

# **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

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**

Steven Meyer, Group Officer, Natimuk Brigade, and

David Sudholz, Captain, Natimuk Brigade, Country Fire Authority.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the next witnesses. The Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria is coming to you today from Quantong.

I will just make the witnesses aware that all evidence taken 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 the hearings, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review prior to its publication on the committee's website.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and Member for Southern Metropolitan Region. I will get our committee members to introduce themselves.

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

**Gaelle BROAD:** Hi. I am Gaelle Broad, also Northern Victoria Region.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Steven MEYER:** Steve Meyer, Natimuk Group Officer.

**David SUDHOLZ:** David Sudholz. I am the Captain for the CFA Natimuk Brigade.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thanks very much. It is pretty straightforward. We will hand over to you to make an opening statement and presentation, and then we will get into questions.

**David SUDHOLZ:** First off, I would just like to thank you for travelling all the way down to the Wimmera and thank you for inviting me to speak here today. As I said, my name is David Sudholz. I am the Captain of the Natimuk fire brigade in the Wimmera here in Victoria. On 9 January 2026 I responded to the fire initially as brigade captain and briefly undertook a sector command role as the fire began impacting the township. Later that afternoon I left Natimuk to defend my own property, which was directly impacted by the fire.

**Visual presentation.**

**David SUDHOLZ:** I appear today to provide an operational perspective from the ground – what we experienced, what worked and where the systems did not align with the reality of the catastrophic fire day.

Next slide, please. The initial pager alert was received at 12:43 pm. By 1:39 pm alarms had activated at the Natimuk aged care facility, 56 minutes after the fire was first observed. This reflects a very narrow window, less than 1 hour from initial detection to direct threat to vulnerable infrastructure. On the slide there you will see

three pictures. The top left one shows the impacted area at the start. The point of origin is near the white – that is the salt lake – and then how the fire travelled pretty much in a south-westerly direction, a very narrow front but at very high speed towards the township of Natimuk. The one beside it on the top right-hand side is what occurred once the wind change happened, how the narrow front turned into a wide front and started to impact the greater township and then north of the township and across the river here to Quantong. Then the bottom picture is what the overall impact was by the time we actually stopped the fire. At the bottom, on the left-hand side of the slide, are the pager messages that we received. The first one was to alert us that there was smoke sighted from the tower on Mount Arapiles, and the second one just below it is when the pager alert went off at the aged care facility saying that their smoke detectors had detected smoke. From early in the response it became clear that this was a fast-moving and unpredictable fire. It travelled rapidly in a narrow front with significant spotting well ahead of the main fire, making conventional containment extremely difficult. Very quickly the operational focus shifted from suppression to asset protection.

Next slide, please. What worked well? There were three key factors that contributed to preventing a worse outcome. First, the community and farmer response – on a declared catastrophic fire danger day our brigade had pre-identified local availability. When the pager activated brigade members responded immediately, and local farmers mobilised private firefighting units and agricultural equipment without delay. This response was decisive, not supplementary. Second, local decision-making and prioritisation – there was an immediate recognition of the risk to the aged care facility, and it was prioritised accordingly. Across the fireground individuals made rapid independent decisions based on local knowledge and conditions. Third, local knowledge itself – aerial observation assets were unavailable due to weather. As a result the incident control centre had limited real-time situational awareness. Local knowledge played a critical role in slowing and ultimately stopping the fire before it reached more densely populated areas.

Next slide, please. Limitations and challenges – I would not characterise these as single points of failure but rather systems limitations that had real operational consequences. First, training and capability – volunteers had limited exposure to fires of this scale, and familiarity with current CFA operational procedures and guidelines was inconsistent, contributing to early confusion. Second, communications – radio systems largely functioned, but confusion around protocols impacted effectiveness. Backup power failure at Mount Arapiles and loss of mobile coverage represent critical infrastructure risks. Third, loss of critical infrastructure – loss of mains power caused a failure of the town's water supply system, reducing residents ability to defend homes. Fourth, command continuity and local familiarity – rotating command personnel within the CFA without detailed local knowledge impacted situational awareness, in my opinion.

Next slide. Preparedness – there was an assumption that a standard response would be sufficient. On a catastrophic day that assumption did not hold. Training participation and community preparedness were variable and are areas for improvement.

Next slide. Recommendations – (1) enhanced and flexible volunteer training with a focus on large fire behaviour and communications; (2) mandatory resilience standards for critical infrastructure, including power, water and communications; and (3) formal recognition and integration of private firefighting capability, including support mechanisms.

In closing, this fire demonstrated that on catastrophic days outcomes depend heavily on local knowledge, community action and rapid decision-making. The system provides an essential framework but must better align with real-world fire behaviour and community response. Thank you. I am happy to take questions.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you. Steven, do you want to say anything?

**Steven MEYER:** Yes. I will do mine, and then we will do questions, if that is all right. My name is Steven Meyer, and I am the Group Officer of the Natimuk group and a CFA firefighter of 43 years in district 17. On 9 January 2026 I responded to the fire initially as a Group Officer in my own private fire truck and headed towards the origin of the fire. While en route with my brother and nephew, who are also members of the Grass Flat fire brigade, I endeavoured to contact relevant CFA members to ascertain the best course of action using the CFA radio UHF telephones for communication. My personal account and what I recollect is that whilst en route to the fire, smoke appeared to be laying flat due to the westerly winds blowing up to 90-odd k's an hour, which severely impacted navigation, making it hard to determine where the fire front actually was. We were able to drive down Wyn Wyn Road and travel up to Three Chain Road, at which time we set up a fire

hydrant on the corner of Grass Flat and Three Chain roads. As the fire came through we were able to follow it on the southern flank all the way back to Natimuk. On the Wimmera Highway our truck then went to Natimuk recreation and staging area through heavy, dense smoke with low visibility. At this point I met up with Scott Connor and filled our water tanker up, and at that facility doing this we discussed the wind change which was about to occur around the 1500 area. At this point Scott agreed that I should get out to the north side of the fire for asset protection and to organise things. To get out there I had to travel to Vectis up along the Wimmera Highway, across the back of Vectis and back to the Polkemmet area near Keatings Road. I then started working with Travis Mayberry to organise farmers' private speed tillers and shire graders to lay firebreaks. There were a large number of farmers' private units which came from far and wide.

What worked well: due to the horrific conditions of fire behaviour, the fire was so large and fast it was nothing like any of us had ever experienced in all my CFA life. All CFA, forest fire management and primary farming units played a critical role in protecting key assets in our local community. All people involved in the fire basically micromanaged themselves in their own roles and what they had to do at their disposal due to the substantial breakdown in communication, most likely caused by the power outages, which included the backup power. Considering the catastrophic fire conditions, there were no lives lost, although one member sustained minor injuries. Without all involved in fighting this fire, it would most likely have impacted on the Horsham area.

Problems on the day: well, the old story – water locations and finding water was a big problem. Lack of knowledge due to insufficient information also compounded the problem. UHF was our only means of communication on the fireground where we were situated. This limited severely our ability to coordinate CFA assets. Two CFA tankers experienced burnovers but thankfully without injury to personnel.

Recommendations for the future: in the large fires we have just experienced we needed more support. Sector commanders are to manage future events, and they need to be rotated regularly for resting. We also need longevity in our commanders staying here in our local area. This would then enable them to have better local knowledge whilst also building trust and friendships amongst CFA members.

Backup power: the backup power on Mount Arapiles was believed to be fully operational, with fuel and battery backup for many days. However, due to the conditions on the day the breaker switch tripped out on the generators. I believe the electrician who maintains this from Horsham was not able to get to the generator as the road was blocked and the aircraft unavailable, so we need another electrician based in a westerly township who can be called upon if access is blocked to the east. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both. David, I might start with one of the comments you made about communications. Correct me if I have misinterpreted, but you basically said the systems worked but there was operational confusion. Can you expand on that a little bit, just so we understand what happened?

**David SUDHOLZ:** It was my experience that the radios were working, but there was a bit of unfamiliarity from the people on the trucks about the use of the radios. Considering they had just been upgraded to new radios, I think that made life a little bit harder. I think also because it happened so quickly, there was probably no time to organise sectors. I think there was a lot of chatter on the trucks that was going unanswered because the people on the trucks were fighting the fires. In my experience, I chose not to use those radios and fell back on something that everybody had. There were a lot of private units on the fireground, so then the UHF became the primary means of communication.

**The CHAIR:** We heard that from the mayor giving his evidence about the use of UHF amongst those who were taking private action on their property. You mentioned this issue. Obviously one of the advantages you had here was private landowners who could get out and effectively use their machinery to create breaks and halt the spread of the fire with particular types of machinery. From a local CFA captain's point of view, how do you think in the future we could think about the integration or coordination of private landowners doing what they decide they want to do to protect their property and the broader emergency response that is obviously led by the fire agencies?

**David SUDHOLZ:** It is a good question, and it is essential. Without the private units, the CFA would not cope. We have got two trucks in my shed. One is a grass and scrub fire truck; one is a town pumper for low-structure fires. We just would not be able to do it. In all my experience with fires in this area, they are usually

stopped and contained by private units, and the CFA usually turns up to then start coordinating and maybe blacking out, pretty much. So they are really, really essential. I guess what we want to do first up is just acknowledge that these people drop everything – and they do drop everything – and just go straight to the fire without any expectation they are going to be compensated for doing that.

**The CHAIR:** From the experience we had – we did a tour today and we saw the distances; we went out to the source of this particular fire at Grass Flat – it is not a short journey from town out to there. It would seem to me that even with the best will in the world, it is hard to get to the source of a fire quickly.

**David SUDHOLZ:** Absolutely. A group officer had obviously alerted all the brigades that it was going to be a bad day and to be prepared. We followed that on with a private WhatsApp group. I just checked with all my brigade members and saw who was available, and I had two crews that said they were on standby, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. With the afternoon guys, the truck was out of the shed. It takes me about 7 minutes to drive from my house to the fire station, and it was already gone by the time I got there. So yes, they did respond.

But getting back to your question about the private units, they are the backbone of fighting fires in this area, and it is just absolutely essential that they be on the fireground. Just to add a little bit more, there were at least, I know, three vehicles and one agricultural piece of equipment that were damaged on the day, and no-one is asking to be compensated for that. Hopefully their insurance covers it, but it just demonstrates what people will do in this area to fight fires.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much, gentlemen. I want to ask a question in relation, Steve, to your experiences of the communications. You have said that there was a substantial breakdown. Paint the picture for us very clearly and give me a recommendation, please.

**Steven MEYER:** I was on the northern side of that fire running towards the river. Travis and myself –

**Melina BATH:** In your own unit, by the way?

**Steven MEYER:** Own unit – private units. We had just set up, organising with farmers to put in speed tillers and grader breaks. The shire grader was there putting breaks in. We had it all sort of pretty well good as far as that goes. On the other side of the Wimmera River down near Polkemmet bridge there were people putting speed tiller breaks in on the Horsham side, so that pulled it up. On the northern sector you will see it. It just stops dead on the river there. That was done with speed tillers.

One point I will say on the Natimuk group is we have got the UHF channel we run on as channel 9, and all our trucks in our brigade have got a big sticker on the side or the back of the truck saying what UHF channel they are on. If a private unit comes along onto that fireground and sees a fire truck that has got channel 9, they can go on there and communicate with the fire truck.

**Melina BATH:** Ultimately you went back to CB radio, UHF?

**Steven MEYER:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** There is another system, though, that was supposed to be working.

**Steven MEYER:** I had a mobile CFA radio. I was talking to Scott quite a bit on that earlier. The phone reception – I was talking to him earlier in the fire on that, and then I just could not talk to anyone. David said he could hear me on the radio, but he was up on top of the hill at Natimuk.

**David SUDHOLZ:** And I was on the vehicle-mounted radio.

**Steven MEYER:** You had the FCV with the radio. He may have been able to hear me, but basically I could not use that. Like Brian said, we have just gone back old school and run UHF.

**Melina BATH:** I have very limited time. You want it fit for purpose, something that actually works and is resilient.

**Steven MEYER:** I guess that is basically because a tower went out, and I believe the handheld CFA radios have some sort of satellite system on them. If you have more satellites, they link up, but apparently on that day there was only one.

**Melina BATH:** I have another couple of quick questions. Longevity in our commanders – this is in the hierarchy, the secondment method. Talk to us about having that conduit and that good contact.

**Steven MEYER:** It is like having a boss for 10 years, you know. You get to know them, understand them, trust them and enjoy their company. It is just a revolving door with our commanders in Horsham. We have had issues with that happening. We just want commanders to stay longer. I think they can learn the layout of the land and get local knowledge and become friends and trusted. When we are communicating with them from a fireground to their ICC or whatever, we know who we are talking to, we know what we can talk about and ask to get things done.

**Melina BATH:** When it is not working and there is a revolving door, if I can use your words, then it is a –

**Steven MEYER:** Well, it still works, but it is just not something that I feel – you know, I like a bit of longevity. You have just got that person there for a longer period of time. From their point of view, they are learning. They might have come from Mount Hotham, and they have got mountains. It is a totally different area here. We want people to go out and drive around with their families and learn the layout of the land because it is flat predominantly here with a few hills and a couple of rocks.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I appreciate that. I am running out of time. How old is your vehicle that sits in the Natimuk shed, your tanker?

**Steven MEYER:** David can answer that.

**Melina BATH:** Sorry – David.

**David SUDHOLZ:** That is about 30 years old, but it has only got about 40,000 kilometres on it.

**Melina BATH:** Does it have a twin cabin or is it an open-back cabin?

**David SUDHOLZ:** It is a single cab, so it is open for the back. We actually like our truck. Through community support we fundraised and got a tyre inflation system put into the truck, and it has made it a very effective truck. It is older in its technology so it is more reliable, as in it is not prone to electronic failures. But we are conscious – we do not send that truck away on strike teams. We would not send people. But within the group we have one new twin-cab truck, which is located at Noradjuha, and that would be the vehicle we would send on strike teams.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you both. Thank you for appearing today and for the work that you did in response to this event. You mentioned the resilience of the critical infrastructure being an issue, and you have demonstrated how loss of power and telecommunications did not just impact the local community after the event but was a problem during the event as well because it affected your communications – also the town water supply and that immediate response. What more do you think needs to be done in the future to prepare that infrastructure so that it is more reliable and there is more resilience in the system?

**David SUDHOLZ:** Thanks for the question. I think what needs to happen is maybe a more robust maintenance system with more frequency in the testing of it. With regard to the water supply, it is not highlighted enough how that was a real failure. I mean, residents were resorting to putting out spot fires in their backyards, literally, with buckets of water coming from their taps and garden hoses, and it literally just fell to a trickle coming out of those. Fortunately I think most of the fire front had gone through by the time, because it was on the eastern end of the town, that the power was lost. That is just something that highlights it is a real vulnerability. It meant that none of the firefighting units could draw water from the town supply system out of any hydrants. As a result, which is really good, the CFA have now introduced this system of transportable, large-scale water trucks that they pre-position at the staging area for us to fill up. But that took a little bit of time. I know we have spoken to GWM, who manage the water here. They have apparently a longer term plan

to put solar batteries on all these pump systems. If we could just somehow speed that up, that would definitely help work with the resilience of the system.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** The communications tower was also damaged by fire?

**Steven MEYER:** No, no, certainly not – Mount Arapiles, which we pointed out this morning on the bus, was unimpacted by the fire or smoke. Up there it would have been just a hot, windy day, but the trip switch tripped out. I would like a recommendation to say that there be dual maintenance people for that tower. If one side of the program is blocked and they cannot access it, someone else can access it and get up there and get it going. If that had have happened, there would have been no phone communications, and it would have been a totally different ball game.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** In terms of the water, how long did it take for that to come in for the CFA to be able to access it?

**David SUDHOLZ:** My world went pretty small when I left to go and fight the fire on my farm with my wife, so I would have to take that question on notice. But it was there by that afternoon – am I seeing heads nod? Yes.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. But given the speed of that fire, it –

**David SUDHOLZ:** Yes. I think, again, like I said in my opening statement, we are generally prepared for these things. We all take precautions individually as brigades and as a group, and we do preseason training and that sort of stuff, but we rely on these water systems to be there. It is the first time in history that the fires have ever impacted the township, so that hydrant system was essential, and it just was not there. It meant that trucks had to go looking for water rather than staying, defending and attacking fires on properties.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** The other thing you mentioned was greater flexibility in training for new CFA volunteers, I think. That is something that has come up already in our hearing. I am wondering what suggestions you have about how you can make it more flexible.

**David SUDHOLZ:** I am passionate about training. I am not too sure why, whether it is just limited budget, and I think it comes back to a bit of availability of people. You know, one of our district 17 trainers lives in Geelong, and our area training manager sets a 12-month calendar to try and, you know, capture some courses. But as volunteers within the community, people have got all different pressures on their lives, so they just cannot commit to long-term things. What I would like to see is that we have more local trainers and that they can just come out almost at the drop of a hat – so if we say, right, we have got five people available this Saturday morning, can someone come and do training? And other than relying on a purely volunteer, unpaid person, that training is not available.

I am also in the Army Reserve – have been for 40 years. And when I came and joined the CFA, the first question was, ‘David, you’re a trainer; would you like to train?’ And I said to them, ‘Well, how much do you pay your trainers?’ And they said ‘Nothing.’ And I said, ‘Oh, I can hear the Army Reserve calling.’ They have a great system of paying you tax-free. It does not affect your income, and it works well in attracting and motivating those essential people. That is what I would like to see when I talk about flexibility of training, because at the moment if I want to do training on the little pumper, which is a low-structure piece of equipment, it means that I can only rely on a professional firefighter to provide that training. A local trainer in Horsham is not authorised to provide training on the pumper, so I have to ask for the trainer to come from Geelong to deliver training on the pumper. It just adds complication to what should be a pretty simple, ongoing system, because we have new members joining all the time and the knowledge is always changing.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. I just want to follow on from Dr Mansfield’s questions. The tower up on Mount Arapiles: are you talking about a Telstra tower? And it failed because of a loss of power?

**David SUDHOLZ:** That is right. The power supply to that facility comes from the north side on the road there, and those powerlines were impacted, so the power failed. It is a Telstra facility, and they do have their own diesel-powered generator that should automatically start once it detects that there is no mains power

coming into it. It also has a battery backup that went for 4 hours, and it did last for 4 hours. All it should be is an automatic switch, and that automatic switch for some reason failed. Now, whether that is because it was not maintained, or was not checked regularly enough – we have not been given an answer.

**Steven MEYER:** It could be just due to the conditions of the heat too.

**David SUDHOLZ:** That is right, yes. So it was a case of when the technician was able to get access to the mountain. They just started the generator and the power was restored.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** The first thing – maybe the third thing – that always happens in a fire is the power goes out.

**David SUDHOLZ:** Yes.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** And yet some of the core functions of firefighting are impacted because of the loss of power, so it interests me about Telstra and their backup capability. We certainly came across it in the Otways. There was one where there was no backup there at all. Then of course, GWM's risk strategy around power loss – again, is that an area that you would like to see beefed up a little bit?

**David SUDHOLZ:** Yes.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** It strikes me that it is fairly important to be able to maintain water supply during a fire.

**David SUDHOLZ:** Yes. No, extremely important. And then we had a lot of responding brigades from outside the area, so they might not have known where the actual water sources were, so they would have just been drawn to what was on their maps or the little blue cat's eyes that are on the road and thought, 'Well, I can get water there.' And they were not able to get water there. And then it was having to be directed that they would have to find out where the water supply was. So yes.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Yes. I just want to say thank you for the clarity of your recommendations, the two of you, really – the training, the infrastructure resilience, power for communications, power for water, and then a suggestion of some integrated structure for the relationship between the private units and the other entities. I think it captures a lot of the issues all in one, so thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Broad.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you. Thank you so much for your work as volunteers. Just on that, as you mentioned earlier, need for more support and rotating people, David, you talked about your own home being under direct threat. We have heard from other captains and other brigade members that have spent 30 hours on a shift. Can you talk to that experience as a volunteer – the level of commitment that people seem to demonstrate? I know in Harcourt we had a number of volunteers that lost their own homes while they were out fighting fires. Can you just give us a bit of an insight as to what brigade members actually do?

**David SUDHOLZ:** Well, in Natimuk, I think nearly every one of my brigade members was impacted by the fire. One brigade member lost two homes in Natimuk, and a lot of his business equipment was located in one of his houses as well – so severely financially and practically impacted by the fire. And it is a tough choice – when I got to the station the forward commander vehicle was there, so I jumped in and was in the passenger seat. My driver was my second lieutenant, and he had a house along Natimuk Road. Once we came back into Natimuk we were assessing which way the fire was going to go, and our first focus was on the aged care facility. We then went and checked the northern part of the town out towards the lake. He lives on that road, and he said, 'I want to go home,' which was going to leave me in the car by myself. And I said, 'You need to go home; that's your priority.' As it turned out, he managed to save his own house and the neighbour's house, but he did lose some outbuildings in the process. It was very, very frightening for him. And my personal experience is that I left my wife at home in the house and the fire actually directly impacted the house with my wife still inside. She was hiding inside the house as the fire went through, and fortunately she is a member of the brigade and her training kicked in and she had her turnout gear on. By the time I got home she already had my private fire unit out of the shed at the back door, ready to go full of water, and we started attacking the fire. Our little brigade, we average about 69 call-outs per year. I think we had 70 in the first month after the fire, and the pager was

constant. And it was the same – CFA volunteers were always turning out. The public were doing the right thing; they would see a little bit of smoke and they would call us, and people just kept turning out, giving up their time for the fire.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** You talked earlier about the need to recognise those private units. We have heard other submissions that perhaps there should be some kind of assistance or support to enable grant programs for people to purchase firefighting equipment. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**David SUDHOLZ:** I have just got one. When I first bought my farm there was a water tank, and it had a brass fitting on it that was for the fire brigade. My understanding is that some years ago there was a scheme that if you put a water tank in on your farm and you made it accessible to the fire brigade, they would compensate you for half of the water tank. I think something like that would – it is no longer around, but that is something that would definitely be good.

**Steven MEYER:** What I want to do as a group officer for Natimuk group going forward is – we have got Noradjuha, Grass Flat, Natimuk and Mitre. I want to get individual maps made up, and I am working with Lily at CFA in town here to get some A3 maps made. They have already got a template on their computers. Scott is providing me with water point signs. I am going to go around and basically reconstruct them all. Anyone that has got a dam that has got water, or a tank, and they want to put a fitting in, we can get that organised and then we put the water point signs on the front gate into the property and onto the tank and get that on a map. So if we go, say, for a Grass Flat tanker that goes to Noradjuha, and they do not really know the area that well, that map gets pulled out from under the seat in the fire truck in Noradjuha. These are where all the water points are. I just want to make it more easy to understand – there are water points already on maps, like you said, Dave, but I want to get that even better so when we have this happen again and someone comes from another area like Warracknabeal or somewhere in a private unit or a tanker, they see that red W and in they go.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. I know when I came back, we were talking roughly a little bit about water and how you had trouble accessing it or it was an issue. A couple of days ago we were at Gellibrand and the CFA there had invested in a water tank, and they said that was a game changer for the fire brigade there because it was really close and it was accessible and it filled up numerous amounts, truckloads, of water. Do you think something like that would work here? I know that the rainfall is a lot less, but over time could you put a bore and a generator there to be able to pump out and make it easier to get water?

**Steven MEYER:** Natimuk lake has got a big tank. A lot of people did not know about that. It was not signed well enough. That is there for CFA or firefighting use. There is a tank here, I believe.

**Wendy LOVELL:** There are two tanks – two 80,000-litre tanks out there.

**Steven MEYER:** Yes, so we have got them, but we have just got to get a bit smarter and get these things put on maps so we can identify where water points are.

**David SUDHOLZ:** We are fortunate that we have the rural pipeline system. They have hydrants along that, and they also put in 22,500-litre water tanks on roadsides that are accessible as well. So I think water for us in our area is usually not really the issue, except for the township with the reticulation system failing. At Wonwondah they have pushed for and I think have got some funding for and have put in two large water storage tanks down there, which they draw from because they are close to the Grampians down near Laharum. So those things are excellent in the right areas, but for us specifically, I think we are usually pretty right if we can access it.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Usually.

**David SUDHOLZ:** Yes, that is right.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Usually, okay. Were there any other issues that we have not touched on that could be changed or altered to make the response better or easier?

**David SUDHOLZ:** I would just keep reinforcing what Smiley said about just the continuity of the staff that we have for district 17, and I am only fairly new to the brigade. I spent a lot of time in the Northern Territory and I have only been in the brigade just over 10 years now, but it strikes me that district 17 is the largest district,

has the most number of brigades within it, but it seems to have the smallest full-time workforce. And the full-time workforce that we get in there – and they are all great people – just seem to move on to other areas pretty quickly, or they are here on secondment. I worked in some pretty remote areas in the Northern Territory, and I hear a lot that they say it is hard to get people to come to Horsham because it is remote, and I am thinking, ‘You know, I used to live on Groote Eylandt.’ It is a 3-hour drive and I am in Melbourne, but it is an issue. I have just got to accept that some people – to come out here there must be some reason why they do not want to take the opportunities.

The other thing I want to say is that I think the current structure of limiting who can apply for those positions to only people that are qualified through the Fire Rescue Victoria system to get that qualification, that they can only apply. We have got some great local people that grew up and were passionate juniors in the brigade. I am talking about one in particular training in the Horsham office. He will come out on his own time, and he is a great guy, yet he is not allowed to apply for the commander or the ACFO position because he does not have that background. The irony is he probably knows more about our area and our equipment than some of these people that do post here. So it is not a reflection on the individual, but I just see that as a barrier to that continuity that Smiley was raising. It was really obvious on the day that people were thrown into this catastrophic situation – I am talking about the full-time people – and they do not know the people and they did not know the area.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** So that is a change you would support.

**David SUDHOLZ:** Yes, 100 per cent.

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

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

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. I have just got a brief question, perhaps to you, David. In terms of the pre-availability, you mentioned that you have a WhatsApp group on days that are going to be scheduled as a catastrophic day. How do you deal with – I think I heard an earlier witness say there were up to 250 private groups coming in over the course of the fire. How do you deal with all those people coming in at the one time?

**David SUDHOLZ:** At my level, I could not, and there was no expectation that I was going to deal with that. That is where the ICC – it is an excellent facility in there. It is well staffed and that sort of stuff, and that is their role. They coordinated all those strike teams coming in, all the support that was needed, all the water tankers when the aircraft could not get up – that is their role. We had an after-action review, and there was a bit of initial – not criticism but some finger-pointing at us, saying, ‘We didn’t have an aircraft in the air, so we didn’t know what was going on, and you weren’t telling us.’ My response was, ‘We were just worried about the flames directly in front of us. We were not thinking we had to provide a running update on that sort of stuff.’ You know, that is where we need more people or some other method to come out and actually take that role on, because the world gets pretty small for us as a brigade. As one truck, when you have got flames in front of you and you are trying to put out a house, that is all you are thinking about.

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

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

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks, guys, for the presentation. Steve, or Smiley, you talked about the longevity in the commanders locally and the revolving door. Is that because they are in acting positions or permanent positions that are turning over quickly as well?

**Steven MEYER:** I am not sure how to answer that one. Like David said, we are seen as a remote area. Commanders probably come here and then all of a sudden there is maybe a better offer somewhere else, and they go, ‘Oh, gee, this would be nice.’

**Wendy LOVELL:** So they are appointed permanently but they just do not stay very long?

**Steven MEYER:** I do not know whether they are permanent, but they are coming here. Horsham just seems to be – I do not want to be derogative or anything, but it just seems to be that people come and they are not here long enough. There are a lot of us getting a little bit upset because we have not got that longevity.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Do not let it be a reflection on Horsham, because we are hearing that commanders are in short supply statewide. I was just wondering if you knew what the vacancies in commander positions were in the region.

**Steven MEYER:** No, I do not.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Do you think it would be beneficial if the government was to return the ability for recruitment of their middle management to the operations of the CFA so that they could then recruit from their own positions but also recruit laterally, not just from the pool that is provided from FRV?

**Steven MEYER:** Yes.

**David SUDHOLZ:** One hundred per cent, I think that would go a long way. There are young people in the area that have family connections and probably would be quite happy to work and stay here and make this a permanent base. I think we really, really do limit it by just drawing from a very small pool, and my understanding is that they are short of workers too in that pool. Yes, that has a huge impact on us.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. We heard from Tony, the captain of the Gellibrand brigade on Monday, and he said his three big-ticket items to improve the CFA were training, trucks and equipment and extra volunteers. Is that the same here locally? What sorts of needs have you got?

**Steven MEYER:** I think going forward, especially with this services tax and stuff, we are going to have trouble keeping people coming through the door to join up in the fire brigade. The cost of everything with all our farming and that is just getting very high now. It is something that we have got to look at.

**David SUDHOLZ:** Natimuk is very fortunate. We have Mount Arapiles, which is a real drawcard. The community is a great community. We have a lot of non-farming people living in Natimuk and they are drawn to Natimuk for the climbing, and guess what, those people are good community people and they have joined the brigade. My membership is probably a bit out of the ordinary – it is quite high – and we have already had another five applications since the fire, so people want to get involved.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Fires are good for recruiting volunteers.

**David SUDHOLZ:** Correct. But they are non-farming people. The farming people that we get in are the kids, and they are the ones that you just sign up because their dad was in it and that sort of stuff. They are great members, the farming part of it, but in my brigade you do not see them take the truck out. They will always turn up on their private units. They are busy, and they are not going to hang around and do blackout. They are going to go straight back home, sort of thing.

Smiley mentioned it, and I will mention it seeing he brought it up: the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund I think mentally has an impact. People are paying a lot already. Potentially that is going to go up to a hell of a lot more, and they are going to say, 'Well, why would I give up my free time when I'm already financially contributing to this?' and they are also providing their own equipment and their own fuel and potentially damaging their own equipment to fight the fires. It is a real double whammy when they see their rates notice and pay this large amount towards that fund.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Gentlemen, thank you both so much for the work you do for the CFA but also for the evidence you have given us today and also facilitating the tour we had prior. It was really informative and beneficial. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript of your evidence today to review. With that, the committee will take a short break to reset for the next witness. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**