



# Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

**Hearing date:** 21/04/2026

**Questions taken on notice**

**Directed to:** Conservation Ecology Centre, Claire Feniuk

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

## 1. P.15 Melina Bath

**Question:** In terms of the evaluation, this has been going for 10 years – that is a significant time – but it is evolving, I am sure, as you are going. What are some of the inhibiting factors – and I guess you were mentioning about ongoing funding for this from government. What are some of the blockers where you go, ‘I know we don’t know enough about this’ or ‘How can we show that there’s been that reinvigoration or resilience of the ecosystem?’- I am really sorry my time is out. The resilient forests program: can you provide some more context to that for this committee – take it on notice and provide, you know, a summation of your work over the last three years?

**Claire FENIUK:** Yes. Absolutely – very happy to do that.

**Response:**





# Briefing Note: Otways Resilient Forests Program

## Lessons for Building Landscape Resilience in a Changing Climate

*Submitted by the Conservation Ecology Centre to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires, June 2026.*

### Purpose

This briefing note accompanies the Resilient Forests Phase 2 Final Report, provided in response to the Environment and Planning Committee's request for further information following evidence given by the Conservation Ecology Centre during the Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Bushfires.

Prepared by the Conservation Ecology Centre, this document highlights several key observations and lessons emerging from the Resilient Forests program that we believe are relevant to the Committee's consideration of bushfire resilience and forest management in a changing climate. These observations reflect the Conservation Ecology Centre's perspective and should not be interpreted as representing the views of all program partners or participants.

### Key message

Bushfire resilience cannot be considered separately from broader landscape resilience. Three years of work through the Resilient Forests program suggests that building resilient forests in a changing climate requires:

- Management approaches that look beyond fuel reduction alone
- Place-based decision-making informed by local conditions and values
- Traditional Owner leadership and biocultural approaches to caring for Country
- Long-term research, monitoring and adaptive management
- Governance models that support collaboration, shared learning and decision-making under uncertainty

### Who we are

The Conservation Ecology Centre (CEC) is an independent not-for-profit conservation organisation based in the Otway Ranges. For more than two decades, CEC has worked with Traditional Owners, government agencies, researchers and local communities to support evidence-based conservation and land management across forests, heathlands, waterways and coastal ecosystems.

Through its role in the Resilient Forests program, CEC has acted as a research partner, knowledge broker and facilitator, helping bring together diverse perspectives on the future management of the Otways' foothill forests.

### The Resilient Forests Program

Established in 2023 and initially funded by DEECA, the Resilient Forests program is a partnership between DEECA, the Conservation Ecology Centre and Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation (EMAC), supported by research collaboration with the University of Melbourne.

The program focuses on the foothill forests of the Otways and uses CSIRO's Adaptation Pathways framework to explore how to improve forest health and resilience under a changing climate. Through collaborative planning, community and stakeholder engagement, research and monitoring, the program seeks to support place-based and evidence-informed decision-making in the face of increasing ecological uncertainty.



## Key Learnings

### 1. **Landscape resilience cannot be achieved through fuel management alone.**

For much of the last two centuries, forest management in Victoria has been dominated by relatively narrow objectives – first timber production and, more recently, fuel management. Long-term resilience depends on the condition of the broader landscape and requires management approaches that integrate biodiversity, cultural obligations, community values and climate adaptation alongside targeted efforts to reduce bushfire risk.

### 2. **There is no “one-size-fits-all”**

The Resilient Forests program has highlighted the limitations of approaches that simplify complex landscapes and rely on broad, standardised management responses. Forest resilience depends on maintaining diversity across the landscape. This requires place-based decision-making informed by local conditions, values and obligations, and management approaches that respond to variation rather than impose uniformity.

### 3. **Traditional Owner leadership strengthens forest management**

Biocultural approaches to forest management provide a framework for responding to the specific needs of Country and the ecological, cultural and social values being managed for in a particular landscape. The Resilient Forests program has shown that this requires more than consultation – it depends on Traditional Owners being actively involved in planning, managing and learning from Country.

### 4. **Significant knowledge gaps remain**

Important questions remain about how forests will respond to climate change and different management interventions over coming decades. Long-term research, monitoring and adaptive management will be essential to reducing uncertainty and improving future decision-making.

### 5. **Governance matters**

Climate adaptation is as much a governance challenge as a land management one. Building resilient landscapes requires decision-making processes that can integrate different forms of knowledge, navigate uncertainty and support long-term adaptive management. This, in turn, requires governance models that support collaboration, shared learning and stewardship across organisational and tenure boundaries.

## Recommendations

### 1. **Adopt a broader landscape resilience framing for forest management and bushfire policy.**

Move beyond a primary focus on fuel reduction and support management approaches integrate biodiversity, cultural obligations, community values and climate adaptation.

### 2. **Support place-based approaches to forest planning and management.**

Enable greater flexibility for regional and local decision-making that responds to the ecological, cultural and social characteristics of individual landscapes.

### 3. **Strengthen Traditional Owner leadership in forest governance.**

Support governance arrangements that enable Traditional Owners to actively participate in planning, managing and learning from Country, rather than being limited to consultation roles.

### 4. **Invest in long-term research, monitoring and adaptive management.**

Provide sustained support for the research, monitoring and evaluation needed to address key knowledge gaps and inform evidence-based decision-making under changing climatic conditions.

### 5. **Foster collaborative governance models that operate across organisational and tenure boundaries.**

Support models that bring together Traditional Owners, government agencies, researchers and communities to plan, manage and learn from landscapes over the long term.