

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 19 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Enver Erdogan MLC, Minister for Environment;

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services,

Carolyn Jackson, Deputy Secretary, Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples,

Rachaele May, Executive Director, Policy and Knowledge, Bushfire and Forest Services,

Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer,

Kate Gavens, Chief Conservation Regulator,

Tony Circelli, Head, Recycling Victoria,

Sally Fensling, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services, and

Etienne Gouws, Chief Finance Officer, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action;

Joss Crawford, Chief Executive Officer, Environment Protection Authority Victoria; and

Lee Miezis, Chief Executive Officer, Parks Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair, I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream tonight and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Environment the Honourable Enver Erdogan as well as officials from DEECA. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Connolly, Chair of PAEC. I might begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to the Wurundjeri people and their elders past and present, any First Peoples joining us today online and anyone in the Victorian community watching today's proceedings.

Visual presentation.

Enver ERDOGAN: In relation to the environment portfolio, it is a very vast and expansive portfolio which covers almost every aspect of our lives, from public land access and management to building a circular economy, bushfire and emergency management and of course environmental regulation and compliance. As I am finding, most of them complement each other, but at times they can be in conflict with each other – that is the nature of the environment itself that we operate in. We manage 8 million hectares of public land, including parks and reserves; we lead bushfire management; we support tourism and outdoor recreation; we regulate pollution, waste and recycling; and we protect biodiversity. We are delivering a circular economy. Most of you

would be familiar now with our very successful container deposit scheme, which has resulted in over 3 billion containers being returned and over 600 jobs being created.

Bushfire prevention, response and recovery is a big feature of the 2026–27 budget. It is about safeguarding what is precious in our state and building resilience, protecting the environment and supporting everyone to enjoy the outdoors. We do that through the \$146.8 million investment to secure critical aviation, \$44 million into maintaining essential emergency and land management, \$25.6 million to support planned burning and fuel management to reduce bushfire risk and \$5 million to cover waste disposal costs for fire-affected residents so that their clean-up can be free.

Access to enjoy parks and nature – we have a number of further investments in this space, building on what we have achieved in previous budgets. There is \$15.5 million for the very popular Zoos Victoria kids go free. If any of you follow my social media, I had the opportunity to feed some giraffes at the Melbourne Zoo recently – that is one of the joys of this role. There is also that overlap with outdoor recreation. I know Mr Hilakari is nodding because he is a big fan of the Werribee zoo, and it is a beautiful zoo. We have had really big investments there, and obviously we are making sure that kids can go free. But it even gets better – we know that the costs for families and adults has also decreased with memberships. We are also investing \$10 million to manage Victoria’s forests, \$7.9 million to enhance the Great Ocean Road visitor facilities, \$5.7 million to secure quality water supply and support Alpine Resorts Victoria as a key tourist destination, and \$1.7 million to invest in playgrounds, community gardens, toilets, sheds and trails to improve our open spaces. Obviously protecting the environment is very vast, and part of that is \$3 million to support implementation of traditional owner agreements, \$2.1 million to support delivering faster and fit-for-purpose environmental assessments, and \$1.9 million to extend the detox your home program, a very popular program that all of us would be familiar with.

Our government is also helping Victorians enjoy the great outdoors. We know that our parks drive \$1.4 billion of annual contribution to the economy and 14,000 jobs statewide, much of it regional. There is \$25 million in this budget towards boosting outdoor recreation through zoos, Great Ocean Road upgrades and community facilities, \$30 million to open access to 1.8 million hectares of state forests in Gippsland and north-east Victoria and \$31 million to support tree planting and action on illegal dumping.

In terms of the investment in preparedness and mitigation, this is about protecting communities into the long term. \$217 million in this budget will strengthen firefighting capability and preparedness, an early investment that we know will pay long-term dividends in terms of costs and keeping communities safer, indeed because we know that the annual economic loss from bushfires is projected to reach \$387 million by 2050 without appropriate action. This funding is really about the people and the hardware on the front line. We are supporting aviation, firefighting vehicles, heavy machinery, radios and fuel management. It has already contributed to additional planned burns and fuel management over this autumn and going forward. It is a busy agenda in environment, in our last portfolio, so I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. We are going to go to Deputy Chair Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, you have mentioned quite a bit there about the Great Ocean Road, and of course that is entirely in my electorate and something we are very proud of down our way. A couple of quick questions, please. In budget paper 4, page 50, there is ‘Supporting nature-based tourism and the environment along the Great Ocean Road’, \$2.3 million of which \$1.5 million is supposed to have been spent by the end of this financial year and \$768,000 for next year. What is that bucket of money for?

Enver ERDOGAN: In relation to those specific investments I might hand over to the CEO of Parks Victoria, Lee Miezis.

Lee MIEZIS: I will have to take that one on notice, given the transition arrangements currently in place between Parks Victoria and GORCAPA, the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority, at this time.

Richard RIORDAN: Yes. All right, if you could. Thank you very much. Then you have identified a further \$7.8 million, which I think has been identified in the budget for the entire spend of that, and that is basic capital maintenance of some key spots along the ocean road.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right.

Richard RIORDAN: With the transition from Parks Victoria of all those various sites to the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority, last year they needed an end of financial year top-up. Are you expecting to have to provide a letter of comfort and/or a top-up to the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of a letter of comfort, yes, I will be providing a letter of comfort for the organisation.

Richard RIORDAN: Can you tell the committee how far short of balancing the books they are?

Enver ERDOGAN: I will be providing a letter of comfort. I was briefed on this matter, as you would appreciate, in the four weeks in the role. But in the longer term I feel that there are opportunities to make sure that there is greater sustainability there, as you would appreciate, with our announcement under the previous minister to have visitor entry fees to the Twelve Apostles visitor centre, the \$126 million investment.

Richard RIORDAN: So you are expecting the visitor fees to the Twelve Apostles to help prop up the GORCAPA budget?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think a lot of the plan is to make sure that it is sustainable into the long term. So yes, a lot of those visitor fees will be –

Richard RIORDAN: So are you able to tell us what the shortfall is this year?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of the budget figure for this year, Ms Jackson, our Deputy Secretary, might have more.

Carolyn JACKSON: We would need to take that on notice. The minister is correct. GORCAPA does have a letter of comfort for this financial year.

Richard RIORDAN: So you will be able to provide the committee with what the short –

Carolyn JACKSON: We will not know until the end of financial year, so it is something that we will not –

Richard RIORDAN: But it is heading in that direction?

Carolyn JACKSON: There will be, I expect, a shortfall.

Richard RIORDAN: Has GORCAPA supplied to you, Minister – it was a fairly problematic summer, not their fault at all of course, but summer accommodation and other key revenue sources for GORCAPA were severely affected – or have they indicated to you what sort of write-down they have had on income and, secondly, the extra costs incurred for clean-ups, flooding and so on?

Enver ERDOGAN: GORCAPA has been working very closely with the department about the losses experienced due to the season we have had, the weather conditions in January. So the department is in regular contact with them, talking about their long-term strategy and about their viability. That is why a lot of our investments are focused there. They would be working with the department.

Richard RIORDAN: A final GORCAPA question: the model is relatively unique to the Otways – correct me if I am wrong – in terms of handing large areas of national park and coast and marine environment across to a separate agency from Parks; is that a model you are looking to experiment or try within other parts of the state?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think the establishment is about long-term management of the region. They will have a large, extensive area of 150 hectares to manage. In terms of other regions and whether it is applicable, I think I would need to consider that, as every situation is unique. At this stage I do not have any plans to have a similar set-up anywhere else, but I would not rule it out going forward. If it is a successful way of operating, then why wouldn't you roll it out?

Richard RIORDAN: The transition I think across of everything to GORCAPA is to be complete by 1 July this year; is that correct?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right.

Richard RIORDAN: And has all funding that would have ordinarily gone to Parks been transferred in its entirety across to GORCAPA?

Enver ERDOGAN: I might just pass to the CEO, Mr Miezis.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes, I am happy to take that one. We are in the process of finalising that transfer, which will be both, obviously, revenue sources and recurrent funding to Parks Victoria, as well as people who will transfer from Parks Victoria to GORCAPA effective 1 July. We are just doing the final tidy-up of the paperwork, in effect, for that.

Richard RIORDAN: So local rumours that there have been many staff let go from Parks, particularly in the southern parts of the GORCAPA, and not replaced, so they are actually transferring fewer people, therefore less recurrent cost to GORCAPA –

Lee MIEZIS: No. There are people, certainly, who have moved on, they have transferred – as people do in workforces, they move on. But if a position is not filled, then the vacancy and the associated funding will transfer from Parks Victoria to GORCAPA.

Richard RIORDAN: So there will be no net reduction at all in funding to that region to manage the national parks?

Lee MIEZIS: There will be no net reduction. And as you may be aware, through the model Parks Victoria retains responsibility for broad-acre conservation programs, so we will still continue to have a presence in the Great Ocean Road, particularly working out of both the Anglesea and Colac offices, delivering those programs.

Richard RIORDAN: Subcontracting them to GORCAPA?

Lee MIEZIS: No. We will be delivering those across the estate whilst GORCAPA focuses on, obviously, key visitor sites and visitor experience. We will do the conservation work.

Richard RIORDAN: Final question: when does RDV hand over the \$130 million visitor centre to Parks, and will that fall under you, Minister, responsible for –

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of –

Richard RIORDAN: The visitor centre that is being built at the Twelve Apostles.

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. We are obviously still working on the opening.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. Sorry, Minister – that will go to GORCAPA when construction is completed. Obviously the project is being led by Development Victoria at this point.

Richard RIORDAN: When do you expect the handover?

Lee MIEZIS: I think it is in the second half of this year. I would have to confirm, though.

Richard RIORDAN: Could we have that on notice too, please?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. The second half of this year.

Richard RIORDAN: New topic. The budget states that the 2025–26 expected outcomes for weed and pest control are less than last year's target due to bushfire impacts. Given the reported reduction in treated area from some 1.2 million hectares in 2024 down to 900,000 hectares, what evidence does the minister have to rely on to demonstrate that bushfire impacts are actually responsible for the reduction? What basis can we rely on that it is not a cost-cutting measure?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Riordan. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister, Secretary and officials. Minister, you did touch on firefighting services as a key part of your presentation. I would like to ask about that as well. Specifically, budget paper 3, page 26, talks to the investment in 'Securing critical aviation fire services', with

well over \$146 million over the forward estimates committed to that. Minister, could you detail what this will achieve and why this is such a critical part of our fire response?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Galea, especially for your question – it gives me the opportunity to talk about why our aviation is critical to Victoria’s fire response capability. The \$34.2 million in the 2026–27 budget sustains our firefighting aviation program. Our aviation program includes a fleet of specialised aircraft, air bases, a highly skilled workforce, technology and other enabling resources that enable that rapid response to emergency events. We know that aviation is often the determining factor in whether containing fires early is possible – doing that detection and prevention work as early as possible. When a fire is reported the first response typically is aerial. Fixed-wing firebombers can reach a fire within minutes and deliver large volumes of retardant ahead of ground crews mobilising. This aggressive first attack from the air keeps the fires small – that is the goal, and it has been very successful. Our data shows that more than 85 per cent of bushfires that Forest Fire Management Victoria responds to are kept under 5 hectares. So that is a very – in relative terms – small area. That containment is the difference between a manageable incident and a major fire outbreak.

Ground crews take time to mobilise and reach remote areas in the safest way possible. It is a critical window between fire detection and the ground crew arriving, usually travelling large distances. Aviation assets work to suppress the heat ahead of the fire as much as possible, to slow the spread and to protect firefighter safety by creating suppression opportunities. This funding sustains several critical elements. It is just not aviation first, it is maintaining the fleet for the aircraft, helicopters for water bombing in areas where fixed-wing access is limited and fixed-wing bombers for large-scale retardant delivery. Secondly, it makes sure it supports the air base and infrastructure required to operate these aircraft. And thirdly, it funds the highly skilled workforce, including pilots and air observers, air attack supervisors and support crews, who are trained to operate in emergency conditions and coordinate with ground operations. Aviation is also a key primary tool for remote area access in areas where roads do not exist. It is not necessarily always possible to reach a location by a ground crew, or not in the first instance, until those paths can be created. This sustained investment ensures that we have world-class firefighting aviation capability that is rapid, flexible and effective.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. If I can also draw your attention, in the same budget paper, to the combined output and asset initiatives for maintenance of critical assets, which totals \$44.5 million in the next financial year. What will this funding be used for, Minister, and how does it relate to the broader asset base for fire and emergency response?

Enver ERDOGAN: When you combine the funding for critical assets, approximately \$45 million is dedicated to replacing and operationalising our fire and emergency response vehicle fleet. That is the backbone of forest fire management’s ground response capability. It operates a core fleet of 595 firefighting vehicles distributed across 100 work centres across the state. So this is a big operation, and we are joined by our Chief Fire Officer Chris Hardman – thanks, Chris – who I am sure could talk more about the detail. But what I can say is that this includes ultralight tankers, light tankers, heavy tankers and water-carrying vehicles essential for fire suppression. These vehicles reach fires quickly, deliver water and retardant and support ground crew.

I think the funding addresses critical fleet replacement and maintenance. We know there is always a need for investment, and I note Ms Benham is staring right at me. We know that we need greater investment in this area, and that is what this budget delivers. The fleet has been in operation for many years, and this supports ongoing maintenance and inspections and repairs to keep vehicles safe and roadworthy. But the capital funding supports the replacement of vehicles reaching end of life and the acquisition of additional vehicles to meet operational demands. We know our climate is changing, we know that some of the seasons are getting rougher and tougher, and I think this investment is about that – this fleet work in coordination with our aviation assets. While aircraft provide the first aerial attack and suppression, ground crews are the vehicles engaged in direct suppression, establishing firebreaks and supporting evacuation operations, and when the fire slows, fire ground crews contain and extinguish it. But we know the fleet is also used for transport, moving personnel across challenging terrain, and we need the vehicles positioned ready to go in multiple regions simultaneously. So I think the \$45 million investment is an important piece of that work to make sure we have a safe, capable system in place. I was talking about the 5-hectare goal, and in 85 per cent of situations we have been able to make sure that we have kept the fire to under 5 hectares, because that is crucial to making sure we have the safest possible settings in our state.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. You have touched a couple of times, including just now, on the 5-hectare metric. Indeed the ‘Department Performance Statement’ on page 26 lists the target for FFM Vic to have 80 per cent of them suppressed within 5 hectares before they expand. I see in the financial year it is expected to exceed that target and reach 86 per cent. Minister, why is the 5-hectare metric so important, and can you explain how FFM Vic works to achieve it?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Galea. It is a really straightforward principle here. If you can keep a fire under 5 hectares, it means that you are going to cause far less damage to communities and property and infrastructure and to our environment. That is why we have said 5 hectares. Once a fire spreads to 50 or 500 hectares, it is obviously a different proposition, so it is a key goal and a key target for us. DEECA responds to fires to keep them below 5 hectares in a coordinated way.

Firstly, it is about early detection, but also when a fire is reported we make sure that we can mobilise immediately. I think that is a key goal. Second is the rapid attack, and I have talked about why the aviation fleet is so crucial. The investments in the 2026–27 budget will make a real impact. It means that aviation assets can reach fires within minutes, with fixed-wing bombers leading that in terms of delivering retardant ahead of ground crews, Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. And thank you, Mr Hardman, for the work that your team do.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. We are going to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Following on from Mr Riordan’s question earlier about the reduction in the treated area as far as the pests and weeds and herbivore control activity in 2026, the reported reduction in the treated area is from – rounding up – 1.3 million hectares in 2024–25 to 900,000 hectares in 2025–26. What evidence does the minister rely on to demonstrate that bushfire impacts account for the deferral of approximately 375,000 hectares of herbivore control activity?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Benham. You are a regional MP yourself, so you would have seen firsthand and heard firsthand how large the bushfires were. That did mean across government – not just in my portfolio and in emergency services – that resources had to be redirected and reprioritised to the emergency situation to address it. I think there was a physical impact. I am relying on the advice that my department has informed me of in relation to the bushfires of 2026, but I am also happy to pass to Ms Crosthwaite, who can talk about the bushfires and the impact of them, or to Ms Jackson, who might be best placed.

Carolyn JACKSON: I am happy to talk about the performance measure. I think the first thing to point out is that that particular performance measure and the others also do not pick up the full suite of works that the department undertakes. The performance measure is in relation to priority locations. It does not pick up all of the works that we do. The priority locations are determined by the department using a strategic management prospectus tool. That looks at thousands of biodiversity values, and it looks at, I guess, how to make the biggest impact, to put it simply. That looks at it from a threatened species perspective as well. So it will not necessarily pick up the full suite of actions.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. Have you got a quantified breakdown of the reduction in herbivore pest control activity, including the number of hectares not treated due to bushfire impacts and the number of hectares not treated due to other factors, including funding levels, workforce, contractor capacity constraints et cetera?

Carolyn JACKSON: I can confirm that there has not been a funding impact, but I can take on notice to see whether we have got a breakdown in terms of fire or contractor availability.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Great. I want to go back to the firefighting fleet. You knew I was coming to this, Minister. I want to talk about the Unimogs and the G-Wagons. The 2026–27 budget allocates \$24.9 million to replace and operationalise the emergency fleet for FFMV. Can you provide a detailed breakdown of the allocation, including the total amount allocated to repairs of the existing Unimog and G-Wagon fleets and the total amount allocated to the purchase of new vehicles, including the number, the type and the brand of vehicles to be acquired?

Enver ERDOGAN: As you would appreciate, Ms Benham, with the Unimogs, when the issue was detected last year I think it showed that the detection and safety measures worked because the issues were detected. The

Unimogs and the G-Wagons were worked on, and the funding for that came out of actually base funding. So we saw those critical repairs and maintenance as essential, and the G-Wagon fleet was all repaired by December of last year.

Jade BENHAM: They are due to be decommissioned though, aren't they?

Enver ERDOGAN: Well, in terms of decommissioning, I will not comment on that. But what I will say is that we are looking at long-term options as well as we speak. I know the department is doing some scoping work about the long-term needs of the organisation, not just about the G-Wagons. But the G-Wagons themselves were all repaired using existing base funding last financial year, so this financial year that we are still in.

Jade BENHAM: Are there 300 offline still?

Enver ERDOGAN: My understanding is that all the G-Wagons were actually identified and rectified, but in terms of that remediation work, I might ask Ms Crosthwaite to go into detail.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Sure. All of the G-Wagons were repaired in mid-December last year, and so they all operated across the fire season.

Jade BENHAM: Are they due to be permanently decommissioned?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: They have still got several years to run on the leasing arrangements that we have. But what we are doing is there are several streams of work coming out of the situation that we had last year and what we have learned out of that situation in terms of things that are affecting the performance of the G-Wagons.

Jade BENHAM: How long is left on those leasing arrangements?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: It is staggered. There are different lengths of time.

Jade BENHAM: So there has been no work to rectify that by decommissioning that particular vehicle?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: There has been work to understand the liability issues under the contracts and the insurance issues, and we are working on a longer term fleet strategy that is looking at broadening the types of vehicles that we have in our fleet.

Jade BENHAM: The G-Wagons – are they going to be operational?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: They are operational. They were all operational over summer.

Jade BENHAM: Are they reliable though?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: There are definitely some vulnerabilities, the G-Wagons –

Jade BENHAM: Yes. Can you explain some of those? Because there is concern – you can understand.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Yes, we appreciate that, including from our staff who rely on them.

Jade BENHAM: Exactly.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: There are layers of decisions over time that have contributed to the issue with the G-Wagons. The arduous conditions that they operate in and the weight on top of them are compounding some of those issues. In the immediate short term we are working on the weight distribution and how the overhead protection sits on the vehicles so that they are reliable over the next couple of seasons, as well as looking at two things to broaden the vehicle base – different types of vehicles, as well as some new technology to put overhead protection on the LandCruisers.

Jade BENHAM: But they are operational now and they will be for the next couple of seasons?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: They are, yes.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. I just want to go to Parks Vic really quickly in the time I have got left. The 2025–26 revised outcome – this is the ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 18 – \$211.7 million. Parks Vic’s 2026–27 budget is \$184 million, representing a cut of \$27.7 million – over 13 per cent. Given Parks Vic’s 2025–26 revised outcome, what specific activity, services or maintenance tasks will no longer be funded under the reduced allocation?

Enver ERDOGAN: I might pass this to the CEO. They will be able to give an explanation of the Parks budget.

Lee MIEZIS: Certainly, I am happy to answer that. As you would know, we contribute in Parks Victoria to the department’s departmental objective of productive and effective land management.

Jade BENHAM: What has been cut? What can’t you do now?

Lee MIEZIS: Let me explain. The difference between –

The CHAIR: Apologies. We will be coming back. Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I wanted to talk about bushfire prevention, and I can see there is \$25.6 million for it on page 26 of BP3. Can you explain what this additional funding is for and how it helped in the January 2026 bushfires?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thanks, Ms Kathage, for that question. Bushfire prevention is fundamental to protecting Victorians. The \$25.6 million investment is a direct investment in that prevention work that we are talking about – the funding is for Forest Fire Management Victoria to complete additional planned burns and other fuel management activities across autumn 2026. I am sure there have been a number of petitions on these issues, about some of the planned burns that are taking place as we speak, but I think this work is critical and we are prioritising high-risk areas where fuel reduction has the greatest effect in protecting communities and assets. Planned burning is not only about stopping fires in all conditions – it is really one critical tool, amongst many others, that takes a risk-based approach that reduces fuel, moderates fire behaviour and supports safer, more effective suppression. It works in combination with mechanical fuel treatments – like slashing and mulching – and strategic fuel breaks, early detection and rapid response. It is a really crucial part of the work we do.

I need to be clear on the scale of this work. In 2024–25 FFMVic and CFA treated more than 114,000 hectares across the state through planned burns and other fuel management works. That is a sustained year-round effort to moderate fire risk, and that approach has paid dividends. I think part of the reason why the bushfire damage was able to be to an extent the success of the season was because of that prevention and early detection and the work that went in. I want to again thank Chris Hardman and really all our uniformed workforce, the frontline workforce that were on the front line making sure the season passed with as minimal damage as possible. I do want to also express my sympathies for the loss of life as well and acknowledge that that was tragic. But for the most part, I think the season was successful considering the difficult time we had – one of the hottest seasons on record – for consecutive days. That work would not have been possible without the preparation of pre-positioned crews, maintained fuel breaks and strategic fuel reduction creating safer conditions for an aggressive first attack. If that work had not been done, I think the situation would have been a lot worse and a lot more tragic for Victoria. I think that investment we are making this year is about bushfire prevention in the long-term – a multiyear commitment that is consistent and sustained – and we are delivering.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I can see there is a performance measure related to personnel in the performance statement, on page 26, and it is around accredited personnel serving in a senior capacity. I can see that the expected outcomes are higher than the target for 2025–26. Can you talk through some of the actions that have led to that result?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, I think I talked a bit about the uniformed workforce earlier, but I give a shout-out to DEECA and our VPS staff as well. I think this is about making sure we expand the pool of accredited personnel to senior incident management roles, and that is about a strategic commitment to ensuring depth in our incident management structure. We have deliberately invested in expanding the pool of accredited personnel who can operate in senior roles, including incident management team members, regional

management officers and State Control Centre personnel. In many regards the back office supports the frontline response, so they are really critical during these emergencies, and several actions have driven this result.

First, we expanded the training and accreditation pipeline – the incident management certificates, emergency leadership qualifications aligned to national standards across organisations. Second, we are leveraging a broader pool of personnel, and that is why I want to give a shout-out to DEECA. Approximately 1150 trained accredited emergency personnel from across DEECA and Parks Victoria work in non-operational roles day to day – so day to day they are in non-operational roles, but in terms of the surge capacity, during an emergency they can step up, or step across, depending on what role, to create depth across the organisation in our response. And I think this is just learning from the past, where you might have more people on the front line, but in those back office roles you might not have the accredited people in place. It is about creating a pathway, incentivising accreditation obviously through our workforce management. Personnel are field based, and planning and administrative roles are encouraged and supported to obtain senior incident management accreditations.

Very importantly, for the 2025–26 preparedness season we specifically prioritised recruitment of seasonal personnel with incident management experience and accreditation, so our recruitment process is driven into the process. This depth is critical for the success of our response, so it is great to have more accredited personnel and to invest in our staff. Again, I think a lot of these organisations, like DEECA and Parks, are values-based organisations. People do not work in them just for the remuneration package – a lot of the people are attracted because they genuinely believe in maintaining a healthy environment and protecting Victoria – so it is great to give those staff those pathways too.

Lauren KATHAGE: It is a lovely image too – a meek admin worker suddenly ripping off and getting into their overalls and out fighting fires. I love it. Still on the DPS but on page 33, there is a measure around recreational assets in state forests and the Great Outdoors Taskforce. What has been funded through the government response to the taskforce?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of the taskforce, we are investing \$30 million through to 2028–29 to deliver on the taskforce’s advice. The taskforce shifts how we manage the 1.8 million hectares of state forests in Gippsland and the north-east previously used for timber harvesting. We know about the end of timber harvesting in this state, but \$14.2 million of that \$30 million improves recreational infrastructure – tracks, trails, campgrounds and toilets at key recreation spots. And I can say, since getting this portfolio, I know that public toilets are a big issue; they are an access issue. I know everyone will have a public toilet, and it is important we have responsive agencies not just in this portfolio but across agencies and local governments.

Jade BENHAM: So you are the minister for public toilets.

Enver ERDOGAN: That has come up. It is a big issue, and I put it on the record because across portfolios it is an issue that comes up.

Jade BENHAM: Does it need its own portfolio, Minister?

Enver ERDOGAN: Ms Benham, I know some of your colleagues have also raised these issues. We want access and equity for everyone of all ages. But I think it is about investing in those facilities that make the great outdoors fantastic, and also rangers and guides so we can tackle pests and weeds and protect our native wildlife. That is where that funding will be directed.

Lauren KATHAGE: Let us open up more Crown land if we can.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage. We will come back to the Deputy Chair.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Chair. In September 2024 the Melbourne Football Club completed their feasibility study into moving to Caulfield Racecourse, and that was supported by the government. This proposed move is now stalled, with the government-appointed head of the trust saying the club ‘tried to build the Taj Mahal, and so far they’ve only got budget for a granny flat.’ Minister, is the plan for Melbourne Football Club to move to Caulfield Racecourse still on foot, or not?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Pesutto. It is a good question, because I met with the Melbourne Football Club chair and some of the executives.

John PESUTTO: When was that, Minister?

Enver ERDOGAN: Shortly after taking the portfolio. In fact it was the day on which the CEO left the role, the same day. They have ambitious plans, to say the least, and I think that is fantastic for a football –

John PESUTTO: So they are still on foot?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, they are on foot.

John PESUTTO: Great. That is all I wanted to ask.

Enver ERDOGAN: It is progressing, and I am very supportive, for the record.

John PESUTTO: Thank you. Sam Almaliki has since resigned from the trust, which has been in place for eight years and has consistently cited the lack of funding to do anything substantial in the reserve, with the funding barely covering directors' wages. Why has the government set the trust up to fail by not providing any funding to do anything?

Enver ERDOGAN: I disagree with that categorisation, Mr Pesutto. There are a number of plans at that site, and we are working towards them. One of them – you would be appreciative – is about the Jewish community centre for life at Mount Scopus, which has been publicly reported. The other is the Melbourne Football Club, and there is already existing activity with racing. I think they have been well supported, and I will continue to work with them to get the best outcomes for Victorians.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Minister. Moving to Sustainability Victoria, Minister, will the abolition of Sustainability Victoria adversely affect in any way service delivery in 2026–27 of the department and over the forward estimates?

Enver ERDOGAN: The short answer is no. A lot of the most successful programs as part of Sustainability Victoria will continue and be rolled into DEECA. Sustainability, in my view, is a core duty of any environment department in the nation, let alone in Victoria, a state where we are proud of our record. A lot of the programs will be continuing, but they will be managed by DEECA internally. I am sure the Secretary could speak to that. It does obviously come out of the Silver review, as you would appreciate.

Kate HOUGHTON: The Silver review looked at duplication and efficiencies across public sector entities and found that Sustainability Victoria, whilst achieving great things early on in their life, a lot of other entities were doing their job, including DEECA, EPA and Recycling Victoria. They will finish on 30 June this year, and I think 39 FTE will move from Sustainability Victoria to various parts of DEECA.

John PESUTTO: Can I ask, either Secretary or Minister: will DEECA adapt delivery of waste-related initiatives that were previously delivered by or in partnership with Sustainability Victoria without any interruption to outcomes there?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, that is correct. Existing contracts will then move across to Recycling Victoria, which will then move into EPA, and then the industry connection and coordination functions will stay with DEECA.

John PESUTTO: Thank you. In relation to another issue, the state government applied for and was awarded \$3.3 million from the federal government in November 2022 under the federal government's coastal and estuarine risk mitigation program. The state government finally released their plan, which included this funding, on Christmas Eve last year. Minister, can I ask, either for you or your officials: what has been the hold-up with releasing these funds, and where have these funds been sitting for three years?

Enver ERDOGAN: In relation to those resources, Mr Pesutto, I might have to ask my department officials.

Carolyn JACKSON: I will need to take that specific question on notice.

John PESUTTO: Thank you for that. Further to that, when coming back to the committee, in relation, Minister, to this question, which I do not expect you to answer now given what the Deputy Secretary said: is it true that the government has said previously that 'the works were a priority and needed to begin as soon as

possible, with a two-year completion window'. If you would come back addressing that question, that would be appreciated.

Enver ERDOGAN: Sure. We will take that on notice.

John PESUTTO: Minister, turning to landfill levels and illegal dumping, your government's 2016 inquiry into the EPA found that:

... high landfill levies are likely to drive increased illegal dumping and other avoidance activity. Evidence to other inquiries established the clear link between high levies and illegal dumping of hazardous wastes. For example ... the high levy imposed in Victoria on disposal of asbestos waste to landfill ... discourages decontamination of sites, and encourages disposers to illegally dump asbestos, or to hide it among other waste going to landfill.

Do you agree with that finding?

Enver ERDOGAN: No, not necessarily, Mr Pesutto. I think having a waste levy is an important price signal to the market and encourages businesses and households to reduce their waste. We need to have a price signal in place. Waste crime is a problem, and that is why the EPA is on illegal dumping. It affects a lot of our communities, and I see the Chair nodding as well. All our communities are affected by it. It is a real scourge. The EPA needs to have a front focus on that, and they do. We need to work closely with local governments as well to tackle this issue.

John PESUTTO: Minister, would you concede to any extent that landfill levies continued to rise in 2025 – the metropolitan landfill levy increased by 30 per cent – and that the impact of these higher levies is driving illegal dumping?

Enver ERDOGAN: I would not discount the fact that there are price-signal incentives for some of these criminal elements that are breaking the law and conducting this behaviour, but there is definitely an education and a strong enforcement piece, and that will be a focus for me as minister.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Minister. My colleague Ms Benham had a couple of questions she was not able to get to.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Mr Pesutto. I want to come back to Parks Vic and find out what –

Enver Erdogan interjected.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, the question from before, the 13 per cent cut in budget. What services, activities and maintenance tasks will no longer be able to be delivered?

Lee MIEZIS: Firstly, it is not a cut in activity. I will explain first the difference between the 2025–26 expected outcome and the 2025–26 target: largely investment in recovery – one-off investment recovery following the western Victoria bushfires.

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Lee MIEZIS: It is one-off funding, and it has delivered a number of things across the Grampians: the reopening of the Grampians Peaks Trail, a number of campground upgrades, public roads works, threatened species monitoring, so that money has been expended.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. What about Flinders Pier, in the last 30 seconds we have got? There is no specific capital funding identified for Flinders Pier, so what funding source is the government going to rely on to complete that project?

Lee MIEZIS: It is important to note that there is 327 metres of pier at Flinders including that constructed in 2011.

Jade BENHAM: Can you take that on notice?

The CHAIR: I am mindful of time.

Enver ERDOGAN: It might be a matter for the Minister for Ports and Freight.

Jade BENHAM: Is it?

Enver ERDOGAN: It might be.

Jade BENHAM: I thought it was Parks Vic?

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, we are out of time. We are going to Mr Tak.

Jade BENHAM: All right. Thank you.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. The ‘Department Performance Statement’ that I refer to relates to the container deposit scheme on page 31. Minister, can you please give us an update on the container deposit scheme and how the scheme is reducing litter?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Tak. I think the container deposit scheme has been an enormous success, and we know how popular it is in all our communities. Wherever I go, I see people talking about it – different talks about the mode of operation and some of the settings, but nonetheless, it has been very successful in terms of reducing waste, in particular container waste for the eligible containers. Over 3 billion have been taken off our streets potentially and have been part of the recycling and circular economy. It is 3.1 billion, and more importantly, over \$300 million has been returned to Victorians. Right back into their pockets. This is about supporting individuals. It is an education piece. The latest statistics that I was provided with by the department show that there is a 71 per cent reduction in the material ending up in litter across our streets, beaches and natural areas.

Most recently I had the opportunity to visit Albert Park and the scenic St Kilda Botanical Gardens there and the Port Phillip EcoCentre with the hardworking Member for Albert Park. We were talking about how we had launched one of our programs that is quite a popular program, the Win a Million Cents competition where people can win \$10,000 – 1 million cents – just through their recycling in this period. That competition is still open until 14 June, so I recommend if anyone is watching these hearings – I know how popular these PAEC hearings are – and wants to participate, all you need to do is put 50 eligible containers in and you can enter the draw, and that draw will be after 14 June.

It is a popular program, and we are seeing over 600 refund collection points, of which 291 are reverse vending machines and over-the-counter locations. I think the accessibility has really driven the participation in this program. We obviously did not have this in place. Other jurisdictions had it for a lot longer than us, but we have really set a new standard, I feel, in terms of the engagement piece. There is a lot more work to do, because I know people are keen, but \$3 million has also gone towards supporting charitable organisations where people decide to donate the money that they are eligible to receive, so it is for not-for-profit organisations as well. It has been a very successful.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. In the same ‘Department Performance Statement’, on page 32 there is a performance measure about Victoria’s resource recovery infrastructure. Minister, can you please explain why the target is higher than last year and how it benefits the circular economy?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think in terms of the circular economy and in terms of our measures about investment, I will just start by saying that since 2016 we have invested over half a billion dollars into waste and recycling reforms. These were strategic investments made, obviously, across different environment ministers, I might add. But I think our investment has delivered 2.35 million tonnes of additional waste and resource recovery capacity to Victoria by June this year, so that is a substantial increase in what we can process and divert from landfill. Our year-on-year target is higher because we are seeing the results that those investments are driving. So our capacity and capability to process recyclables and organic material is increasing through government work, but also through private investment as well that has been driven. As new facilities come online and new infrastructure, we will see the ability to handle more material flow. I think a higher target is, I guess, a signal of our ambition and a signal of our capability that we have developed in our state to support the circular economy. That is how reform works. Now, you say ambitious goals in 2016. What we have achieved in the last 10 years is really breathtaking. There is obviously more work to do in the entire system, from collection processing to manufacturing new products with recycled content, but we are committed to doing that work.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Another program is Detox Your Home. That is also interesting. Minister, in budget paper 3, page 26, there is \$1.9 million for Detox Your Home. Can you please tell the committee what the initiative is and how it is helping with the safe disposal of hazardous household chemicals?

Enver ERDOGAN: Definitely. Thank you, Mr Tak, for giving me the opportunity to talk about Detox Your Home, because it is a program where we have further growth opportunities in terms of awareness. It is a program that has practical support initiatives to support households with problems that many people face. You know, we have got toxic chemicals, paints, pesticides, cleaning products, solvents, batteries, fluorescent tubes and other materials that are toxic to human health, and we do not want them ending up in landfill. Many households do not even know how to dispose of them safely, so I think this is work that we could better do. We have been providing and supporting it, and over 6000 households participated in events through 2024–25. We are expecting that to increase. Interest is growing. I think people are more aware as this program has been rolled out, but it is about making sure that these common household waste products – toxic waste – does not end up in our waterways and ecosystems. We are focused on making sure that we reduce the amount of hazardous chemicals disposed of illegally or harmfully and improve recovery, reuse and recycling of those materials. Paint can be processed and reused; that is a fact that many people do not know. Obviously chemicals can be safely processed. We know that is the case for batteries as well. They can be repurposed. And for some of the harmful products we need to make sure they are disposed of safely.

It is part of our commitment of \$1.9 million in this year's budget to ensure that the Detox Your Home program continues beyond this year so that all Victorians, regardless of their income, can access safe disposal of hazardous chemicals, because that is what an inclusive circular policy looks like. It needs to be accessible to all, and that is what we are focused on. This is just obviously part of opportunities for recovery and reuse and recycling. The key is again, I want to emphasise, it is a free service in line with our policy of making life easier, safer and more affordable, so not attaching a cost to it. You may have a lot of this chemical waste, so my message to everyone out there is: please get on the website and find out where you can be part of this program.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tak. We are going to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening. I will start on budget paper 3, page 32, 'Management of public land and forests' output. In previous budgets new national parks like the red gum parks received new funding to set them up with new management requirements to deal with invasive species, restoration, visitor facilities and other things like that. So regarding the new central west national parks, how will these requirements at the central west parks be funded, given I cannot see specific money attributed in this budget for that?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of how the new national parks will be managed, they are created and managed as a responsible transfer from DEECA to Parks, with DEECA continuing to have a role in some aspects. But I guess in terms of the available resources, these are not parks that were not managed before. I notice Lee Miezis is here and can talk about it. But I think what will happen is the relevant resource will be transferred over.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So reprioritizing it to Parks Victoria. Is that what you are saying?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Enver ERDOGAN: Actually, I might get the CEO to explain.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. Thanks. Thanks, Minister. I will add to that. So obviously this land is currently being managed. It is currently being managed by DEECA, and it will transfer across to Parks Victoria, along with the resources that are associated with its management. But of course there has been a long lead into this, and at the same time Parks Victoria has been going through significant management reform –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Well, I was going to come to this, because I understand from the annual report there are 80 FTE positions being consolidated through Parks Victoria. Is that correct?

Lee MIEZIS: No, that is not correct. What I can tell you is we have, with a new board, a new strategy really focused on getting back to basics as an organisation – good land management, good conservation program delivery. Core to that has been really strengthening our front line. We have managed to do that within our existing budget by, in effect, reducing executive positions and removing management layers and as a result have been able to invest significantly in growing our front line. So since June last year we have put an additional 90 rangers across the state. In the most recent recruitment, which was for 65 rangers, in fact we had 1700 applications. So it is really pleasing to see that people want to come and work at Parks Victoria and deliver really good outcomes to enable people to get out and enjoy our outdoors and protect the things that really make these areas so special. So –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I query the roles that are not continuing? You said there were some executive positions. Could you provide us a list of the positions that will not be continuing at Parks Victoria?

Lee MIEZIS: I would have to take that one on notice. But what I can say is it is a reduction in executive, a removal of a management layer, 90 additional rangers, so that will bring our total –

Enver ERDOGAN: Lee, you might want to share how many people applied for those roles – it shows the passion.

Lee MIEZIS: 1700 – 1680, to be exact. But –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: We have got that on record. I might move on to my next question if that is all right.

Lee MIEZIS: So if I could just close that out, what we will have in Parks Victoria once this latest recruitment is completed is about 650 rangers. Now, to compare that say to 2020, we had 460. So it is significant growth in the front line and significant growth of boots on the ground to manage this land well, to deliver good outcomes for the community, to provide opportunities to enjoy the outdoors and to protect, again, the things that make these areas so special.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask, just staying on public land: when is the government planning to introduce the new public land Act? Is there a timeline for that?

Enver ERDOGAN: The new public land Act – for me, I have come into the role, it is an ambitious legislation that we want to prioritise if we can before this term of government, but I am always cautious about making those types of commitments in this environment. As you know, we have a very busy legislative agenda, especially in –

Jade BENHAM: Only six weeks left.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right, there are only six sitting weeks left. So I will try and endeavour to make that happen, but as I said, the government does not control the upper house, Mr Puglielli –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I understand – no-one does.

Enver ERDOGAN: so that still needs the participation of everyone across this hearing room and all the parties represented.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might move on but staying on the same budget page, budget paper 3, page 32, ‘Activating healthy forests’. The government has allocated \$10 million to this item, including new funding to assess forest produce licence applications. Can I ask: why do we need new funding to assess those licences?

Enver ERDOGAN: Ms Crosthwaite, do you want to respond to Mr Puglielli?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Yes. Sure. So that part of the Act under which forest produce licences are issued is for a range of activities, which include scientific activities where researchers need to come in and access forest produce and other activities like that. So there has always been a need for that function, and that is being continued with this additional funding.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I might move on to another question. On page 30 of the performance statements, there is some new funding referred to for the Western Grassland Reserve. Can I ask: how much of the reserve has the government purchased and how much does it intend to purchase going forward?

Enver ERDOGAN: Ms Jackson, I might pass that to you, because we have got that information.

Carolyn JACKSON: The commitment to the Western Grassland Reserve is still the full 15,000 hectares. The funding that we generate to purchase that land is through developer levies, and so the timing of acquisition of that land is dependent on the levies coming through. And so that particular reference in the 'Department Performance Statement' is a trust account that has been set up to capture that revenue coming in and then to expend it. And so as the timing of acquisitions comes on board, that is when we might change when we plan to spend the money, so to align it with the acquisition of land.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is there a timeline for that that we can expect?

Carolyn JACKSON: It is dependent on the developer levy coming in. We purchase land when the funding comes in, so we are reliant on that money coming in. We have acquired I think just over 4200 hectares – so about 29 per cent of the 15,000 hectares.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. Can I ask: is any of that money being used to settle legal cases?

Carolyn JACKSON: We do have some instances where landowners will challenge the valuation of the land that we are acquiring. It is not to settle per se, but we may go through a legal proceeding to determine what that valuation of the land is. That trust account is to acquire the land, so if there is a legal challenge as to the value and we need to pay more than what the valuer-general has said, then we will use that trust account to pay for that full acquisition of land.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials, for your attendance this evening. I am going to take us to bushfire recovery, Minister, and the reference is budget paper 3, page 3. I am sure people at home, as they go to that section, will see the substantial number of points related to it. I am hoping you could outline some of the funding that has been provided to the environment portfolio as part of these recovery efforts.

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, it has been a massive task – over 430,000 hectares of private and public land burnt, with significant impacts on our roads, bridges, fences, cultural heritage, wildlife and biodiversity across our state. We understand the recovery is urgent, and it is not a simple fix. Through our budget obviously in 2026–27 we are making targeted investments to support recovery of the environment but also the communities affected. The environment portfolio is receiving \$15.1 million to support immediate short-term recovery needs across the state. The first \$5 million of that \$15 million is for free disposal of bushfire waste. We have waived the waste levy and are fully covering landfill operator gate fees for disaster waste in 18 eligible local government areas. That is a significant part of the state, and there are local government areas obviously across vast tracts of land in terms of kilometres or hectares. That means that recovered waste from the bushfires can be safely disposed of, and that mirrors the support we provided during the northern Victorian floods – so consistent support for communities.

Secondly, \$6.8 million of that \$15 million is for short-term recovery on public land. This funds urgent works to make safe and reopen roads, bridges, assets and crossings on public land and critical works to reopen parks managed by Parks Victoria. As you all know, we still have closures at three parks as well. We are working towards them as well, funding that work.

Third is \$2.6 million for short-term biodiversity recovery – I know how passionate everyone here is about biodiversity – and wildlife recovery through nesting boxes, a rebate program for fire-impacted wildlife carers and shelters. We recognise that the bushfires have placed enormous strain on the wildlife care sector, both on physical resources but also emotional as well. I think we cannot discount that. It has been quite traumatic for many in our community to see the impact it is had on wildlife and the biodiversity of our state.

Beyond 2026–27 there are further continuing recovery works to happen. We have committed \$37.8 million across 2025–27 for medium- and longer-term recovery, including the \$15 million I have been talking about, and that has enabled us to restore 200 kilometres of strategic road network and reopen key visitor experiences like the Grampians Peaks Trail. This investment is about getting the recovery right for communities and for our environment.

Mathew HILAKARI: One in four or almost one in four council areas speaks to the scope and the size of the fires. I know for the community that I represent, after one of the major bushfires they opened a koala recovery centre and a wildlife centre at Werribee zoo, and they are doing amazing work. I would like to take you to budget paper 3, page 32, around wildlife. You have mentioned supporting wildlife rescue through nesting boxes and those sorts of activities, but for those organisations who are really the front line of that preservation and support for wildlife after bushfires, what have we delivered to those?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Hilakari, and also I think it was an important point you raised. Even in your community, which was not directly affected, we know of the big impacts of the bushfires, especially from the wildlife perspective, because we know the wildlife volunteers come from every part of our state and city. People from –

Mathew HILAKARI: Passion and care.

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, there is passion in the west – people in Hawthorn, people across our state. It is amazing how the passion for wildlife and biodiversity stretches across electorates, to be frank, and across our state. It is fantastic to see. That is why we committed \$2.6 million in short-term biodiversity recovery funding, which is a specific rebate for fire-impacted wildlife carers and shelters in affected areas – direct support for shelters that were damaged in the fires. The impacts are quite vast. But it is much broader than that. In October 2025 the government announced an additional \$2.9 million in wildlife welfare support. That included \$350,000 for a vet outreach and training program.

We also provided \$50,000 in one-off grants specifically for shelters in the south-west of our state and importantly established a \$300,000 wildlife rehabilitator rebate scheme to help carers cover the cost of treating sick and injured animals. So many times carers are also donators themselves. They are donating generously not only their time but their own financial resources. And you see that. It really is amazing work. Beyond the bushfire response, the government provides annual wildlife rehabilitator grants to support wildlife carers providing direct support. Since 2008 this program has provided over 2100 grants. It has been a long-running program but a highly successful program that we are committed to continuing. This program has allocated \$100,000 towards the management of wombat mange and an additional \$100,000 to bolster the number of wildlife rescuers responding to emergencies.

Mathew HILAKARI: We know one of the outcomes of bushfires is challenges with waste, particularly for the built environment all through our parks. Could you please provide a bit of an update on how we have supported either parks through this or the broader community in disposal of bushfire waste?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, I think it is a key result of the fires. We know that there is a lot of waste that is generated, waste that cannot be reused. It is not practical and therefore needs to be disposed of safely. So the additional burden and cost is something that for people in the 18 LGAs – as you said, one in four LGAs – that are affected will be cost free. Five million dollars in this year's budget will go towards fully covering those landfill operator gate fees. That means that Victorians can dispose of fire-damaged materials, debris and waste without facing the cost barrier of gate fees or the waste levy. I think that is crucial, especially with the cost-of-living pressures on the families that have been impacted.

This was an approach we did take elsewhere, like I said, with the northern Victorian floods, so there is precedent for this. We have done this before, and we will do it again. We have always said if we need to do more, we will, as a government, and that is where our focus is. So this is being coordinated alongside complementary programs through the Emergency Management Victoria bushfire clean-up program, which provides broader community clean-up assistance. I think this investment in the landfill operators can process the surge in disaster waste without the cost being passed on to fire-affected residents and businesses.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, minister and Mr Hilakari. Minister and officials, thank you for appearing before the committee tonight. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for economic growth and jobs at 6:50 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.