

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Emerald – Thursday 10 October 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Bill Robinson, Captain, Kalorama and Mount Dandenong Fire Brigade; and

Klaus Brodeck, Captain, Emerald Fire Brigade.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience here in Victoria. Welcome to the reps from the CFA. Thanks for joining us.

All evidence we take today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. Welcome. I will ask members of the committee to introduce themselves.

John BERGER: Good afternoon. My name is John Berger. I am a Member for Southern Metro.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: And online.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: Gaelle Broad is walking through the door.

Wendy LOVELL: Gaelle is also a Member for Northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thanks for much for coming along today. Before we get started, I might ask you, for Hansard, to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Klaus BRODECK: I am Klaus Brodeck, Captain of the Emerald Fire Brigade.

Bill ROBINSON: Bill Robinson, Kalorama and Mount Dandenong Fire Brigade.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, gentlemen, for coming along today. We invite you to make an opening statement if you would like, and then we will get into some questions.

Klaus BRODECK: Sure. I have got something written here, which I prepared a bit earlier in regard to the terms of reference. I make this submission as an operational firefighter at the Emerald Fire Brigade, which is a role I have held for 13 years. I have been Captain, officer in charge, for the last 2½ years. Our brigade is 100 per cent volunteer, and we attend an average of 120 emergencies per year, ranging from house fires, car accidents, bushfires, hazmat jobs to also assisting other emergency services. We are ably supported by our neighbouring brigades from Clematis, Menzies Creek, Upper Beaconsfield, Cockatoo, Macclesfield and Monbulk to the north. Our views in this submission are made on the basis of what we have experienced in the brigade. I have certainly covered a considerably wide range of events, and I have made comments on each of the points below regarding the terms of reference.

For the first one, regarding risks facing Victoria's built environment and infrastructure from climate change and the impact that this will have on the people of Victoria, there are certainly many risks to Victoria's built

environment and infrastructure. In relation to our local area, we have experienced firsthand significant weather effects, and the most recent ones were obviously the storms. We had two events this year, in February and September, and another one in June 2021 which demonstrated significant winds, flash flooding, lightning and more. These caused a tremendous number of trees to come down on cars, houses, powerlines and roads and caused direct damage to properties, including to fences and houses, as well as flooding. I am sure you are not hearing this for the first time today. These events have also changed the landscape in some areas and have certainly created fear in the community about the next time this happens.

The results of these events included damaged and destroyed homes and vehicles; significantly damaged roads; landslips; landslides; power outages; no mobile phone coverage and no internet coverage, being 4G and 5G; no NBN in homes, as it is rendered useless without power; and in some locations no water after the mains burst due to tree falls. These vital services in some instances took weeks to repair, and the inability of people to call 000 after the event was not acceptable. There was no way to share information with some people on how help could be accessed and no communication, essentially, off the mountain, cutting Emerald off from the outside world, even though Berwick is only a 25-minute drive away. Access to groceries, fuel, medicine and cash was limited until power was restored several days later in the shopping precinct. This did bring up the question of why certain areas were prioritised over other areas and why it took so long to commence repairs on infrastructure in the Emerald area.

The flow-on effects for services after these weather events can be significant. For us as a brigade, we attended 32 emergency calls in February this year, and that was our busiest month in over 20 years. We attended house fires caused by the effects of not having power. We attended people trapped in cars and houses under trees. The follow-up storms also brought lightning strikes, creating fires, and we assisted ambulances, helping elderly people living at home without power after their personal monitoring alarms went off. There was an increase in that as well.

The major risk of a large-scale fire, though, is the most significant risk for this area. The Dandenongs are a known bushfire-prone area and face risks from fire every summer, regardless of the fire danger rating. Thankfully, from a fire weather perspective, we have mainly seen mild fire weather and conditions over the last four years, meaning our crews have been able to support campaign fires in other areas of the state or even interstate rather than locally. We have been very fortunate that no major bushfires have been in our area since 1997, evidenced by the number of our actual emergency calls having declined by 41 per cent since the year 2000, yet our calls have actually been constant for the last 14 years.

There is a real risk of the boy who cried wolf with regular messages going into the public every year of impending extremely hot summers like last with El Niño and high fire danger periods creating fear. What this does is dilute the message to the public, and they become apathetic when there is a real extreme fire weather day approaching. As an example, one extreme – which is the second-highest rating you can go, behind catastrophic – fire day last year for the central region actually had rainfall in Emerald and Monbulk, so its effectiveness was really thinned out.

We also see schools following their own ratings from the Department of Education rather than aligning with the CFA ratings, which are communicated across the media. Schools follow the rating of their local LGA, which may be different in the whole region. As a result there is major confusion, with one source of information wanting residents to leave early and find somewhere safe to be and on the other hand schools saying, 'We're open; please send your children to school.' Parents contact us confused, and we really cannot give them any answers.

The above points impact people in various ways but can include people being maybe without homes, unable to attend work or school or maybe at risk of loss of life, and their lives could change significantly as a result of these events. You certainly cannot discount the severe mental anguish and stress events like these put on people and communities, and they really become life-changing events due to the trauma involved.

I move to point 2: how the Victorian government is preparing for and mitigating the impacts of climate change. I am not entirely aware of how the government is preparing for and mitigating, so I cannot really comment on that space. But from a brigade perspective, I guess CFA being a government organisation, what we are doing is we are preparing for the impacts of climate change.

Firstly, as an overarching concept we continue to build a strong brigade membership, keeping members engaged and morale high to ensure attendance to call-outs is at a maximum. We have had our highest engagement for probably 20 years, which is a terrific result. We continue to train constantly in all areas of emergency management to ensure we are at the ready, whether it be bushfires, house fires, hazmat jobs and more, and this is done on a weekly basis. Whilst members also complete many training courses over and above this to increase their competencies and strengthen their ability to protect the community, primacy of life is always the number one priority, but this is closely followed by protection of key assets and infrastructure, and we train accordingly. We fundraise and we spend community donations on additional training courses for our membership. It not only has boosted their development but also will ensure we have a plentiful number of members with relevant competencies when a skill set is required. With recent wind events and the impacts trees have had, we are funding an external provider to train 10 of our members to become chainsaw operators as an example currently. In the storm events we also have pre-planned taskforces that assist the SES when major storms take place, and our surge capacity is a significant strength of the CFA. We also maintain a strong working relationship with the SES to ensure we assist each other as required.

Whilst most of the examples I have just given are reactive, our community safety team are highly engaged with the community in preparing for fire season, house fire safety and more. We have increased our team from one to three in the last year based on the workload to reach Emerald and Avonsleigh residents and businesses to prepare for these events.

Relating the barriers facing Victoria in upgrading infrastructure, this is only my assumption, but my assumption is that the major barrier to upgrade infrastructure would be cost. A perfect example of this would be the Black Saturday fires, where it was recommended to place powerlines underground, but we know that the cost of that would be significant. This would be followed by the question: do we know that the upgrades and retrofits are actually effective in being more resilient to climate change? The next question to be asked is: are there enough resources, and how do you prioritise which area is to be done first? That is a challenge for those involved.

In relation to insurance we have already seen premiums rise steeply this year, putting pressure on households to be able to afford this, leading to an increase in those who are choosing not to purchase insurance at all, which I think we have seen more and more of in recent years.

On (d), the adequacy of the current Victorian planning system as it relates to adaptation to, preparation for and mitigation of climate change impacts, once again I am not entirely sure how the government is preparing for or mitigating the impacts, but I think there is potential to share more information about what is being done with key emergency services, particularly at a local level, so the parties can align and walk on that same journey. Again from a brigade perspective, as trends and improved data really emerge in our ranks and risk profiles change we have been able to better align our firefighting vehicles, equipment and training to be better suited to the risks we now face. We purchase equipment that allows us to improve our service delivery to our community, and I must reiterate this equipment is purchased with money raised and fundraised from us or donated.

In regard to (e), what more can be done, this is an interesting one. I should put this down to, I would say, benchmarking ourselves against other countries who also suffer these events and sharing learnings. If we look currently to the US right now with hurricanes Helene and Milton and also the annual wildfires that take place every year in California, with towns disintegrated, major roads falling away, major towns entirely cut off, no emergency services, people missing and unable to communicate and no medical relief, how would we prepare for this worst-case scenario? What has been done in the US and other countries, what can we learn from them and how can we do better?

And the last one: are there any further inquiries needed. I certainly believe there is an opportunity for further investigation into other areas as the committee sees fit. That essentially is my submission.

The CHAIR: I just want to ask you about communications, and I suppose that was a good way – to drop the microphone and get into it. Thanks very much.

Bill ROBINSON: Can I make a statement before you ask about communication?

The CHAIR: Yes, of course.

Bill ROBINSON: Everything Klaus has written down I agree with entirely, about how things have changed. I was just coming from the point of the June storms in 2021, which were the storms that hit Kalorama, and Kalorama was actually closed down for over 14 hours. We could not get anybody in or out of Kalorama for 14 hours. We actually had to walk into situations – we could not get vehicles to situations affecting people. People did not have comms after about 3 hours because the telephone system went down. The people who we could phone, we would ask them to stay where they were. We had people attending the station. We had people staying overnight at the station. The next day the brigade itself fed 50 people from the local area. In the next two days we fed 200 people, and that was with assistance from the Salvation Army. At 8:30 at night the power went off, when the storm started. By 10:30 there were very little comms. That is radio comms, telephone comms and the NBN that were totally out. So some people could not phone the station or could not phone 000 to get help.

The next day, we went around and helped as many people as we could, and we were told to stop self-deploying. Self-deploying means we have got people coming to the station saying, ‘Can you please help us?’ We see ourselves as a community, this part of the fire brigade. We are there to help our community. There were people who just needed to get their cars out of the driveway so they could actually get off the hill because they were so scared.

The day after that, we said to the authorities, ‘We need to do a doorknock. We need to find out how many people are injured or trapped within our area.’ It was about 1 o’clock we had access off the hill. People still did not have access to communications to get out of their own driveways. So with the help of the captains of the local fire brigades we got enough people together to do a doorknock of the whole of Kalorama. That is 800 houses. By the end of the day we had information about who needed feeding, who needed generators, who needed fuel, who had medical concerns et cetera. And it was all done by the local volunteer brigades. The resilience – this is what this is all about, the resilience – of the local people was amazing. There were groups of people walking around with chainsaws saying, ‘We’re coming to the station; what would you like us to do? How would you like us to help?’ We had food donated. We had people coming up willing to cook. The Salvos came up, the Sikhs came up, and eventually – it took about probably three days or four days before council got involved. Then the council took it over, which was great because our members in the brigade were starting to get tired by that time, trying to look after the community.

The resources did not seem to come in quickly enough to help the community. It was all done in-house. I always thought EMV, Emergency Management Victoria, were there – that a major disaster occurred and, bang, here you go, this is the stuff you can have to help you and help keep your community safe. It did not happen, unfortunately. Hopefully we can learn from that. I know when the storms happened in February, and the most recent storms – I went across to see Klaus after the storms in February and realised the same thing had happened again. Klaus was in exactly the same situation. His brigade was locked into the area, could not get to rescues, could not help people. It is very frustrating when you are on this side and you know somebody needs a hand and you cannot actually get there with the gear and help them. That is all I have got to say. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I want to start on the comms side. It has been a feature of the evidence we have had today that communications towers go out when the power goes out. The NBN does not work, no-one knows what is going on and no-one can communicate with anyone.

Bill ROBINSON: That is correct.

The CHAIR: I would like to understand – you mentioned it a little bit; maybe you can expand – the operational impact of communication outages on CFA brigades, what you do and then how you get around those issues.

Bill ROBINSON: Going back to the June storms, because only five people got to the fire brigade and the other members were in the houses and we had a rescue which we could not get to, five members went directly to the rescue, but we could not communicate with those members because the telephone system was down by this time. So it is just the simple thing of having a telephone system so you can phone members and say what is going on in your location.

The CHAIR: This is a call-out function: ‘We need you to come in here.’

Bill ROBINSON: It was actually a call-out, so we all tried to get to the situation. Five members got to it, but they did not have any radios. They only had telephones, because they have gone directly from their –

The CHAIR: They have gone from home to the site.

Bill ROBINSON: Directly to the site, because they cannot get to the station, so we cannot then communicate. Eventually we did get through on the phone to them and find out that the lady had been rescued and what had happened, but there was no clear direction, if you know what I mean.

Wendy LOVELL: So is your pager system done through telephones now?

Bill ROBINSON: The pager system, unfortunately, because it becomes overloaded, some of the pager messages are 40 minutes behind.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: So the pager system you have got has capacity constraints, does it?

Bill ROBINSON: Yes. It gets to a capacity where it gets overloaded, and then it starts –

The CHAIR: It is just delayed.

Bill ROBINSON: It is delayed.

Klaus BRODECK: So in the storms we had here in Emerald earlier in the year, we had the red-flag warning come on my pager message at 10:30 at night for a storm that came at 3:30 in the afternoon.

Bill ROBINSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Right.

Bill ROBINSON: Then I had people phoning me saying, ‘Does this mean now?’ ‘No.’ Does everybody know what a red-flag warning is?

The CHAIR: Maybe explain it for the purposes of the committee.

Bill ROBINSON: A red-flag warning means there is some sort of danger on the fireground, so there will be an instruction: ‘There’s a fire heading towards you.’ This was an instruction of a red-flag warning to say, ‘Do not attend any jobs unless life is threatened.’ In other words, ‘Stay in your station unless life is threatened.’ So that came through 6 hours later.

The CHAIR: So you were getting out-of-date red-flag warnings and people did not know the veracity of the advice.

Bill ROBINSON: I was getting phone calls with people saying, ‘Does this mean now or is this –’

Melina BATH: Delayed.

Bill ROBINSON: It has got the time stamp on it, but a lot of people do not look at the time stamp. They go ‘Red-flag warning’ and react to that.

Klaus BRODECK: To add to that, in the storms in Emerald earlier this year in February, we had no internet, no phone and all the rest of it. I went to the SES and used their Starlink system to actually wi-fi call, and I got a hold of our BASO. I ended up getting a call from the ACFO, and I said, ‘Are our pager systems working?’ He said, ‘Yes, they are.’ At that stage I was already down the mountain to Narre Warren getting drinks and food and ice for the family. But at that stage of course everything was working because I was in Narre Warren, so we had to take their word that the pager system worked. It did in fact work for emergency call-outs, but it was something that you did not really know. I think no-one down the mountain knew that we were in that situation, without any comms.

The CHAIR: What do you think the redundancy workaround or best backup option would be for you in those kinds of circumstances?

Bill ROBINSON: You mean for the pager system?

The CHAIR: For the communications.

Bill ROBINSON: Telephone would be probably one of the most important communication systems – we were missing that. Not only for us – it is for the community, so the community can even contact the brigade and say, ‘I just need a little bit of help. It’s not necessarily an emergency call, but I need a bit of help.’ In the June storms we did not have comms on the hills for nearly two weeks. It was hit and miss on your telephone system. People were going to certain locations to be able to send out text messages to the friends off the hill, because certain towers were working off the hill. But a lot of the towers on the hill were just out. We were coming across people who were still trapped in their driveways two or three days later who had not been able to phone somebody and were incapable of walking to the bus stop. There are elderly people who cannot get out of the place, and if we had not discovered those people, who knows?

The CHAIR: Correct. That is my time. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much for your service to your community and the Victorian population overall, because it is most valued. I have many questions. ‘Stop self-deploying’ –

Bill ROBINSON: Yes, self-deploying means -

Melina BATH: Who said that to you? Or where did that come from?

Bill ROBINSON: That came from the CFA.

Melina BATH: You are the people on the ground. That would have been very difficult because you knew that your community members over there needed your help.

Bill ROBINSON: That is correct.

Melina BATH: So what needs to change?

Bill ROBINSON: Within the ICC structure or AIIMS it is supposed to be a two-way flow. People on the ground say, ‘This is what we need,’ and the people up top are supposed to say, ‘Here you are. This is what we can give you.’ In my situation, it was not a two-way flow.

Melina BATH: You were saying what you needed –

Bill ROBINSON: We were asking for things. For instance, the generators arrived in Kalorama during the storms – they arrived two weeks later.

Melina BATH: Helpful.

Bill ROBINSON: Helpful. Doorknocking, a simple thing: we needed to doorknock to find out who was injured, who was not injured and what people needed. That would not have happened if it had not been for the local brigades.

Melina BATH: So in the 2021 storms my office in Traralgon was hugely flooded – the Latrobe Valley, as in Gippsland there were storms – and the emergency management commissioner at the time did a report. There were no recommendations in that report, and he said, ‘There were gaps in the system.’ That was in 2021. What about the learnings now, in 2024, this year.

Bill ROBINSON: Nothing has changed.

Melina BATH: I feel a sense of frustration. You are very calm.

Bill ROBINSON: Oh, no. We are frustrated. We are feeling frustrated.

Melina BATH: You get funding through government et cetera, you are trying to do your work for your community. We are here, and I hope we are listening with honest ears. What should we be saying to government – a couple of recommendations to support you on the ground with your people?

Bill ROBINSON: I do not know. The people who are on the ground at the time, they are the ones who need to be listened to. But the problem with storms – fires are different to storms. If it is a storm, the SES are in charge, which is fine, but the SES were trying to run the Traralgon floods. They had floods up in Lilydale, and they were trying to run the storm in Kalorama. It did not work. They had one ICC running the three things, which did not work. Part of the SES system is you phone a line to put a job in. We had a list of jobs that we needed to attend and needed to do. Because somebody has phoned that job into the SES – it might be 50 on the list. SES do not prioritise them unless it is life, so it is 50 on the list. If there are jobs in streets A, B, C and D and there are two jobs in A, they will go A, B, C, D and then they will go back to A. You need to prioritise what is happening in that particular street.

Melina BATH: We are talking about a centralised, prioritised system happening. We are not talking about the fantastic, I am saying, volunteers on the ground who are working side by side with you.

Bill ROBINSON: On the ground, we gathered the list from the SES and we collated it. We went around and we ran the jobs by street. This is what I was saying about ‘Do not self-deploy’. We were told to stop going and doing these jobs.

Melina BATH: Stop going into your community.

Bill ROBINSON: We were helping.

Klaus BRODECK: Yes, and I think that is where the frustration comes in – where SES do not have the resources and we do. They have got 5000 volunteers, and we have got 50,000 volunteers statewide. Within, say, Emerald’s SES response area, I think there are 12 different CFA brigades, who all have similar skill sets with chainsaws, vehicles and four-wheel drive vehicles and who can do the same sorts of things. So essentially we can assist.

Melina BATH: So there needs to be a more flexible arrangement when these frequent and more often events are occurring so there can somehow be – I am asking a question – more legs on the ground from CFA, taking a greater role, or more flexibility. What would that look like?

Bill ROBINSON: You should start passing off. It is like the surge capacity thing. You should start passing off jobs when you get to your limit. Emerald SES has got two trucks?

Klaus BRODECK: Two trucks, two utes.

Bill ROBINSON: Two trucks, two utes. On the night of the storm in June we had 44 calls. We average 50 calls in a year. We had 44 rescue calls that we went to. So if we had 44 rescue calls, that means there would have been a whole list of other calls in amongst that as well. The SES were trying to chase all these other calls, but they could not get to them. They could not even get into Kalorama. It was probably the same in Emerald; they could not actually get into Emerald.

Klaus BRODECK: And that was part of the problem. All the rescue vehicles, with the jaws of life and the rest of it, were trying to get up the mountain but were all blocked by trees on the road. Emerald SES got blocked; the Monbulk rescue got blocked; then they called Lilydale rescue, who were busy; then they just kept paging rescue trucks. The next one was Nar Nar Goon – it got paged to go to Mount Dandenong – and the same issue: it was still facing trees. It was the same sort of –

Bill ROBINSON: They could not actually get there.

Klaus BRODECK: It was almost like they might have had to be parked until crews could actually get through all the trees down on roads and things like that. Time becomes of the essence.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your appearance today. I was just reflecting about the communications, even from this morning. I watched the news last night. The weather report was it was going to be fairly reasonable. I got up this morning and the sun came up and I heard a weather warning about strong winds. I just wonder about the role of the media and how it can assist in making sure there is a level of accuracy and bypass what you say about complacency.

Bill ROBINSON: Yes, that is the hard one.

John BERGER: It is something the recommendations of this committee might be able to put forward in terms of the message getting out, not necessarily just by the app. A lot of people do listen to the radio.

Bill ROBINSON: Yes. I think what Klaus said before about complacency of people, it is really hard to get past that, isn't it?

Klaus BRODECK: It is. The talk last year was of El Niño and one of the hottest fire seasons on record.

Bill ROBINSON: That is right.

Klaus BRODECK: We went really hard on our comms safety program. We never reached so many people and businesses in our lives. Then there was just –

Wendy LOVELL: It was a non-event.

Klaus BRODECK: nothing. So it was 'Okay. Well, this year –'

Bill ROBINSON: Yes. As you said, they had fires over in Ballarat and it was raining up here on the hill, but we still had the same fire ban. We had a total fire ban up here and it was raining, and it was scorching over the other side of the hill.

John BERGER: So do you think an education piece should be –

Bill ROBINSON: It needs to be explained. When they get up the map and say, 'Oh, there's a total fire ban here,' they need to explain. There needs to be more detail, doesn't there, about the whole of the state. The whole of the state is the whole of the state; it is not the same, and you know that. We know that if we drive to Mildura now, we will be sitting in 25 degrees of heat at the moment.

Klaus BRODECK: And I think the actual fire districts – 'central' is so broad. It starts at, say, Bacchus Marsh and goes across to almost Gippsland. It can be 40 degrees in Bacchus Marsh but 25 there, and that all sits under 'central', which all gets 'extreme', whereas that side of town is only really just 'very high'.

Bill ROBINSON: And as you said, the media report is just 'central' – 'Danger: central' – when we are not all in danger at the time.

John BERGER: No, that is right. But I looked at the piece this morning, and it said that the wind weather warning was for a particular area. I am not in the car now. I am just wondering whether that warning continued on and that added to the complacency.

Bill ROBINSON: I heard the first one and I did not hear the rest of it.

John BERGER: I just wonder: if you do not continue to hear it, then what is your mindset?

Klaus BRODECK: It is hard, because in years gone by that just used to be the weather.

John BERGER: That is right.

Klaus BRODECK: And now we get these so frequently. There is probably not a week or two weeks without some sort of warning coming through on something or other, so it is a difficult one to actually ascertain what is going to be something that actually really has an impact on the community and ones that are just 'a bit windy' or 'heavy rain'. It is difficult to put your finger on it.

Bill ROBINSON: And it depends, because there is the Kalorama side of the hill and the Emerald side of the hill, and when I watched the storms come through I was going, ‘Emerald is in trouble this time.’ Although the storm, it still said, was going to hit the hills, you could tell by that slight angle in the wind direction. You knew it was either going to be the Emerald or going to be the Kalorama side. That is detail, isn’t it?

Klaus BRODECK: Absolutely. And that day in February of the storms in Emerald was a high fire weather day; I think it was extreme. We had members standing at the station expecting fire danger, and then in the afternoon at 3 o’clock we got paged to respond to a grass and scrub fire, as part of a strike team, and to go to Gladysdale – Three Bridges, out towards Warburton. That time was just when the storm hit and the rainfall came and all the rest of it came, and our truck could not get out of Emerald. It was struck by trees, so we had to cancel going to that strike team and actually focus on all the rescues, because we had pagers going off and all that –

Bill ROBINSON: Do we realise how lucky we were in February with the storms and bushfire? We had bushfires in the state in February, and we were so lucky that that fire that you did not get to did not actually take off. If that fire had taken off on that day with the winds, we would have been in big trouble. As he said, there were a lot of people spending time doing rescues and stuff.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. I just want to understand: we talk a lot about a community-led response and that sort of thing, but you are talking about not being able to access the station with trees down. Can you talk a bit about how roads get reopened? What capacity have you got? Whose role is it?

Bill ROBINSON: Up here it is a big problem. The trees up here average between 500 millimetres to about 1 to 2 metres in diameter. We cannot cut that stuff. You have got to get either Parks Victoria – and Parks Victoria came into Kalorama and they cut trees that size; they did a lot of work – or you get VicRoads in. But you need machinery –

Melina BATH: Or timber harvesters.

Bill ROBINSON: You need grabbers and big chainsaws to cut them. It is not something that the fire brigade or the SES can do.

Gaelle BROAD: I have got friends that live here, and they have still got massive trees down in the backyard because they are just too big.

Bill ROBINSON: Just too big to cut up, yes.

Gaelle BROAD: How long did it take Parks Victoria to come and assist?

Bill ROBINSON: It was strange, because in June Parks Victoria actually had a strike team on stand-by. CFA did not have a strike team on stand-by in June, but for some reason Parks Victoria had this heads-up of a strike team, and the strike team came in and started cutting open the road. It took them from 8 o’clock in the morning to 1 o’clock that day to get the road open, and when I say ‘get the road open’, it was just wide enough to get a car through.

Gaelle BROAD: So the reality is community has an important role, but you do rely on bigger services and the state-led response to get you going, to enable you to do your job.

Bill ROBINSON: You do, yes.

Klaus BRODECK: But if you notice the trees are not that big, the actual ones – still trees down – it is probably community led. People just get out with their chainsaws and cut them up.

Bill ROBINSON: Like the ones in front of the driveways and stuff like that.

Klaus BRODECK: Yes. In the February storms, from my house I could not get to the station, so all avenues were blocked and back roads were blocked. Residents got out with their chainsaws and were cutting up to make the road usable again, but then there were powerlines down. Luckily we had all the trucks filled with all the members, so that was terrific. Actually from their side of town they could get to the station, which was pleasing, but for me I could not get there, so I walked up to the station.

Bill ROBINSON: It is frustrating, isn't it?

Klaus BRODECK: Yes, absolutely. Pagers were going off and the radio was not working – yes, challenging.

Gaelle BROAD: This inquiry is a lot about infrastructure and the built environment. Is there anything preventing you, or are there any needs that you have for the CFA? You talked about doing your own fundraising, and I have heard that from family members too, on own fundraising for trucks. We have a fire services levy in Victoria, which has increased, but my understanding is that money is not all going to –

Bill ROBINSON: Most of it goes to FRV.

Gaelle BROAD: To FRV, yes.

Bill ROBINSON: Not CFA.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, and I think questions have been asked about it.

Bill ROBINSON: There is an imbalance on how much money goes each way.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. What are your needs? I am hearing a lot about the merry-go-round of trucks that is happening around the state: 30-year-old trucks being replaced with 30-year-old trucks elsewhere. What has been your experience?

Klaus BRODECK: Look, the age of trucks is something that is really key. Our trucks at the moment: we have got a 26-year-old pumper, a 25-year-old tanker, a brigade-owned vehicle that is 16 and we just purchased ourselves a new Ford Ranger ute, which is four months old. The pumper is being replaced next year by the CFA, which is great. Then for the salvage brigade – we have now won a VESEP grant through government, and that will be replaced in the next three, four or five years, however long it takes to build it. But our tank is 25 years old. It is still reliable, but it is not state of the art. It does not have the crew protection as well. That is an ongoing thing across the board, I guess dispersing of which brigades get new vehicles and how and why and how that is determined. Sometimes you may see a brigade with –

Bill ROBINSON: It is all up in the air, isn't it?

Klaus BRODECK: It is. It feels like there is no rhyme or reason to it. So you might have a brigade with 10 calls a year and they get a brand new truck for half a million dollars, but a brigade that does 200 calls a year is still sitting on a 20-year-old truck. How that is worked out is a bit of a mystery to the brigades themselves. That is certainly a need, I think, to have more modern appliances, but the rest of it is just ongoing equipment, and training is probably the key thing as well.

Gaelle BROAD: Would you say a recommendation from this inquiry could be infrastructure being prioritised with areas that perhaps have a larger number of call-outs or are more vulnerable to these events?

Klaus BRODECK: Absolutely.

Bill ROBINSON: It is not just the amount of call-outs; it is also the location of the brigade. We do not get many call-outs, but we are probably in one of the worst locations, as in the easiest to be cut off from the rest of Melbourne. Going back to the trucks, what happened was years ago it used to be 10 years and they would replace your truck. Then it went to 15 years, and then it went to 20 years. Now it is what they call 'fit for service' – fit for service for what the CFA believe or fit for service for what we believe. Klaus is saying that he has got a truck that has not got a –

Klaus BRODECK: Crew cab.

Bill ROBINSON: We have got a truck that has not got a crew cab. The idea was, we were told I think it was 15 years ago: ‘We’re going to replace your trucks with crew cabs so it’s safer for your members.’

Melina BATH: Because otherwise you are in fire danger if you are going into a bushfire.

Bill ROBINSON: Yes, so you are sitting on the back of the truck.

Klaus BRODECK: It opens like a box top.

Melina BATH: Outdoor.

Bill ROBINSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. Klaus, earlier in your opening statement you mentioned that you have got the highest engagement in 20 years. You were referring to new volunteers, weren’t you?

Klaus BRODECK: Membership engagement, yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes. In the past we have done a flood report and an investigation and the scream out from the CFA was that they were struggling to find volunteers. What is your secret? Because I really would like to know.

Klaus BRODECK: A really good captain. That is what it is.

Wendy LOVELL: I bet that is part of it.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: So what are you doing? Because we need to see more volunteers.

Klaus BRODECK: It is a whole range of things. I have been on brigade for 13 years. I have been the recruitment officer for the last 10 and studied different campaigns and been more present in the community. We actually made it look enjoyable, and you actually hit the people who take pride in their community. Our brigade has got 40 operational members and an average age of 40 years old as well, which is quite young in the scheme of things. We have got people coming through who are quite young, 16- and 17-year-olds as well, and we focus on training a lot. We pay for additional training. We have social events. We train hard and we actually look forward to – this sounds a bit bad – some calls to actually utilise that experience, which is really pleasing. Because we are at that level of 120 calls a year, it is not too little, it is not too much. It is hard work for us, but it is a good number to keep people engaged. We have got really strong turnout numbers per call, and all this flows together as well.

We have got great relationships with our neighbouring brigades and emergency services. Even Bill – it is just what the CFA brings as well. In the storm in February this year we had members without power, and Bill just rang me out of the blue – I had not met him – and said, ‘Do you want five generators?’ I said, ‘Absolutely.’ That is the sort of camaraderie it builds, but I think it just takes a little bit of time to show people what it actually can deliver as well.

From my side of things, just back to why I joined up, I was work, home, work, home, work, home, and it just added something else to meet new people. It has been a great bunch of people. So I think you put all of those ingredients together into the pot and you make it a good place to come and work at essentially – that is what works, and that is what has worked for us as well.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. I love your energy. Thank you. Bill, have you had any success in harvesting more volunteers?

Bill ROBINSON: Yes. It has been really good the last probably two years. We have been getting a lot of younger members in, which is good. We have got probably four or five 19- to 20-year-olds, which is really, really good. It is interesting, because they have not grown up in the area; they have moved into the area. It is interesting that years ago it was always people who had lived in the area for a long time and grown up in the area, and now we have got younger people moving to the area who want to join and want to help. That is good.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Have you used social media or anything to target that younger generation, or is it just word of mouth?

Bill ROBINSON: We do the whole lot – social media, yes.

Klaus BRODECK: I think we are just short of 6000 followers on Facebook, so we have got a pretty good membership.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay, so you have got a Facebook page happening.

Klaus BRODECK: Yes. At the moment we are at the level we want to be. We are not looking actively for new people at the moment. If some people come in, that is great.

Bill ROBINSON: You vet them, don't you?

Klaus BRODECK: We vet them, yes.

Bill ROBINSON: You vet people.

Klaus BRODECK: Yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: You are more than welcome to pop up north and just garner more volunteers.

Klaus BRODECK: Recruiting for captains?

Bill ROBINSON: The hardest part is the retention, because when you get the younger members in what usually happens is they either get another job or they move interstate. The Upper Ferntree Gully captain did a survey, and it used to be something like between 10 and 15 years for the average member, and now it is two to three years for the average member. So the retention is the hard part.

Wendy LOVELL: But there is nothing like a disaster in your community for actually generating interest in becoming part of the brigade, yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: All right. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Good afternoon. I am from the other end of the state, but I have been a volunteer firefighter before – not currently of course. Thanks for the service that you provide to your community. I have got two questions really. Your group: so the brigades are made up of groups, aren't they?

Bill ROBINSON: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: What is the name of your group?

Klaus BRODECK: Dandenong Ranges group.

Jacinta ERMACORA: What brigades are in that group?

Klaus BRODECK: There are 15 of them. Do you want me to name them all?

Jacinta ERMACORA: Fifteen, all right. Okay, you do not need to. I am not testing you.

Bill ROBINSON: That is all right. Starting over this side, we have got Kalorama –

Jacinta ERMACORA: No, that is all right.

Bill ROBINSON: Olinda, Monbulk.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. So there are 15 brigades in your group. Do you all have similar geography – I have been listening to you today – with the landscape?

Bill ROBINSON: It is sort of similar, but my area is different to the Emerald area. We have got a lot more mountain ash over our side.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Oh, yes.

Klaus BRODECK: We all share bush. But in saying that, there are some towns – if you look at, say, the inner group, Upwey, Belgrave and Emerald are considered class 4 brigades, and we are more urbanised. We have a population of 6000-plus people, 2200 homes, whereas some of the other towns do not have that, whilst we still have the bushfire and grassfire risk as well.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Cool. Do you have any integrated stations in your area, in your group?

Klaus BRODECK: No.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. So they are all CFA?

Klaus BRODECK: Yes

Jacinta ERMACORA: And all 15 brigades, are they all 100 per cent volunteer brigades?

Klaus BRODECK: Yes. Every CFA brigade is 100 per cent volunteer.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, I understand that. With the leadership of the group, are they all volunteers too?

Bill ROBINSON: Yes. Our group has got four officers in it. Stuart Parker is the leader of the group, and Stuart Parker is the one that organises the summertime strike teams et cetera and gets the bus prepared for strike teams during summertime. Some he will send out a list and say, 'On this strike team, Kalorama, Emerald et cetera – these five trucks are on this strike team,' and get us all prepared for summertime.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, so the group leadership organises the stand-by strike teams for any emergency, in fact for the summer?

Bill ROBINSON: For the summer and for the task force, which is the chainsaw task force which runs over the wintertime.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Awesome. Just one last little question – I know it is getting towards the end of the day for the committee. There was mention of a fire call that you had that you believe was caused by no power being connected or a disconnection. Did I mishear that?

Klaus BRODECK: I was saying that in the aftermath of the storms where houses had no power they hook up the generators and some have candles for light and heat and things like that. One of those was a cause of a house fire. If that was not there, there would very likely have been no house fire.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. That makes sense. As I started, thanks for the work that you do and thanks for all the thinking that you are doing for us around emergency response in the unique dynamic that is your community. You are the experts and you have had the experiences, so that will help us.

Klaus BRODECK: Thank you.

Bill ROBINSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks, guys. Yes, thank you for all the work you do for the communities. It is very much appreciated. I am interested in the disconnect with the ICC. This is something that we heard very clearly during the floods in Shepparton. When the ICC was embedded in that municipality, it worked really well. We had the district 22 officers. In fact the ICC is the back of the district 22 headquarters, and at times we had incident controllers from the CFA and well as incident controllers from SES. And local government were in there for local roads management and everything, all in that one incident control centre. But then we heard from other areas like the Mitchell shire, which was being managed out of Shepparton, that their experience was not very good. We also heard from Echuca, which was being managed out of Bendigo, that their experience was

really poor as well, with the communications from the ICC. We used to have a model that was ICC at a more regional level and then MCC in each local government area. They went away from that a few years ago. Do you think we should go back to more that type of model so that there is some more localised management?

Bill ROBINSON: Yes, they are what we called LCFs, aren't they?

Klaus BRODECK: Yes, we have got a few different LCs. We have got the district control centre, we have got the regional control centre, the incident control centre –

Wendy LOVELL: MECC – municipal emergency control centre, the MECC.

Klaus BRODECK: and then you have also got the LCFs, which we are one of, which has to be manned by volunteers. That rarely ever gets used. Generally our local incident control centre here is Ferntree Gully or Dandenong, so it is still fairly in proximity. It is not too far away if need be.

Bill ROBINSON: When you say it is in Dandenong, the problem is that you have got people in the ICC who have not got a clue about the territory that you are in. When it is a local ICC, they have got a better idea of what your situation is and what they are looking at. Although they are looking at maps, they have a mindset of what works around that area. I worked in the ICC up in Orbost. There were a lot of locals in the ICC in Orbost, and it was really good because they could give you on-the-ground information and tell you how things work around the local area. Whereas when you have got an ICC that is miles away, it just does not seem to work.

Wendy LOVELL: So we either need to get smaller areas under the ICC or we need to re-implement that –

Bill ROBINSON: Or get back to the local ones. Emerald is local. We had one in Sassafras, which was shut down recently, and it was really good because Sassafras had their local system and they –

Wendy LOVELL: The way I have experienced it for fires especially was they were MECCs – municipal emergency control centres, ICCs and MECCs – the ICC might have been in Benalla, but there was a MECC in Mansfield.

Bill ROBINSON: Yes, so closer. So one that would control closer to the situation.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes.

Bill ROBINSON: I think we do need to go back to those. Like anything, anything that becomes too big loses things.

Wendy LOVELL: Right. Terrific. Then my other question was going to be about vehicles and equipment and the support that you get to do the work that you do. Gaelle, or was it Melina – one of them – asked a bit about that. Can you just fill us in a little bit more? I mean, we know you have got trucks that you are asking volunteers to drive that are older than the volunteers who are driving them. That was said by your deputy chief at the inquiry we had into fire services many years ago. What other equipment and support do your brigades need in order to provide these services?

Bill ROBINSON: Training.

Wendy LOVELL: Training?

Bill ROBINSON: Training. A lot of the training that we used to do used to be in house and used to be done through the group, and a lot of that was taken away from us. It is really hard to get members on training. As you know, we live in the hills. The basics that I look at are: four-wheel driving, all members if they drive a vehicle, should have a four-wheel drive ticket; and they should have a chainsaw to be able to operate in this area. As Klaus said, we have done the same thing. We have put one lot of people through that paid with money that we have raised from the local community to do chainsaw, and we are putting another 10 people through shortly for the same reason. We cannot get enough people on courses just to do what we call the basics – four-wheel driving and chainsaw is what they need. Even with first aid courses – we have trouble trying to get people on first aid courses.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. So when you say it was taken away from you, were they at one stage delivered through the brigade and now they are delivered through the district or something like that?

Bill ROBINSON: No. Group used to run a lot of the training sessions and then everything changed because of TAE. But some of the stuff that we do, which is still accredited, could be still run by group. We are not allowed to run a lot of the stuff. It actually has to be run by, and this is where it falls back to – there was a cry last Sunday because we had a captain's breakfast. There were 15 captains from our district and the cry was, 'Give the CFA back to the CFA.' At the moment we are being run by FRV, and FRV are running our training courses. We cannot have a training course unless an FRV member is running it. It is not working. We are not getting enough training courses because there are not enough FRV people to run the courses.

Wendy LOVELL: And the disconnect between the chief and the deputy chiefs and then the actual brigades because of middle management being seconded back by FRV. That was Liberal Party policy at the last election or coalition policy –

The CHAIR: We may be straying slightly beyond the terms of reference of the inquiry in talking about Liberal Party policy at the last election. I am sure you can take it to the next one too. Bill, Klaus, thank you so much for coming along this afternoon. We really appreciate it. You will receive a copy of the transcript shortly to review. The committee will take a short break.

Witnesses withdrew.