

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

Peter Star, President, and

Nicholas Ayres-Wearne, Director, Livestock, Victorian Farmers Federation.

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.

For our witnesses: all the evidence we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore, the information 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 the Parliament.

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

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

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

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

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, Western Victoria Region, coming to you from Warrnambool today.

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

Peter STAR: Thank you. I am Peter Star. I am the President of the Victorian Farmers Federation. With me today I have Nicholas Ayres-Wearne, who is a senior policy adviser. Also present in the audience is Glen Hepburn, another senior policy adviser, who is also handling our media for the VFF.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. I will invite you to make an opening statement, and then the committee will ask you questions. I will hand the floor over.

Peter STAR: By all means. Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to present today. Firstly, I will talk about the VFF's role in the fires. In response to the fires across Victoria this summer, the VFF was responsible for dealing with 531 individual requests for fodder: 545 consignments were completed; 338 trucks were registered to deliver fodder; 292 farmers, not necessarily Victorian, offered donations; VFF staff even ran the Mansfield fodder hub. All of this was over 16 weeks, with detailed reporting, while working in collaboration with Agriculture Victoria. None of this would have taken place without the incredible effort of VFF staff, many of whom gave up their spare time over a fortnight in the immediate aftermath of the fires to coordinate, problem-solve and ensure that fodder reached those who needed it. Also in response to the fires, the VFF Disaster Relief Fund collected and distributed nearly \$1 million across Victoria to fire-affected communities, and the VFF is eternally grateful to those who donated.

But now let me introduce myself as Peter Star, the CFA volunteer – over 45 years as a registered member, 13 years as captain of the Talgarno Rural Fire Brigade and currently a deputy group officer of the Tallangatta

group in region 24. I actively served in the Walwa fire complex this summer as well as the Upper Murray fire of 2019–20. I am shocked today to see the devastation around here and also by the details that I have received in regard to the Longwood fires. While homes will be built and fences replaced, the grass will grow back and many of the trees will reshoot and grow, my concern is with those who carry the mental anguish of being severely affected by the fires. There are people in the Upper Murray who, six years on, still carry the psychological burden of the despair and hopelessness of how that fire was managed and the devastation it caused. My heart goes out to the people around here that are going through that same trauma.

My reflection on the Walwa fire of this summer is that the majority of the fire was on public land, and therefore the incident control centre was managed by Forest Fire Management with limited CFA input and a distinct lack of use of local knowledge. There is a line of thought, based on local knowledge, that that fire could have been contained in its early stages if strategic back-burning had taken place within 48 hours of the fire starting, given the warnings of the impending weather conditions that were to follow in this timeline. Many of those of this opinion are yet to be shown any evidence to the contrary. While on the subject of local knowledge, it is paramount that those with such local knowledge should be implanted into out-of-region strike teams, as there are examples of poor and dangerous decisions being made by those people.

A good local decision at the time was to allow the Tallangatta Valley captain to manage the back-burning from private land into public land on the southern end of the Tallangatta Valley. Unfortunately, most of his work was conducted with private units, with the local CFA strike teams being stood down and not permitted to assist on the grounds of fatigue, while their assistance would have been required only for day shifts. At the Walwa fire overmanagement also prevented early access of AgVic vets to assess and deal with injured and distressed livestock.

Across Victoria we have an ageing CFA base, not only with equipment but also with CFA volunteers. Small country brigades in my area have limited access to firefighter numbers during the daylight hours of weekdays. It is always the same faces that are turning up to the incident. Basic training needs to be simplified. We all get that we need to be safe. There needs to be an acknowledgement of experience that should be part of the granting of crew and strike team leader qualifications. One of the great opportunities for brigade training and familiarisation in the past was roadside burning. Unfortunately, this process has diminished over the years, stifled due to environmental concerns, and the roadsides are now overgrown beyond the position of being burnt.

What is evident is that every time there is a fire disaster of the magnitude that we have seen this summer, we end up starting from scratch – communications disappear and power is lost, with no plan in place to remedy the situation. Those that have learned their lesson from the Upper Murray fire six years ago have set themselves up with generators and are making use of the satellite system for communications, but in a lot of instances this is economically out of the reach of the average farmer. There need to be incentives to support farmers in the wake of a major fire and to improve their capability for dealing with fire disaster in the future: tax breaks, low-interest loans and state government recognising the impact on local government and subsidising farm rates in fire-affected areas. Complementing all of this, Forest Fire Management needs to ensure that the fuel-reduction burns are adequately undertaken. Areas listed as reference areas should also be given adequate attention. In the early days of the Walwa fire, the bright red, glowing burn of the tinderbox known as the Bungil Reference Area in Mount Lawson State Park was clearly visible in Albury, 50 kilometres away from the fire. Firebreaks and access tracks need to be established on the public land side of the public–private land interface. This would allow for better fire management capabilities and also assist in pest animal management.

I probably have not got much more to say. I think we are at the point where we will throw it back to you for questions. Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. We appreciate that today. I just want to go to the question of livestock management post fire. We heard some evidence at our hearings last week about the need to prioritise access to livestock management for basic euthanasia purposes. Do you want to talk through why that is important and what your experience of that process has been in this summer fire season?

Peter STAR: Look, I think in all of everything with this, it is an animal welfare issue. I think no-one wants to see suffering animals, and I think with this bushfire process, probably the best qualified people to deal with this primarily, to a certain extent, are the farmers. But with an overarching view on things, obviously the veterinarians from Agriculture Victoria are best placed to deal with these decisions. A lot of farmers love their

livestock and are at peril to basically see them destroyed, but sometimes common sense must overrule the heartstrings, and the reality is that these animals need to be dealt with.

The CHAIR: How did it go this time around?

Peter STAR: Look, we had issues. We have had feedback. We do have members of the VFF who do have family that are in the veterinary trade. Basically, yes, we have had reports back that those vets struggled to be allowed on the fireground to deal with these animals.

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: I think I will just add that there is obviously a time constraint. You hear an animal is in distress, and you need to act quickly. We have heard, from reports on the ground, that the vets would be allowed in, and then they were stopped. And we know that those animals are burnt and in a lot of distress and need to be put down as quickly as possible. I think if there is some structure that can be put in place to actually expedite that and to ensure that people can get on as quickly as possible, that would be something that we would be supportive of. But also I think, again, it comes back to the local knowledge and the knowledge of the farm and knowing that. I think we are up to 45,000 confirmed deaths of livestock from these fire events, and you could probably say the injured animals on top of that are probably even more – even the small burns that need to be treated. So again, I think we need to do better. We need to do better for the livestock that are impacted by this, and we need to do better for the farmers who in a lot of cases are highly distressed, highly agitated, and are going through hell because their farm is on fire. And for these animals, apart from an economic imperative to keep them well and healthy, I think there is also this element that people want to be good stockmen and managers of their livestock, so any improvements around that I would say would be very welcomed.

Peter STAR: I can further add, not so much on the livestock side of things, but a lot of these decisions that were made have come out of the incident control centres. We had examples where livestock carriers were able to get in to take livestock away. The fodder trucks were also able to enter to deliver fodder, but that was all stopped, probably after a few days. That was all stopped. They basically then had to return to the incident control centre to actually get permits to then go into the burnt ground, which for a lot of people was very frustrating.

The CHAIR: All right. Ms Lovell?

Wendy LOVELL: I was just going to ask about animals that need to be put down. Obviously they need to be put down quickly. You are talking about getting access et cetera, but regarding assistance also to put those animals down, we heard from Trelly – from Steven Threlfall – last week that he had quite a lot of ammunition donated to him. He also told me that he had a number of sporting shooters who were putting their hands up to assist, but they could not get into the fireground. Obviously it is distressing for farmers to have to shoot their own stock, so would you guys be supportive of a taskforce to help with those sorts of things?

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: I think also when you are talking about how you could have a mob of 2000 sheep that need to be put down, asking the farmer – one person – to go and shoot 2000 animals, that is going to put distress on anyone. So I think as much help as possible would be welcomed. I think, sort of to pivot back over that point, there are also animal welfare considerations about stock that may be alive after the fire event but there may be no water; there is no feed. And Peter's comment about livestock carriers – they may know that we can go in and go out very quickly. We may be able to save half the mob or 100 head of cattle on a truck. Now, if they can do that quickly and satisfy some procedure from the on-the-ground fire operations, I think that is something we would of course be supportive of. We are looking to ensure that these farmers can bounce back as quickly as possible.

Wendy LOVELL: The farmers would be charged for leaving animals in distress for as long as some of the animals were left in distress during the fires. We need some way of breaking that nexus about getting people into the –

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: Correct. I think there is a need for quicker decision-making, because a lot of the time this is not something that can wait six hours. If an animal is distressed, it is stressed and it does not really matter – it could be in lamb, it could be in calf – the lack of water essentially means you have got a ticking time bomb there where even if they survive the fire, they are going to pass away. So there needs to be some framework there to be able to react quickly and to acknowledge also that these farmers are also operating

under the Livestock Management Act. There are multiple layers of legislation here that say the responsibility is on the farmer. When you have fire operations coming in and saying you cannot access that, but they are saying we can and we can do it safely, there at least needs to be some mechanism to facilitate that as much as possible, to, I would say, pivot it to a point which is more on the agricultural side rather than on the risk side.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today and for the work that you did supporting farmers through the crisis. I know that a lot of work went into distributing fodder and other practical supports for farmers, and that, from all reports, was really well appreciated. In your submission, you mentioned that one of the contributing factors is the more challenging fire weather conditions that we saw with the fires that we had. We know that farmers are already experiencing significant effects from drought, which is also getting more frequent, more intense and longer with climate change. Do you feel that the government is doing enough to support farmers with the impacts of climate change that they are experiencing?

Peter STAR: I was going to say to you, I think there is that example of that water line that they were talking about putting in that has basically been denied by the state government lately. It is an interesting question. Potentially yes, there is the idea of basically, again, subsidies towards farmers basically drought-proofing their properties. I know myself, I am in the situation – I have got a water borer turning up at home today. Basically for the past two years, water has really been a big issue on my property. Future-proofing your place is all sort of part of the ability to have a store of fodder. The ability to have water storage on your place is probably paramount for the majority of Victorian farmers, not necessarily those that have been fire-affected in the past few months.

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: I would probably also add that there is obviously a need to increase drought preparedness. We have seen that over the last few years. I believe that you notice, for instance, where there is pipeline water out into the north-west of the state, it is a lot easier for farmers to adapt to changing climate conditions – there is always that availability of stock water. But then if you pivot back to the other side of the argument – which is when we have a drought there is less water, unless there are those pipelines there – that makes it harder to fight those fires because fundamentally you are travelling further to get the water that is available. I would also bring it back to the fact that farmers can be as prepared and resilient as possible on their land, but unless the public land – which a lot of the time is just over the fence – is also adequately managed, you are putting the risk onto the farmers rather than spreading that risk. I think the state government needs to look at how it manages public land, especially at that public-private interface – that is weed management and all those sorts of things. I think that farmers are very conscious that the climate has been very unpredictable and unreliable. If you look at today – if it does not rain in the next couple of weeks again, we might miss the autumn break, which again will lead some people back into drought. I think that we need to take a strategic view of water particularly, and also how we support communities in relation to preparing for bushfires, because we live in a bushfire environment. This is not going to be the last one and I suspect this is not going to be the last inquiry into a bushfire. We are just going to always have to be better, and we have to look for consistent improvements.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your appearance today. Peter, the government is providing grants of up to \$75,000 to help primary producers reinstate their enterprises. How are you seeing that uptake?

Peter STAR: Look, I think from what we have seen, the uptake has been slow. We have got staff on the ground. We have received funding through the government. We have actually got three people employed to go out and talk to fire-affected farmers to help them to put in for those grants. But what we have heard is, yes, that the uptake has been slow. But we sort of endeavour that these people will make every effort to get round and contact as many people as they can, and not necessarily VFF members. They are also members of the general public that we are including in all of this umbrella.

John BERGER: Do you have a view on why that uptake is so slow?

Peter STAR: I think part of the reason why the uptake has been so slow is that people are in a position where they are recovering. They are worried about their livestock and they are worried about fencing. It is just a matter of time. For some of them, they may not have the capability to actually apply for this funding, is part of it. This is where we are bringing in these people to help. There is also assistance through the Victorian state government in my area, and even Towong shire have put on a few people to basically assist with this process. But it is slow. It will take time.

John BERGER: Thanks.

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: Just to add to that, I think it is also around any support mechanism always has a lead-in time, and there is an education piece and an engagement piece to do, which the VFF is trying to do. I think also when there is a bushfire, the amount of support – some of the support is going to take years. For instance, if you have lost 300 prime breeding ewes, the genetics that you would like to purchase may not be available. For instance, with fencing contractors at the moment, there is a shortage on the ground because everyone is getting fencing. So I think there is always a lag in picking up that funding, especially when you are dealing with – these are businesses, and people are trying to work out their budgets for the next financial year and trying to work out how that slots into it as much as anything.

John BERGER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much for your presence today. I am just really interested in the emergency fodder program in particular. We have heard some horrendous stories – as has been said, thousands of stock being lost, and others, like a farmer putting out one bale trying to feed a whole herd, and the pressure, the immediacy that is required in responding in that situation. I am just interested in how long it took to get the emergency fodder program going, because you said support can be a slow process, particularly when you are engaging with government, because we know that there were local volunteers here, for example, at the miniature railway that were doing huge hours with donations flowing in from everywhere. I know Annabelle Cleeland over at the other fireground was also working with a team coordinating a whole lot of hay coming in. Were there any double-ups? How long does it take? Can that timeframe be reduced?

Peter STAR: I think once it was declared that the fire was not as active as what it was, I would like to say probably within the first week afterwards that the fodder was arriving. As I said before, we had staff that were basically working nearly 24 hours a day receiving phone calls, trying to organise and trying to get the hay out there. To answer your question, yes, look, probably as soon as possible. In a lot of instances staff were getting phone calls from interstate about where it was best possible to get that hay to – in my instance, being in the upper north-east, it was basically trying to quell people who were ringing me up to say, ‘Look, be calm. It’ll be there. It’s been promised.’ I think probably one of the biggest issues when it arrived was basically there were a lot of people looking for hay, and the fact of having people on the ground there to evenly distribute it amongst community members when it arrived, rather than one person getting the whole lot and others missing out. In times like this people stand up, and that in my area was also done.

Gaëlle BROAD: But it can take up to a week for a government-supported program. Can that time be minimised? Because that is the thing; the help is needed on the ground as soon as possible.

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: I think that an interesting point is Victoria had had a very good hay season, so there was a lot of hay around. I would not like to revisit it if we had not had a good hay season. Obviously, people were like, ‘We’ll donate 100 bales, because we have it. It’s available on hand.’ I do think part of the streamlining of the process – whatever that may be, and I am talking about any support here – again has to come back to what capability is on the ground. For instance, if you are a farmer who has all their machinery burnt and you are getting two B-doubles of hay, how do you unload it? I think that there are those questions of linkages, which we always have to just improve and keep improving, and not saying, ‘Oh, that’s fine. That system’s working.’ It is always, I think, trying to find those tiny, little, 1 per cent improvements in any program. Of course government support is going to take a while. I think people know that, but I think even if it is a 1 per cent improvement, we would welcome that.

Peter STAR: As I said in my presentation, we always just seem to start from scratch. There must be at some point a template that we can work to, to say, ‘Bang, we’ve had a fire. Now this is what we’ve got to start

initiating,' and that just does not seem to be going on. I have been banging on about this for years and it is starting to wear thin.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. During the fires I had a lot of complaints from farmers that they could not get hold of certain government bodies to help euthanise and treat livestock because it was the weekend. Your website does have a phone number 9 to 5 on weekdays, and then there is another phone number. Can people contact you when it is not a weekday between 9 and 5?

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: Well, during those fires the staff were working seven days a week.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. That is good. That was going to be my follow-up question. Do you have more contactable members of the group during an emergency situation?

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: From my understanding, the staff were working a seven-day roster at that time.

Peter STAR: We had one staff member that worked straight through for 16 days. I think basically with our commodity set-up, within regions, there probably are people that know that so and so down the road is a VFF member. He also sits on a commodity council. It is probably the opportunity then for them to touch base. I think one of the biggest issues we have got with the VFF is our small membership. We do advocate and lobby for all Victorian farmers. We have something like 2500 members, whereas there are something like 15,000 farmers out there. We have free riders. The reality is, though, we advocate for everyone.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Peter, you mentioned overmanagement was a restriction, I think in Tallangatta Valley, when it came to the CFA units. You used the term 'overmanagement'. Can you please explain?

Peter STAR: I think I made mention of the local captain that was left to manage the back-burn. The overmanagement was the simple fact that we were turning out strike teams, basically day and night crews, and there had sort of been a gap where that had stopped. One of our strike teams was stranded at Koetong for two days; they were unable to get out due to the state of the Murray Valley Highway. Those strike teams consist of five people. For the Tallangatta Valley example, the simple fact is that brigades have got more people than that behind them. What we were looking at – and we discussed this at group level – was that we could have managed it with day crews – people that basically clocked on at 8 o'clock in the morning, went home at 8 o'clock at night, did not do the night shift, were not forced to stay out overnight and could come back the next day and assist. These local members – in a lot of instances they are friends, they are colleagues, they are people that we know. That was part of the overmanagement. As I mentioned before, overmanagement prevented the vets from going in to look at the affected livestock. Overmanagement stopped the livestock carriers and the fodder carriers until they basically then had to go and set up some permit system at the local incident control centre.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hi. Thanks very much for the work you did during the fires and after. I have always found the VFF incredibly strategic and well researched in the work that they do, so thank you again for that. You mentioned a pre-prepared model. This is not the first suggestion for a fire response at the community level. We had Mount Alexander shire earlier talk about exactly the same thing. Were you involved in those meetings in December last year with the Mount Alexander shire, and if you were, is that a model that should perhaps be spread out across the state?

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: I am not aware of that model or the meeting with Mount Alexander shire.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. No worries. But in terms of relief hubs, would you say that the VFF should have a presence in relief hubs?

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: I guess it comes down to the definition of a relief hub. I guess we played our part with the fodder drive, but again, I would say that lots of communities did. I would say that a lot of relief

hubs probably need that expertise of agriculture. Again, I would come back to – you know, most of the time with these fires, once they leave public land, they go onto farmland, and how you manage the response on farmland is obviously very different than, say, protecting a town, a lot of the time. I think the VFF would support hubs and increased preparedness. But again, I think it is also, to Peter's point, about trying to let the CFA brigades, which a lot of the time are the farmers on the ground, have the autonomy within a structure to be able to fight the fires, because a lot of the time they know how these fires will behave in the landscape. It is probably not 100 per cent the answer to your question. Do you mean the support at these hubs? Can you just expand on that?

Jacinta ERMACORA: I think everybody is saying the same thing. It is about putting together a model or a framework before a fire, not during the fire season, that articulates really simply and clearly what farmers need in terms of euthanasia, facilitation and also fodder. That is pretty much what you are saying, isn't it?

Nicholas AYRES-WEARNE: Yes, 100 per cent. I think fodder as well as water, euthanasia and access to machinery, for instance, because machinery also plays a part in not just the response but also the aftermath. You will need machinery to manage livestock welfare as well a lot of the time.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you, gentlemen.

Peter STAR: I was going to make a comment to that.

The CHAIR: Yes, please.

Peter STAR: The reality was, given the number of fires that were across Victoria at the time, that it was probably physically impossible for us to get staff to those hubs. I think what we did find, if I go back six years to the fires that were then – there was a major fire in the Upper Murray, and there was also a major fire in Gippsland – was those hubs there were managed by VFF staff. Obviously, since that time in the last six years, we have lost a lot of staff, and basically we are in the rebuild process at the moment. But yes, obviously we just did not have the staff to do what we have delivered in the past.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you so much for coming along today and for joining us in Harcourt. We really appreciate you doing that so we could facilitate the rest of the committee's activities. You will be given a draft copy of the transcript to review in the coming week. With that, the committee will take a short break for lunch. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.