



# Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

**Hearing date:** 1/05/2026

## **Questions taken on notice**

**Directed to:** Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action

**Received date:** 9/06/2026

### **1. P.4 Melina Bath**

Question: -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.

#### **Response:**

Safer Together funding supports a variety of activities that deliver Victoria's Bushfire Management Strategy. This currently includes funding to the Country Fire Authority (CFA) for vegetation management on private land, capability building through their Planned Burn Taskforce as well as targeted local government grants programs.

Decisions about funding allocation are informed by a multiagency governance committee including representatives from across the bushfire sector such as CFA, Department of Transport and Planning, Emergency Management Victoria and the Municipal Association of Victoria, with final funding allocations approved jointly by both DEECA and CFA.

Over the past five years (from FY2021/22) approximately \$21.9 million of Safer Together funding has been allocated to CFA for vegetation and fuel management activities, across both salaries and operational expenses. In addition to this, a further \$13.17 million has been provided to CFA over the same period from Safer Together, funding the Community First Program, research programs and for program management office functions.

Over the same period, approximately \$4.6 million has been awarded through grants to local government authorities, through the Strengthening Local Government Partnership Grants program, jointly run by CFA and DEECA. This grant program supports collaborative projects that adopt a community-centred approach to reducing bushfire risk and building community resilience.

Each year, the multi-agency governance committee reallocates any underspend from approved programs, for example, funding not used for private land fuel management delivery. This funding is redirected to other priorities, such as research and grant programs, as agreed by the multiagency governance committee.

Table 1, below, shows the funding allocated to CFA for vegetation and fuel management programs (as requested in the question), for community first and research streams, and to Local Government Authorities through the Strengthening Local Government Partnerships grant program from the Safer Together funding stream for the previous 5 years.

	<b>CFA Vegetation and Fuel Management Safer Together Initial Allocation*</b>	<b>CFA Community First Program, Research program + Program Management Office initial allocation</b>	<b>CFA total allocation</b>	<b>Strengthening Local Government Partnership multi-year Grants rounds</b>
<b>2025-26</b>	\$4,321,849	\$3,042,581	\$7,364,430	\$909,000
<b>2024-25</b>	\$4,156,906	\$2,490,961	\$6,647,867	-
<b>2023-24</b>	\$4,805,846	\$2,645,083	\$7,450,929	\$1,658,395
<b>2022-23</b>	\$4,312,136	\$2,637,580	\$6,949,716	-
<b>2021-22</b>	\$4,309,773	\$2,355,759	\$6,665,532	\$2,099,968
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$21,906,510</b>	<b>\$13,171,964</b>	<b>\$35,078,474</b>	<b>\$4,667,363</b>

\* Includes salaries and OPEX for planned burn taskforce, planned burn delivery and supporting functions

## **2. P.7 Wendy Lovell**

Question: -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—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.

**Response:**

The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) is a statutory position required by s 61A of the *Forests Act 1958*.

The department notes that, in her evidence, Ms Crosthwaite indicated that legislative amendments had not been made to enshrine the Chief Fire Officer as a statutory office holder. However, these legislative amendments were in fact passed in 2010 in response to recommendation 63 of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission to make the position of the CFO a statutory role, with clear authorities, responsibilities, and accountabilities to facilitate clear communication and reporting.

The department acknowledges the evidence provided by Ms Crosthwaite at the hearing, including her statement that the mechanism that is used is the delegation of the Secretary's powers.

To expand on this, the Secretary may authorise the CFO to exercise specified functions under s 29 of the *Forests Act 1958*; and the CFO also has separate statutory functions under s 61B of the *Forests Act* which are exercised in the CFO's own right, and not just for or on behalf of the Secretary.

**3. P.8 Gaelle Broad**

**Question:** Gaelle BROAD: -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-

**Response:**

The Minister for Environment approved an extension to the Gate Fee Rebate and Waste Levy Waiver to 30 June 2026, providing additional time for impacted communities to dispose of bushfire waste free of charge.

The extension was communicated to stakeholders on 12 May 2026 through emails to eligible local councils and waste facility operators and updates to the Victorian Government website ([Free disposal of bushfire waste | vic.gov.au](https://www.vic.gov.au)).

The Government will consider a further extension prior to the expiration of current program based on community need.

**4. P.8 Gaelle Broad**

**Question:** -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-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.

**Response:**

More than 380 staff supported the response overall. This figure includes staff directly deployed to Incident Management Team (IMT) roles and field-based roles, as well as staff who supported the response through business-as-usual functions.

A breakdown of these deployments includes:

- 71 staff deployed on the ground to undertake animal welfare assessments and humane euthanasia of livestock
- 45 staff deployed to contact impacted landholders to understand their impacts and needs and connect them with available support. These staff were further supported by additional DEECA Customer Contact Centre staff.
- 33 staff deployed on the ground at Recovery Hubs, Community Centres and attending community meetings.
- 173 staff were deployed across critical IMT functions, including Incident Control, Public Information, Planning, Operations, Logistics, and Emergency Management Liaison Officer functions.

**Additional questions**

**Melina Bath**

**Directed to DEECA on Safer Together:**

VAGO Concerns and Modelling Reliability

1. The Auditor-General has stated that agencies lack sufficient data to understand the effectiveness of current fuel-management strategies—how can DEECA claim Safer Together is reducing fire risk when VAGO says effectiveness cannot be reliably measured?

The Safer Together program is not a fuel management program: it supports Victoria's bushfire management sector to work together to implement [Victoria's Bushfire Management Strategy](#) (VBMS) through a range of activities

that include community preparedness, planning, research, as well as fuel management.

DEECA acknowledges limitations in modelling. While all models will have limitations, DEECA is open to feedback on priority areas to be addressed, including through processes such as audits by VAGO. DEECA uses a range of tools to assess the effectiveness of fuel management. This includes fire simulations using Phoenix, reconstructions and case studies of actual fires, and qualitative feedback from agency staff.

Bushfire simulators and other modelling tools, such as Phoenix, will always rely on assumptions and have limitations. That is why they are decision support tools and used to guide decisions by experienced operational firefighters rather than being used to prescribe decisions.

DEECA continuously improves data and models and is working with other jurisdictions on the development of new simulators such as Spark, which is currently being trialled in Victoria.

Planned burning demonstrably influences fire behaviour, which gives firefighters a better chance to suppress fires and directly reduces the impact of fires on communities, infrastructure and the environment.

2. Given VAGO's findings about data gaps and modelling limitations, why does Safer Together continue to rely heavily on Phoenix RapidFire outputs without robust, real-world validation against past Victorian fires?

Safer Together is not a fuel management program and does not prescribe the modelling tools used by bushfire agencies to model bushfire risk.

Phoenix is an invaluable tool for fire managers for planning and response. Like all models it has limitations, and it is one of a range of tools DEECA uses for fire prediction.

Other relevant evidence that supports DEECA's fire management includes:

- In depth, robust, empirically driven reconstructions of actual fires. DEECA and CFA have begun publishing reconstructions, commencing with the reports
  - (i) [Major Fires Across Western Victoria February 2024](#)
  - (ii) [Fire and Fuel Treatment Interactions During the Bayindeen Rocky Road Fire 2024](#)

These reconstructions provide a deep-dive into fire behaviour in real world fires, including in relation to fuel management, and include discussion of areas where simulators did not replicate observed conditions.

Partnering with researchers to develop new methods to assess the real-world effects of planned burns on actual fires – see Ellis et al 2025, *Assessing the effectiveness of prescribed burning in limiting the spread of future wildfires.*

Shorter and more accessible case studies available at <https://www.ffm.vic.gov.au/bushfire-science/planned-burn-case-studies>

3. Can DEECA point to independently validated evidence that Phoenix modelling predictions consistently align with actual fire behaviour under extreme conditions in Victoria?

Fire behaviour is complex and affected by a range of factors including terrain, fuel, wind, temperature and moisture.

No simulator consistently replicates real world fire conditions under all circumstances., including Phoenix. However, simulators do provide useful information that support decision making.

Phoenix’s performance has been assessed in a range of settings, including in peer reviewed journals such as:

- [Fox-Hughes et al \(2024\), An evaluation of wildland fire simulators used operationally in Australia.](#)
- [Duff et al \(2018\), Conditional Performance Evaluation: Using Wildfire Observations for Systematic Fire Simulator Development](#)

Fox-Hughes et al (2024) assessed the simulators Australia, Phoenix, Prometheus, and Spark. Each simulator showed strengths and weaknesses; no simulator was clearly superior to others in this evaluation.

At the current time, Phoenix remains the simulator best suited to operational use in Victoria.

Victoria is also collaborating with other jurisdictions on the development and testing of Spark, a next-generation simulation framework. Spark is designed as a development framework for fire simulators and is still in the testing phase. While it is expected to offer improved maintainability over time, it has not yet been validated for operational use in Victoria.

In contrast, Phoenix is built on an ageing code base and is starting to be challenged in incorporating new developments. However, it has been used extensively by fire agencies in both strategic and operational contexts and has provided decision support during response for more than a decade and its performance across a range of conditions is well understood.

While Spark shows strong potential for future capability, it is still under development, whereas Phoenix remains the only simulator currently proven and trusted for operational use in Victoria.

## Fuel vs Climate – Control vs Narrative

1. Independent fire behaviour research shows fuel load hazard is a stronger driver of fire intensity than weather indices—why does Safer Together not prioritise significantly higher rates of fuel reduction as the most controllable mitigation lever?

Safer Together is not a fuel management program and does not set fuel reduction targets. The Victorian Government is responsible for setting fuel management targets.

The effects of fuel and weather on fire behaviour are highly variable and dependent on local context and conditions. In general, fuel effects dominate at less severe fire danger indices, with weather effects increasing in more extreme fire conditions.

In 2020, FFMVic and CFA released long-term fuel management strategies, available online at <https://www.safertogether.vic.gov.au/strategic-bushfire-management-planning>. These strategies set out objectives and priorities for fuel management, including fuel management zoning for public land. These are informed by science, the experience of firefighters, and the knowledge of local communities.

FFMVic reports annually on its fuel management program. This program is highly weather dependent, requiring conditions that are not too cold and wet, and not too hot, dry and windy, so that a safe and effective fuel management program can be delivered. Within these constraints, FFMVic takes every opportunity to deliver its fuel management strategies and objectives.

2. Is DEECA / FFMV concerned that an increased focus on climate explanations risks obscuring the policy failure to adequately manage fuels that are known to drive catastrophic fire behaviour?

Understanding the effects of climate change is an important priority for effective fire management. There is strong and robust evidence that climate change affects fire weather. In Victoria we have already observed a longer fire season and more frequent days of significant fire danger. These changes are likely to escalate with increasing temperatures, though will not be the same everywhere.

These changes and other realised and anticipated impacts of climate change are outlined in the Bushfire chapter of [\*Victoria's Climate Science Report 2024\*](#).

Understanding these changes helps fire managers make their interventions, including fuel management, more effective. It also helps us to adapt to challenges like changing seasonal patterns affecting burn windows.

#### Cost Effectiveness and Fiscal Responsibility

1. Given evidence that mitigation programs deliver economies of scale while suppression costs escalate rapidly during large fires, how does DEECA justify continued under-investment in fuel reduction under Safer Together?

Over the past five years (from FY2021/22) approximately \$21.9 million of Safer Together funding has been allocated to CFA for vegetation and fuel management activities, including fuel management on roadsides and on local government managed land.

The department's fuel management program is funded through a different mechanism, by a combination of base appropriations and supplementary funding. The response to Question 2 from Ms Lovell provides a breakdown of investment in fuel management over the past 10 years.

FFMVic plans and delivers a comprehensive fuel management program. This program is highly weather dependent, requiring conditions that are not too cold and wet, and not too hot, dry and windy, so that a safe and effective fuel management program can be delivered. Within these constraints, FFMVic takes every opportunity to deliver its fuel management strategies and objectives.

As with all emergency services, DEECA's bushfire funding model relies on both base appropriations for core capabilities and capacity, supplemented by funding for urgent and seasonal needs.

Where forecast weather conditions are favourable for an increased fuel management program, the department's funding model is that additional funding is sought to deliver an expanded fuel management program.

Similarly, the same applies to requests for additional preparedness funding where forecast conditions indicate a high-risk summer season (as outlined in the evidence before this Inquiry for the 2025-26 summer season).

2. Has DEECA modelled the long-term fiscal impact of Safer Together compared with a mitigation-heavy approach, given projections that fire costs could reach over \$2 billion per year without proactive fuel management?

Safer Together is not designed as a program to compare the long term fiscal impacts of alternative bushfire management approaches (such as a “mitigation heavy” model) against projected fire costs. Its purpose is to enable coordinated, cross sector delivery of activities aligned to Victoria’s Bushfire Management Strategy.

DEECA is also undertaking a project to better understand the relative effectiveness of fire management actions (including prescribed burning, suppression, mechanical fuel treatments, fuel breaks) in a changing climate. Using long-term fire regime simulations incorporating multiple climate change scenarios, we will increase our understanding of the risk reduction achieved by our management actions, and potential impacts on multiple values (including human life, environmental, and economic).

#### Environmental Risk and Biodiversity Impacts

1. The Bushfires Royal Commission warned that leaving forests unmanaged increases the likelihood of ecologically devastating high-intensity fires—how does Safer Together reconcile low fuel-reduction rates with its environmental protection objectives?

Safer Together does not set environmental protection objectives.

FFMVic operates under the Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land, which includes an objective to “Maximise the resilience of natural ecosystems to future bushfire under a changing climate and to preserve biodiversity, clean water, and carbon storage.”

FFMVic works to deliver a fuel management program aligning to strategies and zoning available online at <https://www.safertogether.vic.gov.au/strategic-bushfire-management-planning>.

Zoning schemes incorporate objectives for the management of landscape fire and the risk this poses to ecosystems. This shapes fuel management and delivery to reduce the impacts of bushfire to ecosystems and threatened species, noting that priority is given to the protection of human life.

The statewide fuel-driven bushfire risk target to maintain risk at or below 70% measures potential house loss impacts and does not provide a measure of risk to environmental values. DEECA reports on changes in ecosystem resilience to fire annually, using metrics including areas within Tolerable Fire Interval and the proportion of vegetation at different growth stages following fires.

2. Does DEECA agree that low-intensity prescribed burning poses less ecological risk than the severe wildfires that result from heavy, unmanaged fuel loads?

DEECA agrees that an appropriately designed and implemented fuel management program provides benefits to the community and the environment in reducing impacts of severe bushfires.

#### Accountability and Outcomes

1. What measurable, independently verifiable outcomes can DEECA point to that demonstrate Safer Together has reduced fire intensity, losses, or suppression costs relative to pre-policy baselines?

Safer Together is not designed or evaluated as a program that directly delivers reductions in fire intensity, losses, or suppression costs. It is a sector coordination and investment mechanism that supports implementation of Victoria's Bushfire Management Strategy and its long-term risk reduction outcomes.

However, fuel management is an essential tool in managing bushfire risk.

While Victoria has a large and ambitious program of planned burning compared to other jurisdictions, it is not the sole determinant of fire intensity, impacts, or response costs.

FFMVic implements a fuel management program consistent with policy directions from Government, including a statewide performance measure to maintain fuel-driven bushfire risk at or below 70%. The previous 5% hectare target was assessed by the independent [Bushfires Royal Commission Implementation Monitor](#) as not being achievable, affordable, or sustainable.

Fuel management sits alongside other actions such as the construction and maintenance of fuel breaks, roading and other access infrastructure, water points and investment in response capability.

#### **Sarah Mansfield**

1. DEECA has said that human safety was the primary consideration in decisions about letting wildlife rescuers into properties where they had been invited by private landholders. However we heard evidence that they were being blocked even where roads had reopened, landholders were allowed back on their properties, and there was no obvious safety concern. Private landholders were then left having to witness and manage distressed wildlife without support. Was safety the only reason qualified wildlife rescuers were blocked from accessing properties to assess and treat wildlife?
2. Were rescuers prohibited from entering non fire ground areas to help injured animals? If so, why?

3. If Wildlife Emergency Response is triggered based on a number of animals needing help, who determines whether that number has been reached and how?
4. Why wasn't WESN stood up in Harcourt?
5. Given the limited WESN resource why weren't they ALL despatched from start to finish?
6. How many officers were deployed to assess and assist injured and orphaned wildlife, in what areas, on what dates?
7. What qualifications and training did those officers have? Were any vets? Did any have training in wildlife rescue?
8. How many pouch checks were performed? What experience in euthanising wildlife with firearms did the officers have?
9. Did they have accreditation for firearm accuracy?
10. Did DEECA arrange for food for wildlife in fire affected areas? If so, when and where? And if not, why not?

#### Response to Questions 1-10:

The need for wildlife emergency response during a fire is determined by the Incident Management Team (IMT) responsible for managing fire suppression. Specialised wildlife roles in the IMT will assess the need for wildlife response based on the scale and severity of a fire, and evidence of wildlife impacts being reported by fire crews. Wildlife response will not occur at every fire.

Wildlife response at significant bushfires commences when the Incident Controller at each event deems that areas of the fireground are safe for wildlife teams to access. This generally occurs several days after firefighting efforts have commenced and is dependent on areas first being assessed for hazardous trees, and then that risk being removed. Areas declared safe can also revert to being closed if there is a change in fire behaviour or if other risks emerge such as severe weather.

Wildlife teams consist of trained DEECA staff members, sometimes working with WESN members. DEECA wildlife staff on the fireground are trained and accredited in wildlife assessment, wildlife handling and the use of firearms. DEECA staff maintain their firearms skills annually and are trained to focus on accuracy and the humane treatment of injured animals. During the 25/26

fire season, vets and vet nurses from WESN were deployed to several fires and worked in both fireground and triage settings. A vet triage unit was deployed to the Longwood fire.

The broader WESN network was not deployed across the fire season as very few animals were found at any fire that were able to be taken into care. Most severely injured animals detected by wildlife teams and vets were found to require euthanasia. Wildlife that didn't require treatment were also observed in field by Wildlife Assessment and remained in the landscape.

Individuals stating that they were wildlife carers were at times, removed from firegrounds where they were found to have breached road closures implemented to protect public safety. Firegrounds are inherently dangerous due to hazardous trees, hot ash, downed power lines and other risks. The overriding priority of all fire response activities is the protection of human life. Restrictions of access to firegrounds are therefore critical to minimising risk to individuals and to ensuring that emergency services can operate safely and effectively. Staged access can occur that sees landowners given initial priority so that they can assess damage to their properties. However, staged access does not mean that other members of the public, including wildlife carers, can gain access at the same time. This approach is consistent with how broader public safety and access on firegrounds is managed.

DEECA does not generally supply food and water for wildlife as there is little evidence that this is effective. Wildlife that has survived a fire will tend to move to unburnt areas of nearby private or public land where they can access food, shelter and water. Where there are risks to endangered species that are unable to move to unburnt areas, targeted water and food may be supplied to support their recovery post fire.

### **Wendy Lovell**

1. What was the funding DEECA received for the fire season readiness expended upon?

A Treasurer's Advance of \$65.790 million was allocated to DEECA as part of its enhanced preparedness for the 2025-26 fire season. This allocation funded enhanced preparedness activities, including:

- Uplift whole-of-season preparedness in response to heightened bushfire risk
- Expand frontline workforce (earlier recruitment, additional operational firefighting workforce, PPE, training and medicals)
- Enhance aviation capability (early activation of aircraft, crews and airbases, extra retardant etc)

- Enhance first attack and surge response (pre-positioning, standby, detection)
- Enhance fleet and plant readiness (earlier activation, standby, additional vehicles/plant, maintenance, spares)
- Boost intelligence and operational systems (EM support, RPAS/drones)
- Increase compliance and community risk reduction (patrols, campaigns, fire towers)
- Enhance specialist capability (additional rappel workforce, training and equipment).
  - Is the fleet procured / managed by DEECA?

The FFMVic firefighting vehicle fleet is managed by DEECA's Bushfire and Forest Services Group including maintenance, servicing, and operational readiness.

The fleet includes a mix of:

- Department owned and leased vehicles (e.g. long term leased G Wagens)
- Additional surge vehicles sourced through VicFleet arrangements and partners when required.

This reflects a centrally managed asset model, with operational deployment across more than 100 work centres statewide.

- How much of this went to fixing the firefighting fleet

Cost incurred in 2025-26 will be accounted for at the end of financial year reporting against fleet rectification.

- How were these issues not foreseen during procurement?

The decision making for the procurement of these assets was in 2014.

Structural issues (e.g. chassis cracking) were identified through routine preparedness inspections ahead of the 2025-26 bushfire season.

The issues emerged through inspection and updated engineering assessment over time, reflecting the complexity of operating specialised vehicles in demanding bushfire environments.

- Is the responsibility of the firefighting fleet that of the CFO?

Fleet management is the accountability of DEECA's Forest and Fire Assets and Resources Division who manage assets and resources within DEECA's

Bushfire and Forest Services Group. The Executive Director of this Division reports to the Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services. This Division and the role work extremely closely with the Chief Fire Officer and his Operations Division.

- How much of this went to replacing skills lost through recent 'efficiency' exercises?

There is no net reduction of frontline fire roles due to any recent efficiency exercises. As noted in the 2025 VAGO report 'Delivering Savings Under the COVID Debt Repayment Plan': *"DEECA removed only 4 roles in the Bushfire and Forest Services group, which aligned to the government's decision to cease native timber harvesting on 1 January 2024. DEECA later offset these reductions by creating 56 new frontline roles through the restructure processes in the Bushfire and Forest Services and Energy groups, which meant there was a net increase of 52 frontline roles. The additional roles in the Bushfire and Forest Services group gave effect to a separate government commitment to create 54 ongoing forest and fire operations officers."*

Subsequent change processes have not included the regions of the Forest and Fire Operations Division, in which the Forest and Fire Operations Officer are situated.

Additionally, the Bushfire and Forest Services Group (BFS) within DEECA developed a Seasonal Emergency Management Workforce Framework (the Framework) in 2024 to account for changes in resourcing associated with organisational change processes including Parks Victoria and other DEECA Groups.

The Framework enables recently departed employees (through resignation, retirement or any other process) to be re-engaged on a seasonal basis for priority emergency roles. The framework is designed to minimise impacts on emergency management capability and capacity and is intended to remain in place for 3 years.

The Framework involves a structured process to identify capability needs for the summer bushfire season and the autumn planned burning period each year. It identifies casual and fixed-term seasonal employment opportunities as a model to retain skills and experience to meet any identified critical short and medium-term gaps in emergency management.

In 2025-26 the Framework invested \$323,744 in seasonal casual contracts.

2. Can you provide the quantum of funding made available for vegetation management including what has been provided by the government for the last 10 years?
  - Does 100% of the funding provided for fuel management go directly to fuel management activities?
  - If the residual risk targets are being met, why is supplementary funding for fuel management regularly sought?

The below table summarises FFMVic fuel management investment over the past 10 years.

The funding provided for fuel management goes towards delivering the fuel management program and includes direct and indirect costs.

Direct costs relate to investment that can be directly and reliably assigned to individual fuel management operations (such as materials, plant and aircraft hire, overtime and allowances, overnight accommodation and meals).

Indirect fuel management costs include expenses relating to base salaries, training, vehicles, equipment, planning and community engagement.

Supplementary funding is sought to maximise fuel management delivery over and above base funding allocations where seasonal conditions are favourable to continue to maintain bushfire risk at or below 70%.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total FFMVic fuel management investment</b>
2024/25	\$159.8M
2023/24	\$159.5M
2022/23	\$141.1M
2021/22	\$151M
2020/21	\$155.8M
2019/20	\$109.2M
2018/19	\$121.7M
2017/18	\$113.5M
2016/17	\$97.9M
2015/16	\$108.5M

3. Regarding the implementation of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy (launched in 2020)
  - How much funding has been committed / expended to this program
  - By TO group – how many vegetation management activities have been completed – other outputs completed.
  - By TO group – how many firefighters have been trained
  - By TO group – how many of these firefighters were deployed during the January fires of 2026?

In the 2021/2022 State budget the Government committed \$22.5m of initiative funding over four years to support implementation of the Cultural Fire Strategy, and an ongoing annual allocation of \$6.3m upon the cessation of initiative funding.

- Initiative funding concluded in June 2025 and has all been expended or committed to Traditional Owner Groups to enable cultural fire outcomes.
- The \$6.3m annual funding for 2025-2026 has all been expended or committed through Cultural Fire Grants to Traditional Owner Groups.

This funding supports Traditional Owners to expand and strengthen their cultural fire capability including employing cultural fire staff, developing or refining cultural burning strategies, planning and delivering cultural burns, providing training opportunities for staff and community and purchasing PPE and vehicles.

In 2024-25, Traditional Owners from 9 Registered Aboriginal Parties conducted 26 cultural burns across Victoria with Forest Fire Management Victoria and builds on the 49 cultural burns delivered across the state between 2022-23 and 2023-24.

In 2025-26 between 30 and 40 cultural burns are expected to be delivered. As of 27 May 2026, 21 cultural burns have been delivered, with others due to progress in late autumn and winter.

The engagement of Traditional Owner Groups as Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) partners for fire prevention and suppression activities occurs separately to implementation of the Cultural Fire Strategy.

DEECA does not provide data about First Nations people or disaggregated by Traditional Owner groups, in line with principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and the risk to the privacy of individuals who may be identifiable through provision of this data.

4. Recommendation by IGEM in 2020 was to establish Office of Bushfire Risk Management (OBRM) to provide ‘independent’ advice directly to the Secretary of DEECA.
  - Could you provide the total sum of funds utilised for that purpose since the establishment of OBRM?
  - Is the OBRM independent as per the IGEM recommendation or is another reporting structure in place?
  - Does the OBRM report directly to the Secretary?
  - If they are independent, narrow in focus and report directly to the Secretary, why has their title recently changed to Emergency Management & OBRM within the Policy & Knowledge Division headed by an Executive Director.

OBRM provides state wide leadership and coordination of evidence-based bushfire risk management policy, assurance and reporting across all land tenures, with a primary focus on fuel management.

While OBRM sits within DEECA and reports through the Executive Director Policy and Knowledge Division, it is organisationally separate from Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic), which is responsible for fuel management and fire response through the Chief Fire Officer. This separation enables OBRM to provide independent oversight and assurance.

OBRM is also supported by an independent, expert Advisory Panel that provides advice directly to the Secretary on the operation of OBRM.

A realignment of staff across the Division was completed in September 2025 that moved two Emergency Management Policy teams into the branch, creating the Emergency Management and Office of Bushfire Risk Management Branch. This was an administrative change and has not impacted the functioning or role of OBRM.

In the 2021-22 Budget, the Victorian Government committed \$21.8 million over four years and \$6 million ongoing, to establish and operationalise the OBRM.

5. If OBRM resides within the same division as the DEECA business unit responsible for producing fire management planning tools utilised by DEECA to provide sector assurance to the Joint Fuel Management Plan pre and post season – where is the independence?

OBRMs reporting line and separation from Forest Fire Management Victoria is outlined in the response above.

OBRMs role in reviewing and providing advice on bushfire management policy in Victoria, including targets, does utilise technical information from other areas of the Policy and Knowledge Division.

6. How does OBRM go about resourcing and analysing ‘independently’ to investigate planned burn breaches (escapes) – what resources are used and who do they report to?
  - Are the same people accountable for the burn plan, responsible for the investigation and accepting the recommendations?
  - Is this not marking your own homework?

OBRM is responsible for providing independent assurance for the investigation of breaches of FFMVic planned burn control lines, a function transferred from IGEM in 2022. OBRM investigators are not operational staff.

The impacts and consequences of each breach are assessed by OBRM to determine the appropriate investigation approach.

For minor breaches only, FFMVic operational staff can be nominated to investigate a breach with OBRM performing an assurance review. In this case, those involved with the burn plan would not be involved in the investigation.

Where breaches are more serious and have had greater impact and require additional independence, OBRM leads the investigation.

OBRM has its own investigation and assurance staff and reports the outcomes of all investigation and assurance activities to the Secretary to DEECA.

Planned burn breaches, assurance activities undertaken by OBRM and the implementation of FFMVic management actions are reported by OBRM annually at [OBRM reporting | vic.gov.au](https://www.vic.gov.au/o-brm-reporting).

7. Can you quantify the outputs provided by OBRM during this time? What have they achieved?

Over the last 5 years OBRM has led or supported several projects across as part of its role in providing statewide leadership on bushfire risk management.

This includes work on policy settings, coordinating a shared approach across agencies, sectors and land tenures, strengthening performance measurement and reporting and delivering independent assurance.

Key projects and achievements include:

- Supporting the development and then coordinating implementation of Victoria’s Bushfire Management Strategy, which sets out a 10 year vision and outcomes for the entire bushfire management sector
- Leading the review of DEECA’s fuel management targets

- Leading the development of a roadmap to expand fuel management targets for all organisations with bushfire risk management responsibilities across public and private land in Victoria
- Leading development of a monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework and measures to effectively monitor sector progress on the Strategy
- Refreshed bushfire management reporting in Victoria

Established OBRM's assurance function, including delivering the first OBRM-led investigation into a planned burn breach

8. Have OBRM established the appropriate targets for bushfire risk management?

- Has this advice been provided to the FFMVic, CFA and FRV Chiefs / Commissioners and other government entities such as DTP?
- Has it been accepted?

Victoria's fuel management program uses a risk-based framework with a target to maintain statewide fuel-driven bushfire risk at or below 70%. This prioritises treatments on public land that most reduce risk to life and property.

The residual risk target has been met each year since its establishment, demonstrating consistent delivery against the State's agreed performance measure.

OBRM has reviewed the current 70% risk target using the best available science and provided advice to Government for its consideration.

OBRM has also developed a roadmap to expand fuel management targets for all organisations with bushfire risk management responsibilities across public and private land in Victoria to strengthen accountability for delivery and guide agencies in effectively managing bushfire risk across public and private land.

9. Can you confirm the 'residual risk' ratings for each of the regions and the state ahead of the 2024/25 and 2025/26 fire seasons?

The Department models the impact that planned burning and bushfires have on reducing fuel-driven bushfire risk to human life and property. The Department has a statewide target to maintain modelled fuel-driven bushfire risk to human life at or below 70% of maximum levels through fuel management on public land.

Currently there is only one residual risk target set for public land. There are no residual risk targets on private land, or other types of land outside of park and forest.

Residual risk outcomes for the state and each DEECA region ahead of the 2024/25 fire season is available in [Victoria's bushfire risk management report 2023-2024 | vic.gov.au](#).

Residual risk outcomes for the state and each DEECA region ahead of the 2025/26 fire season is available in the OBRM Snapshot - [Victoria's Bushfire Management Snapshot | vic.gov.au](#).

10. If the residual risk was recorded as being acceptable or achieving the targets, why does DEECA require additional grant funding leading into the fire season in response to an elevated fire season?

Fuel driven bushfire risk is a measure of the long-term risk in the landscape independent of seasonal conditions such as temperature, dryness, and wind. These are not directly influenced by fuel management but are important contributors to bushfire impacts.

Seasonal risk is a shorter-term measure that includes weather conditions such as rainfall, expected temperature, soil moisture and drought indices.

All risk factors are taken into account in determining resourcing requirements going into the high-risk weather season. Fuel-driven bushfire risk may be high but immediate seasonal risk low due to a cold and wet summer. Conversely, fuel-driven bushfire risk may be low but immediate seasonal risk aggravated by extreme temperature, dryness, and high winds.

No amount of fuel management can reduce bushfire risk in Victoria to a level where we avoid the need for highly capable and well-resourced fire suppression, particularly in extended dry El Nino and drought conditions.

As with all emergency services, DEECA's bushfire funding model relies on both base appropriations for core capabilities and capacity, supplemented by funding for urgent and seasonal needs. Where forecast conditions indicate a high-risk summer season (as outlined in the evidence before this Inquiry for the 2025-26 summer season) additional funding is sought to:

- Uplift whole-of-season preparedness in response to heightened bushfire risk
- Expand frontline workforce (earlier recruitment, additional operational firefighting workforce, PPE, training and medicals)
- Enhance aviation capability (early activation of aircraft, crews and airbases, extra retardant etc)

- Enhance first attack and surge response (pre-positioning, standby, detection)
- Enhance fleet and plant readiness (earlier activation, standby, additional vehicles/plant, maintenance, spares)
- Boost intelligence and operational systems (EM support, RPAS/drones)
- Increase compliance and community risk reduction (patrols, campaigns, fire towers)
- Enhance specialist capability (additional rappel workforce, training and equipment).

Enhanced preparedness funding is typically sought in periods of extended underlying dryness or drought. was sought ahead of the 2025-26 summer. Prior to that, the last time that enhanced preparedness funding was sought and was provided was prior to 2019-20 Black Summer.

11. Considering the bushfire outcomes (loss of private property & impact to communities) over the last couple of years (Multiple, Grampians National Park impacts including Pomonal, Bayandene fire and again in January 2026 such as Walwa and Otways) do you consider the targets still being appropriate?

FFMVic's fuel management program is guided by the Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land, its associated zoning scheme, and six regional bushfire management strategies. It includes a performance measure to maintain statewide fuel driven bushfire risk at or below 70% through fuel management on public land. FFMVic also uses regional and district targets to guide its work. In combination, these targets guide FFMVic's work to ensure that planned burning and other risk reduction works are focussed on the highest risk areas with the highest impact, noting there are always weather and operational limitations within a season.

A statewide target in the current form was recommended by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management in 2015, with review of the percentage value of that target recommended in 2020. No target (hectare based or risk-based) can eliminate all bushfire risk, especially under a changing climate.

The impacts of recent fires will provide important lessons that help improve future fire management. FFMVic is carrying out a Coordinated After Action Review with CFA and other sector partners following this summer's fires, and looks forward to the findings and recommendations of this inquiry and other external review processes.

The OBRM have led the development of a roadmap to expand fuel management targets for all organisations with bushfire risk management responsibilities across public and private land in Victoria, to help measure

effectiveness of risk reduction activities and to increase transparency with the community. It is the Government's responsibility to set or change any targets, not the Departments.

12. What is the remit of the State Aircraft Unit?

- Why does it not report directly to any senior operational leader?

Management and procurement of Victoria's aviation assets for aerial firefighting and land management is overseen by DEECA BFS Aviation Services Unit. The unit is responsible for planning, procuring and managing Victoria's aerial firefighting capability, including the state aircraft fleet and associated contracts.

Operational decision making and deployment of aircraft is managed via Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) through the State Control Centre State Air Desk.

The Aviation Services Unit operates on behalf of all fire and land management agencies in the procurement of aviation assets. Governance arrangements ensure that senior operational leaders are engaged and direct aviation asset capability needs. Operational tasking is exercised separately through EMV under established emergency management arrangements.

13. Can you detail how much funding DEECA is receiving from the ESVF?

- Can you detail which business units and activities within DEECA are recipients of these funds?
- What are these funds used for?
- Are there any restrictions on the use of these funds?

The Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund (ESVF) is an annual property levy collected via council rates in Victoria.

It applies to residential, commercial, industrial, primary production and public benefit properties. It replaced the fire services property levy and supports a broader range of emergency services.

The amount property owners contribute depends on the property type and value. The ESVF is made up of:

- a fixed charge based on the property classification, and
- a variable charge based on the property's capital improved value and classification.

Funding for FFMVic's bushfire and emergency management functions is provided under DEECA's Fire and Emergency Management output. The funding under this output supports FFMVic's in delivering its Fire and Emergency Management responsibilities, including prevention, preparedness, response and recovery activities across public land.

A portion of Fire and Emergency Management output funding is provided through the ESVF.

The funding is managed by the Department of Treasury and Finance as part of DEECA's overall output appropriation rather than being managed separately.

The proportion and funding arrangements are determined by the government and published in the Victorian Government Gazette. Up to 43.3% of the Fire and Emergency Management output can be funded by the ESVF (*Victorian Government Gazette*, S269 30 May 2025, p. 3)

DEECA applies all funding to meet its statutory obligations, including management of fire on public land (state forests and national parks), and broader emergency management functions consistent with the Forest Act 1958.

14. In relation to DEECA funding over the last 4 Financial years, what quantum of savings / efficiencies have been sought and realised?
- As part of realising those savings, how many FTE were affected within Forest Fire Management Victoria?
  - Of those FTE affected, how many had Incident Management Qualifications?
  - Despite now receiving direct funds from the ESVF, how do you reconcile reducing DEECA's Incident Management workforce?
  - Is this not a false economy where on one hand DEECA find financial savings (and in the process reducing its Incident Management Capability) and then prior to each summer request a Treasurers Advance so that DEECA can source and employ the required capabilities for an 'elevated fire season'?
  - A seasonal workforce is known & planned for – it should not require a TA each summer.

DEECA has met the required savings targets of the Government's Departmental Expenditure Review (DER) and reductions in Consultancy, Labour Hire and Professional services (CLHP). For the Bushfire and Forest Services (BFS) Group, this was achieved through reductions in expenditure on external services, reprioritisations of non-emergency programs and organisation change processes.

As outlined in the VAGO report, 'Delivering Savings Under the COVID Debt Repayment Plan', BFS's organisational change processes have been designed to not have a net reduction on frontline emergency roles. In the 2024 change process, there was an increase of 54 frontline Forest and Fire Operations Officer roles, and the only operational roles reduced were 4 regulatory positions that were no longer required following the end of native timber harvesting. As part of this process, there were 53 staff that held emergency management roles that departed from the Department. These departures occurred via opt-in Applicant Separation Packages that provided pathways for career changes or staff nearing the end of their careers for early retirement. All applicants' specific fire roles and experience were considered in the decision-making on packages. Subsequent change processes have not included the regions of the Forest and Fire Operations Division, in which the Forest and Fire Operations Officer are situated.

The receipt of supplementary funding in the form of Treasurer's Advance is related to varying seasonal needs, rather than any previous savings and efficiencies acquitted.

DEECA receives base funding and State Budget initiatives funding to cover its core capabilities and capacity, including standing up the forest firefighter workforce. FFMVic utilises a Seasonal Emergency Workforce Framework to

scale its workforce in line with seasonal risk, particularly during periods of heightened bushfire activity.

These sources of funding are then supplemented when required to meet the specific operational needs of the upcoming bushfire season. For example, the scale and duration of emergency response activities cannot be accurately quantified at State Budget time, so the operational costs for responding to the upcoming bushfires are supplemented with a Treasurer's Advance after the end of that bushfire season when the full scope and costs, such as overtime for forest firefighters, are confirmed.

If the emerging seasonal outlook predicts an extreme bushfire season, supplementary funding is also requested ahead of summer to support enhanced seasonal readiness activities and additional capacity for a likely large and protracted season. This is typically necessary in drought years.

Furthermore, if the emerging outlook in December predicts favourable Autumn planned burning conditions, supplementary funding is requested to maximise planned burning and risk reduction activities. This enables FFMVic to extend its seasonal workforce longer than a usual season and run a 7-day a week operation to make the most of all burning opportunities.

Supplementary funding for both enhanced readiness and planned burns are intended to reduce the extent and severity of individual bushfires, and thereby helps to reduce the costs of emergency response and recovery.

15. The establishment of the Office of Bushfire Risk Management was an outcome of IGEM's review into the 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires and a decision taken by this Government. How would you describe the effectiveness of this new body and would any changes (either previously sought by CFA or new) to the current arrangements benefit bushfire at risk communities and the CFA in meeting their statutory obligations of preventing fires.

Refer to response to question 10 from Ms Lovell.

16. What is the status of the recommendations of IGEM review (fuel management) – why haven't the recommendations been implemented despite the government accepting those recommendations?

In 2020, the Victorian Government accepted all recommendations contained within the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) Report, Inquiry into the 2019–20 bushfires (IGEM inquiry), the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Royal Commission).

Recommendation 9 of the IGEM Inquiry was to undertake a review of the current residual risk target to ensure that it remains contemporary in terms

of its designated percentage value. OBRM has reviewed the current residual risk target and provided advice to Government which is currently under consideration.

Recommendation 2 of the IGEM Inquiry was to review fuel management legislation. DEECA has completed a Review of Fuel Management Legislative Frameworks jointly with the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS). In line with IGEM's recommendations, this review has considered opportunities to amend legislation to enable more effective delivery across different land tenures, support greater interoperability and ensure all firefighters have sufficient protections. Outcomes of the review are being considered by the Victorian Government.