

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Harcourt – Thursday 30 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

Andrew Wilson, Captain, Harcourt brigade,

Adam Paine, First Deputy Group Officer, Mount Alexander group, and

Rohan Stevens, Group Officer, Hume group, Country Fire Authority.

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 today from Harcourt. Welcome to the witnesses from the CFA.

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 all evidence and information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, 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 the evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review prior to its publication on the website.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask 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.

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

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

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: And online?

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region, coming to you from Warrnambool today.

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

Rohan STEVENS: Certainly. Rohan Stevens. I am a Group Officer with the CFA, based out of Hume group, which is outer metro Melbourne.

Andrew WILSON: Andrew Wilson, Harcourt CFA Captain.

Adam PAINE: Adam Paine, First Deputy Group Officer for the Mount Alexander group and member of the Taradale fire brigade.

The CHAIR: Rohan, Andrew and Adam, thanks so much for coming today. The format of the proceedings is pretty straightforward. We invite you to make any opening statements you wish to make, and then we will get into questions. Over to you. Who is first? It is entirely up to you – the locals from the Harcourt brigade, I reckon.

Andrew WILSON: As stated, Andrew Wilson, Harcourt Captain. I have been the Captain for a lot of the last nine years and group delegate, crew leader, incident controller, strike team leader and sector commander. In my role on the day of the Ravenswood fire I was the original incident controller, and then I became the west sector commander. I spent the first 10 days fighting the fire alongside hundreds of CFA volunteers and Forest

Fire Management Victoria firefighters. Over the next 33 days I supported the organisation of tankers and crews to fill the roster once the strike team support came to an end and the fire was handed back to local brigades. The conditions we experienced on 9 Jan, as predicted, were catastrophic, and then the following days remained pretty high fire danger risk days, probably for the duration of the fire.

Where was I when the fire started? I was actually at the Harcourt fire station completing fire reports for the two support calls we had attended in Castlemaine. Both tankers were still at the second Castlemaine event when a grass and scrub fire at Fogartys Gap Road, Ravenswood, popped up on the VicEmergency app, firstly as a grey symbol and then about 30 seconds later it went back to a black, meaning a going fire, which concerned us. Harcourt was not paged at this stage as we were committed to the Castlemaine grass and scrub fire. I and another member decided to go to Fogartys Gap to investigate in my private vehicle as this alert was very close to our brigade's northern boundary. The fire behaviour on the day was very erratic, and very early on in the fire there was spotting up to 500 metres.

What were we proud of and what stood out? The way in which all emergency services worked together on and off the fireground, with very little damage to firefighting appliances and no major injuries to personnel; the distance the strike teams travelled to support us in our time of need; and working with the volunteers whose houses and businesses and families were under threat and affected directly. The CFA peer support team supported during the fire, and they continue to support those members now as we speak and will into the future.

What worked well: the immediate response to the fire and the early escalation of resources. On the way to the fire I requested make tankers 10. Once on scene, I set up the control point, the fireground channel and requested make tankers 20, FCVs four and big fills two. And a very short time later I requested make tankers 30. What also worked well was the support from the many strike teams on the day and the following weeks. It gave the local brigades a break before the fire was handed back to the local brigades and groups, as we knew we were in for the long haul, monitoring this fire across the three brigade areas. The use of the Benloch and Langley-Barfold ultralight tankers to patrol the fire in the following weeks assisted greatly instead of using the larger tankers. The building and strengthening of containment lines – until I had a Mount Alexander shire grader and a private bulldozer that arrived on scene, I was unable to hold the fire in my sector. Once I had this equipment, I was able to construct an earth break and stop the spread of the fire, helping to protect houses. The elevated seasonal response initiative – additional mobile water tankers were available. This aided, and it limited travel time for water replenishment for firefighting tankers. Due to the failure of the reticulated water supply in Harcourt, the bulk water tankers were having to travel some distance to refill, probably an over an hour round trip. Emergency warnings – early warnings were requested and put out.

What did not work? Well, the difficult terrain where the fire was located – it was impossible or hard to reach areas with the machinery on hand. We worked with FFMV to get into those areas. I had no air support on my sector. Radio channels, comms and phone service on my sector were patchy at best, and I had to revert to talking face to face with crews. Also getting information out of the ICC, as one of the brigades affected by this fire, was very frustrating, given the lack of incident shift plans or information flowing out of the ICC. On Sunday the 11th I contacted the ICC and strongly voiced my frustration. Shortly after, I was contacted by a member of a local brigade who was starting in the ICC as an incident commander, and the information flow then started out to the group and the affected brigades.

With the piping of the Harcourt Coliban rural water channel system, we have lost access to water in the rural areas. With this, as well as the drought we are currently experiencing, there is less water available in the dams. The leaking channel system also helped fill these dams. The Harcourt brigade is currently actively pursuing the installation of two large water tanks near the Coliban rural water pipeline, and hopefully they will actually plumb those to be automatically filled from the pipeline when water is drawn out.

Traffic management points were not manned. People were driving around the signs. They are required to be manned by the police 24/7.

How were we prepared in the lead-up to the season? Our brigade completed the chief's preseason requirements, as well as additional grass- and scrub-based training. We conducted a group exercise at Taradale involving all Mount Alexander group brigades, and we engaged with the community through our Facebook page and the fire ready community meetings.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much.

Adam PAINE: As stated, my name is Adam Paine. I am the Taradale fire brigade fourth lieutenant, the First Deputy Group Officer for the Mount Alexander group and also a crew leader. My role on 9 January was actually on the back of the truck as one of the crew for Taradale. We had 12 brigade members waiting ready to roll throughout the day. I then spent the following day on the fireground as well helping out, and then spent the next 12 days in the Castlemaine LCF, helping out to organise shifts and relief crews for the people of the affected brigades.

As Andrew stated, the conditions on the 9th were expected to be catastrophic, and they were, as we saw from the fire behaviour. The fire moved at great speed and in very unpredictable directions at times. We would put out an area and then before we knew it, it had gone behind or around either side of us and started crowning into the trees really quickly, which would then spot and get way in front of us.

When we were called I was at the Taradale station, along with our other members. We had just come back from a call-out to Fryers Ridge, where a lightning strike had ignited from the wind. We were really lucky with that burn that it had not gotten too far, because the fire, once it started moving, moved into an area that had been previously burnt by Forest Fire Management Victoria. So it pretty much stopped to a crawl. If that fire had not been stopped by that previously burnt area, the Harcourt fire would have been much worse, because we would have called for the 30 trucks, and all those trucks that were here would have been down in Taradale. By the time anything got controlled, these two fires could easily have merged. We were just very lucky, and I am very thankful for the burning operations that had been done in Fryers Ridge.

I found the communications between agencies to be quite good after we started working together. While I was in the LCF, trying to get those briefing plans was a struggle. For the first few days one of us actually had to drive up to Ravenswood and get the plans and then distribute them to Andrew and the Sutton Grange captain so that they were aware of what was going on – until we were able to organise for those plans to be emailed to us every morning. As it was, we were pulling quite long shifts at the LCF, as there were not that many of us available at that time.

Community action – we found that in Taradale in particular there is a place of last resort. This, we found, made community members very complacent. They seemed to think, ‘Oh, there’s a fire coming. We’ll just go to the place of last resort.’ This became a real issue, especially once the freeway was closed, because all the traffic then started coming through the little town, which is not really designed to cope with that sort of traffic influx. It was made even worse when a horse was spooked by a truck and jumped onto the road and was then hit. This pretty much stopped all traffic, and at that stage we had three members of our brigade, luckily, that were still at the station and were able to try and help direct traffic. There was no assistance available from police, because they were already up here. That caused a large issue when there were already multiple cars parked at the Taradale hall, which is the place of last resort. We have since had meetings with Mount Alexander shire to try and improve communications on what that hall is able to do.

Following the actual start of the fire, as I said, I worked in the LCF. I was then responsible for helping organise shifts of crews to come out and help relieve especially Sutton Grange and Harcourt. The Sutton Grange brigade in particular was asked to stand down, so I organised crews to come in and take over their brigade, in a sense. I think it was for a period of 24 hours. That involved people leaving and staying at Sutton Grange for that full period.

We were then also responsible for manning what was dubbed the bat phone. All 000 calls that were coming in in regard to the fireground area came to that phone, and the command group in Ravenswood would handle that from 7 am to 7 pm, but then we had to cover it from 7 pm to 7 am. It was a long shift for people to do during the night and to communicate with the vehicles that were on the fireground about what they needed, where the issue was, how to get there and what needed to be done. Then we had to communicate that it had been completed. This went on for, I think, a period of about –

Andrew WILSON: Seven weeks.

Adam PAINE: For seven weeks we were doing that shift. What I was really proud of was the fact that when I asked the Mount Alexander group of brigades for assistance in manning the phone or going out and helping Sutton Grange or anything like that, I always had many members that would put their hands up and give a

hand. A lot of these people had taken time off work – a lot of sole traders in particular – and they, like me, lost a lot of income during that week in particular.

On the immediate response to the fire, I have nothing but praise for Andrew in calling for as many trucks as he did as fast as he did and for how quickly the brigades were on the road. Most brigades were turning out within 30 seconds of being paged, because most of them were actually sitting at the station waiting for it. The cross-agency collaboration was also very good. When the briefings were up at Ravenswood, the Forest Fire Management people were very thorough in what they were doing and communicated what they required from the brigades that were going out to assist the strike teams and so forth so that there were enough resources available for doing what needed to be done.

Again, as Andrew stated, on aviation water bombing, I did not even see a helicopter on the first day. I understand that the weather was very difficult. As I understood later, there was one on the fireground, but it was called off to another fire. Getting water on the day became a bit of a challenge. The bulk water carriers were very, very good, but they were in the middle of the town. Our tankers were out on Fogartys Gap Road, and there were no tankers out there for water. So we had to really go back to our skills of drafting and trying to find water where we could. In a lot of cases, we were just tapped into any tank or dam that we could find.

What did not work well? Again, trying to get into the fireground was very difficult. The access to water was difficult. As Andrew was saying, a lot of the dams were empty or very near to, so trying to get water out of them was a real struggle. Radio comms did drop in and out in the areas that we saw. Traffic management points – again, we were driving around signs on the road. Not very often was there an actual police presence. They were at some of the areas that I saw for actually getting into Harcourt, but once you were in, there was no issue with moving around. Again, I would like to reiterate about the place of last resort. We need to have some more communication and education to the public that these are not just for ‘Oh, there’s a fire. We’ll go to the hall’. It is a place of last resort, and it is a place to go to if you cannot get out. I did speak to one community member who said that his evacuation plan literally was to go to the hall.

In the lead-up to the day, our brigade in particular did a fairly large social media campaign. A lot of people would now recognise Jodie Parker who is our community safety officer. She did many social media posts involving a lot of our members on what people needed to do and what to take in their grab bags. Also during the actual fire, Jodie was placing many posts on what was happening, what our crews were doing and where the fire was. The VicEmergency app was very good, but it was very general, so we were able to give in-time, up-to-date information on where the fire was and how people were. We found that that was extremely informative to people. Jodie has received lots of recommendations from outside, and everybody now knows Jodie.

Recommendations going forward – I did see a couple of brigades struggling with some of their basic training skills, drafting in particular. I would like to personally see just a bit more inter-brigade training, but that is our own issue. I think that is about it. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Anything to add, Rohan?

Rohan STEVENS: Yes, thank you. My story today will be a bit of a different one. It is actually about being based in the outer metro area. It is more about where some of that additional support comes from and what was happening at the relevant time when the Harcourt job kicked off, amongst a few others. My background – 30 years in the organisation this year, and predominantly that time has been spent in that outer metro area. My group effectively runs from Sunbury across to Epping and north up to Kalkallo, which has had its fair share of activity this summer.

I will probably share some insights from what this season has been like. This has been the busiest response year we have had since the 2019–20 season. From our perspective, it has stretched the volunteers, certainly in my local patch, and at times has overstretched them. We have been supporting fires, including obviously in Harcourt and Ravenswood. We had strike teams from my group attend, amongst others, out of district 14, which is my home district, while at the same time supporting Longwood fires and later through the Otways. So it was very much a story this year of members travelling all over the state out of those metro areas, as well as dealing with what was quite a high operational tempo just in metro.

Between 9 and 10 January we had members deployed to a significant fire in Beveridge, later on supporting FRV to an escalating job in Maribyrnong and then later supporting a strike team which actually travelled north

to Harcourt and Ravenswood the following day, so the day of the 10th, who spent quite a few hours up here with some rotations.

What has worked well for us this year has been obviously that planning coordination in the way that some of the metro crews are actually tasked and resourced. The stretch for us has been that it is a finite pool.

There were a number of decisions made through this particular summer period where we were able to support strike teams going out to more rural areas, and we had a number of examples of that occurring. But equally, keeping very much an eye on what was happening locally, we had a number of significant fires occurring locally within our patch, which also needed to be supported. So it was often that fine balance between when you could release crews and could release resources and when you could not as well.

I think the other challenge this year, if I can reflect on how busy some of the brigades in outer metro are at the moment – I transferred to my local brigade at Epping in 1999–2000. That was a brigade that had 45-odd members operational. It was doing about 200 to 220 calls a year. Fast forward to 2026: it has got about the same operational footprint in terms of about 40 to 45 operational members, but we are sitting north of 650 calls a year. To give you an example of that, it is where those resources come from at times of need for fires here at Harcourt–Ravenswood, Longwood over the other side near Seymour and anywhere else around the state. That is the sort of demand that we have got on volunteers in those busy metro areas, just trying to do what they can to support, obviously, others around the state, which we are always trying to do the best way we can, but also just trying to manage the operational tempo that is happening locally at the same time.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much. We will move into questions. I wanted to ask about how this season and these fires compared to what you had seen in the past. We got a little bit of that from you, Rohan, in terms of the busiest season. Andrew and Adam, I do not know if you have got any reflections on this fire, its intensity and how it compares to what you have seen before.

Andrew WILSON: We seem to have these years come along. 2019–20 was the same, that period. We travelled to New South Wales in similar conditions that year. There was Black Saturday. And from the more experienced members in our brigade, it was very similar to Ash Wednesday, especially on the change that was just so erratic for the fire behaviour.

Adam PAINE: For me personally, this was the biggest and most intense fire that I have been to. I did go up to New South Wales in the 2019–20 fires as well, but I was involved more with the back-burning and getting ready for that. I did have members of Taradale that were down at Mallacoota though, and they said although Mallacoota was a different sort of scenario, this one actually moved and changed around a lot, much more irregularly.

The CHAIR: For us to understand, when you have got that irregularity in the movement of the fire itself, what does that do in terms of the response that you have to plan for? I am particularly interested – it has come up a couple of times – in the allocation of resources, because there is obviously a lot going on in a lot of places. Your trucks were in Castlemaine –

Andrew WILSON: Castlemaine to start with.

The CHAIR: at the start of the fire. How do you deal with resource allocation when a fire is moving erratically like that?

Andrew WILSON: Probably one of the things we struggled with with this fire was to actually get a structure set up. It developed so quickly. I think it hit Harcourt within an hour.

The CHAIR: Of ignition.

Andrew WILSON: Of ignition.

The CHAIR: Right. Wow.

Andrew WILSON: To try and get that structure in place is very, very hard. I got transferred reasonably quickly from incident controller to a sector commander. So then I looked after that sector. That was my job on

the day – to try and allocate trucks to asset protection or whatever you need to do. So yes, it becomes very hard. Some people call it herding cats.

The CHAIR: Does that change as the fire progresses? In terms of the structure and the planning and the positioning of resources, did that improve over the days or was it a constant battle of change?

Andrew WILSON: On the day, because I was on a different sector – I was on a different radio channel – I did not hear the chatter in Harcourt, but from accounts from people that were on the ground, it was a lot of ‘See fire, chase fire’. Then they had tankers in Gaaschs Road, and it was ‘Righto, let’s fall back to Harcourt’. So you have sort of got to try and prioritise what is going to happen. Are we wasting our time trying to fight this fire in the bush or open grassland environment? When we know we are going to lose it, we need to fall back.

The CHAIR: So you are just trying to make those kinds of strategic command decisions about where you have got to be to fight in real time, based on conditions.

Andrew WILSON: Yes, best bang for bucks.

The CHAIR: That is pretty amazing. My time is up. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. I guess from all of us, we really do want to say thank you so much to the CFA, because you were at the front line and so many volunteers engaged in that process and did huge hours. So thank you. There have been lots of news reports about the CFA and stations that are not equipped – ageing vehicles, using portaloos and that sort of thing. Is it making it harder to recruit and retain volunteers?

Andrew WILSON: You had an old truck.

Adam PAINE: Yes. We had an old truck, but our brigade has technically only got one vehicle, one fire truck, at the moment. We have just been successful, finally, after 14 years of trying; we will hopefully at some stage get a second firefighting appliance. But for the last few years we have been given an old truck that is about to be decommissioned. We were given, I think, a 36-year-old truck to use for the fire season. This truck is 36 years old. It was still a good truck. It still works. As long as the trucks are maintained, they do work well. Yes, it was a single cab. It is nowhere near as safe to travel in or to be in as a crew cab. But on a day like the 9th, you want as many vehicles on the ground as you can. Those 36-year-old trucks, if they are a second truck for a brigade like they were for us, are an awesome asset to have. There were a couple of older trucks, I believe, on the day that had some issues. I think Spring Hill’s had a brake failure, and it is another 35-plus-year-old truck. But for a lot of brigades, yes, having old trucks makes a lot of people not very interested. A lot of people do want to see the new and shiny vehicles. I remember talking to Malmsbury brigade in particular at one stage, to their former captain, and they found that every time they got a new appliance, they got two to three new members. Having the equipment there for people to use is a very big encouragement to try and get people in. People see Taradale at the moment and there is one truck, which means five people can go out. A lot of people feel that if you have got 15 firefighters, not everybody gets a shot.

Gaelle BROAD: It limits your capacity.

Adam PAINE: It does limit the capacity a lot.

Rohan STEVENS: I would say that there is a lens on safety we need to put on that when we talk about some of the older fleet. One incident that I recall very well, which I attended, was an illegal waste fire over in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, which was on the super hot day we had; it was 44 degrees. We had members on the back of single-cab trucks, out in the open in that sort of heat, having to maintain overwatch on that fire to make sure it did not jump out into grasslands. What that forced us to do was pivot and request assistance from SES to set up marquees so we had cover and also some relief from people having to sit out in that sort of heat on the backs of trucks. I think you will find within the CFA that it is a can-do organisation. We will make things work with what we have got, but equally an up-to-date, modern fleet is something we need to aspire to. If we look at CFS in South Australia, they retired their last single-cab tankers several years ago, so we are a long way behind.

Gaelle BROAD: So we are far behind.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you so much for appearing today and for all the work that you did in response to the fire and that you continue to do in supporting the communities here with the recovery. An issue that has come up at a number of sites is the availability of water. I am wondering whether there are any suggestions you have about how we can better prepare. Accepting that it has been incredibly dry and access to water is an issue that goes beyond just response to fire, is there anything that you think could be done when we know we are coming into a challenging fire season?

Andrew WILSON: Yes. The bulk water tanker initiative this year was fantastic. But as we have said, the mains in Harcourt, the reticulated mains, failed – whether that was through the loss of power and/or the amount of house fires we had with open water services running. With the piping of the Harcourt rural system, we have lost access to that. The channel used to leak a fair bit, and those dams were full of water. That has stopped now. I am putting a proposal together at the moment with the support of Lisa Chesters and Maree Edwards. We have been offered a donation of a 110,000-litre tank. The brigade has moved to purchase a second one of those tanks to strategically place it in our brigade area near the Coliban Water pipeline. I am hoping Coliban Water come to the party and actually tap that water main and fill the tanks for us. That will assist us greatly with that, but it is something, with the drought conditions – a lot of people say we are not in a drought. We are in a drought. It is only going to get worse and we are going to get less and less water in the landscape, like Adam said. We rely predominantly on dams and/or these tanks, hopefully – when they happen, not if they happen. I am pushing it pretty hard. Have you got anything on that?

Adam PAINE: No, that pretty much covers it, I think. But yes, agreed; the water race, I am not sure where it stops now. It does run from Malmsbury through Taradale and Elphinstone. I am not sure where it stops now, though.

Andrew WILSON: It goes around the back.

Adam PAINE: But that water race that goes through, it is turned on during the summer period and we train extensively in actually accessing water from those spots. For that not to be operating in Harcourt did make life more difficult.

Andrew WILSON: And when we get access to this pipeline, it is raw water, it is not treated. When we are taking water out of fire hydrants, it is drinking-class water. There is a cost to treat that water, and we go and pull thousands and thousands of litres of water out of that system. So this will benefit us and Coliban Water and Forest Fire Management as well; they will use it too.

Sarah MANSFIELD: In terms of the nature of the fire, we have heard anecdotally that this was a very different fire to what many had experienced previously. What were your observations and what do you think was contributing to that?

Andrew WILSON: From my point, at the point of origin where I was, it was the amount of fuel load that was ungrazed, really high wild oats and that sort of stuff. And just the wind and then the spotting – I have not seen a fire spot that far so early in its development.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for your appearance here this morning. Andrew, I am interested to understand a bit more about your preseason requirements and what that means.

Andrew WILSON: The chief officer sets a requirement preseason that we have to do an entrapment drill. That is the worst-case scenario: we get caught in the tanker or on foot. What we do in that process to make ourselves safe is either go into the entrapment procedure in the tankers or evacuate ourselves out of the area. So there is that, and there are the hazardous trees that we need to do as well. And then as a brigade – I have pushed and we run with it – we do little preseason drills each year. We chase some barrels around the paddock as training for grassfire attack, and drafting and filling trucks with hydrants, just those general basic skills to keep everyone up to speed.

John BERGER: Okay, so that takes care of you guys. And then you work it down to the next part for the community meetings; how does that pan out, and how well are they attended?

Andrew WILSON: In the past we have hosted the meetings in different locations. We might do a street corner one at Barkers Creek cricket ground. We did that a few years ago and the members came to that. We usually average 15 to 20, maybe sometimes up a bit higher.

John BERGER: Would you think in a community of the size that you have got that you would expect more to come along to understand a bit more about it?

Andrew WILSON: I am expecting a hell of a lot more this year. The trouble is there is complacency. That is the Aussie way: 'Oh, we'll be right, it'll never happen to us,' and as we all know as firefighters, it is only the next day that it could happen. The community need to come along to these events so they learn and pick up all the tools they need to do their homework at their house or wherever they are going to be, whether they are going to leave early or they are going to decide to stay because they have done their homework around their house and it is defensible.

John BERGER: During our travels we have heard different stories of people evacuating and people staying and defending. What was the experience here?

Andrew WILSON: I did not see it on this side of the fire, again, because I was on that side. I did not see Harcourt till midnight on the Friday, so it was a bit of a shock when I came back to this side of town, but from all accounts the majority of people left and left early; some stayed and were going to leave, and then once they decided 'Nup, I'm out of here; it's too hot', it was too late. They had to stay and shelter at their house. I think the roads were pretty good. There was one horse float that got jackknifed in Coolstore Road. That was about the only incident on the roads that I know of. I do not know – you were over this side a bit.

Adam PAINE: No, I started it. The same thing – I was out at Fogartys Gap at the start, and then I was down the northern side the entire time. Again, I did not realise how big the fire had gotten until we were driving home at 2 in the morning. I did not realise that the fire had travelled for 6-odd kilometres down the freeway. I heard that it had jumped the freeway; I did not realise it was that big a front across it.

John BERGER: How can we better prepare the community to understand what 'the place of last resort' means?

Adam PAINE: Again, we just try and iterate to the people that, for example, the Taradale hall is down as a place of last resort, but it is not really defensible. It is a very old brick building. A lot of the windows would not withstand a fire of the magnitude that came through Harcourt. It has got no water source or anything to defend it. We have tried to push the information out as far as possible that the best place to be in a situation like that is nowhere near it. But yes, it is an issue that we have got, and we have just got to try and educate members of the public that it is a place of last resort. It is not a refuge or anything, because there is nothing there, really.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Andrew, you spoke about radio communications and the problems with that on the day.

Andrew WILSON: Yes.

Wendy LOVELL: Over the last few years there has been about \$650 million spent on improving radio communications. Can you just expand on what is wrong and why it is still not working? We have heard stories of radios not communicating, people who are on secondment from FRV not having the same radio as the CFA et cetera. It all seems to be a real concern when you need to start resorting to UHF CBs and mobile phones.

Andrew WILSON: Actually talking in the window – I will handball the FRV question.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes.

Andrew WILSON: On the day, I think it was just down to the amount of smoke that was in the air. Our fireground channels are almost line-of-sight channels – so, you start to get in hills and behind trees and the amount of smoke. I believe at one stage we were actually getting smoke from Horsham. That added to the smoke from our fire as well. The command channel was okay back to Ravenswood, to the DIDComm, but on the actual fireground stuff, it was very hard to be able to talk to tankers. Unless you could almost see them, you

could not talk to them. The new radios that we have got I know are multi-agency radios. I will handball that to Rohan now.

Rohan STEVENS: My experience with our radios in particular is that they have certainly improved. That would be the key highlight from the old analogue days, when you had to put one leg in the air and one arm in the air to try and get some reception. Now we have got a much more resilient network, certainly in the outer metro areas. But even through my group patch, there are areas that we know of where radio comms are still patchy, which is largely driven by topography. I think that is one area around Sunbury, Wildwood area, Deep Creek. You go out into deep gullies, down towards areas – there are poor radio comms in those areas. And even with the 4G mobile phone redundancy within those portable radios, you run out of that coverage as well, so there will be times when crews will be faced with that and need to adapt.

Wendy LOVELL: It seems to me that something is wrong and that most of the bushfires we fight are in areas where there is difficult terrain, and if the communications are not working, there is something desperately wrong. I would like to ask you also about recruiting volunteers, particularly in that outer urban area, because that is where we rely on surge capacity on days like we had here in Harcourt and with other campaign fires. Have you maintained recruitment since fire services reform, or has there been a deterrent to people to come into the CFA since that time?

Rohan STEVENS: Recruitment in outer metro and certainly for the eight brigades that I liaise with often is challenging. You are asking individuals – in my home brigade, as I said, we do north of 650 calls a year; that is on average two or three a day. As we say to people, it is the busiest volunteer job – that you will not get paid for – that you could ever do, and there is quite a significant workload with that. We are finding two key areas in that metro area that are causing difficulty for brigades. One is just the workload that is actually involved. That does tend to scare some away when they realise how busy the brigade actually tends to be. It is an all-hours service; it is 24/7. It does not stop. So it is not a summer service where you can kind of disappear for a few months and come back. We tend to find those winter times are equally as busy. You do not get the large bushfires, of course, but you are getting called out nonetheless to other jobs.

The shift in demographics is also playing a large part there. We have got families who now are dual-income families to keep up with the cost of living and mortgages, so they do not have one parent at home, which was years and years ago the traditional experience that CFA sometimes relied on to draw from its membership base.

The CHAIR: We will go to Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. A quick one from me: what other barriers did you face, if any, that the state government could change to improve the CFA's fire response?

Rohan STEVENS: It is a large question. I am trying to process where that goes – yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: It is a bit open-ended. Go for it.

Rohan STEVENS: There are probably a number of things. From a response perspective – and again, I will talk to my outer metro experience, and the local crews from the country will have a different view, no doubt – I think probably the biggest change that we could see is better access to training and to get people on board and through the door. One of the barriers to recruitment is how long and difficult that can be at times. Then from there it is about ensuring that within our space we have got the right gear to do the job. We have got within my patch a number of stations who are pretty well equipped from a truck perspective. But equally we have interagency responsibilities: we respond with FRV quite commonly, as well as with other services within my patch; we also support the perimeter of Melbourne Airport and work with aviation services. So that cross-agency support and interoperability is critically important in my patch. Just in the lead-up to this season, our pre-summer exercise was actually partnered with aviation and fire rescue at Woodlands park, just on the northern fringe of Melbourne, because we work together so often. So those interagency improvements just need to continue, because we are working together so often.

Andrew WILSON: We work pretty closely with Forest Fire Management here as well, so that is a good team that we have got with the local resources. I think the onboarding of new members is a pretty strenuous sort of exercise to go through. Some can go through really quickly and others draw out; I do not know why. And just resourcing – we desperately need to get rid of the single-cab tankers in the fleet.

Adam PAINE: There is not much more to add – just trying to get people in, but there is not really much we can do. A lot of people are so time-poor nowadays. It is getting to the point where you are trying to find the retirees to be able to crew vehicles during the day, because everybody else just needs to be able to make a living as much as possible.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you, and thanks for your contribution. I am not sure who said this. One of you said that previously you had 200 callouts per year and now you are up to 600. Who was that – Andrew, Adam or Rohan?

Rohan STEVENS: That was Rohan.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Rohan – Group Officer, Hume?

Rohan STEVENS: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. Why? What is causing that, do you think?

Rohan STEVENS: That is development and urban sprawl. If I were to look at my home brigade, Epping, where I transferred, where the fire station sits and remains today was at the end of the suburb as it actually then was. Now it extends through parts of Wollert and out towards Kalkallo, one of the busiest municipal growth areas in the country. So with lots of people, lots of infrastructure and extra cars on the roads, that brings more emergencies and that higher workload that we face.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. Thank you. Now I am just going to a map – so we have got Harcourt and I am just trying to understand the planned burn by Forest Fire Management Victoria. It stopped or significantly slowed the fires' approach to Harcourt. Is that also what one of you said?

Adam PAINE: No. This is Adam from Taradale. There was a fire earlier in the day up at Fryers Ridge, in the back of Taradale. There was a fire that started up there from a lightning strike the night before. And that fire, once it popped out of the ground and started moving along, was slowed right down by a previous burn that had happened about four years ago.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Right. So four years ago – that is impressive that the benefits of a planned burn can still play out four years later.

Adam PAINE: Yes. From where it was, if you looked to the north of where the wind was pushing it away from, 30 to 40 metres was the edge of the burn that had been done. There were tea-trees up to 5 to 6 feet high, and if that burn had not been done, those tea-trees and lower scrub would have been in that area. By the time vehicles were able to pinpoint the exact location of the fire, instead of a fire being 30 metres round by the time the first truck got there, it would have been probably starting to push out to nearly a kilometre.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, we have received quite a bit of information about the role of planned burns, and that sounds like a very strategic one. The impact of that on firefighting – did that enable you to step out of the early chaos into some more structured approaches?

Adam PAINE: It enabled us to really get back to the station and ready for the next one, more than anything else. We did not have to spend 5 hours out there trying to mop it up or anything like that. It was done. It was dusted. We could be back in the station in under an hour. So that was really good.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Gentlemen, thanks so much for your evidence today. We really appreciate you coming today, but also the ongoing work that you are doing to support the communities out here. You will receive a proof version of the transcript to review in the coming week. And with that, the committee will take a short break and prepare for the next witness. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.