

OPENING STATEMENT

Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires Across Victoria

Melbourne Hearing, 1 May 2026

Peter Marshall, National & Victorian Branch Secretary, United Firefighters Union of Australia

Chair and members of the Committee, I appear alongside John Houston of the CFA Volunteers Group. Andrew Weidemann of Across Victoria Alliance is an apology today. Together we represent career firefighters, volunteer firefighters, farmers and landholders.

On 9 January 2026, catastrophic fire conditions were declared across Victoria. Before that season ended, more than 436,000 hectares had burned. Over 1,500 structures were damaged or destroyed, including more than 220 homes. Approximately 45,000 livestock perished. Critical infrastructure — power, communications, water, transport — failed across affected regions.

Every single one of those losses occurred against a backdrop of warnings. Warnings issued by us. Warnings issued by FRV's own executive leadership. And warnings issued sixteen years ago, in 2010, by the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

The Allan Government was warned. The fire service leadership were warned. They chose not to act.

Let me be specific on the major topics of our written submission.

1 — The Fleet Crisis was foreseeable and documented

This fleet crisis did not just appear. It was a documented, predicted failure of investment.

- As at January 2026, sixty-five per cent of FRV's fleet was past its service life.
- FRV's own internal fleet presentation to the Executive Leadership Team, dated 3 June 2025, formally advised that 144 appliances required replacement and that the 15-year fleet replacement policy was not being met.
- That same presentation explicitly invoked the "normalisation of deviations" — the safety concept from the Challenger disaster — as a warning that fleet deficiencies were being treated as routine.
- The KPMG audit of FRV's fleet, commissioned by the Fire Rescue Victoria in January 2025, was due by middle of last year. It is, as at today, still unpublished. FRV's own executive expected that audit to "highlight significant deficiencies."
- The CFA is in no better position. Its average fleet age is 16.3 years against a service life of 20 years. Seven hundred and ninety-two CFA tankers are out of date, unreliable and unsafe. Two hundred and eighty-eight of those are over thirty years old.

KEY POINT: *The fleet crisis of January 2026 was locked in by funding decisions made years earlier. No emergency purchase, no media release, could have changed the outcome by the time the fires arrived.*

2 — The Failures Played Out in Real Time

While the Premier was telling Victorians we were “fire ready,” our trucks were breaking down on the fireground.

- The State Control Centre asked FRV to form additional strike teams during the January fires. FRV could not do so.

KEY POINT: *The UFU’s truck fault spreadsheet — annexed to our submission — documents the systemic pattern across several years. The 2026 fire season was when that pattern became unsustainable.*

3 — Reports Tabled Show That Funding Has Been Cut

The Premier said reports of funding cuts were “false and misleading.” Victoria’s independent Parliamentary Budget Office says she was wrong.

- CFA grant funding fell every year from 2020-21 to 2023-24, from \$351.6 million to \$339.5 million.
- Total Government cash flows to the CFA fell by more than \$52 million over the same period.
- Further, under the new Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, FRV’s base budget is approximately \$846 million — a reduction of around \$275 million against the \$1.121 billion FRV received in 2024-25.
- Meanwhile, the levy paid by Victorian property owners has approximately doubled in some categories, with farming rates increasing by between 115% and 152%.

KEY POINT: *Victorians are paying more for fire services. Fire services are receiving less. The CFA Board itself, in a letter dated 2 April 2026, conceded “significant financial sustainability challenges.” The Government has not.*

4 — Safety Obligations Are Being Breached, Not Just Underfunded

This has moved from a funding problem to a safety problem.

- WorkSafe Victoria, after a January 2026 inspection, issued two formal Improvement Notices against FRV for failing to provide BG4 refresher training and for failing to provide a safe system of work in tunnel environments.
- The UFU was forced to file in the Fair Work Commission in December 2025 because FRV’s Harris portable radios were not functioning in the Metro Tunnel and West Gate Tunnel. The monitored duress function — the function that lets a firefighter in mortal danger call for help — was rendered inoperable.
- Looking to our CFA colleagues, CFA Fire Stations are not uniformly equipped with basic OH&S infrastructure and Station Design Guidelines that are

standard practice at FRV, such as decontamination shower facilities for breathing apparatus operators. CFA brigades do not have filtration systems to remove toxic fumes and particulates, which results in no 'clean areas' for CFA volunteers/brigade members.

KEY POINT: *When firefighters cannot communicate, cannot call for help, and cannot trust their equipment, the question is no longer about budget cycles. It is about whether the Government is meeting its primary obligation — to keep its firefighters, both career and volunteer, alive.*

5 — Sixteen Years After Black Saturday, the Lessons Have Not Been Learned

Black Saturday produced 67 recommendations. Sixteen years later, many recommendations have been abandoned, reversed, or quietly shelved, in respect of key recommendations relating to prescribed burning, powerline replacement, radio communications and community recovery frameworks.

KEY POINT: *Our submission asks the Committee to recommend a structured public stocktake of all 67 VBRC recommendations — what has been done, what has not, and a funded timetable for what remains. Further inquiries are not a substitute for implementation. Sixteen years of warning is enough.*

CLOSING REMARKS

Chair, our 25 recommendations are set out in Annexure 1 to our submission. They are practical and, most importantly, overdue. We believe they address many of the issues I have just highlighted.

We are happy to take the Committee's questions.