

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Harcourt – Thursday 30 April 2026

MEMBERS

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESSES

Professor James McLennan, School of Psychology and Public Health, La Trobe University; and
Lisa Palma, Chief Executive Officer, Wildlife Victoria.

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 our next batch of witnesses.

I will remind everyone that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that witnesses provide during the hearing is protected by law. Witnesses are protected from any action for what they say during the hearing, but if they go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings, and those transcripts will ultimately be made public.

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

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

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

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Jacinta Ermacora is online, when she turns her camera back on. But that is okay; we will get started. For the Hansard record could you each please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of today.

Lisa PALMA: Lisa Palma, CEO, Wildlife Victoria.

James McLENNAN: James McLennan, School of Psychology and Public Health, natural hazard safety researcher at La Trobe University.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you very much for both joining us here today. We will invite each of you to make an opening statement. Then the committee will go to questions. It is pretty straightforward. James, I might start with you.

James McLENNAN: Certainly. Thank you, Chair and members, for the opportunity to discuss my submission with you. You have my written submission, so I will limit my presentation to addressing a few key points. My purpose in being here is quite simple: it is to propose to the committee that among their findings is a recommendation that the current level of state government funding for community and household bushfire safety programs is at least maintained in the face of doubtless competing claims for increased funding.

To begin, I bring the attention of the committee to a success story from the January 2026 bushfires when compared with previous disastrous bushfire events. The 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires resulted in 30 civilian fatalities and also 14 volunteer firefighters, and 172 civilians perished in the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. While any death is a most tragic and regrettable event, especially for family members and those affected directly, the January 2026 fires resulted in a single fatality. While many factors are involved in minimising the destructive impacts of the bushfire, I propose to the committee that a major contributor to the minimisation of deaths and injuries during the January bushfires was the effectiveness of our current community bushfire safety

programs, which emphasise the threat to life posed by bushfires and the need for households to have a survival plan, to leave safely and to relocate promptly to a place of safety in the face of bushfire threat.

It is notoriously difficult to prove that a prevention program is effective. I propose that the limited evidence I presented in my submission – and I will allude to that a little bit later – is at the very least supportive of the effectiveness of Victorian agencies' current community bushfire safety programs. To summarise, prior to the mid-2000s there was effectively no statewide approach to community bushfire safety. Fire brigades put out bushfires; householders looked after themselves. Analyses of the circumstances of fatalities in the 1967 Hobart fires and the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires commissioned by the peak body AFAC demonstrate that the overwhelming number of civilian deaths in those fires was linked closely to house losses in the course of late evacuations and failed attempts to defend ill-prepared properties or to shelter in place safely. That finding was also repeated in relation to the 2009 Black Saturday fires. There is a very strong link between the number of houses lost and the number of civilians who perished. That finding led to a faulty though quite understandable conclusion that in general physically able residents in at-risk areas should prepare their properties and defend them. Fire agencies translated this into a recommendation that residents of bushfire-prone areas should 'Prepare, stay and defend or leave early'.

The unwisdom of this approach was demonstrated clearly when 172 civilians perished in the February 2009 Black Saturday fires, with the overwhelming majority in or near their homes or in the course of late evacuation. One of the several findings from the 2009 Black Saturday post-bushfire disaster taskforce interviews with survivors was that an unfortunate consequence of the 'Prepare, stay and defend' message was to generate a sense among many residents that bushfires were no big deal really. This relaxed view, in addition to 26 years of no serious bushfires in Victoria since the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires and particularly the extreme weather conditions and associated intensity of the fires, contributed to the tragedy. As an outcome of the subsequent royal commission, the 'prepare, stay and defend, or leave early' agency approach to community bushfire safety was abandoned and replaced by messaging that emphasised the danger posed by bushfires and the need for a household survival plan that prioritised leaving for a safer location as soon as possible in the face of a likely bushfire threat. Also, CFA, land management agencies and local governments established community bushfire safety programs staffed by suitably qualified personnel. The table in my submission shows the dramatic reduction in the number of civilian deaths per house loss following that change in emphasis that I have just described, from house defence to early evacuation and the establishment of today's statewide community bushfire safety programs.

By way of conclusion, let me employ a counterfactual – a wildly hypothetical – to illustrate the likely impact of the change in approach to bushfire safety from 2009 to that of today using very simple arithmetic. There were 170 civilian deaths during the Black Saturday bushfires. If – and I accept it is a mighty big if – there had been the same ratio of deaths to house losses as during the January 2026 fires, there would have been 6 deaths in the Black Saturday fires, not 172. On the other hand, if the Black Saturday ratio of deaths to house losses had occurred for the January 2026 bushfires, there would have been 29 deaths, not just the sad one. I submit that current levels of funding for our statewide community safety programs should be at least maintained, and I thank the committee for their attention.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Lisa, over to you.

Lisa PALMA: Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. While Wildlife Victoria's submission focuses on wildlife response, I would like to begin by acknowledging with deep respect the individuals, families and businesses affected by the 2026 summer fires and recognise the hardship, loss and challenge they have endured.

Wildlife Victoria is a charity and the state's leading wildlife rescue organisation. We operate a 24/7 wildlife emergency response service and coordinate more than 1500 trained volunteers supported by a dedicated wildlife veterinary team. In 2025 alone we responded to over 189,000 calls for assistance and supported more than 114,000 native animals across 450 species.

Bushfires have a profound impact on Victoria's wildlife, which lives in the very bush that burns. Wildlife across many species die from burns, smoke inhalation and extreme heat. Those that do survive often later die in pain from severe burn injuries, starvation, dehydration and predation, their homes and habitat gone. It is truly awful to comprehend. The community rightly expects that injured and displaced wildlife will receive timely,

skilled and compassionate care. Wildlife response has become an increasingly visible and important component of emergency management, with the plight of Victoria's wildlife during bushfires often attracting significant national and international attention. Delays in responding to injured wildlife can prolong suffering and place a significant emotional burden on affected communities. Property owners are often confronted with severely burnt or dying wildlife, which can be deeply distressing. Ensuring a timely and effective response is therefore critical for both wildlife welfare and community wellbeing. The very, very sad fact of bushfire is often substantive euthanasia of our native species on compassionate grounds.

During major bushfires the Victorian government leads response, with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, DEECA, as the lead agency. DEECA may deploy wildlife volunteer and veterinary resources through the Wildlife Emergency Support Network, WESN, and Wildlife Victoria as a member of this network. We acknowledge during large-scale emergencies the importance of centralised management and coordination of response efforts by government agencies with the relevant resources and legislative powers. However, the 2026 summer bushfires demonstrated that the current model is not operating as effectively as it could. Victoria has strong wildlife response capability, but it is not being fully utilised or consistently integrated.

I briefly highlight some key issues that we elaborate further on in our submission. Firstly, effective emergency management requires end-to-end volunteer systems, including, amongst other things, ongoing recruitment, ongoing training, deployment, communications, processes, safety, wellbeing and post-incident support. During and before the 2026 fires this full life cycle was not delivered by government for the WESN model, nor was it delivered on a continuous basis to ensure operational readiness and volunteer engagement and involvement. Secondly, experienced and skilled veterinarians and volunteers were unable to deploy during the fires due to limitations in the WESN model, and despite Wildlife Victoria's well-established 24/7 emergency response service being in place, a number of public reporting channels were created, causing unnecessary community confusion. Finally, volunteer and veterinary wildlife involvement in response lacks a clearly defined and consistently understood command and coordination framework, manifesting during the 2026 fires in duplication, confusion and use of non-specialist personnel for critical tasks such as euthanasia, highlighting the need for clearer role definition and earlier deployment of expertise. Together, these issues point to a system that is functional but not yet fully mature. The reforms required to address current deficiencies in the model, we contend, are quite practical to implement, and Wildlife Victoria stands ready to work with government and DEECA on this.

In closing, Victoria has the expertise, infrastructure and community support needed to deliver a best practice wildlife emergency response system for bushfire. What is needed now is stronger integration, clearer accountability and more effective use of existing capability. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Jim, I might start with you. You present a reasonably compelling case. How much do you think that the change in what we saw in terms of the fatality count is significant fire? We heard earlier today from the CFA that these were conditions that they had not seen in a long time and were akin to that which occurred in 2009. How much do you put that down to the public health messaging that has shifted since that time?

James McLENNAN: Sure. Okay. A great deal. Now, I say that in large part on the basis of my experience starting in 2009 with Black Saturday and finishing in 2015 in South Australia. What I did over those periods was to, in many cases, lead investigation teams interviewing survivors afterwards. A very interesting phenomenon, which was only identified at the end, was that over those several years in our interviews we noticed a very interesting change – a change from an initial idea that 'We didn't think bushfires would be so bad' to 'Bushfires are bloody dangerous.' A large amount of that came from the steady repetition of this message, basically: the only safe place to be, unless you are a firefighter, when there is a bushfire is somewhere else where there is no bushfire. Now, that might seem bleeding obvious, but in fact the other thing we found was how difficult it is for people to actually envisage the possibility that they may be threatened. One of the attempts to communicate that that I have used in the past was that it would seem that in the lead-up to the 2009 fires a very common way that bushfires were conceptualised was 'Well, they happen somewhere else to someone else on television.' It is the steady repetition, I believe, of this message that 'Bushfires are dangerous. You can prepare your property, but really, the safest place to be is somewhere else.'

The CHAIR: In terms of the broader question about effective public health messaging across the community over time, it seems that short, clear and repetitive is what works in public health messaging. Would that be fair – that it is the clarity of the message that is important in circumstances like this?

James McLENNAN: Yes. I am not an expert in general health messaging, but certainly in relation to bushfires, yes, it is the short, sharp shock with a very simple message. I think it was also an unfortunate feature of the pre-2009 approaches to community bushfire safety that too much was being presented about how to prepare your house, to defend it and so on.

The CHAIR: I get that point. Thank you. I might leave my questions there. Mrs Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you both. I have two very different questions, one for each of you. Professor, I am just keen, with your background in psychology and public health – we have been hearing from residents that now, over 100 days since the event, they are still getting bottled water. Some have got a lot of trauma. We have heard a lady who talked about receiving 20 phone calls from people wanting to take their own life. You have talked today about the reduction in lives lost during the actual event itself. How important is it that people get access to counselling or support? We have heard that none is available in some areas. Others are waiting a long time or having to spend hundreds of dollars every week, we heard from one lady trying to get support – and she recognised that others do not have that support available. Can you comment?

James McLENNAN: I can, but I am reluctant because it is outside my sphere of competence. My background essentially is in safety and in preparedness. You really need somebody with a background in clinical psychology with expertise in the area. Now, having said that, I can certainly –

Gaëlle BROAD: You can make a personal comment, that is fine.

James McLENNAN: Well, I can certainly say that my experiences in interviewing people who had survived, and in a number of cases whose family members and neighbours had not, certainly attests to the severity of psychological damage that can happen and, as a consequence of that, the urgent need for immediate what my colleagues call psychological first aid – that is, the quick contact with somebody who can listen, help the individual to untangle the most pressing needs and then refer them on to the appropriate help.

Gaëlle BROAD: Yes. I can see people nodding in the background who I know are with the first-aid support that is offered to CFA volunteers and go out and be with brigades on the ground. But perhaps the community, with the experience that they have gone through, needs that similar immediate access to support.

James McLENNAN: It does. This is a very brief anecdote – bear with me. In the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires those of us who were part of the taskforce to interview people about their prior plans, their warnings, their experiences and so on often found ourselves being asked – or I guess in my case I was asked several times: ‘What do I do to help my children?’ It was painfully obvious that that kind of help just was not there. The magnitude of the 2009 fires was such that it just overwhelmed what people in the helping roles perhaps had expected. So I endorse your concern, and I am sorry I cannot provide something more concrete.

Gaëlle BROAD: That is fine. Thank you. Just while I have time, Lisa, I am keen on your insights into that wildlife response, because we have heard that there were limitations with the number of AgVic staff on the ground in different areas, including here, and I heard media reports about there being some uncertainty about access. Is this all decided once the bushfires are already underway? Are there protocols that could be worked out beforehand? What are your thoughts?

Lisa PALMA: I think a lot more needs to be done to ensure a more structured response that is planned in advance for wildlife. For example, Wildlife Victoria has 12 veterinary staff that are full-time employees and they are out every single day responding to wildlife emergencies. Only one of our veterinarians was deployed to bushfire response because he was the only one that had received the training. Again, in an emergency response and a more mature framework, one would expect ongoing recruitment, scenario testing and ongoing training so that when the fire hits there are rapid deployment decisions and the government is aware of which personnel they have got and what their availability and skill set is. I see that some of the deficiencies that I observed were a function of not having a mature framework for the involvement of skilled personnel. We engaged with a lot of local veterinarians in communities, and they were euthanising both wildlife and

agricultural animals as well. The skill sets are very specific when you are dealing with different species, and I think if we have got the skilled personnel there, we should put them to work. And a lot of our volunteers, of course, are firearms trained, because most of what we do is euthanasia.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you both for appearing today. Lisa, I might start with you. Through the submissions we have received and from feedback from different community members, there is concern that DEECA was involved in widespread euthanasia of animals and wildlife in particular that could have potentially been rescued or rehabilitated. We have also heard through those submissions that wildlife rescuers were discouraged or prohibited from attending to injured wildlife – you have highlighted some of those issues yourself. Does Wildlife Victoria consider that there could be changes made to the handling of wildlife calls that could result in fewer animals being euthanised and more rescued and rehabilitated?

Lisa PALMA: Absolutely, yes. Responding to an animal three weeks after it has been severely burnt and is still alive or responding to an animal with smoke inhalation weeks after it has been subject to that smoke inhalation obviously makes the prognosis for that animal a lot more challenging. Now, I am not a veterinarian, but a lot of my team are. It is again, I think, pointing to the lack of maturity in the wildlife response and the involvement of the resources that are already there that are responding day to day. I cannot comment on what DEECA was doing on the ground because we were not there, obviously, observing that. I do know that Victoria Police did have to undertake a lot of wildlife euthanasia. We did get feedback that it was quite distressing for a lot of police members. Again, a trained volunteer that might have been out last night euthanising a kangaroo that has been hit by a car is doing that day after day after day and knows how to and is used to doing that. Again, I cannot comment on what was happening in the field because we were not there, but I agree that there is lots of scope to better engage and involve the wildlife volunteers, rescuers and vets that are out there every day responding to our wildlife.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You mentioned in your opening statement that the Wildlife Emergency Support Network is something that may be activated. Are you aware of whether it was activated in these fires?

Lisa PALMA: That would be a question for DEECA. I think it was activated, but again, the triggers for activation are not readily understood. I think there is a lot of scope there for DEECA to improve the broader understanding and communication around what the triggers are and what is going to happen when those triggers are activated. Again, we have got only a relatively small pool of the available state resources of volunteers and vets that have been trained, and it is only those that have been trained that DEECA will call on to activate. So again, that will be a question for DEECA on what the triggers were and when they were activated. But broadly it is not well understood.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And if it is activated, what difference do you think that makes? Or do you think, again, that is part of what is not understood more broadly?

Lisa PALMA: I think it is difficult to answer and is not well understood. What I will say in my capacity as CEO: I have been a wildlife volunteer for 14 years, a rescuer and a carer. Those of us that live in our local communities know where our local wildlife live, often down to where the wombat burrow is located, and we know what species are in the environment. Utilising that local knowledge is something that I think we should be focusing on – local solutions to local issues – because a local, skilled veterinarian or a local, skilled wildlife rescuer is probably going to be very effective locally versus resources that are not familiar with the habitat and with what species are there.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both for your appearance today. Professor, I want to tackle this messaging part again. Given our travels around through the Otways up into the north of the state and then across to other parts, we have heard different variations on people evacuating and people staying and fighting the fire. It is only a 200-kilometre radius around this area; why are there so many different trains of thought as to what should happen and what people should do?

James McLENNAN: As a scientist, it is difficult for me to answer that, because we just simply do not have the evidence. One way of thinking about it is that people vary greatly in the strength of their attachment to their property. That is particularly the case of course if the property is the source of income, so for some people, in particular, there is a very strong pull to stay and defend there. Now, if I could just move on from that; we can well understand that at a human level. Certainly there have been, recently, considerable advances, changes to building structure and the like, making them less ignitable. So in many cases, particularly for able-bodied people with a strong incentive to defend the property and adequate means to do so, I will not go into all the requirements but things that are absolutely essential are a water supply that is independent of town supply – you absolutely have to have it – and a source of power that is independent of mains electricity, because they will go almost straight away.

Now, this sort of information is available on the websites of many of the agencies, although many of my colleagues would say there is not enough detail there about defence, but that is a whole other issue. I am not sure I can say too much more about it, except I will add on a mantra of mine: there has to be a bloody good reason to stay and defend your property – really. Chance happens. I am thinking of interviews which I have done, of things going quite well and then suddenly the pump stops. It just stops, and there is no other option but to leave under pretty desperate circumstances. Or things appear to be going fine and then the roof evaporative cooler is ripped out with a wind gust, and suddenly the roof cavity is open to embers, and the house goes. I could go on.

John BERGER: I suppose it is always the law of unintended consequences. But we have heard some evidence this morning about fire-ready community meetings and the importance of them, and I think we heard that only a handful attended earlier on this year, and they are expecting quite an influx for next year. How do we get that balance right?

James McLENNAN: I really do not know. As I said before, there is this pervasive notion that ‘Bushfires are unlikely to happen to me,’ because for any given household location, a bushfire in that location is a very rare event. Perhaps an experience-near way of thinking about it is the notion of priorities. All of us live in an event stream with lots and lots of tasks we have to accomplish, and many of them are immediate and important. A bushfire is something that might or might not happen to you, as it were, in the future. So things to do with bushfire safety, for the majority of householders, if they are there at all, are at a fairly low level of immediate priority in terms of taking action.

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

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you very much for both your presentations. Professor McLennan, you talked about the need for more education prior to events so that people understand. But you also talked about complacency and how, leading up to 2009, people thought bushfires were not dangerous, so they stayed to defend et cetera. I think we see complacency in a lot of things. I know and I could name two major things that have happened. In 2022, when we had the floods in Greater Shepparton, which Lisa is very aware of, three weeks beforehand the SES ran a flood preparation session, and we had 20 people turn up to it. Yet we had hundreds of people turning up when we had the community meetings when the water was actually, you know, on our doorstep. Again, in the City of Whittlesea in February the police ran a community crime and safety forum: 30 police there, three politicians and our staff, three local councillors and five members of the community. Yet had we had it three weeks later, following the death of Aidan Becker, there would have been 200 people at it. People do not tend to engage until after an event. We can even look around the crowd today. If we had run a session in December on bushfire preparedness, would we have had the large crowd that we have here today? You know, sort of after the event creates interest. I am just wondering how you think we can better engage people in education prior to events happening.

James McLENNAN: A whole raft of us across many countries wish we could answer that question. The one strategy that appears to have the most effect depends on what we call descriptive norms. Sorry for the psych speak, but it means basically we tend to do what other people who we think are like us do. So if – it is a big if – you can get some champions for bushfire safety in a community, who live that life by clearing gutters, reducing their vegetation, maintaining their property and encouraging others to do it so that you get to a critical mass of people who are behaving in a bushfire safety-wise way – not dramatically, but preparing properties, having a bushfire plan, talking about it – that tends to have an effect. That is the most powerful strategy that those of us across North America, the Mediterranean, Australia and New Zealand have been able to establish.

But you need champions, and if you do not have them, then, there. I might say that when I was actively involved in field research across four states, in each state the agency said the same thing, basically: ‘Nobody comes to meetings, because it’s not high enough in their immediate priority.’

Wendy LOVELL: Also, if we had better preparedness, there may be more opportunities for some people who are able and fit and trained to stay and defend. What we find now is, like, we had that policy before, but people became complacent. They really were not ready to stay and defend. But now we have this blanket leave policy, and every summer we burn more and more houses. So is there a happy medium to be found in the messaging?

James McLENNAN: That is not something you could expect a scientist to answer, because really it is a moral or an ethical issue. How much is a life worth? How many lost houses equal a death? See the difficulty? In terms of protection of life, the safest thing is that everybody leaves. There is no way around that. But clearly it is not that simple. There are people whose livelihoods depend on protecting their property. There are householders who have stock – again, it is their livelihood. So I cannot answer the question, but what I think is important is that our community education programs should encourage people to grapple with that – to personalise it to make the decision.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. Ms Lovell actually took my really good question that I had for the professor, so I will head to Lisa. Wildlife Recovery Australia – have you heard of that truck?

Lisa PALMA: Yes, I have.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Did they reach out to you at all during the fires?

Lisa PALMA: They reached out, yes, and I referred them to DEECA, because DEECA has the authority on who deploys to a bushfire.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Had DEECA allowed them to come here and park in a safe area, do you think that would have been a big benefit to the wildlife in the area?

Lisa PALMA: I think in wildlife response you are responding typically in field, so the type of vehicles that work well in field are four-wheel drive vehicles that are able to get through rough terrain to where the wildlife are living. Once wildlife escape, if they do, into surrounding towns, then a big semitrailer could comfortably park. Typically we saw the local vets responding. Again, DEECA would have the statistics on what volume of wildlife were presented to local vet clinics, but we did reach out to most of the local vet clinics, who had only received a handful of animals. Most of the impact is where the animals are living, which is in quite bushy, tough terrain. We are very familiar with WRA and are actually in a partnership with them on advocating for a national framework for wildlife rescue, treatment and care. I think it depends on the situation, but in a bushfire a rapid response means getting close to the animal, and often an animal that is severely burnt is quite moribund, so it is often field work with firearms or dart guns.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hi. Thank you very much. It is really interesting, the information and work that you are doing. I guess there is an interplay between keeping animals safe and saving human lives as well, so this is a question that almost goes to both of you, except it is a livestock one. On Ash Wednesday I personally knew a person who died at the last minute trying to open a gate so his stock could get out. That goes entirely to what you are saying about leaving early, planning early, opening the gates and having an orderly departure. But on getting back in afterwards, dairy farmers could not get their milk out in the Otways, people could not get in to see if their relatives or friends were alive, people could not get in to do euthanasia on their stock or feed their stock and people could not get in to address wildlife, so it was a broad issue experienced in the immediate post-fire period. Would you say that there should be a structured post-fire plan, which is put in place before a fire, so that there is an order to all of that so that it happens quickly?

Lisa PALMA: Absolutely.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Either of you really, because you are both in that space.

Lisa PALMA: I will go first there. Absolutely, yes. In an emergency where rapid response is critical – and, again, our area of subject matter expertise is wildlife – it is ending suffering, and for those animals that are able to be saved, it is getting the appropriate veterinary care and rehabilitation they need. Confusion and lack of certainty around roles and responsibilities, lack of certainty around process and lack of readiness locally always delay a response. While safety of people going onto firegrounds is very important, a pre-plan that there has been a simulation on, that might be tested annually and where there is ongoing training would, I contend, make a quite significant difference to the outcomes for wildlife.

Jacinta ERMACORA: How do we keep wildlife practitioners safe in those bushy hillsides post-fires because they are very dangerous places? That is usually why they are not allowed in immediately.

Lisa PALMA: That is right. Certainly that will be a question for DEECA as well. But again, at Wildlife Victoria, while we have got over 1500 volunteers, we do have responsibility for their safety and their wellbeing. We are not permitted, actually, to send volunteers into areas that government has deemed unsafe. But what we do want is, at the point it is declared safe, to ensure there are rapid responders there available that are working round the clock to attend to those animals. It is always a challenging trade-off. I listened to the VFF's presentation earlier, which echoes exactly what we were experiencing as well with wildlife. There must be a solution there to ensure that we are taking a risk-based approach while –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thanks. Jim?

James McLENNAN: Yes. I cannot speak for the most recent fires – that is the 2019–20 or the January fire – but for all the fires that I went to this was a major issue in the aftermath of the fire. From my colleagues, I do not think it has been solved. The primary issue is safety. Having been on fire grounds quite a bit, and not just in connection with the post-fire investigations but in a previous life of looking at bushfire firefighter safety, the area after a fire is extremely dangerous. The most obvious threat is of falling tree limbs, and quite a number of firefighters have perished over the years simply because of that. People simply cannot be allowed to rush back there. But on the other hand, the amount of distress and anxiety while being prevented from going back to your property is so great that I think it needs to be dealt with. Everyone agrees on that in the agencies, but nothing actually seems to happen there.

Part of the problem is because there is so much to do in terms of containing the fires – problems of electrical wiring, waste and so on – it really is a dangerous area. My only hope would be to express a wish that perhaps in agencies, that aspect of post-fire access be given a higher level of priority and planning, perhaps even to the extent of setting aside human resources who do not get involved immediately in the suppression activities but are held ready to put some system in place to allow people to get access. I am thinking of the two Western Australian fires that I went to very soon after the fires. In fact, before my team, the residents were bussed through the area. Now, that was a kind of semi-peri-urban area, so that was relatively easy – of course that is quite impractical in a rural area. But it is a major problem. Nobody seems to be able to solve it, and I do not know what the answer is.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you very much. Lisa, James, thanks so much for taking the time to come today and give evidence to the committee; we very much appreciate it. You will get a copy of the transcript to review in about a week. With that, the committee will take a short break and set up for the open mic session. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.