

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**

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 are now moving into the open mic part of today's proceedings, which is going to operate a little bit differently to what we have seen over the course of the morning. Essentially this is an opportunity for members of the committee to listen to what people have to say and an opportunity for members of the public who have indicated their enthusiasm for participating in this part of the session and who preregistered to come forward and speak for 3 minutes, and then we will move on to the next person. The committee has used this format reasonably successfully in past inquiries, including our Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. It does give more members of the public an opportunity to have a say than a longer session where we go backwards and forwards and ask a series of questions, like you might have seen earlier today. So that is the intent.

The first three people we have got on the list are Leigh Harry, Helen Frania and James Thomas – so if Leigh, Helen and James are here, could they come and take a seat at the front table.

Everything you tell us today is protected by parliamentary privilege, so no action can be taken against you for any evidence you give before the committee. Once we are done today, you will be provided with a transcript of what you said so that you can check that for the future.

It is pretty simple. I will hand it over to you. If you can just state your name before you start your proceedings, and then we will do 3 minutes. Once that is up, we will move on to the next person. Thank you.

Leigh HARRY: Thanks for allowing us the opportunity. We appreciate it. My name is Leigh Harry. I am a farmer, an ambulance community officer and a CFA volunteer with about 40 years behind me. I also represent the CFA Volunteers Group and thousands of volunteers that are protecting our communities across the state.

I would like to paint this picture for you: a volunteer firefighter in 2026 getting on a single-cab tanker with no modern crew protection, leaving their station that has no proper facilities and heading into an extreme fire – because that is what is still happening in Victoria today, and that is why I am here. What volunteers are dealing with on the ground is not acceptable in 2026. We are still seeing aged single-cab tankers in frontline service and trucks without modern crew protection, limited burnover protection and outdated designs that place firefighters at greater risk than they should ever be. We are asking volunteers to get on these appliances, to drive into extreme conditions and to trust that everything possible has been done to keep them safe. But the reality is it has not. That is because when the pager goes off, it becomes very real very quickly. The condition of the truck matters, the condition of the station matters and the safety of the crew matters. If we keep ignoring these issues, we will continue to lose volunteers and will continue to weaken brigades.

The CFA itself acknowledges that its volunteer base is ageing, and yet we are asking an ageing workforce to do a job that is becoming more physically demanding, not less. Firefighting is not getting easier. Conditions are hotter and fires are more intense, and yet the equipment and support have not kept pace. And it does not stop at the fireground. We have brigades without basic changing facilities, proper toilets or suitable meeting places. We have volunteers changing out the front of a shed, females included – out on the apron in front of the shed – before they drive off, meeting in rooms that are lined with asbestos and using a portable toilet out the back of their station. And then we ask: 'Why can't we recruit? Why can't we retain volunteers?' We are not replacing the volunteers at the rate we are losing them, and the conditions we are offering are not helping. We talk about increasing female participation, but how do we do that without even basic facilities? You cannot modernise a workforce if the infrastructure is stuck decades behind.

Then we look at the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. The volunteers are asking us: 'Why are we being taxed for volunteering?' Volunteers are already giving their time, their effort and their safety, and now they are being asked to pay as well. Yes, there are some rebates for some, but not for all. What we have is a system where volunteers who already give their time, their effort and their safety are now being asked to pay as well. That is fundamentally wrong. A volunteer said to me recently, 'Tell the government all we want is equipment to do the job. Get out of the way and let us get on with it. That's it.'

When we talk about ageing volunteers, poor facilities and outdated equipment, these are not separate issues. They are all pointing to the same problem, a system under pressure and volunteers carrying the load. If we keep ignoring this, we will lose more volunteers, we will weaken brigades and we will reduce our ability to protect the community. If we send volunteers out with unsafe trucks, inadequate facilities and growing pressure, then

we are not just failing them, we are failing every community that relies on them. Fix the basics, and we will fix the system. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Leigh. Helen.

Helen FRANIA: Hello, everybody. Helen Frania. I have 28 acres of bushland, and I have only been in Gellibrand for seven years. We bought our acreage because of the bush. It is old-growth forest. We back onto a pine plantation. On the night of 24 January we had evacuated, but the CFA saved our house. It is a two-storey cedar house. The footage of it is just amazing. They put their lives on the line for our house – if you like, our asset – but the rest of our bush got burnt. So they saved half an acre; the rest of our 27½ acres got burnt.

We back onto a pine plantation which did not have a proper firebreak, nor did it have enough clearance between their pine plantation and our house. What we are saying is that if there was a firebreak, perhaps we would not have had as much damage to our bush. So I really would like their code of conduct, or their code of practice, looked into. We want to find out who did the planning, who looks over the pine plantation, or any kind of pine plantation, and what the legalities of it all are. Okay, there is that.

The next part is that approximately two weeks after the fire had gone through – or maybe a week after, I do not know; everything was pretty much a mess in terms of the timeframe – we had DEECA come in and take out five big habitat trees, which were well and truly into the hundreds of years old, and they just took them out with excavators. They were all alive. One was burnt, but it still provided habitat. They said it was due to safety. They had enough road clearance; nobody was in the bush. They just came and took all of that, which was what we had left, Jeff and I. So I am really cross, really mad and really angry that they can do that on private property. I want it looked into – why they could just come along and do this, when they said it was to do with safety.

Okay, that is what I have got to say. The three things are that the CFA were just amazing for saving our house; pine plantations, any pine plantations, need to be looked at – the governance of them and who does the legalities of that; and also knocking down big, huge habitat trees, when we have worked our lives to save this bush and save these things. That is it.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Helen. The next three names I have who have registered today are Lachlan Butterfield, Tim Eccles and Alex Pandik.

Thanks so much. You would have heard my statement about your evidence today being protected by parliamentary privilege. For anything you say, no action can be taken against you, and you will be provided with a draft.

Just for the Hansard record, before you start speaking if you could just tell us your name, and then you will have 3 minutes. Lachlan, over to you.

Lachlan BUTTERFIELD: My name is Lachlan Butterfield. I am a leading firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria, and I also perform the role of a ground observer. I want to highlight the critical failure in fireground intelligence during this summer's bushfires and the risk it posed to community safety. As a ground observer I map fire behaviour in real time. Fire edges, threatened homes, hazards, access routes and water points – this information feeds directly into the incident control centres to help guide operational decisions. We use this program called FireMapper, which uploads the data to a program called eMap so everyone can see the information in real time. Normally that information that gets shared instantaneously as I map it.

I was deployed to the Harcourt fire, but ground observers at the Skipton fire also told me that they were facing the same issues that I was facing. The information I was capturing was not uploading. I had raised concerns that morning that it was struggling to upload information. I was told there were too many people on the system and it was causing an overload. I had never heard of that happening before in my years of doing ground observing. During the fire I was forced to manually email every single feature that I was mapping – every fire edge, every house that was potentially going to be impacted, every access point – everything. I had to manually upload every single feature. What would normally take me seconds to share instantaneously by hitting send was now taking me at least 3 if not 5 minutes to send via email. I had to manually type in every single person's email address that I had to send that information to so they could then get the information and upload it to the e-mapping system so people could start seeing what was occurring on the fireground.

Aircraft also do the same thing. Their information was uploading at the time. Our system was not working like theirs was. When the fire weather got even worse they had to land. So it was forced that I was the only point for information to be fed into the fireground at the time. It was simply not reaching the incident control centres. This directly impacted decision-making, resource deployment and ultimately community safety. To make matters even worse, at the Harcourt fire there was a mobile phone tower at Mount Alexander. That got impacted and we lost phone reception. So now we were also struggling to get connectivity with the tablets that we use to be able to even share that information, full stop. I also went to the Longwood fire during the recovery phase afterwards to do the mapping again. We were faced with that same struggle of sharing information in real time about what we were seeing on the fireground. Weeks later I was told the system was back up working again, but by then it was way too late. The fire had already passed. People's lives had already been put at risk.

I believe this is a direct reflection of the underinvestment in critical fireground systems. Under this current government, fire services are being asked to do more with outdated tools and unreliable systems. To me this highlights two key problems. First, we have got outdated equipment. Not only the technology side but all aspects, including fire trucks, are not keeping up with modern-day firefighting for rapid, fast-moving fires. Secondly, there is a lack of proper investment in our fire services equipment, including on-the-fireground technology and the fire trucks. Other states have invested in technologies, including satellites such as Starlink. At the RFS in New South Wales every fire truck has got Starlink fitted to it, and they have also got tablets. So they can capture information in real time and they can send that information in real time. We are not doing that in Victoria. We are so far behind the eight ball it is not even funny anymore. Real-time intelligence is critical in fast-moving bushfires. Delays of minutes can cost homes and lives. Without proper investment these failures will happen again, and that means Victorian communities are being put at risk. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you Lachlan. Tim.

Tim ECCLES: My name is Timothy Eccles. Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am a career firefighter, and I am appearing here in a private capacity. The views and perspectives I will share today are entirely my own and do not represent those of my employer Fire Rescue Victoria or any government agency.

On 27 January 2026 I was deployed as a station officer to the township of Gellibrand, where our task was to undertake asset protection as fire conditions escalated. On that day two strike teams from Fire Rescue Victoria were mobilised: one to Gellibrand and another to the Lismore fire. Each strike team comprised five primary appliances known as pumper tankers. On paper, this is a strong and capable response; in practice, what we experienced on the ground fell short of that expectation. Firefighters actively want to be part of these deployments. Being assigned to a strike team is seen as a privilege. It is an opportunity to stand alongside our CFA colleagues during campaign fires. There is a strong sense of pride and purpose in that role that is undermined by the condition of the appliances we are expected to rely on. Two of the five pumper tankers assigned to our strike team were persistently unreliable. These were not minor or isolated faults, they were recurring mechanical issues that required ongoing attention and at times rendered the appliances temporarily unusable. This was occurring as the fire threat to the township was intensifying. Crews began to question whether the appliances would start, whether pumps would function under pressure and whether they could be relied upon in a rapidly evolving emergency situation. As a station officer I am responsible for the safety of my firefighters and the effectiveness of our response. I must be able to deploy crews with absolute confidence that their equipment will perform as required. When that confidence is undermined, it affects decision-making, slows operations and introduces an additional layer of risk that should not exist. Firefighters should be focused on protecting life and property, not second-guessing the reliability of the truck they are operating.

The second issue is the broader impact that the deployment of these strike teams had on fire coverage within metropolitan Melbourne. To ensure metro communities continue to be protected, historically when FRV has deployed strike teams to support regional campaign fires, the organisation has backfilled those stations using appliances from a dedicated spare fleet. The aged fleet and underinvestment no longer allow for that. Spare appliances are now being used as frontline trucks because primary appliances are out of service, awaiting repairs. As a result, when strike teams were deployed on 27 January there was no capacity to backfill the stations they came from. The consequence was significant gaps in fire coverage across metro Melbourne. As at 4 o'clock that afternoon on the 27th, Keilor had no fire coverage for 81 minutes and Broadmeadows for 65 minutes. Derrimut and Taylors Lakes were each unprotected for 59 minutes. During these times, any

emergency in those areas would have relied on appliances responding from further afield, increasing response times and potentially the severity of the outcomes.

This is not a reflection on the dedication or professionalism of firefighters, who continue to do their job under increasingly difficult conditions, but rather on the lack of resources available to them. This is an underfunded system and an ageing fleet, at a time when Victorian ratepayers are contributing more than ever through the emergency services levy. The issues I have outlined today are becoming routine rather than exceptional. That is a trajectory that places both firefighters and the community at an unacceptable risk. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Alex.

Alex PANDIK: Thank you, committee. My name is Alex Pandik. I am a leading firefighter at Fire Rescue Victoria. I am also a member of the United Firefighters Union and a delegate. However, I am speaking in my own capacity today and do not represent either of those organisations.

Tim covered a lot of the things that I wanted to speak to you about, but I would just like to highlight the reality of what Tim was talking about for those of us who were sitting in stations during the fire. Because of the lack of equipment available to FRV firefighters and the unreliability of it, there were a lot of us sitting in stations watching and hearing what was happening and unable to be utilised to our full capacity. And to hear, as you have heard this morning, from the deputy group officer who is a dairy farmer trying to conduct his own livelihood and also volunteer his time protecting lives and property down here, it is distressing to know that the only reason that we could not be utilised was because of a shortage of equipment. I think that is unacceptable. I have got a report here from Fire Rescue Victoria, which is their fleet services availability report, which shows that this week there are 41 trucks that are unavailable to respond because they are broken down and awaiting service. FRV has a colour-coding system, and it only goes to the critical number of unavailable, and that is at 29-plus – and we are at 41 this week.

I would encourage this committee to ask commissioner Gavin Freeman from FRV whether he thinks that FRV is providing the support that Victorians should expect and whether he has confidence in the fleet that he expects us to use, because we certainly do not. The UFU conducted a survey of members, and 90 per cent of UFU members came back and said they have no confidence in the leadership of Gavin Freeman and his executive leadership team. I do not think Victorians should have confidence either. I would urge this committee to speak to the leadership of FRV and find out whether they have confidence in the equipment that they are providing to us, because we certainly do not. We do not think that we are being utilised to our full capacity in the support of Victorians. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Gentlemen, thanks very much. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review in the coming weeks.

The next two names we have on the list are Simon Birrell and Peter Collopy, and if James Thomas has arrived, he can join the table too.

Welcome. Just a reminder that everything you say is protected by parliamentary privilege and no action can be taken against you for any evidence you give today. We will provide you with a copy of the transcript to review at the end. Just for Hansard, if you could state your name and then make your presentation.

Simon BIRRELL: My name is Simon Birrell, and I am speaking on behalf of the Otway Ranges Environment Network. I would just like to quickly acknowledge the Gadubanud, the traditional owners of the Otway Ranges and forests that I will be speaking about, and just acknowledge that Richard Collopy is with us today in the room.

Visual presentation.

Simon BIRRELL: That is a slide that I have asked to be put up for your benefit. My submission today is to discuss the contrasting Otway bushfire footprints in January 2026 in the Otways, which provide real-world evidence to demonstrate how established old-growth, wet, tall mountain forests can radically reduce the spread of bushfires ignited by lightning strikes. On the evening of Friday 9 January 2026, a cold front weather change from the Southern Ocean crossed the Otway Ranges bioregion. This cold front in the afternoon generated numerous lightning strikes, which ignited four separate out-of-control bushfires in forested country in the

Otways. Now, two of those fires were in the Carlisle River area, which on that map are up in the top left, and these fires quickly became large and menaced the local community. After three days those combined – and that image is from the third day – had burnt about 7000 hectares, predominantly through Otway dry foothill-type forests, heathlands and some private property.

After the three days, those fires were partly contained. However, the bad ongoing weather meant that they did reignite and menaced the townships of Gellibrand and Carlisle River for many weeks. Although there was significant publicity about those two bushfires in the Carlisle River area, there was little media or acknowledgement about lightning strikes that had also, at the same time, started two fires at Cape Otway in the Great Otway National Park. These were located just south of the Maits Rest rainforest walk. These show – you can hardly see them, but if you look down at Cape Otway there is a little triangle, and that is the yellow area. That is, again, day 3. These fires were ignited in terrain that was difficult to access. However, combined, these two fires burnt in three days less than 12 hectares. So there is quite a dramatic difference between rates of fire burning in two areas that are only 20 kilometres separate from each other. They were reported as being under control and no longer a significant threat by Tuesday 13 January. In contrast to the fires that were burning at Carlisle River 20, 30 kilometres away, the Cape Otway fires were burning within established old-growth, tall, wet forests full of moss, tree ferns and a very thick understorey. The contrasting bushfire forest footprints provide real-world evidence to demonstrate how established, old-growth, tall, wet forests appear to have radically reduced the spread of fire, relative to dry forest type, once ignited by lightning strikes.

There is little argument against the fact that lightning strikes are by far the dominant source of forest fires in Australia, about 44 per cent of forest fire ignitions in Victoria. Recent research in Tasmania exploring lightning bushfire ignition in forests suggests ignition is less likely to establish a bushfire in wet sclerophyll forests and cool temperate rainforests, which is what is there. Based on the assumption that the weather and high winds were similar over the Cape Otway and Carlisle fires during the January three-day period, what appears to have radically suppressed the rate of fire spread at Cape Otway is a combination of wetter forest vegetation and the fact that established wet forests had suppressed airflow at ground level, slowing fire spread. Of course there is actually quite a lot of research that makes that point; that is established science fact.

From a bushfire land management perspective, policymakers and land managers need to acknowledge that the Cape Otway old-growth wet forest contributed towards saving Apollo Bay, Marengo and the surrounding community from being menaced by fires started by lightning strikes. These tall, wet forests only exist due to the advocacy of the community to stop logging this area in the 1970s and early 1980s. Through this advocacy the Land Conservation Council recommended this area be made a national park in 1978. This prevented these wet forests at Cape Otway being subjected to clear-fell logging and thinning, which would have significantly elevated the bushfire severity in the landscape, threatening local communities. Again, there is plenty of evidence and science that backs that.

Currently the state government is drafting a new public land Act focusing on the management of state forests on public land in eastern Victoria, where most of the tall, wet forests and rainforests grow. Climate change may elevate the number of lightning strikes across the landscape. Regardless of climate change, legislation and policy must make forest landscapes more bushfire-resilient by permanently prohibiting forms of disturbance, such as logging or thinning, to help restore and enhance and protect the natural fire-resistant characteristics of tall, wet, old forests and rainforests across Victoria. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Simon. You will be provided with a draft to review.

That is all of the preregistered participants who are here. Is there anyone else in the public gallery who would like to participate in the open mic session? You are more than welcome to. We have got a little bit of time left available.

Otherwise, that concludes today's proceedings. I want to thank all of the witnesses for their attendance today, thank people for all of the support the committee received yesterday on our tour of Carlisle River and Gellibrand and the firegrounds and thank everyone who has helped make today's hearing possible. With that, today's hearing is concluded.

Committee adjourned.