

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Shepparton – Wednesday 13 September 2023

#### MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

**WITNESS**

Nacole Standfield, President, Shepparton Search and Rescue.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

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 paying 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. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to please be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

For those of you who are giving evidence today, all evidence taken 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 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.

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce myself, and committee members will also introduce themselves to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee, and I am also a Member for the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

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

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

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

**Melina BATH:** Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

**Sheena WATT:** Sheena Watt, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

**The CHAIR:** With that, it is over to you to make your opening remarks. Could you please keep your comments to about 10 minutes. I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of that time. Could you also please state your name and the organisation you represent for the Hansard record. Over to you.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** No worries. My name is Nacole Standfield, and I am actually the President at Shepparton Search and Rescue. We had a big involvement with the floods as a first responder alongside VICSES, which we currently have an MOU with. During the lead-up to the floods we were obviously preparing to sandbag and getting everything organised for that with a sandbag location. With that we have a membership of 25 members who run a rotation of 24-hour, seven-day-a-week shifts over a nine-day period. In that time we had three boat crews running through the day, four road crews and four people in our divisional command point, and on the night crew we had two boats, two road crews and two people in the divisional command point. We also had deployment crews from VICSES, CFA and Forest Fire Management to assist with sandbagging and boating rescues during that time. In that time we also did food and medication drops once the water had started to subside and less people were requiring evacuation.

Our team did an amazing job. They worked very hard and tirelessly over those eight days, if not longer, to do the job that they could do. The divisional command point was run out of our shed, and thanks to the MOU with

the SES we are able to do that to assist our community. The MOU also allows our members to be trained for a level 2 response to flood and storm events, the same as their members, which helps our community as well.

During the floods we attended 1162 requests for assistance in that eight-day period, which meant our calls were constantly going, from the Thursday morning right through to the following week, which did not leave much time to have a breather or a break and know what was really happening outside of what we were doing. But again the teams did a fantastic job in their response during that time. I am very proud of the work that they did and the hours that they put in, as well as leaving their own homes during that time, which meant a few of us could actually not get home to our families or get home to check on our homes, because we were so busy looking after everybody else's. I am also grateful for the deployment crews who left their families and their homes outside of the Shepparton LGA to come and assist this community in a time when it needed them the most. I am very grateful for all of that and all the work that those people have done.

Shepparton is one of two independents in Victoria. We do not get any state funding; we find our own. We get grants for all our equipment and to be able to make sure our members are trained to a very high quality to be able to assist the community. As soon as the floods finished here we actually had deployments, and some our members went on to the air rescue team and were also deployed to Swan Hill. So their time continued after the floods here as well. The floods were very busy for us. It was very stressful. It was very chaotic. It was a high-pressure situation that many of them wish that we never have to go through or see again, and we are very grateful for VICSES for allowing us to access their peer and critical assessment teams to be able to provide mental health support back to our members after those floods. I think that is about it.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, sure. No problem. All right. We will hand over to questions now. Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Thanks, Nacole, and thank you for the power of work that Shepparton Search and Rescue squad did during the floods. I know that you hosted all of those other deployed crews, all of the volunteer response, SES from around the state, CFA from around the state, Vic water police, the coast guard et cetera, all housed out of your shed. You did an amazing job for this community. You not only filled sandbags before, you sandbagged for the vulnerable who could not do it themselves. It was your members who risked their lives to go out on the floodwaters and rescue people from inundated homes or take food and medication to them. We do owe you a debt of gratitude. I am just wondering if you received any funding at all to cover those additional costs that you incurred as a squad. As you said, you do not get state funding. A lot of your funding you provide through fundraising et cetera yourselves. But you obviously ran vehicles and boats for those eight days. You also had your shed lit 24/7 for those eight days. Did you receive any funding to cover the costs of responding?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Part of our MOU with SES states that during an event on a large scale where they are the control agency they actually cover the costs for fuel and electricity and food. For anything we incur during that time they reimburse us those funds.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Did anyone from the government visit your shed during that week to show their respect to the volunteers?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** The only person that came along was Matt Guy, who gracefully cooked us a barbecue lunch, which was great, because rice and chicken over so many days was not very substantial for our members to eat. To have something different to that was really nice.

**Wendy LOVELL:** Kim and I were with him.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Sorry, and you and Kim.

**The CHAIR:** All right. We will move on to another question. Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Do you think there could be any improvements made to help in the future in the next flood event?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** I think one of the biggest improvements and one of the most difficult things we had was the initial set-up of the sandbagging location. It was not in a great place for the public to access, and it also delayed our response once the pager started going off, because we had to work out who was going to man it

and who had to leave. That did not leave a lot. We had cars lining up, and we had cars waiting for long periods of time while we were waiting for sandbags to be dropped off that were already filled, because it takes time to hand-fill a sandbank. When you have 25 members – and at that point half of them were still at their ordinary jobs – we were running off three people to fill sandbags, so we were very lucky that the council and Dhurringile Prison managed to work together to fill out the sandbags. But getting it delivered through the traffic of cars took time. People got cranky. They were upset that they had to wait. They were obviously stressed out. The sandbagging location itself was not in a really great position. I spoke to the Mayor of Shepparton, and he tried to get it moved and was told that it could not be moved to a better location. It added an extra pressure that we really did not need at that time.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Can I have a subsequent question?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Do you have a proposed idea of where a better location would be?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes. I have since had conversations with council about that, that the showgrounds in Shepparton are a much better space. It is a much larger space. It did eventually get moved there, but then the issue we had once it was moved there was that traffic management did not happen. You had cars lining up on the main street of town and you had people trying to get to supermarkets to stock up on groceries and trying to get fuel before they could not access fuel. You know, people went into panic. You had this little bit of extra traffic on the road, as well as the emergency services vehicles trying to gain access to get the sandbags and trying to get to the jobs that they had been tasked to go to, so it did create a traffic management issue.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Broad.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Thank you very much for the incredible work that you have done and the hours – I cannot imagine what you have put in over this time, so thank you for sharing some of that today. I guess with any emergency there can be red tape that holds back a smooth process. But, I guess, on the ground, with having boats and access to them – were there any sorts of restrictions in place or were you able to utilise all of the equipment that you had there?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** We were able to utilise all equipment that we had and that was given to us, with no questions asked, so we were very lucky in that aspect. We are lucky in that we actually have two boats, two four-wheel drives and two trucks, so we are very well resourced in that aspect. I think probably the hardest thing is gaining access to training for volunteers. It is restricted by budgets, and when you are restricted by budgets some courses cannot be run. People who have a competency to run a boat in an emergency situation – there are not many of them.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Okay. So in that situation what are the requirements for training, and how long are these wait periods that you are talking about?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** I have actually had members wait up to six years to gain access to boating courses.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Okay. In an emergency situation, if there is someone that you know who has not done the course, does that mean you cannot get them to help?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** No. If you do not hold a competency and you are not trained in a certain area, I cannot get you to do that task. Members who did not hold a boat qualification were either tasked as local knowledge navigators to the deployment crews – because obviously they were coming in from an outside area and they did not know the town – or they were tasked as land-based crews, so they would go out and do the sandbagging or they would pick up the people who had been evacuated from their homes and take them to the evacuation centre so they did not have to find their own way.

**Gaëlle BROAD:** Okay. Did that inhibit access to boats or the use of boats in getting out and helping people?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** No, because in the deployment crews we were actually given boating crews, so that actually helped us a lot. Most of the deployment crews that we were given brought boats and had full boating crews.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Sorry, we have to move on. Ms Watt – question.

**Sheena WATT:** Can we come back? I have just got the sneezes.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry about that. Dr Ratnam.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Thank you very much, Nacole, for your presentation and all the work you have done on behalf of all your members. Given that your work sounds like it was embedded in that kind of formal or semi-formal response when the disaster happened, do you have any views or recommendations about how that coordination works? From your vantage point, do you think the coordination between the different levels of government and all the different agencies worked pretty well or do you think there are some recommendations you would like us to think about through this inquiry?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** I think, for us, I was basically in charge of the divisional command point on the day shift here. My job purely was to run my crews. It was getting them out the door, making sure they were fed, making sure they were rested and taking care of them, but also making sure the operation still ran. From an operational standpoint – and I have had conversations with the crews that were out on the jobs – they said that their work flowed perfectly fine. They had no concerns or issues with getting out the door, the rotation of jobs or their rest times and all of that, so they were quite happy in that aspect. But again after working for five, six or seven days, they did start to get tired.

**Samantha RATNAM:** And did they feel supported by the other services that were needed to complement their work – because they were not working alone, essentially – when they went out there?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes. We actually get along very, very well with other agencies when they come through the door. We are very friendly and very grateful to see them, so we all just work as one, basically.

**Samantha RATNAM:** Great. It sounds like when it is plugged in it is working quite well, which is good. It is a strength, and we should think about how we maintain that strength for future responses as well.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Watt, try again.

**Sheena WATT:** Yes. I am just trying to understand more about your organisation and where you fit in the landscape of it all. It is not one that I am familiar with, being in the metropolitan area. Can you just help me out? It is a really simple question. Is it just something that has come up from the grassroots?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** No, you are all right. Shepparton Search and Rescue is one of two independent rescue organisations in Victoria. There is us and Echuca–Moama. With that we have an MOU, so a memorandum of understanding, with VICSES, which allows us access to training but also allows us access to be able to be basically, I guess, subcontracted by them to manage storm and flood response in the Shepparton area.

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. So it is not like a break-off. You are a separate organisation?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** A separate organisation, yes.

**Sheena WATT:** Okay, great.

**Wendy LOVELL:** I'll explain it later.

**Sheena WATT:** Thank you very much, Wendy, because it is a unique model in the state that you have got there.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** It is very unique.

**Sheena WATT:** Thank you very much for that. You talked about the training that folks do. Given that, in terms of folks that want to come up and help and assist, does that mean that they have to have the accreditation through you guys? How does that work? If you are someone that has done search and rescue and you find yourself wanting to help out, how can that be recognised?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** All competencies are nationally recognised, and we access all our training through SES. All our assessments and competencies and stuff –

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. So it is not your own.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** It is not our own. It is all done through VICSES, so it is nationally recognised. But obviously the limitations with that are it costs money to run courses, it costs money to buy resources, it costs money to do these things, and if the money is not there, then how do the volunteers do their job?

**Sheena WATT:** Yes. So the ability to accept volunteers from other –

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes, we can easily do it.

**Sheena WATT:** search and rescue organisations and recognise their skills and qualifications and experiences is established, given that the training and the recognition come through the SES. That is right?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes.

**Sheena WATT:** So do you have any recommendations around that? Like when it comes to that time when people are offering their services, are there challenges with all of that? Talk to me about that influx of volunteers that come to you as an organisation.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** It is very easy to join. You just pop down to your local SES unit or us, if you are here.

**Sheena WATT:** Yes, I am familiar with that one. It is more like when you are in –

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** And we go through the basic process of how to join. So it is a basic police check to make sure that there is nothing we need to be concerned about, and then we process your application. You get –

**Sheena WATT:** Say I am an SES volunteer and I am based in metropolitan Melbourne, but I can stay at my aunty's house up here in Shepparton. I know that they are having a tough time, and I want to go and stay with my aunty and help out. How is that process for you guys, and is there anything we can do to help the inflow of volunteers that come to search and rescue that want to help out?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes. So it is a very easy process. I just ring the SES region in the Benalla office and I go 'I've got this person from this unit. They're working here. Can we do a joint membership?' and we set up a joint membership.

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. So all of that is very smooth.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** I have actually got two Shepp members who have joint memberships with Bannockburn SES and Yarrawonga SES.

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. So that is relatively smooth.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes, it is.

**Sheena WATT:** All right. I anticipated that that might be a challenge, but it is clear that you have got that all worked out and have had for a long time.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes.

**Sheena WATT:** Thank you very much for that, Nacole. I am very happy to move on to others.

**The CHAIR:** I was going to ask a similar question around volunteers, because I think a lot of organisations are struggling with volunteer capacity. I was reading the brief here, and I just want to confirm what your numbers are. It says:

... 22 active members with another 5 non-active members.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** What does 'non-active member' mean? And how do you go about recruiting and letting people know that you as an organisation and entity are always looking for volunteers? How do you attract them?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes. So we have 22 operational members. They are the ones who get in the four-wheel drives and the trucks and they get out onto the road. We have life members who are still around, but their capability to get out the door is no longer there. They have been around for 30, 40 – 50 years, even. They still have an input into what we do and how the squad is run, but they are not active out –

**The CHAIR:** Going out on the road and things like that, yes.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes, going out on the road. But we also have members who have no interest in being on the road and just want to be a part of the team and help run an IMT, or an incident management team, at the divisional command point or incident control point, which is a huge help because those members who are not interested in going out on the road allow those who are to be out there.

**The CHAIR:** That is right. How has it been, attracting volunteers over the last five, 10 years? Has it been more difficult? Are you finding more people wanting to help? Even after the floods, is there a renewed interest in, say, volunteering for an organisation like yours?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** We have not found that. We have found that because of COVID and the pressures of cost of living, people have less time to volunteer – because they have to take up a second job or they have got to work harder at their job – so they are less likely to come down. We are finding we are not getting as many people coming through the door. We were lucky, we did have an influx of about four to five, which is good, but you do not always keep that four to five, which is the hard thing – you might keep one out of that. We like to keep a big media presence in Shepparton and are constantly encouraging people to join. We are very active on our Facebook page because we have to be – we have to be active in our community as an independent.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Are you finding your volunteer base is ageing as well?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thanks. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much for all your work. I am sure there was very little sleep in that eight-day period.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Very, very little sleep.

**Melina BATH:** You were at the pivotal point of that. Thank you very much for your service to your community. We had the wonderful Jan Phillips from Mooroopna, I am going to say neighbourhood house.

**The CHAIR:** The house of hugs.

**Melina BATH:** That is the house of hugs. One of the things that she said was, 'Who's in charge?' That was her experience, she felt. 'Who's in charge?' – she wanted to know that. She did not feel that that was evident. What is your experience? Do you feel that there was a straightforward chain of command? What would you like to see? Were there any gaps in communication? What would you like to see? If you could revisit this flood, from your point of view and your members' point of view, serving your community, who is in charge? What did you experience?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** I think when you work in an emergency management team or in emergency services, chain of command is very strong, and you learn it very quickly. You always know who the person in charge is and that chain of command. Your base-level members all the way right up to the top know exactly who they have to speak to for that chain of command to go up. As for the general community, I guess they do struggle because they do not understand it in the same way we do, because we get the training to be able to understand that chain of command. I felt during the floods the chain of command was pretty good in a very stressful situation, especially with people who had never worked in floods before. For me it was the first time and for a lot of my members it was their first time, so to experience something out of the normal response that we would do, I did feel that it was genuinely okay.

**Melina BATH:** Great. Knowing we had the fires in eastern Victoria in 2019–2020, when you speak to CFA they say, ‘We’ve have had our training and we look to who’s in the chain of command.’ Thank goodness you are here. But floods affect the community and, we will say, neighbourhood houses. From your point of view, what lessons could be learned from an emergency services point of view to be transferred over? If we are just looking at community houses or neighbourhood houses, what do you think the system – the government – could use from your experience for other entities like a community house or a neighbourhood house?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** I think they could reach out to their local SES units or us and get a base knowledge of how that chain of command works, whether it is during the incident, before the incident – preferably before so that they are ready to go during an incident and they are prepared next time something like this happens. We are more than happy to talk to people. We are more than happy for people to come in and ask questions and learn about what we do and share that information with them. It is probably about educating everyone that is involved and needs to be involved during an incident like that so that they are aware for next time.

**Melina BATH:** And on that, you are busy doing your work, particularly at the peak of the disaster, and the only reflection we have as a committee on Jan Phillips is in amazement and awe. How could government structures support them better, do you think? I know this is probably outside your remit. I am just trying to get into your head. You are an emergency response specialist. What could you teach government to support those community groups better?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** I think again it is having a conversation with us. It is hard to answer the question. I did not hear Jan’s presentation, so I am unsure of the points that she put across. But I guess I just keep coming back to education. We learn through education. We learn by sitting, reading books, theory and practical. That is how we learn. So it can only be said the same for everybody else. Education is key.

**Melina BATH:** So a government education system to support before planning, during and post.

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Mrs Broad, I cut you off before. Do you want another go?

**Gaelle BROAD:** No, that is okay.

**The CHAIR:** Are you sure?

**Gaelle BROAD:** Yes.

**Wendy LOVELL:** I have got one.

**The CHAIR:** You have got one? Ms Lovell.

**Wendy LOVELL:** I would just like to talk roads. Jamie is obviously not with you, because he has been called to an accident, and Vicky just got a message to say that there has been a fatality at that accident. Our roads have seriously declined. They have got worse since the floods. Do you feel that the state of the roads has increased the number of call-outs you are getting, whether they are to accidents or whether they are to vehicle damages to tyres and things like that, since the floods?



**Nacole STANDFIELD:** As for the road crash aspect, when we attend a road crash there are multiple aspects of that – not just road conditions, plenty of other things – and I did speak earlier today at the vulnerable road users hearing over in Shepparton. Road conditions are very poor at the moment from the floods. They are not great. We get impacted by that even attending an incident. If that road condition is not great for emergency vehicles, who need to go that bit quicker or whatever, it does create a danger to us. Another thing I raised was the lack of signage on those roads. Some of the signs are right on top of the hazard, and at night-time that is hard to see. So roads definitely need to be fixed after the floods around here.

**Wendy LOVELL:** The other thing you mentioned was closure of roads during the floods. You had difficulty delivering sandbags to some people because of the amount of traffic on the roads. I know for people from where I live, out The Boulevard way, to get in and out of town on the Saturday, when we were trying to sandbag and get supplies and stuff with all of the tourists looking at the river coming up, was very difficult. Do you feel that there should have been closure of local roads much earlier than perhaps they did?

**Nacole STANDFIELD:** Yes, I do believe that did need to happen, because it did make it quite difficult for us, and even when the water was up we had people thinking it was great fun to get out in their speedboats and rally around in the floodwater, which creates dangers to the teams who are actually going to assist people who are vulnerable and need assistance. So yes, there is a lot of danger involved with it, and I think probably closing some of the local roads to allow local traffic only, especially in the areas where tourists want to go and have a look at the river coming up, would minimise risk to everybody that is in that area.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Well, thank you very much for coming in and providing your evidence to us today. It has been very insightful and revealing.

**Committee adjourned.**