

# **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

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Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

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

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into the 2026 summer fires.

This afternoon we have been hearing from members of the community in and around the Walwa fire in the north-east of Victoria. We have just heard from the shire council in an open session, and now we are moving to the open mic session, where we have invited members of the local community to come and have their say. The basic format of this is we will invite each individual in turn, if they can then come off mute, to start their contribution. Contributions of around 3 minutes will help us fit everybody in.

All the evidence – everything anyone says in these hearings – is protected by parliamentary privilege. No action can be taken against you for what you say during these hearings, but if you say the same thing elsewhere, that will not be protected by the privilege. You will all be provided with a proof version of the transcript before it is published.

For the Hansard record we would appreciate it if you could say your full name before you begin so we can accurately attribute your comments to you. That will kick us off. My name is Ryan Batchelor. For those who I have not met, I am the Chair of this committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask other members of the committee to introduce themselves in our usual order.

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

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

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

**Wendy LOVELL:** Hi everyone, I am Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**John BERGER:** I am John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

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

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** I am Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Are we ready to kick off? The first name I have on my list is Sean Farrar. Sean, if you can take yourself off mute, make sure your camera is on and get underway.

**Sean FARRAR:** Good afternoon. My name is Sean Farrar. I am a resident of Bethanga, and during the Upper Murray fire I served as one of the Tallangatta group's deputy group officers. I served approximately 12 days or nights on the fire. This included shifts in the Tallangatta incident control centre. Additionally I performed logistical support for the Tallangatta group brigades in my own private vehicle and other shifts as an active firefighter on the fireground. I was part of the strike team tasked to Corryong on 9 January when the fire undertook a significant run, crossing the Murray Valley Highway and impacting a number of houses and properties. I am also one of the community members on the Towong municipal emergency management planning committee.

I am here today before you to deliver a message from the Upper Murray, a region that has been forged in fire and other natural events but is currently being weathered by neglect. My previous submission to this inquiry laid out some of the issues of the recent fire season, but today I must address the human and political costs of being ignored. There is a deep-seated, simmering dissatisfaction in our community. We have watched from our hills as politicians have held press conferences in Melbourne and Canberra, yet not one Victorian minister, nor the Prime Minister, has seen fit to travel to the Upper Murray to look our residents in the eye. This absence is felt even here. By failing to hold a local in-person hearing within our district this inquiry effectively tells our volunteers and farmers that their lived experience is not worth the travel time. You cannot understand the geography of disaster from a boardroom in the city.

My prior evidence detailed the breakdown of the AIIMS span of control. We witnessed control become an exercise in bureaucracy rather than fire suppression. We saw out-of-area sector commanders, people who could not find Koetong on a map without a GPS, issuing orders that were topographically impossible. Local crews were ordered into dead man's zones because the commander did not know the terrain. This is a recipe for a coroner's inquest. Furthermore, we are fighting 21st-century fires with a 20th-century fleet. The Tallangatta

group's brigades are operating with ageing tankers that are becoming increasingly unreliable. While fire service levies are collected from every Victorian, that money is being swallowed by growing administrative bureaucracies while our frontline volunteers are left to make do with hand-me-downs.

I must also offer a stern warning to the committee not to be seduced by the rhetoric of climate change zealots who attempt to frame every flame through a singular political lens. Whether the climate is changing or not does not help a farmer in the Upper Murray save their livelihood today. We need to move past the grandstanding and concentrate on the mechanics of survival. We need to redefine what an asset is. To a centralised agency a dry paddock is just unburnt fuel, but to our community it is a crop, a herd's survival and a family's income. We need to reform the strangled planned burning approval process and stop treating our local knowledge as an obstacle to policy. Commonsense ideas are being blocked because of policy and legislation. When this happens it usually means that the legislation is poor, and poor legislation can and should be changed.

The path forward requires a radical return to localism. Local volunteer emergency services must be embedded in the decision-making process at the command level. Officers and members with 30 years of experience in the Tallangatta Valley or the hills around Cudgewa possess ground truth that no satellite can provide. We need to empower those on the ground to make tactical decisions based on immediate conditions, without waiting for a signature from an incident controller who is 50 kilometres away. We need to rethink incident control and prioritise financial assets and family homes over public land. Local CFA crews and officers need to be empowered to take control with assistance from firefighters, management and officers.

We also need to look at our main feeder lines with regard to electricity, and these need to be protected in high bushfire risk areas. The line between Tallangatta and Corryong is highly susceptible to bushfires. It has been cut twice in six years. The Tallangatta Valley, Mitta Valley, Nariel Valley and Berringa Peninsula often have their power cut because of a lack of redundancy. The vegetation around these lines has not been cleared regularly. We need protection for our critical infrastructure and more redundancies in place. Utilities such as power, water and telecommunications are not commodities. They need to be treated as essential services and safeguarded as such.

Recovery is not just about insurance payouts; it is about rebuilding the social and physical infrastructure of small towns that have been left to fend for themselves. The Upper Murray is not just a line on a map or a statistic in a report. We are a community of skilled, dedicated volunteers and resilient families. We are tired of being the forgotten corner of Victoria. We do not want your sympathy; we want your respect. We want the resources that our taxes have paid for, and we want the authority to protect our own backyard. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Sean. I now call Andrew Whitehead.

**Andrew WHITEHEAD:** Thank you. Andrew Whitehead. I am a resident of the Biggara Valley, which is on the border between Victoria and New South Wales. I would like to start off with discussions on the VicEmergency app and the messaging put forward from the app. For five or six days we had messaging saying that it was too late to leave, seek shelter now, the fire is imminent. The fire never got within 20 kilometres of us. I have got a 13-year-old son who has got the app as well. Every time he would get this message he would come in and see me and say, 'What's going on, Dad?' We are talking about people's mental health. I just think we are going to get to a stage where if we continue with messaging like this when the fire is not imminent, it is going to be the little boy that cried wolf, and no-one is actually going to take any notice of the messaging that is put forward. I would like to see that there is a review of how the messaging is done, how often it is put out and how often it is changed, because the messaging did not change for days, and yet the fire changed considerably.

I also have a bit of a challenge, having been a CFA member for many, many years. We would now have trouble being able to put strike teams together to take on and fight fires elsewhere, because of the inability that CFA have to actually fight the fire. They are instructed to go to asset management only, which is the house. If a spot fire starts in the grass, they are instructed not to go and put that out, whereas if you talk to any farmer in the area, their assets are there – their hay, their fodder and their stock. So to be not able to actually access the paddock and put those fires out is a real issue that people see moving forward, the ability for us to get crews to go onto trucks. I can only assume that it will be the same from the other side of the mountains to get people to come up and help us in the future if they spend too much time. I know one truck up here got asked after the third day where they had been filling up, and they said, 'We have not filled up yet,' because they had not even

been and looked at a fire or anything. They were just driving around doorknocking doing social work, calling in and seeing people and seeing how they were travelling. I do not think that is going to be sustainable for volunteers in the future.

I had another issue with the MEMP when we were at the incident control centre. I am actually the chairman of the local rec reserve in Corryong. We have a facility here that is used a relief centre, and it was opened and closed numerous times. We had firefighters here from CFA and Forest Fire Management using the facility as a staging area, and when they were going to call an evacuation order on Nariel they said they needed to close the staging area down and they would not be allowed to use this building because it would be a relief centre for people that had been evacuated. There were other centres in the town that were very suitable for that purpose, and unfortunately we could not talk any sense into the MEMP. It was just black and white: there was no other option. What he said was what happened. Forest Fire Management had to get another large marquee out of Albury–Wodonga and get it brought up and set up on our football oval so they had somewhere to eat. And as we knew when we were only evacuating the Nariel Valley, there was actually no-one that came to the evacuation centre and there were other areas within town. The youth club hall would have been a prime example, with a large kitchen, back-up generators and the works, plenty of area for parking. That was suggested but was not taken on board. I think a little bit of common sense in these areas and a little bit of listening to some local knowledge would make a lot of difference. The only other one I have is –

**The CHAIR:** Just quickly, if we could.

**Andrew WHITEHEAD:** Yes. We are putting lots of firebreaks in, which we have done really well. And now they are going and revegetating those fire breaks, pulling the stuff all back out again. So when fire comes through next time, the firebreaks have then got to be pushed through again.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you very much.

**Andrew WHITEHEAD:** We are not running out of trees.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. Next on my list I have got Shelley Henry, Is Shelley here?

**Shelley HENRY:** Yes I am.

**The CHAIR:** Oh, you are. Wonderful. Thanks, Shelley. Off you go.

**Shelley HENRY:** Hi. Good afternoon. I am Shelley Henry from Koetong. I would like to start by saying thank you to AusNet, HVP and our local CFA brigades. Ausnet – we were without power for eight days after the fires impacted our areas, and I would like to thank the staff and the contractors involved in getting our power back on under extremely difficult and trying circumstances. Hancock Victorian Plantations in the Shelley–Koetong area – I would like to say thank you to them for assisting where possible, doing asset protection by putting firebreaks around our farm boundaries for residents in the Koetong–Shelley area and also setting up a safe haven for our men who stayed to fight the fire. Most importantly, and this had a big major impact in our little town, HVP set up a water storage collection point days prior to the fire engulfing Koetong–Shelley, near the Koetong reserve. It is a central point in our little town. This became an extremely valuable resource for our brave men who stayed to fight the fire, as they had to return to this refill station on more than one occasion. If it were not for that, I am sure that we would have had far more homes and buildings lost in the Koetong area.

This leads me on to my thing with water. There need to be more accessible water collection points for all concerned in the Koetong–Shelley area for residents, as well as other small rural communities. Surely some of our emergency services funding could be used towards this. We have a creek in Koetong which is flagged as a collection refill station. Well, you need to go down there and have a good look at it. It is not suitable. Its access can be restricted due to surrounding vegetation and the depth of the creek, which fluctuates. We were so lucky in the fires that we never lost any lives, but one of our local farmers had to go down there to refill while he was fighting the fire and nearly lost his life due to a fireball going over him and his vehicle.

Another major issue that we had in our little town – and we lost five homes in our little town, and we lost three homes in the neighbouring town that only has six residents – was that we had six unpaid local men who stayed to protect our homes and our community whilst we had 10 Forest Fire Management vehicles with paid Forest

Fire Management staff stationed in their utes with water pods near the mailboxes, not even fighting the fire. They never even emptied their water pods. The mental health impact on our men due to this will be everlasting, let alone what it does to me, as they are still talking about this now. We often are asking, 'Why weren't the Forest Fire Management staff engaging, if that's what they were employed to do?' We need a permanent water tank with CFA fittings to be placed at the Koetong reserve, which is owned by DEECA, for future use. I know that our local CFA have been advocating to have a slip-on set up in Koetong. We all pay taxes, so surely this is achievable. Just because we live in a rural area – we do have a voice, and we need to be heard and we need to be looked after, because I am sick of all our taxes going into the city. It was also extremely frustrating that we had to make contact, 14 days after the fire had impacted on our town, with the shire to get water delivered to us for our drinking as well as our water in our tanks.

On my last little bit, and I could keep going on for days, communications. I just hope that none of you sitting here today listening to this ever, ever has to go through what me, my family and other community members had to. We did not know whether our loved ones were alive or dead. We lost all communication from 4 pm on Friday 9 January. My family, my daughter and I had evacuated, along with most of the women in the town, and our partners and husbands had stayed. My family and I were receiving phone calls and messages to say that our residence was gone. The trucks were trapped in our little town, and we had no way of contacting my husband or any other of the gentlemen, the guys staying there to fight, to verify. I contacted Wodonga police, and even though I got a very nice guy on the phone, he was unable to assist. To lose this type of communication is totally, totally unacceptable and deplorable in this day and age. I could go on, but that is all I have got.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Shelley. We really appreciate it. The next on my list is Ross Sutherland. Over to you.

**Ross SUTHERLAND:** Hello. I am Ross Sutherland. Can you hear me?

**The CHAIR:** We can.

**Ross SUTHERLAND:** I am a farmer in the Annandale Road, Bullioh, area, and I would like to just speak similarly to what Shelley has just done to show how people that were left on their own such as ourselves managed and what we noted during that terrible night. I am just going to start by saying what a difference one man can make. The night authorities listed Mount Bullioh and the Cascade to burn, followed by Tallangatta Valley, one man patrolled over 2 kilometres of Annandale Road to keep the fire on the north side of that road. I am told Forest Fire Management watched him at times, without offering any assistance whatsoever. Mount Bullioh, the Cascade and Tallangatta Valley were saved by his actions. He had no time to plan, he had no help and he got no thanks. He just did what he had to do while parts of his own farm burnt. Had this not been done, the containment line subsequently built around the Cascade Falls area would have been too late to have any effect.

Forest Fire Management had no plan or understanding that wherever possible, a stand had to be made, and this man made that stand. Mount Bullioh, Cascade and Tallangatta Valley would have been on fire by daybreak, and I suppose Forest Fire Management would have been right and claimed the credit – or would they have done what they usually did, and just run away? Let us face it, they ran away from our house only a few hours earlier. They yelled at us, 'Get out! We are leaving. You are going to burn.' They left a 79-year-old farmer and his 73-year-old wife to face a fire front about 150 metres wide, and with motors roaring we won that battle. They were nowhere to be seen. To try to save something and fail is one thing; to run away when flames are 250 metres away across a mowed paddock is quite another. To appear to give qualified support, which the incident controller did in the *Border Mail*, is bizarre. Suggesting that those who opted to stay and fight might not get assistance if they needed it was uncalled for. Their assistance was already proven to be worthless anyway. About two weeks later we had a rates notice in the mailbox calling for payment of the emergency services levy. To me, it feels like a fee for no service, which I understand was outlawed by the banking royal commission when it is for banking. When it is fires and people's lives, it does not matter.

I would like to just make a few other points. They have already been covered. One is that local knowledge is invaluable, but it is taken no notice of. Koetong do need that truck. We put in money to get that truck. Money in an account will not put a fire out, but a truck might. It also comes back to individual preparedness, because we trust nobody now. We think we do not even belong in this country at times, so we back ourselves, because if you want something done, you do it yourself. It is about time that authorities gave credit where credit is due. I do not want any credit. My life is over. But I will tell you this. That night I had 200,000 litres to protect our

home. I had another 67,000 litres not far away to protect sheds, and with smaller tanks around the farm we had a total of about 300,000 litres to be used. Four days after that fire I still had 195,000 litres to protect the house and probably 50,000 litres left at the sheds, simply because nobody turned up to use it.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ross. Next on my list is Jon Pitman.

**Jon PITMAN:** G'day. Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am a Corryong community member and CFA member, amongst other things, in our community. There are a couple of things I want to touch on today, and one of them under the terms of reference is point (3) and the retention of volunteers. I think some of the other people have spoken very well to this point on some of their experiences within CFA and the value they feel that they add or are prevented from adding in fighting a fire. I think it has a significant impact on retention of volunteers when they turn up to a fire and do not feel like the time they have put in is valued or they are not tasked effectively. I think this is something that we can do a lot better and certainly need to get on top of.

I think, on top of that, the amount of red tape and training that is now put on new volunteers to be able to turn out in a truck is becoming prohibitive. I think it is important to remember that as a state we cannot afford a fully paid firefighting service and we rely very heavily on volunteers. We need to have more assistance to take the burdens off volunteers, particularly in the way of running brigades, whether it is financial management or whether it is compliance with the number of positions you have to fill. In my time with CFA, which is quite short compared to Ross's, only 25 years, the amount of compliance has probably doubled. It does put people off. I try and attract volunteers and they just say, 'I don't have the time. I can't get away to training.' The other thing is that when they do the training sometimes it is not very well organised. The time given for notice of planning is often only two weeks. Sometimes, as I have experienced this week, it is one week. If you have got other things planned, which a lot of people do, you do not always have time to attend the training, because you have already made plans. They need to plan things further out and lock training in. I do understand that attendance at these things can be difficult, but I feel we need to step up – the CFA needs to step up anyway – and make this training more available and more relevant.

Moving on to point (4) of the terms of reference, regarding communication – once again this has been touched on, particularly when it comes to local knowledge – I will go back to the whole AIIMS thing. We are supposed to have the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System that we all work under so that when we have multi-agency events such as this one we are able to communicate effectively. This seems to have fallen down quite significantly, from the feedback I have heard. I was not at the incident control centre in Tallangatta myself, but I have had a bit of feedback. I was certainly in Corryong, and we got very little communication at all – no timely briefings. There was not a staging area set up initially, as there was nearly two weeks later. We were trying to run a staging area out of our brigade, so we would often have 100 to 130 firefighters convening there to change over, get lunches and try to have briefings, using three toilets, which were overwhelmed. We ended up getting our portable toilet and sitting that out the front. This is on the Murray Valley Highway, our station, by the way. It is a very busy thoroughfare in Corryong, completely unsuitable for a staging area.

No identifiable command point was established in the town during that time. As Mr Whitehead spoke about, the facilities available for suitable staging areas are abundant and have been used in the past in Corryong. I do feel a part of the reason why this has been a failing is to do with funding. I spent quite a bit of time down at the air base in Corryong assisting the refilling and refuelling of aircraft, mainly because Forest Fire Management Victoria were understaffed to the point that they did not have staff to put down there. The divisional command centre in Corryong was not able to be manned, because they did not have the staff to man it, and the facilities they had largely did not function anyway. The air base in Corryong had not had proper preseason preparedness. There was a lack of fuel. The drinking water that was in the fridge there for the workers was three, nearly four years out of date. The place was dirty. It was not anybody's fault. This was not because the locals did not care about it; it was purely because they did not have the manpower to go and clean it and there were other more important priorities for the local DEECA office to attend to in the time leading up to the fires.

Coming back to our Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund and the supposed extra funding that is coming to these services, all I have seen – I am sure other people will attest to this – is a reduction in the funding we have had and a reduction in what we have available to us during this time when they tell us there should be more.

Point (5) I would like to touch on –

**The CHAIR:** Just briefly, if you can, Jon.

**Jon PITMAN:** of the terms of reference is about the resilience of critical services. One of the real challenges we had was communication, and a large part of that was due to the fact that, due to funding cuts once again, most landline telephones were removed out of fire stations, certainly in our area. I cannot speak for the whole of the state. At our brigade headquarters, once the mobile network went down, we had no communications at all because the landlines had been removed three months previously. This is a major failing, and I am sure it would be far cheaper to maintain landlines than to try and pay the cost of maintaining fireproof infrastructure for mobile networks during these sorts of events. Thank you for your time.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Jon. The next name I have got on my list is James Houston. James, are you here? No. We can come back if he joins us. After that, it is Mark Massey. Mark.

**Mark MASSEY:** G'day there. How are you going? I am Mark Massey. I am the captain of Rutherglen Fire Brigade. I will just start off and be as brief as I can. Positives out of it was the Rutherglen group worked really well together, planning and filling strike teams. Brigades within our group cross-mixing members on trucks to ensure their safety worked really well. We worked well with other brigades, strike teams and local landowners when we were deployed. The support from Corryong locals, the petrol station owner and cafe staff was amazing. Our DMO support was first class before, during and after with maintaining our trucks. We had good trucks, good gear and good PPC and equipment, which is talked about a lot in CFA. We are very fortunate, and this helps. It builds confidence and allowed us to focus on the task at hand.

We had good strike team leaders. On the night duty on the catastrophic day I was deployed up there just outside Cudgewa, and we had a forest fire sector commander, I am not sure of his name, who was looking after us. He tasked the strike team, ensured we were utilised and safe and was very, very thankful for our presence although he seemed exhausted and overwhelmed until we arrived. Due to his direction, we actually helped our larger group – the strike team saved three houses that night – and then also the support from our local community was outstanding.

Communication and mission – Forest Fire's aim or mission appears to be to contain the fire and let it burn out. CFA volunteers are firefighters and our aim, as per the CFA chief, is to hit fires hard and fast and put them out and this is causing quite a bit of angst amongst our ranks locally.

Delays in releasing us – when we were tasked up there, there was discussions on the operational channel that we would be released and then 2 or 3 hours later someone would turn up and let us know that we could actually leave. They would drive to where we were, quite a distance away.

Just wanted to mention that the hurry up and wait mentality that CFA has I find is a real negative. We had a number of code 1 responses from Rutherglen to Walwa or Corryong. It would have been actually quicker to get to Melbourne from Rutherglen. Unfortunately, due to poor logistics and organisation, that high-risk activity, which puts all of us and road users at risk, did not match the outcome because when we arrived there was there was nothing to do. No-one knew we were coming.

My next point would be about utilisation of CFA volunteers and the lack of meaningful tasking assignments. Despite the fact there was a need up there, we just did not seem to be tasked throughout a number of weeks we supported the campaign. The pump on our Rutherglen truck only got turned on once on the first Monday night that we were there for one load of water, and then on the Friday night of the catastrophic day when I was up there, we actually turned it on and used four loads of water and that was that. The entire time we were up there it was the only water put out, despite the fact that we were close to where we probably were needed more often than not but were not tasked. Forest Fire Management strike team leaders did not know we were coming, what we could do or could not do, what to task us to, and were not expecting us, was the repetitive statement we heard on every truck and every strike team that went up there from our area. The question I put forward is: were we actually required? The volunteers had given up their work income, family time and sports activities to arrive, and no-one knew about us. We actually need to do better in that space. It appears we were deployed at times for a PR role, and perhaps deploying teams to help reassure and manage communities, their anxieties and their mental health, even during the period of the fires, may have actually been a better use of resources.

On the catastrophic day I had direct reports from strike team crews I sent up to Corryong. They were not tasked. They were actually swimming in the local pool. Despite fires in our own home location and houses

under threat in the Corryong area, which were around Lucyvale, a sector commander was referenced as stating that they were happy for paddocks and pasture to burn out. Given that we are from a rural area as well, that did not sit well with our members. One Rutherglen member on our strike team advised me that they had never before been embarrassed to be part of CFA, due to being told not to respond to properties under threat in Corryong but instead to go to the local pool. They were absolutely devastated and embarrassed. Of the team of five members that I sent up that day, none of them made themselves available again for the rest of the campaign. So that talks a bit to me about how we retain volunteers.

I will just finish off on areas for improvement. Meaningful tasking for volunteers: volunteers understand and accept that sometimes the fire is not raging, and that is okay, but wasting our time has to cease. Fatigue management, travel and accommodation: we were travelling 3, 3½ hours just to get to the fire front and then home again – and then throw in a 16- or 18-hour shift in the middle. Improve consideration and respect of volunteers' time and costs: just briefly, for each strike team of six vehicles we sent up, at a very low level of \$35 an hour basically that is a cost of \$16,000-plus per 24-hour period. That is not a cost to CFA, that is to us in wages that are given up. If those costs were taken into consideration, I think they would actually deploy us a little bit more; our utilisation would be up.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Mark, I do need to wrap up and move on.

**Mark MASSEY:** One quick point if I could?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mark MASSEY:** Just consider stepping up larger stations like Corryong with 24-hour crewing for 3- or 4-day tours. If Corryong was an FRV station, that is what would have happened, and yet they did not actually backfill them. The second-last point is, again, just to task us to what the chief's preseason directives are to let us fight fires. The last point is: I think we actually need a public apology from Forest Fire Management Victoria and CFA – that we did not meet the community expectations. Thanks for your time.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mark. Next I have got Michael Elliot.

**Michael ELLIOT:** Good evening. I am just going to read a statement I printed off last night, and a few of these points were brought up by previous speakers, so just bear with a bit of doubling up. My name is Michael Elliot. I am captain of Talgarno CFA. I have been a member of the CFA for roughly 40 years. I have also served as a DGO with the Tallangatta group, also as a strike team leader and sector commander. I have led strike teams to multiple fire events in the state and interstate.

Thank you for the opportunity to give insight into my experience in the Walwa fire complex in January 2026. Our brigade attended the initial lightning strike that was the source of the fire which continued on for the following weeks. Important points that I would like to express to the committee are the following. I was a strike team leader, and my team was sent to Koetong in preparation for the fire that escaped the control lines earlier in the week. On arrival I contacted the sector commander, who was from FFMV, and established over the next few hours which assets we were going to attempt to protect. We expected to be impacted by the fire, which was crowning and spotting at least 1 kilometre in front of itself. While doing this, the other strike team that was in the area decided to vacate the area, but I was not made aware of the reasoning behind this decision. I was later told that the strike team had left in an easterly direction towards Corryong and had driven through the fire front, which had now impacted to our east, and this was very dangerous.

Leadership from the sector commander was poor in the fact that no plans were made to protect any assets. With my strike team, I had full confidence in the team. I had captains and ex-captains with exceptional experience. The crew leaders and I decided where our appliances would be best utilised with safety in mind. As the fire approached, I was contacted via telephone as the radios had gone down. This was an issue for the whole time the fires were on; we had poor communications. My commander was questioning whether our strike team should go or stay, and I explained it was too late to leave and it would endanger members if we did so. Also in that same period of time, the sector commander advised me to form up the strike team and escape to the west, which was back towards Tallangatta, which was a totally dangerous exercise as the fire had already reached that section of the Murray Valley Highway and would have put members' lives at risk.

The other disappointment was the FFMV taskforce that was in the area as well as the sector commander. It had nine vehicles with water capacity parked up in a safe area. They were sitting in their vehicles with the air conditioners going. They did not assist with any asset protection. Had that taskforce been assigned to asset protection, we could have saved more houses. This would have included Shelley Camp, which unfortunately was razed to the ground. After the fire front went through, the taskforce still did not attempt to do any asset protection. As we know, most houses are lost after the fire front has gone through. I am proud that our strike team successfully defended the buildings that we were tasked with. At this stage I had lost all faith in my sector commander and consulted with my crew leaders. We continued to complete asset protection and support locals who were defending their properties.

In conclusion, there is a trend within both organisations of being risk averse. We must trust our training and experienced members to engage in asset protection. If we continue this trend, it will result in the community losing faith in firefighting services to protect their assets.

On a lighter note, finally, I was told many years ago by an experienced CFA captain that in a major fire three things happen during the disaster. The first thing is the communications break down; secondly, there is confusion on the fireground; and finally, you do not get fed. With all the inquiries and royal commissions over the years, these three things continue to happen. Thank you for your time today.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Michael. Next on my list is Clint Reid.

**Clint REID:** G'day. I am Clint Reid from Tallangatta Valley. I am the Tallangatta Valley CFA captain. I was the leader of the fires for the Tallangatta Valley section for this year.

I will be pretty brief. There are a lot of things that we could probably bring up, good and bad, but there are two points that really stood out to me during the fires. Number one is the power was turned off, and therefore we lost communications within an hour – after the backup battery in the Telstra tower disappeared. So from probably 8 o'clock onwards for the next three or four days we did not have any Telstra communications, which made it near impossible to get messages to people outside. I think there has got to be definitely something looked at to bring generators in to have backup power there, because for two or three days prior the fire was always coming our way. We live in an area where communication is tough enough anyway, with UHF radios and CFA radios. We could not fill our truck because we could not communicate to people. We also had to get people to drive through flames, through fires, to make sure other people could get out, because they were unaware of where it was up to. Having a lot of older residents, not everyone has a mobile phone anyway, so we need as much communication as we possibly can. It was quite disappointing to spend, you know, three days having to drive to people's places in one of the CFA vehicles to get extra support.

The second point is pre-emptive works done in the area leading into the fires. It was quite obvious that the two or three days leading into Thursday and Friday were going to be catastrophic. We never saw a grader. We never heard anyone from CFA or DELWP say, 'Look, what do youse need? What can we do?' In 2019, 2020 there were grader lines cut around people's houses and sheds. We did not have any of that. We saw the first grader at 4 o'clock on Saturday morning when they came – a gentleman who brought his own grader off his own farm to support us. It was not one that was deployed to us. He deployed it himself. There is a thing called super water tankers. One sat in Wangaratta and one went to Corryong, which is fine. I believe Corryong needed it up there. But the one sitting in Wangaratta should have been deployed to help in areas where the fire was heading. With technology the way it is we all knew the winds and which way the fire was going to go.

The number three point I want to make quite clearly is that I thank all the volunteers that turned up in our community. We basically defended Tallangatta Valley for three or four days and held it onto the left-hand side going up with private vehicles, with very little CFA or DELWP support. Those people should be recognised. I was told at a meeting a month or two ago that our role in the fires in the Tallangatta Valley would not be recognised because we were not supposed to be there, that it was a DELWP fire. That was very disappointing, because we had 30 or 40 people that fought day and night to pretty much save the valley. Unfortunately, on the left-hand side where I live about 9500 acres was burnt in about 25 minutes, including my wife's and my place, my family farm, and my uncle's place. We had not a hope of saving that. Further up the valley, when we managed to get all these private vehicles together, we saved a lot of land. I think people need to acknowledge those people with the private vehicles. They saved a lot of country and probably saved it from jumping across the road and heading into Mitta and further on.

My next one is the communication. We definitely need to be looking into that, whether it is a mobile tower supplied or generators or something, because we were very lucky that we did not lose lives because of that. We actually had to get people out ourselves by bashing the door and removing them ourselves. These were volunteers doing this, putting themselves at risk to make sure other people were okay. I thank everyone for their time, and good luck with it all.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Clint. Next on my list is Phillip Coulston. I might come back to Phillip. After that it is Leon Cosgrove.

**Leon COSGROVE:** Hi, how are you going? Good afternoon, and thank you very much for the opportunity to speak. I am representing the Tallangatta Rail Trail Authority Group, which also works alongside the Towong shire on the maintenance and promotion of the High Country rail trail. We collaborate with other regional organisations, including our rail trail community groups and tourism bodies across Albury–Wodonga and the Upper Murray Valley.

Before the fires the High Country rail trail was one of Victoria's most unique regional tourism assets, built around historic timber trestle bridges, remote landscapes and heritage. These bridges are not just crossings; they were a defining experience of the trail. In January 2026 in the Walwa fires the scale of the loss was devastating. We lost 12 of the 14 historic trestle bridges, structures which were over 110 years old, which would be equivalent now, in dollar terms, to between \$40 to \$60 million in assets. Unfortunately those assets could not be protected, due to the restricted capability of the firefighting guys there at the time, and obviously their priorities were saving homes and people. The community is still grieving from that loss. The loss of these bridges is critical for the creek crossings on the Shelley–Tallangatta section of the trail, affecting cycling tourism numbers. Beyond the bridges, we now face 37 kilometres of fencing requiring repair or replacement. There is no bushfire recovery funding allocated to this.

To date, this work has been carried out by community donations and volunteer time. The TAG committee has sourced temporary boardwalk structures to reopen sections of the trail, but it is still waiting on permits for installation, and it appears we are spending more time negating, negotiating and waiting for approvals than doing the actual work. As part of the response to the disaster we developed what we consider to be a structured recovery program, which we call recovery, rebuild, restore and renew. This was presented to Towong shire in March. The TAG's view on this is to reopen the trail, restore connectivity, rebuild key crossings and ultimately re-establish the trail as a major tourism asset. Towong shire has also developed a plan, and we hope to contribute to this as well. But we also hope that they are not restricted by the systemic barriers that we see in government, which could slow down their efforts. To support the recovery there should be practical exemptions for temporary structures following bushfires, particularly when reopening infrastructure which supports both community wellbeing and economic recovery. The TAG and other community groups on the trail are also facing operational challenges. With the closure of the committee of management entity Parklands Albury Wodonga there is now no effective structure to interface with DEECA. This is making it significantly harder to coordinate volunteer works, events and recovery activities on the ground. This is not about assigning blame. The reality is the High Country rail trail simply sat too far down the priority list for a sustained investment over many years.

What we are asking for is straightforward: we want support to champion whatever the Towong Shire Council plan, funding for the rail trail for the recovery and renewal and also for other community groups as well. That single action will unlock the ability to address many of the issues we are now facing, from infrastructure recovery to heritage interpretation to restoring tourism flows into the region. This is the disaster recovery of infrastructure. It is a regional economic recovery, and it is the preservation of a unique part of Victoria's heritage. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Leon. I will go to Clayton Henderson if I can.

**Clayton HENDERSON:** Hello. Clayton Henderson. I am a lieutenant at Killawarra CFA, Wangaratta group. I have been a member of the CFA for about 25-plus years. I am one of three ex-captains in our brigade. I am a strike team leader as well in the group. My past employment has included 6½ years with the CFA in different PTA roles. My incident management role is as an endorsed safety officer in the Hume region.

I attended many of the fires in different capacities, from sitting on the truck to strike team duties and so forth across north-east Victoria, Longwood, Upper Murray and the north-central fires this summer. I would like to just share what I have witnessed, seen and heard during my time attending those incidents, after action reviews and monitoring the radio communications, as many people did over the summer period. I consider I observed unsafe situations, based on my experience as an incident controller and safety officer. They were unsafe for the emergency services and unsafe for the Victorian community we serve.

Number one on the safety officer's checklist is to have a clear incident control agency identified and a single incident controller and control point identified. I witnessed numerous incidents where secondary control points had been set up by higher ranking officers in the CFA chain of command, in what seemed to be custom and practice. The transfer of control was not occurring effectively, and this left two controllers providing directions on radio traffic. Often the secondary controller led to confusion and conflict, a lack of effective use of resources, confusion in what they were to be doing and communications breakdown. I witnessed office-based resource deployments and requests, without communication with the incident controller that was already on scene.

The command and control structure in the CFA is broken. It does not work as it is currently structured. It needs to be consultatively reviewed and fixed as a priority. The secondment model in the CFA chain of command is not working. It is not the fault of the people in these positions. Many of them are more than capable and very capable and experienced people. It is the structure that is failing us all. The people that are not brought into that structure in that CFA chain of command are the group officers, and we have heard a number of group officers talking already today about their experiences, and it clearly shows they have got great experience in the field. The operation model working towards a single culture and a coherent, safe team is what we need. I witnessed numerous highly experienced volunteers no longer stepping up to help the leadership at incidents this year, some not turning out at all, others quietly stepping on the tanker or on the end of a hose, or indeed, not with the CFA at all but in their own private units – years and years of experience not being used and utilised. They see the risks because of their skills and experience. Those are legal risks, physical risks, mental risks and the fear of losing people in the chaos. Their local knowledge, experience and skills they feel are not being used, trusted, valued or respected by the structure that is broken.

Thank you for listening. I will leave you with a thought. Volunteers do not resign. Volunteers simply volunteer less when disrespected by a system that places them and others at risk. This impact was witnessed this fire season and is placing Victoria at risk. We need local knowledge and experience and solutions for preparing for, responding to and recovering from incidents. I stand upon that. That was what I prepared. Just a couple of comments from what I have seen: group leadership, as I say, needs to be involved. That is demonstrated by who we are seeing here. The confusion extends not only to the incident response. It extends to training. It extends to preparedness and response on all areas of incident management as a whole. Mission command was something that we got into a few years back, and mission command basically set us a mission to go and do: preserve and save life, and it has turned into microcontrol and microcommand. That does not work. Thank you for the time. Thank you for the opportunity to listen to the people, which I think is critical – that we have to listen to what is being said to us.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much, Clayton. Tara Brewer.

**Tara BREWER:** Hi. Can you hear me?

**The CHAIR:** We can. Thank you.

**Tara BREWER:** Great. I am Tara Brewer, and we operate Brewer Beef, which is a stud beef cattle operation at Koetong, Berringama and Tallangatta Valley. This fire burnt the entirety of our property at Koetong and Berringama, some 20 kilometres apart, my in-laws' property at Koetong also, and in total, 1000 hectares of ours was lost. We yarded and saved all 900 cattle and both houses due to our preparedness and the CFA strike team. We also learned as much as we could from the experience of farmer friends affected by the Black Summer fires in the days before the fire hit us, and put that into action. I wish to highlight the importance of local knowledge and stronger collaboration between Forest Fire Management and the CFA. In Koetong that day there were over 10 Forest Fire Management units parked on a safe, graded area. They were allegedly instructed not to move or help. They were then forced to watch the town burn. These were young people, trained seasonal firefighters. Then, because of the trees and powerlines coming down on the highway,

they were trapped there overnight and food had to be flown into them the next morning. These young Forest Fire Management seasonal firefighters could have easily been utilised to protect infrastructure under the guidance of a CFA strike team with expert knowledge. However, there is a growing frustration that a highly risk-averse culture can sometimes prevent local initiative and practical decision-making during emergencies. We believe there is an opportunity to better integrate local knowledge and CFA and Forest Fire Management planning while still maintaining safety.

One of the biggest issues was the Murray Valley Highway being cut off due to fallen trees and powerlines. This led to 25 CFA volunteers being trapped with us overnight. The physical blockage of the highway severely restricted movement of critical resources and people in and out of the area. Corryong township was completely cut off for the second time in six years. Koetong became isolated very quickly, and we had to provide the emergency response from within. There needs to be stronger planning around roadside vegetation management and powerline protection. Very minimal vegetation would need to be removed from this corridor at present to ensure that Corryong and surrounds have safe access at all times.

Communication failures were another major concern. Both phone towers were supposed to have battery backups, and they failed within an hour of being impacted, leaving us with no communication during a rapidly evolving emergency. In addition, the main emergency radio tower was lost in the fire. This meant that emergency services could not communicate with incident control or each other. I believe that these assets could and should have been better protected.

Finally, I would like to mention the numerous historic rail trail bridges that were lost during the fires. These structures could have been protected with targeted retardant drops or pre-emptive treatments, but no attempt was made. These bridges were important community assets and tourism infrastructure. One of the most unique timber trestle railway bridge networks in Australia has now been lost forever.

Our experience brought to light the importance of collaboration and localised decision-making to ensure emergency responses are effective for individual communities. Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. David Wortmann? I might come back to you in a sec, David. Phillip Coulston?

**Phillip COULSTON:** Thank you. Phillip Coulston. I have been a volunteer firefighter since age 15, with 16 years as a professional firefighter. Most fires start mid-afternoon, approximately 4 pm, which gives a 4-hour window before night to get to and assess the fire and plan suppression. The first 24 hours are absolutely vital to carry out this out. Hand tools and track machinery are necessary for this. Overnight these are used for initial suppression. The first day is most crucial to carry this out plus bring in heavy machinery and air support. It is no good having a DC-10 or 707 on the tarmac. Direct attack close up against a fire is the first option to stop it enlarging.

After 48 hours and still not controlled, everything possible must be used. Once it gets to the stage of uncontrollable, indirect firefighting may be used, such as backburning from a secure firebreak. Backburning increases the fire size dramatically, making a longer fire perimeter, and should be done with caution, at night, when it is usually cooler and there is less wind. It is no good waiting for it to come out. When it does, it will go 100 miles an hour with flames 100 feet above the trees.

Volunteers with CFA strike teams have not been utilised. They were pulled back from Cudgewa to Corryong, 15 kilometres away, which made them 25 kilometres away from the fire front. If they had been utilised – they were sitting in Corryong on their hands while Berringama, Lucyvale, Shelley, Koetong, Darbyshire, Annandale and Tallangatta Valley burnt. CFA volunteers joined us to squirt water on the fires and win one battle at a time, eventually winning the war. These places are grasslands, hundreds of acres with no bush. Evacuating everyone from towns not even near fire, such as Corryong – Craig Lapsley, emergency commissioner, started this, then Andrew Crisp enforced it even more. Landholders who stayed and defended did not lose homes. Landholders assets include boundary fences, grass, livestock, outbuildings, machinery, stored fodder and of course the residents. CFA sent their asset protect to sit at the back doorstep, and when asked to assist landholders, refused to move – just sat there or sometimes on the roadside and watched.

Radios: the new Motorolas do not work in heavy smoke and mobile phones sometimes close down – for emergency use only. If someone is calling you for assistance, phone contact is not possible.

Managing fires from Melbourne is not working. The time lapse between the fireground and ICC is too long – even the local ICC is too long. Maybe they are not experienced in ICCs. Landholders no longer trust fire agencies. The agencies just run away from fires.

Climate change is no excuse: 40 degrees Celsius today is no hotter than 40 degrees in 1939, or feels any dryer now than then. Since 1939 there have been royal commissions, inquiries and recommendations, but with all the modern technology, flash tankers, radios and myriad aircraft, fire suppression is now no more efficient than 1939, when they used wet bags and a branch off a tree. \$1 million spent initially is better than tens of millions after five months duration and still counting. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Phillip. David Wortmann, I can see you on the screen.

**David WORTMANN:** Hello. How are you?

**The CHAIR:** Hello. Over to you.

**David WORTMANN:** Thank you. I would just like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee today. I just want to talk about two points. The first one is the increased distance of vegetation removal from private property that adjoins Crown land. The second one is the reliable and resilient telecommunications in a bushfire emergency – how critical that is.

I will just give you a little bit of background. Towong shire is a very big shire, 6500 square kilometres. With the bushfires in 2019–20 and the bushfires this year, 65 per cent of the shire has been burnt. So it just goes to highlight how extreme a bushfire-prone area we live in, and that is recognised throughout Australia. It is even recognised throughout the world that north-east Victoria is a very high bushfire-prone area. What we found in the fires in 2019–20 and again this year was there is longstanding community debate. And at recent community meetings following the Upper Murray bushfires, we have come to the conclusion that we need to change the existing statutory distance that applies to the clearance of trees around fences. The generally held view in Towong shire is that the distance should be increased to at least 10 metres. The protection of fence lines is regarded as a priority for farmers, as boundary fences with the Crown are considered very valuable infrastructure and, as we acknowledged, the cost of replacing fences has increased rapidly in recent years. This extra distance will help alleviate the issue of who pays for boundary fences between private property owners and Crown land, which occurs every time there is a bushfire that adjoins private property.

Increasing the clearance distance around boundary fences is identified as achieving a number of benefits, including reducing fuel loads around townships and creating a more realistic and practical vehicle path to enable fuel reduction to be conducted more efficiently and to be monitored. This will, of course, effectively protect boundary fences on private property. The clearance will also allow fire agencies greater access and more points to the fireground, which will allow quick, rapid responses to fires. It will also allow fuel reductions, which we know we need and which we all agree we need more of. The community discussions recognise that this could only occur in practicable places and would not apply in areas where there is steep terrain, rocky outcrops or areas where there is vegetation of high conservation value. So yes, a lot of the areas could have this firebreak around private property.

I just want to talk about reliable communications, which are vital in an emergency bushfire crisis. Telecommunications providers and the state government should continue to invest in adequate battery and generator capacity to safeguard essential telecommunication functions that protect our communities in high-bushfire-risk areas like north-east Victoria. Removal of the vegetation around mobile towers is essential to protect this critical infrastructure in an emergency situation. Another key point is also that the roads allowing access to these communication towers need to be safe and the vegetation removed to allow safe access during bushfire emergencies to refuel generators or [Zoom dropout].

**The CHAIR:** I think David has frozen up. We might have to leave his contribution there. All right. Jamie Baker.

**Jamie BAKER:** Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to speak. Firstly, I would like to say actually how humbled I am to hear the stories from everyone this afternoon, and as a peer support officer and a fellow firefighter, if anyone would like any support, I am available. As I said, I am Jamie Baker. I am a career firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria. I have been a firefighter for the last 16 years and in an emergency

coordinating capacity for the last 25 years. I currently work within the secondment management department as an acting commander. My role is to support FRV's ability to provide personnel working at the CFA, and that includes ensuring that they have the proper coverage that is required. Again, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the level of coverage that was provided from FRV to CFA during the period that is under review, as well as the fire danger period and the fire season in total, and to suggest some improvements to the current model due to some observed bottlenecks that restrict FRV from providing personnel in a timely manner.

During the week of 5 January 2026 FRV was able to fill 87.5 per cent of all positions at CFA. Of the vacancies, four of those were assistant chief fire officer vacancies. Three of those positions were located at headquarters in Burwood. One of those was the manager of community safety, so none of the ACFO positions that were vacant during that period were frontline positions. Unfortunately, FRV did not receive any requests to fill three of those four positions. Also, three of those positions were located at CFA headquarters. They also had all five of their commander relievers at headquarters on approved leave, so there were a total of eight personnel at headquarters on approved leave at that time. That is four above the prescribed amount that was endorsed by CFA. There is an agreement to have only four at headquarters away at any one time, but it was endorsed to have eight away. That would have given us four additional personnel to be redeployed throughout the state to improve coverage during that time. Also, there were 25 commander vacancies across the state. Five of those were due to, again, CFA endorsing above the prescribed amount of planned leave, and an additional three positions were vacant, which we had received no request to backfill.

For some context, FRV have provided a percentage of 92.3 per cent fulfilment of all seconded positions across the period of 5 January through to 29 March. This includes multiple weeks of greater than 94 per cent coverage. FRV currently does not have the authority to fill positions proactively, yet we are scrutinised against this metric. The secondment agreement is constructed in a manner where FRV must wait for formal requests from CFA to provide the relief. Right now, that request should come through with 42 days notice. However, the statistics that I am about to provide suggest and will show that it is regularly missed. Of 185 requests from this financial year to fill positions via a higher duties list, the median days of notice was 24 days. That is far short of the 42 days that is agreed within the secondment agreement, and 72 per cent of all those requests had come through with less than 42 days notice. As a sample of all notifications that have come through from the CFA to Fire Rescue Victoria, of 299 instances, the median notification was 32 days. So 58 per cent of all notifications were received with less than 42 days notice. Currently FRV collaborates with CFA to develop an annual leave plan. This takes place between February and May each year. We then get a projection of what leave and what gaps may exist throughout the following financial year. However, knowing that someone is away for the month of January or February, we are unable to act unless requested by CFA.

I believe that this model is mutually beneficial to both organisations, all firefighters involved, both career and volunteer, and to the state of Victoria and its public. With greater transparency and collaboration between FRV and CFA, and in consultation with the office of the chief officer at CFA, the legislation as is can provide the modern fire service that Victoria deserves. I appreciate your time, and I appreciate you providing me with the opportunity to provide some statistics.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Jamie. Andrew.

**Andrew EMERY:** I am Andrew Emery. I really appreciate the opportunity to contribute today. Although not a community member in the north-east, I was not able to get the opportunity for the other south-west sessions. My contribution is a bit more holistic and overarching. I took the opportunity because during this inquiry there have been many references to the secondment arrangement, and here again today. That arrangement is between FRV and CFA. I have lived experience, and I want to share my experiences and opinion with the committee.

I commenced my 25-year career interstate before transitioning to Victoria as a lateral entry commander with CFA and have since served as both a commander and assistant chief fire officer. Like Jamie, I now work within FRV's secondment management department, with my portfolio involving training, secondment and engagement, workforce readiness and supporting CFA's district duty officer capability through the delivery and planned development of the FRV CFA secondment course. I am also the operational lead of lateral entry recruitment of experienced fire officers into FRV and in turn CFA.

It would be remiss of me not to also take the opportunity publicly to acknowledge my FRV colleagues and the CFA volunteers that I have been lucky enough to work with, support and lead during my time here in Victoria, including the fire season just gone. Make no mistake, they are some of the highest calibre in the world, and they deserve world-class support from both human and physical resources.

My experience being a secondee working in CFA environments is both rewarding and challenging. Seconded officers are required to transition between agencies, systems and different ways of working and often are required to operate in complex environments supporting large numbers of volunteers, something that they do to an extremely high standard. There is a high expectation to lead, integrate and deliver from day one. My experiences highlight to me how important strong training, onboarding, alignment and ongoing support are to setting people up for success. It is apparent to me that CFA volunteers want and deserve high-quality and experienced fire officers to best support them to undertake their roles. These officers need a range of skills, including rural and urban response – knowledge and experience in those areas – and FRV has the appropriate pipeline to supply these officers. Whilst there have been some discussions in this inquiry around vacancy management during the 2025–26 fire season, it is important that the committee considers vacancy discussions in full context, including what roles are requested to be filled, the lead time given to fill those roles and what roles are operationally critical at the time. When viewed through that fairer lens, overall coverage and capability across the system was and continues to be extremely strong.

In my current role with FRV's secondment management department I have been entrusted to be a part of a passionate team to ensure we are actively investing our time into strengthening the secondment model and building long-term capability, something we all truly see and believe in the benefits of. I personally am involved in enhancing workforce planning and capability, allowing us to better forecast demand, identify gaps and build a sustainable pipeline aligned with CFA's needs.

The only criticism I have of the secondment arrangements in relation to the 2025–26 fire season: I do not believe it was utilised to its full ability and capacity, because when it is, it is my opinion that it is the best model and provides the best level of support to Victorians. I and the team I work with are continually strengthening leadership development and career pathways, ensuring clear career progression, particularly from station officer through to commander and ACFO ranks. There has been a strong focus on improving induction and onboarding, particularly for experienced lateral entrants into CFA, so they can integrate more quickly and effectively into CFA environments and better support CFA volunteers and in turn the Victorian community. We continue to invest in skills maintenance and operational readiness through ongoing training and real-world exposure. While progress in some areas has taken time and there have been some challenges, we have continued to invest heavily in strengthening capability and ensuring vacancies are not just filled but filled with the appropriately qualified and experienced people.

In closing, it is my opinion that the secondment model is a great addition to the complementary fire service model here in Victoria. It continues to deliver real value to FRV, CFA and its volunteers and, most importantly, the community. I would like to reiterate that if the committee requires contextualised data and vacancy figures or wants to better understand the capabilities or areas for improvement of the secondment agreement, I urge you to reach out to FRV's secondment management department. Thanks for your time.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Andrew. I want to thank everyone who has participated in the open mike session today. We really appreciate the time you have taken and the courage that many of you have shown in telling some deeply personal stories to this committee, which will really help us shape and frame the report that we now have to go and write. As I said, all witnesses will be provided with a proof version of their transcript in about a week to review. With that, I declare today's session closed.

**Committee adjourned.**