

# **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**

Tim Wiebusch, Commissioner,

Dean Tighe, Deputy Secretary and Chief Executive, and

Mariela Diaz, Deputy Commissioner, Relief and Recovery, Emergency Management Victoria;

Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria;

Greg Leach, Chief Executive Officer, and

Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer, Country Fire Authority; and

Gavin Freeman, Commissioner, Fire Rescue Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria in Parliament House committee rooms today. We welcome representatives from Emergency Management Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria, the Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria.

All the 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 the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

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

Welcome. Thanks very much for coming in today. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. The committee members will introduce themselves, starting with Gaelle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The CHAIR:** Just to assist with the Hansard record, I might get each of you just to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of. We will start down here.

**Dean TIGHE:** Hi, everyone. Dean Tighe. From February I joined the Department of Justice and Community Safety as Deputy Secretary of the Emergency Management Group, and in March I also became the Chief Executive of Emergency Management Victoria.

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Good morning, everyone. Tim Wiebusch. I am Victoria's Emergency Management Commissioner.

**Mariela DIAZ:** Good morning. Mariela Diaz, Deputy Commissioner, Relief and Recovery, Emergency Management Victoria. At the time of the fires I was the CEO for Emergency Recovery Victoria.

**Chris HARDMAN:** I am Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria within the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, DEECA.

**Greg LEACH:** Good morning. Greg Leach, Chief Executive Officer, Country Fire Authority.

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** Good morning. Jason Heffernan, the Chief Officer of the Country Fire Authority.

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Good morning. I am Gavin Freeman. I am the Commissioner of Fire Rescue Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thanks, all, for joining us. We have got an extended session today, which I think will be really useful in delving into a lot of the issues that have come up, particularly in the last couple of weeks as we have been out in regional Victoria, talking with communities. I want to thank at the outset, on behalf of the committee, all of the people who work for you that helped us in the last couple of weeks. It has been extremely informative. Hopefully it did not give us too many good questions to ask, but that is yet to be seen.

We will invite you now to make opening statements. If we can keep them as succinct as possible so we have got enough time to get into the nuts and bolts. It is a long session, so we might take a short break in the middle of it just to stretch our legs, and we will probably do a couple of different rounds of questions on behalf of the committee. So I do not know – Tim, are you going to start?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** I am happy to, Mr Batchelor.

**The CHAIR:** There you go. Over to you.

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Thank you. Good morning. I wish to begin by acknowledging First Nations people that may be with us today and acknowledge the contribution of traditional owners and what they make in supporting emergencies.

My statement today is on behalf of Emergency Management Victoria and also now incorporates Emergency Recovery Victoria. EMV oversees emergency management, planning and operational communications and information systems. EMV is responsible for leading the coordination of strategic investment and major projects on behalf of responder agencies. My accountabilities as Commissioner are defined in section 32 of the *Emergency Management Act 2013* and summarised in the Victorian government's mission at section 1.2.2 on page 15. But in brief, my role is to coordinate emergency management arrangements and help agencies work together before, during and after emergencies. I lead the whole-of-government response coordination for major emergencies, provide strategic advice to government and ensure Victoria's emergency management system is prepared and effective in collaboration with the agencies here today and others. We recognise the significant work of this inquiry and welcome the opportunity to engage on issues of importance to communities.

I would like to extend our condolences to the family and friends of Mr Maxwell Hobson, who tragically died in the Longwood fire.

Having visited most incident grounds and many communities, what came through and continues to come through is how incredibly challenging a time it is for these affected communities. The high-risk weather season was one of the most extreme for Victoria, with a number of new records. The bureau forecasted a hotter and drier spring and summer, leading the chiefs and I to bring forward our annual preparedness activities by two months. Together we set six priorities for the season, including timely and relevant warnings and information, focus on evacuation and take-shelter messaging and community consequence and relief. These became the focus of over 25 statewide briefings and exercises, with those exercises focusing on evacuation and take shelter. EMV coordinated a whole-of-sector funding bid to government ahead of the season. This resulted in funding for the CFA Get Fire Ready program, short-form take action videos, additional forest firefighters, bolstering of the aviation fleet and strategic bulk water cartage and storage. During the season we saw 30 major fires, a major flash flood, storms and two heatwaves. Hundreds more fires were contained early.

From 7 to 9 January fire danger escalated from extreme to catastrophic. Victoria's integrated command and control arrangements have been strengthened since 2009 through applied learnings. We have come a long way, but we also acknowledge more work is needed to be done to strengthen the line of communications with the field in some areas. On 9 January strategic decisions and rapid response contained most of the 200 fires that threatened lives and properties. The geographic spread of fires was unprecedented, affecting 23 local

government areas and an alpine resort area. Over 450 homes and approximately 45,000 hectares of agricultural land were impacted. The scale of the impact was comparable to the 2009 bushfires. Importantly, thousands of homes and assets and critical structures were saved, along with tens of thousands of hectares protected. Support came from every Australian jurisdiction, Canada and New Zealand. Nearly 2000 warnings were issued, including a record 291 on 9 January. Engagements with communities occurred through the VicEmergency app and website, media conferences and interviews, social media and community meetings, all reinforcing strong messaging about the severity of conditions and required community actions. EMV has a multiyear project underway to enhance the VicEmergency app and website for usability and accessibility.

The key difference from past fires, we believe, included the preparedness, such as the Get Fire Ready program; communities acting on warnings; the declaration of a state of disaster; early decisions to leave; and strong firefighting efforts. These all undoubtedly contributed to saving lives.

Local councils and community groups played a key role in relief and recovery, supporting communities during challenging conditions, including opening 32 relief centres. Impacted councils received strong support from other councils. ERV supported these efforts to ensure effective relief and recovery coordination and scaled up the 1800 recovery hotline and clean-up program. DFFH issued personal hardship assistance payments, supported councils with emergency accommodation and established the recovery support program. By 26 February all councils had transitioned to recovery.

In closing, EMV continues to coordinate 36 programs across government that are critical grants and services in support of recovery. We wish to recognise the extraordinary efforts of all our volunteers and staff, particularly those that left their own properties to help others, returning in some cases to find their own property damaged or destroyed. In visiting the areas impacted by these devastating events, I have heard many stories and truly empathise with those that have lost so much. A multi-agency, coordinated, after-action review is well underway and being observed by the IGEM. It will inform our focus for the next season and beyond. We remain committed to implementing the learnings from this summer. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Chris.

**Chris HARDMAN:** Thank you. I too would like to acknowledge our traditional owners. I am Chris Hardman. I am the Chief Fire Officer of Forest Fire Management Victoria. I am accountable for fire management across 8 million hectares of forested land in Victoria, which equates to about one-third of the total land area. As Chief Fire Officer I am accountable for command and control arrangements, including first attack for level 1 and level 2 DEECA-controlled fires, and I am accountable for the command arrangements during complex level 3 fires. From an emergency management perspective, I hold the role of state response controller, and I am a qualified level 3 incident controller. During the 2026 fires I performed the roles of state response controller and deputy state response controller.

Forest Fire Management Victoria manage bushfire prevention, fuel management and response across all public land in Victoria with the core purpose of protecting lives, property and critical infrastructure and of course natural ecosystems. I lead Victoria's fuel management program across Victoria's parks and forests, and I am responsible for meeting the government's target to keep fuel-driven bushfire risk at or below 70 per cent. There are many other things we do to mitigate the spread and impact of bushfires, which I am happy to talk to during the hearing. We rely on a substantial contractor workforce – forest contractors and plant contractors – that support operational activities, and we have a dedicated forest operational fleet of specialist vehicles. We have an operational and surge workforce of around 2700 personnel, which incorporates 1500 accredited firefighters.

During the 2026 fires, this season was driven by prolonged dry conditions. We saw conditions that we have not seen since Black Saturday. FFMVic had fought more than 500 fires on public land, keeping 87 per cent of those fires below 5 hectares. Keeping fires small is absolutely critical – each one of those fires could have been big and impacted community or the environment. 'Aggressive, thorough and determined first attack' is the mantra that we apply. This year we relied on our own and new remote water points, which focuses on reducing helicopter turnaround time to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the aviation assets that we apply. We also rely on our strategic fuel break network, and that network allows us to rapidly move into back-burning operations to remove the fuel from in front of many fires – and we have many examples of where that has been effective. Our forest and plant contractors were critical to the fire fight, as well as a well-managed road network

allowing firefighters to access fires across the landscape. That, along with aviation and ground resources working in unison to mitigate the impacts of these fires – much of those actions were very successful this year.

The Victorian government submission details – and I think the panel has already heard about – the additional resources that we have, so I will not repeat those statistics. I will talk about fuel management. It is also one of our long-term core bushfire risk mitigation activities. We deliver this through a strong risk-based approach that uses planned burning and mechanical fuel treatments across public land with a joint fuel management program in partnership with the CFA. All of these activities are critical to reducing bushfire risk and supporting safe and effective firefighting operations, and they played an important role in supporting suppression efforts during the 2026 fire season.

To finish, I would just like to acknowledge the incredible people in Forest Fire Management Victoria, made up of young and not so young men and women who are without doubt amongst the best specialist forest firefighters anywhere in the world. I know this because I have travelled the world and I have seen how good our people are. They put themselves in harm's way day after day, week after week, year after year, to protect their communities and the environment that they love. I could not be more proud of their skills, commitment and dedication, and I am privileged to lead this group of integrated land and fire managers on behalf of the people of Victoria. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Who is up for the CFA?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** I am. Thank you. Good morning. My name is Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer, Country Fire Authority, principal executive of the CFA registered training organisation. I am joined today by Greg Leach AFSM, Chief Executive Officer, and we appear on behalf of the Country Fire Authority. The distinct powers and duties of the Chief Officer and Chief Executive are defined in the *Country Fire Authority Act*. As Chief Officer, I have responsibility for the service delivery to the community and the order and control of officers, brigades and groups. The CEO is responsible to the board for the effective and efficient management of the CFA. I too acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands affected by the fires and recognise their stewardship and care of country and the impacts on their country and culture.

The inquiry you are conducting is both important and necessary. We welcome the opportunity to contribute openly and constructively to your work. Before I turn to matters of preparedness and response, I want to acknowledge the very real human impact of these fires. Across Victoria, people have endured terrifying days and long nights, many still living with what they have lost – homes, livelihoods, stock and a sense of safety in the places they used to call home. Tragically, a member of the public lost his life, and on behalf of the authority I offer our heartfelt condolences to the Hobson family. Two CFA firefighters suffered significant injuries requiring hospitalisation. I thank them for their endurance and sacrifice as they too travel the road of recovery.

The conditions that produced this outcome were well signalled. The most dangerous period arrived between 7 and 9 January, peaking with catastrophic fire danger forecasts across multiple weather districts. There were widespread temperatures well into the 40s, with a large dry air mass, damaging winds and atmospheric conditions generating lightning strikes into the baked Victorian landscape. More than 200 bush and grass fires started on 9 January. While the vast number of fires were successfully contained, we witnessed some fire behaviour that was uncontrollable. Crown fires ripped through treetops. Grassfires ran at a speed that outpaced fire appliances. Spot fires ignited kilometres ahead of the main fire front, and there was a fire intensity that predictably imposed carnage on the landscape and anything in its path.

Despite the scale and intensity of the campaign, there is also an important truth: countless lives, homes, businesses and farms were saved through the combined efforts of CFA members working alongside our partner agencies and through the decisions communities made ahead of and in response to issued warnings. I thank the agricultural sector and those operators of private firefighting equipment who played a vital role again this summer. The responsibility for individuals to fight on their own land has always been part of the firefighting context here in Victoria. CFA is a trusted volunteer-based fire and emergency service, and I want to recognise and acknowledge the professionalism and courage and endurance shown by all CFA volunteers and staff this past season. In demonstration, from 7 January, more than 15,000 emergency management volunteers and career personnel were involved in the response and relief operations across the state. CFA mobilisation was substantial. Around 60 per cent of the fleet was deployed on 9 January alone, and two-thirds of our 1200-odd brigades responded. Those figures reflect the scale of what was required and the scale of what was delivered.

In recognition of the heightened risk profile, I issued a requirement on 11 July for readiness by 1 October and issued the chief officer's command intent statement for the season. CFA secured supplementary funding from government to support preparedness and response initiatives, including the elevated seasonal response initiative designed to strengthen operational support capability through enhanced bulk water and diesel support. But maybe more importantly, funding enabled the inaugural Get Fire Ready campaign. This focused on three practical behaviours in the community: property preparation, fire planning and the use of the VicEmergency app. The scale of delivery was significant: 537 brigades through 3800 CFA members delivered 547 events across Victoria. These directly engaged tens of thousands of community members in practical and tailored fire safety conversations. Sixty per cent of the events held in locations were identified as high risk in the AFAC spring outlook. Brigades in many of the fire-affected areas held events, including Yarek, Harcourt, Ruffly, Upton Hill, Avenel, Terip Terip and Strathbogie, just to name a few. I have no doubt Get Fire Ready events made a real difference with lives and property remaining here today as a result.

Fire services reform was introduced to ensure that Victorians can rely on the best fire and emergency service response, regardless of where they live. CFA and FRV continue to work together to achieve the complementary fire service arrangements since 1 July 2020. Solid progress has been made. We know there is more to be done, particularly in relation to the implementation across arrangements for seconded senior operational leaders working within the CFA. CFA's post fire season debrief program is progressing well, with strong member engagement that will help us identify improvement opportunities to strengthen operational performance. So far, more than 140 brigades have generated about 1300 observations into 238 insights. Once this work is complete, CFA will ensure the key findings of our intended response are shared broadly with our members.

I want to thank our members who have come before this committee to provide firsthand insights and recommendations, many of whom have lost and felt the pain of service and sacrifice. To everyone who has been affected, those that were forced or chose to leave, those who returned to damage, loss and heartbreak, those starting the long process of rebuilding and those still carrying the emotional and psychological scars, I say this: we see your suffering. We acknowledge it. We are committed to learning everything so that Victoria is best positioned for the future. I want to be clear: CFA approaches accountability in a practical way. We learn, we improve and we report honestly. We are committed to the evaluation improvement cycle, capturing lessons, translating them into changes and ensuring that they are reflected in our capability training and operational arrangements.

In closing, this inquiry matters because Victorians deserve continued confidence that our emergency services remain ready for the increasingly severe and complex fire dangers we now routinely face. We stand ready to assist the committee, acknowledging those who have suffered loss and with deep respect for the volunteers and emergency services personnel who stood between fire and the community. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Jason. Gavin.

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Thank you. Gavin Freeman. I also acknowledge the traditional owners on the various lands across Victoria. I would also like to acknowledge not just Fire Rescue Victoria firefighters, but all firefighters across the state and indeed across Australia as we approach International Firefighters Day this coming Monday. Chair, could I also just state for the record that, unfortunately, I have got a perforated right eardrum, so I do not want members to think that I am being evasive if I need a question repeated. So far, so good.

**The CHAIR:** If you cannot hear anything at any point, just speak up.

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Sure. It is all good. Fire Rescue Victoria is a modern fire and rescue service established in 2020 that operates 85 fire stations across Victoria, protecting metropolitan Melbourne and all the major regional centres. FRV was formed off the back of a fire services reform and is made up of all former MFB firefighters and the previous career CFA firefighters. We currently have approximately 3800 firefighters and around 700 corporate staff who are all integral in keeping the organisation running day to day. I have been a career firefighter for over 40 years and Commissioner of Fire Rescue Victoria since May 2023. In that role I have got statutory responsibility for leading FRV and discharging all FRV legal obligations, and I report directly to the Minister for Emergency Services in the Victorian Government, the Honourable Vicki Ward MP.

FRV firefighters – our people – are trained in firefighting, obviously, complex rescues, road crashes, high-angle et cetera, emergency medical response – and I am particularly proud of the work our people do there in partnership with Ambulance Victoria every day – hazardous material incidents and the list goes on. But we do work very closely with the Country Fire Authority and Forest Fire Management Victoria every day, and more so during summer, including this last summer season. We also work daily alongside the state emergency service and Victoria Police, striving to play our part in providing that complementary service for the Victorian community. As part of fire services reform FRV provide career staff to the Country Fire Authority through a secondment agreement arrangement. That secondment model had some hurdles as we started off, and we have made significant progress but we still have more work to do. There are more improvements that we can make, and we continue to work hard to fill those positions to ensure that CFA have the support they need for their hardworking volunteers.

In particular in regard to the last summer, our written submissions summarise FRV's contribution, so I will not repeat all of that, but it did include strike teams, and incident management at incident level and at state level. We have a heavy contribution to the aviation sector – remotely piloted aircraft systems and impact assessment, just to name a few. But importantly, it was the first season of this scale that we have had since FRV was formed in 2020, and that was therefore the first time we had an opportunity to really test our operating models and procedures. While we can always do better, our processes and more importantly our people performed very well. The total number of FRV staff contributing to deployments was about 557, but many of those people deployed on multiple days, so the total number of deployed person days was in the order of 1800. On the busiest day, which was 9 January, 152 FRV staff were deployed across operational IMT and support roles. The number relates specifically to bushfire emergency, and that was in addition to maintaining our business as usual across Victoria.

Emergency services by nature are learning and forward-focused organisations, always working on what we can improve for next time. No two incidents that we go to are the same. At FRV we are currently conducting our after-action reviews related to the 2026 summer season. We are keen to see the learnings that come from that and implement anything that we need to implement out of our learnings and of course, things that may come out of this inquiry. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Just so everyone knows, we will probably do two rounds of questions, taking a short break between them just to give people an opportunity to stretch their legs. Probably about 7 minutes each is my plan. We will see. Tim, I might start with you just on preparedness. We were told middle of last year or end of last year that it was going to be a bad fire season, and then you asked for extra money from the government. Explain to us how that preparedness process works. What do you do as Emergency Management Commissioner to assess what is likely to happen? How do you inform yourself about the fire season that is coming, and then what goes into getting ready for a season when you think it is going to be particularly bad?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Certainly. I guess in a preparedness sense it all starts with the intelligence that we receive from the likes of the Bureau of Meteorology, working with our fire behaviour analysts that sit within our fire agencies. They look at a seasonal outlook, and that is done in conjunction with the Australian and New Zealand fire and emergency services council, AFAC, and it produces a seasonal outlook. That seasonal outlook gives an indication of where we are perhaps likely to see increased fire potential for a given season, and for this year the map for Victoria was red in in many parts. That then leads us as agency leaders and our teams to put together our annual preparedness program. Based on that seasonal outlook we brought that forward, as I mentioned in my opening statement, by two months, because we knew there was a likely onset of the season earlier. So we targeted a 1 October commencement for our season this year, which meant a number of –

**The CHAIR:** When does it normally start?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** We would normally start that sometime in November rather than October. And that then led to a range of our preparedness activities. We run regional briefings, state briefings, with all our incident management personnel. We run exercises. So this year we ran exercises focused on evacuation and take shelter right across all our eight emergency management regions and 25 seasonal briefings that were conducted. That was then backed up by that aircraft coming on earlier than we would normally have seen, given the increased risk. We also saw the agencies undertake additional preparedness, as you have heard, around bulk water cartage and storage, given the drought conditions, and making sure that we could have sufficient water, not only for firefighting appliances and our aviation fleet but also the additional firefighters in FFM Vic and the like. That

then culminates together with our local governments that are also exercising in things like relief centres, and there are a number of relief centre exercises in the lead-up. And we also combine that with what we call the Victorian annual preparedness program, which means we have our agency personnel go through what is a blended briefing program where there are a number of online modules to prepare people for the particular season ahead, and we had thousands of people undertake that this year ahead of the season.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. We had evidence from our witnesses at DEECA that you asked for more money from government. Did you receive all the money that you asked for?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Yes. In the lead-up to this season I have mentioned a number of the elements already. The bulk water, the aviation bolstering, the Forest Fire Management firefighters, the short-form take action videos and the CFA get ready program were all items that we took as a collective to the government and were funded ahead of this season.

**The CHAIR:** Jason, I might just ask you from a CFA perspective. We heard from a number of captains on the ground that these conditions, the fires they were fighting, were not like anything they had seen, at least probably since Black Saturday. From a CFA organisational perspective, how do you get ready for conditions that are expected to be like that? And also what is your perspective on how bad it was in January?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** Thank you. So we rely on using our network of brigades; as you know, we are in every community across Victoria. And back in early 2025 I was getting a lot of feedback in my visits out to brigades and through the network that surface water was becoming a real issue and in fact non-existent in large parts of south-western Victoria and that the underlying drought conditions were creating an issue for them. And they were flagging very early on that we would see quite a challenging fire season if we did not see those rains come along. That is where we then started to come together and think about what we needed to do in a strategic response to that. Obviously we needed water. We knew water was going to be a challenge for this season, and that is where the elevated seasonal response initiative was born, so 19 strategic locations across the state in addition to CFA procuring our own bulk water capabilities to be deployed throughout the season.

**The CHAIR:** What is bulk water capability in terms that simple people like us might understand?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** The bulk water capability is – we had contracted 100,000-or-higher litreage cartage providers that were strategically resourced and positioned across the state. The easiest way for me to describe it is through something similar that you probably know about, which is we have aircraft positioned around the state. They are on PDD, so predetermined dispatch. We pretty much did the same thing but with bulk water carriers. So they were on a readiness level main matrix, and when conditions were met and triggers were met, these bulk water carriers were staffed with drivers and they were ready to deploy as soon as the incident occurred or as soon as a brigade requested that assistance.

In addition to the funding that we sought and were provided, that also included a component for us to purchase. One of the things I wanted to make sure was that we future-proofed against future seasons where we saw rain deficiency. So we were able to purchase a number of bulk water tankers of our own – large-scale bulk water tankers – and bulk water pods that we will be positioning around the state for this season to come. And of course, as you heard in my opening statement, we also conducted the Get Fire Ready campaign, which, again, was a strategic response to knowledge that we are seeing these conditions and the challenges that we were likely to see. And we wanted to make sure the community knew what was potentially coming and how they could prepare themselves.

**The CHAIR:** All right. That is my time. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much indeed. I have multiple, multiple questions here, but I want to potentially first go to vacancies, and CFA vacancies. How many CFA assistant chief fire officer vacancies and commander positions are allocated to district 22, and how many of these positions were vacant in the week commencing 5 January 2026? You may need to take it on notice.

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** The exact number of seconded staff available in district 22 – I do not want to mislead the committee, so I will take that one on notice. But what I can tell you: on the week of 5 January there were two seconded staff available in district 22, being an acting assistant chief fire officer and a substantive commander.

**Melina BATH:** And how many should there have been?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** There were a number of vacancies through non-relief and genuine vacancies in that office for that week. Again, the exact number I will find.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Can I also ask how many were working on the actual day the Longwood fire broke out?

**Melina BATH:** Yes, and that is what my next question is going to. Do you track those, both vacancies and non-relief, for ACFOs and commanders in all positions across the state? Can you please provide a report showing all the vacancies and non-relief for each week over January and February 2026? Take that on notice. That is the details, but do these gaps concern you, and what impacts have they had on CFA operations, Mr Heffernan?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** Look, CFA supports the principles and obviously the government's policy around a complementary fire service, as I said in my opening statement, so all Victorians can rely on the best fire emergency service by our fire services, regardless of where they live. There have been clear benefits of reform for CFA. And as I alluded to in my opening statement, there do remain some challenges experienced in relation to implementing the secondment agreement and positions around that, mainly around vacancy and relief management. We continue to work closely with Fire Rescue Victoria to ensure the implementation of that, including regularly raising it in conversations. In fact, we established a governance structure through the heads of agency, as it is called, which is a meeting that occurs fortnightly between myself, Mr Freeman and Mr Leach, and we come together to talk about all things reform-related between our two organisations and the complementary nature which we have got and also highlight issues around vacancy and non-relief.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you; I appreciate this. I have very limited time. Now, the fire services have been changed in structure for some many years, and yet on the ground – last week we heard repeatedly that there are not enough controllers and ACFOs, and if you go around the state and talk to them, you will understand and hear. So the conversations might be being had, but the actual outcomes are not being addressed. I put it to you also: did you raise any concerns about your summer attestations to the Emergency Management Commissioner for the upcoming fire seasons in 2026, about CFA capability to actually meet the needs of this fire season?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** I did provide to the Emergency Management Commissioner a qualified attestation in respect to CFA resourcing under the secondment agreement.

**Melina BATH:** And just for clarity, how many unfilled vacancies for both of those two positions were there statewide on 9 January – the week commencing 5 January – when it started? Could you please do that research?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** I will take that on notice and provide that to you explicitly.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Mr Leach, did you have any involvement in drafting the board statement that was issued on 12 January about the CFA budget?

**Greg LEACH:** I did.

**Melina BATH:** Did you? What was your involvement in that, and did you receive any pressure from government to actually make those statements?

**Greg LEACH:** Thank you. The board held an extraordinary meeting on Sunday 11 January. That was in response to a lot of media reporting over that week leading up to the catastrophic day on the Friday. The concern the board had was that the media reporting was a little inaccurate in that it was talking about the grant funding that CFA receives and then connecting the dots and saying that CFA's budget had been cut, which was not actually the case. So the –

**Melina BATH:** Can I just pull you up there? If we look at the budget over time – and I have the budget – from 2021 it was \$351.6 million, and then it went down to \$347 million, and then \$341 million, and then \$339 million and then it bumped up a little bit in last year's budget. But it does not consider indexation. There has been an overall drop; it has not kept pace with the CPI. This is in the budget papers, Mr Leach.

**Greg LEACH:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** So how do you reconcile that in relation to your statement?

**Greg LEACH:** Because the conversation that was being had was in relation to the government grant to CFA. The government grant, which makes up 76 per cent of CFA's budget, did not take into account the nine separate income sources that CFA has. The total CFA budget is different to the government grant that we have received, and in fact the total CFA budget had increased year on year from 2022 through to 2025.

**Melina BATH:** So are you happy with the current budget situation in the CFA?

**Greg LEACH:** I do not think you would ever get a CEO who would say they are happy with the budget. I will always take more. There is no doubt that there is more pressure and demand on the CFA budget for services than the budget provides.

**Melina BATH:** The government has just put out a statement saying \$100 million over 10 years, so that is \$10 million a year – no different to its statement of \$40 million over four years; it is just \$10 million. Yet others, and I will use VFBV, are saying that they need approximately \$65 million per year to retain the age of the fleet that exists now in terms of fleet funding, let alone other funding.

**Greg LEACH:** Yes, that is correct.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. So how do you reconcile that? In many ways this budget statement is being, I will say, twee or accurate in a false sense, because in actual fact you are not receiving sufficient funding from the government to even maintain a level of fleet capability and standard that is acceptable in modern-day society. No other state has an ageing fleet like this state does.

**Greg LEACH:** The board was concerned that in a week when we had a catastrophic fire day, there were conversations about CFA's budget being cut, and the board was concerned that that might undermine confidence in CFA's ability. So the board wanted to make a clear point that the budget had not been cut.

**Melina BATH:** But the reality is people out there – CFA volunteers – know that the budget has been cut over successive years.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Bath, your time has expired. If the witness could answer, you will get another opportunity. Mr Leach, if you want to conclude your answer.

**Greg LEACH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. I might continue on with the questions about fleet. We heard time and again from CFA volunteers – and FRV firefighters, but I will come to that; I will start with CFA – that they had volunteers going out on equipment that just simply was not safe. It was aged and not appropriate, and you know, that I think added to a lot of the stress and the trauma that some of these communities experienced, knowing that their equipment was not safe or just not operational. If it had not been for a lot of people contributing their private vehicles, we could have had very different outcomes from these fires. How is fleet replacement being prioritised by the CFA, given that this is something that we are hearing time and again, that they do not have adequate equipment? They cannot possibly – you know, a few barbecues at the local CFA is not going to really deliver them this kind of equipment that they need.

**Greg LEACH:** Thanks for the question. This is a really fundamental issue for our organisation. We run one of the largest emergency response vehicle fleets in the country. We run a huge asset base of 2361 emergency response vehicles, so trucks. That comprises just under 2000 tankers – 1961 – 218 pumpers, 44 pumper tankers and 138 specialist appliances. Of those 2361 appliances we have 297 tankers that are over the age of 30 years, and of those, 66 are over the age of 36 years. That is certainly not ideal. We over a long period of time have had a management principle of wanting to turn our fleet over at 20 years of age for tankers and 15 years of age for pumpers. But as you can see, our fleet is beyond that, and we continue to advocate with government to ensure that we put forward our whole-of-life asset plan so that we can work with government to secure an ongoing funding stream to replace those trucks.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** How much funding do you need? Have you done that work? How much funding do you need to replace those trucks?

**Greg LEACH:** You get a bit of a clue if you look at the depreciation on the CFA budget. When you put depreciation into the budget, we had a deficit last year of around \$54 million. If that depreciation money was being put back into the budget, that would get us somewhere near what we need. Essentially, if you look at our fleet, we need to replace around 100 trucks a year in round figures in order to maintain that at around the 20-year mark, but at the moment we are going to have to invest more to get the truck fleet back to that preferred position.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Mr Freeman, we also heard from a number of FRV officers who I think were carrying a lot of distress because they were not able to assist communities more, due to lack of availability of appropriate firefighting equipment. We also heard of their distress at having to deal with failing appliances regularly. My understanding is that last year you spoke about an audit that was being done on trucks, and you said at the time it would be made publicly available about mid last year. As far as I am aware that audit has not yet been released. When will that truck audit be released?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** You are correct. That audit is still in draft, and we are looking very closely at the draft to make sure that the data is correct. We will not try and say that there are not significant issues that we need to address; there are, particularly around our fleet maintenance, and we are trying to make sure we have really good management actions ready to respond to that draft report once it is finalised. I have not got a date, but we are keen to make it released as soon as it comes out of draft and have those management actions ready to enact so we can respond to it because we need to do that. I understand the frustration of some of our career firefighters in Fire Rescue Victoria, but we did provide each response that we were required to. We really are a support role for the other two agencies in bushfire. We did provide whatever strike teams we were requested on given days. I think part of the frustration comes from pre-reform Country Fire Authority stations, where career firefighters used to jump across onto the volunteer truck and take it out and respond. We do not do that anymore. CFA volunteers crew those appliances. It is just a bit of a culture shift that we are trying to work through as well – that our firefighters will not necessarily have that frontline responsibility, because CFA have picked that up.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** You said that you provided all of the strike teams that were requested, but we have a joint submission from UFU, AVA and CFA Volunteers Group that said a request was made to FRV for additional strike teams but they were not able to be provided because there were not enough appropriate trucks in commission to be able to meet that request.

**Gavin FREEMAN:** I would have to take that on notice, though I am certainly not aware of that. Everything that was requested through the state we were able to fulfil in terms of our strike teams, and our strike teams are not teams that will go into the bush and fight fires. Those trucks are really for firefighting on the urban interface, so where the town meets the bush, and our crews protect the assets, I guess, when a fire comes up on the back fence of built-up areas.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Given we are going to be facing more severe fires with climate change – we know that and we are going to have more incidents like this – do you think we need more fleet within FRV that is capable of managing a broader range of fire types and some more coordination between the two organisations with respect to fleet capability?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Yes, look, it is certainly something that Jason and I talk about from time to time, and it is something that I want to keep examining. I mean, the statutory responsibilities are set out under the Act, but I think we could contribute a little bit more. We have a very tough industrial environment which makes it difficult just to say, 'I want to put a bushfire truck in there.' Our industrial partner would expect that to be fully crewed, in addition to the pumpers that are in there as well. So there are a few things to work through, but it is not off the table by any stretch.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Berger.

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair and thank you all for your appearance this morning. We have heard some different stories about stay and defend or leave early around the different districts that we visited, and

they were quite perplexing to me as to figure out why some of those decisions were made. Chris, if you have got some insights as to what some of the rationale behind it might look like?

**Chris HARDMAN:** Sure. Thank you. Following the Black Saturday bushfires we saw 173 people killed. I was an incident controller during that fire campaign, which left an indelible mark on many of us that experienced that, and we went from an approach which was really just the choice of residents to stay and defend their properties. What the experience was during Black Saturday was that many people did try and stay and defend. I have, again, tried right throughout my career to make it clear about what that actually means, and what that actually means is that you are going to have to be ready to work for many hours in really trying conditions under really frightening circumstances where large, fast-moving bushfires are approaching you. During those experiences, what we did see in Black Saturday is that it became overwhelming for many people, and they decided to leave when it was too late to leave. That resulted in many, many deaths. We obviously learn through every fire season, as we will with this fire season, and we were unambiguous in our messaging this year, both at the state and the incident level, that the safest place to be is nowhere near a bushfire. Of course we had that tragic loss of life, and that impacts all of us. But we could have seen many more lives lost.

Our experiences and the feedback we heard from community is that it is a terrifying and scary experience to stay and defend your property, particularly under catastrophic conditions. Under those conditions, particularly in forested environments or close to forested environments, the radiant heat will kill you before the bushfire gets there, and to be able to shelter in place whilst facing that sort of risk takes a lot of courage and mental fortitude. So again, from an agency's point of view, our primary job is to ensure we save lives. I know how tragic and awful it is when people lose property and their assets, but they can be rebuilt, but a life cannot be rebuilt, so we are unapologetic in saying that the safest place to be is not anywhere near a bushfire as it is moving through the landscape. We do know that some people do make those decisions to stay in place, and there are circumstances where the weather conditions are not catastrophic, they are more benign, and people will make those decisions. But let me say it is still a challenging and difficult thing for community members to do. So yes, our preference is to see people leave ahead of a bushfire because we have all too often experienced the tragic loss of life.

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** If I may add to that, I think there are some contextual realities to that conversation we need to consider. There are no homes designed to withstand the radiant heat flux put out by a large-scale bushfire under catastrophic conditions; homes just simply are not designed to survive that. Again, as Chris highlighted, to successfully be able to stay and defend, you have to make sure that your home is adequately prepared. That includes its design, its construction, its manufacture and its appropriate setbacks and that you yourself are physically and mentally prepared and capable. We have been doing post-fire research for a number of years, and after every large-scale emergency, whether it be down in The Gurdies only last season or in Pomonal, the people that we speak to that stay and defend inevitably say to us, 'We wish we hadn't,' given the mental anguish that it put them through and the fact that they thought they had a good plan only to have the plan fail halfway through. Again, we need to plan for the worst of situations, and the worst of situations for Victoria is a catastrophic fire day, as we saw. The best advice that we need to be able to give as agencies and authorities is 'Leave now; leave early', otherwise the gamble is just not worth your life.

**John BERGER:** Tim, have you got any experiences about people regretting leaving earlier or leaving at all?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Look, I think, as Jason has just spoken to, as we have been out visiting communities post fire impact, and recently again at Highlands and other places, I have heard those similar stories where people have very much indicated that they thought they were well prepared and had their pumps and their sprinkler systems and other things but perhaps had not realised what they would be confronted with, with a fire front coming through. I think that is our opportunity to continue that education around making sure that people really understand what being prepared is. I think the program that CFA ran this year around Get Fire Ready went a long way to doing that. But I also think it is why our warning systems are structured the way they are. We have implemented those since 2009 as well to really, I guess, put in front of the community that when we start to issue the higher order warnings – the watch-and-acts and the emergency warnings – that is their signal that we are asking them to take action and take action now.

**John BERGER:** What would be a recommendation for the Get Fire Ready plan? We heard yesterday in Harcourt that at the first meeting last year only 13 people attended. How could you get more? Does it take an event like that to kick people into gear?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** The observation I would give is that the Get Fire Ready program, if I am being frank, was a far bigger success than what we actually thought. We thought if we got 150 brigades participating, we would be doing well, and to get over 500 was just amazing. It is about reconnecting with community, and that was one of the other things that we got feedback on throughout – that in the post-COVID environment, sometimes some of these communities had not got back together. The Get Fire Ready initiative was the first time that many of them actually went to the fire shed, realised there was a fire shed, realised there were community members that were part of the local fire brigade and then started having a conversation about fire safety. I envision that the program will grow from strength to strength as we continue to promote it.

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

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. Mr Leach, in the last six years, has CFA been subject to financial efficiencies, financial reviews or the withholding of grant funding by the government, including by their departmental agencies, actual or proposed ones? Can you confirm if that has happened post the introduction of the so-called Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund by government or departments, and can you please provide us with details of that?

**Greg LEACH:** Thank you. I can take some of that on notice, but I can say that CFA, like most government departments and statutory authorities, were subject to the government's efficiency programs in recent years. We participated in the emergency services finance board. We had numerous meetings and requests for documents from them. We put all of that information in front of them, and pleasingly, at the end of the day, there was a decision that there were no efficiencies to be applied to CFA. So that was a good outcome for the CFA budget.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. In the past six years, has CFA sought additional funding from government by any means, including business cases that have been denied by government departments or the government, and if so, can you provide the details of those?

**Greg LEACH:** Yes, certainly. We can, again, take that on notice to give you the details of those programs over the years. But we certainly participate in the annual budgetary process by government. We put together comprehensive submission bids, just as we are doing at the moment, to put together a case to put to government on the back of the funding announcement last year to try and get the best value that we can out of any funds that we get. For example, when we bring new appliances into the fleet, we run a cascade program, so three or four or five brigades might benefit from one new truck coming into the fleet as we cascade those trucks down through the fleet. We are doing that work at the moment, and we think with our preliminary analysis that in addition to the new trucks that we will build, over 130 additional brigades might benefit from a cascaded tanker.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. We have heard from many brigades how that cascading has resulted in the new tanker being a 25-year-old truck delivered to their brigade. But we have also heard from many brigades that they are struggling with trucks and equipment that are beyond their reasonable use-by date. Does the CFA's base funding model adequately allow the organisation to manage its asset base properly, including its firefighting fleet? What quantum of funding has the CFA identified simply to manage and replace its asset base to ensure it is of contemporary standard – that is, no trucks with people on the back or stations without toilets – and what is the current shortfall in government funding to achieve this?

**Greg LEACH:** Thank you. So our current capex budget, capital budget, for trucks and other equipment is around \$30 million. In addition to that, there is a rolling program of capex funding of an additional \$10 million. Then we had the announcement last week of that additional \$10 million a year over 10 years. And then of course we have the volunteer emergency services equipment program, which goes a long way to assisting brigades to replace brigade-owned equipment. When you look at that quantum together, that gives us around \$40 million a year to invest in capital. On the other side of the equation is our opex budget, which we use through our network of district mechanical officers to look after the trucks that we have. As you say, our trucks are ageing and we confront issues such as parts availability and the like. But I know that our district mechanical officers work really hard. Every year each truck receives its annual maintenance check to make sure that those vehicles are roadworthy, that they are fireworthy and that they are safe. I just want to shout-out to our crews who do such a great job to keep our fleet on the road.

**Wendy LOVELL:** You said you are getting about \$40 million a year for trucks, but haven't you already identified that you need \$65 million just to maintain replacements?

**Greg LEACH:** Correct. Yes, that is right. That is part of the budget ask that we put forward each year to try and get our capital onto a sustainable footing.

**Wendy LOVELL:** So you have a shortfall of \$25 million just to maintain the fleet as –

**Greg LEACH:** No, the maintenance of the fleet comes out of our opex budget.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Not maintenance, but just to the age of the fleet.

**Greg LEACH:** To turn the fleet over, yes.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Yes. Thank you. Mr Freeman, has the CFA communicated with FRV their capability requirements? How do you measure FRV's ability to meet those requirements, and what are you doing to rectify the deficiencies?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** I assume you are speaking in terms of the provision of personnel among staff.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Yes, secondments.

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Yes, absolutely. As Chief Officer Heffernan stated, we meet regularly once a fortnight, and one of the key topics of discussion is the vacancies, what we need to fill and predicting what might come up. What we have done is invested more into the secondment unit, so there are dedicated personnel that work closely with CFA every day to fill as many of the vacancies as we can. So the answer to your question is yes. CFA are constantly letting us know where the vacancies are. When we talk about vacancies, though, I just want to make sure people all understand that they are not where people have vacated and left a position. They are where people have leave legacy and have worked 35, 40 years. They are using up their leave prior to retirement generally, and that is their entitlement. That is what makes it quite challenging. I do not think that is a reform issue; that is just a workplace planning issue. I can say that because I was with CFA prior to being with FRV. Jason and Greg have inherited that challenge, and we are going to work with them to continue. If I could just give you a couple of figures around that – we did have, in the last eight months, only about 72 per cent of vacancies on average filled. We have lifted that to a steady 92 per cent in the last three months, with peaks of 96 per cent during the summer season. Now, there will be times when there is less or more of that, but the effort that we are putting into making sure that the dedicated resources to manage that with CFA is starting to come to fruition.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. Mr Heffernan, on page 81 of the CFA's latest annual report 2.2.3 outlines a number of FRV employment equivalents CFA is supposed to receive and the number of actual secondments it receives. Footnote B outlines that the difference is the services not received. The difference is 48 FTE in 2024 and 49 in 2025. It may well be more this year. How did this shortfall affect the day-to-day operation of the CFA and its preparedness for the management of the bushfires, and what happens to the government funding provided to supply those secondees?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** I will start with the matter of the funding. That is a matter for Fire Rescue Victoria, and Commissioner Freeman could probably address that one, as the funding for secondees sits with FRV. The figures that you are talking about in the annual report there are where we report our services free of charge or received free of charge from Fire Rescue Victoria. I guess the reality is that our construct and our operations across our district network are predicated on two elements – one being technical operational staff, so staff that provide operational expertise and guidance to our brigades and groups across our network, and then secondly the administrative support and management support that is put around that. It is fair to say that where you do have a vacancy or non-relief rate, or where those resources are not otherwise there, then there is a need for us to prioritise what we can get done within the resources that we have available to us, and also move resources around to best suit the emergent needs of CFA at the time.

I can give the committee some assurance that during the fire season that is exactly what I sought to do in terms of moving around those seconded resources to meet the emergent risk needs. But I guess it is the day-to-day support to the brigades. I know the committee has heard evidence from CFA volunteers outlining where those

staff are not otherwise available – some of the impacts. That is just, I guess, the ability to phone someone to get that support, whether it be from an operational context or otherwise. In terms of the effective and efficient management of a fire brigade, where those vacancy and non-relief rates are high, then it is fair to say that there would be some deficiencies in that district for the amount of time that those resources are not there. But I would like to make the point to my seconded workforce, who I am sure are watching today: they are very much valued, and the services that they do provide. I guess it is somewhat of a system that we and Commissioner Freeman need to work through in order to get them the support they need, not necessarily about the individuals.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. Mr Freeman, yesterday we heard from a firefighter who apologised for what they described as ‘a woefully inadequate and nearly non-existent response from FRV that has let our communities down’. They said that it was due to a lack of appropriate appliances in FRV. Is there a lack of appropriate appliances that can respond to bushfires in FRV?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** I do not agree with that generalisation. I mean, we respond to over 200 calls a day anyway, all year round. My primary obligation is to make sure that we have the metropolitan area of Melbourne, the outer metropolitan and the larger regional centres protected. We have a role where we will provide support to CFA and FFMVic if need be. But I think it goes back to my earlier comment – I understand the frustration where perhaps before, those career firefighters were used to actually jumping on a bushfire truck and maybe doing something different, but that is not their role now. So it is actually changing that role and getting them used to that idea. There were no impacts that I am aware of to response. Certainly, as I stated before, any strike teams et cetera we were asked to provide into the bushfire response specifically, like our incident management personnel and aviation personnel – and I quoted the numbers before – had a significant contribution there. I think it is just people getting used to that cultural change of their job roles having changed a little bit.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. How many appliances has the FRV put funding requests in for, including those that were unsuccessful?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Clearly we are in a similar position to the Country Fire Authority, where we have got an ageing fleet. With an ageing fleet it does not mean that those trucks are no good. There is often a lot made out of the 15-year target. That is a target, absolutely, but it does not mean a truck expires at 15 years. What it does mean is more maintenance is required, so we have certainly focused on that. We have opened up a secondary workshop for maintenance and put on additional mechanics. That was from funding pre summer. That has been helpful. We continue to work with the government to get a sustainable rolling replacement program, because at some time over the last 10 or 15 years that stalled, so we need to get that back into place. Government, as we know, recently injected \$40 million over four years in addition to our funding. We have already allocated that money and ordered those trucks. They do take a couple of years to come online. I continue to work with government to ensure that we have continued funding, because we do need to invest more into it if we are going to catch up where we have fallen behind.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** What is required to get the fleet up to service life, where you would like it?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Look, just that year-on-year funding, really. It is a two-pronged approach. As I said, there is maintenance, and we are investing more money into maintenance to keep the trucks we have got better maintained so they do not have issues, and more funding around investing into the new fleet. We continue to put submissions in around that. So we are looking at figures. As I said, the \$10 million a year additional over four years has been very helpful, but we would need to be looking at something in the order of that or more in the out years.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Thank you. There is a question that has been grinding my gears since the fires. I was listening to the radios during the fires, as was my adviser, and we both heard the same thing. There was a firefighter screaming out for air support. They did not get a reply until half an hour later, and the request was denied because it was getting close to dark. Can our air services fly in the dark? Because I have seen a lot of aeroplanes in the dark. Can anybody shine some light on this? Excuse the pun.

**Chris HARDMAN:** Thank you. It is a really good question. No, at last light it is not safe for the vast majority of our aviation assets to fly. What we do is we make sure that they are down before last light, which

means that they need to be off the fireground at a given time. There are also wind conditions and atmospheric conditions and smoke conditions that can make aircraft unavailable to be safely used. For instance, if the smoke is in the direction of where the firebombing has to occur and the pilots cannot have a visual reference, then they will not participate in the firefight during those smoke conditions. When we have unstable atmosphere or strong winds, it can ground the fleet. But we do have a night vision bombing capability. We have two aircraft that, based on the regulations we have with CASA, if they are able to get eyes on the fire during daylight, are able to work through till about 1 am. They were used on many occasions this year. There are two of those aircraft, and they were used very effectively this year. Certainly the large air tankers, the normal rotary wings and the single-engine air tanker bombers cannot be used after dark.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. In 2018 there were successful trials of night bombing conducted. Has there been any talk of continuing that in the future? Because I cannot find anything since 2019.

**Chris HARDMAN:** Night vision operations are being normalised now. We will have two night vision platforms going forward, and they have been tried and tested and found to be effective. We will continue to use those in the years ahead.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Thank you. Tim, in the last paragraph of your opening statement, you stated that you are committed to the learnings from the disaster. What have you learned?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Thank you. We are in the early phases of our coordinated after-action review program right at the moment, and that is a multi-agency program that is starting at the incident layer, the agencies conduct some debriefing of their crews, and that is then brought into a multi-agency environment at the incident tier, and then we will progress in the next month or so to the regional and the state tier. I guess in those early conversations already – and you will have seen evidence put before this committee as well – there is obviously some work for us to do in terms of the connectivity between fireground and incident control centres in some cases, and we have obviously seen a significant change in the command and control arrangements since 2009 and seen some good effect with that. We are obviously hearing that in this early phase. I think we are also hearing that hardening of the telecommunications infrastructure is an opportunity, so one of the things that we are raising with our Commonwealth colleagues is also about what we can do more with in terms of working with the telecommunications companies around the hardening of telecoms infrastructure.

**The CHAIR:** All right, thank you. Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Hello. Thanks very much for being here today. I think this one is for Chris Hardman, but I am happy to hear from anybody who wants to jump in. We saw in our tours through regional Victoria how effective planned burns can be, and the committee actually visited a site in the Otways which gave a great example of that. I know there are a lot of preventative works done and preparatory works done. Rodney Carter yesterday from the Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal corporation mentioned the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy*. Just from the six principles, the enabling principles, that I understand have been endorsed by the Victorian government, how are you transitioning, because planned burning at the moment does not look at all like the description of the six principles of traditional owner burning?

**Chris HARDMAN:** It is a really fantastic question. We have relied on an extensive body of evidence nationally and globally from scientists across Australia to establish a risk-based planned fire program. We need to separate two things very deliberately: the work we do to reduce bushfire risk has no connection with the cultural fire practices undertaken by traditional owners. The work we do is based on a model where we are on a computer and ignite 72,000 fires; we run all of those fires across the state, then we apply proposed planned burns across the top of those fires using Black Saturday conditions. We then rerun those fires, and we measure the risk reduction output that those fires deliver. We have asset protection fires, and we have bushfire moderation fires. We also have landscape moderation zones, and we apply fire in the landscape to maximise the risk reduction and that might be to a community, to agricultural assets or to critical infrastructure and the environment.

With the practice of traditional owners there is much we can learn, and we do. We have probably the most advanced connection with traditional owners of anywhere in Australia with the work that we do on public land. There are around a hundred cultural burns proposed on the joint fuel management plan this year, and this year I think we are up to about delivering 30 of those fires. But the purposes of the work that traditional owners do is

for many different reasons: it may be cleansing the landscape, it may be for spiritual connections, it may be growing forest or an agricultural approach to get yams or for other reasons, and it is done with a very light touch in a very sophisticated way using traditional owner science, if you like, but it is for very deliberate purposes. What we never talk about is the role that natural fire played in the landscape. Before European settlement, lightning would have come across the landscape every year, and we would have had hundreds of natural fires in the landscape. The Aboriginal people would have absolutely known that they were there, and they would have then utilised their fire and their practice to protect their communities and to look after their interests, whether it was for hunting or food or of a spiritual nature.

We talk about how the natural fire regime had to be interrupted because we came and settled here. We built towns and villages and communities and mills inside the forest, so all of a sudden instead of just allowing natural fire to occur we had to start putting fires out on a regular basis. That was because we could not allow those fires, because we had just built a town or a village or something adjacent to the forested landscape. So what we do now is instead of having that natural fire regime that would have given natural protection to the Aboriginal community that lived at the time, we now have to apply planned fire, and we do that in a way based on risk. It is a hard job to do. We maximise the burn days that are available to us. Climate change is making that more and more difficult every year. About 1 per cent of my burns breach, and of course that is subject to scrutiny. We do everything we can not to allow that to occur, but it does occur on occasion because of the dynamic nature of the work. There is always more we can do, and we are certainly constantly revising those risk targets. We are looking at ecological targets. We are looking at a range of other things, and we will continue to bring the best science to bear to do everything we can to maximise the risk reduction benefit.

I will just finish with this: planned burning is not a magic bullet. There is no silver bullet. I wish there was a simple solution to this bushfire problem. Climate is driving the bushfire risk, and we do many things to mitigate those impacts. We do the planned burning, we do our mechanical fuel treatment, we have a 50,000-kilometre road network that we maintain, we are putting remote water points in, we are building strategic fuel breaks and we are doing everything we can. All of those things work together. The integrated use of aviation and on-ground resources, forest contractors – all of those things come together to mitigate the impacts of bushfires. Keeping fires small saves firefighters, saves the community and saves the environment.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. There is a lot of alignment between the two approaches, from what your description says. I do not want to put words in Rodney's mouth, but it strikes me that a more enhanced cultural burning strategy which is community based, according to him, might leave you with less work to do. Do you have a plan to continue to try and integrate those two approaches – your risk approach and their cultural approach?

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes. I think there is so much we can learn from each other. I am really thrilled to say that I just signed our sixth agreement where traditional owners are becoming direct partners with FFMVic, and we are looking at extending and removing some of the barriers for cultural fire practices. I really love the light-touch work that they do in the landscape. I am looking forward to applying more of that type of fire in the landscape and sharing our knowledge and our approach with that of traditional owners. I think that will set us in good stead for the future.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Fantastic.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Ms Broad.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you very much for your contribution today. Victoria is one of the most bushfire-prone areas in the whole world, and if conditions are meant to get worse, then obviously our response needs to get better. We have heard a lot from very frustrated communities, as you may be aware, about lack of mitigation, concern about the planned burns and the lack of it, ageing equipment. Then also in the response we heard about livestock being in agony, communities feeling really left alone, brigades having no radio contact and support and being left with no strike teams as backup. People have lost everything. We are hearing a lot about bushfire poverty. Volunteers are absolutely exhausted. One of the comments that has been made today was about the lives saved during the event, but we are also conscious of the lives post the event. I was speaking with a counsellor yesterday, and I was very concerned to hear about several incidents that I will not go into. It is having a massive impact on communities now, with people feeling left alone and wanting to see results from

this inquiry that are actually implemented, because they feel there have been so many parliamentary inquiries over the years. Action needs to occur; not just something in a report that sits on a shelf.

We have also heard people talk about the need for community-enabled recovery rather than community-led recovery, and I think the state does have a very important role in providing that support. One of those programs is the clean-up recovery program. Just in the previous session, we talked to DEECA about the need to extend the waiver of the free waste disposal to enable people to take their bushfire disposed items to the tip free of charge, because that is meant to expire on 12 May. But we have heard that some people have not even started the clean-up process, and the clean-up program has been – yes, significant delays. In previous major Victorian bushfire events, such as Black Saturday, ERV has designed a universal clean-up program that includes insured properties. I guess this is a question for you perhaps, Ms Diaz, but can you explain the policy rationale for the current two-tiered program that excludes insured properties? Who made this decision and who directed it?

**Mariela DIAZ:** Thank you. Victoria has now – this is the sixth time that we have implemented a clean-up program since the 2020 fires and we have learned a lot of lessons through that period of time. Each one of those clean-ups has been remarkably different from the next. One of the key features from the 2020 fires was that Mallacoota was a significant town that was impacted and, of course, that town relies very heavily, or its economy relies very heavily, on tourism.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Just because time is of the essence, I guess I am just interested in who directed the change.

**Mariela DIAZ:** The change was recommended by Emergency Recovery Victoria, and the purpose of that change was based on the impact assessment data at the time. There was one key feature about this event that stood out from other events, and that was the number of agricultural properties that were destroyed. So whilst there were 451 primary places of residence that were destroyed, there were over 1500 outbuildings that were destroyed on large properties.

**Gaelle BROAD:** I am not sure why the difference – is this an attempt to save money? There have been some people that are saying it is actually trying to defer to the next financial year even. But can you comment on that?

**Mariela DIAZ:** So normally residential clean-up, and this goes across all of the events, does 30 metres outside of the residential property. In this event, that was not going to be enough because the properties are large, there are more agricultural buildings and more businesses run from those agricultural properties. So in order to capture as many properties as possible and broaden that width, we included businesses as part of the clean-up, which we have not done before. So the agricultural properties are able to have their residential property cleaned up, as well as some of those outbuildings.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Well, it is more to do with the insurance and the non-insurance. Are you aware the Insurance Council of Australia has got concerns about this program?

**Mariela DIAZ:** Yes, and I spoke to the Insurance Council of Australia very early on. There are two primary sectors that can do this clean-up in accordance with EPA standards, in accordance with WorkSafe standards, and to make sure that the properties are cleaned up in a way that the community deserve for them to be cleaned up with no residue left behind and no hazardous material left behind and that is the government and the insurance sector. So when properties are fully insured, and that includes that they have clean-up as part of their insurance policy, it means that those properties are cleaned up by the insurance companies and those that cannot be done by the insurance because there is not sufficient insurance, they are done by government.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Well, it used to be a reimbursement process that seemed to be a lot quicker than what is happening now. How many properties have actually registered for the clean-up program, and how many have been assessed for eligibility, deemed eligible and actually had clean-up commence and been completed?

**Mariela DIAZ:** 628 properties have registered, 48 properties have been completed and are underway, and 241 are eligible at this stage. So the program is still open. We are still receiving roughly 20 to 40 applications per week. The total number is not yet complete. And in terms of timing for the clean-up program, there is a number of very important elements that are – and I know that this has come up throughout the inquiry, the timing of the clean-up program. This program has not been any slower. In fact, it has been quicker than the time that we did Pomonal, which was only 18 months ago, and it is on track to the 2020 fires.

**Gaelle BROAD:** I think with the Black Summer fires, more than 600 properties were cleaned up within six months. So going on that, this is way behind. But how many properties have actually withdrawn from the program because of delays?

**Mariela DIAZ:** If I could first answer the question in relation to Black Summer, Nous did an evaluation of the report. All our programs are evaluated independently, and Nous conducted the report to the 2020 fires. In that fire, the average length of time that it took to clean up a property was five months. So at this stage we are looking to ramp up to 20 properties being cleaned per week by next week. The clean-up program is ramped up in full.

**Gaelle BROAD:** So when do you expect the whole program to be completed?

**Mariela DIAZ:** In the next six months.

**Gaelle BROAD:** The next six months. So you would support the waiver being extended for the tip to the end of this year?

**Mariela DIAZ:** We are talking to DEECA and to government about how that process rolls out. So yes, I do support that. I think it will line up with the other elements of the clean-up program, which include Disaster Relief Australia, who have also done 260 jobs outside of the formal clean-up program.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you. The committee is going to take a short 5-minute break just so people can stretch their legs, and we will resume with questions at 20 past.

We are resuming the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into the 2026 summer fires, with representatives from Emergency Management Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria, the Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria.

We will just go around to another set of questions for the agencies. Mariela, one of the features of the discussions we have had in some of the towns we have encountered is how the recovery hubs have been set up. We asked a few questions earlier about the preparedness for fighting the fires. I wonder if you could take us through what work has been done in preparedness for the recovery that has to occur in communities.

**Mariela DIAZ:** Thank you. Emergency Recovery Victoria at the time, now EMV, is an integral part of the emergency management system. We work with councils outside of events. We have staff in the regional areas as well as at the state level that engage on different levels with councils to support their stand-up during events. This includes support around where relief centres are going to be based, recovery centres through the municipal emergency management plan, so we support that from the regional tier. We are an integral part of all exercises, including the summer briefings, and we work with councils just before summer to ensure that the attestations are met around their readiness to activate during events.

**The CHAIR:** And what do you look for when trying to figure out what the best spaces for recovery and relief centres are? What factors go into determining, and who makes the decisions about, where recovery centres and relief centres should be?

**Mariela DIAZ:** Councils make the decision on where relief centres are and where recovery centres are, and that is community led. The idea of those facilities is to provide a safe and welcoming place for all community members to be. I will say that relief centres are very different to recovery. Relief centres are designed to provide the basics to sustain individuals and families: food, water, sleeping arrangements, access to critical information and referral for emergency accommodation for those people that cannot stay in relief centres. Relief centres are not the ideal place for people to be on an ongoing basis for more than a few days. So often there is a transition out of relief centres to other types of emergency accommodation, which DFFH support councils to deliver.

In relation to recovery hubs, again, the welcoming space is very, very important. We want that to be a place for communities. The facility might be run by a council, and a broad range of government services, including Commonwealth services, might be there to provide information, but it is a community space first and foremost. And from my time visiting these recovery centres, I think local government have done a really good job in consultation with communities to identify where those spaces might be – and some of those spaces have been created by communities themselves.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. The committee went and held some sort of pretty low-key listening posts particularly near the Longwood fireground. We visited the Ruffly hall and the Fawcett hall, and it was clear that those halls in particular – and it might be a feature of how those types of institutions in that part of Victoria play a role in their community – seem to be the ideal spot where community came together and felt a sense of connectedness and connection again after some pretty devastating and traumatic experiences.

Part of the concern that was raised with us as committee members was that whilst there was obviously support being provided to local government to do recovery work and set up recovery centres and recovery hubs and there was support being made available to individuals, there was a bit of a gap in terms of what sort of support was available to these types of community halls. Do you have any reflection on that – any advice to the committee on what is provided either through EMV or through local governments, the expectation is, to these sorts of community halls or community hubs to support ongoing community recovery?

**Mariela DIAZ:** Thank you. Those community halls and pop-up community centres are really critical in the early days of relief and recovery. They are critical often because the professional relief and recovery workforce cannot be there immediately due to road closures or due to being impacted themselves, so those first, early days are often quite chaotic across the board, and we certainly acknowledge that.

If I was to provide advice on what that might look like – and I have seen this through visiting many towns on multiple occasions through the Black Summer fires – one of the great benefits that I have seen is how those communities have grown from the event from when I was in Bushfire Recovery Victoria and doing early visits to Mallacoota to where they are today, and those community-led initiatives and a community's ability to transit from the crisis to then a focus on resilience and building the future are really important. So if I was to provide some advice, it is that those areas in the 2020 fires that have grown and grown themselves through access to grant programs, through access to training and planning and some of the work that Jason mentioned earlier around more engagement from communities after event are a great opportunity around futureproofing.

**The CHAIR:** What could government do in terms of recommendations this committee might make to better support those types of organisations? As the recovery from these fires is not going to be measured in a matter of weeks – maybe not even measured in a matter of months – what support is available or could be made available to these types of organisations to do that recovery transition into resilience over the coming years?

**Mariela DIAZ:** If I could step back a bit to the relief element when they pop up, under category A of the disaster arrangements with the Commonwealth, those – food, water, establishment of relief centres – are all automatic, so councils are able to go in there and support those pop-up communities in the way that they need to.

**The CHAIR:** That is a role for council in terms of funding?

**Mariela DIAZ:** This is council. That is under counter-disaster operations. Anything that is about supporting communities in situ, like relief centres, food, water et cetera, all of those are things that council do not have to ask for money for. They can do those and then talk to us about how they get reimbursed for those things. In relation to transition to recovery, I think some of the important components will be to have a range of flexible, community-led initiatives or a grants program. We have done this in the past, where communities could come up with the ideas and apply, but also get the support to apply, and that is government-enabled or community-enabled so they do not feel like they need to do all the work.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. Thank you. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I have got a range, so this will be across the board. We heard very much so about first responders and communities complaining about radio congestion impacting operations, that there were mixed messages and people were not on the right station. Can I ask, Mr Heffernan: why has the short status messaging not been part of the CAD upgrades?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** I might address the issues of radios first. In respect to matters around short status messaging, that will be a matter for Triple Zero Victoria, but I might defer that to the secretary in respect to the CAD project. But the radio replacement program upgraded the end-of-life Tait radios that the CFA brigades had – and I mean, they were at end of life; they were failing daily for us, so there was an urgent need for us to

replace our radios. We did that through a \$136 million investment through that program, which delivered more than 9700 portable radios and 4100-odd mobile radios.

**Melina BATH:** Sorry, Mr Heffernan – I am really interested in this short status messaging not being part of CAD upgrades. That is my line of questioning, so I am happy to turn that to somebody else.

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** My answer in respect to the radios would be that the radios are capable. I now defer to the secretary.

**Dean TIGHE:** I will just confirm that I am the Deputy Secretary as opposed to the secretary, but I think –

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** Oh, sorry. It is a promotion.

**Dean TIGHE:** in terms of the next-gen CAD project and the scope of that, Tim, are you happy to talk about that?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Yes. Thanks, Ms Bath. As you would be aware, Triple Zero Victoria have been funded to upgrade their CAD system. The current CAD system does not provide for short status messaging for some of our agencies at this point in time; that includes the likes of CFA and SES in that mix. Part of what is being developed in the new CAD system that will be delivered over the coming years is the ability to open up other channels for integrated messaging, and there is some work that EMV is leading around mobility for agencies into the future.

**Melina BATH:** When? Into the future – what is the timeframe, because clearly we have got next fire season coming. We are seven months away. Can you maybe take that on notice and provide some additional context about when you foresee that happening?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Yes, we can get Triple Zero Victoria to provide that back to the committee.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. That is good. Now, DEECA spoke earlier today about, I think it might have been, Chris, that you had some extra funding for the bushfire season. Can you please provide a breakdown of how much of that additional funding – that extra money – was actually spent on getting the Unimogs and the G-Wagons back and up on gear, because 300 of them were, we will say, stationary at the start of bushfire season. Could you take that on notice?

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes. Just, if I can, we can certainly provide a breakdown of the costs associated with that, but I can confirm that they did not come out of the additional funding we received for the bushfire season. That was for enhanced readiness and preparedness. That did not contribute to the fleet or G-Wagon issue.

**Melina BATH:** Can you also please table the amount of funding by year that DEECA and FFMV have received for vegetation management over the past 10 years? It would be good for our committee to understand a profile of that.

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes, we will take that on notice.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much. We have also heard very much in our hearings and in submissions that fuel on the roadside and fuel on the Hume Highway was paramount. It might be something for Mr Wiebusch – why aren't public land management authorities, such as PTV or rail, meeting their obligations to keep the level of vegetation growth at what would be considered acceptable levels, because all of the people we have heard over the last week have said that they are not?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Thanks, Ms Bath. As you will see in the whole-of-government submission, the Department of Transport and Planning have provided some information and data on the level of work that they undertook ahead of and during the season to reduce roadside vegetation. Obviously land managers, holistically, are responsible for vegetation management, but in terms –

**Melina BATH:** I know, but these are government agencies. Do you have a power to force them, or are they just not done and bad luck? How does that sit?

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Certainly, as the Emergency Management Commissioner, I do not have any accountabilities or powers to direct or require that land managers of any kind undertake vegetation management.

**Melina BATH:** There is an inconsistency there, isn't there? Somebody should be responsible for reducing that fuel load on the roadsides, but you are not. Who is? Is it the individual? I will leave that as a floating question. I also want to ask a question in relation to appliances, so I may go back to CFA. Can we please be provided a table with the breakdowns of all CFA appliances by type – pumper and tanker – and age profiles? I am putting that on notice. Can you include whether these appliances are brigade owned or CFA owned? I know that there is some data, but it is actually old data now. It is 2023 data, and it was released in 2024. I think it is important for the committee to understand those profiles.

Just a quick one back to Mr Hardman, at the start of the year, halfway through January and to the beginning of February, there were forest fire contractors, whether they were plant or panel contractors, who were not paid and were having to sustain significant bills, i.e. into the thousands and thousands of dollars, with government needing to pay them. Are you able to confirm – maybe not today – that those bills have been paid?

**Chris HARDMAN:** It was really difficult to track the hours. We have a manual system to pay the forest contractors. There was a significant delay. It was really challenging and difficult for some of those providers. I can take it on notice to let you know. That payment is progressing really well. We have put on additional resources to make those payments, and we do need to improve the system to make sure that we do not see that delay occur again in the future.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I appreciate that, because it was a disaster for small business people. I will put some more questions, Mr Hardman, on notice in relation to Safer Together. Clearly the government is only using either prescribed burns or mechanical treatments, covering around 1 per cent of the forest estate. Can you provide a breakdown over the last five to six years on that, because it is clearly well short of the bushfire royal commission. I know the government is doing Safer Together, but I also note that the Victorian Auditor-General has said in his report that the Phoenix modelling has not been up to standard and that he is concerned about that Phoenix modelling. Can you provide an update on what the government is doing to ensure that really you are targeting the right sectors? I will put some more questions on notice.

**Chris HARDMAN:** We are happy to take all those on. We do have the data, and we will be able to provide that information.

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

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. I want to ask about telecommunications failures. I know we have touched on radios already. This one might be best for you, Mr Wiebusch. Every fire site we went to experienced a loss of a telecommunications tower locally. Either the tower itself was damaged or it lost power and generators failed. That seemed to be a common experience across the board. I know that for a lot of those towers private companies own and manage those and there are federal jurisdiction and other things involved. But this was a serious issue that caused all sorts of communication problems, not just for first responders and firefighters but also for the community members not being able to get information. What is being done to address this issue? I think it is a real priority when it comes to community safety in the face of emergencies like this.

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** Yes, thanks for your question. I guess we have heard, as you have, about the challenges of not having telecommunications provided to communities, both in the immediate aftermath of these fires and in the days that preceded. The state continues to work with the Commonwealth on black spot programs in terms of making sure that there are infills into areas where telecommunications have been a challenge. But as I mentioned to an earlier question around opportunities, we do think that there is more work to be done with telecommunications infrastructure resilience, and our Department of Government Services are continuing to work with the Commonwealth on what that should look like. Certainly from an emergency management point of view, we are raising that through the national forums that I sit on as well in terms of better resilience, in terms of battery life, in terms of solar arrangements and other things that perhaps do not rely so much on generators. But what I can also say is we do prioritise trying to get those services restored, and so our incident management teams are very focused on making sure that we can either get generator fuel back into sites or

making safe the roads or the tracks that go to those sites to be able to restore telecommunications, because we do know how significant it is for communities to be reconnected.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes, thank you. I think it was also just during the fire response – it added to some of the chaos that was experienced by some of the firefighting units losing that, because it then affected different technology and their radio communications and other things.

**Tim WIEBUSCH:** And if I can, just to that end, we are undertaking a number of projects in partnership with the agencies that are here today to look at future technologies that can do some of that. You will have heard of products like Starlink and the like that are satellite communications, and they are the sort of things that we are now piloting. There is currently a trial of around about \$4 million that is underway and will conclude in July this year that will give us some insights as to what might be some of the best options moving forward.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Another issue that came up frequently was training opportunities for CFA volunteers. I think there are real concerns about the sustainability of our CFA volunteer base and making it easier for people to become CFA volunteers and also just retention, or to upskill if they are already a CFA volunteer. There are a lot of calls for greater flexibility of the training program, which is something that is also just about perhaps some cultural change that needs to happen as well to encourage a broader range of people to participate. What is being done by CFA to look at some of these issues?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** A great question. Training would be the number one discussed issue within CFA and has the most divergent views across our 52,000-strong membership, from people who feel that there might be too much training and too complicated, right through to the other side, where people are wanting far more and wanting more complex training offered to them as well. When I commenced with the CFA as the Chief Officer in 2020, shortly thereafter, having done a tour and speaking to the volunteers, it was clear again that training was an issue. I commissioned the Australasian fire and emergency services council to conduct a peer review into our training, and that facilitated bringing on experts from the New South Wales Rural Fire Service and the Country Fire Service in South Australia to specifically go out and talk to our volunteers about what mattered to them. That report generated 14 recommendations, which have now formed part of what we are calling our training enhancement program.

What we have heard from our people are a number of key issues that we are working through. Training needs to be flexible. It needs to be available to them when they are available, because that availability differs throughout the time of day, day of week and the like. One size fits all does not work, and that is something our volunteers have said to us time and time again. And in that vein, they have asked us to ensure that we have a hybrid delivery system. So face to face is an absolute must, but some want online training as well, and then some want a hybrid – ‘I want to do part of the course in my time when I am available, and then turn up to a training campus or to a classroom and be able to do that sort of stuff.’ So in the redesign of all our training programs they are done now with the ability to ensure that that flexibility is applied across the board. Those are probably some of the key things that we are working through. We work strongly with Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria through our joint training committee, and they are a key partner in the consultation around the development of our courses, what goes into them and how they are delivered to our people.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. Thank you. Mr Freeman, we also heard from an FRV officer who was deployed as a ground observer to gather intelligence during the fire. How many firefighters have been trained in this role since FRV, as an entity, commenced?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** I would have to take that on notice. There are a number of them, but I can get that answer for you.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Another thing that was raised by some of the FRV officers was that they felt that while there is some legacy institutional knowledge about how to manage scrub or grass bushfires because of the history of the organisation still within FRV, they are concerned that over time that knowledge will disappear. Is FRV looking at training opportunities for FRV officers to understand and be able to respond to those sorts of fires and be able to be deployed to bushfires when required?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Yes, absolutely. That is a concern I share. We do not want to lose that ability. Our firefighters at recruits are taught basic bush firefighting et cetera. But we have not quite nailed, I do not think, the career progression as they progress through the officer ranks. I think there is some opportunity for us.

Maybe we can kill two birds with one stone, where we can get people to work in the Country Fire Authority earlier in their career as an opportunity to make sure they maintain those skills but also to give them an opportunity to see what it is like working in a country area of Victoria. We have been talking about that, and I think that is an opportunity we need to seize.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Berger.

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. Chris, FFMVic does a lot of preventative activities in relation to the fires. Are there some other examples of what you do outside of that, that help in seasons coming?

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes. It is a really good question. There are lots of different thoughts, views and opinions on how you mitigate bushfire risk. After, I suppose, nine years as chief officer of this organisation, I have got this really significant accountability to mitigate bushfire risk. There is always more we can do; I just acknowledge that. There are seven or eight levers that we need to pull, and I might just take a little bit of time to talk about what they are, because people talk about whether it is picking up wood off the roadside or putting cows in the high country. They have a lot of simple solutions for a complex problem. There is only really one way to deal with this, and that is to do many things and to pull the levers at the right times to mitigate those risks. For instance, for us, on public land we have a 50,000-kilometre road network; we are the largest road manager in Victoria. That network is absolutely fundamental to providing rapid access to keep fires small. We have a model of response in partnership with our forest contractors where we apply an aviation predetermined dispatch. We then send out a bulldozer, an excavator and four slip-ons with crews to go out and attack that fire. Keeping fires small saves the risk to everyone: to the environment, to the firefighters and to the community. Then on top of that we develop an extensive strategic fuel break network. We have currently built 1500 kilometres. We need to build more. That starts to break the landscape up into what we might call suppression units. As the fires lay down over the ridgelines and all of that sort of stuff, if we do not get the fire at first attack, it gives us real opportunities to be able to suppress the fires at a larger scale.

Over the last 23 years we have had 5.1 million hectares of forested land in Victoria burn. If climate science is right, then that number is going to increase, so we will look at applying features in the landscape, which includes planned burning, remote water points using portable water and a road network. If we do that well, over time, instead of seeing another 5.1 million hectares burn in the next 23 years, maybe those investments can reduce that. Three million hectares would be a huge save and save billions of dollars to the Victorian economy from the impact of bushfires. So it is not about a simple solution. It is about pulling the levers at the right rate and at the right time to enable us to minimise the amount of fire in the landscape over the long period ahead of us.

You could look at climate change and say, 'This is too hard.' We live – and the committee have said – in the most bushfire prone areas in the world. We could see fires like the Palisades. We could see again, and we have seen, Australia's worst ever natural disaster on Black Saturday in 2009. So they are very real threats for Victoria, but there is much we can do. So you could sit up and say, 'Oh, my God, it's all too hard,' but we have been practising this for a long time. We know the levers we can pull, we know we can make a difference. But it can only be done if we share that responsibility with the whole community. So it might mean strategic field breaks on the edges of towns to do that final asset protection. That will need partnerships with local government and other landowners to enable that work to be done and maintained over time. And so to solve or to reduce the severity, spread and impact of bushfires into the future, we do need to do lots of different things, and we need to be able to maintain those things over the long run, because ultimately we are seeing more challenging conditions with something like 15 per cent less rain since the 1970s in spring. And when we do not get the spring rain, we are in for a big bushfire season, and the early signs for next year are not good. So all of us are thinking about that now, and we will do everything we can to be well prepared for another challenging season ahead.

**John BERGER:** This particular inquiry is focused on the bigger bushfires. Can you give us an indication of what other fires were around this season just past and how you dealt with them?

**Chris HARDMAN:** Yes. So I will give an example of Gippsland. A lightning band moved through Gippsland. There were 32 lightning strikes that turned into bushfires on that day. And so the approach that I described in my comments about all the different things came into play. Thirty-one of those fires were contained to under 5 hectares, and that was done by fast, aggressive, thorough, determined first attack with

highly skilled forest firefighters. With the Lake Mallacoota fire in Mallacoota, which was terrifying for the Mallacoota community after what they had been through in 2020, they could see that fire in the background. But I am pleased to say that the efforts that firefighters put in to that fire enabled them to hold that to the east of Mallacoota and Mallacoota was not impacted again. But if we had not have held those fires, the Princes Highway would have been cut, communities would have been isolated and we would have had hundreds of thousands of hectares of land burnt in East Gippsland.

I will just talk about the Walwa fire in the north-east of Victoria. We had a planned burn and a strategic fuel break on the Gibb Range Road on the southern extent of that fire. That fire was 120,000 hectares in size. I did not expect my team to be able to hold that fire. That fire could have grown to 300,000 or 400,000 hectares, moved into Gippsland and impacted the valleys in East Gippsland. The fact is that they held that on one of those strategic breaks by burning 40 kilometres of back-burning operations. For the first time in a very, very long time we stopped without the aid of weather a 120,000-hectare fire spreading into Gippsland. So although it was incredibly challenging and there were many properties lost – there were 11 properties lost on that Walwa fire; it was deeply distressing for the Tallangatta Valley and the Mitta Valley and those communities, and I do not want to understate this – it could have been much, much worse. And the fact that we were able to utilise some of those features we applied in the landscape to suppress that fire delivered amazing benefits to protect the community and the environment.

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

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. To the CFA, I guess, there are obviously problems with the secondment model, and that is evident by the number of vacancies. Would it be preferable for CFA to have responsibility for recruitment and employment of your own middle management, including the opportunity to do things like lateral entry?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** The matter of fire services reform and the construct of the secondment agreement are matters for government, obviously executed through legislation in the Parliament, and ultimately the decision of where that rests will be with the minister and the government. As Chief Officer, what I can say is whatever the mechanisms are – and we currently have the secondment agreement with my colleague here from Fire Rescue Victoria – it is important that we have access to appropriately trained and skilled, qualified and competent officers that value working with community, that understand volunteer ethos and volunteer impacts, and ensure that we have the capacity and capability in train in all of that. That is probably what is more important to the CFA in ensuring that we are able to see that delivered. But in terms of what is ultimately government policy, that is a matter for the minister.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks. Mr Freeman, how many FRV commanders and ACFOs have received incident management team training that would increase CFA's and Victoria's incident management team capability whilst on secondment to CFA?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** There are a couple of programs: the secondment program and of course the AIIMS for incident control. I will have to take that on notice to get those numbers for you, but there are a number that have gone through those various programs.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. Mr Heffernan, are you satisfied that a person with no major bushfire experience or qualifications can be appointed as the state response controller by the Emergency Management Commissioner and then given your statutory responsibilities in respect to keeping Victorians safe from major bushfires?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** My statutory responsibilities and accountabilities in respect to the major emergency arrangements are facilitated through the construct of the *Emergency Management Act* and the state emergency management plan that is outlined as such. In respect to the capability, competence and applicability of the state response controllers, that would be a matter for the Emergency Management Commissioner.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. Are you satisfied with how your statutory responsibilities were exercised in response to the January fires by the EMC and the various rostered state response controllers? What would you have you done differently, and why didn't you intervene?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** Big question. There are a couple of things to work through that. Again, I refer the committee to the construct of the emergency management arrangements here in Victoria in respect to major emergencies where the state arrangements under the state emergency management plan kick in with the appointment of the state response controller under line of control. I think that there are two very different constructs under which we operate in that respect. When there is a line-of-control incident and the state response controller is appointed, that appointee takes on the responsibility and accountability for exercising my statutory obligations within the incident to which the major emergency is outlined. Otherwise outside of that major emergency arrangement, naturally, my statutory duties remain sovereign.

With respect to ability to intervene and the like, that is I guess constrained within the arrangements that we do have. I do have at the various highest means the ability to come together with my chief colleagues, as we did do during the summer, to discuss any observations or otherwise that we might be making with the Emergency Management Commissioner, who then in turn has the ability to direct or otherwise provide advice to the state response controller.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. Mr Freeman, during any of the January fires were FRV staff that were seconded to CFA withdrawn from the fireground because of issues with radio communications?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** No, I am not aware. I think there was an issue in the north-east – and again, I could check that out and take that on notice – where there was confusion amongst some radio channels, but that was addressed pretty quickly, as I understand it. But I will take that on notice, if I could, please.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Why don't commanders and ACFOs seconded to CFA have the same communication equipment that the rest of the CFA brigades and volunteers have? And what action have you taken since January to rectify it?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** They should have the same equipment. When the seconded officer comes out of FRV into CFA, we are responsible for providing the tools of trade for them. So, again, for any specific examples I will have to take that on notice.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Okay. Why has FRV prevented staff holding the rank of station officer from undertaking higher duties as commanders in CFA? This practice previously existed, and is this change of policy by FRV not designed to make it harder?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** That is an ongoing discussion, and part of that is due to our requirements under the industrial agreement. We are required to follow the enterprise agreement, and part of that is getting consensus with the United Firefighters Union about people's career progression and what they are qualified to do. It is an ongoing discussion, and I think there is some merit in going back to the way that we used to operate, where people had the appropriate qualifications and could act.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thank you. Guys, I noticed when you all came in you had briefing packs, and you have been flipping through them. Can you all table those for the committee's benefit, please? Thank you. One more: Mr Heffernan, have you had any calls to raise any performance or discipline related matters affecting the seconded workforce with FRV during the operation of reform, and have these issues been addressed to your satisfaction?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** I have had recourse to make referral to the fire rescue commissioner under the purview of the secondment agreement. In accordance with that, it would be inappropriate for me to detail that in terms of the individual instances. But yes, I have had reason to make those referrals, and how they have been dealt with is probably best a question for Commissioner Freeman.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Commissioner Freeman?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Could I ask you to repeat the question?

**Wendy LOVELL:** It was: has Mr Heffernan had any reasons to raise issues of performance and discipline related matters affecting the seconded workforce, and have the issues been addressed to his satisfaction? How has that been addressed?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** As the Chief Officer said, there were a number of occasions where he has been required to raise matters with me, based around behaviour, competence and performance, and we have addressed those through our channels that we have got to follow. Again, that is linked to our industrial agreement, but they are followed up and dealt with. It is inappropriate to talk about specifics here, but they are dealt with. We take that very seriously.

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

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you, Chair. Mr Heffernan, with bulk water, what are you doing to address the areas that were struggling to have access to water during the fires? We have seen in the Otways they have a water tank that they managed to construct, and that was a lifesaver. But out in the Colac area they were struggling a lot, and I am sure Longwood would have the same issues. What is being done?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** Great question. As I referred to in my opening statement, we had the elevated seasonal response initiative, which saw those contracted bulk water carriers for this season. Depending upon the indications for next season, if they remain on track where they are now, they will probably see me further make requests for continuation of that program with government for this season coming. But again, we will just need to keep a close eye on the indicators with the weather. As part of the government's supplementary funding to us, it also allowed us to procure a number of large-scale – 100,000litres or more – bulk water carriers, and we now are positioning those strategically across the state, in addition to large water pods. We have also secured hook trucks and are strategically positioning those across our respective regions. That will allow greater water capability and capacity to be in place, which did not exist previously. That is in addition to continuing to work with our brigades, such as what you saw down in Gellibrand, for the installation, maintenance and management of brigade-based water tanks, in addition to working with our water provider partners for access to respective pipelines – the West Wimmera pipeline, as an example – in order to have fire access points along those pipelines for our firefighters.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Has the ESVF had a negative impact on volunteer retention and morale? Have you found that from your position as the Chief Officer?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** It is fair to say that the introduction of the emergency services and volunteers levy had a widescale impact upon our membership, with a dichotomy of views across all of our membership. When we look at the data in terms of people leaving our organisation across the last couple of years, in addition to people coming in – noting that we typically see an increase in numbers after large-scale emergencies, so putting that to the side – we are still running as average. But it is fair to say with what we are seeing in the media, what we saw on the steps of Parliament and the concerns that our members are voicing that, yes, I have to acknowledge that they have views, they have opinions, and many of them share the views and opinions of the wide variety of communities from which they come. As an organisation, we respect the views and opinions of our members and also respect that a lot of our people – as I have said, 52,000 of them – come from many different communities and have many different views.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. Mr Freeman, have you recovered yet? You are good to talk? Okay. You kept going on about culture change before. Why does there need to be a culture change when your workforce want to do the jobs that they are trained to do? They are an amazingly talented force of firefighters that can be utilised in an emergency situation; how come they are not being allowed to do that? Who made the call?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Well, it is really on the back of reform. There was agreement that we would return CFA to a whole-of-volunteer organisation, and they would predominantly focus on the bushfire risk in the state, among other things. I do not want to downplay CFA's responsibility. FRV has moved more into the metropolitan and urban areas, so that is just the reality of the role we undertake now. I have to maintain coverage and crewing in those stations, and that is again dictated largely by our industrial agreement around minimum and safe crewing levels, I must add. It is not that I do not want our people to be involved in bushfire – I think we can explore other ways that they can contribute – but their main job is to crew or staff the fire stations across the state.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** So they are focused on structure fires?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Structure fires and urban risk and rescue, and emergency medical response is a huge part of what they do as well. Notwithstanding that, though, remember we do have specialist roles, as I mentioned in my opening, with aviation, remotely piloted aircraft, ground observers, and I absolutely support our people being involved in that, and of course incident management personnel once they are up in the officer ranks.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** What clarifies a bushfire and a structure fire? So your paddock is on fire but your house is also on fire: can you call the FRV for help because your house is burning down, or is that still classed as a bushfire? When there is a bushfire – I think Mr Heffernan is understanding what I am trying to say – but then your house is suddenly on fire, can you call the FRV and say, ‘My house is on fire, I need your help’?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** It is a complementary fire service. It depends on where it is. If a bushfire runs into a built-up area that we have responsibility for and have crews in, absolutely they would be there, and they would be working, as would CFA, because those stations that we are talking about still have CFA volunteers in them, so they co-respond, and they would work together to address the risk. If it is more appropriate that our crews addressed the structure fire while CFA fought the scrub fire that caused it, yes, but they generally – in fact on all occasions – do work really well together, despite some of the rumblings and murmurings we hear and the personality clashes and the bit of turf war which happens occasionally. When there is a job to do, CFA volunteers and FRV career staff really do work well together.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes. Thank you, Chair.

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

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you. I guess I have got three different questions: One, I just want to double-check some points on the clean-up program, and I have also got questions for CFA and FRV. Just earlier you mentioned that the change was recommended for the clean-up program under ERV, and I think you were CEO: did you actually make that recommendation?

**Mariela DIAZ:** Yes, I did.

**Gaelle BROAD:** You did, yes. You mentioned that over 600 have registered for the clean-up program, with more coming in each week; 241, I think you said, are eligible to date, but you mentioned 48 properties where clean-up is underway. Can I just clarify, because I know there have been repeat inspections to some properties, sometimes up to four inspections, but clean-up has not actually commenced: how many sites have actually been completed under that program?

**Mariela DIAZ:** The number completed under the program is 28, and more next week are booked in. So that number of 48 makes up the properties that are cleaned up already and those that are booked in.

**Gaelle BROAD:** So 28 sites have been fully completed under the program?

**Mariela DIAZ:** Correct.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay. There is a long way to go. Just with CFA, the volunteer numbers have dropped by nearly 11,000 operational firefighters – my understanding is it was 40,000 operational firefighters in 2009 to 28,855 in 2026 – despite high community interest. We have heard a lot about the lack of support that many CFA volunteers feel that they have got, and the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, as you mentioned, has had a big impact on that. I heard of one brigade where the brigade members were facing about \$400,000 extra in combined tax between them, which is quite extraordinary. We have heard from volunteers about 36 days straight on a fire truck, and 30-hour shifts. I spoke to one CFA volunteer who had lost 4 kilograms in just a few days fighting the fires, so we are certainly aware of the sacrifice they are making. Another watched his own house burn down as he was driving past on a truck and then was told they are not eligible for some government grants because they stayed and did not evacuate.

We have heard you mention today about the CFA needing to replace about 100 trucks a year, I think you said, and you mentioned the rolling fleet program had stalled over the last 10 to 15 years. I am just interested if you could, on notice, provide how many CFA appliances by type – and also FRV – have actually been purchased by our state each year over the last 12 years. If you could take that on notice. And just with the recent

government announcement, there was \$100 million announced for new appliances over the next 10 years – how many will this actually buy over the forward estimates and over the next 10 years? Are you able to provide that information?

**Greg LEACH:** We can give you some estimates of that. It will vary depending on what type of truck we build each year. For example, a medium tanker is around half a million dollars, a heavy tanker three-quarters of a million dollars and a pumper \$1.2 million, so it depends on the configuration that we will build each year. But we can give you some information around that.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Okay. Well, if you could put in what you are requesting – because you mentioned that requests are going in – with the costs associated, that would be great. Just with single-cab tankers, we have heard from a number of different brigades about firefighters actually sitting outside on fibreglass seats, in the heat and in the dust and significant smoke. Other states have moved to get rid of the single-cab tankers. We heard one yesterday – I believe they went to Shepparton, did a 396-kilometre round trip in over 40-degree heat, but then were told to stand down, and that they did not need to assist. Then coming back, they heard on the radio about the Harcourt fire, and they were not in a position to actually help out. Just with the single-cab tankers, how many remain in the CFA fleet currently, and what is the timeframe to phase them out completely?

**Greg LEACH:** We have 802 single-cab tankers still in the fleet. Factoring in the funding that government announced last week, we think that will enable us to remove the single-cab tankers out of the fleet by around 2036.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** 2036. Right. So that is still another 10 years.

**Greg LEACH:** Correct.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** And other states have got rid of them.

**Greg LEACH:** Yes. Country Fire Service in South Australia removed their last one last year. Recognising of course they are a far smaller fire service and they do not run a fleet anywhere near the size of ours, but yes, they have got rid of theirs.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Okay. So we are a long way behind other states, even though we are one of the most bushfire-prone places in the whole world. Okay. I guess just on that, the single-cab tankers – because of the impact it has on volunteers, is it consistent with workplace health and safety laws, and has that ever been tested in the courts?

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** We acknowledge the concerns around being exposed to heat and other elements whilst travelling on the back of one of those single-cab tankers and appliances. The vehicles, as Mr Leach alluded to in earlier responses, are mechanically checked by our expert district mechanical officers and they meet the required Australian design rules for the time in which they were manufactured, and they continue to meet those requirements. Providing the volunteer whilst riding on the back of those vehicles secures themselves as intended in addition to wearing their other PPE and PPC as supplied, that meets the relevant safety requirements that we have. I am not aware of that being tested – to your question – externally in the courts. However, we remain ready to work with WorkSafe as a regulator to work through those. Other than, I guess reiterating what Mr Leach was saying – with the government's most recent announcement, it will go a very long way to removing those tankers out of our fleet over the next 10 years, which pleases me very much as a Chief Officer to see them being able to not ride on the back anymore.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Yes, that is exactly right. We all want to see the end of that. Just with the FRV, I am keen to understand because you are talking about not being in bush areas. I know Bendigo is a city surrounded by forest. FRV has about – 40 per cent of the area is covered by bush. But with the Harcourt fire, my understanding is that the FRV in Bendigo, 25 minutes away, was not called, and it took 14 hours for FRV to provide back up. It took 17 hours for them to get on the ground, and then they were only there for a couple of hours. Can you talk to that response specific to the Harcourt fires?

**Gavin FREEMAN:** Yes, look, our responses – we respond wherever we are requested to go. We frequently, if CFA ask us to respond then we do – vice versa as well. And in response to your question on that bushfire area that sits within FRV's area, each year that is a conversation that I do have with Chief Officer Heffernan to

ensure that CFA are able to provide support to help us, and with Chris Hardman as well in our area, because we are not equipped with bushfire-specific trucks. So we do draw on the other agencies to assist us when we get fires that are our responsibility. In terms of that response you are talking about there, I would have to take that on notice and get the details around those timeframes, because I am not sure why that occurred.

**Jason HEFFERNAN:** If I may, it might help the committee to draw a little bit of extra context. This is not necessarily about any one particular agency being called to a fire. It is a complementary fire service model. CFA makes decisions about our resource deployments with the knowledge of where FRV is and what they continue to do. It is also not uncommon, for example, for us to send additional resources to a fire with the knowledge that, after conversations with our colleagues, if they stay in an area that they would cover the area that we are also leaving as well. So it is not to be seen within that isolation. It is within the context of the system of fire response, which has all three fire agencies working together and covering our own areas and supporting each other.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you, everyone, for the more than 2½ hours you have given evidence today. It was a lengthy session. We do appreciate the evidence that you have given. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for review. And with that, the committee will take a short break to get ready for the next witness. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**