

# **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**

Terence O'Brian; and

Mark Billing.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria. We have got some local residents and business owners with us for the next session.

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

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

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Ms Tyrrell.

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

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Hi. I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region as well.

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

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

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

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

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

**The CHAIR:** For Hansard, if you could each state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

**Mark BILLING:** My name is Mark Billing, and I had a challenge this morning as I stood in front of the wardrobe as to what uniform or what bit of gear to put on. I am representing community, but I am also a group officer with the County Fire Authority, the president of Dairy Farmers Victoria and a dairy farmer.

**The CHAIR:** A lot of hats – a big hat rack.

**Mark BILLING:** Big hats – that is right.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** I am Terrence O'Brian. I am actually a member of the CFA, but I am speaking personally today. My history is that I was born in Kenya, educated in Western Australia, attended quite a few fires there and came here, and in 44 years I have had over 600 turnouts in Victoria. That is my background, but as I said, I am speaking as an affected landowner in the area, in the Barongarook area particularly, and I have noticed, can I say, some of the inadequacies at that stage.

**The CHAIR:** Right. The way this will work is we will invite you to make an opening statement and then we will get into questions. It will be pretty straightforward. Mark, I might invite you to commence.

**Mark BILLING:** Thank you, Chair. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry. My name is Mark Billing, and I am a dairy farmer from Larpent, just west of Colac. We also have a farm in the Gellibrand area, and I am also Corangamite group officer with the CFA. Importantly, much of the private land

affected in the recent Otways fire complex lies within the Corangamite group area, reflecting as I can on the on-ground experience from both farming and an operational response perspective.

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the enormous commitment from volunteers and their families during the Otway fires. Volunteers committed long hours over extended periods, not just during the response phase but well into recovery. Behind every one of those volunteers is a family, a farm or a workplace carrying that load. Partners and families step in to keep farms running, manage stock and hold things together at home while volunteers are out protecting communities. That contribution is often unseen but is absolutely critical to the system working, and it deserves to be properly recognised in how we support our volunteers going forward. In rural Victoria agriculture and fire response are not separate systems. They are deeply interconnected. Farmers are often first on scene. We provide water, machinery and local knowledge, and a large proportion of the volunteers firefighting workforce comes directly off farms. At the same time those farms are highly exposed to fire, and when they are impacted, the consequences last well beyond the fireground. We are talking about lost pasture, damaged infrastructure, animal welfare pressures and in dairy regions disruption throughout the milk supply chain. Recovery is not weeks, it is seasons.

One of the issues that I really want to highlight is preparedness is not consistently shared across the system. Farmers are held to clear expectations around fuel management and fire prevention, but those same standards are not always applied to roadsides, rail corridors, easements and utility-managed land. Fire does not recognise boundaries. During the Otway fires we saw the consequences – delayed roadside fuel reduction and poorly maintained infrastructure, which increased both ignition risk and fire spread. When prevention is not done properly across all land, the burden shifts to the response, and that burden falls on volunteers and local communities.

From a response perspective there are also serious concerns. The integration with the Colac incident control centre was very poor. There was little or no direct consultation with the Corangamite group or many local brigades during key parts of the response phase. That is a fundamental issue. Local knowledge, local leadership and local resources are critical to effect fire response, particularly in agricultural landscapes. Not properly integrating into the planning and decision-making undermines the response. Importantly, this is not a new lesson. It goes directly against repeated findings from royal commissions and fire reviews, which consistently highlight the need to involve local volunteer leadership. We know better, but we are still consistently applying those lessons.

Rural fire capability is built on volunteers, but that system is under increasing pressure. We are seeing longer fire seasons, more complex fire behaviour and greater operational demands. At the same time our appliances are ageing, capital investment is lagging and volunteer fatigue and availability are growing concerns. Volunteers should not be placed in a position where the equipment they use falls below modern safety and performance standards. That is not sustainable and it increases risk.

There are also practical issues that need urgent attention. Road access is one of them. Delays in clearing and reopening roads following fire events have real impacts on farmer wellbeing and fatigue, on animal welfare, on milk collection and supply chains, and on movement of emergency services. In agricultural regions road access is not simply a recovery task, it is a frontline operational priority. We need a dedicated, properly resourced capability to make those corridors safe and reopen them quickly.

Farmers also play a direct role in prevention and early suppression. We manage fuel loads every day, we invest in equipment and we often take early action to prevent fires from escalating. But the cost of doing that is increasing, particularly under drought and financial pressure. Supporting farmers in that role should be seen as an investment in community risk reduction, not individual assistance.

Infrastructure resilience is critical. Power, water and communications are essential for both farming operations and emergency response. When those systems fail during an event, the impacts escalate quickly. As rural areas undergo infrastructure and energy transitions, resilience must remain a priority, particularly in fire-prone areas.

In wrapping up, fire prevention, response and recovery in rural Victoria must be treated as a shared system. Right now too much of the responsibility sits with farmers and volunteers, while gaps remain in accountability across statutory authorities and infrastructure managers. If we want better outcomes, we need shared accountability across all land managers. We need proper integration of local knowledge into response. We need

to invest in frontline capability and recognition of agriculture as a critical infrastructure. Without that we continue to repeat the same failures, placing unnecessary risk on rural communities, volunteers and farming businesses. Thank you.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Thank you for allowing me to speak. I would like to start by saying a small fire can be quickly extinguished with little long-term effect, but a major inferno relies on huge resources – costs – to be able to be controlled and has very long-term effects. Preventing fires becoming large is the most effective form of firefighting and results in minimisation of costs and damage and disruption. I have 12 points relative to that.

I believe in Victoria we should be implementing statewide legislation requiring mineral earth firebreaks along private property boundaries and dividing major acreages, similar to Western Australia. This will increase small fires and reduce big ones. Implement legislation requiring mineral earth firebreaks and access roads within state-managed public areas and mandate annual fire mitigation targets. We are not meeting targets that have been set. Roads and tracks are being closed by fallen trees with no-one looking after them because there is no more forest removal. The end result is firefighters cannot get to the fires quickly. We need to strengthen the accountability and oversight of councils for fire prevention activities, including slashing and burning of all roadsides before and during fire seasons and responsibility for implementation and maintenance of strategic firebreaks and roads – Mark referred to that same question.

We need to modify the 10/50 rule to be mandatorily applied to all buildings within a bushfire management overlay or pastoral land irrespective of age et cetera. The 10/50 rule, brought in by a previous royal commission, was immediately watered down by councils, to the point where now we expect a CFA appliance to go and be at a house to prevent it from burning. We should not have to. Apply consistent fuel management standards across all land tenures – Mark also referred to that.

Significantly increase CFA fleet renewal and volunteer support funding measures to reflect the increased risk that has applied over the last 20 years. The statement 'Funding hasn't been decreased' may be true, but it has not kept up with inflation. The same thing applies to training. We need to modify 2020 legislation creating Fire Rescue Victoria to fix the CFA mid-management problems resulting from the shortfall/secondment of Fire Rescue Victoria personnel. We have a rotating door system at the moment of middle management, and I do not know how you expect that to give you a consistent fire attack system. Improve the current public education and information systems – radios, VicEmergency et cetera – to significantly improve the accuracy of information to the public and to ensure local knowledge is included in the incident management teams and that people on the fire front can get to them much more promptly, particularly with VicEmergency information. There was a case in Barongarook where the Barongarook people received a message 'Evacuate now' and 5 minutes later 'It's okay to return' for the same areas in VicEmergency.

Ensure the consistent exclusion of people from fires and modify that continually as a situation changes. During our fire, they basically set the control points and then did not move them. We went through at least three cycles of weather, with the wind going around 360 degrees, and the ability or safety of certain roads for certain areas changed radically during that situation. When there was a south wind, people to the north were affected, and when there was a north wind, people to the south were affected, but the people outside those areas could not do anything. Establish dedicated resources focused on road corridor reopening following emergency events. People in these areas rely (a) on dairy farmer operations and (b) almost everyone else relies on tourists. Excluding tourists kills those other people. Improve the resilience of rural communications, power and water infrastructures and require the operators to conduct and maintain fire mitigation before and during each fire season. CFA had to allocate fire trucks to protect telecommunication things that had not been cleared during this fire. Ensure recovery frameworks recognise the impacts on agricultural businesses and country operations that are reliant on passing travellers. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both. You both talked about roads and the importance of opening roads. Mark, you talked about a dedicated capability that can get in and do that. What are some of the risks that you observe with roads post fire that need to be managed?

**Mark BILLING:** Obviously falling trees and trees that have not fallen create a safety issue. Most road signage is destroyed with the passage of a fire front. Whilst they are not as important, the tree hazard is the significant one, without a doubt, particularly with this fire.

**The CHAIR:** And what would a dedicated capability do? What would it have in it, and how would it go about its task, in your view?

**Mark BILLING:** I think one thing – and I am sure you understand this with the Otways fires – was we had three separate and very distinct runs over a number of weeks with this one. The theory around having a dedicated team or taskforce – whatever the terminology is – is that they are allocated and just deliberately work on mitigating the road risk for reopening. So that might be more mobile excavators to do tree treatments and tree assessors to identify the trees that need treatment. On occasion with this fire, because we still had running fire and were trying to put containment lines in, the resources that would normally be put towards mitigating the risks around roads were drawn off for the impending next day for a fire. My theory around this is to have a dedicated taskforce of tree assessors, chainsaw operators and heavy equipment to open these roads up much quicker, because as we have discussed, with dairy, milk collection is critical. It has to happen virtually every day. There were a number of farms that had to dump milk, particularly in the Carlisle area. One farm in particular dumped three days worth of milk. Now, the company that he supplies has paid for that milk. They do not have to, but generally milk processors will pay for milk that is dumped in emergency situations, fire or flood. But for that to happen is not good, and once you are dumping that amount of milk – our effluent management systems do not handle milk. Milk is really bad for the environment, so the EPA would become involved very quickly once we go past one or two days of having to dump milk.

**The CHAIR:** Terence, any views?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Basically the same as Mark. The problem is that it is the same people who are doing the firefighting as are doing the tree assessment and the treatment, so if you have a situation like we did this year with multiple cycles going around and multiple breakouts, those resources just become totally stretched. Now, I understand you cannot have millions of dollars everywhere, but the resources this time were far less than were required.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much, both of you. I feel like there is a world of wisdom sitting in front of us. Mark, thank you. You are a farmer, and that is very, very important. I grew up on a dairy farm, so I thank you for the work you do to feed us and thank you as a volunteer for protecting us – and Terence for your observation and understanding and experience. Does your dairy have a backup generator? Can you run it on a diesel generator if the power goes out?

**Mark BILLING:** Yes, we do.

**Melina BATH:** Some can, and it seems like more and more farmers are having to have that. I am really interested in contractors. We know we have heard in the last few hours and days the importance of clearing the roads. The native timber industry is closed. There are still plant panel and contractors around. I want to understand: how should their work be improved? They are there, but they are actually a bit of a threatened species as well sometimes. So can you explain that to us from your point of view?

**Mark BILLING:** There are probably two parts to that. We did see on the fireground where equipment was brought in and the operators probably were not quite up to the task, so we ended up with mounds of spoil material that had timber and everything in it. So then we had to go back and break it open to put them out. So since the forestry has closed, particularly hardwood in the Otways, as you say, we have lost access to a lot of skilled operators. The machines can be brought in; it is the operators, who make those machines work and make them talk, that we are probably starting to see being a real issue.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. That is an issue. I have got limited time. You said with the Colac incident control centre and the Corangamite group you felt that there was a lack of integration. Can you please give that as a case study and a recommendation of what needs to happen to be better?

**Mark BILLING:** Yes. I can add it in on notice if you like, but as a group officer in charge of 15 brigades – and as I have mentioned, the whole of the private footprint is in within our group – at no time was there any connection with the Corangamite group and the ICC around response. As Lachlan said earlier, on the ground was really good. Working with Forest Fire Management on the ground and the staff on the ground was excellent.

**Melina BATH:** It was up the food chain.

**Mark BILLING:** That is exactly right. There was a gap, very definitely a gap – and also around community information. And I had to push reasonably hard to get a session at Carlisle River.

**Melina BATH:** As in bringing them out?

**Mark BILLING:** Community information, yes, and we also put in a request, because obviously – and you spoke with Tony Robertson yesterday – Tony was in the situation where he was a little bit hampered on what information he could give his community, and we did not have a one-pager or something from the ICC to say, ‘These are the things that are happening, and these are the things you can talk to the public about,’ because obviously there are, you know, certain things we cannot. I ensured that all the brigade captains within my group were getting the incident shift plan each day, but obviously we could not pass it out to the public.

**Melina BATH:** I have run out of time, but take this on notice, please. We are going to go and talk to the department, and the department are going to say, ‘Oh, the communication’s great. It works very well.’ Can you provide a specific example of what you want to see to make that communication better? We are hearing from you. We will hear from, I will say, the department. I am not putting words in their mouths, but they will say no. So what needs to happen to change? What is a recommendation for us, please?

**Terence O’BRIAN:** Can I add two very quick items?

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**Terence O’BRIAN:** Two indications of some of the problems – meals were not getting out to the firefighters. ICC’s responsibility is to do that. And VicEmergency – when I noticed it was so horrible in sending out the ‘evacuate now’ and ‘return’, I tried to contact, in fact phoned in to, the ICC and spoke to someone. It took two days before anything came out. These are just examples.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. And thank you for appearing today and for the evidence that you have provided to the committee. I am interested in understanding a bit more about how that integration with private landholders and other land managers can be better done in terms of prevention and preparedness. What sorts of processes do you think would help? Rather than the specific land management, I guess, what processes to help build that partnership and collaboration would assist?

**Mark BILLING:** Most rural brigades are representative of their communities – they are made up of the communities – and in this space, whether it is prevention or whether it is suppression, we are representing our communities as brigades. Colac Otway shire ceased to have the municipal fire prevention committee. It does not exist anymore. That was a great conduit for us to bring issues to the table, for the fire prevention manager within the shire to manage or to instigate remedies. Unfortunately, that has ceased to be now. We are working on reinstigating that, and maybe after the Otway fires we can make that happen again. But that, to me, has been a huge gap in the connection between issues that have been raised by the community through their brigades or brigades on behalf of their communities and getting at least to local government. I think that that is one thing, if we can reinstigate that. We have got a neighbouring shire that has that, has kept it going and gets great results. It gets that community message into at least local government level.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Terence, have you got any views on that?

**Terence O’BRIAN:** Just one thought. Colac shire has a large parcel of land on the top of the hill just above Colac, forested. It has had no fire mitigation for many years, despite the local brigade chasing it. Most of the road corridors are grossly overgrown, and there is no action at all. It is not acceptable.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Do you feel that the preparation was adequate for these fires in your experience?

**Mark BILLING:** I could probably cite two examples where they were not. We had a Telstra tower that had no fuel reduction around it. We actually had to task one of the Tasmanian crews during the fire to go and specifically clear the land within the ringlock fence that protected the tower – protected it from somebody jumping in but not so much from fire. That was a critical issue, and that is critical infrastructure for us as a

response agency as well as for the community, obviously. That was potentially under threat. So again, putting resources that could have been doing other work onto Telstra infrastructure was a bit frustrating.

The farm that I own in the Gellibrand area – the road into that is a gravel road. It normally gets cleared reasonably well. This year, or this season, it has not. We actually evacuated all our cows out of that area, not just for that reason but because access, if the fire had gone through, was going to be pretty much impossible. We had a number of large-value animals in there, and we got permission through the ICC to actually get them out as part of the evacuation. They are a movable asset, and for us that is a whole generation of highly valuable animals that we wanted to get out of there and get back up here at home. So they are just a couple of examples.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. Thank you for the work that you do and the knowledge you have across all the different layers. We heard from the CFA that they need to take fire trucks off the fireground to do assessments of trees in burnt areas, so your recommendation or suggestion to have dedicated tree assessment teams sounds really like a good idea. Would there be any reasons why that would not work? What are the barriers to that? Sometimes good ideas sound good, but in actual fact –

**Mark BILLING:** A point of clarification firstly: normally in our area, within my group, we do not have CFA personnel that are qualified to do tree assessment. So we would not be taking CFA appliances off the line to be doing road access mitigation. That is the role of Forest Fire Management here for us in the Otways.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** I might have been incorrect. It might have actually been Forest Fire Management that said they were taking trucks off line.

**Mark BILLING:** Yes. They have been taking slip-ons and potentially tankers –

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Again, same fire – it is a resource.

**Mark BILLING:** It is a resource – exactly. If we were able to bring in resource from outside the actual response area to support road access – that is probably more my thinking. We do not want to be drawing resource off a firefight. And again, some of the fires that you have looked at or fires that have a massive impact but happen very quickly – this one went three weeks basically with three separate runs, so there was a huge commitment of resource. People to respond to that. I think what we need to look at is: we time and time again talk about getting roads open as quickly as possible and as safely as possible, and the incident controller is ultimately responsible for making that call. So we need to be able to have a ready resource that is able to be rolled in, literally, and can start working on recovery of roads when it is safe to do so. But I think because of a lot of the red tape around that needs to be ticked off before an incident controller is comfortable – because it is their responsibility and they are wearing the cost of whatever happens that is untoward – we need to support that better with resource.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Terence?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** No, I do not have much on that one, but I would like to very quickly go back to the other one.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Sorry – on this question?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** On a previous question I would like to add in –

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Oh. Well, I will close out this one, and then you can, if that is all right.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Whatever is your process, please.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** It sounds like it might be a good recommendation for this committee to consider alternative options, including that separate teams for road openings be slotted into that hierarchy, because then they can look at other options as well, not just what you have suggested.

**Mark BILLING:** Yes. It could be private contractors under the supervision of the department, for instance. Do not forget, within this fire footprint too we had significant plantation response. We actually have two forest industry brigades that sit within our group as well. They have access to quite a lot of resource as well. But yes, as far as having an incident controller have a level of comfort around the clearance of road to a safe standard, I think there are other ways of doing it other than just drawing resource off the fireground.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thanks. Sorry – go ahead.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** That is all right. Adding on to what Mark said previously, the other problem locally is that the towers, both for radio communication and for mobile communication – the backup for them is totally inadequate. Several I am aware of only have four hours of backup, and with a big fire like this the end result was they went down and we were losing communications. It has been improved recently, but it is still a problem.

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

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you both, because your submissions are very detailed and very thoughtful. We really appreciate your insights. Both of you kind of touched on this issue, but Mark, in your submission, you said:

A recurring issue across rural Victoria is the delayed or inconsistent completion of fire prevention works on roadsides, rail corridors, easements, telecommunications infrastructure, and other statutory-managed land. These areas can present significant ignition and fire spread risks, often adjacent to highly productive agricultural land, yet remain outside the control of neighbouring landholders.

And you also touched on that in your submission. What needs to change? What would you like to see?

**Mark BILLING:** I cannot remember if I put a recommendation or a suggestion within my submission, but in my opening piece it is about coordinating it to a level that is suitable. As an example, we have got the Melbourne to Warrnambool rail line. The grass on the side of that easement has not been touched, effectively, for quite some time. They used to go fence to fence in the easement. Now it is just off to the edge of the ballast. What that creates is a wick, effectively, where on a wind change or something like that – you know, it is hard enough to get appliances in and around rail infrastructure, but when you are dealing with grass that is higher than the fence it does not help.

The Princes Highway – our farm is right on the Princes Highway, past the 80-kilometre zone out of Colac. They only do one or two mower widths, and then there is again – this is on the Princes Highway – grass as high as the fence. Yet on farm we do fuel reduction, and that is through grazing, through hay production, silage production and just mowing. Then you come to your driveway and you are just looking down the road at something that has not been treated in any way, really. I think from my perspective there needs to be better coordination and better accountability – so VicRoads, V/Line and the major infrastructure, whether it is Barwon Water. I do not know whether you went up and had a look at the Barwon Water site yesterday at Gellibrand. That was impacted. It is just a matter of coordinating it so that when we get to a fire season these things are done. And if they are not done, what is the consequence?

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Yes, I heard the same in Harcourt. A property near VicTrack said they had not seen any appliance there to reduce the load in over six years. Yet a farmer can face fines for not having –

**Mark BILLING:** Potentially, yes. The shire that sits within local government could be issued with clearance notices. That does not apply – Colac Otway shire cannot give a clearance notice to V/Line, for instance, or VicRoads.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Or themselves.

**Mark BILLING:** Or themselves.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** I am just interested in your insights into volunteers. We have heard – and I have heard this from across different brigades – some members, captains and others, are doing 30-hour shifts, driving their own vehicles into dangerous situations and doing significant kilometres. Both of you talk about that increased need to support, but do you have any insights? They are not necessarily wanting to be paid – they are volunteers – but how can we better support CFA?

**Mark BILLING:** At my level, within CFA command and control of a group, for 15 brigades we have got one command vehicle, which we had to apply through a VESEP grant to get, so we had to put money towards it. We have one dedicated vehicle for command and control in the group. I have seven DGOs, deputies. Lachie, who addressed you earlier, is one of those. On all occasions they are using their private vehicles to go forward and set up command and control until we can get other resources there. That is from the command and control point of view. As we get these more complex fires these command and control points are becoming more and more important: setting up fireground positions, reporting back to Firecom, our dispatch, and setting up control channels as well. I think as far as a coordinating resource we are lacking – particularly in our group, because we only have that one resource – and then relying on private vehicles to go forward into fire areas to provide that support with command and control.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** If you are working in government or big business and you need to use your private vehicle to get from A to B, you are recompensed. Yet volunteers are not. We do not want to be paid, but we would really appreciate some of our expenses being paid.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. Terence, I might start with you. Mineral earth firebreaks – are they any different to the normal firebreaks I am used to in New South Wales? Is it just exposed dirt ploughed in?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Basically you are removing all flammable material.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** That is all right. It is just a different name then.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** It can be ploughed; it can be graded.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Wonderful. And, Mark, local knowledge – you were going on about how important that is to be implemented in the emergency response. What do you think would be the best way to integrate that?

**Mark BILLING:** Yes, a really good question. Within our group we could have put someone into the ICC if it was requested. It was not. However, that means that we are taking someone off the fireground and it would limit my fatigue management. As I said earlier, I have got seven DGOs. I do not expect all of them to be out together on the same day. We actually roster it and manage it so that someone is on downtime. I probably do not do that well enough for myself, and there is some evidence to prove that. However, going forward I think we really do need to start thinking about how we manage that issue.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Beautiful. I will finish on a good one. What changes in state policy or legislation would you like to see to ensure a more efficient response from the organisations or bodies that you represent?

**Mark BILLING:** Yes, policy – with my Dairy Farmers Victoria hat on, the policy thing I sort of appreciate. We have talked about coordinating and accountability around fire prevention, so statutory bodies and land managers having the same rules, requirements and accountability that private landholders have. I think that would be a big step because that then gives us a commonality across the landscape, where we do not end up with areas that do not have sufficient fire prevention.

In this fire, as I mentioned, we had the Barwon Water pumping station impacted because of the fuel that was around it – partly, not solely – and then us having to take response resource off the fireground to reduce fuel around a communications asset. Someone has got to be accountable for that, in my view.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Terence, would you like to get anything off your chest about it?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** No, I think a lot of our comments previously have basically rolled and covered that. My key point was you can stop a small fire if you have got a firebreak along a road. If someone throws out a cigarette, it tends to be a small fire. If you have not, it can be an Otways fire. We were very lucky with this fire that the lightning strikes occurred after the major wind on the starting day. Having seen Ash Wednesday, I reckon we would have had fire all the way up to Torquay if it had occurred 8 hours earlier.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, gentlemen.

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

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your appearance today. Terence, I just want to explore the Western Australian experience with the firebreaks. Can you give us a brief outline as to how they work?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Simplistically, if I use the cigarette example I just gave you, if there is a firebreak adjacent to the fence – or even better two firebreaks adjacent to the fence, because that protects the fence as well – the fire burning up to it has a chance of going out. It depends upon the conditions and everything else, obviously. It depends upon the fuel load. I was over in Western Australia at one stage driving down the road and there was a fire on the roadside up to the firebreak. I jumped out of my car and went and basically stamped that fire out and stopped it going on. I know of many more situations like that. Does it always work? No. The farm we were on was impacted by fire when the firebreak had not been cleared properly late in the season, and the fire came up to it, crept across it and then took off again on the other side.

**John BERGER:** Does the firebreak responsibility apply between farmers, between boundaries?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** It is basically within the boundary of each private property. If the property is larger – I forget the size, but if you are talking a big wheat farm et cetera, then there have to be a number of firebreaks across it as well.

**John BERGER:** And what about your property if your broadacre property abuts a national forest? Is the responsibility then on the national forest to do a firebreak as well as the farmer?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** I am not sure of that one. Pardon me, it is 50 to 60-odd years since I was over there, so it could have changed. But my experience or my memory is they had a lot more than we do, and having driven into South Australia, into the pine country, I see a lot more in that area as well. I cannot talk more broadly than that.

**John BERGER:** I am just trying to rationalise it in my mind – the forest here in the Otways, trying to cut firebreaks between private property and the natural bush – as to how you might go about that and if we were to apply a standard or a scenario in Western Australia to this particular environment, how that might work.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Western Australia has a lot of bush areas, some with very heavy fire loads and some mountainous areas, not as big as the Otways et cetera, but there obviously have to be, can I say, practical capabilities of that. But applying it where you can, within reason, would be a lot better than having nothing at all.

**John BERGER:** Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Berger. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Terence, you talked about the 10/50 rule and you particularly talked about it being watered down. I had some constituents who prior to Black Saturday had implemented the 10/50 rule on their own and got a massive fine, but when the fire went through, theirs was the only house left standing in the district. So it does obviously work. I was just wondering if you could tell us how it is being watered down by councils and also how that works if your house is within 50 metres of a neighbouring property, particularly if that neighbouring property is public land.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Okay. I am not an expert on how it is being watered down, but simplistically, as I understand it, the councils have brought in requirements for properties in fire-prone areas to have a fire plan – if I can use that broad term. Those fire plans appear to be significantly less strenuous than the 10/50- or the 10/30-type rules, right?

**Wendy LOVELL:** So they are not including the removal of trees within 10 metres and other vegetation?

**Terence O'BRIAN:** No. I can take you 5 kilometres away from here where there are trees growing through houses rather than basically being cleared around houses. It is totally unfair, I believe, to the CFA volunteers to have to try and protect something like that.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. For both of you, what would your two key recommendations that you would like us to make be? Perhaps we will kick off with you, Mark.

**Mark BILLING:** I will go first. Around the road clearance, we need to get our roads open quicker. That is the simplest way to put it, right? It has got a whole lot of community downstream issues if we do not. So that is the first one.

The second one is that we need to look at the age of our fleet. Within my group, I have got three, four tankers that are in that age bracket – single cab. As Lachie mentioned earlier – he talked about responding to fires and how if you are more than two up or three up you have got crews sitting on the backs of trucks. We should be well past that now. So I think we need to look at that particular investment into frontline capability. Again, it frustrates me at times how we seem to be getting quite a lot of reasonable money into the CFA, but it does not always quite reach brigade level for various reasons. It is the same with any large organisation, I know, but we just need to make that a priority, I believe.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. I believe we had someone from the CFA at the fire services reform inquiry say that we are asking kids of today to drive trucks that are older than they are. Terence.

**Mark BILLING:** Maybe not Terry.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** I am only 21. I believe we need the standardisation and requirement for everyone to have firebreaks et cetera – you know, private, councils, companies, the state et cetera – obviously within practical limits. I believe that is one of the key things – keep the fires small so that we do not have to fight the big ones.

The second one – I guess I have got too many things there, but I think the government urgently needs to solve the FRV and CFA separation problem. Personally, I believe CFA should be given back middle management. It belongs to them. This rotating door system is not working.

**Wendy LOVELL:** And lateral entry.

**Terence O'BRIAN:** Not only a rotating door but an empty door – the system is not working.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Gentlemen, thank you so much for taking the time to join us today. We really appreciate it. You will be provided with a draft version of the transcript to review in the coming week. With that, the committee will break for lunch. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**