

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Harcourt – Thursday 30 April 2026

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
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The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria, coming to you today from Harcourt. We are moving into the open mic session of today's proceedings, which enables members of the community, in a slightly different format to the one we usually use – normally the committee accepts evidence from witnesses and we ask them questions and there is backwards and forwards. This is an opportunity for us to just hear from and listen to members of the community.

What I will do in just a moment is invite a number of people, probably in groups of five, up to the microphone. We have got a list of people who have preregistered for today's session, and we will go through that list. If there is opportunity at the end with available time to hear from some more, we will have the opportunity to do so. We do understand that much of what people are here to tell us are stories that some, including those who are telling them and those who are listening to them, might find distressing. If anyone at any stage needs any support or someone to talk to, we do have some counselling services available here. Members of the CFA wellbeing team are here, so there are people here who can support anyone who is participating in the proceedings or listening to them in the public gallery, should that be required. You can just make yourself known to members of the Parliament secretariat staff who can assist.

That is really all I think I want to say. We have got a lot of people who want to speak. My big request is, at best, if people can keep to a 3-minute time slot. We just want to make sure we can get through as many people as we possibly can. With that, I will just call up the first list of names. We have got someone, Jan Hull, who is joining us online, so we just thought we would do her as part of the first – there we are; thanks for turning your camera on, Jan. I will also call up five names. Just sit in any order you like in front of the five microphones here. I have got Michael Shay, Leah Rushford, Kellie Davis, Vera Hemkes – now I have got to figure out if my maths is any good – and George Milford. Welcome all.

Just a quick reminder – those who have been watching earlier will know my spiel down pat – all the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege, so anything you say in the course of these proceedings is protected by law. We will provide you with a copy of the transcript of what you say today in about a week so that you can review that.

As I say, we have got about 3 minutes. I have got a little timer here – you will hear it go off – so if you can try and keep to time as best you can so we can get through as many people. Before you begin, what we would really appreciate is if you would state your full name so the Hansard can properly identify you and make sure that your comments are attributed to you in the transcript. The best way to start – if anyone has got any questions, let me know. If you stumble, if you cry, I do not mind. We are here to hear from you. With that, we might start at the end of the table and work our way down.

Kellie DAVIS: I am Kellie Davis, Disaster Recovery Lead at Financial Counselling Victoria. Financial counsellors work with people experiencing financial hardship. First of all, Financial Counselling Victoria would like to thank the Victorian government for the expedient funding of financial counselling services in response to the January 2026 fires. Early connection with community leads to better financial outcomes. However, we must ensure that the benefit of this funding is not eroded. Financial counsellors are telling us that their work is being significantly hampered by the time and effort required to navigate inefficient systems that are meant to support community. There are a number of issues contained in our submission, but today I would like to focus on one: the clean-up process, because when clean-up is delayed, recovery is delayed, people cannot rebuild their homes and they cannot begin to rebuild their lives. In previous disasters across Victoria state government has coordinated a statewide clean-up for all impacted residents without restriction. That approach worked. It provided clarity, equity and speed.

But in response to the January 2026 fires that process appears to have changed without notice, without clear communication and without transparency. The result? Confusion and delays, and four months on, many properties are still waiting to be cleared. Even insurers, who typically work alongside government in this space, are trying to navigate a system that lacks clarity. I ask this question of the committee: has the Victorian government engaged with the Insurance Council of Australia to establish a memorandum of understanding securing a standing arrangement for a no-cost, coordinated statewide clean-up for disaster-impacted Victorians? Because what we are seeing now is a shift in response, with eligibility criteria being imposed. Where previously clean-up support was available to all, residents must now demonstrate that they are uninsured or underinsured, and this is where the system is falling down. People are being referred to financial counsellors for assistance,

but financial counsellors themselves are unable to provide clarity, as they have not been given clear definitions or eligibility guidelines. This places unnecessary burdens on already stretched services.

What is the definition of underinsured in this context? Underinsurance is not determined until an insurance claim is finalised – a process that can take months, sometimes years. Are people expected to wait that long before their eligibility for clean-up support is determined? What about those who receive their full entitlements under their insurance policy but still do not have enough to cover the cost of clean-up and rebuilding? The insurance industry deems this as underinsured; does the Victorian government? These are real barriers affecting real people right now. In the clean-up context are they considered underinsured or not?

Layered on top of this area are serious public health and safety risks. Insurers have advised that many impacted properties contain asbestos. In the absence of a coordinated statewide clean-up, people without adequate financial means feel they have no choice but to undertake their own clean-up. In the process there have been reports that people have sustained serious injury. Let us not dismiss the public health and safety and environmental issues involved. This is not a burden we should place on individuals. There are real concerns about the use of appropriate protective equipment and how dangerous and hazardous debris is being handled and disposed of, and the problem is exacerbated by the lack of recovery hubs across all affected areas. Without those hubs there is no clear pathway for services to raise concerns or feedback to government in real time.

The clean-up issue cannot wait. It cannot wait for the outcome of this inquiry. Answers to the questions raised here today need immediate response. Action is needed now because we have seen this before. After every disaster there are inquiries, there are findings, there are recommendations. But over time as public attention fades, those lessons are not always embedded in processes, procedures and legislation. Then the next disaster comes, rinse and repeat, the same issues emerge. We have to ask ourselves: is this the cycle we wish to repeat? We must not, indeed we cannot, fail Victorians when we know better. I thank the committee for its time today.

Vera HEMKES: Hi, my name is Vera Hemkes. I have submitted a longer piece to the Environment and Planning Committee, but I will now read my remarks.

Good afternoon. My name is Vera Hemkes, and I have lived in Harcourt for 15 years. From the verandah of my property you can look across to the brown and blackened corpses of trees straddling the Calder Freeway that carries people in fossil fuel guzzling vehicles to work and play. If the skeletal remains of one human being were to replace every one deadened tree, there would be hundreds of dead humans facing me across my valley. That image in and of itself should be enough, you would have thought, to shock politicians and their advisers into action, to phase out Australian fossil fuel reliance and certainly to stop greenlighting new coal, oil and gas mines in this country, but no. The catastrophic conditions that enabled the fire of 9 January 2026 that tore through Harcourt and Walmer – decimating people's lives, destroying 54 homes, 85 businesses and 400,000 acres of farmland – have not gone away. We know that the Earth's temperature now sits at 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial times. We know that this seemingly small increase in average temperature has brought a more unpredictable climate, more floods, more devastating fires, more devastating storms. We know that our political leaders do nothing fundamental about reversing our reliance on fossil fuels. Indeed our government is sitting on an Office of National Intelligence report that spells out exactly what Australians have to look forward to from increasing climatic unpredictability in the years ahead. The independent senator David Pocock has said that report should be released:

We're woefully underprepared for what's coming ... it's frankly terrifying, what our national security agencies are telling us is coming, and government is not acting.

As a Harcourt resident who witnessed the disaster at firsthand I call for a disaster recovery levy to be paid by the fossil fuel extraction industry. This industry annually takes \$385 billion in revenue whilst Harcourt has to fundraise to pick up the shattered lives of people in our community.

I have one more paragraph. I call on our Labor Premier and her government to lobby the Labor federal government for this levy, and of course I also call on our Labor federal government to show some leadership and some courage and stop greenlighting new fossil fuel projects in this country. We know that the damage is already done, but the science is also clear in telling us that putting in place policies that will limit new sources of carbon dioxide emissions and bringing our emissions down may prevent even higher increases in average global temperature to the point where humanity itself is unsustainable.

Leah RUSHFORD: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Leah Rushford, emergency management and recovery coordinator at Macedon Ranges Shire Council, and I am reading this prepared statement on behalf of the council. We are the southern neighbour of Mount Alexander shire. We were proud to support relief efforts for communities affected by the Fogartys Gap–Harcourt bushfire in January, and we acknowledge the ongoing impacts on residents, businesses and the Dja Dja Wurrung people, whose land was impacted by this fire. My purpose today is to outline our experience in implementing roadside fuel reduction treatments and to highlight the need for clearer delivery mechanisms and sustainable funding for priority roadside works on state-managed roads in the highest risk locations.

In 2022 a subcommittee of our municipal fire management planning committee reviewed the local road network to better understand how roads can reduce fire risk. That work set out three key principles for identifying and prioritising critical roads. Firstly, the protection of townships – this is about reducing the likelihood of fire running from rural areas into towns. Secondly, critical roads for access and egress – these are the routes people rely on to leave safely and for responders to get in. Thirdly and finally, critical roads for managing fire – these are the roads that help agencies defend against fire in response. Applying these principles across both council- and state-managed roads was an important step forward in reducing risk to our communities. While the plan was agreed and endorsed, implementation has been uneven. Treatments are delivered by the relevant road manager, and around 90 per cent of the identified works have so far been completed or scheduled through the joint fuel management plan. However, we have observed that treatments delivered on some state-managed arterial roads do not consistently reflect the scope and priority that was agreed. Council continues to receive community concerns about roadside fuel loads on major routes.

We recognise that funding settings and contract arrangements can constrain the department’s ability to rapidly target works on the highest risk locations. In our experience individual departmental staff engagement has consistently been constructive. However, their model limits flexibility to adjust scope within the season and to flex within the plan and priority needs. In 2025 council increased our advocacy and worked collaboratively with the department, offering to help project-manage works where feasible, share approved contractors and reduce inefficiencies where responsibility changes between road managers. This method delivered tangible results for our community. For example, along the Calder Freeway between Kyneton and Woodend increased slashing was completed, reducing fuel on steep embankments and lowering the likelihood of fuel moving from the freeway corridor into nearby residential areas. These outcomes show what is possible when agencies work flexibly towards a shared purpose, but these treatments need sustained, ongoing funding and clear delivery mechanisms, because without ongoing maintenance these fuel loads return quickly and the risk quickly rebuilds. Without stronger sustainable support for effective roadside fuel management on major roads fires will continue to escalate before they are contained, in turn making protecting lives and property harder.

To finalise, I would really like to see this inquiry give thought to recommendations of sustainable, ongoing funding for inspection, updating roadside management treatment plans and maintenance of high-risk roadside corridors, not just treatments that were developed in a different season with different conditions, and strengthening statewide risk-based guidance for roadside fuel management on all roads so treatment standards and priorities are applied consistently across Victoria. Thank you, and we appreciate the opportunity to participate in this inquiry.

Michael SHAY: Michael Shay, Marong CFA captain and also CFA volunteers group committee member. Thank you, committee and the Victorian government, for the opportunity to speak. On Friday 9 January the Marong fire brigade, in conjunction with other surrounding brigades, responded to the call at the Fogartys Gap Road fire. While our crews were driving down to the fire, our newly cascaded tanker, a 2010 3.4C heavy tanker, a Hino, could not travel over 80 kilometres an hour due to the overheating issues of the tanker. Thankfully, while on the fireground the truck operated without issue. The age and the safety of our CFA vehicles is continually being raised by volunteers – and has been in the media – with this government for the past nine years, and the health and safety of our volunteers and the public is a growing concern.

Friday the 9th reminded me of a previous day back in February 2009, Black Saturday. It was a hot or extremely hot day with an extremely hot northerly wind. I had a similar thought: ‘We will be going somewhere; it will just be a matter of where and when.’ Our summers continue to be hot, and our climate is talked about a lot, but questions continue to be asked about if we are properly prepared. On Friday the 9th, as a small business owner, I went into work to organise work for the staff and to remind them that they could knock off early due to the heat and that I would be, like a lot of other CFA volunteers across the state, waiting at our stations for a fire call.

Marong fire brigade responded well, with quite a few members turning up so that we could respond quickly if a call came through.

Listening to the CFA radio and following on the VicEmergency app informed us it was going to be a busy weekend. If we were not responded locally, we would probably be responded on a strike team somewhere, and we did get a call. Our brigade arrived on scene. They got to work extinguishing the fire here at Harcourt and assisting other brigades in saving as many properties as possible, but the crew reported that during this time radio communications were failing and there was an inability to talk to incident control. As we know, the fire moved quickly towards Harcourt and jumped across the Calder Freeway very easily, engulfing over 50 dwellings, including houses, business properties and shedding in and around Harcourt.

As a young farmer's son with a father that was involved with the local CFA at Yarrawalla, I remember clearly that quite often CFA brigades' – sorry, my father passed away a couple of years ago – fire tactics would include pulling up fires along roadsides, as our roads were regularly used as firebreaks. Currently our roadsides are not firebreaks. Vegetation management seems to be lacking. Clean-up along our roads is not happening, which is making our roads and roadsides very dangerous places to be during a fire and an extra battle for firefighters on extreme bad days attempting to pull up the fire.

Also on the day our local mobile towers and TV transmission towers on top of Mount Alexander were severely damaged due to fire and I believe also due to the lack of vegetation management. The fire also severely affected V/Line's railway infrastructure and signalling here at Harcourt, again, due to the lack of vegetation management; we found out staff were not allowed to clear vegetation even though they had requested to do so. The lack of vegetation management has been highlighted across the state during the bushfire inquiry and was also highlighted during the 2009 royal commission into the Black Saturday fires. Are we really learning from these inquiries?

Also during the fire the water mains burst here in Harcourt. I am not sure why. Water is a key element in extinguishing fires. When it is hard to source, it severely affects firefighters' ability to control and extinguish a fire. I raise the question of whether water infrastructure is being maintained and being made available across the state as a key resource.

Finally, I hope that this inquiry will continue to raise awareness about these issues, that governments will take notice and that for the health and safety of emergency services and the public these issues get addressed. Thank you.

George MILFORD: George Amos Milford, local resident. It is relevant to say for my remarks later in the piece that I am the treasurer of the Leisure Centre here, this building that we are in; a director of the Harcourt Coolstore; a trustee of the Harcourt Cemetery; treasurer of the Harcourt Valley Landcare group; and chairman of the Heritage Centre here in Harcourt. That is the burden that a person with accounting skills carries in a small community.

I was affected by the fire on 9 January in each of the above organisations except the Heritage Centre. I am so pleased to say that the fire in the creek did not get right to the museum. I lost a tenanted house, five sheds, fencing, four plastic water tanks and, contrary to what Rodney said earlier, an Indigenous scarred tree that was at least 400 years old. I cried when I saw that had burnt; I really did.

I wish to address the sixth of the terms of reference – efforts to aid in recovery.

First of all I have to commend the volunteers, who moved extremely quickly, before any municipal initiative, to set up a relief centre here in Harcourt. I attended the relief centre when it moved into the Castlemaine town hall. That was very helpful, and the specialist advice was very constructive, but in Harcourt I regularly attended the relief centre here at the Leisure Centre. They gave specialist talks on insurance, fencing and things like that, and there were support staff from the VCC, Anglicare, Red Cross and the Progress Association. Their efforts were genuinely welcome and I found them helpful.

Of even greater value have been the meals offered on Wednesdays and Fridays here. Just as soldiers rendezvous to regroup after a battle, counting the cost in lives and territory lost, so the victims of the bushfire have come together to talk about and mentally process the catastrophe that befell us all. In a dispersed residential area like the Harcourt Valley, which has about a thousand residents over a long rectangle about

4 kilometres wide and 8 kilometres long, it is important that human contact is maintained. Gathering over shared meals reinforces the wise words of the late Pope when he said, 'Happiness is bread that is not eaten alone.' I welcome the HPA initiative in continuing these weekly meals. They have been very positive to the recovery of community identity and wellbeing after what was actually a very shocking and emotionally trying experience.

I will change the subject, getting back to my treasurer role. Considerable sums of money have been raised in response to the disaster. It seems that the community is invited to speculate on the use of those funds. As a treasurer of various committees, I am authorised to say that first of all, the upgrade of this building would be a good use for a small fraction of the amount. You have brought the best, absolutely most sophisticated reproduction and amplification equipment today, but generally in here, if somebody wants to give a speech, it is lost about halfway down the building. The acoustics are poor and we need a bit of money spent on acoustics here. Other suggestions have been to put some money into a path from the children's playground to the famous rail viaduct, and that would help to clean up the creek, which was a wick into the centre of the community, so I would like to see that happen too. But was the improvement of a community's infrastructure the motivation for the generosity of the public? Perhaps not. From my limited exposure to disaster recovery efforts, it seems to me that the folk involved in every disaster have to work out their own formulae for distribution of the funds. In recent times, we had the fires at Mallacoota and the floods at Rochester. Has anyone distilled from the recovery efforts in those communities a standard template for the allocation of those relief funds? Is there a decision tree that committees can look to to see whether or not, if you pass this particular milestone, you get funds? Is it to be assumed that each household, for example, is of the same size? I am a widower living alone, fully insured. What about the single mother living in rented accommodation with children? My moral sense suggests that the latter household is the more deserving.

There is only a tenuous nexus between what people contribute in the emotionally heightened aftermath of a disaster and the real need. One will be disproportionate to the other. I am sure this is a complex matter. I see that the local HPA has been helped by a disaster recovery mentor from Strathewen and that is very good. But it seems to me that the response to a disaster in this State runs the risk of being subjective and idiosyncratic for each community, and I think perhaps there is some way we can help formulate a decision tree for the giving of relief. As an accountant and a long-time community voluntary treasurer, I worry about this sort of issue. Could you as a State government direct your agencies to provide guidance resources to prioritise need and the equitable administration of funds after a disaster? I was thrilled to bits today to hear Rachel say much the same thing at point 11 in her remarks. And as to the upgrade of this building, she said at point 19, 'Upgrade the Harcourt Leisure Centre. That would be a good spending point for the funds.' Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, George. All right, just stay there for a second, George. Can you hear me?

Jan HULL (*via videoconference*): I am here.

The CHAIR: Over to you.

Jan HULL: Beautiful. Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity. I have not lived in the area as long as George. But I am getting there, George, hopefully. I have lived in the Sutton Grange and Harcourt area for 51 years. I am currently the captain of the Sutton Grange and Myrtle Creek fire brigade and secretary and treasurer of the Harcourt Cemetery Trust.

Firstly, I want to state that the Harcourt Progress Association has been doing an extremely good job supporting the Harcourt community. Once again, is there an external body that is going to oversee the donated money? Is the donated money going to be for the complete fire footprint? How does this money get distributed? Is there a matrix or a guideline? Is the donated money for residents, businesses or community groups or all of the above? Will it be per household or per how many residents there are at that residential address? In the instance of the Harcourt Coolstore, do the businesses that store their goods there get anything? It appears that people outside of Harcourt are missing out, in my opinion. Is Mount Alexander shire going to hold any public meetings on what is available for people outside the Harcourt area? This needs to include all the affected people of the entire footprint. Once again, congratulations to the Harcourt Progress Association for really coming together and holding Harcourt together in a steady position going forward. I will beat the timer. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jan. Thanks to all of you for participating. I will now call up the next cohort of participants I have on my list: Sandra Ramsay, Bronwyn Lay, Rob Fowler, Heidi Johnson and Casey Rice.

As I said before, all evidence that we take is protected by privilege, so no action can be taken against you for what you say today, and you will be provided with a transcript of what you do say for review in about a week. With that, if you could just state your name before you continue with your contribution and as best you can keep it to the 3 minutes.

Sandra RAMSAY: My name is Sandra Ramsay. I have been a member of the CFA for eight years. I serve as a firefighter and communications officer in my brigade, and I am also the community safety coordinator for the Eppalock group of brigades. I am proud of the role I play in my community, but what I experienced on 9 January raised serious concerns for me, both as a firefighter and as someone responsible for community safety.

On that day, four tankers from our group were deployed to Shepparton. One of those was a single-cab tanker with three crew members travelling in the back in the ROPS in 40-degree heat. That in itself should give you a sense of the conditions we were working under. We arrived around 6 pm and were then moved on to Katamatite and eventually to Cobram. Over several hours we received no tasking, no briefing and no direct communication from the incident controller. We had been told we were needed, yet no-one ever made contact with us. We ended up relying on a Yarrowonga strike team leader we encountered at Katamatite, who also could not reach the incident controller. At one point, after about 45 minutes at Cobram with still no direction, we were told indirectly that we could stand down. That was a 368-kilometre round trip with no operational outcome.

But what made that situation so much harder was what was happening back home. While we were sitting there waiting for instructions that never came, we were receiving frantic calls and messages from our families. They were under ember attack from the Harcourt fires just 20 kilometres away from our own community. Then on the way home we switched our radios back to our local dispatch channel, and we could hear the crews working that fire. Listening to that and knowing that we could not help was incredibly frustrating and, honestly, quite demoralising. That experience left me questioning how decisions are made, who is making them and whether we are making the best use of the resources we have, especially when volunteers are being taken away from their own communities.

I would also like to raise concerns about communications and infrastructure, because what we experienced that day highlighted how vulnerable we are. Areas like Mia Mia and Redesdale are already known mobile black spots. When the Mount Alexander tower went down communication became extremely difficult. The new digital CFA radios rely on mobile networks when radio signal is weak or unavailable. So when we lose both radio and mobile coverage we effectively have no communication at all. That is a very real risk, and it is not theoretical. We experienced it. Mobile towers rely on mains power, and when that fails they depend on backup systems like batteries or generators, but those backups are often limited or in some cases not properly maintained. I live off grid, and to get approval for my home I had to demonstrate that we had reliable backup power. That was a requirement placed on us as individuals, so I find it difficult to understand that the same standard does not apply to critical infrastructure, especially infrastructure that communities rely on during emergencies.

Wendy LOVELL: Can we have your notes?

Sandra RAMSAY: Of course. There is a bit more, but my 3 minutes is up.

The CHAIR: You can hand the notes over if you would like.

Casey RICE: Hi. It was very interesting to hear you give your presentation – I am going to start my own timer here – because I am just here to relay the facts of my own story on 9 January as it relates to communications infrastructure. I am on North Harcourt Road.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I just want your name for the record.

Casey RICE: Casey Rice is my name. I am on North Harcourt Road. As the people who may reside alongside me know, there is no mobile reception at my property whatsoever at any time. I live with a

vulnerable senior citizen, and I work within the Dhelkaya Health homeshare program to provide her with some support and some safety – and evacuation in this case. On the day of the fire I could see the conditions; I knew that it was going to be hectic, so I got everything packed and got the car ready to go and listened to district 2 radio. I heard the call for that fire come on the radio. I went and looked down the drive and saw the plume. I thought, ‘Oh, shit. Here we go,’ and got her ready to get in the car. In the interim, while we were getting collected and getting ready to leave, the power went out, which meant that the Telstra-provided DSL, which has the ‘landline’ on it, did not work anymore because there was no power to the premises. At that point if you did have mobile reception, everybody hits that tower on Mount Alexander trying to get VicEmergency information, and it just falls over because they run their towers at near capacity, so the infrastructure is woeful. Because of that, by the time we got in the car, which was only a matter of 20 minutes or so, and drove, we drove in the wrong direction under the ember shower because we could not access information from VicEmergency and I do not get FM broadcast in that little valley.

In the interim I partnered with another friend, who is here, and got a radio licence, and we are going to try to take matters into our own hands by putting UHF radios in the hands of residents, and seemingly we might want to get some for the CFA as well. They are about \$120 from an Australian manufacturer, and we are going to take care of it ourselves. But this has been ongoing for decades according to the residents who have lived here longer than me. They have had no mobile reception there. My neighbour is a volunteer. He does not get his pager calls or his call-outs to jobs because he cannot get reception on his phone. I think that is kind of unacceptable, and we really dodged a bullet. It is lucky nobody died. But if this would have happened down the road in Castlemaine – I can tell you that nobody knew what was going on down there when we got there at all because VicEmergency fell over and the mobile tower fell over. All the traffic gets directed back towards this infrastructure that is operated at near capacity, and then it fails, and we know what happens when it fails. That is all. Thanks for hearing me.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Casey.

Heidi JOHNSON: Heidi Johnson, and I am here as a wildlife rescuer but also as someone whose family was born and raised in the Longwood area now under the Longwood fire area zone. Firstly, I would just like to echo what Casey just said about the issue with the black spots and with VicEmerge, both app and website, either being inaccessible or sometimes having incorrect information and delayed information – updates that are promised to be next updated at 5 pm, and at 10 pm there is still no update, and when an update does come, it comes with the exact information that they had at 5 pm. All they have done is change the time. But second to that, with the wildlife, we have had a lot of issues with rescuers and volunteers being unable to access or physically prevented, threatened, abused, harassed or threatened with arrest by FFMV staff and DEECA staff. We have had issues with actually armed personnel getting out of their vehicle and threatening someone with arrest for taking photos on private land where they have been invited by the landowner. These are all things that have been reported to me directly in person or by phone by the affected people. We have had issues where farmers – when an area has been declared reopen as safe to come back in to assess the properties and do the insurance inspection – have come in, and they have found livestock that are okay but in desperate need of feed and desperate need of water. They have gone back out, come back in again with a trailer load of hay, with IBCs full of water, and been blocked and not permitted in, and nothing they have said or done would allow them to bring in food for their animals. You can imagine the trauma that that does to any farmer, and we have had the same thing happening with wildlife. We have had people, property owners, who have invited wildlife rescuers and carers and vets out to try and help them with their animals, and people have answered the call and come out and they have been physically blocked. I am not just talking ‘Sorry, you can’t go in’ and then you have a discussion. We are talking people who are armed with guns getting out of their vehicle and threatening all sorts of things – that if you do not turn around and leave immediately, they are going to – one person was actually threatened with physical assault. They were also told, ‘You must not speak about this to the media. You must not speak about this to anyone.’ They are being told to shut up.

We had a renowned film documentarian – Paul Hilton. He does docs on the Discovery Channel. He was actually invited to a property somewhere out in the area of, let us say, somewhere in Murrindindi shire to take photographs as well as to help with one of the wildlife carers doing assessing. When he arrived in their driveway, he was chased up the driveway by a member of, I am not sure if it was FFMV or DEECA – I forget the details, but the same group anyway – and he was told it was illegal to take photographs in a fire zone, which is completely rubbish. And yes, he was threatened. He was pushed. He was told, ‘You must not speak about this to anybody. You must leave the area immediately. You are not permitted to be here.’ And this was on

private property where he had been invited by the landowner. It was in an area where the road was clear. The road was officially open to the public, not just to locals, so there was absolutely no justification for this.

This is just one example of many, many complaints that have been made from the volunteer community. As well – I will really quickly shove this in – on the emergency website, VicEmerge website, there were posts going up asking for people, if they saw wildlife rescuers in the fire zones, to call 000, police and state firearms because the ESTA call takers, while they might treat such calls as nuisance calls normally and deprioritise, as soon as they hear ‘firearms’ they are legally required to put it through. So this is criminalising volunteers who are just trying to bring food and water and health support.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Heidi JOHNSON: That is all.

Rob FOWLER: Hi. Good afternoon. Thanks for being here all day. It has been interesting to see your reactions and hear your questions to the various people involved. My name is Rob Fowler. I live in Harcourt. I suffered a fairly large loss during the 9 January fires, but I would like to change the tone a little bit. I would like to look a bit forward. We have heard a little bit about Mount Alexander, or Leanganook, today, and very fortunately, we started putting together a plan last year to improve the health of that landscape. We brought in a group called the Healthy Forests Foundation. Last October we did a walk over on the mountain with Rodney Carter and his kids and some ecologists and some botanists and foresters and had a good hard look at the place, and we started to formulate a plan to figure out how we could get up there and actually make that a much more healthy landscape. The fires made a big difference to that plan, so we now have a really interesting urgent situation. I wanted to just read out some of the material that the Healthy Forests Foundation has put together to create a plan to get on top of that mountain and really help the recovery of it; avoid the invasive species coming in, because they do that very quickly after a fire event; and to try and get the community involved in all of that so that there is much more ownership of the landscape and care for the landscape over a longer period of time.

We expect that the total plan of about five years of work would only cost about \$500,000. It is not very expensive to do that. We are looking for an early injection of cash to get the detailed planning done for the first 12 months, and we are hoping that we can get that documentation and collaboration started very quickly. We have been up onto the mountain quite frequently since the fire. My partner’s place backs onto the mountain, so on the Monday after the fires we were up in there having a look around. It was very dangerous, perhaps, but not if you were careful and walked around and did not do anything silly. We have gone back again and again, and my kids are exploring that place and understanding where the damage is, and how does it range from a little bit of damage to really quite scary to hellscape, which we have seen in a few of the places. At the end of the hearings today as you travel back to Melbourne for tomorrow’s hearings, I recommend you go along Reservoir Road, turn right, turn right and go across the mountain. The road takes you across past the comms towers, and you can see the sort of destruction that has gone on. But hopefully it will give you a bit of hope that it can be recovered with intervention. The landscape needs intervention; it has not had that for quite a while. We are hopeful that we can put together a group and a plan and get the community involved. There are plenty of volunteers, plenty of machines, plenty of people that want to do something, so we are hoping to put that plan together and get the endorsement from all involved – importantly, involving Dja Dja Wurrung from the start. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you all. I will call the next witnesses on the list. I have got Tony Falla, Terry Willis, Colin Iskov, Jane, whose surname does not appear on my sheet, and Kerrie Allen.

Thank you all. As you may have heard before, all the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege, so no action can be taken against you for what you say during these proceedings. You will be given a copy of the transcript following today to review. Before you begin your contribution, for the Hansard record and to assist the accuracy of the transcript, can you please state your full name. We ask that you keep your contribution to around 3 minutes. I will just run down the table in turn. I will start with you, Sir.

Tony FALLA: Thank you very much. I am Anthony George Falla, known as Tony, and I was asked to come here by Casey, who was last on. We communicated and we are colleagues. Communities facing fire, flood or storm quickly learn one lesson: when the phones fail, the internet fails and the power goes out, survival depends on the people closest to you. During the recent fires, the fire first headed towards Maldon, and Maldon

friends took shelter in our home in Castlemaine. Then the fire changed direction toward Castlemaine. But after the next wind change, it tore through Harcourt. Power and phones were unreliable or gone altogether. In those moments, communication became the most important resource. I was able to maintain radio communication with the outside world because I had battery power and radio capability. That made an enormous difference to my ability to cope. It reinforced something I had seen repeatedly through my emergency support work on events and through following other disasters such as Mallecoota and the Northern Rivers communities in the media.

Everyone who works in this space already knows the same thing; the Red Cross tells people to prepare at a household and neighbourhood level. Emergency coordinators understand it. People in remote communities live it every day – resilience begins locally. The best example I have seen is the Northern Rivers response during the Lismore floods. When official systems were overwhelmed, Sally Flannery and local volunteers created a simple open system using Facebook, a shared spreadsheet and local boat owners. More than a thousand rescues were coordinated because the community did not wait for permission; they organised themselves. When I asked her what would have happened had the phones failed, she replied nothing could have happened. The same principle applies here. At Castlemaine hospital when the power failed recently, staff did not rely on mobile phones. Every department has UHF radios. Engineers, reception and treatment area could all hear the same information at once and respond immediately. It worked because it was an open network.

This is what I believe we need more of: local communications groups or hubs using simple, resilient systems like UHF, CB radio, amateur radio, which I belong to, and local community coordination. These hubs do not require complex technology, and they do not need anyone's approval to begin. Communities can and should organise themselves. Councils can help, but resilience should not depend on waiting for permission. I am currently helping the Baringhup community, amongst many others, and the Macedon Ranges, who are advanced in this area. I have been helping them apply for grants, and the community has set itself up to be a model community we should encourage: people connected, informed and prepared to help each other first. My recommendation is simple: support and recognise community-led communication hubs as a core part of emergency planning, because in the first critical hours of a disaster, your neighbours are your first responders. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Terry WILLIS: My name is Terry Willis. I am a fire-affected resident of Harcourt North, and also the president of Harcourt Valley Landcare. Today I am speaking on behalf of my family, my wife Bron and our two boys Sonny and Kit. I would like to take this opportunity to honour the life of a tree lost on our property, a very, very old grey box scar tree. Most of its crown had been lost over time, but its hollow lens still reached for the stars high above. Our family was the last of many, many families that thought of this tree as precious, families both human and animal. And then the fire happened. The CFA came at least five times to douse water on the smouldering stump over a period of two weeks after that first terrible day. Its root system stretched deep into the earth. The burnt base of the tree's outer layer is all that remains, reaching like a blackened, twisting claw out of the charcoal in a haunting tribute to its former glory. This was a tree that had witnessed over 400 years on Dja Dja Wurrung country, a tree so wide at its base that our family of four could not hug it together, a tree so loved that every person that visited our property would be proudly shown the scar tree. That tree survived an attempted ringbarking, who knows how many years ago. It was a tree that life centred around, providing a community house in the landscape; a tree that sheltered possums, phascogales, Krefft's gliders, bees, antechinus, cockatoos and galahs from the harsh conditions outside. It was a nursery for those creatures to raise their young, a tree that nurtured and provided food, a tree that held the soil together on the slopes of Leanganook, a tree that gave life and hope. Who knows how many more years it would have lived; we do not know. This tree was one of the many habitat trees lost in the Harcourt fire. It is a tragedy; you cannot rebuild this tree. It is lost forever. No amount of nesting boxes will replace the homes it once provided. It feels like an injustice that this has happened, and fills us with deep remorse and grief. Thank you.

Colin ISKOV: Colin Iskov, long-time resident of North Harcourt, 70 years, not affected by the fires at all – lucky.

Visual presentation.

Colin ISKOV: My issue here, if you look on the screen there are photos that I have taken over the years at the Harcourt roundabout and, as you can see, a complete fire hazard.

If you would like to go to the next shot, if you can, please, if that is possible. Okay, so this is what we end up with. See the grass? It is just atrocious. Now, the only reason that this gets mowed is because it is rung in to VicRoads. There is no preventative maintenance done whatsoever on this roundabout.

That is approaching the roundabout from the Harcourt side. Now, the grass gets that high that, for sight distance, you cannot see cars coming off when they exit Castlemaine off the freeway. You cannot see a vehicle, but nothing gets done. It remains this way until you ring it in, because there is no preventative maintenance done.

And this is a firebreak. It is asphalt. It is the roundabout at Harcourt. Now, this has been an ongoing issue since the Calder Freeway was opened around about 10 or 12 years ago. I worked for VicRoads on major projects at Harcourt when we built this freeway, and somebody in their wisdom down the track has decided – if you want to go back to a couple before of the roundabout itself – you will find that somebody got funding and they have placed granite rocks in the middle of the roundabout. So I spoke to the Bendigo patrol boys the other day. The Bendigo patrol blokes are the VicRoads guys that go around and put white posts in. I said to them, ‘How do you ever maintain that? Look at it. How can you maintain that?’ He said, ‘We can’t. It’s impossible because of the granite rocks.’ So remove the granite rocks, get them off the roundabout and then they can mow it in half the time that it takes them now to try to maintain the area. This has been an ongoing issue for years and years and years and years. You have got a perfect firebreak: a road, bitumen, but in the middle of it all you have got grass 4 or 5 foot high. It just does not make sense. I have been to VicRoads in Bendigo, I have left my name, I have left my email. I do not get a response. I have rung a lady in Melbourne. You do not get a response. You talk to somebody. The last lady I spoke to in Melbourne, I said, ‘How much experience have you had in building roads?’ ‘Oh, 12 months worth.’ I said, ‘Fantastic, love, that’s great. Put me on to somebody who has been in the organisation for 20 or 30 years.’ ‘Oh no, I can’t do that.’ So somebody needs to do something about these granite rocks. They need to be removed ASAP. That is all I have got to say. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Kerrie ALLEN: I am Kerrie Allen. Thank you for the opportunity of hearing me. I am speaking on behalf of a local group, Mount Alexander Wildlife Watch. I am president of that group. Our focus is to advocate for wildlife in the region and also to be a voice for the communities that love it – and to be clear, that is most people. Specifically I am speaking on behalf of two cohorts today. One, the residents that were totally distraught, calling for help, watching and hearing, listening to injured, burning wildlife, the cries of joeys who were falling over in their front yards with burnt feet, making calls but no-one came. The second cohort is trained rescuers, including those trained in accessing firegrounds, able and willing to help, forced to stand by helpless and do nothing for weeks. To be clear, for two weeks rescuers were not able to access public land, not even private land with owner’s permission. Roads were opened, locals were allowed back in, tradies were going in and out, kids were riding their pushbikes in bare feet 100 metres down the road, but trained wildlife rescuers were not allowed in to help wildlife. Why? In fact we were advised – and I think we heard before – rescuers were threatened with arrest if they tried to enter these areas. Residents were confused, they were appalled and they were traumatised. They were calling Wildlife Victoria, trying to report injured wildlife needing help, orphaned joeys needing help. DEECA were turning up, supposedly, and police; animals were shot. Residents thought they could have been saved – clearly not.

At one point we heard there was one DEECA officer responsible for the whole area in terms of wildlife. This person was not a vet, apparently. Rescuers ultimately are concerned: why weren’t all the WESN-trained rescuers deployed from the outset? That is what they are there for. Why was there an unnecessary delay in them being able to access areas that were obviously safe? Why were they being prevented from accessing areas surrounding the fire zones, which were clearly safe? We would like it to be made public how many DEECA officers were out there looking after the wildlife. Where were they and on what dates? What were their qualifications? Were they trained in wildlife rescue? Do they know how to do pouch checks? Do they know by looking at the length of a teat whether or not there are dependent young nearby needing help? If they are euthanising wildlife, what is their firearm accuracy? These are all things that specifically trained wildlife rescuers need to be able to prove. Do DEECA officers have to prove those things? There is no doubt wildlife was left suffering and starving for weeks, and that is just unacceptable. Rescuers are still finding wildlife that

are burnt. They are unable to move and unable to eat. These animals could have been helped had rescuers been allowed in. Mount Alexander is home to over 50 species of threatened animals. Just talking macropods, seven of 16 macropod species have already gone extinct just since European settlement. It is not good enough. How can this government say that it cares about biodiversity, let alone animal welfare, when this seems to be the pattern every time there is an emergency.

I am nearly done. Economically, Tourism Research Australia says that wildlife is our number one attraction for tourists. Tourism is what small towns depend on. It is time that this government recognise the inherent value of wildlife and prioritise the protection of it. Charred landscapes and concrete zones are not conducive to being areas people want to live in, work or visit. Please, government, do better, because the time is now before there is nothing left to protect.

The CHAIR: Thank you, all. I will now call up our final cohort. I have got Luke Alexander and Lachlan Butterfield, and I called out Bronwyn Lay earlier but she did not make it up.

Kellie DAVIS: Bronwyn Lay has emailed her apologies for not being able to attend.

The CHAIR: Easy. If there is anyone else in the room who would like to participate in the open mic session, this will be the last of our cohort, and we have got a couple of slots available. If you would like to come forward, have a chat to Kieran and take a seat.

Once again, all the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege, so no action can be taken against you for what you say here today.

All evidence is being recorded, obviously, and you will be provided with a transcript following the proceedings.

For the accuracy of the Hansard record, could you please state your name before you start your contribution. If you can keep your remarks to 3 minutes, that will enable everyone to have their say. The gentleman down the end has insisted that we start down this end.

Kate ELLIOTT: I have not prepared a statement. I am just responding to what I have heard today.

The CHAIR: What is your name, just for the record?

Kate ELLIOTT: My name is Kate Elliott. I am not part of the animal rescue community, but I responded, so I am not speaking on their behalf, but I just want to share what I experienced. I was actually involved with feeding the wildlife. If you look at DEECA's official response to wildlife after a fire, they state you should not feed wildlife. Probably one of the main things that I want to stress is that if we are feeding livestock and wildlife has actually survived a fire, we should be providing them with support, because in some areas they could move on, but in other areas it took two months of feeding wildlife. A small crew of us were feeding wildlife for two months, and particularly at the really burnt-out areas of Leversha and Gaaschs roads there was no food, but there were mobs of kangaroos, and there was other wildlife but mainly mobs of kangaroos. I am just saying that needs to be addressed with DEECA.

The other thing which has also been raised is when we are talking about criminalisation of response, we had the incident controller issue a statement in their notice to the community, or community notices, that if you see wildlife rescuers or responders you are to call 000. So in my case, if I attended a property and I was feeding alpacas, I was applauded for that; if I was going to the same property and feeding wildlife at the request of the landowners, I was in risk of the police being called. Another thing, just quickly: there was a wildlife rescue organisation well established in Bendigo who was visited by the police to warn them not to attend site even after the landowners had requested that they did. So when you deny that request, that landowner has to sit with that, knowing that injured animal or animals are going to die slowly, because really what we are talking about is euthanasia a lot of the time in these cases, and that landowner knows that that is the case.

I just also want to address something with Wildlife Victoria. It was mentioned, as Lisa said, that they were not in the field. That is correct. They were not in the field for three weeks, so we are not talking about emergency response here – we are talking about no response. When they are not communicating – when DEECA is not revealing any information about their actions in the field: they would not respond to any communications – we do not know what they are doing, so we have to assume they are not doing anything. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

John WATTS: Thank you. My name is John Watts. I am the captain of the Huntly fire brigade, and I would like to address some issues that I think are affecting the fire services in Victoria currently and definitely will into the future.

Just to give a little bit of context first – I apologise; I am not a very polished public speaker, so bear with me – to where I am coming from, on Friday the 9th we had about 18 volunteers at the Huntly brigade ready to respond to whatever happened. Our first tanker was deployed to Harcourt, followed by a pumper and then myself once the pump was on the road. With pretty much zero notice, I was asked to look after the composite pumper tanker strike team that came out of Bendigo, consisting of the Eaglehawk pumper, Huntly pumper, Junortoun tanker, and Axedale tanker, which we never met up with. We got into Harcourt just as the fire was coming up over the Calder, so we were thrown into the thick of it and were unable to really get any proper briefing before being deployed, as is what happens on these days. It is not unusual – that is fine. We were sent in the direction of the fire to look after whatever assets we could. After a quick little consult with the crew leaders in my taskforce or strike team, we deemed that the primary school and the coolstore were probably priorities to look after. We headed up that way. The primary school looked very defensible – the coolstore, not so much, so we made a stand there. When the fire first came over that way, we actively defended, and we were going okay. Then the wind conditions changed, and we were in a position where we needed to protect ourselves and our appliances over the structures around us. Subsequently it was decided that we needed to pull out and we were going to lose the coolstore. We then made our way back into the town centre of Harcourt and were successful in pulling up flanking fire that was coming down along the creek line.

Look, that was the context. But I noticed that there has been some discussion about a lack of support from ACFOs and commanders on the fireground so far, and I think that that is maybe informed incorrectly. We operate under the AIIMS system of incident control, as you will be aware, in Victoria. If an ACFO or a commander that is seconded from FRV is on the fire but they are not in that AIIMS role, they are not going to change the outcome of the fire. If an ACFO is there and then goes home, it does not matter. I guess what I want to say – the main point here – is that what we need to concentrate on is the interoperability between FRV, CFA and FFMV. We need to be working together. At the moment we train with these guys, but it is because we organise it. We have got different policies and procedures, so we do not train together. This needs to be pushed from the organisation level, not because we want to work together and we make it happen on the ground. That needs to be driven from the top.

The other thing, quickly, is that at the moment it is okay because the ACFOs and the commanders that are seconded to the CFA from FRV have probably come up in the CFA career system, and they have got a lot of experience in wildfire and urban interface firefighting. That will diminish because these guys are now getting sent home from such fires because they do not have appropriate appliances to fight them. So they are on the side of the road, and then they are going home because they cannot do much with a pumper. In 10 years time when the CFA is seconding this guy because he is in an ACFO, what experience is he going to have? We have got to get the interoperability happening from the firefighter level upwards, is what I am trying to say.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much.

Luke ALEXANDER: My name is Luke Alexander. I am a leading firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria and the UFU delegate up in Mildura. I have been a professional firefighter for eight years, and prior to that I was a volunteer with the CFA. The opinions and comments I put forward today are mine and they do not represent the FRV, the CFA or the UFU.

I would just like to start by saying the work that the CFA did and FFMV and FRV firefighters on the ground was fantastic and should be appreciated. But I am here to talk today as a firefighter who was not able to attend these fires, was not able to help the community, which is the majority of FRV firefighters. The reasons that we could not help were failures of FRV leadership to invest in appropriate appliances for the Victorian environment and the failures of an executive leadership team within FRV to act on knowledge and risk that they are fully aware of and have been aware of for years.

In 2020 the *Weekly Times* actually published a draft report from the office of the deputy commissioner of FRV Gavin Freeman. Within that document it states that

Fire Rescue Victoria ... have no capacity to adequately respond to our bushfire risk within the FRV primary areas or adjoining CFA Districts in the regional locations.

It also stated that:

... it was custom and practise for professional firefighters to support their local community with appropriate vehicles for bushfire response. This service is no longer available, nor is the capacity to protect these communities from fire impacting from adjoining CFA brigade areas.

That is damning stuff, considering that is five years ago, that draft report. Gavin Freeman is now the commissioner of Fire Rescue Victoria, and he has known for over five years that this organisation is woefully unprepared to respond to the types of fires that Victoria experiences. He has taken no actions to address these shortcomings; in fact FRV's capability in bushfire response has diminished under his leadership. FRV has not ordered a single appliance that can respond to bushfires, as was being said before. We just do not have them and we are not getting them any time soon. None of the funding that is planned in the next four years is going towards appliances that are appropriate to this response. That puts us back possibly another 10 years. Sixty-five per cent of the current fleet of FRV trucks that we do have are beyond their service life, and Victoria constantly is at a crisis point of running out of spare trucks.

There are only 28 pumper tankers in FRV, so these are the ones that have some capability to respond to bushfires. Fourteen of them are past their service life. None of them are located in regional Victoria except for one. They are all located within the urban environment. The main failures in FRV leadership's planning are not in the months leading into the fire season but in years of problems that have been identified and have been ignored. As firefighters we have tried to raise these with the last two emergency services ministers – that is the Treasurer Jaclyn Symes and the current minister Vicki Ward – but both of them have ignored requests and refused to meet with FRV firefighters. There has not been an emergency services minister meet with an FRV firefighter in over five years.

I spoke to my colleagues in Bendigo at fire station 73 about their response to the Harcourt fires. It was a short conversation because they did not go. They did not have the appropriate truck to go and help that community, and so they had to sit at the station and watch the CFA volunteer strike teams drive past to help. When an FRV strike team was requested on the 9th at about 2:30 in the afternoon, it was 14 hours before that strike team arrived. Historically, there would have been a strike team in Bendigo ready to go, but there was not, because we do not have the trucks.

I would like to take this opportunity to actually offer an apology to the communities affected by the 2026 summer fires, the volunteers of the CFA and all Victorians. FRV firefighters are aware that due to a lack of appliances available to respond, the FRV response to these fires was woefully inadequate, nearly non-existent, and it has let our communities down, and for that we are sorry. We know that you will not receive this apology or accountability that you deserve from the leadership of Fire Rescue Victoria or FRV as an organisation. Despite the factors that have led to this failure in FRV's response being out of our control, firefighters from across FRV are embarrassed by what was delivered by this organisation, and we will be undertaking every effort to hold the leadership of this organisation accountable so that we are not left in this same position again. Thank you.

Lachlan BUTTERFIELD: Thank you. My name is Lachlan Butterfield, and I am a career firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria. I am here in my own capacity to address the issues I witnessed during the 2026 bushfires, and I previously spoke at the Colac open mic session as well. Sorry.

I joined CFA as a volunteer in 2005 after I witnessed a house fire in my street as a teenager. I watched a family standing there, watching their possessions burn to the ground while they were in their pyjamas. I felt completely helpless, and I made a decision then: I would never stand by again without the ability to help. When I signed up as a firefighter I knew there were risks. I knew I would be exposed to carcinogens. I knew I might not make it home one day because of the fire. But what I never expected was the equipment that we rely on would fail me when we needed it the most.

During the 2026 bushfires, especially at Harcourt, I saw these failures firsthand. I was on duty as a ground observer, sent to capture real-time information if a fire broke out. Hours before the Harcourt fire started, my crew attended the Epsom incident control centre in Bendigo. A power outage occurred, and the backup generator failed at that incident control centre. It was in complete darkness. There were no lights. There was no computer. There was no information available for anyone. The Harcourt fire then started. Early in the fire we

located a person that appeared to be trying to escape the fire. We attempted to call that information in, but the phone supplied to us was so old it would play a prerecorded message telling us that the phone was no longer able to work. After about 30 seconds it would then start working, and we could then eventually make a phone call. Later that day the mobile phone tower at Mount Alexander was impacted by the fire, and that mobile phone was effectively now useless to us.

At the Colac open mic I explained the delays in us uploading critical real-time information that we were capturing on the fireground. Stuff we would normally be sharing instantly was now taking up to two days to get sent through because of failures within the IT system. And on the fireground here and across Victoria we saw fire trucks failing. I heard on the radio at Harcourt a fire truck had their brakes fail while they were trying to attack the fire here at Harcourt. In my 21 years of service I have never seen this many failures in such a short amount of time. This changes how firefighters now think. The biggest fear used to be the fire itself; now it is 'Will the equipment fail me? Will the radio work when I need to give a mayday message? Will the firefighting pump keep working when I am facing extreme fire conditions?'

As an example, equipment past its service life needs to be replaced. From the Fire Rescue Victoria 2025 annual report, in the 2022–23 financial year Fire Rescue Victoria recorded 3406 failure reports. Last year that more than doubled to 7289. In that same amount of time the amount of out-of-date fire trucks has doubled from 63 to 126. That increase of failures is not a coincidence. Fire trucks have a defined service life of 15 years, set by experts. You will hear people say, and in the government's own submission to the bushfire inquiry, that 'Just because a fire truck has a birthday, it doesn't simply expire,' but they are wrong. These fire trucks work hard every day, and as they get to the end of their service life, the failures start to skyrocket. The equipment we use have service lives. The rescue rope we use has a service life. My helmet has a service life. One day I can start using it; the next day, once it reaches that service life, we take it out of service and it gets replaced instantly. Why? Because experts have determined that beyond that point the risk is too great. Fire trucks are no different. People can have their opinions, but the experts are right, and the fault report data does not lie.

I have been to firefighters' funerals from work-related deaths. They are harrowing experiences. Families lose a loved one, children lose a parent, firefighters lose their best mate. I am telling you now that if we continue delaying replacing fire trucks, we will see a firefighter killed by the equipment that has been supplied to them. This will not be a tragic accident, this will be a preventable death. This inquiry has the responsibility to ensure that does not happen. The solution is clear: we need immediate investment to replace all fire trucks that are beyond their service life. We also need a rolling replacement program so we do not end up here again and these fire trucks replaced when they are actually due. Both Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria have a strict vehicle replacement program that is followed. This does not happen with FRV, with CFA or with FFMV. This is about firefighter safety. This is about Victorians' safety. Ultimately this is about whether preventable deaths are allowed to occur any longer. Twenty-one years ago I stood on a street watching a family lose everything. Right now Victorian firefighters are in that same position, helplessly watching, but now because our equipment is failing us. I ask the inquiry to put firefighters' safety first, put Victorians' safety first and ensure that no firefighter is ever forced to stand by again or end up at a funeral because their equipment, which they trusted, has failed them. Thank you.

Michael HENRY: Hello. Wow. Following that is going to be hard. Michael Henry from Henry of Harcourt. I lost my house and I lost a very large portion of my business to the bushfires. I have been an on-the-ground volunteer since day one, working both here at the leisure centre and at the distribution centre. None of my comments have been prepared. This is all in response to stuff that I have heard. The first part of my statement I would like to actually make to the community. The community is apparently very angry at the HPA, particularly around all the funds that we have received as donations. To put it into context, I was the progenitor of HPA. I seeded the first group that became the HPA. Everybody talks to me. I am receiving a lot of information that the community is upset. To the community: the HPA is working on this. They are working through a lot of information that has to be gathered. We are trying to find out who all the impacted victims are.

The part of this that I need to address to the parliamentary inquiry is that the council already has done this information. The secondary impact assessment has been done. All of that information is there. When we have requested access to that information, it has been denied to us on privacy grounds, meaning that the HPA has to redo all the work with limited volunteers, who are exhausted and at the end of their rope. It takes excessive amounts of time to redo the work that has already been done and is available for the council, when council is sitting there and telling us, 'Community-led relief is the best way to do it. You guys do the work.' Yet when it

comes time to distributing the funds fairly and equitably, we do not have access to that information. We have to go out, we have to collect the information again, we have to then run our assessment and then check with council if that is okay to use and if that meets their requirements and then hand the money out. So of course it is taking a long time. What needs to happen, particularly when governments or local governments like council put a community group in charge of the relief effort and leading the recovery, is they need to be freed from their privacy acts to give information to that group that they authorised to do the work so they can actually do the work and make sure people get the funds that they need to live. That is basically it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you all. And thanks, everyone, for participating in the hearings today. I can genuinely say on behalf of the committee we have been moved by many of the contributions that we have received today. It has been both informative and educative and will help us greatly in the preparation of the report that we prepare for the Parliament, which is due to be tabled by the end of July. With that, and with our thanks for your contributions and hosting us here today, I declare today's hearing closed.

Committee adjourned.