

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Alexandra – Friday 24 April 2026

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria. We are now moving into the open mic session of today's proceedings, where we have invited registrations from members of the public who want to come and have a say. Unlike the previous part of the session, this is just an opportunity for members of the public to have their say, so it is not a traditional question-and-answer session.

I have got a long list of names. I am just going to read them out in order. In groups of five, people will come forward and sit at the table. A reminder to everyone who is here that we do have counselling services onsite if people feel like any of the material that is being presented today is causing them concern or distress or they just want someone to talk to, and if you make yourself available and known to the committee secretariat staff, they can put you in touch with those support services.

I would like to invite up, just in the order that they are appearing on the list that someone else has prepared for me, Miranda Connaughton, Dianne Cameron, Annabelle Cleeland, David Webb and Finn Keath. I am just trying to reach a batch. The next two names on my list are Cass Groves and Aidan O'Dempsey. Aidan not here? I have got Thomas de Mamiel. Steve Threlfall?

David WEBB: We are going to get 10 minutes each in a minute! This is great.

Wendy LOVELL: Where has Threlly gone? He was here.

The CHAIR: We might just get started with four. A reminder to all the witnesses: all the evidence you give is protected by parliamentary privilege, so you can make comments and you will not be subject to any action for any evidence that you give to the committee today. We will provide you with a copy of the transcript to review after the proceedings. Before you speak, could you just state your name so that Hansard can accurately record who is giving evidence. Let us start at this end of the table and work our way down.

Cass GROVES: Thank you. My name is Cass Groves. I am here representing the Yea Community House, and I have a statement I would like to read out that was written by one of our coordinators, Carlie Underhill. Our staff were first on the ground in Yea as the emergency unfolded.

During the Longwood bushfires community organisations and local halls across affected areas quickly became informal evacuation and support hubs, providing critical place-based assistance to community members throughout the evacuation, the immediate response and the longer recovery phase. This response was not directed or pre-planned but led by the community itself, evolving organically as needs changed day by day. Our spaces became safe and familiar spaces where people could gather, access information, seek practical help and connect with others during an incredibly uncertain time. This work was undertaken without any dedicated funding or any formal acknowledgement, highlighting a significant gap in the current emergency management system.

Local community organisations and facilities are not simply support services, they are critical community infrastructure. Time and again during fires and floods they are among the first on the ground, providing immediate, trusted and accessible support when formal systems are still mobilising or occasionally unable to reach us in an emergency. Even once formal supports are in place, communities continue to rely on local organisations and halls as a central and trusted part of their ongoing support and recovery network, particularly because of the relationships, local knowledge and sense of safety that we provide.

However, in addition to operating without formal support, local organisations often encountered administrative barriers and red tape at a time when flexibility and responsiveness were critical. In some instances efforts to establish or expand support were slowed or complicated by external processes, requiring significant time, volunteers and energy to navigate workarounds. This created unnecessary pressure on volunteers and staff who were already responding in high-stress situations. At a time when communities needed support systems to enable and empower local action, there were occasions when processes instead acted as barriers. What was needed was not additional complexity but practical support, people and systems that could help open doors rather than unintentionally place obstacles in our way.

Despite this, there is still no clear mechanism for the rapid provision of flexible funding to enable our work. As a result there is a heavy reliance on already stretched staff and volunteers, many of whom are personally impacted by an emergency in their community, increasing the risk of fatigue and burnout. Additionally, these

organisations and halls are not formally included in any emergency planning or emergency communication structures, despite being consistently relied upon as key points of coordination, information sharing and care. This often leaves us operating without timely information, clarity of role or connection to any broader response system.

The recovery phase further exposed systemic challenges, including delays, administrative complexity and inequitable access to support, particularly in rural communities. During this time, local organisations and halls again continue to fill the gaps, supporting individuals and families who may not meet formal criteria for support or who fall through the cracks. Much of this work is informal and relationship-based, including emotional support, practical assistance, coordination and fostering community connection. As a result, it remains largely invisible and unrecognised within any official processes or any official reporting.

These experiences highlight an opportunity to better recognise local community organisations and halls as trusted partners to ensure that we are meaningfully included, supported and considered throughout emergency planning, response and recovery efforts, rather than being relied upon informally or after the fact. While this experience reflects the broader role of organisations and halls, it also highlights the distinct and critical function of community houses within our landscape. Community houses operate with established governance structures, strong local connections and the capability to deliver both ongoing programs and responsive place-based support.

In this instance proximity to fire-affected areas meant that Yea Community House was able to mobilise exceptionally quickly in response to emerging needs, drawing on our deep understanding of the local community and our existing relationships. However, a lack of recognition of community houses as formal organisations with governance structures and defined capacities created significant challenges. The gap led to unrealistic expectations, where it was assumed that any and all tasks could be absorbed without any consideration of resourcing, responsibilities or limitations. There was also a widespread misunderstanding that those undertaking this work were in paid roles, when the reality was that the response was driven by volunteers, including staff acting as unpaid volunteers, operating under pressure and while personally impacted by the emergency. At the same time Yea Community House demonstrated a substantial capacity to manage complex large-scale response efforts, including coordinating significant volumes of donations, organising volunteers and in some cases operating as a distribution centre across multiple sites to support surrounding impacted communities. This level of responsibility was taken on without any formal recognition, support or integration into the broader emergency response system, creating additional strain and inefficiency at a time when clarity and coordination were critical.

These challenges point to a deeper systemic issue. Community houses are consistently relied on to deliver critical outcomes yet are not formally acknowledged or supported in a way that reflects our role in the community. This is not incidental work but a direct extension of what community houses are designed for and capable of doing. Our strength lies in our ongoing embedded presence within communities, supporting people week to week through programs, outreach and connection, which positions us as trusted, capable and highly effective responders in times of crisis. Recognising our existing capacity and formally valuing community houses as established and essential partners would enable a more coordinated, efficient and sustainable response in future emergency situations.

It is difficult not to reflect on the importance of this work while at the same time many community houses are facing uncertainty or potential closure due to lack of sustainable funding. This highlights the urgency of ensuring these vital community assets are supported, not only during emergencies but as an ongoing part of resilient and connected communities.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Cass. If you could state your name for the record and then kick off.

Miranda CONNAUGHTON: My name is Miranda Connaughton. I have lived in Mansfield shire for 38 years and have been an active CFA member for 26 years, and I was part of the strike team for the Longwood fires. I am speaking from long local experience and direct frontline involvement.

The first issue I want to raise is prevention. I have never seen the roadsides as overgrown as they have been in the past 10 years. Fuel loads have been extreme, and in many places roadsides have been left long and not maintained. In my view this has created unnecessary risk. Practical fuel reduction has also been made harder,

not easier. Safety barriers on the Hume Highway and Maroondah Highway have created major difficulties for roadside maintenance. Both CFA crews and landholders have been hamstrung by bureaucracy and policies that stop them from grazing, collecting wood or clearing roadside verges for fear of damaging habitat. In the past we were able to do this while native flora and fauna were still abundant during that time, and fuel loads were reduced.

The second issue is frontline response capacity. My brigade's fire truck is 35 years old. Communication was poor when the fires approached. Burnover protection failed on trucks, truck communications did not work and mobile service dropped out, leaving many people in vulnerable positions. My brother's property is in Merton. He lost power and mobile service, and he was cut off from communication altogether at one point. Triple Zero stopped taking calls because it was clearly over capacity.

The third issue is what happened during and after the fires. No meaningful state government help was given during the fire or in the immediate aftermath. Much of the real support came from locals – some local councils, Rapid Relief, Sikh Volunteers, BlazeAid and Aussie Hay Runners. They stepped in where the government failed to appear. Animal welfare also suffered badly. Burnt livestock and wildlife were left suffering because roads were closed and government departments did not come in, nor were animal welfare groups allowed in promptly to assess and help. Many animals died waiting.

I also want to raise concern about the laws around forced evacuation. Our Premier implemented more laws stating that people could be forcibly removed if told to evacuate. That was on 10 January. We did not need to hear that at that point. Yet many people I know who stayed to defend their properties saved not only their own properties but also neighbouring properties. I feel strongly that this issue needs careful scrutiny, because decisions made at a distance do not always reflect what is happening on the ground in a rural fire emergency. CFA is stretched to the limit. Private vehicles were integral in defending properties. Fatigue in events of this scale is severe, and the ongoing mental health impacts on firefighters and residents are immense.

My final point is this: these failures are not new. The frustration is that the recommendations from the Black Saturday royal commission still have not been properly implemented. People on the ground have been saying this for years. At what point will government stop merely listening and finally act? Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you for the chance to speak. My name is Annabelle Cleeland. I am the Member for Euroa. I am here on behalf of my communities across Longwood, Upton Hill, Ruffy, Creightons Creek and Gooram, and my own family property burnt, as did my parents' and my sister's, during the Longwood bushfire.

What we have lived through is not just a bushfire, it is a systemic failure – a failure of leadership and a failure of recovery. I am going to speak to three areas: failures on the fireground, the community response and failures in recovery. This fire did not just escalate because of weather. It escalated because the system did not respond the way it should have. We had a catastrophic breakdown in communication. Radio channels were unclear. The communication plan changed during the fire, and that change was not communicated to the people risking their lives on the ground. Volunteers were left to operate blind. There is evidence that even central coordination could not confirm what channel brigades were operating on. This is a system failure that put lives at risk. We had a complete breakdown in command continuity. Control shifted between locations. Personnel rotated in and out on short deployments, and leadership did not have time to understand the fireground before making decisions. Critical leadership roles were vacant, and it took several weeks before the chief fire officer visited the fireground at all. People were placed into positions they were not adequately supported to perform, and one of the most serious failures was that the acting chief fire officer left the fireground at approximately 6 pm on Wednesday. This is a fact, and that decision left volunteer group officers to defend an escalating fire without senior command. They felt abandoned because they were abandoned. Those individuals will carry that for the rest of their lives, and you have heard that today.

This timeline matters because at about 2:30 on Thursday morning the fire jumped containment lines. That was the moment this incident escalated. Instead volunteers were left to manage it – volunteers, farmers, without clear communication, without continuity of command and without senior leadership on the ground. The consequences were immediate. We had about 40 vehicles trapped on the Hume Freeway, including a fuel

tanker, surrounded by fire. Volunteers were left to manage the situation, and the fact that more people did not die is nothing short of a miracle. This inquiry must ask: who directed the acting chief fire officer to leave the fireground?

Wendy Lovell interjected.

Annabelle CLEELAND: It was the assistant. I will keep speaking. Because that decision was made within the system, the system is responsible, and if it was not directed, then we have a failure of competency at the highest level. Either way it is unacceptable.

We also saw dangerous levels of fatigue. Volunteers were working beyond safe limits – eight days straight in some cases, and no workforce in the world would allow that. And yet we expect it from our volunteers, and we penalise them, because many of those exhausted volunteers were also victims. They lost their homes, their fencing, their livelihoods and their livestock. Because they stayed to defend their properties they were deemed ineligible for the basic \$1000 emergency relief payment. We built a system that punishes people for doing the right thing, and that is indefensible.

What we are seeing is a result of structural decisions that have taken us backwards. After Black Saturday the royal commission called for strong leadership, clear accountability and a system built around operational capability, and this is not what we have today. Emergency Management Victoria was meant to strengthen coordination. Instead it has become a centralised bureaucracy that lacks operational clarity on the ground. We now have a system where the most senior decision-makers are not fire-experienced, where accountability is diffused and where decisions made in offices do not reflect the realities on the ground, and this is not what was recommended. This inquiry must ask whether EMV and FRV are conducting a restructure in the middle of a disaster recovery. The government has failed to implement key recommendations from past inquiries. You have heard it numerous times. Fuel reduction is one of them. Communities did their part – they reduced fuel; they prepared their properties – and to hear from the environment minister that the targets were not met because they were too expensive is an insult to every family that lost everything, because the cost of not doing it is what we are living through right now.

The CFA is being asked to carry the burden of response, but it is not being given the tools to do so. The CFA cannot employ and manage its own people, and that means it cannot ensure performance, it cannot fill vacancies effectively and it cannot build leadership capability. At the time of this fire key command roles were vacant, and it explains why the acting chief fire officer was even on the fireground in the first place. Volunteers are being locked out of progression, and training is inaccessible – courses are only run during business hours.

Contrast all of that to what the community did, because when the system failed, our community stepped up. Farmers used their own tractors and dozers to cut firebreaks. They protected homes, livestock and lives, and many of them have still not been paid. We had a community-led fodder relief effort distribute more than \$2.5 million within two weeks. It is faster and more effective than any government programs. Fuel has not been reimbursed in many cases. People who donated have worn the cost. Locals who undertook the traumatic task of euthanasing livestock had to fundraise for their own mental health support. Community organisations like the Strathbogie Disaster Relief Fund have delivered immediate targeted support. They are agile and trusted and they know their communities, and yet they are not being supported by government. We should be backing these organisations with direct funding, because they are proving what works.

More than three months on parts of our region still look like a war zone, and, Chair, you have seen the heart of it. This is not recovery, this is a failure of government. The clean-up program has been one of the most inequitable we have seen in a decade. The deputy commissioner for recovery has initiated a two-tiered system clean-up without eligibility criteria determined and without agreements in place. Her decision has crippled our recovery.

The CHAIR: Mrs Cleeland, we do have –

Annabelle CLEELAND: Chair, with respect, you have given everyone else some leniency.

The CHAIR: I have given you a lot of leniency too.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I am going to speak on behalf of my community. It has interfered with insurance, and our communities will face a contaminated watertable if asbestos properties are not cleaned before winter. It has divided communities into haves and have-nots. People who did the right thing and insured themselves are being excluded, and that sets a dangerous precedent. Nearly four months on the clean-up has barely started. Black Summer saw the clean-up of more than 600 properties within six months, and we have to question the competency of the CEO of Emergency Recovery Victoria. We need a universal clean-up program yesterday. This is not new. Everything you have heard here today has been done before, and it is shameful that it takes an inquiry to remind this government of its responsibilities. Recovery is being crippled by planning delays, permits are not being fast-tracked and rebuilds are stalled – again, this has been done before.

Rate relief is another failure, and there is a clear precedent from Towong and East Gippsland following previous disasters. Instead Strathbogie Shire Council only offer deferrals due to rate-capping. That is not relief, it is debt. Families who have lost everything are expected to pay rates for years to come. This will financially ruin people.

The CHAIR: Mrs Cleeland, everyone is being treated the same.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I would like to table documents that highlight that everything I have asked for has been done before as precedent of previous disasters. We are calling for three years of rates exemption, not deferral. Housing is also completely inadequate, with the only option offered being caravans, and we know where that leads: addiction, family violence and long-term social harm. How, nearly four months on, we still have people in tents is shameful. There must be a range of housing options, including modular homes and stamp duty exemptions, and we also need to address the funding inequity. Strathbogie shire has received 750 grand, the same as Mitchell, Mansfield and Murrindindi, despite Strathbogie and Murrindindi bearing the majority of losses. A life has been lost. Hundreds of families have been impacted, and yet the Premier has not visited my region and nor has the Prime Minister. Instead my communities have been left to fight for themselves. This disaster risks going down in history as one of the greatest failures of government response this state has ever seen, and that is no exaggeration. But this inquiry has the opportunity to change that, to fix the system, to restore accountability and to ensure that when the next fire comes communities are supported and not ignored. They have done their part, and it is time for the government to do its job. I would like to table these documents.

The CHAIR: You can send them to the secretariat and ask they be made a submission. That was a very passionate contribution. I just think these open mic sessions are designed to give everyday members of the community an opportunity to have a say.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I am an everyday member, Chair. I also got burnt.

The CHAIR: We appreciate the time you have taken, and now we would like to give other people time too.

David WEBB: My name is David Webb. I am the captain of the Highlands–Caveat fire brigade. We were burnt out on 9 January this year in the catastrophic day, and I would just like to speak to the failings of the CFA over the entirety of the fire. We attended the fire at 4:04 pm on 7 January to find an escalating fire that was not being dealt with properly. CFA had crews in attendance that were not equipped and not willing to fight the fire in the paddocks. It is a failing of the CFA's training. We have gone to full risk adversity. The CFA has now trained its members that we are better off staying on the roads and letting everything burn and we go into asset protection too quickly. The best way to protect an asset is to put the fire out, and that was not done over the entirety of this fire.

I entered the fire on 7 January and was on a fire truck for 36 days straight. Every single day I was on a fire truck. We did not receive any support in Highlands until the end of the second week of the fire. We did not see another fire truck in our valley until the end of the second week. I was the sector commander, and we made requests for patrols to be put in place overnight on the Thursday before the catastrophic day. Those were declined, denied by the ICC, with no explanation as to why. We also asked for more fire trucks to be deployed to our area, which was going to be the front of the fire on 9 January. They were also denied. We were told we were allocated – allocated, not given what we needed – one strike team, while multiple strike teams sat in places in Yea, which was not under imminent threat, and also at Alexandra, which did get affected. But we had strike teams sitting unutilised. We had CFA members in Melbourne and outer Melbourne areas wanting to

come and help that were told to stand down and go home – they were not required. We could not contact the ICC most of the time due to lack of communication, and a lack of experience in the ICC I believe led to the ability of this fire gaining so much momentum.

The CFA needs to take a very hard look at itself with its training and with its inappropriate deployment of local crews and everything. We were not listened to as local captains and brigade members. We were not listened to. We were asked for situational reports, which we gave, and it just seemed to not make any difference. We could ask for food, for instance, and we were told at Highlands our food would be delivered to Bonnie Doon at 3:30 on the catastrophic day. I do not know whether anyone knows the distance, but it would have been a 6- to 7-hour round trip for us to get some food.

When the fire jumped the fire line on 9 January at about 10 am in Highlands, I escalated and asked Firecom for an extra 20 trucks. I was also told by the ICC that that request was denied. It is a pretty hard thing to stand there in front of all your CFA volunteers that you have got around you in private units and on CFA appliances and say, 'Guys, we're on our own. No-one's coming.' No-one did come for nearly two weeks, and I just think it is a disgrace. On the allocation, I do not think it has got anything to do with funding. It was the allocation and deployment, and it happens at every major fire we go to, whether it be Beaufort or whether it be the Grampians last year. It happens at every major fire we go to, and it must stop now.

The CHAIR: Thank you all. We appreciate the time you have taken.

The next names I have got on the list are Tori Mitton, Julian Wilkes, Tom Ward, Peter Davies, Rob Parker and Dennis Sicily.

As you might have heard me say earlier, all the evidence you give is protected by parliamentary privilege, so no action can be taken against you for anything you say during today's hearings. After the hearings, in about a week, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript for you to review.

We ask before you make your contribution if you could state your name so that we can make sure all your comments are correctly attributed to you. So that everyone gets a say, we ask you to keep to 3 minutes. I know that is difficult in many instances, but it just means that we can get as many people up to the table having their say as we can. We will start at this end of the table.

Julian WILKES: Greetings. Thanks for this opportunity. My name is Julian Wilkes, and I am from Kangaroo Ground on the outskirts of Melbourne. Since 11 January my partner and I have been distributing hay and other essentials to fire-affected farmers throughout the district. My main reason for wanting to say something today is more in regard to the enormous degradation of the environment that this fire has caused, as I am sure there are going to be many others talking on the human costs, with both I believe being very avoidable. This fire should not have happened to the extent that it did. The lack of prescribed burning on Crown land and the mismanagement of roadside vegetation escalated the extent and the intensity of this fire, with the roadside vegetation carrying and spreading the fire, in my opinion, and that needs to change.

I expect you are all well aware of the royal commission that the government called post the Black Saturday fires in 2009 at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars to investigate what went wrong and what could be done better in the future. I will not dwell on that but more so on the failures of the state and local governments not only in this area but I believe across the state to act on the recommendations handed down by that royal commission. The sheer arrogance of the current non-elected Premier and her predecessor and the extreme Greens, whose support they need, speaks volumes to this and what has not happened since in regard to those recommendations. This Greens minority calling the shots I believe is the reason we are here today. They are the ones saying that roadside firewood is critical habitat and that prescribed burning of the bush destroys habitat, amongst other inventions of fact they disseminate.

I am a conservationist and active Landcare member for nearly 20 years of multiple groups, one of which has given me a lifetime membership for my work building and installing nest boxes for the critically endangered brush-tailed phascogale, so I know what critical habitat is. I plant trees, I get rid of weeds, I shoot and trap multiple feral species and I look after what needs a hand and get rid of the rubbish that does not belong. That makes me a conservationist. Greens, on the other hand, dictate what happens everywhere else, using deceit and false propaganda, despite never having been in the bush, experienced life on the land or contributed in any other

useful manner anywhere. As a conservationist, I now see the rubbish needing removal is this current wasteful, out-of-touch government.

The actual reality of the situation is that this so-called significant roadside habitat is actually insignificant – fallen branches, leaves et cetera – and its mismanagement under the Greens umbrella has completely decimated the most important habitat, that being the centuries-old trees that lined the roadsides. They were – and I reiterate the word ‘were’ – the high-rise apartment blocks of habitat across the district, vast swathes of epically old trees with hollows of all sizes, from those small enough for pardalotes to nest in to those large enough for the critically endangered powerful owl to nest in. Those high-rise apartment blocks have had the extreme Greens and Labor wrecking ball through them and will never exist again while humans exist on this planet. They were the survivors of multiple fires up until January 2026. All of the armed forces in Australia would not be capable of building enough suitable nest boxes to replace the roadside habitat lost in this fire event. We personally witnessed in the days and weeks following the ferocity at which the roadsides burnt nothing remaining but white ash where this so-called habitat used to be and yet adjoining paddocks singed but otherwise largely unaffected in places. What chance did those epically old trees have to survive such an enormous fuel load surrounding them? None – none at all. And that is why they are now gone – gone forever.

This landscape has now changed forever because of a noisy, ill-informed and militant minority who do nothing but push a barrow of fallacy to Spring Street, who lap it up. As one farmer quite aptly stated, ‘I haven’t seen any blue- or green-haired types up here helping since the fires.’ The Victorian government is called that for a reason. They are supposed to look after all of our interests, not bow down to a reckless minority residing in inner suburbs because of backroom deals that they have made to suit their own interests. I just hope the information gathered here is used more purposefully than that from the Black Saturday royal commission. Thanks again for the opportunity to speak.

Tori MITTON: Hello. My name is Tori Mitton. I am the director of Greensborough Grain Store. These are my personal observations while managing a feed relief program through the grain store in conjunction with St Andrews Stock Feed. All the details of the program are and have been transparently recorded on Facebook. We began on Sunday 11 January and still are in operation, but we are nearing completion. I also supplied animal product to Kinglake in the week following the Black Saturday fires. To date in this region, up to Ruffy, we have distributed over 650 purchased and donated bales directly to 35 properties and indirectly to at least another 65 properties via collaborations, particularly with Fawcett Hall. Within a week, as the urgent need for feed was met and supply secured, funds, with the donators’ blessings, were directed towards other items and needs such as water pumps, fencing and animal first-aid products. We have also distributed many donated items such as generators, tools and water tanks. We reached people through personal and supply contacts, dropped into properties that looked in need and spoke to people as we came across them en route. Many people asked us to check in on others in the area as they could not be reached. Phone coverage was extremely poor. I do question why phone companies cannot immediately deploy a portable type of mobile tower in situations like this.

My concerns: we often heard that we were the first people that they had seen, even a week after the fire. There is a strong sense of loss of confidence in the government with such things as fire mitigation policy and post-fire responses, particularly roadblocks issues et cetera. Many of our donators mentioned they were hesitant to donate after Black Saturday as they were uncertain of where their funds would be directed, and so they were so happy that we set up this program.

Also in the first week: animal welfare. Many were without adequate feed supplies, a particularly distressing situation for single-stomached animals such as horses. Surely an entity like the army, with their resources and training, would be very suited to immediate action in a disaster like this to ensure human and animal welfare and such things as establishing immediate communication relief perhaps.

Noted effects on people which I believe are avoidable in the future: initially many were unable to go to depots or hubs for immediate supplies or services for fear of leaving their properties, many with continual flare-ups or just being too emotionally overwhelmed and bewildered or having no vehicles or trailers to use and in many cases just their stoic proudness. We heard too many times ‘Give it to someone who needs it more.’ In the weeks that followed, the impacts on the people changed and even to this day appear to be harder in some respects than the fire front. To list a few, having the time and the headspace to follow up on what they may be eligible for, let alone doing the admin while dealing with alternative accommodation and/or tending to the immediate needs of

feeding and containing stock; prolonged and/or difficult insurance claims; and, from what I have heard, questionable support from council, i.e. very late welfare calls, no exemptions to building permit fees, setting six-monthly deadlines, threats of fines for not removing burnt items and delays in road clearing for safe property access. Lastly, and this is the big one for me, I was not directly affected by the fire, and I even found it quite difficult to keep across what was available to people, with regards to available support, goods and services.

Just two weeks ago I came across two organisations I had not heard of. There seem to be too many gaps, and many people fall through the cracks, especially if they are not on social media. People wondering how someone got something and they missed out should not occur. We established a group chat early on in the program, and we now communicate with 49 people. I have been told it has been beneficial. I do wonder how those who are not really well connected, particularly those who are not smartphone-savvy, tech-minded or on social media, fared. Surely there must be the ability for a more cohesive approach to avoid these gaps.

To the Chair and to the committee: I thank you for this opportunity, but I hope I never feel I have to do a program like this again. Unfortunately, and perhaps naively, I had hoped that this would be the case after the Black Saturday royal commission.

Rob PARKER: Good afternoon, Chair and committee members. My name is Rob Parker, and I am a leading firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria. I appear in my private capacity as a career firefighter and a member of the UFU. I do not speak for FRV, I just work for them. As part of this inquiry, I have submitted a 42-page document on the state of FRV and Victorian firefighting more generally, which I will do my best to condense into 3 minutes.

For every issue, the pattern is the same. We identify a hazard, firefighters and health and safety reps, of which I am one, document it formally and then it stalls on funding and seemingly only moves when WorkSafe or the Fair Work Commission step in. That is possibly the most important thing I can tell you about how our organisation currently functions.

FRV's portable radios fail routinely inside ordinary buildings and regularly outside of them. At a factory fire in January of this year, during the active fire season, our radios failed completely. They also failed inside the communications bus, and commanders used their own mobile phones to speak to sector commanders at an above ground and outdoor incident. In 2025 I issued eight provisional improvement notices over these failures. Multiple other HSRs independently raised the same concerns. At a statewide safety forum, radio failures were rated the number one risk to firefighters by more than two-thirds of those present. At a meeting attended by WorkSafe in July last year, FRV management were presented with evidence of these failures alongside some information around the death of Queensland firefighter Izabella Nash in 2023. Contributing factors to her death involved very similar communication failures to what we experience every day, and this case is now being criminally prosecuted. On all the improvement notices that have been issued, the compliance date comes and goes. This year the fire season began without any of those hazards being resolved, and they still remain unresolved today.

Roughly two-thirds of our frontline fleet are past their service life or inside their replacement lead time. The oldest appliance still in service is 33 years old. That is older than me. FRV's own policy says our trucks should be replaced at 15 years, or 10 years for high-usage stations like mine. My two trucks are 11 and 12 years old, and they are held together with duct tape, zip ties and hopes and dreams. The funding commitment through the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is \$10 million a year. By my rough calculation, steady-state replacement needs to be more than double that. I set that out in full arithmetic in section 4.5 of my submission, and I would urge you to take a look at it.

In addition, we cannot reliably tell where our truck is at any point in time. Our appliance tracking runs on an unreliable iPhone app. On extreme fire days this year, between one-quarter and one-third of the active fleet could not be located accurately. FRV firefighters still navigate to emergencies using paper Melway books – in 2026. When I joined FRV in 2021 trial in-vehicle data terminals were removed from the trucks and never got replaced. On this issue and many others we are moving backwards. In February this year WorkSafe issued an improvement notice on this matter, assessing the risk as one that could result in death or serious injury. FRV have troves of detailed information about sites that we just cannot access on the fireground. When we arrive on

scene, all we have is our collective knowledge as a crew, a radio that probably will not work and a truck that might pump some water out if we are lucky.

Committee members, these are just some of the issues that I have plucked, with one pattern that sits behind them: we identify these issues, we document them and then they just stall. Only after external regulators intervene are they reluctantly progressed. WorkSafe has already put in writing that funding is not a valid reason for noncompliance with employer duties. It should not take a regulator to secure the basic conditions for firefighter and, by extension, community safety, and yet this is where we are today. We were not even close to being prepared for this fire season, and we do not currently have the proper plans in place or a structure to allow us to fight next year's fires confidently. Most of these issues would need at least a minimum two-year runway to be resolved, and we have not even started.

I will just add on a more personal note that WorkSafe data shows that organisational stressors are the leading causes of mental health injury in Victorian emergency services, and that is then followed by traumatic exposures. The cumulative effect of systemic neglect is not neutral. It shows up in the quality of fireground decisions made by good people operating under conditions that do not need to be this difficult. FRV currently functions on the goodwill of its firefighters. That goodwill is what keeps this organisation operating and the public safe. It is not inexhaustible, and it is not a substitute for proper investment. I really hope it does not take the death of another firefighter for us to take any action. Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Tom WARD: My name is Tom Ward. My family lost everything in Yarck – house, winery, shed. I know what it is to stare into the abyss of what little remains of your physical presence. The home videos from growing up overseas, the portraits that crookedly adorned the hallways, a lifetime of travel mementos – all gone. And I wanted to be here to just say how important it was that the community was there. Many of them we had never met before. Many of them, even though we have lived here for six years, still think we are 19 years off being locals – but we get it; that is the way it is. I am just so grateful.

I want to echo the comments earlier from Fawcett Hall. I want to shout out to Graham, who is here from the Yarck hall as well as read 'Sharon Fox is a legend' into Hansard, because she has been unstoppable. The one policy I would like to see changed is that when disasters happen, give money to these community halls. It helps twofold: (1) we get help immediately from people who know who needs the help, and (2) people who have not lost everything want to help. They are desperate, and often they feel worse than the people who have lost everything, because of survivors guilt. Giving money directly to the community has two benefits: the people get to give it out where it is needed, and they feel good; and the people who need it get it directly. ERV have no idea what is happening. I think they were offering Dad aromatherapy at this point, which was like – come on. But DEECA and Forest Fire Management Victoria drove up. They pulled up – I thought they were going to yell at me for pushing over a tree, which I definitely did not do – and they said, 'Here's a funding deed. You've got 292 metres of fence line that borders a reserve. It'll come in a month. This is a waiver.' Why can't it all be like that? If it was all like that, we would all be cleaned up and we would be singing praises. Thank you for being here. Thank you for hearing me.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Tom.

Dennis SICILY: Hi. I am Dennis Sicily, a farmer from the top end of Yarck. I am just very disappointed at what happened with the fire. My property overlooked the whole fire. When the fire came out of the back of Gobur towards the Old Gobur Road, there was not a fire truck anywhere. This was night-time. There were two of us, two neighbours, sitting in vehicles watching. I said, 'I've got to get home and get some more water. This doesn't look good. They're not going to pull it up.' When I got back to the house, there were three fire trucks in my driveway. They said, 'How're you going, Sisco?', and I said, 'Oh, good.' I said, 'You're going to have to get around to the Gobur road and pull this fire up. And they go, 'Well, how do we get to there?' So I drew a mud map on the road, and I said, 'Look, mate, I've got to go.' So we sat up and we watched three houses burn inside Brilliant estate. I called Rob Webb up. I said, 'You'd better come up and have a look at this, Rob.' And he said, 'There are four or five trucks at the Gobur turn-off.' And we could see along the Gobur road there were another five sets of flashing lights going everywhere. There were another six [inaudible] and not one of them went near the fire. And the fire was coming from Gobur towards the Old Gobur Road.

One of the neighbours, a bloke by the name of Alex Morgan, knew a fire truck driver. He got onto him. He said, 'Mate, you've got to get up; it's going to jump the Gobur road.' He said, 'F that. We're not going in there.' And I said, 'Whatever – we're stuck, mate.' And Rob goes, 'I'd better get home and get organised.' So I went home, and at 3 o'clock in the morning the fire came. So I rang Rob and said, 'I'm going to have a go at this to stop it coming in,' and he said, 'I'll be up. Are the trucks there?' And I am on top; you could see right through Middle Creek – nowhere, no trucks. So we put that out. The wind was blowing south towards north. The wind was going to Merton. I said, 'Beauty; we're out of jail here.' Then just on daylight the wind started to turn, and then we said, 'Oh, well, we're gone,' and at daylight the fire came into my property.

We made the decision that I would have to muster the sheep because I was going to lose them, because the wind had turned. There were still no fire trucks anywhere. And I look and here come three fire trucks and a white Prado or something leading the way, like a mob of Indians. They get 200 yards away from the fire and they pull up; then they turn around and drive out. So I just kept pushing the sheep out. I got to the gateway. Here they are all standing there playing with their phones and smoking. I said, 'What the F's going on, boys? Get up there and put the fire out.' They said, 'Oh, we're not going up in there.' And I said, 'Well, you may as well just keep going' – you know, with a few other words. That was cool. Next minute the fire is coming and the two fire trucks are just parked out on the edge of the road. The fire jumped and landed right in my driveway. Just at that stage my daughter's two friends came out of nowhere, and all they had was a bucket and a hose and I had the firefighting outfit, and it was bombing us up big time, and she is going, 'Sparrow, they've gone.' Then she is going, 'Come in,' and they just drove off. I said, 'Keep going, mate.' Anyway, as soon as the fire went through, they jumped in their car and drove through the fire to go back to help their friends. Then we never saw anybody for three or four days. Rob came up that afternoon, or he sent his son up at about 3 o'clock to see if I was still alive, because they were fighting the fire. I said, 'I'm all good, mate.' And that was it. We never saw a thing.

That fire, when it went from Gobur Road to the top of the Merton gap, which is a triangle of about 3 miles, it had already burnt my section. When that wind was going to change, they should have been there at daylight and bombed that fire up, and they would have had it out and would not have had to listen to that lady there crying about an alpaca and everybody else getting burnt out – and Yarck. When those three trucks drove up there, they should have had that out, and Yarck would not have got burnt. It crossed the Gobur–Middle Creek road; it was in the triangle and I never saw a thing. There was not a truck there, mate – a bloody disgrace. Then three days later, they are all driving up and down the road, they are flashing – 'Oh, there's a stump on fire. Quick!' They are all out with the hoses, squirting anything. And I said – sorry, boys – 'Look at the dickheads. The fire's already been out and gone three days ago. You should've been here.'

Everybody else had the same story. Webbie said they drove in there and as soon as the fire came they pissed off. Down the road Ansel Sauer, the same thing. He was under big strain. It would have been enormous. He sells wood. He had wood from one end of the thing to the other, probably 50 tonnes. A fire truck pulled up alongside Ansel, and it was starting to smoulder. He said, 'Bomb that up,' and they just drove off and left it, and that fire went through Yarck and burnt me mate John Dryden. It burnt all my mates' houses, and everybody that left got burnt. The people that stayed, except for Paul Beadle across the road – and he was destined to, because there was too much rubbish on the road and the phalaris – it just exploded.

The CHAIR: We do need to keep moving. I appreciate it. We do need to keep going. Thank you for the evidence. Thank you, all. I will call up the next panel. We have got Tom Upton, Ross Thomson, Gary Nash, Ian MacIntyre and Tony Murphy.

As you have no doubt heard me say before, all the evidence that you give us today is protected by parliamentary privilege, so you are protected against any action for what you say during this session. You will get a copy of the transcript afterwards, in about a week or so, to check. Three minutes, if we can keep to time, means everyone can get their say, which is what we are trying to achieve here today, and if you can state your name for the Hansard record.

Ross THOMSON: Good afternoon, committee. My name is Ross Thomson, and my wife and I farm 620 hectares at Ruffy, which was totally burnt out on 8 January. We lost 18 kilometres of fencing and just shy of 1900 sheep, which had to be shot. I was fortunate I was able to save the buildings and yards with our own private fire truck, which I would like to say that the government charges me \$534 a year to register, which is a community asset. I think we need to look at private registrations for fire trucks. Our preparation for fire

commences each year in September with spraying herbicide around all the farm buildings, crash grazing and mowing around the farm infrastructure. We continue this right into the early summer to remove as much fuel load as possible. My success in saving the buildings was through active planning and being there. Recently government policy has encouraged people to leave their homes rather than stay and defend. The problem with encouraging people to leave is that the volunteers are spending their time saving houses which have been often unprepared for fire conditions. While volunteers are saving these assets the resources are not available to put the fire out. My assets as a farmer, and I would like you to take this on board, are my grass, crops, livestock and fencing. Fencing at \$15,000 a kilometre is quite expensive. Currently the hierarchy seems to forget this. More time and energy should be invested in encouraging the community to prepare properly for fire so volunteers can put the fire out and not save someone's asset that has run away.

Since the Victorian government interfered in the operation of the CFA, imposing a centralised hierarchy which does not fit the needs of the rural volunteers, membership has fallen and many have lost confidence in the Country Fire Authority. My volunteering with the CFA commenced in 1970, and I am worried about the demise and the use of local knowledge, which most effectively controlled and put fires out in the past. The offices are now filled with career firefighters with little expertise in the terrain and the conditions of the region. A case in point: when speaking with the incident controller at Ruffy a week after the Ruffy fire, he was not aware that Ruffy was in a mobile black spot when I was telling him that communication was a big issue. The knowledge or lack of it was significant to the community. I believe this incident controller was not up to speed and was not up to the job. Historically, regional and local controller knowledge was valued and encouraged. Many farmers and landholders have private tankers and slip-ons. These resources are undervalued by the CFA bureaucracy. We invested heavily in our fire protection with our active management around our assets. We have, as I said, a private fire truck, for which the annual registration is \$536. This truck goes to other local fires in the area and is of considerable use to the region outside our own property. Some registration relief for private tankers should be considered, and with the fire emergency services levy for which we pay over \$10,000 – thank you to the Labor government.

Also, I should say I have long been concerned with the use of cabling down the major roads, and the Longwood–Ruffy fire demonstrated one of these problems. This cabling prevented access to the initial fire, and it was able to escape. Burning almost all the roadside vegetation, it increased at an alarming rate. Management of roadside vegetation is critical in the future and the ability to access it. Government policy has eroded local CFA and centralised it with those with little knowledge of rural and regional Victoria. I would just like to say as a sideline, having been burnt out completely, some low-life bastard pinched 500 litres of diesel two weeks after the fire. Thank you.

Tom UPTON: Good afternoon, committee. My name is Thomas Upton. I am a leading firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria. The views I present today are my own and no reflection of the organisation that employs me. I have lived through Black Saturday as both a CFA volunteer and a resident of Humevale, and this is the worst state I have seen the fire services in Victoria in. I would like to speak on the lack of resources available to Fire Rescue Victoria, the perception of firefighters, the mismanagement of funds by the leadership of the organisation and the lack of investment in its personnel.

Over the summer I was deployed twice – in the role of situation officer to the Walwa fire and as the Colac ICC for the Carlisle River fire. These deployments were for a week at a time. My role was to maintain situational awareness of the entire incident, feeding intelligence into the ICC to guide broader decision-making by all parties in the ICC. This training was undertaken prior to fire service reform when I was a career firefighter with the CFA. FRV has approximately 4000 operational firefighters with many different skills and abilities to assist Victorians in their time of need beyond just being on the back of a fire truck, with many years of wildfire and command and control experience. Given FRV's fleet failures and lack of investment, I note that since July 2020 FRV has spent more money on consultants and lawyers than new fire appliances. I believe during the peak of the fire we were only able to deploy two strike teams of approximately 60 personnel. It is then to this point I raise why there was no concerted effort by Commissioner Gavin Freeman to stand up and deploy firefighters with skills to readily deploy to some of the many ICCs across the state.

I only received seven requests via SMS for the entirety of summer, and in some cases these positions were filled by interstate personnel without being offered to local crews prior. Some of the issues local crews faced when expressing interest was cost, and from one of my commanders I was advised that FRV preferred not to send operations staff on deployments and that if I wanted to go, it would have to be cost neutral – meaning a

spare firefighter had to be available – or it would have to be done in my own time, incurring overtime. I also note I am still yet to be paid for the time that was spent away from my family and friends on extra time. FRV, to my knowledge, has run limited to no ground intelligence courses in the six years of FRV and has run limited to no incident management team training courses. Why, in 2026, can we not supply and staff incident control centres with FRV personnel and reduce the burden placed on volunteers? Why does FRV not have enough working fire trucks to respond? And why are we not utilising crews in incident control centres to contribute to the response and assist Victorians when they need it most? We are facing a morale crisis due to the lack of support from an executive level and a feeling like we are letting our communities down when we have to sit idly by, with no leadership. It is why we have no confidence in the leadership of Gavin Freeman, as backed up by an overwhelming vote of no confidence. Yet the government protects him. Vicky Ward as minister refuses to meet with or acknowledge FRV firefighters, despite repeated invitations from her local fire station in Eltham. This is why I feel like Fire Rescue Victoria and the government have not only let down firefighters but the greater Victorian community as well. Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ian MACINTYRE: Ian Macintyre from the Yarck rural fire brigade. Thank you for the opportunity to address your inquiry. I have the pleasure of addressing this as a Country Fire Authority life member and continuing member of the Yarck Country Fire Authority. I am a long-term operator of family farms in the Yarra Valley and the Upper Goulburn Valley. The views expressed are my own. Firstly, I would like to address the Yarck fire brigade premises, which realistically offer only shopfront facilities. It relies upon makeshift generator facilities. It has no drive-through capacity. Six fire trucks from the New South Wales Rural Fire Service crews were difficult to accommodate. The demographic of the Yarck Fire Brigade is changing. Many of the people in the Yarck village choose to work from home, or even American work hours, and are frequently unavailable for brigade duties. Some of the people are somewhat transient and cannot understand that a fireman's duty is to extinguish the fire rather than concentrate on saving houses. Displaced members of the community may have lost their homes and have no refuge to attend after suffering such severe consequences. Any further brigade development at Yarck should be on Country Fire Authority land, owned in Yarck, near the recreation reserve.

For fire to survive, there must be three basic conditions: fuel, oxygen and ignition. My observation is that in recent years bushfires in this district have been increasing in their intensity. It seems that highway roadsides and rail trails become linear forests, which are acting as conduits for wildfire severity in the district. Rail trails and roadsides where wood collection has been limited act as perfect environments for very hot fires. The Great Victorian Rail Trail runs from Tallarook to Mansfield, with a connection from the old Cathkin railway station to Alexandra. Most of this trail has generated highly explosive and inflammable eucalyptus regrowth. In the main, the rail trail is not interrupted by firebreaks nor is there regular management of the undergrowth. By providing cleared areas where such fires could be retarded, the trails should be available to Country Fire Authority light tankers to traverse. Likewise, there is undergrowth onto the Goulburn Valley Highway, which runs from Seymour to Eildon, which is often parallel to the rail trail. The undergrowth lacks any management, and it is my opinion that fire suppression management should be part of the municipal planning schemes administered by the Country Fire Authority.

Mr Chairman, I have made a longer submission to the inquiry, and I am really talking to points within that. I believe the Longwood fire, which originated along the Hume Highway, may not have happened if the highway verge had been cleared of inflammable material. Highway verge mowing seemed to be poorly executed along highways in different areas. For example, the Melba Highway, which I travel several times a week, is mown far more extensively on the southern end near Coldstream than on the northern end near Yea, where a single mower cut once a year is often made to suffice. I remain highly critical of the Murrindindi shire's mowing program, which started far too late in the season.

The town of Molesworth on the western side has a large reserve adjacent to the caravan park, which has not been managed for years. It is a high fire hazard. Additionally, beside the town of Yea, the Yea River and the anabranch is a large tract of land known as the Yea common, which is only partly mown. Immediately east of the town boundary the area should be grazed or completely mown. The lack of fire abatement in the Yea common could threaten the inhabitants of the Yea caravan park, the Yea hospital, Rosebank Nursing Home and the residents of Miller Street and Whatton Place. Similarly, the Goulburn Valley Highway, the southern end of

the John Cummins Reserve and the adjoining Y Water education centre are both situated within 2-metre-high grass and scrub and therefore extremely vulnerable.

The CHAIR: Ian, if we could just wrap it up.

Ian MACINTYRE: The town of Yea was only saved by a west wind change, which subsequently endangered Alexandra on the second day of the Longwood fires. Each of the four entrances to Yea township are covered by very high long grass, which has not been mown past the verge of the road. The Whittlesea-Yea Road and the rail trail coming from Tallarook to my mind present high-risk fire conduits. All the entrances to Yea need far more attention.

I further mention the environmentally hazardous conditions in the Goulburn Valley Highway roadside. It crosses the Goulburn River flood plain, the area north of the Native Dog Creek road south of Molesworth to the site of the Cathkin railway station, which encompasses the Sheepwash Lagoon and the former primary school plantation of Molesworth. It is littered with 2-metre-high *Phalaris tuberosa* and out-of-control blackberries –

The CHAIR: Ian, we really do need to wrap this up.

Ian MACINTYRE: sometimes hundreds of metres wide. Environmental management is required. The flood plain north of the Home Creek has contained I believe 300-year-old river red gums – I even brought a photo of one – where a koala population I believe has expired. Just hundreds of metres from our home the 300 river red gums – *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* – that quite possibly may have been destroyed in the January fire were there before Captain Cook discovered Australia.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ian. I really do need to finish up and move on to the next person, if I can.

Ian MACINTYRE: Finally, as a long-term and frequent traveller through the mountain ranges, perhaps twice weekly, I remain despondent of fire security and the future of the eucalypt forests. The Blue Range and the Black Range, including Toolangi State Forest, are situated south of Alexandra and Yea. I think it is only a matter of time until these forests ignite and fire threatens water catchments serving the Melbourne metropolitan area. I believe that fire prevention needs a lot more preparation and planning by local government and other governmental agencies. It should not be hastily planned when the fires are approaching. Thank you for listening to my submission.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Ian.

Peter DAVIES: Ladies and gentlemen, I wrote a speech, but I am not going to read it. I am going to speak from the heart.

The CHAIR: Just your name is all we need for the record.

Peter DAVIES: Sorry. Peter Davies.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Peter.

Peter DAVIES: I used to live at Gobur. We were burnt out on 9 January. Before I start I would just like to thank Annabelle Cleeland. I reached out to her. I have never reached out to anybody in my life for help. She has been absolutely outstanding. The reason I reached out is that on the day after the fire I visited the property – the whole place was destroyed to the front gate – I had the great task of ringing my partner, who was in Melbourne, and I rang my sister to get over there to be with her, to tell her the house had been wiped out. I said to her, ‘We have got three choices: we can rent’ – there was no rental in Alexandra – ‘we can buy a small house and build, which will probably take three years’ – at my age we have not got three years – ‘or we can buy’. I ultimately said to her that we really only had one choice, and that was to buy. We bought a house 13 days after the fire wiped the joint out.

I was advised by the conveyancer that we would get stamp duty relief, because in the last two catastrophes stamp duty relief was afforded. I was subsequently advised that that was not going to be the case, so I contacted the State Revenue Office, and they said to me that I could apply for a first home owner grant. The fact that I was ringing him was because the house had burnt down. What was the point of a first home owner grant? This does not just apply to me. I bumped into neighbours that were up the back of me. They are in their 80s. They do

not work. He is decrepit; he can hardly walk. They were forced to buy a house in the new estate down in Alexandra. They were slugged 60,000 bucks for stamp duty, which they can ill afford. Another guy in Yarck – he voluntarily runs the local library. His house burnt to the ground. He was slugged 25,000 bucks to buy a cottage in Yarck.

I think it is absolutely appalling when governments can give \$15 billion to unions and bike gangs and they cannot even afford to help people that have been kicked in the guts. I would like to make a suggestion, if I may, that you could take back to the government: they could ask the unions and the bike gangs if they could be generous enough to donate some money back so that it can be passed on to people that have to pay stamp duty in light of being wiped out. Thanks for your time.

Steve THRELFALL: Thank you for the opportunity. Steven Threlfall. I have got a business in Shepparton – outdoor goods – and in Bendigo. I have been in the firearms industry for around 40 years. I have got family members who – my father started up at the top of Creightons Creek.

What happened was on the Friday the fires were working. A couple of people came in from up near Longwood, and they said, 'Look, we've got to deal with some sheep in the fire-affected area.' I said, 'Okay, how many sheep have you got to deal with?' They said 19,000, and I went, 'Oh, golly, okay.' They had to put some down. I think they bought 500 rounds of ammunition, and I donated 500 rounds of ammunition. As they walked out the door I am thinking, 'I reckon I can get this for nothing.' The next people walked in – 12,000 sheep. The next people walked in – 7000 sheep. The next ones walked in – 9000 sheep. These people had not got right back onto their properties at that point, but they knew they had to deal with something.

With my connections I rang the wholesalers. I got on to approximately 60,000, 70,000 rounds of ammunition, which is all 0.22. It is only a low round for shooting, for the destruction of stock or wildlife at very, very close range. But the problem there was it is all classed as dangerous goods, so it takes a week or 10 days to get to us. One of the companies actually got a guy to run some up from Winchester in Geelong. He actually put it in the car and ran it up to us, which was really good. Then what happened was my daughter runs social media from Darwin, so we went back to the public and on the Friday night we asked for donations of ammunition, because we needed it in the next few days for people to start euthanising their sheep and wildlife. I stayed back the Saturday and Sunday; one of the guys in Bendigo did the same, and we had 220,000 rounds donated over that weekend, which we took in.

Over the whole course of the thing we have accumulated or given out – we have not given it all out; we have still got a lot – just under half a million rounds of ammunition that have been donated through the public and through our wholesalers, the firearms industry, in Australia. So it has been very, very good. As part of the drive we had a lady ring up and go, 'Look, I haven't got a licence, I haven't got anything, but I can feel it. Can you give us your bank account, and I'll send some money to buy some ammunition.' Again we went back to social media. That kicked off another flurry of things. We have raised over \$70,000 through that, through the shop, which we have distributed back into buying some specialised ammunition that was not handed in and also distributed through various different places up around Ruffy and those areas and things.

We had a national response. Every state of Australia I think donated money. Seventy per cent were women, and they all had a story to tell. Everyone who I came across and who I could get in contact with I would ring back. I would stay up until all hours of the night – the first four or five days it was 24 hours running around. A lot of these people had something to say. They were mostly off farms or connected with farms and had been in fires and things like that. So that worked well. Getting the ammunition out was a real problem, because if you go up to the government departments they do not want to touch it. They go, 'You've got to have a licence, you've got to have it locked up and you've got to go through all the process,' so it was pretty much back to the family, friends and people that we knew through the business to get this ammunition out. But that happened; we got it out.

We were being mindful all the time of mental health. While this was all happening, it was all go, go, go, go, go. But you know the weeks following that there will be mental health, and we are dealing in firearms and we are dealing in ammunition. So we are very, very aware of all of that going on. That worked well. Our restrictions then over the next few days – I had a call because we had gone to Facebook with the ammunition. Of course we got red-flagged by Facebook and we also got red-flagged by the government, so we had a few calls to the police, which is fine. We chased it up. I got put on the emergency list, so I had access past some of the

roadblocks and things like that, which was very important to get this stuff out to people. A lot of people did not realise, if they are outside the area and they do not know, that the guy in the fire truck comes home and has got to deal with his sheep or his livestock, or his family has got to deal with it. They do not put the two together. They think the firefighter is over here and the farmer is over there. They are not; they are one. This whole thing about putting down their own stock and things like that is really, really crucial, as in handling it.

The Victorian police were excellent. They had something like 270 safes to go through. This was here, and over in Harcourt we helped out too. The police handled it really, really well. We would have guns coming in the shop that were just basically charcoal with an axle out of a car, and it was the barrel. You could not really identify it by serial number and that type of thing, so the police were really good. They had the registry of their guns there. We could identify the make and model and just marry it up without going into the serial numbers and things. They crossed them off, and they did it in a really, really good way. The police were actually really excellent. But the big let-down with the police and the registry is we are up to four months behind in licence issuing, renewing licences. A lot of farmers, if they have not got a physical licence, cannot go and buy ammunition. A lot of farmers cannot go and buy ammunition because we have got to see an ammunition licence before we can sell to them. So there is a real lag in the firearms registry ability – that is a funding thing more than anything – that puts a roadblock on the farmers being able to access those types of things and bits and pieces. If you have not got a physical licence, we cannot generate a permit to purchase to buy a gun. There are a lot of different things in there. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We really appreciate all the evidence that you have given today.

Hearing suspended.

The CHAIR: We will continue with the last part of the open mic session for the hearings of the Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria.

All the evidence you give is protected by parliamentary privilege. No action can be taken for what you say. You will be given a copy of the draft transcript. Three minutes, and your name for the record, please.

Garry NASH: Okay. Thanks, Chair. My name is Garry Nash. I am a deputy group officer with Wangaratta district 23 and also the president of Victorian volunteer firefighters district 23. I have listened to this today with heartfelt – and I thought we as CFA, when I came across here, were doing a pretty good job. But listening to our colleagues, there is a lot more that we can do to improve things. I am going to suggest to the inquiry that there are a couple of things that you can do very quickly and efficiently, because as I understand it, this is not going to be actioned until 2027.

You have heard today so much about the roadside management and planning. In my experience at Merton with a strike team, the fire was coming up over a valley at us, and I said to some locals, ‘Can we get down this laneway and go and knock the fire out?’ As you have heard from other speakers, that is our job – put the fire out – not necessarily asset protection, which we are good at. We could not get down this laneway to put the fire out. We were detoured around on the main road for kilometres and kilometres. By the time we got there it was rampant; it was gone.

Anyway, back to this – you have to go back to your government, or you as the government, and change the requirements of roadside management. There is a process: we have got to get vegetation management assessment, we have got to get VicRoads approval and municipal approval and Aboriginal cultural leaders have to approve. It is all BS. Get back to the basics. Let us get in there. Let us do township protection and protect our rural properties. It is very, very simple and straightforward. In addition to that, that will give us opportunity with our firefighters. As you have heard, there are not a lot coming in off the land now. They are city or township based and do not have that experience of burning stubbles or whatever. This will give us a chance to train them up in front of a real fire going forward. A highlight of that was the Golden Plains shire issues down there. Also the fire on Sunday 1 February on the Hume Freeway – Victoria’s busiest freeway – was a lineal fuse right into the back of Wodonga, hitting into industrial properties, and the next level was residential. So get your act together and move forward with that.

Another one quickly and then I will hand over to my colleague who is part of our VFBV, who helped us put the submission in. I am talking to you about training. Training is critical to keep our firefighters coming forward, and the barriers across there that government and legislation put in – and I will be about half a minute – are

amazing. I can show you a letter that hit my desk on 21 April going to our local member about the cost and the barriers for people. All they want to do is volunteer and be part of a community and contribute. For this particular lady, it has cost her at this stage close to \$1000-odd in travel time and time off work to try and get there just to do the general firefighting process. So really we can change and improve so many things so that we do not have this catastrophic situation going forward. But you have got to listen to us. I think you suffer from hubris, and it is time to act.

I will hand across for a bit more on climate change as to the impact, and that is highlighted in your terms of reference.

The CHAIR: Yes. We are going to go here.

Garry NASH: That way? Okay.

Neil BEER: My name is Neil Beer. My family own two properties just outside Yea. I have been a CFA member for 48 years. During the 2009 Black Saturday fires, I was appointed divisional commander for the Yea, Glenburn, Strath Creek and Murrindindi areas. Going to our current fire, the first two days our family and adjoining farmers fought fires with our private units around the Yea area because there were not sufficient tankers available to handle our area. On one particular day I was returning from our Ghin Ghin property, which was heading towards the Highlands, which is in fact just west of the Goulburn River. At approximately 1900 hours on 11 January, I was returning from checking the cattle at Ghin Ghin when I was confronted by a number of vehicles and their occupants who had been stopped by police at the traffic management point, which I will refer to as TMP in the future. There were several bystanders standing around. They were arguing with the police about not being allowed to progress any further. They included the general public, stock agents and property owners, and shortly afterwards Stephen Keating, who is the AFCO at district 12 in Seymour, the officer in charge. Stephen queried in regard to the TMP if it was a category A or B. There was some confusion initially as to the interpretation given by the police officer. Stephen then apologised when the matter was clarified. I will stress that it was a very, very heated situation at the time. It became so heated that in fact two additional police vehicles turned up, thinking obviously that the matter was going to get pretty serious.

The initial four police who were at the TMP, from memory, were from St Kilda. They were young officers. I hold nothing against them at all, but you would have to put it down to being not experienced in rural situations. I distinctly remember saying to Andrew Embling, who is a stock agent in Alexandra, that things were getting extremely agitated and that we had better look at the matter a little bit more seriously. I was made aware that Greg Murphy, whose name was mentioned earlier in regard to the royal commission, was the incident controller at Alexandra. Someone did say he was deputy, but one or the other. I said, 'Look, I'll give him a call and see what we can sort out,' suggesting it should be considered to allow transporters through if it was safe to do so and they were accompanied by a CFA escort. My request was replied to by text from Greg Murphy at 806 hours on the 12 January – it went to message bank initially – advising the message was passed on to the day shift incident control centre and had also been pushed to state level. As I walked away from the group at the TMP, I met local member Cindy McLeish, who was standing in the centre of the median strip with her husband. I said to her, 'Things are getting pretty heated, and I had better sort things out here.'

I have a longstanding relationship with Libby Murphy, who is currently assistant police commissioner. I have worked with her at various incidents over the years, I would estimate probably somewhere near 25 years or more. She said, 'Look, I'll make a phone call to police command,' which she did. Then at 1945 hours I received a voicemail from Superintendent Wayne Cheeseman, who was a state commander, advising that Libby had asked him to give me a call, leaving his phone number and asking that I return his call so we could try to sort out what the issue was. I phoned Superintendent Cheeseman and gave him a full run-down of the situation and what had occurred. He advised me his shift at 22 hours would be completed and that he would make further inquiries and get back to me. At 2204 hours I received a phone call from Superintendent Cheeseman advising that Felicity Bell, the acting inspector, state police command on night shift would be working until 0600 hours and that he had versed her on the situation. At 2214 hours I received a text message from Andrew Embling advising police command – I beg your pardon, I texted Andrew Embling and advised him that police command would be looking at authorising trucks to be allowed through the TMP at Yea. On Monday, which was going into 12 January 2026, at 327 hours I received a text message from Felicity Bell, saying: I have spoken to the police at the Benalla IPOC, who have assured me that the appropriate comms with police on traffic management points will allow for escorted cattle trucks and hay trucks to be allowed into the

Yea and Alexandra areas. The next morning when I arrived there, the night shift had taken over and were completely lost as to the situation. Fortunately Andrew Walker, who is a sergeant of police at Alexandra, had arrived on scene. I explained to him the situation and what had occurred during the night.

The CHAIR: Neil, if we could try and wrap it up. If there is something you want to give us, we can take a written document.

Neil BEER: Yes, I will do that. Cutting it short, it was mentioned earlier in regard to local people knowing their local area. It was through this that I achieved the situation that I was appointed through the CFA in control of the TMP. We allowed then for cattle trucks, emergency and other important vehicles, food transporters and medical supplies to go through. Prior to this virtually everyone was being stopped. It was completely out of control. I had made some suggestions to the CMP, which I know have gone to state level. The matters for consideration are that there should be a distribution of wristbands to local residents at the earliest practical time. The location of the TMP we found was quite sufficient. There was a need for the EMLO, which is emergency management liaison officer, to become involved at traffic management points so that in turn the incident control centre knew exactly what was appearing. I stress again that in situations that did occur, local knowledge is most absolutely important.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Shannon.

Shannon ROACH: Thank you. My name is Shannon Roach. I am the Captain of the Terip Terip fire brigade and the Deputy Group Officer in the Alexandra group of brigades. The Terip Terip fire brigade did not hesitate. We protected our community, saved lives and supported each other through three weeks on the fireground without stopping, often with very little. Some things worked. Our brigade worked, our community worked – high evacuation rates, strong communication. District and group support helped when it counted, but there were critical gaps. We were expecting strike teams that never came. Terip was left to defend the mountain. CFA must be prepared to get support to communities like ours when it is needed, not after the fact. Training is failing us. Members are stepping into roles they are not qualified for because courses are not available, and access is getting harder. We need to fix the training model and increase availability. Communication did not work. Radios failed. Telstra outages left us exposed, and we are already a black spot on a good day. We need investment in reliable redundant communication. There is a disconnect between the ICC and the fireground. We relied on DCC and personal contacts to get things done. We must embed local knowledge in the ICC and strengthen field communication. We lost a member of our community, Max. At that location basic road barriers could have prevented a vehicle leaving the road. This comes back to underfunded local government. We need properly funded councils to address high-risk infrastructure. Roads were a major issue. High fuel loads and fallen trees meant we were escorting cattle trucks, cutting trees as they fell in front of us and bringing fodder in, all done by volunteers. We must create rapid road clearance teams, improve access to plant and address fuel loads before the fire season.

DEECA crews were tied to shift times, leaving mid-incident. Fires do not follow shifts. We need to align resourcing with fire behaviour. CFA crews were pulled to protect the Alexandra township. We must use FRV for asset protection and keep CFA on bushfire. That is what we do. I love my new-to-us 23-year-old fire truck. It saved our lives. But our station is not fit for purpose. We ate our only proper meal in three weeks sitting on the concrete engine bay floor. We need investment in facilities that reflects what is being asked of our volunteers. And as we rebuild, we are facing the cost of permits just to put our lives back together. After losing homes people should not be paying to rebuild what was taken from them. We must have waived or subsidised rebuilding permit costs for fire-affected residents.

Burnt properties, including my own, are still sitting there waiting for clean-up. Underinsured, we are left looking at what is left of our homes every day. We need more resourcing for the clean-up program and less administrative burden on the fire-affected residents. And after all of this – three weeks on the fire truck, losing everything but my car and my dogs – we come back to the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund tax. After everything we have been through, that is incredibly hard to take.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you all for participating in today's proceedings. With that, the hearing is closed.

Committee adjourned.