

# VERIFIED VERSION

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into budget estimates 2012–13

Melbourne — 10 May 2012

#### Members

Mr N. Angus

Mr P. Davis

Ms J. Hennessy

Mr D. Morris

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr M. Pakula

Mr R. Scott

Chair: Mr P. Davis

Deputy Chair: Mr M. Pakula

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms V. Cheong

#### Witnesses

Mr P. Ryan, Minister for Bushfire Response,

Ms P. Armytage, Secretary, and

Mr N. Robertson, Executive Director, Police and Emergency Management, Department of Justice.

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

**The CHAIR** — I call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 10 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the bushfire response portfolio

**Overheads shown.**

**Mr RYAN** — Chair, this is a very, very important portfolio area. The government committed to the implementation of all 67 of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission's final report, and to drive that commitment we established the unique bushfire response portfolio to oversee the implementation of the response to the commission across a range of departments and agencies. In May last year the state's implementation plan implementing the government's response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was tabled in Parliament. The plan includes over 250 separate actions to improve the ability to mitigate, prepare and plan for, respond to and recover from future bushfires. It is supported by an investment of more than \$900 million.

We also acted on the commission's final recommendation 66 by putting the role of the implementation monitor on an independent statutory footing to ensure that the Parliament and the Victorian community receive transparent assessments and reports on the implementation being made. The monitor is due to table his final report in Parliament on 31 July this year. The monitor has advised there are about 80 outstanding actions, mostly components of larger projects in the plan, that are due for completion or further review after the implementation monitor's current final reporting date.

For that reason I have recently introduced amending legislation to the Parliament, the Police and Emergency Management Legislation Amendment Bill 2012. It is intended to extend the monitor's role for a further two years, with two further reports to be tabled in Parliament to ensure our implementation efforts do not slacken and the Victorian people continue to receive clear and independent reports on the progress of our efforts. I note in passing that the bill also delivers on the government's response to the VBRC's final recommendation 53 by amending section 32 of the Sale of Land Act to require a vendor statement to disclose whether the land is in a bushfire-prone area.

By way of achievements, we have developed and started implementing a rolling three-year reform action plan to increase the interoperability, resilience, capability and capacity of Victoria's fire services. We have conducted the annual review of the bushfire safety policy framework to take into account the lessons and experiences from the 2010–11 fire season, together with other bushfire safety developments and relevant research. In consultation with agencies we have revised and implemented the use of sirens for brigade and community alerting. In consultation with agencies we have issued the community fire refuges policy as well as the community fire refuges practices and procedures. We have led fire-management planning, championing an approach to ensure regional and municipal fire-management plans are linked with other planning arrangements, and they lead to sustainable change for the safety of communities. We are also piloting landscape planning in the Dandenongs. We have sponsored a trial of a single integrated website, testing the concept of one website providing near real-time emergency information to the public on emergency services.

On our other achievements, the summer fire campaign of 2011–12 was a campaign dedicated specifically to the issue of complacency. Complacency in the community about the ever-present threat of fire is indeed in itself one of our greatest threats. The campaign commenced in December 2011. It was to challenge perceived high levels of complacency in the community around fire preparedness. It was hard hitting in the television presentation and the radio advertisements. They were launched at the start of December, prompting Victorians to prepare for the risk of fire by completing a fire plan.

Over the duration of the campaign there were 2.1 million visits to the CFA's website — an increase of 885 000 visits compared to the same period last year. Almost 30 per cent of visitors had not previously visited the website. There were key campaign web pages, there was the Fire Ready Kit web page and the Fire Ready mobile phone app page. In response to changing weather conditions and an increased grassfire threat the campaign print and online advertising shifted across to the prospect of grassfires. There was an immediate response to the CFA's web page as people sought to be able to access that threat message.

On emergency alert, the national telephone warning system was implemented in December 2009. Before this, of course, as I have said, there was no national emergency warning system. Emergency alert has been an

extraordinarily valuable tool, and over 7 million messages have been issued nationally. During the 2012 floods the emergency alert was used on eight occasions. We have spoken about the location-based capability that we will now have as a result of the arrangements that have been struck with Telstra. The ongoing discussions with Vodafone and with Optus will hopefully yield all the carriers being part of this important program. Victoria is leading the program. It is complex, but we believe we have every right to be confident about the outcome.

On the issue of community preparedness, community fire drills in Noojee and Lavers Hill in November tested the township protection plans and the evacuation plans and processes. I had the pleasure of being at the Lavers Hill initiative, where we were able to see some of the best laid plans being put into action. Some of those best laid plans, in part at least, did not perform exactly as required, and so it is that these plans should be put to the test, and we strongly encourage that activity.

In Project Belenus we had a multi-agency fire-training exercise — eight fire and two flood exercises were held across Victoria involving emergency services, the community and emergency broadcasters. I participated in the one in Sale, which focused on an issue which was purported to have arisen at Loch Sport, which was used as the focus of the incident. A multi-agency incident-management surge capacity team has been formed to provide leadership and support to incident-management teams during major incidents or emergencies.

On the issue of sirens, the fire services commissioner, in consultation with the CFA and the office of the emergency services commissioner, has been developing a new policy, and I anticipate we will be able to finalise that and make announcements in relation to it soon.

On the issue of shelters, VBRC recommendation 4 urged the state to introduce a comprehensive approach to bushfire shelter options. To date 233 neighbourhood safer places have been established. A \$13 million grants program has been initiated. It focuses on potential sites that have been located in some of the highest bushfire risk areas in the state where it has previously proven difficult to identify and establish neighbourhood safer places. Four such sites have had NSPs designated and a further seven sites approved and funded. Thirteen potential NSP locations in the Dandenong Ranges are on hold while there is further investigation being undertaken in conjunction with the fire services commissioner in the context of the landscape planning project.

There are, however, 11 high-risk locations where it is not possible to establish an NSP as there is simply no suitable site or potential site. The fire services commissioner is working with councils responsible for these locations to explore other bushfire safety options appropriate to local needs, such as evacuation and community fire refuges.

The 12–13 budget contains \$2 million — and that is in addition to the \$1.5 million which was included last year — to pilot the establishment of community bushfire refuges. The fire services commissioner is actively pursuing this pilot program with the Shire of Yarra Ranges and the Shire of Moorabool. Furthermore, under the heading of ‘Achievements’, a key aspect of the commission’s recommendations, particularly recommendation 63, was to establish a fire services commissioner to promote and lead a reform program to improve the operational capability, interoperability and resilience of Victoria’s fire services, and again, to pay credit where due, that was initiated under the former government.

The 11–12 Victorian flood review echoed that recommendation but placed it in a broader all-hazards context. I was very pleased, I must say, to observe that the response to the 2012 floods led by VICSES, with strong support from the fire services, demonstrated significantly improved levels of interoperability between our emergency services, and that was extended across incident management structures, working with communities to better prepare and respond, planning that was both strategic and tactical depending on the changing circumstances, much better integrated relief operations, support and assistance leading up to and implementation of recovery, and joined up, timely and relevant community information and advice. Those initiatives undertaken in this year’s event are currently the subject of an ongoing review, with a view to at all times improving the standards.

Among the achievements is the bushfire safety policy framework. It aims to improve bushfire safety for all Victorians. It focuses on protecting human life as a priority, the safety of individuals, and aims to improve the level of public awareness of bushfire risk. The township protection plans are enhanced action-oriented community preparedness guides. A template has been developed. All pre-existing township protection plans

have been updated to the new format, and 240 plans covering about 460 communities have now been developed.

The \$13 million Municipal Fire and Emergency Management Resourcing program has provided funding for 25 positions across 34 municipalities across the state. Without going right through it all in the interests of time, Chair, I am conscious that this is an important initiative which has drawn significant and very positive commentary through the regions. We are looking at how we can enable a mechanism whereby we can provide that level of all-important service to those municipalities.

The \$5 million Fire Ready Communities program has been funded through the Regional Growth Fund. It is helping to build resilience and prepare for a safer future. I might say it extends into some of the interface councils and that was done by me with a view to ensuring that particularly those areas in those interface councils which face the ever present threat of fire have the opportunity to share in that important program.

By way of budget outcomes, we have initiated the buyback scheme in response to recommendation 46. Applications opened on 1 March; they will close on 31 May. Eligibility is based on owner-occupiers whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the 2009 fires who have not yet rebuilt on that site and whose homes were less than 100 metres from the forest. It involves, I emphasise, non-compulsory acquisition of land. As at 2 May, 134 applications have been received and 10 offers have been made.

As mentioned earlier, the additional funding that we have available will assist the piloting of community fire refuges in locations where it has proved impossible to establish an NSP. The fire risk mapping data is free of charge, which is recommendation 16 of the commission. It implements that recommendation to improve mapping support by providing data free of charge to emergency services. That is referred to in BP 3 at page 60.

There is the expanded planned burning program. The additional funding that we have in the budget will increase the burning program to 250 000 hectares in 12–13, on the way to the commission's target of 390 000 hectares. Very importantly, in response to recommendation 3, the vulnerable people program has been developed. We have the safer electricity asset work plan responding to recommendation 27.

Finally, Chair, the 12–13 budget continues to deliver on our commitment to implement all the bushfire commission's recommendations and the CFA appliances in the rural fire stations are but part of that, as are the emergency services communications.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister. The remaining time until 12.15 p.m. is available for questions on the bushfire response portfolio, and I ask: given the key growth and efficiency initiatives announced in the budget, can you please outline for the committee the likely impact of the budget on enhancing service delivery, promoting productivity and achieving efficiency gains within your portfolio? In your response, could you also indicate how you intend to monitor the portfolio's effectiveness in maximising improvements in these areas? As you do so, could you make some comments in relation to the impact of initiatives in relation to stakeholders?

**Mr RYAN** — As the committee is aware, the implementation of the government's commitment to implement all the commission's recommendations has been a whole-of-government effort. I am pleased to say significant progress has been made and a number of the royal commission-related initiatives and measures embedded in departments' and agencies' core business. That said, we cannot slacken in our resolve to improve. Here I mean in the widest sense: to include all the levels of government, business, not-for-profits and the community, because after all this is a shared responsibility for all of us. We must do everything we possibly can to avoid the tragedy of another Black Saturday.

To that end, Chair, I recently introduced legislation to extend the implementation monitor's role for another two years. In part, that extension is designed to ensure the state and its agencies do not lose momentum in the implementation effort and, importantly, to account to the Parliament and to the community on the progress made. There are various efficiencies. The fire services commissioner is about to evaluate the benefits of extending the Victorian Bushfire Information Line to an all-hazards Victorian emergency information line to remove duplicative processes which exist within the emergency services sector. This also creates opportunities to explore combining the functions of the information line with the police advisory line with the potential to reduce the number of staff needed to provide both independent services while also providing a ready workforce to provide a 000 surge capacity. The potential added benefit for ESTA is more effective work arrangements and reduced reliance on expensive overtime.

Furthermore, the fire services commissioner is exploring improved interoperability and in so doing seeking to avoid duplicative investment in technology and systems. Through the emergency services communication master planning process the department is now pursuing the benefits of centralised procurement of communications systems. Other matters, Chair, include assessing how the state may utilise the fibre optic cable through the NBN, along with augmentation provided by the state, to provide for improved connectivity for regional towns and also for connectivity of the state's incident control centres and facilities such as the SES local headquarters and CFA brigades. While avoiding duplication in procurement, it is envisaged that economic benefits will flow to the regional townships.

**Mr PAKULA** — Minister, I just refer back to your handout — your presentation. On the back two pages you have various budget initiatives with amounts of money attached to them. Referring back to your well-known commitment to implementing all the recommendations of the royal commission, I am wondering whether the initiatives in this budget, when combined with the initiatives in the last budget, now fully acquit all the funding that is required to implement the bushfire royal commission recommendations, or is there an expectation that more funding will be required in future budgets and, if so, how much?

**Mr RYAN** — As you know, we have initiated a vast array of responses to the recommendations of the commission. In so doing, we have committed something rising \$1 billion to that process. Some of the programs in which we are engaged are of a nature where one is simply unable to say right at this point in time that that will be a concluded position in relation to their implementation.

For example, with the buyback scheme, to which I have already referred, we allowed an initial \$50 million, less in this financial year, because what we are wanting to do is to make sure that we have sufficient funding available for the anticipated uptake. But as I have already made public on various occasions, we have committed to the fact if we needed more money — another \$50 million — then we would make that funding available. On present indications that will not be the case. We think the envelope we presently have allocated to this task — \$50 million — will be sufficient for the purposes. As but one example, it demonstrates the fact that in that case there is the distinct prospect we will not need as much money as has been allowed.

In issues around planned burning, we will need to allocate funding as we grow our planned burn goal to accord with the ultimate, which was recommended by the commission and which we have accepted. This year we are aiming for 225 000 hectares; ultimately the goal is 390 000 hectares. So over a period of time there will need to be an incremental allocation of funding with regard to that initiative. In the safer electricity assets initiative, we have made what I think is a very meaningful start towards delivering on recommendation 27. Again we will need to see with the passage of time how that follows through.

But the ultimate intent is that, having made a start into this process in a way which I believe is responsible and appropriate and which pays particular regard, I might say, to the fact that 5 of the 11 fires on that awful day killed 119 of the 173 people who died, we as a government accepted the responsibility to implement that recommendation, to do everything we possibly can within our capacity to be certain that we deal with that recommendation and not shy away from it. These are issues that will continue to evolve over the course of the years, but I am very confident that for the main part we have been able to collar this. We have been able to allocate the principal amounts of funding, which are going to be able to deal with the horrors that we faced on that awful day and which gave rise to the commission.

**Mr PAKULA** — Just to follow-up, Minister, I accept that you might not be able to outline to the dollar what future allocations might be required, but can you give us a ball-park?

**Mr RYAN** — For the reasons I have mentioned, and there are many other instances and examples, I am not able to do that now. But I do emphasise there will be unders and overs, as I have demonstrated here today. To take this from another perspective, were anybody to go out of here thinking that there is some endless commitment which is going to mean that in future budgets we are going to be locked into a situation where the state is faced with enormous financial obligations, I think that would be a very poor take-out of the current position. The work of the implementation plan and the reports from the implementation monitor, with the fact of his having said we are down now to about 80 of the 250-plus initiatives which comprised the response to the report — all those issues and more — give rise to my confident belief that we have done the main work in terms of being able to fund what is needed here.

**Mr MORRIS** — Minister, I refer you to budget information paper 1 and page 28 of that document on regional and rural Victoria. I want to particularly refer to the community safety aspect, which takes up that whole page in fact, and the reference to the government's efforts to improve the safety of Victorian communities. Can you outline for the committee the key achievements to date in improving bushfire safety, particularly in relation to the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission?

**Mr RYAN** — In May 2011 the government's implementation plan implementing the government's response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was tabled in the Parliament. The implementation plan includes over 282 individual measures. Indeed, if I may be so bold, I think it in fact amounts to something in the order of 282, but I stand to be corrected. They are intended to improve the ability to mitigate, to prepare and to plan for, respond to and recover from future bushfires. They are supported by an investment of over \$900 million, and indeed something rising to \$1 billion.

A number of the measures are already in place. The bushfire safety policy framework is but one of them. It was reviewed by the fire services commissioner; it was re-released on 30 September 2011. The framework aims to improve the bushfire safety for all Victorians. It focuses, as did the commission, on the primacy of life and the safety of individuals, and it aims to improve the level of public awareness of bushfire risk. It aims to develop a shared responsibility for bushfire safety between the state, local government, fire agencies, emergency management agencies, communities, households and individuals. And it is a point which bears emphasis, Chair: this is a shared responsibility. We as a government have obligations, and we are exploring some of them here today. But the people of Victoria do need to understand: it is a shared responsibility — that when the bell rings and the threat is there, people are obliged, in their own interests, to take appropriate steps to protect themselves. It cannot simply be left to the state. People have a great capacity to look after their own interests in these issues, and I use the opportunity to urge that they continue to do so.

The framework clarifies the range of options available to communities. It includes references to initiatives in bushfire safety, such as the development of policies on community alert sirens and on fire refuges. On the issue of evacuation, guidelines have been developed on evacuation processes, and funding was provided to two high fire risk communities — at Noojee and Lavers Hill — so that they could practise their emergency response as part of a pilot community fire drill. As I said, Chair, I was there to observe that which occurred at Lavers Hill. On the emergency alert, it has been strengthened with the location-based telephone emergency warning system announced, and a contract to develop that system which has been signed with Telstra. The ongoing negotiations occur, as I have explained.

On the issue of the shelter options, the government has committed \$13 million to assist councils to establish neighbourhood safer places and other bushfire shelter options in high bushfire risk areas. The program focuses on potential sites that have been located in some of the highest bushfire risk areas in the state, where it has previously proven difficult to identify and establish neighbourhood safer places — such as in the Otways, the Dandenong Ranges and the Macedon Ranges. In this budget there is an additional \$2 million to assist with the community bushfire refuges project.

On the issue of the incident control centres — a matter that Mr Scott raised previously — the 40 incident control centres have been upgraded and audited to agreed minimum standards. The CFA has all 155 divisional command centres operational. The CFA also has in place a number of alternate solutions to support incident response capability and the divisional command function, including the capacity to deploy up to 10 mobile divisional command caches and mobile communications vehicles, which can provide important communication support during incidents.

The CFA stations and the firefighting vehicles, I have already made reference to those, both last year's and those that are in this year's budget. We have the continuation of the implementation monitor; I have already referred to the work that has been undertaken in that regard.

Taken in its totality, Chair, we have made a substantial advance toward being able to do what we said we would do — and that is to implement all 67 of these recommendations.

**Mr SCOTT** — I will ask you a different question than the one I asked in the previous session, seeing you have partly answered it. I will seek information on another matter. In your presentation you made reference to the community bushfire refuges project, and I believe it is referenced in budget paper 3 at page 40 and also at

page 43, where the funding is identified as a grants program for public entities like local government to apply for. I would be grateful if you could provide information to the committee regarding: what building standards will these refuges be required to comply with? And will the government be responsible for the cost and liability associated with the ongoing maintenance of any refuges built with funding provided under this program?

**Mr RYAN** — The government supports creating these additional last-resort shelter options so that the people in the high bushfire risk areas do have access to a range of alternatives relevant to their local community and individual circumstances. That said, and I use the opportunity again to emphasise: leave early, do not take the risk. If the risk is there, particularly on the code red days, get out and give yourself enough time. That said, there are a total of 233 neighbourhood safer places that have been established as at 13 April this year.

We have allocated \$13 million for a grants program to support councils and communities to establish contingency shelter options, and they include those neighbourhood safer places. That is a program that focuses on potential sites that have been located in some of the highest bushfire-risk areas in the state where it has previously proven difficult to identify and establish NSPs, such as in the Otways and in the Macedon Ranges. The Tony Clarke Reserve in Macedon, for example, has been designated as an NSP following extensive clearing, civil and building works on site. It is a \$1.185 million upgrade and it now provides access to the reserve from three entrances, while the sports stadium has had its bushfire attack level increased to 29 — an industrial standard of fire protection.

Agreement has also been reached with the Colac Otway Shire regarding the funding of the establishment of neighbourhood safer places at Barwon Downs, at Carlisle River, and at Forrest. And in addition, an NSP has been commissioned at Loch Sport — I did it my very self — in Gippsland in December 2011, following the clearing of roadside vegetation and the reinforcement of embankments. That is a very good example of how, with the application of appropriate work standards, you can achieve an NSP in apparently otherwise difficult situations.

On the question of the funding in relation to refuges, the essence of it is that out of the \$13 million that was allocated in last year's budget, \$1.5 million of that money was made available on the basis that the government is looking to fund the construction of a refuge, and as I have already indicated, we are in active negotiations, through the fire services commissioner, with Yarra Ranges and Moorabool to see what can be done in that regard. Over and above that, in this year's funding we have allowed \$2 million. Whereas with the first project we are going to build and pay for it ourselves out of the \$1.5 million, with this additional funding it is our intention, ongoing, to enter arrangements with communities, entities, organisations to share with them the cost of being able to develop these sorts of facilities.

As to the standards that will apply, they have to comply with the appropriate building regulations. Those regulations were amended in July 2011. We found that, in essence, we had to start almost from scratch to be able to get those regulations up and then to be able, in concert with the Building Commission, to develop the concepts that will be available to different communities who are able to satisfy the terms of those regulations for the purposes of any of these refuge structures that they may want to engage in.

On the issue of the supervision of them, that would be part of the negotiated arrangement which we strike with whomever it is. We can cooperate, for the purposes of being able to develop refuges in the future, as to the dimensions and scale of them. That will change with respective communities, and we will only see that depending on where it is that we are looking to have a facility actually built.

In October 2011 the fire services commissioner published a revised policy on the community fire refuges, along with the practices and procedures. Those cover issues such as identification, designation, management and maintenance, and I think it is reasonable to say that work is progressing well on completing a project structure and establishing a project steering group and local community consultative committees within those two municipalities to which I have referred.

**Mr SCOTT** — There is one point I wish to clarify, Minister, in the second part of my question because the funding appears to be for one year in the budget papers. Could you just clarify who would be responsible for the ongoing maintenance costs, since it is obviously only a program for \$2 million over one year?

**Mr RYAN** — Mr Scott, that again will be a matter that will form part of an arrangement which is struck with whomever is the recipient of the funding that we make available. I can tell the committee without any

reservation that the fire services commissioner will be overseeing all of this extraordinarily carefully, and we will ensure therefore that appropriate measures are put in place to accommodate these matters in their various forms.

**Mr ANGUS** — I refer to budget information paper 1, page 16, on the subject of ‘Bushfire recovery’ and the reference to ‘New or extended programs provided by the government in the last 12 months’ as noted there. Can you provide the committee with further detail on these and other programs, and how they are assisting individuals and communities recover from the effects of the 2009 Victorian bushfires?

**Mr RYAN** — The coalition government continues to provide support in those key areas where bushfire recovery is ongoing. In addition to the work of the fire recovery unit, the following programs are directly supportive of those most affected by the 2009 bushfires. There is the \$5.2 million Marysville and triangle economic recovery package. On 1 July last year I announced that package. It is supporting key recommendations made in the report from the Boston Consulting Group, which, to its eternal credit, has contributed on a pro bono basis to the development of much of the work which underpins these initiatives. That report on the progress and the recovery of Marysville and the triangle communities has been pivotal in seeing that work undertaken. The package itself seeks to encourage new investment in Marysville and the surrounds as part of the recovery effort.

The centrepiece of the package is the \$4 million infrastructure investment subsidy which was officially launched in November 2011. The interest subsidies are supporting reinvestment and new investment in the Marysville and triangle region, targeting the areas of tourism, visitor accommodation, rental accommodation, some retail accommodation, restaurants and light industry. Applications for the scheme, which is being administered by Rural Finance Victoria, are still open.

The package included a variety of other funding measures, such as a state-of-the-art interpretive tourism experience that will educate visitors about the area, including all importantly the history of the area prior to and subsequent to that dreadful day in 2009. It will include the development of year-round tourism activities for the Lake Mountain Alpine Resort. As I recall, Chair, we established here vocally last year that we have all been to the Lake Mountain Alpine Resort. It will include the development of a professional prospectus to attract investors and families to establish in the region. It will provide support for the Marysville and triangle economic leadership group, which was formed after the fires to drive business recovery in the region. In addition, there is \$19 million which has been committed to the Marysville hotel and conference centre.

Significant progress has been already made in the social and environmental recovery of Marysville, but these economic initiatives of course are vitally important. Late in 2010 the government of the day, to its credit, committed up to \$19 million to facilitate the establishment of this new facility. In partnership with the private sector we have carried on that commitment.

In early 2011 Regional Development Victoria was given the task of delivering the centre. We have gone through an expression of interest process, which was completed in December last year. Now we are into the request for proposal process that is presently under way. It is anticipated that when the centre is developed it will facilitate significant investment in the area. I think I gave the committee my own snapshot of how I see it evolving over the course of the years.

We have invested in the skills, training, engagement and practical support program. We have the bushfire community support program administered through the Department of Human Services. That is due to expire towards the middle of this year, but there is another \$3.5 million package which is being funded by VBAF that will undertake much of the work and indeed more of it, in many senses, than was previously provided.

The rebuilding advisory service remains in place at the moment with three personnel. That also is due to expire at the end of June, but I have made it very clear to the department that we need to keep a careful eye to that to look to its ongoing important work, because thus far it has made a valuable contribution. In relation to the bushfire buyback scheme, to which I have already referred, we have a substantial commitment there available to those people who wish to equip their property under the circumstances set out under the criteria by which they can qualify.

**Ms HENNESSY** — Minister, I will take you to budget paper 5, page 169, and specifically to the reference in the budget papers that the government will soon announce the details of a new property-based levy. Last



Friday the Treasurer would not rule out in this forum that anyone who presently makes a contribution to the fire services levy will have to pay more under the government's new scheme. Are you in a position to give this guarantee, or will the current contributors be hit with an increased bill?

**The CHAIR** — I am not sure about the portfolio response ability here, given that it is clearly a matter for the Treasurer, but I will allow the minister — —

**Ms HENNESSY** — It does relate to recommendation 64 of the bushfires royal commission.

**The CHAIR** — I will allow the minister to respond.

**Mr RYAN** — I understand that the Treasurer was asked about the issue. It is a matter which falls directly within his responsibility. Ultimately when it comes to the Parliament it will do so within his area of his portfolio. As to the specifics with regard to it, the matter is still being developed. When the legislation is introduced to the house these matters will be appropriately detailed to the public at large.

**Ms HENNESSY** — Just to confirm: that legislation will be under the remit of the Treasury portfolio?

**Mr RYAN** — Sorry?

**Ms HENNESSY** — Will the legislation be under the remit of the Treasury portfolio?

**Mr RYAN** — The Treasurer.

**Ms HENNESSY** — The Treasurer, yes.

**Mr RYAN** — The Treasurer will have carriage of the legislation.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — I would like to pick up the buyback scheme that you just touched on in your last answer to Mr Angus's question. I refer you to two parts of the budget paper: firstly, budget paper 3, page 45, which has justice asset initiatives under 'Bushfire response — retreat and resettlement strategy' at \$20.2 million; then on page 40 in the justice output initiatives, you also have 'Bushfire response — retreat and resettlement strategy' at \$0.4 million. Based on my arithmetic that is a total of \$20.6 million in the 2012–13 financial year for that initiative. Could you outline, Deputy Premier and Minister, what this funding provides and how the strategy will impact on community safety?

**Mr RYAN** — The government has indeed allocated \$20.6 million in the 12–13 financial year to implement the second phase of the bushfire buyback scheme. This is of course in response to recommendation 46 of the commission's report. I again emphasise that it is an entirely voluntary scheme. Unfortunately when it was being spoken of and then initiated there was a belief in some elements of the community that there would be some obligatory aspect to this. Such is certainly not the case. It is entirely voluntary.

Five million dollars was also allocated in 11–12 as the first stage of the program. As I said, the scheme delivers on the government's commitment to implement recommendation 46. The scheme is about reducing the bushfire risk and giving eligible landowners an option to resettle away from areas of unacceptably high bushfire risk. I am pleased to say that the coalition government is moving quickly to implement this key recommendation. It is a recommendation, I must say, that the former government was not prepared to accept or act upon. There was broad community consultation on the implementation of the scheme. Over 200 people either attended information and consultation sessions on the scheme or spoke by telephone or emailed the Department of Justice. Applications for the scheme opened on 1 March, and they will close on 31 May this year.

Almost 2500 properties were destroyed in the fires, and of these around 1500 were people's primary places of residence. According to the survey data of 2011 some 77 per cent of households have rebuilt, have purchased a new home or are in the process of rebuilding. This means that approximately 345 householders have not rebuilt on their land. Owner-occupiers whose principal place of residence was destroyed by the 2009 fires, who have not yet rebuilt on that site and whose homes were less than 100 metres from the forest are able to apply to have their land voluntarily acquired by the government. The scheme gives landowners who would otherwise be forced to rebuild an option to resettle on a lower bushfire risk property elsewhere. It gives landowners currently living in temporary accommodation on their land an opportunity to move to a safer, more permanent form of accommodation. It ensures that land of unacceptably high bushfire risk cannot be built on, in the sense certainly

of residential buildings, in the future. It ensures the effective management of land where the current owner is no longer able, due to physical or emotional reasons, to return to the land. It is important to emphasise it will involve non-compulsory acquisition. As at 9 May the Department of Justice has received 141 applications for the scheme. Some 95 applications have proceeded to valuation, and 21 applicants have been informed of the results of the application process.

The Bushfire Land Acquisition Panel is chaired by the Honourable Patrick McNamara, who of course has broad experience in a number of spheres in relation to these matters. The members of the panel have been appointed so they can use their expertise and experience when assessing applications. The panel will make recommendations on the best future use of the acquired land, ensuring there is not an increased risk to other residents. Where it is possible all ineligible applicants will be advised of alternative options that may be open to them. For example, that may include, as appropriate, assistance from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund or the Rebuilding Advisory Service in rebuilding on their land. Some of the land will go to the public estate, and the Department of Sustainability and Environment will determine the most appropriate future use and management of it. Some of the land will be resold. For example, a neighbouring landowner may wish to buy the property and take on management responsibilities. However, and again I emphasise, a covenant will be placed on any land sold prohibiting any future residential development.

**Mr PAKULA** — Minister, you have provided funding in the budget for the CFA radio communication strategy and black spot remediation — it is in budget paper 4, page 59. The implementation monitor reported in July 2011 in a progress report that eight radio sites had been identified for remediation. In June 2011 the CFA advised that the black spot solution had been delivered for three of those sites. I am wondering if the eight black spot sites have now all been fixed. If not, how many are outstanding, where are they, and will they be fixed before the 2012–13 fire season?

**Mr RYAN** — I do not have with me the specific response to your question. I will make it available to the committee in a timely way. I do share the fundamental concern which underpins your question, which is to do with the significance of these black spot areas — the fact that in many locations people are unable to obtain relevant information at the appropriate time. It is important therefore that initiatives, as reasonably can be pursued, are undertaken to accommodate it. I will provide the information to the committee.

**The CHAIR** — Minister, I refer to budget paper 3 at page 47. In the planning and community development output initiatives there is funding of 8.6 million over the forward estimates for the vulnerable people in emergencies program. Minister, will you outline what this program achieves and how it contributes towards addressing the recommendation in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission report regarding the identification of vulnerable people by councils during emergencies?

**Mr RYAN** — By definition this is a critically important recommendation, therefore it has been vitally important that we develop a mechanism of being able to satisfy it. How often was it heard in the events subsequent to Black Saturday about vulnerable people in our community who got caught for one reason or another, and how important is it therefore that we are able to make sure we can accommodate this risk for the inevitability of the future threat.

The government is committed of course to the implementation of all 67 recommendations. The 12–13 budget includes \$10.4 million across the departments of health, human services, planning and community development to provide for vulnerable people in emergencies over the next four years. It will deliver on the commitment to implement recommendation 3 from the commission's report. That is about improving safety for those Victorians most at risk in our community on those days of high fire risk and will more widely support the planning for vulnerable people in other types of emergencies. It is imperative that the government, emergency services, local councils, communities, households and individuals learn the lessons from the dreadful events of February during the Gippsland and Black Saturday fires and that we are prepared for the inevitability of their return.

As part of ensuring that we plan better for such events, the vulnerable people in emergencies program will allow proactive emergency planning at the municipal, community and individual level to support vulnerable people and enable the establishment of a vulnerable persons register for use in emergencies. The development of that register is a key element of the vulnerable people in emergencies program. It will be maintained at the local level by councils. It will be available for use in emergencies. Councils will be supported to undertake these

activities through local resourcing to support implementation and to undertake emergency preparation, provision of targeted advice and screening to identify those people who may need to be registered. We do recognise the value and importance of local people and local communities caring for each other. Very importantly, the issue that was replete through the commission's investigations and recommendations was the notion of local knowledge and being able to bring that to bear over an area so critical as this. That is what the program will do.

**Mr SCOTT** — Minister, I refer you to budget information paper 1, which is the regional and rural information paper, page 16, and the support for bushfire recovery. I ask you for the reasons the government has ceased funding for the business enterprise centres in bushfire-affected communities, specifically the Kinglake Ranges Business Enterprise Centre?

**Mr RYAN** — As you would know, Mr Scott, this was a concluding program; it had been funded to a particular point in time. As I recall, it was extended once. I stand to be corrected in that regard, but I believe it was extended once. It was found, on a complete examination of the program, that although it had some benefit, that benefit was of limited purview to those who wanted to access it and, as it was being provided, as I recall, through the office of the minister for small business, it was determined ultimately that the program would not continue. I do emphasise to the committee that there are a plethora of programs available for people who wish to access small business support, not the least of those being through the minister's own portfolio responsibility area — the minister for small business.

Also we have people on the ground in different respects up in those areas who are able to talk with those who may have a small business inquiry that they want to pursue, and so there is any amount of assistance for those who are interested in being able to either commence, remain in or enhance a small business. As I have already indicated, that assistance extends to funding arrangements of different sorts, being in the nature of those to which I have already referred.

**Mr SCOTT** — I do have a follow-up, Minister. In correspondence that you sent, and I think you were reflecting a similar sentiment to the answer you have just given, you suggested programs that are the responsibility of Minister Asher. Has any work been undertaken on the impact that would be had on these communities of the cuts that are being made to this sector, which I think are around 34 per cent of the funding for small business assistance which DBI has, on the bushfire communities that were previously receiving support through organisations such as the Kinglake Ranges business enterprise centre?

**Mr RYAN** — We have, as you know, established the bushfire recovery unit. It is ongoing in its work. It is available to anyone — to everyone — as a first point of call, who may be interested in pursuing any issue which is of relevance to their recovery from the bushfires. That extends not only across the whole gamut of the health sector and all the elements and the agencies of government but very particularly into this area around small business.

In addition to that we have supported this sector with a range of programs which are ongoing, and I have made reference to some of them already, that are available to those people who wish to pursue their interest in small business. That also is an ongoing program. So I can assure you, Mr Scott, and I can assure the committee that anybody who wishes to avail themselves of those forms of assistance is very welcome to do so. That is exactly why they have been established.

**Mr MORRIS** — Minister, can I refer you to budget paper 3, page 47, which is the planning and community development output initiatives. The table on that page outlines funding of \$1.2 million over two years for communities affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires, and I am wondering can you outline for the committee the need for this spending and its significance to the recovery of bushfire-affected communities?

**Mr RYAN** — Indeed I have it. While a lot of progress, as we have been discussing, has been made along the road to recovery from the 2009 bushfires, it is a long process. There remains a need for continued government support. As I have said in many forums, many times, different people recover in different ways. Some people never recover. Other people make their way through it and are able to continue, but there are others with a legacy that we do need to support. The fire recovery unit plays a very important role in addressing that need. It provides a clear point of contact for information and connection to services within the state government for

bushfire-affected communities. I reiterate in further response to the issue Mr Scott has just realised — raised — it may be both — that the fire recovery unit is there and is able to ensure — —

**Mr SCOTT** — Please! It is not something to make levity of.

**Mr PAKULA** — You are channelling Naphtine, just being nasty.

**Mr SCOTT** — I think this is not the area for such comments. We have been very civilised about this area.

**Mr RYAN** — It is able to ensure there is assistance available. The coalition government established that unit in mid-2011. It is committed that it continue to service the needs of those communities. The funding will allow the unit to continue to address those needs in various ways. It will provide regionally based community engagement coordinators who respond to an average of 400 inquiries per month on a range of recovery-related issues. They are the personnel to whom I was referring who are available on the ground to look after anybody who has a small business query.

They provide a dedicated 1800 helpline and an email address which has received 770 inquiries to date. They produce a monthly newsletter for information, services and support. It is a wonderful production; I recommended it to all members of the committee. They maintain a website with up-to-date fire recovery information. They provide monitoring and reporting on progress of bushfire recovery projects. They are assisting with the delivery of community recovery projects, and, finally, they are advocating for bushfire-affected people across government.

In 12–13 the fire recovery unit will be focused on a variety of initiatives, Chair. They include supporting communities through the necessary transition from the bushfire-specific services to mainstream services, so that will see, with the passage of time, a movement away from different programs that were established specifically at the moment to be able to deal with the urgency of need into a way that the mainstream services can continue to provide that vital assistance. They will be identifying and assisting people in temporary accommodation, and I am pleased to say, Chair, that the movement of people out of temporary accommodation is progressing well.

They are encouraging economic activity within the Murrindindi shire. They have responsibility of course for the implementation of VBAF-funded community projects. Finally, they are building community capacity for the future. I conclude by saying that they continue to play an absolutely vital role in supporting those poor folk who are, on an ongoing basis, caught up in this nightmare.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister. Mr Scott has a point of clarification on an earlier question.

**Mr SCOTT** — I am happy for it to be taken on notice, not to waste the time of the committee now. There was an element of the question I asked you in the previous session which I think you responded to in large part but I do not think you covered it all. If you could just respond on notice at a later point to the elements particularly relating to training, I think, which were not dealt with.

**Mr RYAN** — Certainly I can do it now, if you — —

**The CHAIR** — Do it now.

**Mr RYAN** — Let's do it now and be done. There are currently 40 level 3 incident control centres that are located over the state. They are aggregated into 12 groups. Key centres are stood up — or activated — pre-emptively in response to weather conditions that suggest there might be a problem. Fully staffed, an ICC requires many personnel, and the state currently has capacity to stand up multiple ICCs.

These are the points, I think, that go particularly to your question, Mr Scott. There are currently 118 qualified level 3 incident controllers and 71 regional controllers. We are continuing to strive to maintain these numbers. We are actively looking to reach the target of 129 which is set out in the budget papers. In line with the commission's recommendations, a solid body of work has led to the development of a common system which is now used by CFA and DSE to accredit the level 3 controllers.

On 24 February this year I opened the new Gippsland regional control centre in Traralgon. Without dwelling on it, in the interests of time, a great thing about these facilities is the interoperability across the different agencies

who are able to come in at short notice and be part of what is required. We are looking to achieve that 129. We are almost there; we are looking to get there conclusively.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister. That brings to a conclusion the discussion on the bushfire response portfolio. I thank Ms Armytage and Mr Robertson for their attendance today. We will take a very short adjournment.

**Witnesses withdrew**