

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Monday, 21 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Mr Danny Pearson, MP, Acting Minister for Police and Emergency Services, and

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary, Department of Justice and Community Safety;

Mr Andrew Crisp, Emergency Management Commissioner,

Ms Sue Clifford, Deputy Secretary, and

Ms Jenni Rigby, Acting Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management Victoria; and

Ms Carmel Flynn, Chief Executive Officer, Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. The committee will now resume consideration with Minister Pearson, this time of the emergency services portfolio. We welcome Commissioner Crisp to the table as well and other departmental officials that have joined us.

We invite you to make an opening statement of 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Mr PEARSON: Thank you, Chair. This budget provides \$70.6 million over two years for critical programs and increased demand for Life Saving Victoria, the State Control Centre, the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority—ESTA—as well as Emergency Management Victoria.

In relation to critical public water safety initiatives, there will be \$8.3 million provided to Life Saving Victoria for critical water safety initiatives to help reduce the number of drownings in Victoria, which we have tragically seen increase over the past year. In relation to the state control workforce, \$12 million has been provided to the SCC workforce over two years for continual 24/7 coverage across a range of key functional areas. In relation to the 000 service and their computer-aided dispatch upgrade program, \$46.2 million will go to ESTA in 2021–22 for the 000 service and their computer-aided dispatch upgrade program. Importantly, this funding includes provision of additional staff to meet demand pressures.

In relation to emergency management sector reforms, \$39.2 million is provided to the DJCS portfolio over four years to support emergency management sector reforms, including volunteer and firefighter safety, incident management control capability and critical upgrades to VicEmergency and other information systems. This forms part of a broader investment across government to implement recommendations from reviews and inquiries into our emergency management sector.

Just turning now to the emergency management budget investment infrastructure, \$28 million will go towards high-priority infrastructure and asset upgrades. The lifesaving clubs: Life Saving Victoria will receive \$2.5 million in 2021–22 for the redevelopment of the Point Lonsdale beach base and \$4.5 million for the redevelopment of the Wonthaggi Life Saving Club. \$11.349 million is also provided over three years for the development of the Williamstown surf lifesaving club.

In relation to CFA stations and equipment, \$0.87 million will be allocated for the refurbishment of the CFA's Doreen station, \$2.25 million to replace the Irymple station, \$0.85 million to replace the Serpentine station, \$0.886 million to replace the Metcalfe station, and \$0.114 million is provided for the Edithvale station to enhance its ICT and audiovisual functionality.

In relation to the VicSES Port Fairy unit, \$4.661 million in funding is provided over four years to the Victoria State Emergency Service for a new Port Fairy unit build, to be co-located with the CFA. The new facility is a priority for VicSES, with the current Port Fairy facility recently condemned by local council due to a number of occupational health and safety issues.

Turning now to bushfire recovery, the Victorian government is supporting community recovery following the 2019–20 bushfires. Key achievements in 2020–21 include: 736 properties cleaned up ahead of schedule;

211 property owners assisted by the rebuilding support service; approximately \$260 million directly released to individuals, businesses and organisations in bushfire-affected communities; and 2152 individuals and families supported through the bushfire recovery case support program. The \$104.4 million provided in the 2021–22 budget brings Victoria’s total investment in recovery since the fires to more than \$658 million. The 2021–22 budget provides more than \$22 million for the delivery of bushfire recovery services that are important right now. This includes funding for the bushfire recovery case support program, bushfire financial counselling, mental health services and family violence support. It also includes funding to support continuation of frontline legal services for bushfire-affected communities and the small business recovery advisory service. BRV is committed to working side by side with communities and delivery partners to help shape long-term priorities that will see bushfire-affected communities recover stronger and more resilient.

In relation to the 1920–21 key achievements in relation to fire services reforms, it has been nearly 12 months since the new fire service arrangements took effect, and they are now being embedded in service delivery. As of 1 July 2020 all parts of the *Fire Rescue Victoria Act* come into effect.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Welcome back, Minister and emergency service personnel. There are a couple of references in the budget papers—budget paper 3 mainly, pages 47, 88 and 57—where we talk about women’s programs and specifically gender equality programs in various settings. The *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* makes sexual harassment against the law in certain areas of public life, including at work. In March 2016 the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission was commissioned to undertake an independent equity and diversity review of the CFA and the MFB by your government following shocking allegations of sexism, misogyny and discrimination in our fire services. This report was suppressed by the government, but on 5 May 2021 the upper house voted to compel the report to be tabled in Parliament. The Attorney-General has advised on the deadline that the report could not be found despite the Acting Premier having been briefed on it in 2018. Minister, why is there secrecy around this report?

Mr PEARSON: Well, Deputy Chair, I think in relation to this particular report you are right, it is a report that was produced by VEOHRC. I have not seen a copy of that report.

Mr RIORDAN: Have you asked?

Mr PEARSON: Well, I have not seen a copy of that report and the report is not a government report. It is a report by VEOHRC and it is historic.

Mr D O’BRIEN: It was asked for by your predecessor.

Mr RIORDAN: It was commissioned by the government, wasn’t it?

The CHAIR: Can you allow the minister to answer, please?

Mr PEARSON: In relation to the specifics that you are asking me, Deputy Chair, this is not a report of the government. It is a report of VEOHRC. It is not in my possession. I understand the Attorney provided advice to the effect that it is not in the possession of her department, and the report is now some five years old. What I would say is that we always must be striving our best to ensure that our workplaces are safe, that they are diverse, that they are inclusive and that they are respectful. I think that if you think about it for a moment, people’s time is probably the most precious asset they have got—they can choose to spend their time any way they wish. They do not have to volunteer for the CFA; they could do something else. Certainly from my perspective I am very keen to ensure that the CFA continues to be an organisation of choice for volunteers.

Mr RIORDAN: So, Minister, there is no statute of limitations on many of the things this report was inquiring into. So do you think it is suitable for the minister of the day, the minister responsible for the wellbeing and safety of literally thousands of volunteers plus literally thousands of paid emergency service staff—do you think it is an acceptable answer—to say, ‘I haven’t looked at it. I haven’t seen it. I don’t know where it is’?

Mr PEARSON: Well, Deputy Chair—

Mr RIORDAN: Is that like a ‘see no evil, hear no evil’ sort of approach to government?

Mr PEARSON: Deputy Chair, this is a report that is five years of age. It was produced—

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, but the allegations in it—there is no statute of limitations on them.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are not giving the minister an opportunity to answer your question.

Mr PEARSON: So as I said, this report was produced some five years ago. It was the subject of an injunction. The courts ruled that it should not be—

Mr RIORDAN: Who was that injunction from?

Mr PEARSON: I was not the minister at the time, Deputy Chair, but I believe that the UFU sought an injunction and the court ruled in favour of the UFU. As I have indicated, it is not my report, it is VEOHRC's report, and these matters are historic in nature. It is five years ago. We have reformed the fire services since that time, we are continuing to invest—

Mr RIORDAN: How do you think that went down for the church group saying that these are historic so therefore we do not have to worry about the crimes and allegations?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you not interrupt, please? Mr Riordan!

Mr PEARSON: We are continuing—

Mr RIORDAN: The minister is sort of applying a new sort of legal principle that because it is five years ago it does not matter.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, the minister is trying to answer your question, free from interruption if you do not mind.

Mr PEARSON: So we are continuing to support our volunteers, we are continuing to invest in the CFA. We are not slashing their budget. We are continuing to provide them with the resources and the support that they need.

Mr RIORDAN: This is not about the budget, Minister. This is about acts of wrongdoing—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan! Mr Riordan, these entire hearings are meant to be about the budget. You have had widely ranging questions, but I suggest that if you would like to hear the answer to the latest one, you allow the minister the opportunity to answer it.

Mr PEARSON: As I said, Mr Riordan, or Deputy Chair, I do not have a copy of the report. The report is a report by VEOHRC, and the courts have ruled it should not be released.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, you are well known for your love of history. Five years is probably relatively recent history for you. Are you likely to inquire about where the report got to?

Mr PEARSON: I am committed to making sure that we have got well-resourced fire services and a great, safe environment.

Mr RIORDAN: So that is a no.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired, and I pass the call to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, Commissioner Crisp and departmental officials for your appearance in this hearing. I would like to make reference to the recent June weather event that we had, but I will take you specifically to budget paper 3, page 279. There is a reference under Department of Justice and Community Safety objective 2, and that is to 'Reduce the impact of, and consequences from, natural disasters and other emergencies on people, infrastructure, the economy and the environment'. I was hoping you would be able to give us an update on the recent weather event which has impacted the state but also how that might inform Victoria's emergency management capability that has been deployed in support of communities to this event.

Mr PEARSON: Yes. Thank you, Mr Maas. Look, what we saw on the night of Wednesday, 9 June—the devastation is just so profound. This is the worst event that the SES has ever been called out to. At 11 o'clock that night up in the Dandenongs the SES issued an order for their crews not to go out for fear of life. Two members of the SES were injured. Thankfully they were not seriously injured. But I want to use this opportunity now just to give my heartfelt thanks for the hard work that both VicSES and the CFA did, as well as others—you know, including Victoria Police—in terms of keeping us safe. This was something I have never seen. I was up in the Dandenongs. I have been up there twice since it has happened, and I grew up out that way. You see these enormous old-growth trees just pushed over like toothpicks. It is shocking. This is going to be a major, major effort. It is going to require a huge, huge clean-up.

And it has impacted a wide area. I was speaking to Mr O'Brien on the Thursday when he and Mr Bull went back to their electorates. You know, you have got flooding down in Traralgon—you have got the impact that that is having down in those communities—you have got a significant amount of devastation up in the Dandenongs and then you have got further damage up around Trentham. People up on the mountain who have lived there for 40 years have said they have never seen anything like it.

So in terms of the event itself, VicSES received more than 9100 requests for assistance across the state, and the majority related to trees, building damage as well as assisting the fire service and assisting police. Sadly, there were two confirmed fatalities relating to the storm event: one in floodwaters at Woodside and another in floodwaters off Maddens Bridge Road in Glenfyne, which is about 45 kilometres east of Warrnambool. My sincere condolences go out to their families at this difficult time. But can I just please say that if you are caught in a flood do not enter floodwaters in your vehicles. It is just so incredibly dangerous. It is dangerous for you, but you are also putting the lives of our first responders at risk because they have to go out and save you as well, and this is an incredibly risky and dangerous thing to do.

But, look, I want to thank the SES. I want to thank the CFA, Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, ESTA, Fire Rescue Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria and now the BRV for all their efforts in working together over the week and a half since these storms hit. I also want to thank the ADF. I had a briefing yesterday with the Commissioner and Brigadier Burr, who is the lead ADF person involved in the relief and recovery efforts. Brigadier Burr might be known to some of you as the key ADF resource who played a pivotal role in the 2019–20 fires, when we had a very large ADF contingent to support the communities of East Gippsland to rebuild during that time.

In terms of the damage in the event itself, four SES vehicles were damaged and other emergency vehicles have been impacted by falling debris. I think the Emerald truck was crushed. Thankfully the SES volunteer was out of the cab. But, you know, those SES trucks—they are big, right? They are big units, and this thing was just flattened by this tree. Where we find ourselves now: as of 18 June there have been 2075 impact assessments completed. In relation to damage, 118 are damaged but are habitable; 126 are assessed as damaged and uninhabitable.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and team, again. On the very last slide you referred to intelligence-led targets and surveillance for policing CHO directions. I was wondering: what sort of intelligence are we talking about there? Are we talking about checking businesses? We heard this morning from WorkSafe about the work that they are doing. How does this tie up with what they are doing?

Mr PEARSON: Thank you. I am assuming the question is to me, Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes, sorry.

Mr PEARSON: It is about trying to ensure that there is the assessment in terms of what businesses are doing from the point of view of being compliant with the CHO's directions. In terms of 2020–21 we have allocated \$10.6 million to recruit dedicated authorised officers and surveillance officers, and that is to undertake surveillance and enforcement activities. I think it is about making sure that we are in a position where we are able to have resources out on the ground to maybe, say, corroborate. You might recall in the previous session the Deputy Chair asked a question about whether people are ringing 000 to report issues of non-compliance.

That is not being encouraged. We are encouraging people to use the police assistance line, which is 131 444, and that is an opportunity for people to identify areas of non-compliance. What we then do, I think, in my understanding—and if I have got this wrong, I am sure the Secretary will correct me—is about then trying to corroborate the intelligence that has been received, and it is that process then of escalation and enforcement.

In terms of what we are trying to do, it is an educative process. I have been really clear on this. I would be delighted if we did not issue a single infringement notice and if we did not collect one single dollar. I just want people to do the right thing. I want people to follow the CHO directions, adhere to the rules and do the right thing, because we know that by following the advice of the experts, by sticking with that advice and following the rule of law, that is the way you drive down infections, that is the way you reduce transmissibility of this insidious disease. But sometimes people do not get the message and sometimes people are wilful and they are not prepared to do what is required, and that is regrettable. But we make no apology for the fact that we expect businesses to do the right thing, and if they do not do the right thing, then there are consequences.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I would like to bring your attention to one particular issue. It has been brought to my attention that there are many businesses refusing access to people with mask exemptions. Now, there have been a number of businesses—and I have confirmed this with the businesses themselves—and this has caused great distress for people who have mask exemptions. They had been refused access to entertainment venues; they have been refused access to chemists to get medication. They have very distressing stories that have been relayed to me from many different people. It would appear that the businesses are having trouble differentiating and enforcing this, and they are just drawing a blanket thing to comply with what the CHO has said. They have just said, ‘Well, we just won’t have any exemptions because it’s too difficult to comply’. How is this being dealt with to make sure that these people are not being discriminated against through the CHO directions?

Mr PEARSON: I am not disputing your assessment, Mr Limbrick; that has not been raised with me. What I would say is my father-in-law has emphysema, and he has got COPD very badly, and he has not raised those issues with me in terms of him going about doing his normal course of events. What I would say is I would encourage businesses to probably encourage patrons to ask the question, to prove the facts. There is that validity, the attestation process: ‘Yes, I’ve got a doctor’s order saying I can’t wear a mask’, because, for example—

Mr LIMBRICK: They are not required under the CHO directions to produce any evidence. In fact it says quite clearly on the Department of Health website that they just need to state that they have an exemption—they do not need a letter from a doctor—and it is my understanding that many doctors are refusing to provide letters.

Mr PEARSON: Well, I think under those circumstances I would like to think that businesses would be allowing a level of flexibility on those questions. Again, though, I think that the specifics around the directions of the CHO are best answered by the Minister for Health. But again, I think if you look at it we have got a process of escalation where it is far more gradual. It is not a punitive response in relation to enforcement, Mr Limbrick.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr O’Brien.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, in budget paper 3 on page 282 is the ‘Emergency Management Capability’ reference, and the question I have is: in the forward estimates have you budgeted for the backdated overtime to Victorian firefighters totalling \$50 million?

Mr PEARSON: Can you just remind me of that reference again, Mr O’Brien? Budget paper 3, page—

Mr D O’BRIEN: 282. That was just the ‘Emergency Management Capability’ output for the department.

Mr PEARSON: Okay. Well, I think on those questions we negotiate in good faith with our worker representatives, the unions, and those enterprise agreements must fit within the wages policy as determined by—

Mr D O’BRIEN: No, sorry, this is in respect to the plan for back pay that is currently before the Fair Work Commission.

Mr PEARSON: Okay. So I think in relation to that specific issue, Mr O'Brien, what I would say is that 2020 has been an incredibly challenging and difficult year for our fire services. If you think about this for a moment, they have worked through a catastrophic and unprecedented fire season. They then contributed to the successful establishment of a modern fire service, and they have quickly adapted to the challenges of the pandemic, so we make no apologies for providing them with the resources and support they need to keep the community safe. And so the establishment of Fire Rescue Victoria on 1 July—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, Minister, I am not sure if you are following the question I am talking about. There are currently 32 former CFA and MFB employees in the Fair Work Commission claiming back pay for overtime since 2016. If that is applied across the entire fire services, it would actually tally about \$50 million if it is approved. Does the budget allow for that, either in the budget papers or in contingencies?

Mr PEARSON: Well, Mr O'Brien, I think these matters are subject to proceedings at the Fair Work Commission, and I would not want to say anything that might prejudice or interrupt those hearings or weaken the position of the state. But what I would say is that our fire services have done a fantastic job these last 18 months under incredibly trying conditions, and it is important that that contribution is recognised and supported.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If there is an additional \$50 million bill for back pay for the fire services, what will be the impact of that on the fire services levy for all Victorians?

Mr PEARSON: Again, Mr O'Brien, these matters are subject to Fair Work proceedings. It is not for me to start opining in this forum or any other forum while those proceedings are on foot. The government will consider any determination made by the Fair Work Commission and respond accordingly.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Have you been briefed on what the likely outcome of that is or what the cost impact might be to your budget?

Mr PEARSON: Well, again, I personally am not a party to those proceedings, Mr O'Brien, so we will let the Fair Work Commission do its work.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, no, you are never personally, or rarely personally, going to be a party to it. It is your portfolio, though. That is the question I am asking. Have you been briefed as to whether there is going to be a \$50 million hit to the budget bottom line?

Mr PEARSON: Well, again, Mr O'Brien, I think that we will let the commission processes run through their natural course, and we will see where we get to.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Going to the storm issue you talked about earlier, it was clearly very significant, but right around the state I guess it has highlighted the lack of chainsaw training available to CFA officers. There have been numerous reports coming back of that. Will you guarantee that all CFA volunteers will get the requisite training to be able to deal with a major storm event such as this?

Mr PEARSON: Look, I have not heard those reports, Mr O'Brien. I mean, I think that the CFA have done a fantastic job under very challenging and trying conditions, as have the SES. What I would say is that looking at the size of the trees, you cannot go down to Bunnings and pick up a chainsaw and lay into these things. This is going to require very specialist equipment. If you are looking at so-called 'killer trees' that are perched dangerously over people's homes, again, you are going to have to go in there with arborists and with tree loppers going up there to remove it. So these are really, really specialist skills. Looking at the size—

Mr D O'BRIEN: But do all CFA volunteers get access to the training to deal with such an event?

Mr PEARSON: Well, I mean, I want to see the CFA being a well-trained, well-equipped workforce, which they are.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister, Secretary, Commissioner, Chief Executive and officials, for your time this afternoon. I am going to, Minister, take you further along the path that Mr Maas took you along and refer you to budget paper 3, page 407. It describes EMV's role in administering the commonwealth natural

disaster relief and recovery arrangements and the disaster recovery funding arrangements. I am interested in having an understanding of how these have been activated in response to the current event and whether there are any additional arrangements being considered.

Mr PEARSON: Yes. Look, thanks, Ms Richards. Immediately following the weather event the government activated the personal hardship assistance program emergency relief payments. That comprises \$560 per adult and \$280 per child up to a maximum of \$1960 for eligible families to help meet immediate needs including emergency food, shelter, clothing and personal items. As of 18 June—and I think these figures may have changed since then—there were 259 PHAP payments that had been made to date, and they total \$295 000. On 13 June the Acting Premier and I announced further assistance for the community, activating the emergency re-establishment assistance for households affected by the June 2021 severe weather event through the jointly funded commonwealth-state *Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements*. So in that particular case, under that arrangement, eligible recipients can receive a maximum of \$42 250 per household to re-establish their homes as quickly as possible, and that assistance can be used to pay for alternative accommodation, removal of debris, home repairs, reconnection of essential services, and rebuilding and replacement of essential household contents.

We are also working closely with councils and will continue to look at ways to provide the financial support to them for counter disaster operations and the restoration of essential public assets and to help communities recover as quickly as possible. I think, again, looking at the magnitude of the damage, this is going to require a joint effort by all of us working together. And, look, I have spoken with the mayors and the CEOs of Yarra Ranges, Cardinia, Latrobe and Hepburn. I have got another nine CEOs and mayors I am going to speak with over the course of the next week. That is my plan at this stage, and I want to work closely with them. I want to thank the commonwealth for responding to this issue as well. I want to thank the ADF for their resources, and I am really pleased at the close working relationship that Commissioner Crisp has with Brigadier Burr.

I do not think people necessarily appreciate just the size of the damage in these communities and the length of time it is going to take to put the power on. Now, AusNet have done a power of work. I mean, there were 300 000 homes disconnected at one stage, and we are now down to but a small fraction of that, but it is still there and we have got work to do on that. We need to work really hard with councils. It is about clearing the roads—making sure they are clear. I know Mr O'Brien and I had a conversation about this, not this weekend but the weekend before—about just what his community is experiencing. We have got to clear the roads. We have got to remove the debris. We have got to make sure that if people's cars have been flattened or their driveways are blocked, they can get out of their driveways. We have got to make sure that we remove some of this debris as well. And we have got to make sure that people who do not have power are connected.

At the moment, right as we speak, we have got ADF resources, we have got representatives from our first responders doorknocking impacted communities who do not have power to try and work out what their needs might be and what we can do to support them. So this is a big task, Ms Richards. It is going to take a lot of time, but one of the benefits I think is having Ms Flynn from BRV with us, tasked with that immediate rollout in support of the communities—working with local government, working with the ADF and working with the commonwealth. That is what the communities need; they need us to really work with them closely and carefully to rebuild. They have been beaten and they have been battered, but they have not been broken, and I want to make sure that the three tiers of government are working together closely to get these communities back on their feet. And I feel with a degree of confidence that with these targeted investments, by having a constructive and collaborative approach, we will have the capacity to do that. We have all got our roles to play, we have all got different skill sets we can bring to bear. What these communities need is a variety of skill sets brought to bear in a timely way, in a well-resourced way.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I would like to go back to compliance activities that have been happening under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act*. Currently the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act* specifies that the emergency powers must end in December. Are these compliance activities also scheduled to end in December?

Mr PEARSON: I would envisage that would be the case, Mr Limbrick. My only cause for hesitation, and the Secretary may wish to supplement my answer, is that it is not my Act; it is an Act that is administered by the Minister for Health. I do not feel I have got sufficient information around the intricacies of that particular Act to be able to give you a definitive answer one way or the other. I think that we are further downstream in relation to working with the Department of Health and the CHO to enforce the CHO's directions, so we will be guided by what those directions reveal or what they say, and we will work in accordance with those.

Mr LIMBRICK: But the current Act does specify that these powers would end in December. Therefore I would imagine in your budgeting when you are saying, 'Well, we need these compliance activities', you would have to think if the powers cannot extend past December, then you would not budget for anything past December to be engaging in those compliance activities, would you?

Mr PEARSON: Well, we work on a financial year, so we will provide funding for the 2021–22 financial year. I am not trying to be evasive or difficult, Mr Limbrick. I am trying to assist the committee in its deliberations, but on these matters the Act does not sit within my responsibility; the Act sits within the responsibility of the Minister for Health. I guess for want of a better term, we are subcontracted to enforce those directions. So it is difficult for me—I do not want to mislead the committee on these questions. I think I would need to seek advice and guidance from the Minister for Health and the chief health officer, because ultimately the Act sits with them. At one level I think intuitively what you are saying is right. I would imagine that would be the case, but I do not want to be definitive in this environment and find that there might be some peculiarity or there might be something that changes that would therefore undermine the testimony I am giving you today, Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Minister. With the intelligence-led targeting that you spoke about in your presentation, what form does this intelligence take and where does it come from?

Mr PEARSON: Well, I think the public are our greatest friends—

Mr LIMBRICK: So you are talking about the 131 444 number?

Mr PEARSON: Yes. Invariably I think it would be the case that we get some leads from the police assistance line. I think in addition to that AOs are tasked with and are out on the streets investigating, but I might ask the Secretary just to supplement my answer.

Ms FALKINGHAM: Mr Limbrick, we get intelligence from a range of sources, so from our compliance activities, from all the assistance lines, but also from working with the peak bodies themselves to understand issues right across their industry. We also get a lot of public health data that will point us to where we need to make sure we have the strongest enforcement and compliance. So, for example, when we have outbreaks we make sure we wrap around those outbreaks to make sure businesses are as compliant as possible to stop further spread of the outbreak.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. We heard this morning about different risk levels for different industries. Meat processing was one that was identified by WorkSafe as very high risk for a range of reasons. Do you have rankings of these industries that you refer to to determine risk? If you are comparing meat processing to a hairdresser, for example, how do you assess these risks?

Ms FALKINGHAM: We do not have rankings, but the chief health officer obviously designates an industry that is high risk. That can be based on a range of issues, from the location, the premises, the workforce, the airflow and the temperature, as we discussed this morning, but obviously areas particularly where we have high mobility of people coming in and out of them. That is why obviously ports of entry are a really high-risk area for us at the moment. The aged-care and the healthcare worker settings are high risk for us given all those different intelligence-driven factors.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Minister, Commissioner and other officials, if I could take you to budget paper 3, page 93, on bushfire recovery, could you please explain how initiatives to fast-track Victoria's recovery from the 2019–20 Victorian bushfires will support recovery and rebuilding in East Gippsland and the north-east?

Mr PEARSON: Yes. Thanks, Ms Taylor. The eastern Victoria bushfires resulted in far-reaching devastation for local communities, ecosystems, businesses and infrastructure, particularly in East Gippsland and the north-east. It is interesting to note that the impact was felt differently across those two communities. So in terms of the north-east you had fewer homes lost—you had more property damage and fencing and the like—whereas I think in East Gippsland more people were displaced. So we have really tried to work with both the communities—BRV have done a fantastic job—just to try and find a way of working with those communities to get them back on their feet.

As I indicated in my presentation, we have invested approximately \$658 million towards support for those communities. This includes more than \$161 million directly released to individuals, businesses and organisations. I have run you through some examples—\$50 000 in small business bushfire recovery grants. So we have paid out \$3.7 million to 127 businesses. There have been the \$10 000 small business bushfire support grants, so we have paid out \$26.3 million to 2626 businesses; \$75 000 for the primary industry grants, so we have paid out \$30.5 million to 466 primary producers. We have provided a freight subsidy for primary producers, so \$926 000 has been paid to 182 primary producers. In relation to fencing we have provided \$4.9 million through 502 applications. In relation to grants for wildlife shelters we have provided a \$41 150 grant that has been paid to help rehabilitation and care for wildlife affected by the bushfires. And we have provided \$25.2 million to local government areas, mostly to the Alpine, East Gippsland and Towong shires.

So the early investments focused on direct payments and stabilisation and then shifted to generating economic activity and growth. As a government we stand side by side with these communities as they get back on their feet. The clean-up was completed on all 736 registered properties ahead of schedule in August last year, and over 2500 structures and 75 000 tonnes of waste were removed. A short-term modular housing program was established, providing high-quality modular homes to families that lost their homes, enabling people to stay on their land and connected to their communities while they rebuild. The program has so far delivered 50 homes, with several more being installed over the coming weeks.

Last year on 11 March and 6 May new planning scheme provisions were introduced to streamline the planning and rebuilding process, including making it easier to get temporary accommodation on a property while the permanent rebuild is underway. A rebuilding support service is being delivered to assist community members who lost their homes to navigate the process of rebuilding. The rebuilding efforts have so far seen 211 home owners being assisted by rebuild support services, 197 rebuilding and planning permits having been approved and 143 planning permits for sheds and/or outbuildings having been approved.

Bushfire-affected communities will receive ongoing support, with a \$104.4 million funding package for a range of services and supports to help people rebuild their lives, livelihoods and communities. The funding includes support for reconstruction, financial counselling, mental health services, family violence prevention and intervention, legal services, services for Aboriginal Victorians and traditional owners, tourism, land and water management and bushfire recovery. We recognise that this recovery is going to take years, not months, and we are here to work in partnership with councils for the long haul. Again I want to thank Commissioner Crisp but also Ms Flynn from BRV for their work on the ground in standing with these communities and supporting them through some very challenging and difficult times.

Ms TAYLOR: Indeed. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Taylor. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I just want to go back to the comment you finished with at the end of our last session, when you said you wanted to see the CFA as a well-trained, well-equipped workforce, which they are. In addition to the concerns that have been raised about chainsaw training I have had brigades come to me and say that BA and search-and-rescue training they have not been able to do for three years now, and the reason they cannot do that is that it used to be a two- or three-day course; it is now buried in an eight-day course, which very clearly makes it almost impossible for volunteers to do, because they would need to

take two weeks off to do so. What are you doing to ensure that volunteers can still maintain the requisite levels of training that they need? And is this a deliberate strategy to dumb down the volunteer contingent in the CFA?

Mr PEARSON: Not at all. I would refute that suggestion, Mr O'Brien. This is about investing heavily in supporting the CFA. We need to make sure that they are properly trained and resourced, because I think that we cannot stand still; we cannot stand still as a community. We have got to make sure that as circumstances change and as new technology becomes available, or new opportunities, we provide that opportunity for our volunteers to be able to be trained.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But on that exact point, though, Minister, if there is an eight-day course run on weekdays, how are volunteers ever going to be able to do it? They are very committed, and many would take two weeks off to go and do a course like that, but it makes it extremely difficult if it is all bundled up into one course and volunteers cannot do the little bits and pieces like BA and chainsaw training and the like individually.

Mr PEARSON: Yes, well, I think on those specifics, Mr O'Brien, we will work with the chief fire officer to determine what their needs might be and what they believe the training requirements for the CFA are, and we will make sure that they are appropriately resourced. It comes down to the investments we are making. We are investing in newer stations and we are investing in more appliances that are up to date because we want the CFA to be the very best it can be. But it is not for me to sit here and tell the CFA what I think their training should be. I think it is about making sure you listen to the experts. We will work with the chief fire officer, we will work with the CEO and we will work with the board in order to identify what they think their needs are going forward, and we will work in a constructive and collaborative way. I think that with these things circumstances will change, technology will change, we will learn more. We always knew firefighting was a dangerous career, but we have got a deeper appreciation now in terms of some of the cancers and some of the other diseases that our firefighters are more likely to be afflicted by, which led to the presumptive rights legislation. We continue to work with our fire services because they do a great job.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Why did it take the Victorian government so long to accept the commonwealth's offer of ADF assistance after the storm?

Mr PEARSON: I refute that assessment, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, it was well over a week, when it was very clear that there was a lot of stuff on the ground. There is some suggestion, I think, that ADF do not have chainsaws. Well, Minister, here they are—there is a picture of them today out there with chainsaws doing things. They can do things like this; they have done it before.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, could you allow the minister to answer the question.

Mr PEARSON: I think on this thing you cannot go to the commonwealth and say, 'It's the vibe, it's the constitution; can you just give us a blank cheque?'. It does not work that way, Mr O'Brien.

Mr RIORDAN: But you can actually—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you do not have the call.

Mr PEARSON: I think in this particular case what we needed to do was to go into these communities, assess the level of damage and make a determination as to what we thought were the best resources required in order to deal with these issues. So, for example, if you look at the Dandenongs, the storms knocked out power, they closed roads, they knocked out telecommunications. Some of these communities are isolated and remote. You do not have real-time information when the roads are cut, the power is off and the lines are down to work out what their needs might be. Similarly, I think, if you look at Traralgon with the floodwaters there, it is about trying to work out, as the floodwaters recede, what sort of damage is required. Now, Commissioner Crisp has got a very close working relationship with Brigadier Burr. As I indicated earlier, I was briefed by Brigadier Burr yesterday. The initial requests for assistance occurred last week for logistics and operational support. That has been provided, and I thank the ADF for doing that. A subsequent request for assistance was provided and that has been provided as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, Commissioner and department representatives for joining us today. Can I take you back to the discussion with Ms Taylor around bushfire recovery, Minister, and budget paper 3, page 93, particularly around the government's strategic investments to support the economic recoveries in those bushfire-affected regions.

Mr PEARSON: Yes, thank you, Mr Richardson. So, look, what we are trying to do, and I have touched on some of the support we have done to date, but we also know that it is about supporting the local communities with the aid and recovery they need. So \$52 million has been awarded to successful projects across four grant types, being local government and community service organisations, community facilities, Aboriginal communities and LER. So that includes \$1 million for community facilities grants of up to \$50 000, with funds being allocated to 29 projects, like improving energy efficiency, church hall and community hall repairs and solar panel streetscape projects; \$3.52 million in grants of up to \$500 000 to local government and community service organisations across 13 projects, such as reseeded Upper Murray farms for recovery, a new technology platform for the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund and connecting seniors through delivering infrastructure within the Wodonga Regional Park. The following LER grant streams as well have been provided: \$6.6 million in local community project grants, noting round 2 is currently being assessed and will be announced in the coming weeks; \$8 million in the Regional Economic Program Fund; \$32.9 million in regional economic stimulus and resilience grants.

So this is about—having looked at these projects, it is very much led by the community. It is basically the community coming forward and saying, 'Look, this is what we would like. This is what our needs are. Can you fund us?'. Some of these programs are a joint initiative between us and the commonwealth, and again I want to thank the commonwealth for the support they have provided to these communities as well. But it is very much led from the community, because every community is different, as we all know. I mean, we all represent different electorates and even within an electorate there are different parts of your electorate where certain matters are more important than others. And I think that when you are providing funding support, it is about making sure that you work with those communities, understand what their needs are, provide the necessary funding, do that economic empowerment so that they can feel like they are getting the support they need when they need it and where they need it.

And again BRV have done a power of work in this space over a lengthy period of time, going out there and working with the communities, and I think it has been really effective. I think it is working really well, and I think that is why BRV will be playing such a key role, I think, in relation to the recovery of these communities who have been impacted by the storm event, because we need to try and find a way where you can play that enabling role. These communities are not impoverished, they are not disempowered, they are not isolated—or they are sort of isolated and removed. But it is about making sure that—you know, they know what they want, they know what their needs are, and we have got a role to play to empower them, and I think that this is a really good way forward about giving those hard dollars on the ground where they are needed most, Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: I might just take you to the support for property owners, Minister. What support has the government provided to support property owners whose properties were sadly lost or damaged during those fires?

Mr PEARSON: Thank you. Over 460 properties were damaged or destroyed by the fires, and we have taken a number of steps to make it easier for communities to rebuild. As I have indicated, we have completed the clean-up for the 736 registered properties, and we did that ahead of schedule. We have removed 2500 structures and 75 000 tonnes of waste—I mean, 75 000 tonnes of waste is an extraordinary amount that we had to remove. We have established the short-term modular housing program, and that is about giving people the opportunity to stay on their land, connected with their communities, while they rebuild. We have so far delivered 50 of those homes, and several more will be installed over the coming weeks. We are looking at new planning scheme provisions to streamline that planning and rebuilding process, because again I think this is something that may have come out of the Wye River fire about trying to encourage people to get back into their communities, as well as \$4.6 million to East Gippsland Shire Council and Towong Shire Council.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the emergency services estimates with you today. We thank you very much for appearing before the committee in

this capacity. The committee will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

We thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today and Hansard and the secretariat, as well as the catering, security, attendants and cleaning staff that have assisted us.

The committee will resume consideration of the 2021–22 budget estimates on 29 June.

I declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.