

# **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**

Ivan Smith;

Kevin Bolwell; and

Martin Colbert, Treasurer, West Wimmera Action Group.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria, coming to you from the Quantong community recreation facility.

I will just remind our witnesses that all evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during this hearing 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, 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 following the hearings. Transcripts will ultimately be made public.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will get committee members to introduce themselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Martin COLBERT:** Marty Colbert on behalf of West Wimmera Action Group.

**Ivan SMITH:** Ivan Smith, volunteer fireman all my life with the CFA.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Marty and Ivan, the way we will do this is I will invite each of you to make an opening statement – I might start with you, Ivan – and then we will go into questions. Ivan, if you want to start us off.

**Ivan SMITH:** Thank you very much for that, and thanks for the opportunity today to speak. I have a vision problem, as you have probably all noticed, so I sometimes wonder what I am doing here. But I am passionate about the volunteer fire service, so that is the reason I am here. We lived on a family farm 40 kilometres south of Horsham. I have been involved in the brigade all my life. The district is situated between the Grampians National Park on our eastern side, running down to the southern section, and the state park on our western side, running down to the southern section. So we have fought many fires on public land, large and small, and many fires on private property as well.

I had 17 years as captain of the Brimpaen brigade and a period as deputy group officer in that that period, and it has all been a great experience for me.

My submission relates to the benefits of private units and their possible subsidisation from the Victorian government; traffic management points with private equipment access through those points and access for stock owners through those points; property protection before evacuation takes place – there are some things we could do there; and fire prevention in the national parks and the seven steps of approval that the CFA and Forest Fire Management Victoria have to go through before they are allowed to carry out a burning program.

Subsidising private equipment – it was evident in the Natimuk fire the great work that the private equipment did, and I congratulate all the people that fought that fire. They did a splendid job to tidy that up and have it rounded up by that evening. It was a tremendous effort, and I believe the private equipment did a great job in helping out at that fire. Very often the private equipment can be first at a fire. It is a great advantage to have them involved within your brigade, and I have seen that happen many times over the past years. They can have that fire rounded up or nearly rounded up by the time the CFA tankers get there, so they are of great assistance. With the subsidisation from the government, I think you would be looking at maybe only suggesting subsidising a third or a quarter of the cost of the unit. But the units of course would have to come up to a certain standard to be available for that sort of thing. I think there is something like this that happens in South Australia, or so I believe. Maybe there needs to be a cap on the subsidy to a certain figure.

I will try and speed it up a little bit. These units of course would have to work with the CFA. They would have to be under the CFA guidance and directions, but they could carry out pretty important tasks by looking after infrastructure or houses, and that would allow the CFA tankers to get on with the job of fighting and rounding up the actual fire. They would be a great assist in that. The more units you can have to help – you need all the help you can get, particularly in these catastrophic fire situations.

The blocking of the roads with the traffic management points – I believe it might be a little bit better now than it used to be. If private units come along to help with the fire, they need to be let through these traffic management points. They come to help, and as I said before, you need all the help you can get in a fire situation, and likewise after the fire. Property owners that have lost stock need to be allowed back to their properties to check their stock and treat their stock rather than leaving them for nearly a week suffering. It is cruelty – burnt around the mouth, burnt around the ears. The female stock have their teats burnt and all that sort of thing. It is nothing else but cruelty – certain cruelty. If that was under normal circumstances, the property owner would be liable for the cruelty to animals. Are the traffic management people going to be liable themselves in preventing the farmers from going in to tend to their stock? I think not.

Fire prevention in national parks and the fire access tracks – there need to be more fire access tracks. I go back to the old days of the old Forests Commission. All those old tracks that were made in those days are grown over and non-existent. The aircraft do a great job, but on catastrophic days they cannot fly because of the conditions. Very often the drops miss out on accuracy for many reasons. You still need the fire tankers to get in to put the under fire out. These fire access tracks allow more tankers to get in in that respect. You often hear people say, ‘Oh, it’s inaccessible,’ but it is only inaccessible because there is no track in there. As I said, I grew up in the old Forests Commission days. Since the national parks have taken over, the fire prevention and fuel reduction burning is nowhere near the type of control and management that the Forests Commission had.

Also there are the seven steps of approval, as I said. If Forest Fire Management Victoria or CFA want to burn off, they have got to go through the seven steps of approval. It can take up to 12 months, and by that time you have lost what you want to do. It has all gone by the wayside.

Forest fuel reduction cool burning – I believe that our First Nations people used to do the cool burns. They would burn back into the wind, so a much slower fire. When it burns back into the wind it does not crown the fire, it does not crown into the trees, and all the native little animals have a far better chance to escape a slow burn like that. That then became their hunting ground later on. They seemed to be able to manage in that respect. If climate change is what it is and is making these fires hotter, we have to be smarter and quicker and change some of our practices – that being more fuel reduction burning. Sometimes there is 20 or 30 years of fuel in the forest, and that is why these fires are hotter.

I think that is probably near enough from me. The only other thing is there is a bit of publicity that perhaps could be done. When the evacuation notices are called through people can, if they have time – and this is what we used to do years ago – fill up their spouts with water, block their downpipes and water all around. A lot of the houses get alight from the spouts. It gets up under the eaves – under the corrugated iron and that sort of

thing – and the tiles. So the more you can wet down before you leave, your building has a better chance. Just as an example of that, in the 2014 fires coming out of the state park, it was ripping out. A chap had a little shack on a block of land, and there was grass that high – dry grass. Someone had been to see him, and he would not leave. Anyway, the group officer at the time and I went back to see him, and we said, ‘Well, you can’t stay here.’ He had a thousand litres of water. I said, ‘Look, I don’t want to come back tomorrow and pick you up, burnt to death. I don’t want that to happen. Empty that water on your building. Fill your spouts up, spray all your water all around as much as you can, empty your thousand litres and go,’ which he did. We came back the next day, and that little building was sitting there, and it was all burnt around. So if you have got time for some of these things, they can be done, but you have got to have time. I think I will leave it at that.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ivan. We really appreciate it.

**Kevin BOLWELL:** I just want you to know that Ivan is in his 90s. He mentored me at fires. He would have seen more catastrophic-type fires than anybody in this room and some of us multiplied together. Ivan has been at the fire front, and even though he might not be as articulate as some people can be, he is very sincere and very experienced.

**The CHAIR:** We really appreciate his evidence.

**Ivan SMITH:** It is a great organisation. I know we have our problems with the CFA, bureaucracy and all this sort of thing, but the camaraderie within the people that are volunteers and that sort of thing is great. People do not know what they are missing out on when they do not get involved in these things. Thank you for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ivan.

**Ivan SMITH:** I thought, through the week, ‘What am I doing here, a silly old bloke like me?’

**The CHAIR:** It is all good. We will let Marty do his presentation now.

**Martin COLBERT:** I see the time, and I am going to talk to the time somewhat. I know you have got a copy of my intro, so I will abridge it. I also have some images on file that I am going to call to be shown in a second, and it might help you focus a few questions.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Martin COLBERT:** Good afternoon, Chair and committee members. Thank you for bringing this hearing to Quantong. Yours is a huge task going forward. West Wimmera Action Group has done two reports. We have got the template, and we do not want to be faced with having to do another report again. So it is incumbent on you to go forward with this process and follow through, and we are asking that of you. I appear today as a representative of the West Wimmera Action Group. I speak with the full support and prior approval of our committee and the fire focus group. You have our 61-page submission on the 2025 Little Desert fire, and today I will connect those findings directly to the 52-page January 2026 Grass Flat, Natimuk and Quantong fire booklet. A lot of that has been driven through our group and through the respondents, but I must make note of the great work of our secretary in pulling it all together. You have seen the documents; they are an amazing production.

Just to the point that was brought up by the previous witnesses. I think it needs to be put on the record that it was not a lightning strike that started this fire. What is the committee’s understanding of the actual cause of the fire? It actually has not been –

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Power pole.

**Melina BATH:** Private power pole.

**Martin COLBERT:** Cool. We have heard about the devastation, but from our 37 survey respondents – and there were more people impacted than that; some were too traumatised to respond – there was in excess of \$9 million worth of damage. That is just from 37 respondents, so we are talking big numbers here. Local volunteers contributed between \$296,000 and \$486,000 in time and equipment damage, effectively saving the government this sum. Fifty-seven per cent of our respondents attended the fire with their own equipment and

their own units. The Little Desert fire showed identical patterns: volunteers saved government more than \$1 million, and the community suffered in excess of \$1.5 million in damage. It begs the question: why has it been left to a volunteer charity organisation such as West Wimmera Action Group to research and supply these detailed on-ground impacts? To answer that question: this is exactly why West Wimmera Action Group exists.

After the Little Desert fire our community survey data led to our fire focus group securing formal, ongoing meetings with DEECA and Forest Fire Management Victoria, providing locals with a voice to have input into better decision-making around fire management and preparedness. We have not come here to represent ourselves for sympathy. We are actually quite proud of what our community has achieved, especially the private units and farmers with discs and speed tillers who ultimately stopped that Grass Flat fire before it reached Horsham. But within that success, the same failures occurred again: inadequate fuel reduction on public land and operational boundaries between Forest Fire Management Victoria and the CFA that frustrate volunteers and lead to less than optimal results and critical communications black spots, exemplified by the failings at the Mount Arapiles Telstra tower and, in consequence, the fire observation tower.

We have endured two catastrophic fires within 12 months. We do not wish to wait for a third; we want action now. We are aware that the internal review has been done into the Horsham incident control centre, and we are looking forward to reviewing the results in mid-May. We propose six clear, practical actions so the next fire does not follow the same script. We have already covered fuel reduction on public land. It must actually happen, not just be plans. We have seen copies of plans, and they are quite extensive. The plans are unreal, but it is the actions that actually get the result. There has been a commission done previously that shows – and they have calculated – that for every \$1 spent on fire prevention, it saves \$11 in damage, so it is a no-brainer. The current operational boundaries between Forest Fire Management Victoria and the CFA consistently produce less than optimal results and frustrate volunteers who are actually on the ground who are left to manage those consequences.

I think we have already spoken about the subsidisation of private purchases of firefighting appliances. Likewise, the fire access tracks need to be open. Landowners need to be permitted and unencumbered to slash and burn roadsides without penalty, all in a smart manner, prior to the lead-up to summer, and rural councils should not be in a position to be short of funds to achieve the same. Communications infrastructure, especially fire towers, must have mandatory, regular testing of backup generators and communication systems so phones do not experience unreliable black spots during catastrophic days. And local knowledge and data from groups like West Wimmera Action Group should be hardwired into planning before the next season, not after the damage is done. Our fire focus group model of turning community surveys into direct agency meetings is already delivering results and should be formalised further.

Committee members, the people in this room have lived through both fires. We look forward to answering your questions and continuing to assist the inquiry with further detailed evidence as it progresses through all 11 terms of reference. Thank you. I look forward to this discussion and your questions. Is it appropriate to have a look at some images now?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Go for it.

**Martin COLBERT:** Do you want to go to the folder called ‘GIFs of the fire impact’, please, and pick ‘Little Desert north boundary 2025’? So you are all familiar with what a GIF is; it is just a rolling couple of images there.

We have got before the fire, the morning of the fire and after the fire. This is due south of Nhill, an area that is from Lawloit through to the Little Desert lodge, which we are seeing there. That particular boundary had a plan for a significant fire control to be put in all the way along it, and it was not achieved. In fact none of the burn was achieved. That was due to happen in the September prior, in September 2024; it did not occur. The fire happened on 27 January 2025. As happens with all these fires when they come through from a lightning strike, the wind swung around to the south-west and the result was that it breached the boundary and the productive farming country became the firebreak. So that is where the local appliances were.

If we want to talk about the shortcomings of the incident control centre in Horsham, that is a prime example. The trucks were onsite waiting for that fire to come out, and indeed it was coming out, and they were called away en masse to relocate to Dimboola because Dimboola was deemed to be under threat. They would have

had to leave. There is just a great big, long string of houses and the like along there with a lot of residents. The fire captain on the day called the shot and did not leave. He stayed there and protected them, and his decision saved the district.

To the right of the screen there, where it came out there, past that cloud, that is where the Little Desert lodge got taken out. If we go to the GIF called 'Stringybark Walk Little Desert 2022–25', there are a couple of years rolling here. Of importance is that funny-looking tear in the middle of your screen. That was from a 2022 fire, and it is an example of what would have happened if a controlled burn had been done along that northern boundary. You will see that funny-looking tear get red, which is green biomass, and you will see behind it that it did not burn. We will get to it again.

When it gets to the catastrophic fire day – this next one – it does not burn. Likewise, if you have a look at the at the bottom of the screen next to the scale, you will see an old burn there, and behind that, on the catastrophic fire day – next – it did not, the shadow behind it. Anyway, I can give you a thousand of them from the Little Desert with the evidence of what happens when the planned burns are actually undertaken. The question to you is: what is stopping these planned burns from happening when they are shown to be so successful?

Quickly we will touch on the one called 'Loch Iel'.

**The CHAIR:** I want to get to questions because we are running out of time.

**Martin COLBERT:** Your call.

**The CHAIR:** I might start with that. What is the reason you are given for the planned burns not proceeding?

**Martin COLBERT:** They are too complicated, essentially. We have been given a long list of this northern example.

**The CHAIR:** The burns are too complicated?

**Martin COLBERT:** The burns are too complicated to proceed with. I know we have got rid of the image, but that northern boundary goes like that, so there are too many facing – to work with the wind, if it is right somewhere, it is wrong somewhere. I am sure Parks Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria have a matrix to work to and then it gets a cross in it, so it just stops. The possibility of actually being able to complete that controlled burn is virtually zero, because other avenues of fuel reduction need to be –

**The CHAIR:** What would you suggest they would be?

**Martin COLBERT:** It needs at least 20 metres of bare earth, or that could be very low vegetation, to achieve that. You would achieve that by either a chain or by heavy-duty mulching equipment.

**The CHAIR:** Does that sort of fire breaking occur around here?

**Martin COLBERT:** It occurs in the Big Desert, which is due north of Nhill. We will just talk about the Murrayville track area, where they have got 100 metres of flattened scrub. If I took you up there and you had a look, you would say, 'What are you on about, Marty? It looks the same as everywhere else.' The point is that it is lower, and so the fire loses its velocity and is actually controllable. In this instance it would be Forest Fire Management Victoria on their side of the fence, and if we are on the other side of the fence, it might never get to us, but it would be a lot easier for us to control.

**The CHAIR:** Are you suggesting that those firebreaks occur on public land, or should they be occurring on private land as well?

**Martin COLBERT:** They should occur on public land. We take controls on private land, but these need to happen. Where the fire originates in the public land, it is actually their fire to look after; we just bear the consequences of being their firebreak.

**The CHAIR:** Fires do not always occur on public land, though.

**Martin COLBERT:** In the instance of the northern boundary of the Little Desert National Park, historically when these dry lightning strikes come through, the wind always swings around to the south-west.

**The CHAIR:** You talked about the interface between the CFA and FFMVic. What do you think works well and what do you think does not work well in that interface?

**Martin COLBERT:** I struggle to find where Forest Fire Management Victoria works well in a private land sense. And I get it – they have to deal with fires in the public lands. Within the public lands they do not seem to do an adequate job. I know it is easy to poke sticks, but there is a prime example where the fire in the Little Desert did not need to go for nine days. It was poorly maintained and surveyed and did not have an eye kept on it. One of the crucial fire breaks that was put in during the Little Desert fire was not properly assessed, and that is where the fire got over and essentially nearly took Goroke to the ground.

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

**Ivan SMITH:** Could I just follow up there a little bit?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, please.

**Ivan SMITH:** I believe there is another reason why it is difficult to do these controlled burns. Whether it be Forest Fire Management Victoria or the CFA, there are seven procedures of permission that they have to go through before they are able to do a burn. By the time you do all that, your opportunity to do your burn is – very often the weather has changed and you have missed that opportunity. Volunteers get sick of this bureaucracy. They say, ‘It’s too hard. We’re not going to do it.’ The people in Forest Fire Management Victoria, the people on the ground that manage that, the CFA people, the group officers and volunteers need to have that final say if that area needs to be burnt or not. There are too many other splinter government organisations coming in over the top saying, ‘Oh, we can’t burn here because of this and because of that.’ The primary need to do a burn is protection, so the people that are in control of those departments – Forest Fire Management Victoria and the CFA – are the controlling burning bodies, and they are the ones that know best. These other little groups should not be able to override them. They should have the final say.

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

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much. I really hear what you are saying. When you have a bushfire which becomes out of control, you have got an ignition point. You have got the right – meaning ‘poor’ – hot and windy days and you have got a fuel source. The only things that we can really modify at the moment is fuel on the ground, whether it be stubble or whether it be in public land undergrowth or the like. There are actually multiple points within those seven steps of approval. Do you feel overarchingly it is a philosophical point of view that is halting this and that is driving these multiple, multiple, multiple layers that just stop fuel hazard reduction from occurring? Ivan, what are your thoughts?

**Ivan SMITH:** I think it is some of these groups that are protecting a little animal or protecting a flower or something like that, but they forget that the cool burn-off situation is much better. They have an opportunity to get away from these cool burns, and if it is a cool burn, all your vegetation, your native vegetation and that, will come back. But if it is a major red-hot bushfire, well, it is a different story. That is what I feel. I think there are too many other groups, conservation-type groups, within departments that have a say in what they should not have a say in in that respect when there is a need to do a certain area, to do a certain burn, to protect a certain place or township or something or whatever.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks. Martin.

**Martin COLBERT:** I will agree with Ivan there. I think the outside interest groups, as we call them from our point of view, do hold a lot of sway. I am not saying they should not have some sway. We all are concerned about the environment. I think there may be room for improvement in legislation to help forgo some of the litigation that sometimes is brought against governments in regard to native vegetation control. I guess that is a job you have got going forward to make these recommendations to trim that up. But it has become very hard for anyone to manage anything within the environment, given all the auspices that are placed upon us, be it anything to do with native vegetation. I know I talked about the Little Desert there before, but the same thing exists with Natimuk Creek. It comes from being a vital fire protection asset to a fire corridor.

**Melina BATH:** In Gippsland we lost 1.5 million hectares of forest – incinerated – and farms et cetera. That is a pretty significant part. My time is up. Maybe an answer on notice: thinking about your traffic management system, could there be a green, an amber and a red? If I am a tourist, I am a red – I do not get through. But if I am a local, can I have a green light to get back to my farm? Is that something – my time is out; I am sorry.

**Ivan SMITH:** That sort of thing would help. In the Natimuk fire here there was a chap that was in fighting the fire and he had to go home for some reason through the traffic management point. He was coming back to fight the fire and they would not let him through. He had already been in there fighting the fire. This is what happens. There have been private tankers come along – a lot of the units are ex-CFA units – and they have been held up from time to time too. As I said, you need all the help you can get. Do not turn it away.

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

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today and for your detailed submission as well. I am interested in some of the perspectives you have brought around the need for better preparation, in particular around some of the, say, fuel management control or some of that landscape management. We came from Colac yesterday, where we were hearing from some of the groups that have been doing work in the Otways, where there is a collaboration between researchers, ecologists, local landholders, First Nations groups and fire management authorities – a whole range. They have been doing some work there to look at in that particular environment what the best ways are to prepare for fires, build resilience, protect different species and also protect communities. They have done that by bringing together a whole lot of different groups that have an interest, and they are working together. Is that sort of approach something that you think could work here in this environment? Obviously it is very different to the Otways here, but having all those groups around the table to work out what is going to deliver the best outcomes here for this landscape, for these communities – is that something you think could work?

**Ivan SMITH:** It probably gets back to the point, as I say, that sometimes you have got to lose a bit of something to have a big gain later on. If it is necessary to protect a township by doing a burn in a national park to protect that township, that has to be done, irrespective of what somebody else thinks. It is the fire people's responsibility, I think, to do that burn, and they should have that final say. It is okay for your group to get together, and I agree you can have a talk about it and maybe come up with different ideas. But when it comes to the crunch, if that burn needs to be done to protect a township or something, it needs to be done.

**Martin COLBERT:** Fire does not care who you are or where you are from. It is just coming at you, and it is going to burn you. To go to an example that might suit your question, the West Wimmera Action Group's work from their fire focus group to actually strike up a quarterly meeting with CFA and Forest Fire Management Victoria is a way ahead. We are trying to get more transparency by doing that so we know what is going on and also perhaps highlight a little bit of accountability. That is what is on the other side of transparency. We have got intergenerational knowledge in our fire focus group that will really aid a far better result.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. That is my time.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Broad.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you. I just wanted to have your insights on the emergency services levy and how that might impact. We have heard that not all volunteers are eligible for the rebate, and with smaller brigades it is very challenging compared to some other areas, where you still have to raise the same amount of funds for the VESEP grant. So I guess I just thought you could talk to that issue and what you are hearing locally.

**Martin COLBERT:** I can. I am not a primary producer landowner, so although I am impacted, I am not as impacted as a primary producer, but I can talk to that regarding my work as an insurance loss assessor. I spend six months of the year talking to farmers about insurance. So what happens when farmer X has got Y dollars in his budget to spend on insurance, then he gets hit with the ESVF, which is a disproportionate tax from state government, is that he or she decides, 'I've got less money to spend on insurance.' So immediately their property becomes less insured, because farming has a razor-sharp margin at best. The first thing that gets less insurance is fences – and you have seen plenty of burnt fences today. I have been across that Natimuk fireground. In fact, the morning of the Natimuk fire, I was undertaking paperwork to do with other fires for loss of fences. It is a big thing. All those assessments I did in Natimuk – everyone was underinsured, because the

margins in farming do not allow it. So an increase in the ESVF will immediately put an increase in the losses to primary production, just from that factor alone.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Mr Smith, did you have anything you wanted to say?

**Ivan SMITH:** No. I think I would go along with that. It just makes it pretty difficult and puts more cost on the farming community. It is not very good.

**Martin COLBERT:** We just do not see the money coming back. I can go on for ages about this rabbit hole. As it is, the fire services levy does not come back, let alone when you multiply it by four. It just is not coming back to this neck of the woods.

**Gaelle BROAD:** And we also heard today that those that have insurance, even at some level, are therefore not eligible for some of the government grant programs. Is that something that you are hearing? Have you got any feedback on the actual grant system as you are working with people?

**Martin COLBERT:** Utter frustration, contempt, a lot of swear words – it is probably a subject that, when you are trying to talk to someone in a stressful situation after a fire, is one of those ‘Don’t go there’ type things, because it is a real trigger point. You have seen the overalls and everything else hanging off the fence. It is a hot subject.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. In your submission summary and the recommendations, you state that it is for the government to provide more support to build the community’s understanding on property protection. Now, regardless of who holds government, we all know that they like to get their messages across loud and clear. How can they do that better out here, for this demographic?

**Martin COLBERT:** How can the government get the message across better?

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes. How can we reach that target audience to get the message of the understanding on property protection across?

**Martin COLBERT:** It would probably be by better representation by the incumbent agriculture minister in a farming-type sense, to be able to walk the walk and talk the talk on the ground.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes. Okay. Mr Smith, did you have any input?

**Ivan SMITH:** I think, yes, something like that would help.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Beautiful. That is all.

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

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you both for your attendance at today’s hearing. Martin, I just want to clarify something you said about a disconnect between the ICC and the fire captain with respect to the Dimboola fire. Can you just expand on what that –

**Martin COLBERT:** South of Nhill they were fighting the fire there as it was coming out of the desert on the south-west change. There was a huge disconnect between the ICC and what was actually happening on the day, all day. It was like they were about four hours behind, and if you can get to have a look at where the aerial work was being done that day, you will see they were constantly behind where they should have been. It is clearly able to be seen. It became really apparent really quickly that they were underprepared for what was supposedly and probably going to hit Dimboola, and they had actually been made aware of that earlier in the day by a member of our fire focus group that was going to head to Dimboola. He was not just ignored, he was discounted or discredited with ‘It’s not going to happen.’ So they should have known it was coming that way, and they should have started preparing then. They left it till the last minute – this is the ICC. All hell broke loose, and they tried to pull every truck they could into Dimboola. And from the accounts I heard from the trucks that were in there – because I was actually back out in that fire area where there were no trucks; they had been pulled in closer to Dimboola and we were lucky to get out of there alive – they could hardly move for

trucks in Dimboola. There were that many trucks pulled in there. The fire captain south of Nhill elected to not move and to stay and fight the fire there, and that action by that person there saved at least six dwellings and possibly lives south of Nhill.

**John BERGER:** Since that incident has there been any retrace of the steps of what actually happened?

**Martin COLBERT:** No. The Little Desert fire is the forgotten fire. That is probably why what I am telling you just sounds like news. It is the forgotten fire. At the same time there was a Grampians fire – you are going to hear all about that; you probably have already heard all about that. You will hear very little about the Little Desert fire. I will suggest that it is because there were so many faults and failings in there that they do not want them to surface. I can tell you about ICC and Natimuk if you want.

**John BERGER:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mr Berger. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. I will just continue on that one. When you talk about the ICC incidents and that, is there anyone in the ICC who actually communicates directly with either the local fire captains or with the strike teams who are on the ground to find out what is happening, where they are and why they need to stay there, rather than just give these commands to leave and go to somewhere else?

**Martin COLBERT:** I am not in a position to answer that. Although I am a member of the CFA, I will not purposely get on a truck because I value my life. I cannot honestly answer that. I think you ask the ICC. The issue around the ICC is that in our scenario here with very fast-moving fires – and you heard all about how fast they are on these open plains – they actually might be full of good people but the system they use is not fit for purpose, and the purpose out here is fast-moving fires.

**Wendy LOVELL:** In your submission there is a pie chart of how people rated communication, and 63 per cent of the respondents rated the communication either non-existent or unacceptable on the day. Can you expand on that, and do you have any solutions for how we can solve that?

**Martin COLBERT:** This is the Grass Flat, Natimuk, Quantong fire. You heard the CFA group officer Steve Meyer talk about the issues that he had with the communication. My personal experience there was – and you heard from Brian; we are all a tight little community. In fact I shifted from the Nhill fire and relocated to the Natimuk fire and nearly 12 months later it got burnt out. I went out to Brian Klowss's property because, after a 15-second telephone call before the phones went out, I knew he was not at his house and I knew it was about to get burnt. So I went out there and started putting things in place so his house did not get burnt. While I was doing that the first CFA truck pulled up to get water, and the first thing they said was, 'We can't talk to anyone; the only thing we can do is use phones.' So I got all my leads, all my chargers, all my power banks and just made sure they had phone – of course then the phones went down as well. That is my firsthand account of what they were saying they were experiencing. Now, these blokes were in the Grass Flat truck. They were right in the heat of the fire. This was only in the first half an hour and they were already operating without communication. From the 37 respondents, quite a few of them were people that were either in the fireground or adjacent to it, and that would be either firsthand experience as a volunteer or it could even be someone like me who was also trying to use the VicEmergency app – and that was beyond frustrating.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Ivan, do you have any insight into the communications – whether there are communications from the ICC directly to strike teams or captains?

**Ivan SMITH:** No. I am not active now, so I am out of, I suppose, the modern type of communication and that sort of thing.

**Wendy LOVELL:** What about your mate beside you, Kevin? Does he have any?

**Ivan SMITH:** Yes, Kevin would.

**Kevin BOLWELL:** Well, one of the problems with communications is that they work great at Burwood, but then as you move out into the country, you get dust, dirt, rubbish, you get smoke over the top of the new radios and you get all sorts of things happening that were not factored in on the first day. So you lose your radio communications. And then the responsibility – you see, I think the batteries failed on the generator up in the

communications tower up at Mount Arapiles. Somebody was supposed to check them. There is a little board up there and you write 'checked' on it, but nobody seems to take responsibility. Telstra, various communications organisations – nobody takes responsibility. You get all these little bureaucratic people running around doing good work here and good work there but not getting – so the communication failure starts on day one right away from the fire, and it builds until you get to a fire, when you have to use all this communication equipment, and it fails time and time again.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, gentlemen, for coming in today and for your evidence. You will be provided with a draft of the transcript of today's proceedings to review before it is published. With that, the committee will take a short break and return with the open mic session.

**Witnesses withdrew.**