

# **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria**

Melbourne – Friday 1 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**

Adam Barnett, Chief Executive Officer, and

Samantha Collins, State President, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria. We welcome representatives of the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

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

All the evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review prior to its publication on our website.

Welcome. Thanks for joining us today. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask members to introduce themselves.

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

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

**Wendy LOVELL:** Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

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

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

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

**The CHAIR:** And joining us online –

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

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

**Adam BARNETT:** Adam Barnett, Chief Executive of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

**Samantha COLLINS:** Samantha Collins, State President, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Adam and Samantha, thanks for joining us today. It is a pretty straightforward session. We will invite you to make an opening statement, after which we will ask questions. That is it. Over to you.

**Adam BARNETT:** Thank you, Chair. I will make a statement on behalf of both of us. Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, committee members. I would like to start this afternoon by paying tribute to the tens of thousands of volunteers and other agency partners and first responders who contributed to the 2026 fire season. Like all seasons past, CFA volunteers have overwhelmingly answered the call for help from across the Victorian community. We wish to thank them for their courage, commitment, compassion and service under very difficult and challenging conditions. As firefighters, we feel every loss and every setback. We share the grief and pain for every community impacted and every home and household affected. We feel the devastating loss of our wildlife, stock and animals and mourn the loss of Maxwell Hobson, who tragically perished during this summer's fires.

From our perspective, the outcomes of fire seasons should not only be measured by what was lost but by what was saved also. For without the bravery, expertise, experience and tireless dedication of our volunteers and

other agency personnel, the devastation and loss would be many magnitudes higher. In many ways the extent and ferocity of this year's fires were immense, and the breadth of the disaster simply underscores what Victorians have always known: Victoria is one of the most fire-prone places in the world. The state's preparation, resourcing and support for those communities and their fire services must therefore meet this immense challenge.

CFA volunteers join the CFA to help people, plain and simple. That is their primary goal and motivation. They did their best with what they had. The frustration of many is what they have and what they are provided is not always enough. CFA volunteers have borne the brunt of limited funding and resourcing that simply does not stretch far enough. The things they depend on and want funding for are not things for themselves; they are things they want to best be able to assist their communities in their time of greatest need. The brigades whose stations cannot even accommodate bare necessities, let alone a new fire truck, know how difficult it will be to attract the next generation of volunteers. The brigades who are forced to turn out 37-year-old tankers know their communities deserve better.

CFA fire stations should be a beacon of hope, shining brightly in every one of the locations across Victoria. They should be monuments to the respect, support and appreciation shown by the Victorian government towards communities who have agreed to share responsibility for their fire safety and whose community members risk their own lives and livelihoods as volunteers to protect their fellow citizens. Victoria approached this fire season with the lowest level of volunteer firefighters, the lowest levels of trained level 3 incident controllers and the low morale caused by bruising and ill-thought-out changes to Victoria's fire service levy that disproportionately impacted regional and rural communities.

We cannot control Mother Nature, but we can control our preparedness and response. Public landholders must be accountable for roadside fuel management. Planning frameworks must recognise deliberate and specific steps that need to be taken to reduce the risk of fire. Communication systems and critical infrastructure should not discriminate based on your postcode or how far away you are from Melbourne. Fires do not respect these boundaries, and neither should our infrastructure that our firefighters and communities depend upon. Government policies should be designed to encourage and promote volunteerism and recognise the importance of households preparing their properties and investing in private equipment. Command structures must better embed local knowledge and local experience to ensure the painful lessons of previous fires are not lost. Community warnings must include information that helps Victorians make informed decisions about what they will do and how they will respond.

Resilience is not a theoretical exercise. It can only be built in partnership with the community. You do not do recovery to a community; you do it with them. Recovery begins immediately after a fire has crossed the landscape. Priority must be given to facilitating the safe return of residents to ensure they have confidence to leave early in the future. Communicating what we are doing and when will help communities plan for their return, rather than being left in limbo.

Finally, CFA was created by an Act of Parliament. It was purposefully and deliberately set up as an independent statutory authority at arm's length from government. Parliament recognised that the risk of fire was so extreme that Victoria required an independent authority that had the power to do all things necessary to protect life and property and build a strong and sustainable volunteer workforce. At times this may mean its position and advice may need to diverge from current government priorities. And while ultimately it is for government whether or not to act on the advice provided, it is essential that CFA advice is independent, authoritative and transparent to Parliament and the public. To many volunteers, this fiercely protected independence and authority is hardly recognisable in today's CFA. In practice CFA has been allowed to be treated as simply an extension of government. Ministerial accountability has slowly but decidedly crept into government control. Leaders are now expected to balance their careers with providing government with at times unwelcome advice. Only parliamentarians may restore this imbalance and transparency.

CFA volunteers implore you, as representatives of Parliament, to consider the evidence you have heard before you. Your statutory authority has given evidence this morning through a whole-of-government submission that has been through who knows how many layers and filters. The experience on the ground from community members and volunteers does not even remotely get reflected in the whole-of-government response. This chasm of advice should alarm you. We implore you to pursue greater protections to ensure CFA's independence and standing is restored. Volunteers will not volunteer for a government department, and

therefore CFA's ability to strongly stand in defence of our communities for future fires and emergencies is intrinsically linked to how CFA listens and responds to the concerns of its volunteers truthfully, honestly and without interference.

We have great sympathy for the difficult role of this committee, and we thank you in advance for your compassion and empathy for all those affected by this year's fires and those who simply want to see improvements to ensure the safety of Victoria is preserved now and into the future. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for that. You mentioned preparedness in your opening statement as being a critical issue. In our regional hearings and our regional visits last week we spoke to a lot of brigades, and water came up a lot. You cannot fight fires without water. What is your reflection on water access in terms of its part of the preparedness issue? We had evidence earlier today from the CFA in particular about their bulk water initiatives and the extra work they did this season. Do you have any views on that and its effectiveness?

**Adam BARNETT:** Yes, and welcome to the sector, Mr Batchelor, in your role as parliamentary secretary from here on. We look forward to working with you. You hit the nail on the head: we need water. And coming off a long period of drought that we moved into this fire season with, I think the strategic water initiative is a fantastic initiative. The devil, I guess, in the detail is we just do not know where a fire is going to start, and we have got this tyranny of distance. Now, we are fortunate in Victoria that that tyranny is not as long as in other states, but it is a tyranny nonetheless, and the experience from this fire season was just how difficult the terrain was, where these fires were fought. That is always going to create logistical issues, getting water. But no, I think it was a good initiative.

**The CHAIR:** We cannot predict the fire and we cannot put enormous reserves of water on standby everywhere across the state, so how do we balance that? Operationally, how do we make sure that we have got enough in the right places and that we have got mobile capacity to sort of take it where it needs to go? How do we do that?

**Adam BARNETT:** Look, I think you have almost explained the volunteer surge model that we have got spread across Victoria. You have got 1208 fire brigades embedded in these communities as the first response, and the idea is that they will bring the water with them for the first part of the attack, and obviously the quicker we can get to a fire hopefully the smaller it is and the easier it is to put out. And then you have got that surge capacity when you get the local community brigades completely committed to the fire. That is when the rest of the brigades across the state start sending what we call strike teams. It allows the system to keep resources at home in those communities to protect from any fire outbreaks that may occur elsewhere while also allowing volunteers and additional appliances, equipment and water to be sent to where it is needed most.

**The CHAIR:** One of the issues we came across in some of the regional areas was in particular some water assets not having the right connectors, private water assets – tanks and the like – not being compatible with the CFA trucks.

**Adam BARNETT:** Yep.

**The CHAIR:** Any views on how we fix that problem?

**Adam BARNETT:** Forgive my frustration, hose fittings and connections are a bugbear. We have spent 15 years trying to standardise couplings just between what was then the CFA and MFB, which is now Fire Rescue Victoria. The water industry uses different couplings altogether; they use camlocks. You have then got forestry industry couplings. So we have probably just got to accept that there are going to be different couplings. I have got to say, though, it costs about \$20 to get an adaptor that simply converts one coupling to another, so these are not insurmountable problems. Even as I say it, I can hear the contradiction. There are a limited number of variations out there. Yes, we are running out of room on trucks to start putting stuff, but I have got to say, even if we are approaching four or five connectors, that is a manageable problem. With the trucks that have now been ordered, one would hope that the experience from this season will ensure that they will have adaptors with them.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much for the work you and your volunteers do, and I say that again across all the spectrum. Ninety-five per cent of the brigades have a representative or contact with VFBV, so you are a broad-spectrum representative of the volunteers.

**Adam BARNETT:** We are. The correction I would make is that under the Act and the charter we actually represent all volunteers.

**Melina BATH:** Yes.

**Adam BARNETT:** We seek a contribution from brigades to basically give their support to say that we are credible, because not only are we representing them, because we are required to, but they are actually making a voluntary contribution to our running costs.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. In terms of real funding and the decline in recent years, CFA grant funding has fallen, in real terms, just under 14 per cent, or \$48 million, since 2020–21, while incident demand rose 11 per cent in 2024–25 and 18 per cent the year before – I think this is in your report. The fire services property levy, when it was called that, had increased by \$191 million – that is also in your report. Now we have – and I find it slightly offensively named – the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, and you may have a similar opinion to me, yet you are getting a smaller and smaller piece of the pie. How can volunteers interpret these figures as anything other than a strategic underinvestment?

**Adam BARNETT:** I think that is exactly how they interpret it, and I think that is what is behind some of the lowering in numbers of volunteers. When you are turning out on 37-year-old trucks, it is inescapable for a volunteer not to associate their lack of resourcing with a lack of respect. I make the point continuously that we are highly appreciative of the lovely words that most members of Parliament make in their speeches during the fire season, but it very rarely translates into actual resources on the ground that people can touch, feel and smell, and we are asking volunteers to do more with less.

**Melina BATH:** There is a reduction of 11,000 volunteers since 2009 to this year. Is that correct?

**Adam BARNETT:** Over the last 10 years, yes.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. That is right. Active members.

**Adam BARNETT:** Operational.

**Melina BATH:** Operational. Sorry, that was my mistake. I just want to raise an important thing that you brought up in your submission. You talked about the amendments with the 2018 repeal of part IV of the CFA Act and the abolishment of CFA prevention committees in councils. Just very briefly, what has been the impact of that, and what are your concerns? We have heard in our inquiry hearings from councils that they cannot get enough done, we will say, in short.

**Adam BARNETT:** I think you have seen the result of that firsthand. I mean, in our submission we walk through the four LGAs impacted by the Berrys Lane, Longwood, fire and the vast difference. We are not placing blame with the municipalities. I think they each have spoken very well themselves around the impact of rate capping and cost shifting. But the reality is, under the old Act, councils were mandatorily required to have a fire prevention plan. They were mandatory to ensure that brigades had representatives as part of that committee to speak, plan and do fire prevention. That is no longer required, and in the most fire-prone place on earth, why would you not want that to be required?

**Melina BATH:** So with 30 seconds left, a recommendation is to overturn that and go back to a fairer, better model for councils?

**Adam BARNETT:** Yes. We are not arguing against all hazards, all agencies. But what we are saying is that, at a minimum, it should be mandatory that municipalities develop a fire prevention plan under the old specifics.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Now, 67 per cent of pumpers in the CFA and 41 per cent of tankers are beyond their designed life. Some frontline trucks are 37 years old. Volunteers are required to operate these vehicles, which are banned for the paid or career firefighters, with a lack of equivalent OHS and legal protection. Does

the VFBV believe the state is failing in its duty of care by allowing volunteers to operate an unsafe, outdated fleet that would be unlawful for paid firefighters to use?

**Adam BARNETT:** Put simply, yes. I guess the way to look at this is volunteers do not have the same protections under Victorian OH&S legislation; I find that quite appalling. They are not able to provide provisional improvement notices on equipment like our career counterparts can. So this is the different treatment, and the fact that volunteers, therefore, are forced to use equipment that is not considered safe for an employee workforce – these are members who are giving up their safety, their wellbeing and sometimes their livelihoods. Why would we not want to provide them at least the same protection that we provide any other employee in the state when it comes to their equipment and their workplace?

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you, and thank you for appearing today. We heard plenty of evidence from on-the-ground CFA volunteers that at a lot of the fire sites there was a lack of clarity about who was where, what was happening; calls for help were going unanswered. Some of that was due to communications equipment failures and them just not working, and there is a whole variety of contributing factors to that. It certainly sounded very distressing and frightening for a lot of those teams. From your perspective, what do you think needs to change in terms of that command-and-control structure to give the support that these on-the-ground volunteers were saying was missing in many of the fire-affected areas?

**Samantha COLLINS:** I am going to jump in there. I think a lot of it has to do with the secondment model. I was really impressed, watching this morning, that our concerns were raised repeatedly, but it is not just that, it is the volunteers' frustration and disappointment that this has been raised for a number of years now with no change, and it feels like it has been swept under the carpet. We know that CFA have highlighted it, we know that FRV talk about it but constantly we have got unfilled positions, vacancies across the board, and it makes us feel like we are left on our own. In situations of major fire and events like that, we are left on our own. So at any point in time those shortages are really impactful for the volunteers, not just at a fire event but in the everyday running of brigades. They have not got the support, the advice and I suppose the back-up that they need to do the job that they do.

**Adam BARNETT:** One of the things you heard this morning, Dr Mansfield, was around the fact that the DEECA system was unable to print an incident action plan. Could you just reflect on that for a second? This is chaos on a fireground where comms has gone down and mobile phone towers are out, so they do not have digital data. How else are you going to advise a crew of what the incident action plan is without handing them a piece of paper? The fact that that was described as a minor issue is probably the part that I think contributes to some of our frustration. Crews that have not been briefed on what the strategy is, on what the tactics are, on what the safety requirements are – that is a recipe for disaster.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** We did hear from one volunteer who said they had to drive for hours to go and get a printed copy of the plan, which is obviously taking someone off the ground.

**Adam BARNETT:** Spot on. We make the recommendation in our submission that the agencies rely on private operators to provide their coverage maps. So the RMR network, which is our main infrastructure in this area, is provided by Telstra. Relying on Telstra to tell you where there is coverage and where there is not – we are asking for an independent audit of coverage so that crews and brigades are absolutely crystal clear on where the coverage gaps are and so that ICCs can then plan accordingly where crews are.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. That was the other thing that came up around radios not working – some of them – and other communication methods not working because towers were down. That was actually at all the fire sites we visited – the towers were down, so they lost mobile coverage. A whole lot of new equipment was not working or was not suitable – it did not seem to work in the terrain that it was being used in because of the mountains and other issues. What are your views on some of the communications equipment and what do you think needs to change there?

**Adam BARNETT:** All of this is predictable. It has happened before and it will happen again. The way that radios work in mountainous terrain is very well documented. You know, you cannot pass signals through. This is where the layers of redundancy come in. The layer of redundancy with the new radios was built precisely to ensure there was 4G and 5G capability if the RMR network went down. When you have got mobile phone

towers also going down, you have got this cascade impact. And this is critical infrastructure. The fact that critical infrastructure is not required to have anything other than a couple of hours backup in an emergency – again, how do you expect people to communicate if we are not investing in the critical infrastructure that is actually going to keep them safe?

**The CHAIR:** All right. Mr Berger.

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your appearance today. I want to touch on training, if I could. If you have got a fire truck with some volunteers on it and then you have got a farmer who is also a volunteer, they will have two different points of view as to how they might want to tackle the fire. From a farmer's perspective, he will go in and he will just do what he has got to do, whereas a group on a truck will take a different view – 'Oh, no, this is not quite right, what we've got to do.' How do you get around those differences of opinion and then ultimately try to fight the fire with those differences?

**Adam BARNETT:** I think, luckily, there is a lot of merit in encouraging the community to invest in private equipment. It is essential. The problem you describe is less of an issue because typically the farmer is the very first person on scene and so they are doing an immediate first attack. It is not overly complex – and I do not mean to be disingenuous with that. It is as the resources start ramping up that you require a little bit more tactics in how you are going to approach the fire. So I do not see that conflict happen very often. More often than not it is the farmers with the private equipment who know the terrain better than anybody. Luckily, that is why the volunteer model works so well, because in an ideal world, that farmer also happens to be a CFA volunteer. So you immediately eliminate that problem.

**John BERGER:** Some of the examples were from the Natimuk one, because it was obviously the clear grazing land or cropping land that was a lot more accessible for them to use their equipment, as opposed to some of the ones in Longwood. I actually was taken out to a truck, and they were showing me the ute with 1000 litres on the back, with the pump on the back, and what they were doing with a person standing on the back, driving through the fires. I was thinking, 'Okay, I get that.' How does it work in reality when you have got others with a different point of view – a farmer wanting to save land and others wanting to preserve life away from that?

**Adam BARNETT:** As I said, it does not play out that way often, luckily. I think the other things to factor in – and this is where I think there can be incentives to encourage private equipment – are things like rebates for their registration, things like insurance and perhaps giving people a break on their insurance if they have invested in that private equipment. But going back to Dr Mansfield's issue around communications, we do not issue them with radios, and there is probably a good reason why we do not do that – we have got radio congestion pretty much as it is. But helping them with the UHF network and some redundancy systems – the pre-training and the pre-exercising I think is also worth a lot of merit. Brigades will do this, and this is the beauty of the community model – hopefully all the people there know each other. It is not until you get those second, third and fourth types of reserves that people are going to be coming from afar.

**John BERGER:** How have you found the fire ready campaign going with volunteers getting involved with it?

**Samantha COLLINS:** Yes, I think it has been working really well, and I think it has been a benefit to lots of communities around the state – having a program that allows the creation of more awareness within our community. Volunteers have jumped on board to support the program as well, so it has been really effective.

**Adam BARNETT:** And for me, it is the empowerment angle. You have heard over the last couple of weeks various observations that it is sometimes difficult to get residents to those meetings. It does coincide with large fire seasons. It is human nature; we become complacent. If we get a large fire, I can guarantee you we are going to be oversubscribed next year as residents will want to talk about it. But for me, this is about some of our messaging. I understand the pressures on all those in leadership positions, but we are falling into a pattern where people are waiting to be told what to do, when to do it and how to do it. We have got to build that into our community education around 'When you hear X, here are the things that you should be considering to do.' That is what we think will create more community resilience.

**John BERGER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks for being here, guys. This morning the CFA CEO confirmed that \$65 million per annum is needed just to maintain the current age of the fleet. What is your assessment of the government's recent announcement of \$100 million over 10 years?

**Adam BARNETT:** It is a very welcome announcement; any money from government is welcome. But I guess the point that we keep trying to stress is when it is nowhere near enough to even start arresting the problem, it is really difficult to stand here and say 'It's just not enough.' It is not enough. We need to build 100 trucks a year at a minimum just to keep the age of the fleet stagnant to where it is. The responses that we get are around, 'Well, we've built 80 trucks this year, and we've got 160 in the next couple of years.' Okay. That is still 80 a year. That is still less than 100. It also includes trucks that we ordered four or five years ago. We have done analysis, and I only just finished it a couple of days ago. Over the last 10 years, if you use the 100 trucks a year, we should have built 1000 trucks. The state has built 401. So you come at a deficit of 600 trucks. Yes, the extra \$10 million – fantastic – but that could be 20 trucks. It is not going to make a dent in the 600 that are required. Every year we kick this can down the road. How many more years is a volunteer expected to put their life and trust in a 37-year-old appliance? It will be 38 next year, it will be 39 the year after.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. In my area I have a lot of very angry volunteers. They feel that they were failed by command and that there was a lack of information and communications with the incident control centre or commander. They felt there was no support coming. They requested strike teams, and they were told there was no support. There are stories of FRV secondees walking off the fireground when their shift finished and leaving the volunteers to face the worst fire that they had seen in a very long time. What do you think the impact of these things on volunteer morale and your ability to maintain volunteers in the CFA is going forward?

**Adam BARNETT:** Look, it obviously makes it more difficult. If I go back to communications, there is fireground communications, but there is also the back of house communications. What you are hearing and what you are seeing the result of is the lack of connectedness of the local brigades, local captains and local crews to what the ICC is planning. If they were actually brought into the picture and required to be briefed on exactly who will be where and what we are trying to achieve, you would get far more confluence of people all working towards the same goal. Everyone on the fireground – I do not care whether you are paid or not – is there because they want to make a difference. I honestly believe that. But the systems are letting these people down. We use the saying all the time that we are set up for failure, because the systems and processes that we are relying on just simply are not there. That is why we get so frustrated when the government submission does not go into any of these issues that have become very clear to each of you through your testimonies. How is it that the people responsible for running these services are not telling you what they are hearing from the field, just as the field is telling you? We cannot have an inquiry like this after every single fire. Yet is that what is required to get people to honestly talk about what the issues are?

**Wendy LOVELL:** Have we become too risk averse? We hear stories of crews being told, 'No, you can't go into that paddock because there's a fire in that paddock.'

**Adam BARNETT:** That is a very, very vexed issue, so I am going to answer it very carefully. Community safety and firefighter safety are absolutely primary principles for us. I would say in the protection of life we should be risk adverse. This is the kicker around liability, and we have become a more litigious society – the effort, the resources that that now takes. Planned burning is the classic interface of where there is considerable litigation. That is the pressure that leaders are under, and that is the protection they need. We have got good coverage currently in legislation around immunity provisions but nothing that protects the agencies from the financial impact of litigation. I saw it in the Longwood fire brigade submission to your inquiry. They spoke about a planned burn that was cancelled just the month prior to this fire. Now, even if that had not made a difference – and I believe it would have, but even if it had not – that would have given that community the confidence to know that they had prepared for that fire. Now, it was cancelled because – I am trying not to be personal, but you know, the person decided that it was too risky. We have got to compound that with 'And what is the risk of not doing some of this stuff?' And that is what we have got to try and teach our people.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. I will pick up from Ms Lovell's question just then. We have noticed that there are a lot of people, especially in the Longwood area, who use their own private units in their vehicles because initially they were part of the CFA. They, for one reason or another, left. They did not like the politics, or they did not like joining the CFA and being told they could not fight a fire. Are you aware of how many of those private units were actually used to fill the gap of the CFA in the fires?

**Adam BARNETT:** No, there is no resource-tracking system that provides that. There will be anecdotal evidence, and as the after-action reviews are completed that information will start to come up, but it is not available at the moment.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** That is good. I was going to ask you where I can find that. What policy reforms would you like to see to improve the CFA's response?

**Adam BARNETT:** Look, that is a big question. We have provided a lot of recommendations obviously in our submission, which go to the heart of some of that. If I take the community aspect first, the hardening of critical infrastructure is just so critical to community safety. We are about making the public feel confident that if they do choose to leave early, they are able to get back to care for their livestock and their homes as quickly as possible. We need to prioritise the reopening of roads to make it safe for people to return, which means we have got to pour resources into hazardous tree assessments and the systems that – even, you know, some of the evidence around telecommunication providers was that they could not access the towers because it was unsafe for them to access the fireground. We should fix that. There should be crews that allow those people onto the fireground and do it safely. We talk about – and if we talk about a real, holistic level – retention programs for volunteers. After every fire season we get thousands of Victorians wanting to join CFA. Now, it is not always in the areas where it is most needed, but I often say that recruitment is just one tiny part of the puzzle. It is that real retention part.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Great. Thank you. Are there safety concerns that stand out regarding single-cab tankers that volunteers have spoken to you about?

**Adam BARNETT:** Absolutely. You have got half the crew riding on the back in the open air facing backwards, on old trucks. So the reliability comes into question and the fact that they are sitting in the hot sun or the snow. I will point out that CFA is not just a bushfire service; it is actually the largest urban service in Victoria. You know, we have got more than 200 urban brigades as part of the 1200 that just fight bushfires, so it is this integrated service. And the fact that you have got people that are cut off from their crew leader and their driver – they cannot hear the radio, so you do not get all that radio traffic to give you situational awareness. You are breathing in the smoke, the toxic fumes. You are sitting in the sun. And I make this point: they are sitting in fibreglass cocoons. We had to apply through a VESEP grant just to get money to make cushions for them to sit on. This is 2026.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Sorry, I am rushing through these. I have got a heap. Are volunteers reporting retention issues around the ESVF?

**Adam BARNETT:** Absolutely. And again, it is a very broad and diverse membership, so the impact of the ESVF, which out of respect I will be referring to as the emergency services tax, is around how it impacts each individual. And this is the problem that then faces a brigade: you have got people that are impacted differently, and that creates a lot of friction in a brigade. You will see it amongst people who lost their home and those that did not – that survivor guilt. It is the same with the emergency services tax. It is a disproportionate impact on those that, you know, are contributing a very large part of the service. We asked for some reasonable amendments. We asked for it not to be passed, but if it was going to be passed, we asked for amendments, and one which just triggers respect: just take the name 'volunteers' out of it. How offensive is it to have a tax with 'volunteers' named in it? We asked for it to be taken out, and we cannot understand, given it would have had zero impact on the revenue raised, why the government could not extend.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. Thanks for coming along today. I just want to understand your governance structure a bit more. You mentioned that your representative model is based on brigade membership. Are individual volunteers also members of VFBV?

**Adam BARNETT:** Members in the term that they are CFA members, and under the Act, we act as the elected representatives of all volunteers, so yes in that respect. But if we look strictly – and this is where the legislation makes things a little difficult – we are formed under the CFA Act and our role is in the Act, but we are not a statutory authority. We are private, organised under the associations Act, so we do not have any of the protections thereof. What we call it is individual relevance, and it goes to the peer review model of a membership model. Under the associations Act, to be a member there has got to be a benefit and a fee. How offensive would it be to create a model where a volunteer would actually have to pay to be a member of the organisation that has been given a role in the Act to represent them and consult with them? That is why we try to take this brigade approach; it avoids a fee having to be paid by the individual member. But organising and trying to represent 50,000 individuals is incredibly challenging. That is why a lot of thought and effort has been put into a structure which involves peer review, because frankly, we want the community to be at the centre of every decision and policy decision that we make, and that is going to be very difficult if you have got individual motivations. This allows brigades – and they are already exercised to – to do it, and that is why the model is so important.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** It sounds all very communal, and quite different to the way a union is structured, for instance.

**Adam BARNETT:** It is completely different. We are not a union, and we are not entitled to have a union, as volunteers. So we have none of the legal protections of a union.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** How does your group differ from this other group, the CFA Volunteers Group, I think they are called?

**Adam BARNETT:** Our role, as I said, is laid out in the Act. Our predecessor associations date back to pre-CFA, so we have always existed. We existed before the agencies. We have a legislated role. Obviously – and I have great sympathy for volunteers who are extremely frustrated and angry – we are not a union. We do not have the protections of a union. Some volunteers look at how unions typically organise; they are more political. They are certainly more assertive in – I do not want to call them stunts, because that sounds disrespectful – how they get public attention. That is not what we do. So there are people that are frustrated, ‘We want you to go harder.’ My experience is we have a legislated role to fulfil, we are a peak body, but most importantly, we are a charity. Under the *Charities Act* and under our protections under the ATO to have a deductible gift recipient status, we have very clear guidelines in place that ensure we cannot fuff this line between advocacy and political activism. It is something that that the board and VFBV take very seriously.

If you are a frontline volunteer, that answer does not always rest well with you. You are just really angry, you are feeling really disappointed, you just want more. We respect the right of any volunteer in any brigade to say what they think. We try to support all brigades. But it goes back to, if we cannot get consensus – and the EST was the classic example. There was great disharmony in brigades as to how this notion of brigades going offline was deeply, deeply controversial. Therefore, that was something that the majority of brigades overwhelmingly looked at as probably a step too far. But we did not want to disrespect those brigades that felt they had no choice but to just be heard. It is a really, really vexing problem.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mrs Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you. I am just interested in new stations. We heard the government announce recently \$26 million for 10 new stations. Do you know how many new stations have actually been built over the last 12 years?

**Adam BARNETT:** I do not think anybody can tell you that because it goes into a big black hole. But you hear me talk a lot about financial sustainability, and I always say that as volunteers we run the most efficient model in Victoria. The state benefits from almost \$ 2.5 billion of volunteer output each year. We are not opposed to efficiencies, as long as the efficiency does not end up with a dilution of what it is we are trying to achieve. But if there is a more efficient way to do it, volunteers as taxpayers themselves are perfectly fine with, ‘Okay, if there is a cheaper way to achieve the same result, let’s be open to it.’ There is a cheaper way to build

CFA fire stations today. Give the building of fire stations back to CFA, and you will be able to save half the cost under the current CSBA model.

**Gaelle BROAD:** That was my next question, actually. Has the cost of building increased or decreased since the establishment of the Community Safety Building Authority?

**Adam BARNETT:** Increased.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Do you have any examples?

**Adam BARNETT:** No, because they do not publish their builds or their prices. All they publish is their tender documents.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Right. Okay, so there is a bit of a lack of transparency there. Just with the CFA, we have heard from CFAs about how they fundraise for their own appliances. Can you give examples? People do not necessarily understand that and they might think the government is funding the CFA. What types of things are they going out and funding themselves?

**Adam BARNETT:** It was our biggest argument around pleas for removing the name 'volunteer' out of the emergency services tax. These are people who are tin-rattling, running barbecues to save up for the equipment, the tools and the trucks to do the work that the state is asking them to do. VESEP – we helped design that program. It is a fantastic program. You are not going to hear me say a bad word about VESEP, but I ask you to consider that last year alone volunteers contributed \$4 million of their own money to top up what was being received from government. This is the goodwill that volunteers are providing the system and this is a slap in the face. This is why you are seeing the frustration of volunteers in the field. This is why we are having such a hard time trying to keep morale up, because they see this slap in the face, and they are literally running sausage sizzles for defibrillators, for first-aid kits, to replace brigade-owned trucks and the equipment. The classic is all the issues with communications. There is an answer at the moment, and that is called Starlink, but the agencies are not even close to providing Starlink to brigades. So what is happening out there in 1208 volunteer fire brigades? They are out there fundraising for their own Starlinks, trying to get permission to buy them, because they see the problem and they just want it fixed so they can help their communities, and that is what will always drive volunteers.

**Gaelle BROAD:** We have heard from smaller brigades that they might struggle with that 30 per cent contribution that is required, whereas in larger towns they might be able to raise the funds more quickly. Do you think that needs to be reviewed?

**Adam BARNETT:** That is some misinformation. For the last 7 years brigades have been entitled to apply for a hardship grant, which will waive the entire volunteer contribution.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay. That is encouraging to hear. I was not aware of that. Today we heard about the single-cab tankers. It is 10 years away until they are phased out –

**Adam BARNETT:** No, it is not even close to 10 years away. Sorry to interrupt you.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Well, what do you think it is, and what are the concerns?

**Adam BARNETT:** Real simple – 650 trucks. Start doing the math at around – and I am going to use very ballpark figures – half a million dollars per truck. Ten years is not even going to be close. This is why – and again, we lay it out in our submission – we think there needs to be a minimum investment in total of \$61 million a year. We have proposed that all that does is freeze the fleet. The only way to remove the 650 single-cab tankers that we are most concerned about is a five-year expedited program that not only is replacing what should be replaced anyway, but a five-year program will add another \$60 million for five years per year. Getting that to \$120M means in five years time we will have each of those single-cab trucks off the road.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Adam and Samantha, thanks so much for your time today. We really appreciate the evidence you have given to the inquiry. The time for this session has concluded. We will be providing you with a proof copy of the transcript in about a week to review. With that, the committee will take a short break and reset for the next witness. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**