



Legislative Council
Environment and
Planning Committee

The 2026 summer fires across Victoria

Inquiry

July 2026

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About the Committee

Functions

The functions of the Environment and Planning Committee are to inquire into and report on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with the arts, environment and planning the use, development and protection of land.

The Environment and Planning Committee may inquire into, hold public hearings, consider and report on any Bills or draft Bills referred by the Legislative Council, annual reports, estimates of expenditure or other documents laid before the Legislative Council in accordance with an Act, provided these are relevant to its functions.

Government Departments allocated for oversight:

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- Department of Premier and Cabinet.

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Terms of reference

Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

On 4 February 2026, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Environment and Planning Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 1 June 2026, on the 2026 summer fires across Victoria, including but not limited to —

- (1) the preparation and planning by government, emergency services agencies and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides;
- (2) the causes and circumstances of the bushfires, including climate change and the adequacy of the Government's climate policies and actions, forecasts, warnings and public education on bushfire threats;
- (3) funding, equipment and appliances for the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, and recruitment and retention of CFA volunteers;
- (4) the emergency responses to control and contain the fires, including adequacy of resources and communications;
- (5) resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after the fires;
- (6) the impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery;
- (7) the impact on the environment, including native wildlife, and any measures to better protect native forests, including technology for early detection and firefighting in remote locations;
- (8) the impacts of climate change on the natural environment, which has resulted in more frequent and intense bushfires occurring in Victoria;
- (9) the prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season;
- (10) the interjurisdictional support into and out of Victoria leading into and during the fire season, including interstate and international deployments, Commonwealth support and relief efforts; and
- (11) lessons from and progress on the implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries, reports and Royal Commissions.

On 5 March 2026, the Legislative Council resolved to extend the reporting date to 28 July 2026.

Chair's foreword

The 2026 summer fires had a devastating impact on communities across Victoria.

More than 440,000 hectares of land were burnt – an area larger than that affected by the Black Saturday fires of 2009. 451 homes were destroyed, a further 1,110 outbuildings lost, and businesses were severely affected. It is estimated that more than 45,000 livestock deaths were recorded, as well as an incalculable loss of wildlife. Tragically, one individual, Maxwell Hobson, lost his life. I extend my condolences to his family.

Victoria entered the 2026 fire season with a clear understanding of the heightened risks in conditions. Catastrophic conditions on 9 January 2026 saw the creation or major expansion of numerous fires. Fire agencies and communities were overall well-prepared, and through a combination of the tireless work of agencies, firefighters and communities, the response was strong and saved many lives.

Considering the conditions, it is remarkable that we did not see mass fatalities as was seen in 2009.

This is an achievement on which credit can rightly be given to Victoria's dedicated firefighters, including career full-time firefighters, volunteers and private landholders, and the incident control teams which responded to protect Victorians.

Importantly, it is also a reflection on the lessons learnt from the Black Saturday fires and major fire events after. This includes technological improvements including the VicEmergency app and other measures. In particular, it shows the importance of 'leave early' messaging.

Nevertheless, the Committee observed many patterns of concern from communities, agencies and other stakeholders. The resilience of critical infrastructure, most particularly telecommunications, was a recurring theme of evidence, as was a greater need for the utilisation of local knowledge in incident response centres.

These and other important areas are discussed within in this report and form a grounding from which further examination could effectively build from.

This Report sits within and should be read within the context of other reviews in the aftermath of the fires. At the time of this Inquiry, fire agencies have also been conducting their own agency after reviews, as is customary after such a large fire event.

In addition, the Minister for Emergency Services has instructed the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to conduct a full review into the fires. That review is scheduled to take place after the tabling of this report, in order for the IGEM to be able to draw from the evidence given to this Committee, most particularly from the large base of evidence outlining the perspectives of regional communities in the immediate months after the fires.

The Committee has worked to ensure that these perspectives permeate through this report. The transcripts of evidence from the regional hearings powerfully articulate the energy, dedication and resilience of Victorians who have been through circumstances which are at once both unimaginable and all too common.

The Committee conducted public hearings in Colac, Quantong, Longwood, Harcourt, Melbourne, and online for north-east Victoria. Open mic sessions were held whereby members of the public were afforded the opportunity to speak on the record. Site visits were conducted at firegrounds in Carlisle River and Natimuk, and listening posts were held in Ruffy and Fawcett, two communities affected by the Longwood fire.

With a constrained timeline, this Inquiry was not in a position to draw upon an expansive base of technical evidence. Rather, this report's strength lies in the vast and detailed evidence from communities about the preparation and response to the fires, as well as time-in-place evidence about relief and recovery efforts, the latter of which remain ongoing.

Having taken up the role as Chair of this Committee in the later stages of this Inquiry, I wish to acknowledge each one of the Committee members for the way in which they worked collegially to ensure that the voices of regional communities were heard.

I would like to particularly acknowledge and thank the previous Chair Ryan Batchelor MLC for his diligent stewardship of this Inquiry throughout its process of gathering submissions and conducting hearings.

There is a power of work that goes into any Committee inquiry, and we are indebted to the tireless efforts of our Committee Manager Kieran Crowe and his team, including Te Kooanga Awatere, Joshua Pedersen and Monique Riordan-Hill. Gratitude of the Committee also goes to the Parliament's Hansard and Broadcast teams who facilitated our work.

The relative success of the response to the 2026 summer fires in terms of loss of life, should not permit anyone to underestimate the severe and widespread impacts that these fires both had and continue to have on many communities.

We know that it is a question of when, not if, we will experience our next bushfire disaster. I trust that this Report will shape the ongoing improvement of systems so that we as a state are better prepared for when the next critical bushfire event arrives.



Michael Galea MLC
Chair, Environment and Planning Standing Committee

Findings and recommendations

1 About the Inquiry and engagement with fire affected communities

FINDING 1: The Committee had significantly less time to conduct its Inquiry as compared to other similar reviews. This inhibited the breadth and depth of evidence that could be collected and analysed and placed some strain on councils, communities and agencies to meet the inquiry timelines.

3

2 Victoria's emergency response framework

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government instruct the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to undertake an independent review of Victoria's emergency management governance arrangements, examining the roles and relationships of Emergency Management Victoria, the Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, with the objective of improving accountability, reducing complexity and strengthening frontline operational leadership and how it aligns with the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission.

28

3 Preparedness settings

FINDING 2: Climate change is a key contributor to bushfire conditions and is contributing to the frequency and intensity of bushfires in the state.

43

FINDING 3: Victoria entered the 2025–26 fire season with clear and timely intelligence of elevated bushfire risk, providing a basis for bringing preparedness activity forward.

45

FINDING 4: Victoria's emergency management sector completed a formal preparedness program before the 2025–26 fire season.

47

FINDING 5: The Country Fire Authority's readiness attestation to Emergency Management Victoria was qualified, but the content of those qualifications and the measures taken in response were not disclosed to the Committee.

47

RECOMMENDATION 2: That Emergency Management Victoria publish annual regional readiness statements before each fire season, addressing workforce, fleet, water supply, communications, local capability and relief arrangements to better understand and respond to each region's needs.

47

FINDING 6: The number of Country Fire Authority operational volunteers has declined by 26% over the past decade. While there is continued strong community interest in joining the Country Fire Authority, including from young people, challenges remain in volunteer retention.

52

FINDING 7: The Committee recognises that employers, particularly in regional communities, play a crucial role in supporting emergency service volunteers by enabling employees to participate in bushfire response and recovery activities.

52

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government work with the Country Fire Authority to develop and fund a volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention strategy. 52

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Emergency Management Commissioner commission an external review of volunteering at the Country Fire Authority to understand the drivers of declining volunteer numbers and to identify process and cultural improvements at the Country Fire Authority to help increase volunteer recruitment and retention.

52

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government consider expanding Country Fire Authority volunteer recruitment by establishing specialist firefighting teams similar to other states, to attract metropolitan volunteers, including metropolitan residents with appropriate outdoor skills, thereby increasing Victoria's bushfire response capability.

52

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government that it ensure workplace settings are conducive to supporting volunteering, including consideration of inclusion of employment protection of volunteers in the National Employment Standards.

53

FINDING 8: The Country Fire Authority delivered training at scale before the season, but course access, duration, location and digital systems can impede the recruitment, qualification and progression of some volunteers.

56

FINDING 9: Delays in field leadership training affected progression to Level 2 and Level 3 incident controller pathways.

56

FINDING 10: The Country Fire Authority continues to attract volunteer interest, but prospective volunteers can be lost through slow induction, inaccessible training and administrative burden.

56

FINDING 11: Access to field leadership training is precarious in some districts. If training courses are cancelled, a rescheduled opportunity is not guaranteed, which may block progression into strike team and incident management roles.

56

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Country Fire Authority liaise with volunteer brigades to improve access to training opportunities. This should include consultation on duration, location and mode of training.

56

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Victorian Government ask the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to review the ways in which local knowledge can be better integrated into incident management teams, including Incident Control Centres, as part of its forthcoming review.

56

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government engage the Fire Services Implementation Monitor to evaluate the secondment arrangements and advise how they could be strengthened within the current framework.

56

FINDING 12: 802 single cab tankers remain in the Country Fire Authority fleet and it is estimated that their phase out and replacement won't be completed until 2036. In comparison, South Australia has already phased out single cab tankers

60

FINDING 13: Approximately 650 CFA tankers continue to carry firefighters in exposed rear seating. Although those vehicles remain subject to inspection, it is a widely held view that their design provides less protection to volunteers and shared situational awareness for volunteers and that they should not be required to respond to major bushfires in such appliances.

60

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government commit to the accelerated replacement of all CFA single-cab frontline firefighting tankers and fund a fleet renewal program that removes these vehicles from operational service within five years.

60

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Country Fire Authority establish a public database to monitor fleet status, including vehicle class, age and operability, to maintain volunteer confidence in local brigades.

60

FINDING 14: Forest Fire Management Victoria's accelerated fleet-remediation program identified and controlled significant safety risks, but that the emergence of fleet-wide defects shortly before summer and the continuation of Unimog truck repairs into March 2026 meant that part of its fleet was not available during the summer fires of January 2026.

61

FINDING 15: Private firefighting units, applicable machinery and local knowledge form an important part of firefighting capability in many rural districts, but their identification, communication and integration remain dependent on local arrangements rather than a consistent statewide framework.

62

FINDING 16: Local knowledge exists before a fire but is not always available in a form that incoming crews and commanders can use.

62

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria develop a policy framework for incorporating local knowledge into their preparation and response capabilities. This should include identification and incorporation of private units and applicable machinery, similar to agreements that exist in South Australia.

63

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Victorian Government consider ways in which it can support private landholders to operate and maintain private firefighting units, including farm firefighting units, water tanks, pumps, communications equipment and personal protective equipment, where the owner can demonstrate it is fit for use.

63

RECOMMENDATION 14: That incident management arrangements include local knowledge liaison roles to support incoming strike teams and out-of-area commanders.

63

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government provide ongoing funding for strategically located bulk water tankers and continue to invest in innovative firefighting appliances, including ultra-heavy tankers, to improve water supply, operational flexibility and firefighting capability across the state.

65

FINDING 17: Emergency management agencies materially strengthened bulk water capability before the 2025–26 fire season, but evidence from hearings and submissions identified continuing preparedness issues in local water availability, static water infrastructure, reticulated supply resilience, backup power, coupling compatibility and responsibility for accessible firefighting water points.

68

RECOMMENDATION 16: That:

- emergency response agencies work together to improve and standardise access to bulk water capacity across the state including connector compatibility
- all firefighting appliances be fitted with standard adapter kits for common private, agricultural and water industry fittings.
- emergency response agencies, sign and test static water points before each season, including known community and private tanks where the owners consent.

68

FINDING 18: Victoria met its risk-based target for statewide bushfire risk ahead of the 2025–26 fire season.

69

FINDING 19: As in previous years, many areas of the state carried very high to extreme fuel loads into the 2025–26 summer.

69

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government ensure fire agencies undertake an urgent science- based appraisal of areas with extreme fuel risk prior to funding and implementing works ahead of the next summer.

69

FINDING 20: Planned burning can reduce fire intensity, alter spread and improve opportunities for suppression, but its contribution depends on the treatment's purpose, location, age and the conditions under which a later fire burns.

74

FINDING 21: The seasonal window for planned burns during cooler months is narrowing due to climate change, making them harder to be delivered as planned.

74

FINDING 22: The current risk-reduction model is preferable to a hectare target model, which would incentivise quotas over risk-reduction without a demonstrated reduction in risk to life or property.

74

FINDING 23: Roadside vegetation management is inconsistently delivered and constrained by funding, inflexible state programs and unclear accountability, resulting in hazardous fuel loads along key transport corridors that can impede evacuation and firefighting efforts.

78

FINDING 24: Roadside fuel and access risks can change throughout the season, with councils and brigades having limited capacity to reprioritise their roadside management programs.

78

FINDING 25: Roadside reserves can contain important ecological values which may be impacted by fuel reduction measures.

78

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Department of Transport and Planning create an in-season escalation process for councils and brigades to request urgent roadside works following substantial rain and grass regrowth events that increase fire risk or block access.

78

RECOMMENDATION 19: The Victorian Government amend legislation to provide the Country Fire Authority with clearer authority to enforce roadside vegetation management, investigate bushfire hazard complaints, issue and enforce fuel management notices and require remediation by public land managers, and particularly around critical infrastructure.

78

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Victorian Government, including through existing arrangements, ensure that roadside vegetation management can demonstrate clear risk reduction for community infrastructure and emergency response, while limiting ecological harm.

78

FINDING 26: Direct, localised engagement through measures such as the Country Fire Authority's Get Fire Ready program improves community preparedness. 537 brigades took part ahead of the 2025–26 fire season, a significant increase on previous years; however, coverage of the program remains inconsistent.

84

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Victorian Government increase support for locally delivered, face-to-face bushfire preparedness initiatives. This should prioritise strengthening brigade capacity to deliver consistent engagement across high-risk areas.

84

RECOMMENDATION 22: That Country Fire Authority and Emergency Management Victoria explore ways to measure community campaign outcomes, including fire plans created, property works undertaken and VicEmergency app uptake, to better quantify outreach effectiveness.

84

FINDING 27: There are gaps in public knowledge of bushfire risks and the appropriate actions to take in response to some agency messaging.

85

FINDING 28: Gaps in warning literacy and preparedness understanding limit the effectiveness of pre-season messaging and reliance on emergency warnings.

86

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Victorian Government improve messaging on bushfire risks and the appropriate actions to take in preparation.

86

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Victorian Government fund enhanced community education programs to build warning literacy and independent decision-making through more practical, scenario-based messaging. This should include greater use of simple, accessible communication tools, including digital and non-digital formats.

86

FINDING 29: Some people misunderstood the role and safety of Bushfire Places of Last Resort, creating a risk of complacency and inadequate fire planning.

88

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Victorian Government provide resources to educate communities on the role and function of bushfire places of last resort.

89

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Victorian Government consider how to enhance messaging with specific advice on how to make properties less fire-prone, what to do with extremely fast-moving fires and appropriate actions on what to do if it is too late to leave.

89

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Victorian Government prioritise the delivery of reliable power supply in bushfire-prone communities, and advocate to the Commonwealth Government to ensure that the Australian Energy Regulator assessment framework also considers social resilience, emergency management and regional equity.

91

FINDING 30: The importance of access to telecommunications during a bushfire cannot be understated, particularly as it relates to accessing timely and critical safety messages for fire responders and the general community alike.

93

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for stronger telecommunications resilience in disaster-prone areas.

93

FINDING 31: Emerging technologies can enhance the reach and effectiveness of early fire detection and suppression, but are not a substitute for existing methods.

96

RECOMMENDATION 29: That the Victorian Government actively consider how emerging fire detection technologies, including AI-enabled cameras and remotely piloted aircraft systems, can augment Victoria's existing bushfire preparedness measures.

97

4 An overview of the 2026 summer fires and their impacts

FINDING 32: The 2026 summer fires burnt 440,000 ha of land. This is a larger area than the Black Saturday fires of 2009.

109

FINDING 33: The 2026 summer fires had significant and enduring mental health impacts on affected communities, with individuals experiencing trauma, grief and prolonged stress that extended beyond the immediate emergency period.

113

RECOMMENDATION 30: That the Victorian Government provide sustained, long-term funding for accessible mental health and wellbeing services in bushfire-affected communities, recognising that recovery extends well beyond the immediate emergency response.

113

FINDING 34: The 2026 summer fires resulted destruction of approximately 1,590 structures across the state, including:

- 451 homes destroyed, and 29 homes damaged
- 1,110 outbuildings damaged or destroyed.

115

FINDING 35: The loss of housing and assets as a result of the 2026 summer fires has had a significant social, emotional and economic impact on fire affected communities. **115**

FINDING 36: The 2026 summer fires caused extensive disruption to Victorian agricultural and farming businesses, with significant losses to crops, livestock, fodder and infrastructure, as well as damage to productive land that will affect businesses over multiple seasons. **120**

RECOMMENDATION 31: That the Victorian Government consider ways in which local veterinarians and registered firearms owners can access impacted properties to support farmers and assist with livestock euthanasia. **120**

FINDING 37: The 2026 summer fires caused widespread economic disruption to Victorian businesses, with significant losses driven by asset destruction, supply chain interruptions and sharp declines in visitation, even in areas not directly affected by fire. **122**

FINDING 38: The 2026 fires caused widespread disruption to Victoria's transport network, with extensive road closures, including major highways, in fire affected regions. This disrupted freight, agriculture and essential services, while restricting access for residents and delaying recovery efforts. **122**

FINDING 39: The 2026 summer fires caused significant disruption to power, communications and water infrastructure, resulting in widespread power, communications and water outages at a number of locations. **124**

FINDING 40: The 2026 summer fires caused extensive environmental damage across public and private land, including a significant loss of biodiversity, destruction of critical habitats, and closure of parks and recreational infrastructure. **127**

FINDING 41: The 2026 fires had severe effects on wildlife, including injury, death and habitat loss. Wildlife impacts were particularly severe in the National and State parks that were affected by the Otways and Harcourt fires. **129**

5 The response to the 2026 summer fires

FINDING 42: The shift toward ‘leave early’ bushfire messaging, supported by sustained community education campaigns, has improved public safety outcomes since their widespread adoption in the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday fires. This messaging contributed to a marked reduction in fatalities in the 2026 summer fires event, compared to equivalent fire events including the 2009 Black Saturday fires and those before.

133

FINDING 43: The ‘leave early’ approach has trade-offs including an increase in undefended homes and businesses and ‘leave early’ burnout.

133

RECOMMENDATION 32: That the Victorian Government, in conjunction with fire response agencies continue to promote the ‘leave early’ message in fire preparedness awareness and education programs. Programs should incorporate awareness of community fatigue, the mental toll of staying and defending, and issues surrounding property loss when communicating the primacy of public safety.

133

FINDING 44: The VicEmergency app functioned highly effectively as a mass communication platform during the 2026 summer fires, enabling the rapid dissemination of a record number of warnings with strong community uptake. Widespread use and trust in the VicEmergency app contributed to strong public awareness and is likely to have supported the low fatality outcomes.

136

FINDING 45: While the VicEmergency app is a critical communication tool, inconsistencies in warnings, usability challenges, and unclear or conflicting information reduced its effectiveness and contributed to community confusion in some instances during the fires. These issues highlight the need for improved message clarity, better integration of local knowledge, enhanced user education, and system upgrades to ensure the app supports informed and timely decision-making under emergency conditions.

136

FINDING 46: The widespread use and reliance on the VicEmergency app by the Victorian community underscores the importance of robust telecommunications resilience in disaster-prone areas of the state.

136

RECOMMENDATION 33: That Emergency Management Victoria prioritise updates to enhance the VicEmergency app for useability and accessibility, addresses issues raised by stakeholders in this Inquiry, including:

- Enhancements to the quality of messaging, usability, features and accessibility.
- Consultation with the public to ensure that the messaging is comprehensible and provides information relevant to make informed decisions.
- Continued resourcing for education on interpreting warnings and information. **136**

FINDING 47: There were challenges in operational communications during the response to the Longwood, Natimuk and Harcourt fires. This included failure in communications infrastructure due to fire damage, channel congestion and unclear protocols. Contingency communications protocols were unreliable or unclear. **141**

RECOMMENDATION 34: That the Inspector-General for Emergency Management review the suitability and resilience of the Country Fire Authority's radio communications to ensure reliability in major fires, compatibility with other fire services radios and consider options for the installation in privately owned firefighting appliances. **141**

FINDING 48: A number of mobile phone towers in fire affected areas lost power and had insufficient backup capacity through generators or batteries. This exacerbated dangers at critical moments. **144**

FINDING 49: Emergency warning information is communicated through multiple different methods, and community awareness about these different channels can vary significantly. Such awareness is very important for methods that do not rely on power and communications infrastructure being operational. **144**

FINDING 50: Power and communications failures in some firegrounds prevented fire affected communities from accessing timely emergency information from the VicEmergency app. **144**

FINDING 51: Electronic platforms such as the VicEmergency app become inaccessible when power and communications infrastructure are damaged in emergencies such as the 2026 summer fires. A heavy reliance on this platform is a vulnerability as it creates a single point of failure in large emergencies. **145**

RECOMMENDATION 35: That the Victorian Government conduct an education campaign in communities with high fire risk around what emergency warning and information sources are available in emergency situations where power and communications are lost.

145

FINDING 52: The loss of mains water supply at Natimuk reduced the ability of residents and firefighters to defend properties and respond effectively to fire threats.

147

FINDING 53: The Country Fire Authority's Elevated Seasonal Response Initiative provided bulk water capacity to areas that were affected by the 2026 summer fires. These additional water resources helped in the suppression of the fires at a number of areas.

147

RECOMMENDATION 36: That the Victorian Government continue to provide funding to the CFA for the Elevated Seasonal Response Initiative as required. This should enable the initiative to be activated on years of elevated fire risk.

147

FINDING 54: The Victorian Government is working with the Commonwealth Government to explore opportunities to 'harden' telecommunications infrastructure to improve resilience during emergencies, address coverage gaps in regional areas and explore alternative network solutions such as low earth orbit satellite internet (Starlink) and alternative forms of backup power.

150

RECOMMENDATION 37: That the Victorian Government, as a matter of priority, work with telecommunications providers, energy distribution providers, and the Commonwealth Government to develop a communications network disaster resilience plan that improves resilience. This should include:

- identification of communications resilience challenges in disaster prone areas
- investigation of measures which can improve resilience, including but not limited to batteries, diesel generators and, where available, generators plumbed into the reticulated gas network
- an expanded rollout of satellite technologies for firefighting purposes
- consideration of authorising accredited fire management personnel to refuel generators for mobile phone towers and other relevant infrastructure during an emergency.

150

RECOMMENDATION 38: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for telecommunications to be declared an essential service.

151

RECOMMENDATION 39: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to implement mandatory resilience standards for mobile phone towers in disaster prone areas, to ensure continued operation without intervention is achievable for a minimum period of 48 hours without mains power.

151

FINDING 55: Strategically located water tanks assist in protecting assets during major fire events, particularly where mains water supplies fail or natural water sources are limited.

152

RECOMMENDATION 40: That the Victorian Government establish a dedicated rural firefighting water infrastructure fund to support the installation, upgrade and maintenance of strategic water tanks and other water storage assets in high bushfire-risk areas. The program should:

- provide funding to CFA brigades and communities for large-capacity firefighting water tanks and associated infrastructure
- prioritise areas vulnerable to mains water failures, drought and limited natural water availability
- support the connection of water tanks to existing water supply networks where feasible to enable automatic refilling
- facilitate agreements with private landholders for the use of dams and tanks during emergencies
- ensure all firefighting water sources are appropriately mapped, signposted and incorporated into operational systems accessible to responding agencies.

152

FINDING 56: Fire crews across the state showed tremendous skill and dedication in tackling fires in unprecedentedly difficult conditions.

156

FINDING 57: There were some instances where ground crews had insufficient resourcing or were unable to effectively respond to rapidly escalating fire conditions.

156

FINDING 58: There were significant aerial support resources prepared and deployed in during the response to the 2026 summer fires. This support played a significant role in the suppression of a number of fires. However, the extreme weather conditions hampered aerial availability at crucial times, and concerns were raised about the coordination and availability of aerial support in some areas.

157

FINDING 59: The Committee notes the immense gratitude of the Victorian people for the assistance rendered in the 2026 summer fires by the 1,458 firefighters from every other Australian state and territory, New Zealand and Canada.

159

RECOMMENDATION 41: That the Inspector-General for Emergency Management review the conditions for visiting interstate and international support crews hosted at regional air base stations during the fire season.

159

FINDING 60: A significant proportion of Fire Rescue Victoria's fleet is aged past its target replacement age of 15 years. There have been mechanical failures during responses to emergencies. The age profile and extent of the Fire Rescue Victoria fleet limits its reliability and operational capability.

161

RECOMMENDATION 42: That the Victorian Government establish and fund an annually appropriated rolling fleet replacement program for Fire Rescue Victoria, with replacement benchmarks, that is independently reported to Parliament.

161

RECOMMENDATION 43: That the Victorian Government provide an immediate funding uplift to replace the most degraded Fire Rescue Victoria appliances.

161

FINDING 61: A significant proportion of the Country Fire Authority's fleet is aged past its recommended service life. The current age profile of the Country Fire Authority fleet limits its reliability and operational capability.

162

RECOMMENDATION 44: That the Victorian Government establish and fund an annually preproperated rolling fleet replacement program for the Country Fire Authority, with replacement benchmarks, that is independently reported to Parliament. 162

RECOMMENDATION 45: That the Victorian Government provide an immediate funding uplift to replace the most degraded County Fire Authority appliances.

162

FINDING 62: The Country Fire Authority has a shortage of trained staff, especially experienced incident controllers. Incident control staff with local knowledge can offer valuable insights about local conditions. Barriers to Country Fire Authority Volunteers becoming trained incident controllers include a lack of access to training at times and locations suitable for volunteers.

164

FINDING 63: The Country Fire Authority has long-term vacancy and non-relief issues with a lack of qualified and experienced Command personnel which impacted response.

164

FINDING 64: Where planned burning was carried out in the area of some of the fires, it was effective in reducing fire intensity and supporting containment efforts. However, inconsistent delivery of planned burns has limited these benefits in some areas.

166

FINDING 65: During the 2026 summer fires inconsistent roadside vegetation management increased bushfire risk and made fires harder to control. There is a lack of clarity around the responsibility for roadside vegetation management.

168

RECOMMENDATION 46: That the Victorian Government improve management of roadside vegetation to reduce fire risk and limit ecological harm. This should include:

- clearly assigned responsibility for roadside vegetation on all public roads and transport corridors, including relevant agencies such as VicRoads, V/Line, DEECA and local councils
- increased adaptability of maintenance schedules to enable risk-based targeting of roadsides in bushfire-prone areas ahead of and during fire seasons
- minimum maintenance standards
- improved reporting for all relevant agencies to allow for public transparency on roadside vegetation management standards
- consideration of permitting landholders to undertake approved fuel reduction activities on nearby roadsides, where appropriate.

168

RECOMMENDATION 47: That the Inspector-General of Emergency Management review of wire rope safety barriers and other roadside safety infrastructure to ensure they do not impede bushfire prevention, response or recovery activities.

169

6 Relief and recovery

FINDING 66: There was a lack of community understanding of the role of emergency relief centres and the support services they provide. This includes a lack of understanding of the difference between places of last resort and community relief centres.

177

FINDING 67: Councils hold a key role in emergency management planning and providing immediate relief services to residents during fire events. The responsibilities of this role have grown in response to the severity and frequency of fire events. However, councils are struggling to respond effectively and efficiently due to constrained funding and resources.

177

FINDING 68: Smaller rural and regional councils who were impacted by the fires were expected by their communities to provide a high level of emergency relief support, for which expenditure was reimbursed through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

178

RECOMMENDATION 48: That the Victorian Government work with councils to facilitate stronger understanding of the funding arrangements for the establishment and operation of emergency relief centres. This should include an evaluation of certain upfront relief costs to assist smaller councils with cash flow concerns.

178

FINDING 69: Community hubs are a demonstration of community resilience and effective place-based community leadership. Volunteers worked together to provide vital services to communities.

180

FINDING 70: There was little evidence of widespread use of reimbursement model where councils apply to Emergency Management Victoria to recoup costs accrued through emergency management activities.

180

RECOMMENDATION 49: That the Victorian Government investigate ways it can more adequately support a community-enabled response. This could include a funding mechanism that can be mobilised quickly to provide upfront funding to community hubs for essential provisions, rather than relying entirely on reimbursement models that require community hubs to have funding available to pay upfront costs.

180

RECOMMENDATION 50: That the Victorian Government work with councils and community recovery hubs to inform them about options for reimbursement of costs and wider support available.

180

FINDING 71: Some residents who were fire affected but stayed to defend their homes were deemed ineligible to receive hardship assistance despite them suffering significant loss and trauma.

185

FINDING 72: Victorian Government and Commonwealth support packages have aided in the relief and recovery of impacted communities. However, the process for accessing funding is complex and administratively burdensome for communities recovering from disaster.

185

FINDING 73: Criteria used for announcing Commonwealth Government Disaster Recovery Payments disadvantaged many residents in localities that were left off the eligibility list.

185

FINDING 74: The 2026–27 Victorian State Budget announced relief measures from land tax, vacant residential land tax and land transfer (stamp) duty for people affected by the January 2026 Victorian bushfires.

185

RECOMMENDATION 51: That the Victorian Government review and evaluate the support packages offered to communities during relief and recovery stages of emergencies. The review should focus on:

- Community needs, including prioritisation of resources
- Administrative barriers, including duplication and requests for additional information
- Ensuring equitable access for all fire-affected communities, including those who stayed to defend
- Introducing clearly defined eligibility criteria to assist with reducing challenges with claim resolution
- Measures by which emergency relief payments could be made immediately after residents are asked to evacuate.

185

RECOMMENDATION 52: That the Victorian Government review the eligibility methodology for disaster relief payments at both state and Commonwealth levels, and advocate to the Commonwealth Government to harmonise criteria for residents eligible for Commonwealth Disaster Recovery Payments with the criteria used by the State Government for Emergency Disaster Relief Payments.

185

FINDING 75: There are limited emergency and temporary accommodation options that place residents back with their communities. Stakeholders have shared that recovering from the fires will be a long process and continued displacement inhibits community wellbeing.

186

RECOMMENDATION 53: That the Victorian Government prioritise the delivery of temporary modular housing for homeless residents whose homes were significantly damaged or destroyed by the fires, and ensure sufficient temporary accommodation remains available until permanent housing is completed.

187

RECOMMENDATION 54: That the Victorian Government enable local councils to fast-track planning and building approvals for rebuilding of homes, businesses and agricultural infrastructure following bushfire events.

187

RECOMMENDATION 55: That the Victorian Government provide exemptions from the Emergency Services Volunteer Fund for bushfire-affected property owners and support councils to provide rate relief.

187

RECOMMENDATION 56: That the Victorian Government prioritise recovery approaches that enable displaced residents to remain close to, or return to, their communities where it is safe and practicable to do so.

187

FINDING 76: The lack of insurance and the lack of comprehensive insurance is a barrier to recovery. Many communities have insufficient insurance cover, with many reporting that it been difficult to obtain insurance or adequate insurance due to affordability and or location.

189

FINDING 77: The Personal Hardship Assistance Program fails to address the inequity issues faced by those who are insured and are dealing with complex insurance processes, and delays in receiving insurance payouts. Stakeholders have shared that this program has contributed to insurance delays.

189

RECOMMENDATION 57: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government and the Insurance Council of Australia to improve insurance affordability in fire-prone communities and to address the following issues:

- the overlap with Government support packages and how these are operating alongside insurance policies
- engagement with policy holders who may be underinsured
- whether climate risk is outpacing existing insurance models.

190

FINDING 78: Recovery from the 2026 summer fires is ongoing. The formal transition from relief to recovery does not mean that every fire-affected person and community has begun the recovery phase.

192

RECOMMENDATION 58: That early recovery funding allocations be reviewed and adjusted as damage assessment and recovery needs become clearer.

192

RECOMMENDATION 59: That the Victorian Government establish an impact-based recovery funding model for major bushfires, with allocations based on scale and type of loss.

192

RECOMMENDATION 60: That the Victorian Government publish regular, publicly accessible reports detailing bushfire recovery expenditure, project delivery, funding allocations and outcomes to ensure transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.

192

FINDING 79: The Victorian Government established formal recovery support pathways following the 2026 bushfires, including the 1800 Recovery Hotline and the Emergency Recovery Support Program, but some people found these services difficult to access.

194

FINDING 80: Delays in case management meant that community hubs, neighbours and volunteers became the go-to for residents seeking assistance in accessing recovery support.

194

RECOMMENDATION 61: That the Victorian Government establish a rapid case management deployment system or provide case-management training to community hub leaders.

194

FINDING 81: Community-led recovery was essential and remains essential for ongoing recovery, but local organisations lack adequate support and funding. **195**

FINDING 82: Community-led recovery should not be used as a substitute for a fully resourced recovery system. **195**

RECOMMENDATION 62: That the Victorian Government establish a community recovery hub model for natural disasters that includes pre-approved arrangements for funding, information sharing and connection to recovery services. **196**

RECOMMENDATION 63: That the Victorian Government develop information sharing arrangements between local councils and community organisations to reduce duplication. **196**

FINDING 83: Psychosocial recovery extends beyond the initial fire event and is a critical component to ongoing recovery. Re-traumatisation is a risk for individuals working through the rebuilding phases. **197**

RECOMMENDATION 64: That the Victorian Government establishes a dedicated program for improving baseline mental health service capacity in rural and regional areas, focusing on upskilling established local health providers and expanding long term local mental health capacity and outreach. **198**

RECOMMENDATION 65: That the Victorian Government ensure that recovery case management assistance integrates psychosocial support with practical recovery issues including insurance, financial counselling and legal assistance. **198**

RECOMMENDATION 66: That the Victorian Government develop a long-term psychosocial recovery plan for communities affected by repeat disasters, including Black Saturday, Black Summer and the 2026 summer fires. **198**

FINDING 84: As at 1 May 2026 only 28 out of 241 properties assessed as eligible (more than 600 registered) have been fully cleaned up. **200**

FINDING 85: Clean-up is a gateway to recovery. Where clean-up is delayed, people cannot safely rebuild, return home and continue their recovery. **200**

FINDING 86: There was a lack of clarity around the state's clean-up policies, including eligibility and deadlines, as well as a shift away from a previous policy with broader eligibility.

200

FINDING 87: The Victorian Government extended the waste levy waiver and gate fee rebate in response to requests from local councils and community advocacy, ultimately extending the program until 28 October 2026. However, the Committee heard extensive community anxiety over the lack of certainty before these extensions were announced, placing pressure on affected communities, councils and recovery efforts.

200

RECOMMENDATION 67: That the Victorian Government establish a default clean-up model for major bushfires to ensure that properties are cleaned up quickly and residents are not exposed to hazardous material.

200

RECOMMENDATION 68: That the Victorian Government ensure that clean-up support is not dependent on insurance status, and that there be support provided to affected residents while insurance claims are being processed.

200

RECOMMENDATION 69: That the Victorian Government publish clear and up-to-date eligibility rules, underinsurance definitions and referral pathways for clean up support within two weeks of a major bushfire.

200

RECOMMENDATION 70: That the Victorian Government continue to ensure waste levy waivers and gate fee rebates remain in place until the end of 2026.

200

RECOMMENDATION 71: That the Victorian Government consider implementing a permit system to authorise landholders to access roads closed by disasters where certain conditions are met, and the risks of access are assumed by the permit holder.

200

FINDING 88: Fencing was a central recovery issue for agricultural communities, with delays in fencing restoration threatening stock containment and return to farm operations.

202

FINDING 89: Recovery is more complex where fencing is damaged at public-private boundaries.

202

FINDING 90: Some farmers' homes were saved but their agricultural assets were damaged, which left them ineligible for some forms of recovery support. **202**

RECOMMENDATION 72: That the Victorian Government include an assessment of productive loss of primary producers, not purely residential damage, when designing recovery support for agricultural businesses. **202**

RECOMMENDATION 73: That the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action establish a single accountable pathway for landholders seeking fencing repairs that involve public or Crown land. **202**

RECOMMENDATION 74: That the Victorian Government consider how any potential permit system authorising landholders to access roads closed by disasters could be expanded to include access for essential agricultural purposes. **202**

FINDING 91: Business and tourism recovery depends on shared facilities, visitor confidence, regional reputation and the ability of local economies to resume trade. **204**

RECOMMENDATION 75: That the Victorian Government establish targeted business recovery grants to support businesses affected by the 2026 summer fires. **204**

RECOMMENDATION 76: That the Victorian Government, through Visit Victoria, promote initiatives to support regional tourism and events in bushfire affected areas, and restore visitor confidence. **204**

FINDING 92: There were unclear arrangements for trained responders to access injured wildlife, including confusion around access to public and private land. **206**

FINDING 93: Delays or uncertainty in wildlife response added to the distress of affected landholders and communities. **206**

RECOMMENDATION 77: That the Victorian Government prioritise environmental recovery in bushfire affected regions (such as the Strathbogie Ranges) including rehabilitation of native vegetation, erosion control, pest and weed management, biodiversity restoration and catchment recovery. **206**

RECOMMENDATION 78: That the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action review post-fire wildlife response arrangements, including the deployment of trained wildlife volunteers, veterinarians and wildlife organisations. 206

RECOMMENDATION 79: That emergency and recovery arrangements include clear access protocols for landholders, animal welfare support and trained wildlife responders once areas can be accessed safely. 206

RECOMMENDATION 80: That the Victorian Government consider how any potential permit system authorising landholders to access roads closed by disasters could be expanded to include access for accredited wildlife rescuers. 206

What happens next?

There are several stages to a parliamentary inquiry.

The Committee conducts the Inquiry

This report on the Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria is the result of extensive research and consultation by the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee.

The Committee received written submissions, spoke with people at public hearings, reviewed research evidence and deliberated over a number of meetings. Experts, government representatives and individuals expressed their views directly to us as Members of Parliament.

A Parliamentary Committee is not part of the Government. The Committee is a group of members of different political parties (including independent members). Parliament has asked us to look closely at an issue and report back. This process helps Parliament do its work by encouraging public debate and involvement in issues.

You can learn more about the Committee's work at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/2026firesinquiry>.

The report is presented to Parliament

This report was presented to Parliament and can be found at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/2026firesinquiry/reports>.

A response from the Government

The Government has six months to respond in writing to any recommendations made in this report.

The response is public and put on the inquiry page of Parliament's website when it is received at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/2026firesinquiry/reports>.

In its response, the Government indicates whether it supports the Committee's recommendations. It can also outline actions it may take.

Chapter 1

About the Inquiry and engagement with fire affected communities

1.1 Acknowledgement and appreciation

The Committee extends its gratitude to all community members, organisations, local governments and other authorities who took the time to prepare submissions and/or appear as witnesses at hearings and acknowledges the significant impact of the 2026 summer fires on fire affected communities including:

- the loss of the life of Maxwell Hobson in the Longwood fire and extends its condolences to his family friends and community
- 451 homes destroyed
- 29 homes damaged
- 1,110 outbuildings
- approximately 440,000 hectares of land burnt
- the impact on 150,000 hectares of agricultural land
- more than 45,000 livestock deaths
- approximately 9,625 kilometres of fencing lost
- approximately 40,400 tonnes of hay or silage destroyed
- commercial properties destroyed
- tourism and community infrastructure damaged or destroyed
- the significant disruption to farming enterprises and other local businesses
- significant loss of wildlife.

1.2 Introduction

The 2026 summer fires had a devastating impact across Victoria, destroying homes, businesses and critical infrastructure, claiming thousands of livestock, and causing significant losses of native wildlife and habitat. The fires burned extensive areas of public and private land, leaving lasting economic, environmental and social consequences for affected communities. Beyond the immediate destruction, the

bushfires disrupted livelihoods, displaced residents, and highlighted the importance of strengthening bushfire preparedness, response and long-term recovery to build more resilient communities.

This Inquiry found that Victoria's emergency management system continues to rely heavily on volunteers, local governments and communities to fill gaps in preparedness, response and recovery. While frontline personnel and affected communities demonstrated extraordinary resilience, evidence highlighted systemic shortcomings in fuel management, emergency communications, animal welfare response, infrastructure resilience, volunteer support, recovery coordination and community recovery.

Evidence consistently demonstrated that communities expected a more coordinated, locally informed and better prepared emergency management system. The Inquiry heard concerns regarding declining fuel reduction activities, ageing emergency service fleets, communications blackspots, delays in clean-up programs, inadequate animal welfare support, increasing insurance costs, volunteer fatigue and a growing reliance on local communities to organise their own recovery.

The Committee has identified findings and made recommendations to strengthen preparedness, emergency response, recovery and long-term resilience.

1.2.1 The Inquiry timeline

As noted in the Terms of Reference, the Legislative Council required that this Inquiry be tabled in Parliament by 1 June 2026. The Committee was contacted by Murrindindi Shire Council and Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) asking for the Committee to seek an extension for this timeframe. Murrindindi Shire was one of the Local Government Areas most heavily affected by the 2026 fires, with almost half of the total state-wide impact occurring within the municipality, including 193 homes destroyed.¹ The council argued that the community were still heavily engaged in response and recovery efforts and would not be able to meaningfully engage in the Inquiry in such a short timeframe. Similarly, EMV outlined that the State's fire response and emergency management agencies were still engaged in response and early community recovery operations and would be unable to contribute fully to the Inquiry.²

The Committee heeded these concerns and sought an extension from the Legislative Council for the reporting date to be amended from 1 June 2026 to 28 July 2026. This extension has allowed the Inquiry's recommendations to be delivered to Government and considered before onset of the 2026–27 fire season.

While the Committee received an extension to the reporting date, it is important to stress that the time Parliament allowed for the completion of this Inquiry was brief, particularly when considering the wide scope of the Terms of Reference. The eleven

¹ Cr Damien Gallagher, Mayor, Murrindindi Shire Council to Ryan Batchelor MP, Chair, Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, *correspondence*, 16 February 2026, p. 1.

² Tim Wiebusch ESM, Emergency Management Commissioner, to Ryan Batchelor MP, Chair, Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, *correspondence*, 23 February 2026, pp. 1–2.

parts of the Terms of Reference have required the Committee to inquire into much of the emergency management and response portfolio, from preparedness to response, to climate change and resourcing. When undertaking a similarly scoped inquiry for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria, the Committee was afforded one year and five months. This Inquiry has been undertaken in less than six months.

The evidence provided by fire affected communities, emergency response agencies, unions, academics and non-government agencies has been comprehensive and compelling. The Committee trusts that this report and the evidence received will be a valuable resource for further work by the emergency management sector, noting in particular the forthcoming review of the Inspector General for Emergency Management.

FINDING 1: The Committee had significantly less time to conduct its Inquiry as compared to other similar reviews. This inhibited the breadth and depth of evidence that could be collected and analysed and placed some strain on councils, communities and agencies to meet the inquiry timelines.

1.2.2 The call for submissions

The Committee called for submissions on 10 February 2026, and following the granting of the extension of the reporting date, the closing date for submissions was extended to 19 April 2026.

The call for submissions was advertised on social media and in writing to a number of stakeholders. The Committee received 480 submissions from Government departments, non-government organisations, unions, academics, and people from fire-affected communities. The Committee thanks all those who took the time to provide their experience and expertise to the Inquiry.

1.3 Engagement with fire affected communities

The 2026 summer fires have had a devastating impact on communities across the state. Approximately 440,000 hectares were burnt, 1590 structures (including 451 homes) were lost and tragically, one person lost their life.³

The Committee felt it was important that this Inquiry process provided a voice to fire-affected communities. Accordingly, the Committee travelled to fire-affected parts of the state to speak to the communities in person and ensure their input was reflected in this report.

These communities deserve to have their voices heard in order to share their experiences, their hardships, their frustrations and contribute to improved outcomes.

³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 63.

Fire-affected communities were clear that local resilience and volunteer effort cannot be treated as a substitute for government responsibility. The Committee heard that in a number of cases communities stepped up because they had no choice, but that they expected properly prepared agencies, reliable communications, adequate equipment and timely recovery support.

1.3.1 Site visits

The Committee conducted site visits before two of its hearings. The Committee visited firegrounds and heard directly from responders and emergency management personnel about the nature of the fires and how they were contained.

On Monday 20 April 2026, the Committee toured the Carlisle River firegrounds, which burnt through the Great Otway National Park from 9 January to 1 February 2026.⁴ The Committee was assisted by representatives from Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action of Victoria (DEECA) and visited the Carlisle River CFA station to hear about the efforts of local volunteers in fighting the fires.

On Wednesday 23 April 2026, the Committee visited the Natimuk Firegrounds and was assisted by representatives from the CFA, who gave an overview of the progress of the fire and efforts to control it.



Committee members touring fire damaged areas in the Great Otway National Park.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 122-123.



Visiting the Carlisle River CFA station to hear from responders about efforts to contain the Carlisle River fire.



A fire damaged building in Gellibrand.



CFA representative Dr Joshua Hodges providing a briefing on the Natimuk fire.



A fire damaged building in Natimuk.

1.3.2 Public hearings

The Committee held six public hearings between 21 April 2026 and 6 May 2026. Between 21–30 April 2026, the Committee travelled to four fire-affected areas to hold public hearings. The hearings were held at:

- Colac, on Tuesday 21 April 2026
- Quantong, near Natimuk, on Wednesday 22 April 2026
- Alexandra, on Friday 24 April 2026
- Harcourt, on Thursday 30 April 2026.

The Committee also held an online public hearing on Wednesday 6 May 2026 with Towong Shire Council and community members affected by the Walwa fire in north-east Victoria.

Representatives from Government departments and agencies, union representatives, academics and non-government organisations spoke with the Committee at a public hearing in Melbourne on 1 May 2026.



Trevor Peeler, owner of Harcourt Coolstores at the public hearing in Harcourt.



Sam Hicks, President of Fawcett Hall, at the public hearing in Alexandra.



Committee Members at the public hearing in Colac.



The most dangerous period arrived between 7 and 9 January, peaking with catastrophic fire danger forecasts across multiple weather districts. There were widespread temperatures well into the 40s, with a large dry air mass, damaging winds and atmospheric conditions generating lightning strikes into the baked Victorian landscape.

Jason Heffernan, CFA Chief Officer at the public hearing in Melbourne.



The fire was reported just before 1 o'clock. I was 7 kilometres away from home when it started. It was there within 15 minutes ... We had a fairly close shave with one elderly resident. The fire was a matter of 50-odd metres away from the house, and by the time we got him out, the house was on fire.

Cr Brian Klowss, Mayor, Rural City of Horsham at the public hearing in Quaanatong.



This is not just loss, it is ongoing trauma, grief and exhaustion. Since returning home I struggle to be there. The smell of scorched earth remains. Standing in the ruins of your life's work, trying to reconcile it – there is insomnia, there is guilt and there is hypervigilance. My son is still asking now if the clouds over the valley are actually clouds or they are smoke.

Fiona Lindsay, resident of Fawcett at the public hearing in Alexandra.



The community stepped up because we had no choice, but community strength cannot be used as a substitute for government responsibility ... We expected the cavalry. We realised we are the cavalry.

Colleen Furlanetto OAM, member of Tablelands Recovery Hub at the public hearing in Alexandra.



I propose to the committee that a major contributor to the minimisation of deaths and injuries during the January bushfires was the effectiveness of our current community bushfire safety programs, which emphasise the threat to life posed by bushfires and the need for households to have a survival plan, to leave safely and to relocate promptly to a place of safety in the face of bushfire threat.

Professor James McLennan, adjunct professor at La Trobe University at the public hearing in Harcourt.

1.3.3 Open mic sessions

At the end of each of the public hearings in fire affected areas, the Committee held 'open mic' sessions to allow members of the community, including those affected by the fires to have their say. These sessions were well attended, with the following number of speakers at each open mic session:

- six in Colac
- 10 in Quantong
- 17 in Alexandra
- 19 in Harcourt
- 15 at the Walwa hearing.

At the open mic sessions, the Committee heard heartfelt evidence about the efforts to contain the fires, the impact on people's homes, livelihoods and the environment, as well as the adequacy of recovery efforts.

The open mic evidence also demonstrated the human consequence of bushfire crisis events and responses to them. The Committee heard accounts of residents and volunteers operating for prolonged periods without adequate relief, equipment or certainty. This evidence should inform the Committee's findings on preparedness, initial attack, surge capacity and recovery.



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.

David Webb at the open mic session in Alexandra.



Firefighting is not getting easier. Conditions are hotter and fires are more intense, and yet the equipment and support have not kept pace.

Leigh Harry at the open mic session in Colac.



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.

Tom Ward at the Yarck open mic session in Alexandra.

1.3.4 Listening posts

The Committee visited recovery centres in Ruffey and Fawcett to hear from fire affected communities about their experiences with the fires and ongoing relief efforts. This included a visit to Ruffey Community Hall and Fawcett Hall on Thursday 23 April.

The Committee thanks all those who attended the listening posts, open mic sessions and public hearings to share their views and experiences during a difficult time.



Fawcett Hall.



Left: Committee member and then-Chair Ryan Batchelor MP at the listening post at Fawcett Hall. Right: Committee members Sarah Mansfield MP, John Berger MP and Melina Bath MP at the listening post at Fawcett Hall.



Left: former Committee member Jacinta Ermacora MP at the Listening post at Fawcett Hall. Right: Committee member Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell MP at the listening post at Fawcett Hall.



Left: Committee member Wendy Lovell MP at the listening post at Ruffy Community Hall. Right: Committee member Gaelle Broad MP at the listening post at Ruffy Community Hall.

The evidence gathered from fire-affected communities should be read not only as a record of loss, but as a practical guide to what must change before the next fire season. The recurring themes were clear: preparedness must be practical, local knowledge must be used in preparation, volunteers must be properly supported, communications must work when power fails, and recovery must be funded according to impact.

Chapter 2

Victoria's emergency response framework

2.1 Introduction

Victoria has an integrated emergency management system that brings together multiple agencies, plans and legislative arrangements to provide a coordinated approach to preparing for, responding to and recovering from emergencies. The framework reflects lessons learned from previous major disasters and is designed to support a whole-of-government response to emergencies of all types.

Emergency Management and response agencies including Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) and Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic). Each play distinct but complementary roles within this system. Effective coordination and interoperability between these agencies is critical to ensuring Victoria can respond to complex and large-scale emergencies.

2.2 Legislative and institutional framework

Bushfire control in Victoria is primarily governed the *Emergency Management Act 2013*, *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*, *Forests Act 1958* and the *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958*.

Emergency Management Act 2013 establishes Emergency Management Victoria (EMV). It provides the supreme command structure for coordinating the response to, and recovery from, major bushfires across the state. The Act requires the preparation of the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) to provide “an integrated, coordinated and comprehensive approach to emergency management at a state level,” and empowers the Commissioner to direct agencies that fail to act in accordance with the SEMP.

The *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (CFA) governs fire prevention, suppression, and mitigation across regional Victoria and country areas.

The *Forests Act 1958*: Directs bushfire management on public land (such as State forests and national parks). It outlines how fire is applied and managed, by agencies like Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) for fuel reduction and ecological purposes.

The *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958*: Defines the responsibilities of Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) in protecting metropolitan and major urban areas, and their cooperative agreements with rural fire agencies.

The *Building Act 1993* empowers the Victorian government to designate Bushfire Prone Areas (BPAs), which enforce minimum building construction standards (such as Bushfire Attack Level or BAL ratings) for new homes.

Victoria Planning Provisions (VPA) / *Planning and Environment Act 1987*: Includes the Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO) (Clause 44.06). This requires property owners in high-risk zones to obtain planning permits and implement strict bushfire protection measures, like dedicated water supplies and defensible space.

Vegetation Exemptions (Clause 52.12) provides statutory allowances for residents to clear native vegetation around existing houses and fencelines to reduce fire fuel loads without a planning permit.

The Code of Forest Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land (the Code) is a Code of Practice made under the *Forests Act 1958* for the purpose of section 31(1) of the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987*.

2.3 Victoria's emergency management and response agencies

2.3.1 Emergency Management Victoria

Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) leads and coordinates the state's emergency management sector, ensuring various agencies, government departments, and communities work together to plan for, withstand, respond to, and recover from disasters like bushfires, floods, and storms. It 'oversees emergency management, planning and operational communications and information systems' and 'is responsible for leading the coordination of strategic investment and major projects on behalf of responder agencies.'¹

The EMV is headed by the Emergency Management Commissioner, who holds specific functions relating to emergency management planning, including the preparation and review of the State Emergency Management Plan and approves regional emergency management plans.² Tim Wiebusch, Emergency Management Commissioner gave an overview of his role:

I lead the whole-of-government response coordination for major emergencies, provide strategic advice to government and ensure Victoria's emergency management system is prepared and effective ...³

¹ Tim Wiebusch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 15–16.

³ Tim Wiebusch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

The Emergency Management Commissioner also has responsibilities under the *Emergency Management Act 2013* (Vic) (the Emergency Management Act). According to the Victorian Government submission, their key functions under the Act include:

- managing the State Control Centre
- coordinating the activities of agencies having roles or responsibilities in relation to the response to Class 1 emergencies or Class 2 emergencies, and coordinating agencies in relation to consequence management
- ensuring the Minister for Emergency Services is provided with timely and up to date information on actual or imminent major emergencies and the response to major emergencies
- coordinating data collection and impact assessment processes
- developing and maintaining incident management operating procedures and operational standards for the performance of emergency management functions by responder agencies
- leading and promoting the implementation of the Victorian Emergency Strategic Action Plan to the extent that it relates to the improvement of the operational capability of responder agencies.⁴

Emergency Recovery Victoria

Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV) was a standalone agency responsible for emergency recovery. In response to the Independent Review of the Victorian Public Service, produced by Helen Silver AO, ERV was incorporated into EMV on 23 March 2026.⁵

Today, the functions of ERV are managed within EMV.

Annabelle Cleeland MP, Member for Euroa spoke at the hearings on behalf of local communities and someone whose family property was burnt, as did her parents and sister's properties during the Longwood bushfires.

Ms Cleeland questioned the State Government's decision to undertake a department restructure which included Emergency Recovery Victoria immediately after the summer bushfires. She said 'This inquiry must ask whether EMV and FRV are conducting a restructure in the middle of a disaster recovery.'⁶

⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 15–16.

⁵ Emergency Management Victoria, *Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria hearings*, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, pp. 19–20; Emergency Management Victoria, *Recovery*, <<https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/state-emergency-management-plan-semp/roles-and-responsibilities/recovery>> accessed 1 July 2026.

⁶ Annabelle Cleeland MP, Member for Euroa, Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Victoria, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

2.3.2 The Country Fire Authority

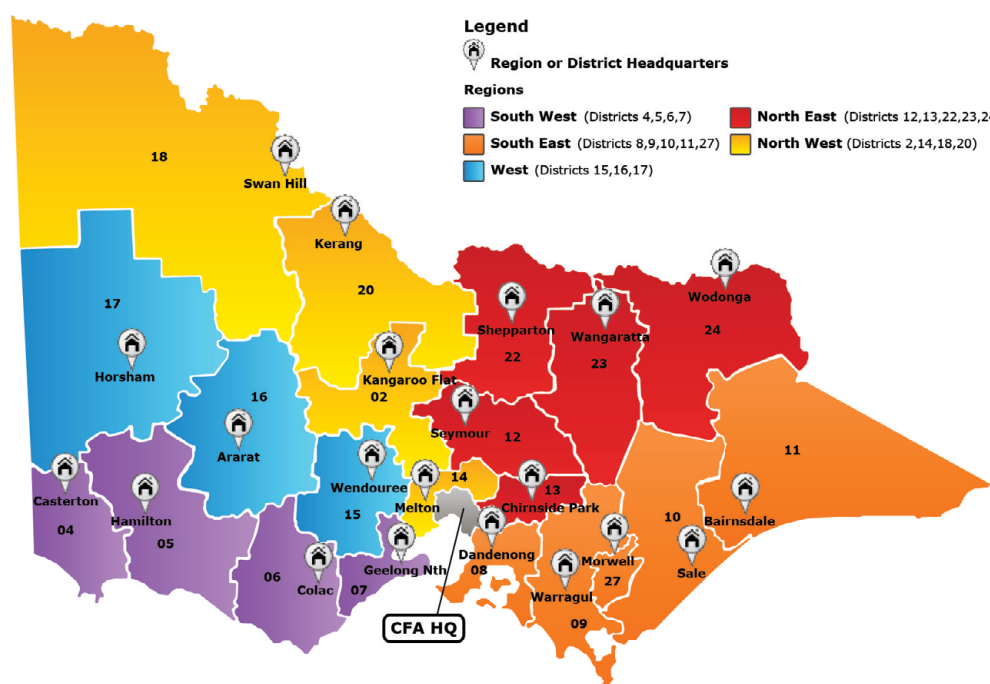
The CFA is a community-based volunteer fire and emergency service. It was created under the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (Vic) (the CFA Act) for the control, prevention and suppression of fires in country Victoria.⁷ Section 20 of the CFA Act outlines their functions, which were summarised in the Victorian Government submission as:

- community preparedness
- fire prevention and preparedness
- emergency response (fire and non-fire incidents)
- incident/emergency management planning
- post-incident response
- regulatory services.⁸

The CFA has 1,210 volunteer brigades, covering 22.2 million hectares.⁹ Its area of responsibility spans rural and regional Victoria, as well as peri-urban parts of the state. The CFA is administered through five regions and 21 districts.¹⁰

Figure 2.1 below shows CFA regions and district headquarters.

Figure 2.1 CFA Regions and district headquarters



Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 75.

⁷ *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (Vic) s 6A(1).

⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 74–75.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

As well as combatting fires across regional Victoria, the CFA responds to other emergencies, including 'road crashes, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, and support during floods and storms'.¹¹

The CFA is a community-based volunteer organisation, however it has 'a smaller cohort of full time paid staff providing training, logistics, planning, and operational appliances, equipment and support'.¹² The CFA's staffing arrangements, in particular its staffing secondment arrangement with FRV is discussed in section 2.3.3.

As well as fire control and suppression, the CFA also has an important role in community education and fire prevention. This includes community fire education initiatives such as Get Fire Ready, Fire Safe Kids, and seasonal bushfire-awareness campaigns.¹³ These 'aim to improve household preparedness, safe use of fire, and understanding of total fire bans and Fire Danger Ratings'.¹⁴

2.3.3 Fire Rescue Victoria

FRV was established under the *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958* (Vic) (the FRV Act) on 1 July 2020. Its creation involved the merger of the functions of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade as well as full time paid firefighting services at CFA managed stations in outer metropolitan and regional Victoria. It is therefore the fire and rescue service for urbanised areas of metropolitan Melbourne and a number of regional cities.¹⁵

Under the FRV Act, FRV's functions include:

- (a) to provide for fire suppression and fire prevention services in the Fire Rescue Victoria fire district; and
- (b) to provide for emergency prevention and response services in the Fire Rescue Victoria fire district; and
 - (ba) to implement the fire and emergency services priorities of the Government of Victoria; and
 - (bb) to provide operational and management support to the Country Fire Authority in consultation with and as agreed by the Authority, to meet the Authority's objective under section 6B of the Country Fire Authority Act 1958, including support to maintain, strengthen and encourage the capability of volunteers.¹⁶

¹¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 77.

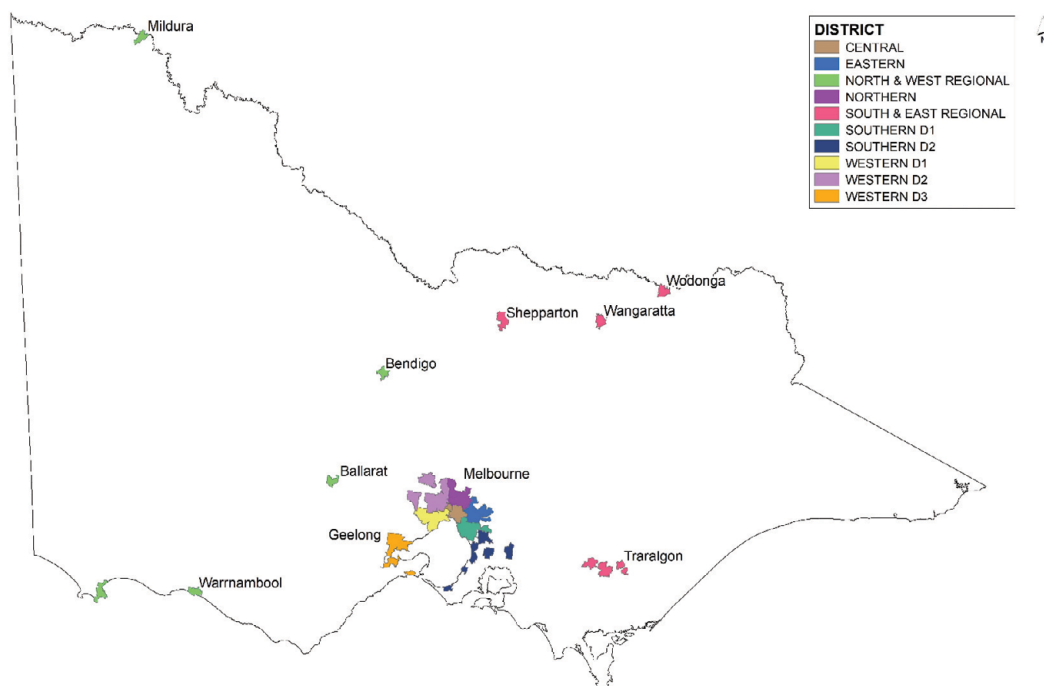
¹⁶ *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958* (Vic) s 7.

There are 85 FRV fire and rescue stations across the state. This includes 47 fire stations in metropolitan Melbourne and 38 regional stations, most of which are co-located with CFA volunteer brigades.¹⁷ FRV services regional centres including:

- Bendigo
- Ballarat
- Geelong
- Latrobe Valley
- Mildura
- Portland
- Shepparton
- Wangaratta
- Warrnambool
- Wodonga.¹⁸

Figure 2.2 shows FRV's fire district boundaries.

Figure 2.2 Fire Rescue Victoria's fire district boundaries



Source: Victorian Government, *The Fire Rescue Victoria fire district boundaries*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/fire-rescue-victoria-fire-district-review-proposed-risk-assessment-methodology-discussion-paper-2>> accessed 10 June 2026.

¹⁷ Fire Rescue Victoria, *About us*, <<https://www.frv.vic.gov.au/about-us>> accessed 10 June 2026.

¹⁸ Fire Rescue Victoria, *Response area*, <<https://www.frv.vic.gov.au/response-area>> accessed 10 June 2026.

FRV's firefighters are paid full time firefighters, as opposed to CFA's volunteer brigades. Gavin Freeman, Commissioner of FRV said that 'FRV was formed off the back of a fire services reform and is made up of all former MFB [Metropolitan Fire Brigade] firefighters and the previous full time paid CFA firefighters'.¹⁹ He stated the organisation currently has 'approximately 3800 firefighters and around 700 corporate staff'.²⁰

Like the CFA, FRV does not just respond to fires. It also has a role in other emergency incidents including hazardous materials incidents, complex rescues, road crashes, and emergency medical calls. Mr Freeman said:

our people – are trained in firefighting, obviously, complex rescues, road crashes, high-angle et cetera, emergency medical response – and I am particularly proud of the work our people do there in partnership with Ambulance Victoria every day – hazardous material incidents and the list goes on.²¹

The agency also delivers community education and fire-prevention initiatives to reduce risk and build resilience.²² This includes education on home fire safety, battery safety, bush and grass fire safety, building fire safety and guidelines for dangerous goods.²³

2.3.4 Forest Fire Management Victoria

The *Forests Act 1958* (Vic), confers responsibility to the Secretary of DEECA for all matters relating to fire in State forests,²⁴ including the prevention and suppression of fire in within fire protected areas.²⁵ FFMVic is part of DEECA with responsibilities for 'managing bushfire prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery on public land'.²⁶ According to Chirs Hardman, Chief Fire Officer at FFMVic, this includes 'fire management across 8 million hectares of forested land in Victoria, which equates to about one-third of the total land area'.²⁷ The Victorian Government submission noted:

FFMVic was formed to unify land and fire management responsibilities under one coordinated structure. It integrates staff and resources from DEECA (formerly DELWP), Parks Victoria, and Melbourne Water, ensuring consistent planning and field operations across the state's public lands. FFMVic works closely with the CFA, FRV and EMV to align community safety and emergency response strategies.²⁸

¹⁹ Gavin Freeman, Commissioner, Fire Rescue Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 15.

²² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 77.

²³ Fire Rescue Victoria, *Safety*, <<https://www.frv.vic.gov.au/safety>> accessed 10 June 2026.

²⁴ *Forest Act 1958* (Vic) s 18AA(a).

²⁵ *Forest Act 1958* (Vic) s 20(1)(b).

²⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 77.

²⁷ Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

²⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 77.

FFMVic has 'an operational and surge workforce of around 2700 personnel, which incorporates 1500 accredited firefighters'.²⁹ and 'a dedicated forest operational fleet of specialist vehicles'.³⁰ The agency also works with over 500 contractors across the state 'who supply a range of forest and civil contracting services and play a vital role in the state's bushfire management and emergency response capacity'.³¹

Fire prevention, preparedness and fuel management are the core part of FFMVic's work. They adopt a risk-based approach to bushfire management planning. This 'risk is assessed by modelling predicted bushfire behaviour across Victoria under worst-case fire weather conditions and estimating their potential impact to homes'.³² Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer of FFMVic said fuel management is:

one of our long-term core bushfire risk mitigation activities. We deliver this through a strong risk-based approach that uses planned burning and mechanical fuel treatments across public land with a joint fuel management program in partnership with the CFA. All of these activities are critical to reducing bushfire risk and supporting safe and effective firefighting operations, and they played an important role in supporting suppression efforts during the 2026 fire season.³³

The Office of Bushfire Risk Management (OBRM) (formerly the Office of Victorian Bushfire Management) role is to lead and coordinate evidence-based bushfire risk management policy, planning, assurance, and reporting across all public and private land in Victoria, including Victoria's Bushfire Management Strategy, cross-tenure coordination, assurance and compliance and monitoring and reporting. OBRM publicly reports on breaches of Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) planned burning, bushfire preparedness and suppression.

Preparation and fuel management are discussed in Chapter 3.

2.3.5 The Department of Transport and Planning

The Department of Transport and Planning administers land use planning, building regulations relevant to bushfires and manage land around State roads and rail corridors.³⁴ In relation to planning and bushfire risk, the Department administers local planning schemes 'setting out how settlements and rural areas will grow and change in response to the threat of bushfire'.³⁵ The Department also sets out building regulations to ensure new buildings are constructed with bushfire threat in mind. The Department also has responsibility for roadside fuel management and in helping to get roads open after an emergency. The Victorian Government submission stated that the Department's responsibilities include:

²⁹ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 77.

³² Ibid., p. 22.

³³ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

³⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 77.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

- taking all practicable steps to prevent the occurrence of fires and minimise the danger of the spread of fires on and from any land or roads under DTP control or management (as per the CFA Act).
- supporting the reopening of transport access to communities (including to support restoration of power and telecommunications) once it is safe to do so.³⁶

Road access during and after the 2026 summer fires is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.3.6 The Inspector General For Emergency Management

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) was formed under the Emergency Management Act following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.³⁷ It undertakes reviews, evaluations and assessments of Victoria's emergency management arrangements and the sector's capacity and capability.³⁸ According to IGEM's submission, this work provides 'independent assurance to the Victorian Government and the community about how well our emergency management arrangements are working, and to support their continuous improvement in order to keep Victorians safe'.³⁹

Dr Emily Phillips, Inspector-General of IGEM told the Committee that the Inspector-General can self-initiate reviews, or they can be taken at the request of the Minister for Emergency Services. She said that recent reviews have looked at 'the arrangements for water safety; our preparedness for chemical, biological and radiological emergencies; and our preparedness for major health emergencies'.⁴⁰ Other reviews have included post-event inquiries, such as the Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season.⁴¹ The Inspector-General monitors the implementation of its recommendations and reports on progress.⁴²

IGEM has received a formal referral for a review of the 2026 summer bushfires from the Minister for Emergency Services. The review will commence after the tabling of this Inquiry, with the Terms of Reference to be provided to the Inspector-General at that time.⁴³ At a public hearing, Ms Phillips was asked about the timing of the referral. She noted that this Inquiry has collected a 'significant body of evidence' and 'the timing enables that body of evidence to be available to me in the review that I undertake and for your findings and recommendations to be available as well'.⁴⁴

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Dr Emily Phillips, Inspector-General for Emergency Management, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

³⁸ Inspector General for Emergency Management, *About us*, <<https://www.igem.vic.gov.au/about-us/about-the-inspector-general-for-emergency-management>> accessed 11 June 2026.

³⁹ Inspector General for Emergency Management, *Submission 284, Attachment 1*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Dr Emily Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

⁴¹ Inspector General for Emergency Management, *Reports and publications*, <<https://www.igem.vic.gov.au/publications/reports-and-publications>> accessed 11 June 2026.

⁴² Inspector General for Emergency Management, *Submission 284, Attachment 1*, p. 3.

⁴³ Dr Emily Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

2.4 Fire services reform, secondment and interoperability in Victoria's fire agencies

2.4.1 Fire services reform and the secondment arrangements between Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria

Victoria's fire services were reformed after 2019, with the passing of the *Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Act 2019*. The Act amended (among other things) the FRV Act (formerly known as the *Metropolitan Fire Brigades Act 1958*) and the CFA Act.

One of the main outcomes of the reforms was to merge all former Metropolitan Fire Brigade and all full time paid firefighters in CFA into the new fire services agency, FRV. The CFA became 'a volunteer and community focused firefighter organisation', with all paid CFA firefighters moving to FRV and being seconded back to the CFA as required.⁴⁵ According to the United Firefighters Union (Victoria Branch) (the UFU), the positions that are seconded from FRV to the CFA include:

- (a) Instructors (CFA Volunteer Training);
- (b) Practical Area Drill Operators/Supervisors (CFA Volunteer Training);
- (c) Commanders (senior operational firefighters); and
- (d) Assistant Chief Fire Officers (senior operational firefighters).⁴⁶

Amendments to the CFA Act limiting hiring of Officers and Commanders

FRV replaced the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and became the employer of all fulltime fire officers, including the CFA, where full time fire offices are now seconded from FRV. Section S6F and S17 of the CFA Act were amended to prevent CFA from employing its own Assistant Chief Fire Officers and Commanders and the CFA is instead required to enter a secondment agreement for the provision of these staff from Fire Rescue Victoria. For example, section 6F:

The Parliament recognises that the Authority is a fully volunteer fire fighting service under the command and control of a paid Chief Officer and supported where necessary by other paid staff. The Parliament recognises that this does not preclude the Authority from employing paid staff in the role of Chief Officer, Deputy Chief Officer and Chief Executive Officer or from entering into a secondment agreement (within the meaning of section 25C(10) of the Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Victorian Government, *Fire Services Statement*, 2017, p. 12.

⁴⁶ United Firefighters Union, *UFU response to VFBV submissions*, supplementary evidence tabled at public hearing on 1 May 2026, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* (Vic), s. 6F.

Jason Heffernan, Chief Fire Officer of the CFA said the reforms were 'introduced to ensure that Victorians can rely on the best fire and emergency service response, regardless of where they live,' and stated that CFA and FRV have worked together to achieve complementary fire service arrangements.⁴⁸ However, he noted of the secondment arrangements:

We know there is more to be done, particularly in relation to the implementation across arrangements for seconded senior operational leaders working within the CFA.⁴⁹

Competing views were expressed on the merits of the secondment model, including from Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV), and the UFU.

In its submission, the VFBV said the secondment model constrains CFA command because it requires its officers to be drawn from FRV, which has a different culture and operational background to the CFA:

The new arrangements prevent CFA from employing its own command workforce, and now relies on officers being seconded from an all-staff fire service. One that has a significantly different culture and operating model, is a predominantly centralised urban and metropolitan based and therefore with little exposure to Victoria's largest natural hazard risk of large-scale bushfires and a decentralised volunteer workforce. The effects and dangers of this approach should be obvious.⁵⁰

The Committee notes that fire services reforms were outside of the focus of what this inquiry examined, but some witnesses raised aspects of the secondment arrangements in their evidence.

The VFBV also raised the issue of 'long-term vacancy and non-relief issues'.⁵¹ At a public hearing, Samantha Collins, State President of VFBV said 'we have got unfilled positions, vacancies across the board, and it makes us feel like we are left on our own'.⁵² She added:

So at any point in time those shortages are really impactful for the volunteers, not just at a fire event but in the everyday running of brigades. They have not got the support, the advice and I suppose the back-up that they need to do the job that they do.⁵³

Under the secondment agreement and associated policy, Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) holds primary responsibility for recruitment and selection into CFA positions, both on a permanent and temporary basis.

The Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM) is an independent statutory office established under the Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958. Its core responsibility is to provide

⁴⁸ Jason Heffernan, Chief Fire Officer, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 27.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Samantha Collins, State President, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61.

⁵³ Ibid.

independent assurance to both the government and the community regarding the progress of Victoria's fire services reforms. The Monitor is tasked with ensuring that the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) (but not Forest Fire Management Victoria) are held accountable for delivering modern, safe, and effective fire services.

Niall Blair, the Fire Services Implementation Monitor, described vacancies and non-relief at commander and assistant chief fire officer level as a continuing issue. He said that additional funding and capability planning has improved the position, but has not overcome an ageing workforce, recruitment difficulty and the structural and industrial constraints surrounding secondment.⁵⁴

Mr Blair expressed concern that the CFA has limited input into the recruitment and skill mix of FRV staff seeking secondment, notwithstanding the CFA Chief Officer's operation oversight once they are appointed.⁵⁵ He also identified limits on CFA's ability to investigate and address performance, occupational health and safety or disciplinary issues involving seconded staff, because those employment matters remained with FRV.⁵⁶

The combined submission from the UFU, CFA Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance offered an alternative view to the adequacy of efforts to fill secondment vacancies. A document tabled by the UFU at a public hearing outlined data for seconded commander vacancies falling from 16 in August 2020 to 4 in August 2023,⁵⁷ that contradicted many of the claims made by the VFVB. The document stated:

Never before has there been such a concerted effort to fill senior command roles in the CFA. Prior to Fire Services Reform, vacancies, including many Long Term Vacancies, simply existed. Now, there is a department (FRV Secondment Department) that is dedicated to filling those vacancies where such request is made by CFA. Therefore, any criticism of fire service reform in the context of vacancies, respectfully, can only be made with all data presented, including data held by CFA prior to Fire Services Reform.⁵⁸

In relation to the claimed cultural differences between the CFA's bushfire focussed operations and volunteer makeup, and FRV's metropolitan focussed paid firefighters, the UFU submission said: 'Data currently held by the fire agencies demonstrates that 66.2% of all command staff seconded to CFA are former CFA employees'.⁵⁹ This indicates that a majority of the current secondees are already immersed in the CFA culture. The VFVB acknowledged the high proportion of Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Commanders with previous CFA experience, but stated '– as time goes on, the number of seconded officers who come into these roles with no experience of volunteers,

⁵⁴ Niall Blair, Fire Services Implementation Monitor, public hearing, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ UFU, *Supplementary document tabled at public hearing: UFU response to VFVB submission*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

community embedded fire brigades or CFA systems and processes will continue to rise'.⁶⁰

The impact of secondment arrangements on the operational performance in the suppression of the 2026 summer fires is discussed in Chapter 5.

2.4.2 Interoperability in Victoria's fire services

FRV and the CFA work together to respond to emergencies where appropriate to meet the needs of the community. This interoperative capability means that the agencies have the 'opportunity to leverage the strengths of both fire agencies and ensure that all Victorians receive a world-class fire service response no matter where they live'.⁶¹

The CFA Act and the FRV Act set objectives relating to interaction between the fire services agencies. The objectives include to:

- (a) promote collaboration and coordination between fire services agencies to best meet the safety needs of the community; and
- (b) recognise the importance of maintaining capacity to respond to peaks in demand for fire services within fire services agencies; and
- (c) recognise and value the contribution of volunteer brigades; and
- (d) recognise that both volunteer firefighters and career firefighters are vital to delivering safe and sustainable fire services; and
- (e) maintain the ability of fire services agencies to respond to critical incidents, to prevent and suppress fires and to protect life and property.⁶²

The interoperability between the agencies helps to provide 'a mechanism for achieving better outcomes by allowing the control and support agencies to effectively work together before, during and after an incident'.⁶³ To achieve a cooperative response to bushfire emergencies, there are 'multiple inter-agency agreements to allow operations across fire districts and define how agencies interact in those circumstances'.⁶⁴ All roles and responsibilities for preparation, response and recovery from bushfires are outlined in the State Emergency Management Plan Bushfire Sub-Plan.⁶⁵

The success of the interoperative response and cooperation of Victoria's fire response agencies, including FFMVic, during the 2026 summer fires is discussed in Chapter 5.

⁶⁰ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 29.

⁶¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 77.

⁶² *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958 s 2A; Country Fire Authority Act 1958 s 2.*

⁶³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 74.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government instruct the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to undertake an independent review of Victoria's emergency management governance arrangements, examining the roles and relationships of Emergency Management Victoria, the Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, with the objective of improving accountability, reducing complexity and strengthening frontline operational leadership and how it aligns with the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission.

2.5 Victoria's emergency response framework

Victoria has experienced several devastating bushfires in recent years, including the 2026 summer fires, the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires and the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009. Other emergencies and disasters have also occurred in recent years including the 2022 flooding events and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Because of the varied nature of these incidents, the framework is centred around responding to emergencies, rather than a single event type, such as bushfires or floods.

The Emergency Management Act provides a legislative basis for Victoria's emergency management arrangements. This includes the establishment of:

- Emergency Management Victoria
- the Emergency Management Commissioner
- the primary control centre for Victoria, known as the State Control Centre
- the Inspector-General for Emergency Management
- the State Crisis and Resilience Council.⁶⁶

The State Crisis and Resilience Council (SCRC) is formed under the Emergency Management Act 2013 and as the peak crisis and emergency management advisory body in Victoria. It is responsible for providing advice to the relevant Minister in relation to whole of government policy and strategy for emergency management. It is Chaired by the Secretary for Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Deputy Chair is the Secretary for the Department of Justice and Regulation along with the department head of each of the Victorian public service departments; Chief Commissioner of Police; CEO of EMV (who is a deputy secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety); the Emergency Management Commissioner; the Inspector-General for Emergency management (as an observer only) and the CEO of the Municipal Association of Victoria.

According to the Victorian Government submission, when an emergency becomes a 'major emergency' (a large or complex emergency that has the potential to cause loss of life and extensive damage), state control arrangements are activated under the

⁶⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 15.

Emergency Management Act. These arrangements provide clarity and certainty regarding how government works together to respond to the emergency. The arrangements designate key responsibilities, including for the control of response activities across government.⁶⁷

The state control arrangements are categorised by three classes. Class 1 emergencies are major fires or any other emergency for which FRV, CFA, DEECA or Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES) is the control agency under the State Emergency Management Plan (for example, storms and floods).⁶⁸ Class 2 emergencies include public health or animal disease emergencies, whilst Class 3 emergencies involve warlike or terrorist attacks, hijacks, sieges or riots and are the exclusive domain of Victoria Police. The 2026 summer bushfires were a Class 1 emergency.

Under the Emergency Management Act, state, regional and municipal plans must be prepared providing detailed information about how government will work together and with communities to mitigate, respond to and recover from emergencies.⁶⁹

2.5.1 The State Emergency Management Plan, Bushfire Sub-Plan, Regional Emergency Management Plans, and Municipal Emergency Management Plans

The State Emergency Management Plan sets out a plan 'for the mitigation of, response to and recovery from emergencies, and specifies the roles and responsibilities of agencies in relation to emergency management'.⁷⁰ This includes:

- information on Victoria's state control arrangements
- state emergency management priorities to underpin and guide all decisions made during emergencies in Victoria
- agency role and responsibilities for the mitigation, response and recovery phases of emergency management.⁷¹

A Bushfire Sub-Plan is also developed to provide specific information on managing emergencies involving bushfires, this includes the roles and responsibilities for containing fires, as well as for 'planning, preparedness, response (including relief) and recovery'.⁷²

Regional Emergency Management Plans and Municipal Emergency Management Plans are also in place to ensure that 'planning reflects area-specific risks'.⁷³ According to the

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁷⁰ Emergency Management Victoria, *State Emergency Management Plan*, <<https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/state-emergency-management-plan-sembp>> accessed 14 June 2026.

⁷¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 18.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Victorian Government submission, eight regions and all Victorian municipalities have an emergency management plan:

Eight designated regions have a Regional Emergency Management Planning Committee, with a corresponding a regional emergency management plan. All Victorian municipalities have a municipal emergency management plan (MEMP) approved by their REMPC in accordance with the Emergency Management Planning Guidelines.⁷⁴

A number of volunteers told the Committee moving from Municipal Fire Planning Committees (MFPC) to Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPC) has been a retrograde step. Some volunteers describe the new EMV led arrangements as a bureaucratic tick box exercise.

Martin Colbert from the West Wimmera Action Group told the Committee, 'Local knowledge and data from groups like West Wimmera Action Group should be hardwired into planning before the next season, not after the damage is done.'⁷⁵

In 2018, the Victorian Government repealed Part IV of the CFA Act that had previously governed and established Municipal Fire Prevention Committee's (MFPC's) and repealed the obligation to prepare specific fire prevention plans. MFPC's were replaced with the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPC's), 'all hazards – all agencies' committees. The auditing of these committees was also transferred from the CFA to EMV. At the time of the change in 2018, it was acknowledged that Victoria had a high standard and oversight of bushfire risk through the MFPC structure.

Submissions from Rural Councils Victoria, VFVB and others indicated that the new 'all hazards' arrangements are not delivering adequate fuel reduction across multiple land tenures – roadsides, corridors managed by the state and crown land, and this contributed to the extent and difficulty of suppressing the 2026 bushfires.⁷⁶

Preparation for the 2025–26 summer fire season, including the role of the State Emergency Management Plan, Regional Emergency Management Plans and Municipal Emergency Management Plans are discussed in Chapter 3.

2.6 Funding arrangements

2.6.1 The Country Fire Authority's funding arrangements

The CFA's funding structure is complex.⁷⁷ Its funding comes from multiple sources. According to the Victorian Government submission, funding is provided primarily from grant payments via the Department of Justice and Community Services (DJCS).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Martin Colbert, Treasurer, West Wimmera Action Group, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

⁷⁶ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

These include 'annual base funding (operating and capital), new initiative funding from the State Budget and funding for competitive volunteer grants programs'.⁷⁸ The submission noted that in 2024–25, CFA received 76% of its \$477 million revenue and income through grant payments from DJCS.

The submission noted a number of other funding sources, which include:

- budget supplementation following emergencies via Treasurer's Advances
- grant payments through other departments such as DEECA
- own source revenue (e.g. sale of goods and services, interest income and fair value of assets and services received free of charge or for nominal consideration, the latter includes FRV provision of resourcing under the Secondment Agreement).⁷⁹

The Government submission stated that 2024–25, CFA 'received income of around \$72 million (15%) relating to services received free of charge from FRV, to meet the cost of a defined number of staff for specific senior operational roles'.⁸⁰

The submission stated that 'CFA's total revenue and income from transactions have increased from \$430.57 million in 2021–22 to \$477.41 million in 2024–25'.⁸¹ In addition, that 'since the 2025–26 Budget, additional budget supplementation of \$11.61 million has been approved by Government for CFA in 2025–26'.⁸²

The Committee notes that the original CFA response to questions on notice reportedly stated that between 2022 and 2025 the CFA sought \$330.57 million in additional funding but only \$117.95 million was approved, and that this information was removed from the later version. It also reportedly removed CFA concerns that fire station delivery under the Community Safety Building Authority was up to three to four times more costly than equivalent CFA station builds.

The VFBV submission outlined an aspect of CFA funding, the 'general-purpose grants' which it said mainly relates 'to operational funding as opposed to "Specific purpose" funding which is accounted for separately and mainly relates to joint agency program funding'.⁸³ It further stated that 'in four of the 5 five years, CFA general purpose grant funding has decreased year on year'.⁸⁴ It noted an increase in this funding for 2025 of \$24 million was primarily taken up [by] increased workforce costs and consultancy and contractor fees, as a result 'the increase in general purpose funding was not noticeable to CFA volunteers'.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 79–80.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., p. 80.

⁸³ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 49.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

The VFBV also stated that funding has appeared stable in recent years, with a slight increase between 2021 and 2024–25. However, because of the cumulative 19.2% of consumer price index inflation over the same period, the real value of the CFA grants has declined.⁸⁶

The VFBV expressed concern about the CFA's funding arrangements in the context of increased operational demands, with an '11% increase in incidents in 2024/25 financial year, and a 18% increase the year before that'.⁸⁷ In addition, the VFBV said that the CFA has an ageing fleet of operational firefighting vehicles, which they characterised as 'a staggering 43% of CFA Pumpers and Tankers aged beyond their useful and design life putting firefighters at risk and reducing the capability in the field'.⁸⁸

The Committee considers that the scale of any difference between funding sought and funding approved is directly relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference concerning CFA funding, equipment, appliances, recruitment and retention. The Committee further considers that this information should be transparent where it goes to operational readiness and the capacity of the CFA to protect communities.

The Victorian Government submission gave an overview of the funding for capital works, including new trucks, equipment and station upgrades. This included:

- over \$200 million across the last four financial years in additional asset investment, including CFA infrastructure (predominantly new station builds or upgrades), and for CFA to replace its digital radios
- \$18.36 million asset and \$2.43 million output over five years in the 2025–26 State Budget to deliver stations at Wendouree, Hampton Park, Hoddles Creek, Winnindoo, Dartmoor, Leitchville, Kinglake West, Raywood and Yarram
- a share of the \$53.06 million over four years for the 'Further supporting our emergency services and volunteers' initiative, which built on the \$200 million announced in the 2024–25 Budget Update for the 'Supporting our emergency services volunteers' initiative. This funding will help support CFA to replace its existing fleet by providing \$10 million per annum for fleet replacement.⁸⁹

The Committee was unable to ascertain how this government funding compares with what is required by the CFA or what they have requested from government.

In their submission, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria claimed there has been an 11,000 reduction in volunteers, and that single cab tankers expose firefighters.

A further submission from Mr John Cameron analysed the CFA budgets and claimed a 29% reduction in paid staff and a 30% decrease in budget in real terms over the decade to 2024–25. It also claimed that ageing tankers were grounded during the

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

⁸⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 80–81.

January 2026 bushfires and need replacing (some more than 30 years old). Further, that roadsides now have hazardous fuel levels which the CFA used to address, but is now hampered by excessive central control and bureaucratic inertia.⁹⁰

Information contained in answers to questions on notice received from the CFA on 4 June 2026 stated the cost of building new stations under the CSBA is 3–4 times more than equivalent CFA-delivered projects and that CFA built an average of 29 stations annually before the transfer to CSBA that averages approximately two stations annually.

Information contained in answers to questions on notice received from the CFA on 4 June 2026 also stated that the CFA is significantly under resourced with seconded staff, particularly in Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Commander positions.

The operational performance of the CFA during the 2026 summer fires, including the performance of its fleet, is discussed in Chapter 5.

2.6.2 Fire Rescue Victoria's funding arrangements

Like the CFA, FRV is funded primarily from grant payments via the DJCS. According to the Victorian Government submission, 'these grant payments include new initiative funding from the annual Budget, budget supplementation released in year, and annual base funding'.⁹¹ Other sources of revenue include grant payments through other departments and own source revenue.⁹²

In 2024–25, FRV received 95% of its \$1.189 billion income from through grant payments from DJCS. In addition, \$41 million was recognised for the 'sale of goods and services including fire suppression equipment sales and servicing and road accident rescue'.⁹³

The rate of FRV's grant funding from DJCS has averaged 'nearly \$1 billion each year from 2021–22 to 2024–25' although the funding increased year on year since 2021–22.⁹⁴

The combined submission from the UFU, CFA Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance addressed the funding of FRV in discussing its fleet replacement program. In its submission, UFU, CFA Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance stated that the program was 'progressively defunded through successive state budget cycles with the Victorian Government substituting predictable annual investment with ad hoc, one-off capital allocations'.⁹⁵ It further stated that a 'failure to maintain a rolling replacement program has produced 'a fleet crisis of significant scale'⁹⁶ with

⁹⁰ John Cameron, *Submission 244*, p. 22

⁹¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 81–82.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 82.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ UFU, CFAV and AVA, *Submission 449*, p. 16.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

'65 per cent of FRV's fleet (138 of approximately 213 trucks) were past their service life'.⁹⁷ The submission noted that 'some vehicles up to 35 years old are still responding to emergencies across Victoria'.⁹⁸

The Victorian Government submitted that the 2025–26 Budget provided \$57.44 million in new initiative funding for FRV including:

- \$40.00 million asset over 4 years under the Fire Rescue Victoria – rolling fleet replacement program initiative for replacement of heavy pumpers and ladder platform appliances.
- \$17.44 million output funding over 3 years under the Better protecting Fire Rescue Victoria from cyber security threats initiative for the continuation of improvements to FRV's cyber security.

Supplementation is also expected at year-end for the direct costs of Emergency Response for the season.⁹⁹

The adequacy of FRV funding and the issues relating to its fleet during the operational response to the 2025–26 summer fires is discussed in Chapter 5.

2.6.3 Forest Fire Management Victoria's funding arrangements

FFMVic is funded under DEECA's Fire and Emergency Management output, which receives annual base funding through the state budget process. This is supplemented each year by funding for urgent and seasonal needs.¹⁰⁰ As the needs for seasonal funding are not known beforehand, 'the operational costs for responding to bushfires are funded via supplementation after the end of the bushfire season each year'.¹⁰¹

As noted in Section 2.2.4, FFMVic works with over 500 forest management contractors, who support fire management programs. The forest contractor program has been funded by a \$362.3 million investment over five years.¹⁰²

FFMVic also has an aviation contract to provide additional capability to suppress fires. This is partially funded by the National Aerial Firefighting Centre, which is conducted via a resource management agreement with other states and territories.¹⁰³ This includes access to a contracted fleet of 54 aircraft, plus more than an additional 100 available on call. Aircrafts are strategically located across the state to facilitate an urgent response.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 82–83.

¹⁰² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 83.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 84.

2.6.4 The Emergency Services Volunteer Fund

The Emergency Services Volunteer Fund (ESVF) replaced the Fire Services Property Levy on 1 July 2025. It is an annual property levy that is collected via council rates that applies to residential, commercial, industrial, primary production and public benefit properties.¹⁰⁴

The former Fire Services Property Levy was enacted in 2013, following a recommendation from the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission which examined the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. The recommendation was that funding to fire services from levies added onto insurance premiums and passed onto the Government, be replaced with a property-based levy, paid by property owners via their council rates bills.¹⁰⁵

The Victorian Government submission noted that the ESVF supports a broader range of emergency services than the previous Fire Services Property Levy. This includes:

- Fire Rescue Victoria
- Country Fire Authority
- Victoria State Emergency Service
- Triple Zero Victoria
- Emergency Management Victoria
- Forest Fire Management Victoria
- State Control Centre.¹⁰⁶

All funds collected through the ESVF are legislated to contribute to Victoria's emergency services only. Volunteers from the CFA, VICSES and the Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad can apply for a rebate on their Emergency Services Volunteer Fund charge on their principal place of residence or farm. However, the Committee heard evidence that not all volunteers are eligible to receive the rebate.

In its submission, the VFBV stated that the ESVF was harming volunteer morale, stating that the inclusion of 'volunteers' in the name of the new Fund unfairly tied volunteers to the ESVF.¹⁰⁷ It further stated that of the ten agencies to be funded, only two (CFA and VICSES) were volunteer, and would account for less than one-quarter of the total funding collected.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ State Revenue Office Victoria, *Emergency Services Volunteer Fund*, <<https://www.sro.vic.gov.au/owning-property/emergency-services-and-volunteers-fund>> accessed 19 June 2026.

¹⁰⁵ Kim Wells MP, Treasurer, Fire Services Property Levy Bill 2012, 30 August 2012, Second Reading, Hansard, Legislative Assembly, p. 3883.

¹⁰⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁷ VFBV, *Submission 408*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

At a public hearing, Adam Barnett, CEO of VFBV told the Committee that the ESVF was causing friction within brigades, stating '... with the emergency services tax. It is a disproportionate impact on those that, you know, are contributing a very large part of the service'.¹⁰⁹

Mr Heffernan was asked at a public hearing whether the ESVF had impacted volunteer membership numbers. He noted that while there was a diversity of views on the issue, the volunteer membership was stable:

It is fair to say that the introduction of the emergency services and volunteers levy had a widescale impact upon our membership, with a dichotomy of views across all of our membership. When we look at the data in terms of people leaving our organisation across the last couple of years, in addition to people coming in – noting that we typically see an increase in numbers after large-scale emergencies, so putting that to the side – we are still running as average.¹¹⁰

The Committee heard substantial evidence that the ESVF became a highly divisive issue across regional Victoria. The levy prompted widespread public opposition, including rallies, protests and advocacy campaigns involving farmers, CFA volunteers, SES members and local communities.

At the Quantong hearing, Martin Colbert from the West Wimmera Action Group spoke about the impact of the ESVF on primary producers:

So what happens when farmer X has got Y dollars in his budget to spend on insurance, then he gets hit with the ESVF, which is a disproportionate tax from state government, is that he or she decides, 'I've got less money to spend on insurance.' So immediately their property becomes less insured, because farming has a razor-sharp margin at best. The first thing that gets less insurance is fences – and you have seen plenty of burnt fences today.¹¹¹

In their submission, Protect Our Farms outlined their strong objection and calls to scrap the tax:

POF's strongly oppose the so called Emergency Services and Volunteer Fund. The so called "Levy". Only a small fraction of the funds raised will support Emergency Service Volunteers. We regard this as a cynical exercise in Cost Shifting, with the additional burden of a new Tax disproportionately focused on Farmers and the Business Community. It is a fundamental responsibility of Government to protect all citizens and much of the so-called Emergency Services that were originally funded through normal Budget processes have been switched to this so-called Levy.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Adam Barnett, Chief Executive Officer, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Jason Heffernan, Chief Fire Officer, CFA, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

¹¹¹ Martin Colbert, Treasurer, West Wimmera Action Group, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38.

¹¹² Protect our Farms, *Submission 190*, p. 4.

2.7 Issues pertaining to CFA's responses to Questions on Notice and additional questions

At a hearing of this Inquiry on 1 May 2026, the CFA took a series of Questions on Notice. There were four questions asked by Committee members. Following the hearing, a further 34 additional questions were posed in writing by Committee member Wendy Lovell.

The responses to these questions were due on 8 June 2026.

On 4 June 2026 the CFA provided a document responding to the Questions on Notice and additional questions. On 5 June the CFA followed up claiming that the document had been sent in error, and requested to recall the document. An extension was sought until 11 June 2026.

In correspondence to EMV dated 11 June 2026, the CFA stated that it did not consider the 4 June response contained material that would give rise to a claim of executive privilege.

Despite this, the CFA told EMV that the response could not be provided to the Committee until it had been reviewed by the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS), the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office (VGSO), and a Cabinet Committee. In response, EMV clarified that it would only need to go to a Cabinet Committee if they were unable to resolve the executive privilege concerns themselves.

EMV coordinated this review process in its role as the lead agency. A revised document responding to the Questions on Notice and additional questions was supplied on 30 June 2026. The responses in the second version were significantly more concise than in the first version. Some information relating to funding requests and concerns about infrastructure delivery that was included in the first version did not appear in the second version. All but two of the questions were altered in one form or another between versions.

Along with the second response, CFA CEO Greg Leach advised the Committee that the second version should be taken as the CFA's official response, and that the first version should not be relied upon and disregarded because it contained material that:

- would be factually contested.
- references Cabinet and executive privilege considerations;¹¹³ and
- had not been validated or approved by the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Officer, or the CFA Board.

¹¹³ Executive privilege is the term given to the exemption claimed by Government for information requests by Parliament, where the information may be broadly prejudicial to the public interest (Victorian Government, *Guidelines for appearing before and producing documents to Victorian inquiries*, Appendix A: Executive Privilege, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/guidelines-appearing-and-producing-documents-victorian-inquiries>> accessed 10 July 2026.)

On 2 July 2026 the Committee wrote to the CFA asking for an explanation for the variance between the two versions, and requested answers as to which specific responses were factually inaccurate, violated executive privilege or were not approved by senior leadership including the board.

Also on 2 July 2026 the Committee published email correspondence it had received from the CFA and EMV between 4 June and 30 June 2026. Any attachments to these emails were not published at the time.

Within these emails, it was shown that the questions submitted to the Committee on 4 June had been provided to Emergency Management Victoria to coordinate a review. As part of this review the questions were sent to the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office for review for content that could be the subject of executive privilege.

On 6 July 2026 Mr Leach responded to the Committee. This response reiterated the reasons the first version of the response should not be relied upon, but did not meet the Committee's specific request for a question-by-question explanation of the changes made.

The Committee sought advice from the Clerk of the Legislative Council and was advised that it is open to the Committee to decline that request and accept and publish the original response. Following this response, on 6 July 2026 the Committee resolved to publish both versions of CFA responses, along with the correspondence of 2 July and 6 July.

The Committee's disappointment over these matters should not be read as a reflection of the hardworking CFA volunteers and officials for their efforts in responding to the 2026 summer bushfires. It is this Committee's earnest view that none of the issues explored in this section should detract from focus on the fires, the response, relief and recovery efforts, and the voices of fire-affected communities that are contained within this report.

2.7.1 Inappropriate disclosure of information to the Weekly Times

At 10:41am on 6 July 2026 an article was published on the website of the Weekly Times. The article referenced the email correspondence which had been published by the Committee on 2 July 2026. However it also made references to the content of the first and second CFA responses. It described in brief detail content which was not in the public domain, and also made reference to the comparative page length of the responses, which was also not in the public domain.

This was information which would not be published by the Committee until the evening of 6 July 2026. On that basis the Committee is concerned that an inappropriate disclosure was made whereby confidential information was released to a journalist.

The ability for parliamentary committees to weigh confidential evidence without interference is a fundamental privilege of the Parliament, and underpins the ability of committees to perform their roles effectively. If it is proven that an individual

improperly conveyed confidential information, this would constitute a serious breach of the Legislative Council Standing Orders.

Standing Order 23.17 reads:

Disclosure of submissions, evidence and other documents

- (1) A committee may authorise the publication of any documents, papers and submissions presented to it.
- (2) Evidence not taken in public and any documents, papers and submissions received by the committee which have not been authorised for publication will not be disclosed unless they have been reported to the Council.¹¹⁴

The Committee resolved to conduct its own inquiries into how the confidential information was disclosed to the Weekly Times. The outcome of these inquiries were inconclusive. This should therefore not be interpreted as alleging an act of wrongdoing on the part of the CFA, any individual Committee member, or any other party.

2.7.2 Other matters for noting

The Committee notes serious concern that the CFA's initial response to questions on notice was materially more detailed, candid and operationally specific than the later version provided to the Inquiry. The CFA's original 33-page response was replaced by an 18-page version after consultation with government and departmental officials, with more than 5,000 words removed. The material removed or substantially softened included detailed information on CFA funding shortfalls, staffing and command vacancies, the cost of fire station builds, and criticisms of the CFA/FRV secondment model.

This raises significant issues of transparency and accountability. The Committee considers that the differences between the CFA's original and revised responses warrant consideration by the Government, the Inspector-General for Emergency Management and the Parliament, particularly where those changes concern emergency service capability, resourcing and public safety.

¹¹⁴ Legislative Council Standing Orders, 2026, Standing Order 23.17.

Chapter 3

Preparedness settings

3.1 Introduction

Victoria entered the 2025–26 fire season under a clear warning. Forecasts identified elevated and regionally uneven bushfire risk.¹ The emergency management sector brought its preparedness timetable forward by two months.² Additional funding was directed to workforce, aviation, firefighting water, intelligence and other seasonal capability.³ The state had time to prepare, and substantial work was done.

Government and emergency management agencies described a substantial program brought forward, funded and checked before summer.⁴ This Chapter tests that account against evidence from hearings and submissions. It considers what had been done, and whether local capability, access, infrastructure and responsibility were visible in the statewide preparedness account before the season began. Volunteer numbers, fleet age, command depth, communications, roadside management, local water access and household planning could not be remade in a single fire season.

The Chapter is concerned with readiness before the fires. Evidence from the response period is used only where it reveals a capability, dependency or constraint that already existed when the season began. Chapter 5 examines the operational response to the 2026 summer fires.

3.2 The fire risk outlook for the 2025–26 fire season

By Spring 2025, Victoria's fire risk was clear enough to change the state's preparations. Bureau of Meteorology (the Bureau) forecasts, the Seasonal Bushfire Outlook and agency analysis pointed to elevated fire potential across western, central and northern Victoria and south-west Gippsland. Agencies could not predict where an ignition would occur. Agencies did identify the districts where risk was higher, and that the conditions were likely to make fire harder to control.

¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 47.

² Tim Wiebusch ESM, Emergency Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 47.

⁴ Ibid.

3.2.1 The risk profile entering summer

Bushfire risk is shaped by weather, fuel, terrain and suppression capacity. Rainfall and temperature affect how fuel grows and dries. Terrain affects how fire moves. Suppression capacity affects whether a fire can be found, reached and contained before it escalates.

Victoria entered the fire season after prolonged warmth and rainfall deficits across substantial parts of the state. The Bureau advised that 2025 was Victoria's eighth-warmest year on record, and in some districts, dryness extended across multiple years.⁵ Spring rain complicated that picture. It replenished surface moisture and produced new grass growth without fully relieving the deeper dryness beneath it. Agencies expected that the new growth would dry rapidly once hotter and drier weather returned, leaving continuous fine fuel across farms, roadsides and peri-urban land.⁶ The Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) consequently identified significant grassfire potential through western and central Victoria, where a fast-moving fire could leave little time for warning or first attack.⁷

Climate change and the 2025–26 fire season

The Bureau placed those conditions within a longer trend. It reported that Australia had warmed by 1.59 degrees since 1910 and linked that warming to more frequent extreme fire weather and longer fire seasons across large parts of the country.⁸ Numerous submissions identified climate change as a key contributor to the conditions that led to the 2026 Victorian bushfires, including through heatwaves, lightning, drying of the landscape and longer fire seasons. Longer seasons extend the period in which crews, aircraft and control centres must remain ready. They also reduce the mild-weather windows for planned burning and increase pressure on water resources.

Under the Intergovernmental Agreement, the Bureau provides forecasts and warnings on weather conditions likely to give rise to bushfires. The responsibility for bushfire preparation and actual bushfire warnings lies with the state and territory emergency and fire agencies including the determination of the fire danger ratings. The Bureau collaborates closely with these agencies to enhance preparation and informed decision-making and assists with disaster preparation and resilience programs.⁹ The Bureau can improve its service by providing long term data on minimum, maximum and average daily, monthly and yearly values for relative humidity and wind speed like it does now for temperature.

⁵ Matthew Collopy, General Manager, Environmental Prediction Services, Bureau of Meteorology, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 79.

⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 47.

⁷ Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council, *Submission 288*, p. 5.

⁸ Matthew Collopy, General Manager, Environmental Prediction Services, Bureau of Meteorology, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 79.

⁹ Bureau of Meteorology, *Submission 265*, p. 6.

Multiple submissions, including from Friends of the Earth Melbourne, Doctors for the Environment Australia, and Climate Action Team Colac Otway, argued that the 2026 bushfires reinforced the need to take stronger action on climate change by transitioning away from fossil fuels.

FINDING 2: Climate change is a key contributor to bushfire conditions and is contributing to the frequency and intensity of bushfires in the state.

3

3.2.2 Forecasts and seasonal outlooks

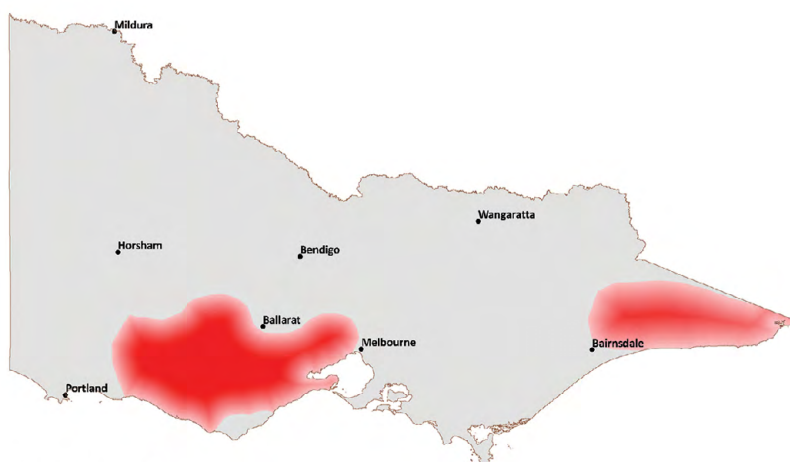
The Bureau reports high levels of accuracy for next-day temperature and wind forecasts.¹⁰ Those performance figures describe the system as a whole. Local fireground conditions can be harder to predict. The Bureau combines fixed and portable weather stations, radar and satellite systems and numerical models, but topography and interaction between fire and the atmosphere may produce winds or temperatures that are not recorded at the nearest station.¹¹ Seasonal and shorter-range forecasts could therefore set the wider posture, while observations and fire behaviour analysis continue to guide decisions around an active fire. Recent AFAC outlooks show that elevated fire potential had recurred across parts of Victoria over several summers.

¹⁰ Bureau of Meteorology, responses to questions on notice received 4 June 2026, p. 1.

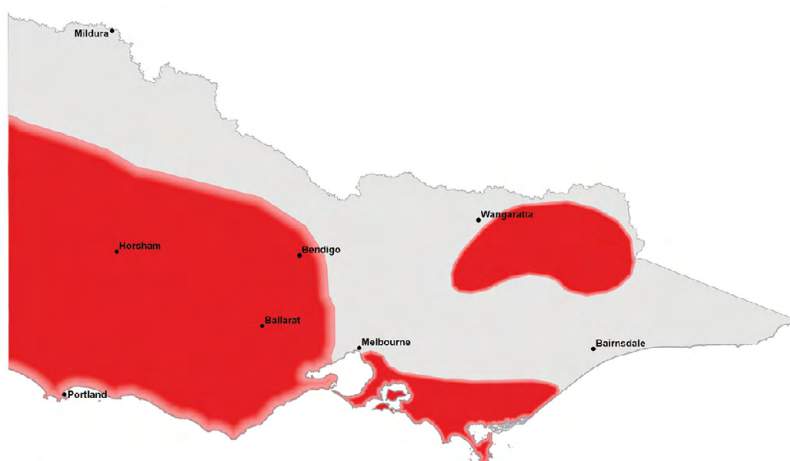
¹¹ Ibid., p. 4.

Figure 3.1 Australasian Fire Authorities Council Seasonal Bushfire Outlook for Victoria, 2023, 2024 and 2025

Summer 2023



Summer 2024



Summer 2025



■ Increased risk of fire

Note: The maps compare the spatial distribution of areas identified as having increased fire risk across the three most recent summer outlooks for Victoria.

Source: Australian and New Zealand Council for fire and emergency services, *Seasonal Bushfire Outlook*, <<https://www.afac.com.au/seasonal-outlook>> accessed 21 July 2026.

3.2.3 From risk intelligence to preparedness

The outlook changed the timetable and scale of preparation. Tim Wiebusch, Emergency Management Commissioner at Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) told the Committee that widespread areas of increased fire potential prompted the sector to bring its annual program forward by two months, with relevant activities to be completed by 1 October 2025.¹² As the longer range forecasts firmed, the Government approved an \$80 million seasonal package of preparedness spending, including \$65.79 million for Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action of Victoria (DEECA) preparations and \$9.5 million for the Country Fire Authority (CFA) water capacity.¹³ The uses of that funding are examined in Section 3.4.

The forecasts did not reveal where the first fire would start. Forecasting did establish when the state needed to be ready, which districts required closer attention and why additional staff, aircraft and water were sought before summer.

FINDING 3: Victoria entered the 2025–26 fire season with clear and timely intelligence of elevated bushfire risk, providing a basis for bringing preparedness activity forward.

3.3 Sector preparedness framework

The outlook did not result in a new preparedness system but brought forward the work of the existing one. Victoria's formal preparedness framework describes readiness through 21 core capabilities and five supporting elements: people, resources, governance, systems and processes.¹⁴ For 2025–26, those arrangements were applied through five seasonal priorities set for the higher risk weather season, outlined in Table 3.1.

¹² Tim Wiebusch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹³ Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, pp. 13–14.

¹⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 25.

Table 3.1 2025–26 seasonal priorities

2025–26 priority	Preparedness focus
Timely, tailored and relevant warnings and information	Information capable of supporting timely decisions by communities and agencies
Evacuation and shelter-in-place arrangements	Arrangements for movement, refuge and last-resort safety before conditions deteriorated
Flexibility in readiness arrangements	Capacity to adjust posture, staffing and resources as risk changed across the season
Effective use of resources to maximise the available resource pool	Coordination of personnel, aircraft, plant, control centres and other operational resources
Community consequence and relief	Preparation for the immediate effects of fire on communities and the relief needs likely to follow

Source: Adapted from the Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 47.

The priorities extended the preseason program beyond suppression. Agencies were required to consider what communities would be told, how people might move or shelter, how staffing and resources would change with the risk, and what relief would be needed if fire reached homes, farms or essential services. Training, exercises, audits, doctrine review, cross-border meetings and sector briefings gave those priorities a program of work before the height of the summer season.¹⁵ The heightened outlook was converted into priorities, assigned work and readiness checks.

The Emergency Management Commissioner also required agencies to attest that they could discharge their responsibilities under the State Emergency Management Plan. These attestations followed audits of control centres and community fire refuges, preparedness briefings and exercises, aircraft readiness work, doctrine review and the accreditation or renewal of Level 3 incident-management personnel.¹⁶

The attestation process gave the Emergency Management Commissioner a structured basis for judgement, but this level of detail was not provided to the Committee. EMV advised that the CFA had indicated that it could meet its obligations under the State Emergency Management Plan, subject to qualifications that were not disclosed to the Committee.¹⁷

In response to questions on notice, the Fire Services Implementation Monitor stated that its work had principally examined whether implementation actions had been completed and would now turn more closely to their efficacy.¹⁸ The Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) similarly assessed completed actions against their stated terms and the documentary material supplied by the responsible organisation.¹⁹ A ‘completion’ status may therefore establish that a review was conducted, a process

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 47–48.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Emergency Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 32.

¹⁸ Fire Services Implementation Monitor, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 3.

¹⁹ Inspector-General of Emergency Management, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 2.

created or a system introduced, but it does not demonstrate that the underlying capability problem has been resolved.

Victoria entered the season with an accelerated preparedness program, formal checks and agency attestations. Those arrangements supported a sector-level judgement of readiness. However, they did not provide the Committee with a complete or independently testable account of the material qualifications, unresolved capability issues or regional limits that remained before summer.

FINDING 4: Victoria's emergency management sector completed a formal preparedness program before the 2025–26 fire season.

FINDING 5: The Country Fire Authority's readiness attestation to Emergency Management Victoria was qualified, but the content of those qualifications and the measures taken in response were not disclosed to the Committee.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That Emergency Management Victoria publish annual regional readiness statements before each fire season, addressing workforce, fleet, water supply, communications, local capability and relief arrangements to better understand and respond to each region's needs.

3.4 Operational preparedness

The heightened outlook brought forward operational preparations across the fire sector. Seasonal recruitment began earlier, aircraft and water resources were positioned, detection and intelligence capability was strengthened, and regional teams advanced their own readiness programs.

Regional evidence showed that this work reached local planning. Scott Turner, Director of Forest and Fire Operations Barwon South West at DEECA told the Committee that his region brought forward seasonal crews, updated response plans and ensured fire towers were operational.²⁰

The uplift was real. Its limits appeared in the evidence about the system already in place before the summer. This section considers operational preparedness before the fires. Chapter 5 considers the adequacy of the operational response once fires had started.

²⁰ Scott Turner, Director, Forest and Fire Operations, Barwon South West, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

3.4.1 Firefighting resources and pre-positioning

Resources brought forward

The principal seasonal uplift was funded through an \$80 million package of additional funding sought by the fire management sector once the longer-range outlook became clearer.²¹ DEECA received an additional \$65.79 million allocation to enhance its preparedness activities, which supported:

- earlier recruitment and an expanded operational workforce, including an additional 130 seasonal firefighters
- personal protective equipment, training and medical assessments
- earlier activation of aircraft, airbases and crews, together with additional retardant
- pre-positioning, standby, detection and surge arrangements for first attack
- earlier activation and increased readiness of vehicles, plant, maintenance capacity and spare parts
- intelligence and operational systems, including remotely piloted aircraft
- patrols, compliance activity, community campaigns and fire tower operation
- additional rappel personnel, training and equipment.²²

The funding operated across the chain of initial attack rather than through aviation alone. It strengthened the capacity to detect a fire, position and dispatch resources, sustain aircraft and plant, and support specialist crews before an ignition developed into a larger incident.

DEECA distinguished this seasonal allocation from the base funding used to maintain year-round capability. In response to questions on notice, DEECA stated that the Treasurer's Advances allowed the state to respond to ongoing drought and the severe seasonal outlook – conditions whose cost could not be resolved through the ordinary budget process.²³ The model gave agencies flexibility. It also left unresolved whether these costs were exceptional to 2025–26 or are becoming a regular feature of longer and more severe fire seasons.

Aircraft were the most visible part of the uplift, providing firebombing, aerial supervision and intelligence. Earlier activation and pre-positioning allowed them to reach emerging fires sooner. Their effect still depended on ground crew to contain the perimeter, roads and plans to gain access, water to sustain operations and command arrangements capable of providing direction.²⁴

²¹ Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary, Bushfire and Forest Services, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

²² Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, pp. 13–14.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 39–40.

Officials confirmed to the Committee that the additional funding provided to fire management sector matched the amount sought. When asked about the quantum of DEECA's additional funding request and the amount provided, Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary Bushfire and Forest Services at DEECA told the Committee that DEECA had 'requested \$80 million and were provided \$80 million across the fire agencies'.²⁵

The adequacy of resources deployed for the operational response to the 2026 summer fires is discussed in Chapter 5.

3.4.2 Volunteer and workforce capability

Seasonal recruitment and workforce sustainability

Victoria's firefighting workforce entered the 2025–26 season with substantial formal preparation behind it. The Government submission identified recruitment, training, briefings, accreditation panels and readiness activities across the emergency management sector.²⁶ For the CFA, that included member training, preseason briefings and community engagement activity; for Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic), it included seasonal recruitment, firefighter accreditation, rosters, fitness and medical testing, incident control arrangements and regional readiness planning.²⁷

Regional Forest Fire Management Victoria evidence was consistent with the statewide account. In the Otways, Mr Turner told the Committee that an additional 22 seasonal forest fire operations officers were brought in ahead of summer and used across autumn and spring burning, rehabilitation and response work.²⁸ He described the seasonal workforce as 'extremely agile', with personnel moving across Victoria as conditions required.²⁹

The long-term workforce picture was more difficult to read. In response to questions on notice, DEECA stated that 53 DEECA staff, who held emergency management roles, left through organisational change while 54 frontline Forest and Fire Operations Officer positions were created.³⁰ Those categories are not equivalent, and the figures do not show whether the departing experience was replaced in the same roles or regions.

As at 6 January 2026, there were 2222 DEECA staff with an emergency management role.³¹ DEECA also established a three-year framework through which former employees – including Level 3 Incident Controllers and senior commanders – could

²⁵ Kelly Crosthwaite, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

²⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 47–48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 115.

²⁸ Scott Turner, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 25.

³¹ Forest Fire Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 4.

return for priority seasonal roles.³² Its use indicates that headcount alone did not answer the need to retain scarce experience.

FFMVic's seasonal recruitment strengthened the paid workforce for the season. The CFA evidence raised a different concern. The local base from which the state draws first crews, brigade leaders and local knowledge had continued to decline.

In relation to the CFA, Adam Barnett, CEO of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) told the Committee that Victoria entered the season with historically low operational volunteer numbers, low morale and declining confidence.³³ Mr Barnett confirmed that the operational membership had fallen by about 11,000 over the previous decade, while VFBV's welfare survey found that fewer than half of respondents felt positive about CFA's future.³⁴

Evidence from CFA volunteers at public hearings in fire affected areas illustrated this decline. Trevor Puls, Captain of the Vasey Brigade described remote 'shed in the paddock brigades' that lack the membership and connection of township or peri-urban brigades.³⁵ He told the Committee that those brigades are structurally different and that many did not participate in programs such as Get Fire Ready. He conveyed the dilemma facing a volunteer who no longer felt valued. He stated: 'There are many things in life I must do, but I do not have to be a volunteer.'³⁶

The older profile of CFA volunteers was also raised, with volunteer Lester Mayberry raising concerns about a lack of younger recruits and succession planning: 'The CFA has lost members, especially the younger ones, I believe to the extent of one to two generations. Where is our succession plan with that?'.³⁷

The changing nature of the workforce and resultant pressures on the time volunteers and prospective volunteers are able to provide is a trend which is being observed across all Australian jurisdictions, and beyond.

Figure 3.2 from the VFBV submission shows the decline in operational volunteers from 2011 to 2025.

³² Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 15.

³³ Adam Barnett, Chief Executive Officer, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, p. 58.

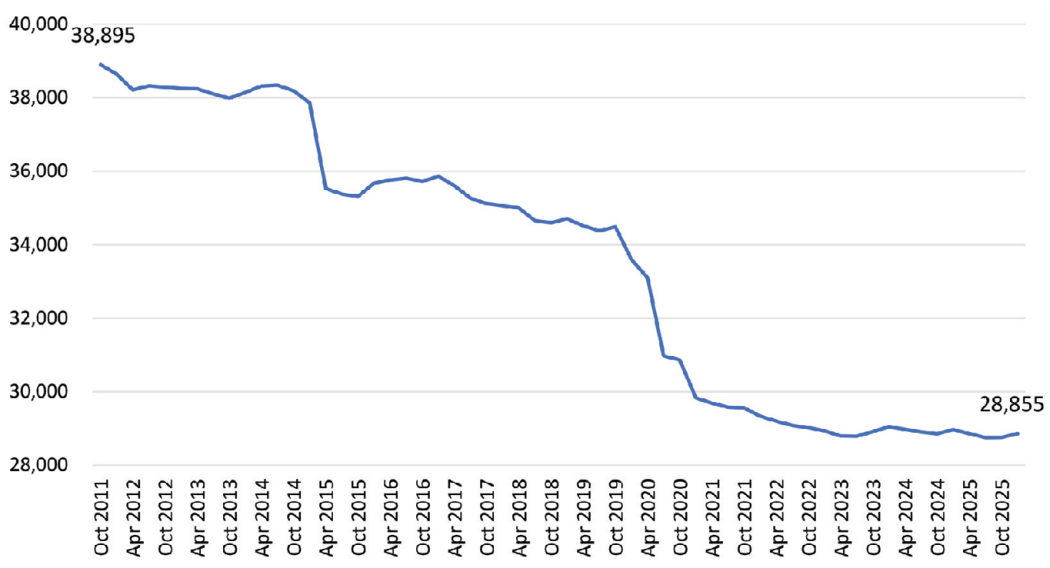
³⁴ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 109.

³⁵ Trevor Puls, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁷ Lester Mayberry, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

Figure 3.2 Total Operational CFA Volunteers, October 2021–2025



Source: Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 71.

VFBV argued that the CFA ‘does not have a recruitment problem per se – but rather a retention problem’.³⁸ It cited an ongoing high interest among Victorians to volunteer with the CFA, who have an interest in volunteering at a ‘for purpose’ organisation.³⁹

Recruitment interest did not settle the preparedness issue. VFBV’s evidence was that prospective volunteers could still be lost through slow induction, inaccessible training, administrative burden or reluctance to accept leadership. Those matters are taken up in the next section. The adequacy of volunteer numbers in the operational response to the 2026 summer fires is addressed in Chapter 5.

At the Harcourt public hearing, Cam Walker from Friends of the Earth Melbourne, spoke about the need to expand the remote area firefighting team into metro Melbourne:

This summer saw the first ever deployment of a volunteer arduous/remote area firefighting team within the CFA. This is a welcome development. We must continue to expand the arduous/remote area firefighting capacity within CFA to explicitly recruit new members from urban areas that are outside CFA brigade catchment areas.⁴⁰

³⁸ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 71.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Friends of the Earth, *Submission 207*, p. 2.

The Protect our Farms submission highlighted that volunteers are the backbone of the CFA and SES in Victoria, and referred to a ‘very ponderous and time-consuming recruitment process that is limiting the ability of the CFA to attract new volunteers.’⁴¹ They stated:

Volunteer numbers are particularly relevant in rural communities. Many smaller brigades need increased numbers of operational firefighters to have the ability for a sustained emergency event. Many of these brigades are in areas that are actually growing in population, but the new residents are unaware that they have an unrecognised responsibility to provide mutual protection and support for the community in which they live (there are many ways in which this can be delivered). These small local brigades are critical in the early suppression of fires (time critical). Also, these brigades supply much of the surge capacity of the CFA in major emergency events. Therefore, a statewide, centralised Volunteer recruitment campaign is urgently required. Coupled with a new and streamlined volunteer induction process that is more volunteer friendly.⁴²

FINDING 6: The number of Country Fire Authority operational volunteers has declined by 26% over the past decade. While there is continued strong community interest in joining the Country Fire Authority, including from young people, challenges remain in volunteer retention.

FINDING 7: The Committee recognises that employers, particularly in regional communities, play a crucial role in supporting emergency service volunteers by enabling employees to participate in bushfire response and recovery activities.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government work with the Country Fire Authority to develop and fund a volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Emergency Management Commissioner commission an external review of volunteering at the Country Fire Authority to understand the drivers of declining volunteer numbers and to identify process and cultural improvements at the Country Fire Authority to help increase volunteer recruitment and retention.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government consider expanding Country Fire Authority volunteer recruitment by establishing specialist firefighting teams similar to other states, to attract metropolitan volunteers, including metropolitan residents with appropriate outdoor skills, thereby increasing Victoria’s bushfire response capability.

⁴¹ Protect our Farms, *Submission 109*, p. 23.

⁴² Ibid., p. 24.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government that it ensure workplace settings are conducive to supporting volunteering, including consideration of inclusion of employment protection of volunteers in the National Employment Standards.

3.4.3 Training and incident management capability

Seasonal recruitment strengthened FFMVic for the summer. CFA evidence pointed to volunteers being lost before they became experienced firefighters, brigade leaders or incident-management personnel.

The Government submission recorded substantial CFA preseason training activity. In the 12 months leading up to December 2025, more than 10,750 members took part in 1,418 courses, including general and urban firefighting.⁴³ Training for the 2025–26 season was delivered at scale, and several witnesses acknowledged improvements in recent years. VFBV’s submission, for example, stated that CFA training had ‘significantly improved in recent years’.⁴⁴

In supplementary evidence provided to the Committee, VFBV distinguished between interest in joining and the retention of an operational volunteer workforce, noting that ‘following each major fire season, thousands of community members express an interest in becoming a CFA volunteer’.⁴⁵

However, it contended that delays in recruitment and induction, inaccessible training, administrative burden, inadequate facilities and declining confidence prevented that interest from being converted into sustained operational membership.⁴⁶ Initial interest did not guarantee operational membership.

The access, flexibility and practical fit of training was criticised. VFBV submitted that volunteers remained dissatisfied with training arrangements, particularly the availability of courses at times, locations and in formats that make it easy for them to participate.⁴⁷ It identified lengthy courses, excessive theory, inflexible scheduling and limited consultation on timing and location.⁴⁸

This sentiment was reinforced by regional witnesses. In Colac, Lachlan Sutherland, Deputy Group Officer (Corangamite) of the CFA described members travelling 2 or 3 hours to attend courses that were not always offered at times compatible with work or shift patterns.⁴⁹ He noted that training packages and programs have ‘become

⁴³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 76.

⁴⁴ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, response to questions on notice received 8 June 2026, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁹ Lachlan Sutherland, Deputy Group Officer, Corangamite Group, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

quite a bit more extensive than they were five to 10 years ago' and that courses have expanded across several days or evenings.⁵⁰

At the Alexandra hearing, Lachlan Gales, Group Officer at Wangaratta Fire Brigade and a Level 3 Incident Controller, identified a different barrier: joining a brigade and completing training now relies heavily on digital systems that do not suit every prospective member or every form of literacy and learning.⁵¹

The CFA did not dismiss those concerns. Mr Heffernan called training the most contested issue across the organisation's membership and referred to a peer review and that recommendations were being carried through a training enhancement program.⁵² His evidence recognised the breadth of the problem: volunteers want both simpler access to core qualifications and more advanced opportunities, delivered through formats flexible enough to fit a dispersed workforce.⁵³ Mr Heffernan summarised the sentiment, saying that a 'one size fits all does not work'.⁵⁴

The Committee also heard that access to training remains a challenge. Although CFA delivers extensive volunteer training, the organisation identified constraints associated with the secondment model, instructor shortages, limited access to subject matter experts, and the loss of dedicated training infrastructure following the closure of Fiskville. The CFA response to the questions on notice dated 4 June further advised that the centralisation of Incident Management Team training had limited its ability to develop bushfire-focused incident management capability and training pathways suited to volunteers.

The same correspondence reported that the 2025–26 fire season exposed shortages in both command personnel and Incident Management Team capability, with the organisation indicating that enhanced investment in leadership development, training delivery and succession planning is required to support major bushfire events and maintain operational readiness.

Incident management and command depth

Training mattered most where it affected field leadership and incident management roles. VFBV submitted that Victoria had only 57 Level 3 Incident Controllers in July 2025, about one-third of the number built after Black Saturday, and that delays in field leadership training have affected progression to Level 2 and Level 3 incident controller pathways.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Lachlan Sutherland, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

⁵¹ Lachlan Gales, Group Officer, Wangaratta Group, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

⁵² Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 121.

Mr Gales described shortages across a wider group of roles – sector command, operations, planning and logistics – and linked them to the difficulty of qualifying and supporting volunteers through the pathway.⁵⁶ He connected that shortage to training and progression, telling the Committee that people are often brought into roles with good intent but poor preparation, and that training for those roles was increasingly complex and time consuming.⁵⁷

Mr Gales also linked leadership depth to local knowledge. When asked whether volunteers were unable to use local knowledge in higher leadership roles, Mr Gales said there were no formal barriers of which he was aware, but that the barriers lay in ‘achieving the qualifications and being supported through that role to navigate the pathway’.⁵⁸ He said that the way forward was to increase the number of experienced volunteers in incident management roles, because they understood the fireground.

Sean Farrar’s submission provided local grounding for this issue. He explained that a Strike Team Leader course in District 24 was cancelled in November 2025 because one instructor was ill and no replacement could be found, leaving the district’s leadership pipeline empty.⁵⁹

EMV described a formal multiagency pathway in which Level 3 Incident Controllers are trained, coached and mentored, assessed by a multiagency panel, endorsed by the Emergency Management Commissioner and required to renew their accreditation every five years.⁶⁰ Agency heads are required to review endorsed lists at least annually to confirm that personnel remain suitable and capable of performing the role.

Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) reported that, ahead of the season, 33 staff seconded to CFA held a Level 3 incident management accreditation: 28 as Incident Controllers, four in operations and one in planning.⁶¹ A further 16 were on the Level 3 Incident Controller pathway. FRV also noted it had no visibility of seconded staff progressing through other Level 3 pathways, has limited records of Level 2 skills maintenance activity and limited access to the complete set of incident management endorsements held by seconded personnel.⁶²

These figures describe different workforces and cannot be assembled into a reliable statewide total. More importantly, accreditation does not settle availability – an endorsed person may be committed to another incident, unable to leave ordinary duties, geographically distant or unavailable for a sustained deployment. A functioning incident management team also requires the right combination of operations, planning, logistics, intelligence and public information personnel, it is not an Incident Controller operating in isolation.

⁵⁶ Lachlan Gales, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁹ Sean Farrar, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Emergency Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 28.

⁶¹ Fire Rescue Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 3.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 3–4.

The Committee was given a detailed account of the accreditation process and several partial accounts of the people within it, but no consolidated measure of how many complete Level 2 and Level 3 teams the state could staff concurrently and sustain through a prolonged season.

The adequacy of training during the operational phase of the response of the 2026 fires is discussed in Chapter 5.

FINDING 8: The Country Fire Authority delivered training at scale before the season, but course access, duration, location and digital systems can impede the recruitment, qualification and progression of some volunteers.

FINDING 9: Delays in field leadership training affected progression to Level 2 and Level 3 incident controller pathways.

FINDING 10: The Country Fire Authority continues to attract volunteer interest, but prospective volunteers can be lost through slow induction, inaccessible training and administrative burden.

FINDING 11: Access to field leadership training is precarious in some districts. If training courses are cancelled, a rescheduled opportunity is not guaranteed, which may block progression into strike team and incident management roles.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Country Fire Authority liaise with volunteer brigades to improve access to training opportunities. This should include consultation on duration, location and mode of training.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Victorian Government ask the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to review the ways in which local knowledge can be better integrated into incident management teams, including Incident Control Centres, as part of its forthcoming review.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government engage the Fire Services Implementation Monitor to evaluate the secondment arrangements and advise how they could be strengthened within the current framework.

3.4.4 Fleet, equipment and communications systems

Training and accreditation determined who could be sent. Those personnel still needed vehicles, equipment and communications systems fit for the conditions.

The Country Fire Authority fleet

The CFA entered the season with 2,361 emergency response vehicles, including 1961 tankers and 218 pumpers.⁶³ Each was subject to an annual maintenance and fireworthy inspection. The fleet was also being renewed, with 89 trucks delivered in 2025 and 29 ultraheavy tankers completed their rollout. A further 167 vehicles are scheduled over the following two years.⁶⁴

However, the rate of replacement has not kept pace with the age profile. Greg Leach, Chief Executive Officer of the CFA told the Committee that the CFA's asset base is one of the largest emergency response vehicle fleets and accepted that a significant number were older than the organisation's preferred replacement age. He stated:

we have 297 tankers that are over the age of 30 years, and of those, 66 are over the age of 36 years. That is certainly not ideal.⁶⁵

Mr Leach said that this profile rests against a preferred replacement age of 20 years for tankers and 15 for pumpers.

The VFBV contends that the CFA entered the fire season with many tankers older than 30 years and about 650 tankers with single cabs without adequate fire fighter protection and also with a communication system that failed at the Longwood fire.⁶⁶

It further stated that short term preparations within the CFA's control for the fire season were mostly on track, including pre-season briefings, aircraft arrangements, community preparedness, review of endorsements, and preseason training. However, medium- and longer-term preparedness outside of CFA's direct control, there were serious and known deficiencies in the lead up to the 2025–26 Fire Season.⁶⁷

VFBV's broader analysis found that, as at January 2026, 67% of pumpers and 41% of tankers were beyond those designed ages.⁶⁸ Based on its calculations, VFBV stated that the CFA would need to replace about 100 pumpers and tankers each year, at an estimated cost of \$60.48 million annually, simply to prevent the fleet age profile from worsening.⁶⁹ It recommended a 10-year plan to return the fleet to maximum age profiles, annual reporting of fire service fleet profiles and a funded replacement program.

⁶³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 87–88.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Greg Leach, Chief Executive Officer, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁶⁶ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 13.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Adam Barnett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63.

This was supported by evidence from CFA members at regional hearings. In his submission, Sean Farrar stated that that tankers in the Tallangatta group average 26 years of age, with some reaching 33 years, and recommended a mandatory 20-year retirement age for frontline tankers in high-risk rural districts.⁷⁰

At the Harcourt hearing, Adam Paine, First Deputy Group Officer of Mount Alexander CFA told the Committee that after 14 years of advocating for a new truck for his brigade, they were provided with a 36-year-old truck for the fire season.⁷¹ He described it as a valuable second truck, noting that on a major fire day ‘you want as many vehicles on the ground as you can’.⁷² However, he also reported that it was a single-cab appliance, which is ‘nowhere near as safe’ as a crew cab.⁷³

Concerns over fleet age were raised by many witnesses. However, opinion was not unanimous. A captain of a CFA brigade told the Committee, ‘we have one truck. It is 33 years old. We love it. We do not want to get it replaced’.⁷⁴

The CFA entered summer with a large, inspected fleet and new vehicles arriving, but also with a replacement backlog due to a historic lack of government funding.

The impact of the CFA’s ageing fleet in the operational response to the 2026 summer fires will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Single-cab tankers and crew safety

Many single-cab tankers require firefighters to travel behind the driver and crew leader in rear-facing rollover-protection seating, exposed to heat, smoke and weather and separated from much of the radio traffic inside the cab. Some witnesses argued that because of this, single-cab tankers are dangerous and should be replaced.

Mr Barnett told the Committee that single-cab tankers placed part of the crew ‘on the back in the open air facing backwards’ and separated them from the crew leader and driver.⁷⁵ He said crew members in that position could not hear all radio traffic and therefore lost situational awareness. He also referred to exposure to smoke, toxic fumes, heat, cold and weather, stating:

You are breathing in the smoke, the toxic fumes. You are sitting in the sun. And I make this point: they are sitting in fibreglass cocoons. We had to apply through a VESEP grant just to get money to make cushions for them to sit on.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Sean Farrar, *Submission 1*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Adam Paine, First Deputy Group Officer, Mount Alexander group, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Nick Murray, Captain, Upton Hill Brigade, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

⁷⁵ Adam Barnett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 64.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Mr Leach advised the Committee that 802 single-cab tankers remain in the CFA fleet and that it is estimated that their phase-out and replacement would not be completed until 2036.⁷⁷ In response to questions on notice, VFBV clarified that the total figure includes single-cab appliances that are purpose built and not intended to carry crew on the back. Factoring this in, there are about 650 tankers of concern.⁷⁸

Mr Heffernan acknowledged concerns about the exposure of crew members to heat and other elements.⁷⁹ He told the Committee that the vehicles are mechanically checked, meet the required Australian design rules ‘for the time in which they were manufactured’ and remain compliant if used as intended with appropriate Personal Protective Equipment and Personal Protective Clothing.⁸⁰

John Houston, President of CFA Volunteers Group challenged the reliance on historical vehicle standards, pointing to lap seatbelts, which are now noncompliant, a lack of air-conditioning and heat stress management.⁸¹ He told the Committee that a vehicle may be serviceable and compliant with the standard that applied when it was built, while still falling short of contemporary expectations for crew protection in high-risk firefighting.⁸²

Mr Houston told the Committee:

Fix the fleet. It is ridiculous that in this day and age we are expecting volunteers to give up their time to attend fires and road accidents with old, outdated, unsafe tankers and equipment ...

... It is 792 tankers. Some of those tankers are fast approaching nearly 40 years old, twice the use-by date. That is ridiculous. Brigade-owned tankers have to be updated at 20 years old. Why is there no expiry date for CFA tankers? We want to address station upgrades and replacements also in a timely manner. Address the virtually non-existent safety standards around fumes, washing contaminated turnout gear – the basic minimum safety standards that are afforded to all other frontline emergency services but not afforded to our volunteers.⁸³

This was also framed as an issue of volunteer confidence and fairness. Rohan Stevens, Group Officer of Hume CFA told the Committee that South Australia’s Country Fire Service had retired its last single-cab tankers several years earlier, while Victorian volunteers were still expected to use them.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Greg Leach, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 37.

⁷⁸ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, response to questions on notice received 8 June 2026, p. 12.

⁷⁹ Jason Heffernan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 37.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ John Houston, President, Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group Inc, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 73.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ John Houston, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 71.

⁸⁴ Rohan Stevens, Group Officer, Hume group, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

The evidence places the issue beyond vehicle age alone. A tanker may pass inspection and remain available to its brigade while placing part of its crew in conditions no longer accepted in a contemporary cab. Replacement therefore bears directly on situational awareness, heat and smoke exposure and the confidence of volunteers asked to crew the appliance.

FINDING 12: 802 single cab tankers remain in the Country Fire Authority fleet and it is estimated that their phase out and replacement won't be completed until 2036. In comparison, South Australia has already phased out single cab tankers

FINDING 13: Approximately 650 CFA tankers continue to carry firefighters in exposed rear seating. Although those vehicles remain subject to inspection, it is a widely held view that their design provides less protection to volunteers and shared situational awareness for volunteers and that they should not be required to respond to major bushfires in such appliances.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government commit to the accelerated replacement of all CFA single-cab frontline firefighting tankers and fund a fleet renewal program that removes these vehicles from operational service within five years.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Country Fire Authority establish a public database to monitor fleet status, including vehicle class, age and operability, to maintain volunteer confidence in local brigades.

Forest Fire Management Victoria fleet rectification

FFMVic entered the preparedness period managing a separate fleet readiness issue. Pre-season inspections identified systemic chassis cracking in FFMVic's G-Wagen fleet, resulting in 290 vehicles being stood down in October 2025.⁸⁵ FFMVic said the priority G-Wagen fleet was returned to service by 15 December 2025 following accelerated inspection, repair, engineering certification and safety assurance.⁸⁶

The Mercedes Benz Unimog truck remediation program followed a longer timetable. Vehicles were returned progressively from December, but the remediation program was not completed until 16 March 2026.⁸⁷ During that period FFMVic sourced surge vehicles from partner agencies, established additional fleet capacity and prepared alternative firefighting strategies should the rectification program not succeed.

⁸⁵ Forest Fire Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

The stand-down showed the inspection system working as intended: a systemic defect was identified before vehicles were allowed into the season, repairs were certified and other capacity was arranged while work proceeded. The priority G-Wagen fleet returned by 15 December 2025, but Unimog repairs continued until 16 March 2026, leaving part of the heavy fleet under remediation after the season had begun. FFMVic funded the work by reprioritising its existing budget rather than drawing on the seasonal allocation.⁸⁸

FINDING 14: Forest Fire Management Victoria's accelerated fleet-remediation program identified and controlled significant safety risks, but that the emergence of fleet-wide defects shortly before summer and the continuation of Unimog truck repairs into March 2026 meant that part of its fleet was not available during the summer fires of January 2026.

3.4.5 Local knowledge, private units and agricultural capability

Available crews still needed local information. Many witnesses said that knowledge already existed in rural districts but was not always captured before the fire.

In many rural districts, farmers are the first responders. They may bring private units, machinery and knowledge of tracks, gates, dams and terrain. The Government includes private firefighting equipment in its account of the state's resource pool.⁸⁹

Some districts have already turned that capacity into a working local arrangement, with witnesses describing CFA and private units using agreed UHF channels, machinery operators known to brigade leaders and equipment assembled through established contacts. Andrew Weidemann, Chairman of Across Victoria Alliance told the Committee that connection with the local CFA group was 'vitally important',⁹⁰ while Horsham resident Ivan Smith emphasised how quickly a nearby farm unit could arrive.⁹¹ David Sudholz, Captain of the Natimuk Brigade stated the dependence more starkly: 'without the private units, the CFA would not cope'.⁹²

Local knowledge becomes operationally useful only when it reaches the people making decisions. Witnesses proposed local knowledge advisers for incoming strike teams and incident-management personnel. Steven Meyer, Group Officer of the Natimuk Brigade described the value of maps showing tanks, dams and refill points, supported by signs that would allow an unfamiliar crew to use them.⁹³ These are practical means of converting knowledge held by individuals into information available to the wider response system.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 39.

⁹⁰ Andrew Weidemann, Chair, Across Victoria Alliance, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 72.

⁹¹ Ivan Smith, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

⁹² David Sudholz, Captain, Natimuk Brigade, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁹³ Steven Meyer, Group Officer, Natimuk Brigade, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

Mr Farrar recommended local knowledge liaisons for out-of-area commanders and strike teams, reflecting his concern that incoming personnel may lack what he described as local 'dirt knowledge'.⁹⁴

Agency evidence showed that local knowledge was used in some formal planning processes. In response to questions on notice, FFMVic stated that proposed fuel management activities originated with local staff, and that modelling was intended to support, rather than replace operational and local judgment.⁹⁵ The Committee was not presented with evidence that shows equivalent statewide intake, mapping or integration process for private firefighting units and applicable machinery.

Local knowledge assisted preparedness only when it was recorded before the fire and available to incoming crews and commanders. Agencies need to know who has machinery, where water can be drawn, how that capability can be used safely and what incoming crews need to know about roads, gates and hazards.

The West Wimmera Action Group made a related point about community data. It told the Committee that local knowledge and data from groups such as its fire focus group should be 'hardwired into planning before the next season' and highlighted that its community survey work had led to ongoing meetings with DEECA and FFMVic.⁹⁶

In their submission, Protect Our Farms highlighted the abundance of privately owned firefighting equipment.

POF's advocate for the recognition and incorporation of semi-trained personnel, particularly farmers and contractors into a formal reserve force during significant emergencies and supporting them.⁹⁷

The incorporation of local knowledge during the operational phase of the response to the 2026 summer fires is discussed in Chapter 5.

FINDING 15: Private firefighting units, applicable machinery and local knowledge form an important part of firefighting capability in many rural districts, but their identification, communication and integration remain dependent on local arrangements rather than a consistent statewide framework.

FINDING 16: Local knowledge exists before a fire but is not always available in a form that incoming crews and commanders can use.

⁹⁴ Sean Farrar, *Submission 1*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ Forest Fire Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Martin Colbert, Treasurer, West Wimmera Action Group, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

⁹⁷ Protect Our Farms, *Submission 190*, p. 2.

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria develop a policy framework for incorporating local knowledge into their preparation and response capabilities. This should include identification and incorporation of private units and applicable machinery, similar to agreements that exist in South Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Victorian Government consider ways in which it can support private landholders to operate and maintain private firefighting units, including farm firefighting units, water tanks, pumps, communications equipment and personal protective equipment, where the owner can demonstrate it is fit for use.

RECOMMENDATION 14: That incident management arrangements include local knowledge liaison roles to support incoming strike teams and out-of-area commanders.

3.4.6 Water for firefighting

Water was the clearest example of where local knowledge affected firefighting procedure. Crews needed to know where it was, how to reach it and whether their appliances could connect to it:

At Upton Hill I experienced, on the Wednesday night, a truck on the fireground – I do not know if the shire brought it in or they just came in. It had no fittings to fit a CFA truck. We had to fill it in through the top, which is very slow. At our station we have a tank for fire use. It is only 9000 litres. That is four truckloads, and that ran out early Thursday morning. We have since sourced a tank, and we are trying to get it upgraded to a 50,000-litre tank, which the fire station can support. Yes, water was a premium. On that day when we lost those eight houses, the trucks were fighting to find water. I know the Upton Hill truck had no suction hoses left on it because they were with our quick fill down in Oak Valley Road, which we could not access, so we had to rely on other trucks and their suction hoses to get water.⁹⁸

Surface water and seasonal risk

Water scarcity was identified before the season as a constraint on operational readiness. By early 2025, CFA brigades in parts of south-west Victoria were reporting that ordinary surface supplies were limited or ‘non-existent’.⁹⁹ Mr Heffernan said those reports shaped CFA’s planning, ‘We knew water was going to be a challenge for this season’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Nick Murray, Captain, Upton Hill Brigade, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

⁹⁹ Jason Heffernan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

EMV later advised that the Government's \$9.5 million water initiative responded to significant rainfall deficits that had reduced firefighting water and created competing demands between human consumption, animal consumption and firefighting.¹⁰¹ The initiative funded large-capacity water tanks, bulk-water carriers, transport services and relocation costs, with particular attention to drought-affected areas.¹⁰²

Additional water capacity does not guarantee water that crews can draw from. The Committee heard that drought reduced the ordinary supplies available to brigades before ignition, such that a water supply could fail as a source of firefighting water if access, pressure or fittings were missing.

Bulk water capability

The CFA's principal additional preseason measure was the elevated seasonal response initiative, which included additional bulk water capability. Jason Heffernan described contracted cartage providers with capacity of at least 100,000 litres, positioned at 19 strategic locations across the state and placed on readiness triggers similar to aircraft predetermined dispatch.¹⁰³ When trigger conditions were met, bulk water carriers were staffed and available for deployment once an incident occurred or a brigade requested support.

Mr Heffernan also told the Committee that the CFA used the funding to purchase its own large-scale bulk water tankers and bulk-water pods for future seasons affected by rainfall deficiency.¹⁰⁴ The Government submission described the elevated seasonal response initiative as including bulk-water carriers, a bulk diesel transport vehicle and open-top bulk-water modules, supported by a dedicated desk and dashboard to show availability and deployments.¹⁰⁵

Mr Barnett described the strategic water initiative as 'a fantastic initiative'.¹⁰⁶ He also identified its limit: 'we just do not know where a fire is going to start'.¹⁰⁷ His evidence placed bulk water within the broader surge model. Local brigades bring the water available on their own appliances for first attack. Further water then depends on strike teams, logistics arrangements and the capacity to send appliances, equipment and water to the fireground without leaving other districts exposed.

At Alexandra, Mr Gales told the Committee that a bulk-water tanker had been pre-positioned at Wangaratta and had been used effectively. He said that if the capability were not available next season, 'We will miss it. We need it.'¹⁰⁸ He also linked water to fleet capability, referring to ultra-heavy tankers carrying 9000 litres

¹⁰¹ Emergency Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 2.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Jason Heffernan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 170.

¹⁰⁶ Adam Barnett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Lachlan Gales, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

and giving crews flexibility and operational efficiency that had not previously been available in the same way.¹⁰⁹ Mr Gales said:

There are some positive developments around water. Water across the state is an issue and it is going to become a worse issue, but we did things this year and we are doing other things with vehicles that will improve it, if we can continue to fund it. This year, on a one-off year, funding for bulk water tankers was provided to the CFA and prepositioned around the state. There was one at Wangaratta and it was used very effectively, and if it is not there next year we will miss it. We need it.

The other aspect is the changing nature of our vehicle fleet. CFA came out with a build of ultra heavy tankers. A lot of them went out to the west part of the state, and they are very effective. We have got two in the northern part of the state here, one at Browns Plains and one at Wangaratta North. They are extremely effective. They bring 9000 litres of water, and they give us flexibility and give us an operational efficiency that we have not previously had. We need to look at that kind of innovation and address the water shortage that way. But certainly the funding of those bulk water tankers that we had this year needs to continue.¹¹⁰

The state materially strengthened mobile water capacity before summer. That did not remove the need for usable water in the district where a fire started.

This issue is discussed further in Chapter 5.

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government provide ongoing funding for strategically located bulk water tankers and continue to invest in innovative firefighting appliances, including ultra-heavy tankers, to improve water supply, operational flexibility and firefighting capability across the state.

Static water points and local infrastructure

Brigades also relied on fixed local water points such as tanks, hydrants, dams and other local supplies that crews could draw from if the water was close enough, accessible and fitted for firefighting use.

Mitchell Shire Council submitted that Emergency Water Supply Points funding enabled it to install and maintain standpipes and water tanks.¹¹¹ It said strategically located water points enhanced both volunteer and full-time paid firefighting capacity during the Longwood fires, particularly in areas with limited reticulated water access.

The Colac hearing gave a similar example. Evidence from the Gellibrand area identified the recently installed water tank at Gellibrand Hall as important preparedness work.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Mitchell Shire Council, *Submission 133*, pp. 10–11.

¹¹² Lachlan Sutherland, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

It provided a reliable water source for firefighting appliances without relying on the town hydrant system. The same evidence noted that nearby dams supported aircraft operations when conditions permitted.

At Harcourt, Andrew Wilson, Captain of Harcourt CFA described a changed water landscape. He said the bulk-water tanker initiative was ‘fantastic’, but explained that Harcourt had lost access to the old rural system that had previously supplied water through channels and dams.¹¹³ The brigade had been offered a 110,000-litre tank and had moved to purchase a second tank, with the aim of placing both near the Coliban Water pipeline.

Mr Wilson also drew a practical distinction between treated and raw water. He said drawing thousands of litres from hydrants meant using drinking-class water, while access to the Coliban Water pipeline would provide raw water that could assist the brigade, Coliban Water and FFMVic.¹¹⁴ Mr Paine added that the local water race was used in training and that its unavailability in Harcourt made conditions more difficult.¹¹⁵

Reticulated supply, pressure and backup power

A town water network could also fail as firefighting water if pumps, power or pressure were lost.

At Quantong, Mr Sudholz told the Committee that the town water supply was a ‘real failure’.¹¹⁶ Residents trying to put out spot fires with buckets, taps and garden hoses saw the supply fall to a trickle. He said firefighting units could not draw from town hydrants. He also referred to discussions with Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water about longer-term plans for solar batteries on pump systems and called for more robust maintenance and more frequent testing.¹¹⁷

The Quantong evidence arose from the experience of the fire. It nevertheless exposed a preparedness dependency that existed before the fire. Reticulated water could only be relied on for firefighting if the pumps, power, pressure and backup arrangements were ready for fire conditions.

The Victorian Government submission shows that water corporations were part of fire readiness. DEECA activated state water emergency management arrangements on 9 January 2026 to monitor fire danger, protect water corporation assets and begin recovery planning with the sector. Water corporations affected by the fires included Barwon Water, Coliban Water, Goulburn Valley Water, Goulburn-Murray Water and Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water. The submission records disruption to

¹¹³ Andrew Wilson, Captain, Harcourt Brigade, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Adam Paine, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

both reticulated and non-reticulated supplies, particularly at Harcourt, Longwood/Longwood East and Gellibrand.¹¹⁸

Firefighting water therefore depended on more than CFA appliances or bulk carriers. It also depended on water systems owned and operated by others.

Council and local water assets

Water preparedness also involved local government assets. Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer of the Colac Otway Shire Council told the Committee that council deployed graders, excavators, a front-end loader, water tankers and staff to support containment activities. The council recommended funding before events so that plant could be made fire-ready, with suitable protective equipment and training available before staff were asked to assist.¹¹⁹

Council water tankers and plant could form part of practical suppression capacity. They still needed people, equipment and safety arrangements prepared before they were requested.

Fittings, couplings and practical access

Water connection was a practical limit. Water could be close, full and accessible, but still difficult to use if the appliance could not connect to it.

At the Melbourne hearing, the Chair put to Mr Barnett that regional witnesses had raised concerns about private water assets, including tanks, not being compatible with CFA trucks. Mr Barnett described hose fittings and connections as a ‘bugbear’.¹²⁰ He said that the CFA, FRV, the water industry and forestry use different couplings and suggested that this practice is unlikely to change. He also identified a practical solution:

I have got to say, though, it costs about \$20 to get an adaptor that simply converts one coupling to another, so these are not insurmountable problems.¹²¹

The Alexandra evidence showed the same issue in practical form. A witness told the Committee that water was at a premium, that trucks were ‘fighting to find water’, and that the Upton Hill truck had no suction hoses left because they were with a quick-fill point that could not be accessed.¹²² Crews therefore had to rely on other trucks and their suction hoses to draw water.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 69.

¹¹⁹ Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2–3.

¹²⁰ Adam Barnett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Nick Murray, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

¹²³ Ibid.

Responses to questions on notice confirmed the statewide bulk-water initiative but did not resolve the local access issues raised in evidence. Emergency Management Victoria referred the compatibility of tank fittings to CFA and did not identify a statewide arrangement for couplings, adaptors, testing, appliance access or consented use of private and community water assets.¹²⁴

The seasonal initiative increased the volume of water that could be moved around Victoria. It did not settle the local conditions of use. Firefighting water still had to be present, accessible, pressurised where reticulated, and compatible with the appliance that arrived.

FINDING 17: Emergency management agencies materially strengthened bulk water capability before the 2025–26 fire season, but evidence from hearings and submissions identified continuing preparedness issues in local water availability, static water infrastructure, reticulated supply resilience, backup power, coupling compatibility and responsibility for accessible firefighting water points.

RECOMMENDATION 16: That:

- emergency response agencies work together to improve and standardise access to bulk water capacity across the state including connector compatibility
- all firefighting appliances be fitted with standard adapter kits for common private, agricultural and water industry fittings.
- emergency response agencies, sign and test static water points before each season, including known community and private tanks where the owners consent.

3.5 Landscape preparedness

Victoria entered the 2025–26 season with an established risk-based fuel-management framework and a substantial program of completed work. The evidence tested the reach of that work. It asked what the State's measures counted, where treatment had been delivered and whether work continued across the boundaries between public land, roads, farms and settlements.

The 2026 Walwa, Dargo and Otway fires were predominantly forest fires and the Longwood, Harcourt and Yarroweyah fires were predominantly grass fires. While grassfires tend to be less intense, they can spread extremely quickly. In 2026 the grass fires were fuelled by abundant fine fuels following several wet years.

¹²⁴ Emergency Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 2.

3.5.1 Victoria's risk-based framework

Victoria's public land program uses a modelled risk target, not a hectare target. It seeks to keep fuel-driven bushfire risk at or below 70% of a level based on modelling of different bushfire scenarios. As at 30 June 2025, the statewide result was reported at 66%; without fuel management, DEECA modelled it at 69%.¹²⁵

The measure estimates the contribution of public land fuel to potential house loss. It is not a measure of all bushfire risk.

Regional and district targets also vary according to population, terrain, vegetation and each region's contribution to statewide risk. A regional result above 70% is therefore not evidence that the program failed its formal measure, without reference to the applicable regional target.

The statewide result showed what the public land program was modelled to achieve. It did not describe the fire risk across the whole landscape.

FINDING 18: Victoria met its risk-based target for statewide bushfire risk ahead of the 2025–26 fire season.

FINDING 19: As in previous years, many areas of the state carried very high to extreme fuel loads into the 2025–26 summer.

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government ensure fire agencies undertake an urgent science-based appraisal of areas with extreme fuel risk prior to funding and implementing works ahead of the next summer.

3.5.2 Program delivery and constraints

The model set the program's logic. Delivery still depended on weather, fuel condition, smoke and crew availability. In 2024–25, FFMVic carried out 270 planned burns across 92,473 hectares, alongside 951 non-burn fuel treatments covering 17,465 hectares.¹²⁶ DEECA and Parks Victoria land accounted for 95% of the planned burning area, while agency-supported private land burns accounted for 4% and other public land accounted for 1%.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 49.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer of FFMVic told the Committee that some burns are designed to protect assets directly, others seek to moderate fire behaviour or reduce the prospect of fire running through a wider landscape.¹²⁸

FFMVic said proposed work begins with nominations from staff who know the local forests and land:

DEECA's fuel management program is developed from the ground up based on burn nominations from local staff with deep, expert knowledge of the land and forests they manage.¹²⁹

The Committee was not provided with how often local nominations changed the final order of work, or how those choices were explained to affected communities.

Delivery of fuel management treatments is governed by conditions – weather, fuel moisture, smoke, crew availability and the effects on nearby communities determine which burns can proceed.¹³⁰ Mr Hardman told the Committee that FFMVic seeks to maximise available burn days but climate change is making the task 'more and more difficult every year'.¹³¹ VFBV also submitted that climate change is reducing the windows available for planned burning and other fuel reduction practices that depend on suitable weather.¹³²

FFMVic reported that it had completed, on average, 59% of the priority burns listed over the previous five years.¹³³ It explained that the Joint Fuel Management Program intentionally contains more proposed activities than can be delivered, to preserve alternative options when conditions prohibit one opportunity but create another.

In Natimuk, 16 treatments had been nominated and approved for the local group, including the environmental and heritage checks, but five were delivered: four burns and one slashing treatment.¹³⁴ CFA volunteer and District 17 vegetation management officer Joshua Hodges attributed the difference principally to suitable weather and the availability of resources. On why the remaining 11 treatments were not carried out, he told the Committee:

That had little to do with any planning issues. All of our burns were 100 per cent planned and approved and had environmental and heritage values checks approved. The predominant issues associated with delivery of treatments – one is just suitable weather windows; weather always plays a big role in being able to get our treatments done, and the other being availability.

¹²⁸ Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

¹²⁹ Forest Fire Management, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 3.

¹³⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 21.

¹³¹ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

¹³² Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 42.

¹³³ Forest Fire Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 9.

¹³⁴ Joshua Hodges, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42.

3.5.3 Planned burns: contribution and limits

Mr Hardman described to the Committee how FFMVic uses modelling tools to determine how planned burns are prepared:

The work we do is based on a model where we are on a computer and ignite 72,000 fires; we run all of those fires across the state, then we apply proposed planned burns across the top of those fires using Black Saturday conditions. We then rerun those fires, and we measure the risk reduction output that those fires deliver.¹³⁵

The model is neither a forecast of a particular fire nor a complete reproduction of the landscape. DEECA acknowledged that no simulator captures every observed event and described work comparing modelling outputs with reconstructed fires, including cases in which modelled and actual behaviour differed.¹³⁶ Used in that way, the model gives the Government a consistent means of comparing strategies while remaining open to correction by real fires, current fuel information and operational judgment.

Mr Hardman cautioned against treating planned burning as a standalone solution ‘planned burning is not a magic bullet. There is no silver bullet’.¹³⁷

He described planned burning as part of a wider system that also includes mechanical fuel treatment, the maintenance of a 50,000-kilometre road network, remote water points, strategic fuel breaks, aviation, ground crews and contractors.¹³⁸

The Government submission made the operational rationale for planned burning, stating that planned burning can reduce flame height and intensity, reduce convection and spotting distance, slow the rate of spread and provide known low-fuel edges from which firefighters can undertake backburning.¹³⁹ Its effect changes with the purpose and location of the burn, the time since it was conducted and the weather when the fire arrives.

Professor David Lindenmayer, Adjunct Professor at La Trobe University emphasised those limits. He told the Committee that the protective effect generally declines as a treatment becomes older or more distant from the asset and as fire weather becomes more severe.¹⁴⁰ Professor Lindenmayer also pointed to disturbance-stimulated flammability as a reason to exercise caution when conditioning prescribed burns in forests:

After a system has been disturbed and then regenerates there is a pulse of additional flammability that can last for several decades after those disturbances.¹⁴¹

¹³⁵ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

¹³⁶ Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 6.

¹³⁷ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁰ David Lindenmayer, Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 52.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 51.

His evidence was not that all prescribed burning is ineffective. It was that the benefits of burning are conditional, and that broadscale burning far away from assets may deliver limited protection while carrying ecological and future flammability risks.

The Committee received evidence regarding the ecological impact of fuel reduction burning, and the need to review current policy settings to ensure they are informed by the best available science. Concerns were raised about current practices, which while being better than per-hectare targets, still cause significant ecological harm and may increase long-term fire risk.

Friends of the Earth Melbourne highlighted the particularly devastating impact on older, hollow-bearing trees, which are critically important for native wildlife, especially when there are repeated cycles of burning over decades.¹⁴²

Otway Ranges Environment Network provided evidence that argued that the dense Cape Otway tall old growth wet forests played a key role in protecting townships along the Great Ocean Road, as they were less likely to combust due to lightning strikes.¹⁴³

Doctors for the Environment Australia also highlighted that it is not just the ecological impacts that need to be considered, but also the health impacts of prescribed burns:

The response to this must move beyond ideological adherence to habitual practices. Prescribed burns that do not reduce – and may even increase – fire risk are not just a waste of resources, they are inherently hazardous to health because of the severe air pollution they produce. They are also very risky exercises for the firefighters involved, with severe burns injuries being sustained in recent prescribed burns.¹⁴⁴

Dr Claire Fenuik, Director Conservation Strategy and Partnerships from the Conservation Ecology Centre reflected on the need to take a more nuance and holistic approach to managing bushfire risk:

If we want to build long-term ecological and community resilience to climate change, not just respond to risk in the short term, then we need to think about bushfires as one aspect of complex and dynamic landscapes. The forests and heaths of the Otways are not just fuel for bushfires. They are social, cultural and ecological systems.¹⁴⁵

Forestry Australia told the Committee:

Increased investment in prevention and preparedness activities is essential to achieve enhanced management of fire in the landscape and address the increased risk of more frequent and severe bushfires. This should include well-planned, risk-based strategic programs of fuel reduction. Mild extensive burning is not only a tool for fuel management but also contributes to maintenance of forest health and biodiversity and to minimising the impact of fire on distributed assets and infrastructure.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Friends of the Earth Melbourne, *Submission 207*, p. 10.

¹⁴³ Otway Ranges Environment Network, *Submission 397*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ Doctors for the Environment Australia, *Submission 312*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ Claire Fenuik, Director, Conservation Strategy and Partnerships, Conservation Ecology Centre, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ Forestry Australia, *Submission 258*, p. 3.

Farmers for Climate Action reported that fragmentation of land management responsibility across CFA, FFMVic and local government resulted in inadequate fuel reduction on public land adjacent to farms over the last five years, leaving rural properties exposed.¹⁴⁷

Primary producer organisations, including the Victorian Farmers Federation, Farmers for Climate Action, the Mountain Cattlemen's Association, Wine Victoria and West Wimmera Action Group, called for a range of fuel reduction measures¹⁴⁸, including fuel treatment on public land within 500 metres of the boundary abutting agricultural land.¹⁴⁹

Several submissions from rural shires, towns and community groups called for more fuel reduction.¹⁵⁰ Melton City Council MEMPC called for minimum fuel load standards.¹⁵¹

Professor Rick McRae, Adjunct Professor and bushfire researcher at the University of New South Wales Canberra and a former emergency management practitioner submitted that fuel reduction burning remains a fundamental component of bushfire risk mitigation.

A primary basis for bushfire risk management is fuel reduction burning. The more burning is done and the more area is treated, the more fire behaviour potential is reduced. And the more funding is required.¹⁵²

Rural Councils Victoria recommended defined responsibility and sustainable funding for roadside and public land fuel reduction.¹⁵³ VFBV claimed an overwhelming number of CFA volunteers support increased fuel reduction burning and believe prescribed burning provides valuable skill formation.¹⁵⁴

Forestry Australia said:

The scale of bushfire impacts on the community, economy and environment result from a reduced commitment to properly resource the management of public forest lands and in particular a decline in the use of planned (prescribed) fire at the landscape scale.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁷ Farmers for Climate Action, *Submission 423*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Pomonal Rural Fire Brigade, *Submission 106*; Wine Victoria, *Submission 111*; Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission 286*; Victorian Forest Products Association, *Submission 316*; Farmers for Climate Action, *Submission 423*; The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria, *Submission 458*; West Wimmera Action Group, *Submission 12, Attachment 1*, supplementary evidence 12a and 12b.

¹⁴⁹ Farmers for Climate Action, *Submission 423*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ Strathbogie Shire Council, *Submission 163*; City of Melton, *Submission 169*; Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 173*; Municipal Association of Victoria, *Submission 260*; Murrindindi Shire Council, *Submission 281*; Highlands Community Fireguard Group, *Submission 282*; Hepburn Shire Council, *Submission 338*; Timber Towns Victoria, *Submission 356*; Horsham Rural City Council, *Submission 386*; Mansfield Shire Council, *Submission 411*; Rural Councils Victoria, *Submission 463*.

¹⁵¹ City of Melton MEMPC, *Submission 169*, p. 1.

¹⁵² Rick McCrae, *Submission 119*, p. 9.

¹⁵³ Rural Councils Victoria, *Submission 463*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 36.

¹⁵⁵ Forestry Australia, *Submission 258*, p. 3.

The Committee acknowledges there are different perspectives surrounding planned burning and did not receive a significant body of material to resolve ecological disputes.

Planned burning was not presented as a general shield against fire. Its value lies in changing fuel and fire behaviour in places where that change could protect an asset, support suppression or alter the path of spread.

Victoria's shift from a hectare target to a risk-based approach reflects that more exact purpose. The Government submission states that Victoria adopted a risk-based target because hectares alone do not necessarily reduce risk to life and property and may produce adverse environmental outcomes.¹⁵⁶

FINDING 20: Planned burning can reduce fire intensity, alter spread and improve opportunities for suppression, but its contribution depends on the treatment's purpose, location, age and the conditions under which a later fire burns.

FINDING 21: The seasonal window for planned burns during cooler months is narrowing due to climate change, making them harder to be delivered as planned.

FINDING 22: The current risk-reduction model is preferable to a hectare target model, which would incentivise quotas over risk-reduction without a demonstrated reduction in risk to life or property.

3.5.4 Non-burn treatments, roadside vegetation and cross-tenure delivery

Landscape work before summer extended beyond burning. FFMVic and other land managers used slashing, mowing, mulching, chemical treatment and fuel-break maintenance, while roads and tracks provided the access from which crews could reach, contain and patrol a fire.

FFMVic maintains about 50,000 kilometres of public land roads and reported more than 1000 kilometres of strategic fuel breaks.¹⁵⁷ Mr Hardman described the network as central to rapid first attack and to dividing larger landscapes into areas from which fire could be managed, since it helps divide the landscape into 'suppression units' and gives firefighters opportunities to suppress larger fires where first attack is unsuccessful.¹⁵⁸ Those figures establish the scale, but not the condition of every track or the continuity of every break.

¹⁵⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 21.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁵⁸ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

Roadsides expose that difference most clearly. The Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) reported about 50,000 kilometres of mowing along roadsides and medians between October and December 2025.¹⁵⁹ Earlier reform actions had also produced reviews, a working group and a transport dataset. IGEM reported those actions as complete because the specified work had been undertaken; however, Ms Phillips noted that the completion status does not certify the condition of each roadside.¹⁶⁰ A separate action concerning the identification, prioritisation and conduct of strategic fuel management along major arterial roads had been closed without full implementation because dedicated funding was not secured.¹⁶¹

Leah Rushford, Emergency Management and Recovery Coordinator at Macedon Ranges Shire Council told the Committee that the council's municipal fire management planning committee reviewed the local road network in 2022 to better understand how roads can reduce fire risk.¹⁶² This work established three key principles for identifying and prioritising critical roads: the protection of townships, to reduce the likelihood of fire running from rural areas into towns; access and egress, to enable people to leave safely and allow passage for first responders; and roads that help agencies to manage fire.¹⁶³

Ms Rushford said the plan was agreed and endorsed, and that approximately 90 per cent of identified works had been completed or scheduled through the Joint Fuel Management Program. However, she also noted that implementation had been uneven, particularly where works were to be delivered on state-managed arterial roads.¹⁶⁴

Ms Rushford suggested that the DPT's model has limited flexibility to adjust scope within the season and adapt to changing priorities. However, she provided an example of where cross-tenure advocacy and management has had a successful outcome:

In 2025 council increased our advocacy and worked collaboratively with the department, offering to help project-manage works where feasible, share approved contractors and reduce inefficiencies where responsibility changes between road managers. This method delivered tangible results for our community. For example, along the Calder Freeway between Kyneton and Woodend increased slashing was completed, reducing fuel on steep embankments and lowering the likelihood of fuel moving from the freeway corridor into nearby residential areas. These outcomes show what is possible when agencies work flexibly towards a shared purpose, but these treatments need sustained, ongoing funding and clear delivery mechanisms, because without ongoing maintenance these fuel loads return quickly and the risk quickly rebuilds.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁰ Inspector-General of Emergency Management, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 1.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Leah Rushford, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 62.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

This suggests that effective cross-tenure management requires a delivery model that can respond to the season as it develops. John Martin, Chief Executive Officer of Horsham Rural City Council gave similar evidence at Quantong. He told the Committee that late spring rain had caused roadside regrowth and that, while councils try to complete their programs, ‘there seems to be less flexibility with the state’s program for its roadside slashing’.¹⁶⁶

These concerns were echoed by local brigades and community members. The Creightons Creek Brigade submitted that main roads and roadsides through the area were congested with tall dry grass, fallen timber and old-growth trees, creating conditions that could hinder evacuation and obstruct effective firefighting.¹⁶⁷ The brigade also noted that responsibility sat with councils or VicRoads, while the brigade, CFA command and local residents did not have power to ensure roadsides were appropriately managed.¹⁶⁸

Roadside risk also intersects with evacuation planning. The Highlands Community Fireguard Group submitted that, before the fire, it had identified dense roadside vegetation along Old Highlands Road as a safety risk because it could act as a ‘wick’, allowing fire to travel along the road corridor and trap residents attempting to evacuate.¹⁶⁹ The group said that risk was raised with council authorities and that progress was restricted by bureaucratic processes, environmental overlays, administrative requirements and approval delays.

The Committee received a submission from Bianca Hitchens, a resident of Harcourt whose home was destroyed in the fires:

On the right hand side of my block is crown/ council land and then next to that is more vic track land [redacted].

I’d like to know what responsibility both parties have to maintain their land, grass and trees in residential streets. And if they have a responsibility, id like to see their maintenance records as to when they’ve attended ...

Just before the fire, the grass on each side of my fence line was around 6 foot high in spots. Dry, tall dead grass! I never thought a bush fire would tear through our street like it did. [Redacted] isn’t even in the bush. It’s township with a really wide dirt road out the front of my house. Naive, well I’m guilty of that however in my circumstances, a bushfire isn’t what directly destroyed my home, and my neighbours homes, it was a grass fire that was owned by government bodies.¹⁷⁰

In its submission, Murrindindi Shire Council reported inconsistent roadside and forest interface fuel management, with limited capacity for councils to undertake

¹⁶⁶ John Martin, Director, Infrastructure, Horsham Rural City Council, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Creightons Creek Country Fire Authority Brigade, *Submission 238*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Highlands Community Fireguard Group, *Submission 282*, p. 8.

¹⁷⁰ Bianca Hitchens, *Submission 477*, p. 1.

preventative burning, slashing and fuel reduction at the scale required and the fragmented accountability across land managers (council, state, private landholders), leading to gaps in fuel treatment.¹⁷¹

The Committee also received evidence about access and clearance along the boundary between public and private land. At the 6 May online hearing, David Wortmann told the Committee that in Towong Shire there was local support for increasing the clearance distance around fences adjoining Crown land to at least 10 metres.¹⁷² He said the objective was not only to protect valuable boundary fencing but to create 'a more realistic and practical vehicle path' for fuel reduction and firefighting access, subject to terrain and conservation constraints.¹⁷³

However, some submissions highlighted the need to ensure that roadside clearing was justified, given the potential ecological impacts. Friends of the Earth Melbourne noted that:

Given that roadside reserves exist next to roads, they usually offer an opportunity for firefighters to slow a fire, so overall, they help reduce the movement of fires. They also often contain significant remnants of ecological diversity in otherwise cleared landscapes, so they must be managed for their conservation values and not just treated for 'fuel-reduction'.¹⁷⁴

The evidence received illustrated the importance of the public-private interface, with much of Victoria's bushfire risk sitting across boundaries: forest to farm, roadside to paddock, park to township, public track to private access point. Fuel breaks and access works have limited value if they are planned only within one tenure or one agency's responsibility. FLARE Wildfire Research made this point more broadly, submitting that effective bushfire preparedness depends on coordinated management across public land, private property and roadside corridors, and that fragmented land tenure can produce inconsistent outcomes and gaps in treatment across boundaries.¹⁷⁵

Roadside evidence exposed the weakness of divided responsibility. Works could be planned, reviewed or reported as complete while local councils, brigades and residents still faced fuel, access and evacuation risks on particular roads. The problem was not only the amount of work done before summer but whether the program could respond to the roads that mattered as grass grew and conditions changed.

The impact of treatments on roadsides in the operational response to the 2026 summer fires will be discussed in Chapter 5.

¹⁷¹ Murrindindi Shire Council, *Submission 281*, p. 8.

¹⁷² David Wortmann, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Friends of the Earth Melbourne, *Submission 207*, p. 8.

¹⁷⁵ FLARE Wildfire Research, *Submission 307*, p. 3.

FINDING 23: Roadside vegetation management is inconsistently delivered and constrained by funding, inflexible state programs and unclear accountability, resulting in hazardous fuel loads along key transport corridors that can impede evacuation and firefighting efforts.

FINDING 24: Roadside fuel and access risks can change throughout the season, with councils and brigades having limited capacity to reprioritise their roadside management programs.

FINDING 25: Roadside reserves can contain important ecological values which may be impacted by fuel reduction measures.

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Department of Transport and Planning create an in-season escalation process for councils and brigades to request urgent roadside works following substantial rain and grass regrowth events that increase fire risk or block access.

RECOMMENDATION 19: The Victorian Government amend legislation to provide the Country Fire Authority with clearer authority to enforce roadside vegetation management, investigate bushfire hazard complaints, issue and enforce fuel management notices and require remediation by public land managers, and particularly around critical infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Victorian Government, including through existing arrangements, ensure that roadside vegetation management can demonstrate clear risk reduction for community infrastructure and emergency response, while limiting ecological harm.

3.5.5 Private and agricultural landscapes

The same boundary problem appeared on farms. Landholders could prepare their own properties and still remain exposed to fuels, access points and management decisions on the other side of the fence.

Much of Victoria's fire landscape sits outside the public land program. Farms, plantations and roadsides carry fuel, water, access and shelter. Work on one side of a boundary may be weakened by conditions on the other.

Witnesses from farming communities discussed what occurs at the public-private boundary. This included whether adjoining land managers were working to a shared understanding of risk, fuel condition, access and water availability across the broader landscape.

The Victorian Farmers Federation gave evidence from the perspective of primary producers. Nicholas Ayres-Wearne, Director of Livestock at Victorian Farmers Federation pointed to the importance of both private and public landholders working together:

... farmers can be as prepared and resilient as possible on their land, but unless the public land – which a lot of the time is just over the fence – is also adequately managed, you are putting the risk onto the farmers ...¹⁷⁶

He identified weed management, water availability and the public-private interface as matters that require a more strategic approach to bushfire preparedness.

Many farmers have their own fire-fighting equipment including slip-ons, tankers and equipment to construct containment lines and reduce fuel hazards and prepare fire breaks.

John Bennett, a farmer and CFA member appearing at the Quantong hearing, made a similar point in relation to landholders adjoining the Little Desert. He told the Committee that private landowners felt their views were being discounted in decisions about environmental management and fuel reduction despite those decisions directly affecting them:

In many cases private landowners are being asked to provide the firebreak for public lands. The state government is our largest neighbour, and in many cases I think we are being asked to contribute more than what is being done on the other side of the fence. I do not think that meets requirements that good neighbours have of each other.¹⁷⁷

This evidence does not suggest that all boundaries ought to be treated in the same way. Public land may contain cultural and ecological values requiring different work, while vegetation on a farm may be pasture, crop, drought reserve or shelter. Professor Lindenmayer told the Committee that in many agricultural areas ‘fuel loads actually relate to pasture grasses, which you want to feed your livestock’.¹⁷⁸ He suggested that preparedness in those landscapes should pay closer attention to the drivers of grassfire behaviour, particularly wind speed, and to the strategic use of shelter belts.¹⁷⁹

Shelter belts can reduce wind speed and, if placed strategically, may make grassfires more suppressible. Professor Lindenmayer also linked shelter belts to water resilience, observing that trees around farm dams can reduce evaporation and increase water persistence, supporting farmers’ capacity to use water for suppression during drought periods.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Nicholas Ayres-Wearne, Director, Livestock, Victorian Farmers Federation, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁷ John Bennett, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

¹⁷⁸ David Lindenmayer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

The Committee received clear evidence that boundary condition mattered. It received less evidence that municipal and regional planning had turned that shared risk into coordinated work before summer.

3.5.6 Cultural fire

Traditional Owners described cultural fire as a practice grounded in authority over Country, local knowledge and obligations to land, water, plants, animals and cultural heritage. It is included in the state's formal fuel-management program, but Traditional Owners described a practice centred around care for Country, not a variant of planned burning.

The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy provided an established framework before the season. Government funding comprised \$22.5 million over four years from 2021–22 and an ongoing allocation of \$6.3 million a year, supporting practitioners, local strategies, planning, training, equipment and vehicles.¹⁸¹ Cultural fire is also included within the Joint Fuel Management Program, which provides the formal planning mechanism through which planned burns, non-burn treatments and cultural burns are considered across public and private land.

Traditional Owners from nine Registered Aboriginal Parties conducted 26 cultural burns with FFMVic in 2024–25, following 49 burns over the previous two years.¹⁸² Rodney Carter, a Dja Dja Wurrung man and former chair of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy working group, described the strategy as a practical and constructive document developed to bring Traditional Owner knowledge into a form that could be understood within contemporary land and fire management systems.¹⁸³ He described the cultural burning as 'the right fire at the right time', with the right time and method changing between regions, seasons, vegetation and cultural purpose.¹⁸⁴

Mr Hardman stated that cultural fire should not be treated as a variant of the state's planned burning program.¹⁸⁵ He said the planned burning is based on risk modelling and planned fire categories such as asset protection, bushfire moderation and landscape moderation. By contrast, Traditional Owner fire may be used for cleansing the landscape, spiritual connection, growing particular plants or food sources, protecting communities and caring for country.

Mr Hardman also gave evidence about the extent to which cultural burning had been incorporated into formal preseason planning. At a public hearing, Mr Hardman told the Committee that in the first four months of the year, 30 cultural burns had already been completed:

With the practice of traditional owners there is much we can learn, and we do. We have probably the most advanced connection with traditional owners of anywhere in

¹⁸¹ Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 17.

¹⁸² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 21.

¹⁸³ Rodney Carter, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁸⁵ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

Australia with the work that we do on public land. There are around a hundred cultural burns proposed on the joint fuel management plan this year, and this year I think we are up to about delivering 30 of those fires.¹⁸⁶

The evidence identified several conditions that affect whether cultural fire can operate as part of preparedness. Mr Carter spoke about the importance of mobilising people and developing practitioners. When asked about the potential benefit of cultural burning around Harcourt, he said he did not think there was a lack of people who wanted to do the work, but rather the challenge was ‘mobilising and getting to the point of being the practitioner’.¹⁸⁷ He also cautioned that risk aversion can remove opportunities to apply fire when conditions are suitable.

The evidence before the Committee does not provide a complete statewide account of cultural fire readiness before the 2025–26 season and does not identify how many of the proposed cultural burns were delayed or why; how delivery varied between Traditional Owner groups; what resourcing was available to each group; or whether cultural fire plans were integrated consistently into regional preparedness arrangements.

Without that information, the Committee could not assess whether cultural fire was being incorporated into seasonal preparedness in a consistent or adequately resourced way. The gap was material because cultural fire was already recognised in the State’s formal program, while delivery depended on Traditional Owner authority, practitioner development and local conditions.

3.6 Community preparedness

Community preparedness is built before a fire warning is issued. It rests on what people understand about their local risk, the decisions they have already made and whether they possess the means to carry them out.

Before summer, the CFA used the Get Fire Ready campaign to reach households through local brigades. The strongest evidence concerned face-to-face conversations about property preparation, fire plans and the VicEmergency app.

3.6.1 Public information and local engagement

The most prominent pre-season initiative in the evidence was the CFA’s Get Fire Ready campaign. Mr Heffernan told the Committee that supplementary funding from government enabled the inaugural campaign, which focused on three practical behaviours in the community: property preparation, fire planning and use of the VicEmergency app.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Rodney Carter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 51.

¹⁸⁸ Jason Heffernan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

Mr Heffernan reported that 537 brigades, through approximately 3800 CFA members, delivered 547 events across Victoria and directly engaged tens of thousands of community members in practical and tailored fire safety conversations.¹⁸⁹ He said that the CFA had initially expected about 150 brigades to participate, but 537 became involved. He described the campaign as helping to reconnect communities with local brigades and fire stations after a period in which community engagement had been disrupted.¹⁹⁰

The Get Fire Ready campaign combined early timing with local delivery. Its events asked residents to prepare property, make a fire plan and use the VicEmergency app, while giving them access to brigade members who understood the roads, vegetation and likely fire behaviour around their own community. Participation by the 537 brigades demonstrated broad reach, although remote and thinly staffed brigades were less uniformly placed to stage events, meaning coverage was not universal.

Preseason public information also operated through the Australian Fire Danger Rating System. EMV told the Committee that implementation in Victoria included new Information and Communication Technology and decision-support products; application of the system to Victorian incident management footprints; replacement of roadside rating signs; training across CFA, FFMVic and FRV; and a statewide public campaign supported by CFA engagement activity.¹⁹¹

3.6.2 Uptake, warning literacy and behavioural preparedness

Preparedness messaging before the season placed considerable weight on the VicEmergency app, official warning levels and early decisions. Campaign figures show how widely information was offered but reveal less about the decisions made after the event ended.

The clearest evidence of changed intention came from Highlands. Andrea Bauer, member of the Highlands Community Fireguard Group told the Committee about a bushfire essentials meeting held in November 2025. The meeting was in addition to the core community fireguard program and was presented by the CFA District 12 community engagement coordinator. Ms Bauer said the presentation departed from the cautious tone of earlier years:

Words were not minced. Previously there has always been this little bit of ‘We better go gently, we frighten people.’ We sort of sugar-coat it. It was not at that meeting.¹⁹²

The conditions were explained directly, including the long period since the area had experienced a significant fire and the extent to which ‘everything was ready to burn’.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹¹ Emergency Management Victoria, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 25.

¹⁹² Andrea Bauer, Highlands Relief Hub, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

Ms Bauer told the Committee that surveys undertaken after the meeting indicated that it affected how people planned to respond and the decisions made.¹⁹⁴ In particular, more people indicated that would choose to leave early and understood that leaving early was about preserving life. Ms Bauer indicated that about 40 people attended, compared with around eight in some previous years. Her evidence suggests that clear, localised and direct engagement can change preparedness decisions before the fire danger period.¹⁹⁵

Chris Lynch, Captain of the Alexandra Brigade said that his brigade joined the Get Fire Ready campaign through local events, taking a purpose-built trailer as well as trucks and multiple brigade members to speak directly with community members.¹⁹⁶ He told the Committee that the central question put to people was: 'What are you going to do if a fire comes?'.¹⁹⁷ In his view, the direct face-to-face nature of the engagement was beneficial and 'seemed to be quite effective'.¹⁹⁸

Mr Gales provided similar evidence reporting that the Get Fire Ready events 'reinvigorated brigades into staging community events' and produced an 'elevated response'.¹⁹⁹ However, he noted the difficulty in drumming up community engagement:

It is a constant battle for our community safety people to get enthusiasm from the public around these things. The Get Fire Ready events, enervated brigades, and that flowed through. They got an elevated response. It is still not the response we need – we need more people engaged in that – but it was a positive thing.²⁰⁰

He also identified a barrier along with a practical reason for its success:

It is difficult. I think it is an issue of marketing and promotion firstly, but supporting the brigades financially to stage these events made a big difference to them. A lot of these brigades are not flush with funds, and a little bit of money went a long way. So there is a multiplying effect to giving volunteers a small pile of money. They will make the most of it, and the Get Fire Ready events were a case of that.²⁰¹

The evidence also identified limits in the reach of Get Fire Ready. Mr Puls told the Committee that when the participation map was overlaid with the map of brigades across Victoria, it was possible to see areas that did not participate. His submission focused on remote rural 'shed in the paddock' brigades, which he said differ from urban or peri-urban brigades and face particular challenges in morale, engagement and resourcing.²⁰²

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Chris Lynch, Captain, Alexandra Brigade, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Lachlan Gales, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Trevor Puls, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

Statewide reach still depended on local capacity. Brigade-led engagement was easier where brigades had the people, time and money to run events. It was harder in thinly staffed or isolated brigades, including some places where fire risk made preparedness most important. Get Fire Ready appears to have been strongest where it activated local brigades and created practical conversations about property preparation, fire planning and leaving early.

The Highlands Community Fireguard submission also illustrated the kind of preparedness that is difficult to capture through campaign metrics alone. The group has operated for about 19 years and supports approximately 102 residents across 53 households, including permanent and non-permanent residents. It uses local communication systems, maintains neighbour-to-neighbour links and provides local context alongside official alerts.²⁰³ The submission describes Community Fireguard groups as a practical and trusted system for preparedness, while also identifying vulnerabilities: reliance on one or two volunteers, limited communication tools, administrative burden and the need for stronger institutional support.²⁰⁴ Community Fireguard is a CFA-supported model in which local groups work together before the fire season to understand their local fire risk, develop plans and maintain communication between neighbours.

The evidence distinguishes three levels of preparedness measurement. Event numbers and campaign reach show that information was delivered. Surveys and local accounts may show changes in intention. Neither, by itself, proves that households completed plans, prepared property, arranged transport or acted when conditions changed.

FINDING 26: Direct, localised engagement through measures such as the Country Fire Authority's Get Fire Ready program improves community preparedness. 537 brigades took part ahead of the 2025–26 fire season, a significant increase on previous years; however, coverage of the program remains inconsistent.

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Victorian Government increase support for locally delivered, face-to-face bushfire preparedness initiatives. This should prioritise strengthening brigade capacity to deliver consistent engagement across high-risk areas.

RECOMMENDATION 22: That Country Fire Authority and Emergency Management Victoria explore ways to measure community campaign outcomes, including fire plans created, property works undertaken and VicEmergency app uptake, to better quantify outreach effectiveness.

²⁰³ Highlands Community Fireguard Group, *Submission 282*, p. 2.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

Warning literacy

Preparedness messaging before the season placed considerable weight on people using the VicEmergency app, understanding official warnings and making decisions early. The CFA's Get Fire Ready campaign focused in part on use of the VicEmergency app, while the Government submission referred to VicEmergency communications, the 'Are You Fire Ready?' campaign and public information coordination through the Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee.²⁰⁵

Those settings assume a degree of warning literacy in the community. People need to know where warnings come from, what the warning levels mean, how those warnings relate to their location and what action they should take before a warning escalates. The evidence before the Committee suggests that this was an area of continuing difficulty.

Mr Barnett told the Committee that public messaging is contributing to a pattern where some people waited to be told 'what to do, when to do it and how to do it'.²⁰⁶ He contended that community education should seek to build more community resilience and self-sufficiency, so that rather than waiting to be told what to do, the frame should be: 'When you hear X, here are the things that you should be considering to do'.²⁰⁷

Mr Wiebusch's evidence also pointed to the gap between having a plan and understanding its limits. He told the Committee that some people believed they were prepared because they had pumps, sprinkler systems or other equipment, but may not have appreciated what they would face when a fire front arrived. He said this showed the need for ongoing education about 'what being prepared is'.²⁰⁸

Mount Alexander Shire Council's evidence provided a practical example of preparedness information designed to prompt those decisions before the season. Toby Heydon, Mayor of Mount Alexandra Shire Council described a printed 'What's your plan?' disaster preparedness cards and distributed to households shortly before the fires.²⁰⁹ He said the value of the card was that it could remain on a kitchen table or fridge, and that residents had given positive feedback about receiving a simple physical reminder. Mr Heydon also contrasted that approach with relying solely on online information, noting the continuing importance of local newspapers, direct mail and face-to-face contact for some residents.²¹⁰

FINDING 27: There are gaps in public knowledge of bushfire risks and the appropriate actions to take in response to some agency messaging.

²⁰⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 47.

²⁰⁶ Adam Barnett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 62.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Tim Wiebusch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

²⁰⁹ Toby Heydon, Mayor, Mount Alexander Shire Council, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

FINDING 28: Gaps in warning literacy and preparedness understanding limit the effectiveness of pre-season messaging and reliance on emergency warnings.

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Victorian Government improve messaging on bushfire risks and the appropriate actions to take in preparation.

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Victorian Government fund enhanced community education programs to build warning literacy and independent decision-making through more practical, scenario-based messaging. This should include greater use of simple, accessible communication tools, including digital and non-digital formats.

3.6.3 Inclusive preparedness and additional support needs

A warning is useful only if a person can act on it. Some residents needed transport, accessible information, support workers or somewhere safe to go. The evidence also tested whether public information, household planning and evacuation advice were accessible to people who faced additional barriers in an emergency.

For some residents, the barrier was not the warning. It was transport, mobility, language, money, isolation or the loss of support services. Those barriers affected whether a person could receive information, understand it, leave early and remain safe after leaving.²¹¹

These factors affect whether a person can receive information, understand it, act on it, leave early, relocate safely and continue receiving essential supports.

The Government submission showed that community preparedness briefings were held for the not-for-profit and multicultural sectors. That recognised, at sector level, that mainstream channels would not reach everyone.²¹²

National Disability Services, a peak body for disability service organisations, argued in their submission that people with disability face disproportionate and compounding risks during emergencies, and that disability service providers perform a critical role in maintaining safety and continuity of support.²¹³ It submitted that the current arrangements do not adequately fund or coordinate the additional work required of providers during disasters, including emergency coordination, evacuation planning, transport, temporary accommodation, workforce surge and continuity of critical supports.²¹⁴

²¹¹ National Disability Services, *Submission 306*, p. 3.

²¹² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 48.

²¹³ National Disability Services, *Submission 306*, p. 3.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

They advocated for measures that include seasonal preparedness activities, client risk mapping, multiagency exercises, disability liaison roles, better information sharing, and pre-assessment of evacuation centres and accommodation for accessibility and suitability.²¹⁵

Towong Shire Council's evidence described the compounding effect of repeated disasters, drought, distance and socio-economic disadvantage in the Upper Murray. Juliana Phelps, CEO of the Towong Shire Council told the Committee that 'evacuation is a privilege', noting that some people may not have a full tank of petrol to reach an evacuation centre and may make decisions in that context.²¹⁶

3.6.4 Leaving early and places of last resort

Leaving early depended on decisions made before smoke, road closures or fire narrowed the choice. On the worst days, advice had to be understood before smoke, roads or fire narrowed the choice. Evacuation advice remained clear throughout summer. In the most dangerous conditions, the safest course of action is to leave before fire reaches the area. Mr Hardman told the Committee that, from an agency perspective 'the safest place to be is not anywhere near a bushfire as it is moving through the landscape'.²¹⁷

Mr Heffernan said homes are not designed to withstand the radiant heat flux produced by a large-scale bushfire under catastrophic conditions, and that the best advice agencies can give in those circumstances is, 'leave now; leave early'.²¹⁸

The 'leave early' messaging is further discussed in Chapter 5.

Scott Jeffrey, Mayor of the Strathbogie Shire Council noted that some landholders are better prepared than others to stay and defend their property. He told the Committee:

The fact that I see in this particular event and with my significant experience in firefighting and in rescue organisations is that if you have a blanket approach to asking people to stay or leave, it is inconsistent with what we have on the ground. Every individual and every property is unique, and they cannot be responded to with a blanket approach. As I said, in this fire I am yet to speak to someone who stayed to defend who lost their property. All the properties that were lost were unattended, and so when you look at that from a post-fire trauma perspective, it is extremely significant. It is extremely significant from an insurance perspective and an ability to rebuild perspective. As I also said, my family and I successfully defended six houses between four groups of us, and quite safely so, so it is possible. My family has been through this before. Other senior people in the CFA in this district have been through this before and

²¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 13–14.

²¹⁶ Juliana Phelps, Chief Executive Officer, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

²¹⁷ Chris Hardman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

²¹⁸ Jason Heffernan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

also believe that it is safe to stay and defend, providing the work is done in advance of the fire season, people are adequately trained and experienced and they also have the resources on hand to defend their properties.²¹⁹

The evidence on places of last resort raised a particular problem of public understanding. The Government submission described Neighbourhood Safer Places Bushfire Places of Last Resort as places intended to provide some protection when all other bushfire plans have failed – they are not relief centres, evacuation centres or guaranteed places of safety.²²⁰

Mount Alexander Shire Council submitted that residents in parts of the shire were familiar with Neighbourhood Safer Places Bushfire Places of Last Resort because of the known bushfire risk in areas including Chewton, Taradale and Campbells Creek.²²¹ The council also submitted that confusion remained about those places, because the terminology suggested a safe refuge that council would enable and coordinate.

Darren Fuzzard, Chief Executive Officer of Mount Alexander Shire Council described the issue as a mismatch between ‘what the offer [is] and what the belief [is] about the offer’.²²² He told the Committee:

People honestly think that they can go to those and they are going to be okay, and that is not what they are about.

I think it is really important that there is a revisit of what their purpose is and whether everybody understands that or not.²²³

Mr Paine gave similar evidence from Taradale. He said the existence of a place of last resort had made community members ‘very complacent’, with an attitude of ‘oh, there’s a fire coming. We’ll just go to the place of last resort’.²²⁴

He described the Taradale hall as an old brick building with no water source and said it was ‘not a refuge or anything’.²²⁵ Mr Paine’s evidence showed the risk in the phrase ‘place of last resort’. Some residents understood it as a place of safety. It was not that. It was a place to go when safer plans had failed. The weakness lies in the distance between formal designation and public expectation. Pre-season information must explain not only where the place is but why it remains a last resort and what a person should have done before reaching it.

FINDING 29: Some people misunderstood the role and safety of Bushfire Places of Last Resort, creating a risk of complacency and inadequate fire planning.

²¹⁹ Scott Jeffery, Mayor, Strathbogie Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

²²⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 24.

²²¹ Mount Alexander Shire Council, *Submission 285*, p. 9.

²²² Darren Fuzzard, Chief Executive Officer, Mount Alexander Shire Council, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Adam Paine, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Victorian Government provide resources to educate communities on the role and function of bushfire places of last resort.

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Victorian Government consider how to enhance messaging with specific advice on how to make properties less fire-prone, what to do with extremely fast-moving fires and appropriate actions on what to do if it is too late to leave.

3

3.7 Critical infrastructure and telecommunications

Much of the preparedness described in this Chapter depends on electricity and telecommunications. Power supplies homes, businesses, emergency facilities, water systems and communications sites. Telecommunications carry warnings, emergency calls, operational information and contact with family.

The Committee previously addressed this issue as part of its *Inquiry into Climate Resilience*, tabled in 2026. The Report found that the delivery of resilience-focused regulatory reforms for energy infrastructure needs to be accelerated. It recommended that the Victorian Government expand targeted investment in high-risk areas for energy and water infrastructure.²²⁶

NBN Co submitted that telecommunications outages during emergencies are most often caused by the loss of commercial mains power, and that exchanges, nodes, towers and customer equipment all require power. Peri Urban Councils Victoria submitted that telecommunications connect people to 000 services, the VicEmergency app, Bureau information, Watch and Act and Emergency Warnings, evacuation coordination, agency communication and recovery information.

Responsible entities for vital infrastructure participate in an annual Resilience Improvement Cycle, including risk management planning, exercises, audits and statements of assurance. The Government submission also stated that owners and operators of vital critical infrastructure must conduct documented and audited emergency risk management exercises under Part 7A of the *Emergency Management Act 2013* (Vic). Those exercises are intended to test preparedness for disruptions in energy, water and transport, and to support essential service continuity.

3.7.1 Electricity

Electricity preparedness includes the work done before outages occur. Power supplies homes, businesses, water pumps, communications sites and the equipment people use to receive warnings. Loss of power can therefore remove other services at the same time.

²²⁶ Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, *Climate Resilience*, August 2026, p. 339.

The Government's submission referred to critical infrastructure resilience auditing, a Critical Infrastructure Industry Preparedness Briefing, readiness attestations and emergency risk management exercises. It also identified the need for vital critical infrastructure operators to test preparedness for disruptions in essential services before the higher-risk weather season.

Electricity distributors described their own preparedness activities. AusNet submitted that, before the 2025–26 fire season, it conducted scenario-based emergency exercises, delivered high-risk weather briefings, confirmed workforce and resource surge arrangements, established a readiness activation level and pre-positioned personnel, materials, equipment, mobile generation, temporary network assets and logistics support in identified high-risk areas.²²⁷ It also undertook targeted inspections and maintenance across higher-risk parts of the network.

Powercor submitted that longer-term resilience work included increased pole replacement, targeted undergrounding in high bushfire-risk areas, mobile generator connection points and improved backup power at key communications sites.²²⁸ It proposed 17 mobile generator connection points at vulnerable towns and backup power upgrades at 23 key radio communications sites, providing 48 or 72 hours of battery capacity.

Infrastructure Victoria shifted the focus from seasonal activity to asset condition. It submitted that Victoria's infrastructure is increasingly exposed to bushfire and other climate risks, and that governments often spend heavily after infrastructure fails rather than investing earlier in adaptation. It argued that climate change modelling should be incorporated into asset management and maintenance.

The Victorian Government informed the Committee about Rapid Earth Fault Current Limiters (REFCL), which are safety devices installed at substations to prevent powerline-related bushfires.²²⁹ These limiters act as a safety switch when a fault is detected on the line. During high fire danger days, the sensitivity of the limiters is increased so that power is cut to a line almost instantaneously upon a fault detection, thus acting as a fire prevention mechanism.

The Committee is aware that the REFCL system has caused significant issues for towns like Euroa, causing frequent power outages. AusNet sought approval from the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) to build a new Benalla to Euroa express feeder with a remote REFCL changeover station to provide backup power supply to the area, reducing the number and length of outages. This was referenced in the submission from AusNet:

The 2026 bushfires highlighted the growing challenge to reliable electricity supply posed by the increasing frequency, scale and intensity of extreme weather events. While AusNet's network performed consistent with its historical design, construction

²²⁷ AusNet, *Submission 459*, p. 3.

²²⁸ Powercor, *Submission 469*, p. 8.

²²⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 67–68.

and configuration, the extent of damage reinforces the need to increase network resilience, particularly in high bushfire risk areas.

There are opportunities to mitigate the impacts of future bushfires on the highest risk parts of our network through targeted investment in more event-resistant asset designs and network configurations. As part of the Electricity Distribution Price Review 2026–31 (EDPR) process we have encouraged the Australian Energy Regulator to approve our proposed expenditure relating to resilience, which includes proactive investment to minimise the impacts of natural disaster events such as bushfires and storms on the highest risk parts of our network. These investments are increasingly critical to maintaining safe and reliable electricity supply in the face of climate change and as the system increasingly electrifies.²³⁰

However, the Committee noted that AusNet’s submission to the AER was rejected and that frequent power outages continue to frustrate and impede local businesses and residents.

In response to questions on notice, CFA identified vegetation around critical infrastructure as a local risk. CFA said that it understood, anecdotally, that some critical infrastructure in fire-affected areas had significant vegetation and fuel loads nearby, creating a risk of outage or failure from fire intensity. CFA also said it had no power, except in limited private-property circumstances, to compel land managers to manage vegetation and fire risk or comply with CFA standards.

At a public hearing, Mark Billing, resident of Colac gave a concrete example, telling the Committee that a Telstra tower had no fuel reduction around it and that a Tasmanian crew had to be tasked during the fire to clear land inside the fenced compound.²³¹

Electricity preparedness included seasonal checks, staff, equipment and restoration arrangements. It also depended on asset condition, backup power, vegetation management and access for repair crews. Those conditions affected the electricity network and the services that drew power from it.

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Victorian Government prioritise the delivery of reliable power supply in bushfire-prone communities, and advocate to the Commonwealth Government to ensure that the Australian Energy Regulator assessment framework also considers social resilience, emergency management and regional equity.

3.7.2 Telecommunications

Telecommunications carry the public safety information people need during a fire. Peri Urban Councils Victoria submitted that reliable telecommunications connect people to 000 services, the VicEmergency app, Bureau information, Watch and Act and Emergency Warnings, evacuation coordination, agency communication and

²³⁰ AusNet, *Submission 459*, p. 5.

²³¹ Mark Billing, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39.

recovery information.²³² It also identified ‘grey spots’, where areas appear covered on maps but fail under congestion, peak demand or extreme weather.

Regional witnesses described known blackspots and weak capacity before the fires. Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer of Colac Otway Shire Council, described blackspots, dead spots and intermittent connectivity across parts of the Otways. He said that if there was no power, people could not charge the phones and other devices giving them information, and that the Otways still had areas with sporadic internet and general connection.²³³ He also said there were only two generators in the region and that more were needed, particularly for communities between the coast and the highway.²³⁴

Mark Florence, Director of Community and Planning at Towong Shire Council described parts of Towong Shire as telecommunications ‘black holes’, including the area around Thologolong and communities along Murray River Road.²³⁵ He said the Mitta Valley was one of Towong’s highest risk bushfire areas, but ordinary demand during the Mitta Muster could overwhelm local connectivity to the point that the hotel could not process EFTPOS transactions. In an emergency, when people were trying to get updates or contact family, he said that was ‘intolerable’.²³⁶

Aside from known communications blackspot challenges, the Committee heard that communications connectivity was dependent on power supply at exchanges, nodes, towers and customer premises.

Electricity distributors and telecommunications providers described exercises, inspections, briefings, backup power and deployable resources. For example, Telstra described its prepared actions as including:

- a. Vegetation clearance programs to improve fire breaks around infrastructure
- b. Active network resiliency, including inspections and deployment of temporary assets
- c. Power resiliency, including ongoing maintenance and replacement of power systems as well as the deployment of mobile generators
- d. Operational readiness for emergencies including an incident management team and regional emergency council.²³⁷

The Committee heard that there is some resilience built into communications infrastructure such as mobile phone towers. The Telstra tower at Mount Arapiles had its own diesel-powered generator and a backup battery. The generator tripped out due to

²³² Peri Urban Councils Victoria, *Submission 205*, p. 1.

²³³ Andrew Tenni, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Mark Florence, Director, Community and Planning, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Telstra, *Submission 184*, p. 10.

the hot and windy conditions, but the backup battery provided power for its maximum 4-hour life.²³⁸

NBN Co discussed the importance of integrating telecommunications considerations into local and regional emergency management planning, exercises and community education.²³⁹

During the 2026 summer fires, power and telecommunications infrastructure was damaged by several fires. This impacted fire affected communities access to communications, as well as the operational communications of fire response agencies. These issues are discussed further in Chapter 5.

FINDING 30: The importance of access to telecommunications during a bushfire cannot be understated, particularly as it relates to accessing timely and critical safety messages for fire responders and the general community alike.

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for stronger telecommunications resilience in disaster-prone areas.

3.8 Relief preparedness

When power, roads or telecommunications failed, people needed somewhere to go and someone ready to receive them. Relief preparedness therefore began prior to relief centres opening. Councils needed places, staff and supplies. Neighbouring municipalities needed arrangements to support each other. Community organisations needed to know how they would connect with the formal system.

Community consequence and relief was one of the five statewide priorities for 2025–26. EMV led forums and exercises, briefed surge personnel, mapped resources and worked with councils and relief partners. The evidence showed established municipal planning and practical preparedness work. It also showed uneven local capacity.

3.8.1 Local relief arrangements and community organisations

The experience of the 2019–20 Black Summer led several north-east councils to strengthen relief staffing. Peter Tolsher, Mayor of Towong Shire Council told the Committee that his council officers had worked for up to 10 days with little break.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Steven Meyer, *Transcript of evidence*, p.17.

²³⁹ NBN Co, *Submission 136*, pp. 4–5.

²⁴⁰ Peter Tolsher, Mayor, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

The council employed about 40 office staff, while a single relief centre shift could require 10 or 12 of them, reducing its capacity to continue other essential work.

Towong, Alpine and Indigo shires subsequently established arrangements whereby trained staff could support a neighbouring council during a prolonged emergency. Mr Tolsher and Ms Phelps told the Committee that the councils had recognised that local government was not accustomed to operating around the clock, and needed a more sustainable way to relieve exhausted staff. The arrangement converted earlier experience into a practical measure to increase the workforce available to sustain local relief operations.

Mariela Diaz, Deputy Commissioner of Relief and Recovery at EMV, told the Committee that relief centre locations were identified through municipal emergency management plans.²⁴¹ EMV regional staff supported councils before the season through exercises, summer briefings and readiness attestations. Relief centres were intended to provide immediate basics, including food, water, sleeping arrangements, critical information and referral for emergency accommodation.²⁴²

Neighbourhood houses represented another source of local capacity. Neighbourhood Houses Victoria submitted that its members already provided premises, volunteers and administrative support to community groups, particularly in rural and regional Victoria.²⁴³ Some also helped communities prepare and document local disaster plans. The organisation said this work was not routinely funded and that neighbourhood houses were not formally recognised within statewide emergency management arrangements.

Neighbourhood Houses Victoria recommended that neighbourhood houses be recognised in state and municipal emergency plans, supported to participate in local planning and given access to flexible funding under pre-agreed triggers.²⁴⁴ It also proposed a pilot program through which neighbourhood houses and councils could document community-level preparedness plans.

Municipal relief planning was undertaken before summer. Some councils had strengthened the staffing arrangements needed to sustain it. The unresolved issue was local capacity outside government; organisations with premises, volunteers and trusted relationships whose emergency role had not been settled before the season.

3.9 Emerging technologies and fire intelligence

Emerging technology was a small part of Victoria's preparedness settings, but it went to the interval between ignition, detection and first attack. Project Pinpoint did not

²⁴¹ Mariela Diaz, Deputy Commissioner, Relief and Recovery, Emergency Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, *Submission 380*, p. 1.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

replace existing detection arrangements. Instead, it added another way to identify possible smoke or fire activity and pass it to incident control centres.

DEECA and FFMVic gave the clearest evidence about technology already being evaluated within Victoria's fire detection system before the season. Kelly Crosthwaite, Deputy Secretary Bushfire and Forest Services at DEECA told the Committee that Project Pinpoint was trialling artificial intelligence-enabled cameras on eight of Victoria's 80 fire towers, supported by two relocatable cameras that could be moved into higher risk areas.²⁴⁵ The cameras use automated image analysis to identify possible smoke or fire activity and alert operators. Ms Crosthwaite said the trial was intended to detect bushfires and feed information 'back to people in our incident control centres'.²⁴⁶ That evidence places Project Pinpoint within a broader preparedness system for early detection and fire intelligence. The preparedness value of those measures is their potential to improve the speed and quality of information available to incident management teams before a fire escalated, rather than to replace existing detection arrangements.

Ms Crosthwaite also referred to reconnaissance flights after lightning bands and the use of heat detection technology. Heat detection can assist agencies to identify hotspots or fire activity that may not be visible from the ground, particularly after lightning or in difficult terrain.²⁴⁷

Regional evidence showed that camera-based detection was developing through more than one pathway. Mr Turner told the Committee that DEECA, FFMVic and CFA had staffed fire towers and were exploring camera technology with artificial intelligence. He referred to the Green Triangle Fire Alliance's camera network in south-west Victoria and south-east South Australia and noted that the Barwon South West region had strong integration with that network.²⁴⁸ The preparedness value of these systems depends on the whole detection chain: a camera, aircraft, tower observer or heat detection system must identify a possible ignition. That information must be verified and located, it must reach the relevant incident management personnel, and suppression resources must be available to respond while the fire remains small. Technology can shorten parts of that chain, but only if it is reliable, integrated and supported by people who can interpret and act on the information.

The Bushfire Research Centre for Excellence provided an important qualification, submitting that automated fire-tower camera systems can provide valuable continuous monitoring, but their performance depends on terrain, atmospheric conditions, visibility, coverage and fire behaviour.²⁴⁹ Its submission also identified limitations in data quality and benchmarking for artificial intelligence detection systems, as well as gaps in camera coverage across fire-prone landscapes.

²⁴⁵ Kelly Crosthwaite, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Scott Turner, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

²⁴⁹ Bushfire Research Centre of Excellence, *Submission 322*, pp. 13-16.

Smoke, cloud, distance, ridgelines, false detections, blind spots and algorithm quality can affect whether a camera system detects a fire accurately and quickly. A technology that performs well in one landscape or in a set of conditions may not perform as well elsewhere. Human observers may still provide judgment, local knowledge and context that automated systems cannot fully replace.

FLARE Wildfire Research also cautioned against treating technology as a substitute for broader preparedness. In its submission, it accepted that remote early detection technologies may offer operational benefits in some contexts but warned that overemphasis on technological solutions could create false confidence, divert investment from landscape-scale planning, overlook ecological understanding and under-resource long-term on-ground capacity.²⁵⁰

Professor Lindenmayer expressed the same need for balance, telling the Committee that new technologies have a role in rapid detection and suppression because ‘that is the best time to extinguish fires, when they are small’.²⁵¹ He added, that ‘you do not want to be replacing people with that technology; you want them to be working alongside one another’.²⁵²

The evidence supported continued testing and integration. It did not support treating a trial, purchase or dashboard as readiness in itself. Victoria entered the season with established detection systems and developing technology trials, including AI-enabled cameras, relocatable cameras, heat detection and reconnaissance flights. These tools may strengthen preparedness where they improve the speed and quality of fire intelligence and support rapid initial attack. Their value depends on coverage, reliability, verification, trained personnel, communications and the availability of suppression resources.

Technology strengthened preparedness only where it improved the speed, quality or safety of a practical decision. The Committee received evidence concerning weather modelling, fire simulation, radio equipment and dispatch modernisation, which collectively reinforces a common test: a technology contributes to readiness where it has been validated, incorporated into operational doctrine, supported by trained users, made interoperable with existing systems and connected to people and resources able to act on the information it produces.

The evidence supports continued testing and integration of emerging technology, while resisting the assumption that procurement or completion of a trial is itself an outcome. The preparedness value lies in whether the technology improves the speed, quality or safety of a practical decision.

FINDING 31: Emerging technologies can enhance the reach and effectiveness of early fire detection and suppression, but are not a substitute for existing methods.

²⁵⁰ FLARE Wildfire Research, *Submission 307*, p. 8.

²⁵¹ David Lindenmayer, *Transcript of evidence*, p 54

²⁵² Ibid.

RECOMMENDATION 29: That the Victorian Government actively consider how emerging fire detection technologies, including AI-enabled cameras and remotely piloted aircraft systems, can augment Victoria's existing bushfire preparedness measures.

Chapter 4

An overview of the 2026 summer fires and their impacts

4.1 Introduction

This Chapter gives an overview of the fire events that occurred during January and February 2026, the extent of the fires and their impacts. It includes an overview of the duration and extent of some of the larger fires including those in the Otways, at Natimuk, Longwood, Harcourt and Walwa.

The impact of the fires was devastating. Approximately 440,000 hectares was burnt across Victoria, from national parks to farmland and regional towns. 23 Local Government Areas (LGA) were affected and the total area burnt surpassed the 2009 Black Saturday fires. Buildings and homes were destroyed, 1,590 structures, including 451 homes lost.¹ Over 300 farms and businesses were impacted with significant livestock losses and structures burnt, as well as damage to critical infrastructure.² The environmental impact was significant, with large ecologically important areas of forest burnt, affecting wildlife and causing habitat loss.

4.2 Overview of the 2026 summer fires

The extremity of the 2026 summer fires 'resulted in new records' across multiple contexts.³ As discussed in Chapter 3, the fire risk profile for the 2026 summer fire season was severely heightened. Years of persistent dry conditions and severe rainfall deficits in some regions, as well as above average maximum temperatures contributed to extreme fire risk in many regions.⁴

The first fires ignited on 5 January 2026, including the fire at Walwa, and later the Longwood fire on 7 January. By 9 January, a convergence of extremely high winds and temperatures led to catastrophic fire conditions in many regions across the state. A number of new fires ignited and existing ones were exacerbated.⁵ By 10 January, the Victorian Government declared a State of Disaster for 18 LGAs. Thousands of people were displaced with evacuation orders issued across a number of LGA and Emergency Relief Centres put in place.⁶

¹ Victorian Government, *Submission*, 287, p. 63.

² Ibid., p. 65.

³ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 8, 44 and 107.

⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

The 2026 summer fires were characterised by a mosaic of fires in a geographic spread not seen 'in a single day in Victoria since Ash Wednesday in 1983'.⁷ While there were large fires, particularly the Longwood fire and in the Otways around Carlisle River, the scale of the single fires was not comparable to the 2019–20 Black Summer fires. Rather, a large number of fires igniting around the same time under adverse weather conditions collectively represented a severe emergency that stretched fire response agencies to their limits.

The Victorian Government's submission outlined the 25 fires that collectively represent the 2026 summer fires. They are the:

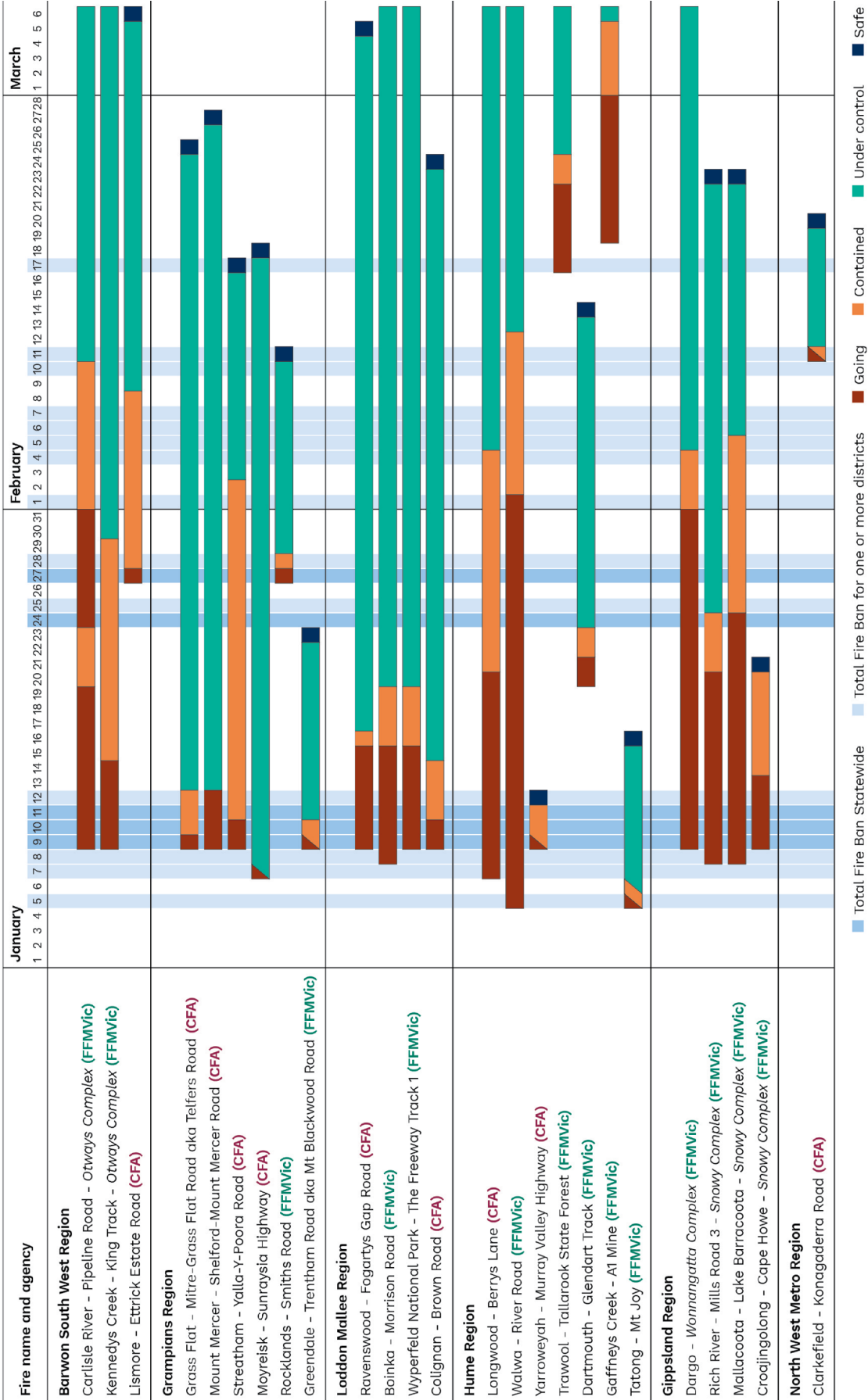
- Otways complex, which includes the Carlisle River fire and Kennedys Creek – King Track fire
- Lismore Road – Ettrick Estate Road fire
- Grass Flat – Mitre – Grass Flat Road fire
- Mount Mercer-Shelford – Mount Mercer Road fire
- Streatham – Yalla-Y-Poora Road fire
- Moyreisk – Sunraysia Highway fire
- Greendale – Trentham Road fire
- Rocklands – Smiths Road fire
- Dargo – Wannangatta Complex fire
- Rich River – Mills Road 3 fire
- Mallacoota – Lake Barracoota fire
- Croajingolong – Cape Howe fire
- Longwood – Berrys Lane fire
- Walwa – River Road fire
- Yarroweyah – Murray Valley Highway fire
- Trawool – Tallarook State Forest fire
- Tatong – Mt Joy fire
- Dartmouth – Glendart Track fire
- Gaffneys Creek – A1 Mine fire
- Ravenswood – Fogartys Gap Road fire
- Boinka – Morrison Road fire
- Wyperfeld – Freeway Track 1 fire
- Colignan – Brown Road fire
- Clarkefield – Konagaderra fire.⁸

Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the start and finish dates for each of these fires and the days that Total Fire Bans were in place. It also highlights the number of fires that burnt during the 2026 summer fire event, with multiple fires occurring at once.

⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 121–166.

Figure 4.1 Overview of significant fire events that occurred during the ‘2026 summer fires’



Source: Victorian Government, Submission 287, p. 52.

Of the 25 fires that occurred in Victoria throughout January and February 2026, several fire events were significant due to the intensity, severity and scale of impact:

- Otways complex fire, including Carlisle River fire (the Otways fire)
- Grass Flat – Mitre – Grass Flat Road fire (the Natimuk fire)
- Longwood – Berrys Lane fire (the Longwood fire)
- Ravenswood – Fogartys Gap Road fire (the Harcourt fire)
- Walwa – River Road fire (the Walwa fire).

This Report looks into further detail at five of the largest major fire complexes. This should not be read to diminish the impact and importance of the other fires.

These major fires and information about them provided in the Victorian Government submission is shown in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Information about the major fires

Fire name	Local Government Areas affected	Area burned	Duration	Cause
Otways fires	Colac-Otway Shire Council and Corangamite Shire Council	15,151ha (Carlisle River and Kennedys Creek combined)	Carlisle River: ignited 9 January; contained 1 February Kennedy's Creek: ignited 9 January; contained 15 January	Lightning
Natimuk fire	Horsham Rural City Council	8,190ha	Ignited 9 January; contained 10 January	Electrical
Longwood fire	Mansfield Shire Council, Mitchell Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council and Strathbogie Shire Council	132,427ha	Ignited 7 January; contained 21 January	Ongoing Investigation
Harcourt fire	Mount Alexander Shire Council	4,408ha	Ignited 9 January; contained 16 January	Ongoing investigation
Walwa fire	Towong Shire Council	120,914ha	Ignited 5 January; contained 2 February	Lightning

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 122-147.

The following sections discuss each of these fire events in further detail, including duration and cause. Section 4.3 discusses the collective impact of these fires in greater detail. Chapter 5 of this report discusses the response to the fires.

In describing the duration of each fire event, the Victorian Government's submission uses the date that a fire was contained as the end date for the fire event duration. The date that a fire is contained refers to when control lines are established around a fire.⁹ It is important to note that a fire can be contained, and it can also still be burning.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 121-166.

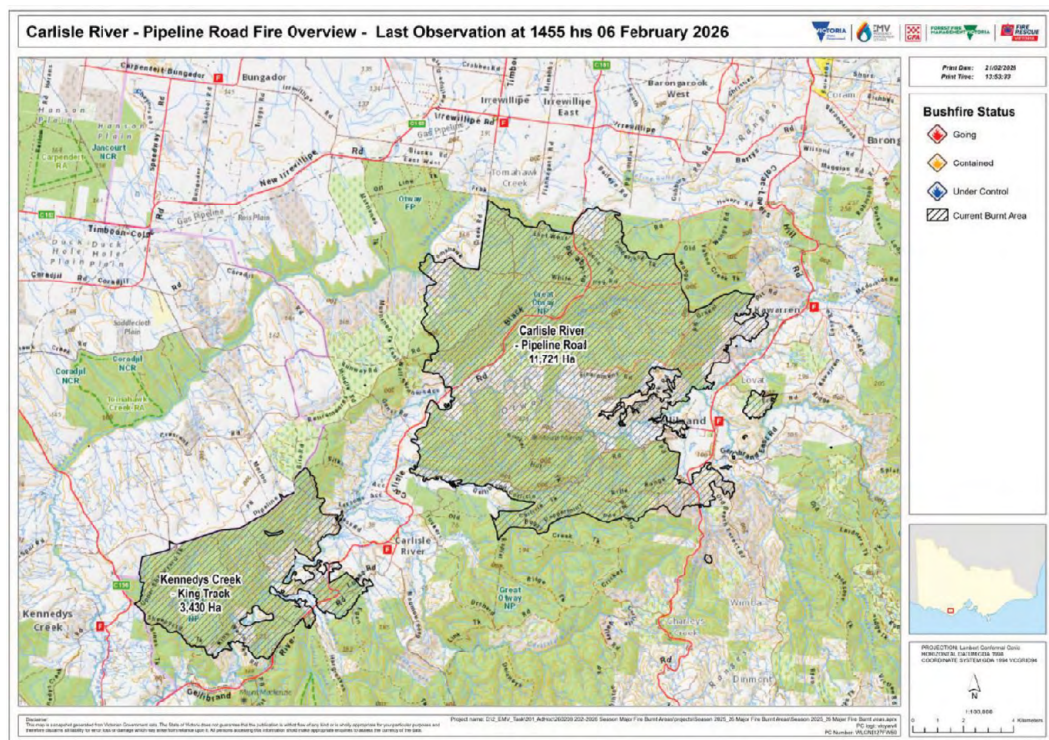
4.2.1 Otways fire

The Carlisle River fire and the Kennedys Creek fire both started on 9 January 2026 and were collectively managed as the Otways fire.¹⁰ The duration of the Kennedys Creek fire was 7 days and it was contained on 15 January.¹¹ The Carlisle River fire lasted for 21 days, and was contained on 1 February.¹² The cause of both fires was lightning.¹³

The Carlisle River fire was the largest of the two Otway complex fires, burning through areas of the Great Otway National Park, with some areas of high fuel loads in stringybark dominated forest. The fire had burned through 5,000 ha by 19 January and was declared contained on 20 January. However, fire conditions worsened and the fire returned, breaching a containment line near the town of Gellibrand. The fire threatened the town of Gellibrand on 26 January and impacted the Gellibrand water treatment plant on 27 January. Firefighting operations continued until 1 February, when the fire was declared contained.¹⁴

Figures 4.2 and 4.3 depict the scale of each fire.

Figure 4.2 Overview of the Carlisle River fire



Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 122.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 121–123.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 121–123; Colac Otway Shire Council, *Submission 314*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 123.

[illegible]

4.2.2 Natimuk fire

The fire started near Telfers Road, approximately 25 km east of Horsham. Due to the catastrophic fire conditions including high winds and high temperature, the fire spread extremely quickly eastwards towards the towns of Natimuk and Quantong.

West Wimmera Action Group's submission provided a timeline, which described how fast the fire travelled on 9 January, noting that the fire travelled '11.7 km in the first hour', having been detected at 12:42 pm by residents.¹⁸

The fire resulted in the loss of 17 houses in Natimuk, along with significant impacts to farmland and agricultural infrastructure, as well as infrastructure disruption.¹⁹

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., pp. 127–128.

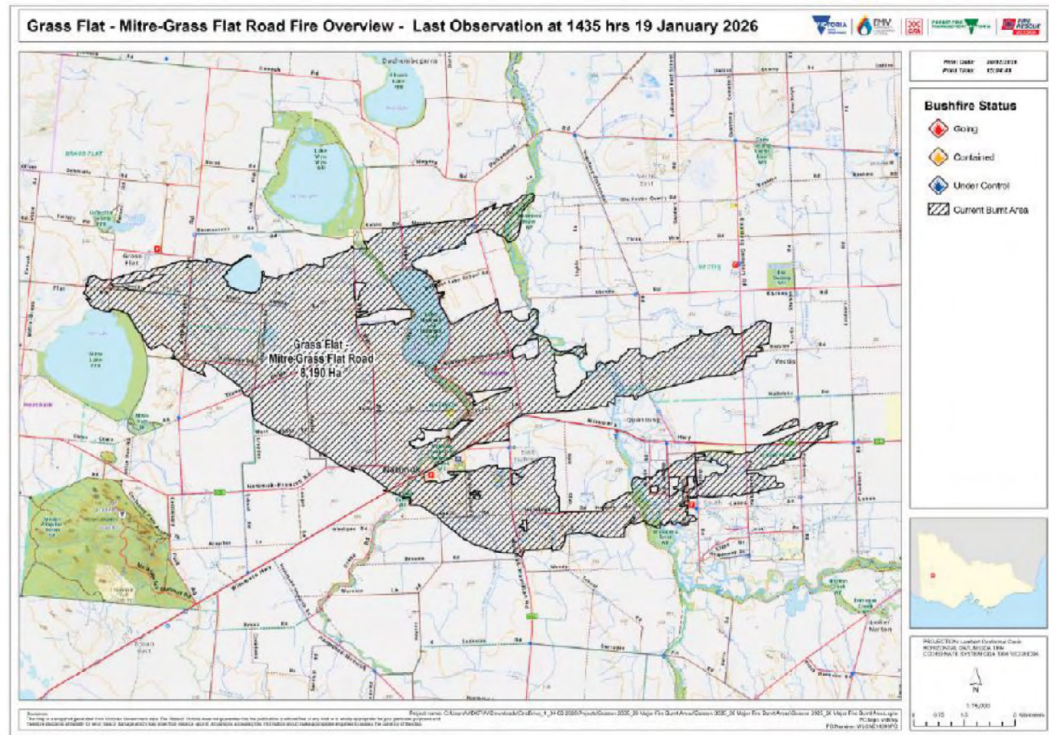
18 West Wimmera Action Group, *Submission 12*, supplementary evidence, p. 4.

19 Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 128; ABC online, *Tens of thousands of livestock confirmed dead as Victorians return to bushfire-ravaged communities*, 2026, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-01-15/victoria-bushfires-homes-destroyed-farmers-support-package/106229098>> accessed 15 July 2026.

The Committee commends the successful efforts of the Country Fire Authority and supporting crews in defending the Natimuk aged care facility and suppressing spot fires in the town, which helped prevent further property loss.²⁰

Figure 4.4 depicts the scale of the fire.

Figure 4.4 Overview of the Natimuk fire



Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 128.

4.2.3 Longwood fire

The Longwood fire started on 7 January 2026 and it was contained on 21 January.²¹ The duration of the fire was 15 days.²² The Victorian Government's submission stated that the cause of this fire is subject to ongoing investigation.²³

The Longwood fire started on 7 January 2026 near the Hume Freeway. The Victorian Government submission stated that the fire spread quickly 'through dry grass and scrub fuels under elevated fire danger conditions, threatening properties, critical transport infrastructure and rail assets'.²⁴ As the fire travelled south-east, it destroyed homes in Yarck, Ruffy, Caveat, Fawcett and Terip Terip, and posed a threat to the township of Alexandra. Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) subsequently undertook 1,198 structure damage assessments, finding that 320 residences had been destroyed,

²⁰ David Sudholz, Captain, Natimuk Brigade, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*.

²¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 145.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

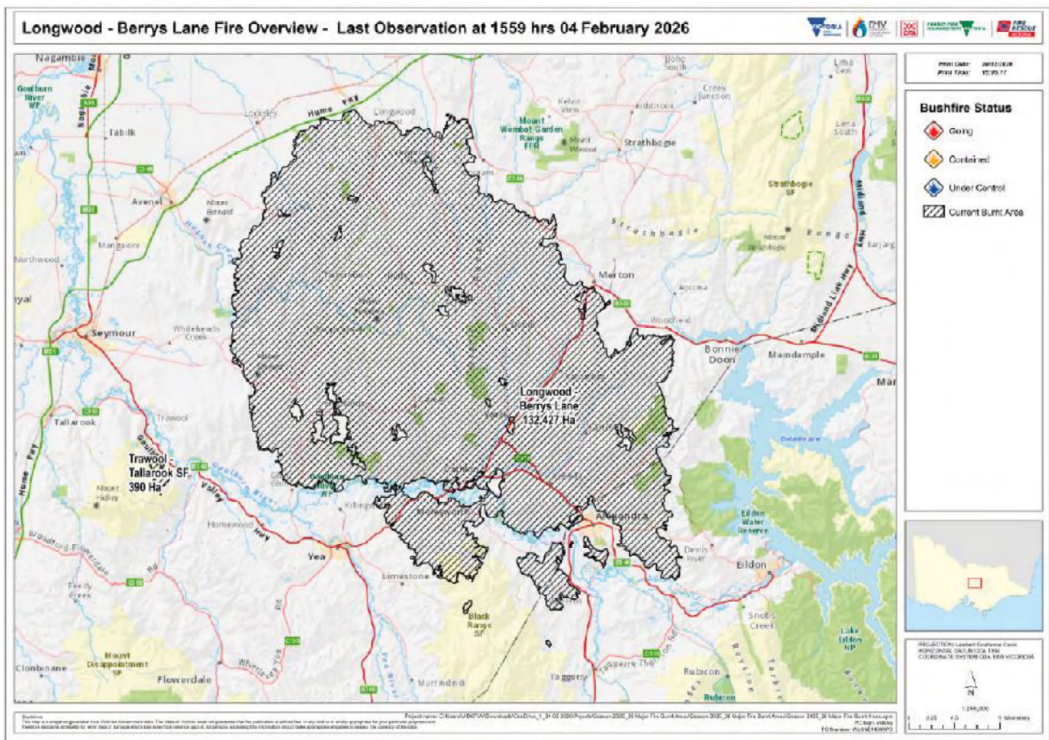
19 had been damaged, and 859 properties had experienced damage to or destruction of outbuildings²⁵ The fire was declared contained on 21 January 2026 and under control on 5 February 2026.

The fire impacted four LGAs: Mansfield Shire Council, Mitchell Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council and Strathbogie Shire Council. Murrindindi Shire Council's submission noted that as a result of the Longwood and Tallarook fires, approximately 'one third of Murrindindi Shire was directly affected by the January 2026 bushfires'.²⁶ The council stated that this accounts for 48% of the total 2026 summer fires impact in terms of land burned.²⁷ Strathbogie Shire Council stated that the Longwood fire impacted approximately 12% of its municipal area.²⁸ Mitchell Shire Council's submission also noted the 'multi-council footprint of the fire', emphasising that it is difficult for council to fully assess the impact of the fire.²⁹

The Committee commends the efforts of the CFA and FRV in putting in place firebreaks and suppression resources to successfully save much of town of Alexandra from being consumed by the Longwood fire.³⁰

Figure 4.5 depicts the scale of the fire.

Figure 4.5 Overview of the Longwood fire



Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 146.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁶ Murrindindi Shire Council, *Submission 281*, pp. 3–4.

²⁷ Murrindindi Shire Council, *Submission 281*, p. 3.

²⁸ Strathbogie Shire Council, *Submission 163*, p. 1.

²⁹ Mitchell Shire Council, *Submission 133*, pp. 7, 15.

³⁰ Chris Lynch, Captain, Alexandra Brigade, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

4.2.4 Harcourt fire

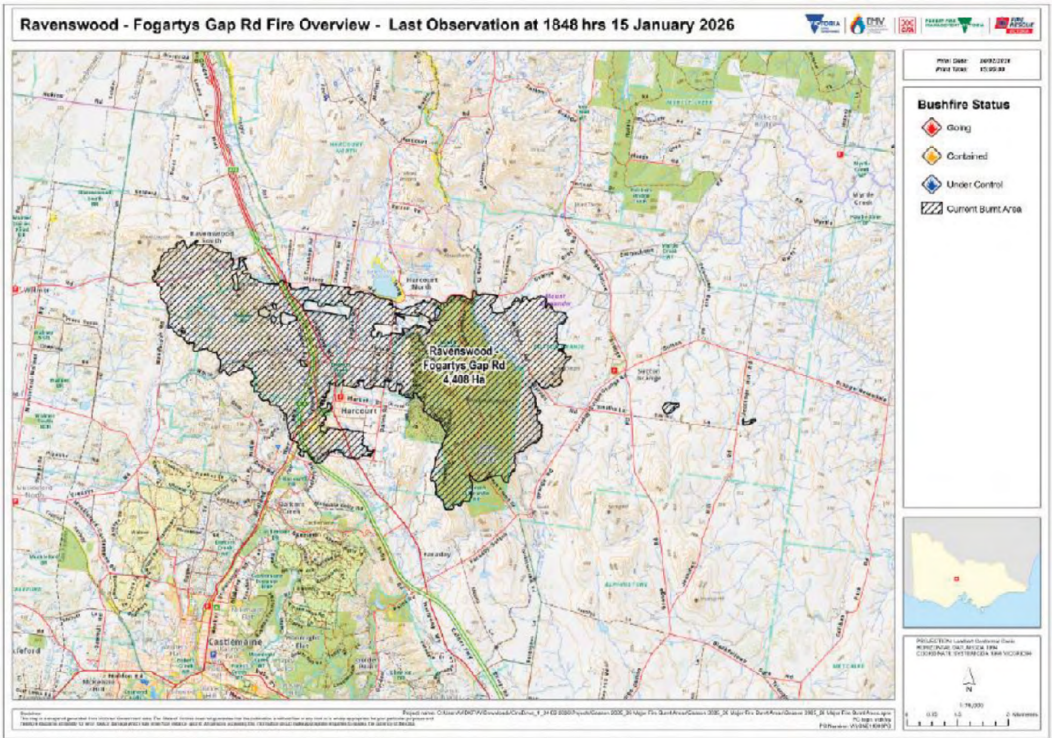
The Harcourt fire started on 9 January 2026 and was contained on 16 January.³¹ The duration of the fire was 8 days.³² The Victorian Government’s submission stated that the cause of the fire is subject to ongoing investigation.³³

The fire ignited near Fogartys Gap Road and travelled eastward rapidly ‘under extreme fire behaviour conditions’.³⁴ The fire crossed the Calder Highway before burning into Mount Alexander Regional Park, impacting fire tower and communications infrastructure. Between 10 and 15 January 2026, efforts focussed on strengthening control lines in Mount Alexander regional park and protecting the town of Harcourt. The fire was contained on 16 January 2026 and declared under control on 17 January.³⁵

The fire destroyed 74 houses and 23 properties had damaged or destroyed outbuildings.³⁶

Figure 4.6 depicts the scale of the fire.

Figure 4.6 Overview of the Harcourt fire



Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 158.

31 Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 158.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 159.

4.2.5 Walwa fire

The Walwa fire started on 5 January 2026 and was contained on 2 February.³⁷ The duration of the fire was 29 days.³⁸ The Victorian Government's submission stated that the cause of this fire was lightning.³⁹

According to the Victorian Government submission, 'the fire spread rapidly through steep forested terrain and dry grass fuels, moving north and north-east toward Murray River Road and adjoining rural properties'.⁴⁰ Between 8–11 January, the fire expanded significantly and spread into plantation areas. A significant backburning operation led to the containment of the fire. The fire was contained by 2 February and declared controlled by 13 February.⁴¹

Impacts included road closures, loss of farmland, fencing and plantation timber. 14 residences were destroyed and 93 properties had destroyed or damaged outer buildings.⁴²

Towong Shire Council's submission highlighted the impact of the Walwa fire on its municipality, stating that between the 2019–20 Black Summer fires and the 2026 summer fires have collectively 'impacted over 50% of the total municipal area'.⁴³

In the immediate period after the recent January fire event, parts of the Walwa fireground were hit by torrential rain which resulted in damage to fire impacted properties and the loss of vast quantities of prime agricultural topsoil. Council infrastructure such as bridges destroyed and roads severely damaged.

The most impacted area was Burrowye where 260 mm of rain fell in under 4 hours in an isolated super cell weather event. Farming fences only just replaced after the fire were washed away, many cattle were drowned, and Towong Shire Council reported that \$11 million worth of its infrastructure was damage or destroyed.

An already damaged landscape was further impacted, and the subsequent mental health issues for farmers and families deepened.⁴⁴

Figure 4.7 depicts the scale of the fire.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 147.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 148.

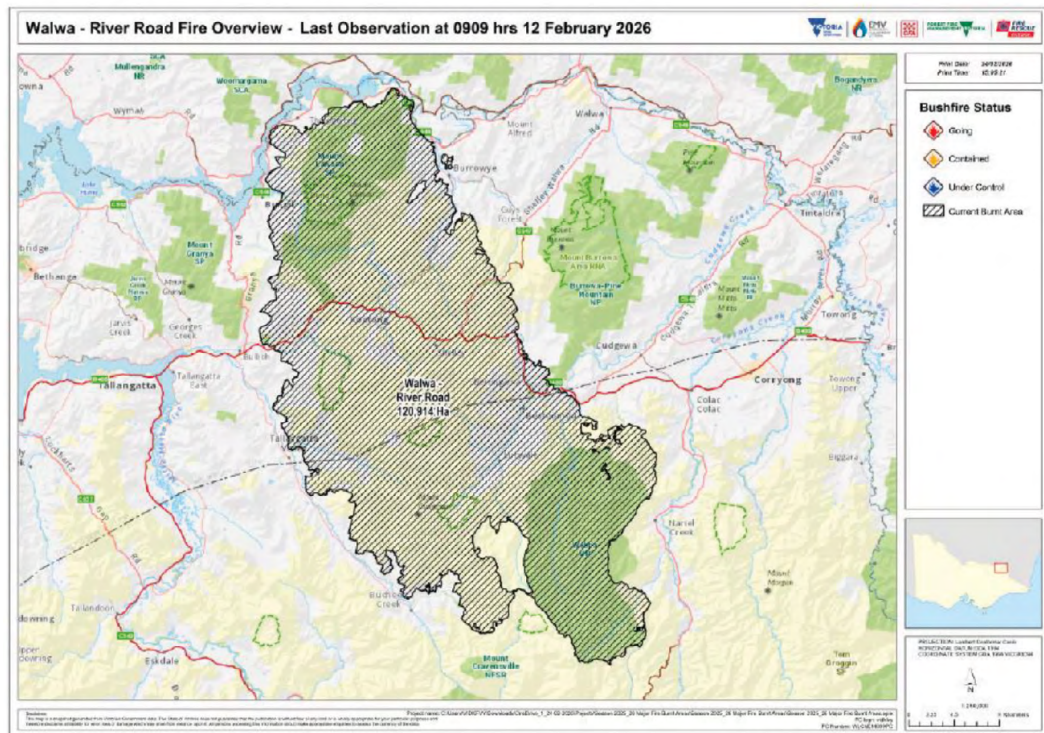
⁴¹ Ibid., p. 149.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Towong Shire Council, *Submission 292*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

Figure 4.7 Overview of the Walwa fire



Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 148.

FINDING 32: The 2026 summer fires burnt 440,000 ha of land. This is a larger area than the Black Saturday fires of 2009.

4.3 Impact of the 2026 summer fires

As noted in Section 4.2, the 2026 summer bushfires consisted of 25 individual fire events that occurred throughout January–February 2026. The 2026 summer fires had significant and widespread impacts across Victoria, including:

- approximately 440,000 hectares of land burned
- impacts across 23 LGAs
- one confirmed death.

Some of the largest fires by area were those at Longwood, which burnt 132,427 ha. The Walwa fire burnt 120,914 ha, and the Otways fires burnt 15,151 ha.

The impact of the 2026 summer bushfires extended across public and private land resulting in damage to natural environments/national parks, homes, farms, businesses, community facilities, cultural heritage and critical infrastructure.⁴⁵ Other evidence noted that the economic impacts of the fires, highlighting the financial losses from destroyed businesses and the cost of repair following the fires.

⁴⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 64.

The Committee also heard that the fires had a significant psychological impact on communities with evidence describing mental health impacts and associated trauma.

In many regions, the fires were experienced against a backdrop of earlier emergencies, including previous bushfires, floods, storms and prolonged drought. Witnesses from municipalities including Murrindindi and Towong described the 2026 fires as part of a cumulative pattern of disruption and trauma rather than a standalone event.⁴⁶

The Committee heard evidence which described the impacts of the 2026 summer bushfires. This includes:

- human impacts
- the loss of homes and structures
- loss of pets and livestock
- economic impacts, including agriculture, business and tourism
- damage to critical infrastructure
- environmental impacts, including wildlife.

The impact on households can be multifaceted and traumatic. In Alexandra, Fiona Lindsay resident of Fawcett told the Committee that ‘preparedness, funding and response are not abstract policy questions. They are the difference between protection and abandonment’.⁴⁷

4.3.1 Human impacts

The 2026 summer fires across Victoria had significant and widespread impacts on individuals and communities across the state. The fires affected 23 LGAs and tragically resulted in the death of one person.

For many communities, the fires occurred against a backdrop of repeated disaster events, with several municipalities also having been impacted by the:

- February 2024 western Victorian bushfires
- February 2024 Victorian storms
- December 2023–January 2024 storms and floods
- October 2022 floods
- June 2021 floods and storms
- 2019–20 eastern Victorian bushfires.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Livia Bonazzi, CEO, Murrindindi Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Fiona Lindsay, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 63.

During the emergency, thousands of people were displaced across affected communities. Evacuation orders were issued across 10 LGAs, requiring the activation of 32 Emergency Relief Centres and 15 recovery hubs statewide to support displaced residents and coordinate relief and recovery efforts.⁴⁹

The extent of displacement was associated with widespread damage to homes and property across Victoria. The bushfires destroyed or damaged approximately 1,590 structures, including 451 homes destroyed and a further 29 homes damaged. These included both principal places of residence and secondary homes.

For some residents, the loss or damage to housing meant being unable to return home for significant periods. A further 1,110 outbuildings were also damaged or destroyed, contributing to broader personal, agricultural and economic impacts across affected communities.

Rachel Vanstone, a resident of Harcourt shared with the committee that ‘we have the smallest burn scar here in Harcourt, yet the fire impact has been profound. The total number of properties burnt is 288. We have lost 74 houses. It is quite I do not have words. It is an unimaginable loss.’⁵⁰

Ivan Gilbert, Chair of the Harcourt Progress Association also told the Committee:

I personally know a number of people who have lost their home, the trauma that they are going through – they are not even living in the same home. He and she are living apart because they are so traumatised. We really need to get things going in the most efficient and speedy manner possible to try and get people back to some normality, whatever their particular circumstances.⁵¹

The financial impacts of the fires are continuing to be assessed. In its submission, the Victorian Government stated that 4,300 insurance claims had been lodged, with an estimated total value of \$422.9 million. As claims continue to be submitted, the full financial cost of the event remains uncertain. On Friday 16 January 2026, the Insurance Council of Australia escalated its event declaration from a ‘significant event’ to an ‘Insurance Catastrophe’, reflecting the scale and severity of the damage.⁵²

Strathbogie Shire Council gave an overview of the impact of the fires on its residents, citing the loss of livelihoods, family legacies and community facilities central to local identity and connection:

The fire’s impact has been profound. In our municipality, over 100 homes were destroyed and tens of thousands of hectares, mostly agricultural land were burnt, with the full effects still unfolding. For many families, these properties represent generations of farming, hard work, and personal history. For some, the loss may mean they cannot

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Rachel Vanstone, Resident, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁵¹ Ivan Gilbert, Chair, Harcourt Progress Association, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

⁵² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 63–64.

return or rebuild, with lasting consequences for livelihoods and family legacies. The destruction was widespread, affecting intergenerational homes, second dwellings, and vital community facilities central to local identity and connection.⁵³

Mental health and cumulative trauma

Evidence before the Committee indicated that the impacts of the fires continued well beyond the immediate emergency period. Witnesses across several regions described trauma, fatigue, grief, anxiety and prolonged recovery stress, particularly in communities already affected by earlier disasters.

A submission from the West Wimmera Action Group, based on surveys of local residents, highlighted the significant emotional and psychological impacts of the fires. Respondents described feelings of guilt, trauma and ongoing distress:

Guilt for being fortunate enough to have not lost my home. The speed of the fire, from when I saw smoke go up to being told to evacuate, was under an hour. That took days to process. I found it hard to concentrate at work and was mentally fatigued by the end of the week following the fire.⁵⁴

The West Wimmera Action Group quoted another resident who described how the fires reignited past trauma and heightened feelings of helplessness:

Having been diagnosed with PTSD, events like this kick a few things into gear. I'm already hyper-vigilant, so the immediate effect isn't great. But afterwards it really hits. Post the Little Desert fires I was more shaken up but did a few more dangerous things that day. This time it's more about having seen friends lose everything, and thinking perhaps I should have been at their house helping ...⁵⁵

In Alexandra, witnesses described the recovery process as contributing to further distress. Damien Gallagher, Councillor of Murrindindi Shire Council told the Committee that communities were being 'retraumatised by the recovery experience'.⁵⁶ He also emphasised the cumulative and continuing nature of the fires impact on affected communities, as they were experienced in a context shaped by earlier drought, flood and fire events, and that some residents were only beginning to seek assistance months later. He observed that some people have returned to a level of normality, while others 'reached out to Council for support for the first time last Friday afternoon', underscoring the uneven and prolonged nature of recovery.⁵⁷

Towong Shire Council shared that cumulative disaster effects were being magnified by remoteness, repeated emergencies and limited access to services.⁵⁸

⁵³ Strathbogie Shire Council, *Submission 163*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ West Wimmera Action Group, *Submission 12*, supplementary evidence, p. 43.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Damien Gallagher, Mayor of Murrindindi Shire, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Peter Tolsher, Mayor of Towong shire, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

Community-based organisations including the Australian Red Cross, the Victorian Council of Churches, community health services and community legal services reported widespread impacts. These impacts were compounded by the fact that many individuals were still recovering from previous emergencies, including the 2019–20 bushfires, 2022 floods, 2023 storms and floods, and 2024 fires. The evidence highlighted that trauma was not limited to direct fire impacts, but was also triggered by indirect reminders such as smoke, emergency warnings and disruption during recovery.⁵⁹ As one witness stated, ‘our communities are being retraumatised by the recovery experience’, underscoring the cumulative and long-term nature of disaster-related mental health harm.⁶⁰

FINDING 33: The 2026 summer fires had significant and enduring mental health impacts on affected communities, with individuals experiencing trauma, grief and prolonged stress that extended beyond the immediate emergency period.

RECOMMENDATION 30: That the Victorian Government provide sustained, long-term funding for accessible mental health and wellbeing services in bushfire-affected communities, recognising that recovery extends well beyond the immediate emergency response.

4.3.2 Homes and structures

The Victorian Government submission states that the 2026 summer fires resulted in the destruction of approximately 1,590 structures across the state. This included 451 homes destroyed and 29 homes damaged, together with 1,110 outbuildings damaged or destroyed. These housing losses have displaced hundreds of people for periods ranging from a few days to potentially several years.⁶¹

The loss of homes and properties was more heavily concentrated in the Harcourt and Longwood fires as the fires burned through more heavily populated areas and townships. In Harcourt, Mount Alexander Shire Council reported that 228 properties had been burnt, with 74 homes completely lost. Eleven houses were reported uninhabitable but repairable and 27 houses impacted but still habitable.⁶²

In the Longwood fire, 320 homes were destroyed, 19 damaged, and 859 properties had been destroyed or damaged outer buildings.⁶³ At the public hearing in Alexandra, witnesses from the CFA referred to multiple homes being lost during the Longwood fire, including the homes of volunteer firefighters who remained on the fireground

⁵⁹ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 343*, p. 3

⁶⁰ Damien Gallagher, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2

⁶¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p.63

⁶² Darren Fuzzard, Chief Executive Officer, Mount Alexander Shire Council, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁶³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 145.

protecting their community while their own properties were destroyed. Evidence provided to the Committee indicated that ten homes belonging to members of the Ruffy Fire Brigade were lost during the fire. Additionally, the fire destroyed several important community assets, including the Ruffy Recreation Reserve, the former Table Community Centre school building and the Terip Terip church, compounding the impact on the local community.⁶⁴

Ms Lindsay described the destruction of property in the Longwood fire including buildings, vehicles, business assets and agricultural infrastructure on her family's land. She explained that:

within seconds ... it stopped being a fire. It became a devourer, and that in less than a minute ... 50 acres of our life's work was erased – not damaged, not partially lost, completely incinerated.⁶⁵

Evidence from the Walwa fire highlighted the uneven nature of impacts, with Mr Tolsher noting that 'some people lost all their sheds, all their farmland, all their fences ... but they actually managed to save their home.'⁶⁶ Despite retaining their principal place of residence, such losses affected the viability of continuing to live and work on the land.

The emotional and lived reality of housing loss was also reflected in the submission from Housing for the Aged Action Group, which described the case of an older renter in regional Victoria whose 'rental property and everything in it was destroyed'.⁶⁷ The submission noted that she had built her life there over many years, with '60 years of personal belongings, clothing, and possessions' lost in the fire, illustrating the depth of loss experienced when homes are destroyed.⁶⁸

The impact on housing extended beyond physical damage to include broader social and practical consequences. Decisions about whether to remain or relocate were influenced by factors such as ongoing risk, attachment to place, property management responsibilities, and varying capacity to evacuate.

Figure 4.8 below shows a home destroyed by fire in Natimuk.

⁶⁴ George Noye, Captain, Ruffy Brigade, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

⁶⁵ Fiona Lindsay, Resident, Fawcett, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ Peter Tolsher, Mayor, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Housing for the Aged Action Group, *Submission 268*, pp. 7–8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Figure 4.8 A home destroyed by fire in Natimuk



Source: Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee.

FINDING 34: The 2026 summer fires resulted destruction of approximately 1,590 structures across the state, including:

- 451 homes destroyed, and 29 homes damaged
- 1,110 outbuildings damaged or destroyed.

FINDING 35: The loss of housing and assets as a result of the 2026 summer fires has had a significant social, emotional and economic impact on fire affected communities.

Displacement

The 2026 summer fires displaced thousands of people across Victoria. At the peak of the bushfires, residents in 10 LGAs had received evacuation orders, resulting in the activation of 32 Emergency Relief Centres and 15 recovery hubs.⁶⁹

In the Otways, the Colac Showgrounds Emergency Relief Centre accommodated around 180 people at peak occupancy, together with pets and livestock.⁷⁰

In other districts, the Committee heard that many displaced residents remained within their local areas, relying on nearby family, friends and community networks rather than leaving the district altogether.

⁶⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 64.

⁷⁰ Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

Evidence from the Towong Shire Council highlighted that displacement often involved more than temporary relocation. Mr Tolsher told the Committee that ‘many residents experienced prolonged isolation due to road closures, disruption of essential services, evacuation and uncertainty regarding property and livelihood impacts’, indicating that the effects of displacement were extended, uncertain and closely tied to loss of access, services and security.⁷¹

Relief and recovery hubs are discussed in Chapter 6.

4.3.3 Economic impacts

Agriculture

The 2026 summer fires had a severe impact on Victorian agriculture, causing widespread losses to livestock, fodder, farm infrastructure and productive land. The Victorian Government submission records more than 45,000 livestock deaths, the destruction of 9,625 kilometres of fencing, the loss of over 40,400 tonnes of hay or silage, damage to more than 500 farm sheds, and impacts across 150,000 hectares of agricultural land.⁷²

Figure 4.9 below, which was submitted by Gavin Beever, a landholder in Yarck, depicts the damage at his farming property resulting from the Longwood fire.

71 Peter Tolsher, Mayor, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

72 Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 66.

Figure 4.9 Farmland at Yarck burnt by the Longwood Fire



Source: Gavin Beever, *Submission 401*, p. 2.

Bushfires cause much business interruption and economic loss for regional communities. Livestock, crop and plantation losses impact both the farmers and the industries that process the livestock, crops and timber. Dealing with burnt livestock is particularly harrowing for farmers.

Figure 4.10 shows livestock at Gooram burnt by the Longwood fire.

Figure 4.10 Livestock at Gooram burnt by the Longwood fire



Source: Fergus Ellis, Carly Douglas and Jordan McCarthy, 'Dead sheep everywhere': CFA captain reveals bushfire horror amid response chaos, Herald Sun, 17 January 2026.

The Victorian Farmers Federation emphasised that bushfires are a system wide shock to farming operations with severe and long-lasting impacts disrupting production cycles and reducing output across multiple seasons.⁷³ Its submission noted that 'livestock losses, destruction of fodder reserves and widespread infrastructure damage have placed considerable pressure on farm businesses',⁷⁴ with effects lasting 'over several years as herds and flocks are rebuilt'.⁷⁵ These impacts extend beyond farms, as 'reduced production flows through to processors, transport operators and regional businesses'.⁷⁶

Corangamite Shire Council's submission highlighted the impact of the fires on primary producers in the Yalla Y Poora Fire (Skipton–Streatham–Carranballac–Stoneleigh corridor). It reported that 'over 7000 sheep [were] lost' and 'over 1100km of fencing [was] impacted'.⁷⁷ The submission also showed that the effects on agriculture continue well beyond the initial fire event, noting that 'mental health pressures' remain

⁷³ Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission 286*, pp. 7–8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p 2

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission 286*, p. 8.

⁷⁷ Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 173*, p. 2.

significant for 'primary producers facing prolonged clean-up, livestock disposal, water access and fencing backlogs'.⁷⁸

Pyrenees Shire Council reported similar agricultural impacts from the Streatham-Yalla-Y-Poora fire, including livestock losses, crop damage, silted dams and risks of future soil erosion. The council also identified damage to 135 power poles, transformers and powerlines, disrupting power supply across affected farming areas. These impacts demonstrated that agricultural recovery depends not only on replacing stock and fencing, but also on restoring essential infrastructure needed for farm operations.⁷⁹

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) also raised concerns about the practical and emotional burden placed on landholders during agricultural recovery. It noted that, under the State Emergency Management Plan, farmers are responsible for disposing of deceased livestock on their properties, but councils were concerned that the psychological toll of emergencies can leave some farmers unable to manage this task.⁸⁰ The submission also noted that small-scale and hobby farmers may not have the equipment, knowledge or capacity to dispose of carcasses in accordance with environmental guidelines. Although Agriculture Victoria established a Livestock Disposal Advisory Service, some councils reported that this support was activated after many landholders had already disposed of stock, highlighting the need for timelier on-ground advice and assistance during future fire events.⁸¹

Evidence to the Committee also highlighted the importance of recognising agricultural land as productive economic infrastructure. The MAV submitted that, for many rural councils, farming and agriculture are the base of the local economy and central to the state's food and fibre production. It noted that emergency assessments in farming zones can focus heavily on dwellings and buildings, while the broader productive use of land, including livestock, crops, fodder, fencing, water infrastructure and farm access, may not be sufficiently recognised.⁸² This is significant because damage to agricultural land and infrastructure can delay recovery, reduce production over multiple seasons and affect processors, transport operators and other regional businesses that rely on farm activity.⁸³

Steve Threlfall, who runs outdoor goods retail stores, presented to the inquiry in Alexandra, and spoke about their experience helping farmers with livestock in fire affected areas.

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

⁷⁸ Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 173*, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Pyrenees Shire Council, *Submission 291*, p. 4.

⁸⁰ The Municipal Association of Victoria, *Submission 260*, p. 19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

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... 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.

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.⁸⁴

FINDING 36: The 2026 summer fires caused extensive disruption to Victorian agricultural and farming businesses, with significant losses to crops, livestock, fodder and infrastructure, as well as damage to productive land that will affect businesses over multiple seasons.

RECOMMENDATION 31: That the Victorian Government consider ways in which local veterinarians and registered firearms owners can access impacted properties to support farmers and assist with livestock euthanasia.

Business and tourism

Impacts on businesses across the affected areas were substantial, including both direct impacts from loss of assets and supply chain disruptions, as well as the broader effects of reduced visitation and reduced trade.

Mount Alexander Shire Council illustrated the scale of disruption in Harcourt, where at least 157 businesses were impacted, with estimated initial losses of approximately \$23.62 million.⁸⁵

Wine Victoria identified significant economic and operational impacts on grape and wine businesses arising from the 2026 fires. A particularly significant direct loss occurred at the Harcourt Cool Stores facility, where more than 42 wine businesses stored product and over 600 pallets of wine, equivalent to approximately 480,000 bottles, were destroyed.⁸⁶ The lost stock was estimated to be worth around \$15 million wholesale and up to \$22 million retail, with some individual businesses losing as much as 98% of their total stock holdings. Wine Victoria submitted that these losses caused

⁸⁴ Steve Threlfall, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 55.

⁸⁵ Darren Fuzzard, Chief Executive Officer, Mount Alexander Shire Council, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Wine Victoria, *Submission 111*, pp. 1–2.

immediate revenue impacts, disrupted distribution arrangements, and placed significant pressure on business cashflow and ongoing viability, particularly for small and medium-sized producers.⁸⁷

Wine Victoria also highlighted longer-term production and regional economic impacts. In the Strathbogie Ranges, the Longwood fire directly affected more than four wine producers and destroyed approximately 300 acres of vineyard, with losses including vineyards, houses, sheds, stock and critical infrastructure.⁸⁸ Vineyard re-establishment costs were estimated to exceed \$20 million, with up to seven years required before full production capacity is restored. Wine Victoria also raised broader flow-on impacts for regional tourism, employment and supply chains, noting that reduced visitation following fires can affect cellar doors, accommodation, hospitality, events and local businesses. The submission further stated that repeated high-intensity fire seasons increase investment uncertainty, insurance costs and long-term financial risk for agricultural businesses.⁸⁹

The Victorian Government submission states that visitor movements in affected regions dropped by 20 to 30% over a three-week period, contributing to revenue loss, event cancellations and reduced forward bookings.⁹⁰

Evidence from Surf Coast Shire Council demonstrated that business impacts from the 2026 fires were not confined to areas directly burnt by fire. The Council said that tourism-dependent communities experienced significant economic disruption as a result of fire warnings, media reporting and public perceptions of risk.⁹¹ In Lorne, where visitors accounted for 79% of total summer expenditure, inaccurate reporting that the town was fire-affected led to booking cancellations and reduced visitation. The Council reported that traders lost an average of two weeks of peak January trade, with forward bookings down 18% in March and 31% in April.⁹² The submission stated that this reputational damage had lasting consequences for local businesses, particularly accommodation providers, hospitality venues, retailers and other businesses reliant on visitor spending.

In both Colac and the Upper Murray, witnesses said that tourism losses extended beyond the immediate fire footprint, affecting broader regional visitation, local trade and key tourism assets.⁹³

The fires also had a significant impact on tourism and recreational infrastructure on public land. Damage to 15 historic trestle bridges and two rail trails, the High-Country Rail Trail and the Great Victorian Rail Trail, continues to have a long-term impact on tourism in these regions.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 66.

⁹¹ Surf Coast Shire Council, *Submission 280*, p. 9.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Phil Howard, Deputy Mayor, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

Mount Alexander Shire Council further reported the closure and disruption of local businesses and amenities including petrol stations in Harcourt and Ravenswood, the Harcourt Motel, public toilets, sporting grounds, recreation reserves and the La Larr Ba Gauwa mountain bike park.⁹⁴ It also identified supply chain impacts, ‘job losses or reduced access to employment’, and possible smoke damage to grapes that could affect the year’s vintage.⁹⁵

Relief efforts for businesses are discussed in Chapter 6.

FINDING 37: The 2026 summer fires caused widespread economic disruption to Victorian businesses, with significant losses driven by asset destruction, supply chain interruptions and sharp declines in visitation, even in areas not directly affected by fire.

4.3.4 Critical infrastructure impacts

Roads and access

The Victorian Government submission stated that 56 arterial roads had been closed during January in connection with the fires, along with sections of the Hume Highway, Murray Valley Highway and Goulburn Valley Highway. A further 250 local council road closures and 38 jointly managed closures were recorded, while more than 1,300 kilometres of roads across DEECA and Parks Victoria land lay within the fire-affected zone.⁹⁶

As discussed earlier at Section 4.2.5, in some areas damage to infrastructure as a result of the fires was compounded by storm damage in the aftermath, as happened at Burrowye following the Walwa fire.⁹⁷

The Committee also heard that prolonged road closures affected freight, agriculture, milk collection, tourism and access to affected residents.⁹⁸

These matters are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

FINDING 38: The 2026 fires caused widespread disruption to Victoria’s transport network, with extensive road closures, including major highways, in fire affected regions. This disrupted freight, agriculture and essential services, while restricting access for residents and delaying recovery efforts.

⁹⁴ Mount Alexander Shire Council, *Submission 285*, p. 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 66–67.

⁹⁷ Towong Shire Council, *Submission 292*, p. 12.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

Power, telecommunications and water

The fires caused widespread electricity outages across Victoria, peaking at 98,000 customers, including more than 2,000 life support customers.⁹⁹

The most severe and prolonged impacts occurred in Walwa and Longwood, with restoration in some areas continuing until late January and early February.¹⁰⁰

The Committee received submissions from Powercor and AusNet. Powercor operates the electricity distribution network across Melbourne's west and central and western Victoria and AusNet's electricity distribution network covers Melbourne's northern and eastern suburbs and most of north-eastern and eastern Victoria.

AusNet's electricity distribution network was significantly impacted by the bushfires, particularly the Longwood and Walwa fires.¹⁰¹ Over 10,000 customers were without electricity with outages affecting households, farms, essential services and businesses. A large number of network assets required replacement with close to 400 poles replaced.¹⁰² Supply was restored for the vast majority (>96%) of affected customers within 72 hours, with the assistance of mobile generation at Ruffy and Woods Point.¹⁰³ In some communities, outages extended for weeks due to the scale of damage and the need to progress restoration sequentially as conditions allowed.

Powercor's electricity network was also heavily impacted by the Natimuk, Skipton, Harcourt, and Cobram fires.¹⁰⁴ On 9 January, approximately 52,000 Powercor customers were without power and more than 270 power poles needed replacing. Within 12 hours, 90% of customers had power restored.¹⁰⁵ Where there were prolonged outages, Powercor stated that some sites had ongoing fireground access restrictions and required extensive rebuilding.¹⁰⁶ By 17 January, power was restored to all customers.¹⁰⁷

In its submission, the Victorian Government said:

Statewide, restoration progressed rapidly: 81% of customers were reconnected within 24 hours, 96% within 72 hours, and 98% within seven days. However, rural and farming communities in fire affected regions experienced extended outages due to the scale of infrastructure damage and safety constraints.¹⁰⁸

⁹⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ AusNet, *Submission 459*, p. 3.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Powercor, *Submission 469*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 67.

The Committee also heard that loss of mains power caused failure of the town water supply system in Natimuk, reducing residents' ability to defend homes and forcing some firefighters to search for alternative water sources during active operations.¹⁰⁹

Communications failure was a feature of many of the fires. Witnesses described extended communications outages, failed tower backups, fibre outages, inability to use landlines or mobile phones, and, in some areas, inability to contact emergency services.¹¹⁰

This was identified as a major impact multiplier during the 2026 fires. Witnesses described loss of contact with loved ones and emergency services, including evidence that 'we lost all communication from 4 pm on Friday 9 January' and that families 'did not know whether our loved ones were alive or dead',¹¹¹ others reported that phone towers 'failed within an hour'.¹¹²

The impact of the loss of power and communications in the response to the fires is discussed in Chapter 5.

FINDING 39: The 2026 summer fires caused significant disruption to power, communications and water infrastructure, resulting in widespread power, communications and water outages at a number of locations.

4.3.5 Environmental impacts

The Victorian Government submission noted that 63 parks were closed across Victoria due to bushfire impacts, including parts of the Alpine National Park, Lake Eildon National Park and areas on the Murray River east of Walwa.¹¹³ There were ecological impacts on private land also with, more than 2% of Victoria's total private protected area estate burnt, including high-quality habitat for biodiversity, long unburnt habitat, and habitat suitable for approximately 50% of Victoria's listed threatened species.¹¹⁴

There were 'considerable impacts to catchments and biodiversity', including heavy vegetation loss, habitat degradation, erosion risk and increased predator pressures.¹¹⁵

The Australian Land Conservation Alliance highlighted the seriousness of the environmental damage caused by the 2026 fires. It noted that more than 10,000 hectares of conservation covenant land was burnt, including very high-quality

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Peter Weeks, President, Upper Goulburn Community Radio, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 37.

¹¹¹ Shelley Henry, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

¹¹² Clint Reid, Captain, Tallangatta Valley CFA, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

¹¹³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 64–65.

¹¹⁴ Australian Land Conservation Alliance, *Submission 182*, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 64.

biodiversity habitat, long-unburnt areas, and habitat suitable for approximately 50% of Victoria's listed threatened species. They said that the impacts on private land conservation were more expansive than during the Black Summer fires of 2019–20.¹¹⁶

This was echoed by the Euroa Arboretum and Granite to Goulburn, Biodiversity Recovery Alliance, who addressed the environmental damage caused by the Longwood fires. They explained that 'hollow bearing trees have been the biggest casualty, with 1000's burnt or subsequently cut down, with initial estimates indicating that around 90% of hollow-bearing trees had been lost.¹¹⁷ The submission noted that these trees provide critical habitat for species including bats, birds, possums, gliders and phascogales, and that the long-term effects on biodiversity remain uncertain.¹¹⁸

The loss of old growth trees was also raised by Terry Wills, President of Harcourt Valley Landcare. He gave a personal account of the impact of the loss of an old growth tree on his property:

It was a tree that life centred around, providing a community house in the landscape; a tree that sheltered possums, phascogales, Krefft's gliders, bees, antechinus, cockatoos and galahs from the harsh conditions outside. It was a nursery for those creatures to raise their young, a tree that nurtured and provided food, a tree that held the soil together on the slopes of Leanganook, a tree that gave life and hope. Who knows how many more years it would have lived; we do not know. This tree was one of the many habitat trees lost in the Harcourt fire. It is a tragedy; you cannot rebuild this tree. It is lost forever. No amount of nesting boxes will replace the homes it once provided. It feels like an injustice that this has happened and fills us with deep remorse and grief.

Some submitters were concerned with the practice of felling trees post-fire. Friends of the Ironbark Forests Mt Alexander Region said:

FOBIF is concerned about the near indiscriminate felling of Large Old Trees in the immediate aftermath of fires. After the direct mortality caused by heat and smoke, post fire tree removal may represent the greatest additional ecological impact¹¹⁹

Friends of the Earth Melbourne expressed concern that the post-fire removal of hazardous trees can have unintended social and environmental consequences. While recognising the need to manage risks to public safety, it submitted that clean-up works may sometimes result in the excessive removal of trees, particularly along roadsides in farming areas where remnant vegetation provides important habitat for birds and mammals. It argued that this can lead to unnecessary canopy loss, visual damage and ecological impacts, as well as causing distress for local residents.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Australian Land Conservation Alliance, *Submission 182*, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ Euroa Arboretum and Granite to Goulburn, Biodiversity Recovery Alliance, *Submission 452*, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Friends of the Ironbark Forests Mount Alexander Region, *Submission 123*, p. 4.

¹²⁰ Friends of the Earth Melbourne, *Submission 207*, pp. 29–30.

In contrast, the Victorian Government highlighted the importance of timely hazardous tree assessment and treatment after bushfires. It noted that fire affected trees can pose a serious and sometimes hidden risk, particularly where they are within falling distance of access routes, control lines, transport corridors or fireground work areas.¹²¹ The Government submitted that these trees must be assessed and treated by appropriately qualified or endorsed personnel where practicable, to support safe access for emergency services, recovery crews and the broader community.¹²²

Environmental recovery will take years, and some impacts, particularly those relating to biodiversity, may only become evident over time.¹²³

Figure 4.11 Fire damaged trees felled near Gellibrand



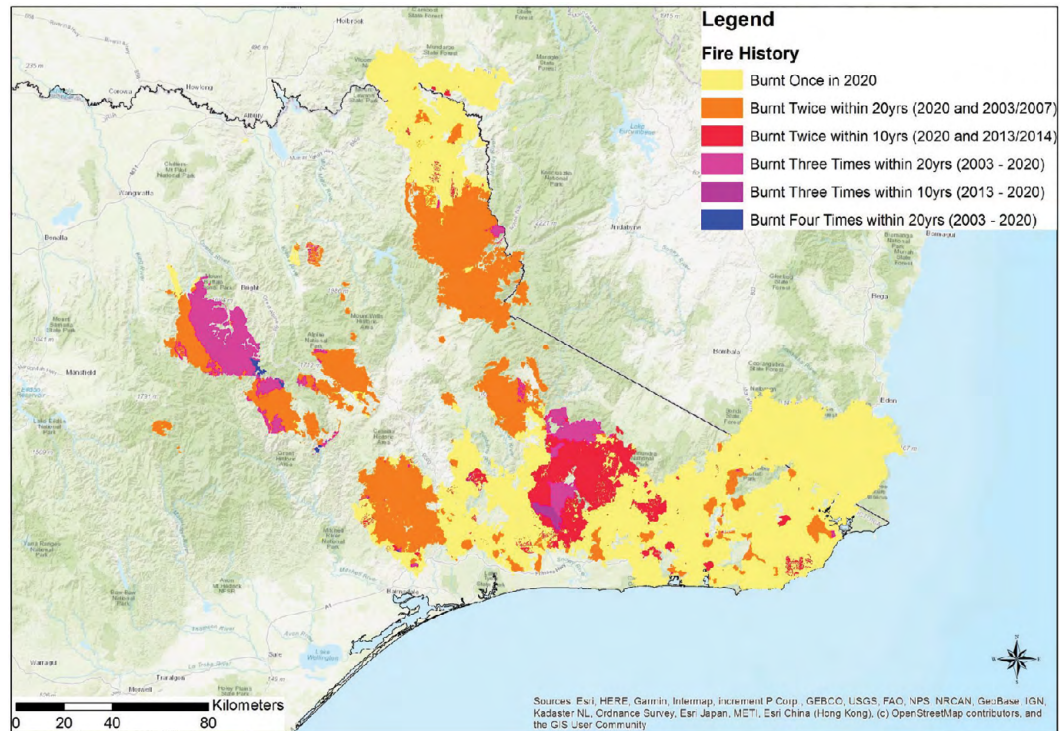
Source: Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee.

¹²¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 105.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Figure 4.12 Some parts of eastern Victoria have been repeatedly burnt by bushfires



Source: Peter McHugh, *Submission 313*, p. 36.

FINDING 40: The 2026 summer fires caused extensive environmental damage across public and private land, including a significant loss of biodiversity, destruction of critical habitats, and closure of parks and recreational infrastructure.

Wildlife

Severe wildlife impacts were evident both during and after the fires. Without official numbers, it is difficult to estimate the total loss of wildlife which occurred as a result of the 2026 summer fires. Lisa Palma, CEO of Wildlife Victoria however told the Committee in relation to her organisation's Emergency Response Service:

Wildlife Victoria increased staffing levels, including night shift staffing, to manage an increase in incoming call volume and handled the highest number of calls to the service in its history with 1,135 calls for help received on 9th January.

The most widespread wildlife injury and death were reported to the Committee at the Harcourt and Otway fires, corresponding to significant fire damage to Mount Alexander National Park and the Great Otway National Park respectively.

Kerrie Allen, President of Mount Alexander Wildlife Watch described residents observing injured and burnt wildlife during the fire event.¹²⁴ Ms Allen also said that restrictions on access to fire affected areas delayed assistance to injured animals and contributed to prolonged suffering, with rescuers continuing to locate animals in severely compromised condition after the main fire front had passed.¹²⁵

Similar animal deaths were reported at the Otway fires, with ‘uncountable birds and animals’ killed.¹²⁶

RSPCA Victoria stated that the 2026 fires caused a ‘devastating number of livestock and wildlife lost and injured’.¹²⁷ Their submission explained that fire impacts on wild animals include death and physical injury, smoke inhalation, heat stress, starvation and dehydration, loss of habitat, ongoing displacement, and increased predation risk for surviving animals. It also noted that repeated fire and climate-related events are affecting the capacity of habitat to regenerate and wildlife populations to recover, placing additional pressure on already vulnerable ecosystems.¹²⁸

Evidence from La Trobe University’s Research Centre for Future Landscapes further emphasised that the ecological impacts of bushfires extend beyond immediate animal injury and mortality. Its submission highlighted that fire has significant consequences for rare and threatened species, particularly where critical habitat, long-unburnt vegetation, hollow-bearing trees or geographically restricted plant and animal populations are affected.¹²⁹ It also raised concerns that reduced biodiversity expertise and capacity within relevant agencies may limit the ability to identify and protect important ecological assets before, during and immediately after fire events. The submission stated that stronger pre-fire planning, including better use of species records and local ecological knowledge, is needed to minimise avoidable biodiversity losses during fire response and recovery.¹³⁰

RSPCA Victoria raised concerns about the wildlife response following the fires, stating that communication with wildlife stakeholders was limited and often delayed, and that trained wildlife volunteers were reportedly not deployed in some areas. It further stated that private landowners were required to euthanise injured wildlife on their properties, particularly kangaroos, indicating that the full scale of wildlife injury and mortality may not yet be fully understood.¹³¹

The 2026 bushfires had severe and immediate impacts on wildlife across all firegrounds. Animals Australia’s veterinary-led field teams observed significant numbers of injured native animals, particularly kangaroos and wallabies, suffering

¹²⁴ Kerrie Allen, President, Mount Alexander Wildlife Watch, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 69–70.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹²⁶ Marina Lewis, Climate Action Team, Colac Otway, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹²⁷ RSPCA Victoria, *Submission 296*, p. 4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Research Centre for Future Landscapes, La Trobe University, *Submission 269*, p. 4.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ RSPCA Victoria, *Submission 296*, pp. 11–12.

from burns, starvation, dehydration and shock in the days and weeks following the fires. Surviving animals were often found in burnt paddocks, roadside areas, tree canopies and isolated pockets of habitat, many requiring urgent veterinary assessment, treatment or euthanasia.¹³² The fires also left many animals stranded in landscapes where food, water and shelter had been destroyed, placing them at ongoing risk well after the fire front had passed.¹³³

These impacts were compounded by delays and limitations in the formal emergency response for wildlife. Community members and wildlife carers were frequently the first to identify injured or stranded animals, but inconsistent access to firegrounds, limited reporting pathways and delays in agency coordination meant that some animals experienced prolonged suffering before assistance could be provided. The destruction of habitat, combined with post-fire heatwave conditions, created further risks of starvation and dehydration for surviving wildlife.¹³⁴

Wildlife rescuer access will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

FINDING 41: The 2026 fires had severe effects on wildlife, including injury, death and habitat loss. Wildlife impacts were particularly severe in the National and State parks that were affected by the Otways and Harcourt fires.

¹³² Animals Australia, *Submission 394*, p. 3.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Chapter 5

The response to the 2026 summer fires

5.1 Introduction

The response to the 2026 summer fires was marked by the extraordinary dedication and bravery of firefighters, volunteers and emergency personnel, whose efforts significantly limited loss of life under extreme conditions. There were a number of areas the response was successful, including at Alexandra and Natimuk, where crews acted quickly to save property in built up areas. Strong community education, communication and public awareness, particularly the shift toward leaving early, led to less fatalities compared to previous major fire events such as the 2009 Black Saturday Fires.

However, there is a need to improve operational capability in some key areas and strengthen infrastructure resilience to ensure Victoria is better prepared for large-scale fire events in the future.

5.2 Community education and communication

5.2.1 The leave early message

The Committee heard that education about fire preparation has shifted in the past decade or more to encourage community members to leave early, rather than to prepare, stay and defend.¹ As discussed in Chapter 3, the leave early message was delivered in public education campaigns ahead of the 2025–26 fire season, including the Get Fire Ready program. The program featured local events, a roadshow including a purpose-built trailer as well as trucks and multiple brigade members to speak directly with community members. This campaigning to build awareness and provide communities with tools and resources to prepare for the upcoming fire season, demonstrated that there was strong community engagement. Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) said the Get Fire Ready program ‘was a far bigger success than what we actually thought’.² Ongoing engagement from emergency response agencies about fire preparation, and lived experience of previous significant fire events, has led to a cultural shift where people begin to normalise preparedness and behave in a ‘bushfire safety-wise way’.³

¹ Professor James McLennan, *Submission 134, Attachment 1*, p. 4.

² Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer, CFA, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

³ Professor James McLennan, Adjunct Professor, La Trobe University, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 57.

The Victorian Government submission noted the leave early message was successful, stating ‘the public were observed heeding the public information and warnings including early evacuations. The focus on proactive evacuation was a key difference in approach from 2009’.⁴

Professor James McLennan, Adjunct Professor at La Trobe University said he believed that preparation and the success of the leave early message was a major contributor to the minimisation of deaths in the 2026 summer fires:

While many factors are involved in minimising the destructive impacts of the bushfire, I propose to the committee that a major contributor to the minimisation of deaths and injuries during the January bushfires was the effectiveness of our current community bushfire safety programs, which emphasise the threat to life posed by bushfires and the need for households to have a survival plan, to leave safely and to relocate promptly to a place of safety in the face of bushfire threat.⁵

He contrasted the single fatality of the 2026 summer fires, where the messaging was to leave early, with the 172 deaths of the 2009 Black Saturday Fires, where the messaging was to ‘Prepare, stay and defend or leave early’.⁶

Mr Heffernan echoed this sentiment, saying:

an important truth: countless lives, homes, businesses and farms were saved through the combined efforts of CFA members working alongside our partner agencies and through the decisions communities made ahead of and in response to issued warnings.⁷

While a lack of fatalities in comparison to equivalent fire events can be considered a success, some submitters cautioned there were trade-offs with the leave early approach. This included:

- an increase in the loss of undefended houses⁸
- the loss of livestock, fencing, machinery and farming infrastructure, as well as the trauma of putting down injured livestock or removing carcasses⁹
- ‘leave early’ burnout during fire seasons with multiple periods of high fire danger, leading to a sense of hesitation to set clear triggers to leave.¹⁰

These issues should be taken into account when assessing the success of the leave early approach. Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer at Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) acknowledged the loss of property and assets when considering leave early, but said ‘they can be rebuilt, but a life cannot be rebuilt, so we are unapologetic in

⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 60.

⁵ Prof James McLennan, La Trobe University, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 52–53.

⁶ Professor James McLennan, *Submission 134, Attachment 1*, p. 6.

⁷ Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer, CFA, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁸ Nicholas Barton, *Submission 210*, p. 5.

⁹ Lionel Rose, *Submission 22*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Gillian Brew, *Submission 375*, p. 1.

saying that the safest place to be is not anywhere near a bushfire as it is moving through the landscape'.¹¹

One element fire service chiefs emphasised was the mental and physical preparedness to stay and defend. Mr Hardman told the Committee:

Our experiences and the feedback we heard from community is that it is a terrifying and scary experience to stay and defend your property, particularly under catastrophic conditions. Under those conditions, particularly in forested environments or close to forested environments, the radiant heat will kill you before the bushfire gets there, and to be able to shelter in place whilst facing that sort of risk takes a lot of courage and mental fortitude.¹²

Mr Heffernan stated plainly:

To successfully be able to stay and defend, you have to make sure that your home is adequately prepared. That includes its design, its construction, its manufacture and its appropriate setbacks and that you yourself are physically and mentally prepared and capable. We have been doing post-fire research for a number of years, and after every large-scale emergency, whether it be down in The Gurdies only last season or in Pomonal, the people that we speak to that stay and defend inevitably say to us, 'We wish we hadn't,' given the mental anguish that it put them through and the fact that they thought they had a good plan only to have the plan fail halfway through.¹³

FINDING 42: The shift toward 'leave early' bushfire messaging, supported by sustained community education campaigns, has improved public safety outcomes since their widespread adoption in the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday fires. This messaging contributed to a marked reduction in fatalities in the 2026 summer fires event, compared to equivalent fire events including the 2009 Black Saturday fires and those before.

FINDING 43: The 'leave early' approach has trade-offs including an increase in undefended homes and businesses and 'leave early' burnout.

RECOMMENDATION 32: That the Victorian Government, in conjunction with fire response agencies continue to promote the 'leave early' message in fire preparedness awareness and education programs. Programs should incorporate awareness of community fatigue, the mental toll of staying and defending, and issues surrounding property loss when communicating the primacy of public safety.

¹¹ Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer, CFA, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

5.2.2 The effectiveness of the VicEmergency app

The Victorian Government submission outlined that at the peak of the bushfires, on 9 January 2026, the VicEmergency app had 1.6 billion hits. On the same day, 291 warnings were issued, making it the largest number of warnings issues in a single day, surpassing the record set during the 2022 Victorian floods.¹⁴ In total, 1,798 bushfire and grassfire warnings were issued through VicEmergency channels between 1 December 2025 and 1 February 2026.¹⁵

The Committee notes VicEmergency's success as a mass communication platform that can disseminate important emergency information in a timely manner. The broad level of uptake contributed to the low number of fatalities during the 2026 summer fires. The feedback from submissions included that 'messaging from the VicEmergency app in the main were good'.¹⁶

Stakeholders acknowledged that they knew that the primary source of information was the VicEmergency app and that residents were advised to monitor the state of the fires through the app.

However, users of the VicEmergency app must be able to understand the various messages, and act on the information under heightened stress. If they are unable to do so they may seek alternative sources of information, which may be inaccurate and place them in danger.¹⁷ Some stakeholders highlighted issues with the quality of the messaging coming through the app.¹⁸

In the Otway fires in particular, the Committee heard there were instances of inconsistent warnings causing confusion. Terence O'Brian, a Colac resident described a case in Barongarook where residents received a message to 'evacuate' and then shortly after an 'it's okay to return' for the same area.¹⁹ He argued that local knowledge needed to be utilised more effectively by incident management teams so that this information can be reflected within the VicEmergency warnings.

The Apollo Bay Fire and Rescue Brigade explained that residents were 'massively confused' by the messaging and general usability was difficult for many. There were specific concerns raised around finding the 'fire footprint' and setting up 'watch zones' in the app.²⁰

Colac Otway Shire Council highlighted conflicting information from overlapping warning zones, as well as gap between advice provided by the Incident Control Centre

¹⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 60.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Colac Otway Shire, *Submission 314*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 46.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Gilbee, *Submission 117*, pp. 1-2; Andrew Miller *Submission 31*, pp. 2, 5-6; Name withheld, *Submission 109*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ Terence O'Brian, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

²⁰ The Apollo Fire & Rescue Brigade, *Submission 203*, p. 2.

and the VicEmergency app.²¹ Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer of Colac Otway Shire Council described the warnings as a ‘whiplash of ‘in and out’ and ‘evacuate’ and ‘prepare’.²²

Some stakeholders advised that there needed to be more training on how to use the VicEmergency app, how to understand the various warnings, and whose information to rely on when deciding. Phil Howard, Deputy Mayor of Colac Otway Shire Council shared that people were confused and could not navigate through the amount of information from so many different sources, and that ‘how you educate people to go to the right one and learn to interpret it’ would have been beneficial.²³

Similar views were shared in Alexandra and Harcourt, where stakeholders shared that the warnings were very general and that these needed to provide more information to explain what the fire was doing and what people were expected to do.²⁴

In addition, some residents shared that there needed to be clearer messaging to describe the fire activity and provide enough details for residents to make an informed decision.²⁵ The Committee heard that road closure notifications were not clearly visible through the app. There were concerns raised around difficulties seeing road closures overlaid with the fire affected areas and that this made it difficult for residents to leave safely, check on neighbours or to return to their property safely.²⁶

The usability of the VicEmergency app was an issue identified by this Committee in its report into the 2022 flooding event in Victoria. In that report, the Committee made several recommendations to improve the VicEmergency app, which were accepted by the Government in its response.²⁷

Accordingly, Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) stated that there is a multiyear project underway to enhance the VicEmergency app for usability and accessibility.²⁸ The Committee considers that these improvements and enhancements should address the issues highlighted by stakeholders in this Inquiry, and should be progressed as a matter of priority.

The use of VicEmergency was severely impacted in some areas by communications outages. This is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 and in the following Section.

²¹ Colac Otway Shire, *Submission 314*, p.15.

²² Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

²³ Cr Phil Howard, Deputy Mayor, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

²⁴ Andrew Miller, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35; Adam Paine, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

²⁵ Andrew Miller, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

²⁶ Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

²⁷ Victorian Government, *Response to the Parliament of Victoria, Environment and Planning Committee, Inquiry into Climate Resilience*, 5 February 2026, p. 55.

²⁸ Tim Wiebusch, Commissioner, Emergency Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

FINDING 44: The VicEmergency app functioned highly effectively as a mass communication platform during the 2026 summer fires, enabling the rapid dissemination of a record number of warnings with strong community uptake. Widespread use and trust in the VicEmergency app contributed to strong public awareness and is likely to have supported the low fatality outcomes.

FINDING 45: While the VicEmergency app is a critical communication tool, inconsistencies in warnings, usability challenges, and unclear or conflicting information reduced its effectiveness and contributed to community confusion in some instances during the fires. These issues highlight the need for improved message clarity, better integration of local knowledge, enhanced user education, and system upgrades to ensure the app supports informed and timely decision-making under emergency conditions.

FINDING 46: The widespread use and reliance on the VicEmergency app by the Victorian community underscores the importance of robust telecommunications resilience in disaster-prone areas of the state.

RECOMMENDATION 33: That Emergency Management Victoria prioritise updates to enhance the VicEmergency app for usability and accessibility, addresses issues raised by stakeholders in this Inquiry, including:

- Enhancements to the quality of messaging, usability, features and accessibility.
- Consultation with the public to ensure that the messaging is comprehensible and provides information relevant to make informed decisions.
- Continued resourcing for education on interpreting warnings and information.

5.3 The impact of critical infrastructure loss during the response to the fires

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, there were significant power outages experienced across a number of firegrounds during the 2026 summer fires. The power outages were caused by the destruction of transmission networks, with hundreds of power poles requiring replacement across fire affected areas.²⁹

The power outages, and direct fire damage to communications infrastructure,³⁰ led to significant communications outages across a number of the firegrounds during and after the fires.³¹ The Victorian Government submission stated that ‘at its peak on

²⁹ AusNet, *Submission 459*, p. 4; Powercor, *Submission 469*, p. 4.

³⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 158.

³¹ Telstra, *Submission 184*, p. 8.

11 January 2026, as many as 25 communities were identified as being at risk of losing all mobile and broadband services'.³²

According to Telstra, 270 network sites (fixed and mobile) experienced power outages, causing communications failures in those areas. Physical damage was also sustained to one mobile 'small cell',³³ one exchange building in Ruffy and two Victorian Regional Mobile Radio sites, all of which were damaged beyond repair.³⁴

The loss of power caused failures in water supply systems, and this impacted on brigades and local residents' abilities to manage the fires and defend assets. In Natimuk, a power failure in part of the town caused a loss of water pressure, making access to water for responders and residents difficult.³⁵ In Harcourt, the water supply failed and water piping issues meant access to water was difficult.³⁶

The loss of power, and communications in particular, had a significant impact on the operational response to the fires, and the ability of the public to stay informed about the fires and receive emergency warnings. This is discussed in the following sections.

5.3.1 Communications loss and the coordination fire responses

Communications caused issues for the coordination of responses to the fires, particularly in the response to the Longwood and Natimuk fires. At the Longwood fire, the Committee heard there were difficulties in ground crews receiving information from incident controllers. There was also difficulty with ground crews reporting information back to incident controllers. The Committee heard in Natimuk that 'the radios were working' but there was operational confusion created by unfamiliarity with how to use the radios by those on the trucks.³⁷ A number of ground crews were left isolated and without support, acting on initiative, the Committee heard they fought on for days without relief or communication.³⁸

The Committee heard that the installation of new digital radios on CFA trucks did not work out in the field due to telecommunications blackspots, leaving crews vulnerable and unable to contact each other. At the Alexandra hearing, George Noye, Captain of the Ruffy Brigade said:

For us, in challenging terrain radios at the best of times are scratchy and we have our black spots. I do recognise that CFA had trialled and tested those Motorola radios extensively. I am a big believer in technology. You can see where the trucks are. The problem was, with the loss of mobile connectivity due to the towers and whatever problem happened there, we could not use the tablet. We could not see where

³² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 69.

³³ Telstra, *Submission 184*, p. 4.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ David Sudholz, Captain, Natimuk Brigade, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

³⁶ Andrew Wilson, Captain, Harcourt Fire Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

³⁷ David Sudholz, Captain, Natimuk Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

³⁸ David Webb, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 47.

appliances were. We could not communicate on most of the CFA channels because they would not work. So we had to use UHF or send a text message out on WhatsApp to communicate within our own brigade. Days later, when we were back at the station – our landline was never reliable because of lightning strikes, so we went over to an internet system. We lost the exchange, but still the modem that supplies that IP phone connectivity could be through the mobile network. It was down, so we had nothing – no mobile phone reception – within the town. So we had to source a Starlink and set it up so we had basic communication.³⁹

The Committee heard that at the start of the Longwood fire, communications were available, but inconsistent and that efforts to control the fire lacked coordination. This may have been a consequence of coming to grips with a fast-moving situation under difficult conditions.⁴⁰ Chris Lynch, Captain of the Alexandra fire brigade described the communications during the night of 7 January: ‘Tasking later that night seemed ad hoc as communications between the strike team leader and the MCV [Mobile Command Vehicle] based at the staging area were either minimal or non-existent’.⁴¹

As Adam Barnett, CEO of the VFBV said ‘the way that radios work in mountainous terrain is very well documented. You know, you cannot pass signals through’.⁴²

Another firefighter who attended the Longwood fire in its early stages, and lost their home, described not being given ‘any specific instructions’ and that ‘there appeared to be little awareness of the situation including the location of the fire front or where current efforts were being put into controlling the fire’.⁴³ They said they believed there was inadequate communication and control of the firefighting efforts ‘We were not receiving any specific information, instructions or directions’.⁴⁴

Nick Murray, Captain of the Upton Hill Fire Brigade said of the early stages of the fire, ‘there was a lack of communication about resourcing and a general lack of resourcing’.⁴⁵ He said:

We were under-resourced, and crews asked for help but none came.⁴⁶

It should be noted that at the Longwood fire, weather conditions became catastrophic on 9 January 2026. According to the Victorian Government submission, Deputy Incident Controller Greg Murphy told a community meeting on 8 January 2026 that ‘Despite our best efforts today, we were not able to control this fire. Tomorrow, we’ve got no chance’.⁴⁷

³⁹ George Noye, Captain, Ruffy Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Chris Lynch, Captain, Alexandra Fire Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Adam Barnett, Chief Executive Officer, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 61.

⁴³ Name withheld, *Submission 96*, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Nick Murray, Upton Hill Fire Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 168.

As the Longwood fire progressed, power and communications availability in some parts of the fire-front were compromised. George Noye explained that the communication challenges impacted coordination and situational awareness:

during the incident we experienced significant communication challenges. CFA communication systems and network connectivity were unreliable, impacting coordination and situational awareness. The mobile command vehicle was limited in its ability to effectively communicate with the incident control centre. As the local brigade captain, I was not contacted by the ICC until days after the fire, despite being on the ground and directly impacted.⁴⁸

David Webb, Captain of the Highlands CFA brigade told the Committee, ‘we could not contact the ICC [Incident Control Centre] most of the time due to lack of communication’ and that his brigade did not receive operational support ‘for nearly two weeks’.⁴⁹

The Committee heard that crews used radio communications, including UHF radio,⁵⁰ during this time, but there was confusion about the correct channel to use and some channels became congested. The Creighton’s Creek CFA brigade said ‘given all local brigades were on the same channel, communication became very difficult as there were often dozens of people on the radio at the same time’.⁵¹ They added ‘often calls for help went unanswered’.⁵² Chris Lynch described using a ‘command channel’ with a ‘minimal amount of people’ to provide critical information.⁵³ He and others described crews using personal Starlink devices to maintain communications and seek information.⁵⁴

The Victorian Government submission stated that ‘there was also no interruption to communication at the Alexandra ICC and effective communication was maintained to the field at all times’.⁵⁵

Landowners using private appliances to help fight the fires also creates additional communications complexities. Private landowners often use UHF frequencies, separate from the CFA radio channels. At Natimuk, the Committee was told that ‘there were a lot of private units on the fireground, so then the UHF became the primary means of communication’.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ George Noye, Captain, Ruffy Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ David Webb, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 47.

⁵⁰ George Noye, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

⁵¹ Creighton’s Creek CFA Brigade, *Submission 238*, p. 7.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Chris Lynch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Chris Lynch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.; George Noye, *Submission 225*, p. 2; District 23 Council of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 289*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 146.

⁵⁶ David Sudholz, Natimuk Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

Adam Barnett, Chief Executive Officer of the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) told the Committee that in relation to private landowners using private equipment:

we do not issue them with radios, and there is probably a good reason why we do not do that – we have got radio congestion pretty much as it is. But helping them with the UHF network and some redundancy systems – the pre-training and the pre-exercising I think is also worth a lot of merit.⁵⁷

During the Natimuk fire, communications were impacted within the first hour of the fire igniting.⁵⁸ The Mount Arapiles communications tower stopped operating due to a loss of power. It had a fully operational backup generator with fuel and battery; however, this also failed due to suspected weather conditions tripping a switch on the generator.⁵⁹ There was one electrician in the area equipped to override the switch, however, he was on the other side of the fireground and unable to access the tower.

Martin Colbert, member of the West Wimmera Action Group described the impact this had during the Natimuk fire. After a brief phone call before the network failed, he went to a neighbour's property. He said the first CFA truck that arrived told him, 'We can't talk to anyone; the only thing we can do is use phones.'⁶⁰ He provided chargers and power banks, but 'then the phones went down as well'. Mr Colbert said crews were operating without communication within the first half-hour of the fire, while people trying to use the VicEmergency app found it 'beyond frustrating'.⁶¹

In Natimuk itself, ground crews had to act quickly and prioritised defending the aged-care facility that was under threat. Mr Sudholz highlighted that the loss of mobile coverage significantly affected both firefighting operations and community safety.⁶² He said that local knowledge and conditions informed rapid decision-making. Due to the communication failure, all those combating the fires (CFA, FFMVic, private units) 'micromanaged themselves' and crews resorted to using the UHF communications as it was the only means to communicate on the fireground.⁶³ The Natimuk Aged-Care facility was an example where the Natimuk brigade relied on local knowledge and prioritised defending the facility. They saved the 59 people inside.⁶⁴

At the Harcourt fire, Sandra Ramsay said that when the mobile phone tower on Mount Alexander tower was impacted by the fires, communication became extremely difficult. She also said the newer digital CFA radios relied on mobile networks when radio signal

⁵⁷ Adam Barnett, CEO, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 62.

⁵⁸ John Martin, Director, Infrastructure, Horsham Rural City Council, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

⁵⁹ David Sudholz, Captain, Natimuk Brigade, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Quantong 22, April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Martin Colbert, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² David Sudholz, Captain, Natimuk Brigade, Country Fire Authority, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁶³ Steven Meyer, Group Officer, Natimuk Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁶⁴ David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

was weak or unavailable, and that when radio and mobile coverage were both lost, crews effectively had ‘no communication at all.’⁶⁵

Lachlan Butterfield, a firefighter with FRV who performs the role of a ground observer was deployed to the Harcourt fire. He stated that the information he was capturing about fire behaviour to share with the Incident Control Centre was not uploading. He said that he had to send the information manually, costing precious time during the blaze.⁶⁶ A FRV firefighter working on ground intelligence also reported issues with uploading fire progression information to the FireMapper/E-Map systems the during the Harcourt fire.⁶⁷

In modern bushfire control operations, effective communications between frontline crews and incident controllers is of critical importance. Where a functioning primary communications system fails, back-up systems are utilised and the reliability of communications may be impaired.

Recommendations around building network resilience are discussed in Section 5.3.4.

FINDING 47: There were challenges in operational communications during the response to the Longwood, Natimuk and Harcourt fires. This included failure in communications infrastructure due to fire damage, channel congestion and unclear protocols. Contingency communications protocols were unreliable or unclear.

RECOMMENDATION 34: That the Inspector-General for Emergency Management review the suitability and resilience of the Country Fire Authority’s radio communications to ensure reliability in major fires, compatibility with other fire services radios and consider options for the installation in privately owned firefighting appliances.

5.3.2 Communications loss for fire affected communities

The failure of communications infrastructure at and near some fires meant fire affected communities had difficulty accessing emergency warnings, safe travel information, and in contacting loved ones. Witnesses described weak capacity, limited backup, single fibre routes and towers dependent on mains power. At the peak on 11 January 2026, the Victorian Government submission identified as many as 25 communities at risk of losing all mobile and broadband services.⁶⁸ NBN Co informed the Committee that Across the 2026 summer fire events, about 56,000 customers experienced an outage and 485 sites were impacted, with power-related outages the principal cause of network impacts.

⁶⁵ Sandra Ramsay, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 65.

⁶⁶ Lachlan Butterfield, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

⁶⁷ United Firefighters Union, Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance, *Submission 449, Attachment 1*, p. 146, supplementary evidence.

⁶⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 69.

The Municipal Association of Victoria provided an overview of the cascade of communication failures at Mount Alexander (the Harcourt fire) and their impacts for the community:

The damage to infrastructure meant ABC Victoria was unable to broadcast on its standard frequency. Communities also lost access to SBS, commercial radio and TV. This significantly impacted the ability of emergency services to deliver advice and warnings. It is understood the fire damaged both antennas and power systems, and that redundancy plans, including backup generators, were unable to continue powering the stations. Telecommunications outages can be life-threatening in an emergency demonstrating the importance of community preparedness and the agility of emergency services to broadcast advice and warnings through different channels.

Harcourt resident Nick Sharplin described the impact of these communication failures and the inability to access important emergency information:

Firstly power went out in Harcourt (and didn't return for days), which meant loss of home internet connectivity, Telstra mobile outage which meant loss of mobile coverage. Because of these 2 failures we then had no communication with the outside world so no idea what was happening, except that is through free to air radio. That is until the tower/mast at Mt. Alexander was destroyed, so then radio the only lifeline communication left was lost. Then we had zero contact with the outside world, zero knowledge of what is happening.⁶⁹

Casey Rice gave similar evidence about North Harcourt Road. He said there was no mobile reception at his property 'whatsoever at any time'.⁷⁰ When power failed, the Telstra-provided DSL service and landline also failed.

The submission from the Longwood Fire Brigade said that an inability to access VicEmergency meant many residents in Longwood East did not receive warnings. Some residents were subsequently not 'aware of the evacuation orders nor the location of suitable Emergency Relief Centres'.⁷¹

At the Quantong hearing, Mr Sudholz described a backup failure at the Mount Arapiles Telstra facility. He said the Telstra facility had a diesel generator that should have started automatically when mains power failed. It also had battery backup that lasted four hours, however the automatic switch failed, and power was restored only when a technician could reach the mountain and start the generator.⁷²

Kevin Bolwell also referred to the Mount Arapiles communications tower. He said radio communications worked well in controlled settings but could fail in country conditions with dust, smoke and other factors. He said the batteries failed on the generator at the

⁶⁹ Nik Sharplin, *Submission 231*, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Casey Rice, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 65–66.

⁷¹ Longwood Fire Brigade, *Submission 273*, p. 8.

⁷² David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 17–18.

Mount Arapiles communications tower and that ‘somebody was supposed to check them’.⁷³

In his submission, Steve O’Pray noted that communications services are aggregated to single points of failure.⁷⁴ While Sonja Herges noted in her submission that insufficient backup power for telecommunications infrastructure in high fire risk areas and ‘a lack of coordinated contingency arrangements between telecommunications providers to ensure continuity of service’.⁷⁵

The Committee heard that once the VicEmergency app was offline in these areas and that many were unsure on where to source information on the fires. Some communities did know about other communication sources, such as radio networks, but some did not.

In Alexandra, a radio station, UGFM—Radio Murrindindi had permanent generators at the transmission sites and continued to broadcast throughout the outage. The radio station was able to provide information and had presenters ‘rostered every 4 hours and shift changes with two presenters at a time, and that was 24/7 for about four days so that they could get that information out’.⁷⁶

Peter Weeks from Radio Murrindindi identified network redundancy as the weakness. He said that most of Murrindindi Shire and surrounding districts were connected by only one fibre route, and when that route failed, NBN, Telstra landline and mobile services failed across a large part of the shire.⁷⁷

The instability caused by the power and cellular outages meant that communities were desperately seeking information through various channels and that had the potential to lead to misinformation. In Colac, the council acted to remedy this issue. Andrew Tenni, Mayor of Colac Otway Shire Council held community meetings and held daily stand-up briefings to establish a central location to manage the messaging.⁷⁸

In Mount Alexander Shire, Mayor Toby Heydon provided updates through the radio networks:

I was doing short, little 3-minute videos, and I realise now how important they were for many members of the community. Faced with so many channels of different information – of different news services, of different online resources and of information and misinformation on social media – the single voice coming from the Mayor of the shire actually proved to be incredibly important for residents, and still the rates of listenership of my weekly updates are extraordinary.⁷⁹

⁷³ Kevin Bolwell, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41.

⁷⁴ Steve O’Pray, *Submission 227*, p. 1.

⁷⁵ Sonja Herges, *Submission 257*, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Peter Weeks, President, Upper Goulburn Community Radio, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷⁸ Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Toby Heydon, Mayor, Mount Alexander Shire Council, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

The Victorian Government's submission stressed there were a number of methods for providing emergency warnings. These include through:

- emergency broadcasters (designated community radio stations, ABC radio, local radio, Sky News)
- media releases, press conferences and interviews
- social media
- variable message signs and VicRoads overhead gantry signs
- email distribution lists
- community meetings and door knocks
- community alert sirens.⁸⁰

The submission explained that methods that did not rely on power or communications technology were utilised, including 'a strong focus on sharing clear messages with the community through community meetings'⁸¹ and the deployment of Community Liaison Officers to conduct door knocks and set up community information points.⁸²

While these methods are important, they are not a substitute for the broad and timely dissemination that can be achieved through electronic communications resources such as the VicEmergency app.

Measures to improve the resiliency of critical power and communications infrastructure is discussed in the next section.

FINDING 48: A number of mobile phone towers in fire affected areas lost power and had insufficient backup capacity through generators or batteries. This exacerbated dangers at critical moments.

FINDING 49: Emergency warning information is communicated through multiple different methods, and community awareness about these different channels can vary significantly. Such awareness is very important for methods that do not rely on power and communications infrastructure being operational.

FINDING 50: Power and communications failures in some firegrounds prevented fire affected communities from accessing timely emergency information from the VicEmergency app.

⁸⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 103.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

FINDING 51: Electronic platforms such as the VicEmergency app become inaccessible when power and communications infrastructure are damaged in emergencies such as the 2026 summer fires. A heavy reliance on this platform is a vulnerability as it creates a single point of failure in large emergencies.

RECOMMENDATION 35: That the Victorian Government conduct an education campaign in communities with high fire risk around what emergency warning and information sources are available in emergency situations where power and communications are lost.

5.3.3 Availability of water

Availability of water was a factor at some of the fires. The Committee heard that at Harcourt and Natimuk, water supply was lost, while other responders described difficulty finding dams with enough water to draw on. The Committee was informed that at Harcourt and Natimuk, availability of mains water was impacted. However, the CFA's elevated seasonal response initiative, which saw water capacity placed in strategic fire danger areas ahead of the fire season proved effective in getting water where it was needed when the fires began.

At Natimuk, the Committee heard that power was lost on the eastern side of the town, causing a failure of the town's water supply system in that part of the town.⁸³ This reduced residents' ability to defend homes.⁸⁴ Mr Sudholz said that as a result:

residents were resorting to putting out spot fires in their backyards, literally, with buckets of water coming from their taps and garden hoses, and it literally just fell to a trickle coming out of those. Fortunately I think most of the fire front had gone through by the time

... It meant that none of the firefighting units could draw water from the town supply system out of any hydrants.⁸⁵

He added 'it meant that trucks had to go looking for water rather than staying, defending and attacking fires on properties'.⁸⁶

Use of town tanks proved important. Steven Myer, Group Officer of the Natimuk brigade said that at Natimuk, there were two water tanks available for usage to fight fires, but they were not signed well enough and a lot of people did not know about them.⁸⁷

⁸³ David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Steven Myer, Group Officer, Natimuk Brigade, CFA, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

The town water supply was also impacted in Harcourt.⁸⁸ A CFA member described the water mains ‘bursting’.⁸⁹ Adam Paine, 1st Deputy Group Officer of the Mount Alexander Group CFA described fighting the fire outside of Harcourt. He said that his team ‘tapped into any tank or dam that we could find’.⁹⁰ However, because of the dry conditions, there was difficulty in finding dams that were full enough to draw water: ‘a lot of the dams were empty or very near to, so trying to get water out of them was a real struggle’.⁹¹ Andrew Wilson, Captain of the Harcourt Fire Brigade said ‘We are in a drought. It is only going to get worse and we are going to get less and less water in the landscape, like Adam said. We rely predominantly on dams and/or these tanks’.⁹²

As discussed in Chapter 3, the CFA runs the Elevated Seasonal Response Initiative, which aims to elevate bulk water storage at high-risk fire areas in preparation for the season. Mr Wilson said the initiative assisted in the response to the fires at Harcourt. He noted ‘The elevated seasonal response initiative – additional mobile water tankers were available. This aided, and it limited travel time for water replenishment for firefighting tankers’.⁹³

Lachlan Gales, Group Officer (Wangaratta Group) was also supportive of the elevated seasonal response initiative, noting that it was a one off this year. He said:

This year, on a one-off year, funding for bulk water tankers was provided to the CFA and prepositioned around the state. There was one at Wangaratta and it was used very effectively, and if it is not there next year we will miss it. We need it.⁹⁴

At Natimuk, Mr Sudholz described the initiative as ‘really good’ but noted that it took a bit of time to fill up. He proposed putting solar batteries on the pump systems to fill tankers quickly.⁹⁵

As noted in Chapter 3, there is support for the Elevated Seasonal Response Initiative, including from the VFBV.⁹⁶ However, it is limited in its effectiveness because, according to Adam Barnett, ‘we just do not know where a fire is going to start’.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the evidence from the response to the fires illustrates that strategic water availability made an impact in suppressing the fires. Mr Heffernan noted that the CFA received ‘supplementary funding’ for the program. The Committee considers that funding should be ongoing.

⁸⁸ Andrew Wilson, Captain, Harcourt Brigade, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁸⁹ Michael Shay, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63.

⁹⁰ Adam Paine, First Deputy Group Officer, Mount Alexander Group, CFA, public hearing, Harcourt, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Andrew Wilson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Lachlan Gales, Group Officer, Wangaratta Group, CFA, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

⁹⁵ David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁹⁶ Adam Barnett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 59.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

FINDING 52: The loss of mains water supply at Natimuk reduced the ability of residents and firefighters to defend properties and respond effectively to fire threats.

FINDING 53: The Country Fire Authority's Elevated Seasonal Response Initiative provided bulk water capacity to areas that were affected by the 2026 summer fires. These additional water resources helped in the suppression of the fires at a number of areas.

RECOMMENDATION 36: That the Victorian Government continue to provide funding to the CFA for the Elevated Seasonal Response Initiative as required. This should enable the initiative to be activated on years of elevated fire risk.

5

5.3.4 Building resilient power, communications and water infrastructure

The Committee was informed that steps are being taken to strengthen both electricity and communications infrastructure through more investment, improved coordination and use of new sources of energy generation and communications technology. Improving the resilience of power and communications networks in fire prone areas requires ongoing collaboration between the State and Commonwealth Governments and industry providers.

Power

The Committee was informed that power companies are exploring ways to strengthen the electricity network through more 'event-resistant asset designs and network configurations'.⁹⁸ Every five years, power companies are required to submit proposed investment programs to the Australian Energy Regulator. As part of the Electricity Distribution Price Review 2026–31 process, AusNet advocated for the approval to invest in network resilience in rural and regional parts of the network.⁹⁹ Powercor also advocated to replace current infrastructure with fire resistant materials, increase the number of secondary power sources (e.g. generators) in vulnerable towns, and improve climate and outage modelling to improve impact analysis.¹⁰⁰

On 30 April 2026, the Australian Energy Regulator released its final revenue decisions for the five Victorian electricity distribution network service providers for the 2026–31 regulatory period. With regard to augmentation expenditure¹⁰¹ and rural and regional supply, the regulator approved \$49.8 million, an increase of 39.3% from Powercor's

⁹⁸ AusNet, *Submission 459*, p. 5.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Powercor, *Submission 469*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ The capital or operating spending required to expand, upgrade, or enhance the capacity of existing assets.

expenditure in the last regulatory cycle (2021–26).¹⁰² With regard to augmentation expenditure and rural and regional supply, the regulator approved \$49.8 million, an increase of 39.3% from Powercor’s expenditure in the last regulatory cycle (2021–26).¹⁰³ The regulator also approved \$32.4 million to improve the resilience of Powercor’s network.

AusNet was approved a total of \$73.6 million to improve the resilience of its network. The regulator also approved: \$7.2 million in new expenditure to improve regional reliability.¹⁰⁴

The Victorian Government submission informed the Committee that a factor in the slow restoration of power was Rapid Earth Fault Current Limiters (REFCLs), which are discussed in Chapter 3. REFCLs act as a safety switch to turn off power when a fault is detected on the line.¹⁰⁵ The Government noted that once a limiter is activated, the length of the line must be checked before resetting it.¹⁰⁶ The submission argued that REFCLs are an effective and cost-efficient way of significantly reducing bushfire risk from powerlines and have been deployed across bushfire prone areas of Victoria. However, the inherent consequence of this system is that power outages on fire risk days are more likely.¹⁰⁷

Communications

The Committee heard that work is underway to identify communications resilience challenges in disaster prone areas, improve the effectiveness of backup generators in the face of power failures and invest in supplementary communications avenues such as satellite internet.

NBN Co submitted that most telecommunications disruption during emergencies is caused by loss of commercial mains power rather than direct damage to telecommunications infrastructure. It said connectivity depends on power at exchanges, nodes, towers and customer premises.

Backup power for communications infrastructure is therefore an important measure to keep communities connected when mains power is affected. This includes mobile generators and batteries.

Mr Weeks argued that the mobile phone base stations had no backup generators to maintain services, that batteries did not provide a long-term solution to loss of mains power, and that generators could not always be safely transported into an emergency

¹⁰² Australian Energy Regulator, *Final Decision: Powercor Electricity Distribution Determination (1 July 2026 – 30 June 2031)*, April 2026, p. vii.

¹⁰³ Australian Energy Regulator, *Final Decision: Powercor Electricity Distribution Determination (1 July 2026 – 30 June 2031)*, April 2026, p. vii.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. viii.

¹⁰⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 67–68.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 67–68.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

area because of fire activity. He called for primary telecommunications sites, telephone exchanges and emergency services radio communications infrastructure serving towns such as Alexandra and Yea to have permanent onsite generators able to run for up to five days without refuelling.¹⁰⁸

Telstra's submission identified limits on restoration and temporary connectivity. It stated that deployable assets such as generators and rapid deployment kits may be constrained by unsafe access, road closures, evacuation orders and changing fire fronts. It also submitted that a temporary deployable asset may not replicate the full coverage or capacity of the original site, particularly in challenging topography.¹⁰⁹

Telstra outlined its response to the 2025–26 summer fires, including the provision of a disaster relief package focused on service restoration and customer assistance for affected communities. As part of these efforts, Telstra deployed temporary communications infrastructure to Ruffy between 14–16 January 2026 to restore mobile coverage in areas impacted by network outages.¹¹⁰

Telstra also advised that it is finalising information-sharing agreements with energy providers and developing secure data-sharing protocols.¹¹¹ Better coordination between communications and energy providers may improve network resilience, particularly given the interdependence of power and communications infrastructure during emergencies.

It also stated that no common system currently exists at state or Commonwealth level to provide a real-time picture of public telecommunications networks.¹¹² During the fires, the Department of Government Services had to engage with carriers to build a picture of communities that may have been at risk of losing connectivity.

However, the Committee considers that these initiatives fall short of establishing clear or enforceable obligations on telecommunications providers to improve the reliability and resilience of services, particularly in rural and regional areas. In this regard, the Committee notes that more tangible outcomes are achieved through the proactive engagement with industry to identify areas of network vulnerability and the creation of contingency plans.

Telecommunications is a matter that falls under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Government. Tim Wiebusch, Emergency Management Commissioner advised that he is engaging with the Commonwealth and telecommunications providers to explore options to 'harden telecoms infrastructure'.¹¹³ He said that 'the Department of

¹⁰⁸ Peter Weeks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Telstra, *Submission 184*, p. 14.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹¹² Victoria Government, *Submission 287*, p. 69.

¹¹³ Tim Wiebusch, Commissioner, Emergency Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

Government Services are continuing to work with the Commonwealth on what that should look like.¹¹⁴

An added complication arises when power outages cause NBN connections to drop out. Demand on mobile phone towers increases as a result, placing further strain on backup battery or generator capacity. As has been discussed in previous chapters, resilience of mobile phone towers has been identified as a major recurring issue. Recommendations made by this Committee in its *Inquiry into climate resilience* calling for advocacy to the Commonwealth have been supported by the Government.

Mr Wiebusch advised that he also continues to work with the Commonwealth on communications 'black spot' programs to address coverage gaps in regional areas. He also said that work is being done on alternative forms of backup power to support network continuity, including batteries and solar, so that agencies 'do not rely so much on generators'.¹¹⁵

In addition, the Committee heard that emerging technologies, such as satellite communications systems including Starlink, are being trialled to supplement traditional telecommunications infrastructure. A \$4 million trial is underway that is due to be completed in July 2026.¹¹⁶

FINDING 54: The Victorian Government is working with the Commonwealth Government to explore opportunities to 'harden' telecommunications infrastructure to improve resilience during emergencies, address coverage gaps in regional areas and explore alternative network solutions such as low earth orbit satellite internet (Starlink) and alternative forms of backup power.

RECOMMENDATION 37: That the Victorian Government, as a matter of priority, work with telecommunications providers, energy distribution providers, and the Commonwealth Government to develop a communications network disaster resilience plan that improves resilience. This should include:

- identification of communications resilience challenges in disaster prone areas
- investigation of measures which can improve resilience, including but not limited to batteries, diesel generators and, where available, generators plumbed into the reticulated gas network
- an expanded rollout of satellite technologies for firefighting purposes
- consideration of authorising accredited fire management personnel to refuel generators for mobile phone towers and other relevant infrastructure during an emergency.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Tim Wiebusch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

RECOMMENDATION 38: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for telecommunications to be declared an essential service.

RECOMMENDATION 39: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to implement mandatory resilience standards for mobile phone towers in disaster prone areas, to ensure continued operation without intervention is achievable for a minimum period of 48 hours without mains power.

Water

The Committee heard that to ensure access to water remains available during emergencies, it is important to diversify sources, particularly where mains water fails. One of the key strategies that the Committee was informed of is the investment in large capacity tanks to protect assets. It is also important to properly map and signpost available water assets so that responders are aware of available water sources during emergencies.

Improving access to water in many regional and rural areas involves cooperation with owners of private dams and tanks. Steven Meyer, Group Officer at Natimuk discussed the importance of liaising with local farmers who want their water sources accessible for firefighting. He said that during the response to the Natimuk fires, ‘water locations and finding water was a big problem.’¹¹⁷ He spoke of producing detailed maps of where water is available which should be accessible to surrounding CFA brigades, ‘so when we have this happen again and someone comes from another area like Warracknabeal or somewhere in a private unit or a tanker, they see that red W and in they go’.¹¹⁸

The Committee heard from brigades who had invested in their own water supply systems to not overload the town’s water supply systems. At the Otways fires, a Barwon Water pumping station was impacted by the fires, partly because of the fuel that was around it.¹¹⁹ In nearby Gellibrand, the community funded the installation of a water tank which provided a reliable water source for firefighting appliances without relying on the town’s hydrant system.¹²⁰

The Harcourt brigade has been donated a 110,000L water tank and is hoping to purchase another, both of which will be placed near a Coliban Water pipeline.¹²¹ Mr Wilson said ‘hopefully they will actually plumb those to be automatically filled from the pipeline when water is drawn out’.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Steven Meyer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Mark Billing, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41.

¹²⁰ Lachlan Sutherland, Deputy Group Officer, Corangamite Group, CFA, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

¹²¹ Andrew Wilson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹²² Ibid., p. 13.

The size of the tanks is important, Mr Murray described his brigade having a smaller 9,000L tank, he said ‘That is four truckloads, and that ran out early Thursday morning’.¹²³

Adequate knowledge of where tanks are located is also essential. As noted in Section 5.3.3 at Natimuk, the tanks were underutilised because the tanks were not signed well enough and not enough people knew about them.¹²⁴

The Committee notes submissions that indicate Victoria’s water supplies are at risk from post-bushfire siltation. John Cameron cited risks to regional and metropolitan catchments alike.¹²⁵

FINDING 55: Strategically located water tanks assist in protecting assets during major fire events, particularly where mains water supplies fail or natural water sources are limited.

RECOMMENDATION 40: That the Victorian Government establish a dedicated rural firefighting water infrastructure fund to support the installation, upgrade and maintenance of strategic water tanks and other water storage assets in high bushfire-risk areas. The program should:

- provide funding to CFA brigades and communities for large-capacity firefighting water tanks and associated infrastructure
- prioritise areas vulnerable to mains water failures, drought and limited natural water availability
- support the connection of water tanks to existing water supply networks where feasible to enable automatic refilling
- facilitate agreements with private landholders for the use of dams and tanks during emergencies
- ensure all firefighting water sources are appropriately mapped, signposted and incorporated into operational systems accessible to responding agencies.

5.4 The adequacy of resources deployed

Many stakeholders expressed their appreciation for the heroic work of the CFA, FRV and FFMVic responders who put themselves in difficult and dangerous situations to protect lives, property and the environment. Without them the losses to communities would have been significantly greater.

¹²³ Nick Murray, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

¹²⁴ Steven Myer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

¹²⁵ John Cameron, *Submission 244*, pp. 40–41.

During the first week of response from 7 January 2026, more than 15,000 CFA volunteers and FRV personnel were involved in emergency response and relief operations.

Approximately 60% of the CFA fleet were deployed on 9 January 2026 of around 1,400 vehicles. Further, 537 brigades and 3,800 CFA members were engaged in responding to the fires, about two-thirds of all brigades.¹²⁶

During the week commencing 7 February 2026, approximately 80% of FFMVic's operational fleet of around 700 vehicles were deployed across the state to support operations.¹²⁷

In response to questions on notice, FRV said that that approximately 557 personnel were deployed during the 2026 summer fires with 152 FRV staff deployed on 9 January 2026.¹²⁸

5.4.1 Resourcing of ground crews

The Committee heard examples of well-resourced ground crews working in concert with incident controllers to successfully respond to the fires at critical junctures, saving property and likely also saving lives in the process.

The Committee also heard reports from a number of ground crews who attended different fires that they had insufficient resources to effectively respond to the fires. This suggests that:

- resources were not prioritised for their part of the fire ground
- communications were disrupted and incident controllers did not have a complete picture of the scale of the task confronting ground crews
- there were not enough resources available to respond to the situation in an effective way.

In some instances, some or all of these issues may have been a factor.

It is worth restating that crews were working in extreme conditions with very narrow windows between initial detection to direct threat to infrastructure. In Natimuk for example, it is reported that the initial pager alert went off at 12:43 pm and by 1:39 pm the alarms at the Natimuk Aged Care Facility, several kilometres away, had activated.¹²⁹ Similarly, in Alexandra, conditions were also challenging, 'it seemed you could put an area fire out and all of a sudden it would come from a different direction'.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Jason Heffernan, Chief Officer, CFA, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹²⁷ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 10.

¹²⁸ Fire Rescue Victoria, Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria hearing, response to questions on notice received 15 May 2026.

¹²⁹ David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

¹³⁰ Chris Lynch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

At the Longwood fire, Scott Jeffery, Mayor of Strathbogie Shire Council shared with the Committee that only two CFA tankers and a strike team leader were seen on 9 January 2026 responding to the fires and ‘not a single other emergency responder was seen that day’.¹³¹ A similar experience was also reported in Upton Hill. Mr Murray said that the crew ‘felt forgotten’ and that there was a lack of communication around resourcing and a general lack of resourcing, stating that they ‘were under-resourced, and crews asked for help but none came’.¹³² On the evening of 7 January through to the morning of 8 January 2026, Mr Murray described that his team had only four trucks and an extra strike team to defend the Hume Freeway and Oak Valley Road. More crews arrived when a firestorm struck, but then this would be reduced to three trucks from 8 January 2026 to defend the Upton Hill area.¹³³

Also at the Longwood Fire, David Webb, Captain of the Highlands-Caveat Fire Brigade, was on the Highlands fire ground for 36 days and shared his experience on the fire ground in Highlands and how his multiple requests for support were denied. On 8 January 2026, he requested for more trucks to station the front of the fire, and on 9 January 2026 for an ‘extra 20 trucks’ when the fire jumped the fire line:

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.¹³⁴

One of the issues that presented during the Longwood fire was that some landholders and CFA members felt that not enough resources were put into stopping the fire in stretches of farmland with low fuel loads, which acted as strategic firebreaks. Gavin Beever, a farmer with a property at Yarck told the Committee:

Fires are difficult to fight in urban settings and the urban fringe; on the open farmland this fire was for the most part a grass fire and easy to engage with safely... We had direct experience of an opportunity to contain the fire front on our place, to prevent impact on neighbouring homes and on to Merton; that would not have taken much resourcing and commitment, but we couldn’t get the controller to release sufficient tankers ...¹³⁵

The Committee heard requests for ‘plant’ equipment – bulldozers or graders to make firebreaks was denied due to shift changeovers, and that individuals had to contact contractors to get work done.¹³⁶

The Alexandra brigade reported that they had newer trucks, which ‘performed exceptionally well’ during the Longwood fire event, and good working relationships between the CFA, FRV, and FFMV which in combination helped to protect critical

¹³¹ Scott Jeffery, Mayor, Strathbogie Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, p. 4.

¹³² Nick Murray, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ David Webb, Captain, Highlands-Caveat Fire Brigade, CFA, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5–6.

¹³⁵ Gavin Beever, *Submission 401*, p. 3.

¹³⁶ George Noye, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

infrastructure in Alexandra.¹³⁷ Requests for additional support were fulfilled, experienced firefighters from FRV were stationed to protect critical infrastructure such as the nursing homes, hospitals, and schools.¹³⁸

In relation to Gippsland, the Committee heard from Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer at FFMVic, who said:

A lightning band moved through Gippsland. There were 32 lightning strikes that turned into bushfires on that day ... Thirty-one of those fires were contained to under 5 hectares, and that was done by fast, aggressive, thorough, determined first attack with highly skilled forest firefighters.¹³⁹

Specifically in Mallacoota, Mr Hardman stated:

The efforts that firefighters put in to that fire enabled them to hold that to the east of Mallacoota and Mallacoota was not impacted again. But if we had not have held those fires, the Princes Highway would have been cut, communities would have been isolated and we would have had hundreds of thousands of hectares of land burnt in East Gippsland.¹⁴⁰

During the Harcourt fire, requests for support were fulfilled and demonstrated strong cross-agency collaboration. Mr Wilson was on call for 33 days. He shared that the immediate response to requests for support and the early escalation of resources was pivotal to managing the fire:

On the way to the fire I requested make tankers 10. Once on scene, I set up the control point, the fireground channel and requested make tankers 20, FCVs four and big fills two. And a very short time later I requested make tankers 30. What also worked well was the support from the many strike teams on the day and the following weeks. It gave the local brigades a break before the fire was handed back to the local brigades and groups, as we knew we were in for the long haul, monitoring this fire across the three brigade areas.¹⁴¹

The Committee heard evidence that crews in Castlemaine were working with what they had, and that in catastrophic conditions the older trucks were still valuable assets on the firegrounds.¹⁴² This view was also shared and reiterated by crews in Harcourt and Ravenswood. Rohan Stevens, Group Officer of the Hume Brigade, stated that the CFA is a 'can-do' organisation but that more needed to be done to lift Victoria's fleet management standards to the standard of other jurisdictions:

I think you will find within the CFA that it is a can-do organisation. We will make things work with what we have got, but equally an up-to-date, modern fleet is something we

¹³⁷ Chris Lynch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Chris Hardman, Chief Fire Officer, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Andrew Wilson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹⁴² Adam Paine, 1st Deputy Group Officer, Mt Alexander Group, CFA, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

need to aspire to. If we look at CFS in South Australia, they retired their last single-cab tankers several years ago, so we are a long way behind.¹⁴³

FRV firefighters who were deployed to the Gellibrand and Lismore fires also reported issues with their pumper tankers. The Committee heard that two of the five pumper tankers had persistent issues that required 'ongoing attention and at times rendered the appliances temporarily unavailable'.¹⁴⁴

The Natimuk brigade also reported that two CFA tankers experienced burn overs. Fortunately, these occurred without injury to personnel.¹⁴⁵ Members of the Natimuk Brigade stated that private units were the 'backbone of fighting fires' in the area and that the CFA would not be able to cope without them.¹⁴⁶ This is further supported by the West Wimmera Action Group who found that 57% of its survey respondents attended the Natimuk fire with their own equipment.¹⁴⁷

There were calls for the Victorian Government to reform the Community Emergency Risk Assessment (CERA) and Regional Emergency Risk Assessment (RERA) frameworks and increase local government surge support capacity to reflect risk complexity, seasonal population variability, geographic exposure and infrastructure constraints rather than permanent population alone.¹⁴⁸

Fleet issues are addressed in section 5.4.2.

FINDING 56: Fire crews across the state showed tremendous skill and dedication in tackling fires in unprecedentedly difficult conditions.

FINDING 57: There were some instances where ground crews had insufficient resourcing or were unable to effectively respond to rapidly escalating fire conditions.

Aerial support

As part of fire danger preparedness, by the 9 January 2026 75 aircraft were strategically located across the state based on risk, ready to respond to nearby fire events. Aerial intelligence supported situational awareness and informed public information and warnings. This resourcing was discussed further in Chapter 3.4.

Weather has a significant impact on the performance and effectiveness of fire aircraft, especially where there is a forecast of high winds and wind gusts as was the case on 9 January 2026. During the day there were several periods from late morning through

¹⁴³ Rohan Stevens, Group Officer, Hume Group, CFA, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁴ Tim Eccles, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁵ Steven Meyer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁶ David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Steven Meyer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁷ Martin Colber, Treasurer, West Wimmera Action Group, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

¹⁴⁸ Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 173*, p. 1.

to the afternoon where extremely high winds extended across multiple firegrounds. This coincided with significant fire behaviour, resulting in some of the aircraft unable to take off or operate safely, incident controllers in some situations determining their use as not having a sufficient suppression effect.

As conditions eased, aviation activity resumed. From the early morning on 10 January 2026, 72 aircraft were available across the state to support fire suppression efforts.

Stakeholders in Colac shared that aerial support was a key driver for successful fire containment.¹⁴⁹ Colac has the Colac Municipal Aerodrome which was used as a base for aircraft used throughout the event. Approximately 29 different aircraft were housed at different times at the airfield over the period (up until the start of February 2026). There were 469 departures from the airfield in that time. Phil Howard, Chief Executive Officer of Colac Otway Shire Council shared that having the aerodrome played a significant role in combating the fires and building community confidence.¹⁵⁰

CFA crews responding to the Longwood fire had different experiences of aerial support. The Upton Hill Brigade shared that firefighters were ‘perplexed’ by some of the aerial deployment decisions and raised questions about why no additional aerial support was sent to Ruffy, Upton Hill, and Oak Valley Road.¹⁵¹ In Ruffy, there were reports of delays to aerial support and that in areas where there is steep terrain, larger capacity aircrafts needed to be prioritised early in these conditions to reduce fire spread and overall impact.¹⁵² The Longwood Fire Brigade reported that aerial support was provided to them, however, due to multiple fires in a close geographical location (Northwood, Tabilk and Longwood) happening at the same time, only one aircraft was immediately available.¹⁵³

Fireground crews in Natimuk and Harcourt spoke about intermittent aerial support due to weather conditions.¹⁵⁴ In Harcourt, the Committee heard Mr Paine who stated that a helicopter was available at the Harcourt fire but the weather was challenging and it was called to another fire later on.¹⁵⁵

FINDING 58: There were significant aerial support resources prepared and deployed in during the response to the 2026 summer fires. This support played a significant role in the suppression of a number of fires. However, the extreme weather conditions hampered aerial availability at crucial times, and concerns were raised about the coordination and availability of aerial support in some areas.

¹⁴⁹ Colac Otway Shire Council, *Submission 314*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁰ Cr Phil Howard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁵¹ Upton Hill Brigade, *Submission 390*, pp. 2–3.

¹⁵² George Noye, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

¹⁵³ Longwood Brigade, *Submission 273*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Steven Meyer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Andrew Wilson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁵ Adam Paine, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

International and interstate assistance

Victoria has been supported in its response to the fires by 1,458 staff and volunteers from New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, New Zealand and the Canadian province of Alberta. Table 5.1 below provides an overview of the international and interstate assistance that the state received during the 2026 summer fires.

Table 5.1 Overview of international and interstate assistance

	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	WA	NZ	Canada	Total
Crew Members	128	679	44		120	55	34	42	40	1142
Incident Management Team Members	4	59	11	56	45	21	32		30	258
Liaison Officer (and Admin)	3	6	2	3	6	4	2	2	4	32
NRSC Deployment Managers (and Admin)		4		2	7					13
Aviation Support		4		2						6
Specialist / Other		3			4					7
Total	135	755	57	63	182	80	68	44	74	1458

Source: Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p 57.

Support from interstate and New Zealand firefighters is facilitated through the ‘Arrangements for Interstate Assistance’, a formal agreement signed in 2019 which outlines the ways in which personnel and equipment can be shared between the jurisdictions in a major disaster. It is coordinated by the National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC) of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Authorities Council, as well as by the Chief Officers Strategic Committee.

These bodies also facilitate and coordinate the exchange of personnel and equipment between Australian and Canadian jurisdictions. The framework for these arrangements is laid out in the ‘Exchange of Wildland Fire Management Resources’ agreement.

The Government exercised provisions in both Agreements seeking assistance through the NRSC on the 7 January 2026, in anticipation of the catastrophic fire conditions on the 9 January 2026.¹⁵⁶

The Committee wishes to express its deep appreciation and thanks to every firefighter who volunteered their time and services to support our state during the 2026 summer fires.

¹⁵⁶ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 56–57.

FINDING 59: The Committee notes the immense gratitude of the Victorian people for the assistance rendered in the 2026 summer fires by the 1,458 firefighters from every other Australian state and territory, New Zealand and Canada.

RECOMMENDATION 41: That the Inspector-General for Emergency Management review the conditions for visiting interstate and international support crews hosted at regional air base stations during the fire season.

5.4.2 The Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria fleets

As at 16 January 2026, the CFA's fleet of firefighting appliances consisted of 2,361 vehicles, including 1,961 tankers, 218 pumpers, and 44 pumper tankers.¹⁵⁷ Of those appliances, 297 tankers are over the age of 30 years, and of those 297, 66 are over the age of 36 years.¹⁵⁸ Greg Leach, Chief Executive Officer of the CFA shared with the Committee that this was not an ideal situation:

We over a long period of time have had a management principle of wanting to turn our fleet over at 20 years of age for tankers and 15 years of age for pumpers. But as you can see, our fleet is beyond that, and we continue to advocate with government to ensure that we put forward our whole-of-life asset plan so that we can work with government to secure an ongoing funding stream to replace those trucks.

As at 30 June 2025, FRV had 212 firefighting road appliances in service.¹⁵⁹ In documents provided by FRV to the Committee in May 2026, the age profile for the fleet over 15 years old included:

- 57% of primary appliances
- 72% of aerial appliances
- 55% of specialist appliances.¹⁶⁰

Fire Rescue Victoria's fleet

The Victorian Government submitted that FRV's medium to long-term planning is based on a target fleet replacement age of 15 years, but fire trucks 'do not expire simply because they reach a certain age'.¹⁶¹ FRV's firefighting appliances are specially built and can remain in service for long periods, depending on their usage and workload. Before a vehicle is considered for replacement, FRV undertakes a detailed vehicle assessment to determine its priority in the Fleet Replacement Program.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁵⁸ Greg Leach, Chief Executive Officer, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

¹⁵⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 90.

¹⁶⁰ Fire Rescue Victoria, Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires hearings, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 4.

¹⁶¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 90.

The FRV fleet was a common issue raised by stakeholders through the Inquiry. In its combined submission, the United Firefighters Union (UFU), CFVolunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance stated that the current FRV fleet was well under the appropriate standard for the 2026 fires season.¹⁶² They provided a break-down of the fleet age according to appliance type as illustrated in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Fleet analysis of FRV appliances according to type

Appliance type	Total	Over 15 years	% over 15 years	Average age	Oldest
Pumper	122	66	54%	14.0	24 yrs
Pumper Tanker	35	22	63%	14.3	26 yrs
Ladder Platform	13	9	69%	16.5	28 yrs
Teleboom	5	5	100%	22.6	25 yrs
Ultra Large Pumper	3	3	100%	28.3	33 yrs
Aerial Pumper	4	4	100%	15.0	15 yrs
Hazmat	5	3	60%	13.8	15 yrs
Rescue	11	5	45%	11.3	21 yrs
Transporter	10	4	40%	13.2	25 yrs
Command Unit	1	1	100%	17.0	17 yrs
Pumper Platform	3	0	0%	1.0	1 yr
Total	213	122	57%	14.3	33 yrs

Source: United Firefighters Union, Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance, *Submission 449.1, Attachment 5*.

This table shows that several appliances are past their service life. The submitters outlined reported fleet failures that occurred during the 2026 fire season, and reported that seven FRV trucks broke down during or immediately after responding to fires in a single week between 10–17 January 2026.

The submission stated that FRV's fleet replacement program has been 'progressively defunded through successive state budget cycles with the Victorian Government substituting predictable annual investment with ad hoc, one-off capital allocations'.¹⁶³

Alex Pandik, a firefighter with FRV stated that the lack of reliable equipment and limited trucks meant that 'there were a lot of us sitting in stations watching and hearing what was happening and unable to be utilised to our full capacity'.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² United Firefighters Union, Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance *Submission 449*, p. 8.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁴ Alex Pandik, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 47.

FINDING 60: A significant proportion of Fire Rescue Victoria's fleet is aged past its target replacement age of 15 years. There have been mechanical failures during responses to emergencies. The age profile and extent of the Fire Rescue Victoria fleet limits its reliability and operational capability.

RECOMMENDATION 42: That the Victorian Government establish and fund an annually appropriated rolling fleet replacement program for Fire Rescue Victoria, with replacement benchmarks, that is independently reported to Parliament.

RECOMMENDATION 43: That the Victorian Government provide an immediate funding uplift to replace the most degraded Fire Rescue Victoria appliances.

5

The Country Fire Authority's fleet

According to internal CFA documentation in February 2026, the average fleet age of CFA vehicles is 16.3 years.¹⁶⁵ Stakeholders argued that based on the recommended service life of 20 years, the average fleet age is six years beyond where it should be.¹⁶⁶ The VFBV characterised the CFA's fleet as 'one of Australia's oldest fleets of operational frontline fire trucks'.¹⁶⁷ They stated that 43% of CFA pumpers and tankers are aged beyond their useful life, putting firefighters at risk and damaging capability in the field.¹⁶⁸

Mr Leach gave an overview of CFA funding and the effects of depreciation on the CFA budget. He shared with the Committee that in 2025, the CFA was in a deficit of \$54 million. He said that the CFA needed to 'replace around 100 trucks a year in round figures in order to maintain that at around the 20-year mark, but at the moment we are going to have to invest more to get the truck fleet back to that preferred position'.¹⁶⁹

The regional hearings provided the Committee with opportunities to hear firsthand from local brigades about their fleet. One witness in Alexandra reflected that 'our only resource out might be a 34-year-old truck, but it did a lot of good on the day'.¹⁷⁰ Whilst a Captain of the Terip Terip Brigade told the Committee that 'I love my new-to-us 23-year-old fire truck. It saved our lives. But our station is not fit for purpose'.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ United Firefighters Union, Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance, *Submission 449, Attachment 1*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁶ United Firefighters Union, Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance, *Submission 449*, p. 25.

¹⁶⁷ Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 58.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Greg Leach, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

¹⁷⁰ Sam Hicks, President, Fawcett Hall, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

¹⁷¹ Shannon Roach, Captain, Terip Terip Brigade, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 58.

A captain of Alexandra Brigade said:

Fortunately at Alexandra we have newer trucks. However, when I started in my time at Taggerty fire brigade it was on an older truck with exposed cabin on the back, and I think during these fires, especially when we are volunteers – people taking their own time – trucks need to be a priority, as in, this is a safety issue.¹⁷²

A captain of the Upton Hill Brigade said:

We have one truck. It is 33 years old. We love it. We do not want to get it replaced, which is really going against what everyone else says, but it is built for our terrain, for rocks, for hills. We find it goes a lot further than some of the newer trucks as we fight fires in our local area. I find we are resourced. There are a few things we could do to the truck, but I feel we have been resourced quite well.¹⁷³

The ageing CFA fleet, combined with ongoing funding constraints, is placing increasing pressure on operational capability and the safety of firefighters.

FINDING 61: A significant proportion of the Country Fire Authority's fleet is aged past its recommended service life. The current age profile of the Country Fire Authority fleet limits its reliability and operational capability.

RECOMMENDATION 44: That the Victorian Government establish and fund an annually preoperated rolling fleet replacement program for the Country Fire Authority, with replacement benchmarks, that is independently reported to Parliament.

RECOMMENDATION 45: That the Victorian Government provide an immediate funding uplift to replace the most degraded County Fire Authority appliances.

5.4.3 Forest Fire Management Victoria's fleet

FFMVic grounded 290 Mercedes-Benz G-Wagens and 59 Unimogs fire trucks at the start of the fire season in early October 2025 because of safety concerns.

In its submission, the Australian Workers Union claimed the Mercedes Benz G-Wagens have been problematic since inception. The union also stated that the Unimogs have been better received but have issues, cracked chassis and Personal Protective Equipment issued to field staff are not fit for purpose.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Chris Lynch, Captain, Alexandra Brigade, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

¹⁷³ Nick Murray, Captain, Upton Hill Brigade, public hearing, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

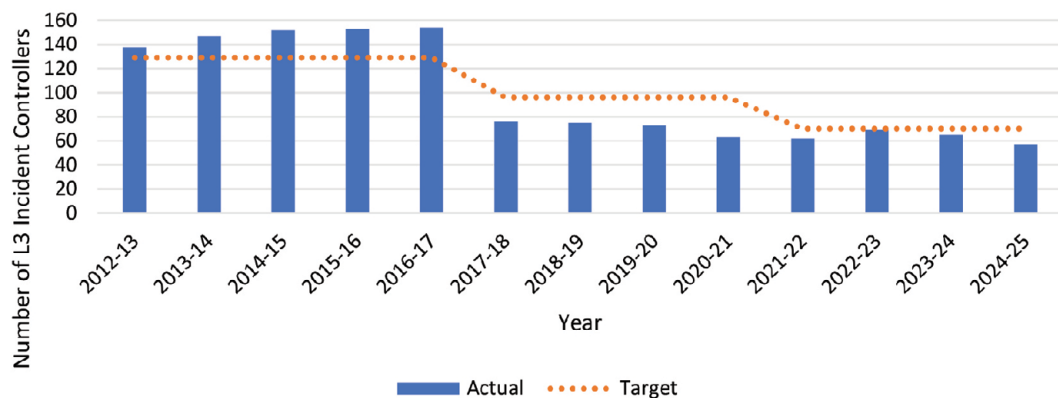
¹⁷⁴ Australian Workers' Union, *Submission 157*, p. 2.

5.5 Volunteer and workforce capability

The Committee heard evidence that in some areas the CFA lacked volunteers and staff trained in incident management, and that there were other workforce shortages that impacted on the response to the 2026 summer fires.

The Committee heard there was a shortage of trained incident management staff, including Level 3 incident controllers. Level 3 incident controllers are trained to deal with protracted, complex and resource intensive emergencies such as the 2026 summer fires. VFBV said ‘EMV have failed to meet their level 3 incident management personnel (volunteers and staff) targets for successive years’. The VFBV claimed that EMV had reduced its targets for Level 3 incident management controllers as numbers dropped. Figure 5.1 from the VFBV shows the number of Level 3 incident controllers from 2012–13 to 2024–25.¹⁷⁵

Figure 5.1 Number of Level 3 Incident controllers 2012–13 to 2024–25



Source: Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, *Submission 408*, p. 23.

Mr Gales said there is a lack of senior members trained in senior roles, including in incident management:

Across the board CFA lacks depth in numbers for core roles in both the fireground and in IMTs [Incident Management Teams]. There are low numbers of sector commanders, low numbers in IMT roles as operations, planning, logistics, you name it. Despite our relatively large workforce, CFA as an agency is particularly under-resourced in these personnel. People become drafted in, all with good intent, but suffer from poor preparation for the role, and subsequently our operations suffer.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ VFBV, *Submission 408*, p. 23.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

The VFBV stated that EMV has proposed under its *Operating Model Review* to replace the current model with a small pool of paid personnel as incident controllers.¹⁷⁷ They said this could be ‘a significant lost opportunity as volunteers frequently bring valuable local knowledge with them when undertaking these roles’.¹⁷⁸

The Committee heard evidence that continuity of staff is also a concern for brigades. Mr Sudholz shared his observations on District 17, ‘it is the largest district, has the most number of brigades within it, but it seems to have the smallest workforce’.¹⁷⁹ He added that there were multiple factors that contributed to this, including secondments and remoteness. He added that the current management structure meant that those who were on secondment to assist with the fire lacked local knowledge and had limited rapport with communities, ‘it was obvious on the day that people were thrown into this catastrophic situation ... and they do not know the people and they did not know the area’.¹⁸⁰

During the Longwood fire, Mr Lynch said he worked closely with a strike team whose sector commander seemed either ‘inexperienced or new to the role’ which in turn, made tasking difficult.¹⁸¹

There was also evidence that due to the nature of the fires, there is a necessary level of experience required to be effective during the fire events. In Natimuk, the local brigade shared that volunteers had limited exposure to fires of that scale, and familiarity with current CFA operational procedures and guidelines was inconsistent, contributing to early confusion.¹⁸²

FINDING 62: The Country Fire Authority has a shortage of trained staff, especially experienced incident controllers. Incident control staff with local knowledge can offer valuable insights about local conditions. Barriers to Country Fire Authority Volunteers becoming trained incident controllers include a lack of access to training at times and locations suitable for volunteers.

FINDING 63: The Country Fire Authority has long-term vacancy and non-relief issues with a lack of qualified and experienced Command personnel which impacted response.

¹⁷⁷ VFBV, *Submission 408*, p. 24.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19–20.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁸¹ Chris Lynch, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

¹⁸² David Sudholz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

5.6 Planned burning and landscape preparedness

As discussed in Chapter 3, fuel management is an important part of Victoria's approach to managing bushfire risk. Fuel management activities reduce the likelihood of fire starting, the severity of fire, the likelihood of fire spreading. Fuel management is undertaken by fire agencies, FFMVic, the CFA, and FRV, as well as by councils, land managers, road authorities and private landowners.¹⁸³

DEECA's fuel management program is guided by a risk reduction target to keep fuel-driven bushfire risk at or below 70% of its maximum. FFMVic delivers against this target by delivering fuel management in State forests, national parks and protected public land. Currently, there are no targets set for private land, or for public land managed by other State government entities or local councils.

The Committee heard evidence about the effectiveness of planned burning in and the response to the 2026 summer fires related to the following key areas:

- the success of planned burns, including at the Otway Fires and elsewhere
- the lack of roadside vegetation management including planned burns contributing to the severity of the fires, including the Longwood and Harcourt fires.

5.6.1 Planned burns

There was evidence provided of where planned burns were successful in helping to reduce fuel load and reduce the intensity of fires. For example, in Colac Otway, planned burns helped to reduce the intensity of Carlisle River and Kennedys Creek fires.¹⁸⁴ The Victorian Government submission said:

At Kennedys Creek, the fire ran into a planned-burn area to the north, where reduced fuels moderated fire behaviour to the point that crews were able to contain the fire. Further north at the Carlisle River fire, earlier planned burns also moderated fire activity, and assisted suppression efforts by supporting rapid backburning operations to be conducted given previous preparation works.¹⁸⁵

The submission noted similar success with planned burns at the Walwa fire undertaken during 2021 and 2025, (and strategic fuel breaks) being 'critical' in supporting containment efforts.¹⁸⁶

In Taradale, a planned burn that occurred in 2022 was successful in slowing the spread of a fire in Fryers Ridge.¹⁸⁷ This enabled ground crews to respond more efficiently, spending less time containing the fire, and able to move on to the next event.

¹⁸³ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 21.

¹⁸⁴ Scott Turner, Director, Forest Fires and Fire Operations, Barwon South West, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

¹⁸⁵ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 50.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Adam Paine, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

The Committee heard that where planned burns had not taken place for some time, increased fuel load contributed to damage. Michael Shay, Captain of the Marong brigade described at Harcourt:

Local mobile towers and TV transmission towers on top of Mount Alexander were severely damaged due to fire and I believe also due to the lack of vegetation management. The fire also severely affected V/Line's railway infrastructure and signalling here at Harcourt, again, due to the lack of vegetation management.¹⁸⁸

Ivan Gilbert from the Harcourt Progress Association shared that 'nothing is ever done to clear that mountain of dry, dead timber' and even after the fires, there is still more clearing that is required to reduce fuel loads.¹⁸⁹

There was evidence, however, to suggest that joint fuel management program and the corresponding reduction targets, are difficult to achieve. Dr Joshua Hodges, Second Lieutenant at the Noradjuha Brigade shared with the Committee that Natimuk was the only group in District 17 who completed any planned burning in 2025–26.¹⁹⁰ Under the joint fuel management program, the Natimuk group was able to complete five of the 16 planned treatments. He explained that suitable weather windows restricted the amount of planned burns the brigade was able to conduct.

FINDING 64: Where planned burning was carried out in the area of some of the fires, it was effective in reducing fire intensity and supporting containment efforts. However, inconsistent delivery of planned burns has limited these benefits in some areas.

5.6.2 Roadside vegetation

As discussed in Chapter 3, management of roadside vegetation was a significant concern raised by many stakeholders and seen as a key factor in fire behaviour and suppression. The Committee heard evidence that roadside clean-up had not been completed prior to the summer fires.¹⁹¹ Further, a number of submitters argued that inadequate fuel reduction along roadsides contributed to fire risk and worsened the impact of the 2026 summer fires.

In his submission, Peter Saglietti argued that fuel loads on roadsides have been poorly managed, with grass and fallen vegetation left to create a fire risk. He said that these fuels, combined with an ignition source, were 'the likely cause of the Hume Freeway fire,' and noted that 'there has been no effective vegetation control undertaken along the Hume Freeway for some time...across large sections of the freeway'.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Michael Shay, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 63.

¹⁸⁹ Ivan Gilbert, Chair, Harcourt Progress Association, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

¹⁹⁰ Joshua Hodges, public hearing, Quantong, 22 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42.

¹⁹¹ Andrew Tenni, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁹² Peter Saglietti, *Submission 395*, p. 2.

Some submitters described the impact of unmanaged roadside vegetation on their ability to defend their properties. Gavin Beever told the Committee that despite efforts to prepare through slashing and firebreaks, the roadside ‘was an extremely major issue for us in defending our property.’ Similarly, Nancy Spiteri expressed frustration at what she perceived as inconsistent standards, stating that she believed the Longwood fire was ‘bigger and more destructive than should have been, had the council owned lands and highways been maintained’.¹⁹³

In his submission, David Whittaker submitted that the Harcourt fire ‘would not have impacted the town...if there had been effective fuel reduction on the public land to the north and west,’¹⁹⁴ noting that this land is managed by VicRoads, V/Line and the local council. He argued that even ‘a minimal mowing program’ could have made the fire more manageable, although he acknowledged that heavily treed areas present practical limitations for mowing.¹⁹⁵

The Committee heard that there was uncertainty about who is responsible for roadside vegetation management. In its submission, the Pomonal Fire Brigade said there is ‘significant ambiguity regarding responsibility for fuel management across different categories of public land and roadside areas’.¹⁹⁶ It stated that it is often unclear whether responsibility lies with councils, state government agencies, or private landowners. The Brigade called for a ‘clearer delineation of responsibilities’, as well as public reporting to improve preparedness.

Some stakeholders proposed practical measures to address these issues, including enabling farmers to undertake roadside burning or mowing in appropriate circumstances. A submitter argued that landholders should be able ‘to apply for a permit for roadside burning where safe and appropriate’¹⁹⁷ and to manage fuel loads along shared boundaries.

While many submitters emphasised the risks associated with inadequate roadside fuel management, the Committee also received evidence presenting an alternative perspective. The Victorian Forest Alliance submitted that ‘fires this summer mostly spread through private farmland, not roadside reserves or public bushland,’ and argued that roadside reserves can ‘slow fire spread and provide important habitat’.¹⁹⁸ From this perspective, roadside vegetation should be managed not only for fuel reduction but also for its environmental values.

¹⁹³ Nancy Spiteri, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁴ David Whittaker, *Submission 27*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Pomonal Fire Brigade, *Submission 106*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁷ Name withheld, *Submission 42*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁸ Victorian Forest Alliance, *Submission 143*, p. 3.

Roadside wire barriers

Scott Jeffery, Mayor of Strathbogie Shire Council highlighted preventable failures, including unmanaged fuel loads and insufficient access points along wire barriers that impeded firefighting operations:

There were other notable preventable failures prior to the fire. Fuel loads along the Hume Freeway were not and are not adequately managed. We must confront the trade-off between cost, environment and human safety, particularly on high-volume roads. Further, infrastructure decisions such as wire barriers without appropriate through access points across all lanes created issues during firefighting efforts. Avenel CFA was impeded during this fire when the fire changed direction and jumped the freeway. It got away from us, heading towards the Longwood township. Furthermore, impact with the barrier is thought to have started the Longwood fire.¹⁹⁹

The Protect Our Farms submission also raised concerns about the impact of wire rope barriers and roadside vegetation:

Wire rope barriers and other road accident mitigation devices need considerable reviewing and appropriate re-engineering. Breaks in these barriers must be easily identifiable and well-spaced to allow access for fuel reduction, fire control and mitigation works. There must be closer spacing of crossovers to enable the prompt turnaround of traffic in any emergency.²⁰⁰

FINDING 65: During the 2026 summer fires inconsistent roadside vegetation management increased bushfire risk and made fires harder to control. There is a lack of clarity around the responsibility for roadside vegetation management.

RECOMMENDATION 46: That the Victorian Government improve management of roadside vegetation to reduce fire risk and limit ecological harm. This should include:

- clearly assigned responsibility for roadside vegetation on all public roads and transport corridors, including relevant agencies such as VicRoads, V/Line, DEECA and local councils
- increased adaptability of maintenance schedules to enable risk-based targeting of roadsides in bushfire-prone areas ahead of and during fire seasons
- minimum maintenance standards
- improved reporting for all relevant agencies to allow for public transparency on roadside vegetation management standards
- consideration of permitting landholders to undertake approved fuel reduction activities on nearby roadsides, where appropriate.

¹⁹⁹ Scott Jeffery, Mayor, Strathbogie Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 3–4.

²⁰⁰ Protect our Farms, *Submission 190*, p. 3.

RECOMMENDATION 47: That the Inspector-General of Emergency Management review of wire rope safety barriers and other roadside safety infrastructure to ensure they do not impede bushfire prevention, response or recovery activities.

Chapter 6

Relief and recovery

6.1 Introduction

Relief and recovery arrangements during the 2026 summer fires were supported by collaboration between government agencies, councils, individual volunteers and community organisations. Communities pulled together to provide critical support to fire affected people during an incredibly challenging period.

Emergency relief centres and government assistance packages played an important role in delivering essential services, while community hubs demonstrated the strength and resilience of local communities. Government funding is delivered primarily through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), a cost sharing arrangement between the Commonwealth and state governments to support certain relief and recovery activities following an eligible disaster. The rules and processes outlined in the DRFA have a significant impact on relief and recovery efforts.

Relief and recovery systems were not always well understood, accessible or aligned with the lived experience of fire affected communities. Funding mechanisms for councils and complex support and approval processes are often not well understood and lead to frustrations with the recovery process. This placed additional strain on volunteers and residents already struggling to rebuild.

The recovery from the fires will be a long and complex process. It requires sustained and locally informed support. Improving the recovery process requires better support for councils and community organisations. It will need to address the mental health impacts as well as the needs of households and businesses who face the difficult task of cleaning up and restoring lost assets.

6.2 Funding framework

As outlined in Chapter 2, funding for relief and recovery efforts are largely provided through the DRFA, a cost sharing arrangement between the Commonwealth and state governments.

General program guidance from the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) provided to delivery agencies (state agencies and local government authorities) notes that the purpose of the DRFA is to 'enable the State and Commonwealth to provide financial assistance, to support certain relief and recovery measures following an eligible disaster, they do not cover all costs that may be incurred resulting from an eligible disaster.'¹

¹ Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/disaster-recovery-funding-arrangements>> accessed 22 July 2026.

The DRFA was activated for the January 2026 fires via AGRN 1242, in 28 Victorian Local Government Areas (and one Alpine region).

The guidance material further notes that ‘the DRFA is not intended to replace other actions and measures that should be taken to protect assets or prevent disasters, including having insurance coverage where possible.’²

6.2.1 Funding categories

Relief and recovery funding is provided on a reimbursement basis under the DRFA. There are four categories of assistance:

- **Category A:** Assistance to individuals.
- **Category B:** Essential public assets.
- **Category C:** Community recover.
- **Category D:** Exceptional circumstances.

Category A – assistance to individuals

Category A assistance includes:

- early relief and recovery activities including the establishment and operation of a Relief and Recovery Centre
- counter disaster operations undertaken to provide direct assistance to individuals, immediately before, during and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster (e.g. sandbagging or the establishment of bushfire control lines)
- personal hardship assistance programs administered by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)
- removal of debris operations carried out by councils from residential properties (immediate house footprint only) to make them safe and habitable
- other – personal and financial counselling and the employment of a Community Recovery Officer.

Category B – essential public assets

Category B assistance can be divided into five broad areas of assistance designed to support the community to recover from an eligible disaster:

- emergency works to urgently restore an essential public asset to an acceptable level of service (make safe or temporary repairs) within three months from date of the event

² Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/disaster-recovery-funding-arrangements>> accessed 22 July 2026.

- immediate reconstruction works (to fully restore an asset) undertaken within three months from date of the event
- reconstruction works outside of the three-month window (requires a certified estimate to be prepared)
- counter disaster operations for the protection of the general public including the establishment of a Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre
- concessional loans to assist impacted small businesses, primary producers and non-profit organisations whose assets have been significantly damaged or who have suffered a significant loss of income as a direct result of an eligible disaster.

Category C – community recovery

Category C includes:

- Community Recovery Fund – grants/programs to restore social networks, community functioning and community facilities.
- Recovery grants for small businesses and non-profit organisations and primary producers. Aimed at covering the cost of clean-up and reinstatement (not compensation for losses). Grants can vary depending on event – based on recommendation from Agriculture Victoria and Small Business Victoria.

Category D – exceptional circumstances

Category D applies to exceptional circumstance assistance that is beyond what can be covered under Categories A, B and C. This category applied to the State Coordinated Clean Up packages for the 2019–20 Black Summer Bushfires and June 2021 Storm and Flood Event. It also applied to the October 2022–January 2023 Floods and Storms – Community Recovery Offices, Clean Up program.

The funding for relief payments under categories A, C and D are shared on a 50/50 basis between the Commonwealth and the states. Category B employs a threshold system whereby a state is responsible for total funding up to a set threshold point at which the Commonwealth provides contributions.

Once the relevant disaster declaration is made, local councils do not require pre-approval for expenditure within categories A and B which are made within the program guidelines. This is designed to enable immediate assistance to be provided by the council without worrying about the financial implications on their local government authority. However, it is clear from the evidence provided to the Committee that there could be better awareness of how these arrangements work, especially on what specific expenditure is automatically reimbursed and what expenditure requires pre-approval.

This is discussed further below.

6.3 Immediate relief

During the height of the fires, emergency relief centres were established to provide immediate and temporary support for firefighters who were on the fireground and communities who had evacuated their homes.

The Victorian Government reported that 32 Emergency Relief Centres and 15 Recovery Information Hubs were also opened by councils and the Victorian Government to provide food, water, psychosocial, financial and accommodation supports, as well as general recovery information.

6.3.1 Emergency Relief Centres

The setup and control of relief centres involve a collaborative effort between local councils and the Government.³ During the fires, emergency relief services were activated, and emergency relief centres were stood up. These are buildings or places established to provide life support and essential needs to persons affected by the fires. The centres are coordinated and staffed by councils together with other support agencies such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, DFFH, the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry and Victoria Police being in attendance, as the situation scales up or down. The purpose of the centres is to provide food, water, temporary accommodation, counselling services, vital information about the fires, and connectivity to community members.

The provision of all relief services is managed according to an established coordination arrangement, where the relief tier coordination responsibilities are:

- Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) provide state and regional relief coordination
- councils provide municipal relief coordination.

Under the emergency management framework, there are various agencies involved in coordinating relief activities as illustrated in Table 6.1 below.

Table 6.1 Specified relief activities and relief coordinating agency

Relief activities	Relief coordinating agency
Disbursement of material aid (non-food items)	Salvation Army
Drinking water for households in non-reticulated areas	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Emergency financial assistance	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Emergency shelter	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
Food and grocery supply continuity	Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions

3 Emergency Management Victoria, *Relief*, 2026, <<https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/state-emergency-management-plan-semp/roles-and-responsibilities/relief>> accessed 16 July 2026.

Relief activities	Relief coordinating agency
Food and water	Activity leads
Health, medical assistance and first aid	Activity leads
Psychological support	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
Reconnecting family and friends	Victoria Police
Waste service disruption	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action

Source: Emergency Management Victoria, *Relief*, 2026, <<https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/state-emergency-management-plan-semp/roles-and-responsibilities/relief>> accessed on 23 June 2026.

The Committee heard from various stakeholders who expressed gratitude to the multiple agencies, councils, local businesses, and community groups who came together to provide shelter, meals, clothing, essentials and community connectivity to all those impacted. That said, there were many who shared differing views on the effectiveness of the current emergency management settings. Specific issues raised included:

- communication on emergency relief centres
- the DRFA arrangements, especially in relation to expenditure approvals and program guidelines
- the growing number of community-led relief hubs in response to the growing needs of communities.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the early power outages and loss of reception caused significant communication issues across the regions. The Committee heard that the widespread power and telecommunication issues contributed to early confusion and led to many residents turning to multiple communication systems to source information, such as WhatsApp groups, social media and radio networks.

At one point the VicEmergency app went offline and there were reported issues with refreshing the app, which led to residents turning to councils for critical information. Toby Heydon, Mayor of Mount Alexander Shire Council shared that in the first '24 hours' there was confusion on the role of councils and the services they provided.⁴ For example, there was a lack of community understanding between places of last resort and emergency relief centres, including their purpose, available support, and decision-making for relocations.⁵

Various stakeholders highlighted the central role local government holds in enabling relief and recovery efforts on the ground. There were various examples of how councils worked together to share resources and provide relief for communities across the state. Mount Alexander Shire Council spoke to the Committee about how when the council

⁴ Toby Heydon, Mayor, Mount Alexander Shire Council, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

⁵ Strathbogie Shire Council, *Submission 163*, p. 4.

needed support to establish a relief centre in Castlemaine, the neighbouring councils were able to assist and provide support to those residents:

From a local government perspective, the generosity, the capability and just the straight-out fleet-footedness of our neighbouring councils – in particular the City of Greater Bendigo and Macedon Ranges Shire Council, who both established emergency relief centres, in Bendigo and Kyneton, within hours of us realising that we could not safely establish a relief centre in Castlemaine at the time that people were starting to look for those services – was immensely appreciated.⁶

The Committee heard from Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer of the Colac Otway Shire Council who shared that cross-council collaboration helped in standing up the relief centres, including providing additional staff when required. He shared that the ability to accommodate animals and livestock made the decision for many people in the community to leave much easier.⁷ Towong Shire Council also spoke of the ‘seamless support’ of the north-east emergency management collaboration between the Towong, Alpine, and Indigo shires.⁸

However, councils provided evidence that their capacity to respond quickly and effectively in an emergency is constrained by ‘structural funding limitations, rate-capping, inequitable government grants allocations and settings, the scale of our municipal road network and dispersed settlement patterns’.⁹ The Committee heard from Scott Jeffery, Mayor of Strathbogie Shire Council who shared that there is ‘structural funding inequity faced by small regional councils’.¹⁰

These criticisms appeared to relate to more generalised local government funding issues such as rate capping and funding for fire preparedness rather than specific funding for relief and recovery under the DRFA.

In addition, the cross-council collaboration can only go so far and for so long. The Municipal Association of Victoria has resource-sharing protocols which enables councils to pool resources; however, it has stated that this arrangement is unsustainable.¹¹ The Corangamite Shire Council also highlighted that while managing emergency relief centres, councils have additional and concurrent roles that they must fulfil, for example removing debris and dangerous trees, case management triage, and road openings.¹² The added workloads of councils, as a result of the intensity and duration of the summer fires, placed sustained pressure on infrastructure and

6 Darren Fuzzard, Chief Executive Officer, Mount Alexander Shire Council, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

7 Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

8 Peter Tolsher, Mayor, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

9 Murrindindi Shire Council, *Submission 281*, p. 7.

10 Scott Jeffery, Mayor, Strathbogie Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

11 Murrindindi Shire Council, *Submission 281*, p. 7.

12 Corangamite Shire Council, *Submission 173*, p. 6.

community-facing staff. Corangamite Shire Council submitted that ‘workforce fatigue emerged as a significant operational risk’.¹³

The costs and operations of relief centres are eligible to be recouped by councils through the DRFA. The Committee heard from councils that this model of full cost reimbursement paid 50% by the Victorian Government and 50% by the Commonwealth Government requires that councils are to make payment upfront, and that:

being small rural councils or medium councils, we need funding probably up-front to make sure our equipment is ready to go straightaway but also some of the provisions for local people to stay in accommodation or to have supplies ready when they have evacuated their houses. I think it would be good if councils were funded some money up-front in the short term so our cash flow and our budgets are not greatly affected.¹⁴

There was widespread appreciation along with criticism of the Government’s Council Support Fund which provided up to \$750,000 per council of targeted bushfire relief funding, which was allocated to councils at varying rates which depended on the scale of impacts. Some councils shared that the additional boosted funding, while welcomed, was not distributed according to the level of impact suffered by communities and thereby did not accurately provide for the loss suffered by each community.¹⁵ The Committee also heard evidence that there should be better engagement with councils to better explain the Commonwealth-State funding guidelines that apply to natural disasters:

There is no commensurate understanding of where that lands. It also comes as a surprise and is sort of withheld – an announcement is made, but then the guidelines come much later. We would like to get much more up-front engagement and understanding of how that money is to be deployed and where it better lands.¹⁶

FINDING 66: There was a lack of community understanding of the role of emergency relief centres and the support services they provide. This includes a lack of understanding of the difference between places of last resort and community relief centres.

FINDING 67: Councils hold a key role in emergency management planning and providing immediate relief services to residents during fire events. The responsibilities of this role have grown in response to the severity and frequency of fire events. However, councils are struggling to respond effectively and efficiently due to constrained funding and resources.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Phil Howards, Deputy Mayor, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Scott Jeffery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4; Damien Gallagher, Mayor, Murrindindi Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Livia Bonazzi, Chief Executive Officer, Murrindindi Shire Council, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

FINDING 68: Smaller rural and regional councils who were impacted by the fires were expected by their communities to provide a high level of emergency relief support, for which expenditure was reimbursed through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION 48: That the Victorian Government work with councils to facilitate stronger understanding of the funding arrangements for the establishment and operation of emergency relief centres. This should include an evaluation of certain upfront relief costs to assist smaller councils with cash flow concerns.

6.3.2 Community hubs

In addition to the council-run emergency relief centres, the Committee heard overwhelming support from locals on the positive impacts of the multiple community hubs that were stood up across the state. The Murrindindi Shire Council stated that without the work of the community hubs, then the disengagement and mental toll on communities would have been worse.¹⁷

Community hubs are run by volunteers which became the ‘centre of gravity’ for many.¹⁸ The hubs provided a range of support services including navigating complex grant applications, sourcing materials for farmers, providing food, clothing, and shelter. In Alexandra, the Committee heard from Colleen Furlanetto, Team Leader of the Tablelands Recovery Leadership Team. She stated that the various community hubs have been highly effective in providing support to communities where there has been little engagement by Government support services, ‘the hub has kept people connected to their place, their neighbours and their future, and that has been the difference between a community surviving and a community disappearing’.¹⁹

Stakeholders advocated for dedicated funding to community hubs, who fill the multiple roles that council and state agencies fill as seen in Table 6.1. Representatives of the Yea Community House shared that they provided emotional support, practical assistance, coordination and fostering community connection and that this was undertaken ‘without any dedicated funding or any formal acknowledgement, highlighting a significant gap in the current emergency management system’.²⁰

Mariela Diaz, Deputy Commissioner for Relief and Recovery at EMV told the Committee that the role of the ‘pop-up community centres are critical in the early days of relief

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁸ Colleen Furlanetto, Team Leader, Tablelands Recovery Leadership Team, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cass Groves, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42.

and recovery', and further explained that it is the role of councils in terms of funding community hubs:

That is under counter-disaster operations. Anything that is about supporting communities in situ, like relief centres, food, water et cetera, all of those are things that council do not have to ask for money for. They can do those and then talk to us about how they get reimbursed for those things.²¹

However, there was mixed evidence to show that costs of community hubs were being passed onto councils and to EMV. Ms Furlanetto shared with the Committee that the power bill is the 'one partial bill being supported by council at this stage'.²² She further stated that the issue of funding is being worn by the community hubs, 'the community stepped up because we had no choice'.²³

Sam Hicks, President of Fawcett Hall shared with the Committee how community hubs have demonstrated that they have developed the 'practical framework' and 'cheat sheet' that requires government support.²⁴ The Harcourt Progression Association shared with the Committee about the work of the association to provide relief to the community through 'meals and connection and a food pantry to bushfire survivors'.²⁵ The association received no government funding and the support has come from donations, philanthropy, local businesses, and community banks.

Stakeholders also shared how the community hubs tailored support to community needs.²⁶ In response to questions asked by the Committee on what essentials communities need in the immediate and short-term, the response from stakeholders was water, fodder, fencing, and maintaining communication with caseworkers. Many stakeholders advocated for community resilience and place-based policies to lead preparedness, response, and recovery. Rachel Vanstone, resident of Harcourt advocated for a 'recovery playbook for communities, resources for children, volunteer support frameworks and regional disaster plans that can activate people and assets quickly'.²⁷

Evidence to the Committee suggested that local bushfire prevention and preparedness mechanisms have diminished over time, reducing opportunities for communities to contribute to planning and decision-making. Witnesses emphasised the importance of local knowledge in identifying risks and preparing for bushfire seasons, highlighting the value of local committees and community-based prevention planning in strengthening preparedness and resilience.

²¹ Mariela Diaz, Deputy Commissioner, Relief and Recovery, Emergency Management Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

²² Colleen Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

²³ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁴ Sam Hicks, President, Fawcett Mechanics Institute Reserve Committee of Management, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

²⁵ Rachel Vanstone, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

²⁶ Andrea Bauer, Highlands Relief Hub, public hearing, Alexandra, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

²⁷ Rachel Vanstone, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

Annabelle Cleeland MP, Member for Euroa told the Committee:

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.²⁸

FINDING 69: Community hubs are a demonstration of community resilience and effective place-based community leadership. Volunteers worked together to provide vital services to communities.

FINDING 70: There was little evidence of widespread use of reimbursement model where councils apply to Emergency Management Victoria to recoup costs accrued through emergency management activities.

RECOMMENDATION 49: That the Victorian Government investigate ways it can more adequately support a community-enabled response. This could include a funding mechanism that can be mobilised quickly to provide upfront funding to community hubs for essential provisions, rather than relying entirely on reimbursement models that require community hubs to have funding available to pay upfront costs.

RECOMMENDATION 50: That the Victorian Government work with councils and community recovery hubs to inform them about options for reimbursement of costs and wider support available.

6.3.3 Government support packages

Relief payments were made available after the fires began in order to support urgent relief needs under the Personal Hardship Assistance Program, including to allow people to meet immediate food, clothing medication, toiletries and accommodation needs. Evacuations began at the Walwa fire area on 5 January 2026 and Longwood fire area on 7 January 2026, however, the Emergency Relief Payments were not introduced until Friday 9 January 2026. The relief payment was a one-off payment of \$680 per adult and \$340 per child, up to a maximum of \$2,380 per family. As of 2 March 2026, over 10,000 relief payments have been made, totalling over \$12 million. In addition, the Government provided:

- **Re-establishment assistance:** this program is to assist people to re-establish a principal place of residence (primary home). People could apply through the 1800 Recovery Hotline or through an online portal. Applicants need supporting documents to show proof of income, insurance status, home assessment reports.

²⁸ Annabelle Cleeland, Member of Parliament, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 45.

- **Victorian Emergency Relief and Recovery Foundation payments:** a one-off \$1000 means-tested payment for those significantly impacted by the fires. People could apply through an online portal. Applicants need supporting documents showing proof of occupancy.

The Australian Government also provided disaster relief payments. This included:

- **Disaster Recovery Payment:** this is a one-off non-means tested lump sum payment. The payment is \$1000 for eligible adults and \$400 for eligible children.
- **Disaster Recovery Allowance:** this is an allowance for up to 13 weeks to assist those who lost income as a direct result of the fires. Eligibility criteria include:
 - loss of income (some or in full)
 - earn less than \$2,011.40 per week before tax
 - work or live in a declared impacted area
 - over 16 years of age
 - Australian resident or meet other residence rules.

In addition to financial support payments, the Government provided:

- emergency accommodation
- 1800 Recovery Hotline
- financial counselling
- emergency animal fodder support and waste disposal supports.²⁹

The Government established a dedicated portal on its website outlining what type of relief supports were available, including eligibility criteria, detailing application processes and listing timelines.

A 1800 Hotline was established to be a single point of entry to connect affected residents with relief services. Stakeholders raised concerns with the government assistance hotline and reported long wait times to then be told that their property was not yet listed within the disaster zone.³⁰ The Committee was told that callers to the hotline were subjected to ‘seven minutes of scripted messaging warning about fraud and consequences for false claims’. A submitter said this showed a lack of compassion for bushfire survivors.³¹ Financial counsellors from Financial Counsellors Victoria reported ‘system fragmentation’ with communities struggling not only with loss, but with ‘navigating a maze of agencies, hotlines and intake processes.’³²

²⁹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 12, 71.

³⁰ Carrie Brewer, *Submission 384*, p. 2; Arie Eddy, *Submission 81*, p. 1.

³¹ Carrie Brewer, *Submission 384*, p. 2.

³² Financial Counselling Victoria, *Submission 290*, p. 5.

The Committee's understanding of the Hotline is it is intended to operate as a gateway to support, however, instead of obtaining clear and accurate information, Financial Counsellors Victoria reported that people are directed to a case management service.³³

Stakeholders have shared that the Government funding packages are complex, confusing, and insensitive to the circumstances of fire impacted communities. Financial counsellors have reported a lack of transparency across multiple assistance programs. The group submitted that detailed eligibility criteria have not always been publicly accessible, and applicants are being asked to upload extensive financial and insurance documentation before receiving clear guidance about whether they qualify.³⁴

The Alexandra Community hub provided a range of frontline community services in Alexandra and surrounding localities in Murrindindi Shire. In its submission, the group outlined how the eligibility criterion is overly cumbersome and shared examples of where residents have been deemed ineligible:

- **Evacuation requirements:** for the Victorian Government's Personal Hardship Assistance Program, eligibility often required residents to have evacuated. Those who stayed to defend properties reported as deemed ineligible, causing significant frustration.
- **'Principal place of residence' rule:** support (including the Emergency Re-establishment Payment and access to the state clean-up program) is generally restricted to an individual's main home, excluding holiday homes, sheds or secondary properties even if destroyed.
- **Definition of 'major damage':** to qualify for the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment, homes must have sustained 'major damage' or become uninhabitable. Loss of amenity and some forms of 'minor' damage may not qualify.
- **Location activation settings:** disaster assistance is activated for specified Local Government Areas and locations that meet thresholds, as required under the DRFA.
- **Asset value thresholds:** some assistance requires losses to meet a high combined market value threshold (e.g. \$20,000).³⁵

Financial Counselling Victoria has shared that communities have been directed to its counsellors for assistance with grants and eligibility questions. In its submission, it stated that financial counsellors are accustomed to navigating complex systems but that in this instance, 'they have not been provided with clear or consistent program guidelines'.³⁶ This in turn has meant that counsellors are feeling ill-equipped and creates a situation where both parties are navigating uncertainty. The Committee heard from Peter Tolsher, Mayor of Towong Shire Council who shared that the eligibility criteria for financial assistance is 'inconsistent, confusing in price, and ignorant to

³³ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁵ Alexandra Community Hub, *Submission 403*, p. 4.

³⁶ Financial Counselling Victoria, *Submission 290*, p. 5.

the local impact'.³⁷ He shared that not all townships impacted by the Walwa fire were eligible for Disaster Recovery funding in instances where farm assets were lost as a direct result of the fires.³⁸ In addition, there was strong evidence that there is 'a disconnect between what is offered and what is needed on the ground'.³⁹

The prolonged road closures also caused issues with farmers whose trucks could not get through to bring fodder in for their stock, and conversely, could not move milk shipments out. This had negative social, financial, and environmental impacts:

Obviously you have to milk your cows twice a day. You have milk. If you do not milk them, it becomes an animal welfare issue. You have to feed them, and often you do not have feed because you may have been burnt out. So there are a number of things that can impact you there. Farmers will dump milk, which can become an environmental issue.⁴⁰

This view was also shared by communities in relation to the Longwood fire. Fawcett Hall President Sam Hicks reinforced that the first and most important thing farmers required was fencing, fodder and water for their cattle. She shared that where limited replenishments could reach farmers, this further exacerbated the emotional toll that the fires have had on them:

To reinforce the water and the fodder – I have gone through many droughts in my lifetime. When I woke up – I think it was about day four – I could hear the cattle that were left behind in our valley screaming for fodder. I made a call to the Western District and I asked for semi-loads of hay. We got them in because I had gone through bushfire recovery before. Our Koriella fire brigade drove all the way to Yea and escorted the fodder in. When you see a 70- or 80-year-old farmer crying because it is the one bale that is going to feed his cattle, it is hard. It is hard on us. We were fortunate: we saved our cattle and our fodder. But we carry guilt. A lot of people that have not lost homes, fencing, fodder or their livelihoods will say the same thing – that they feel guilt.⁴¹

The Committee also heard evidence that in the current financial climate, to evacuate without the surety of Government assistance was not a simple binary option for some communities, with some saying that 'evacuation is a privilege'.⁴² The Towong Shire Council highlighted that many residents were in low-socio economic positions and that this guides the decision on whether to stay or leave. With regard to the one-off Disaster Recovery Payment of \$1000, the Council shared that this did help residents but there needed to be greater certainty well before the fires ignited on what is available and when:

I am serious when I say some people could not afford to put the fuel in the car to get to the Wodonga evacuation centre some kilometres away. Even the thought of leaving

³⁷ Peter Tolsher, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

³⁹ Carrie Brewer, *Submission 384*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Lachlan Sutherland, Deputy Group Officer, Corangamite Group, Country Fire Authority, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

⁴¹ Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁴² Juliana Phelps, Chief Executive Officer, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

their home and perhaps losing power and the fridge full of food going off is real for a lot of people in our community. I think if there is greater certainty around what is available to assist them and there is a very quick turnaround time in securing that assistance, then that would help.⁴³

Some communities encountered difficulty in accessing Commonwealth disaster relief. Towong Shire Council Mayor Peter Tolsher explained the difficulties facing landowners in Tallangatta Valley and Burrowye, who were not eligible for Commonwealth payments for significant losses of farm buildings and assets they experienced in the fires, because no principal places of residence were lost in these localities:

[The National Emergency Management Agency] has not approved any household in either community to receive DRFA financial grant support despite clear evidence from multiple fire agencies of the impact of the fire. It is a ludicrous situation. The town and district of Walwa is eligible for financial support by virtue of the naming of the fire event, when in reality the fire ignited 30 kilometres away from the Walwa township and no principal places of residence or other assets were lost in the fire.⁴⁴

Mr Tolsher confirmed that despite efforts of the council and local Federal Member to have NEMA review this eligibility ruling, the authority was either unable or unwilling to apply discretion.⁴⁵

In addition, the Commonwealth made declarations for the Disaster Recovery Payment based on locality instead of using the Local Government Area criteria used by the State. On 11 January 2026, nine locations were announced as eligible leaving three localities in western Victoria and eleven localities in the Longwood area including: Yarck, Upton Hill, Creightons Creek, Terip Terip and Caveat. It took until Thursday 15th January to rectify the error.

The 2026–27 Victorian State Budget provides a range of relief measures for people affected by the January 2026 Victorian bushfires, including exemptions and refunds relating to land tax, vacant residential land tax, and land transfer (stamp) duty. Eligible property owners may receive a 2026 land tax waiver if their property was destroyed or substantially damaged by the bushfires, or if they have suffered significant financial losses as a result of the disaster in bushfire-affected areas. In addition, owners of residential properties that cannot be used or accessed due to bushfire damage may be eligible for a vacant residential land tax waiver for the 2027 tax year. The package also includes land transfer duty refunds of up to \$55,000 for recent purchasers whose homes were destroyed by the bushfires, as well as up to \$55,000 in land transfer duty relief when purchasing a replacement home.⁴⁶

⁴³ Juliana Phelps, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Peter Tolsher, Mayor, Towong Shire Council, public hearing, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Peter Tolsher, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

⁴⁶ State Revenue Office, *Bushfire Relief Measures*, <<https://www.sro.vic.gov.au/owning-property/land-tax/exemptions-and-concessions-land-tax/bushfire-relief-measures>> accessed 16 July 2026.

FINDING 71: Some residents who were fire affected but stayed to defend their homes were deemed ineligible to receive hardship assistance despite them suffering significant loss and trauma.

FINDING 72: Victorian Government and Commonwealth support packages have aided in the relief and recovery of impacted communities. However, the process for accessing funding is complex and administratively burdensome for communities recovering from disaster.

FINDING 73: Criteria used for announcing Commonwealth Government Disaster Recovery Payments disadvantaged many residents in localities that were left off the eligibility list.

FINDING 74: The 2026–27 Victorian State Budget announced relief measures from land tax, vacant residential land tax and land transfer (stamp) duty for people affected by the January 2026 Victorian bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 51: That the Victorian Government review and evaluate the support packages offered to communities during relief and recovery stages of emergencies. The review should focus on:

- Community needs, including prioritisation of resources
- Administrative barriers, including duplication and requests for additional information
- Ensuring equitable access for all fire-affected communities, including those who stayed to defend
- Introducing clearly defined eligibility criteria to assist with reducing challenges with claim resolution
- Measures by which emergency relief payments could be made immediately after residents are asked to evacuate.

RECOMMENDATION 52: That the Victorian Government review the eligibility methodology for disaster relief payments at both state and Commonwealth levels, and advocate to the Commonwealth Government to harmonise criteria for residents eligible for Commonwealth Disaster Recovery Payments with the criteria used by the State Government for Emergency Disaster Relief Payments.

6.3.4 Emergency and temporary housing

As the fires swept through the regions, many residents evacuated their homes and were placed in emergency and temporary accommodation. In its submission, the Government has supported displaced people through emergency accommodation, rent relief and other temporary accommodation (modular homes) supports to date.⁴⁷ The Government submitted that it is continuing to work with recovery support providers, councils and households to provide medium to longer term accommodation options best suited to the recovery needs of individuals, families and communities.

Ms Diaz told the Committee that relief centres provide short-term accommodation during the fires and referral for emergency accommodation for those who cannot stay in relief centres.⁴⁸ Further, she stated that relief centres are not suitable for people for 'more than a few days' and that they are transitioned to emergency housing through DFFH.

The Committee heard evidence that decisions around temporary accommodation has resulted in residents separated from their community at a time when they need them most. Stakeholders shared that displacement has been difficult for many, with reports that temporary accommodation options have not been suitable for many communities. Sam Hicks shared with the Committee that farmers returned to their lands with no services because 'being back in their community and maintaining connection is vital' and that they could not afford the commute between temporary accommodation and their property.⁴⁹ In Harcourt, Rachel Vanstone, Harcourt resident, shared with the Committee that 'communities heal communities' and that due to limited temporary accommodation options in the community, this means communities are unable to work together in the healing process.⁵⁰

Andrea Bauer from the Highlands Relief Hub shared with the Committee that residents have asked to be placed closer to their communities and that she has seen the positive impacts this has had on their mental health:

The change in the little old fella up with us – he completely transformed when we got him back in one of these dilapidated caravans, to just be in his place on his land.⁵¹

FINDING 75: There are limited emergency and temporary accommodation options that place residents back with their communities. Stakeholders have shared that recovering from the fires will be a long process and continued displacement inhibits community wellbeing.

⁴⁷ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 178.

⁴⁸ Mariela Diaz, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Rachel Vanstone, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

⁵¹ Andrea Bauer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

RECOMMENDATION 53: That the Victorian Government prioritise the delivery of temporary modular housing for homeless residents whose homes were significantly damaged or destroyed by the fires, and ensure sufficient temporary accommodation remains available until permanent housing is completed.

RECOMMENDATION 54: That the Victorian Government enable local councils to fast-track planning and building approvals for rebuilding of homes, businesses and agricultural infrastructure following bushfire events.

RECOMMENDATION 55: That the Victorian Government provide exemptions from the Emergency Services Volunteer Fund for bushfire-affected property owners and support councils to provide rate relief.

RECOMMENDATION 56: That the Victorian Government prioritise recovery approaches that enable displaced residents to remain close to, or return to, their communities where it is safe and practicable to do so.

6.3.5 Insurance

The role of insurance, and under-insurance, in the recovery efforts from the January 2026 fires has been of particular concern to affected residents and communities.

Rural Victorians broadly face persistent structural barriers to gaining adequate insurance for fire and flood. Stakeholders shared with the Committee issues on insurance cover, processes, and eligibility. There appears to be two categories of people who are insured and uninsured, with subcategories within those two groups:

- **Insured**, includes those who are adequately insured and are underinsured
- **Uninsured**, includes those could not afford the insurance or could not get approved.

The Committee heard that the cost-of-living and high premiums are factors impacting on a person's decision on the level of insurance that they get, or in obtaining insurance at all. The Harcourt Progression Association submitted that insurance policies are different for individuals and businesses, for example, if insured, typically fencing surrounding the home is covered, but not the fencing for paddocks.⁵² For the communities of Harcourt, there have been successive insurance premium increases across successive years as the district is considered a bushfire zone, which the

⁵² Harcourt Progression Association, *Submission 197*, p. 5.

association submits may have led to some families being unable to afford insurance cover.⁵³ The association advocated for the Government to review insurance policies, with particular focus on:

- the structural nature of high cost of insurance premiums and limited diversity of insurance products in rural Victoria
- the consistency of policies across providers
- whether climate risk is outpacing existing insurance models.

Further, Ms Hicks shared with the Committee that those who do not have insurance simply cannot afford it and have had to forego insurance in order to prioritise livestock: 'farmers have diverted funds into fodder during drought rather than insuring fencing, leaving them exposed, or they cannot afford or could not afford insurance, or in very big circumstances have not actually been able to obtain insurance'.⁵⁴

This view was also shared by submitters who expressed that increased insurance premiums are foreseeable and that they 'can't afford insurance now as is'.⁵⁵ The corollary of this is that adequate insurance coverage is 'one of the main factors aiding recovery'.⁵⁶ In their submission, Protect our Farms raised concerns with the growing number of regions across Australia that are becoming 'uninsurable' due to climate conditions.

Some stakeholders said there needs to be greater coordination between insurance companies, relief packages, and local government disbursements to ensure that processes are progressing in unison, simplifying the process for residents.⁵⁷

The Government has recognised the 'insurance gap' and provided support for households with lower incomes whose primary place of residence was uninsured. The Personal Hardship Assistance Program provides access to payments of up to \$52,250 to help them re-establish their home.⁵⁸ The Alexandra Community hub submitted that some Government grants are targeted to uninsured or underinsured people. Where a person has comprehensive insurance, they may be ineligible even if the insurance process is slow or insufficient.⁵⁹ This view was also noted by Strathbogie Shire Council.⁶⁰

A perceived flaw of the Government's approach to fill the 'insurance gap' with additional assistance is that the undefined eligibility threshold for underinsured properties, has meant that insurance companies cannot calculate the gap between

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 164*, p. 1; Cameron McPherson, *Submission 183*, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Protect Our Farms Incorporated, *Submission 190*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Leigh Harry, *Submission 64*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 178.

⁵⁹ Alexandra Community Hub, *Submission 403*, pp. 3–4.

⁶⁰ Strathbogie Shire Council, *Submission 163*, p. 12.

what insurance will cover and what the Government will cover.⁶¹ This has paralysed claim resolution for many affected residents. The Insurance Council of Australia's position is that this undermines the relationship between government recovery programs and the private insurance market. In response to questions on notice, EMV provided that the scheme is meant to be 'flexible' to maximise the amount of funds under-insured and non-insured households have to be able to rebuild.

The Committee heard examples of where residents only became aware after the fact that their insurance policy did not cover all that was lost. Fiona Lindsay, a resident of Fawcett shared with the Committee that she and her family were 'significantly underinsured' and that the insurance process has been 'inconsistent and retraumatising'.⁶² Others have also shared that insurance claims have stalled due to uncertainty around eligibility and delays in providing insurance holders with information on their cover, 'the insurance company still has not told us after over four months what they are going to pay us'.⁶³

Some stakeholders also advocated for state and federal governments to review insurance companies and their insurance policies, with a focus on eligibility, claims processes, transparency and affordability.⁶⁴ Suggestions have included capping insurance premiums, review insurance policies, and simplify the insurance claims process for fire impacted communities.⁶⁵

FINDING 76: The lack of insurance and the lack of comprehensive insurance is a barrier to recovery. Many communities have insufficient insurance cover, with many reporting that it been difficult to obtain insurance or adequate insurance due to affordability and or location.

FINDING 77: The Personal Hardship Assistance Program fails to address the inequity issues faced by those who are insured and are dealing with complex insurance processes, and delays in receiving insurance payouts. Stakeholders have shared that this program has contributed to insurance delays.

⁶¹ Insurance Council of Australia, *Submission 349*, pp. 4–5.

⁶² Fiona Lindsay, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 35–36.

⁶³ Trevor Peeler, Manager, Harcourt Co-operative Association Cool Store, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

⁶⁴ Ivan Gilbert, Chairperson, Harcourt Progress Association, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26; Trevor Peeler, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Colleen Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Phillipa Bailey, Climate Action Team, Colac Otway Shire, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Tori Mitton, public hearing, Alexandra, 24 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

RECOMMENDATION 57: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government and the Insurance Council of Australia to improve insurance affordability in fire-prone communities and to address the following issues:

- the overlap with Government support packages and how these are operating alongside insurance policies
- engagement with policy holders who may be underinsured
- whether climate risk is outpacing existing insurance models.

6.4 Recovery

At the Committee's hearings in Alexandra held fifteen weeks after the Longwood fire, Murrindindi Shire Council told the Committee that its community was still 'only taking the first steps to recovery'.⁶⁶ Mayor Damien Gallagher said the experience remained raw and that moving from relief to recovery, while navigating destruction and loss, had made it hard for some people to take part in the inquiry.⁶⁷

This section deals with recovery, not relief. Relief is concerned with immediate safety and urgent need. Recovery is different. The Victorian Government described it as helping affected people and communities to 'resume a proper and effective level of functioning'.⁶⁸ The regional evidence showed that this work begins before relief has neatly ended and continues long after the immediate emergency has passed. Ms Hicks emphasised that 'recovery is not linear',⁶⁹ while Mr Gallagher told the Committee that recovery is 'not a journey that will be completed in days or weeks, but ... years'.⁷⁰

That distinction explains the scope of this section. It refers to relief only where relief arrangements became part of the recovery pathway, or where the handover from relief to recovery shaped what followed. On the evidence before the Committee, recovery means more than rebuilding houses. It includes clean-up, insurance, accommodation, fencing, stock containment, farm viability, business continuity, visitor confidence, public assets, wildlife, waterways, mental health and the capacity of councils and local organisations to keep working with affected communities.

Mr Gallagher told the Committee that Murrindindi Shire Council sustained about 48% of the state's summer fire impact by measures such as homes lost, outbuildings destroyed and fencing damaged, but had received 8.3% of an early recovery funding round.⁷¹ That evidence was not put as a claim that Murrindindi should be preferred over other affected municipalities, but it raises a question about proportionality. The Committee

⁶⁶ Damien Gallagher, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 41.

⁶⁹ Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ Damien Gallagher, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

heard that fire impacts did not fall evenly; in some districts, loss was concentrated in homes, business and local infrastructure, while in others it was spread through agricultural land, roads and public assets. The evidence raised a broader point: recovery arrangements need to be able to follow the pattern of loss.

Strathbogie Shire Council gave similar evidence about the continuing nature of recovery. Mayor Scott Jeffery said that ‘there is now green grass and blue skies’, but the community is ‘still living in this disaster and we will be for years to come’.⁷² His evidence made clear that rural recovery could not be measured by dwellings alone. In agricultural communities, a home could be saved while the land around it was burnt, fences destroyed, sheds lost and stock systems broken.⁷³

The Victorian Government submitted that recovery in Victoria is intended to be ‘community-led and community-centred’ and ‘responsive and flexible’.⁷⁴ Its recovery framework extends to people, businesses, public health, community assets, environmental restoration, make-safe works, cultural heritage assessment and public land recovery.⁷⁵

The regional evidence gave this framework its weight. Witnesses reported that recovery was being carried by councils, landholders, local halls, community houses and volunteers and was often happening while affected people were waiting for clean-up, fencing, insurance outcomes or safe access to their properties.

Livia Bonazzi, Chief Executive of Murrindindi Shire Council said that local government is a recovery coordinating authority with a continuous operational and legal responsibility, but that role assumes a well-resourced system to deliver it.⁷⁶ She told the Committee that recovery in Murrindindi had been carried by a small workforce working ‘sustained 14-hour days week after week’.⁷⁷ Council officers were coordinating services, managing infrastructure and filling gaps where the formal systems had not reached. ‘Council cannot realistically discharge its statutory coordinating role if the funding that underpins it is not proportionate to the task,’ she said.⁷⁸

Ms Bonazzi put it plainly:

The recovery system treated impact as if it were evenly distributed. It is not. This mismatch is now shaping outcomes on the ground – in the pace of recovery, in the visibility of services and in the widening disparity between communities. Recovery is the point at which we either restore communities or quietly lose them.⁷⁹

⁷² Scott Jeffery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Livia Bonazzi, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

By 26 February 2026, all local government areas had formally transitioned to recovery.⁸⁰

FINDING 78: Recovery from the 2026 summer fires is ongoing. The formal transition from relief to recovery does not mean that every fire-affected person and community has begun the recovery phase.

RECOMMENDATION 58: That early recovery funding allocations be reviewed and adjusted as damage assessment and recovery needs become clearer.

RECOMMENDATION 59: That the Victorian Government establish an impact-based recovery funding model for major bushfires, with allocations based on scale and type of loss.

RECOMMENDATION 60: That the Victorian Government publish regular, publicly accessible reports detailing bushfire recovery expenditure, project delivery, funding allocations and outcomes to ensure transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.

6.4.1 Navigating recovery support

The Victorian Government submitted that fire-affected people could access assistance through a 1800 Recovery Hotline and the Emergency Recovery Support Program.⁸¹ The hotline provided general information services, while the support program offered a single entry point for people needing help to navigate housing, health, financial and legal support. By 2 March 2026, the hotline had received more than 3,000 calls, and the Emergency Recovery Support Program had recorded over 1,400 intake calls.⁸²

The Committee heard evidence that the 1800 number was, at times, difficult to navigate. Ms Furlanetto reflected on her experience with the service, saying:

... we rang it as a secret shopper and were pushed to go here: 'I'm sorry, this isn't connected and up and running yet. Call back at another time.'⁸³

EMV was asked about evidence that support after the fires was confusing and hard to navigate, particularly for people who had lost everything. EMV said the hotline had operated since the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires and that its capacity surged in

⁸⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 72.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 72–73.

⁸² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 178–179.

⁸³ Colleen Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p.9.

response to the 2026 fires.⁸⁴ It was not aware of any instances where the line did not work during the season. EMV also noted that it reviews the hotline's menu structure to keep information accurate, and after the January fires it added specific menu options to support primary producers.⁸⁵

Where formal pathways were difficult to navigate or slow to arrive, community hubs and neighbours became the practical route to grants and case support. At Highlands, Andrea Bauer said volunteers helped neighbours with complex grant applications 'when there was not a case manager in sight'.⁸⁶ Case managers began to arrive only in April, leaving community volunteers to carry much of that work in the early recovery period. Ms Bauer said fatigue amongst volunteers had become 'debilitating'.⁸⁷

Ms Hicks gave similar evidence about case management. 'Delays in case manager allocation leaves some residents without guidance at critical time,' she told the Committee.⁸⁸ Some landholders returned to properties without services because suitable accommodation was not available, because travelling between temporary accommodation and their land was unaffordable, or because they needed to be onsite to deal with clean-up, utilities and rebuilding.⁸⁹

Ms Hicks said her community delivered practical items directly to people who had not presented as relief centres, with 'no forms, no queues'.⁹⁰ People were at different stages, depending on their circumstances – some needed accommodation, some needed to access their property, some needed assistance with recovery support application forms. Ms Hicks' evidence showed that a single recovery pathway did not match the way people were living through the event.

Towong Shire Council gave evidence that physical access could also delay recovery. It said it was nearly four weeks before council relief and recovery staff could access some impacted residents because the fireground remained under the purview of the incident control centre.⁹¹ The evidence showed that recovery responsibilities could begin before councils and formal support workers were able to reach the places where they were needed.

Mount Alexander Shire Council gave a different example. Chief Executive Officer Darren Fuzzard told the Committee that two days after the fire the council established a recovery hub in the Castlemaine town hall and that by the third day there were 40 critical services providers assisting affected residents.⁹² He said this was able

⁸⁴ Emergency Management Victoria, *Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria*, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Andrea Bauer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Peter Tolsher, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁹² Darren Fuzzard, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 3, 7.

to happen only because the right people knew the right people and the Harcourt community is tightly connected. He said that this approach was not a satisfactory basis for recovery coordination, since ‘it should not be up to luck’.⁹³

FINDING 79: The Victorian Government established formal recovery support pathways following the 2026 bushfires, including the 1800 Recovery Hotline and the Emergency Recovery Support Program, but some people found these services difficult to access.

FINDING 80: Delays in case management meant that community hubs, neighbours and volunteers became the go-to for residents seeking assistance in accessing recovery support.

RECOMMENDATION 61: That the Victorian Government establish a rapid case management deployment system or provide case-management training to community hub leaders.

6.4.2 Community-enabled recovery

The Victorian Government’s recovery framework uses the language of ‘community-led’ recovery.⁹⁴ Regional witnesses described what that meant when roads were closed, telecommunications were down and people were still finding out what had survived.⁹⁵

Ms Hicks told the Committee that ‘community-led recovery has worked’.⁹⁶ She said many in the community describe it as ‘community-enabled recovery’. In Alexandra, local people and organisations moved first because they know the town and know the people.⁹⁷ Ms Hicks said that local movement works best when the government recognises it and backs it early with targeted and immediate funding.⁹⁸ This reflects the distinction she drew between ‘led’ and ‘enabled’ – community leadership still requires funding, authority and support from government.

Ms Bauer described a core team of three, supported by volunteers who had all been touched by the fires. She told the Committee that for the initial few weeks after the bushfire, the community was completely cut off, with restricted telecommunications access and widespread road closures placing the recovery responsibility principally with the hub.⁹⁹ While the Highlands Hub played a substantial role in relief provision, Ms Bauer identified clear recovery priorities moving forward: reliable delivery of water and essential supplies in all locations; continued face-to-face access to caseworkers;

⁹³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹⁴ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 41.

⁹⁵ Andrea Bauer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁹⁶ Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Andrea Bauer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

practical information sessions to help residents navigate recovery and rebuilding processes; and ongoing support for community connection and mental wellbeing.¹⁰⁰

Ms Furlanetto said the Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub became the first responder when roads were blocked, communication was down and formal systems were overwhelmed.¹⁰¹ The group was ‘not planned, funded or resourced by government’ and ‘created because there was no other choice’.¹⁰² At the time of the Alexandra hearing, the hub continued to operate three days a week as a local place where recovery services could reach affected residents.

Cass Groves, reading a statement on behalf of Yea Community House, said that community organisations and local halls became informal relief and recovery hubs because they were safe and familiar spaces.¹⁰³ Ms Groves said the recovery phase has exposed systemic challenges, including delays, administrative complexity and inequitable access to support.¹⁰⁴ Local community groups continue to fill gaps for individuals and families who did not meet support criteria, while also providing emotional support and community connection. Ms Groves said these organisations and facilities should be recognised as ‘critical community infrastructure’.¹⁰⁵

The Committee also heard that community groups could be expected to lead recovery without the tools to do it. Harcourt witnesses raised concerns that community recovery groups could not access council impact data because of privacy restrictions, requiring volunteers to repeat work that had already been done.¹⁰⁶

The evidence did not diminish the value of community-led recovery. It showed the cost of asking communities to lead without enabling them to do so. Ms Furlanetto told the Committee that ‘community capacity must never be a substitute for government responsibility’.¹⁰⁷ Ms Bonazzi made the same point from the local government perspective: ‘community is not a substitute for a system that is properly resourced’.¹⁰⁸

FINDING 81: Community-led recovery was essential and remains essential for ongoing recovery, but local organisations lack adequate support and funding.

FINDING 82: Community-led recovery should not be used as a substitute for a fully resourced recovery system.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Colleen Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Cass Groves, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ivan Gilbert, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33; Michael Henry, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁷ Colleen Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁸ Livia Bonazzi, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

RECOMMENDATION 62: That the Victorian Government establish a community recovery hub model for natural disasters that includes pre-approved arrangements for funding, information sharing and connection to recovery services.

RECOMMENDATION 63: That the Victorian Government develop information sharing arrangements between local councils and community organisations to reduce duplication.

6.4.3 Psychosocial recovery

The Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub was still operating three days a week at the time of the Alexandra hearing.¹⁰⁹ It hosted psychologists, case managers, financial counsellors, lawyers and other recovery services. The same local hub that had been created when roads were blocked and communications were down had become a place where affected people could seek practical and personal support together.

Highlands Hub identified mental wellbeing and community connection as continuing recovery priorities. Its evidence placed psychosocial support in the same local settings where people were already seeking case support, information and help with the practical work of recovery.¹¹⁰

Ms Bonazzi linked trauma to the way recovery support was delivered. Underfunded recovery, she said, ‘does not just delay rebuilding, it compounds trauma’.¹¹¹ For affected people, that could mean retelling their story, waiting for support and watching services arrive elsewhere sooner. In those circumstances, delay was not only a failure of administration. It affected people who were already trying to rebuild homes, routines and confidence.

In their submission, Doctors for the Environment Australia noted that the mental health impacts of extreme weather events like these fires occur on the background of ‘manifestly inadequate mental health support in rural and regional areas, where a dedicated program for improving mental health service capacity is desperately needed’.¹¹² They identify the need to focus on upskilling local health providers to build enduring capacity.

For residents trying to rebuild, that strain could be immediate and practical. Ms Lindsay described 12 weeks of inconsistent and retraumatising insurance processes, significant underinsurance and ongoing financial uncertainty. ‘This is not administration,’ she told

¹⁰⁹ Colleen Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹¹⁰ Andrea Bauer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

¹¹¹ Livia Bonazzi, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹¹² Doctors for the Environment, *Submission 312*, p. 5.

the Committee, ‘this is multilayered trauma’.¹¹³ Ms Lindsay said rebuilding is about more than structures; it is about ‘safety, identity, a future and trust’.¹¹⁴

Mount Alexander Shire Council’s evidence showed how quickly psychosocial recovery moved beyond counselling alone. After the Harcourt fire, council identified trauma-related support needs, relationship strain, loss of income, reports of family violence, and existing mental health needs made worse by the fires.¹¹⁵ It also recorded maternal and child health staff contacting affected families. Some aged-care clients could not return home or receive services at home, because surrounding properties remained burnt and affected by asbestos risk. The evidence tied mental health to the ordinary supports that allow people to keep family, care and household routines intact.

Mr Gallagher illustrated a longer horizon. He referred to the long shadow of the 2009 Black Saturday fires, saying that, after those fires, 12 years was the average time taken for some affected people to reach out for the first time.¹¹⁶ He said Murrindindi is already seeing intergenerational trauma after the 2026 fires. For farming communities, he said mental health was central to sustaining wellbeing and keeping farmers on the land.¹¹⁷

The Victorian Government’s recovery package recognised mental health as part of recovery, with funding for psychological supports, school-based support and support for primary producers and farming communities.¹¹⁸ The regional evidence showed why that support could not be confined to clinical care. At Tablelands, Highlands and Harcourt, mental health needs appeared with insurance, clean-up, care arrangements, income, rebuilding and decisions about whether people could return home. The Australian Red Cross submission described psychosocial support in similar terms, extending beyond clinical care to safety, connection, daily functioning and practical assistance.¹¹⁹

Psychological recovery therefore needs to remain available while practical and logistical aspects of recovery remain unresolved, with support available through trusted local places where people are already seeking recovery help.

FINDING 83: Psychosocial recovery extends beyond the initial fire event and is a critical component to ongoing recovery. Re-traumatisation is a risk for individuals working through the rebuilding phases.

¹¹³ Fiona Lindsay, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Mount Alexander Shire Council, *Submission 285*, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Damien Gallagher, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5–6.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁸ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, pp. 179–180.

¹¹⁹ Australian Red Cross, *Submission 310*, p. 10.

RECOMMENDATION 64: That the Victorian Government establishes a dedicated program for improving baseline mental health service capacity in rural and regional areas, focusing on upskilling established local health providers and expanding long term local mental health capacity and outreach.

RECOMMENDATION 65: That the Victorian Government ensure that recovery case management assistance integrates psychosocial support with practical recovery issues including insurance, financial counselling and legal assistance.

RECOMMENDATION 66: That the Victorian Government develop a long-term psychosocial recovery plan for communities affected by repeat disasters, including Black Saturday, Black Summer and the 2026 summer fires.

6.4.4 Clean-up, waste, insurance and rebuilding

The Government's Clean-up Program was funded at \$122 million.¹²⁰ It supported uninsured and underinsured residential homes and structures, and business and community assets where clean-up was not covered by other programs. The program removed dangerous and hazardous bushfire waste and had received 474 registrations by 2 March 2026.¹²¹ Waste levies in eligible local government areas were waived from 13 January to 12 May 2026, along with gate fee rebates so that bushfire waste could be disposed of free of charge.¹²²

The Committee asked the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) about concerns that some people had not yet begun clean-up when the waiver was due to end. DEECA responded that the Minister for Environment had approved an extension of the gate fee rebate and waste levy waiver to 30 June 2026.¹²³ They advised that a further extension would be considered before expiry, based on community need. This was enacted with the granting of a further extension of the waste levy waiver until 28 October 2026.¹²⁴

Kellie Davis from Financial Counselling Victoria gave the Committee the clearest description of clean-up as recovery: 'When clean-up is delayed, recovery is delayed,' she said.¹²⁵ Ms Davis said that in the past statewide clean-up arrangements had been available to all affected residents without restriction, which provided clarity, equity and speed. In January 2026, she said, the approach changed without clear communication

¹²⁰ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 178.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria hearings, response to questions on notice received 9 June 2026, p. 4.

¹²⁴ Victorian Government, *Disposal of bushfire waste*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/disposal-bushfire-waste>> accessed 22 July 2026.

¹²⁵ Kellie Davis, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 60.

or transparency.¹²⁶ Four months after the fires, many properties were still waiting to be cleared.

Ms Davis said the requirement to show a person was uninsured or underinsured was where the system was ‘falling down’ – a person might not know whether they were underinsured until an insurance claim was finalised, and that could take months or years.¹²⁷ Financial counsellors were asked to help but had not been given clear definitions or eligibility guidelines. She also warned that many properties contained asbestos, and that without coordinated clean-up, people without the money to pay privately could feel forced to do the work themselves, creating risks for them, their neighbours and the environment.¹²⁸

Evidence to the Committee highlighted the significant impacts of delays to the bushfire clean-up program. Months after the January bushfires, many properties remained contaminated with hazardous materials, including asbestos, fuel tanks and gas cylinders, preventing residents from rebuilding and creating ongoing health and environmental risks. The Committee heard that the slow pace of the program led some residents, including elderly landholders, to undertake hazardous clean-up work themselves. Concerns were also raised about the absence of event-specific eligibility guidelines, limited public reporting on program progress, inconsistent decision-making, and uncertainty regarding timeframes for property assessments and completion of clean-up works, contributing to frustration and delaying community recovery.

Similar concerns appeared in the Alexandra evidence. The Committee heard that some people were still looking at their destroyed homes months after the fire while trying to prove underinsurance. Ms Furlanetto said people were ‘retraumatised daily’ by seeing what had not been cleared.¹²⁹ Ms Hicks said arborists and machinery for private land clean-up could average \$500 or more per hour.¹³⁰ For people without insurance, those costs sat beside the cost of fencing, stock containment, water and basic services.

The Government submission also referred to emergency and temporary accommodation, and to work with recovery support providers, councils and households on medium to longer term accommodation options.¹³¹ People could not make settled decisions about returning, rebuilding or remaining near their land while insurance, clean-up, accommodation, permits and safety risks were unresolved.

The Recovery Support Program included help with housing, finances, legal matters, forms, payments and grants. The regional evidence showed those matters were connected: insurance affected clean-up, clean-up affected rebuilding, temporary accommodation affected whether people could remain connected to their land or

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹²⁹ Colleen Furlanetto, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

¹³⁰ Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹³¹ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 178.

community, and financial and legal navigation affected when families could make decisions about the future.

FINDING 84: As at 1 May 2026 only 28 out of 241 properties assessed as eligible (more than 600 registered) have been fully cleaned up.

FINDING 85: Clean-up is a gateway to recovery. Where clean-up is delayed, people cannot safely rebuild, return home and continue their recovery.

FINDING 86: There was a lack of clarity around the state's clean-up policies, including eligibility and deadlines, as well as a shift away from a previous policy with broader eligibility.

FINDING 87: The Victorian Government extended the waste levy waiver and gate fee rebate in response to requests from local councils and community advocacy, ultimately extending the program until 28 October 2026. However, the Committee heard extensive community anxiety over the lack of certainty before these extensions were announced, placing pressure on affected communities, councils and recovery efforts.

RECOMMENDATION 67: That the Victorian Government establish a default clean-up model for major bushfires to ensure that properties are cleaned up quickly and residents are not exposed to hazardous material.

RECOMMENDATION 68: That the Victorian Government ensure that clean-up support is not dependent on insurance status, and that there be support provided to affected residents while insurance claims are being processed.

RECOMMENDATION 69: That the Victorian Government publish clear and up-to-date eligibility rules, underinsurance definitions and referral pathways for clean up support within two weeks of a major bushfire.

RECOMMENDATION 70: That the Victorian Government continue to ensure waste levy waivers and gate fee rebates remain in place until the end of 2026.

RECOMMENDATION 71: That the Victorian Government consider implementing a permit system to authorise landholders to access roads closed by disasters where certain conditions are met, and the risks of access are assumed by the permit holder.

6.4.5 Farms and agricultural recovery

Sam Hicks told the Committee that fencing was ‘the big one’.¹³² Without it, she said, ‘there is no security, no containment of stock and no pathway back to operation.’ She estimated that 500,000 star pickets were needed across the region to rebuild thousands of kilometres of fencing.¹³³ That did not include wire, strainers, gripples, labour or transport.

Fencing support became harder where properties bordered rail trails, Crown land or other public assets. Ms Hicks said Fawcett Hall contacted DEECA through the portal two days after the fire to ask about fencing on Crown land and had received no response by the time of the hearing.¹³⁴ Operation Vet Assist eventually reinstated fences, which allowed the hall to keep stock out and help neighbours keep stock in.

Evidence heard in Colac confirmed that fencing recovery could be slow. Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer of Colac Otway Shire Council said restoration of fencing for agricultural properties took time.¹³⁵ BlazeAid helped through the clean-up and setting up residence to accommodate volunteers who rebuilt fences and other structures.¹³⁶ Ian Newman, a resident of Fawcett shared that he is ‘indebted to Blaze Aid’ and all those who provided help, fodder, and fencing equipment.¹³⁷ That said, some stakeholders shared that the some tasks, such as tree management, were beyond the group’s capabilities.¹³⁸ Stakeholders shared that faster assessments would have helped people start replanting, rebuilding and re-establishing boundaries.¹³⁹

Towong Shire Council gave evidence that some people lost sheds, farmland, fences and stock but saved their homes, leaving them outside some forms of disaster relief support.¹⁴⁰ The shire also described prolonged road closures, reduced visitor movement, supply chain disruption and financial stress for households and businesses.¹⁴¹

The Victorian Government submitted that primary producers could access grants of up to \$75,000 and concessional loans of up to \$250,000.¹⁴² It said eligible costs included debris removal, equipment hire, damaged infrastructure and other costs to resume operations. It also referred to rural fencing repairs along public-private boundaries.

¹³² Sam Hicks, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Andrew Tenni, Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council, public hearing, Colac, 21 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

¹³⁶ Mount Alexander Shire Council, *Submission 285*, p. 6; Name Withheld, *Submission 137*, p. 9.

¹³⁷ Ian Newman, *Submission 333*, p. 2.

¹³⁸ Pyrenees Shire Council, *Submission 291*, p. 11.

¹³⁹ Andrew Tenni, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Tolsher, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁴² Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 181.

The evidence showed that farm recovery depends on restoring productive capacity, not only compensating visible damage.

FINDING 88: Fencing was a central recovery issue for agricultural communities, with delays in fencing restoration threatening stock containment and return to farm operations.

FINDING 89: Recovery is more complex where fencing is damaged at public-private boundaries.

FINDING 90: Some farmers' homes were saved but their agricultural assets were damaged, which left them ineligible for some forms of recovery support.

RECOMMENDATION 72: That the Victorian Government include an assessment of productive loss of primary producers, not purely residential damage, when designing recovery support for agricultural businesses.

RECOMMENDATION 73: That the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action establish a single accountable pathway for landholders seeking fencing repairs that involve public or Crown land.

RECOMMENDATION 74: That the Victorian Government consider how any potential permit system authorising landholders to access roads closed by disasters could be expanded to include access for essential agricultural purposes.

6.4.6 Local businesses, tourism and community assets

The Victorian Government's recovery framework extended to industries, businesses and community recovery.¹⁴³ From the regional evidence, that means the repair of shared facilities, the return of visitors and the restoration of local assets that supported trade and community life.

In Harcourt, much of the business evidence centred on the Coolstore. Mount Alexander Shire Council told the Committee that the fire burnt 16 commercial properties, affected at least 157 businesses and caused an initial estimated business loss of about \$24 million.¹⁴⁴ The fire also destroyed homes and affected farms and orchards.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴⁴ Darren Fuzzard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

The Coolstore was a shared facility. Mount Alexander Shire Council's submission recorded that about 80 businesses were affected by its loss.¹⁴⁵ The Harcourt Progress Association said local producers used the Coolstore and Coolstore Cafe to store fruit, seed potatoes, wine, craft beer and other goods, and some producers could not insure the small quantities of product they had stored there.¹⁴⁶ For those producers, lost stock was only part of the recovery task. They needed storage, trading arrangements and the Coolstore itself back in operation.

The Victorian Government provided \$500,000 to support the Harcourt Cooperative Coolstore rebuild.¹⁴⁷ Trevor Peeler, who manages the Coolstore, told the Committee that it had about 85 customers and was 'more than' a customer base.¹⁴⁸ He described it as a 'community hub' where people met when they dropped off wine, apples or other produce. More than four months after the fire, however, the insurance company had not told the business what it would pay, demolition had taken longer than expected, the slabs still needed engineering work and the rebuild had not begun.¹⁴⁹ The funding was important, but the recovery of the Coolstore also depended on the practical sequence of insurance, demolition, engineering and construction that would allow the facility to operate again.

In Mansfield, recovery was tied to the return of visitors. With the fires coming during a peak tourism period, Mansfield Shire Council said businesses reported revenue reductions averaging 80–85% across multiple sectors, and that council staff visited more than 100 businesses.¹⁵⁰ The submission referred to coordinated marketing to restore visitor confidence once conditions stabilised.

Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism framed recovery in similar terms. It estimated that the January fires caused a loss of 283,000 visitors, \$89.1 million in direct visitor expenditure, \$193.9 million in regional economic output and 591 jobs affected.¹⁵¹ It submitted that access conditions, visitor confidence and the capacity of tourism businesses to keep operating would continue to shape recovery beyond the fire event. It also identified reputational effects from national and international media coverage and called for state-level destination recovery marketing.¹⁵² The recovery task is not confined to replacing what has burnt out; it includes restoring confidence that affected regions are safe, open and ready for visitors to return.

At Walwa, the High Country Rail Trail evidence brought community infrastructure into the same recovery frame. Leon Cosgrove, from the Tallangatta Rail Trail Authority Group, said the trail had been one of Victoria's unique regional tourism assets, built

¹⁴⁵ Mount Alexander Shire Council, *Submission 285*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Harcourt Progress Association, *Submission 197*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ Victorian Government, *Submission 287*, p. 181.

¹⁴⁸ Trevor Peeler, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁰ Mansfield Shire Council, *Submission 411*, p. 10.

¹⁵¹ Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism, *Submission 308*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

around historic timber trestle bridges, remote landscapes and heritage.¹⁵³ The Walwa fire destroyed 12 of 14 historic trestle bridges, all more than 110 years old. Thirty-seven kilometres of fencing needed repair or replacement.¹⁵⁴

Mr Cosgrove said the work had been carried by community donations and volunteer time while the group waited on permits for temporary structures to reopen parts of the trail. He described the task as ‘recovery, rebuild, restore and renew’.¹⁵⁵ Repairing the trail is part of how the district would draw people back, reopen a valued local asset and restore a piece of community life.

Harcourt needs the Coolstore operating again. Mansfield and the Great Ocean Road region need visitors to return. Walwa needs damaged trail infrastructure repaired. In each case, recovery requires more than responding to direct property damage. It requires the facilities, trade, access and public confidence that regional economies need to keep working.

FINDING 91: Business and tourism recovery depends on shared facilities, visitor confidence, regional reputation and the ability of local economies to resume trade.

RECOMMENDATION 75: That the Victorian Government establish targeted business recovery grants to support businesses affected by the 2026 summer fires.

RECOMMENDATION 76: That the Victorian Government, through Visit Victoria, promote initiatives to support regional tourism and events in bushfire affected areas, and restore visitor confidence.

6.4.7 Wildlife and environment

The Victorian Government’s recovery framework includes natural environment restoration, environmental asset work and public land recovery. Witnesses told the Committee that wildlife recovery also belongs in that frame, since it affects injured animals, landholders, wildlife carers and the people confronted with injured or dying animals on burnt properties.

Lisa Palma from Wildlife Victoria said bushfires have a profound impact on wildlife because wildlife lives in the bush that burns. Animals die from burns, smoke inhalation and extreme heat; others survive the fire front but later die from burn injuries, starvation, dehydration, predation or habitat loss.¹⁵⁶ Ms Palma said delays in

¹⁵³ Leon Cosgrove, public hearing, Melbourne, 6 May 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Lisa Palma, Chief Executive Officer, Wildlife Victoria, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 53.

responding to injured wildlife prolonged suffering and placed an emotional burden on affected communities and property owners.

Wildlife Victoria accepted the need for central management during major emergencies, with DEECA as lead agency. Ms Palma's concern was that Victoria's wildlife response capability was not being fully used or consistently integrated.¹⁵⁷ Experienced veterinarians and volunteers were unable to deploy during the fires because of limits in the current model. Multiple public reporting channels also caused confusion.

The local evidence showed how these arrangements were experienced after the fire front had passed. Kate Elliott, speaking at the Harcourt public hearing, said that a small group had fed wildlife for two months in severely burnt areas where there was no food but where a mob of kangaroos remained.¹⁵⁸ She said DEECA's official response after fire is that wildlife should not be fed.¹⁵⁹ She commented that if she were feeding livestock that had survived a fire and needed support, she would be applauded for that, but if she attended the same property to feed wildlife at the request of the landowners, she risked having the police called. She suggests that there should be consistency across the treatment of rehabilitating livestock and wildlife.

Other Harcourt witnesses raised access concerns. The Committee heard that landowners invited wildlife rescuers, carers and vets onto private property, but volunteers were blocked or threatened.¹⁶⁰

Farmers also described being blocked from returning with hay and water for surviving livestock. The Committee received those accounts alongside the evidence about fireground safety and agency control. The record suggests that access pathways for landholders, animal welfare and trained wildlife responders need to be clearer once an area can be entered safely.

During the Harcourt hearing the Committee heard about livestock management post fire, and the need to prioritise access to livestock management for basic euthanasia purposes. Peter Star from the VFF responded:

... it is an animal welfare issue. I think no-one wants to see suffering animals, and I think with this bushfire process, probably the best qualified people to deal with this primarily, to a certain extent, are the farmers. But with an overarching view on things, obviously the veterinarians from Agriculture Victoria are best placed to deal with these decisions. A lot of farmers love their livestock and are at peril to basically see them destroyed, but sometimes common sense must overrule the heartstrings, and the reality is that these animals need to be dealt with.... Look, we had issues. We have had feedback. We do have members of the VFF who do have family that are in the veterinary trade. Basically, yes, we have had reports back that those vets struggled to be allowed on the fireground to deal with these animals.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁵⁸ Kate Elliott, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 70.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Heidi Johnson, public hearing, Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 66.

¹⁶¹ Peter Starr, Acting President, Victorian Farmers Federation, public hearing Harcourt, 30 April 2026, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 38–39.

FINDING 92: There were unclear arrangements for trained responders to access injured wildlife, including confusion around access to public and private land.

FINDING 93: Delays or uncertainty in wildlife response added to the distress of affected landholders and communities.

RECOMMENDATION 77: That the Victorian Government prioritise environmental recovery in bushfire affected regions (such as the Strathbogie Ranges) including rehabilitation of native vegetation, erosion control, pest and weed management, biodiversity restoration and catchment recovery.

RECOMMENDATION 78: That the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action review post-fire wildlife response arrangements, including the deployment of trained wildlife volunteers, veterinarians and wildlife organisations.

RECOMMENDATION 79: That emergency and recovery arrangements include clear access protocols for landholders, animal welfare support and trained wildlife responders once areas can be accessed safely.

RECOMMENDATION 80: That the Victorian Government consider how any potential permit system authorising landholders to access roads closed by disasters could be expanded to include access for accredited wildlife rescuers.

**Adopted by the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament of Victoria, East Melbourne
Tuesday 14 July 2026**

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

A

A.1 Submissions

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72	Katy McMurray
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78	Ted Hume
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81	Arie Eddy
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96	Name withheld
97	Seb Rowlinson
98	Name withheld
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109	Name withheld
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112	Darren McKendry
113	Name withheld
114	Name withheld
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116	Rebecca Bolwell
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202	Luke McClelland
203	Apollo Bay Fire & Rescue Brigade
204	Sara King
205	Peri Urban Councils Victoria
206	Malcolm Taylor
207	Friends of the Earth Melbourne
208	Helen Haines
209	Annabelle Cleeland
210	Nicholas Barton
210a	Nicholas Barton
211	Regenerate Earth
212	David Webb
213	Kestrel Aviation
214	Loretta York
215	Fawcett mechanics institute reserve committee of management
216	Bronwyn Howell
217	Sheryl Lewis
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218	Sandra Macalister
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240	Australasian College of Paramedicine
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251	Sean Drifill
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259	Alex Kelly
260	The Municipal Association of Victoria

No.	Author
261	Mount Alexander Wildlife Watch Inc
262	Yea Community House
263	Raelene Mold
264	Fire Services Implementation Monitor
265	Bureau of Meteorology
266	Australians for Animals Inc.
267	Allied Justice
268	Housing for the Aged Action Group
269	Research Centre for Future Landscapes, La Trobe University
270	Cathy Till
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272	Name withheld
273	Longwood Brigade CFA
274	Stephen Nee
275	Robert Stevens
276	Melanie Green
277	Name withheld
278	The Salvation Army Australia Territory
279	Disaster Legal Help Victoria
280	Surf Coast Shire Council
281	Murrindindi Shire Council
282	Highlands Community Fireguard Group
283	Colleen Furlanetto
284	Inspector General for Emergency Management (IGEM)
285	Mount Alexander Shire Council
286	Victorian Farmers Federation
287	Victorian Government
288	Australian and New Zealand Council for fire and emergency services
289	District 23 Council of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV)
290	Financial Counselling Victoria
291	Pyrenees Shire Council
292	Towong Shire
292a	Towong Shire
292b	Towong Shire

No.	Author
292c	Towong Shire
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294	Jane Moss
295	Beyond Blue
296	RSPCA Victoria
297	Emma Barlow
298	Kevin Chisholm
299	Northern Victorian Emergency Management Cluster
300	Geelong Sustainability
301	Yarra Ranges Council
302	RDA Murray
303	Yea Group CFA
304	Mary Hoodless
305	Greater Shepparton City Council
306	National Disability Services
307	FLARE Wildfire Research
308	Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism
309	ARC Justice
310	Australian Red Cross
311	Morrow Motor Group
312	Doctors for the Environment Australia
313	Peter McHugh
314	Colac Otway Shire
315	Confidential
316	Victorian Forest Products Association
317	Invasive Species Council
318	Thomas Upton
319	Amanda Straw
320	Wimmera Mallee Environmental and Agricultural Protection Inc.
321	Geoffrey Barker
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330	Confidential
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332	Jared Denton
333	Ian Newman
334	Lou Danieli
335	Lachlan Butterfield
336	Zoe Puls
337	Geoff PIKE
338	Hepburn Shire Council
339	Joy Burchell
340	Navy Blue Planning Pty Ltd
341	Michael Stubbe
342	Haydon Martin
343	Victorian Council of Social Service
344	Name withheld
345	Name withheld
346	Howard Evans
347	Ballarat Wildlife Rehabilitation & Conservation Inc
348	Snowy Valleys Council
349	Insurance Council of Australia
350	Environmental Education in Early Childhood (EEEC) Inc
351	Jarrad Gilbert
352	Chelsea McMillan
353	Wye River Separation Creek Community Association
354	Brian Dalrymple
355	Stuart Strachan
356	Timber Towns Victoria
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358	Damian Murphy
359	Humane World for Animals
360	Name withheld

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361	Lucas Maddock
362	Janet Heald
363	Kingston and District Power Alliance
364	Name withheld
365	Rotary Club of Alexandra
366	Penelope Hawe
367	Confidential
368	Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) Inc
369	Robert Onfray
370	Jamie King
371	Lake Eildon Houseboat Industry Association
372	Yarck Hall Community Relief Hub
373	Victorian Forest survey Group
374	David McKenzie
375	Gillian Brew
376	Kerry Reid
377	Foundation Murrindindi
378	Confidential
379	VMIAC
380	Neighbourhood Houses Victoria
381	Colin Smith
382	Bernadette Goodall
383	Confidential
384	Carrie Brewer
385	Name withheld
386	Horsham Rural City Council
387	Kinglake Friends of the Forest Inc.
388	Brenda Haskins
389	Confidential
390	Upton Hill CFA Brigade
391	Patricia Paget
392	John Drysdale
393	Damien Gallagher
394	Animals Australia
395	Peter Saglietti

No.	Author
396	Jonathon White
397	Otway Ranges Environment Network
398	Roslyn Bowd
399	Leonie Schween
400	Bertram Lobert
401	Gavin Beever
402	Josephine Collins
403	Alexandra Community Hub
404	John Houston
405	Ian Macintyre
406	Timothy Huf
407	Amanda Smith
408	Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV)
409	Kate Saunders
410	David Kort
411	Mansfield Shire Council
412	David Graham
413	Glenn Bullen
414	Fiona Bullen
415	Robert Smith
416	Confidential
417	Felicity Sloman
418	Confidential
419	Rod Stebbing
420	Mary Lush
421	Lighter Footprints
422	Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter
423	Farmers for Climate Action
424	Stephen McCredie
425	Matthew Weidemann
426	The Country Women's Association of Victoria Inc.
427	Name withheld
428	Graeme Parry
429	Liz Burton
430	Andrew Perry
431	Robert Goodall

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432	Scott Tomlinson
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435	Name withheld
436	John Morris
437	Ben Pyatt
438	Law Institute of Victoria
439	GIVIT
440	Justin Clancy
441	Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR)
442	Catchment Spatial Solutions
443	Goulburn Valley Environment Group (GVEG)
444	Adam Rogers
445	Confidential
446	Emergency Leaders for Climate Action
447	Primary Care Connect
448	Proforma
449	UFU, CFAV Group and AVA
449a	UFU, CFAV Group and AVA
450	Remy Bramley
450	Gayle Chappell
451	Lorelei Goodall
452	Euroa Arboretum and Granite to Goulburn, Biodiversity Recovery Alliance
453	Tablelands Fire Recovery Hub
454	Trevor Cubbin
455	Peter Trounson
456	Susan Cooper
457	Gippsland Apiarists Association Inc.
458	The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV)
459	AusNet
460	David Lawrence
461	Wildlife Rescue Information Network
462	Tablelands Recovery Hub
463	Rural Councils Victoria

No.	Author
464	University of New South Wales
465	Koetong Community
466	Gordon Wildlife Alliance
467	Bill Stockdale
468	David Lawrence
469	Powercor
470	Australian Veterinary Association
471	Victoria Koala Alliance
472	Australian Disaster Recovery Organisation

No.	Author
473	Tenants Victoria
474	Victorian National Parks Association
475	Gary Martin
476	Daniel Miltz
477	Bianca Hitchens
478	Brian Carter
479	Doug Steeley
480	James Houston

A.2 Public hearings

6 May 2026

Committee Hearing Room 1, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Peter Tolsher	Mayor, Towong Shire Council
Juliana Phelps	Chief Executive Officer, Towong Shire Council
Mark Florence	Towong Shire Council
Sean Farrar	
Andrew Whitehead	
Shelley Henry	
Ross Sutherland	
Jon Pitman	
Mark Massey	
Michael Elliot	
Clint Reid	
Leon Cosgrove	
Clayton Henderson	
Tara Brewer	
Phillip Coulston	
David Wortmann	
Jamie Barker	
Andrew Emery	

1 May 2026

Committee Hearing Room 3, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Kelly Crosthwaite	Deputy Secretary, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Rachaele May	Policy and Knowledge Division, Bushfire and Forest Services
Carolyn Jackson	Deputy Secretary, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Beth Jones	Deputy Secretary, Regions, Environment, Climate Action and First Peoples
Tim Wiebusch ESM	Commissioner, Emergency Management Victoria
Dean Tighe	Deputy Secretary and Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria
Mariela T Diaz	Deputy Commissioner, Emergency Management Victoria
Chris Hardman	Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria
Greg Leach	Chief Executive Officer, Country Fire Authority
Jason Heffernan	Chief Officer, Country Fire Authority
Gavin Freeman	Fire Rescue Commissioner, Fire Rescue Victoria
Dr Emily Phillips	Inspector-General, Inspector-General of Emergency Management
Niall Blair	Fire Services Implementation Monitor
Professor David Lindenmayer	ANU Fenner School of Environment and Society
Adam Barnett	Chief Executive Officer, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria
Samantha Collins	State President, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria
Peter Marshall	Secretary, United Firefighters Union
John Houston	Country Fire Authority Volunteers Group Inc.
Andrew Weidemann	Across Victoria Alliance
Matthew Collopy	General Manager Environmental Prediction Services, Bureau of Meteorology

30 April 2026

Harcourt Leisure Centre, Meeting Room 1 & 2, Harcourt, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Darren Fuzzard	Chief Executive Officer, Mount Alexander Shire Council
Toby Heydon	Mayor, Mount Alexander Shire Council
Andrew Wilson	Captain, Country Fire Authority
Adam Paine	1st Deputy Group Officer, Country Fire Authority
Rohan Stevens	Group Officer, Country Fire Authority
Mr Ivan Gilbert	Harcourt Progress Association Inc.
Mr Mike Reeves	
Ms Rachel Vanstone	
Ken Pollock	Blackjack Wines

Witness	Position and Organisation
Trevor Peeler	
Peter Starr	Acting President, Victorian Farmers Federation
Nicholas Ayres- Wearne	Director of Livestock, Victorian Farmers Federation
Mr Cam Walker	Friends of the Earth Melbourne
James McLennan	
Ms Lisa Palma	Wildlife Victoria
Kellie Davis	
Vera Hemkes	
Leah Rushford	
Michael Shay	
George Milford	
Jan Hull	
Sandra Ramsay	
Heidi Johnson	
Rob Fowler	
Tony Falla	
Terry Willis	
Colin Iskov	
Kerrie Allen	
Kate Elliott	
John Watts	
Luke Alexander	
Lachlan Butterfield	
Michael Henry	

24 April 2026

Alexandra Shire Hall, Meeting Room 1 & 2, Alexandra, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Livia Bonazzi	Chief Executive Officer, Murrindindi Shire Council
Damien Gallagher	Mayor, Murrindindi Shire Council
Andrew Paxton	Director of Community and Development, Murrindindi Shire Council
Rachelle Quattrocchi	Chief Executive Officer, Strathbogie Shire Council
Cr Scott Jeffery	Mayor, Strathbogie Shire Council
John Dougall	Mitchell Shire Council
Sam Hicks	President, Fawcett Hall Reserve
Colleen Furlanetto OAM	Tablelands Recovery Leadership Team

Witness	Position and Organisation
Andrea Bauer	
Lachlan Gales	Group Officer, Wangaratta Group, CFA
Nick Murray	Upton Hill Fire Brigade, CFA
George Noye	Captain, Ruffy Fire Brigade, CFA
Chris Lynch	Alexandra Brigade Captain, CFA
Andrew Miller	
Fiona Lindsay	
Peter Weeks	UGFM - Radio Murrindindi
Miranda Connaughton	
Annabelle Cleeland	
David Webb	
Cass Groves	Yea Community House
Julian Wilkes	
Tori Mitton	
Rob Parker	
Tom Ward	
Dennis Sicily	
Ross Thomson	
Tom Upton	
Ian Macintyre	
Peter Davies	
Steve Threlfall	
Gary Nash	
Neil Beer	
Shannon Roach	

22 April 2026

Quantong Community Recreation Facility, Meeting Room 1 & 2, Quantong, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
John Martin	Director Infrastructure, Horsham Rural City Council
Cr Brian Klowss	Mayor, Horsham Rural City Council
David Sudholz	Captain, Natimuk, CFA
Steven Meyer	Group Officer, Natimuk, CFA
David Schultz	Director of Nursing, Natimuk Aged Care, West Wimmera Health Service
Darren Welsh	Executive Director, Quality and Safety, West Wimmera Health Service
Lynette Morrow	Head Coach, Natimuk and District Gymnastics Club

Witness	Position and Organisation
Ivan Smith	
Martin Colbert	Treasurer, West Wimmera Action group
Joshua Hodges	
Kevin Bolwell	
Peter Flinn	
Andrew Colbert	
Matt Morgan	
Ross Johns	
Trevor Puls	
John Bennett	
Brad Marson	
Ester Maybury	

21 April 2026

Colac Otway Performing Arts & Cultural Centre (COPACC), Meeting Room 1 & 2, Colac, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Andrew Tenni	Chief Executive Officer, Colac Otway Shire Council
Cr Jason Schram	Mayor, Colac Otway Shire Council
Dr Marina Lewis	Climate Action Team, Colac Otway
Lizzie CorkeOAM	Chief Executive Officer , Conservation Ecology Centre
Dr Claire Feniuk	Director Conservation Strategy and Partnerships, Conservation Ecology Centre
Alistair Drayton	Chief Officer Operations, VICSES
Chris Jones	Unit Controller, Lorne SES Unit, VICSES
Lachlan Sutherland	Deputy Group Officer (Corangamite Group), CFA
Scott Turner	Director Forest and Fire Operations, Barwon South West, DEECA
Terrence O'Brien	
Mark Billing	
Leigh Harry	
Helen Frania	
Lachlan Butterfield	
Tim Eccles	
Alex Pandik	
Simon Birrell	

Extracts of proceedings

Legislative Council Standing Order 23.20(5) requires the Committee to include in its report all divisions on a question relating to the adoption of the draft report. All Members have a deliberative vote. In the event of an equality of votes, the Chair also has a casting vote.

The Committee divided on the following questions during consideration of this report. Questions agreed to without division are not recorded in these extracts.

Committee meeting – Monday 13 July 2026

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 1, Section 1.2.4, a new finding be inserted:

Finding: The 2026 summer fires exposed systemic weaknesses across Victoria's emergency management system. While frontline responders performed with courage and professionalism, the evidence demonstrates persistent failures in preparedness, workforce sustainability, fleet renewal, communications resilience, roadside and public land fuel management, and recovery planning. Many of these shortcomings had been identified in previous reviews and inquiries but remain unresolved.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.4 the following text be inserted:

Concern was raised about FFMV's inability to deliver effective bushfire mitigation and suppression, despite having some great people.

Issues with FFMV that were raised included:

- Fuel reduction on public land is inadequate – over the past decade an average of less than 1.5% per annum has been achieved compared to the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission (VBRC) Recommendation 56 of 5% rolling target.
- Failure to meet many targets, including its own targets, VBRC recommendations and best practise.

- Only 65% of planned and 25% of high priority fuel reduction has been implemented in recent years. (S244)
- Failing the basics as evidence by removing over 300 tankers (Mercedes G Wagons and Unimogs) at the start of the fire season. The G Wagons cost substantially more than alternatives and FFMV workers have raised issues with them for years (S157).
- Fuel reduction costs are excessively high due in part to overheads accounting for 75% of costs.
- Fire detection and initial attack have been delayed and bushfire suppression compromised by poor access and vetoing containment lines and backburning that would have aided bushfire suppression.
- Little evidence of substantive initiatives to improve access to remote forests, and deliver sufficient resources and increase water points in these locations to reduce the time to initial attack.
- Little investment in innovative equipment to assist with initial attack in hazardous tree areas (the shrublands with dead overstory on millions of hectares of old bushfire grounds).
- Some fuel reduction has resulted in excessive crown scorch.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4 the following text be inserted:

Victoria was not well prepared for the 2025–26 fire season. Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) fuel reduction area was too small, several well populated FFMV districts with critical infrastructure (Latrobe, Yarra, Metro, Midlands & Ovens) had fuel driven risk above ‘risky’ targets, and over 300 tankers were out of service at the start of the fire season. FFMV’s preparedness has been compromised by its funding (income) declining 9% in real terms over the last decade.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4 the following text be inserted:

FFMV faces challenging fires, with difficult terrain and access and longest time from detection to initial attack, and is the weakest link across the three agencies (FFMV, CFA, FRV), FFMV has consistently failed to meet moderate KPI's on fuel mitigation and bushfire suppression.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4 the following finding be inserted:

Finding: Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) has resulted in diminished focus, fragmented responsibility, and weakened ministerial accountability, contributing to an organisation that is no longer adequately structured or resourced to effectively fulfil its core bushfire prevention, preparedness and response functions.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4, the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) should be streamlined an executive reporting direct to a Minister responsible for public land management with responsibility for all aspects of fire control on public land.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4, the following text be inserted:

However, it is effectively a lacks sufficient independence from DEECA and reports with much political spin and little substance, unlike FSIM whose reports are more fearless.

Responding to Questions on Notice the CFA commented, ‘lack of policy has led to ambiguity about the role of OBRM, for example, it is unclear whether its focus on fuel management solely (as per the Premier’s letter when the office was established) or broader.

The implementation of the OBRM has also created ambiguity as it resides as a unit inside the Planning and Policy Section of DEECA. While ostensibly set up to be independent, it operates as specific policy section within a directorate and overlaps with policy development in other areas of Bushfire and Forest Services.

Recently, the unit has changed its name to the Emergency Management and Office of Bushfire Risk Management and under the Director Emergency Management and Office of Bushfire Risk Management (recently advertised position). This reflects the practical/ current operation of the Office.

The OBRM was envisaged by the IGEM as a unit that provides independent advice to the Secretary of DEECA, however, the way it was created is not conducive to independence from other parts of DEECA Forest and Fire Policy Division.

OBRM was also tasked by the Premier to look at fuel management across public and private land. CFA has not seen any outcomes that support better tenure-blind fuel management or interagency operations. Responsibilities and powers as they relate to private land remain opaque.

CFA would suggest that a joined Office (possibly virtual) with people from both organisation working on solving problems and improving fuel management, would be a more appropriate construct for the OBRM.

There are two other options to replace the OBRM:

- One would be to abolish the OBRM and continue managing fuel management arrangements within the existing multi-agency governance structure in place (Bushfire Risk Mitigation Group). In practice, this has achieved much greater tangible outcomes for joint agency activities and efficiencies both prior to the establishment of OBRM and since this time.
- A second option would be to place those functions within CFA as that would have less conflict of interest as CFA is not a land manager or landowner.

In CFA's experience, supporting the work of OBRM has been time consuming for staff with less benefit and/or duplication of other interagency work activities.

The OBRM has not assisted CFA in meeting our statutory obligations, nor facilitated or enabled greater utilisation of CFA's fuel management services.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4, the following finding and recommendations be inserted:

Finding: The Office of Bushfire Risk Management (OBRM) has failed to improve the fire mitigation and bushfire loss of FFMV, is not independent of DEECA.

Recommendation: Disband the Office of Risk Management (OBRM), charge FFMV to oversee improved policy, strategy, risk and governance and get FSIM to monitor FFMV's performance.

Recommendation: Urgently fix the organisational, approval, resourcing and efficiency and effectiveness to deliver more fuel reduction and address the catastrophic fuel risk prior to next summer.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1, the following text be inserted:

The CFA response to Questions on Notice dated 4th June further expands ...

CFA considers there would be significant benefit in having a more direct role in recruitment and selection processes for FRV employees appointed to senior operational leadership positions within CFA. This would support improved alignment between role requirements and candidate capability and help ensure that appointed incumbents possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience to effectively lead within a volunteer-based service and community-focused operating environment.

Further highlighting the issues, the CFA stated on June 4,

In the week commencing Monday 5 January 2026:

- 3 of the 5 AFCC/Commander positions to be provided to District 22 under the Secondment Agreement were vacant.
- CFA's senior operational leader workforce was reduced from the Secondment Agreement level by 29 FTE or 18.5 % (4 AFCC and 25 Commander roles) due to vacancy and non-relief issues.
- The term 'non-relief' is applied in circumstances where a position has an incumbent assigned to that position, but that incumbent is unavailable due to circumstances such as annual / long service leave, temporary duties in another position etc. The term vacancy is applied where a position has no incumbent allocated to the position.
- CFA had a total of 25 vacant/non-relieved Commander roles with critical gaps (over 50% reduction) in 5 district locations. These critical gaps include District 22 (where the Longwood fire ignited) and District 2 (where the Harcourt fire ignited). Both Districts were required to immediately commence 24/7 ongoing operations with significant command resource constraints.

Since record keeping began in October 2020 CFA has been required to operate with a reduced operational command workforce on average of 17.2 persons per week (a combination of AFCCs and Commanders). This average equates to a reduction of services of 11.4%.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1, the following finding be inserted:

Finding: The Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM) has continually reported on the failure of the Secondment Agreement but has not been able to fix the issue. FSIM does not monitor Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV), the worst performing of the three agencies.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1, the following text be inserted:

The Committee notes the CFA's first response to Questions on Notice, dated 4th June, contained more detailed operational information about the impact of command workforce shortages, including an average weekly shortfall in operational command positions since October 2020 and critical gaps across five districts during the week commencing 5 January 2026. The reporting stated that this included District 22, where the Longwood fire ignited, and District 2, where the Harcourt fire began.

This evidence reinforces concerns that the secondment model has not simply created administrative inconvenience, but has had practical consequences for CFA command capability during major fire events.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2, the following finding and recommendations be inserted:

Finding: This Inquiry received reports that the filling the CFA's paid fulltime officers only by secondment from FRV is unsatisfactory and has left the CFA critically short of Assistant Chief Fire Officers and Commanders including during 2025–26.

Recommendation: The fulltime paid officers of the CFA should be directly funded, recruited and employed by the CFA.

Recommendation: Scrap the failed Secondment Agreement and task FSIM to monitor FFMV.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2, the following finding and recommendations be inserted:

Finding: Fire Services Reform introduced over the last decade has weakened the CFA. CFA weaknesses exposed in the 2026 bushfires, included insufficient ACFO's and Commanders and an under-resourced and poorly governed FFMV's inability to contain forest fires at initial attack.

Recommendation: Urgently resource the CFA with sufficient ACFO's and Commanders and reorganise FFMV so it is fit for purpose.

Recommendation: Resource the CFA with adequately paid staff, volunteers, safe tankers, level 3 incident controllers and funding.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2, the following text and recommendation be inserted:

CFA/FRV secondment model

The 'Secondment Agreement' was controversial and led to instability and under-resourcing of the CFA. There have been many changes to the Board, CFO and Ministers and an exodus of staff and volunteers.

Under the Secondment Agreement, the CEO and CFO of the CFA have no formal input as to which FRV employees fill seconded positions and limited visibility of incoming secondees' capabilities – the CFA Chief Officer's entire middle and lower management levels are borrowed, with the CFA having limited input in the recruitment, and skills set, of FRV staff seeking secondment into the CFA.

Under the Secondment Agreement of 31 October 2020, FRV was contractually obliged to provide CFA with 223 staff (45 ACFO's; 96 Commanders; 53 Instructors; and 29 PAD Supervisors/Operators). FRV has been in breach of these obligations for almost the entire duration of the Secondment Agreement. Each time FRV fails to make a seconded officer available to CFA, FRV then uses the Government funding for those unfilled positions for its own purposes. When FRV are unable or unwilling to provide suitably qualified officers, CFA is not legally able to fill these roles from anywhere else.

This secondment requirement is seriously handicapping CFA's ability to plan and respond to large scale emergencies, and the "revolving door" of ACFO's and Commanders is highly disruptive and setting the CFA, and its volunteers up for failure. Lack of suitably qualified and experienced CFA Command personnel seriously impacted the CFA response to the 2026 bushfires. At the commencement of the rapidly escalating Longwood fire, CFA District 22 (the District that the Longwood fire originated from) was operating at just one third of the required number of command personnel. Dual commissioned is a serious risk to the officers and the CFA and FRV. (S408).

The FSIM 2024–25 Annual Report reports that the secondment model is not working:

I share this view and believe that the future success of the secondment arrangement is now out of the hands of FRV and CFA. They have done all that they can do, in good faith, to have it successfully implemented and now must wait for the UFU to decide if they will allow the remaining issues to be resolved. The industrial environment and legislative limitations will curtail any further attempts to implement the secondment model, and the effort to try and work around these impediments does not present a cost-effective return. Something must change.

Implementing the model, however, has been a central challenge for all stakeholders. Considerable resources have been expended on working through its implementation, the actions that intersect and underpin the secondment model, and the alternative measures developed to manage issues caused in part by its design.

Recommendation: Rescind the sections of the CFA Act pertaining to the FRV/CFA secondment arrangement and return the right for the CFA to hire their own staff

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2, the following text, finding and recommendation be inserted:

The Class 1 agencies being CFA, FRV, FFMVic and SES are not on the Council and are all required to be represented singularly by the EMC. Fire mitigation under this arrangement is sure to be ignored.

Finding: The State Crisis and Resilience Council (SCRC) lacks operational fire knowledge, particularly on fire mitigation.

Recommendation: The Chief Officers of each of the Class 1 agencies (CFA, FRV, FFMV and SES) should be represented on the SCRC.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.5,1 the following text, finding and recommendation be inserted:

Volunteers overwhelmingly believe moving from Municipal Fire Planning Committees (MFPC) to Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPC) has been a retrograde step.

Finding: Numerous submissions indicated that at municipal level fuel management across all tenures has deteriorated under the “all hazards” MEMPC’s that replaced the “fire mitigation focused” MFP’s.

Recommendation: Reintroduce the “fire mitigation focused” MFPC’s with adequate CFA representation.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1 the following text be inserted:

Under the new MEMPC model volunteer representation has declined from two volunteers to only one representative from each responding agency. Local fire risks and prevention works are no longer adequately prioritised. Under the old CFA Act, the MFPC's representation from each CFA brigade and each CFA group within the municipality ensured local knowledge was embedded into the committee structure (S 408). There has been little guidance, oversight or leadership provided by EMV who are now responsible for leading and auditing these plans. VFBV's view is there not a strong standard of integrated, coordinated and comprehensive planning in place under the Emergency Management Act as was envisaged.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1 the following finding and recommendation be inserted:

Finding: Bushfire hazard reduction continues to be inadequate under the new MEMPC model and municipalities lack power to issue a fire prevention notice over publicly owned land.

Recommendation: Amend legislation to return to the previous requirements for a comprehensive municipal fire prevention plan and committee, with local CFA brigade and group representation and CFA Auditing role. S43 of the CFA Act be amended to strengthen the Chief Officer's powers to enforce fire mitigation action on all landowners with unacceptable fire risks within appropriate timeframes.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.1 the following text be inserted:

The Committee further notes that the original CFA response reportedly stated that between 2022 and 2025 the CFA sought \$330.57 million in additional funding but only \$117.95 million was approved, and that this information was removed from the later version. It also reportedly removed CFA concerns that fire station delivery under the Community Safety Building Authority was up to three to four times more costly than equivalent CFA station builds.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	

Question agreed to.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.1 the following text be inserted:

The Committee also that the CFA's June 4 response stated that between 2022 and 2025 the CFA submitted funding requests totalling \$330.57 million, of which only \$117.95 million was approved. The later response reportedly removed those figures and instead stated only that the CFA participated in annual budget bid processes.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.1 the following text be inserted:

The Committee considers that the scale of any difference between funding sought and funding approved is directly relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference concerning CFA funding, equipment, appliances, recruitment and retention. The Committee further considers that this information should be transparent where it goes to operational readiness and the capacity of the CFA to protect communities.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	

Question agreed to.

Ms Lovell moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.2 the following text be inserted:

Information contained in answers to QON's received from CFA on 4th June revealed the cost of building new stations under the CSBA is 3–4 times more than equivalent CFA-delivered projects and that CFA built an average of 29 stations annually before the transfer to CSBA that averages approximately 2 stations annually.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	

Question agreed to.

Ms Lovell moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.2 the following text be inserted:

Information contained in answers to QON's received from CFA on 4th June also stated that CFA is significantly under resources with seconded staff, particularly in AFCCO commander positions.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	

Question agreed to.

Ms Lovell moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.4 the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: The Victorian Government return the responsibility for building new Fire stations to the CFA and commission an independent review into CSBA's delivery of CFA stations to establish if any misappropriation or inappropriate use of Government funds has occurred.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Lovell moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.4 the following text and recommendation be inserted:

The effects of ongoing vacancies under the secondment model on the CFA has created leadership instability, reduced leadership continuity, caused difficulty and delays in developing future leaders and reduced the ability to recruit and assess suitability of senior leaders.

Recommendation: That the Victoria Government rescind the sections of the CFA Act pertaining to the FRV/CFA secondment arrangement and return the necessary funding and right to the CFA to enable recruitment and employment of personnel to fill the roles currently seconded from FRV.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.4 the following text be inserted:

Replacement of the Fire Services Property Levy (FSPL) with the Emergency Services Volunteers Fund (ESVF) has been extremely unpopular in Victoria and particularly with the CFA and SES. A home valued at \$750,000 could see nearly a 99% increase in the

levy. Primary producers (farmland) face an increase of around 150% and Commercial and industrial properties also face steep increases. Residents are tricked to believe the funds income was going to volunteers, but of the ten agencies to be funded from the 'new tax', only the CFA and SES are volunteer.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

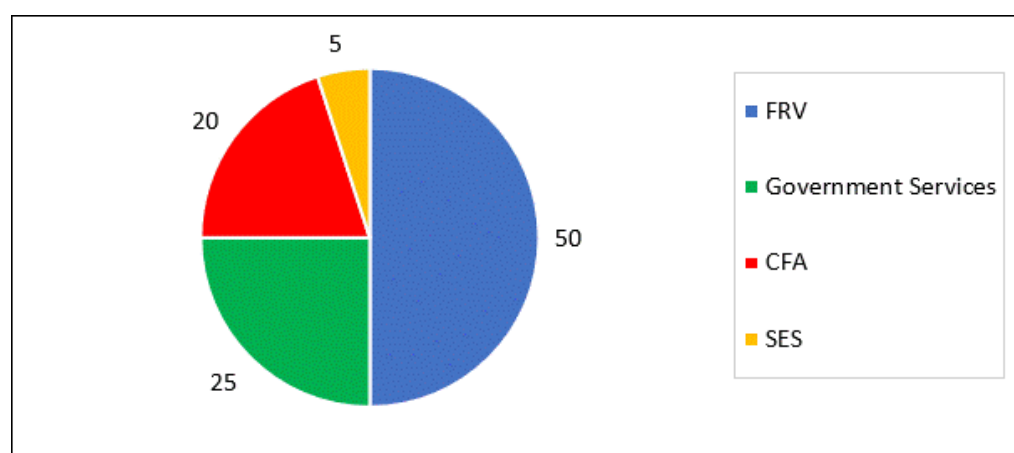
There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.4 the following text be inserted:

The volunteer fire brigades Victoria submission predicts that less than one-quarter of the total funding collected leaving them with inadequate government funding (\$408) and already well funded FRV rolling in more cash (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Forecast allocation of the Emergency Services Volunteers Fund



The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.7 the following text be omitted:

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 2, Section 2.7 the following text be omitted:

In the absence of sufficient information to determine the veracity of its responses, the Committee has to defer to the CFA's statement that only the second version should be relied upon as evidence. Therefore, this report has utilised the second version of CFA responses to Questions on Notice and additional questions as the basis for its findings and recommendations. However, both versions remain published on the Committee's website.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	

Question agreed to.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.1 the following text be inserted:

Significant demonstrations were held across country Victoria, including in Camperdown, Warrnambool and Bendigo, while thousands of farmers and emergency service volunteers travelled to Melbourne to protest the levy on State Budget Day. Protesters consistently argued that the tax placed an unfair burden on rural and regional communities, particularly farmers facing drought and cost-of-living pressures.

The Committee notes that the emergence of organised campaigns such as "Scrap the Tax", together with the participation of volunteer emergency service personnel in public demonstrations, reflected a significant breakdown in community confidence and highlighted concerns regarding the fairness, transparency and regional impact of the levy.

Accordingly, the Committee finds that the ESVF generated considerable community unrest and division across regional Victoria, extending beyond a debate about taxation to broader concerns about equity and the treatment of rural communities.

The CFA Volunteers Group (CFAVG) spokesperson John Huston told the committee, “The conversation I have had with farmers is they are happy to pay a tax. They are happy to pay a bit more, but they are not happy paying 10, 20 or 30 times more, because that is just not fair.”

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

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.1 the following recommendation and text be inserted:

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government repeal the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund (ESVF) levy and replace it with a fairer and more transparent funding model for emergency services.

Any replacement model should ensure the CFA, VICSES and volunteer marine rescue and coast guard services are adequately funded through a combination of a broad-based levy and Consolidated Revenue, while avoiding disproportionate impacts on farmers, volunteers and regional communities. Funding arrangements should be transparent, equitable and directly linked to frontline emergency service capability.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Mr Puglielli moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.1, the following finding be inserted:

Finding: Climate change is a key contributor to bushfire conditions and in contributing to the frequency and severity of bushfires in the state.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	Melina Bath
John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)	Gaelle Broad
Michael Galea	Wendy Lovell
Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the affirmative.

Question agreed to.

Mr Berger moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3, the following finding be inserted:

Finding: Climate change is contributing to the frequency and intensity of fires in Victoria.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	Melina Bath
John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)	Gaelle Broad
Michael Galea	Wendy Lovell
Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the affirmative.

Question agreed to.

Mr Puglielli moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.1, the following recommendations be inserted:

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government ban new fossil fuel projects, including gas exploration.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government make rapid decarbonisation of our economy an urgent priority.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 1	Noes 7
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
	Michael Galea
	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
	Melina Bath
	Gaelle Broad
	Wendy Lovell
	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3, the following finding be omitted:

FINDING 1: Victoria entered the 2025–26 fire season with clear and timely intelligence of elevated bushfire risk, providing a basis for bringing preparedness activity forward.

And insert:

FINDING 1: Despite receiving clear and timely intelligence of elevated bushfire risk, Victoria entered the 2025–26 fire season inadequately prepared, with deficiencies in fuel management, emergency service resourcing, communications resilience, community preparedness and recovery planning contributing to the impacts of the fires.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3, the following finding be omitted:

FINDING 2: Victoria's emergency management sector completed a substantial formal preparedness program before the 2025–26 fire season.

And insert:

FINDING 2: Despite some preparedness activity, Victoria entered the 2025–26 fire season inadequately prepared, with known deficiencies in fuel reduction, emergency service capability and community preparedness.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.
Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2, the following text be inserted:

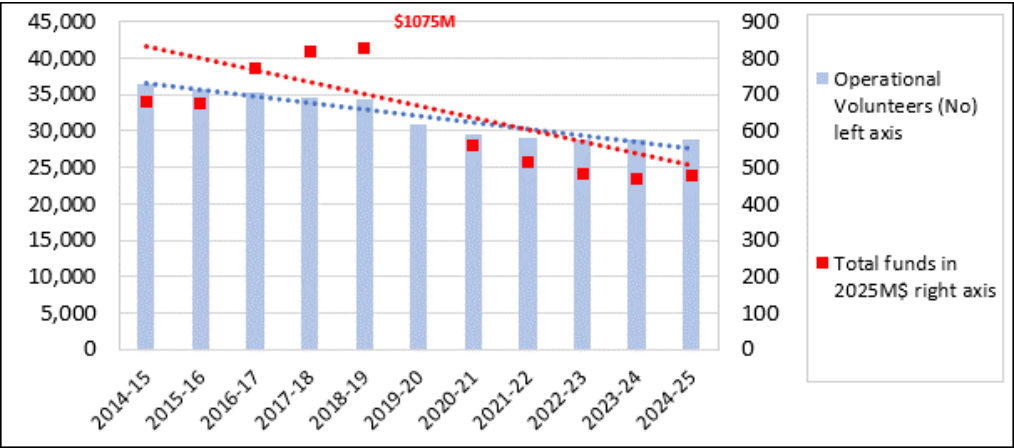
Another way to measure the decline in the CFA’s total funding and frontline operational firefighters over the last decade is in Figure XX.

Over the last decade CFA funding expressed as total expenditure has declined by 30% in real terms and the number of frontline operational firefighters has declined by 21% contrary to the misleading statement from the CFA Board on 12/6/26:

However, in response to recent commentary regarding CFA funding and preparedness, the CFA disputes claims that funding to CFA has been cut and our volunteers and brigades are not prepared for the current fire season.

“CFA volunteers have borne the brunt of limited funding and resourcing that simply does not stretch far enough.” — Adam Barnett, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, p. 58.

Figure XX: Decline in the CFA’s funding in real terms and operational frontline firefighters



The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2, the following recommendation be omitted:

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government that it ensures workplace settings are conducive to supporting volunteering, including consideration of inclusion of employment protection of volunteers in the National Employment Standards.

And insert:

Recommendation: The Victorian Government should restore the CFA's independence as Victoria's primary volunteer firefighting service, remove unnecessary bureaucratic and legislative constraints on its operations, return control of staffing and leadership appointments to the CFA, and strengthen the role of local brigades and volunteers in fire prevention, planning and emergency response

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Mr Berger moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2, the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: The Emergency Management Commissioner commission an external review of volunteering at the CFA to understand the drivers of declining volunteer numbers and to identify process and cultural improvements at the CFA to help increase volunteer recruitment and retention.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)	Melina Bath
Michael Galea	Gaelle Broad
Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)	Wendy Lovell
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the affirmative.

Question agreed to.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3 the following text be inserted:

The Committee also heard that access to training remains a challenge. Although CFA delivers extensive volunteer training, the organisation identified constraints associated with the secondment model, instructor shortages, limited access to subject matter experts, and the loss of dedicated training infrastructure following the closure of Fiskville. The CFA response to questions on notices dated 4 June further advised that the centralisation of Incident Management Team training had limited its ability to develop bushfire-focused incident management capability and training pathways suited to volunteers.

The same correspondence reported that the 2025–26 fire season exposed shortages in both command personnel and Incident Management Team capability, with the organisation indicating that enhanced investment in leadership development, training delivery and succession planning is required to support major bushfire events and maintain operational readiness.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	

Question agreed to.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3 the following text be inserted:

The CFA also reported that the implementation of Fire Services Reform and the secondment arrangements have constrained its ability to develop, recruit and retain operational leaders, trainers and incident management personnel. CFA expressed concern about the declining pipeline of suitably experienced personnel capable of filling command and incident management roles in the future.

The Secondment Agreement between CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), which is a key feature of Fire Services Reform, sets out the role types and number of roles that CFA must source from FRV. This includes Assistant Chief Fire Officers, Commanders and – relevant to training – Instructors (53 roles in total) and Practical Area Drill (PAD) staff roles (29 in total comprising 8 PAD Supervisors and 21 PAD Operators); those who maintain and operate CFA’s network of field training grounds.

CFA is limited to the terms of the Secondment Agreement for the employment of paid instructors for firefighting training. The future growth in training delivery within the volunteer focused fire service places more emphasis on the use of volunteer instructors to meet growing demands.

CFA is seeking to strategically build and support the number of volunteer instructors who, along with the seconded instructors, who are the backbone of CFA’s training excellence. Their dedication, experience, and passion for sharing knowledge is vital to ensuring that every member, whether they are a new recruit undertaking General Firefighter training or a long-serving member advancing in Incident Management, Advanced Firefighting, or Fire Investigation—receives the highest standard of instruction. Instructors deliver training and conduct assessment in accredited and non-accredited training courses. They play a critical role in building the capability, confidence, and safety of our members.

Whilst upskilling CFA volunteers as instructors provide some benefits and assist with a local capacity being established, this strategy naturally has a threshold in respect to sustainability. Competing demands, social and economic pressures all inform and constrain a member’s ability to volunteer more time with CFA.

In relation to Incident Management Training (IMT), Emergency Management Victoria’s decision to centralise of the development and delivery of IMT training programs has impacted CFA’s ability to develop, plan and deliver programs that focus on the management of fire, build CFA command capability and provide opportunities that are suitable for volunteer member participation.

CFA has recently commenced developing its own IMT training programs to better meet the needs of a volunteer workforce with a bushfire hazard focus. The delivery of this training will utilise both volunteer and paid IMT practitioners who have a wide range of operational experience in IMTs.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3 the following finding be inserted:

Finding: CFA's ability to train, develop and retain operational leaders, instructors and Incident Management Team personnel has been adversely affected by workforce shortages, the secondment model and limited succession planning, resulting in reduced command capability and increased pressure on volunteers.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3 the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: The Victorian Government should provide the CFA with the authority, funding and workforce capacity to directly develop its own operational leaders, instructors and incident management personnel, with a focus on rebuilding Victoria's Incident Management Team (IMT) capability.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Lovell moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3, the following recommendation be omitted:

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government engage the Fire Services Implementation Monitor to evaluate the current secondment arrangements and advise on what improvements could be made.

And insert:

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victoria Government rescind the sections of the CFA Act pertaining to the FRV/CFA secondment arrangement and return the necessary funding and right to the CFA to enable recruitment and employment of personnel to fill the roles currently seconded from FRV.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Mr Puglielli moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3, the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government engage the Fire Services Implementation Monitor to evaluate the secondment arrangements and advise how they could be strengthened within the current framework.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)	Melina Bath
Michael Galea	Gaelle Broad
Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)	Wendy Lovell
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the affirmative.

Question agreed to.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3, the following text be inserted:

Victoria approached the 2025/26 Fire Season with historically low numbers of CFA volunteer firefighters, low volunteer morale, the lowest levels of Level 3 Incident Controllers since 2009, an ageing CFA fleet with no approved replacement program, aging infrastructure (fire stations that do not meet OH&S standards) and falling government funding

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Broad moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.4, the following text be inserted:

Due to a historic lack of government funding.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	

Question agreed to.

Ms Lovell moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.4, the following text be inserted:

Insert table 'Appliance type by age (all funding sources)' from CFA QON's 4 June (p. 5).

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Sheena Watt)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Tom McIntosh (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Committee meeting – Tuesday 14 July 2026

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.1, the following finding be inserted:

Finding: Victoria entered 2025–26 with insufficient fuel reduction across landscape, at forest urban interface and close to assets and failed to ensure household preparedness including plans, warnings, fire egress, backup communication, even/equitable recovery assistance and adequate capacity of emergency services.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3, the following text be inserted:

Gaps in long-term preparedness

Victoria was not well prepared for the 2025–26 fire season. Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) fuel reduction area was too small, several well populated FFMV districts with critical infrastructure (Latrobe, Yarra, Metro, Midlands & Ovens) had fuel driven risk above ‘risky’ targets, and over 300 tankers were out of service at the start of the fire season. FFMV’s preparedness has been compromised by its funding (income) declining 9% in real terms over the last decade.

The CFA entered the fire season with many tankers older than 30 years and a communication system failed at the Longwood and Harcourt fires. The CFA’s preparedness has been compromised by volunteer numbers down by 11% and the CFA’s funding (income) declining 30% in real terms over the last decade.

Community Preparedness

Effective bushfire mitigation requires fuel reduction at three scales – across the landscape, at the forest – urban interface (FUI) and in proximity of assets. The agencies continually fail to do sufficient fuel reduction across the landscape, at the FUI, along roadsides and to protect infrastructure. Inadequate roadside fuel reduction delivered a fatality at Longwood. Some households did insufficient fuel reduction.

“We cannot control Mother Nature, but we can control our preparedness and response.” — Adam Barnett, VFBV, Melbourne, 1 May 2026, p. 58.

Australian Disaster Recovery Organisation (ADRO) reported a failure to implement household preparedness at scale including, householder fire plans and preparation, fire warnings, fire egress, backup communication, uneven recovery assistance and unsustainable demand on emergency services.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5, the following text be inserted:

According to John Cameron, heavily forested areas that lacked recent fire history carried Very High to Extreme fuel loads. He further stated that this dense vegetation, combined with extended dry conditions and record-breaking heat, created extreme fire danger indices during the January 2026 blazes.

FFMV typically only completes about 67% of its planned fuel reduction and only about 25% of its priority planned fuel reduction. FFMV has failed to meet its own 'risky' fuel driven risk target for several years in five districts (Latrobe, Yarra, Metro, Midlands & Ovens), which has exposed to unacceptable risk large population centres including Metro Melbourne, critical water supplies and power generation infrastructure. Only about 7.5% of Victoria's forest area has fuels less than 5 years old against best practise of at least 45% (S244).

A large component of the area burnt in the January 2026 blazes were largely grassfires. Consecutive wet years led to exceptionally heavy grass fuel loads. When dry, these fine fuels allowed fires to spread at up to 25 kilometres per hour in open areas, making them highly uncontrollable

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5,3, the following text, findings and recommendations be inserted:

System reforms since the 2009 VBRC

While the Victorian Government largely supported the 67 recommendations from the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission (VBRC), the following have not been fully implemented:

Fuel reduction averages about 1.5% of the forest each year rather than the 5% of the forest recommended.

Finding: Victoria's modelling of bushfire risk underpinning the 'Safer Together' policy is so inaccurate that DEECA and the CFA cannot accurately predict district-level bushfire risk.; the 'average' statewide risk is meaningless given the history of district-based megafires. The policy and modelling have failed as evidenced by large fires over the last decade under conditions far less extreme than 1983, 2009 etc.

Recommendation: The 'Safer Together' policy and its underlying bushfire risk modelling should be reviewed and replaced with a more transparent, evidence-based approach to fuel management and risk reduction that provides confidence to communities, supports effective bushfire mitigation, and can withstand legal, scientific and operational scrutiny.

Finding: Organisational structures not fit for delivery of fuel mitigation outcomes (MEMPC and FFMV within DEECA), cumbersome and centralised approval processes, and insufficient resources, along with inefficiency and ineffectiveness are barriers to more fuel reduction across all tenures.

Recommendation: Scrap the 'Safer Together' fire policy and launch a new policy based on a strategic analysis of mitigation options on bushfire, financial and risk metrics.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5, the following text be inserted:

In 2020 the Victorian Auditor General (VAGO) raised so many issues with the modelling of residual fire risk underpinning the 'Safer Together Policy', such that it was 'not fit for purpose'. Issues raised by VAGO were:

- DELWP (now called DEECA) advised that it could reduce Victoria's bushfire risk by 30 per cent with \$50 million pa, but failed to advise that it could achieve greater risk reduction with further investment.
- DELWP did not explain that the model used (Phoenix RapidFire) had several limitations.
- Limitations of the datasets and model simulations include using data that was not up-to-date.
- The model needed expert validation and peer review.

- DELWP completes too few fuel hazard assessments after planned burns and bushfires, reducing its ability to validate how quickly fuel re-accumulates to hazardous levels.
- DELWP's modelling relies on a range of assumptions that likely impact the results, including the application of a single extreme fire scenario.
- The tool (Phoenix RapidFire) needs significant investment to be fit for purpose including systematically verifying the effectiveness of Phoenix RapidFire predictions against real fire events.
- Regional targets did not consider key regional risk factors including current fuel loads.

The Victorian Auditor-General's (VAGO) 2026 report exposed ongoing failures by DEECA and the CFA to accurately assess bushfire hazards including relying on inconsistent, unreliable hazard assessments and subjective visual judgments, undermining statewide risk mitigation. The follow-up report reviewed progress on the 17 recommendations made in the initial 2020 VAGO report. Key findings were:

- DEECA and the CFA did not complete all the actions they committed to and in 2025 reported completion of some recommendations from VAGO's 2020 recommendations that were not complete.
- DEECA cannot assure that its district fuel hazard assessments are accurate. It has only verified fuel accumulation curves for 4 of the 60 different vegetation types since VAGO raised this issue in 2020. The fuel accumulation curves are a key input to Phoenix RapidFire's simulations and need to be accurate to assess bushfire risk and plan fuel reduction treatments.
- DEECA kept statewide bushfire risk below the target but did not deliver all strategic fuel breaks in and around Grampians National Park.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

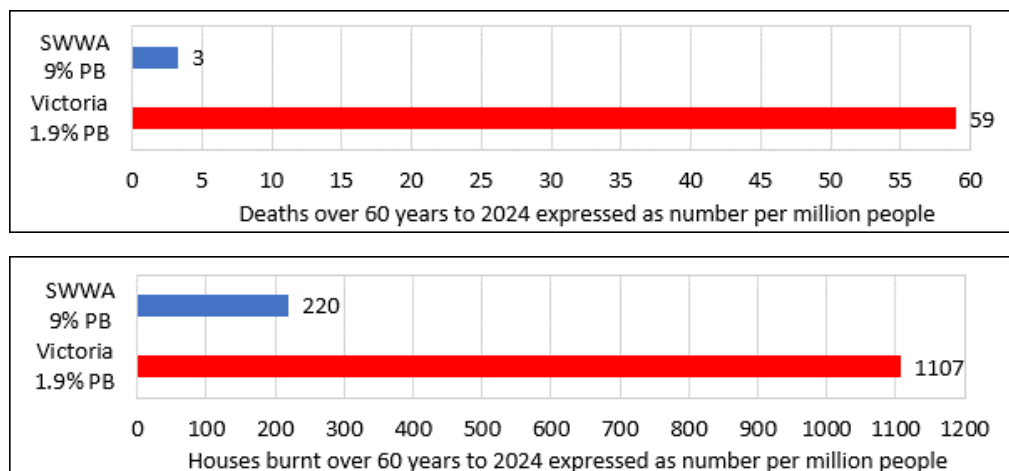
Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3, the following text and finding be inserted:

Impact of fuel management on lives lost and houses destroyed

South west WA fuel reduced about 9% of the forest and Victoria about 1.9% of the forest each year on average over the same 60 year period. Deaths have been about 20 times higher and houses burnt about 5 times higher in Victoria (Figure 9) despite higher population density fire proneness in south west WA.

Figure 9: Impact of fuel reduction regimes on deaths and houses destroyed in bushfires



Finding: The 'Safer Together' policy has failed because in old heavy fuels fire perimeter at initial attack overwhelms the capacity of suppression resources.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3, the following text be omitted:

Professor David Lindenmayer, Adjunct Professor at La Trobe University emphasised those limits. He told the Committee that the protective effect generally declines as a treatment becomes older or more distant from the asset and as fire weather becomes more severe. Professor Lindenmayer also pointed to disturbance-stimulated flammability as a reason to exercise caution when conditioning prescribed burns in forests:

After a system has been disturbed and then regenerates there is a pulse of additional flammability that can last for several decades after those disturbances.

His evidence was not that all prescribed burning is ineffective. It was that the benefits of burning are conditional, and that broadscale burning far away from assets may deliver limited protection while carrying ecological and future flammability risks.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3, the following finding be omitted:

Finding: The seasonal window for planned burns during cooler months is narrowing due to climate change, making them harder to be delivered as planned.

And Insert:

Finding: While Victoria's risk-based fuel management model provides a useful framework for prioritising bushfire risk reduction, the absence of minimum treatment targets and public reporting has contributed to a decline in the scale of fuel management activities and reduced transparency regarding fuel reduction outcomes.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3:

Omit Finding.

Insert:

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government abandon its 70% residual risk Safer Together risk-based fuel management model and adopt a hybrid bushfire mitigation framework that incorporates both risk reduction modelling and minimum fuel treatment targets. The framework should require annual public reporting on hectares treated, fuel reduction outcomes and regional risk reduction achieved, to restore accountability and ensure sufficient fuel management occurs across Victoria's public land estate.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4, the following finding and recommendation be inserted:

Finding: While the current risk-reduction model is preferable to a hectare target model, ecological harms may still be excessive compared with alternative models

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government establish an independent, evidence-based review of the current risk-reduction model with a view to minimising ecological impacts and the short- and long-term risks to communities and habitat. The review should include an assessment of:

- the adequacy and resourcing of environmental assessments prior to burning
- the location of planned burning with respect to key infrastructure
- measures to reduce the loss of old and critical habitat trees
- the adequacy of engagement across different sectors and parts of the community.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Mr Puglielli moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4, the following finding be inserted:

Finding: That roadside reserves can contain important ecological values which may be impacted by fuel reduction measures.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)	Melina Bath
Michael Galea	Gaelle Broad
Sheena Watt	Wendy Lovell
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the affirmative.

Question agreed to.

Mr Puglielli moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4, the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: That the Victorian government, including through existing arrangements, ensure that roadside vegetation management can demonstrate clear risk reduction for community infrastructure and emergency response, while limiting ecological harm.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)	Melina Bath
Michael Galea	Gaelle Broad
Sheena Watt	Wendy Lovell
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the affirmative.

Question agreed to.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5, the following text be inserted:

Murrindindi Shire reported inconsistent roadside and forest interface fuel management, with limited capacity for councils to undertake preventative burning, slashing and fuel reduction at the scale required and the fragmented accountability across land managers (Council, State, private landholders) leading to gaps in fuel treatment (S281).

Impediments with respect to FFMV's role in delivering more fuel reduction are:

- FFMV is ill equipped with centralised decision making within a super department leading to untimely decisions on time-critical operation such as fuel reduction burning. FFMV completes only two-thirds of its planned fuel reduction and a quarter of its high priority planned fuel reduction.
- FFMV is unable to assemble surge resources including field staff and contractors to complete fuel reduction within the available window of opportunity. Yet farmers assemble surge resources to implement time-critical operations such as harvesting within windows as short as a couple of days.

In terrain with 'shape', slope and aspect affect fire behaviour (shape = hills, ridges, spurs and drainage lines). Fire generally travels NW to SE under northerly wind and then from SW to NE after the SW wind change. In this 'shaped' terrain the largest contributor to fire spread is long distance spotting, generated when a fire running up a northerly or westerly slope and creating convection at the ridge top, projects large embers that can travel from 3 to 20 km ahead of the fire front to ignite another spot fire (fast moving bushfires on flat ground travel by flame contact and short distance spotting up to 4km). This long-distance spotting can be minimised by systematic fuel reduction of the top third of the slope on all North and West aspects of major ridge and spur systems, equating to about 17% of the landscape. Ignition can be completed by aircraft with limited field crews.

Roadsides, rail corridors and land supporting public infrastructure

Road and rail corridors and around vital infrastructure continue to be of significant concern to volunteers because of inadequate fuel reduction (Appendix 1). Fuel reduction on roadsides and rail lines is inadequate due to a protracted and centralised approval process, and the loss of local CFA brigade input after the transition of MFPC to MEMPC. Many roadsides and railway lines are overgrown with heavy and elevated fuel loads such that they facilitate rapid spread and spotting of bushfires.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5, the following text be inserted:

Strategic burns on private land contribute to life and asset protection within their communities.

Access and water sources

Forest fires occur from sea level to 1800m, but most of Victoria's flowing and static water sits below 250m asl. Currently there is a lack of accessible water points suitable for aircraft and ground vehicles in over 5 million ha of forest of Victoria's 7.8 million ha of public forest. Establishing 280 water points of 200,000L at about 15km spacing serving about 18,000 ha each would cost about \$20 million (ca. \$70,000 each) and has the potential to reduce helicopter turnaround time from 40 minutes to 7 minutes and substantially increase aerial fire line capacity from 120m/hr to about 640m/hr. The long water ferry time is a lost opportunity to minimise the fire perimeter in the first few hours.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Mr Puglielli moved, That in Chapter 3, after Section 3.9, the following text and recommendations be inserted:

Insert new section:

3.9 Preparation funding

3.9.1 Climate resilience funding

A range of issues relating to the need for greater investment in preparation have been identified in this chapter. However, there is a question of how this will be resourced. Bushfire preparation is a feature of climate resilience and adaptation, and it was a subject that was highlighted in this committee's inquiry previous into climate resilience.

Recommendation 6 from the Climate Resilience Report stated:

That the Victorian Government establish a Climate Adaptation Fund to fund priority adaptation projects identified under the Adaptation Action Plans and Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategies.

The Victorian Government is yet to respond to this specific recommendation.

The need for significantly more climate resilience funding was raised in evidence received by the committee in the current inquiry, including Friends of the Earth Melbourne. In their submission, they cite evidence from the CSIRO highlighting that a \$1 investment in climate adaptation or disaster risk reduction leads to a \$2-11 saving in post-disaster costs. Given the enormous cost of bushfire events, investment in preparation and adaptation presents a clear economic benefit. The cost of the 2026 Victorian bushfires is explored further in Chapter 4.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government implement Recommendation 6 of the Climate Resilience Inquiry report

Insert new section:

3.9.2 "Polluter-pays" approach to funding

Throughout the Climate resilience inquiry, the Committee received evidence supporting a tax or levy on fossil fuel producers to raise revenue for such a fund. Friends of the Earth Melbourne, in their submission to this inquiry, reiterate the need for such a tax (p. 20).

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government adopts a ‘polluter-pays’ approach to raising revenue to fund climate adaptation, including by applying a Climate Response Levy to the fossil fuel industry (such as Victoria’s coal-fired power stations).

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 1	Noes 7
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
	Michael Galea
	Sheena Watt
	Melina Bath
	Gaelle Broad
	Wendy Lovell
	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That Chapter 4, Section 4.3.5, the following text be inserted:

Old-growth forests were protected from logging under the RFA’s introduced between 1997 and 2000.

One of the key objectives of the RFA process was to use a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system in Australia based on the JANIS criteria to protect, in nature conservation reserves 60% of existing old growth forest along with 15% of pre-1750 distribution of each forest type (60% if rare) 90% of high-quality wilderness forests; and all remaining occurrences of rare and endangered forest ecosystems.

The transfer of more than 2 million hectares of forest from broad-tenure multiple-use public forest to nature conservation reserves failed to protect our old-growth from bushfire. Victorian old-growth forest area has declined drastically, with studies indicating a reduction of roughly 77–80% since 1995 primarily due to bushfire. About 45% of the 2019–20 bushfire area was burnt at high-severity. Over 62,000 hectares of modelled old-growth in Eastern Victoria was burnt, reducing the total remaining old-growth by an additional 15%. The remaining old-growth forest is now highly fragmented.

The call for less fuel reduction is also not supported by those exposed to the fury of bushfires including many fire experts, practitioners and associations, primary producer organisations and rural shires.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2, the following text be inserted:

Structural, leadership, cultural challenges across agencies and churn issue

The biggest issue is the CFA/FRV secondment agreement. Under the secondment agreement the CFA is restricted from achieving the best match between position description and applicant, including the cultural skills to manage a volunteer workforce. Moving career CFA staff to being employed by Fire Rescue Victoria, created a turbulent environment, a loss of local operational autonomy, and leadership resignations in the CFA. As well as the leadership turbulence there has been churn of CFA volunteers.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 5, Section 5.6.1, the following text be inserted:

Role and value of volunteers, fatigue and deployment

The value of volunteers and community-based fire services is two-fold – a worthwhile contribution relatively free of demand for state funding and a valuable communications conduit for information on fire mitigation, fire control and emergency response. There was a consistent reluctance by volunteers to speak “on record”, particularly among those who are directly involved in their local CFA. There is concern that the fire services levy supports the rich FRV and no longer just the volunteer driven CFA.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 5, Section 5.6.1, the following text be inserted:

Recruitment, retention and workforce trends

The decline in the number of CFA volunteers indicates they are issues retaining volunteers and recruiting replacements for those who leave. FFMV have too many managers and executives and not enough field staff – like Parks Victoria where managers/executives are 65% of the workforce and consume 75% of the payroll. Field work is neglected across all tenures of the native forest (State Forest and Parks and Reserves).

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 5, Section 5.5, the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: The Victorian Government increase funding for more fuel reduction (landscape, FUI, near assets and roadsides), improved surveillance of ignitions, enhanced suppression capability and build dual/backup systems for infrastructure.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 5, Section 5.5, the following text be inserted:

Why the ‘Safer Together’ fire policy relying on attack and suppression failed

The policy adopted in 2015 called ‘Safer Together’ has failed with disastrous results for rural communities and industries. Safer Together Policy relies on less fuel reduction and early initial attack and rapid suppression. The Safer Together policy failed because (S244):

The statewide residual risk target of 70% is too high, and only 30% below catastrophic fuel loads, resulting in many initial attacks failing because fire intensity and fire perimeter at initial attack exceeds the resources deployed to contain the bushfire.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Ms Bath moved, That in Chapter 5, Section 5.6.1, the following recommendation be inserted:

Recommendation: Establish some FFMV deports in remote forests with high fuel hazard risks (e.g. shrublands-scrub) and establish more water points in remote forests.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Melina Bath	John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)
Gaelle Broad	Michael Galea
Wendy Lovell	Sheena Watt
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell	Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the negative.

Question negatived.

Mr Berger moved,

That the Draft Report, (Chapters 1 to 6, including all findings and recommendations, together with Appendix A, be adopted as the Report of the Committee, and that it be Tabled on Tuesday 28 July 2026.

The question was put. **The Committee divided.**

Ayes 4	Noes 4
John Berger (Substitute for Ryan Batchelor)	Melina Bath
Michael Galea	Gaelle Broad
Sheena Watt	Wendy Lovell
Aiv Puglielli (Substitute for Dr Sarah Mansfield)	Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

There being an equality of votes, the Chair used his casting vote in the affirmative.

Question agreed to.

Minority reports



Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria: Minority Report



Victorian Greens

Dr Sarah Mansfield MLC and Aiv Puglielli MLC

20th July 2026

Foreword

The Victorian Greens at the outset want to acknowledge the immeasurable impact that the 2026 summer bushfires had on Victorian communities, wildlife, and firefighters.

The trauma experienced by communities who bore the brunt of the fires was clear through the submissions, at the hearings, and at the listening posts conducted throughout this inquiry. Many residents, farmers and businesses lost everything, including multiple CFA volunteer firefighters who fought to save the lives and properties of others. The trauma for many didn't stop at the fires - it was compounded by the recovery process itself, which could be frustrating, difficult to navigate, and too often, characterised by an overwhelming sense of abandonment.

We want to thank those who shared their experiences with us. But it must be recognised that they did so in order to see action to address ongoing problems with the current recovery process, and importantly so we can ensure changes are made to prevent some of the same issues occurring in the future. As so many community members have done in previous disasters this state has faced. It is disheartening that some of the experiences of these communities could have been avoided had warnings been heeded, and lessons from previous disasters learned.

While we broadly support the majority report, there are several areas that are either inadequate or missing entirely:

- 1. Addressing climate change and making polluters pay to support disaster preparedness, firefighter resourcing, and recovery**
- 2. Fuel load reduction, safeguarding ecosystems and protecting wildlife**
- 3. Critical infrastructure resilience**

While we are largely supportive of the findings and recommendations of the majority report, it fails to appropriately recommend actions for the government in several key areas despite strong support in submissions and evidence presented at hearings.

This minority report will make further recommendations on the above points which we believe should be addressed by the Victorian Government as a matter of urgency.

1. Addressing climate change and making polluters pay to support disaster preparedness, firefighter resourcing, and recovery

The role of fossil fuels

Because of the failure of successive governments to stop the burning of fossil fuels, and despite decades of warnings about the consequences, the climate is heating rapidly, leading to more frequent extreme weather events like bushfires. Evidence received by the committee clearly identified climate change as a key contributor to the conditions that led to the 2026 Victorian bushfires, including through heatwaves, lightning, drying of the landscape, and longer fire seasons. Climate change in turn is being driven by the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation.

While the report notes climate change affecting the conditions in which the recent bushfires burned, it stops short of establishing the link between the burning of fossil fuels (such as that which occurs in Victoria) and climate change itself.

Multiple submissions, including from **Friends of the Earth**, **Doctors for the Environment Australia**, and **Climate Action Team Colac Otway**, argued that the 2026 bushfires reinforced the need to take stronger action on climate change by banning new fossil fuel projects, urgently transitioning away from fossil fuels, and ensuring that policy settings across government supported this.

Recommendation: that the Victorian Government ban new fossil fuel projects, including gas exploration.

Recommendation: that the Victorian Government make rapid decarbonisation of our economy an urgent priority.

Climate Resilience & Adaptation

A range of further issues relating to the need for greater investment in bushfire preparation and recovery were identified throughout this inquiry, as was well documented in the majority report. This included ensuring communities and councils had funding to invest in adaptation and mitigation measures, providing CFA and FRV firefighting crews with the fleet and resources they need to safely and effectively defend lives and property, and increasing the funding available to communities to support recovery or relocation.

With climate change increasing the threat from bushfires - both in terms of frequency and severity - the current funding allocated to bushfire preparation, prevention, and firefighting response is grossly inadequate.

This was particularly evident with respect to the maintenance and renewal of firefighting appliances. While the majority report identifies the need for rolling fleet replacement, it recommends leaving the amount of funding to government discretion. Having reliable and up-to-date firefighting appliances is a basic requirement to keep firefighters and communities safe and should be non-negotiable.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government establish and fund legislatively guaranteed, annually appropriated rolling fleet replacement programs for FRV and the CFA.
Replacement benchmarks for FRV should be aligned to FRV's own fleet policy as established in the Corporate Services Fleet Development Process Manual.

While the need for further funding for bushfire resilience and adaptation was broadly acknowledged by a range of agencies and community groups, what remained unaddressed in the majority report was *how* this should be funded.

Bushfire preparation is a feature of climate resilience and adaptation, and it was a subject that was highlighted in this committee's previous inquiry into Climate Resilience.

Recommendation 6 from the Climate Resilience Report stated:

That the Victorian Government establish a Climate Adaptation Fund to fund priority adaptation projects identified under the Adaptation Action Plans and Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategies.

The Victorian Government has not responded to this specific recommendation.

The need for significantly more climate resilience funding was raised in evidence received by the committee in the current inquiry, including **Friends of the Earth Melbourne**. In their submission, they cite evidence from the CSIRO highlighting that a \$1 investment in climate adaptation or disaster risk reduction leads to a \$2-11 saving in post-disaster costs.

Given the enormous cost of bushfire events, investment in preparation and adaptation presents a clear economic benefit.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government implement Recommendation 6 of the Climate Resilience Inquiry report.

Make Polluters Pay

A further question that remained unresolved in the majority report, is *where* such funding for bushfire preparation and recovery should come from. The financial burden on citizens as a result of climate change impacts - both individually and collectively as taxpayers - is substantial and growing.

Yet the most polluting industries reap immense profits, pay little or no tax, and take no responsibility for the consequences of their businesses. This is completely unjust.

Requiring the fossil fuel industry to contribute to funding climate adaptation not only acknowledges this injustice, it also creates a financial incentive to transition away from fossil fuels.

Throughout the Climate Resilience inquiry, the Committee received evidence supporting a tax or levy on fossil fuel producers to raise revenue for such a fund. **Friends of the Earth Melbourne**, in their submission to this inquiry, reiterate the need for such a tax.

Disappointingly, the majority of the Environment and Planning Committee once again refused to support a recommendation to make the polluters pay for the damage their extraordinarily profitable products are causing.

The Greens, and many in the community believe strongly that the fossil fuel industry, not everyday Victorians, should be paying for climate damage.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government adopts a ‘polluter-pays’ approach to raising revenue to fund climate adaptation, including by applying a Climate Response Levy to the fossil fuel industry (such as Victoria’s coal-fired power stations).

2. Fuel load reduction, safeguarding ecosystems and protecting wildlife

Fuel load reduction was the subject of significant interest throughout the inquiry. Understandably, there were strong and often divergent opinions about fuel load reduction, including the locations, methods, and extent.

However, the Greens strongly support the calls from many witnesses for a revision of the current policy settings to ensure they are informed by the best available science.

Current practices, while less environmentally destructive than per-hectare targets, still cause significant ecological harm, may not reduce risk to property, and may increase long-term fire risk.

As noted in the majority report, evidence demonstrated that fuel reduction burning and clearing in its current form is unnecessarily destroying ecologically sensitive areas without commensurate reduction in fire risk to people or properties. This includes loss of old, hollow-bearing trees and complex rainforest structures that keep moisture in the soils.

Finding: While the current risk-reduction model is preferable to a hectare target model, ecological harms may still be excessive compared with alternative science-based models.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government establish an independent, evidence-based review of the current risk-reduction model with a view to minimising ecological impacts and the short- and long-term risks to communities and habitat.

The review should include an assessment of:

- the adequacy and resourcing of environmental assessments prior to burning**
- the location of planned burning with respect to key infrastructure**
- measures to reduce the loss of old and critical habitat trees**
- the adequacy of engagement across different sectors and parts of the community**

Treatment of injured wildlife and livestock

The Committee heard evidence describing wildlife and livestock that were injured and required urgent treatment or in many cases, euthanasia. This proved highly difficult with an ongoing bushfire emergency, and in the aftermath that followed. It was also a cause of significant distress for community members and wildlife rescuers.

The Greens believe strongly that this work must be allowed to be undertaken unimpeded, and that a humane response be a matter of priority in treatment of animals post-bushfire.

While the majority report acknowledges some of the failings in the post-fire wildlife response, it recommends a review be undertaken by the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action (DEECA). Many witnesses identified concerns about DEECA's conduct and response, and we believe that an independent review is required.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government commission an independent review into post-bushfire wildlife response, including an assessment of the role of government departments and agencies.

Post-fire tree removal

Evidence was presented to the committee by residents concerned about the potentially unnecessary removal of trees damaged by fires. Removing burnt trees can destroy surviving seed sources, accelerate soil erosion, and leave areas uninhabitable for wildlife, including many hollow-dependent birds and mammals. This was of particular concern to several residents we heard from in Harcourt. While we acknowledge that some damaged trees may pose safety threats, there needs to be a balance of the actual risks against the ecological impacts of aggressive tree removal.

Further, we note the extensive contributions of the forestry industry to this inquiry and the majority report in written quotes and evidence from the proceedings. Salvage logging by the forestry industry, including post-fires, has been used as a cover to continue native timber harvesting, and remains an ongoing concern in Victoria. Post-bushfire response to tree removal should be science-informed and prioritise ecosystem protection, and not be led by industrial interests that stand to benefit financially from certain responses.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government ensure that post-bushfire tree removal is based on science and limits the impact on native ecosystems to the greatest extent possible.

3. Critical infrastructure resilience

As well identified in the majority report, telecommunications failures occurred at every major fire site during the bushfires, hampering firefighting efforts and community communications. This contributed to the trauma experienced by many residents and firefighters we heard from.

In many instances, these failures were directly linked to loss of electricity supply to the telecommunication infrastructure.

While the majority report identifies specific actions needed to be undertaken by telecommunications companies, these incidents once again underscore the need for a deep whole-of-systems review that considers all significant essential services - including electricity, communications, and water - and the inter-reliances between them which create vulnerabilities. This involves both private companies and government agencies, and all levels of government taking collective responsibility and action to address these issues.

This was highlighted during the Climate Resilience inquiry, and in many other post-disaster reviews in recent years.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government instigate an independent review into the climate- and disaster- resilience essential services, including telecommunications, electricity and water.

This should include addressing vulnerabilities created by interdependencies, and outline recommendations to build whole-of-system resilience and protect communities during and after disasters.



Dr Sarah Mansfield MLC
Western Victoria Region



Aiv Puglielli MLC
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region



VICTORIAN PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE 2026 BUSHFIRES

LIBERAL AND NATIONALS' MINORITY REPORT

Prepared by the Liberal and Nationals

July 2026



Picture credit: Jason Edwards, Annabelle Cleeland, Liam Mendes, Eddie Jim

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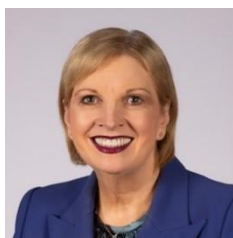
Melina Bath

Melina Bath MP



Wendy Lovell

The Hon. Wendy Lovell MP



Gaelle Broad

Gaelle Broad MP



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Executive Summary

The 2026 Victorian bushfires burnt more than 436,000 hectares, destroyed more than 1,590 structures, over 45,000 stock and tragically claimed a life. Regional communities suffered extensive damage to homes, farms, businesses, infrastructure and the natural environment. Recovery will take many years.

The Liberal and Nationals members of the EPC thank all individuals and organisations who contributed to this Inquiry, particularly fire affected residents, volunteers, emergency service personnel, farmers, councils and community groups.

We thank the Committee Secretariat for their dedicated assistance and support.

We acknowledge the Committee members for their professional engagement throughout the Inquiry.

The incredible bravery of volunteer and fulltime firefighters, emergency services personnel, farmers, volunteers and local communities prevented what could have been a far greater tragedy. However, their efforts should not obscure the systemic shortcomings revealed by this Inquiry.

The Minority notes that the Committee's report relies heavily on government evidence at the expense of the lived experience of affected communities and frontline responders.

This Minority Evidence shows the Allan Labor Government was repeatedly warned about inadequate fuel management, declining emergency service capability, weakened local fire planning, governance failures and increasing bushfire risk.

Our report reaches a different conclusion from the Majority Committee report. It finds Victoria entered the season underprepared, so called fire reforms weakened capability, the bushfire mitigation policy framework failed to deliver promised outcomes and communities paid the price.

The evidence establishes 6 central failures:

1. Government ignored repeated warnings

Multiple reviews, audits and inquiries identified risks and shortcomings that remained unresolved.

2. Victoria entered the fire season underprepared

Declining volunteer numbers, command shortages, ageing fleets and underinvestment weakened preparedness.

3. Governance reforms reduced operational capability

The CFA–FRV secondment model, weakened local fire planning and emergency management reforms reduced accountability and operational effectiveness.

4. Bushfire mitigation failed to keep pace with risk

Fuel loads increased, roadside management deteriorated and the Safer Together framework failed to deliver the promised mitigation outcomes.

5. Emergency management systems failed communities

Communications failures, command shortcomings, infrastructure vulnerabilities and emergency management weaknesses affected response operations.

6. Communities have borne the consequences

Despite the scale and severity of the summer fires, many regional communities have been left to fend for themselves, with an evident disparity in support provided by the Victorian Government in comparison to previous disasters.

FINDINGS:

FINDING 1: The 2026 bushfires exposed failures repeatedly identified by Royal Commissions, auditors and oversight bodies. The Allan Labor Government was warned and did not adequately act.

FINDING 2: The decade long decline in CFA operational volunteer numbers represents one of the most serious risks to Victoria's bushfire preparedness and has not been adequately addressed by the Allan Labor Government.

FINDING 3: The Inquiry heard evidence that underinvestment in the CFA by Labor over successive years has resulted in a significant deterioration of fleet and infrastructure renewal programs, with funding failing to keep pace with inflation, service demand and asset replacement requirements.

FINDING 4: The Inquiry heard evidence that hundreds of CFA and FRV appliances are operating beyond their intended service life and CFA volunteers continue to respond to major incidents in ageing single cab appliances that do not provide the crew protection, communications capability and situational awareness available in contemporary firefighting vehicles.

FINDING 5: The transfer of CFA station construction to the Community Safety Building Authority has resulted in significantly higher costs and far fewer CFA stations being delivered.

FINDING 6: The Allan Labor Government's expanded Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund imposes an inequitable burden on Victorians.

FINDING 7: The Inquiry heard evidence of significant radio communication deficiencies during the 2026 summer bushfires, including communication blackspots, reduced functionality in heavy smoke, terrain related limitations and difficulties maintaining contact with incident control.

FINDING 8: The CFA - FRV secondment model has created a sustained and systemic shortfall in senior operational leadership positions within the CFA, reducing command capability, limiting workforce planning and undermining support for CFA volunteers.

FINDING 9: That private units added substantial firefighting capacity and were beneficial in the containment of fires.

FINDING 10: The absence of CFA, FRV, FFMV and SES Chief Officers from the State Crisis and Resilience Council limits the influence of frontline operational expertise in Victoria's emergency management governance.

FINDING 11: The Inquiry heard evidence that Victoria's current emergency management arrangements do not require the State Controller for major bushfires to be the state's most senior and experienced fire officer, potentially limiting the influence of specialist bushfire expertise during major fire events.

FINDING 12: The replacement of Municipal Fire Prevention Committees weakened local bushfire planning, reduced accountability for fuel management and diminished the influence of volunteer and community expertise.

FINDING 13: The Inquiry heard evidence that the current structure and operation of the Office of Bushfire Risk Management has not delivered the independent oversight, tenure blind fuel management coordination and practical bushfire mitigation outcomes originally envisaged.

FINDING 14: The grounding of the G-Wagon and Unimog fleet exposed a significant operational vulnerability and raised concerns about the long term serviceability of critical firefighting assets.

FINDING 15: Labor's *Safer Together* policy has failed to deliver the mitigation outcomes promised when it was introduced. Significant areas of Victoria remain above fuel risk targets and hazardous fuel continues to accumulate to the detriment of communities and the environment.

FINDING 16: The current fuel management outcomes are not meeting the intent of previous bushfire inquiry recommendations and that fuel driven bushfire risk remains unacceptably high in regions across Victoria.

FINDING 17: The Committee finds that insufficient fuel reduction increases risk to life, property, critical infrastructure, firefighters and the environment, while reducing opportunities for successful early suppression and containment.

FINDING 18: Victoria's approach to roadside bushfire mitigation and strategic fuel breaks is inconsistent and inadequate, resulting in excessive fuel loads along key transport corridors and reducing their effectiveness as bushfire mitigation and suppression assets.

FINDING 19: The Victorian Government was slow to announce Emergency Relief Payments resulting in some residents making choices about whether to evacuate and others displaced for four days before being able to apply for the payment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government work with the CFA to develop and fund a volunteer fire fighter recruitment and retention strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Victorian Government restore CFA funding to a level capable of meeting operational requirements and establish a permanent indexed funding framework that provides adequate recurrent funding for volunteer support, operational capability, fleet replacement and infrastructure renewal.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government commit to a funded, accelerated fleet replacement program for CFA and FRV and establish an ongoing fleet renewal funding stream that ensures:

- all CFA frontline single cab tankers are removed from operational service within five years; and
- and develop and fund a fully costed 10 year plan to restore each agencies fleet to its prescribed maximum age profile.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Victorian Government immediately return the responsibility for the planning and delivery of CFA stations to the Country Fire Authority, with public reporting of project costs, timelines and delivery outcomes to ensure transparency and value for money.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government scrap the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund and revert to the previous Fire Services Property Levy model and properly fund our emergency services.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government ensure EMV publicly reports annually on the full complement of endorsed Level 2 and Level 3 Incident Management Team roles, enabling transparent monitoring of the State's emergency management capability.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Fire Services Implementation Monitor report quarterly on volunteer access to Incident Management Team training.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Victorian Government undertake an independent audit of emergency service radio coverage and resilience across Victoria and fund the infrastructure and technology upgrades required to ensure reliable emergency communications during major bushfire events.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government, telecommunications providers and electricity network operators to improve the resilience, redundancy and timely restoration of critical communications and electricity infrastructure, ensuring communities remain connected and emergency services can operate effectively before, during and after bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government restore CFA's capacity to directly employ its operational leadership workforce by ending the mandatory secondment model and providing ongoing funding for the recruitment and retention of senior operational and training personnel.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the State Government provide CFA with the authority and funding to establish formal agreements that register private units based on similar agreements and benefits that exist in South Australia and New South Wales. As well considering installing radios that communicate with CFA in the private units.

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Victorian Government should appoint the Chief Officers of CFA, FRV, FFMV and SES as members of the State Crisis and Resilience Council.

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Victoria Government ensure that the state's most senior fire officer should hold ultimate operational command authority for major bushfires and serve as the State Controller for Level 3 fires.

RECOMMENDATION 14: Municipal Fire Prevention Committees should be reinstated across Victoria with strong CFA, local government and community representation and a specific statutory responsibility for bushfire prevention and fuel management oversight.

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government create a formal community-based bushfire prevention framework to ensure local knowledge is incorporated into fuel management decisions, fire risk assessments and bushfire preparedness planning.

RECOMMENDATION 16: That the Victorian Government reform the Office of Bushfire Risk Management to ensure genuine independence from land management agencies and provide clear responsibility for coordinating tenure blind fuel management across Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government provide assurance that remediation works undertaken on the G-Wagon and Unimog fleet deliver a sustainable long term solution, and report on the ongoing serviceability, replacement planning and operational readiness of the fleet before future fire seasons.

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Victorian Government replace the current residual risk only approach with a hybrid bushfire mitigation framework that combines risk modelling with minimum fuel treatment requirements and landscape scale fuel management objectives. The framework should ensure balanced fuel reduction across communities, public forests, roadsides, critical infrastructure corridors and water catchments, with annual public reporting on fuel management performance and regional bushfire risk.

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Victorian Government increase targeted investment in fuel reduction, strategic fuel breaks, roadside fuel management and rapid initial attack capability, recognising that preventing catastrophic bushfires is more effective and less costly than responding to out of control bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Victorian Government recognise roadside bushfire mitigation as a core roadside asset management function, with road authorities responsible for assessing bushfire risk, selecting appropriate treatments and coordinating delivery through authorised agencies, councils, contractors and CFA resources. Prescribed burning should remain an available treatment option where appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Victorian Government establish and maintain strategic fuel breaks along key roads, rail corridors, public land interfaces and other high risk corridors to support bushfire mitigation, emergency access and suppression operations.

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Victorian Government develop best practice guidelines to direct funding to flow immediately to local government authorities for relief centres and allow Emergency Relief Payments to be made available to residents following an order to evacuate.

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Victorian Government provide a three year exemption from council rates and exemption from the Emergency Services Volunteers levy for homeowners, primary production properties and businesses directly impacted by the bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Victorian Government reinstate a universal bushfire cleanup program to ensure all eligible affected properties receive assistance with debris removal and site remediation, regardless of insurance status.

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Victorian Government extend the landfill levy waiver for bushfire waste until 31 December 2026 to reduce the financial burden on affected communities, households, businesses and councils.

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Victorian Government enable local councils to fast track planning and building approvals for the rebuilding of homes, businesses and agricultural infrastructure following bushfire events.

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Victorian Government prioritise the delivery of temporary modular housing for homeless residents whose homes were significantly damaged or destroyed by the fires, and ensure sufficient temporary accommodation remains available until permanent housing is completed.

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Victorian Government establish targeted business recovery grants to support the reopening, rebuilding and long term viability of businesses affected by the bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 29: That the Victorian Government develop and fund a regional tourism recovery strategy to restore visitor confidence, support local tourism operators and promote bushfire affected regions.

RECOMMENDATION 30: That the Victorian Government provide sustained, long term funding for accessible mental health and wellbeing services in bushfire affected communities, recognising that recovery extends well beyond the immediate emergency response.

Comment on Committee Report

The Minority report recognises that the Committee report adopted sound recommendations to support local communities impacted by the fires, including:

- Supporting local councils to provide rate relief
- Providing an exemption from Emergency Services Volunteers Levy
- Reinstating a universal clean up program
- Extending the landfill levy waiver for bushfire waste
- Prioritising the delivery of temporary modular housing for homeless residents
- Enabling local councils to fast track planning and building approvals for rebuilding
- Providing sustained long term funding for accessible mental health and wellbeing services
- Establishing business recovery grants
- Establishing a regional tourism recovery strategy to restore visitor confidence, support local tourism operators and promote bushfire affected regions

Further points that were accepted:

- That the Victorian Government publish regular, publicly accessible reports detailing bushfire recovery expenditure, project delivery, funding allocations and outcomes to ensure transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.
- Provide ongoing funding for bulk water tankers and continued investment in innovative firefighting appliances to improve water supply and firefighting capability across the state.
- Strengthening private firefighting capability to assist farmers and rural landholders, recognising the critical role they play in early response to fires
- Prioritising environmental recovery including the rehabilitation of native vegetation, erosion control, pest and weed management, biodiversity restoration and catchment recovery
- Enhanced prevention and response messaging, and fast tracking improvements to the VicEmergency app
- Reviewing wire rope safety barriers and roadside infrastructure to ensure that they do not impede bushfire prevention, response and recovery activities.
- Enabling the CFA to require public landholders to reduce and maintain vegetation surrounding critical infrastructure.
- Prioritising the delivery of reliable power supply in regional communities, and advocate to the Commonwealth Government to ensure that the AER framework also considers social resilience, emergency management and regional equity.
- Requesting that IGEM review the conditions for international support crews hosted at regional airbases

However, the Committee's report frequently dismisses compelling evidence from submissions and witnesses and, in doing so, effectively papers over the deep structural flaws and policy failures of the Labor.

Given the extremely tight timeframe for preparing this Minority Report, we have concentrated on the most serious findings and policy failures, acknowledging that it has not been possible to address every concern identified throughout the inquiry.

Chapter 1 - Government Ignored Repeated Warnings

One of the most striking findings of this Inquiry is that many of the shortcomings revealed during the 2026 bushfires were neither unexpected nor unprecedented.

The evidence received by the Inquiry demonstrated that many of the failures exposed during the 2026 bushfires were foreseeable. They had been identified previously by the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC), the Victorian Auditor General (VAGO), the Inspector General for Emergency Management (IGEM), the Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM), local government, volunteer organisations and bushfire practitioners.

As noted in the Victorian Auditor General's Report, *Reducing Bushfire Risks 2020*, 'While it is not possible to eliminate the risks associated with bushfires, government agencies play key roles in reducing the likelihood of them starting and lessening their impact.' (pg 22)

The issue confronting Victoria is not a lack of recommendations.

The issue is a failure to adequately implement them.

FINDING 1: The 2026 bushfires exposed failures repeatedly identified by Royal Commissions, auditors and oversight bodies. The Allan Labor Government was warned and did not adequately act.

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

Among its recommendations were measures to improve fuel management, capability, incident management and preparedness. Evidence before this Inquiry indicate many of the same issues identified in 2009 still evident today.

Victorian Auditor General

VAGO found significant flaws in the risk modelling underpinning *Safer Together*, many of which remained unresolved in 2026. Despite this, Labor continued to use the model to support major fuel management policy decisions.

Fire Services Implementation Monitor

The FSIM repeatedly identified shortcomings in the Labor implementation of the fire service restructuring, particularly the CFA–FRV secondment model. As Niall Blair warned, "structural, legislative and industrial barriers remain" within the reform framework. Evidence indicated these unresolved problems continue to weaken CFA workforce stability, leadership continuity and operational capability.

Inspector General for Emergency Management

The IGEM repeatedly identified failures to fully implement Government commitments across fuel management, the Safer Together program, preparedness, evacuation planning and workforce capability, critical infrastructure and recovery arrangements. IGEM reported in 2026 that 31 actions from the 2019–20 Victorian Bushfires Inquiry remained incomplete or in progress. The 2026 bushfire season again demonstrated the cost of this failure to fully deliver promised reforms.

Chapter 2: Victoria Entered the Fire Season Underprepared

2.1 Declining Volunteer Numbers and Workforce Sustainability

Country Fire Authority

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) is one of Victoria's most respected institutions, built on local knowledge, volunteer commitment and a long tradition of community service.

Volunteer firefighters remain the backbone of Victoria's regional fire response capability. However, the Inquiry heard compelling evidence that Victoria entered the 2025–26 fire season with significant and well known capability and preparedness deficiencies that had not been adequately addressed.

"We cannot control Mother Nature, but we can control our preparedness and response." Adam Barnett, VFBV, Melbourne, 1 May 2026.

Witnesses consistently raised concerns that the CFA was being asked to meet increasing emergency management demands while operating under growing resource pressures, including.

- declining volunteer numbers;
- reduced funding in real terms;
- an ageing fleet of appliances;
- ageing stations and supporting infrastructure;
- shortages of experienced command and leadership personnel; and
- increasing operational and administrative demands on volunteers.

Rather than entering the 2025–26 season from a position of strength, many witnesses argued that the CFA and its volunteers were being asked to do more with less, despite repeated warnings about these systemic challenges.

"CFA volunteers have borne the brunt of limited funding and resourcing that simply does not stretch fair enough." – Adam Barnett, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, 1 May 2026.

Declining volunteer numbers

CFA operational volunteer numbers fell from around 40,000 in 2009 to 28,855 in 2026, a reduction of approximately 11,000 volunteers. Witnesses linked this decline to volunteer fatigue, increasing operational demands and declining morale. The Inquiry also heard that the most significant drop in volunteer numbers occurred in the two years following Fire Services Reform.

"We are not replacing the volunteers at the rate we are losing them."

Leigh Harry, CFA Volunteers Group, Open Mic Session, Colac hearing, 21 April 2026.

FINDING 2: The decade long decline in CFA operational volunteer numbers represents one of the most serious risks to Victoria's bushfire preparedness and has not been adequately addressed by Labor.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government work with the CFA to develop and fund a volunteer fire fighter recruitment and retention strategy.

CFA responses to Questions on Notice

The Minority Report notes serious concerns regarding the apparent alteration of CFA responses to Questions on Notice provided to the Inquiry.

While most witnesses gave evidence openly and directly, it remains unclear to what extent evidence provided by Government departments and statutory authorities was independently prepared, given the requirements imposed by the *Victorian Government Guidelines for submissions and responses to inquiries* and the *Guidelines for appearing before and producing documents to Victorian inquiries*.

The Committee received two materially different versions of the CFA's responses to Questions on Notice. The original response, dated 4 June 2026, comprised 33 pages and contained detailed operational information, funding requests and agency concerns. A revised 18 page response was subsequently provided on 30 June 2026 following review through government processes.

The original CFA response stated that between 2022 and 2025 the CFA had sought an additional \$330.57 million in funding, of which only \$117.95 million had been approved. This information was removed from the later version. The revised response also omitted CFA concerns that fire station projects delivered through the Community Safety Building Authority were costing up to three to four times more than comparable stations delivered directly by the CFA.

In correspondence sent to the Committee, CFA Chief Executive Officer Mr Greg Leach advised Mr Dean Tighe:

“CFA prepared a written response to those questions which was provided to the Committee on 04 June 2026. CFA did not consider its response contained any content which would give rise to a claim of executive privilege. I note that FRV’s written response to questions is already available on the Committee website.”

Mr Leach further advised Mr Tighe that:

“Based on our telephone conversation, my understanding of the process from here is that the CFA’s written response has to be reviewed by DJCS/VGSO and a Cabinet Committee (listed for 20 June 2026) before it can be provided to the committee. I also understand that EMV is coordinating that process in its role as the lead agency.”

These statements indicate that CFA evidence was subject to review by multiple government agencies and a Cabinet process before being provided to the Inquiry, despite the CFA's view that the material did not raise issues of executive privilege.

Evidence provided to a parliamentary inquiry should not be sanitised in a manner that removes operational concerns, capability constraints, funding pressures or agency views that are directly relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference. The differences between the CFA's original and revised responses raise significant issues of transparency, accountability and the ability of parliamentary committees to receive candid evidence from emergency service agencies.

The Minority Report considers that these matters warrant further examination by the Inspector General for Emergency Management and the Parliament, particularly where alterations to evidence concern emergency service capability, resourcing and public safety.

The Minority Report Appendix B, C and A contain both versions of CFA Questions on Notice and all publicly available correspondence to the Committee.

Links to the Victorian Government's guidelines governing submissions are found at the following website. [Guidelines for submissions and responses to inquiries | vic.gov.au](#) and

[Guidelines for appearing before and producing documents to Victorian inquiries | vic.gov.au](#)

2.2 Funding and Resource Constraints

The Inquiry heard that CFA has been expected to do more with less. While incidents and brigade turnouts have increased, the real value of CFA funding has fallen by at least \$50 million since 2020, contributing to growing pressures on volunteers, ageing infrastructure and an ageing fleet.

The VFBV estimates \$65 million per year is needed, while the Allan Labor Government only offers \$10 million per year.

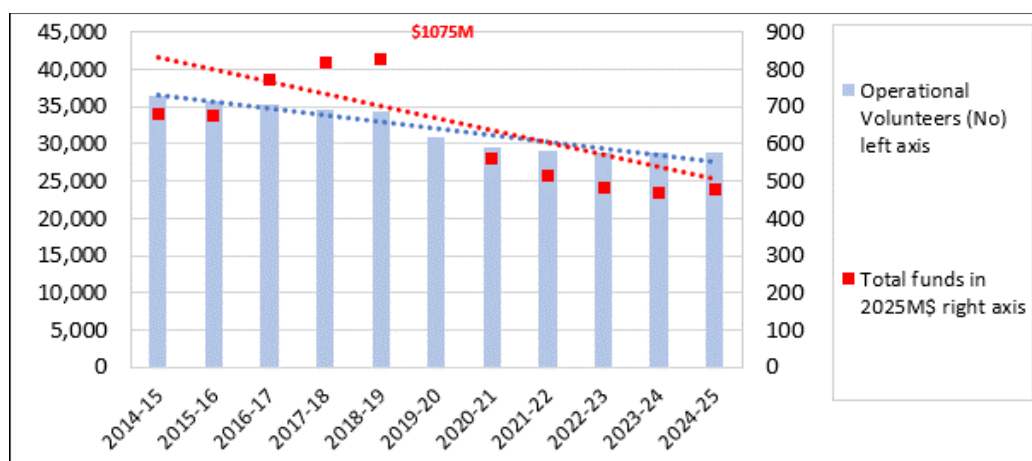
Evidence before the Inquiry distinguished between headline funding announcements and the ongoing operational and capital funding required to maintain CFA capability, arguing that the latter has not kept pace with demand.

In answers to Questions on Notice dated 4 June 2026 the CFA stated that the annual funding it had received was insufficient to support its asset base of \$2.2b.

It also stated that in the three years FY 2022-23 to FY 2024-25 inclusive, it had submitted requests to the State Budget process totalling **\$330.57m** yet only **\$117.95m** had been approved.

See Appendix B for full document.

Figure XX: Decline in the CFA's funding in real terms and operational frontline firefighters (\$244)



FINDING 3: The Inquiry heard evidence that underinvestment in the CFA by Labor over successive years has resulted in a significant deterioration of fleet and infrastructure renewal programs, with funding failing to keep pace with inflation, service demand and asset replacement requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Victorian Government restore CFA funding to a level capable of meeting operational requirements and establish a permanent indexed funding framework that provides adequate recurrent funding for volunteer support, operational capability, fleet replacement and infrastructure renewal.

2.3 Ageing Fleet and Infrastructure

Ageing appliances

Ageing appliances are not simply an asset management problem. They are a frontline safety problem. First responders who enter dangerous firegrounds should not be expected to rely on outdated vehicles lacking contemporary safety protections because government failed to fund a sustainable replacement program.

“We are asking volunteers to get on these appliances, to drive into extreme conditions and to trust that everything possible has been done to keep them safe. But the reality is it has not.” Leigh Harry, CFA volunteer / CFA Volunteers Group, 21 April 2026.

The committee heard extensive evidence that a significant number of firefighting appliances in the CFA fleet are beyond the standard replacement age of 15 years for pumpers and 20 years for tankers.

The CEO of the CFA Greg Leach told the committee

“We over a long period of time have had a management principle of wanting to turn our fleet over at 20 years of age for tankers and 15 years of age for pumpers. But as you can see, our fleet is beyond that, and we continue to advocate with government to ensure that we put forward our whole of life asset plan so that we can work with government to secure an ongoing funding stream to replace those trucks.”

Data included in answers to Questions on Notice to the CFA (June 4) reveal that 725 Tankers are beyond the age of 20 years and 163 Pumpers are beyond 15 years of age.

Table: CFA Response to QoN June 4 Appliance type, by age (all funding sources)

	0-5 years	5-10 years	10-15 years	15-20 years	20-25 years	25-30 years	30-35 years	35-40 years	Total
Pumpers	1	43	11	85	56	20	2	0	218
Pumper tankers	1	0	0	20	8	12	3	0	44
Tanker	260	229	408	339	186	242	231	66	1,961
Specialist Vehicles	25	44	28	20	12	6	3	0	138
Total	262	272	419	444	250	274	236	66	2,361

The committee also heard evidence of numerous single cab tankers where crew members have to travel in exposed rear facing seating on the back of the truck.

Nick Murray the Captain of the Alexandra Brigade told the committee:

“Moving forward, I would like to see the government look into our ageing fleet of trucks. Fortunately, at Alexandra we have newer trucks. However, when I started in my time at Taggerty fire brigade it was on an older truck with exposed cabin on the back, and I think during these fires, especially when we are volunteers – people taking their own time – trucks need to be a priority, as in, this is a safety issue.”

Lachlan Butterfield told a similar story about FRV appliances saying:

“We also need a rolling replacement program so we do not end up here again and these fire trucks replaced when they are actually due. Both Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria have a strict vehicle replacement program that is followed. This does not happen with FRV, with CFA or with FFMV.”

FINDING 4: The Inquiry heard evidence that hundreds of CFA and FRV appliances are operating beyond their intended service life and CFA volunteers continue to respond to major incidents in ageing single cab appliances that do not provide the crew protection, communications capability and situational awareness available in contemporary firefighting vehicles.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government commit to a funded, accelerated fleet replacement program for CFA and FRV and establish an ongoing fleet renewal funding stream that ensures:

- all CFA frontline single cab tankers are removed from operational service within five years; and
- and develop and fund a fully costed 10 year plan to restore each agencies fleet to its prescribed maximum age profile.

CFA Fire Stations

In answers to Questions on Notice dated 4 June 2026 the CFA included information about the cost of building new Fire station from 2018 through to 2024 showing the cost of building new stations under CFA management from 2018 to 2022 prior to the change to the Community Safety Building Authority.

The information revealed that post the change to CSBA the cost of building the five classifications of station had more than doubled and a class 1B station had more than tripled.

The information also revealed that prior to the transfer to CSBA the CFA would deliver an average of 29 new stations per annum and post the change CSBA only averages two new stations per annum.

Typology	2018	2020	2022 WoLP	2024 CSBA	Variance to last build	% variance	Variance to WoLP	% Variance	Comments
1A	\$550,000	\$650,000	\$750,000	\$2,284,623	\$1,634,623	251%	\$1,534,623	205%	No laundry or drying room facilities required. Increase to motor room length, approx. 1m (10m2).
1B	\$770,000	\$850,000	\$1,200,000	\$3,952,912	\$3,102,912	365%	\$2,752,912	229%	No laundry or drying room facilities required. Increase to motor room length, approx. 1m (10m2).
1C	\$1,650,000	\$1,750,000	\$2,500,000	\$5,665,219	\$3,915,219	224%	\$3,165,219	127%	Laundry and drying room included – included in 2020 Increase in motor room widths in end bays by 0.4m across 12m length not in standard designs initially (10m2).
2A	\$2,200,000	\$2,300,000	\$2,900,000	\$7,626,834	\$5,326,834	232%	\$4,726,834	163%	Laundry and drying room included – Part of station typology Increase in motor room widths in end bays by 0.4m across 12m length not in standard designs initially (10m2).
2B	\$2,600,000	\$2,700,000	\$3,500,000	\$7,863,972	\$5,163,972	191%	\$4,363,972	125%	Increase in motor room widths in end bays by 0.4m across 12m length not in standard designs initially (10m2).

Table: Cost comparison CFA vs CSBA. Source CFA Response to QON's 4 June 2026

FINDING 5: The transfer of CFA station construction to the Community Safety Building Authority has resulted in significantly higher costs and far fewer CFA stations being delivered.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Victorian Government immediately return the responsibility for the planning and delivery of CFA stations to the Country Fire Authority, with public reporting of project costs, timelines and delivery outcomes to ensure transparency and value for money.

Scrap Labor's Emergency Services Tax

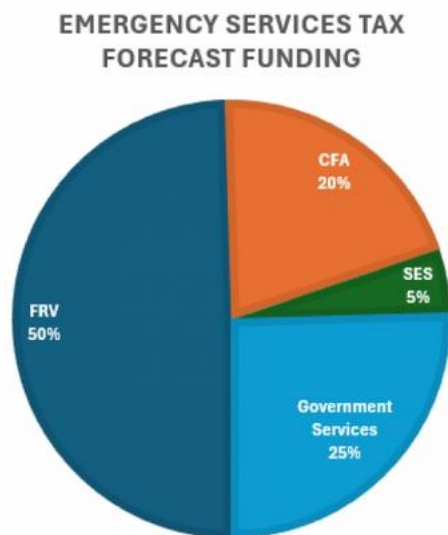
The Allan Labor Government's expanded Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund (Tax) is an inequitable and punitive tax that places the greatest burden on regional Victorians. Many of those facing the largest increases are CFA volunteers who already contribute their time, equipment and local knowledge.

Labor presents a larger levy as stronger emergency services funding. The clear evidence tells a different story: declining CFA capability, ageing appliances, command shortages, fuel management failures and unresolved infrastructure vulnerabilities.

A higher tax bill is not a substitute for frontline investment. Volunteers expressed outrage that the Fund bears their name while most of its revenue is not directed to volunteer emergency services. Many regard the title as misleading and offensive, creating the impression that volunteers are the primary beneficiaries when the evidence suggests otherwise.

CFA Volunteers Group spokesperson John Huston told the Inquiry that farmers were prepared to contribute fairly, but not to pay "10, 20 or 30 times more" than others. He also linked the tax directly to volunteers being expected to attend fires and road accidents in old and unsafe tankers. They expect less than one quarter of the total funding collected leaving them with inadequate government funding (Submission 408) and already well funded FRV rolling in more cash.

Figure: Forecast allocation of the Emergency Services Volunteers Fund



FINDING 6: Labor’s expanded Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund imposes an inequitable burden on Victorians.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government scrap the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund and revert to the previous Fire Services Property Levy model and properly fund our emergency services.

2.4 Incident Management and Leadership Capability

As at July 2025 Victoria had only 57 accredited Level 3 Incident Controllers compared to approximately 100 Level 3 Incident Controllers in 2009 - around one third of the capability established following Black Saturday.

Lachlan Gales, Group Officer at Wangaratta and an experienced Level 3 Incident Controller, warned that *“the current situation we have got sets us up to fail”* and that unless leadership development is addressed meaningfully, future inquiries will hear the same evidence again.

His evidence supports a dedicated reform program to rebuild CFA volunteer leadership pathways, expand incident management training, embed experienced volunteers and local knowledge in IMTs and fund practical preparedness and communications capability before the next fire season.
“Across the board CFA lacks depth in numbers for core roles in both the fireground and in IMTs. There are low numbers of sector commanders, low numbers in IMT roles as operations, planning, logistics, you name it.” – Lachlan Gales, Group Officer Wangaratta, 24 April 2026, transcript p.27.

This shortfall highlights a stark decline in incident management capability.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government ensure EMV publicly reports annually on the full complement of endorsed Level 2 and Level 3 Incident Management Team roles, enabling transparent monitoring of the State’s emergency management capability.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Fire Services Implementation Monitor report quarterly on volunteer access to Incident Management Team training.

To delve further into the lack of IMT the Minority report will consider the impact of Labor’s Secondment Arrangements.

2.5 Communications and Operational Readiness

Radio and Telecommunication Failures

The committee heard evidence that CFA radio communications failed and that the Motorola Radios struggled or did not work due to telecommunications blackspots, heavy smoke and challenging terrain, leaving crews vulnerable and unable to contact each other.

Michael Shay Captain of Marong said: “Our brigade arrived on scene. They got to work extinguishing the fire here at Harcourt and assisting other brigades in saving as many properties as possible, but the crew reported that during this time radio communications were failing and there was an inability to talk to incident control.”

Michael Elliott Captain of Talgarno CFA told the committee: “As the fire approached, I was contacted via telephone as the radios had gone down. This was an issue for the whole time the fires were on; we had poor communications.”

Some brigades reported difficulties in using radio communications due to difficult terrain.

Nick Murray Captain of Alexandra Brigade told the committee: “And with regard to the radios, as much as I say ‘If they didn’t work,’ you have got to take into account we are in steep hills. It is erratic. Radio communication cannot go around a hill; it cannot go through hill, and to go around is very difficult.”

Peter Weeks, with over 50 years of experience in radio and telecommunications said:

“People could not use their internet, could not use their phones, could not call 000 and had to rely on UHF radios if they had those and, if they had the ability, satellite services through Starlink and things like that.” Peter Weeks, Alexandra Hearing, 24 April 2026.

Lachlan Butterfield, a leading firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria further commented:

“I was deployed to the Harcourt fire, but ground observers at the Skipton fire also told me that they were facing the same issues that I was facing. The information I was capturing was not uploading. I had raised concerns that morning that it was struggling to upload information.”

Peter Tolsher, Mayor of Towong Shire told the Committee:

“Power was a big issue. The line follows the Murray Valley Highway all the way along, and when the fire comes through and takes that down, it is 10 or 15 days before they can get power back up, because they have got to get safe access. Then they have got to change out poles from wood to concrete. The reality is that if the Murray Valley Highway could be considered as a strategic firebreak and they could actually take the vegetation back and put concrete poles in, you would not lose power in Corryong. That would be such a simple thing to do to guarantee the power would stay up there.” 6 May 2026, Public Hearing.

FINDING 7: The Inquiry heard evidence of significant radio communication deficiencies during the 2026 summer bushfires, including communication blackspots, reduced functionality in heavy smoke, terrain related limitations and difficulties maintaining contact with incident control.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Victorian Government undertake an independent audit of emergency service radio coverage and resilience across Victoria and fund the infrastructure and technology upgrades required to ensure reliable emergency communications during major bushfire events.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government, telecommunications providers and electricity network operators to improve the resilience, redundancy and timely restoration of critical communications and electricity infrastructure, ensuring communities remain connected and emergency services can operate effectively before, during and after bushfires.

Chapter 3: Governance Reforms Reduced Operational Capability

CFA–FRV Secondments

Following Labor’s restructure of the fires services in 2019, the CFA Assistant Chief Officers, Commanders and Training Officers are no longer employed directly by the CFA but seconded from Fire Rescue Victoria.

Significant evidence presented to the Inquiry concerned the CFA - FRV secondment model.

Across the regional hearings and in submissions, stakeholders repeatedly argued that the model has:

- reduced CFA autonomy
- contributed to leadership instability
- left key positions vacant
- inhibited workforce planning
- reduced training opportunities for volunteers
- undermined volunteer confidence.

During the week commencing 5 January 2026:

- three of the five Assistant Chief Fire Officer or Commander positions required for District 22 were vacant;
- the CFA was 29 full time equivalent senior operational positions, or 18.5 per cent, below the Secondment Agreement requirement;
- five districts had Commander gaps exceeding 50 per cent, including District 22, where the Longwood fire ignited, and District 2, where the Harcourt fire began; and
- both districts commenced sustained 24 hour operations while carrying serious command shortages.

Since October 2020, the CFA has operated with an average weekly shortfall of 17.2 ACFOs and Commanders, equivalent to an average 11.4 per cent reduction in command services. This was not an administrative inconvenience. It was a frontline capability failure.

See Appendix B & C for full list of vacancies from CFA Questions on Notice June 4.

FINDING 8: The CFA - FRV secondment model has created a sustained and systemic shortfall in senior operational leadership positions within the CFA, reducing command capability, limiting workforce planning and undermining support for CFA volunteers.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Victorian Government restore CFA's capacity to directly employ its operational leadership workforce by ending the mandatory secondment model and providing ongoing funding for the recruitment and retention of senior operational and training personnel.

Private Fire Units

The Committee heard extensive evidence on the important role private firefighting units played in supplementing CFA capacity during the 2026 summer bushfires.

Typically owned by farmers, private units range from slip on firefighting units mounted on utes, trailers and tractors to privately owned fire trucks. Equipped with water tanks, pumps and firefighting hoses, they provide a critical first response capability for grass, machinery, hay and bushfires on private land.

Both the South Australian Government and the NSW Government have established agreements with the owners of private units. The committee heard that these units substantially boosted the capacity to fight the 2026 Summer Fires.

In Quantong Brain Klowss told the Committee:

“We found resources. We did not have a lot of resources in that first 15, 20 minutes given the speed of the fire and just the physical time to get there. It was the private units that were there on scene fast, and they were a huge benefit to the community in the early stages”

He went on to say: “... but we are aware it is all the private units. That is what stopped this fire. It was not the fire trucks, as such, it was what I estimate at 250 odd private units that were here on the fireground. They were all with private units at this fire. So that is what stopped it.”

FINDING 9: That private units added substantial firefighting capacity and were beneficial in the containment of fires.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the State Government provide CFA with the authority and funding to establish formal agreements that register private units based on similar agreements and benefits that exist in South Australia and New South Wales. As well considering installing radios that communicate with CFA in the private units.

State Crisis and Resilience Council

The Minority recognises that the State Crisis and Resilience Council excludes the Chief Officers of CFA, FRV, FFMV and SES. Consequently, Victoria's highest emergency management body develops policy and strategic priorities affecting bushfire mitigation, preparedness and response without direct representation from the operational leaders responsible for delivering emergency services. Evidence indicates this must be rectified for improved operational and community safety.

FINDING 10: The absence of CFA, FRV, FFMV and SES Chief Officers from the State Crisis and Resilience Council limits the influence of frontline operational expertise in Victoria's emergency management governance.

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Victorian Government should appoint the Chief Officers of CFA, FRV, FFMV and SES as members of the State Crisis and Resilience Council.

State Emergency Management

Changes to statewide emergency management control to the Emergency Services Commissioner has meant that the states most senior fire officer is not the person in charge during major bushfires. Since the position of Emergency Management Commissioner was established, Victoria has appointed four people to this position. The last three appointments have consisted of two Police Officers, and the current EMC's expertise is in the SES.

Fire is the one natural disaster in which humans can intervene to lessen its effects or guide its path. It is common sense that the person in charge during bushfires is an officer who is a highly trained expert in firefighting. Recommendation 63 of the VBRC advised the state to enact legislation appointing an independent Fire Commissioner as the senior operational firefighter.

FINDING 11: The Inquiry heard evidence that Victoria's current emergency management arrangements do not require the State Controller for major bushfires to be the state's most senior and experienced fire officer, potentially limiting the influence of specialist bushfire expertise during major fire events.

RECOMMENDATION 13: That the Victoria Government ensure that the state's most senior fire officer should hold ultimate operational command authority for major bushfires and serve as the State Controller for Level 3 fires.

Municipal Fire Prevention Committee

The Inquiry received substantial evidence regarding the replacement of Municipal Fire Prevention Committees (MFPCs) with Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPCs).

Witnesses argued that local fire prevention expertise became diluted within broader emergency management structures and that accountability for fuel reduction across multiple land tenures weakened.

"Colac Otway shire ceased to have the municipal fire prevention committee. It does not exist anymore. That was a great conduit for us to bring issues to the table, for the fire prevention manager within the shire to manage or to instigate remedies. Unfortunately, that has ceased to be now." Mark Billing, Corangamite Group Officer, CFA, Colac hearing on Tuesday 21 April.

Many volunteers and councils regarded the change as a step backwards rather than an improvement.

"We have got a neighbouring shire that has that, has kept it going and gets great results." Mark Billing, Corangamite Group Officer, CFA, Colac hearing on Tuesday 21 April.

FINDING 12: The replacement of Municipal Fire Prevention Committees weakened local bushfire planning, reduced accountability for fuel management and diminished the influence of volunteer and community expertise.

RECOMMENDATION 14: Municipal Fire Prevention Committees should be reinstated across Victoria with strong CFA, local government and community representation and a specific statutory responsibility for bushfire prevention and fuel management oversight.

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government create a formal community-based bushfire prevention framework to ensure local knowledge is incorporated into fuel management decisions, fire risk assessments and bushfire preparedness planning.

Office of Bushfire Risk Mitigation

The Inquiry received evidence that the Office of Bushfire Risk Management has not delivered the independent oversight originally envisaged. The CFA argued that its location within DEECA limits its independence and has not resulted in improved cross tenure fuel management or bushfire mitigation outcomes.

FINDING 13: The Inquiry heard evidence that the current structure and operation of the Office of Bushfire Risk Management has not delivered the independent oversight, tenure blind fuel management coordination and practical bushfire mitigation outcomes originally envisaged.

RECOMMENDATION 16: That the Victorian Government reform the Office of Bushfire Risk Management to ensure genuine independence from land management agencies and provide clear responsibility for coordinating tenure blind fuel management across Victoria.

Chapter 4: Fuel Reduction, Risk Mitigation Failure and FFMV

Fuel is the bushfire risk factor most directly influenced by government action.

In 2015, the Labor replaced hectare based fuel reduction targets with the *Safer Together* framework. More than a decade later, evidence to this Inquiry suggests the policy has failed to deliver the promised reduction in bushfire risk.

The Inquiry heard consistent evidence that fuel loads remain high, roadside vegetation is poorly managed and mitigation has not kept pace with risk.

Forestry Australia submitted:

“The scale of bushfire impacts on the community, economy and environment result from a reduced commitment to properly resource the management of public forest lands and in particular a decline in the use of planned (prescribed) fire at the landscape scale.”

It further stated:

“Mild extensive burning is not only a tool for fuel management but also contributes to maintenance of forest health and biodiversity and to minimising the impact of fire on distributed assets and infrastructure.”

The evidence does not suggest fuel reduction alone prevents bushfires. However, it does show that inadequate fuel management increases fire intensity, accelerates fire spread, reduces initial attack effectiveness and makes suppression more difficult.

As John O'Brien from Murrindindi Shire told the Inquiry:

“Fuel management remains one of the most critical and unresolved issues facing bushfire prone communities.”

Evidence presented to the Inquiry raised concerns about:

- the removal of more than 300 G-Wagons and Unimog tankers from service at the start of the fire season.
- fuel reduction on public land averaging less than 1.5 per cent annually;
- districts remaining above fuel risk targets;
- increasing forest fuel loads;

FFMV Fleet

The Inquiry also received evidence that more than 300 FFMV firefighting vehicles, including Mercedes G-Wagons and Unimogs, were removed from service at the beginning of the fire season because of safety concerns. This represented a significant preparedness failure.

John Cameron, forestry and fire policy consultant and former CFA forest industry brigade member cited the grounding of 290 G-Wagons and 59 Unimogs at the start of the 2025–26 fire season as a significant preparedness failure and a reduction in available suppression capability.

“This is a serious breach of fire season preparation....”

“It begs the question why the fire trucks were not inspected in winter so they could be prepared well before the fire season.”

“FFMV had to rely on some CFA tankers, leaving some areas critically short of tankers.” Submission 244.

Other submitters similarly argued that shortcomings in fleet maintenance, preparedness and organisational readiness increased operational risk and reduced firefighting capability during the 2025–26 fire season.

FINDING 14: The grounding of the G-Wagon and Unimog fleet exposed a significant operational vulnerability and raised concerns about the long term serviceability of critical firefighting assets.

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government provide assurance that remediation works undertaken on the G-Wagon and Unimog fleet deliver a sustainable long term solution, and report on the ongoing serviceability, replacement planning and operational readiness of the fleet before future fire seasons.

Fuel Modelling and Failed Bushfire Mitigation

The Inquiry heard evidence that the average time from ignition to attack for forest fires is approximately two hours. Under conditions of heavy fuel loads and adverse weather, fires can become well established long before suppressions resources arrive.

The consequences are that Victoria increasingly relies upon suppressing large, high intensity bushfires that have already escaped initial attack rather than preventing them from developing in the first place.

The Inquiry heard repeated concerns that Victoria has increasingly relied on modelling, suppression and recovery while failing to deliver sufficient mitigation on the ground.

Sustained mitigation is cheaper than suppression, recovery and repeated insured losses. A policy that relies on rapid suppression while allowing fuel loads to accumulate is fundamentally flawed.

The low fuel reduction in Victoria has resulted in considerable wildfire (grass and bushfire) and increase in total fire.

Figure: Low levels of fuel reduction and the increase in total fire in Victoria.

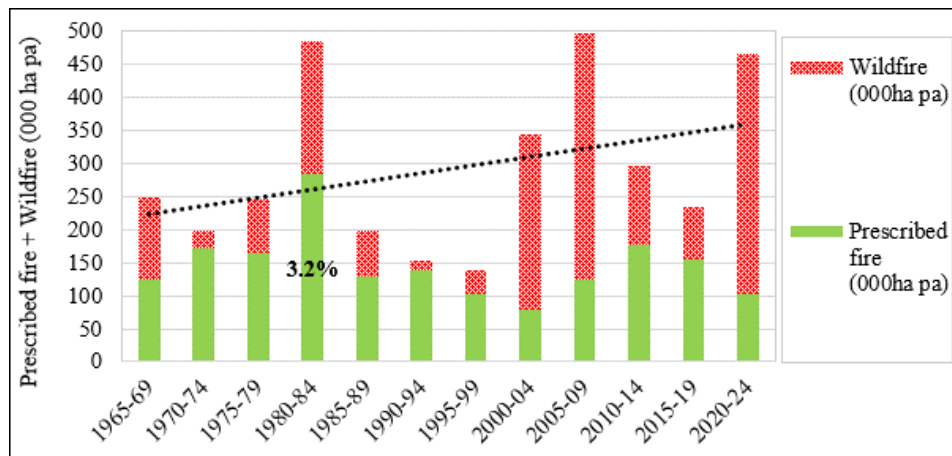
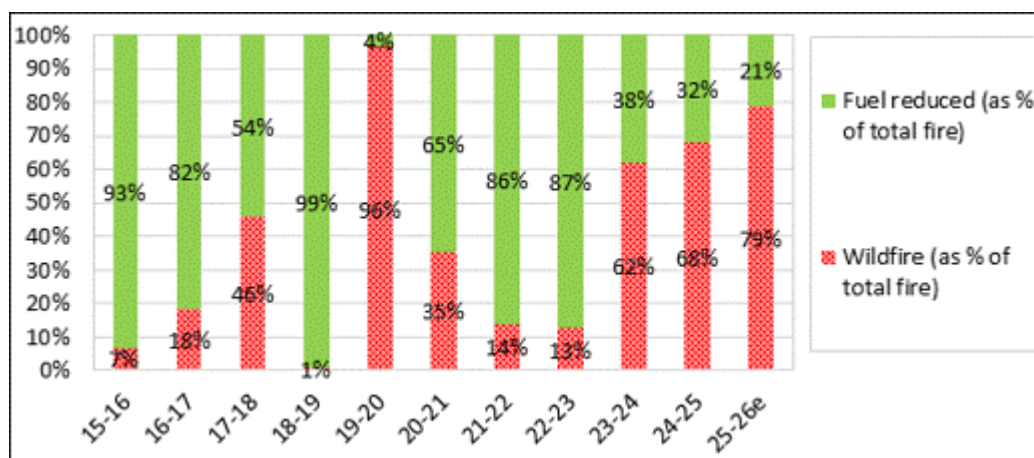


Figure: The proportion of wildfire has increased over the life of the Safer Together policy



Submission 244 John Cameron.

FINDING 15: Labor's *Safer Together* policy has failed to deliver the mitigation outcomes promised when it was introduced. Significant areas of Victoria remain above fuel risk targets and hazardous fuel continues to accumulate to the detriment of communities and the environment.

Table: The CFA, FFMV and FRV funding comparisons

Item	CFA	FFMV	FRV	Total
Fire protection area (million ha)	13.9	7.8	1.0	22.7
Fire stations (No)	1,208	80	85	1,373
Fire fighting appliances (No)	2,389	650	250	3,289
Frontline firefighters (No)	28,855	1,800	4,032	34,687
Fire stations (No/million ha)	87	10	85	60
Appliances (No/million ha)	171	83	250	145
Frontline firefighters (No/million ha)	2,069	231	4,032	1,525
Typical detection to initial attack (minutes)	20 (rural)	120	8	

Source: Stations, appliances and personell from Submission 408.

Despite carrying responsibility for more than 21 million hectares of bushfire prone land, CFA and FFMVic operate with significantly lower resource densities, reinforcing concerns about fuel management, initial attack capability and preparedness.

FINDING 16: The current fuel management outcomes are not meeting the intent of previous bushfire inquiry recommendations and that fuel driven bushfire risk remains unacceptably high in regions across Victoria.

FINDING 17: The Committee finds that insufficient fuel reduction increases risk to life, property, critical infrastructure, firefighters and the environment, while reducing opportunities for successful early suppression and containment.

Victoria needs a fuel management framework that measures risk but also guarantees sufficient on ground fuel treatment across the landscape.

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Victorian Government replace the current residual risk only approach with a hybrid bushfire mitigation framework that combines risk modelling with minimum fuel treatment requirements and landscape scale fuel management objectives. The framework should ensure balanced fuel reduction across communities, public forests, roadsides, critical infrastructure corridors and water catchments, with annual public reporting on fuel management performance and regional bushfire risk.

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Victorian Government increase targeted investment in fuel reduction, strategic fuel breaks, roadside fuel management and rapid initial attack capability, recognising that preventing catastrophic bushfires is more effective and less costly than responding to out of control bushfires.

Roadside Bushfire Mitigation and Strategic Fuel Breaks

The Inquiry received compelling evidence that Victoria's roadside bushfire mitigation regime is no longer fit for purpose. Excessive fuel loads, inadequate slashing and poor vegetation management have left many roadsides acting as conduits for fire spread rather than effective firebreaks. Witnesses repeatedly questioned why private landholders are held to strict fuel management standards while similar obligations are not consistently enforced on publicly managed land.

Evidence from Murrindindi, the Wimmera, the Otways and the Upper Murray suggested that roadsides, rail corridors and other public land were increasingly contributing to fire spread rather than helping contain it. These concerns are particularly relevant given evidence presented to the Inquiry that the Hume - Longwood fire is alleged to have originated in roadside fuels.

Several witnesses argued that fuel reduction works on roadsides and transport corridors have not kept pace with bushfire risk.

“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.” Ian Macintyre, Yarck Rural Fire Brigade.

“The vital and time honoured practice of roadside firebreaks burnt annually and efficiently by CFA volunteer brigades to protect their communities has also become much more difficult. The process has been strangled by unrealistic bureaucratic conditions and at much greater cost. As a result, more roadsides are becoming serious fire hazards.” Peter Flinn, Chairman, Howitt Society; Secretary, Grampians Asset Protection Group; Life Member CFA and Dunkeld Fire Brigade.

“Currently our roadsides are not firebreaks. Vegetation management seems to be lacking. Clean up along our roads is not happening, which is making our roads and roadsides very dangerous places to be during a fire and an extra battle for firefighters on extreme bad days attempting to pull up the fire.” Michael Shay, Marong CFA Captain.

The Inquiry also heard repeated calls for strategic fuel breaks along key roads, public land interfaces and other high risk corridors to improve firefighter access, support rapid initial attack and provide safer containment opportunities during major bushfires. Witnesses consistently identified strategic fuel breaks as a practical but underutilised mitigation measure.

FINDING 18: Victoria's approach to roadside bushfire mitigation and strategic fuel breaks is inconsistent and inadequate, resulting in excessive fuel loads along key transport corridors and reducing their effectiveness as bushfire mitigation and suppression assets.

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Victorian Government recognise roadside bushfire mitigation as a core roadside asset management function, with road authorities responsible for assessing bushfire risk, selecting appropriate treatments and coordinating delivery through authorised agencies, councils, contractors and CFA resources. Prescribed burning should remain an available treatment option where appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Victorian Government establish and maintain strategic fuel breaks along key roads, rail corridors, public land interfaces and other high risk corridors to support bushfire mitigation, emergency access and suppression operations.

Chapter 5: Human Impact and Community Recovery

Despite the scale and severity of the summer fires, many regional communities were left to fend for themselves, with an evident disparity in the support provided by the Victorian Government compared to previous disasters.

Initial support was slow to come and councils already stretched for resources were forced to use their own funds to set up relief centres, house and feed those who had evacuated.

Evacuations began in the Walwa Fire area on the 5th January and Longwood Fire Area on the 7th January, however, the Emergency Relief Payments were not announced until Friday 9th January. The Emergency Relief Payments are made under the Personal Hardship Assistance Program, including to allow people to meet immediate food, clothing, medication, toiletries or accommodation needs. The relief payment was a one off payment of \$680 per adult and \$340 per child, up to a maximum of \$2380 per family.

The CEO of Towong Shire Julianna Phelps told the committee:

“A number of our community members have a low socio economic position. I heard it recently said that evacuation is a privilege. There are people within our communities who probably did not even have a full tank of petrol to get them to the evacuation centre in Wodonga and made choices around staying.”

The Committee heard significant evidence that the level of recovery assistance provided to communities most severely affected by the bushfires is inequitable and does not reflect the scale of their losses. Many residents are forced to bear the financial burden of paying council rates, taxes, and planning and building permit costs while attempting to rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

At the same time, an inequitable clean up program has caused prolonged delays, leaving some properties contaminated and delaying recovery.

Evidence to the Committee highlighted the significant impacts of delays to the bushfire clean up program. Months after the January bushfires, many properties remained contaminated with hazardous materials, including asbestos, fuel tanks and gas cylinders, preventing residents from rebuilding and creating ongoing health and environmental risks. The Committee heard that the slow pace of the program led some residents, including elderly landholders, to undertake hazardous clean up work themselves. Concerns were also raised about the absence of event specific eligibility guidelines, limited public reporting on program progress, inconsistent decision making, and uncertainty regarding timeframes for property assessments and completion of clean up works, contributing to frustration and delaying community recovery.

Despite more than 600 registrations for the clean up program and 241 properties assessed as eligible, only 28 properties had been fully cleaned up at the time of the hearing on 1 May, nearly four months after the fires. The Committee heard that repeated inspections and delays meant many eligible landholders were still waiting for clean up works to commence.

The Committee also heard concerns about the absence of targeted business recovery grants, insufficient long term mental health services, and a lack of investment to promote bushfire affected regions and restore tourism. Together, these shortcomings slow community recovery and place additional strain on individuals, families, businesses, and local economies already devastated by the fires.

Peter Tolsher, Mayor of Towong Shire reflected on the long term impact of the fires on the local economy:

The economic impacts are expected to have medium to long term consequences for Towong's agricultural base and the local economy, including tourism. While only a small number of businesses were directly impacted by the fire, there was a widespread loss of trading across the entire Towong shire due to the fire threat and major access limitations, and visitations to the regions were substantially reduced. (6 May hearing)

FINDING 19: That the Victorian Government was slow to announce Emergency Relief Payments resulting in some residents making choices about whether to evacuate and others displaced for four days before being able to apply for the payment.

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Victorian Government develop best practice guidelines to direct funding to flow immediately to local government authorities for relief centres, and allow Emergency Relief Payments to be made available to residents following an order to evacuate.

The following recommendations seek to restore the imbalance experienced by residents and rural and regional communities directly impacted by the bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Victorian Government provide a three year exemption from council rates and exemption from the Emergency Services Volunteers levy for homeowners, primary production properties and businesses directly impacted by the bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Victorian Government reinstate a universal bushfire cleanup program to ensure all eligible affected properties receive assistance with debris removal and site remediation, regardless of insurance status.

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Victorian Government extend the landfill levy waiver for bushfire waste until 31 December 2026 to reduce the financial burden on affected communities, households, businesses and councils.

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Victorian Government enable local councils to fast track planning and building approvals for the rebuilding of homes, businesses and agricultural infrastructure following bushfire events.

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Victorian Government prioritise the delivery of temporary modular housing for homeless residents whose homes were significantly damaged or destroyed by the fires, and ensure sufficient temporary accommodation remains available until permanent housing is completed.

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Victorian Government establish targeted business recovery grants to support the reopening, rebuilding and long term viability of businesses affected by the bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 29: That the Victorian Government develop and fund a regional tourism recovery strategy to restore visitor confidence, support local tourism operators and promote bushfire affected regions.

RECOMMENDATION 30: That the Victorian Government provide sustained, long term funding for accessible mental health and wellbeing services in bushfire affected communities, recognising that recovery extends well beyond the immediate emergency response.

Fire impacted local MP Annabelle Cleeland speech encapsulates the human impact, government failures and lack of response.

Annabelle CLEELAND: 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?

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.

I am going to speak on behalf of my community. It has interfered with insurance, and our communities will face a contaminated water table 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.

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

Conclusion

The 2026 bushfires were not only a test of emergency response.

They were a test of more than a decade of policy, governance and preparedness decisions.

Victoria entered the 2025-26 season with known deficiencies in fuel management, capability, governance, infrastructure resilience and community preparedness. Independent bodies, councils, volunteers and practitioners had warned government. Too little was done.

The Allan Labor Government was warned. It failed to act. Country Victoria paid the price.

The Liberal and Nationals stand with CFA volunteers, farmers, regional communities and every Victorian who faces bushfire risk.

Victoria does not need another inquiry to identify the same problems. It needs a government willing to implement the solutions already identified and accept accountability when it fails to do so.

We recognise the extraordinary efforts of volunteers, emergency service personnel, councils, farmers, businesses, recovery workers and community members who responded to the bushfires and continue to support affected communities. Their commitment, often extending well beyond the immediate emergency response, has been instrumental in helping residents recover and rebuild.

Bushfire recovery is a long-term process, and lasting recovery depends on empowering local communities, recognising their knowledge and leadership, and providing sustained support for community-enabled recovery initiatives over the months and years following a major bushfire.

Evidence presented to the Committee demonstrates that Victoria must:

- strengthen preparedness,
- improve emergency response capability,
- better support volunteers and affected communities,
- simplify recovery arrangements,
- improve infrastructure resilience and
- ensure greater accountability across the emergency management system.

Victoria is one of the most bushfire-prone regions in the world, with major fires occurring regularly and placing communities, volunteers and emergency services under immense pressure.

We should not be relearning the same lessons after every major fire event. There is a clear need for a comprehensive bushfire recovery playbook that sets out a consistent, best-practice framework for recovery, informed by previous disasters and capable of being adapted to local circumstances. Such a playbook should provide certainty for affected communities by establishing clear processes, responsibilities and minimum standards for clean-up, financial assistance, rebuilding, business recovery, mental health support, environmental restoration and community-led recovery.

A standing recovery framework would enable a faster, consistent and more equitable response, communities receive the support they need without unnecessary delays or uncertainty.

The findings and recommendations in this Minority Report provide a practical framework for improving Victoria's bushfire preparedness, response, recovery and resilience, to ensure that the lessons from previous bushfires are translated into meaningful and lasting reform.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

From: [Scott Purdy](#)
To: 2026summerfires
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Transcript - 1 May 2026 | Inquiry into the 2026summer fires across Victoria
Date: Thursday, 4 June 2026 8:05:02 PM
Attachments: [irpaq@2_00g](#)
[image003.png](#)
[image004.png](#)
[iroaof:00Srrn](#)
[OON2- \(FA\) Response_Anal.pdf](#)

Hi Kieran and team.

Please find attached CFA's response to the Questions on notice and other matters as requested by the committee in your correspondence dated 18/5/2026.

I thank you for the support and engagement throughout this process, and trust the attached response meets the needs of the committee.

Should further be required, please reach out.

Regards,



Scott Purdy Deputy Chief Officer (Acting)
[REDACTED]

Protecting lives and property

a a

eta.vie.gov.au

From: [Scott Purdy](#)
To: [2026summerfires](#)
Cc: [REDACTED] [Greg Leach](#)
Subject: FW: Transcript - 1 May 2026 | Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria
Date: Friday, 5 June 2026 3:04:58 PM
Attachments: [image002.png](#)
[image003.png](#)
[image004.png](#)
[image005.png](#)

Hi Kirean,

Thanks for your time on the phone earlier.

As discussed, I would like to request the CFA response as provided by myself yesterday be returned to CFA.

Due to an administrative error on my end, the submission was not complete and was a working draft.

CFA will endeavour to meet the deadline as communicated, but would appreciate a short extension if possible until Thursday 11 June.

Apologies again for the error, please let me know if the extension is possible.

Regards,



Scott Purdy Deputy Chief Officer (Acting)

[REDACTED]

Protecting lives and property



cfa.vic.gov.au

From: [Greg Leach](#)
To: [2026summerfires](#)
Cc: [Scott Purdy](#); [Jason Heffernan](#); [REDACTED]
Subject: FW: CFA QoN responses to Upper House Inquiry
Date: Tuesday, 16 June 2026 1:14:08 PM
Attachments: [Outlook-ingyd4g3.png](#)
[Outlook-p2pj4vi0.png](#)
[Outlook-r0endhng.png](#)
[Outlook-hmggegu2.png](#)

Good Afternoon Kieran,

In reply to your email to A/DCO Scott Purdy, I refer you to the email correspondence I have received from DJCS outlining the process that CFA has been requested to undertake in relation to the CFA QoN responses.

My apologies, I was of the understanding that DJCS were going to notify you of this process.

Please email or call if you need to discuss further.

Regards,

Greg



Greg Leach AFSM
Chief Executive Officer

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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From: David Clavarino (DJCS) [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, 12 June 2026 9:11 AM
To: Greg Leach [REDACTED]
Cc: Dean M Tighe (DJCS) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Jason Heffernan [REDACTED] Scott Purdy
[REDACTED]
Subject: Re: CFA QoN responses to Upper House Inquiry

Hi Greg, thanks for sending these through.

We will share these QoN responses with VGSO for review and will come back to you on their timeframes (probably early next week).

In the event that VGSO confirms there is no content which could be subject to an executive privilege claim, you can then re-send and confirm the responses with the Committee.

In the event that VGSO identifies content which could be subject to an executive privilege claim, you have two options:

1. Consider whether there is another way of answering the QoN without divulging executive privilege content.
2. Advise the Committee that the content in response to a QoN is subject to an executive privilege claim and that we need to seek approval from executive Government to provide the response. EMV can then include this claim in the Cabinet Submission we are currently progressing for the briefing packs claim (later this month).

For awareness, we are working with the Minister's Office to try to arrange out of session approval of the executive privilege claim in the next two weeks (through the Legislation Sub-Committee of Cabinet). We are continuing to engage with the Committee Secretariate on the timeframes.

Thanks again and please reach out if you have any questions or concerns.

Dave

David Clavarino

Director Emergency Management Strategy and Policy
Emergency Management Victoria



We acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of country throughout Victoria and pay our respects to them, their culture and their Elders, past, present and future.

Please consider the environment before printing this email

From: Greg Leach [redacted]

Sent: Thursday, 11 June 2026 13:53:58

To: Dean M Tighe (DJCS) [redacted]

Cc: Jason Heffernan [redacted]
Scott Purdy [redacted]

Subject: CFA QoN responses to Upper House Inquiry

Hi Dean

I refer to our phone conversation on Tuesday last regarding the process for CFA to respond to the questions from the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee which Jason Heffernan and I took on notice at the hearing on 01 May 2026. CFA was provided with a due date of Monday 08 June by the Inquiry Secretariat to submit our responses to the QoN's.

CFA prepared a written response to those questions which was provided to the Committee on 04 June 2026. CFA did not consider its response contained any content which would give rise to a claim of executive privilege. I note that FRV's written response to questions on notice is already publicly available on the Committee website.

Based on our telephone conversation, my understanding of the process from here is that the CFA's written response has to be reviewed by DJCS/VGSO and a Cabinet Committee (listed for 20 June 2026) before it can be provided to the Committee. I also understand that EMV is coordinating that process in its role as the lead agency. CFA has informed the Committee Secretariat via email that its response will be re-submitted at the end of that process, and that the response provided on 04 June 2026 should be disregarded. CFA has received written acknowledgement from the Committee Secretariat to that effect.

Accordingly, I **attach** CFA's written response so that it may be subjected to the review process outlined above.

Can you please confirm that the outline of the process from here based on my understanding of our conversation is correct, and that EMV will coordinate the VGSO and Cabinet Committee review process and then liaise back with CFA to ensure our comfort with the final version prior to it being submitted to the Inquiry Secretariat. If you could also confirm that you are in contact with the Committee Secretariat to advise them of this process and likely timelines.

Regards,

Greg

Greg Leach AFSM

Chief Executive Officer



[Redacted signature line]

[Redacted line]

[Redacted line]

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[g]

[g]

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From: [Dean M Tighe \(DJCS\)](#)
To: [2026summerfires](#)
Cc: [David Clavarino \(DJCS\)](#); [Michael Galea](#); [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Correspondence from Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee
Date: Tuesday, 30 June 2026 9:41:15 AM
Attachments: [image002.png](#)
[image003.png](#)

Dear Mr Galea

Thank you for your letter and congratulations on your appointment to the role as Chair of the Environment and Planning Standing Committee.

As you may be aware, Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) is the lead agency coordinating the State's involvement in the 2026 Summer Fires Inquiry. As such, I'm writing to provide an update on the CFA's responses to Questions on Notice (QONS) from the Hearing of State witnesses on 1 May, as well as the Committee's request for State Witness Briefing packs.

CFA Questions on Notice

I understand that the CFA provided responses to their QONS to the Committee Secretariate on 4 June and subsequently advised that these initial responses should be disregarded pending a legal review to identify potential executive privilege content.

EMV has been supporting the CFA with this legal review. We have prioritised this work and anticipate that the CFA should be in a position to provide updated responses to their QONS by Wednesday this week at the latest.

State witness briefing packs

On 22 May 2026, I wrote to the former Chair of the Committee (Ryan Batchelor) advising that the Briefing Packs, requested by the Committee on 1 May 2026, are within a class of documents over which executive privilege could be claimed by Government. In accordance with the Government-endorsed [Guidelines for appearing before and producing documents to Victorian inquiries](#), the potential claim of executive privilege is currently before Government for consideration. I anticipate that a decision regarding the claim will be made by Government by 14 July 2026.

Thank you again for the Committee's engagement on this Inquiry.

Please let me know if you require any further information.

Dean Tighe

Chief Executive & Deputy Secretary
Emergency Management Victoria

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

We acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of country throughout Victoria and pay our respects to them, their culture and their Elders, past, present and future.

From: [Greg Leach](#)
To: 2026summerfires; Michael Galea; [REDACTED] I
Cc: [peanli9be CMCS](#); [Jason Heffernan](#); [Scott.r11cdy](#)

subject: CFA answers to Questions on Notice following the public hearing on 01 May 2026
Date: Tuesday, 30 June 2026 7:01:08 PM
Attachments: [inaqc001.png](#)
[.inaqc002.ono](#)
[inaQP_QQ:1nm](#)
[.CFA answers to OoN's - Final - 30 June 2026.odf](#)

Dear Committee Secretariat,

Thank you for your correspondence dated 30 June 2026 in relation to Country Fire Authority's answers to Questions on Notice arising from the public hearing on 01 May 2026.

In response, please find attached the CFA's formal responses to the Questions on Notice.

Further to this matter, I wish to clarify that an earlier document provided to the Committee was submitted in error and should not be relied upon and subsequently disregarded.

That version contained material that:

- includes matters that would be factually contested.
- references Cabinet and Executive privilege considerations; and
- had not been validated or approved by the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Officer, or the CFA Board.

In addition, the document was an internal working draft only and had not been finalised through appropriate internal check and balances in accordance with relevant departmental guidelines.

I apologise for any inconvenience caused by this matter and thank you for your patience while we worked through the finalisation of our responses.

The attached responses represent the validated and authorised position of the CFA and should be taken as the official submission to the Committee.

Should the Committee require any further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Yours sincerely,

Greg Leach



Greg Leach AFSM
Chief Executive Officer



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Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

APPENDIX B

Hearing date: 1/05/2026

Questions taken on notice

Directed to: Country Fire Authority

Received date: [office use only]

1. P.16 Melina Bath

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

Jason HEFFERNAN: The exact number of seconded staff available in district 22 – I do not want to mislead the committee, so I will take that one on notice.

CFA Response:

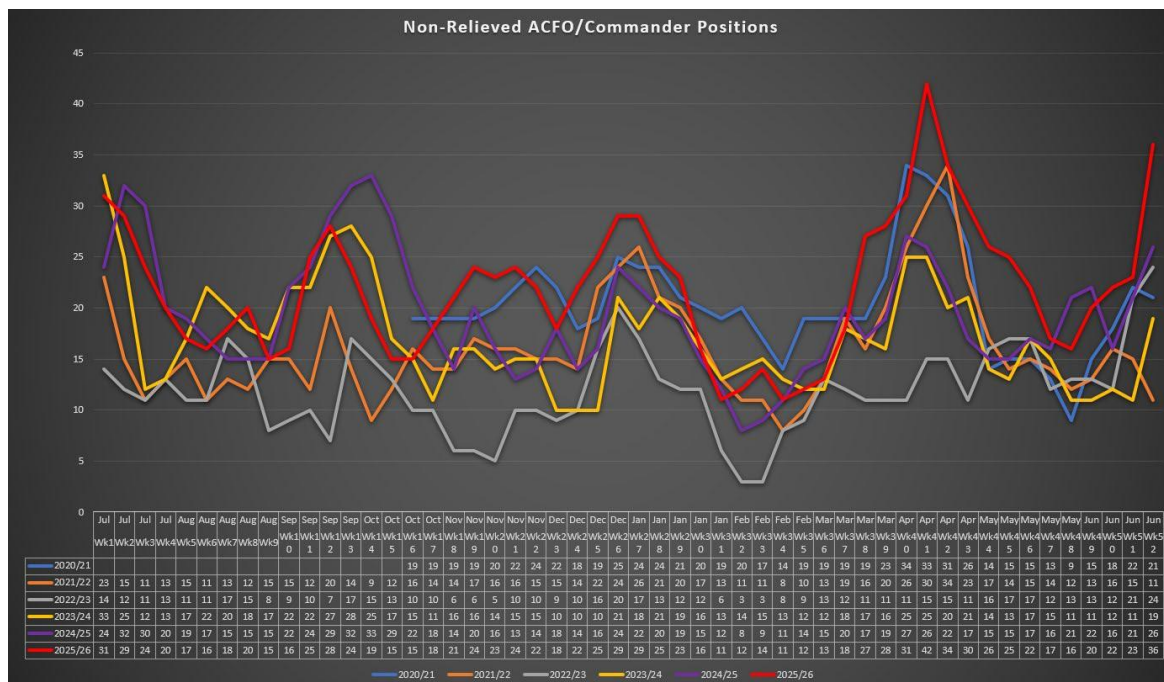
• In the week commencing Monday 5 January 2026:

- 3 of the 5 AFCCO/Commander positions to be provided to District 22 under the Secondment Agreement were vacant.
- CFA's senior operational leader workforce was reduced from the Secondment Agreement level by 29 FTE or 18.5 % (4 ACFO and 25 Commander roles) due to vacancy and non-relief issues.
- The term 'non-relief' is applied in circumstances where a position has an incumbent assigned to that position, but that incumbent is unavailable due to circumstances such as annual / long service leave, temporary duties in another position etc. The term vacancy is applied where a position has no incumbent allocated to the position.
- CFA had a total of 25 vacant/non-relieved Commander roles with critical gaps (over 50% reduction) in 5 district locations. These critical gaps include District 22 (where the Longwood fire ignited) and District 2 (where the Harcourt fire ignited). Both Districts were required to immediately commence 24/7 ongoing operations with significant command resource constraints.
- Since record keeping began in October 2020 CFA has been required to operate with a reduced operational command workforce on average of 17.2 persons per week (a combination of ACFOs and Commanders). This average equates to a reduction of services of 11.4%.
- Ongoing vacancy and non-relieved positions at senior operational levels persist.
- The below table lists command resourcing for the week commencing 5/1/2026.

District	No. of ACFO/Commander positions to be provided under secondment arrangements	Substantive Vacancies 05/01/2026	Non-Relief week commencing 05/01/2026
2	7	3	3
4	5	1	1
5	6	2	0
6	5	1	0
7	8	0	0
8	11	6	3
9	5	1	1
10	5	2	2
11	5	1	1
12	5	0	1
13	7	3	0
14	7	1	2
15	7	1	1
16	5	3	1
17	5	4	1
18	6	3	2
20	5	1	0
22	5	3	2
23	5	1	1
24	5	0	0
27	3	2	2
HQ	22	2	4

Regional	14	0	1
Total	158	41	29

The below graph shows the consistent issues with vacancy and non-relief issues being experienced by CFA in relation to ACFO/Commander positions since CFA began keeping records in October 2022:



When analysing the data, the number of command positions impacted by vacant/non-relieve by each given week and the percentage this equates to for ACFO/Commander positions:

	Vacant / non-relieved Command Positions			
Year	Min #	Max #	Average #	%
2020/21	9	34	20.27	14.2%
2021/22	8	34	16.12	11.3%
2022/23	3	24	11.96	7.4%
2023/24	10	33	17.1	10.6%
2024/25	8	33	19.37	12.1%
2025/26 (to date and projected to 30 June 2026)	11	42	21.9	13.86%

2. P.21 Wendy Lovell

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

Greg LEACH: Yes, certainly. We can, again, take that on notice

CFA Response:

With annual base capex of \$30m, annual VESEP capex grants \$22m, is insufficient to support CFA's asset base of \$2.2b. CFA continues to be in the position of needing to bid for supplementary funding through the State Budget process. In the three years FY 2022-23 to FY 2024-25 inclusive, CFA has submitted requests to the State Budget process totalling \$330.57m, with \$117.95m approved. CFA works through the Sector Investment Team within the Department of Justice and Community Safety to submit its initiatives list and then develops the full budget bids that have been authorised to proceed through the process.

The announcement of \$148.6m for CFA in the 2026-27 budget is very welcome. This includes an additional \$100 million over 10 years for new CFA tankers and pumpers and funding for station builds/upgrades, land acquisition, and protective gear, training resources and wellbeing support for firefighters. The additional investment in fleet will go a very long way to removing the aged single cab appliances from the CFA fleet, and as usual CFA will seek to retire the oldest appliances from service. What this means in practice is in addition to brigades receiving new appliances, greater than 100 brigades will receive a younger cascaded appliance.

3. P.30 Melina Bath

Question: -Can we please be provided a table with the breakdowns of all CFA appliances by type – pumper and tanker – and age profiles? I am putting that on notice. Can you include whether these appliances are brigade owned or CFA owned? I know that there is some data, but it is actually old data now. It is 2023 data, and it was released in 2024. I think it is important for the committee to understand those profiles.

CFA Response:

Table: CFA emergency response fleet number and age, by funding source (as at 15 January 2026)

Appliance type	Number CFA owned	Number Brigade owned	Total Number	CFA owned - average age (years)	Brigade owned - average age (Years)
Pumpers	214	4	218	16.8	17.5
Pumper tankers	41	3	44	21.9	19.7
Tankers	1,413	548	1,961	19.3	10.8
Specialist	55	83	138	13.3	11.5
TOTAL	1,723	638	2,361	18.9	11

Source: Total number from Whole of Victorian Government submission

Table: Appliance type, by age (all funding sources)

	0-5 years	5-10 years	10-15 years	15-20 years	20-25 years	25-30 years	30-35 years	35-40 years	Total
Pumpers	1	43	11	85	56	20	2	0	218
Pumper tankers	1	0	0	20	8	12	3	0	44
Tanker	260	229	408	339	186	242	231	66	1,961
Specialist Vehicles	25	44	28	20	12	6	3	0	138
Total	262	272	419	444	250	274	236	66	2,361

4. P.36-37 Gaelle Broad

Question: -Just with CFA, the volunteer numbers have dropped by nearly 14,000 operational firefighters – my understanding is it was 40,000 operational firefighters in 2009 to 28,855 in 2026 – despite high community interest. We have heard a lot about the lack of support that many CFA volunteers feel that they have got, and the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund-We have heard you mention today about the CFA needing to replace about 100 trucks a year, I think you said, and you mentioned the rolling fleet program had stalled over the last 10 to 15 years. I am just interested if you could, on notice, provide how many CFA appliances by type – and also FRV – have actually been purchased by our state each year over the last 12 years. If you could take that on notice. And just with the recent government announcement, there was \$100 million announced for new appliances over the next 10 years – how many will this actually buy over the forward estimates and over the next 10 years? Are you able to provide that information?

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

CFA Response:

A fit for purpose fleet is critical to ensuring all Victorian communities are effectively protected from fire and other emergencies, regardless of where they live. The announcement in the 2026-27 State Budget of \$100 million over 10 years for new tankers and pumpers is very welcome.

This announcement by the Government allows industry to invest and resource up to meet the anticipated CFA demand. CFA is reliant on an internationally competitive market for cab chassis. Build delays have been experienced with all manufacturers in recent years primarily due to the global pandemic affecting skilled labour and material supply. Whilst this has stabilised in the past 18 months, there is still a backlog of build programs across the sector affecting the commencement of any new orders. This backlog is quickly reducing however CFA is also actively seeking alternate suppliers, and possible partnership with agencies in other jurisdictions to leverage existing contract relationships that could help mitigate delays. From the time that funding has been secured, and an approved appliance design is in place and a supplier contract has been awarded, there is typically a 12-18 month build timeframe before receipt of the vehicle.

When CFA introduces a single new appliance into its fleet, it cascades other existing appliances to brigades within the CFA network which delivers an increase in overall capability across the brigade network. For every new appliance given to a particular brigade there can be up to 3-4 other brigades that receive an appliance better suited to their brigade area risk profile.

CFA modelling suggests that the additional investment will allow it to purchase approximately an additional 200 fire fighting vehicles. The precise mix of appliances to be ordered is subject to confirmation. CFA will use its cascade program to remove the oldest appliances from the fleet.

In relation to the question about appliances purchased over the last 12 years. The number of new appliances delivered or received by CFA over this same period is possibly more practical considering procurement and lead time complexities. The following tables provide this information.

Type	CFA	Brigade	Total
Pumper	50	1	51
Pumper Tanker	1	0	1
Tanker	385	337	722
Specialist	32	52	84
Total	468	390	858

Table: Appliances delivered since 2014 as at 15th January 2026 (**not** including appliances transferred to FRV in 2020 as a requirement of Fire Services Reform)

Type	CFA	Brigade	Total
Pumper	65	1	66
Pumper Tanker	1	0	1
Tanker	385	337	722
Specialist	32	52	84
Total	483	390	873

Table: Appliances delivered since 2014 as at 15th January 2026 (including appliances transferred to FRV in 2020 as a requirement of Fire Services Reform)

Additional questions

Wendy Lovell

CFA - Funding

1. Have changes in government policy such as the establishment of the Community Safety Building Authority (CSBA) who are now responsible for the procurement and construction of new CFA fire stations realised financial benefits to CFA or the Victorian Taxpayer?

- What did it cost CFA previously to build a new / replacement fire station for a small rural community? Perhaps you could provide the cost of both a single and double bay station?

- Currently, what cost are CFA being asked to pay to CSBA for them to construct the same types of station?

CFA Response:

In August 2022 the then Minister for Emergency Services requested CFA to transition the delivery responsibility for 20 identified major capital projects to the Community Safety Building Authority (CSBA).

CSBA's cost to deliver CFA station builds is up to 3-4 times more costly than CFA equivalent station builds.

In the 13 years prior to the transition to CSBA, CFA built 386 fire stations (average of 29 per annum). Since the transition in August 2022, there have been 9 new stations delivered to CFA volunteers solely by CSBA (average of 2 per annum).

The table below shows the cost to build different station types in the years 2018, 2020, 2022 by CFA commensurate with our Whole of Life Asset Plan, and again in 2024 by the CSBA.

Stations in small rural communities are station type 1A and 1B.

Typology	2018	2020	2022 WoLP	2024 CSBA	Variance to last build	% variance	Variance to WoLP	% Variance	Comments
1A	\$550,000	\$650,000	\$750,000	\$2,284,623	\$1,634,623	251%	\$1,534,623	205%	No laundry or drying room facilities required. Increase to motor room length, approx. 1m (10m2).
1B	\$770,000	\$850,000	\$1,200,000	\$3,952,912	\$3,102,912	365%	\$2,752,912	229%	No laundry or drying room facilities required. Increase to motor room length, approx. 1m (10m2).
1C	\$1,650,000	\$1,750,000	\$2,500,000	\$5,665,219	\$3,915,219	224%	\$3,165,219	127%	Laundry and drying room included – included in 2020 Increase in motor room widths in end bays by 0.4m across 12m length not in standard designs initially (10m2).
2A	\$2,200,000	\$2,300,000	\$2,900,000	\$7,626,834	\$5,326,834	232%	\$4,726,834	163%	Laundry and drying room included – Part of station typology Increase in motor room widths in end bays by 0.4m across 12m length not in standard designs initially (10m2).
2B	\$2,600,000	\$2,700,000	\$3,500,000	\$7,863,972	\$5,163,972	191%	\$4,363,972	125%	Increase in motor room widths in end bays by 0.4m across 12m length not in standard designs initially (10m2).

Table: Cost comparison CFA vs CSBA

Station Type	Risk Profile	Brigade Classification	Current Number
1A Station	Remote Rural	Class 1	556
1B Station	Rural	Class 2	376
1C Station	Small town or Semi Urban	Class 3	137
2A Station	Large Town or Urban Interface	Class 4	57
2B Station	Large Town or Fully Urban	Class 4 & 5	73

Table: station type, by risk profile and classification

2. Have changes in Government Policy regarding the purchase / disposal of vacant land for agency use impacted CFA in any way?

CFA Response:

The changes in policy now require the Government to centrally list all sites surplus to requirement, manage the disposal and retain the proceeds.

CFA does provide the full list to Government regarding surplus sites (on the First Right of Refusal portal) and CFA manages the disposal process. In accordance with the CFA Act all moneys resulting from the sale, exchange or letting of any property by the CFA is then applied in the purchase of property for the CFA or the improvement of the property of the CFA.

3. Why is CFA dependent upon DEECA for fuel management funding?

CFA Response:

CFA's fuel management program expanded dramatically with the implementation of the Government's Safer Together (**ST**) policy. The joint agency program has supported CFA to build its capability in fuel management and work in partnership with Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (**DEECA**) to improve the state fuel management program. Since the inception of this program, the budget has been provided to DEECA from Treasury, and funding allocated to DEECA and CFA through an annual budgeting (business planning) process conducted by a joint agency team. While this was useful in the initiation of the funding in 2017/2018, the majority of the funding now supports ongoing staff in both agencies.

CFA is actively seeking an ongoing appropriation funding transfer of \$7.352m (the 2025-26 budget for CFA) between the DEECA and the Department of Justice and Community Safety (**DJCS**) for CFA's government funded initiative to reduce bushfire risk from the 2021/22 budget announcement and the ST Program. This is to mitigate against proposed funding cuts to the ST Program by DEECA which currently receives the \$14.704m output funding and then CFA annually negotiates a proportion to deliver an agreed program of works.

The ST Statement released in 2015 was the Government's response to an inquiry into planned burning and fuel management performance targets. The ST Program funding commenced in 2017 to support implementation of the statement.

The initial funding of ST was through two 2-year pilot projects with funding provided to the then Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (**DELWP**) and to CFA through a partnership approach. DELWP and CFA developed a collaborative program of projects, which subsequently led to ongoing staff and operating programs supporting community engagement, joint agency fuel management activities, and research and knowledge application initiatives.

Ongoing funding was sought in 2021 and in the 2021-22 State Budget the 'budget announcement aiming to protect Victorians from bushfire risk' was made as a response to

the recommendations of the Inspector-General for Emergency Management Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season.

This initiative contributed to DELWP's Fire and Emergency Management output with \$339.6m over 4-years allocated to continue to fund Forest Fire Management workers and firefighters, as well make sure technology, fire towers and equipment was maintained.

Under the State Government budget announcement in 2021/22 aiming to protect Victorians from bushfire risk, 5 pillars were agreed by the Chief Fire Officer, Forest Fire Management Victoria (**FFMVic**) to reducing bushfire risk. CFA and FFMVic agreed funding of \$56.7m over 4-years and \$14.704m ongoing under pillar number 5 'Working in partnership to protect communities.

CFA - Chief Officer

4. Many of your volunteers are unhappy with the way some of the fires were managed. What are you going to do to improve it?

CFA Response:

CFA is committed to an evaluation and improvement cycle - capturing lessons, translating them into changes, and ensuring they are reflected in our capability, training and operational arrangements. An after-action review (AAR) is a structured review or debrief process for analysing an incident to help us improve our performance. It considers what was planned, what happened, why it happened and how it can be done better/differently. These are standard practice in CFA.

The 2025-26 Post Season Debrief Program is underway to gather feedback and insights from members. CFA has designed various mechanisms to gather input and is seeking to hear from all members. Mechanisms being used include:

- Facilitated AARs with fireground leaders following significant incidents
- Tailored surveys to Strike Team Leaders, Sector Commanders and Divisional Commanders
- Targeted interviews with key personnel, particularly those involved in the transfer of control to an Incident Control Centre from a fireground
- District and Region surveys and facilitated AARs for those that had significant operational activity.

To date, there have been 19 fireground AARs for significant incidents, attended by over 450 members from more than 140 brigades. The team has so far captured in excess of 2,000 observations that have formed approximately 100 insights, covering a range of topics.

In addition, CFA & FFMVIC are leading a Combined After-Action Review program across all the major bushfires at the Incident Management Team level.

Once this work is complete CFA will ensure the key findings and our intended response is shared broadly with our members.

CFA - Sustainable brigades & volunteerism

5. From VBRC 2009 “Bushfire is an intrinsic part of Victoria’s landscape, and if time dims our memory we risk repeating the mistakes of the past. We need to learn from the experiences of Black Saturday and improve the way we prepare for and respond to bushfires”

- Are agencies such as CFA better equipped, supported and enabled now in 2026 than you were in the lead up to that tragic day in 2009?

CFA Response:

This is a complex, multi-dimensional question. The risk environment continues to change rapidly, with climate-driven increases in severity/frequency of emergency events and changes in where and how people are living.

At the system level, the sectors shift to an all agencies, all hazards approach has delivered both benefits and challenges. For example, a single integrated emergency warnings platform for all agencies to leverage when seeking to alert the community in times of emergency has delivered significant benefits. Likewise, all agencies operating out of a single State Control Centre has improved co-ordination and connection.

Bushfire remains the most significant natural hazard to Victoria as demonstrated by the cyclical nature of major bushfire emergencies. The 2009 VBRC made numerous recommendations specific to the States preparedness for and response to bushfire. Subsequent policy shifts have diluted the focus on the bushfire hazard with a broadening scope to emergency management across all hazards. Changes to the fire management planning framework and Victoria’s command and control arrangements for Class 1 emergencies (that include bushfire) are notable examples of this shift that inevitably impact the States preparedness.

Responding to these challenges, CFA would welcome the committee making recommendations that strengthen the effectiveness of local fire management planning arrangements that empower brigades, communities, stakeholders and agencies to work together with a focus on the bushfire hazard to mitigate fire risk.

Likewise, CFA would welcome the committee strengthening the role that bushfire hazard specific knowledge in a local context plays within the management arrangements of bushfire planning, preparedness and leading major emergency responses.

Fuel management, community resilience and the application of a ‘shared responsibility’ policy approach in respect to bushfire preparedness and response has been highlighted as a challenge by many previous reviews and inquiries and remains so. Complex land tenures, conflicting value propositions and stated objectives (e.g. safety V’s environment) and a complex regulatory environment continue to constrain fire mitigation effectiveness and policy development.

In respect to vegetation management, CFA would welcome the committee in making recommendations that:

- Strengthening the effectiveness of CFA's powers as they relate to enforcing vegetation management standards and dealing with bushfire hazard complaints (e.g. roadside vegetation).
- Explore options to streamline environmental and cultural checks and approvals required at local and state levels associated with priority bushfire hazard reduction works.

CFA believe that an inherent connection between agricultural landowners and the fire service exists; this was once again demonstrated through the use of private units across the 2026 fires. An opportunity exists to more fulsomely partner with the agricultural sector using the shared responsibility proposition. CFA would encourage the committee to consider making recommendations to explore policy options for CFA to more effectively partner with and support agriculture and our farming communities, especially as it relates to water access, vegetation management and the coordination and use of machinery and private appliances. The successful use of high-speed disc tillage tools (or speed tillers) this season has been notable.

Similarly to the long-standing challenges associated with vegetation management and planned burning, Victoria once again experienced the consequences of vulnerable critical infrastructure. The loss of power and telecommunications had a significant impact on both fire agency operations and community. CFA would welcome any recommendations that seek to improve the resilience of Victoria's communications infrastructure; especially the Mobile and Radio network and investment that supports improved technology and connectivity on the fireground for CFA crews.

At the agency level, CFA has an ongoing focus on financial sustainability to underpin its ability to meet the increasing demands for investment in asset improvements and new services whilst not transferring unnecessary burdens to volunteers. Whilst the bushfire hazard continues to present challenges, so do other external environmental changes such as rural decline and urban sprawl which both directly challenge CFA's capability and capacity.

CFA has a large emergency response vehicle fleet and significant fire station footprint and seeks to make improvements as budget is made available. Asset condition remains an area of ongoing focus. Currently many stations are still without basic amenities and there are 802 single cab tankers in the fleet.

As knowledge and safety standards change, CFA must continue to ensure it can invest in contemporary protective clothing and equipment for volunteers and comprehensive wellbeing support services. Recent investments into the wildfire personal protective clothing, fit for purpose gloves and boots for female firefighters and improved respiratory protection are positives.

CFA continues to invest in research which is fundamental to its ability to understand changing conditions and ensure it can deploy evidence-based tactics and strategies in fire response.

CFA is a community-based volunteer emergency service and relies on a sustainable pipeline of community members willing to commit the time to protecting the life and property of others.

Volunteering Victoria's recent report¹ notes the longstanding impact the COVID pandemic has had on formal volunteering and that volunteering is becoming "more informal, more diverse, more digital, and more integrated with people's lives." CFA is working to respond to the changing needs of contemporary volunteers with deep consideration being given to a contemporary membership model and focused improvement to services across the volunteer lifecycle. It is critically important for CFA to adequately support and enable volunteers to deliver services and not overwhelm them with administrative and management responsibilities.

Fire Services Reform, implemented in July 2020, fundamentally impacted CFA, significant challenges continue to be experienced in relation to implementing the secondment arrangements, mainly in the supply and retention of important senior operational leadership roles, particularly Commanders. Since record keeping began in October 2020 CFA has been required to operate with a reduced operational workforce on average of 17.2 persons per week (a combination of ACFOs and Commanders). This average equates to a reduction of services of 11.4%. CFA is continuing to work closely with FRV to ensure implementation of the secondment arrangements are effective.

The 2025/26 fire season challenged the human resource capability and capacity. Some challenges were immediate such as suitable numbers of Incident Management personnel whilst others resulted from more systemic constraints. CFA would welcome the committee making recommendations that seek to enhance and provide an uplift to strengthen CFA's human resource capacity and capability required to support Incident Management, the management of major bushfire events and the provision of reliable and capable support to our volunteer membership, brigades and groups.

The 2025 CFA annual Bushfire Community Survey, run since 2009-10, showed 30.9 per cent of community members would wait for emergency authorities to tell them what to do and 28.6 per cent would stay until they felt threatened. The survey showed 44.4 per cent of people believed CFA is responsible for protecting them during a bushfire, and 43.8 per cent believed CFA is responsible for protecting their home. Over the last two years, the survey shows the perception of a bushfire being a threat to Victorians and their property has declined from very large to small, with 50 per cent of people not showing concern and nearly 40 per cent are not alarmed enough to warrant direct interaction with CFA. There is some evidence to suggest that for some Victorians the lessons and memory of 2009 have faded. Ongoing focus and effort is needed by CFA to inform the community of their fire risk and the practical steps people can take to prepare for fire and to calibrate community expectations of the fire service in large scale bushfire events.

¹2025 State of Volunteering Report [VV0012-VV-SOVR-Report-FINAL.pdf](#)

6. Are CFA members receiving the quantity and quality of training they request?

CFA Response:

The diverse nature of CFA's membership brings a diversity of views on the suitability of CFA's training. CFA's training of volunteers to a high level commensurate with national standards supports interoperability and safe operations.

Training includes formal courses, awareness packages, fleet/equipment inductions and skills maintenance. Training occurs in a variety of settings (brigade level and through RTO-offered courses either delivered locally or at campuses) and a variety of modes (face to face, blended, fully online). CFA's training campuses are located across the state for ease of access of members (and made available to other agencies).

The foundation of CFA's training delivery and development capability relies heavily upon a paid instructor cohort provided by FRV via the secondment arrangements. This model inherently contains some constraints that can inhibit CFA's ability to be responsive to all the needs of a volunteer workforce.

CFA has established a training pathway to support the developmental needs of members and provides guidance on the progression of qualifications required to meet the various roles within CFA. The training pathway is being implemented across the state and together with the redevelopment of the Brigade operating skills profile (under development) will better guide CFA in the determining training demands and priority courses.

CFA operates as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO, through the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority) to deliver nationally recognised training and enterprise packages to volunteers. National units of competencies are aligned to the Public Skills packages. Some members may claim that the RTO brings a level of bureaucracy to training that prevents members obtaining the skills but having highly trained volunteers supports volunteer safety and interoperability.

Starting with the AFAC peer review in 2021 CFA has had a focused program of work to enhance its training offerings. This work is ongoing, including exploration of a General Fire fighter 'on the job' training model for our class 1 and 2 brigades in rural areas that may be better suited to their needs. The Training Enhancement Program (TEP), now in its second year, includes 23 specific initiatives to improve CFA's training offering to our members.

7. What impediments exist in being able to improve the quality and meet the demand?

CFA Response:

The key impediment relates to the effects of the implementation of the Secondment Agreement between CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), which was a key feature of Fire Services Reform. As a result of Reform, impacts have been observed in relation to instructor management (a change made solely as a result of fire services reform), a revolving door of staff, limited resources and reduced access to key subject matter expertise.

Paid instructor management is a current pain point with 53 seconded instructors, required to be supervised by two (2) Assistant Chief Fire Officers (**ACFOs**) centrally located within CFA's Operational Doctrine and Training Department. These arrangements compromise the ACFO's capacity to develop programs and training policy whilst being required to act as a line manager for the scheduling, tasking and management of the instructor cohort commensurate with the needs of a decentralised training delivery model.

The effective utilisation of instructors is compromised at times due to inconsistent application of the secondment arrangements, delays in recruitment and the need to induct and endorse new instructors against the courses scheduled to be delivered and within the individual instructor skill mix to ensure compliance with Registered Training Organisation requirements.

No longer having access to a full operational workforce has inhibited CFA's ability to identify, access and engage various subject matter experts in the development of training courses and materials has become compromised, further placing at risk CFA's training quality.

	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	FY 2025
Courses delivered	1,869	1,916	1,997	2,182	1,669
Members trained	10,437	13,551	13,738	14,370	12,126

Table: Summary of number of courses delivered and members trained, by year

CFA is also constrained in enhancing the digital learning experience for our volunteer workforce by the adequacy of the current ICT software platforms and limited asset funding envelope. The current platforms provide an inefficient student management capability and sub-optimal learning experience for our members.

Fiskville Training College was the State Training College for members of the CFA. Following site tests which revealed high levels of contamination and various inquiries, on 26 March 2015, the Victorian Government announced that the Fiskville facility would be closed permanently. A redress scheme was announced in 2022. CFA no longer has a State

Training College and is hindered by a lack of accommodation and conferencing facilities with the loss of Fiskville, this has limited our ability to establish effective training delivery of enhanced firefighter and command and control programs. CFA is currently undertaking master planning at the Central Highlands Training Campus (Ballan).

8. Why is CFA dependent upon other agencies such as EMV and FRV to deliver training?

CFA Response:

The Secondment Agreement between CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria (**FRV**), which is a key feature of Fire Services Reform, sets out the role types and number of roles that CFA must source from FRV. This includes Assistant Chief Fire Officers, Commanders and – relevant to training – Instructors (53 roles in total) and Practical Area Drill (PAD) staff roles (29 in total comprising 8 PAD Supervisors and 21 PAD Operators); those who maintain and operate CFA's network of field training grounds.

CFA is limited to the terms of the Secondment Agreement for the employment of paid instructors for firefighting training. The future growth in training delivery within the volunteer focused fire service places more emphasis on the use of volunteer instructors to meet growing demands.

CFA is seeking to strategically build and support the number of volunteer instructors who, along with the seconded instructors, who are the backbone of CFA's training excellence. Their dedication, experience, and passion for sharing knowledge is vital to ensuring that every member, whether they are a new recruit undertaking General Firefighter training or a long-serving member advancing in Incident Management, Advanced Firefighting, or Fire Investigation—receives the highest standard of instruction. Instructors deliver training and conduct assessment in accredited and non-accredited training courses. They play a critical role in building the capability, confidence, and safety of our members.

Whilst upskilling CFA volunteers as instructors provide some benefits and assist with a local capacity being established, this strategy naturally has a threshold in respect to sustainability. Competing demands, social and economic pressures all inform and constrain a member's ability to volunteer more time with CFA.

In relation to Incident Management Training (IMT), Emergency Management Victoria's decision to centralise of the development and delivery of IMT training programs has impacted CFA's ability to develop, plan and deliver programs that focus on the management of fire, build CFA command capability and provide opportunities that are suitable for volunteer member participation.

CFA has recently commenced developing its own IMT training programs to better meet the needs of a volunteer workforce with a bushfire hazard focus. The delivery of this training will utilise both volunteer and paid IMT practitioners who have a wide range of operational experience in IMTs.

CFA - Vegetation / roadside fuel management

9. Do CFA have adequate powers to require the management of vegetation on roadsides?

CFA Response:

CFA conducts planned burning along roadsides managed by both the Department of Transport and Planning (major arterial roads) and roadsides managed by Local Municipalities (Council Roads).

The management of roadsides for fire prevention purposes is specifically referred to in the CFA Act in Section 43(1), which states that:

*It shall be the **duty of every municipal council and every public authority** to take all practicable steps to prevent the occurrence of fires on and to minimise the danger of the spread of fires on or from:*

*any land vested in it or under its control or management, **and any road under its care and management***

CFA has developed roadside fire management guidelines that focus on eliminating the source of ignition but it does **not** have any power or authority to enforce these Guidelines.

Guidelines provide for different strategies to achieve fuel free areas adjacent to roadsides. Where fuel free roadsides cannot be achieved CFA Guidelines call for a slashed verge to be maintained at 10cm in height during the Fire Danger Period.

CFA would welcome a recommendation from the Committee strengthening the effectiveness of CFA's powers as they relate to enforcing vegetation management standards (e.g. roadside vegetation) and dealing with bushfire hazard complaints.

10. Are public land managers who are responsible for roads and infrastructure (such as mobile phone towers and water systems) adequately managing fuel loads on their land? If not, what powers do CFA have to ensure public safety?

CFA Response:

Anecdotally, CFA has heard that some critical infrastructure had significant vegetation and fuel loads adjacent to it that would could cause a critical outage or failure due to the intensity of heat during a wildfire. Whether this is the public land managers responsibility or the leaseholder's responsibility is not known to CFA. Roadside vegetation management remains a challenge (see response to Question 9).

While CFA actively engages with critical infrastructure operators to provide guidance on fire risk management practices, CFA has limited powers to compel land managers to manage vegetation and fire risk or comply with standards.

Considering the impacts of bushfire on critical infrastructure and the subsequent consequences of fire impacts, CFA encourages the Committee to make recommendations about strengthening CFA's powers as they relate to treating fire risk and separately, improving the resilience of Victoria's communications infrastructure; especially the Mobile and Radio network and investment that supports improved technology and connectivity on the fireground for CFA crews.

11. Why is CFA dependent upon DEECA for funding vegetation management activities? Has this quantum reduced or is it at risk of not continuing?

CFA Response:

CFA's fuel management program has grown with the successful implementation of the Safer Together program. Funding of both planning staff and operational activities comes through this program. While the program has become ongoing and operating with a similar budget for the last six years, the funding pathway has not changed and is negotiated with DEECA and provided through an annual agreement. The quantum has not reduced however progressive funding cuts to DEECA, which have also been applied to the Safer Together program, has resulted in a more constrained program overall and further cuts would pose a real risk to the CFA fuel vegetation management activities.

See also response to Questions 3 and 12.

12. Have DEECA reduced the quantum of funding to CFA through the Safer Together initiative?

- If so, is this despite the fact that DEECA now receive funding certainty from the ESVF?

CFA Response:

For the ongoing program for ST (over the period 2021-22 to 2025-26) funding has generally been allocated in roughly equal proportions between the CFA and DEECA. The quantum of funding to CFA has not yet reduced, however CFA is very concerned this may occur in future years.

CFA is actively seeking an ongoing appropriation funding transfer of \$7.352m between the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) for CFA's government funded initiative under the Safer Together (ST) Program. This is to mitigate against proposed funding cuts to the ST Program by DEECA's Forest Fire Management which currently receives the \$14.704m output funding shared with the CFA in equal proportions (\$7.352m).

See also response to Questions 3 and 11.

13. Have DEECA communicated a position in respect to the continuance of Safer Together and their ongoing partnership with CFA?

CFA Response:

See response to Questions 3, 11 and 12.

There has been no formal advice with respect to the continuance of the ongoing partnership with CFA. However, with the implementation of funding cuts within DEECA there has been an implied narrowing of the scope of partnership together with progressive staffing changes in DEECA and significant movement in roles all of which has resulted in a reduced attention and interest in collaborative approaches initiated under Safer Together. For example, DEECA made positions in the joint agency Community First program redundant. The remaining positions in this program sit in CFA. With limited positions in this subject area within DEECA, working in partnership is challenging.

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

CFA Response:

The Office of Bushfire Risk Management (**OBRM**) has been established with minimal policy development beyond the IGEM inquiry. That lack of policy has led to ambiguity about the role of OBRM, for example, it is unclear whether its focus on fuel management solely (as per the Premier's letter when the office was established) or broader.

The implementation of the OBRM has also created ambiguity as it resides as a unit inside the Planning and Policy Section of DEECA. While ostensibly set up to be independent, it operates as specific policy section within a directorate and overlaps with policy development in other areas of Bushfire and Forest Services.

Recently, the unit has changed its name to the Emergency Management and Office of Bushfire Risk Management and under the Director Emergency Management and Office of Bushfire Risk Management (recently advertised position). This reflects the practical/current operation of the Office.

The OBRM was envisaged by the IGEM as a unit that provides independent advice to the Secretary of DEECA, however, the way it was created is not conducive to independence from other parts of DEECA Forest and Fire Policy Division.

OBRM was also tasked by the Premier to look at fuel management across public and private land. CFA has not seen any outcomes that support better tenure-blind fuel management or interagency operations. Responsibilities and powers as they relate to private land remain opaque.

CFA would suggest that a joined Office (possibly virtual) with people from both organisation working on solving problems and improving fuel management, would be a more appropriate construct for the OBRM.

There are two other options to replace the OBRM:

- One would be to abolish the OBRM and continue managing fuel management arrangements within the existing multi-agency governance structure in place (Bushfire Risk Mitigation Group). In practice, this has achieved much greater tangible outcomes for joint agency activities and efficiencies both prior to the establishment of OBRM and since this time.
- A second option would be to place those functions within CFA as that would have less conflict of interest as CFA is not a land manager or landowner.

In CFA's experience, supporting the work of OBRM has been time consuming for staff with less benefit and/or duplication of other interagency work activities.

The OBRM has not assisted CFA in meeting our statutory obligations, nor facilitated or enabled greater utilisation of CFA's fuel management services.

15. Reference Chapter 3 of the “Report of the Board of Inquiry into the occurrence of Bush and Grass Fires in Victoria” ordered by the Legislative Assembly in October 1977. This report provided considerable attention to roadside vegetation management. Some 50 years on, it appears these issues persist. Can CFA meet its statutory obligation to prevent fire and protect lives and property from bushfire under the current arrangements?

CFA Response:

See response to Question 9.

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

CFA Response:

CFA continues to work with DJCS and DEECA to implement the fuel management recommendations made by IGEM post the 2019/20 fires. Some of those recommendations include legislative amendments which CFA continues to advocate for, and which were due to be submitted for Bill at Cabinet in April 2026. Changes to fuel management legislation would allow greater interagency cooperation and efficiencies in planning and delivery. It would also remove ambiguity in legislation and the rationale for engagement of volunteers and other stakeholders in planned burning and insurance for members and agency staff engaged in these activities. Changes to fuel management legislation have currently been put on hold. The rationale for this pause is not clear. CFA would welcome recommencement of work to progress these changes.

The Joint Fuel Management Program (**JFMP**) is a rolling three-year plan developed between FFMVic and CFA. The JFMP supports the identification of areas requiring fuel reduction, through risk assessment processes and consultation with brigades. CFA exceeded its target in FY2024-25. CFA would welcome greater funding certainty for its JFMP-related work.

CFA’s Planned Burn Taskforce began as a pilot in 2019 with the aim of increasing capacity for carrying out planned burns. It is a mobile, volunteer workforce drawn from CFA districts across the state to support both CFA and FFMVic (now more than 900 registered CFA volunteers across Victoria).

The taskforce increasingly supports FFMVic burns, mainly for asset protection along the rural-urban interface.

In 2024-25 FY there were 44 Taskforce deployments contributing to 61 planned burns mostly in the state’s south-west and west (source: CFA Annual Report 2024-25).

The Taskforce was also used to complete planned burning preparation works which allowed local brigades to then deliver the burns themselves or in conjunction with the Taskforce.

17. Changes to the Emergency Management Act made under this government established 'all hazards' emergency management planning committees. In doing so, these changes removed the statutory requirement (under CFA Act) to establish municipal and regional fire management planning committees. Have these changes improved or hindered CFA's efforts in preventing and mitigating bushfires in Victoria?

CFA Response:

Although, several bushfire committees still continue to operate in some municipalities and regions, CFA's position is that the current arrangements have shifted focus away from bushfire prevention and mitigation reducing the effectiveness of bushfire risk mitigation at the local level.

A further consequential impact from the change has been the additional time and resource commitment made by stakeholders to emergency management planning as it pertains to other types of emergencies. While this shift may have yielded positive results, it is CFA's experience that it has frequently resulted in trade-offs being made by stakeholders with time and resources being shifted away from a bushfire risk management focus.

CFA would like to see those bushfire specific committees being required and reinstated with supporting guidance. CFA would encourage the Committee to consider recommendations that seek to strengthen bushfire planning and risk management arrangements at the local level, that would support the operationalisation of stronger powers to undertake / enforce / treat unacceptable fire risks.

18. Now municipalities have a reduced role in fire prevention (as per the planning legislation changes) why do they retain other statutory responsibilities under CFA's legislation?

CFA Response:

That part of the legislation was not looked at when the changes to the planning arrangements and committee structures were introduced. It was envisaged that the newly formed emergency management committees will continue to provide a focus on bushfire prevention and mitigation.

CFA's legislation was drafted many decades ago at a time where the role of municipalities in managing / mitigating fire risk was a much higher focus than is observed today. The role and expectations of both municipalities and CFA have shifted overtime, with expectations on CFA to lead and manage fire risk increasing whilst resource constraints are inhibiting some municipalities from contributing to the levels preferred or required. These shifts are illustrated in the operation of fire management planning arrangements, roadside and vegetation management, fire trail / track maintenance, provision of resources under the emergency resourcing program and changing expectations as it pertains to relief and recovery. In the most obvious example, many municipalities are now requiring a fee payable by residents seeking a permit to burn inside the Fire Danger Period; CFA do not charge a fee for application.

The possible improvements would be to provide CFA broader powers to audit the work conducted by the LGA's or alternatively for CFA to undertake that work on behalf of LGA's. However, the second option will require shifting of resources to CFA, including increased funding.

- Should municipalities be required to issue fire permits under CFA legislation?

CFA Response:

There are many municipalities that have stopped issuing permits since introduction of the online permit system. That has increased workload for CFA officers.

CFA position is that municipalities should be issuing permits under the current model, however, CFA should be responsible to audit the permits issued by municipalities.

The alternative model would be for CFA to be resourced properly to undertake all the bushfire functions (mitigation and prevention) currently required to be undertaken by municipalities.

19. Should municipalities be required to monitor fire safety and enforce fire prevention notices?

CFA Response:

Yes, unless the roles of municipalities for fire prevention and mitigation change.

Under the current model, this arrangement should be retained. The Country Fire Authority Act 1958 gives CFA the legal authority to issue Fire Prevention Notices (FPNs), although this function is primarily delegated to local councils.

The current FPN process operates as follows:

- Primary responsibility sits with municipal fire prevention officers, who inspect properties and issue notices to private landowners requiring fuel reduction. Typically this is long grass, heaps of vegetation, prunings etc. FPN's are not typically used for the purpose of broad acre planned burning, although the legislation does not prevent them being used in this manner.
- While councils issue most notices, CFA may step in under limited circumstances, such as where a council fails to act or during complex multi-agency incidents.

CFA's powers could be strengthened by allowing it to issue FPNs under the same rules that apply to municipal councils and/or specifically for fuel management activities, in particular planned burning. With planned burning, the need for this activity would have been identified and planned by CFA staff, and CFA would have the capacity to implement the burn.

20. Is it reasonable for municipalities to undertake these functions to the satisfaction of CFA within their constrained resources (rate capping)?

CFA Response:

This question is probably more appropriate to be directed to the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and/or municipalities themselves rather than CFA.

In this context, CFA employs 1 full-time equivalent staff member (with support of other staff) whose full-time responsibility is to support Municipal Fire Prevention Officers to understand their responsibilities and how to carry out municipal functions consistently.

21. Why aren't CFA primarily responsible for administering your own legislation?

CFA Response:

CFA is primarily responsible for administering its own legislation, in line with the statutory responsibilities that the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958* assigns to the Authority and roles of Chief Executive Officer and Chief Officer.

Fire Services Reform fundamentally changed the day-to-day operating arrangements with CFA however, since it precluded CFA from employing its own career firefighters (ie Assistant Chief Fire Officers and Commanders). These positions and their associated budget were transferred to Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV). CFA and FRV were required to enter into a Secondment Agreement that identified the number and type of roles that FRV would be required to supply to CFA. These roles (including ACFO's, Commanders, Instructors and PAD Staff), while working in CFA, are under the command and control of CFA's Chief Officer but remain employees of FRV.

Furthermore, the CFA and FRV also entered into Service Level Deeds of Agreement (SLDA's) which outlined particular service delivery where the agencies would provide services to the other agencies. The SLDA's were high level and required significant work to implement at the technical level and necessitated the development of instruments of delegations and authorisations, a deed of indemnity to support FRV employees performing certain functions on behalf of CFA and for CFA and FRV to agree Service Delivery Plans on a range of topics. Since 2020, seven (7) Service Delivery Plans have been developed and three (3) are still under development and negotiation.

CFA's ability to provide the required delegations is dependent on whether the power and authority resides with the Chief Officer or the Authority. Where constraints have impacted CFA's ability to delegate its powers and functions (such as fire safety regulations that apply to caravan parks), inefficiencies have been evident.

In relation to land use planning and dangerous goods, as a result of inadvertently transferring primary resources (fire safety officers) to FRV in July 2020, an interim arrangement for FRV to undertake administrative and ancillary work on behalf of the CFA was agreed between the agencies. The CFA has a quality assurance role and final sign-off because, by law, the function and liability remain with the CFA and cannot be delegated to FRV.

The Victorian Planning Provisions prevent the CFA from delegating functions and powers to FRV to process (end to end) dangerous goods applications.

CFA - Fire Service Reform impacts on CFA

22. Did the District 22 ACFO attend the Longwood fire on the 7/1/2026 soon after it started, only to depart a couple of hours later and leave volunteer firefighters staring at the worst fire they have ever seen without support and leadership to return home and rest?

CFA Response:

We are aware of concerns about a CFA Acting ACFO, and this is an interpersonal issue that we are working through. We continue to listen to our brigades.

Prior to 7 January 2026 and at the time of the incident, District 22 was significantly under-resourced in relation to senior operational leadership. For the week commencing 5 January 2026, the district was operating with an Acting ACFO and one Commander; whilst 3 Commander positions had no relief available. In the weeks leading up to 5 January, this under-resourcing was consistent, resulting in sustained operational pressure.

23. What has been the reaction from your volunteers to the actions of the District 22 ACFO?

CFA Response:

The Committee has heard firsthand from CFA members including via the 'open mic' sessions about their reflections and views towards the management of fires throughout the Northeast Region and the levels of support provided by CFA District teams. Many CFA members have raised concerns around the operation of the current secondment model and CFA's chain of command directly with the Committee.

CFA values the significant contribution of Assistant Chief Fire Officers and their Command staff who perform critical roles within CFA, directly supporting brigades and volunteer leaders with skills, knowledge and leadership that is critical to enabling success and maintaining safe systems of work. We continue to work closely with Fire Rescue Victoria on the implementation of the secondment arrangements.

24. Did you or CFA have any say in the decision to appoint the incumbent to the position of District 22 ACFO – the Officer in Charge of 73 CFA Volunteer Fire Brigades.

CFA Response:

Under the secondment agreement and associated policy, Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) holds primary responsibility for recruitment and selection into CFA positions, both on a permanent and temporary basis.

CFA considers there would be significant benefit in having a more direct role in recruitment and selection processes for FRV employees appointed to senior operational leadership positions within CFA. This would support improved alignment between role requirements and candidate capability and help ensure that appointed incumbents possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience to effectively lead within a volunteer-based service and community-focused operating environment.

25. How would you describe the effectiveness and performance of District 22 prior to the change of leadership? Who appointed the previous ACFO in District 22?

CFA Response:

The previous Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) for District 22 was appointed prior to the implementation of Fire Services Reform and was retained in the role following 1 July 2020.

Historically, the stability of leadership provided through long-term CFA-employed ACFO appointments has been a key contributor to the effectiveness and performance of Districts, including District 22. This continuity has supported strong relationships with brigades, consistent operational leadership, and deep local knowledge.

Since Fire Services Reform, the management of the senior operational workforce, including recruitment, appointment, and development of secondees, has transitioned to Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV). As a result, CFA's ability to influence leadership continuity has diminished.

Importantly, CFA is not currently positioned to implement structured succession planning or mandate professional development pathways for personnel transitioning from Commander to ACFO roles. This limits the ability to systematically prepare and equip secondees for the unique leadership, community engagement, and volunteer management responsibilities associated with leading a CFA District.

As long-term CFA-employed leaders continue to retire, and key leadership positions are increasingly filled through secondment arrangements, often on a temporary basis, these challenges are likely to persist, with implications for consistency, capability development, and overall district performance

26. How many CFA Commander positions are allocated across the four CFA Districts that encompass the Gippsland EM region? How many of those commander positions were filled by an incumbent and available for work on the 17/2/2026 when the region was subject to a TFB.

CFA Response:

In response to widespread elevated fire risk, a total fire ban (TFB) was declared for multiple fire weather districts on Tuesday 17 February 2026, this included West & South Gippsland. The Gippsland region had been subject of numerous major bushfire emergencies throughout the summer, namely the Snowy and Wonnangatta Complexes of fire. The Gippsland element of CFA's South-East Region consists of Districts 9, 10, 11 and 27 and encompasses two fire weather districts, one of which was declared a TFB for the 17/2/26.

At this time the four CFA Districts were at a combined strength of 50% command staff, with 2 in 3 Commander positions vacant / unrelieved.

CFA Gippsland District Workforce Status (week commencing 16/2/26)

- Total positions: 18
 - ACFO: 4
 - Commanders: 14
- Status of Positions with incumbents (week commencing 16/2/26)
 - ACFO: 4 (two acting)
 - Commander: 5 (9 positions vacant / unrelieved)

Thankfully, February 17 did not see any new major fires commence in the Gippsland Region; should they have, CFA's command integrity would have been immediately tested. This level of command resourcing available across these districts is not an anomaly. Since Reform, this region has routinely experienced a high level of vacancies / non relief. The circumstances of the 25/26 fire season coupled with the command resourcing challenges has been sighted by some as being a contributing factor for workplace health and safety concerns that have led to some incumbents commencing periods of personal leave.

27. Has CFA communicated the capabilities it requires from FRV through the secondment agreement? If so, are they being met?

CFA Response:

CFA has consistently raised concerns regarding not only the capacity of resources provided by FRV, but also the capability of those resources.

Upon the commencement of reform, CFA was required to transfer 52 ACFOs and 141 Commanders to FRV. Despite no change to statutory responsibilities, the number of CFA fire brigades or volunteer members, a reduced number of command staff (45 ACFOs and 96 Commanders) was returned to CFA via the Secondment Agreement. During the operation of the current arrangements staffing levels have been adjusted and currently reflect 50 ACFOs and 108 Commanders – equating to an 18% reduction on pre-reform levels if all roles were filled at all times.

Issues with CFA operational resourcing (particularly at Commander and Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) rank) persist. These roles are provided to CFA by FRV under the Secondment Agreement and associated arrangements. Focus must continue to be on both provision of the adequate number of staff (as defined in the Secondment Agreement) and staff with the appropriate skills (as defined by the CFA Capability Statement).

Since record keeping began in October 2020, vacancy and non-relief has meant CFA has been required to operate with a further reduced operational command workforce, on average of 17.2 persons per week - a combination of ACFOs and Commanders. This equates to a 11.4% reduction in workforce.

In the week commencing Monday 5 January 2026, CFA's senior operational leader workforce was reduced from the Secondment Agreement level by 29 FTE or 18.5 % (4 ACFO and 25 Commander roles) due to vacancy and relief issues.

As FSIM has noted in numerous of its annual reports, the Secondment Agreement has driven constant, fundamental and systemic challenges. Vacancies and the 'revolving door' of command staff incumbents result in a disrupted chain of command, lack of leadership continuity, reduced management capacity, operational capability, and inhibits CFA's ability to adequately support brigades, members and stakeholders.

The CFA Capability Statement was first developed and provided to Fire Resue Victoria in June 2022 and sets out the required technical skills, behavioural and personal attributes and knowledge and experience for these positions. This is important because CFA's operating context is vastly different from that of FRV and its organisational needs vary from FRV's. The CFA Capability Statement provides a clear articulation of these requirements against what it requests FRV to supply with the appropriate numbers of staff. CFA does not have an ability to be systematically part of selection decisions nor can it undertake performance management or FRV employees (or have visibility of any actions FRV takes).

In response to CFA's concerns, CFA and FRV established a Joint Secondment Workforce Advisory Group, comprising key representatives from both agencies, to develop an action plan supporting implementation of the CFA Capability Statement. However, progress has been slower than anticipated, noting that any proposed measures to address capacity and capability must be approved through the relevant industrial processes, in line with the consult and agree provisions of the FRV/UFU Enterprise Agreement.

28. How would you describe FRV's ability to supply you with the required personnel?

CFA Response:

FRV's ability to supply the required personnel continues to present challenges for CFA. FRV is funded to deliver seconded staff regardless of whether those personnel are provided (equates to \$7.3 million worth of service not provided to CFA in the FY 2024-25).

The implementation of the secondment arrangements has remained complex, with ongoing issues relating to both vacancy rates and the provision of relief, as outlined in response to Question 1. CFA's operational command workforce (Commanders and ACFO's) is acutely affected by these challenges; the supply of resources to other functions such as training ground staff has been less consequential.

These challenges indicate that FRV is not consistently able to supply personnel at the levels required to meet CFA's operational needs.

Since record keeping began in October 2020:

- CFA has been required to operate with a reduced operational command workforce on average of 17.2 persons per week (a combination of ACFOs and Commanders). This average equates to a reduction of services of 11.4%.

In practical terms, this reduced capacity has a direct impact on service delivery, particularly in relation to the level and continuity of support provided to brigades and volunteers. Gaps in resourcing can limit leadership presence, reduce engagement, place additional pressure on existing personnel and volunteers who are asked to "do more" which negatively impacts on overall operational effectiveness.

Updated demographic analysis of the seconded workforce undertaken by CFA in May 2025 (and presented to CFA-FRV Heads of Agency Steering Committee) shows there is a critical risk in the workforce. Familiarity with CFA operations will diminish as former CFA personnel retire and the pipeline to provide operational staff with the capabilities needed to take up these significant community-based leadership roles will be a significant challenge.

- 27% of the seconded workforce is aged 60+ (an increase of 3% since the August 2023 analytics) and 20% is between 55 and 59 years (a decrease of 4% since the August 2023 analytics). However, it is reasonable to expect that 47% of the current seconded workforce will retire over the next 5 years
- 46% of substantive incumbents in CFA seconded ACFO roles are likely to retire or transition to retirement in the next five years.
- 45% of substantive incumbents in CFA seconded Commander roles are likely to retire or transition to retirement in the next five years.
- 47% of substantive incumbents in CFA seconded Instructor roles are likely to retire or transition to retirement in the next five years.
- 62% of PAD Staff are 55 or above, with a 38% being aged 60+ and 50% of current seconded PAD Supervisors aged 60+.

Considering the challenges presented by the demographics of the current workforce and the ongoing resource deficiencies, CFA don't expect any significant improvements to emanate from the current arrangements.

29. Do you believe FRV genuinely seek to provide you with the capabilities CFA require?

CFA Response:

CFA considers that FRV is committed to maintaining the secondment model and, through established governance forums, demonstrates an ongoing willingness to engage in discussions regarding capability and capacity.

CFA seeks to do everything within its remit to support the success of these arrangements. A number of established forums continue to operate between CFA and FRV, most notably the CFA–FRV Heads of Agency Steering Committee. This Committee met weekly for an extended period and now meets on a fortnightly basis. Operational capacity remains a standing agenda item, supported by a CFA developed dashboard that serves as the agreed source of truth. These meetings enable regular identification of critical gaps.

In addition, the Heads of Agency Steering Committee has established a Joint Secondment Workforce Advisory Group (JSWAG). This group has been tasked with developing a coordinated workplan of short, medium, and long-term actions aimed at improving FRV's ability to meet CFA's workforce capability and capacity requirements.

Notwithstanding these arrangements, there are inherent structural challenges within the secondment model. Both CFA and FRV have senior operational roles, including ACFO and Commander positions, that require resourcing. This can create competing priorities in workforce allocation and may limit FRV's ability to consistently meet CFA's requirements.

There is also a perception at times that, given differing operating environments and limited familiarity with the CFA volunteer-based model, FRV's approach may place greater emphasis on directing how services should operate, rather than fully incorporating CFA's operational needs and context.

Further, the ongoing and sustained issues of vacancy and non-relief raise concerns about financial gains to FRV as a direct result unfilled positions in CFA.

While CFA acknowledges FRV's engagement and intent to make the arrangements work, these factors collectively contribute to a view that the current model does not yet consistently deliver the level of capability required to fully support CFA's operational needs.

30. Why don't CFA train and develop your seconded (middle management) workforce – this would be part of any organisation's priorities – to develop their middle / senior management cohort and would it deliver better outcomes if you were responsible?

CFA Response:

Senior operational leaders (operational middle management) are employees of Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), and as such, FRV retains primary responsibility for the recruitment, professional development, and ongoing capability of this workforce. FRV also holds the budget for these positions, including associated on-costs, which further reinforces its role in managing workforce development.

While this limits CFA's ability to directly train and develop the seconded middle and senior management cohort in a formal or mandated way, CFA recognises its responsibility to support these personnel to be effective in the CFA operating environment. In particular, the transition into CFA, leading a volunteer-based organisation with unique community, governance, and operational characteristics, requires targeted induction and support.

In that regard, CFA is undertaking work to strengthen induction arrangements, improve onboarding, and provide clearer guidance and support frameworks to assist senior operational leaders to adapt to the specific requirements of their roles working in CFA.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the inability for CFA to directly influence structured succession planning and professional development pathways for this cohort represents a limitation within the current model. There is a strong view that CFA lead development, particularly in preparing personnel for working with volunteers, managing complex HR issues, and for progression from Commander to ACFO roles within the CFA context, would support improved capability, leadership continuity, and ultimately better outcomes for brigades and communities.

Whilst CFA is currently not positioned to directly develop its senior operational leaders, and does not have the appropriate funding mechanisms to do so, it is actively exploring opportunities to establish development pipelines that support the growth and capability of personnel operating within the CFA environment.

CFA sees significant value in enabling the organisation to directly train and develop its operational middle management cohort, particularly given the markedly different operating environments between CFA and FRV. In this context, CFA is best placed to design and deliver development that is tailored to its volunteer-based service model, ensuring leaders are appropriately prepared for the unique demands of the role.

31. Are paid CFA instructors (seconded from FRV) delivering the same quantity of training sessions and courses as CFA instructors did prior to reform?

CFA Response:

Since 2023 CFA has developed the configuration and structure of courses which means a direct comparison of delivery volumes pre- and post-reform does not provide a like-for-like view.

However, when we examine delivery at a proportional level, specifically the split between career (instructors seconded from FRV) and volunteer instructors, it is apparent that there has been an increase in the percentage of courses delivered by volunteers:

2019:

- Career instructors delivered 907 courses (**61%**)
- Volunteer instructors delivered 563 courses (**39%**)

2025:

- Career instructors delivered 798 courses (**51%**)
- Volunteer instructors delivered 768 courses (**49%**)

This represents a **10% shift**, indicating an increased reliance on volunteer instructors to deliver training to CFA members.

In summary, while overall course configurations limit direct comparison of absolute volumes, the proportional data demonstrates that more is being asked of volunteers who are now delivering a greater share of training relative to career instructors compared to pre-Reform arrangements.

32. What feedback are you receiving from CFA volunteers in respect to the impacts of reform & support they are receiving from your senior leaders?

CFA Response:

CFA acknowledges the significant contribution of many senior operational leaders who continue to support the organisation, its brigades, and volunteers with a high level of professionalism and commitment, often under challenging circumstances.

Feedback from CFA volunteers indicates that the impacts of Fire Services Reform continue to be experienced, particularly in relation to leadership continuity, capability, and the level of support provided by senior operational personnel.

Volunteers consistently report challenges associated with senior operational roles being vacant and/or non relieved or subject to frequent change. This has resulted in a number of practical impacts, including reduced continuity in support and follow-through on requests, limited presence of senior leaders within districts, and a perceived inconsistency in capability and experience. The “revolving door” nature of some positions has made it difficult to establish trusted relationships and maintain momentum on local support initiatives.

From an operational perspective, volunteers have also identified that gaps in leadership, or variability in capability, can affect the timeliness and quality of support provided on key operational matters, as well as broader engagement with brigades and communities.

Additionally, there is an emerging concern that, over time, the connection, trust, and reliability historically built through long-standing relationships with CFA's station-based staff will diminish. The limited opportunity for CFA to develop and maintain strong engagement with FRV station-based personnel, who represent the future pipeline of senior operational leaders, will result in a reduced understanding of the CFA operating environment, including its volunteer model and community context. If unaddressed, this has the potential to further impact continuity, capability, and the strength of relationships between leaders and the volunteers they support.

33. There were media reports at the time of the Clarkfield fire of CFA cancelling FRV fire trucks from responding to a fire that impacted a caravan storage facility? Was this true? Are issues of one fire service ignoring the capability / availability of the other fire service in dispatch and response still an issue?

CFA Response:

Both FRV and CFA attended a grass fire near Clarkfield that impacted a caravan storage facility. CFA is not aware of any response issues that negatively impacted the management of this fire.

In general terms, CFA is at times made aware of instances where the dispatch of resources can be improved. CFA and FRV continue to work together to implement a complementary fire service model across Victoria which includes the timely and effective dispatch of the nearest and most appropriate resources.

34. Fire Services Reform was intended to provide for a complimentary fire service to Victorians' – how do examples of the closest fire stations not being dispatched to emergency calls because of the agency badge reflect a complimentary fire service?

CFA Response:

CFA supports the intent of Government policy – a complementary fire service so that all Victorians can rely on the best fire and emergency service response, regardless of where they live. CFA works with FRV and other partners (including 000Vic) to seek to ensure that the nearest and most appropriate appliances are dispatched to all incidents. CFA's mission is to protect life and property in the Country Area of Victoria, engaging actively with the community to support the prevention of fire and with partners in managing emergency incident response.



Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

APPENDIX C

Hearing date: 1/05/2026

Questions taken on notice

Directed to: Country Fire Authority

Received date: [office use only]

1. P.16 Melina Bath

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

Jason HEFFERNAN: The exact number of seconded staff available in district 22 – I do not want to mislead the committee, so I will take that one on notice.

CFA Response:

District 22 – Has a total operational staff allocation of five (5) - 1 x Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) and 4 x Commanders.

For the week commencing 05 January 2026, two (2) operational staff were available.

2. P.21 Wendy Lovell

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

Greg LEACH: Yes, certainly. We can, again, take that on notice

CFA Response:

CFA through DJCS participates in the annual budget bid processes ensuring the needs of the CFA are presented when budget bids are proposed. Funding considerations and allocations is a deliberative process of Cabinet, and questions to these deliberations should be referred to the relevant Minister.

3. P.30 Melina Bath

Question: -Can we please be provided a table with the breakdowns of all CFA appliances by type – pumper and tanker – and age profiles? I am putting that on notice. Can you include whether these appliances are brigade owned or CFA owned? I know that there is some data, but it is actually old data now. It is 2023 data, and it was released in 2024. I think it is important for the committee to understand those profiles.

CFA Response:

Table: CFA emergency response fleet number and age, by funding source (as at 15 January 2026)

Appliance type	Number CFA owned	VESEP / Brigade	Total Number	CFA owned - average age (years)	VESEP / Brigade - average age (Years)
Pumpers	214	4	218	16.8	17.5
Pumper tankers	41	3	44	21.9	19.7
Tankers	1,413	548	1,961	19.3	10.8
Specialist	55	83	138	13.3	11.5
TOTAL	1,723	638	2,361	18.9	11

Source: Total number from Whole of Victorian Government submission

Table: Appliance type, by age (all funding sources)

	0-5 years	5-10 years	10-15 years	15-20 years	20-25 years	25-30 years	30-35 years	35-40 years	Total
Pumpers	1	43	11	85	56	20	2	0	218
Pumper tankers	1	0	0	20	8	12	3	0	44
Tanker	260	229	408	339	186	242	231	66	1,961
Specialist Vehicles	25	44	28	20	12	6	3	0	138
Total	262	272	419	444	250	274	236	66	2,361

4. P.36-37 Gaelle Broad

Question: -Just with CFA, the volunteer numbers have dropped by nearly 14,000 operational firefighters – my understanding is it was 40,000 operational firefighters in 2009 to 28,855 in 2026 – despite high community interest. We have heard a lot about the lack of support that many CFA volunteers feel that they have got, and the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund-We have heard you mention today about the CFA needing to replace about 100 trucks a year, I think you said, and you mentioned the rolling fleet program had stalled over the last 10 to 15 years. I am just interested if you could, on notice, provide how many CFA appliances by type – and also FRV – have actually been purchased by our state each year over the last 12 years. If you could take that on notice.

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

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

CFA Response:

The number of new appliances received by CFA and delivered to brigades over the 12-year period is shown below in Table A:

Type	CFA	VESEP	Total
Pumper	50	1	51
Pumper Tanker	1	0	1
Tanker	385	337	722
Specialist	32	52	84
Total	468	390	858

Table A: Appliances delivered since 2014 as at 15th January 2026 (not including appliances transferred to FRV in 2020 as a requirement of Fire Services Reform)

Type	CFA	VESEP	Total
Pumper	65	1	66
Pumper Tanker	1	0	1
Tanker	385	337	722
Specialist	32	52	84
Total	483	390	873

Table: Appliances delivered since 2014 as at 15th January 2026 (including appliances transferred to

FRV in 2020 as a requirement of Fire Services Reform)

CFA modelling suggests that the additional investment (\$100M over 10 Years) will allow CFA to purchase approximately 200 firefighting vehicles. The precise number and mix of appliances to be ordered is subject to a procurement process yet to be commenced. CFA will use its appliance cascade program to ensure priority removal of the oldest appliances as new appliances are delivered.

Additional questions

Wendy Lovell

CFA - Funding

- I. Have changes in government policy such as the establishment of the Community Safety Building Authority (CSBA) who are now responsible for the procurement and construction of new CFA fire stations realised financial benefits to CFA or the Victorian Taxpayer?
 - What did it cost CFA previously to build a new / replacement fire station for a small rural community? Perhaps you could provide the cost of both a single and double bay station?
 - Currently, what cost are CFA being asked to pay to CSBA for them to construct the same types of station?

CFA Response:

Questions relating to Government Policy and deliberation considerations (including any benefit realisation) of the establishment of the Community Safety Building Authority (CSBA) are best directed to the relevant Minister.

The table below shows the cost to build different station types in the years 2018, 2020, 2022 by CFA commensurate with our Whole of Life Asset Plan.

Budget and cost considerations under the CSBA model is site specific and modeled based on the type of station approved and site-specific considerations of each build. Questions on the modeled cost structure used by CSBA during budget considerations are best directed to CSBA.

Stations in small rural communities are station type **1A** and **1B**.

Typology	2018	2020	2022(*)
1A	\$550,000	\$650,000	\$750,000
1B	\$770,000	\$850,000	\$1,200,000
1C	\$1,650,000	\$1,750,000	\$2,500,000
2A	\$2,200,000	\$2,300,000	\$2,900,000
2B	\$2,600,000	\$2,700,000	\$3,500,000

(*) CFA forecast budget allowance against Whole of Life Asset Plan (WOLP)

Station Type	Risk Profile	Brigade Classification	Current Number
1A Station	Remote Rural	Class 1	556
1B Station	Rural	Class 2	376
1C Station	Small town or Semi Urban	Class 3	137

2A Station	Large Town or Urban Interface	Class 4	57
2B Station	Large Town or Fully Urban	Class 4 & 5	73

Table: station type, by risk profile and classification

2. Have changes in Government Policy regarding the purchase / disposal of vacant land for agency use impacted CFA in any way?

CFA Response:

No - In accordance with the *Country Fire Authority Act 1958 (CFA Act)* all funds resulting from the sale, exchange or letting of any property by the CFA is then applied in the purchase of property for the CFA or the improvement of the property of the CFA.

Questions about Government Policy regarding purchase and disposal of other lands across government are best directed to the relevant Minister.

3. Why is CFA dependent upon DEECA for fuel management funding?

CFA Response:

CFA's fuel management program expanded dramatically with the implementation of the Governments *Safer Together (ST)* policy. The joint agency program has supported CFA to build and operate its capability in fuel management and work in partnership with Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (**DEECA**) to improve the states fuel management program.

Primary funding from DEECA (*Safer Together* program funding) is used for the purposes of fuel management / mitigation programs.

CFA - Chief Officer

4. Many of your volunteers are unhappy with the way some of the fires were managed. What are you going to do to improve it?

CFA Response:

CFA is committed to an evaluation and improvement cycle - capturing lessons, translating them into changes, and ensuring they are reflected in our capability, training and operational arrangements. An after-action review (**AAR**) is a structured review or debrief process for analysing an incident to help us improve our performance. It considers what was planned, what happened, why it happened and how it can be done better/differently or sustained where positive outcomes were achieved. This is standard practice in CFA.

The 2025-26 Post Season Debrief Program is underway to gather feedback and insights from members. CFA has designed various mechanisms to gather input and is seeking to hear from a wide range of members across the state. Mechanisms being used include:

- Facilitated AARs with fireground leaders following significant incidents
- Tailored surveys to Strike Team Leaders, Sector Commanders and Divisional Commanders

- Targeted interviews with key personnel, particularly those involved in the transfer of control to an Incident Control Centre from a fireground
- District and Region surveys and facilitated AARs for those that had significant operational activity.

Once this work is complete, CFA will ensure the key findings and our intended response are shared broadly with our members, including activities undertaken that improved operational outcomes and where the AAR outcomes recommend sustainment.

CFA - Sustainable brigades & volunteerism

5. From VBRC 2009 “Bushfire is an intrinsic part of Victoria’s landscape, and if time dims our memory we risk repeating the mistakes of the past. We need to learn from the experiences of Black Saturday and improve the way we prepare for and respond to bushfires”

- Are agencies such as CFA better equipped, supported and enabled now in 2026 than you were in the lead up to that tragic day in 2009?

CFA Response:

This is a complex, multi-dimensional question. The risk environment continues to change rapidly, with climate-driven increases in severity/frequency of emergency events and changes in where and how people live.

At the system level, advancements such as the single integrated emergency warnings platform for all agencies to leverage when seeking to alert the community in times of emergency has delivered significant benefits. Likewise, all agencies operating out of a single State Control Centre has improved co-ordination and connection.

Bushfire remains the most significant natural hazard to Victoria as demonstrated by the cyclical nature of major bushfire emergencies. The 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission made numerous recommendations specific to the State’s preparedness for and response to bushfire.

Significant advancements have been made since 2009, and CFA considers strengthened local fire management planning, response and prevention arrangements that empower brigades, communities, stakeholders and agencies to work together with a focus on bushfire hazard to mitigate fire risk, would build on the advancements since 2009 and further enable CFA and the Chief Officer in the execution of statutory functions and community preparedness outcomes.

6. Are CFA members receiving the quantity and quality of training they request?

CFA Response:

The diverse nature of CFA's membership brings a dichotomy of views on the suitability of CFA's training. CFA's training of volunteers in line with national public safety standards supports Local, State and National interoperability and safe operations.

CFA Training includes formal courses, awareness packages, fleet/equipment inductions and skills maintenance. Training occurs in a variety of settings (Brigade, Regional and State levels) and a variety of modes (face to face, blended, or online). CFA's training campuses are located across the State for ease of access to members (and made available to other agencies).

CFA has established a training pathway to support the developmental needs of members and provides guidance on the progression of qualifications required to meet the various roles within CFA. The training pathway is being implemented across the State and together with the redevelopment of the Brigade operating skills profile (under development) will better guide the CFA and Brigades in determining training demands and ensuring priority of courses.

CFA operates as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), through the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, to deliver nationally recognised training and enterprise packages to volunteers. National units of competencies are aligned to the Public Skills packages.

In 2021, CFA commissioned the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) to conduct an independent peer review into CFA Training. Since then, a focused program of work to enhance CFA training offerings has been underway. This work is ongoing, including exploration of a General Firefighter 'on the job' training model for our Class 1 and 2 brigades in rural areas that may be better suited to their needs. The Training Enhancement Program (**TEP**), now in its second year, includes 23 specific initiatives to improve CFA's training offering to our members. CFA has committed to work jointly with Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria to collectively and collaboratively implement the TEP.

7. What impediments exist in being able to improve the quality and meet the demand?

CFA Response:

CFA has made significant progress in strengthening training systems and governance, particularly through the implementation of the Training Enhancement Program (TEP) and the progressive delivery of recommendations from the AFAC independent peer review into training. These initiatives have provided a clear roadmap for improvement, strengthened governance arrangements, and enhanced the consistency and quality of training across the organisation.

However, several structural and operational factors continue to influence the ability to fully realise these improvements at pace and scale.

1. Balancing Quality, Consistency and Local Flexibility

CFA operates across a highly diverse volunteer-based service, with over 1,200 brigades and a wide range of training needs and expectations. Feedback indicates varying preferences, including demand for more online training, more face-to-face delivery, and differing views on training complexity and standards.

This diversity requires a balance between standardised, high-quality training frameworks (as progressed through TEP and AFAC recommendations) and the flexibility needed for regions and brigades to tailor training to local risk and capability requirements. Achieving this balance can inherently limit the ability to fully optimise both quality and accessibility simultaneously.

2. Workforce Availability and Competing Priorities

A key constraint across training delivery is the availability of instructors, subject matter experts (SMEs), and incident management personnel, many of whom are volunteers or operational staff. Competing operational demands—particularly during prolonged fire seasons—can delay program delivery, governance activities, and reform initiatives such as elements of the TEP.

While there has been a concentrated effort to grow the number of volunteer instructors, this remains a key objective to increasing training capability and access for our members.

3. System and Technology Constraints

The AFAC peer review of CFA training identified the need for more contemporary and fit-for-purpose systems, particularly in learning management and training administration. This has been reflected in TEP priorities, including stabilisation of, and potential replacement of, the Learning Management System (LMS).

While improvements are underway, current system limitations can impact the efficiency of training delivery, reporting, and the overall user experience for instructors and learners. CFA is currently embarking on a market approach to replace its problematic legacy LMS.

4. Complexity of Reform Delivery (TEP Implementation)

The Training Enhancement Program is a substantial, multi-year reform program spanning eight scope areas, including training model reform, program redevelopment, instructor pathways, and incident management capability building.

The breadth of this reform means that improvements must be sequenced and prioritised. At times, elements of the program have required adjustment or pausing to align with

operational priorities or resource availability.

This reflects the scale and complexity of transformation rather than a lack of direction.

5. Volunteer-Based Service Model

As a predominantly volunteer organisation, CFA's training system must operate within a model where participation is discretionary and influenced by broader life commitments of our volunteer members. This affects both the demand for training (which continues to grow) and the capacity to deliver it.

It also requires training to be accessible, relevant and efficient, while minimising administrative burden—an ongoing focus of reform through both TEP and broader operating model initiatives.

Actions taken by CFA has dramatically increased the availability and delivery of training as outlined below, however acknowledge that more work is needed, including the consideration to development of a live-in campus (similar to the former Fiskville Training Center) to further accommodate volunteer needs from across the state.

	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	FY 2025
Courses delivered	1,869	1,916	1,997	2,182	1,669
Members trained	10,437	13,551	13,738	14,370	12,126

Table: Summary of number of courses delivered and members trained, by year

8. Why is CFA dependent upon other agencies such as EMV and FRV to deliver training?

CFA Response:

The Secondment Agreement between CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria (**FRV**), which is a key feature of Fire Services Reform, sets out the role types and number of roles that CFA can source from FRV. This includes Assistant Chief Fire Officers, Commanders and – relevant to training – Instructors (53 roles in total) and Practical Area Drill (**PAD**) staff roles (29 in total comprising 8 PAD Supervisors and 21 PAD Operators); those who maintain and operate CFA's network of field training grounds.

The future growth in training delivery within the volunteer-focused CFA, places more emphasis on the use of volunteer instructors to meet growing demands.

CFA is seeking to strategically build and support the number of volunteer instructors who, along with the seconded instructors, are the backbone of CFA's training excellence. Their dedication, experience, and passion for sharing knowledge is vital to ensuring that every member, whether they are a new recruit undertaking General Firefighter training or a long-serving member advancing in Incident Management, Advanced Firefighting, or Fire Investigation—receives the highest standard of instruction. Instructors deliver training and conduct assessments in accredited and non-accredited training courses. They play a critical role in building the capability, confidence, and safety of our members.

In relation to Incident Management Training (**IMT**), Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) provides centralised development and delivery of IMT training programs. CFA has access

to, and has participated in, EMV-led incident management programs.

CFA has recently commenced rollout of an in-house IMT training program to better meet the needs of a volunteer workforce with a bushfire hazard focus. The delivery of this training will utilise both volunteer and paid IMT practitioners who have a wide range of operational experience in IMT's. This CFA IMT program will complement the EMV programs and provide a more volunteer-centric approach to IMT capability development.

CFA - Vegetation / roadside fuel management

9. Do CFA have adequate powers to require the management of vegetation on roadsides?

CFA Response:

The management of roadsides for fire prevention purposes is specifically referred to in the CFA Act in Section 43(1), which states that:

*It shall be the **duty of every municipal council and every public authority** to take all practicable steps to prevent the occurrence of fires on and to minimise the danger of the spread of fires on or from:*

*any land vested in it or under its control or management, **and any road under its care and management***

CFA has developed roadside fire management guidelines that focus on eliminating the source of ignition, but it does not have any power or authority to enforce these guidelines.

10. Are public land managers who are responsible for roads and infrastructure (such as mobile phone towers and water systems) adequately managing fuel loads on their land? If not, what powers do CFA have to ensure public safety?

CFA Response:

Anecdotally, CFA understands that some critical infrastructure within the 2026 fire-affected areas had significant vegetation and fuel loads adjacent to the critical infrastructure that would could cause a critical outage or failure due to the intensity of heat during a wildfire. Whether this is the public land managers' responsibility (for those critical infrastructure sites located on public land) or the leaseholder's responsibility it is not known to CFA.

While CFA actively engages with critical infrastructure operators to provide guidance on fire risk management practices, CFA has no powers to compel land managers (other than private property where Municipalities fail to do so) to manage vegetation and fire risk or to comply with any relevant CFA standards.

11. Why is CFA dependent upon DEECA for funding vegetation management activities? Has this quantum reduced or is it at risk of not continuing?

CFA Response:

Refer to response to Question 3 and 12.

12. Have DEECA reduced the quantum of funding to CFA through the Safer Together initiative?

- If so, is this despite the fact that DEECA now receive funding certainty from the ESVF?

CFA Response:

For the ongoing Safer Together (ST) program over the period 2021-22 to 2025-26 funding has generally been allocated in roughly equal proportions between the CFA and DEECA. The quantum of funding to CFA has not reduced over that time.

Questions regarding the future funding of the ST program and the interplay with the ESVF are best directed to DEECA.

13. Have DEECA communicated a position in respect to the continuance of Safer Together and their ongoing partnership with CFA?

CFA Response:

There has been no formal advice from DEECA with respect to the continuance of the ongoing *Safer Together* partnership with CFA. Questions on DEECA's position in respect of the *Safer Together* program continuation are best directed to DEECA.

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

CFA Response:

The establishment of the Office of Bushfire Risk Management has sought to establish system-level coordination, assurance and transparency in bushfire fuel risk reduction for Victoria. As the model continues to mature, CFA have identified practical challenges associated with operating within a multi-agency environment. These include ensuring clear role definition, aligning strategic risk frameworks with operational delivery realities, managing increased assurance and reporting requirements, and navigating the complexity of cross-tenure fuel management.

These are not uncommon in a system of this scale and complexity and are being progressively addressed through ongoing collaboration and refinement of arrangements.

CFA stands ready to assist the OBRM with facilitating its functions through embedded collaboration within the OBRM.

15. Reference Chapter 3 of the “Report of the Board of Inquiry into the occurrence of Bush and Grass Fires in Victoria” ordered by the Legislative Assembly in October 1977. This report provided considerable attention to roadside vegetation management. Some 50 years on, it appears these issues persist. Can CFA meet its statutory obligation to prevent fire and protect lives and property from bushfire under the current arrangements?

CFA Response:

See response to Question 9.

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

CFA Response:

Questions regarding the status of recommendations arising from the IGEM fuel management review are best directed to the Inspector General, Emergency Management, or the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS).

17. Changes to the Emergency Management Act made under this government established ‘all hazards’ emergency management planning committees. In doing so, these changes removed the statutory requirement (under CFA Act) to establish municipal and regional fire management planning committees. Have these changes improved or hindered CFA’s efforts in preventing and mitigating bushfires in Victoria?

CFA Response:

The 2018 reforms improved planning by replacing hazard -specific structures with an integrated, all-hazards framework, enabling agencies to plan collaboratively for a wide range of emergencies (e.g. floods, pandemics, and infrastructure failures).

This has strengthened preparedness by promoting coordinated, multi-agency capability, consistent governance, and flexible plans that can be applied across different emergency scenarios, improving overall system resilience.

Post the implementation of changes several municipal bushfire committees continued to function across a number of CFA Districts and Regions. Unless strong commitment is given by Municipalities and Agencies, CFA holds concerns that the current arrangements may risk a shift of focus away from bushfire prevention and mitigation reducing the effectiveness of bushfire risk mitigation at the local level, unless strong mechanisms exist to ensure compliance.

Following the repeal of the statutory requirements MFPCs, reduced visibility and influence of CFA at the municipal level does creates challenges for CFA and Chief Officer in forming applicable views and applying statutory powers under Section 45(1) and 41F of the *CFA Act 1958*.

18. Now municipalities have a reduced role in fire prevention (as per the planning legislation changes) why do they retain other statutory responsibilities under CFA's legislation?

CFA Response:

CFA's legislation was drafted many decades ago at a time where the role of municipalities in managing / mitigating fire risk was a much higher focus than is CFA's experience today.

The role and expectations of both municipalities and CFA have shifted over time, with expectations on CFA to lead and manage fire risk increasing whilst anecdotally reported resource constraints are inhibiting some municipalities from contributing to the levels preferred or required.

These shifts are illustrated in the operation of fire management planning arrangements, roadside and vegetation management, fire trail / track maintenance, provision of resources under the emergency resourcing program and changing expectations as it pertains to relief and recovery.

In the most obvious example, many municipalities are now requiring a fee payable by residents seeking a permit to burn during the declared Fire Danger Period; CFA do not charge a fee for application. A review of the role of Municipalities and CFA functions and accountabilities and where it is best placed would be a matter for consideration of the Government.

- Should municipalities be required to issue fire permits under CFA legislation?

CFA Response:

Yes, this is the current function of Municipalities under the CFA Act.

There are many municipalities that have stopped issuing permits to burn since introduction of the online permit system. That has seen an increase in workload for CFA officers. A review of the accountabilities of Municipalities and CFA for bushfire mitigation and management and where it is best placed, would be a matter for consideration of the Government.

19. Should municipalities be required to monitor fire safety and enforce fire prevention notices?

CFA Response:

Yes, this is the current function of Municipalities under the CFA Act.

A review of the role of Municipalities and CFA accountabilities for bushfire mitigation and management and where it is best placed, would be a matter for consideration of the Government.

20. Is it reasonable for municipalities to undertake these functions to the satisfaction of CFA within their constrained resources (rate capping)?

CFA Response:

This question is probably more appropriate to be directed to the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and/or municipalities themselves rather than CFA.

21. Why aren't CFA primarily responsible for administering your own legislation?

CFA Response:

CFA is primarily responsible for administering its own legislation, in line with the statutory responsibilities that the CFA Act assigns to the Authority and roles of Chief Executive Officer and Chief Officer. A review of the role of Municipalities and CFA accountabilities for bushfire mitigation and management and where it is best placed, would be a matter for consideration of the Government.

CFA - Fire Service Reform impacts on CFA

22. Did the District 22 ACFO attend the Longwood fire on the 7/1/2026 soon after it started, only to depart a couple of hours later and leave volunteer firefighters staring at the worst fire they have ever seen without support and leadership to return home and rest?

CFA Response:

The Committee has heard firsthand from CFA members, including via the 'open mic' sessions, about their experiences, reflections and views regarding the management of fires throughout the Northeast Region and the level of support provided by CFA District teams. Many CFA members have raised concerns around the operation of the current resourcing model and CFA's chain of command directly with the Committee.

CFA values the significant contribution of Assistant Chief Fire Officers and their Command staff who perform critical roles within CFA, directly supporting brigades and volunteer leaders with skills, knowledge and leadership that is critical to enabling success and maintaining safe systems of work, including fireground attendance. CFA also recognises for both staff and volunteers the importance of compliance with applicable health and safety standards, policies and, for employees, relevant provisions of enterprise agreements.

23. What has been the reaction from your volunteers to the actions of the District 22 ACFO?

CFA Response:

The Committee has heard firsthand from CFA members, including via the 'open mic' sessions, about their experiences, reflections and views regarding the management of fires throughout the Northeast Region and the levels of support provided by CFA District teams. Many CFA members have raised concerns around the operation of the current resourcing model and CFA's chain of command directly with the Committee.

CFA values the significant contribution of Assistant Chief Fire Officers and their Command staff who perform critical roles within CFA, directly supporting brigades and volunteer leaders with skills, knowledge and leadership that is critical to enabling success and maintaining safe systems of work. CFA also recognises for both staff and volunteers the importance of compliance with applicable health and safety standards, policies, and for our employees relevant provisions of enterprise agreements.

Volunteers have expressed their disappointment regarding the staff resourcing on 07 January 2026, and CFA continues to work with FRV to ensure that seconded ACFO and Commander positions are filled.

24. Did you or CFA have any say in the decision to appoint the incumbent to the position of District 22 ACFO – the Officer in Charge of 73 CFA Volunteer Fire Brigades.

CFA Response:

Under the secondment agreement and associated policy, Fire Rescue Victoria (**FRV**) holds primary responsibility for recruitment and selection into CFA seconded positions, both on a permanent and temporary basis.

25. How would you describe the effectiveness and performance of District 22 prior to the change of leadership? Who appointed the previous ACFO in District 22?

CFA Response:

CFA values the significant contribution of Assistant Chief Fire Officers and their Command staff who perform critical roles within CFA, directly supporting brigades and volunteer leaders with skills, knowledge and leadership that is critical to enabling success and maintaining safe systems of work.

The recently retired ACFO of District 22 served for approximately 6 years in the role and was appointed prior to fire services reform (which came into effect on 01 July 2020).

26. How many CFA Commander positions are allocated across the four CFA Districts that encompass the Gippsland EM region? How many of those commander positions were filled by an incumbent and available for work on the 17/2/2026 when the region was subject to a TFB.

CFA Response:

CFA Workforce Status (week commencing 16/2/26) limited to Gippsland EM Region:

Ranks	Allocated	Available
ACFO	4	4
Commander	14	5

CFA operates as a statewide, integrated network of brigades, command personnel and specialist capabilities that enable the dynamic movement of resources to areas of greatest need during periods of heightened operational demand.

This model is supported by coordinated regional structures, state-level oversight, and interoperable systems, allowing command personnel and specialist resources to be rapidly redeployed across geographic boundaries. During peak events, this surge capacity ensures that local capability can be reinforced by resources drawn from across Victoria, maintaining an effective and sustained response to emergencies while supporting communities and volunteers impacted by prolonged operations.

27. Has CFA communicated the capabilities it requires from FRV through the secondment agreement? If so, are they being met?

CFA Response:

The CFA Capability Statement for seconded positions was first developed and provided to Fire Rescue Victoria in June 2022 and sets out the required technical skills, behavioral and personal attributes, knowledge and experience for CFA seconded positions. This is an important document because CFA's operating context is vastly different from that of FRV and its organisational needs vary from FRV's.

The CFA Capability Statement provides a clear articulation of these requirements against what it requests FRV to supply with the appropriate numbers of staff.

CFA and FRV established a Joint Secondment Workforce Advisory Group, comprising key representatives from both agencies, to develop an action plan supporting implementation of the CFA Capability Statement. However, progress has been slower than anticipated, noting that proposed measures to address capacity and capability must be consulted through the relevant industrial processes, in line with the FRV/UFU Enterprise Agreement.

28. How would you describe FRV's ability to supply you with the required personnel?

CFA Response:

FRV's ability to supply the required personnel continues to present challenges for both FRV and CFA. The application and operation of the Secondment Agreement is monitored by the Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM). CFA and FRV remain focused on developing workforce planning frameworks to develop the pipeline of FRV personnel to be eligible for secondment to CFA.

29. Do you believe FRV genuinely seek to provide you with the capabilities CFA require?

CFA Response:

CFA considers that FRV is committed to maintaining the secondment model and, through established governance forums, demonstrates an ongoing willingness to engage in discussions and to explore all options to ensure CFA is provided with the requisite number of ACFO's and Commanders at the required capability and capacity.

30. Why don't CFA train and develop your seconded (middle management) workforce – this would be part of any organisation's priorities – to develop their middle / senior management cohort and would it deliver better outcomes if you were responsible?

CFA Response:

Senior operational leaders in CFA (operational middle management ranks including ACFO's and Commanders) are employees of Fire Rescue Victoria (**FRV**), and as such, FRV retains primary responsibility for the recruitment, professional development, and ongoing capability of this workforce. FRV holds the budget for these positions, including associated on-costs including training, which underscores FRV's role in managing workforce development. CFA also notes relevant provisions within the secondment agreement and FRV operational employee's enterprise agreement that also informs training and development.

While this may limit CFA's ability to directly train and develop the seconded middle and senior management cohort in a formal or mandated way, CFA recognises its responsibility

to support these personnel to be effective in the CFA operating environment. In particular, the transition into CFA, leading a volunteer-based organisation with unique community, governance, and operational characteristics, requires targeted induction and support.

In that regard, CFA is undertaking work to strengthen induction arrangements, improve onboarding, and provide clearer guidance and support frameworks to assist senior operational leaders to adapt to the specific requirements of their roles while working in CFA.

31. Are paid CFA instructors (seconded from FRV) delivering the same quantity of training sessions and courses as CFA instructors did prior to reform?

CFA Response:

As a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), CFA is required to meet nationally mandated vocational education and training standards, including maintaining the quality, consistency and integrity of training delivery and assessment. This requires all instructors regardless of whether they are staff or volunteer to meet the same competency, accreditation and quality assurance requirements.

In practice, this means that trainer qualifications, assessment practices, moderation, and ongoing professional development obligations apply equally across the workforce to ensure compliance with regulatory standards and the credibility of qualifications issued. While this approach supports a consistent and high-quality training system, it also introduces complexity within a predominantly volunteer-based model, where maintaining instructor capability and availability must be balanced with broader operational and personal commitments.

The network of CFA staff Instructors (seconded from FRV) and CFA volunteer Instructors provides a significant statewide training capability to deliver the planned CFA Training Program.

32. What feedback are you receiving from CFA volunteers in respect to the impacts of reform & support they are receiving from your senior leaders?

CFA Response:

CFA acknowledges the significant contribution of many senior operational leaders who continue to support the organisation, its brigades, and volunteers with a high level of professionalism and commitment.

The most reform-related feedback that CFA receives from brigades, groups, and volunteers relate to challenges associated with senior operational roles (i.e. ACFO and Commander positions) being vacant and/or not relieved or subject to frequent change. Volunteers report this makes it difficult where it occurs, to establish trusted relationships and maintain momentum on local support initiatives.

CFA and FRV, through a number of standing Working Groups and other governance forums, continue to collaborate to seek to ensure that all seconded positions within CFA are filled, and that the seconded officers have the capability and capacity to perform their roles effectively.

The application and operation of Fire Services Reform is monitored by the Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM).

33. There were media reports at the time of the Clarkfield fire of CFA cancelling FRV fire trucks from responding to a fire that impacted a caravan storage facility? Was this true? Are issues of one fire service ignoring the capability / availability of the other fire service in dispatch and response still an issue?

CFA Response:

Both FRV and CFA attended a grass fire near Clarkfield that impacted a caravan storage facility. CFA is not aware of any response issues that negatively impacted the management of this fire.

In general terms, from time to time CFA is made aware of instances where the process for the dispatch of resources can be improved. CFA and FRV continue to work, along with other stakeholders such as Triple Zero Victoria (TZV) to implement a complementary fire service model across Victoria.

The application and operation of Fire Services Reform is monitored by the Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM).

34. Fire Services Reform was intended to provide for a complimentary fire service to Victorians' – how do examples of the closest fire stations not being dispatched to emergency calls because of the agency badge reflect a complimentary fire service?

CFA Response:

CFA operationalises the intent of the Government's fire service reform policy for a complementary fire service so that all Victorians can rely on the best fire and emergency service response, regardless of where they live. CFA works with FRV and other partners (including TZV) to ensure that the nearest and most appropriate appliances are dispatched to all incidents.

CFA's mission is to protect life and property in the Country Area of Victoria, engaging actively with the community to support the prevention of fire, and with partner agencies in managing emergency incident response.

The application and operation of Fire Services Reform is monitored by the Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM).

Annabelle CLEELAND MP

The Nationals Member for Euroa

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health

15 July 2026

The Hon. Jacinta Allan MP
Premier of Victoria
Level 1, 1 Treasury Place
East Melbourne 2002
jacinta.allan@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Premier,

RE: URGENT INTERVENTION REQUIRED — JANUARY 2026 LONGWOOD–STRATHBOGIE BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

I write on behalf of the communities of Longwood, Ruffy, Gooram, Creightons Creek, Euroa, Violet Town and the broader Strathbogie Shire, six months on from the catastrophic Longwood–Berrys Lane bushfire of 7–9 January 2026. This fire burned more than 136,000 hectares, destroyed more than 100 homes and 294 other structures, and claimed the life of Max Hobson. A State of Disaster was declared, and more than \$420 million in state and federal support has since been announced. Yet six months on, recovery on the ground remains fragmented, delayed and, in key respects, has fallen well short of the recovery standard set by other national disasters, including the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires and the Victorian floods of 2022.

I have raised these failures directly with the Emergency Management Commissioner, Tim Wiebusch, and before the Legislative Council's Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires. I am now asking you, in your capacity as Premier, to intervene. Set out below, in order of urgency, are the outstanding failures and the actions required.

1. **Rate relief and Emergency Services & Volunteers Fund (ESVF) levy exemption — still awaiting a decision.** Three years of rate relief (\$5.941 million) and an ESVF levy waiver (\$1.013 million) for bushfire-impacted properties remains undecided. This is consistent with precedent: following the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires, Bushfire Recovery Victoria, through the Victorian Government's Council Assistance Fund, credited ratepayers' rates and business registration fees for fire-affected properties. Strathbogie, Mitchell and Murrindindi Shires have all separately called for the same investment in rate relief, so residents are not paying rates on properties that are, in many cases, now valueless. More than 15 per cent of Strathbogie ratepayers were directly impacted by this fire, and a mental health crisis is unfolding in this community at the same time as impacted ratepayers are receiving arrears notices. This is compounding harm on top of harm and must be resolved immediately.



Annabelle CLEELAND MP

The Nationals Member for Euroa

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health

2. **Emergency Management Victoria and Emergency Recovery Victoria are being restructured and amalgamated in the middle of active recovery.** This timing is entirely inappropriate and has already resulted in significant staff redundancies and departures, offset only by temporary surge staff. The resulting churn means residents are being forced to repeat their trauma to a constantly changing cast of case workers. It has further dissolved the single, 'one-stop shop' recovery model that every Royal Commission and inquiry has recommended, fracturing service delivery so that the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing now manages housing and mental health support, Emergency Recovery Victoria manages only the hotline and initial response, and environmental recovery sits with a separate department again. The system is now so fractured that residents cannot navigate it, and this represents one of the worst-coordinated disaster responses in the state's history. This must be reviewed immediately — if the same competency and coordination is seen again this coming summer, it will be a disgrace.
3. **A two-tiered, dysfunctional clean-up program.** Insured properties were excluded from the government clean-up despite contrary advice from the Insurance Council of Australia. This runs directly counter to precedent: the 2022 Victorian floods clean-up program was explicitly open to property owners "regardless of whether or not they were insured," as was the 2019–20 Black Summer program, and the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements specifically warned governments against targeting clean-up assistance to the uninsured only, since doing so disadvantages and disincentivises those who took out insurance. A universal, fast-tracked program is also a health and environmental necessity, not simply a fairness issue: fire-damaged asbestos grows more friable and airborne the longer it sits exposed to weather, contaminating soil and leaching into water catchments during rain, while every week a site is left untouched prolongs the trauma of residents living beside the ruins of their home. Clean-up did not commence until four months after the fire, and at the five-month mark had cleared only around 70 properties, against 736 properties cleared within seven months after Black Summer.
4. **The landfill gate fee waiver has lapsed while the clean-up is only half-finished.** The State's own clean-up program is still only around halfway through eligible properties, yet the waiver of landfill gate fees for bushfire-affected residents has been allowed to lapse. Residents who clean up ahead of the program, or who need to finish work once contractors leave, are now being charged tip fees to dispose of the ruins of their own homes. This waiver must be reinstated and extended to the end of 2026, in line with a realistic timeframe for the state program to actually finish its work.
5. **'Discovery' is not being consistently offered.** Allowing a property owner to search the rubble of their home for personal effects before clean-up begins has been standard practice in Victoria's own government-run bushfire clean-up programs, including after the 2019–20 fires, but has not been consistently offered in this disaster. This must be rectified immediately so that every landowner is guaranteed the opportunity for discovery before their property is cleared, rather than being retraumatised by further, avoidable loss on top of everything they have already lost.

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6. **Inadequate and poorly explained temporary housing.** Only around 100 temporary or modular homes have been made available against more than 300 properties destroyed. At least 40 modular homes from Black Summer were identified sitting unused in storage and have since been sold rather than deployed to residents in the middle of winter. Contracts for temporary housing remain complex and unclear, and residents are reluctant to sign them for fear of what rights they may be waiving. This uncertainty contributed to reluctance among some eligible residents to enter into the agreements, undermining confidence in a program intended to provide timely and secure temporary accommodation during recovery.
7. **No properly funded mental health service for the scale of trauma involved.** GV Health has stepped up to offer Dr Sharon, a clinician with the skills appropriate to a disaster of this scale, to service the fireground — but this remains unfunded and has been cut from two days a week to one. Current outreach and peer support through Mental Health Locals in Shepparton and Benalla does not adequately address the level of complex trauma experienced, with ongoing concerns regarding service gaps in Strathbogie Shire, one of the hardest-hit areas.
8. **Council funding inequity is threatening the Recovery Hub.** Strathbogie Shire received the same \$750,000 in immediate assistance as councils with far less severe impacts, despite more than 15 per cent of Strathbogie ratepayers being directly affected. Following the 2022 Victorian floods — a considerably smaller event for this Shire — Council received more than \$1.5 million and was still left over \$3 million out of pocket. Council needs \$2.8 million over three years simply to keep the Recovery Hub and dedicated recovery staff in place.
9. **The Relief Drinking Water Program was cut short.** DEECA's tank-for-tank water replacement program ceased on 22 April 2026 having completed only around a quarter of eligible applications, largely because clean-up delays prevented residents from accessing their own properties in time to apply. Affected residents remain without a reliable water supply.
10. **Fencing cannot be rebuilt because government has failed to clear fence lines.** Trees remaining on fence lines — a DEECA responsibility to clear — have paralysed BlazeAid's ability to assist farmers, who lack the resources or physical capacity to clear the lines themselves and therefore cannot rebuild fencing or resume farming operations.
11. **No small business or tourism recovery package has been delivered.** Unlike comparable disasters, no small business grants or tourism activation funding have been made available, despite the fires destroying trade across both Australia Day and Anzac Day — two of the region's most important tourism and hospitality trading periods.
12. **No dedicated landholder rebuild support programs or grants.** Previous disasters have offered dedicated small landholder and farmer rebuilding grants; no equivalent has been made available this time, leaving small-holding farmers who need significant rebuilding support with nothing to draw on.

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13. **The planning system is under-resourced for the scale of the task.** Strathbogie's small planning team is managing the entire recovery caseload without additional support. Council has already self-funded a 50 per cent waiver of planning, building and environmental health fees (\$240,000) and is seeking the State to fund the full cost (\$480,000), alongside a dedicated, State-supported planning recovery hub of the kind extended elsewhere.
14. **Community infrastructure has been left exposed.** \$12.9 million is needed to bring local halls and pavilions — the de facto emergency and recovery hubs for these towns — up to a standard that includes backup power and safe, functional facilities, after the fires exposed how ill-equipped they were to serve that role.
15. **A lack of transparency and accountability.** More than \$420 million has been announced across state and federal governments, yet this is not being felt on the ground. It remains unclear who authorised the decision to exclude insured properties from the clean-up program, and the Deputy Commissioner for Recovery's public statements that only caravans would be provided directly contradict evidence given on the record to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee that modular homes would be delivered.

This community did not choose this disaster. They have shown extraordinary resilience — but resilience is not a substitute for a properly funded, coordinated and equitable recovery. Six months on, neither the Prime Minister nor the Premier of Victoria has visited these communities. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters further and to work with your office on a swift resolution. Every month of delay compounds the harm already done to families who have lost everything.

Yours sincerely,



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