

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 6 May 2026

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

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

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Cr Peter Tolsher, Mayor,

Juliana Phelps, Chief Executive Officer, and

Mark Florence, Director, Community and Planning, Towong Shire Council.

The CHAIR: I declare open today's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria, a public hearing of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of Parliament looking into the 2026 summer fires in Victoria. The committee has been receiving submissions and evidence from witnesses and will be providing a report to the Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government.

For those who are on mike, if you could just make sure background noise is minimised and mobile phones are switched to silent.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on here today. I am coming to you from the lands of the Wurundjeri people but I pay my respects to all the traditional owners of all the lands that people are joining us from today and pay my respects to elders, past and present.

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

All the evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review following the hearings, and those transcripts will ultimately be made public and published on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I normally go down the table, but it is hard to do that, for people to introduce themselves. So I am going to see if people remember the order in which they last introduced themselves. Rikkie, you can go first, and then we will go from there. We will see how we go.

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

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

Melina BATH: Good afternoon. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Southern Metro

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. For each of our witnesses, for the Hansard record, if you could please state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of here today.

Peter TOLSHER: My name is Peter Tolsher, Mayor of Towong shire.

Juliana PHELPS: My name is Juliana Phelps. I am the CEO at Towong Shire Council.

Mark FLORENCE: I am Mark Florence. I am the Director of Community and Planning at Towong shire.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much for joining us today. We really appreciate you taking the time to give evidence to the committee. It is a relatively straightforward procedure. We will invite you to make an opening

statement; then we will go to questions. I am not sure who from the shire is going to kick us off, but over to you. Peter.

Peter TOLSHER: I am Peter Tolsher, Mayor of Towong shire. On behalf of Towong shire I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to present the impacts and ongoing challenges emanating from the January 2026 fire event. Council's submission to the inquiry is long and highlights the many issues and challenges associated with the response, relief and recovery components, on which all of us here today are happy to respond to any questions from the committee.

There are a number of key points I wish to make today, many of which are covered in the council's submission. I reiterate those to reinforce to the committee the importance of the issues to the Towong community. The main focus points are: council knows that the likelihood of regular bushfire events and other emergencies across the Towong shire and Upper Murray regions is very high, and the need for strong government and agency proactive strategies is crucial.

The cumulative effects are not confined to fire events. Towong shire experienced drought before the 2019–20 fires, followed by COVID-19 across 2021–22, floods in late 2022, prolonged drought conditions in 2023–25 and then the January 2026 fire event. The trauma experienced from all these events is magnified in small, rural and remote communities that are often isolated and limited to service supports. History shows that major fire events generally occur in remote and rural locations and within small local government municipalities. Small councils like Towong find it very challenging to resource relief and recovery requirements. Larger councils have greater access to resources, including staffing and services, but rarely are directly impacted by the emergency event. Council is highly critical of the management of federal support in funding arrangements and interpretations of program guidelines. The Commonwealth disaster relief funding assessment program, administered by the National Emergency Management Agency, has been proven to be inconsistent, confusing in price and ignorant to the local impact.

Tallangatta Valley and Burrowye are two small communities where principal places of residence were not lost but significant farm assets were lost to the fire. NEMA has not approved any household in either community to receive DRFA financial grant support despite clear evidence from multiple fire agencies of the impact of the fire. It is a ludicrous situation. The town and district of Walwa is eligible for financial support by virtue of the naming of the fire event, when in reality the fire ignited 30 kilometres away from the Walwa township and no principal places of residence or other assets were lost in the fire. The poor processes and bureaucratic inconsistencies require urgent review and change. The impacts on community members brought about by ignorance or bloody-minded unwillingness to consider clear evidence and on-the-ground data are worse than disappointing. It is very disrespectful.

To make a poor situation even worse, Burrowye was hit by a supercell storm event in the weeks after the fire that saw 260 mil of rain fall in less than 4 hours. The storm caused devastating losses of newly erected farm fences, the death of many livestock, significant loss of prime agricultural soil, the contamination of creeks and rivers and \$14 million worth of damage to council assets, which includes roads and bridges.

Item 4: early access by council teams to impacted property owners needs to be addressed. In the recent fire event it was nearly four weeks before council relief and recovery staff could access impacted residents because the fireground was still under control of the ICC. Many residents have expressed frustrations that council has been absent in supporting them in a manner that lessens the impact on the residents and their families. The current protocol should be reviewed and adjusted as part of the ICC management procedures.

The Corryong health service has made its own submission to this inquiry, and council urges the committee to consider that report carefully. The Corryong health service is an important facility that serves the Upper Murray and is home to many elderly and frail residents. Acting on the orders to evacuate, Corryong Health encountered bureaucratic and logistical challenges that proved very difficult to manage. Council wishes to highlight the Corryong health service submission and the recommendations it lists.

The January 2026 fires will have significant ongoing impacts on the Towong shire community, affecting safety, wellbeing, access and social connection. Many residents experienced prolonged isolation due to road closures, disruption of essential services, evacuation and uncertainty regarding property and livelihood impacts. The

scale and duration of the emergency, combined with the early stage of the fire season, contributed to a heightened anxiety and fatigue across the community.

The economic impacts are expected to have medium- to long-term consequences for Towong's agricultural base and the local economy, including tourism. While only a small number of businesses were directly impacted by the fire, there was a widespread loss of trading across the entire Towong shire due to the fire threat and major access limitations, and visitations to the regions were substantially reduced. Recovery will depend on timely restoration of access, availability of labour and contractors, insurance outcomes, sustained support for affected businesses and primary producers and investment into major tourism infrastructure such as the High Country rail trail, including the replacement of nine historically significant timber trestle bridges, the loss of which makes the rail trail unable to be traversed. The Murray Valley Highway is the most prominent road through the Towong shire. In the emergency context the highway is a strategic asset that needs to be protected and available at all times. The highway is also a very strong candidate as a strategic firebreak or containment line, and the appropriate clearances and barriers, obstacles, vegetation and infrastructure on either side of the Murray Valley Highway should be considered.

A positive development since the 2019–20 fire event, strongly evidenced during the January 2026 fires, was the north-east emergency management collaboration between Towong, Alpine and Indigo shires. This collaboration details agreed responsibilities for each shire and highlights the capacity of each council to support other collaboration members in any event with specifically trained staff. During the January 2026 fires Towong shire benefited from the seamless support of Alpine and Indigo staff as emergency management liaison officers at the incident control centre and a regular presence at Towong council offices to support data collection and collation, initial contact with impacted residents and other specified tasks. The collaboration was impressive and is a model which could be employed across other local government areas.

Thanks again for your time. We would now be pleased to respond to any questions that the committee members may have. I tried to limit it to 5 minutes; I went for about 7.

The CHAIR: All fine. We understand there is a lot to get through, and we just appreciate you taking the time. I want to just go to this issue about the parts of the shire that have been deemed eligible and ineligible for disaster relief funding. Can you talk a little bit more about what you have been told as the reasons for some areas being declared and others not, and who you have been dealing with and what they have said in response?

Mark FLORENCE: Yes. Thank you, Mr Chair. Our contact with NEMA resulted in their interpretation that the scheme provided for residents that had lost principal places of residence. That is despite their own guidelines referencing the loss of assets as a direct result of the fire.

The CHAIR: Sorry, just to clarify, if I can. They were saying that in order to be eligible you would need to have the loss of your principal place of residence, which some places did not but there were other asset losses, is that right?

Mark FLORENCE: That is correct. So in one part of their guideline they talk about principal place of residence and then in another part of their guideline it talks about eligibility based on the loss of other assets impacted by the fire.

Peter TOLSHER: So some people lost all their sheds, all their farmland, all their fences and half their stock, but they actually managed to save their home, and they were not eligible.

The CHAIR: And what has been the response from NEMA to your representations arguing that that is an incorrect application of their guidelines?

Mark FLORENCE: We had our local federal member Dr Helen Haines represent on our behalf directly to the minister for emergency services.

The CHAIR: That is the federal minister.

Mark FLORENCE: The federal minister, sorry. Yes. And the response back to Dr Haines was that whilst they were sympathetic to the experiences of those particular communities, their interpretation of the program was that they were not eligible.

The CHAIR: And there is no application of discretion or they are not willing to exercise it is quite clear?

Mark FLORENCE: No, that has been the end of it.

The CHAIR: Right.

Peter TOLSHER: The really sad part is a place like Walwa, which was 30 k's from the fire front, is eligible. They were not affected by the fire or anything.

The CHAIR: What is the justification for that?

Peter TOLSHER: It was called the Walwa fire.

The CHAIR: Can we rename the fire?

Peter TOLSHER: Yes. If we had named it something different, maybe the 'Burrowye fire', they would have been eligible.

Mark FLORENCE: The 'Upper Murray fire' or something like that. But that is a common practice with the naming of fires. It is where the ignition is closest to.

Juliana PHELPS: 'Thologolong' was too hard to say instead of 'Walwa'.

Mark FLORENCE: Yes, that is right.

The CHAIR: What has been the feedback on the impact it is had on residents in those communities?

Mark FLORENCE: It is quite devastating. The example that I will use is one elderly couple, longstanding farming community members, well into their 80s – experienced the 2019–20 fires as well. Most of their land was burnt, fences destroyed, and they were the ones that suffered the 260 mm of rain straight after it. Their words to our recovery team were quite depressing and sad, that they felt what was the point of continuing on. That is one story, but it is replicated across Tallangatta Valley and other parts of Burrowye as well.

The CHAIR: All right. Ms Lovell, did you want to ask some questions?

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Hi, everyone. Good to see you all. I was going to ask about the compounding impact of the event. You had 2019–20 and now you have had 2026, guys, and as we all know, we have not fully recovered from 2019–20. What is the compounding impact from that not only on residents but also on you as a local government area? We are a large shire in landmass area, but a small shire in revenue base.

Juliana PHELPS: I might start. Nice to see you, Wendy. I guess for me, and this is an on-the-ground story, it was pretty evident right from the get go that even speaking to former staff members who now might be engaged with the state government it was not far from the surface, the trauma that they had experienced in the 2019–20 fire. We were much better positioned in terms of the assistance that we had from our neighbouring councils through the collaborative efforts post 2019–20. But I guess from my perspective the emotions and that trauma are still there for many of our staff who went through the 2019–20 fires, but even more so for our community members. I think, just the uncertainty, the length of the event, the emergency evacuations.

A number of our community members have a low socio-economic position. I heard it recently said that evacuation is a privilege. There are people within our communities who probably did not even have a full tank of petrol to get them to the evacuation centre in Wodonga and made choices around staying. They had had the experience of the 2019–20 fires as well, and understood what was involved with that and the length of time before they might be able to get back to their homes. When you are in that kind of position, the right decisions perhaps are not made because of people's economic standing. There are those issues.

There is still a lot of angst in our community in terms of the state government and the decisions being made by the incident controller in terms of whether people should stay or go, whether the relief centre in Corryong was open or not open, whether the health service in Corryong was opened or not, whether Ambulance Vic were available to provide services to the community. They had experienced similar situations in 2019–20, and then

going through all of that again I think has just compounded that trauma that I do not believe was resolved adequately after 2019–20 because we had COVID in 2020, which meant that our communities were not able to come together. We were in a situation where they could not play football and netball, they could not have gatherings. We had to cancel our recovery exercises and events because of COVID. So there was not that opportunity to bring the community together and share their experiences and support each other, and that went on for many, many, many months. I think that is all part of why this time through the trauma is even greater for our communities. I hope I have explained that well enough.

Mark FLORENCE: To add to that, we have conducted a number of community events since the January fires. The numbers at those have been very large. We are talking about very small communities, but we are probably having 70 or 80 per cent of those communities attending. Some of the statements of individuals have been similar to ‘I thought I was over 19 and 20, but the events of January showed me that I am not.’ When some of our staff have met one-on-one with couples, usually the male disappears when the support workers attend, and they learn from the wife or the partner the real impacts that have taken place within their family. It is really sad, and it has just compounded, as we have said, across the six- to 10-year period.

Wendy LOVELL: Juliana, you are no stranger to fire events. We have had 2002, 2006. I think you had 2009, 2019–20 and this year again. They are just regular events up there as well as other events like the storm event that happened shortly after the fires this year. One of the things that I got contacted about by a couple of your residents – and also I had people approaching me at the community meeting in Seymour on 8 January – was that your people were being evacuated from 6 January, in the Longwood fire ground people were being evacuated from 7 January, and yet the \$1000 support grants that are supposed to provide for accommodation, toiletries, clothing et cetera were not announced until 9 January. Do you think there should be a minimal support package that is announced immediately when there is a major event where people are being evacuated that includes things like what the \$1000 support grant does? And what other things? Perhaps money for you to set up your relief centres and things like that. It would be a minimal package. Of course more would need to be announced once the extent of the crisis is fully understood.

Juliana PHELPS: I think in terms of our residents, some perhaps struggle a little more than others in terms of their economic circumstances. If that was known before any event happened anywhere in the state, I think that would give people reassurance that they could get in their car and get to the evacuation centre and know that there would be some financial support for them. The other thing is when is it paid. They need to have access to that straightaway, and I am serious when I say some people could not afford to put the fuel in the car to get to the Wodonga evacuation centre some kilometres away. Even the thought of leaving their home and perhaps losing power and the fridge full of food going off is real for a lot of people in our community. I think if there is greater certainty around what is available to assist them and there is a very quick turnaround time in securing that assistance, then that would help.

From a council perspective, setting up release centres – we are fine with being able to do that in the moment and we work out the finances later. The most important thing is how we serve our communities. Financial sustainability is always a challenge for a small council like Towong, but I think we can cover those costs in the early stages of the event and sort that out at a later stage. But I think it is good to clarify before we ever get hit with another event in terms of what support would be available for our residents particularly.

Wendy LOVELL: People were making choices about whether they could afford to leave if they were forced to evacuate.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Wendy. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today and for the work that you have done supporting your communities through this time. In your submission you talk about – this follows on a little bit from Ms Lovell’s question about the cumulative impact of the fire events – the storm events that happened soon after the fires and about the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related events that you are part of and Victoria is experiencing. You talk about some funding that was provided to have an emergency response officer or someone in a role like that. It is not even enough to really pay for that role. What sorts of things would you like to see from a council perspective that could help you better plan for, prepare and adapt to what we are seeing in terms of climate-related events?

Mark FLORENCE: It is a good question. Whilst the \$60,000 is welcome, as I have said in the submission, it does not go far enough because we are dipping into our own money to top that up. If we had a substantial grant that secured that strong strategic position, it would then free council to add to that resource. So we would have one focus on the strategic work with the MEMPCs and agencies and all of that, and then our other resource could be used for that community education, the community emergency plans, and embedding those into how communities respond. I think your point is that this is going to be a frequent occurrence, whether it is floods, pestilence, fire, whatever, and we need to be really locked in with our communities about how we respond to that and be quite resilient.

Just to add to that, I think a really important point for the committee to consider is how some of the funding from governments can be used. We are challenged at the moment. Yes, we very much welcome the \$1.3 million that we have received for the CRO and hub funding and also the 750K that came very quickly after the event. But they are very limited, particularly the CRO and hub to the human resource or some of the physical elements of standing a recovery hub up. What the frustration for us is that for all communities we should be looking at legacy resilience opportunities. Sometimes that involves infrastructure or assets where it is quite clear, under particularly the NEMA requirements, that the money cannot be used for those legacy resilience opportunities. If we had more resource in the arms and legs component, we could really build the strengths in that resilience.

Sarah MANSFIELD: What sorts of things would you like to be able to do in terms of resilience?

Mark FLORENCE: If we go to a small community called Koetong, it was subject to probably the hottest part of the fire, if I can put it like that. It had the highest percentage of homes lost. It had no community space either before the emergency or after the emergency – no community space where the community can come together. The pub that was there has gone out of business, and it was a quasi-community centre. Now they do not have a community centre to come and gather – to meet, to form relationships, to work on community plans – and they had nowhere to go immediately after.

One of the benefits of 2019–20, when we received lots of money, was that with the recovery funding council were able to install a program called Resilient Buildings, where over 25 community halls were upgraded with a whole range of different facilities and infrastructure to enable communities to come together, even in non-emergency times to come and have events and strengthen the relationships and do their community plans and whatever. Koetong is unable to have that at the moment. We have been told directly that, no, the funding cannot be used for that. But we are going to push really hard to get an exception to that, because it makes no sense to us that all this money to be spent on recovery and resilience cannot be used for things that are going to provide resilience long term.

Peter TOLSHER: The other hub up in that area was the DEECA at Shelley Forest Camp. It got totally burnt out. That was another place further up the road that was utilised by the community at times. It is now no longer there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We need to go to Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for your appearance today. Peter, I might direct this question to you about preparedness. I understand that you are surrounded by plantations and state forests and things of that nature. How did the residents up there go about ensuring that they had got their right prepared plans in place in the event that has just happened?

Peter TOLSHER: As part of that process from 2019–20 we have actually done some work with the community – what is the name of that group from inside council? – to get together with the community to make fire preparedness plans that are individual for every person. That probably did help a hell of a lot. It gave them an insight into what is defensible, what is not defensible, what to do, that side of it. But we could probably even go further than that again. Mark?

Mark FLORENCE: Yes. Through you, Mr Chair, since 2019–20 I think up to about 21 community plans now, emergency plans, have been established and signed off by the community. Now, plans are plans. When the event happens, hopefully people follow those plans. But certainly they were far more prepared this time than last time.

John BERGER: And Peter, you spoke of a model earlier on. Can you just expand a little bit on what that model might look like? Because it might be able to be applied across all councils if this is what you are –

Peter TOLSHER: The collaboration with Alpine, Indigo and us, which Juliana led and Mark led, was to get people with the experience in each council, and the knowledge, to actually come together in an event and go and support each other. So if there was a fire in Towong, they would come and give our guys a hand when their time was up, like after their 10-hour period or 8-hour break, and we could interchange people from outside, from other councils. And the same for us: if they had a fire over there, we have got people here that could go and support them. We found in the 2019–20 fires that people would go for 10 days straight without much of a break, and they would burn themselves out. This was a four-week event. It was not over in five days, seven days, 10 days, 12 days, 20 days. It was a long event, so we needed to support each other as an organisation here. The Indigo and Alpine shires supported us greatly, and even Wodonga set up a centre in there for the evacuation of people. We were so grateful, because we have 40 people that work in the office. You take 10 or 12 out to do shifts in a recovery centre or emergency centre and that takes a lot of our workforce that could be doing other things.

John BERGER: And Juliana, were there sufficient people around to help at the hub in terms of helping the community members out?

Juliana PHELPS: There were, to a point. I might just go back to your initial question. Local government is very different to a state government agency like DEECA where people are used to emergencies and working on shift and working around the clock 24/7. Our learning from 2019–20 was that despite the great intentions of all of our neighbours, who at a point were also being threatened by a fire, we were not used to working around the clock. We had people working extraordinary hours, and we thought, ‘We need to do this better.’ That is where the collaboration came about: that we have like-minded people in each council and how might we work together. We were able to then put officers from the other councils into the ICC and have that continuity of the communication of information through our organisation, which was, I think, the greatest benefit.

In terms of the relief centres, we did open initially the Tallangatta and the Corryong relief centres. One of the challenges you have as local government as you open the relief centre is we are at the direction of the ICC. Once there is an emergency of that size the CEO of the council and the council are no longer in control of their municipality. We do what we are told to by the incident controller, and when they are telling us that we need to shut the relief centre and that we should be evacuating from the town, I cannot ask my staff to stay in town. That is part of the challenge that we have, that we then do not have anyone that we could rightfully ask to stay. We did have enough people – I think with our experience six years ago, we had worked that out pretty well. The saving grace for us was Wodonga opening the relief centre. Tallangatta is 25 minutes from Wodonga; Corryong is an hour and a half. Fantastic they could stand that up in a very short space of time. The biggest challenge for us is the Murray Valley Highway and the Murray River Road are the two key routes to get people from Corryong to Wodonga, and you can imagine at night on a heavily treed road, with a road that is not in terribly great condition either, to get people to that location was problematic. They would have been better placed to go across the border into New South Wales, to have a venue there where they could seek relief. I think that is in our submission anyway.

Mark FLORENCE: And 20 minutes away.

Juliana PHELPS: I hope that answered your question about resourcing.

John BERGER: It does. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Peter TOLSHER: She explains it a lot better than me. I was four months into the tenure as mayor when all this happened.

Melina BATH: A baptism, unfortunately, of fire, Peter, literally. Thank you very much for being here and sharing your very on-the-ground knowledge. We appreciate it. Your submission speaks, and you spoke earlier, on the impact on council roads; on bridges, both footbridges and historic trestle bridges; on amenity; on the rail trail and community assets, even down to the toilets. These are not only part of your identity, they are also part of your economy and your driver for tourism. I hasten to say, what are some of the learnings that you took from

the 2019–20 fires about how these need to be restored, and what flexibility do you need? What do you need to tell state government in relation to renewal of these assets?

Juliana PHELPS: The first thing I would be saying is that we cannot do it alone, and I always use the example that a 1 per cent rate increase across the whole of Towong shire will yield an extra \$100,000. I think that brings it into stark reality for a small council like us. We cannot do it alone in terms of the infrastructure. In terms of our businesses, they tend to make a lot of money over the Christmas–New Year period, and some into the Easter period. We had a situation where we were having to evacuate a town. We are the committee of management for the caravan park up near Corryong; it had to be evacuated. It is the busiest time generally of the year, when they are making enough to see them through the rest of the year. The caravan park example is not unique. Many, many businesses had no trade or very little trade during that time, and there is nothing there to support them in terms of some targeted business support, be that a small grant or whatever that might be. I think that would make all the difference for our businesses. I might throw to you, Mark. You have probably got some more that you would like to add.

Mark FLORENCE: Yes, and I think Juliana is right about the businesses. There needs to be some direct support for them to be able to get back on their feet or to feel like they are being supported. I think from the infrastructure point of view, the rail trail – we were just starting to get some really good traction in terms of our plans and our strategies around that and creating small hubs and hero installations to really go to the next level, and the rug has been pulled from under our feet, literally with the nine trestle bridges, one, because they were iconic and that was an attraction in its own right. But now that market that we were starting to get some real benefit into is now lost. Other places like the Bullers and the Falls Creeks and Beechworths and Indigos and that will probably benefit, and we would just like to be able to get at least part of it back up and going to get our share of that market, because that then has a flow-on.

Melina BATH: If I could drill down just one more layer on that, we are making recommendations to government, are there a couple of specific things that you need that would help unlock some of that? I mean, it is lost infrastructure, it needs to be replaced – or reassessed at the very least. What do you need from state government, in a practical sense, in an achievable sense?

Mark FLORENCE: We have made a submission to Regional Development Victoria, on their request, and we have mapped out a staged approach for the resurrection of the trail. I think if you went from right at the very start to right at the very end, it is something like \$30 million, but we have staged it so that there are key parts that could be done. I would recommend that the committee has access to that.

Melina BATH: Could you provide that?

Mark FLORENCE: Sure.

Melina BATH: Could you maybe do it as a supplementary submission, because that would be helpful for us to understand what your practical asks are.

Mark FLORENCE: Yes,

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. I am just conscious of time for, so I might go to – oh, we have lost Rikkie-Lee. All right, I might go to Ms Broad and then we will come back.

Gaelle BROAD: Sure. Thank you very much for your input. We really appreciate it. I guess one of the terms of reference talks about the resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after the fires. Your submission does address that slightly. You mentioned that there are performance issues there and with the reliability, if you could tell us the experience that people had during the bushfires.

Mark FLORENCE: Thank you. Yes, it is an ongoing challenge for the small communities. Where the fire actually started at Thologolong – and it has become famous in recent times for another matter – was an area where obviously the response agencies went to very quickly, but it is right in the middle of the biggest black hole on that side of the shire. They had challenges with their communications, and that expanded to

communities up along the Murray River Road. Probably our highest risk area for bushfires is the Mitta Valley, with communities like Eskdale, Mitta Mitta and Dartmouth. Their normal practice, for example, is that if they have the Mitta muster, their famous event there, the pub has to close down because there is no access to EFTPOS machines, because the communications towers and whatever are unable to cope with the extra demand. That is a lifeblood for those communities, from an economic point of view. But if you put that into an emergency situation, when people are trying to get messages or updates about the state of affairs or to communicate with family and all of those different things, that is intolerable. They are two cases where critical infrastructure like communications towers and upgrades are crucial. We are advocating for that outside of the emergency space as well.

I think with the other infrastructure, water is a critical one. As we said in the submission, at Corryong we had that situation where people evacuated and did the right thing, but then they left their sprinklers on. Then when they came back, there were water challenges in terms of supply and whatever. There needs to be a complete audit of these high-risk areas – and we are clearly demonstrating that Towong is a high-risk area for emergencies – to be able to build the resilience of those critical infrastructures, because we just cannot do without them in these circumstances.

Peter TOLSHER: Power was a big issue. The line follows the Murray Valley Highway all the way along, and when the fire comes through and takes that down, it is 10 or 15 days before they can get power back up, because they have got to get safe access. Then they have got to change out poles from wood to concrete. The reality is that if the Murray Valley Highway could be considered as a strategic firebreak and they could actually take the vegetation back and put concrete poles in, you would not lose power in Corryong. That would be such a simple thing to do to guarantee the power would stay up there.

Gaelle BROAD: Is the management of roadside vegetation an issue?

Peter TOLSHER: Large trees – they burn, they fall, they collapse. Then there is the other thing of phones. We put in a submission for up the Murray River Road and we got knocked back. That would have been another one which could have given more coverage on the Murray River side for telecom, but we got knocked back on that one. That is something we should really try and push as well. What area was that, Juliana?

Juliana PHELPS: Thologolong.

Peter TOLSHER: Thologolong.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello. Thank you, Peter, Juliana and Mark. I really appreciate your presence. This committee has encountered power failures and then subsequent communications loss everywhere that we have been. It almost seems like CFAs need to practise without radios and without communications because it is inevitable with every fire.

Peter TOLSHER: Is there a possibility for a communication on wheels to be taken around – a COW they are called – which means you can just wheel up a trailer, set it up, and everyone has got telecom, phone cover.

Jacinta ERMACORA: We have heard a few different sorts of solutions that may be recommendations to consider what effective solutions might be for small communities in emergency circumstances.

Peter TOLSHER: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes?

Peter TOLSHER: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. The other thing I wanted to ask you about was you mentioned in the submission poor coordination between government departments with data collecting and residents having to tell their stories over and over again. What would make that easier? How could you solve that? I think it is a big issue.

Mark FLORENCE: Yes, it is a big issue. There are probably two parts to that. One goes to the Mayor's point about early access for council to be able to get to some of the impacted residents to hear that story. I think it is really the coordination pre emergency, so in the lead-up to fire season the DFFHs of the world, the DEECAs, the NEMAs, the ERVs and our local health services, who generally get funding to support people should be actually at a round table to say, 'Okay, what is the process to be delivered in the event of an emergency so that people can come to one place, give their story once, and that information can get disseminated behind the scenes?' People are not interested in what happens behind the scenes. All they want is an immediate response. There needs to be a better preparation component. All of our emergency response, the CFA and SES and all of those, have really improved the way that they coordinate. It is the softer side, if you like, that needs to have the same level of coordination.

Juliana PHELPS: And ensuring that the privacy legislation actually allows that. I think that was part of the problem in 2019–20, that we had agencies looking at similar things, but they could not tell each other what was going on because of the privacy legislation. We need to make sure that that is clear in an emergency situation.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. And at the same time keeping in mind the prevalence of family violence and so on – it requires safety as well.

Peter TOLSHER: Yes.

Juliana PHELPS: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Can I just finish by checking with you for the purposes of Hansard, when you have mentioned 19–20, do you actually mean the 2020 fires?

Peter TOLSHER: 2019–20.

Juliana PHELPS: 2019–20. It was on New Year's Eve of 2019, and it crossed over into January.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Sorry, I am sure Hansard did not have that confusion. I did. Okay, thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. Now, I am not sure how much of the conversation I missed out on when my computer decided to have a moment. As a council, what major hurdles did you face during the fires?

Mark FLORENCE: If I can go first, it is always the timing. It is that Christmas–New Year period where people have pre-booked leave, so just having comfort that you are going to have enough human resource to be able to support it. People can be anywhere at that time. From early December through to late January our numbers are down generally, which goes to the collaboration model that we had in place to be able to use people from other shires, remembering that in a small shire the majority of our people live in the shire, and for a lot of them their main priority is the protection of their own place and their own family, so we cannot rely on them. One of the hurdles, to answer specifically your question, is the consistent availability of staff.

Juliana PHELPS: I might just add to that. Being such a large municipality, there is also an expectation from some elements of our community that business as usual will continue. So we have our staff who are trying to focus on the relief and recovery aspects of the emergency, but then there is also the business as usual expectation. We took a position to say, 'Well, the number one priority is around the fire emergency' and that we will just wear any flak that we get from the community as far as business as usual. But it is challenging because it is such a small team – very small.

Peter TOLSHER: My bugbear was access to the community, not in the first three or four days but after the fire event had gone through. I know that there were a lot of rogue people that went up there and supported and did their thing. But as the Mayor, I could not see myself going rogue and going up there because if something happened, I would be shot, drawn and quartered. But the access issue for me was to go and see the people, talk to them and say, 'We've got your back' – for a leader in the community to go there and show their face would really lift them.

Juliana PHELPS: That is the expectation of the community. We received a bit of negative feedback from residents who had been significantly impacted: 'Where is council? We haven't seen anyone.' There is a

complete lack of understanding in terms of what we are allowed to do during that time when we are not in control of the municipality. The roads are closed –

Peter TOLSHER: And you cannot call. There are no phones.

Juliana PHELPS: Yes. So that is a big challenge.

Peter TOLSHER: I even got into a 45-minute conversation yesterday about that thing that is still going on. They are still talking about: Why weren't you there early?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: All right. Prior to the fire was council advocating for certain tape to be cut or funding from state government that was focused on your fire preparedness that you had been advocating for for quite a while?

Mark FLORENCE: To be fair, I think what was available we had access to. We had our emergency strategic coordinator position funded, the \$60,000, but we have also had access to relief centre training, municipal emergency management officer training, EMLO training workshops with the ICC agencies. So to be fair, we were well serviced in that regard.

The CHAIR: Peter, Juliana and Mark, the time we have has come to an end. I want to really thank you for giving us the evidence today and for the submission and the advocacy on behalf of your community. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the coming week to review. With that, the committee will take a short break and get ready for the open mic session.

Peter TOLSHER: Just a quick one. I just want to say thanks for doing this because we were not on the list initially. This is really, really good. It is going to give the community an opportunity to say whatever they feel.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.