

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

Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services,

Rachaele May, Executive Director, Policy and Knowledge, Bushfire and Forest Services,

Carolyn Jackson, Deputy Secretary, Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples, and

Beth Jones, Deputy Secretary and Chief Executive, Agriculture Victoria, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

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

Can I ask everyone who is with us today to please ensure that your mobile phones are switched to silent and that we minimise background noise.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I welcome any members of the public who might be watching the live stream or joining us here in the public gallery.

I remind everyone participating in today's proceedings to please be respectful at all times.

For our witnesses today, all the evidence we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during 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 Parliament.

All the evidence is being recorded, and witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. Those transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor, the Chair of the committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask our committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Gaelle.

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

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

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

The CHAIR: And we have Jacinta Ermacora joining us online when we get the technology to work. For the Hansard record, if I could just, before we start, get each of the witnesses to please state their name and the organisation they are appearing on behalf of. We will start with you, Beth.

Beth JONES: Good morning. Beth Jones, the Chief Executive of Agriculture Victoria at the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

Carolyn JACKSON: Good morning. I am Carolyn Jackson. I am the Deputy Secretary of Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples with DEECA, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services for DEECA.

Rachaele MAY: Rachaele May, Executive Director of Policy and Knowledge in Bushfire and Forest Services at DEECA.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. You all know how this thing works. We will give you a chance to make an opening statement, and then we will get into questions. Over to you.

Visual presentation.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to come and answer questions today. This is a quick snapshot of the department's emergency management responsibilities and how we are organised around those. I will start with this organisational chart. The point to make about this org chart is that Forest Fire Management Victoria sits within my group in the department, led by the chief fire officer. He is in my team in a day-to-day sense, but when we are in emergency management/emergency response mode, the chief fire officer discharges his responsibilities that are delegated directly from the secretary. Mr Hardman will be in the next panel, and there may be aspects of our answers today that we refer to him for an operational perspective.

This is the same chart, but it is outlining that the Office of Bushfire Risk Management, which is relevant to the terms of reference of this committee, sits in my group in a day-to-day sense, led by Rachaele, but also has a direct line to the secretary through the OBRM advisory panel, an independent panel that advises the secretary and guides the department's work. DEECA is a large and dispersed department. We have a broad range of responsibilities. Across the top of the slide there, you can see those. We have about 6000 people spread across 86 locations. Under the state emergency management plan, we are the lead agency for one class 1 emergency, being bushfires on public land. We are also the lead agency for 15 different types of class 2 emergencies. They include wildlife, energy, water and agriculture. I will pass to Ms Jones to talk about agriculture.

Beth JONES: Thank you. Agriculture Victoria have a number of roles that we play in relation to emergency management and bushfire. The three key areas are around our preparedness, which involves making sure we are working with stakeholders in terms of outlooks and readiness for emergencies, training and briefing our staff and also maintaining our own doctrine and plans in terms of how we respond. In the response itself, we have a key role around supporting response and relief around agriculture and animal welfare that is quite broad, but it addresses urgent animal welfare needs, supporting landholders and working in with the broader response with other agencies. We also have a role in terms of coordinating and delivering recovery programs as they relate to agriculture, be that assisting with financial assistance or access to services or working with other agencies and actually delivering a range of recovery programs. I will hand over to Ms Jackson in relation to her role.

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you. My group has four main connections in with emergency management and response. The first one is that we lead recovery preparedness and coordination across the environment portfolio and DEECA portfolios as well, so that would pick up recovery needs of entities such as Parks Victoria. We also lead wildlife emergency response, so wildlife welfare and wildlife recovery, and that includes preparedness and planning. We oversee government's climate action work, so whole-of-government policy or the whole-of-government advice to government, as well as a range of deliverables under the *Climate Action Act*. It is worth noting that departments and entities are responsible for implementing changes as a result of climate change and adaptation to climate change, but we do run that whole-of-government policy. Lastly, I also have the circular economy within my group, and the connection to emergency management is that there are often government approval and funding associated with the free disposal of emergency-related waste.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: We just have a couple more slides on the bushfire season itself. Leading up to summer, as long-term forecasts firmed up and it became clearer that we were likely to have a big season, the department and the fire agencies went to government with a request for supplementary funding. That was provided. The DEECA portion of that funding enabled us to do things like recruiting an additional 130 seasonal firefighters. That was on top of the 500 that we usually recruit. It also enabled us to bring on our aircraft early. Fifteen of them were started early and pre-positioned across the state. In the lead-up to summer we also delivered an accelerated repair program. There was some publicity leading up to summer around a cracking issue in a portion of our fleet, and they were all repaired ready for the height of summer.

A couple of headline stats about our response: Forest Fire Management Victoria responded to 542 bushfires on public land. We also supported the CFA as a support agency for many hundreds more. Eighty-seven per cent of those were put out at less than 5 hectares. FFMVic with the conservation regulator patrol for unattended camp fires as a prevention strategy. We put out 199 this year. We have had 71 wildlife assessors deployed across eight fires, doing 439 days of service. Likewise, more than 380 Ag Vic staff were deployed to 14 fires. Our water group worked with utilities to protect water assets or to restore services when there were some impacts on water services as a result of the fires. Through our energy group we worked with electricity distribution businesses to restore critical infrastructure when they were impacted by power outages as a result of the bushfires. We are very proud of all of the work of our people that sits behind those statistics – incredible hard work and skills from a lot of people throughout the whole season.

And just one last slide: DEECA's role does not stop when the fires are out. We have broad roles in relation to the immediate relief and the longer-term recovery efforts. On public land that includes restoring roads, bridges, crossings and visitor infrastructure. It is repairing and restoring the fences that are damaged by suppression activities or bushfires on the boundary between public land and private land. Where there are immediate risks to wildlife populations, we have activities there. Ms Jones has already outlined the broad supports that we provide for farmers and rural communities. I have spoken about the essential service restoration; that has often got a long tail. Importantly, we facilitate power outage payments for eligible community members. With waste, it is waiving the waste levy and rebating any gate fees for community members to support their clean-up, working closely with Emergency Recovery Victoria. So that is it; that is our snapshot run-through. We are very happy to answer questions that the committee has.

The CHAIR: No worries. We will go to questions now. You mentioned you had recruited additional personnel. Was it 150?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: 130.

The CHAIR: 130 additional personnel. Why and when were those decisions made?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: As the long-term forecasts firmed up and were progressively more certain over May, June, July, that period, and it was clear that we were likely to have a protracted season, that is when we went to government requesting that funding. The fire agencies did that together, and \$80 million was provided. A large portion of that went to DEECA for Forest Fire Management Victoria.

The CHAIR: I am sorry – that was additional to your existing budget funding?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Yes, that was supplementation. The 130 extra seasonal firefighters is on top of our usual 500, which is on top of our existing ongoing workforce.

The CHAIR: The committee spent last week in regional Victoria in a number of communities where obviously both the direct firefighting on public land elements emerged but also the interface where private land abuts public land, and several people raised the issue of fencing. What is the policy on fence replacement on the interface between private and public land? How is it supposed to work?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: It is always a priority after a bushfire. Some of the immediate effort to repair those fences is done within the response, but there is often a longer tail to that work, and it is done in recovery phase. There is a formula that is applied in terms of how the costs are shared, but Forest Fire Management Victoria, when we are the control agency, do come in and do that repair work, and it could be repair work required because of things we have had to do in the firefight – pushing a fence over to get through.

The CHAIR: If you need to knock over a fence to get through, you will go back and repair it afterwards?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Yes, or it could be as a result of the fire itself; it has caused damage. We take accountability for that work as well.

The CHAIR: One of the other issues that emerged in our discussions and is probably a waste issue is – there are issues about fees, but I will leave that to one side. It will probably come up. Others will bring that up. We had a particular issue with what we do with a lot of burnt-out polyurethane water tanks that are sitting on private land. From a circular economy point of view, from a waste management point of view, do we have a

strategy for dealing with that particular type of quite common waste that is on a lot of properties across Victoria at the moment?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. We do not have a specific policy for that particular waste. From a broader circular economy perspective we are absolutely looking for everything that we can to avoid landfill; that is obviously a place of last resort, I guess, for the resources that we have and that we use. So we are definitely looking at plastics in all forms as a broader piece. There is a lot of work going on. This is outside, obviously, bushfire response, but a lot of work is going on across the country with environment ministers. But in terms of that particular one, there is not a specific policy, and so I am not sure whether those items were taken to landfill as a result of the fire.

The CHAIR: Yes. Okay. No worries. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Now, I have a lot of questions that I will not be able to get through, so I am just putting on record I will be sending these to you via the secretariat afterwards. In relation to Safer Together, the IGEM, the inspector-general for emergency management, has forecast in reports that it is basically relying too heavily on planning, modelling, engagement and governance but not actually doing the work around fuel management capability and delivery. So my question is: how does DEECA explain that nearly a decade after Safer Together commenced, the IGEM still finds that fuel management reforms have not translated into sustainable, system-wide operational capability?

Rachaele MAY: I will take that, Ms Bath. Thank you for your question. The Safer Together program brings together lots of different agencies across the bushfire sector. It started with a tranche of initiative funding and is now an ongoing program. That includes the other fire agencies as well as other broader members of the bushfire sector, including local government, transport and EMV. That program looks to fund resources particularly within CFA and also DEECA to deliver on-ground work, but also supports, I guess, funding other initiatives. So it has been used to fund grants through local government, for example, to increase the planning and capability at that local level. It has been used to support our work on roadsides, and it has also been used to fund research. So it is still continuing, that program, as a cross-sector group that looks at how best to allocate that funding to increase the capability across the sector.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I do not think that quite answered my question, but I will take it as read. You just mentioned the grants to communities. Why has DEECA chosen to channel a growing proportion of the Safer Together funding into short-term council grants and projects rather than building enduring CFA fuel management and brigade capability as envisaged by the inspector-general for emergency management?

Rachaele MAY: Quite a proportion of that Safer Together funding does go to the CFA to fund, I understand, their vegetation management program.

Melina BATH: Has that funding gone up over the years, and could you share that with us, on notice?

Rachaele MAY: I can certainly, on notice, provide you a breakdown of how the funding has been provided over the years. Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you. The inspector-general also speaks to recommendation 2 in relation to the IGEM fuel management. Why has DEECA failed to deliver the core risk-based fuel management framework underpinning Safer Together for more than four years after the government accepted this IGEM recommendation 2?

Rachaele MAY: DEECA has a target that has been set for it to keep the residual risk associated with fuel-driven bushfire to at or below 70 per cent each year, and 'residual risk' means the amount of risk that is left over after fuel treatment has been conducted. The department has met that target each year that it has been in place across the state.

Melina BATH: It has actually met it on a state-wide proportion, but there are regions and districts that are well over that 70 per cent. That is actually quite a failure, as I see it and many others; not just Melina Bath but many others are very concerned that it is up to 83, 85 per cent in some districts. Doing a state-wide statement like that does not reflect the risk to certain regions and districts.

Rachaele MAY: The state-wide risk of 70 per cent is then distributed across each of the regions and districts to support allocation of the program on ground, and our chief fire officer could speak to that in more detail later. The 70 per cent target is not a uniform target for each region, because the risk is different if you compare the Mallee to the Dandenongs, for example. So there are different proportions across each of the districts.

Melina BATH: Yes. But it is still higher – some of those districts are actually well above 80 per cent, and that is, I think, quite frightening.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. Likewise, I have quite a few questions that I do not think we will be able to get through, so I might send some through on notice. Yesterday when we were in Harcourt we heard from a number of wildlife rescuers about the concerns around the response to wildlife, particularly in that Harcourt area but also on other firegrounds. One of the concerns that was raised a number of times was that wildlife rescuers were blocked from entering properties, even where they might have had the permission of a private landholder. Where roads had been reopened, private landholders were allowed back on their properties, but those wildlife rescuers were being blocked by, sometimes, armed officers saying they were not allowed to enter the property to attend to wildlife. They were apparently qualified to do that work. Can you explain why that was the case?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. I might just give a little bit of context in terms of the wildlife response. First of all, we do have incident management teams that are running the fire response. They will make assessments about when it is safe for people to enter into a fireground. I know in the wildlife sector we have a lot of really amazing volunteers and professionals who are very passionate and keen to get in as quickly as possible, but human safety is paramount in all of the decisions that are taken. We obviously do not want to let people into areas that are unsafe, because we do need to make sure that it is safe. There are a range of actions that need to occur before an area is deemed safe; there is a hazardous tree assessment, for example, and an assessment of the roads and the tracks and other things. I am not sure of that specific example, but there are a number of activities and assessments that need to occur before an area is open.

In terms of the broader wildlife response, we did have 71 individuals that were deployed to the fire events across the state. That was comprised of 54 people from DEECA and Parks Victoria and a further 17 members of the Wildlife Emergency Support Network. We had just over 5000 animals that were sighted by those accredited and qualified assessors, and just over a thousand were then taken in for further assessment. There were, unfortunately, as there always are, a number that were euthanised and a number that were taken into care, but the vast majority were left where they were. After being sighted or assessed, the assessors were confident that those animals could remain in the landscape. There was a big wildlife response that was undertaken by a number of people – those 71 people. It equated to about 439, I think, days of wildlife response across those eight major fires where people were deployed, so it was a significant effort. But the human safety aspect is certainly number one, and that may have been why people were not allowed into particular areas for a period while those assessments were underway.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. Thank you. From what we heard it sounded like the private landholders were allowed back onto those properties and that the roads had been opened, so I think for those rescuers there did not seem to be an obvious reason and they were not provided with reasons for why – at least that is the evidence we heard – they could not re-enter those properties. The Wildlife Emergency Support Network, was that activated in the Harcourt–Ravenswood fireground area?

Carolyn JACKSON: I am just having a look, sorry. So the eight fires where there were wildlife welfare emergency response activities were the Boinka– Morrison Road, Wyperfeld National Park, the Walwa River Road, Longwood–Berrys Lane, Shelford–Mt Mercer Road, the Otways complex, the Dargo–Wonnangatta complex, the Yalmy–Serpentine Creek 2 and the Ravenswood–Fogartys Gap Road. They were the eight major fires where there was wildlife welfare response deployed.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Good morning. Sorry about the technicals earlier. I want to ask about the technology being used in defence industries and whether you have heard about those sorts of products, specifically, I suppose, cameras oversighting bush to early-detect fires. And I understand that DEECA has got a

pilot program and the Victorian timber products association also have a program that they are seeking to expand. I guess I want to know what you see the status of that program from the DEECA perspective is.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Yes, I will take that one. Thank you very much for the question. We do engage a lot of really sophisticated technology in our firefighting, including for detecting fires. The camera trial that you are talking about is known as project pinpoint. In addition to the 80 fire towers with people in them across the state, eight of those towers have cameras that we are trialling. They are AI enabled so that they are continually learning how to detect bushfires and feed that information back to people that we have in our incident control centres. We also have two relocatable cameras that can be moved to areas of highest risk. That project has been going for a couple of years. Even within the lifetime of the project, with everything involving AI, the advancements have been huge in terms of how usable that information is, and it is certainly making us more efficient. We have worked with –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Sorry to interrupt because I have limited time.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Sure.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So the link between early detection of a fire in an isolated place and response – and this is something that communities have raised with us across the state in the last couple of weeks – do you have an effective response to an early detection?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Yes, we do. We have integrated systems for detecting the fires and a whole range of activities, including putting up recon flights when there has been a lightning band move through the landscape. We have really good heat detection technology that tells us where the fires are, even before you can see the smoke, and that information is then fed through into our incident management teams and they activate their response. In high-risk conditions we have those incident management teams stood up and pre-positioned, so they are ready to go. We also have then a direct line to 000 so that if the public report those fires, they also enact the response. The response – and the chief fire officer can speak in detail about this from an operational sense – is a very sophisticated integration of our air resources and our ground crews, who are also on standby and pre-positioned. We have the incident control centres managing that aerial response and in direct contact with the ground crews.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is time.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Is my time up, because I cannot see it on this screen.

The CHAIR: That is your time up. That is okay. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks very much. I have got a number of questions that I will put on notice as well. We hear that all emergency services work as one, so why did DEECA implement fireground communications plans that were incompatible with other emergency services? And that was evident through the issuing of statewide bulletins. How does this happen when we are assured that the sector plans, trains and works together as one fully interoperable?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Thank you for the question. We do work as one, and the command and control arrangements are best explained by the chiefs in the next panel. But what we do have in place is, apart from what is happening on the day, we provide services for each other in terms of our technology and systems and there are systems that DEECA provides for the whole sector. I know that there were some issues raised with an aspect of one of our systems, particularly a new format around our incident plans, and that there were some hiccups at the start of the season in terms of being able to provide those plans in a hard copy to crews that did not have access to technology. That is certainly something that we are aware of and we are addressing throughout the season. It is also fair to say that it is a theme that has come out of the after-action reviews that are underway. Those processes will follow through and we will get outcomes from those after-action reviews, but we do know that that is one of the things that will come out of it. But I would say that is one small issue that occurred in the context of a large number of systems that are there to support our incident control teams, our deployment systems, and our tracking of time and those sorts of things.

Wendy LOVELL: I would not say it is a small hiccup because these things are critical information plans and contact work plans and contact details are uploaded. Did DEECA gain support and approval from other emergency services who expected to use the platform before implementing the new system?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: There is with all of our systems projects where we roll out new systems or new parts of systems. Governance involving all of the agencies, there has been some consideration of the approvals process. That is another thing that I know is being discussed through the after-action reviews. I do not have information immediately about how that worked, but certainly we involve all of the agencies in the development of those systems.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. Regarding the department structure, in your structure it said that the chief fire officer reported to the Deputy Secretary of Forest Fire Management. Why hasn't DEECA implemented recommendation 63 from the royal commission by having the chief fire officer as a statutory office holder?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: The chief fire officer holds delegations directly from the secretary and so they are

Wendy LOVELL: But the recommendation was for them to be a statutory office holder.

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: Those legislative changes have not been made. The mechanism that is used is the delegation of the secretary's powers.

Wendy LOVELL: So why haven't they been made?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: I would have to take that on notice in terms of the history of decision-making.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. If you could take it on notice, it would be great. But I have got others that I will put on notice as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. During the entire inquiry DEECA has not had the most popular of reputations. We have heard a lot of complaints. Now, just for the residents, I am really wanting to know: are you hearing the complaints yourself, and what are you doing for that in the future? Are you doing a review of everything that has happened this past bushfire season?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: . Thank you. Yes, we are undertaking reviews for this season. We are doing that, as DEECA, at multiple levels, so statewide and regional, and we are also a part of the emergency management sector's review processes that are being led by the emergency management commissioner – so absolutely. In terms of different incidents that have been raised, and raised during the season, there are always incidents raised throughout a season, and we investigate all of them. The level of formality depends on the context and how serious the issues are. But we are very mindful that people are in very stressful situations in bushfires, and it can be very sensitive. We know that our people work really hard. We know that they have good relationships with the local communities that they live in. If something happens, we do want to investigate it, and we have during this season. But in all the incidents that have been raised with us directly prior to this inquiry, we have not found anything untoward that our staff have done. We have understood how some conflicts have arisen in some situations, but we have dealt with all of those.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. How do the residents know where to go and how to reach out?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: In what context?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Say, if they are not happy with how DEECA behaved during the fires or after in the aftermath, how do they reach out to file a complaint? Do they have to go online, or does DEECA actually come and talk to them and liaise with the community?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: There are a lot of community meetings that happen during the response, and then there are also community meetings and emergency recovery committees that are set up with local government and local community members, so there are avenues in that sense. There are also online avenues through the DEECA website for raising issues. There are phone numbers there, but also you can ring the DEECA customer

contact centre. That is sometimes how things are raised with us, and then they get fed to the right people to deal with them.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you, Chair. Thank you. I guess we as a committee are doing a report with some recommendations, but there is an urgent matter that I would like to address this morning. You mentioned you are responsible for the waste disposal program, the fee waiver. It has been brought up with us a number of times that the deadline for that is 12 May, which is less than two weeks away. Yet we have got a state clean-up program that has been a bit of a disaster, with the rollout, to be honest, and I am assuming that you are aware of that. Because there is a two-tiered approach, it is causing delays with insurance companies. It is a very different process to what has been done in the past. Will you commit to extending the waiver – some have said to the end of the year – to provide people the adequate time they need?

Carolyn JACKSON: Thank you for the question. You are right. The waiver started on 13 January, and it is due to complete or end on 12 May. Under the legislation there is a defined period that it can be set for. That is not to say a new one cannot be set to give you the extension that you are asking for. I do know that recently we have heard that there may be some concerns that the waiver is ending on 12 May, so that is something that at the moment is under active consideration. It will require a decision by the Minister for Environment – under the legislation it is the Minister for Environment that issues the waiver – but it is certainly something that my group is looking at.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. Can you commit to following that up with the minister –

Carolyn JACKSON: Sure.

Gaelle BROAD: and giving an update, a public update, on that? I think a lot of residents are very concerned. Some of them have not even started. Some residents are just coming in for the first time seeking assistance and support. So I think the rollout of the clean-up program is certainly directly impacting the ability for people to take their bushfire waste to the tip.

Carolyn JACKSON: I am happy to take that on notice and follow it up. It is worth noting that when we do issue a waiver there is quite a lot of communication out with local governments and making sure that everyone is aware of it. If it is extended, I am happy to commit that we will do that same process to make sure as many people know as possible.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you, because I think there are about 16 or 19 local governments that it impacts, and a number of them have raised concerns on behalf of residents, as well as us hearing directly.

I am interested in animal welfare. We heard earlier just about the wildlife. I am interested in the livestock as well. We are aware that over 45,000 livestock have been lost. Some say that is an underestimate. Certainly in Harcourt they reported that there were not many AgVic staff on the ground. There may have been shortages due to people being on leave. We heard in the highlands from people that said that no-one came. I spoke to a farmer, and they had thousands and thousands of livestock to put down. We heard from people in Ruffy, in Fawcett – similar concerns. How many staff did you actually have that were trained and qualified out on the ground assisting with putting down animals, because we heard about teenagers having to do it for days, and it has caused a lot of angst in the community.

Beth JONES: Thanks, Ms Broad. This is a really critical issue, and we certainly know that access to firegrounds to ensure animal welfare needs were met and to support landholders at that time was a really critical issue that has been raised through evidence you have heard, through even our own conversations.

Gaelle BROAD: Do you know how many staff you actually had out?

Beth JONES: Yes. We had 380 staff on the ground the whole time. I would need to come back to you with the exact number of staff in terms of a breakdown of who did what.

Gaëlle BROAD: I would be interested in that specific – because obviously it is a trained professional, and we heard from Wildlife Victoria that they had 12 vets capable, but only one was called to assist.

Beth JONES: We certainly had multiple teams on the ground across the 14 fires. We exercised our surge capacity with vets, so we had vets from interstate, the RSPCA and our own staff who were on the ground. But I can give you an exact breakdown of how many vets and animal health staff were on the ground at any one time.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We have probably got time for one more quick question if someone wants to grab it?

Gaëlle BROAD: Yes. Can I? Is that all right? Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will leave it to you.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. Just on the emergency fodder program, we know that with animal welfare too you need that immediate support. There were a lot of people in the local community – I know in Harcourt, and Annabelle Cleeland with the Longwood fires – doing a lot of work to get that fodder out asap. With the Victorian Farmers Federation, it can take about a week to roll out these programs. Do you have things in train? Because obviously we are the most bushfire-prone areas – or one of them – in the world. Are programs ready to go to roll out quickly? How do you provide support in that immediate need?

Beth JONES: Thanks, Ms Broad – another really critical issue. Yes, we do have programs ready. That emergency fodder agreement that you referenced with the VFF is something that we have in place all the time. We had actually exercised it with the VFF prior to the fire season; that was ready to go. What I would say is there always is a little bit of time that is taken just to activate the logistics around these things in terms of having 14 different firegrounds, the coordination of who donates and the logistics of how to get that hay from various places around the state or interstate to people who need it. Then you do have operational complications around how some people can accept the hay, but they might have machinery or equipment that is damaged that would allow them to unload it. There is quite a bit of logistics involved. Yes, they are ready to go. There is a little bit of time taken just to get the logistics up to the particular fire, but in reference to how we enact that too, we know the critical role that donations in the community play, like Ms Cleeland's fodder area. We did seek to work very closely with them as best we could to support the work of the community at that time as well and make sure there was a good balance of that community effort, as well as the work of the VFF and government.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Last question, Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. You said in your presentation that you went to government for extra funding and you had extra funding provided, but what was the quantum of your actual request to government for funding and how much was actually provided?

Kelly CROSTHWAITE: We requested \$80 million and were provided \$80 million across the fire agencies. DEECA's share of that was in the vicinity of \$65 million. A portion of that was for aviation, as I said, and then recruiting the extra firefighters, some extra repel crew members, and additional fleet and equipment to support those extra people. We had to start our standby rosters earlier, so there was funding for that. We retained some heavy plant bulldozers that would have otherwise been retired. We kept them going for longer, and we were able to engage experienced incident controllers and similar roles as well, using that funding.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Thank you all, for participating in today's hearings. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review before it is made public. And with that, the committee will take a short break to get ready for the next witnesses. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.