Emergency Leaders for Climate Action

Submission to:	Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee: Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria.
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About Emergency Leaders for Climate Action

Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA) is a coalition of 38 former fire and emergency service leaders from every Australian state and territory demanding stronger government action on climate pollution that is driving more frequent, damaging extreme weather disasters, while advocating for better resourcing for climate adaptation, community resilience, and frontline fire and emergency services.

To find out more about Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, visit: www.emergencyleadersforclimateaction.org.au.

Introduction

Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA) would like to thank the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria.

ELCA submits that any Inquiry into the disastrous fires would be incomplete without acknowledging the fundamental role played by climate change, which is adversely impacting fire weather, fuels, and fire behaviour. Climate pollution from the burning of coal, oil and gas has changed the Victorian climate and is driving increasingly dangerous fire weather in Victoria. Declining winter rainfall, rising temperatures, and more frequent and intense heatwaves and droughts create the conditions for more frequent, more damaging bushfires. Since Ash Wednesday in 1983, the gap between major Victorian fire seasons has reduced, with fewer years between devastating events. This trend will worsen without rapid, deep cuts to climate pollution. Strong action now can help slow down and limit escalating bushfire risk.

A worsening fire-prone climate, alongside growing numbers of Victorians living in places with heightened fire risks will place more pressure on the state's fire and emergency services in the years to come.

The following submission identifies that climate change is fuelling worsening bushfires in Victoria, influencing the severity of the 2026 fire season. Greater government investment to build household and community resilience and fire-fighting capacity is required to meet the escalating challenge. The submission addresses the following Terms of Reference:

- The impacts of climate change on the natural environment, which has resulted in more frequent and intense bushfires occurring in Victoria (ToR 8)
- The causes and circumstances of the bushfires, including climate change and the adequacy of the Government's climate policies and actions, forecasts, warnings and public education on bushfire threats (ToR 2)
- The impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery (ToR 6)
- Funding, equipment and appliances for the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, and recruitment and retention of CFA volunteers (ToR 3)
- The preparation and planning by government, emergency services agencies and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides (ToR 1)

- The interjurisdictional support into and out of Victoria leading into and during the fire season, including interstate and international deployments, Commonwealth support and relief efforts (ToR 10)
- The prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season (ToR 9)

Key Recommendations

For the Environment and Planning Committee's reference, ELCA has recommended that the Victorian Government, working with state fire and emergency services:

1. should prepare for plausible, worst case bushfire scenarios possible under global warming of 2°C or more this century, and develop detailed action plans to increase capabilities and harden infrastructure, while maximising opportunities for hazard reduction burning and community resilience.
2. seek co-funding from the Federal Government to pilot a household resilience program for bushfire risk. This should include targeted measures to support disadvantaged households in at-risk locations.
3. increase funding for research into better attraction and retention strategies for both Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Victorian State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers as an urgent priority, including incentives and protections.
4. ensure that fire truck fleets are managed according to whole of life total asset management plans that include optimal disposal age and that agency capital budgets are resourced to a level that rapidly reduces fleet age profiles until they are under control. Replacement of fire trucks with external crew seating must be a high priority, as they are unsafe.
5. support the Victorian Auditor-General to fast-track its review of emergency asset maintenance alongside other relevant reviews including the follow up to the 2020 *Reducing bushfire risks* report and a planned review of emergency management public information and warnings.
6. maintain risk-based approaches to hazard reduction, but invest more heavily in the protection of homes and infrastructure assets.
7. continue to work with federal, state and territory counterparts and the peak council for Fire and Emergency Services, AFAC, to ensure domestic firefighting capacity is sufficient to respond to major events occurring simultaneously in multiple jurisdictions.
8. review the complicated emergency management structures in place and consider using Section 44 of the NSW Rural Fires Act (1997) as a model to simplify overly complicated command and control provisions that put multiple agencies in charge of different parts of a single fire.

9. consider how the critical capabilities of Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) are best retained following the phase out of as native logging in Victoria, including access to specialised plant and equipment. Also consider options to merge FFMV with the CFA under a single command structure.
10. The Victorian Government should increase their investment in public education on how fire risks are managed around sources of renewable energy generation and transmission in the lead up to the next bushfire season.

Responses to the Terms of Reference (ToR)

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

Climate change is fuelling more frequent and severe fire seasons in Victoria

Climate change is making fire weather in Victoria worse by increasing temperatures, contributing to a long-term decline in rainfall, intensifying droughts, flash droughts and heatwaves.

Hotter temperatures and declining rainfall create conditions conducive to rapid drying of fire-prone forests and grasslands. Victoria has warmed by about 1.4°C since pre-industrial times, with cool season rainfall down more than 10% over the past 30 years, leaving vegetation drier and more flammable (DEECA 2024). At the same time, climate pollution is pushing formerly reliable cooler season rainfall systems south, causing forests to dry earlier and increasing bushfire risk (Climate Council 2026).

Droughts have preceded some of Victoria's most devastating bushfires, including Black Saturday (2009) and Black Summer (2019–20). Less well known, flash droughts also increase fire risks. They occur when unusually high evaporation — often linked to heatwaves — compounds low rainfall. Unlike traditional droughts, they can escalate within weeks or months, rapidly drying landscapes (Hadjimichael 2022). It appears that parts of Victoria experienced flash drought following very high temperatures in 2025 and 2026, and this in turn set the scene for devastating fires when Extreme and Catastrophic fire weather arrived in early January 2026.[1]

Climate change is making hot days hotter and heatwaves longer, more intense and more frequent (Perkins-Kirkpatrick 2020; Reddy Perkins-Kirkpatrick and Sharples 2021). Heatwaves directly prime landscapes to burn by heating and drying vegetation,

[1] Parts of western Victoria, the Otways, central west Victoria and the north east of metropolitan Melbourne stretching into Gippsland showed signs of flash drought in the four weeks ending 15 February 2026. For more information see: Climate Council 2026 Breakneck speed: Summer of climate whiplash (p.35)

increasing combustible fuel (Collins et al. 2022; Bowman 2026).[2] Recent major fires have preceded heatwaves, e.g. Black Saturday, Black Summer and 2026 fires.

While driving hotter, drier conditions, climate change is also increasing the risks of fires igniting. Dry lightning has risen by 50% in south-east Australia since 2000 and is projected to increase further with warming (Canadell et al. 2021). Dry lightning was a major factor in ignition of many of the fires in Victoria in the summer of 2026.

Together, these factors have driven a sharp escalation in the length, severity, and frequency of Victorian fire seasons — and a clear step-change in extreme fire weather. Historically, catastrophic fires causing extreme losses occurred about once every 40 years (e.g. 1851, 1898, 1939, 1983). Now it is closer to decadal - Black Saturday (2009), Black Summer (2019/20) and now the January 2026 fires (Climate Council 2026). Three massive "one million-hectare" fire seasons have occurred this century, while only one occurred last century.

Most of the state's 59 recorded pyroconvective fire storm (pyroCb) events have occurred since 2000, in parallel with the rapidly warming climate (DEECA 2024; McRae 2026). [3] The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Binskin et al, 2020) heard evidence detailing a significant increase in the number of pyroCb, linked to the warming atmosphere. PyroCbs create fires so intense and volatile that they cannot be controlled by current firefighting tactics, strategies and technologies.

Climate change will continue to worsen bushfire weather and extremes in Victoria (DEECA 2024). On current emissions trajectories, global temperatures are projected to have increased between 2.1 and 2.7°C by the end of the century. However, emerging evidence shows that climate extremes at 2°C resemble the modelled average climate impacts at 3–4°C (Climate Action Tracker 2025; Teske 2025; Bevacqua et al. 2026). That means once global temperatures increase by 2°C extremes become much worse. Victoria should be preparing now for fire weather extremes consistent with the average fire weather projected for a 3–4°C warmer world.

Recommendation

1. The Victorian Government and fire and emergency services should, based on scientific evidence, prepare for worst case bushfire scenarios possible under global warming of 2°C or more this century, and develop detailed action plans to

[2] The two-week Victorian heatwave before Black Saturday was about 3ºC hotter than it would have been without climate change (Abhik et al. 2023). The hottest week of Black Summer was 1–2ºC hotter and roughly ten times more likely than a century ago (Climate Council 2026). For more information, see:

[3] These events are formed when extremely intense fires send convection columns into the stratosphere, drawing down dry air and interacting with strong upper-level winds. These systems can form towering storm clouds that produce violent downbursts, erratic wind squalls and lightning that ignites new fires up to 30 km away, but with little or no rain. For more information see: Climate Council 2026 Breakneck speed: Summer of climate whiplash (p.40)

increase capabilities and harden infrastructure, while maximising opportunities for hazard reduction burning and community resilience.

The causes and circumstances of the bushfires, including climate change and the adequacy of the Government's climate policies and actions, forecasts, warnings and public education on bushfire threats (ToR 2)

The January 2026 fires were made worse by climate change

Multiple climate-driven factors — including prolific fuel accumulation after earlier rains, long-term drying, heatwaves, flash drought, then dry lightning — combined to create dangerous pre-conditions across Victoria leading up to periods of Extreme and Catastrophic fire weather in January 2026.

In the 24 months to January 2026, most of Victoria recorded below to very much below average rainfall, with some regions experiencing record lows (BoM 2026). This was made worse by a rare Sudden Stratospheric Warming (SSW) event that occurred from September onwards which increased heat and dryness (ABC 2025).[4]

Victoria then experienced a far wetter than average November, spurring vegetation growth that dried rapidly when heat and flash drought hit parts of the state throughout January and February 2026 (BoM 2025; Guardian 2026).

By January 2026 large parts of the state were already at heightened risk of bushfire and primed to burn. The 7–9 January heatwave, made about five times more likely by climate change, meant fire conditions were particularly challenging (Clarke et al. 2026). On 8 January dry lightning ignited dozens of fires, many in remote areas where containment was difficult. The extreme conditions also generated fire-driven storms. Three pyroCB events developed on 8–9 January, intensifying fire behaviour and increasing fire spread (McRae 2026).

The January 2026 Victorian bushfires were the worst the state has experienced since Black Summer 20219 / 2020, with the unmistakable influence of climate change helping to fuel the destructive power of the fires. Given the increasing frequency of destructive fire seasons and worsening fire weather, there needs to be a far greater focus on building household and community resilience to bushfires across the state

[4] The 2025 SSW weakened the polar vortex that holds a tight band of strong westerly winds around Antarctica. This enabled the winds to reach the Australian continent, to push away moist maritime air that would otherwise have moderated fire weather, and drove hot, dry air from the interior to the east coast. These surface conditions associated with the SSW also likely intensified the onset of flash drought (see Section 2) in many parts of South Australia and Victoria, and parts of New South Wales. Then from late 2025 a series of heatwaves resulted in multiple days of Extreme and sometimes Catastrophic fire danger across multiple states, further drying out the landscape and rapidly exacerbating soil and fuel dryness. For more information see: Climate Council 2026 Breakneck speed: Summer of climate whiplash (p.43)

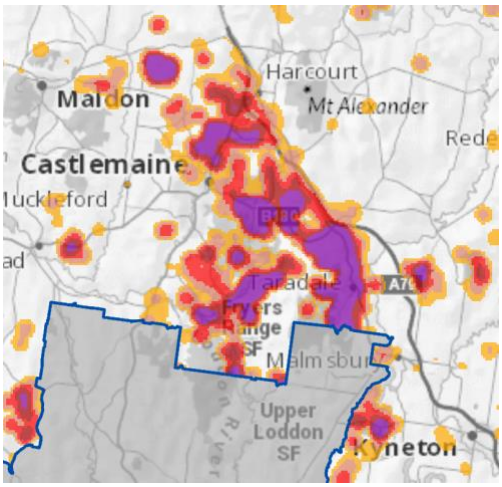
rather than simply relying on response capabilities. On the worst days, there will never be enough fire trucks and firefighters to go to every threatened home. This is where improved building standards, principally AS3959, come in.

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

Households in fire prone areas need more support to prepare for bushfires

The January 2026 fires highlighted that many bushfire-prone households are not sufficiently prepared for the risks they face. In December 2025, the Castlemaine Institute and Resilient Building Council released the results of an assessment of 140 houses around Castlemaine finding that 90% had a one star bushfire resilience rating. This is considered to be very poor (CI & RBI 2025). This finding sits at odds with the known bushfire risks the region faces. Forest Fire Management Victoria identified that there is a high and very high risk of house loss due to bushfire homes in Castlemaine and surrounding towns (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Risk of house loss due to bushfire (FFMV 2021)



The fire-impacted communities of Harcourt and Longwood sit among the more disadvantaged half of the state's rankings for socio-economic disadvantage (Akter, Bui & Grafton 2026). Similarly, disadvantaged communities also had greater exposure to the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires with many still grappling with the aftermath (Akter & Grafton 2021). Communities that are already facing hardship typically have less resources to draw upon when disaster strikes, and have a longer path to recovery (ELCA & Climate Council 2024). The announcement by the Australian and Victorian governments of assistance payments to uninsured households impacted by the fires acknowledges this. While beneficial, a far more cost effective option over the longer

term would be to support lower income households in bushfire exposed areas to improve the resilience of their homes before disaster strikes.

The Victorian Planning Framework directs development to lower bushfire risk areas and requires bushfire risk to be assessed and mitigated through planning controls, helping to reduce future household exposure. However, given the high bushfire risks many households face now, and that many were built before the introduction of modern building standards, the Victorian Government should consider piloting a household resilience program for bushfire-prone areas.[5] This should include targeted support for disadvantaged households in at-risk areas.

Queensland and New South Wales already have resilience programs co-funded by the Commonwealth Government to help households prepare for cyclones and floods in high-risk areas. These programs provide an example that the Victorian Government could draw upon to design a household resilience program focused on bushfire risk. The Commonwealth has indicated as recently as December 2025 that it is open to funding such a program.

Recommendation

2. The Victorian Government should seek co-funding from the Federal Government to pilot a household resilience program for bushfire risk. This should include targeted measures to support disadvantaged households in at-risk locations to retrofit homes to meet current requirements of AS3959.

Funding, equipment and appliances for the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, and recruitment and retention of CFA volunteers (ToR 3)

There is no doubt that fire service organisations including the Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria will need more resourcing to prepare for and respond to grass and bushfire threats made worse by climate change. While these agencies will be best placed to identify their current and future resourcing requirements, ELCA believes that addressing volunteer recruitment and retention and upgrading fleet and equipment should continue to be key areas of focus. At the same time, more effort should be put toward maintaining forestry resources and

[5] Across Australia, up to 90% of homes in bushfire prone areas were constructed before modern, bushfire-resilient standards were introduced (Binskin et al., 2020). The Black Summer bushfires made this clear: 99% of buildings destroyed were within 500m of bushland, and 74% were built before AS 3959.2 was included in the Australian Building Code, now Australian Construction Code (Binskin et al., 2020) (see Climate Council & ELCA 2026 When cities burn: Could the Los Angeles fires happen here?)

equipment for fire mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery following the end of commercial logging of native forests.

Greater investment is required to address the decline in firefighting volunteers

Climate-driven fire conditions are placing greater strain on volunteers, with longer seasons, longer shifts and rising health impacts (Binskin et al. 2020). Just as climate change has ratcheted up the bushfire risks Victoria faces, the number of volunteer firefighters the state has to respond to these risks has declined significantly.

In 2024/25 Victoria had 28,753 volunteer firefighters, about 7,251 (20%) fewer than were available to respond to the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 (Productivity Commission 2026, 2018).[6] The decline in volunteer numbers is steeper when considered alongside population growth – per capita numbers falling by a third (33%) (Productivity Commission 2026, 2018).[7] While there are now 1,636 more paid firefighting positions, per capita numbers have barely changed (Productivity Commission 2026, 2018). Overall there are proportionally fewer fighters in Victoria than 15 years ago at the same time as risks are increasing.

The Country Fire Authority is addressing this capacity gap by canvassing ways of boosting volunteer numbers and capacity through their Contemporary Volunteer Membership Model (CVMM) (CFA 2026). Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA) has previously advocated for some of the measures in the Options Paper, including creating or supporting a seasonal workforce / surge workforce and exploring spontaneous volunteer opportunities. However, given the combination of declining volunteer firefighting numbers, growing population and increasing bushfire risks, more investment will be needed to boost firefighting capacity.

Recommendation

3. Increase funding for research into better attraction and retention strategies for both CFA and SES volunteers as an urgent priority, including incentives and protections.

Clear targets should be set and made public for upgrading Victoria's firefighting fleet

Recent investments of $150 million by the Victorian Government to deliver a rolling fleet program for VICSES, CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria are welcome (Office of the Premier of Victoria 2025), and will go some way to supporting firefighting efforts and concerns about the age of the state's firefighting fleet.

[6] These figures refer specifically to firefighting volunteers and do not include support roles. Including support roles, there were 58,943 people volunteering for Victorian fire agencies in 2008/09 and 51,796 in 2024/25

[7] These figures include both firefighting and support roles. The decline would be steeper for firefighting roles only.

While assets can last up to 25 years, their economic life is typically 15–20 years, after which maintenance costs rise (NSW Audit Office 2023). Fire Rescue Victoria has a medium to long term planning target fleet replacement age of 15 years (Fire Rescue Victoria 2025). This is similar to the NSW RFS operational objective to have a firefighting fleet with an average age of 15 years (NSW Audit Office 2023).

However, given widespread reports of CFA brigades relying on trucks that have probably exceeded their safe, effective service life (see ABC News 2023; 2024 and 2026), the Victorian Government, working with fire agencies, needs to develop clear replacement age targets for the firefighting fleet across all agencies for public reporting and to improve accountability.

It should also be acknowledged that the investments referred to above are largely replacing ageing vehicles rather than increasing the number of vehicles in operation. This means overall capacity may not keep pace with increasing fire risk due to climate change and population growth in fire-prone areas.

ELCA has observed over the years that some governments and treasuries sometimes provide sporadic capital funding for fleet renewal and expansion, or attempt to secure savings by going below minimally required evidence-based investment levels. This is short-sighted, and leads to suboptimal outcomes and increased risk. It builds in long delays to fleet replacement and rapidly ages the overall fleet. As is the case of Victoria, it also requires firefighters to work on antiquated machines with sub-standard safety systems (e.g. external seating for crews), that firefighters in other states would refuse to crew. Replacement and removal from service of vehicles with external seating needs to be a top priority.

A less visible issue is the impact on the niche Australian fire truck fabricating industry. Without a reliable and sustained procurement pipeline, companies have difficulty retaining their specialised workforces, and a number of companies have had to close over recent decades as a result. Should the local fire truck industry collapse, which is not unlikely if treasuries restrict vital capital investment, Australian fire services will be at the mercy of overseas suppliers who will have no incentive to price competitively, and no incentive to design trucks for Australian conditions, given it is a very small market.

The other issue is truck chassis supply. The types of trucks used by fire services are also used by the mining industry. Large numbers of cab chassis cannot be ordered quickly or off the shelf, as they are all imported. A sudden injection of cash to solve a political issue will probably have little to no effect on fleet age, because the fire services will likely not be able to secure trucks, and supply lines of the few Australian fire truck manufacturers, perhaps downsized due to lack of sufficient orders, cannot suddenly gear up to fulfil short-term orders. The end result, and this has happened, is

that treasury then says, "You didn't spend the money", and restricts funding in future years. It is a vicious cycle based on flawed understanding by treasury departments and misguided budget decisions, ultimately leading to higher costs.

Sustained, viable funding for fire service fleet renewal and replacement to meet objective age criteria is essential.

Older fire trucks should be replaced with electric vehicles and trucks where possible

The ongoing US-Israel-Iran conflict and subsequent oil price increases has highlighted the risks of having firefighting and emergency service fleets that are almost entirely dependent on petrol and diesel. Since January, Victorian retail prices for diesel and petrol have increased by about 68% and 42% respectively, increasing the costs of running the state's firefighting fleet (AIP 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d). The Victorian Government has already invested in one urban electric fire truck, which has been operational since 2024 (FRV 2024). Other states and territories are doing similar (ACT ESA 2026; QFES 2023). The market for electric fire trucks and vehicles is small and supplied solely by overseas companies. This in turn means that trucks require costly refits for Australian conditions. State by state purchasing of individual electric trucks is likely to be more costly over time than more coordinated investment. The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should consider coordinating and co-funding the purchase of electric fire trucks while also investing in domestic capacity to maintain and repair the fleet.

It needs to be recognised however that firefighting at present is a niche market for electric trucks and the unique demands of bushfire fighting – long duration operations for days and even weeks in the field – cannot be provided by current electric offerings. However Australia needs to have a national approach to the eventual introduction of new hybrid and electric capabilities and ensure that Australian operational needs are understood and met.

Recommendations

4. The Victorian Government should ensure that fire truck fleets are managed according to whole of life total asset management plans that include optimal disposal age and that agency capital budgets are resourced to a level that rapidly reduces fleet age profiles until they are under control. Replacement of fire trucks with external crew seating must be a high priority, as they are unsafe.
5. The Victorian Auditor-General's Office should fast-track its review of emergency asset maintenance alongside other relevant reviews including the follow up to the 2020 *Reducing bushfire risks* report and a planned review of emergency management public information and warnings.

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

Climate change is reducing opportunities for hazard reduction burning

Hazard reduction by prescribed burning remains one of the most effective broad-scale fire mitigation tools available to fire services and land management agencies. However it needs to be understood that effective hazard reduction burning depends on when, where and how burns are conducted, and the protective impact. Simple measurements of hectares treated can be impressive, but be almost meaningless if there is no protection afforded to people, infrastructure and unique and special ecosystems. The Victorian Government has taken a risk reduction approach, which appears to be effective.

Prescribed burns are seen by some as a panacea that will remove the risk of asset loss from fire - a simplistic and often incorrect assumption. It is well known that the protective effect, depending on vegetation type, can last from 3 to 5 years, after which the mitigative effects are negligible; in other words there needs to be an endless cycle of burning if it is to be effective. This is unrealistic given that prescribed burning is resource intensive. It must be understood that prescribed burning is intended to make fires easier to control, not to prevent them entirely. Where prescribed burns have been found to be most effective is when they are conducted close to assets and homes (Climate Council 2020).

Climate change and the associated lengthening of fire seasons has narrowed available windows for prescribed burning. Higher temperatures, drier conditions and fewer days of low/moderate fire danger lead to unfavourable conditions that increase the risks of prescribed burns escaping.

On the flipside, wild swings in weather from dry to wet also impede burning. Following the 2019 / 2020 Black Summer fires, the east coast of Australia experienced a rare “triple dip” La Niña weather pattern with record flooding. For years it was simply too wet to burn, and there was prolific growth that resulted in increased fuel loads that would eventually dry out and become available to burn. This has become an established pattern – hot, dry, and windy weather too dangerous for burning, followed almost immediately by wet conditions that make burning impossible.

It has also been long understood that hazard reduction burning will have limited impact on the spread of fires burning under extreme and catastrophic conditions (Climate Council 2020). Given that the intensity and severity of fires are increasing, spurred by climate change, increasingly we are seeing instances where the upper limit of what can be achieved through hazard reduction is reached (Climate Council 2020;

Clarke et al. 2023). During extreme and catastrophic conditions, fires will burn across seemingly bare paddocks, spot fires caused by ember storms can ignite new fires kilometres ahead of the main fire, and pyroCb conditions can spawn storms that generate lightning and new fires up to 100 kilometres away. No amount of hazard reduction burning can stop a fire from spotting many kilometres ahead into untreated fuels. Ecologically, there must be a mosaic of fuel ages that provide habitat for plants and animals, so apart from being impossible in a practical sense, aspiring to burn everything at regular, short intervals would be extremely damaging to the environment.

Regional variations in settlement patterns, vegetation and climate combined with the growing risks posed by climate change will reduce the effectiveness of risk reduction strategies that are predominantly focused on single approaches such as prescribed burning. As a result fire agencies in Victoria will need to pursue more adaptive risk reduction strategies (Clarke et al. 2023).

Given these complexities, it is inevitable that fire and risk reduction management will become more costly under future climate scenarios. This is a reality that federal, state and territory governments must face. However the return on investment of disaster risk reduction is $9.60 per dollar spent (ICA 2022). While the current risk based approach to hazard reduction in Victoria is more appropriate than a simple measure of hectares burned, more effort and investment will need to be focused on protecting life, property and critical assets. To use a military analogy, a layered approach to protection and disaster risk reduction will become increasingly necessary as conditions worsen:

- careful planning decisions on where and where not to safely establish communities and infrastructure, incorporating passive protective measures such as perimeter roads;
- stringent regulation of construction standards and siting of buildings;
- community education and upskilling, for example establishment of community fireguard and community fire unit programs;
- targeted hazard reduction programs concentrated in interface areas;
- early fire detection, response and warning systems;
- robust command, control and coordination systems between agencies, farm fire units, communities, and other stakeholders.

Recommendation

6. The Victorian Government should maintain risk-based approaches to hazard reduction, while investing more heavily in the protection of homes and infrastructure assets through a layered approach to disaster risk reduction through better planning, building standards, rapid fire detection, response and

warning systems, and improved command, control and coordination of all stakeholders involved in fire protection.

The interjurisdictional support into and out of Victoria leading into and during the fire season, including interstate and international deployments, Commonwealth support and relief efforts (ToR 10).

Overlapping fire seasons and more extreme events in future will limit shared support, requiring stronger domestic firefighting capacity

The 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires showed that existing interjurisdictional support models will be increasingly tested as fire seasons overlap and jurisdictions experience simultaneous threats (Binskin et al; 2020), reducing the ability of states and territories to assist each other at times of greatest need. Thankfully, support requested by Victoria for the January 2026 fires was not tested by competing needs in other states, territories and countries as occurred during Black Summer, and will occur increasingly due to climate change.

Fire seasons in Australia and North America now overlap by about seven weeks each year (Richardson et al. 2025). Since 1979, the overlap has grown by roughly one day per year — adding up to an extra month compared to the 1980s and 1990s. Fire seasons in eastern Australia have lengthened at twice the rate of western North America (Richardson and Ribeiro 2025). Between 1958 and 2000, major fire events in Western North America and Eastern Australia occurred during the same year just three times; since 2001, they have occurred eight times, including in consecutive years from 2017 to 2019 (Richardson et al. 2022).

Worse is projected. By 2050, seasonal overlap between North American and eastern Australian fire seasons is expected to increase by a further 4 to 28 days each year, driven by climate change (Richardson et al. 2025). At the same time, more frequent severe fire weather and extreme events across Australia will place greater pressure on states and territories, limiting their ability to support other jurisdictions. This will increasingly impact competition between other countries and Australian jurisdictions for limited resources such as large fixed and rotary winged firefighting aircraft.

Victorian inter-agency arrangements are complicated and can hinder effective command, control and coordination

Victorian emergency management arrangements have long been a source of concern to practitioners in other jurisdictions. Over the last 30 years or more there have been regular inter-agency disagreements, industrial disputation, and instances of poor operational coordination and communication between the CFA, FFMV, and FRV.

Establishment of the Fire Services Commissioner after the Black Saturday Royal Commission, then later the Emergency Management Commissioner, could be considered a workaround solution: an office that had to adjudicate the responsibilities of the different agencies, in the absence of clarity in legislation. This has added additional layers of governance and bureaucracy beyond what would be required if legislation and interfaces provided required clarity.

The most obvious operational artifact of this complicated governance model is its translation into Incident Management Teams (IMTs) charged with managing individual fires. Interstate fire teams and experienced operators routinely report deep concern and confusion about the unnecessarily large IMTs in Victoria, where it can seem like every agency has to have a presence in crowded control rooms. Decision-making can be slow, cumbersome, and ultimately subjected to vetting in the field by the agency with geographical jurisdiction. For example crews routinely reported being barred from venturing short distances outside an assigned sector, even when they saw a developing situation that needed immediate attention, because, "That's 'X' jurisdiction, not ours", or refusal of assistance from major plant at an adjoining sector because of jurisdictional control.

These complicated arrangements cause a fundamental breakdown in the operating principles of the Australasian Interservice Incident Management System (AIIMS) – that there be a single incident controller – because Victorian legislation does not provide a pathway for an individual agency to take overall control if a fire crosses private and public land tenures. This is a weakness that will become increasingly problematic as Victoria's fire seasons continue to worsen.

NSW had similar inter-service rivalry and a disputed command and control environment for many years. However following the serious fires in January 1994, the NSW Government repealed the Bushfire Act of 1949, and established the NSW Rural Fires Act in 1997. Section 44 enables the RFS Commissioner to personally, or through delegates, take control of fires that are beyond the capacity of local firefighting resources, or where conditions are conducive to the outbreak of such fires, throughout the state of NSW regardless of fire service jurisdiction. The Commissioner or appointee then has sweeping powers over all other agencies, including Police. In practice, the tenure-blind coordination system has been pressure tested many times (its genesis was following firefighter fatalities during fires in the Blue Mountains in 1968), and agencies work well together. There are clear boundaries between IMTs managing individual fires, and the strategic responsibilities of State Operations. It is a flexible, well understood and fit-for purpose system. Victoria's arrangements, in contrast, appear rule-bound, grounded in steep multi-layered hierarchy, and reliant on the goodwill and expertise of individuals rather than clear legislation. Legislation that places the Emergency Management Commissioner above all agencies is obviously a

response to this situation, but results in overly burdensome, expensive and cumbersome administrative processes that slow down operational decision-making.[8]

Possible loss of capacity in forested parts of Victoria

Forest Fire Management Victoria is a capable and vital part of Victoria's fire mitigation and fire response system. It deals with fires on public lands and brings specialist expertise including remote area firefighting, large plant and equipment including dozers, graders and tree-felling machines.

The organisation and capabilities evolved as part of Victoria's forest industry. It is relevant that Victoria's native logging industry is being wound up for sound environmental reasons.

The Victorian Government must be mindful that with the shutting down of this industry there will be a withdrawal of large amounts of vital plant, equipment, knowledge and capability that at present can be deployed to fires, and eventually, a possible reduction in capability of FFMV.

Objectively and historically, the interface between FFMV and the CFA has not been easy, with historic rivalry arguably detracting from effective coordination during fires. That having been said, the specialist FFMV capability is vital to Victorian communities. The Victorian Government should start considering what form the current FFMV capabilities will take when the native logging industry is no more, and how for example, its capabilities might be melded into the CFA. This would not be easy culturally or organisationally, however conversations need to start.

Recommendations

7. The Victorian Government should continue to work with federal, state and territory counterparts and the peak council for Fire and Emergency Services, AFAC, to ensure domestic firefighting capacity is sufficient to respond to major events occurring simultaneously in multiple jurisdictions.
8. The Victorian Government should review the complicated emergency management structures in place and consider using Section 44 of the NSW Rural Fires Act (1997) as a model to simplify overly complicated command and

[8] The Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958 has as one of its purposes 'to provide for fire safety, fire suppression and fire prevention services and emergency response services in the Fire Rescue Victoria fire district' Parliament of Victoria 1958 [2025]) The Country Fire Authority Act 1958 in contrast has no clearly defined purpose, but shares objectives with the FRV Act 1958 concerning the governance and collaboration of fire agencies. The CFA 1958 Act does provide the Chief Officer with the power and authority to direct brigades and volunteers in country areas of Victoria when a fire is likely to start, is burning or has recently been extinguished (Parliament of Victoria 1958 [2025]). However, in the event of a major fire, it is the Emergency Management Commissioner, who appoints a State Response Controller - effectively acting as an adjudicator on whether an event falls under the responsibility of one agency or another (Parliament of Victoria 2013).

control provisions that put multiple agencies in charge of different parts of a single fire.

9. Following the phase out of native logging in Victoria, the state government should consider how the critical capabilities of Forest Fire Management Victoria, including specialised plant and equipment are best retained. This could include options to merge FFMV with the CFA under a single command structure.

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

Firefighting agencies are well equipped to respond to fires near transmission lines and renewable energy projects

Climate change has intensified and increased the frequency of bushfires over recent decades. Cutting coal, oil and gas use and accelerating the shift to renewable energy is the most effective way to limit further escalation. A critical part of that transition is upgrading transmission networks so renewable energy can be fully integrated into the national electricity market.

From 2024 onwards some volunteer firefighting brigades in Victoria's central north have refused to attend blazes at properties hosting renewable energy plants or transmissions lines, claiming they present an increased fire risk (ABC 2024).

However, suggestions that firefighters cannot safely defend homes near transmission lines are not supported by evidence. Victoria's firefighting and emergency agencies have managed bushfire risks around transmission infrastructure for more than 70 years (West Vic Brolga 2026). The state has over 6,500 kilometres of transmission lines with high-voltage construction dating back to the 1950s (The West Vic Brolga 2026; VicGrid 2025).

Aerial firefighting can also still occur around transmission lines. Pilots operate with detailed knowledge of exclusion zones and GPS coordinates for critical infrastructure, and are trained for complex fireground environments. Further, transmission infrastructure can assist fire response. Requirements for cleared easements and access tracks can provide control lines to help contain fire fronts and improve ground access to otherwise hard-to-reach areas (West Vic Brolga 2026).

The suggestion that a line of transmission infrastructure can fundamentally impede and detract from firefighting operations ignores the facts: that fires move very quickly under adverse weather conditions – meaning firefighting efforts simply need to move a short distance or be delayed slightly if there is a perceived risk. Arguments to the

contrary are a fallacy and are likely being supported and energised by known players in climate misinformation, aimed at delaying necessary rollout of renewables infrastructure.

Fire and emergency services routinely manage infrastructure that presents greater inherent risks. Victoria's long reliance on coal, oil and gas has required preparedness for hazards such as liquid propane gas facilities and fuel infrastructure, where strict safety distances and grounding requirements are enforced. The Longwood Mine Fire in 2014 was particularly hazardous for firefighters and surrounding communities. Electrical infrastructure risks are embedded in standard operating procedures and managed without posing undue danger to firefighters or communities (West Vic Brolga 2026).

Misinformation about the fire risks posed by renewable projects and transmission infrastructure aims to hinder the one thing that will help to limit further escalations in bushfire severity - rapid cuts to the burning of fossil fuels and a transition to renewable energy.

Similarly, misinformation about increasing fire risks, changing fire seasons and the effectiveness of hazard reduction burning are common, but are not supported by available evidence. Such misinformation should be addressed and strongly refuted through clear, evidence-based public communication.

Recommendation

10. The Victorian Government should increase their investment in public education on how fire risks are managed around sources of renewable energy generation and transmission in the lead up to the next bushfire season.

Conclusion

Climate change has fuelled worsening fire weather for Victoria, leading to longer fire seasons, shorter windows between major fire events and more dangerous firefighting conditions. At the same time windows for hazard reduction by prescribed burning are reducing, further increasing risks. This is creating major challenges for how fire agencies prepare for and respond to increasingly frequent and intense major fire events.

Firefighting personnel and fleet are now responding to more frequent and severe conditions than has occurred historically due to climate pollution from the burning of coal, oil and gas. This is taking a greater toll on volunteer firefighters, whose numbers

have declined over the last decade and a half. Reversing this decline is essential to ensuring that regional and rural fire-prone areas are adequately supported during dangerous fire seasons. At the same time, firefighting truck fleets require sustained investment, managed age and capability profiles based on agreed total asset management plans, and boosted numbers. Fire trucks with open rear cabins are dangerous and need to be withdrawn from service as quickly as possible.

Victoria's emergency services are capable and dedicated. However, organisational and legislative arrangements are cumbersome and complicated, resulting in administrative workarounds that can be a burden on effective management of major fire events that cross organisational fire jurisdictions. This is a flaw that can only be solved by legislative change, and effective models, such as that used in NSW, should be examined closely by the Victorian Government.

Victoria's growing population and climate-fuelled bushfire risks will also mean more people, homes and communities will be in harm's way in the years to come. The Victorian Government must prioritise efforts to plan safer communities, require adherence to construction requirements of AS3959, prepare households for the bushfire risks that they face, and streamline current complicated emergency management arrangements. This must include investing more in hazard reduction around properties in at-risk areas - including on the urban fringe - and supporting householders to improve their resilience to bushfires.

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