

INQUIRY INTO THE 2026 SUMMER FIRES ACROSS VICTORIA

Organisation: Doctors for the Environment Australia

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Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

*Submission to the Victorian Legislative Council
Environment and Planning Committee*

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About Doctors for the Environment Australia

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent, non-government organisation of medical doctors in all Australian states and territories.

DEA's work is based on the premise that humans need a future with clean air and water, healthy soils capable of producing nutritious food, a stable climate, and a complex, diverse and interconnected humanity whose needs are met in a sustainable way. We are therefore interested in environmental protection and restoration to promote human health and social stability.

Acknowledgement of Country

Doctors for the Environment Australia's members live and work around Australia. We would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of these lands, in the spirit of reconciliation.

We recognise that First Nations peoples have cared for Country and lived sustainably for millennia, and that sovereignty of this land was never ceded. We pay our respects to First Nations Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders.

Summary

The 2025 Victorian summer bushfires impacted thousands of people, destroyed over three hundred homes, and resulted in widespread evacuations.

The risks of extreme weather events, such as these fires, are intensified by global heating, directly and indirectly harming human health, both immediately and in the long term. Notably, the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect the vulnerable in communities, including the very young, old, and those living with disease and disability.

The mental health consequences alone for residents, emergency responders, and all those affected by the fires are expected to be serious and enduring. Notably, the mental health service capacity in rural and regional areas is inadequate to meet current needs and requires sufficient resourcing to respond to the impacts of this and future climate-fuelled disasters.

Urgent action is also needed to improve the resilience of key infrastructure to the increasing impacts of extreme weather events. Essential services such as power, water and communications are easily impacted and need to be better protected.

The impacts of bushfires and other extreme weather events on wildlife habitat and biodiversity are also significant. Current measures to reduce bushfire risk such as fuel reduction burns must be based on the most recent evidence or they risk adversely impacting ecosystem and human health without reducing bushfire risk, but increasing it instead.

To address underlying drivers of climate change and protect global health, an urgent co-ordinated response is required and the Victorian Government has an important role to play. It is vital that all levels of governments take every action available to them to accelerate the transition to clean, renewable energy sources and to decarbonise our economy.

In particular, new fossil fuel projects (including exploration) contradict Victoria's climate action goals, are not in the interests of the community, and should not be approved. A rapid transition away from gas and other fossil fuels will help protect human health and well-being as well as our planet, and should be prioritised by governments.

As part of this, the Victorian Government should be aware of and actively work to prevent and minimise the mis- and disinformation around climate change, which can influence public policy decisions to the detriment of human and planetary health.

Recommendations

The Victorian Government should:

- bring prescribed burning practices in line with the most up to date evidence about their effectiveness and risks
- prohibit native forest logging on private land
- undertake a comprehensive inquiry into the evidence base for the safety of firefighting foams used in bushfire suppression. It should:
 - be led by appropriately qualified, independent health professionals, ecologists and other relevant scientists
 - be given full access to relevant information on proprietary chemicals
 - include impacts to agriculture, water supplies and the food system as well as human and ecosystem health more generally.
- have coherent and consistent policies to urgently transition away from fossil fuels as energy sources and decarbonise the economy
- ban new fossil fuel projects, including exploration
- use evidence-based interventions to actively combat mis- and disinformation around climate change and the energy transition.

The Victorian Government, along with local governments and utility providers should take urgent action to increase the resilience to extreme weather events of essential services provision, especially in rural and regional communities. This should be done through properly resourced, community-led programs to:

- establish fire-proofed, off-grid capable, and local renewable energy generation and storage
- preserve local potable water supplies from contamination during and after extreme weather events including bushfires
- provide rapidly deployable back-up infrastructure for communications.

Psychological support for survivors of bushfires and other extreme weather events should include:

- 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
- sufficiently resourcing local communities to rapidly respond to emergencies with mental first-aid
- flexible, long-term funding to respond to survivors as they present, even weeks, months or years later
- funding to enable meeting victims in place, rather than forcing them travel to receive services
- raising community and health professional awareness of available counselling services to facilitate referral
- no restrictions on eligibility for counselling
- no arbitrary end dates to therapy, as the trauma may last for years after the event.

Addressing selected terms of reference in detail

(1) the preparation and planning by government, emergency services and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides

There is an urgent need to bring prescribed burning and logging practices in line with the most up to date evidence of the flammability of forests. Received wisdom is that prescribed burning is essential to reduce fuel load and therefore bushfire intensity ahead of a bushfire season. Recent research brings this into question, showing that while prescribed burning can decrease flammability in the short term, the way these burns disrupt forest ecosystems can drive extended periods of increased flammability as vegetation regrows. Logging can also similarly increase fire risk. Large, remote, infrequent burns can maintain the landscape at maximal fire risk because they remove the natural controls that old growth forests place on fire.¹

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.

The Natimuk fire demonstrated the newly ferocious climate change-fuelled speed at which grass fires can rip through fields and houses. The behaviour of this fire needs to be examined closely, because on face value, these fields were already stubble and it is possible that no amount of fuel reduction could have prevented the fire. The use of fire resistant plantings (such as succulents) to protect property needs to be considered as one of the few preparatory measures available to us in this context.

Recommendations

The Victorian Government should:

- bring prescribed burning practices in line with the most up to date evidence about their effectiveness and risks
- prohibit clearance of native forests on private land.

(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;

Climate change, which is primarily driven by the burning of fossil fuels combined with deforestation, has increased the risk of bushfires in Victoria. Increased temperatures and a decline in cool season rainfall in southeast Australia is contributing to an increased likelihood of more dangerous bushfires. Extreme fire weather has increased over the last 30 years in southern and eastern Australia.²

The World Health Organization considers climate change as the defining issue for public health in the 21st century, and calls for urgent coordinated action to mitigate its impacts and protect global health systems.³ The 2026 Victorian bushfires are an example of the direct harms caused by climate change. We can expect an increase in the frequency and severity of bushfires as well as other extreme weather events as the climate continues to warm. Limiting global warming by 'deep, rapid and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions', as recommended by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is the only certain strategy to reduce the harms of climate change on human and planetary health.⁴

The primary driver of global warming is the burning of fossil fuels, combined with deforestation. This is recognized by the Victorian Government in its Climate Change Strategy, climate action targets, emissions reduction pledges as well as halting large scale native forest logging on public land. While the Victorian Government has made progress in reducing emissions and increasing renewable energy use, it has also continued to approve new fossil gas exploration projects in the state. In 2025, the government approved exploration licences for two new gas projects in the Otway and Gippsland basins. Continuing to approve new fossil fuel projects contributes to accelerating climate change, in turn further harming human health, and is inconsistent with Victoria's stated climate action targets.

Recommendations

The Victorian Government should:

- have coherent and consistent policies to urgently transition away from fossil fuels as energy sources and decarbonise the economy
- ban new fossil fuel projects, including exploration.

(5) resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after fires

The 2026 fires revealed critical deficiencies in the resilience of essential infrastructure. Many affected households were left without power or potable water for days to weeks. For example, Harcourt in central Victoria was without safe mains drinking water for 8 days from 9 January to 17 January. Gellibrand in the Otways was without safe mains drinking water for 8 days from 27 January to 4 February. In addition, many households in bushfire-prone regions have poor mobile phone coverage, hampering their ability to receive critical warnings.

There is an urgent need for concrete, specific, community-led approaches to strengthen the resilience of energy, water and communications infrastructure. Public funding should be targeted to developing local,

distributed energy generation and storage – with fire-proofed off-grid capable solar/wind and battery systems being the preferred core element of energy resilience for when the grid fails.

Local water storage and filtration systems should also be better protected from contamination by ash and chemical fire retardants, so that a local supply of potable water can be maintained in the event that a town remains cut off for days.

Backups to mobile phone and mains dependent National Broadband Network (NBN) infrastructure for communications should also be developed and made available for rapid deployment to affected communities.

Recommendations

The Victorian Government, along with local governments and utility providers should take urgent action to increase the resilience of essential services provision to extreme weather events, especially in rural and regional communities. This should be done through properly resourced community-led programs to:

- establish fire-proofed, off-grid capable, and local renewable energy generation and storage
- preserve local potable water supplies from contamination during and after extreme weather events including bushfires
- provide rapidly deployable backup communications infrastructure.

(6) the impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery

The impacts of bushfires are felt by communities both local to and long distances away from the actual fires. Human health is harmed through both immediate and long term impacts – these are summarised in the DEA fact sheet *Bushfires and your health*.⁵ Briefly, bushfire smoke can affect air quality many thousands of kilometres away, and can cause major illnesses such as significant episodes of asthma or cardiac arrests. The elderly, young children, people with a chronic medical condition, pregnant women, and those who spend a lot of time outdoors are particularly vulnerable to the negative health effects of smoke.

Prolonged exposure to smoke contributes to heart disease, dementia, cancers, stroke, diabetes, poor mental health, and affects the growth of unborn babies. Bushfire smoke contains toxic and cancer-causing chemicals, many of which can cause asthma attacks and can worsen other allergies.

Extreme heat often accompanies bushfires, compounding the physical and mental health impacts of both. The impacts of extreme heat on human health, including on increasing the death rate, are summarised in the DEA *Heat health* fact sheet.⁶

The long-term mental health impacts of bushfires on communities and individuals are broad, severe and often enduring.⁷ Supporting survivors of bushfires and other extreme weather events in Victoria requires appropriate ongoing resource allocation and funding.

Notably, the mental health impacts of extreme weather events occur on a background of manifestly inadequate mental health support in rural and regional areas, where a dedicated program for improving baseline mental health service capacity is urgently needed. This should be focused on how best to upskill and

recruit further GPs, counsellors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists that have a long term commitment to the communities that they serve. The focus should be on upskilling established local health providers as needed, and on expanding long term local mental health capacity and outreach by local providers to bushfire survivors.

In addition, a comprehensive inquiry is needed into the safety of the firefighting foams that are used heavily in bushfire suppression. Many of these fires were fought in close proximity to key agricultural and water sites – it is critical to understand the potential downstream effects of the use of these chemicals on the food system, waterways, ecosystem health and human health. This must include disclosure of proprietary ingredients in these formulations, to allow full, independent assessment.

Recommendation

Psychological support for survivors of bushfires and other extreme weather events should include:

- 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
- sufficiently resourcing local communities to rapidly respond to emergencies with mental first-aid
- flexible, long-term funding to respond to survivors as they present, even weeks, months or years later
- funding to enable meeting victims in place, rather than forcing them travel to receive services
- raising community and health professional awareness of the counselling services available to facilitate referral
- no restriction on eligibility for counselling
- no arbitrary end dates to therapy, as the trauma may last for years after the event.

The Victorian Government should undertake a comprehensive inquiry into the evidence base for the safety of firefighting foams used in bushfire suppression. It should:

- be led by appropriately qualified and independent health professionals, ecologists and other relevant scientists
- be given full access to relevant information on proprietary chemicals
- include impacts on agriculture, water supplies and the food system as well as human and ecosystem health more generally.

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

The 2026 Victorian summer bushfires caused significant loss of wildlife. The destruction of native habitat caused by the fires is devastating and will have ongoing impacts for Victoria's native wildlife.

Maintaining healthy native forests requires appropriate funding to be allocated to land management and forest fire services to implement forest-health programs at scale. DEA supports any measures aimed at meaningfully improving environmental standards under state control which may reduce the intensity of fires and also help protect those ecosystems most vulnerable to recurrent large-scale bushfire impacts.

(8) the impacts of climate change on the natural environment, which has resulted in more frequent and intense bushfires occurring in Victoria

As climate change intensifies fire behaviour, it sets off a cycle of further environmental degradation on a background of accelerating biodiversity loss with inadequate federal and state legal protections for nature. Loss of vegetation reduces carbon storage capacity and exposes soil to erosion. Frequent burning disrupts regeneration cycles for many native plant species, some of which may now be feared extinct following the 2026 fires. Altered habitats increase vulnerability of native species to predation and displacement. These effects collectively weaken the natural environment's ability to buffer against future climate pressures.

(9) the prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season

As the Parliament of Australia's Senate Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy heard in its recent inquiry (March 2026), persistent mis- and disinformation about climate science, renewable energy and the energy transition continues to distort public debate and delay urgent climate action leaving communities exposed to rapidly heightening risk.⁸

Misinformation and disinformation are widespread across Australian media and politics, much of which originates in well-funded, well organised strategic bad actors with vested interests. For decades, fossil fuel interests and allies have seeded false narratives to protect their commercial positions and profits.⁹ They have become a major barrier to effective climate action – undermining public trust in science, skewing public debate and delaying coordinated policy development.

Recommendation

The Victorian Government should use evidence-based interventions to actively combat mis- and disinformation around climate change and the energy transition.

(11) lessons from and progress on the implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries, reports and Royal Commissions

Investment in psychological preparedness and mental health first aid for natural disasters may assist in preventing mental ill health exacerbation after disasters.¹⁰ This is particularly important in rural communities, which are more likely to experience disasters but have limited mental health support.

The magnitude of long-term bushfire-related mental health impacts in Australia is severe. It is therefore important to monitor firefighters' and survivors' mental health and assist affected communities. This was recognised in the response to the 2009 Victorian bushfires, in that funding after these fires continued for many years.

Firefighters have been found to have a high prevalence of long term mental health issues following bushfires.¹¹ In view of the large number of volunteer emergency responders involved in managing recent bushfire events in Australia, sustained psychological support and resources tailored to this particular occupational group are needed.

It is to be hoped that the extension of the closing date for submissions to this inquiry will allow sufficient time for those impacted by the 2026 bushfires to contribute. However, it is likely that those most affected –

particularly by mental health impacts – will be insufficiently represented, and their views should be actively sought, using whatever method is easiest and most effective for them.

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