

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 18 October 2023

#### MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

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#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

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Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne



**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I declare open this online open mic session for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee.

This open mic session is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October 2022 flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government.

Community engagement has been a major focus of this inquiry, and I would like to thank everyone who has participated so far. We have had people contributing during our open mic sessions in Rochester, during our seven days of hearings so far, at site visits and workshops and on our social media channels. We have a specially created playlist on our YouTube channel with coverage of the various activities we have undertaken. These videos feature individuals who have shared their experience with us, and they have reached tens of thousands of people. We are so very grateful for everybody's contribution, including everyone who will be participating with us tonight. Thank you.

This is the product warning: each of our speakers this evening is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and 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 this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by that privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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

I should introduce myself. I am David Ettershank. I am chairing tonight. I am the Deputy Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee, and I am a Member for the Western Metropolitan Region. I will now invite my colleagues to introduce themselves. Perhaps, Melina, you could kick off, please.

**Melina BATH:** Hello. Good evening. Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region. Thank you for being here tonight.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region. Thank you, everyone, for participating.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Evening, everyone. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Hello. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. That is fantastic. Can I just say: we have been overwhelmed with interest in this online open mic. My apologies for those who we could not accommodate tonight. We are running for 2 hours. We will be hearing from participants in groups of about three, and we ask that presentations are kept strictly to 4 minutes to ensure that we have enough time to hear from everyone. My colleagues and I will not be interrupting anyone or asking questions, because this is absolutely an opportunity for you to tell us your story and to get it onto the public record. Please keep your microphone muted unless you are actually speaking. For the Hansard record, can you please state your name before you begin. I hope that is all nice and clear. With that, we will get started. Could I start off by welcoming Selin, if she would be so kind as to kick us off. Thank you.

**Selin LANZAFAME:** Absolutely. My name is Selin Lanzafame. Committee, I come to you today from what could not be further from the Australian dream: from my home, which was inundated by a river, which had at its side 680 homes, 1500 residents – retirees, refugees – and a racetrack. The Maribyrnong flood

rampaged through like a heartless marauder, caring not for the destruction it left in its wake, breaking the hearts and spirits of an entire community.

I come to you today as the wife of a man who is still processing intergenerational flood trauma as our family home, within which we are raising the fourth generation, has been devastatingly flooded a third time. My husband Lee wrote submission 19, a 74-page financial analysis of the impact of flooding in Maribyrnong. I encourage you, please, to read it.

I come to you today as the mother of a child clutched from his sleep to evacuate with barely an hour's notice before our home was inundated with filthy silt and sewer contamination, losing access to his beloved garden and toys.

I come to you as a daughter who had to find the strength to cart a parent ill with stage 3 cancer to doctors' appointments and treatments in the midst of cleaning up a home we were not sure we could save; and as an educated professional employee and woman who has spent the last 12 months balancing motherhood, work and the disruptive and costly reconstruction of a home purchased with a lifetime of savings, staring into an unknown future, where the choices made by preceding authorities mean my husband and I will be forced to face another flood, leaving a worthless asset for our son.

Because the countdown to the next flood started last October. So I will not be lectured about the validity or accuracy of my experience by a group of people who appear to be incentivised to maintain the status quo, embodied in Tim Wiebusch and Nerina Di Lorenzo, who had the gall to appear in front of you last week and tell you that their processes were and are good enough, and that their model is accurate enough. They fabricate a reality for themselves which is so far removed from the actual situation whilst the sounds of drills, hammers and hosing of silt continues in Maribyrnong.

These people have woken up after a track record of inaction and inaccuracies and want to be taken seriously, yet I heard no remorse, no regret and, most importantly, no appetite for change. They delay the imperative for mitigation, hoping for another disaster to draw the media's attention, buying themselves another six months of salary and time to search for new jobs.

I paraphrase John Woodland from last Wednesday's hearing. He said: 'the public misunderstood the warning, we maintained a major flood warning', he said.

Dear committee, I implore you:

1500 residents misunderstood? The SES? The local police? Three councils and a major racecourse all misunderstood, and everyone slept well on 13 October, only to wake up waist-deep in water? This is textbook victim blaming, but there are too many victims here to sit idle, because what they have said is inaccurate and disheartening to a community still grieving. Yet no-one is able to tell me, 12 months on, a definitive number of impacted properties and people.

- Maribyrnong council stated 512 homes.
- Melbourne Water published 500 homes in the Pagone report and noted 600 verbally in their parliamentary hearing,
- And the media recently reported 680 homes in Maribyrnong.

To us, we are hiding in plain sight, not a doorknock nor a call.

With our possessions strewn on nature strips for looters to pillage and with home rebuild costs only fractionally covered by insurance companies.

Maribyrnong has been a settled residential area for over 100 years.

Should we sell our homes, only to pass the burden of this terror onto another unsuspecting young person with the glimmer of home-ownership joy in their eyes, only to tear their lives apart with the next flood? No. This is an opportunity to do better and to be better.

The events of 14 October cannot be repeated, or the outcomes will stain the hands of every person who has held a position of responsibility and decision-making authority since the event.

How can we be confident that anything will be done today, when Melbourne Water naively used the phrases 'retarding basin' and 'dam' interchangeably at a parliamentary inquiry?

Arundel retarding basin is not a dam, and it should never be discussed as such, because the challenges and costs that plague a dam take it off the table before it is even considered. And how can you accurately size the cost of this flood without a doorknock, precluding an accurate cost-benefit analysis? Please review submission 19, page 54, for this.

In the midst of all of this –

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I am sorry, but we are going to have to –

**Selin LANZAFAME:** I respect that. That is fine.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We need to finish up. Can I thank you very much. That was really from the heart, and we appreciate that.

**Selin LANZAFAME:** We stand to lose everything, and we really appreciate the effort you are putting in.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Geoff, could I ask you if you would care to kick off for us? That would be appreciated. Thank you.

**Geoff KYVAL:** G'day, all. My name is Geoff Kyval. I am a beef farmer on Whanregarwen Road between Alexandra and Molesworth. I live in the danger zone, as water released from Eildon hits my farm within 8 hours. I own 610 acres, 173 acres of which was totally flooded, killing 10 cows and leaving me to rescue stranded cows by boat as they were landlocked, which took three days on the property and a further five days helping neighbours. In total, over 1000 head of cattle and 36 sheep had to be rescued.

Months before the 14 October floods, many phone calls were made to Goulburn–Murray Water by locals to release water to mitigate flooding concerns. Nothing was done or considered to be taken to a higher level to assist in flood mitigation – totally ignored.

On 13 October, Goulburn–Murray Water's Eildon phone hotline, which was our only method of calling, basically stated that they were only going to let out 22,000 megalitres the night before the flood. So my cattle were moved to higher ground to suit their advice on my river flats.

On 14 October, 38,000 megalitres was released at night with no notice, no alerts and no calls. Not even the SES knew, or police. My phone rings at 4 in the morning, with a neighbour saying, 'We're fully flooded.' It is dark. I do not believe there was a moon that morning, so we have no visual. My cows were now stranded and swimming in fast-flowing floodwater. At very first light we were prepped with boats to rescue cattle in very dangerous conditions. We were left flooded at 38,000 meg, plus tributary inflows, for 30 days, agisting cattle on other people's properties. Many cattle were injured and traumatised, making them dangerous to handle.

After the 14th I made many calls to Harriet Shing. I left messages each time and requests to return the phone calls, all rejected. I researched Jesse Rose, from Harriet Shing's office, and I have had many conversations now to date. The purpose of these calls was to inform them of the issues we were facing and recommendations to prevent all of the problems we are currently suffering from. Flexibility in the legislation requirements needs to be exercised now. Again no recommendations were acted on. Eildon is still too high, with lack of airspace, an agenda to meet a 100 per cent fill curve by 1 October and no intent to flood mitigate, which is a breach of their policy.

I met with Georgia and Alieta from Harriet Shing's office in September 2023 at the Nicholson Street offices to put forward my agenda and recommendations moving forward. This meeting went on for an hour and three-quarters with the presence of my local member, Cindy McLeish. I warned them we will be flooded again this year. You have lost volumetric controls of managing Eildon and cannot release water in time to manage large inflows when the dam is so full. It is just [Zoom dropout].

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I think we lost your sound there for a little while, mate. I am going to need you to finish off though, I am afraid, if you could wrap it up.

**Geoff KYVAL:** Where did you hear to?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** You had been talking about Cindy McLeish, and I think we lost you for about 30 seconds, 45 seconds.

**Geoff KYVAL:** I warned them that we would be flooded again. This has just destroyed my meeting now with you guys.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Why don't you give us your punchline, Geoff? I mean, what was the conclusion you wanted to really leave us with?

**Geoff KYVAL:** Complete inaction through many meetings, consultations and private and public visits. A lack of respect, duty of care. No compassion or empathy. Reluctance to come out to our farms and see what is going on and measure the damage. Knowing that the capabilities of Lake Eildon and withholding the water and the outflows are now not manageable, how you used to run the whole process – it has to be re-engineered.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** That is great. Thank you, Geoff. That is really clear, and we appreciate your time this evening.

**Geoff KYVAL:** I am happy to talk to you guys again if you want any more information.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, mate. I appreciate that. That is terrific. The next speaker we have is Tony Goddard. Okay, we are going to do a little switch and I will welcome Vula Kerr. Vula, you have 4 minutes. I will give notice when you have 1 minute left. How does that sound?

**Vula KERR:** That is great.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Please, share your thoughts with us.

**Vula KERR:** Okay. Good evening. My name is Vula Kerr, and I am a resident at Rivervue Retirement Village in Avondale Heights. I am here tonight to recognise the support given to myself by residents, friends and family as well as the staff and management of Tigcorp and Rivervue. On 14 October 2022, in a changing environment that was chaotic, we all banded together to help each other in what was a frightening and extremely stressful situation. After receiving no warning for the flood, most of us gathered in the community centre, watching while water raged through our homes. By mid-afternoon, with the water receding, Tigcorp and Rivervue staff had contractors on site beginning to clean up. This continued in the weeks following. They also arranged short-term hotel accommodation for those who required it, and with other residents who were not in the flood, they supplied food and drinks throughout the days as well.

Going forward, all of the displaced residents had our monthly fees suspended for the duration of the time we were absent from our homes. In my case that was nine months. Additionally, group counselling sessions as well as flood forums were on offer to those who wished to attend them. Staff from Rivervue and other agencies kept in contact to check on our welfare on an ongoing basis and provide support wherever they could. While \$5 million flood insurance cover – and I just want to stress that \$5 million was only flood insurance cover – was nowhere near enough to repair 47 villas, the community centre, wetlands and the bowling green, they only guaranteed and delivered an approximately \$2 million shortfall that was required to see all the works completed and all of us returned to our villas, unlike Maribyrnong residents and people in Rochester and Echuca who are still waiting for their homes to be repaired.

While I understand the frustration, anxiety and anger felt by some people, my focus is on moving forward, ensuring the best levels of structural mitigation are installed so that if future flooding is to occur, the devastation and damage will be minimal. I sincerely hope valuable lessons have been learned and this parliamentary inquiry concentrates on the future and makes strong recommendations that reflect this. There may have been errors made by Melbourne Water that contributed to the damage incurred by the flood, but that will be for others to determine. For me, my goal is to concentrate on living in a villa I love in my village surrounded by friends and residents who share my values. I do not pretend to be an expert in determining what constitutes LSIOs, floor levels, models and the like. I do know that on 14 October 2022 I watched while my home was inundated by blackwater, and I pray I never see it again.

With regard to insurance, I fortunately was fully covered for my contents and accommodation and have been able to obtain new contents insurance at a reasonable cost and hope this continues in the future, which will be

helped by all measures of structural mitigation being put into place. I want to thank Tigcorp management, Rivervue management and staff, Moonee Valley council and all the other agencies who gave and are still giving support both for our mental health and in some cases financial assistance. Twelve months on I am still receiving contact by phone or mail with people reaching out. We cannot change the weather. I do not wish to leave my home of the past six years, and I hope to spend my remaining years in the home I shared with my late husband. So let me be clear, if we can ensure all structural mitigation measures recommended, whether it is levees, walls, drainage or dams, are used to reduce the risk of future flooding causing such massive damage from happening again, let us hope we can do that and not only at Rivervue either. So thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Vula. That was fantastic. Really appreciate you sharing that with the committee.

**Vula KERR:** That is okay. Just a different viewpoint.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Our thanks to the residents at Rivervue. It was really good to share some time with them, for the committee, when we went out there the other day, so thank you.

**Vula KERR:** Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** All right. Tony Goddard. Up to you, mate. Four minutes, and I will go like this when you have got 1 minute left. How is that?

**Tony GODDARD:** Thanks, David. Can I just double-check that you can hear me.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes. Fantastic.

**Tony GODDARD:** Thanks for the opportunity to address the inquiry. My name is Tony Goddard, and I am the Secretary of Rivervue residents committee. I will be reading from a prepared statement.

Rivervue village is an independent living set-up located immediately adjacent to and upstream from the Canning Street bridge in Avondale Heights. At our village 47 homes were flooded, with residents needing to find and fund alternate housing for seven months while a rebuild took place. That rebuild, which was quickly organised, managed and is now complete, saw the strip-out and replacement of walls, cabinetry, carpet, floorboards, tiles, and fittings. The residents committee has previously presented thoughts on the flood and its impacts to Mr Pagone's independent review panel. The views we gave both then and now came from flood-affected residents who volunteered their input. We do not pretend that these views singly represent every one of our residents. This is because the circumstances of our flood-affected residents vary differently in terms of the extent of flooding, the insurance they did or did not have and the personal anxiety and trauma that they suffered.

In our submission to the independent review panel, we asked questions and raised concerns regarding the Rivervue village planning and approval process. This included the probity of both the engineering works undertaken and the Melbourne Water decision to remove a longstanding land subject to inundation overlay requirement. The LSIO removal was done despite a long history of flooding and local residents' views that shifting the flood inundation boundary nearest the river would be a wrong decision. The shift of that boundary and the subsequent removal of the LSIO requirement, seemingly done without testing Melbourne Water's modelling against historical flood data, opened the door for the building owner Tigcorp to proceed with their village design. The result was that a number of homes were constructed below the floor-level height, the AHD, that would have been required if the land had remained classified as subject to inundation.

Of course when the flood hit, the extent of the flood exactly matched where the original LSIO said it would flow – amazing how history does repeat, and questionable how much of the engineering and retainment basins held the water back. Whether Melbourne Water and subsequently many Rivervue residents were duped by the flawed modelling or the genuineness of the newly gazetted flood boundary is open to conjecture. This is what we want the parliamentary inquiry to get behind. The question of compensation needs consideration if improper arguments or decisions were made or taken.

Much of the detail and the case for parliamentary scrutiny on these and other matters was put to this inquiry last week by two Rivervue village residents who gave presentations. I do not intend to go over their evidence again

other than to say that the matters are complex and require detailed scrutiny to unpack all issues. In our submission to the independent review panel, matters we also drew attention to were the warning system, which was completely lacking, and the idea of one-way valves to stop water surging up through the higher drains.

Now that residents are back in their homes, our focus is also on the future. We very much enjoy Rivervue as a place to live. As such, structural flood mitigation solutions, be they local or upstream, will be needed. Those solutions may include an upstream dam, culverts in the Canning Street bridge, levee banks or re-engineering of the Rivervue drainage system. We urge the –

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I am going to have to get you to finish up there, Tony, so maybe just the one sentence or so.

**Tony GODDARD:** Sure. We urge the inquiry to recommend that such strategies are instigated without delay, and going forward we believe that building owner Tigcorp has significant responsibilities, particularly to extend the pursuit of flood mitigation solutions. As a committee we will be helping with all players as needed, and we thank the inquiry for their time.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We thank you as a committee for your submission. Thank you, Tony. We really appreciate it. Our next presenter is Greg Corcoran. Greg, we would love to hear what you have got to tell us.

**Greg CORCORAN:** Thanks for the opportunity to speak here today. Look, the bottom line is I have sent you guys a couple of reports and a summary of what I was going to say tonight, and now I am going to throw it out the window and just wing it basically, because I was talking to Rochester people and really to get through this in 4 minutes is just too quick. The bottom line of it is what we have got here is we are asking you people for assistance. That is what it is. I have sat in on a couple of the sessions so far, especially when Buloke was there and everything, and it is like hearing our own conversation all over again, so all we are doing is repeating the same things.

The Carisbrook levee – if Carisbrook gets flooded, it gets flooded by overland water, which is one of our major things, and then we have got Tullaroop dam and McCallums Creek. The bottom line is we are like Rochester and that: we are affected by Tullaroop dam majorly. One of the recommendations we are putting to you people is to see if we can get Goulburn–Murray, who have been really good to us at this stage, to put a 90 per cent limit on the dam. That gives us time for that water to fill up, and by that stage the overland water has already gone through. Now, we have got the levee. The levee has been built, and with all its sins and all the sins of the past and everything with the council and everything else, there is no good whingeing about it. We have got it, but it can be improved, and it can be improved to make it so if Mother Nature has a bad hair day, she is not going to flood the town.

There are a couple of effects of this. We need a water study done on the overland water, and we have spoken to the north catchment authority. They have not got an accurate figure for what we call the Flagstaff end of the catchment. We have got 24 kilometres of catchment area at the back of us. They talk about the soil type and absorbing it into the ground. Our soil is hard, hardly any goes into the ground. What comes down we get down our creeks very quickly. The bottom line of it is we have got a levee. The levee will work as far as we are concerned, but the problem is we have got the Pyrenees Highway and due to our council and some so-called experts who will not listen to the locals, who do not have local consultation – they make their decisions off their own bat even though they do not live here – we are getting decisions from people who do not know what happens – 99, 2010 and 11. We dodged a bullet in October 2022 because we did not get the overland water, and the levee looked like it worked. Everyone has got their hands in the air, and the council is saying it is the greatest thing since sliced bread. It is a great thing, but we need to improve it. The way we improve it is we need to have more culverts under the Pyrenees Highway. The council have got to a lot of our authorities, like VicRoads. When we spoke to VicRoads they were going to come and have a meeting with the residents and the council and north catchment and Goulburn–Murray. The council got into all their ears, and the next minute the meeting is off. We have had trouble getting to our local member. We have not had a lot of assistance from her. You guys have been more assistance to us than anyone else.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Having said such a nice thing about us, Greg, I am going to have to ask you to wind up, if you could, please.

**Greg CORCORAN:** Okay. Our recommendations: we need an overland water study. We need to get an independent engineering company like ANCOLD to do the review on this, because once it is done, if they say we are wrong, we will take our bat and ball and go home. We do not think we will. We need a program to keep the Carisbrook Creek clear. On top of all of that, we would love you people to come and have a look at this system as it is now. They have got water like a dogleg. The original plan was a straight to get rid of the water around the town. These guys have changed it, and we have got doglegs going through. They have got obstructions in the water flow. The system cannot work the way they have got it now. We just need someone to come in independently, have a look and then say, 'It'll work', and then we will say, 'Okay, sorry. You're right, we're wrong. We'll go home.' If you guys could get a chance to come and have a look, it would be great.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We will take that one on notice.

**Greg CORCORAN:** Okay.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Greg. Can I also say, we do have your submission as well, so obviously that has not been lost either, okay?

**Greg CORCORAN:** Again, thank you very much for the opportunity, and again, you have been great.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We really appreciate you sharing your information. Thank you, mate.

**Greg CORCORAN:** Thanks.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I am just checking on who we have got next. I think it is Frances. Frances, you are back. Welcome back.

**Frances WEIDENER:** Hello.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** You have got 4 minutes, Frances. Your time starts now, as they say.

**Frances WEIDENER:** Thank you. My name is Frances Weidener. I live at Riverdale, 900 acres at Gooramadda, on the Murray River, across the river from Howlong. We have beef cattle, and I run the farm with the help of my two sons. I have been a part of the farm for about 50 years. Every 10 years we get a flood. Usually it is quick: the water goes up, down. We leave the cattle on the high banks and they are safe. It is good for the environment. 2022 was different. They filled the weir in July. The flood lasted for three months – we had land underwater for three months. Because the damage was so long, there was erosion. Great big old trees fell in the river. Fences were damaged – because the water was running across for so long, it dragged logs and wood onto the fences. It pushed them over. Loss of wildlife – you can imagine how much wildlife was lost when the farm was underwater for three months. We had pasture, now we have got weeds.

All this could have been avoided if the river had been handed differently, if they had not filled the weir. It was a wet year and they filled it in August. Because the farm went under, we had to send our cattle away on agistment. It cost in excess of \$40,000, plus cartage. Some of the cattle we thought were safe – they were on high ground. But we did not know how long the flood would last or how high it would get so we left them there. Then they brought small bales of hay and, with a boat, boated the hay into the cattle. The river kept getting higher, so we got some neighbours with horses to help us get them out.

The stress and anxiety in those three months were enormous – little sleep for three months. The clean-up afterwards was huge – dead trees all over the place, on fences, in the river. Where we had pasture, now we have got weeds, so we will have years of spraying weeds, sewing new pastures. We estimate it cost in excess of \$300,000. If they had not filled the weir in a wet season, in July–August, it would not have happened. That is what I have got to say. Anything else?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Good on you. Thank you, Frances. We appreciate you taking the time to share that with us. We wish you well and thank you again.

**Frances WEIDENER:** That is all right. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** All right. We will move on now, if I may, to Sarah Marshall. Sarah, if you would like to join us, and your 4 minutes starts now.

**Sarah MARSHALL:** Totally. Thank you. My name is Sarah Marshall. I am a former resident of Ensign Street, Maribyrnong, which is located approximately 100 metres away from the Maribyrnong River. I moved into a ground-floor apartment during the start of COVID in early 2020 and fell in love with the peaceful area, the beautiful river and the surrounds. Also, I previously sent a submission through to the inquiry.

I will touch on what happened that day. I, like many others, received a pamphlet book in my mailbox on or around 13 October, which was information from the SES. However, at this stage the VicEmergency app had a moderate warning for the Maribyrnong River, peaking at 2.4 metres. I spoke to some neighbours who mentioned they had been there for the 2011 floods, but this was forecasted lower than that event. I think it really just seemed to be, you know, 'Maybe put some covers over the drains – we're good, we're fine.' There was no panic in the street at all that afternoon. It was business as usual.

What I woke to the next morning is now burned in my memory – pounding at my door was the SES saying, 'You need to leave and you need to leave now.' I went back inside to throw together a bit of a bag, cat food, to try and work out what it was I was meant to do now. By the stage I went back outside, it was very clear that the water had already begun to come up the street and there was no way I could get my vehicle out. Given that we were still under the impression that that river was going to peak at 2.4, there was no sense of urgency. It became a bit of a situation of: 'We can stay, water is probably going to come up the street – it'll be okay. It'll probably be a few hours, a few days while it all clears – we're okay.' With that in mind, I made a decision to stay, which I often reflect on. I do not think to this point I would do anything differently, because it was based all on the information that I had on that day; I did not know what was coming.

I kept going from inside to outside to keep an eye on the levels. We lived in an apartment block. There were steps up to our apartment and there was an incline up the driveway. I cannot explain the silence on that day. There were no cars, no trams, no emergency warning sirens, just silence as we all waited for the peak, but the water did not stop. It kept rising. It kept coming through that door. I know the point that I had to call the SES was when my fridge fell over and I could no longer see what was on the ground underneath me anymore. I was very fortunate I had a stairwell I could get to with my cats while we called the SES and just waited. We did not know what to do.

The SES at that point, when they arrived, had to break down windows to get me out. There was no other option. I was trapped. Being on that boat and seeing the streets as we left is something I will never, ever forget. Being helped off the boat and just seeing people watching this spectacle, seeing news crews filming on the worst day of my life – I will never forget that, because if you drove four or five blocks over, life was just normal, but our life as we knew it was over.

I understand I am probably running out of time, and I do apologise. Look, I am very happy just to I guess move to the end. I guess my one thing from this inquiry is that no-one ever experiences this again. I think there are lessons to be learned here, and as hard as it is for organisations involved to hear those lessons and potentially their failures, they need to hear them. They need to learn from them. I do not want anyone else to ever go through an event like this again, whether it is in inner-city metro Melbourne or it is in a regional area. We have to take the lessons that have been learned here today, and we need to learn them. Sorry, I know I talked a bit over.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** That is okay, Sarah. Thank you, and I think we feel what you have been through, so thank you for sharing that with us. It could not have been easy. Know that we have heard a lot of stories like this. We understand what you are saying to us, and we will seek to do the right thing. Thank you very much.

I will move on to David Keenan now. David, if you would like to share your thoughts with us, please, that would be great.

**David KEENAN:** Good evening. My name is David Keenan of 70 Northcote Street in Rochester, about 2.5 k's from the Campaspe River –

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Can you come a bit closer to the mic there, Dave, or something like that? That would be terrific – or talk up.

**David KEENAN:** Yes. Can you hear me now?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** That is better, mate, yes.

**David KEENAN:** Excellent. My name is David Keenan, 70 Northcote Street in Rochester. We are about 2.5 k's from the Campaspe River. We had about 50 centimetres of water through our house here. We are still not back in, still living in caravans in our driveway. The lessons learned are for me really only; I am not going to talk for others. My concern has been that we are insured with Allianz. I think they have been great up to a point. My concern has been more with the loss adjusters or project managers. For us we had Crawford and Co to start with, and my lesson from this, or my concern, has been that when their staff take leave, nothing happens. We were very, I think, unlucky that the staff member that we had had seven weeks off in the first four months after the floods and then was literally scheduled to take another four weeks off in July, but not off in that instance – he was going to work on a separate issue. So that was literally going to leave us with 11 weeks out of 26 that we had no-one to work on our case, nothing at all.

The lesson for me is with these companies, they need to have someone who – if someone takes leave or someone cannot do their job, it cannot just stop. It cannot fall over. I have got young kids, a young family – things need to keep going. They need to staff up. There needs to be better handovers from one project manager to the other just to keep these things happening. I ended up swapping, ended up asking Allianz to basically replace Crawford with Ambrose, and fantastic, absolutely fantastic. We are actually getting movement. We had nothing until August, literally nothing. We are hoping to be in by Christmas, so that is fantastic. I hope it happens. I am going to hold my breath.

And the second part to mine is that we need to use Eppalock better, definitely. I have been with Goulburn–Murray Water for 20 years. I know the area well and the local water boards. I work for Coliban Water now, who to me have been fantastic, but the whole of northern Victoria and what the Victorian government class as the water grid need to be used differently. It needs to be used the way it is. During peak times, during flood times, get the water out of these storages, particularly Eppalock, because no-one uses water there now. They have got rid of the farmers. Even the utility companies tend to draw out of the Eildon system. There is just so little water use out of Eppalock now, except for environmental flows that happen down the Campaspe River. There is just so little water getting used now. We need to either encourage water use or use it differently. Let water go and maybe during other times replace that water. Use the water grid. Use the superpipe that is located, and please just use that. There is a whole water grid we have put in place – fantastic – to sort of save during droughts, but we can also use it during floods. We can take the pressure off the system during floods. Let the water go earlier, make some room and then top it up later. So those are my two things, if we work on those couple of things. Thank you very much for the chance to speak tonight.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Good on you. Thank you, David. Great timing, and I appreciate your accuracy there. It is really great. Good evening. Michael Wickham, if you could turn your camera on and join us, that would be terrific.

**Michael WICKHAM:** How are you going?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I am good, mate. You have got 4 minutes. Let her rip.

**Michael WICKHAM:** Righto, David. Thanks for your time, you guys, and for putting this on. Seventeen years ago we bought this property, the wife and I. We did our homework, and it is not in a flood overlay and it is not in a flood zone. On 17 October last year we ended up with 1.2 metres of water through our house and through our daughter and granddaughter's unit. We have lost everything. In that we got locked in; we were underwater for seven weeks. In the third week of that seven, Goulburn–Murray Water finally decided to give us a pump, and then we had to put diesel through that pump 24/7 for three weeks – roughly about 14 megalitres a day and \$9000 worth of diesel.

Back in 2010 the Loch Garry system was pulled, the water went down the flood plains as it should have, and everyone was kosher – no issues. It went where it should go. This time they did not pull the bars. They blame the flood, that this flood was different to other floods. I guess my point is: how can we have set rules when every flood is different? Now, I am 8k's away from the Loch Garry system, and I have never seen, and all the locals have never seen, water in this part where I live. The rules of operation have got to change. When it gets to 10.36 in Shepparton and they give the farmers down below who pay Goulburn–Murray Water their fees to have this flood protection in place, how can we have a set level in Shepparton when they tell me at every flood

inquiry or the council put on a flood recovery – how can we have a set level when every flood is different? It does not work. They keep saying, ‘We followed protocol.’ You cannot have protocol when – like last week we had 80-odd millimetres of rain and the river was at minor flood. If all the waters had met together at each outlet and each tributary, it would have caused another flood.

Also, I would like to know what Goulburn–Murray Water – these are my notes if you want to take them – do with their maintenance money that these ratepayers pay them. Where is their ledger saying what they do on maintenance of the levee banks, which is 9 kilometres, and the loch, because I was down at the loch the other night and there are steel pins missing out of this antiquated system of timber bars. Like, how serious are they at protecting us if they are not keeping maintenance up on the loch system itself? There were logs still adrift on the bars. It just gets me how serious they are to protect people. Sorry, I am just reading off some notes here.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** That is all right, mate. You have got a little bit under a minute left.

**Michael WICKHAM:** Yes. We were away in the Flinders Ranges. We were only three days in to our holidays in the Flinders Ranges, and basically our daughter said, ‘Dad, Mum, your house is gone.’ And we came home to 1.2 metres, chest height, through our house. And this needs to be investigated thoroughly, Goulburn–Murray Water’s incompetence in managing this loch. And that goes for all around the Bunbartha area. I am at 26 Sandilands Road, Kaarimba, which, as again I will say, is not a flood zone, it is not in a flood overlay. So I would push that point strongly.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** All right. Good on you. Thank you very much, Michael. We appreciate you taking the time to make a contribution tonight, mate.

**Michael WICKHAM:** No worries. Thank you. Likewise.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Good on you. Cheers. All right. Now, I think we have got a few next, so we are just doing a little bit of shuffling and shifting. Stephanie, Sharon and Naomi, welcome. Join us. You have got 4 minutes each. I am going to give you a signal when you have got 1 minute left, okay. Stephanie, would you like to kick off for us? You have got 4 minutes starting now.

**Stephanie MUNROE:** Thank you very much. Good evening, everyone. My name is Stephanie Munroe. I am a resident of the Darraweit Guim township and the newly appointed chairperson of the Darraweit Guim community group, our disaster resiliency group. On 13 October 2022 I lost my house and all my belongings to the riverine flood coming through Deep Creek along the frontage of our property. Mine and a number of other homes in this town were lost. Fortunately, I am one of the few that is back in their house, but there are many unresolved issues still in our town and many people who are not currently in their homes. I have come to advocate on behalf of them and on behalf of our town to explain not only how our town has been previously affected by floods but how it has been affected by this flood and is still being affected today and some of the suggestions for future mitigation for future floods.

Our town, being on the Deep Creek frontage, has seen its share of floods in the past, and I recognise the unprecedented nature of this one when I speak. It is the underlining tone here as well. However, throughout the years, although there have been things done to try and mitigate the worst damage of floods, there is still scope for – and this is part of the thing I will advocate for tonight – a flood study to be conducted on the town, as we are upstream of the Maribyrmong and everything that passed into the Maribyrmong passed through our house first.

I implore a flood study to be conducted and take place further upstream, not just in Deep Creek. We also have the Lancefield catchment, which is the origin, and we have Boyd Creek, which feeds into Deep Creek and adds to that. I would also like to implore a study to be conducted of the debris left in the creek and the rubbish left in the creek that is still there a year later. I have contacted members of Melbourne Water, who are responsible for the care of the creek, and they have said they will not clear out the debris as it is of ecological significance. This does present a problem for us, because should another flood come through, this now is clutter in the creek and is more likely to exacerbate any future flooding if it happens and when it happens again, and it will.

In terms of Darraweit, I would also like to advocate that a member of the flood inquiry hit the ground here in the town and speak to the flood-affected people here, the people who have lost their homes, the townsfolk and the community who have put together so much effort to get us back to normal, back to ground zero, and

recognise that most of the work that was done during and after the flood recovery was community led and not state or federal Parliament led. Darraweit had to advocates to be allowed federal funding after the flood. We were not recognised as having been impacted enough for that, and I want to raise that as a note as well.

In terms of my speech I have sort of covered everything that I was hoping to do, and I would like to open up the floor to someone else.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you so much, Stephanie. We really appreciate that.

**Stephanie MUNROE:** No worries. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are very focused on that catchment, and I think a lot of us are looking at that really closely. So thank you very much.

**Stephanie MUNROE:** Brilliant. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Sharon, let us hear what you have got to say. Please share your thoughts with us.

**Sharon BATHMAN:** Hi. Yes, we were unexpectedly inundated by the floods on 14 October –

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Sharon, sorry, I am just going to interrupt for a sec. Could you speak a little bit louder or come a little bit closer to the microphone. It is very hard to hear you.

**Sharon BATHMAN:** Yes. We were impacted on 14 October 2022 by the Goulburn River floods. We did not get a lot of notice in regard to this. My husband and I had had that house for 47 years and had never, ever been flooded out before – at Murchison we are. We lost our house, we lost all of our belongings and we have had a really big nightmare with the insurance company that we had. We were fully covered for flood, but it has just been roadblock upon roadblock, and as you know, it has been 12 months. Because we were actually home owners and we were fully covered by insurance, the only payment we got from the government was \$1580 each to help us get on our feet. Now, we lost all of our belongings and we lost our home – hello, here we are. We have got \$1580 each that they have given us. We are wondering why the government has not stepped up and is not actually overseeing these insurance companies and making sure that the flood victims are looked after – like, the government is just not doing its job there. We had to engage our own person – we had to employ somebody – to fight for us with our insurance company. We are still not in our home. The home still is uninhabitable. There are no answers at this stage. We are maintaining two properties – we actually got another house that we live in now. My husband works full time; I have retired. My husband has to mow lawns at our own property as well as the rental where we are at the moment, the gardens at both houses, not to mention rates. We have got to pay the full amount of rates for our house that is uninhabitable. We have to pay electricity. We have to pay sewerage rates, water rates, whatever it is, for the other house. We have to pay the same for the house we are living in, so we are financially disadvantaged as a consequence of this flood. It is just not good.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** While you draw breath, I will just tell you that you have got a minute left, Sharon.

**Sharon BATHMAN:** We are just wondering what happens from here. Goulburn–Murray Water let the water out of Eildon. They knew that the predicted rain was coming ages before it happened, so why didn't they let the water out of Eildon prior to that, like in little stages? Why did they do it at the last minute and then just bombard us and ruin our lives the way they have? That is our big question. And here we are. We are at retirement. This is not how we expected to live in our retirement, and they have put a pause button on our lives.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** That is a very good question indeed, which we shall endeavour to pursue for you, Sharon.

**Sharon BATHMAN:** Yes, we have got a problem. And I would just like to say that at this point in time there is no insight into the future as to what we are going to do with our home.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We have heard a lot of people in exactly that same terrible position, so our hearts go out to you, and we wish you every strength.

**Sharon BATHMAN:** Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Sharon. We will move on to Naomi Clark. Naomi, share your thoughts with us.

**Naomi CLARK:** Hi. Thanks for giving us the opportunity to speak. I have written letters left, right and centre and I have been under the pump and I have not had a time to write anything so I will just talk myself through it. This time last year, 12 months yesterday to the day, we lost our house and our land. I am at Bunbartha, which is about 10, 15 minutes out of Shepparton. We live practically a stone's throw from Loch Garry, which is an infrastructure I imagine most people know about, where when the water gets to a certain point in Shepparton, they open the bars and let it out onto the flood plains. We were not expecting to flood ourselves; we were expecting it to flood a couple of roads away. However, on that particular day when Goulburn–Murray Water was supposed to lift the bars, due to lack of management, I feel, and no common courtesy obviously for us downstream, the bars were not pulled at an adequate time, and all the water that built up in the loch then blew out the majority of levees, which then led to me and my neighbours losing our homes and our farms. We are hobby farmers, so we work. We do not make a wage off our farms. It is purely we bought it to set ourselves up and so our kids could have an opportunity to be out of town and ride horses and pursue their interests. So for us it has just been absolute turmoil. I probably sound a bit exhausted – it has been a long 12 months. It is taking its toll.

So we lost our home. We are fortunate enough that we have insurance, which is great, but with the amount of damage it has done to our farm itself and the property, the work has just been ongoing. We have had to find somewhere to rent. Like the woman who spoke previously, we are now keeping two houses, keeping two gardens and travelling an extra 40 minutes a day to work and back. Because we could not find anywhere in Shepparton to rent, we had to go to Nathalia, so it is a bit of a drive for us as well.

But also, for us, we are still on tenterhooks as a community – not just myself, but as a community, because I am only one of nine who lost their house in the township of Bunbartha. When we flooded, unfortunately the floods also washed away a majority of the levee banks which protect us from future floods. Goulburn–Murray Water have repaired the levees around the loch structure itself, but the other levees either side of the loch have been left untouched. For us as a community we are trying to rebuild our homes and our lives and get back into our houses, and we are also being left with a huge mess and a huge job of having to repair these levees at our own cost and in our own time so that as a community we are safe from flooding again – and we are not in a flood zone, but so that we are safe from flooding again.

We are all on tenterhooks at the moment. Last weekend, for example, a lot of us went and ordered truckloads of sand and chased up sandbags, because we are worried that if this happens again – we are just starting to rebuild our homes and get on top of things again, but we very well could lose it again at any time. Look, we are just feeling a little bit lost too because we have all been in contact with Goulburn–Murray Water and with our council. Council have been okay, but I feel like they could have been a lot better, but Goulburn–Murray Water have pretty much just wiped their hands of us. And it would be really great as a community to see them step up and help us do some repairs or do those repairs themselves as a gesture of good faith. But we are at our wits' end. We are all extremely, extremely tired at the moment. It is starting to take its toll.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I can imagine.

**Naomi CLARK:** But look, for me that is probably about it, because I have written letters endlessly and forwarded emails endlessly. But it was just great to have the opportunity to talk on behalf of myself and our community.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Look, thank you so much for taking the time, Naomi, to talk on behalf of yourself and your community. We really appreciate it.

**Naomi CLARK:** That is all right. I apologise I am not overly organised, but like I said, we are extremely stretched at the moment, and this is just another thing that I have committed to doing. So I just decided I would wing it tonight. But look, something definitely needs to be done – some accountability and some care perhaps for those of us who live downstream, and a bit of courtesy. But thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to speak.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Well winged. Thank you so much for your time.

We are going to take a break for 5 minutes so people, committee members can just get up and stretch their legs. We have got a few speakers that we are just cuing up, so we will take 5 minutes. Then if the committee could rejoin at a quarter past, that would be terrific. Thanks, folks.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Okay, thank you very much. Thanks for rejoining us if you have just come in off the break. I might ask Johanne Appleby, if you would be so kind, to kick us off in this second part of the broadcast this evening. Thank you.

**Johanne APPLEBY:** So this is my 4 minutes for my story?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Indeed it is, whenever you are ready.

**Johanne APPLEBY:** Wonderful. My name is Johanne Appleby. I live in Molesworth in Victoria. We have 30 acres of land on the river flats in Molesworth along the rail trail, and we breed horses on that. On 13 October we had 35 horses on the property. We have flooded before in the rain. We are quite used to it; 100 millimetres will come through, it will go quickly. We all live with that on the river flats. That particular night was more of a worry because the river was already backing up on our property because the river was so high, the lake was so full, so we already had water in probably six paddocks. Then throughout the evening the rain just did not stop. Then when they opened up the gates and released 38 megalitres, it completely drowned us. We had water coming in from three sides. We had every horse underwater. We had pregnant mares and yearlings. We lost a mare who foaled out of stress and died in childbirth. We had an orphaned foal.

We could not get to any of the horses because the whole property was underwater, so we could not get to the foal for a couple of – no, probably a few hours. We had to wade through thigh-high water to try and get to her, which was very scary. The rest, we could not get to them for probably two days to get hay to them, so they just stood in water. Some of the mares out the back were okay and could move from spot to spot. The boys that we had put in the highest spot we had, they were the worst ones, and they were actually in water.

We evacuated on the Tuesday, so in four days we were able to get to them. We evacuated all 35 of the horses. The pregnant mares went to a thoroughbred stud to be foaled down. The rest were evacuated throughout the area, and they were off probably for eight weeks. We had no feed, obviously – no paddock space for them to come back to. We were lucky – we have largely post-and-rail fencing, so we did not have too much damage in that respect, but we lost driveways and bridges and things like that.

What else? That is probably basically the story. We have flooded twice since then. We flooded in June. Water came in through the back of the property – not rain flooding, just from the river – and we had seven paddocks underwater. We have just finished sort of getting rid of that, pumping bits out so we could get access through to paddocks. And we have flooded again now, and we have seven paddocks under water again now. Luckily this time probably only 40 per cent of the property is flooded, so the horses are still here, and we are just feeding out hay and feeding them that way.

But basically our story is that we can deal with rain, floods – we have for years. My partner has been here 15 years; our neighbours have been here 25 years and behind us for over 70 years – never had this before. We can deal with rainwater incidents, no problem. The dam kept so high and then big releases made – and we were not given any warning of that release during the night – just completely floods us: totally underwater.

And now we just live in fear every time there is rain that we are going to flood again with the dam, because there is nowhere for it to go. It is quite obvious that they intend to keep it full. Their management plan for the dam at capacity with a rain event is to make releases, and even releases below minor flood level will flood us. So we are just in that funnel neck, if you like, with no way to get away from it. We have no high ground; we are just sitting ducks here. Probably my story, and that is 5 minutes – 4 minutes – that is not bad.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** That is pretty much spot on. Thank you, Johanne. We really appreciate you taking the time to share your story with us tonight.

**Johanne APPLEBY:** Thank you.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Johanne.

**Johanne APPLEBY:** Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Cheers. Okay, bye-bye. Isaac, would you like to share your story with us please, mate.

**Isaac HERMANN:** Good evening. I am Isaac Hermann from Elwood, a local historian and author. I have a few points from this side of Melbourne that may be relevant.

Firstly, local government as obstacles to flood mitigation measures – as failing managers of Crown land, they block measures to construct dual-purpose flood-retarding basins. Sports ovals are held in higher regard than the environment or people's safety. The City of Glen Eira and the City of Bayside are clear examples of this attitude.

Secondly, local government reluctance to consult with and inform community of places of refuge – the City of Port Phillip has refused to discuss or divulge places of refuge locations except for perhaps their own St Kilda town hall, the worst possible location, being surrounded by floodwaters at the worst possible time.

Next, Melbourne Water's disregard for CSIRO reports: the 1996 Port Phillip Bay report and the 1999 urban stormwater best practice report – Melbourne Water's forthcoming construction of the Elwood main drain duplication shows an utter disregard for best science and a willingness to have our beaches closed for extended periods due to pathogen contamination.

Fourthly, Melbourne Water's reluctance to address sewerage network surcharge into the bay – though initially denying their existence, Melbourne Water's own infrastructure allows for the flow of stormwater into their sewers, particularly in flood zones, through the intermediate inspection point grilles in streets and laneways, which overwhelms the system and contaminates the bay. This they refuse to address.

Next, the risk of mortality in the Shakespeare Grove main drain catchment in St Kilda – I have personally witnessed floods in Elwood and St Kilda in almost every decade since the 1960s. For proposed new works, they save property in Elwood. It appears nothing planned for would save lives in St Kilda's Shakespeare Grove main drain catchment come the next serious flood. The chest-high floodwaters of February 1989 will be surpassed next time – with drastic consequences, I am afraid.

Next, the planning panel obfuscation of appropriate flood zoning overlays – the term 'special building overlay' does not adequately convey the fact that a property is in a flood zone where, regardless of the dwelling height, residences may cease to have a functioning sewerage network and residents may not be able to reach home, and if they are home, they may be well and truly trapped.

Lastly, there are kilometres of open watercourse through Elsternwick and Elwood – although the zoning 'land subject to inundation overlay' was removed by planning panel members in a hearing at Bayside council, in all likelihood to allow for the construction of the sports pavilion, with zero regard for the consequences. Canal-side Elwood residences should be solely zoned as land subject to inundation overlay if they are to be made aware and ready for future flooding. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Isaac. That was a very thoughtful presentation. I really appreciate it.

**Isaac HERMANN:** Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** All right. We are doing good. Now, Ian, are you good to go there?

**Ian HUNDLEY:** I am. Thank you, Chair. My name is Ian Hundley, and I appear this evening on behalf of the Stop North East Link Alliance, which is a community-based organisation which campaigns against the North East Link project. We appreciate the opportunity to be able to present. Our submission is recorded as number 659, which we lodged on 5 June this year.

The North East Link is a freeway project which would connect the M80 ring-road in Greensborough with the Eastern Freeway in Bulleen principally via tunnels, and also extra lane capacity is proposed on the Eastern Freeway from Springvale Road to Hoddle Street. Our opposition to the project is based in the main on transport planning grounds. There are, however, significant environmental issues, including the potential impact of flooding. Our interest here relates to future flood events as they may affect the Yarra River valley, more specifically in the area encompassed within the cities of Boroondara, Whitehorse, Manningham, Banyule and

Yarra, which together contain the project corridor. Our hope and expectation is that the committee's terms of reference will permit the consideration of these concerns.

We note that much of the discussion on the Maribyrnong floods relates to the structure built on the Flemington Racecourse. The North East Link project also proposes major structures in the Yarra River valley, which may have unanticipated impacts during flood events. Most notably these, as we understand it, include a 9-metre-high wall at the southern entrance to road tunnels in Bulleen proposed to be constructed under the Yarra River. A major interchange adjacent to the Yarra River in the Manningham Road–Templestowe Road area is also of interest in this regard.

The presence of pollutants in the soil, most specifically the 'forever chemical' PFAS and its possible dispersal during flooding events, is also an issue.

Up-to-date modelling of future flood events which would take account of climate change along with the consequences of increased areas of impermeable surfaces at residential and other developments in the catchment is of basic importance as well, in our view.

The increase in the road surface attributable to the North East Link together with significant vegetation removal for the project would by itself add significantly to run-off, even in the absence of major flooding.

We have sought advice from Melbourne Water on the most recent flood modelling on the Yarra River precinct and what it may show for the severity of future flood events and their geographic extent relative to any earlier modelling that may have been done.

In response, the authority responded to us in these terms:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

Melbourne Water's flood modelling studies are typically not publicly available nor are they in a format in which we can readily make them available. Whilst plans are in train to make Victoria's flood information available to the public, this project is not complete.

This briefly summarises where we are now. From our perspective it is a situation of considerable uncertainty, and it is unsatisfactory for that reason. Information on the impact of possible flood events in the Yarra River valley and on this project should be up to date, and it should be available publicly, in our view. So thanks, committee, for your attention.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you so very much, Ian. We really appreciate it. That was a very thoughtful contribution.

**Ian HUNDLEY:** Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** All right. Now, I think we have got a couple of people joining us. We will just wait for them to sashay across from the lobby. Ah, here we go. Welcome, everyone. Lovely to see you. You have got 4 minutes. Maree, would you like to kick us off? I will go like this when you have got 1 minute left, okay? So please start. Take it away.

**Maree MAHER:** Thank you. I would like to thank you for allowing me to have 4 minutes speaking on this very important matter. I am from the north-east, and I have properties in the city of Benalla and also the Strathbogie shire. My family first came here in 1854. But talking about floods, in 1993 there was a very large flood that hit the Benalla area; in 2016 I witnessed Benalla and Violet Town and also just recently last year, 2022. In saying this, I have written many letters to departments, VicRoads, councils, shires – nothing seems to ever come of this. In regard to meetings, I have been to many meetings with farmers, many politicians and local and state governments in regard to the Murray–Darling Basin and the Broken catchment authority. As a woman and a female, we are able to speak a lot more nowadays, but no-one seems to reply back in regard to whether it is a conversation or –

Our recent parliamentarian Daniel Andrews spoke to me and my father at a very big conference in Wodonga a few years ago, and all the responses that we have had back from him are emails saying that – there were floods at one stage, there were fires, and then we had COVID and then we had another lot of floods last year, and that

roundtable meeting never eventuated. That was with very intelligent local people of the different shires and aged people who actually have the history of the areas that need to be looked at.

Sadly, I do believe that we do not have enough people doing the cleaning out of our rivers and our catchment areas, because it is all filled with silt and old, dead wood. But the silt actually comes down from floods. So we have got the continuation of our high streams, and they are coming down into our normal streams and little towns. We are getting it all flooded and destroyed because of people not doing maintenance.

I speak highly on that because my son actually was involved with the demolition of the Rochester school there, because in being employed in the local construction area – you know, we have a devastation and things happen with floods and it is a disaster. And then we have got disaster areas, and towns get wiped out. Well, then we are sending people in to do demolishing, very distraught, and we have got young people and older people having to see this. They have gone from the demolition of a school to building a school. That started in October 2022. It has just been handed over, that school, to the schoolchildren and teachers to start school, on 23 July this year, and there has been no rectification of Rochester. What is going to happen with the next downpour, as we have seen last week? Nothing is happening. So we are going to have high insurance policies.

People are still living in caravans, tents or not even in that town of Rochester. I speak with a big passion because, coming from a farming industry, I have seen floods with losing fodder, cattle, sheep. It is just a disaster, and I am not seeing anything come back to fix anything. So we are going to have another recurrence, and it all comes back to money. People pay insurance, and the higher insurance is because we are getting floods. We need to maintain our creeks, our stream ways, and clear out the debris in our gutters. We need to go back to basics. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Maree. That was just terrific. We really appreciate you giving your time to share your thoughts with us on that.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Maree – very sensible.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thanks for your help. Our next contribution comes from Roger Byrne. Roger, please, take it away.

**Roger BYRNE:** Thank you, David. David, I am a member of the citizens advisory panel for the catchment at Elster Creek. That panel is part of a strategy group that involves all four councils and Melbourne Water, which is proving to be a very good way of getting things done. Five years after the last floods, we have managed to get 16 projects advanced – and these are priority actions across the whole of the catchment, not just any individual council's needs.

After five years, progress on these has been very good. We have got flood risk mapping being improved, we have got plans for Melbourne Water, and the major project to divert – or to mitigate – flooding, more importantly, is well underway and due for construction in 2025. But I think that the most important thing has been that we have engaged the entire community in the catchment on floods, and that is really important because 92 per cent of this catchment is fully developed and it discharges through 5 per cent, which is the Elwood flood plain. So as you can imagine, that makes it pretty well impossible. We might have little floods somewhere in the catchment, but we are going to have massive floods on the Elwood flood plain.

From that point of view, these are some of the things we have identified that are still weaknesses. It really comes in the modelling, as you have had plenty of discussions about, and the hydrology to ensure that we are really putting into the models what is likely to happen, not what was 100 years of history but what is likely to happen, especially with regard to intensity and duration and to the effect of low-pressure troughs lifting the sea level by over 800 millimetres. That has happened twice – luckily without significant rain, but it will happen. It is vital that we tell the general public what the potential flood levels are, and then we have got to spread that word.

One of the things that stunned me was that in 2018 Melbourne Water produced an artificial intelligence flood prediction application for a mobile phone. It is a fantastic application. I have worked all over the world and it is as good as anything I have seen, but for some reason it has not been advanced and has not been made available to the public. It is being used by a few people. That is atrocious because that is the way we are going to win communities over – by being able to tell them 48 hours or 24 hours before the event roughly what is going to

happen and then verifying it when it actually takes place through some good flow monitoring, which is what failed a lot in the Maribyrnong issue.

For all our communication plans, we are looking at the fact that in that catchment we are talking about we have got 50 per cent almost of rented properties, so we have got to deal with tenants rather than owners, which makes communication a step larger. But the top thing that came out of this is that we have been able to advance the whole idea of Melbourne Water supervising what goes on in the catchment as a whole, so not individual councils but some independent body who chooses what is the best cost-benefit analysis for the projects. By doing that we have managed to get a really major duplication being done on the diversion down Head Street, and that will really help the flood-prone area of Elwood. It more than likely still will not save them from the worst event, but it will make a massive difference. If you have waved your hand, David, I have missed it.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Good on you. Thank you, Roger. That was a terrific contribution and magnificent timing, can I say, as well. Thank you very much for your presentation. We do appreciate it. We are getting a lot of really good feedback today and a lot of good advice from people like you, so we do appreciate that.

**Roger BYRNE:** It is wonderful to see. Well done.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Roger.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thanks, mate. Cheers. All right. We are going to do a little switcheroo and welcome Michael Bagnall. Michael, thank you for joining us tonight.

**Michael BAGNALL:** Thank you very much for having us.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** You have our undivided attention for 4 minutes, and I will let you know when you have got 1 minute to go, mate. So let her rip.

**Michael BAGNALL:** Just by way of introduction, my name is Michael Bagnall. I am a volunteer with the State Emergency Service. Up until recently I was the controller of the Gisborne unit for six years but was also the divisional commander for three weeks up in Echuca during the floods.

What I want to talk about is really to bring to your attention the volunteer perspective of the floods, and I have got some quick stats that I have collected. 147 of 150 of our units were actively involved in the flood response. That equated to 400,000 man- and lady-hours of work undertaken by volunteers, many of whom were taking annual leave, sick leave and time without pay to respond to this event. It culminated in 20,000 requests for assistance through the event for our organisation, including 1500 flood rescues. I think what I really want to bring is an acknowledgement of the work of volunteers both through SES, CFA and many of the other agencies that responded to this event – the tremendous work that they did.

Probably the second part of what I want to do – and I think this narrative has come through in this inquiry already, but I really want to hammer it home – is say we really need a sustainable funding model. We are and have always been the poor cousin. We have very, very tight budgets, and they are only getting tighter every year we go on. From my understanding we are the only state in Australia that does not have an emergency services levy that provides a direct funding model to our organisation. We have heard through other inquiries and through other speakers of the lack of training and the constant strain on volunteers. A lot of this could be resolved with adequate funding. I think an emergency services levy in whatever form that came would bring that funding to our organisation. It would create greater training opportunities for our volunteers, it would remove the administrative burden and it would mean the volunteer experience is greater, retaining volunteers for longer. And when we have events like this flood – and unfortunately it is a one-in-100-year; I suspect I will probably see another one of these events in my lifetime unfortunately – we will have a much stronger organisation to respond to this.

But first and foremost what I really want to bring home is the work that the volunteers across the state did. In my time in Echuca I had some 150 people within that division, mostly volunteers, some paid staff from agencies, working in the preparation and response activities for what was a mammoth task in Echuca, and that was seen statewide. That started in my area in Gisborne, and I think you all heard about the lands in Darraweit Guim near Gisborne, which heads down to Footscray and the Maribyrnong, and similarly on the other side of the mountains it heads up to Echuca.

I am probably not going to take my entire 4 minutes. But the two main points I really wanted to bring to your attention – one is, you know, that work that the volunteers have done, but more important, looking forward to the future, is that funding model. We are an organisation of dedicated people that do tremendous work, and we see ourselves in the news when these big events happen and then we disappear back into the darkness. But when that darkness comes, we have got training, admin and all the other tasks that go ahead. That funding will really bring about some relief for our volunteers in that space.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Michael. That is terrific. And look, I think I could say on behalf of all of the committee that we have heard so many stories and we owe so much to the volunteers of a range of services who all put their butts on the line. They put aside their personal lives and they serve the community. Thank you for your service, and we thank all of the volunteers. And we take on board absolutely what you are saying about resourcing. So I appreciate it.

**Michael BAGNALL:** Appreciated.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Michael.

**Michael BAGNALL:** Cheers.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, mate. Thanks. Nicole, welcome. Please, the floor is yours, so tell us what you would like to tell us.

**Nicole McKAY:** I did put in a submission, and I will just explain more about the submission that I did put in. I live on the mid to lower Murray, which is downstream at Swan Hill – and downstream is the area I am familiar with, between here and Robinvale. It is where the Murrumbidgee, the Wakool and the Loddon River enter the Murray River. So we have been at the heart of the floods in 2011 and 2022. 2016 was also a large flood event; however, that was not significant [Zoom dropout].

For a bit of background, I am 55 years old, so I was here before the marketisation of water and the basin plan. I was a young adult. We experienced inundation of this flood plain mostly on a yearly basis and before that time. With marketisation of water, we never had – or between 2000 and 2010 – water onto the flood plain, because the river was not high enough. There was a lack of water. And then once we have had the basin plan we have also had problems with not receiving high enough flows. But I have come to also believe that these flows are not helping us to mitigate flood risk.

The big problem is that water that is considered unregulated. So, high rivers that are currently occurring now due to rainfall are considered natural flows, and private landholders are not able to sue when those unregulated rivers touch on their land. Now, this is land subject to inundation – so where there are red gum trees already – and regularly was inundated in the past. With the basin plan it has become more part of convention to recognise or actually fight against the releases of environmental water to allow it to inundate some private land. I want to emphasise we are talking about for the most part private land that has always historically been in the flood plain and inundated, and I am not talking about flooding whole farms but just, we will say, little creeks where the water rises up a bit – so many varieties of ways. But there is a resistance to relaxing the constraints. It is part of the basin plan. It is funded, and it would involve building small bridges, culverts on private land, these sorts of compensations that make things a bit easier. However, these parcels of land do get inundated, as now when the river is high. The thing is now we are trying to portion our water into environmental water and consumptive water – two sort of separate pools – and the private landholders have come together particularly in Victoria to say they will not allow any environmental water onto the land. However, it is part of the basin plan to enable flows to happen. This is funded, and it would remove flood risk or reduce flood risk for those places on private land but also upstream. That is my belief, and I will say it in this inquiry. This is funded by the federal government under the basin plan, and we need to have those constraints relaxed immediately – as soon as possible. New South Wales is working on this.

What is the consequence of having the constraints in place and not being able to have higher environmental flows? In 2021 the Murray River was running quite low and the storages were very full. Our council – I am a councillor – requested interest from the community. I wrote to all the managers of river ops, the New South Wales and Victorian governments to ask them to release environmental water from the dam, one, to inundate some of the flood plain and lakes in our region that had had no water, and secondly, to reduce the risk of a spill and when consumptive water is lost – and another point made was that this would mitigate flood risk. This was

in 2021. The environmental water holder responded and tried to release water but was not able to release as much as would be really beneficial because of constraints and the problems with river operations not being able to do things in an agile manner. We got some small amount of water onto the flood plain. We filled a couple of lakes, but the water only flowed for about 10 days. Environmental water was still being held high up in the high storages. Another bad consequence of this happening is that in 2021 the red gum forests were not inundated and flushed out into the river system, so when we had a large flood in 2022 we had a massive system-wide blackwater event. It is my belief –

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Hold on. I am going to have to ask you to finish up, if you would be so kind. So if you have got a parting comment, that would be great.

**Nicole McKAY:** Why do I have to finish when we are going to go to 9 o'clock?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We have given everyone 4 minutes, so that is really fair –

**Nicole McKAY:** I understand. I will be very quick. In 2022 we made the same requests. I did send in media releases with people asking for releases of water. By that stage the rivers were full. Environmental water could not be released as agilely as well. I would put it to the Victorian state government that if we are able to release more environmental water more agilely from the dams when we need to, we would mitigate flood risk. I would also like to put it to us that maybe we could also consider using mid-Murray storages for consumptive water and not keep all the consumptive water so high up. When we get very wet years, then it is very hard to reduce the impacts on those towns. It has been absolutely devastating. I would say it is no coincidence that we have had the largest floods with the worst impacts on towns in the last 10 years when the constraints have been recognised. We have also had in this area massive fish deaths, killed off 80 per cent of the Murray crays in 2011. We need environmental flows into this flood plain, but also it would be good to mitigate flood risk to do this. I will also put, and it is an unpopular view: [Zoom dropout]. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are going to have to finish up, but thank you so much. And we do have your written submission as well, so be assured it is not lost, and of course everything we have discussed tonight is going into the Hansard transcript. Thanks for joining us.

**Nicole McKAY:** And it is sponsored by the federal [Zoom dropout]. Thank you, much appreciated.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** No worries. Thank you, Nicole.

That brings us to a conclusion in terms of the presentations for tonight. To everyone who has contributed, I thank you very, very much. Before we finish, though, I will just hand over to a couple of my colleagues, if they have got any final words they would like to share. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks, David. I would just like to thank everyone who contributed tonight. I know that everyone who contributed has gone through a great deal of trauma over the last 12 months. I have been with Mick and Kerry Wickham to their home when we could not get in there because there was water. I was back at their home on Australia Day and there was still water around the house and across the road. I stood with Naomi Clark on her verandah and looked at the destruction in her home. In fact to get to her house I was really concerned that I could not even drive through the water – they had to come out in a tractor to get me – so I know the trauma that all of these people have been through. It is fantastic that they can share that with the committee so that we can get a true understanding, and I thank everyone who has contributed tonight.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Well said. Thank you, Wendy. I appreciate that. Melina, did you have any closing comments?

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, David. I understand for people it is – we can feel the trauma, and I guess the long road is to know that there will be improvements. Whilst we are not government – we are non-government MPs – we will make recommendations, and having very valid comments and lived experience adds to that. We do this as a committee as a whole. We also thank our secretariat, who liaised with all of the people who were speaking to us tonight and the submitters. Thank you on their behalf as well – the secretariat's behalf – because they are doing the work for us behind the scenes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Melina. Terrific. Rikkie-Lee, are there any comments you would like to make in winding up?

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Yes. Thank you, David. Thank you very much to everybody who has attended tonight. What you have supplied to the committee is vital. We need this information and your experiences, and we are going to make sure that it contributes to the report as best as we can. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences, as hard as they were to relive them.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Great. Thank you, Rikkie-Lee. To everyone who has been involved in the broadcast, our thanks. We appreciate your candour; we appreciate your courage. As a committee we have obviously got a lot of work to do, and we are committed to trying to find some truths and trying to find some answers. Leave it with us. You know where to find us; there is no hiding. We will look to carry this forward in a concerted manner. With that, we will call it an evening. Again, our thanks from everyone who has been involved. Thanks to all of the secretariat and the production team, who have done a magnificent job and who have supported the committee so well. I wish you all a lovely evening, and I look forward to seeing you next time. Thank you so much.

**Committee adjourned.**