is challenging for a smaller brigade compared to one in a larger town that might have a Bunnings barbecue and be able to raise a whole lot more. Do you think there needs to be consideration given to those smaller brigades, perhaps a lower contribution requirement?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** I would not knock that back. That would be great, yes. Coming from a small brigade with one truck in a small community, yes.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** One of the previous submissions talked about the fire tracker app and how the CFA has access to it but the local incident controllers do not. Are you aware of any –

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** I am unfamiliar with the fire truck app.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** That is fine. I guess we will have to ask the person that made the submission. We heard previously too about decisions being made in Melbourne, and quite often you have local people on the ground. Do you see a need for more decisions to be made locally rather than going to Melbourne and back out again? What are your thoughts on that?

**Lachlan SUTHERLAND:** I am happy to start – operationally, on the ground – if you like. Particularly in this fire case that we are talking about today – and the relationship we have with Scott’s guys on the ground is great – we never encountered any delays or decisions coming back. There were some waits on the ICC, but decisions that were made by your leaders on the ground that we dealt with as strike team leaders in this fire did not delay suppression or control or burning out areas or anything, in my experience.

**Scott TURNER:** The AIIMS system, again, is integral to getting local knowledge, and for the management of the fire those decisions are made locally. Whether it be Forest Fire Management Victoria or CFA, they are all represented in that incident management team. The warnings are generated locally by warnings experts that sit in the incident management team based on the intelligence we get from the collective firefighting resource on the ground. The broader impact about decisions that are made by other players outside of the emergency management arena, which may happen elsewhere, is certainly outside of our remit. We just encourage everyone to go back to a single source of truth, which for the community is currently the VicEmergency app and for broader government is to come back through our emergency management partners and through the state arrangements to ensure that there is consistency in the messaging that is put out.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Gentlemen, thank you all for coming in and the evidence you have given today. We have let the session run a little bit longer because it was so critically important. You will be provided with a transcript to review before it is published. With that, the committee will just take a short break to reset for the next witnesses.

**Witnesses withdrew.**