

# **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**

Peter Marshall, Secretary, Victorian Branch, United Firefighters Union of Australia;

John Houston, President, Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group Inc; and

Andrew Weidemann, Chair (*via videoconference*), Across Victoria Alliance.

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

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

All evidence is being recorded, and you 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. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. I will ask committee members to introduce themselves.

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

**Melina BATH:** Hello. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

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

**John BERGER:** John Berger, Member for Southern Metro. For transparency, I am known to Peter through my former role as a branch secretary of the Transport Workers' Union.

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

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

**The CHAIR:** And a committee member online.

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

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for joining us today. For the Hansard record, I would ask each of you to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, please.

**Peter MARSHALL:** Yes. Thanks, Chair. My name is Peter Marshall, on behalf of the United Firefighters Union of Australia.

**John HOUSTON:** Yes. Thanks, Chair. John Houston, I represent CFA Volunteers Group.

**The CHAIR:** Andrew?

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** Thanks, Chair. Andrew Weidemann. I represent the Across Victoria Alliance, which is made up of groups from right across western Victoria and includes some interstate groups as well. We have more than 240,000 followers.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Peter MARSHALL:** Thanks, Chair. If I could –

**The CHAIR:** I will just explain how the proceedings are going to work. We will invite you to make an opening statement and then we will ask you questions. Over to you.

**Peter MARSHALL:** Thank you, Chair. We have actually handed up some extra documents, Chair, which you should receive. We were understanding that the terms of reference did not go to fire service reform or, alternatively, secondment. Having heard the evidence today, we have prepared information which is evidentiary based – it is factual. It has come from the secondment department of FRV, which has a staff complement of around 12 people.

I am really disappointed, to say the least, that the chief fire officer of the CFA, nor the commissioner of Fire Rescue Victoria, nor the implementation monitor, provided this committee with the actual data and factual information out of that department. You will see that I have got a response there in relation to notes, which you should have in front of you, and then I have got a supplementary document tabled at the public hearing. All that information is factual information. It is not speculation, it is not opinions, it is actually based on data and it is based on the legislative reform. For example, if I could just talk about, if the committee are going to include fire service reform and secondment in the terms of reference, our advice was that that was removed, so we did not prepare as such, but we have now. If the committee are going to prepare on that basis, what we say very carefully is that the information that this committee needs to evaluate the secondment program and fire service reform has not been provided to you. This documentation does provide it to you.

In relation to the legal framework regarding secondment, the Parliament has already decided the question of parliamentary reform – that is, it reverted CFA to a fully volunteer fire service and created FRV. In relation to some of the submissions of other parties, in particular the VFBV where it says the experienced command staff claim is contradicted by data, the VFBV submission asserts at page 27 that volunteers reported that a lack of suitably qualified CFA command personnel seriously impacted CFA response in the 2026 bushfires. Page 2 of the notes document that I have given you actually breaks down that 66.2 per cent of command staff seconded to CFA are former CFA employees; 84.4 per cent of assistant chief fire officer roles are filled by personnel who are former employees of the CFA; 87.5 regional controllers, a role that existed prior to the bushfire royal commission; 100 per cent of CFA managers community safety; 50 per cent of commander roles. Again, this committee has not been provided with the data, and I question whether the committee should recall – or alternatively you have the power to actually hear from the secondment department themselves.

Pre reform, if we can talk about long-term vacancies, Chair, on page 3, there were 19 vacancies. Two years past the reform the improvement is substantial. Not 19 prior to fire service reform, across to early 2026, the period of the inquiry, examined a weekly rate of seconded positions regard 87.9 per cent to 95 per cent. If we actually go to evidentiary base, and these are secondment data figures, if we actually have a look on page 4 of the document titled ‘Supplementary document tabled at public hearing’, you will see the actual data that you were not given. And I question why the chief fire officer at the CFA and Commissioner Freeman and the implementation monitor did not provide you with that data. For example, if you have a look at the breakdown on page 4: 29 December 2025, 87.9 per cent of positions were filled. If you have a look at the monthly percentage, it is 89 per cent. If you have a look at the month of February 2026, it is 92.1 per cent. In relation to March it is 90.6 per cent and in relation to April it is 84 per cent.

The other issue, Chair, is let us talk about facts and what the legislation is. If you have a look at section 25C of the fire service reform Act – and that is at page 4 on paragraph 18 – it provides the CFA with the sole power to request relief from personnel and it provides the CFA power to agree to particular relief and personnel. The arrangement is 42 days notice. If there is an area for improvement, CFA have been getting short notice in relation to the requirement for relief, and that is set out in paragraph 18, subsections (b) and (c), so 26 days in relation to median notification and 32 days – well below the 42 days – so there is a problem that needs to be referred to.

In relation to the other issue of the chief fire officer not having control or dual commissioning, that is simply not true. Not only is it misleading, if you have a look at the agreement, which is an official agreement signed by CFA and FRV, the secondment arrangements agreement, you have a look at page 7, and I will quote paragraph 7:

The CO, CFA has the order and control of the work of all Secondees who are made available to CFA under this Agreement.  
The Parties agree that all Secondees will implement command and control arrangements at the direction of the CO, CFA.

In relation to 7(b), command and control arrangements and incidents will be managed in accordance with the chief officer’s standing orders and operational procedures. It is simply an untruth which has been provided to this committee. I compel – sorry, I request, respectfully – that the committee actually compel the secondees

department to provide the actual data and come along and give evidence, because you have been grossly misled.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you. I am just conscious of time. I want to let the other witnesses make an opening statement.

**Peter MARSHALL:** I understand that, Chair, but you gave the VFBV 45 minutes. There are three of us. This is 15 minutes.

**The CHAIR:** No, you have got 45 minutes as well.

**Peter MARSHALL:** I understand that. I just want to make a point, if I could, please. We were preparing on the basis of lack of funding for trucks et cetera. The issue regarding secondment – you have not been provided the factual information. We are extremely concerned that you have been grossly misled, and I need that on the record. The documents that you have been given this afternoon are actually data from the seconded department – legislative requirements under the direction of the chief fire officer. In relation to the allegation of child checks, we can actually talk about the working with children checks. That matter is the same for CFA as it is for FRV employees. In relation to the so-called consultation clause, it is exactly the same clause that was there prior to Fire Services reform and the CFA agreement. I am happy to take any questions on this, Chair, but I just urge this committee to base their information and investigations on fact – not hearsay, not innuendo, on fact. We just question why you were not given the information that I have just provided you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Houston, did you have an opening statement you wish to make?

**John HOUSTON:** Yes. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today. I appreciate the efforts and the commitments you all put into this inquiry. My name is John. I am a volunteer. I am a firefighter, a captain and President of the CFA Volunteers Group. I own a few businesses, and I am an active member within my community. My motivation is that I want a better fire service and a better Victoria for all in my community. Like you I have been listening to numerous excellent submissions from amazing people. This inquiry has brought the best of intentions, recommendations and ideas out into the open for discussion. But unlike everybody else that sits here today, this is not my career. I am here as a volunteer representing volunteers. I do not have paid support staff, just my wife, my volunteer mates and the humble volunteers. I am a volunteer speaking on behalf of the volunteers – the 50,000-odd CFA volunteers who cannot be here because of work commitments, farming, running a business, looking after children and those sorts of constraints, the humble volunteer who, unlike everyone else, is the one who answers the call, who reads the pager message at 3 in the arvo or 2 in the morning. I am representing the most important part of the CFA, for without the humble volunteer there is no CFA fire service for all Victorians in the rural areas. For context, our statewide volunteer service saves the taxpayer between \$8 billion and \$10 billion in costs every year by being a volunteer organisation. Brad, my vice-president, who is over there, and I have worked on our part of the submission, so I am not 100 per cent over completely everything. I will be honest about that. But I have done the best I can, and both Brad and I have done the best that we can.

I want to do something different now, because I have listened to everyone else get up here and talk, so bear with me on this one. I want you to look at this through the volunteer's eyes. I want you all to close your eyes. That is including you, Peter. No peeking. Breathe slowly and feel your heart beating within your chest. Now picture this: you are on the fireground. You are on the back of a red tanker. You are pressed up against the side panels, bracing yourself, one hand on the rail, one hand on the nozzle, and it is a bumpy ride. There is a light smell of smoke in the air, the fire crackling as you drive beside the flames, knocking them down. You are gaining ground, but then the wind changes, and you feel the instant heat on your face. The hairs on the back of your neck stand up. The black, thick smoke blinds your eyes as it slams into you, choking you. You try to breathe, and it burns your lungs. The tanker keeps moving forward as the driver is blinded by the smoke. Flames erupt beside you, then above you, all around you. The bush roars, and the heat is unbearable.

It is like opening an oven door but worse. You are standing inside it. It punches through your gear. The air itself is burning your lungs, your face, your body. You cannot see, as your eyes are burning. You cannot think. Your breathing goes sharp, fast, out of control as your lungs scream for fresh air. Then bang – training kicks in. The truck stops. You hear your captain's calm and controlled voice: 'Mayday, mayday! Get down. Nozzles up. Stay together. Breathe.' The fog nozzle comes on above you like a thin shield. The calming, heat-relieving feeling of

cool water over your face. Burnover sprinklers start spraying over the truck. You drop low, curl in, focus on your breathing. In what seems like minutes but is probably only seconds the roar passes over you. The heat eases; the smoke clears. The relief – you are alive, you are safe. You survived a burnover.

Now keep your eyes closed. Let us change one thing. The pumps fail. The sprinklers do not come on. You are in a single cab. You do not have access to the safety of a dual cab. The brakes lock on. The calm voice of your captain is replaced by the panic of your friends – shouting, confusion, fear – then screaming, the frantic stress screams of your mates. Heat builds; air disappears. Pain, unbearable pain from inside, and then nothing. Black. A dark tunnel ahead with a light at the end of it. You and your mates are gone. You can see the headlines in the media: ‘Five brave firefighters lose their lives in tragic circumstances in failed, outdated tankers.’ Your loved ones are left devastated. Now open your eyes. Look around you. Everything is black, burnt out and charred. The corpses of your mates lie beside you.

This is not a training drill. This is a real possible outcome from failed or outdated equipment. This is a volunteer’s worst fear. This is the real risk we face when we are sent in with old, failing or unsafe equipment. You have the opportunity through the learnings of this inquiry to change that outcome moving forward. You have the power to make it safer once again for our volunteers. Please use this power and knowledge wisely. Listen to the volunteers because they will tell you the hard truths that no-one else will.

What are our key points? Scrap the tax and replace it with a fair across-the-board system that acknowledges contributions of our volunteers and provides a more effective modern fire service for all Victorians. Fix the fleet. It is ridiculous that in this day and age we are expecting volunteers to give up their time to attend fires and road accidents with old, outdated, unsafe tankers and equipment. What is the number of outdated tankers over 20 years old? It is a big number. Pete, do you know?

**Peter MARSHALL:** 730-odd, mate.

**John HOUSTON:** 792, I think. It is 792 tankers. Some of those tankers are fast approaching nearly 40 years old, twice the use-by date. That is ridiculous. Brigade-owned tankers have to be updated at 20 years old. Why is there no expiry date for CFA tankers? We want to address station upgrades and replacements also in a timely manner. Address the virtually non-existent safety standards around fumes, washing contaminated turnout gear – the basic minimum safety standards that are afforded to all other frontline emergency services but not afforded to our volunteers. The CFA have lost the ability to have overriding control over community preparedness in fuel reduction and roadside burns. That needs to be addressed. As the state’s largest fire service, our responsibility is to protect Victorians in the best way we can.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Houston, we do need to wrap this part up so we can go on to questions. If you could just finish your opening statement, please.

**John HOUSTON:** Yes. Rightio. Basically in finalising, thank you for your efforts and I look forward to reading your finalised report.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Peter MARSHALL:** Chair, can I just correct the record? I misled the committee. If I could?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, of course.

**Peter MARSHALL:** It is 792 CFA tankers that are out of date, unreliable and over use-by. There are 288 of those that are over 30 years of age, and there are 144 appliances in FRV that should be off the road.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Marshall. Mr Weidemann, if you want to make an opening statement, if you could make it as succinctly as possible, because I know members of the committee are keen to ask questions, but we are running out of adequate time for questions given the length of the opening statements. Thank you.

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** Yes. I figured that might have happened. Thank you, committee. I am a 45-year volunteer here in the local area. We are farmers, like a lot of the volunteers across Victoria, and we represent their interests here today. I think that the issue about the ageing fleet is significant. It is a real issue. Not only am I a farmer, I am also a father – my son is the lieutenant here in the local brigade, and I have concerns about the younger ones going out on old vehicles and with inadequate equipment to fight the fires. I also represent those

private units that are also right across Victoria, and there are a large number of them. By our estimate, of 24,000 farmers there would be at least more than 12,000 private units right across Victoria that are operating today and have been significant in the way that they have addressed fires. We have only got to look to the Natimuk fire here, where there were seven speed tillers – these are machines drawn by tractors and owned by farmers – which actually put out that raging bushfire. That was an extreme circumstance day. But in most cases you will find, alongside the volunteers and the CFA, an enormous number of farmers just like myself out on the fire ground. Even though we are CFA members and volunteers, we are out there with our own private units looking after the interests of Victorians. I think in the interests of time I will leave it at that, and we will move into any questions you might have for us. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much and thank you all. We will now move to questions. Mr Marshall, we have had evidence not just today but prior to today, from last week at our regional hearings, about concerns about the secondment model. From a policy point of view, what is your view on the secondment model? Do you think it is the right approach?

**Peter MARSHALL:** Oh, absolutely. If I could deal with facts – and unfortunately you have not been given the data and facts – if you have a look at prior to fire service reform, on 19 March 2020 there were 19 long-term vacancies for commander positions in the CFA. Post fire service reform, in August 2020 there were only 16; 15 October 2020, there were eight; 30 June 2022, there was one; 31 December, there were four; and in August 2023, there were four. If I could go on in relation to some of the other issues that we have raised –

**The CHAIR:** I just want to deal with this issue first, because it has come up. Mr Houston, do you have a view from a CFA volunteers' point of view about the secondment model and the seconding of FRV staff into the CFA structures?

**John HOUSTON:** From our perspective, and the communications we have had with our volunteers, the volunteers are happy working with FRV. There are probably some things that we need to talk through and work through, but as with –

**The CHAIR:** What would those be?

**John HOUSTON:** Oh, look, they are not really relevant to this inquiry. But what we are –

**The CHAIR:** With respect, we have heard evidence on a range of issues. If you say there are concerns, I would like you to articulate them.

**John HOUSTON:** Well, they are just things that they have brought up that they would like to talk about. One was – I think there was a bit of argy-bargy on the Ballarat thing where brigades spoke to us, and there was a thing in the paper, and we just spoke to them honestly about that and said, 'Look, there is a better way to sort this out rather than play it out.' I mean, at the end of the day, we are firefighters and we just want to fight fires and protect our communities and come home and do our work. You know, we are not paid. The firefighting side of it is we want to get there, do the job and come home. We sort of feel that we have been able to work with the UFU on a range of things. We are here today because of the work that we have done – and with AVA as well. This public hearing and the things that we have been able to achieve, and the recognition that firefighting services are not up to scratch, are because of the collaborative agreements between the three organisations. If we did not do what we did – and we went to Parliament House twice in January – we would not be here today. If we did not ask for a public inquiry –

**The CHAIR:** I just want to ask Andrew a question. When we were up in Natimuk last week, we heard evidence about the role that private appliances played, particularly on that fireground in terms of controlling that fire. What sort of support do you think farmers need in terms of using private appliances on firegrounds?

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** It is pretty clear that connection with the local CFA group is vitally important, and that is probably as simple as it can be. Because ultimately the local fire captain, when we are operating in these areas – in our own brigade here we have a UHF channel we go to, and we operate on that with all the private units in conjunction with the CFA units that are on the fireground. I think that just in relation also, if I may, to that question, with the VFB people that are coming and taking up the roles in various centres, it has never been more important to see that connection of training between the two. A lot of farmers and a lot of CFA volunteers do not get the house fires as such to deal with, so the cross-pollination between both the UFU

and the CFA volunteers is absolutely important, because we need that extra training that we are getting through these people. And it works both ways.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I do need to move on. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I actually really thank you, John, for that sense that you provided, because my questions were all in relation to safety and concerns around single-cab. We heard today earlier from the CFA chief officer that single cabs were overwhelmingly safe – I am reflecting some of the conversation – and met Australian design standards at the time they were constructed. But clearly we have moved on now in terms of human safety and safety of volunteers and any firefighter. Does it give you any comfort to hear that they are safe and that they were made under the design standards at the time?

**John HOUSTON:** Obviously the people that say that they are safe are not fighting a fire in those vehicles. I think if you were in those vehicles on those particular days being bounced around a paddock, you would seriously question whether they were safe. We have got lap seatbelts in the middle seat; those that have to sit on the back and pull out the awning for protection have got lap seats. Now lap seats are basically banned. We do not have any air conditioning. I know that is not a big deal, but if you have got a heat-stressed person – there was one in the Lara Lee fire; they actually had to go off the fireground and have that lady attended to – and you have got air conditioning, you can put them in the cab and give them a glass of water, and you can keep fighting the fire.

**Melina BATH:** Cool their body temperature down et cetera.

**John HOUSTON:** Exactly. You can manage that without putting the strike team at risk and everybody else at risk. The other one was there was a rollover of a tanker, and I think a week previously the brigade had implemented off their own bat that nobody was to be on the back of a single cab. I think roughly a week later they actually had a rollover, and the tank dislodged. That is just some basic info. There are plenty of them, but it is not a very good spot if you are on the back.

**Melina BATH:** I appreciate that. I hate to pick you up, but I want to pick you up: we are not the government. We are going to make recommendations to government, and we are going to make strong recommendations. We are a mixed party over here. We are a mixed bunch of lollies, as I say. Mr Weidemann, if I could just go to you: are volunteers at brigades reporting retention concerns due to – I am not going to call it the volunteers fund; I find that quite offensive – the emergency services tax? Are people questioning their volunteerism because of this?

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** Yes, absolutely. When we led the march earlier last year to the steps of Parliament, that was clearly a signal, and a lot of people resigned from their positions. I can give you the names of those, if you need them, of people I personally know who have actually left the brigade. Some of them are 40- and 50-year-long service people. The big thing is we are losing the experience as well, with a lot of the older ones saying they have had enough and the fire services levy was the catalyst for them to leave. Prior to that, the overtraining or the need for overtraining was also a bit of a concern in terms of retention of people. That is something that we need to be able to sit down and openly talk about with the CFA leadership, because we are losing retention of CFA volunteers because of that and the overreach of the required training. A lot of the training that is needed of course is specific, but in some cases it is definitely causing a retention issue in the CFA. My son would be a classic example of somebody, at the age of 34, who is one of those groups who will be the leaders going into the next 30 and 40 years. So that is my concern.

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

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today and for your very comprehensive submissions. Peter, I put it to Commissioner Freeman earlier that requests were made for additional strike teams that were not met. That is something that you have included in your submission.

**Peter MARSHALL:** Yes.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** He claimed that he was not aware of that, and that all the strike team requests had had been met.

**Peter MARSHALL:** I can give you the date if you would like.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** And part of the reason in your submission for them not being met is that there were not sufficient and appropriate fire trucks available. What is your view on that?

**Peter MARSHALL:** Well, it is disappointing the commissioner would say that. The date was 9 January. The question was why the state agency Commander asked for additional taskforce from FRV to respond to the fires in the country and they were unable to fulfil that request. They just simply did not have the trucks. But I mean, it would be easy to check whether I am right. It is concerning, because there would be minutes of those discussions – 9 January.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** What is your view on the state of the trucks and the impacts that that is having then on the ability of FRV? We have got well-trained firefighters, who could be out there supporting the firefighting efforts that happen during bushfires, but they are being held up due to lack of adequate –

**Peter MARSHALL:** My view is it is important to represent our members, but FRV's view to the government was, more importantly, that they submitted that they do not have the vehicles to protect the community and their firefighters and that the community is at risk. That document was in 2022. It has only got worse since then, and I can hand up a copy of that that refers to our submission. On top of that, tabs 5 and 6 of our submission will have a list of faults. There are literally hundreds of faults. On a daily basis, as we speak, there are trucks that are out of commission. FRV's own executive leadership document, which has been provided to you in annexe 3 of our submission – chain of responsibility, fleet replacement – actually points out, and this is an ELT presentation to the commissioner, that 144 appliances require replacement and 125 will remain in service for 15-plus years. It goes on to say that the abnormal has become normal, and that is going to result in a catastrophic outcome. They are not my words. They are actually in their submission – ELT. As I said, the government was told that they do not have the equipment and trucks that are necessary to protect the community and provide safety for their own staff. So the firefighters are saying this. FRV's documentation to the government confirms it – corroborates it. Their own submission to ELT is simply that the trucks are out of date.

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

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for your appearance this afternoon. Peter, what changes should be made to the secondment agreement?

**Peter MARSHALL:** No changes. What I would like, Mr Berger, is that you actually ask the secondment department. As they are doing that at the moment, they are putting in new initiatives to make sure that there is the continuing pool, if you like. The department, by the way, consists of a comprehensive number of people, so there is one assistant chief fire officer – I can hand this up to you – four commanders for department training and engagement, two senior station officers, one business engagement manager, one engagement coordinator, one admin coordinator and one process improvement lead. There is a whole department. This committee should have the data. You were not provided that, and I question that. One improvement that would help is with the agreement between FRV and CFA. You are supposed to get 42 days notice in relation to the requirements for the chief fire officer of the CFA. That is not being met. It is at short notice, which places additional burden. But even with that, they are actually meeting the requirement by filling those positions with people acting up.

**John BERGER:** Would you support the CFA directly employing staff in areas of long-term absences?

**Peter MARSHALL:** No, for this simple reason: fire service reform is clear – if you have a look at the data, it is not going to rectify anything because there were more absences when CFA did employ prior to fire service reform. This particular secondment reform has shown, and I quoted those figures before, that there has been a reduction in relation to the number of vacancies as a result of secondment arrangements. On top of that, fire service reform rightly categorised the fire services as they should be, and there is lots of documentation. CFA is a volunteer organisation, FRV is career, and indeed the chief fire officer, at his request, at his leisure, can request whatever services he – can I say, we have a wonderful relationship with John and Andrew through the country volunteers, and that relationship should have been there many years ago, because a lot of these issues that have been raised are for issues other than the safety of volunteers and career firefighters, and that is not in the public interest. But again, this committee has power. I have given you the documentation. You have the power to actually get the ACFO in charge of that secondment department to come and tell you the story based

on the data, because what I am giving you today, I got from that department, and it is very different to the story you have been told.

**John BERGER:** Well, thanks, Chair. I do not think that within 20 seconds I can get another question in.

**The CHAIR:** Not a problem. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. Weidy, hi. Your Across Victoria Alliance represents a lot more than just the CFA. It represents people who are aggrieved by mining on their properties or by renewables on their properties. We know that in Colbinabbin alone, there are 300 batteries going in on one property and 750,000 solar panels. But then there are also wind turbines that are going in around the country as well. What is the ability of the CFA rural brigades to fight fires on those renewable locations, and are you being provided with any additional resources or training to do that?

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** No. Thank you for your question, Wendy. This is a massive issue for volunteers and people right across Victoria, because we do not have the tools and we do not have the knowledge to fight those battery fires that are going to potentially exist. We have already seen battery fires in other areas and other zones. In terms of the transmission lines coming across properties, we see that as an absolute increase in the risk we have for fire. We know that most of the fires are actually started by powerlines. The Natimuk fire was started by a powerline, I understand. I think that all of this just leads to greater risk and greater potential for fires right across the areas that I represent. And yes, you are right, it is not just farmers, it is businesspeople and community leaders – all are part of the Across Victoria Alliance. I think that one of the key things that we have seen from our view is that from a lot of the inquiries such as this, and I will reference the 2009 royal commission, a lot of these things have not been implemented. The reduction of fuel reduction burns that we see – absolutely vital to putting out bushfires, particularly right across rural Victoria and in particular the parks. Parks and gardens are being absolutely burnt to a cinder because we are not doing the preparation work we need to be doing. And that is what a lot of my group and my members are saying and seeing. So thank you, Wendy, for your question.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks very much. Peter, why has FRV prevented staff holding the rank of station officer from undertaking higher duties as commanders in the CFA, which is a change of policy that is effectively denying your members the opportunity to gain valuable experience?

**Peter MARSHALL:** There is a program at the moment – I think you are talking about senior station officers, not station officers, because the chain of command and the learnings are, say, qualified firefighter, after that you have leading firefighter, then you have station officer and then you have senior station officer, you have commander and assistant chief fire officer. The learnings are not bridged, if you like, from a station officer to a commander, because the learnings have not been attained and the certificate and training has not been achieved. So you have senior station officers that can perform that role, but station officers cannot because effectively it would be wrong to put them in that position. They have not had the training, instruction or qualifications, but we are looking at enhanced programs. As I said, Ms Lovell, it would be really handy for this committee to hear from the secondment department, the people that put in all these initiatives. But the reason is that that would be dangerous to do so.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Tyrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. John, scrap the tax. How would you like –

**John HOUSTON:** That would be good.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes, it would be great. How would you like to see the government tax Victorians in order to fund the firefighting emergency services better?

**John HOUSTON:** Look, I think it needs to go back to the way it was before. You need to tax everyone roughly equally, and it should be on your property, your house and your dwellings, not a broad tax across everything. When you have got farmers and the like paying tens of thousands of dollars and you have got someone from a city area that is paying \$400, and they have got a fully paid firefighter service and the farmer

has got to supply himself and probably supplies a private tanker – the private tankers outweighed the CFA tankers in a lot of those fires two or three to one, so we need to acknowledge that – why should they pay three, four, 10 or 20 times more than someone who has a paid firefighter service and does not even have to lift the hose, so to speak? I think it needs to come back to a fairer system. The conversation I have had with farmers is they are happy to pay a tax. They are happy to pay a bit more, but they are not happy paying 10, 20 or 30 times more, because that is just not fair. It is pitting the country against the city people, and that is not what it should be about. It should be about obtaining a better fire service, so it should go back to the way it was. Consolidated revenue did pay for some of it as well. That money has disappeared. We want to know where that money has gone, because that should be on the table as well. Where is this extra \$1.4 billion that they have raised? We are not seeing it in extra fire services. It needs to be accountable. It needs to be fully put out on the table and transparent so we know exactly what is going on.

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

**John HOUSTON:** Thanks.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** I left this one for you, Pete, because I was worried you might take up a bit of time. Do you think the vote of no confidence in FRV's leadership has allowed the issues identified throughout this inquiry, such as fleet issues and declining morale, to grow?

**Peter MARSHALL:** Absolutely. The vote of no confidence – firefighting has a hierarchical chain of command, similar to the military. When that vote of no confidence was held, I did not expect that result. That tells you there is something drastically wrong, and I think it is because firefighters feel like the executive leadership team have become an apology for the government not resourcing it rather than the commissioner going out to defend firefighters that have to run into burning buildings with trucks that fail. In fact firefighters feel like they are being gaslighted. So the vote of no confidence is not manufactured; it is their real feeling. As I said, I was quite surprised by it.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Thank you. I cannot believe you left me 17 seconds. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Broad.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing today. Earlier today we had Mr Leach say, I believe, that 802 single-cab tankers should be phased out by 2036. That is still a decade away. But then we heard Mr Barnett suggest that we have 650 single-cab tankers. I just want to recall, did you actually have a figure for the number of single-cab tankers?

**John HOUSTON:** No. We do not have an exact number, because a lot of this information is classified, so to speak. It needs to be put out in the public domain. If you want clear and honest transparency and you want to deal with misinformation, as was brought up in the inquiry or with other things, if you do not put the facts and figures out there so everyone can analyse them, then people are going to be sceptical of what those figures are and have distrust in the whole thing. It needs to be transparent. We have tried to have conversations with VFBV to find out particular data around this, and they have gaslighted us and do not want to talk to us. We do not understand why, because we represent the volunteers. They represent the brigades, not the volunteers. Regardless of what we hear, that is what their organisation has always said, and that has been said to me directly. But we represent the volunteers, and we as volunteers should know exactly where we are, where our fleet is at, which are VESEP tankers and which are CFA-owned tankers, because the numbers that I am getting are completely different to what have been put out there.

**Gaelle BROAD:** We have heard other states have already phased out single-cab tankers. You have talked through some of the concerns. Why is Victoria so far behind other states?

**John HOUSTON:** You would need to ask the government and the CFA around that. I would say it basically has probably got to do with money. But what is most important in here – is it money or is it CFA volunteer safety and concerns? That is the most important thing. Money should not come ahead of anybody's safety, and until that is addressed the CFA volunteers group will be hammering whoever we need to make sure that that is addressed and in a timely manner. We do not want them replaced yesterday, but we want them replaced in a timely manner, and we want to know what that manner is. And whoever is replacing them needs to be upfront and needs to be held accountable.

**Gaelle BROAD:** I have heard that volunteers missed out on state government grants because they chose to stay and defend. Are you aware of that concern?

**John HOUSTON:** Yes. I would not say a lot of them, but there are some volunteers who have not been able to claim a rebate on their tax as well. It is a whole disappointing process that is not clear and transparent. Everyone is not treated equally, and that is the sad part about all this. You know, some people get a free kick in life and some people just seem to be dragged down all the time. It should be fair and transparent and everyone should be accountable.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you, and thank you for the work that you do and for taking the time to attend today. I just wanted to go to some of the feedback the committee received out and about in regional areas of just how effective the local relief centres were because they were place based in their own communities in a small hall. I just wanted to know if you had any kind of experience of recovery and whether you have got any views on local relief centres being front and centre.

**John HOUSTON:** It is probably an answer for you, Weide, is it?

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** Thank you, yes. Thank you for your question. In most of the circumstances that I am aware of through our networks they all worked reasonably well. They do need to be placed in the local community, but they need to be placed in safe and proper facilities. Now, we are lucky in some areas we have good sporting facilities where most of these refuge points are being placed, and in particular the Natimuk one was used exclusively. I think it is going to be rural centres like Horsham as well that we used and utilise. At this stage we just need to be really well prepared in that area. I think at the moment also that there are a number of people who are donating a lot of things to these refuge points as well, which should not be understated. But at the end of the day, yes, they actually play a very important role.

Where some of the fire areas are, particularly in the, I say, less easy to get to terrain like the Harcourt areas and things, then these facilities obviously need to be strategically placed to make sure that they cater for everybody's use and needs. My understanding is that this was an occurrence there. One of the sad parts of trying to get in and help people in these bushfires is particularly around getting food in for livestock. For livestock, we know, we are struggling to get feed, and we did have issues getting food and feed through those bushfire areas.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Fantastic. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Andrew, I just had one thing to clarify before we finish up. You mentioned in a discussion with Ms Lovell transmission lines. You mentioned the Natimuk fire was caused by a powerline. I just want to be clear here. You are not saying the Natimuk fire was caused by a transmission line associated with a renewable energy project, are you?

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** No, I am not saying that. But what I am saying is that we do see, and I have experienced myself, a number of fires that I have attended have been started in most cases in windy conditions by poorly maintained powerlines. Now the 2009 royal commission actually found –

**The CHAIR:** But the Natimuk fire was started by a single line on a private powerline.

**Andrew WEIDEMANN:** It was a private powerline.

**The CHAIR:** Private powerline. Right. Okay. Thank you. That is all. Thank you all for coming along today. You will receive a proof version of the transcript to review in about a week. With that, the committee will take a short break and reset for our next witness.

**Witnesses withdrew.**