

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Quantong – Wednesday 22 April 2026

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

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Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

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Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESSES

Cr Brian Klowss, Mayor,

John Martin, Director, Infrastructure, and

Rhonda McNeil, Community Recovery Coordinator, Horsham Rural City Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome, everybody. I declare open today's hearings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria. We are joining you today from the Quantong community recreation facility. The public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Victorian Parliament looking into the 2026 summer fires, and this forms part of our deliberations and preparations of a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. This is a timely reminder to please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised. For those of us in the room, there is a bit of an echo, and the broadcast benefits from a lack of background noise.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we meet on here today and pay my respects to elders past and present. I welcome all the members of the public gallery who are joining us to watch proceedings today and all of those who are joining us online, and I ask that everyone who participates in the proceedings today please be respectful and for the gallery to remain silent at all times.

We do acknowledge the significant impact that the recent fires have had on many communities, including in this part of Victoria, and that the information discussed today may be distressing for some people. We do have a counsellor and members of the CFA wellbeing team are present to offer support. Should anyone need assistance, please speak with the committee secretariat if you would like to talk with someone.

Welcome to our witnesses from the Horsham Rural City Council. 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 you provide to us today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during these hearings. But if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, these comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

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

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament. I will ask members of the committee to introduce themselves, starting down the end of the table.

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

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

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

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

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region.

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

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

The CHAIR: If each of the witnesses in turn just could state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of for the Hansard record, then we will commence.

Brian KLOWSS: Brian Klowss, I am the Mayor of Horsham Rural City Council.

John MARTIN: John Martin, Director of Infrastructure, Horsham Rural City Council.

Rhonda McNEIL: Rhonda McNeil, Community Recovery Coordinator, Horsham Rural City Council.

The CHAIR: Thanks, all, for coming along today. We really appreciate the time you have taken. The format of this is pretty straightforward. We will invite you to make an opening statement and then we will get into questions. So I will hand it over to you, Mayor.

Brian KLOWSS: Thank you. My name is Brian Klowss. I am the Mayor of Horsham city council. I am also a victim of the fire. Twenty per cent of this fire was actually on our farming land, so just over 2000 hectares was part of our operation – as an individual. I would like to start off I suppose by saying what happened on the day. The day started. The fire was reported just before 1 o'clock. I was 7 kilometres away from home when it started. It was there within 15 minutes. We had our own private units. We met the fire approximately 6 kilometres away. In that time we realised we could not do anything. There was no-one else – we had two other people on our side of the fire. It was at that stage that we went around and got people out of their houses. We had a fairly close shave with one elderly resident. The fire was a matter of 50-odd metres away from the house, and by the time we got him out, the house was on fire. They are the type of things. One of the guys – our next-door neighbours – was with us and watched his house burn to the ground in front of him. I suppose I have been in quite a unique situation. I am the Mayor of the Horsham city council but also was heavily involved, especially in the early stages of the fire.

We found resources. We did not have a lot of resources in that first 15, 20 minutes given the speed of the fire and just the physical time to get there. It was the private units that were there on scene fast, and they were a huge benefit to the community in the early stages. When we were there in that first 15 minutes the fire would have been 200 metres wide. It was not very wide. It was a long, narrow strip. It hit Red Gum Swamp Road and the wind went slightly northerly. It actually created a front to the south in excess of a kilometre wide, and directly behind that the wind then went around more westerly, which then actually pushed it back up to the north and created a huge front on the fire. That all happened in front of us. Our house was in front of that. By that stage there were more of the private vehicles there. We then went in front of the fire and started moving livestock and evacuating houses in front of the fire's path.

That is a bit of an overview of what happened in the first – it would not even have been an hour – 45 minutes. As the mayor, when we got there I actually texted our CEO, and that was one of the last phone calls that we had because telecommunications went down. I actually said, 'You have to evacuate Natimuk. You've got to get Natimuk evacuated.' I could see this was happening. It was happening in front of our eyes. From then on – well, the rest is probably history. So where are we now? There are a lot of lessons to be learned out of this. I will probably hand over to John to keep going now.

John MARTIN: Thanks, Brian. We have got a presentation. I am not sure if that was part of the plan for the session. I will start talking to it anyway and we can catch up. The first point I want to make is Horsham council has provided a submission, but we are also a member of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Council Alliance. I am happy to answer questions in relation to that submission, which we have contributed to and has some common elements as well. Our Horsham submission goes into a bit more detail than some of the points specifically relevant to this area. I note the fire inquiry is about the 2026 bushfires, but we have also had a history of experience in and on the border of our municipality over recent years. Our submission has been significantly influenced by those previous fires as well.

The first page of our presentation, if you are able to see it, shows a map of our municipality and obviously this large Grass Flat fire within the heart of our municipality. We also had a smaller fire, but still significant locally, in the southern part of our municipality in the Telangatuk area – it was called the Rocklands–Smiths Road fire – earlier this year. In the last couple of years we have seen the major Grampians fire, initially called the Yarram Gap Road fire, which burnt up to the edge of our municipality. A municipality that borders a national park presents challenges in terms of that interface with the national park. We also saw the significant Little Desert National Park fire last year as well, which resulted in the evacuation of Dimboola, primarily to Horsham. So we have been bounded by fires in recent years, and that has influenced our experience. We participate in supporting CFA, FFM, our neighbouring municipalities and communities in our response to fires across that area.

The second page of the presentation was a map of the Grass Flat fire area. I can see on your desks that you have got a detailed map showing the location of that. It is worth pointing out, and you probably saw on the road coming here, that this facility here was a near miss in the fire event. So it certainly was all around here, and a significant impact on the community.

Visual presentation.

John MARTIN: Our presentation lists briefly some of the key impacts of the fire. I will not go into those in any great detail. I was up to page 3 – very briefly, just a number of houses destroyed, impact to residents and community facilities. We operate a system at local government. Most local governments operate a system called Crisisworks to manage the impacts on people so we can keep track of it all, and you can see some 440 cases recorded in our system, so broadscale impact across a large part of the community – small communities, but really basically just about everybody in the local community was impacted by the fire in some way or another.

Just moving along, recovery involves a whole range of impacts. Housing is obviously a key one, but other things like drinking water are an issue for people in the time shortly after a fire. Insurance is a very challenging space, and there were some good stories and not-so-good stories that came about from that. Fencing – I have to note the BlazeAid organisation, which provided a very rapid and significant support to the community in this fire, and we have had that experience in other recent fires in our area as well. Waste and roads are other areas where there are recovery issues as well.

I do want to highlight and note and acknowledge the significant funding that has been received from the government in terms of support for the event. The Council Support Fund of \$750,000 was announced quickly and is very positive, so that is certainly worth acknowledging. And more latterly, the community recovery officer fund too is very noteworthy. I do have to note, though, that the timeliness of some of these things can be a challenge, and a key part of our submission too is the administrative complexity and evidentiary requirements relating to those, which are very challenging as well.

Perhaps with that background, I will just get on to our key recommendations relating to the terms of reference. They are in our submission and on the presentation, and they are the next couple of slides down. Sorry, I should have been keeping pace with that. The first one relates to management of public land and national parks. As I have just said, we have got a couple on our boundary and fires often start in those areas and spread out onto private land, which causes a lot of concern for communities. Often, though, the only time you can get those fires under control is when they are out on the open country. But it is therefore vitally important that those public land areas and roadsides are very well managed.

Brian KLOWSS: Can I just jump in there? There are actually some areas along Natimuk Creek, which would have been a strategic north-south firebreak, that have not been – well, I have been involved in trying to get work done in there over 30 years, and it keeps falling on deaf ears. I think you said you had been out to Natimuk Lake and seen the fairy grass. We have had trouble over the years with trying to get fairy grass controlled, even to the extent that we were out there in a meeting two years ago and Mark Gunning, the commander for the CFA in Horsham, actually said, ‘Look, if a fire starts – a bit of collateral damage around a few of these houses, that’s nothing.’ This is what, as rural residents, we are up against – these bureaucrats that will not take any notice of what needs to happen on some of these areas.

John MARTIN: Thanks, Brian. So there, that public land management is important – roadsides as well. A challenge that we have seen this recent season was spring was dryish, then we had a bit of rain late in spring and it led to regrowth on roadsides, and council is responsible for roadsides in some areas, but there are also state roads as well. Certainly from a local government perspective, we try to complete our program and get it done, but there seems to be less flexibility with the state’s program for its roadside slashing, certainly in these areas.

The second point there relates to fire prevention notices. Council has a role: a municipal fire prevention officer is authorised to issue notices for clean-up of properties. We certainly do issue them to state government land, but the powers to enforce that are a concern – that we cannot enforce the requirement to do that – and that is particularly a concern in some of the smaller township areas. There might be rail land that could be a fire risk in towns, and the inability to enforce fire prevention notices is certainly a limitation we experience at present.

A second theme relates to communications. The government agencies have access to a good communications network, and the Telstra network was out of action in the local area during this Grass Flat fire. Our council officers provide support to the CFA and FFM during fire events when requested. We have graders and tankers out there providing, I think, quite vital support to help with the control of fires, and we do not have access to the communication systems that they commonly use, so that is a limitation.

An event that occurred during this recent fire was there were some public meetings scheduled, one here in Quantong and one at Natimuk, during the heat of the fire events. The mayor and CEO were scheduled to be going to some public meetings, and then that access was restricted. It was quite challenging, because there were roadblocks in place – and I understand the need for roadblocks from a public safety perspective. But all the locals were able to navigate ways around the roadblocks safely to get to where they needed to go. We just need some practical measures in place to ensure that roadblocks are there for good reasons but they can be managed in a way to enable access to key events.

Brian KLOWSS: Can I just jump in there? On that, with the ICC, we were actually in the morning after the fire in a briefing, and we were told the community meeting in Quantong, here where you are sitting now, and the one in Natimuk had been cancelled because the road was unsafe. So we walked into that meeting; the highway patrol was patrolling the road. When we walked out – when Gail and I walked out of that meeting – the highway was open. We were only in there for a matter of 20 minutes. So we would have had close to 500 people in Natimuk still – no, it might not have been quite that many, it might have been, say, 400 people in Natimuk – who had no water, no power, no communications and then no information, and Quantong was the same. That is what was going on. They were promised these community meetings the night before. So yes –

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of time. We are going to run out of time for questions. Do you want to wrap up your presentation?

John MARTIN: Okay – just a couple key, quick points. Obviously the loss of phone service is a key issue. The resilience of the phone network is vital. I think we would make a recommendation for – there is a black spot near the Rocklands–Smiths Road fire. And the next slide or two slides on, we have got a graphic there that shows the terrain in that area and where a mobile phone tower could be based.

In relation to term of reference 6, there could be systematic arrangements that the government has in place ready to go when an event occurs. They keep on occurring time after time, maybe in different areas, but the formula is pretty much the same. I would like to think that there could be a standard arrangement to get recovery up and running more quickly after events and also that the arrangements were less complex. So in the interest of wrapping up –

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sorry. I know members of the committee are eager to ask questions, and we have got a long day ahead of us. Thanks so much. Prior to coming today, the committee spent the morning travelling the fireground and seeing a lot of the issues, talking with the local CFA officers about the burning program and also with FFMVic about the fuel reduction at Lake Natimuk. It was very interesting. Yesterday and the day before we were in the Otways talking with communities down there, and one of the things that came up in the course of those discussions was at a municipal level whether there is a fire preparedness or fire management committee or similar. What are the arrangements in this part of the world?

John MARTIN: I understand it is fairly common statewide that at the high level we have a municipal emergency management planning committee. In this area we actually combine four municipalities that are on that so that we can share resources to provide the support needed to it in a more economic way. I cannot miss the opportunity to note that councils in our area receive funding for half FTE, which would be – I am not sure how councils do it with a half of a person. The four councils in our area work together so that we have got two FTEs.

The CHAIR: So you pool to have two FTEs.

John MARTIN: Yes, so we get enough resource to provide a critical mass that can provide the support that those communities need – the higher level and the municipal emergency management planning committee. A standing committee of that is the fire management planning committee, and that is chaired typically by the senior CFA officer.

The CHAIR: So council – and what other agencies are represented on that?

John MARTIN: Well, at the fire management planning committee we generally have CFA; the fire forestry management crew of DEECA; agencies like DTP, the Department of Transport and Planning; and GW water, so public land management agencies are present; and council.

The CHAIR: So you have got the systems in place to –

John MARTIN: We have got a system and we have got a specific sub-plan for the area, and that sub-plan identifies areas, treatments and responsibilities for treatments of different areas of land management. Speaking from the council's perspective, we have a schedule and a map showing roads, for example, that we are responsible for preparing each year on an annual basis. CFA does the same, and FFMV DEECA have a schedule of responsibility as well.

The CHAIR: It sounded from the discussions we had with the CFA this morning like there has been quite an active program, which they have led in the last few years, of various amounts of planned burning. Would that be a reasonable reflection from your point of view?

John MARTIN: There is a program. I cannot attest to the quantum of it and whether it has changed in recent years. It is not an area that I have got numbers on ready to hand.

The CHAIR: Okay. I might leave my time there and go to Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks very much. We hear a lot about the management of public land and roadsides and the different roles, whether it is government authorities or local government or whatever. Do you think it would be of benefit if CFA had more control over the clearing of those roadsides and even some of the public land areas around your area?

John MARTIN: I have not thought of that previously. I think the way I see it is that different authorities have their areas of responsibility and each organisation looks after their responsibilities to varying degrees, subject to the availability of budget, which is often a key constraint. I made the point briefly in the submission that councils have responsibility for issuing fire prevention notices. Whether that is a role that council does or whether it is a role that the CFA does, in terms of the oversight of that to ensure that standards of land management are attained, it sounds like a positive move. But on exactly who should do it, I have not thought about that.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay, so your impression would be that it is not working as well as it could at the moment?

John MARTIN: In the Wimmera Southern Mallee Council Alliance submission we made the point that the budget of the Department of Transport and Planning seems to be less able to be flexible to adjust to variable seasonal conditions. I made the comment earlier that this spring started out dry and then it was wet in about November, and that led to more growth and regrowth. Certainly at the council level we adjust our programs to meet those variable seasonal conditions, but that same level of flexibility does not appear to be there for some other organisations. Maybe budgets are tight; I get that, but we need to focus on what our priorities are, and I suppose I am suggesting that given the risk that it causes to the community, some greater flexibility in how budgets are managed to respond to seasonal conditions really is needed in some agencies.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. Brian, you talked a lot about the fires and things. Do you think that the local CFA are better resourced now or that they are not as well resourced as they were before the fire services reforms?

Brian KLOWSS: I think they would be very similar to where they were, but we are aware it is all the private units. That is what stopped this fire. It was not the fire trucks, as such, it was what I estimate at 250-odd private units that were here on the fireground. I think they are the ones – people were here. There were people from Dimboola, there were people from Minimay and there were people from Coleraine. They were all with private units at this fire. So that is what stopped it.

John MARTIN: And the speed tillers.

Brian KLOWSS: Yes, and the speed tillers also – the farmers with these speed tillers, which are basically a disc. They are what stopped the fire. They put the breaks in. They could do a wide break at high speed, and it was effective. There is no rehabilitation afterwards. It actually changed the way the fire was fought, and going forward, I think it is going to be what will change fires in this area now.

Wendy LOVELL: Basically, you are saying unless there was investment in the private appliances et cetera, the area would not be adequately resourced to contain a fire?

Brian KLOWSS: I do not think it would be. No.

John MARTIN: If I can add to that question, please, if that is okay, I know the Brimpaen fire brigade at the moment is looking for extra water storage. Water is a key resource during fires as well, and they are making applications for various grant programs to get an extra water tank at their brigade location. I am just not sure that there is adequate resourcing within the system to do it. So they are looking externally to try and get extra resources to help make that difference.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you for appearing today and for your submissions and also for the work that you did in responding to the fire and supporting the communities with the ongoing recovery from that. I am interested in – you said that you have got this committee and there was preparatory work that was undertaken by all the different groups that are part of that. Do you feel the preparation overall was adequate for an event like this? Were you able to put those plans into place when the event happened, or do you think that more could have been done to better prepare?

John MARTIN: I think the nature of the day, the catastrophic day, was the significant factor there. It was right to be declared a catastrophic day. Brian has talked about the speed of the fire's movement. I was not on the ground, but from what I have heard it seems pretty much unimaginable unless you were there to witness it yourself. I made the comment earlier that we have got the risk – a lot of fires start in national parks and come out of the national parks. In this case that was not the situation. It started in farmland, pretty much – farmland that had been cropped. The crop was gone, and vegetation was at the lower levels that it should be at that time of the year. It was just a hell of a day.

Brian KLOWSS: To put it into perspective, I think this was actually something that a lot of us that were there in the early stages have used as – the fire index was supposed to be just over 100 on the day. When the fire was running, by all accounts, it was in the 460s. Do not quote me on that, but it was the mid-400s anyway. So that gives you a bit of an idea where it was.

Sarah MANSFIELD: So there is almost nothing you can do to prepare for something that –

Brian KLOWSS: Not at that speed, that type of event.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The other things you mentioned were – and this is something that has come up in previous inquiries this committee has done – the challenges with some of the hurdles you have to go through with accessing recovery support and the burden of evidence that you need to provide. Can you explain a little bit about what that is like for councils? I do not know if you have got any suggestions for how that process could be improved so that you can access that recovery support faster.

John MARTIN: Speaking from a council asset perspective, we are required to have photographic evidence of council assets that is less than, I think it is, three years old. So if it is old, well, we need to see a current photo of the conditions before the fire and as a result of the impact of the fire or the flood – it would be the same for a flood – and then demonstrate that we have done corrective action after that. It is actually quite a cost, and 79 councils going around and organising their own capture of this data is a costly burden. Sometimes you might not actually need it, because hopefully you do not have these events occur, but you have got to have that information always ready. Then you have got to provide detailed evidence of site conditions. You might have a section of road. You might have a bridge that has been burnt. You have got to provide detailed records. That has got to be inspected by somebody. There is a significant financial administrative burden associated with all of that. We have also had the situation where the processing of claims has been very slow. Fortunately Horsham has got a reasonable financial position, but some of our smaller councils in the region have faced

significant costs and significant delays in processing the claims that they have made from particularly the recent floods. I know that Buloke council have had ongoing significant problems with their road restoration because of the whole process. You have to get enough information before you start work so that it will be accepted. I do not know that I am describing it adequately, but you need significant additional resources to cope with that. It is diverting staff from existing functions to provide that support. I am not sure that I have given you a great answer there, but it is a significant burden.

Sarah MANSFIELD: A simpler funding system could be beneficial and probably save money, potentially.

John MARTIN: I have been around long enough to see in the past much simpler processes put in place and to some extent a level of discretion given to councils so they could make judgements based on reasonable objectives. I have seen situations in the past where maybe some of the funding has not been used as wisely as it could have been as well. I understand the need for careful management of public money, but I think it has just gone a little bit too far.

The CHAIR: Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. Brian, it is good to see you, and thank you for the role you played in that first hour or so on the day, which I think was a big burden for you. You saw and you acted and you probably saved lives, I would think. And then subsequently your role as the mayor, as a community leader as well, it is a very unique set of experiences and responsibilities that you have had. I appreciate what you have done. I also want to check in on the broader community – how the community is going. Maybe Rhonda and Brian might want to comment on that.

Brian KLOWSS: Look, I think the realisation has hit home. I think we are starting to see more of the mental impacts coming through now than what we were. Some people are hiding it, some people are not, and there is the realisation for people of all the work that has to happen in recovery. Just on our own farm, we have done close to 500 hours cleaning up fences. We have pulled up over 200 kilometres of fence, so that is the type of thing that people are doing. People are over it now and they want to move on, but they cannot.

John MARTIN: One thing I may add to that is some people have moved on. They have decided ‘I can’t live here anymore’, and people have sold up from some of the areas just around here and moved into Horsham, say, because they just do not want to go through an experience like that again.

Rhonda McNEIL: And I guess from my perspective, this community, like many communities after a fire or after a flood or after a major traumatic event, they go into a hierarchy of loss and they determine who needs the most support. In here it was the people whose homes had been dramatically impacted and had to relocate. The community wrapped their arms incredibly around them, and those people have homes now and we are working with all of them. What is coming out now, what Brian is talking about, is those other 400 cases that we had of people who had an impact on the day. There is more than that, because that is one person reporting on behalf of a family or behalf of their partners or extended family. So there are thousands of people affected by this fire who are now starting to feel that they can come and talk, and that is why we have the recovery hubs and things open. It never can be quickly dealt with, and one of the biggest issues we have is often media and often the conversation move very quickly and go, ‘Well, why haven’t things been cleaned up? It’s months – it’s three months ago.’ Actually, it is the blink of an eye. It is an absolute blink of an eye for people, and so somehow keep that narrative that recovery takes time, and it is okay to take time.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I had a second question, but my time is up, so I will ask it and leave it for on notice. John, you mentioned standard arrangements for recovery so it happens quicker. If you could maybe flesh that out, and I hate to ask you to write it down now because there is no time, also the road closure issue, if you could flesh that out too, because we heard that in the Otways.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for being here, and I want to thank you, Brian, too, in terms of saving that person’s life in the very rapid response that you had. I am sure that always has an emotional toll that is bearing out with you and your family. Can I go to the private units? I think people live on their farms, they work on their farms, they have equipment, they want to support their community very much, and they have. But I think the West Wimmera Action Group put together a survey that says 37 people were interviewed, but

many more who just could not respond at the time. Maybe, Rhonda, to you being in here at the moment: what is that response? What are people feeling, and what do they want? Do they want recognition? What is the feeling of those people that have used their private units?

Rhonda McNEIL: I think the people from the private units, it is just that they are a critical component of lifestyle out here. For many of the people, one of the things is that there has been a lot of learning about you needing to look after your property and what that means. So a lot of people are investing in that space, and I think that is something for us to work very closely with the CFA going forward, on how we support people preparing for next summer and what that looks like from their own preparation level. But it has to be in combination with the agencies that we have and how that works.

Melina BATH: And sometimes you can be a CFA member and also have your own private vehicle; it depends on where you are.

Rhonda McNEIL: Yes, multiple.

Melina BATH: And about communications, because we have certainly heard and had submissions saying that communications were not optimal, and there will be differences of opinion depending on which hat you wear, whether it is the department or whatnot: if you have got a private unit, are there comments maybe from Brian and John? What do they want? It may not be appropriate for them to be on the inner sanctum of communication, but it is no help to the community or fire prevention and suppression if they are on the out. So what is a reasonable stance there?

Brian KLOWSS: Well, what happens at the moment is that, basically, I would say probably 98 per cent of private units would be operating on the UHF network. So people communicate between themselves on the UHF network, mobile phones – well, we did not have mobiles.

Melina BATH: So the mobile phones dropped out because the Telstra tower dropped out, and there was no generator?

Brian KLOWSS: Yes. No backup. So we basically reverted to old school. That is what it was. It was actually old school – it was UHF.

Melina BATH: CB.

Brian KLOWSS: CB radio, yes. And for the best part, you have to say it actually worked okay. The UHF's worked okay. The fire itself was fought on old school; we did not have air support. We did not have anything. It was actually ingenuity by the volunteers that put it together.

Melina BATH: My time is out, but were you able to get, therefore, in touch with the CFA UHF?

Brian KLOWSS: No.

Melina BATH: So you were communicating as private citizens with your own equipment, putting water out or whatever else?

Brian KLOWSS: Yes.

Melina BATH: And so whether there could be something there that government could look at to improve those levels of communication –

Brian KLOWSS: Sure. Yes. It would definitely be advantageous.

Melina BATH: And then the other thing you were just talking about – so take this on notice – is about that disc you were talking about.

Brian KLOWSS: Speed tillers?

Melina BATH: Yes, speed tillers. So just if there is anything else that you want to make a recommendation for us in relation to that, please.

Brian KLOWSS: Okay. Thank you.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. I can follow on from Melina. When it came to communication – when the fire hit your property, how long was it from when it initially started to get into your property?

Brian KLOWSS: The western side would have been about, say, 20 minutes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Had you seen any emergency warnings being put out prior to that?

Brian KLOWSS: Yes. Well, that is actually how we were notified of the fire. The emergency app put the – yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Was it watch and act at the time, or was it evacuate now?

Brian KLOWSS: No, it would have been just that – the first one was that there was a fire. So I then probably never looked at the phone. The emergency app – to be honest, there was too much going on there for a bit trying to organise people and getting things mobile. We had kids at home and that sort of thing and had to get them out of there.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: So the other people that you had to evacuate later on, did they see any warnings prior to you rocking up and saying, ‘You’ve got to leave now’?

Brian KLOWSS: No. They had not, but that might be that they had not looked at the phone or whatever. So there had been warnings before it.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: No, that is all right. Now, you said that there were a lot of lessons to be learned. The mic is yours – go for it.

Brian KLOWSS: I will probably take that on notice, but there are things that come out of this, especially around these fast-moving fires. How do we actually engage in it? Is the right equipment there? When do you actually call for more backup for fire trucks and this type of thing. How do we actually get that out there? A simple thing that I spoke to John about: when we are doing our roadside spraying, why aren’t we using a residual chemical to actually give us a wider break, rather than coming back trying to slash it two or three times? Use a residual chemical that might actually eliminate slashing, and then turn our 3-metre-wide country road into a 6-metre-wide road or an 8-metre-wide road. So all of a sudden you can create firebreaks there by just simple management tools.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. All right. Thank you. We will take that one on notice, Chair, anyhow, and you can give us a much more elaborate answer.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for your attendance at today’s hearing. I have couple of questions. Brian, in relation to the poles and wires that are on private land, is there a plan afoot or anywhere around that might say that they should be inspected on an annual or biannual basis to see their suitability to continue on?

Brian KLOWSS: Poles on – look, I am not with Powercor.

John BERGER: That is why I am talking about private land.

Brian KLOWSS: It depends. The powerlines that we see go through are all inspected. The Powercor network is all inspected. I think they are actually inspected at least once a year, if not twice a year – we see the guys around doing them. I am pretty sure – and you would have to check this with Powercor – that they have got routine maintenance that happens on them.

John BERGER: Okay. Also, I just want to touch on, Rhonda, your area in relation to the community recovery. What are the biggest challenges that you have faced since that?

Rhonda McNEIL: I think one of the biggest challenges – and it relates to the question before – is that there is a delay in council being given the funding to actually employ the coordinator. There is a delay and there is a handover of people, and people can be missed in that space. Getting on the ground early is really important. I think the key out of here is that this fire was so fast and so unexpected in this landscape. We see again that there have been a lot of fires in bushland environments in different places that have affected people. People did not expect it to be here in this landscape. The biggest challenge I think we have is now looking at what it means to live in rural Victoria given that we have these catastrophic days and what it means for me as a person who lives here – how to prepare to go through them. As John mentioned, we have already seen and we expect to see people make decisions about that, which can then have longer term effects on our small communities. So for Natimuk in particular, one of the important things is it is a hub for a lot of small businesses – a lot of people, single operators, work out of there for multinational companies or different places, but they choose the lifestyle of living up here in a rural landscape. An event like this may mean that they choose not to, and we definitely do not want that in our rural communities at this stage. It is that balance of it is safe to live here and it is okay but you need to be mindful. I think that is going to be one of our biggest challenges with recovery.

John BERGER: John, do you see part of some of the challenges might be whether the landholders have got the capacity to have the appropriate insurance?

John MARTIN: I suppose it is a matter of budgets and what people can afford. I have not analysed different insurance policies at all to understand if there are differences. I am sure it is tricky dealing with insurance in a situation like that. I am not able to give you an expert answer on that.

John BERGER: The reason I asked is you said people were sort of walking away from it. It is all getting pretty hard now. Is that one of the factors that might contribute to it?

John MARTIN: I am thinking of a particular case, where speaking to the person myself I understood they had a positive insurance outcome, but that was not the determining factor in their decision about where they are going to live. Insurance is complex, but it is not the only thing.

John BERGER: Sure. Okay. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much for appearing and having us here today. I am interested just on the logistics I guess with that initial recovery. I mean, you mentioned no water, no power and no communications. I guess I have heard others say there is no playbook for this. What are your thoughts? Can that be improved? How can it be improved?

Brian KLOWSS: With the number of poles and so forth – we will break it down with Powercor. I actually think Powercor did a fantastic job after this fire, with the amount of poles that they had to put in. They were basically working two shifts; they were working at night-time. So Powercor did a fantastic job to get the power back on in the time that they did, given the amount of infrastructure that was damaged. I think they need to be given credit for once it had happened. Telstra – was it 24 hours? It might have been 12 hours. It was brought back on online. What is acceptable? I would have liked to have seen the Telstra tower not go out. Water I think was about that 24-hour mark as well.

John MARTIN: In relation to the water, one of the benefits we have with our municipal planning committees, both the overall emergency one and the fire subcommittee, is the familiarity with each other and the relationships we build with different agencies. We were talking with GWMWater during the event in relation to keeping water up for fires and some shortages in their system, because water had been drawn for fires, but then also in their immediate response to provide water where needed as soon as possible. That went from bottled water to tanker water, where it was needed. I think those relationships between the agencies are really strong, to be able to provide that sort of response.

Gaëlle BROAD: In a way, in this area, you have had consecutive disasters. Having those systems in place has served you well by the sound of it, whereas we have heard from other areas that do not have those

committees operating currently, and that may be detrimental to that recovery phase. I am interested, and Rhonda this might be something you could speak to, in the actual recovery process where people are applying for grants. I guess when I visited places, it did seem to be very confusing for people, with a lot of different avenues, you have got to apply, databases, making sure of who has applied for what and who has not. Can you comment on that process and any areas that you think could be improved in the future?

Rhonda McNEIL: My simple answer is: it is confusing. I guess what I am looking at – and one of the things that was set up here, which I think is critical – is Grampians Community Health were brought in right at the very beginning as our local provider of psychosocial service provision, so people did not have to go through a Melbourne intake system. It was there, but we had that local, which was awesome. We have made a decision here, with me working with them, that we will help every participant, every person, manage the systems on their behalf, because I cannot even work out what systems some people would be best to get funding from.

The last thing on that point is that, unfortunately, in this situation, for most of us, the eligibility criteria mean that many of our people are ineligible for most of the funding that is available. The reason for that is because they own their things and they have paid insurance. Now, sometimes there are some clauses about underinsurance, but most of our people who have been greatly affected do not apply for many of these grants that are out there. There are lots of grants out there, which looks like there is lots of funding support, but very few of our people are actually eligible for those things. The ones who are eligible do have to provide proof of who they are and a whole lot of things behind the scenes. Most people, if they have lost their home, have actually lost all of that. So then they have to find their paperwork, and the program shuts two to three months after the event.

A classic case of that at the moment is the water replacement program. However, that closes three months after the event started. But some of our homes have just got tanks reinstalled now because they have got to clear the tank, they have got to put in a new thing and they have got to get the plumber to connect it all. So now we are working through exceptional circumstances to get that to all those people. They are the challenges.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for coming in today. We really appreciate the evidence. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review in the coming week. With that, the committee will take a short break and reset for the next witnesses. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.